

WOMEN AND LEADERSHIP

AGRIPPINA

Tacitus *Annales* 12 selections (1st-2nd century CE).

1 The execution of Messalina shook the imperial household: for there followed a conflict among the freedmen, who should select a consort for Claudius, with his impatience of celibacy and his docility under wifely government. Nor was competition less fierce among the women: each paraded for comparison her nobility, her charms, and her wealth, and advertised them as worthy of that exalted alliance. The question, however, lay mainly between Lollia Paulina, daughter of the consular Marcus Lollius, and Julia Agrippina, the issue of Germanicus. The latter had the patronage of Pallas; the former, of Callistus; while Aelia Paetina, a Tubero by family, was favored by Narcissus. The emperor, who leaned alternately to one or the other, according to the advocate whom he had heard the last, called the disputants into council, and ordered each to express his opinion and to add his reasons.

2 Narcissus discoursed on his early marriage, on the daughter who had blessed that union (for Antonia was Paetina's child), on the fact that no innovation in his domestic life would be entailed by the return of a spouse, who would regard Britannicus and Octavia — pledges of affection, next in dearness to her own — with anything rather than stepmotherly aversion. Callistus held that she was disqualified by her long-standing divorce, and, if recalled, would by the very fact be inclined to arrogance. A far wiser course was to bring in Lollia, who, as she had never known motherhood, would be immune from jealousy, and could take the place of a parent to her step-children. Pallas, in his eulogy of Agrippina, insisted on the point that she brought with her the grandson of Germanicus,³ who fully deserved an imperial position: let the sovereign unite to himself a famous stock, the posterity of the Julian and Claudian clan, and ensure that a princess of tried fecundity, still in the vigor of youth, should not transfer the glory of the Caesars into another family!

3 His arguments prevailed, with help from the allurements of Agrippina. In a succession of visits, cloaked under the near relationship, she so effectually captivated her uncle that she displaced her rivals and anticipated the position by exercising the powers of a wife. For, once certain of her marriage, she began to amplify her schemes, and to intrigue for a match between Domitius, her son by Gnaeus Ahenobarbus, and the emperor's daughter Octavia. That result was not to be achieved without a crime, as the Caesar had plighted Octavia to Lucius Silanus, and had introduced the youth (who had yet other titles to fame) to the favorable notice of the multitude by decorating him with the triumphal insignia and by a magnificent exhibition of gladiators. Still, there seemed to be

no insuperable difficulty in the temper of a prince who manifested neither approval nor dislike except as they were imposed upon him by orders.

4 Vitellius, therefore, able to screen his servile knaveries behind the title of Censor, and with a prophetic eye for impending tyrannies, wooed the good graces of Agrippina by identifying himself with her scheme and by producing charges against Silanus, whose sister — fair and wayward, it is true — had until recently been his own daughter-in-law. This gave him the handle for his accusation, and he put an infamous construction on a fraternal love which was not incestuous but unguarded. The Caesar lent ear, affection for his daughter increasing his readiness to harbor doubts of her prospective husband. Silanus, ignorant of the plot, and, as it happened, praetor for the year, was suddenly by an edict of Vitellius removed from the senatorial order, though the list had long been complete and the lustrum closed. At the same time, Claudius cancelled the proposed alliance: Silanus was compelled to resign his magistracy, and the remaining day of his praetorship was conferred on Eprius Marcellus.

5 In the consulate of Gaius Pompeius and Quintus Veranius, the union plighted between Claudius and Agrippina was already being rendered doubly sure by rumor and by illicit love. As yet, however, they lacked courage to celebrate the bridal solemnities, no precedent existing for the introduction of a brother's child into the house of her uncle. Moreover, the relationship was incest; and, if that fact were disregarded, it was feared that the upshot would be a national calamity. Hesitation was dropped only when Vitellius undertook to bring about the desired result by his own methods. He began by asking the Caesar if he would yield to the mandate of the people? — to the authority of the senate? On receiving the answer that he was a citizen among citizens, and incompetent to resist their united will, he ordered him to wait inside the palace. He himself entered the curia. Asseverating that a vital interest of the country was in question, he demanded leave to speak first, and began by stating that "the extremely onerous labors of the sovereign, which embraced the management of a world, stood in need of support, so that he might pursue his deliberations for the public good, undisturbed by domestic anxiety. And what more decent solace to that truly censorial spirit than to take a wife, his partner in weal and woe, to whose charge might be committed his inmost thoughts and the little children of a prince unused to dissipation or to pleasure, but to submission to the law from his early youth?"

6 As this engagingly worded preface was followed by flattering expressions of assent from the members, he took a fresh starting-point:— "Since it was the universal advice that the emperor should marry, the choice ought to fall on a woman distinguished by nobility of birth, by experience of motherhood, and by purity of character. No long inquiry was needed to convince them that in the luster of her family Agrippina came foremost: she had given proof of her fruitfulness, and her moral excellences harmonized with the rest. But the most gratifying point was that, by the dispensation of providence, the union would be between a widow and a prince with experience of no marriage-bed but his own. They had heard from their fathers, and they had seen for themselves, how wives were snatched away at the whim of the Caesars: such violence was far removed

from the orderliness of the present arrangement. They were, in fact, to establish a precedent by which the emperor would accept his consort from the Roman people! — Still, marriage with a brother's child, it might be said, was a novelty in Rome. — But it was normal in other countries, and prohibited by no law; while marriage with cousins and second cousins, so long unknown, had with the progress of time become frequent. Usage accommodated itself to the claims of utility, and this innovation too would be among the conventions of to-morrow."

7 Members were not lacking to rush from the curia, with emulous protestations that, if the emperor hesitated, they would proceed by force. A motley crowd flocked together, and clamored that such also was the prayer of the Roman people. Waiting no longer, Claudius met them in the Forum, and offered himself to their felicitations, then entered the senate, and requested a decree legitimizing for the future also the union of uncles with their brothers' daughters. None the less, only a single enthusiast for that form of matrimony was discovered — the Roman knight Alledius Severus, whose motive was generally said to have been desire for the favor of Agrippina. — From this moment it was a changed state, and all things moved at the fiat of a woman — but not a woman who, as Messalina, treated in wantonness the Roman Empire as a toy. It was a tight-drawn, almost masculine tyranny: in public, there was austerity and not infrequently arrogance; at home, no trace of unchastity, unless it might contribute to power. A limitless passion for gold had the excuse of being designed to create a bulwark of despotism.

8 On the wedding-day Silanus committed suicide; whether he had preserved his hope of life till then, or whether the date was deliberately chosen to increase the odium of his death. His sister Calvina was expelled from Italy. Claudius, in addition, prescribed sacrifices in accordance with the legislation of King Tullus, and expiatory ceremonies to be carried out by the pontiffs in the grove of Diana; universal derision being excited by this choice of a period in which to unearth the penalties and purifications of incest. Agrippina, on the other hand, not to owe her reputation entirely to crime, procured a remission of banishment for Annaeus Seneca, along with a praetorship: his literary fame, she conceived, would make the act popular with the nation; while she was anxious to gain so distinguished a tutor for Domitius in his transit from boyhood to adolescence, and to profit by his advice in their designs upon the throne. For the belief was that Seneca was attached to Agrippina by the memory of her kindness and embittered against Claudius by resentment of his injury.

9 The decision was now taken to delay no further; and the consul designate, Mammius Pollio, was induced by extraordinary promises to put forward a motion entreating Claudius to affianc Octavia to Domitius: an arrangement plausible enough on the score of their ages and likely to clear the way to higher things. Pollio proposed his resolution in nearly the same phrases which had lately been employed by Vitellius; Octavia's engagement followed; and Domitius — who, over and above his former relationship to the Emperor, was now his plighted son-in-law — began to assume equality with

Britannicus, thanks to the zeal of his mother, and to the art of those who, in return for their arraignment of Messalina, apprehended the vengeance of her son.

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22 In the same consulate, Agrippina, fierce in her hatreds, and infuriated against Lollia as her rival for the emperor's hand, arranged for her prosecution and her prosecutor, the charges to be traffic with Chaldaeans and magicians, and application to the image of the Clarian Apollo for information as to the sovereign's marriage. On this, Claudius — without hearing the defendant, — delivered a long exordium in the senate on the subject of her family distinctions, pointing out that her mother had been the sister of Lucius Volusius, her great-uncle Cotta Messalinus, herself the bride formerly of Memmius Regulus (her marriage with Caligula was deliberately suppressed); then added that her projects were pernicious to the state and she must be stripped of her resources for mischief: it would be best, therefore, to confiscate her property and expel her from Italy. Accordingly, out of her immense estate five million sesterces were spared to support her exile. Calpurnia also, a woman of high rank, came to ruin because Claudius had praised her appearance, not amorously, but in a casual conversation, so that Agrippina's anger stopped short of the last consequences: in Lollia's case, a tribune was dispatched to enforce her suicide. Another condemnation was that of Cadius Rufus under the law of extortion, the indictment being brought by the Bithynians.

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25 In the consulate of Gaius Antistius and Marcus Suillius, the adoption of Domitius was hurried forward by the influence of Pallas, who, pledged to Agrippina as the agent in her marriage, then bound to her by lawless love, kept goading Claudius to consult the welfare of the country and to supply the boyish years of Britannicus with a stable protection:— "So, in the family of the divine Augustus, though he had grandsons to rely upon, yet his step-children rose to power; Tiberius had issue of his own, but he adopted Germanicus; let Claudius also gird to himself a young partner, who would undertake a share of his responsibilities!" The emperor yielded to the pressure, and gave Domitius, with his three years' seniority, precedence over his son, reproducing in his speech to the senate the arguments furnished by his freedman. It was noted by the expert that, prior to this, there was no trace of an adoption in the patrician branch of the Claudian house, which had lasted without interruption from Attus Clausus downward.

26 Thanks, however, were returned to the sovereign; a more refined flattery was bestowed on Domitius; and the law was carried providing for his adoption into the Claudian family and the designation of Nero. Agrippina herself was dignified by the title of Augusta. When the transaction was over, no one was so devoid of pity as not to feel compunction for the lot of Britannicus. Stripped little by little of the services of the very slaves, the boy turned into derision the officious importunities of his stepmother, whose hypocrisy he understood. For report credits him with no lack of intelligence, possibly

with truth, or possibly through the sympathy inspired by his dangers he has retained a reputation which was never put to the proof.

27 Agrippina, on the other hand, in order to advertise her strength to the provinces also, arranged for the plantation of a colony of veterans in the Ubian town where she was born. The settlement received its title from her name; and, as chance would have it, it had been her grandfather Agrippa who extended Roman protection to the tribe on its migration across the Rhine.

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41 In the consulate of Tiberius Claudius, his fifth term, and of Servius Cornelius, the manly toga was prematurely conferred on Nero, so that he should appear qualified for a political career. The Caesar yielded with pleasure to the sycophancies of the senate, which desired Nero to assume the consulship in the twentieth year of his age, and in the interval, as consul designate, to hold proconsular authority outside the capital and bear the title Prince of the Youth. There was added a donative to the troops, with a largess to the populace, both under his name; while at the games in the Circus, exhibited to gain him the partialities of the crowd, Britannicus rode past in the juvenile white and purple, Nero in the robes of triumph. "Let the people survey the one in the insignia of supreme command, the other in his puerile garb, and anticipate conformably the destinies of the pair!" At the same time, all centurions and tribunes who evinced sympathy with the lot of Britannicus were removed, some on fictitious grounds, others under cloak of promotion. Even the few freedmen of untainted loyalty were dismissed on the following pretext. At a meeting between the two boys, Nero greeted Britannicus by his name, and was himself saluted as "Domitius." Representing the incident as a first sign of discord, Agrippina reported it with loud complaints to her husband:—"The act of adoption was flouted, the decision of the Fathers and the mandate of the people abrogated on the domestic hearth! And unless they removed the mischievous influence of those who inculcated this spirit of hostility, it would break out in a public catastrophe." Perturbed by these hinted accusations, the emperor inflicted exile or death on the best of his son's preceptors, and placed him under the custody of the substitutes provided by his stepmother.

42 1 As yet, however, Agrippina lacked courage to make her supreme attempt, unless she could discharge from the command of the praetorian cohorts both Lusius Geta and Rufius Crispinus, whom she believed faithful to the memory of Messalina and pledged to the cause of her children. Accordingly, through her assertions to her husband that the cohorts were being divided by the intriguing rivalry of the pair, and that discipline would be stricter if they were placed under a single head, the command was transferred to Afranius Burrus; who bore the highest character as a soldier but was well aware to whose pleasure he owed his appointment. The exaltation of her own dignity also occupied Agrippina: she began to enter the Capitol in a carriage; and that honour, reserved by antiquity for priests and holy objects, enhanced the veneration felt for a woman who to this day stands unparalleled as the daughter of an Imperator and the sister, the wife, and the mother of an emperor.⁷ Meanwhile, her principal champion,

Vitellius, at the height of his influence and in the extremity of his age — so precarious are the fortunes of the mighty — was brought to trial upon an indictment laid by the senator Junius Lupus. The charges he preferred were treason and designs upon the empire and to these the Caesar would certainly have inclined his ear, had not the prayers, or rather the threats of Agrippina converted him to the course of formally outlawing the prosecutor: Vitellius had desired no more.

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64 In the consulate of Marcus Asinius and Manius Acilius, it was made apparent by a sequence of prodigies that a change of conditions for the worse was foreshadowed. Fire from heaven played round the standards and tents of the soldiers; a swarm of bees settled on the pediment of the Capitol; it was stated that hermaphrodites had been born, and that a pig had been produced with the talons of a hawk. It was counted among the portents that each of the magistracies found its numbers diminished, since a quaestor, an aedile, and a tribune, together with a praetor and a consul, had died within a few months. But especial terror was felt by Agrippina. Disquieted by a remark let fall by Claudius in his cups, that it was his destiny first to suffer and finally to punish the infamy of his wives, she determined to act — and speedily. First, however, she destroyed Domitia Lepida on a feminine quarrel. For, as the daughter of the younger Antonia, the grand-niece of Augustus, the first cousin once removed of Agrippina, and also the sister of her former husband Gnaeus Domitius, Lepida regarded her family distinctions as equal to those of the princess. In looks, age, and fortune there was little between the pair; and since each was as unchaste, as disreputable, and as violent as the other, their competition in the vices was not less keen than in such advantages as they had received from the kindness of fortune. But the fiercest struggle was on the question whether the dominant influence with Nero was to be his aunt or his mother: for Lepida was endeavoring to captivate his youthful mind by a smooth tongue and an open hand, while on the other side Agrippina stood grim and menacing, capable of presenting her son with an empire but not of tolerating him as emperor.

65 However, the charges preferred were that Lepida had practiced by magic against the life of the emperor's consort, and, by her neglect to coerce her regiments of slaves in Calabria, was threatening the peace of Italy. On these grounds the death-sentence was pronounced, in spite of the determined opposition of Narcissus; who, with his ever-deepening suspicions of Agrippina, was said to have observed among his intimates that "whether Britannicus or Nero came to the throne, his own doom was sure; but the Caesar's kindness to him had been such that he would sacrifice life to his interests. Messalina and Silius had received their condemnation — and there was again similar material for a similar charge. With the succession vested in Britannicus, the emperor's person was safe; but the stepmother's plot aimed at overthrowing the whole imperial house — a darker scandal than would have resulted, if he had held his peace about the infidelities of her predecessor. Though, even now, infidelity was not far to seek, when she had committed adultery with Pallas, in order to leave no doubt that she held her dignity, her modesty, her body, her all, cheaper than a throne!" This and the

like he repeated frequently, while he embraced Britannicus, prayed for his speedy maturity, and, extending his cases now to heaven and now to the prince, implored that "he would hasten to man's estate, cast out the enemies of his father — and even take vengeance on the slayers of his mother!"

66 Under the weight of anxiety, his health broke down, and he left for Sinuessa, to renovate his strength by the gentle climate and the medicinal springs. At once, Agrippina — long resolved on murder, eager to seize the proffered occasion, and at no lack for assistants — sought advice upon the type of poison. With a rapid and drastic drug, the crime, she feared, would be obvious: if she decided for a slow and wasting preparation, Claudius, face to face with his end and aware of her treachery, might experience a return of affection for his son. What commended itself was something recondite, which would derange his faculties while postponing his dissolution. An artist in this domain was selected — a woman by the name of Locusta, lately sentenced on a poisoning charge, and long retained as part of the stock-in-trade of absolutism. Her ingenuity supplied a potion, administered by the eunuch Halotus, whose regular duty was to bring in and taste the dishes.

67 So notorious, later, were the whole proceedings that authors of the period have recorded that the poison was sprinkled on an exceptionally fine mushroom; though, as a result of his natural sluggishness or intoxication, the effects of the drug were not immediately felt by Claudius. At the same time, a motion of his bowels appeared to have removed the danger. Agrippina was in consternation: as the last consequences were to be apprehended, immediate infamy would have to be braved; and she fell back on the complicity — which she had already assured — of the doctor Xenophon. He, it is believed, under cover of assisting the emperor's struggles to vomit, plunged a feather, dipped in a quick poison, down his throat: for he was well aware that crimes of the first magnitude are begun with peril and consummated with profit.

68 Meanwhile, the senate was convened, and consuls and priests formulated their vows for the imperial safety, at a moment when the now lifeless body was being swathed in blankets and warming bandages, while the requisite measures were arranged for securing the accession of Nero. In the first place, Agrippina, heart-broken apparently and seeking to be comforted, held Britannicus to her breast, styled him the authentic portrait of his father, and, by this or the other device, precluded him from leaving his room. His sisters, Antonia and Octavia, she similarly detained. She had barred all avenues of approach with pickets, and ever and anon she issued notices that the emperor's indisposition was turning favorably: all to keep the troops in good hope, and to allow time for the advent of the auspicious moment insisted upon by the astrologers.

69 At last, at midday, on the thirteenth of October, the palace gates swung suddenly open, and Nero, with Burrus in attendance, passed out to the cohort, always on guard in conformity with the rules of the service. There, at a hint from the prefect, he was greeted with cheers and placed in a litter. Some of the men are said to have hesitated, looking back and inquiring:— "Where was Britannicus?" Then, as no lead to the contrary was

forthcoming, they acquiesced in the choice presented to them: Nero was carried into the camp; and, after a few introductory words suited to the time, promised a donative on the same generous scale as that of his father, and was saluted as Imperator. The verdict of the troops was followed by the senatorial decrees; nor was any hesitation evinced in the provinces. Divine honors were voted to Claudius, and his funeral solemnities were celebrated precisely as those of the deified Augustus, Agrippina emulating the magnificence of her great-grandmother Livia. His will, however, was not read, lest the preference of the stepson to the son should leave a disquieting impression of injustice and invidiousness upon the mind of the common people.

Suetonius *Life of Claudius* 44 (2nd century CE).

44 Not long afterwards he also made his will and sealed it with the seals of all the magistrates. But before he could go any farther, he was cut short by Agrippina, who was being accused besides of many other crimes both by her own conscience and by informers. That Claudius was poisoned is the general belief, but when it was done and by whom is disputed. Some say that it was his taster, the eunuch Halotus, as he was banqueting on the Citadel with the priests; others that at a family dinner Agrippina served the drug to him with her own hand in mushrooms, a dish of which he was extravagantly fond. Reports also differ as to what followed. Many say that as soon as he swallowed the poison he became speechless, and after suffering excruciating pain all night, died just before dawn. Some say that he first fell into a stupor, then vomited up the whole contents of his overloaded stomach, and was given a second dose, perhaps in a gruel, under pretense that he must be refreshed with food after his exhaustion, or administered in a syringe, as if he were suffering from a surfeit and required relief by that form of evacuation as well.

Tacitus *Annales* 13 and 14 selections (1st-2nd century CE).

1 The first death under the new principate, that of Junius Silanus, proconsul of Asia, was brought to pass, without Nero's cognizance, by treachery on the part of Agrippina. It was not that he had provoked his doom by violence of temper, lethargic as he was, and do completely disdained by former despotisms that Gaius Caesar usually styled him "the golden sheep"; but Agrippina, who had procured the death of his brother Lucius Silanus, feared him as a possible avenger, since it was a generally expressed opinion of the multitude that Nero, barely emerged from boyhood and holding the empire in consequence of a crime, should take second place to a man of settled years, innocent character, and noble family, who — a point to be regarded in those days — was counted among the posterity of the Caesars: for Silanus, like Nero, was the son of a great-grandchild of Augustus. Such was the cause of death: the instruments were the Roman knight, Publius Celer, and the freedman Helius, who were in charge of the imperial revenues in Asia. By these poison was administered to the proconsul at a

dinner, too openly to avoid detection. With no less speed, Claudius' freedman Narcissus, whose altercations with Agrippina I have already noticed, was forced to suicide by a rigorous confinement and by the last necessity, much against the will of the emperor, with whose still hidden vices his greed and prodigality were in admirable harmony.

2 The tendency, in fact, was towards murder, had not Afranius Burrus and Seneca intervened. Both guardians of the imperial youth, and — a rare occurrence where power is held in partnership — both in agreement, they exercised equal influence by contrasted methods; and Burrus, with his soldierly interests and austerity, and Seneca, with his lessons in eloquence and his self-respecting courtliness, aided each other to ensure that the sovereign's years of temptation should, if he were scornful of virtue, be restrained within the bounds of permissible indulgence. Each had to face the same conflict with the overbearing pride of Agrippina; who, burning with all the passions of illicit power, had the adherence of Pallas, at whose instigation Claudius had destroyed himself by an incestuous marriage and a fatal adoption. But neither was Nero's a disposition that bends to slaves, nor had Pallas, who with his sullen arrogance transcended the limits of a freedman, failed to waken his disgust. Still, in public, every compliment was heaped upon the princess; and when the tribune, following the military routine, applied for the password, her son gave: "The best of mothers." The senate, too, accorded her a pair of lictors and the office of priestess to Claudius, to whom was voted, in the same session, a public funeral, followed presently by deification.

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12 For the rest, maternal authority had weakened little by little. For Nero had slipped into a love affair with a freedwoman by the name of Acte, and at the same time had taken into his confidence Marcus Otho and Claudius Senecio, two handsome youths; the former of consular family, the latter a son of one of the imperial freedmen. At first, without the knowledge of his mother, then in defiance of her opposition, they had crept securely into the prince's favor as the partners of his dissipation and of his questionable secrets; while even his older friends showed no reluctance that a girl of that standing should gratify, without injury to anyone, the cravings of the emperor: for, whether from some whim of fate or because the illicit is stronger than the licit, he abhorred his wife Octavia, in spite of her high descent and proved honor; and there was always the risk that, if he were checked in this passion, his instincts would break out at the expense of women of rank.

13 But Agrippina, true to her sex, vented her spleen against "her competitor the freedwoman," "her daughter-in-law the waiting-maid," with more in the same vein. She declined to await the repentance, or satiety, of her son, and the fouler she made her imputations, the more she fanned the flame; till at last, conquered by the force of his infatuation, he threw off his filial obedience and put himself in the hands of Seneca, whose friend Annaeus Serenus had screened his adolescent desires by feigning an

intrigue with the same freedwoman, and had been so liberal with his name that the gifts covertly bestowed on the girl by the emperor were, to the eye of the world, lavished upon her by Serenus. Agrippina now reversed her methods, attacked the prince with blandishments, and offered her bedroom and its privacy to conceal the indulgences claimed by his opening manhood and sovereign rank. She even confessed her mistimed harshness, and — with an exaggerated humility as marked in its turn as her late excessive severity in repressing her son — offered to transfer to him her private resources, which were not greatly less than those of the sovereign. The change did not escape the attention of Nero, and roused the alarm of his intimates, who begged him to be on his guard against the machinations of a woman, always ruthless, and now, in addition, false.

During these days, as chance would have it, the Caesar, who had been inspecting the apparel which had once glittered on wives and matrons of the imperial family, selected a dress and jewels and sent them as a gift to his mother. Parsimony in the action there was none, for he was bestowing unasked some of the most valuable and coveted articles. But Agrippina protested loudly that the present was designed less to enrich her wardrobe than to deprive her of what remained, and that her son was dividing property which he held in entirety from herself.

14 Persons were not lacking to report her words with a more sinister turn; and Nero, exasperated against the supporters of this female arrogance, removed Pallas from the charge to which he had been appointed by Claudius, and in which he exercised virtual control over the monarchy. The tale went that, as he left the palace with an army of attendants, the prince remarked not unhappily that Pallas was on the way to swear himself out of office.³ He had, in fact, stipulated that there should be no retrospective inquiry into any of his actions, and that his accounts with the state should be taken as balanced. At once, Agrippina rushed headlong into a policy of terror and of threats, and the imperial ears were not spared the solemn reminder that "Britannicus was now of age — Britannicus, the genuine and deserving stock to succeed to his father's power, which an interloping heir by adoption now exercised in virtue of the iniquities of his mother. She had no objection to the whole dark history of that unhappy house being published to the world, her own marriage first of all, and her own resort to poison: one sole act of foresight lay to the credit of Heaven and herself — her stepson lived. She would go with him to the camp. There, let the daughter of Germanicus be heard on the one side; on the other, the cripple Burrus and the exile Seneca, claiming, forsooth, by right of a maimed hand and a professorial tongue the regency of the human race!" As she spoke, she raised a threatening arm, and, heaping him with reproaches, invoked the deified Claudius, the shades of the dead Silani, and all the crimes committed to no effect.

15 Perturbed by her attitude, and faced with the approach of the day on which Britannicus completed his fourteenth year, Nero began to revolve, now his mother's proclivity to violence, now the character of his rival, — lately revealed by a test which, trivial as it was, had gained him wide sympathy. During the festivities of the Saturnalia, while his peers in age were varying their diversions by throwing dice for a king, the lot

had fallen upon Nero. On the others he imposed various orders, not likely to put them to the blush: but, when he commanded Britannicus to rise, advance into the center, and strike up a song — this, in the hope of turning into derision a boy who knew little of sober, much less of drunken, society — his victim firmly began a poem hinting at his expulsion from his father's house and throne. His bearing awoke a pity the more obvious that night and revelry had banished dissimulation. Nero, once aware of the feeling aroused, redoubled his hatred; and with Agrippina's threats becoming instant, as he had no grounds for a criminal charge against his brother and dared not openly order his execution, he tried secrecy and gave orders for poison to be prepared, his agent being Julius Pollio, tribune of a praetorian cohort, and responsible for the detention of the condemned poisoner Locusta, whose fame as a criminal stood high. For that no one about the person of Britannicus should regard either right or loyalty was a point long since provided for. The first dose the boy received from his own tutors, but his bowels were opened, and he passed the drug, which either lacked potency or contained a dilution to prevent immediate action. Nero, however, impatient of so much leisure in crime, threatened the tribune and ordered the execution of the poisoner, on the ground that, with their apprehensions of scandal and their preparations for defense, they were delaying his release from anxiety. They now promised that death should be as abrupt as if it were the summary work of steel; and a potion — its rapidity guaranteed by a private test of the ingredients — was concocted hard by the Caesar's bedroom.

16 It was the regular custom that the children of the emperors should take their meals in sight of their relatives, seated with other nobles of their age at a more frugal table of their own. There Britannicus dined; and, as his food, solid and liquid, was tried by a taster chosen from his attendants, the following expedient was discovered, to avoid either changing the rule or betraying the plot by killing both master and man. A drink, still harmless, very hot, and already tasted, was handed to Britannicus; then, when he declined it as too warm, cold water was poured in, and with it the poison; which ran so effectively through his whole system that he lost simultaneously both voice and breath. There was a startled movement in the company seated around, and the more obtuse began to disperse; those who could read more clearly sat motionless, their eyes riveted on Nero. He, without changing his recumbent attitude or his pose of unconsciousness, observed that this was a usual incident, due to the epilepsy with which Britannicus had been inflicted from his earliest infancy: sight and sensation would return by degrees. But from Agrippina, in spite of her control over her features, came a flash of such terror and mental anguish that it was obvious she had been as completely in the dark as the prince's sister Octavia. She saw, in fact, that her last hope had been taken — that the precedent for matricide had been set. Octavia, too, youth and inexperience notwithstanding, had learned to hide her griefs, her affections, her every emotion. Consequently, after a short silence, the amenities of the banquet were resumed.

17 The same night saw the murder of Britannicus and his pyre, the funeral apparatus — modest enough — having been provided in advance. Still, his ashes were buried in the Field of Mars, under such a tempest of rain that the crowd believed it to foreshadow the anger of the gods against a crime which, even among men, was condoned by the many

who took into account the ancient instances of brotherly hatred and the fact that autocracy knows no partnership. The assertion is made by many contemporary authors that, for days before the murder, the worst of all outrages had been offered by Nero to the boyish years of Britannicus: in which case, it ceases to be possible to regard his death as either premature or cruel, though it was amid the sanctities of the table, without even a respite allowed in which to embrace his sister, and under the eyes of his enemy, that the hurried doom fell on this last scion of the Claudian house, upon whom lust had done its unclean work before the poison. The hastiness of the funeral was vindicated in an edict of the Caesar, who called to mind that "it was a national tradition to withdraw these untimely obsequies from the public gaze and not to detain it by panegyrics and processions. However, now that he had lost the aid of his brother, not only were his remaining hopes centered in the state, but the senate and people themselves must so much the more cherish their prince as the one survivor of a family born to the heights of power."

18 He now conferred bounties on his chief friends. Nor were accusers wanting for the men of professed austerity, who at such a moment had partitioned town and country houses like so much loot. Others believed that compulsion had been applied by the emperor, conscience-struck by his crime but hopeful of pardon, if he could lay the powerful under obligation by a display of liberality. But his mother's anger no munificence could assuage. She took Octavia to her heart; she held frequent and private interviews with her friends; while with even more than her native cupidity she appropriated money from all sources, apparently to create a fund for emergencies. Tribunes and centurions she received with suavity; and for the names and virtues of the nobility — there was a nobility still — she showed a respect which indicated that she was in quest of a leader and a faction. Nero knew it, and gave orders to withdraw the military watch, which she had received as the wife, and retained as the mother, of the sovereign, along with the Germans lately assigned to her as a bodyguard for the same complimentary motive. That her levées should not be frequented by a crowd of visitants, he made his own establishment separate, installed his mother in the house once belonging to Antonia, and, at his visits to her new quarters, came surrounded by a throng of centurions and left after a perfunctory kiss.

19 Nothing in the list of mortal things is so unstable and so fleeting as the fame attached to a power not based on its own strength. Immediately Agrippina's threshold was forsaken: condolences there were none; visits there were none, except from a few women, whether out of love or hatred is uncertain. Among them was Junia Silana, driven by Messalina from her husband Silanus, as I related above. Eminent equally in blood, beauty, and voluptuousness, she was long the bosom friend of Agrippina. Then came a private quarrel between the pair: for Agrippina had deterred the young noble Sextius Africanus from marriage with Silana by describing her as a woman of no morals and uncertain age; not with the intention of reserving Africanus for herself, but to keep a wealthy and childless widow from passing into the possession of a husband. With the prospect of revenge presenting itself, Silana now suborned two of her clients, Iturius and Calvisius, to undertake the accusation; her charge being not the old, oft-heard tale

that Agrippina was mourning the death of Britannicus or publishing the wrongs of Octavia, but that she had determined to encourage Rubellius Plautus into revolution — on the maternal side he was a descendant of the deified Augustus in the same degree as Nero — and as the partner of his couch and then of his throne to make her way once more into the conduct of affairs. The charges were communicated by Iturius and Calvisius to Atimetus, a freedman of Nero's aunt Domitia. Overjoyed at this windfall — for competition was bitter between Agrippina and Domitia — Atimetus incited the actor Paris, also a freedman of Domitia, to go on the instant and present the charge in the darkest colors.

20 The night was well advanced, and Nero was protracting it over his wine, when Paris — accustomed ordinarily about this hour to add life to the imperial debauch, but now composed to melancholy — entered the room, and by exposing the indictment in detail so terrified his auditor that he decided not merely to kill his mother and Plautus but even to remove Burrus from his command, on the ground that he owed his promotion to Agrippina and was now paying his debt. According to Fabius Rusticus, letters patent to Caecina Tuscus, investing him with the charge of the praetorian cohorts, were actually written, but by the intervention of Seneca the post was saved for Burrus. Pliny and Cluvius refer to no suspicion of the prefect's loyalty; and Fabius certainly tends to overpraise Seneca, by whose friendship he flourished. For myself, where the authorities are unanimous, I shall follow them: if their versions disagree, I shall record them under the names of their sponsors. — Unnerved and eager for the execution of his mother, Nero was not to be delayed, until Burrus promised that, if her guilt was proved, death should follow. "But," he added, "any person whatsoever, above all a parent, would have to be allowed the opportunity of defense; and here no accusers were present; only a solitary voice, and that borne from the house of an enemy. Let him take into consideration the darkness, the wakeful night spent in conviviality, the whole of the circumstances, so conducive to rashness and unreason."

21 When the emperor's fears had been thus calmed, at break of day a visit was paid to Agrippina; who was to listen to the charges, and rebut them or pay the penalty. The commission was carried out by Burrus under the eye of Seneca: a number of freedmen also were present as witnesses to the conversation. Then, after recapitulating the charges and their authors, Burrus adopted a threatening attitude. Agrippina summoned up her pride:— "I am not astonished," she said, "that Silana, who has never known maternity, should have no knowledge of a mother's heart: for parents do not change their children as a wanton changes her adulterers. Nor, if Iturius and Calvisius, after consuming the last morsel of their estates, pay their aged mistress the last abject service of undertaking a delation, is that a reason why my own fair fame should be darkened by the blood of my son or the emperor's conscience by that of his mother? For as to Domitia — I should thank her for her enmity, if she were competing with me in benevolence to my Nero, instead of staging this comedy with the help of her bedfellow Atimetus and her mummer Paris. In the days when my counsels were preparing his adoption, his proconsular power, his consulate in prospect, and the other steps to his sovereignty, she was embellishing the fish-ponds of her beloved Baiae. — Or let a man

stand forth to convict me of tampering with the guards in the capital — of shaking the allegiance of the provinces — or, finally, of seducing either slave or freedman into crime! Could I have lived with Britannicus on the throne? And if Plautus or another shall acquire the empire and sit in judgement, am I to assume there is a dearth of accusers prepared to indict me, no longer for the occasional hasty utterances of an ill-regulated love, but for guilt from which only a son can absolve?" The listeners were moved, but she demanded an interview with her son. There she neither spoke in support of her innocence, as though she could entertain misgivings, nor on the theme of her services, as though she would cast them in his teeth, but procured vengeance upon her accusers and recognition for her friends.

...

1 In the consular year of Gaius Vipstanius and Gaius Fonteius, Nero postponed no further the long-contemplated crime: for a protracted term of empire had consolidated his boldness, and day by day he burned more hotly with love for Poppaea; who, hopeless of wedlock for herself and divorce for Octavia so long as Agrippina lived, plied the sovereign with frequent reproaches and occasional raillery, styling him "the ward, dependent on alien orders, who was neither the empire's master nor his own. For why was her wedding deferred? Her face, presumably, and her grandsires with their triumphs, did not give satisfaction — or was the trouble her fecundity and truth of heart? No, it was feared that, as a wife at all events, she might disclose the wrongs of the Fathers, the anger of the nation against the pride and greed of his mother! But, if Agrippina could tolerate no daughter-in-law but one inimical to her son, then let her be restored to her married life with Otho: she would go to any corner of earth where she could hear the emperor's ignominy rather than view it and be entangled in his perils." To these and similar attacks, pressed home by tears and adulterous art, no opposition was offered: all men yearned for the breaking of the mother's power; none credited that the hatred of the son would go the full way to murder.

2 It is stated by Cluvius that Agrippina's ardor to keep her influence was carried so far that at midday, an hour at which Nero was beginning to experience the warmth of wine and good cheer, she presented herself on several occasions to her half-tipsy son, coquettishly dressed and prepared for incest. Already lascivious kisses, and endearments that were the harbingers of guilt, had been observed by their intimates, when Seneca sought in a woman the antidote to female blandishments, and brought in the freedwoman Acte, who, alarmed as she was both at her own danger and at Nero's infamy, was to report that the incest was common knowledge, since his mother boasted of it, and that the troops would not submit to the supremacy of a sacrilegious emperor. According to Fabius Rusticus, not Agrippina, but Nero, desired the union, the scheme being wrecked by the astuteness of the same freedwoman. The other authorities, however, give the same version as Cluvius, and to their side tradition leans; whether the enormity was actually conceived in the brain of Agrippina, or whether the contemplation

of such a refinement in lust was merely taken as comparatively credible in a woman who, for the prospect of power, had in her girlish years yielded to the embraces of Marcus Lepidus; who, for a similar ambition had prostituted herself to the desires of Pallas; and who had been inured to every turpitude by her marriage with her uncle.

3 Nero, therefore, began to avoid private meetings with her; when she left for her gardens or the estates at Tusculum and Antium, he commended her intention of resting; finally, convinced that, wherever she might be kept, she was still an incubus, he decided to kill her, debating only whether by poison, the dagger, or some other form of violence. The first choice fell on poison. But, if it was to be given at the imperial table, then the death could not be referred to chance, since Britannicus had already met a similar fate. At the same time, it seemed an arduous task to tamper with the domestics of a woman whose experience of crime had made her vigilant for foul play; and, besides, she had herself fortified her system by taking antidotes in advance. Cold steel and bloodshed no one could devise a method of concealing: moreover, there was the risk that the agent chosen for such an atrocity might spurn his orders. Mother wit came to the rescue in the person of Anicetus the freedman, preceptor of Nero's boyish years, and detested by Agrippina with a vigor which was reciprocated. Accordingly, he pointed out that it was possible to construct a ship, part of which could be artificially detached, well out at sea, and throw the unsuspecting passenger overboard:— "Nowhere had accident such scope as on salt water; and, if the lady should be cut off by shipwreck, who so captious as to read murder into the delinquency of wind and wave? The sovereign, naturally, would assign the deceased a temple and the other displays of filial piety."

4 This ingenuity commended itself: the date, too, was in its favour, as Nero was in the habit of celebrating the festival of Minerva at Baiae. Thither he proceeded to lure his mother, observing from time to time that outbreaks of parental anger had to be tolerated, and that he must show a forgiving spirit; his aim being to create a rumour of reconciliation, which Agrippina, with the easy faith of her sex in the agreeable, would probably accept. — In due course, she came. He went down to the beach to meet her (she was arriving from Antium), took her hand, embraced her, and escorted her to Bauli, the name of a villa washed by the waters of a cove between the promontory of Misenum and the lake of Baiae. Here, among others, stood a more handsomely appointed vessel; apparently one attention the more to his mother, as she had been accustomed to use a trireme with a crew of marines. Also, she had been invited to dinner for the occasion, so that night should be available for the concealment of the crime. It is well established that someone had played the informer, and that Agrippina, warned of the plot, hesitated whether to believe or not, but made the journey to Baiae in a litter. There her fears were relieved by the blandishments of a cordial welcome and a seat above the prince himself. At last, conversing freely, — one moment boyishly familiar, the next grave-browed as though making some serious communication, — Nero, after the banquet had been long protracted, escorted her on her way, clinging more closely than usual to her breast and kissing her eyes; possibly as a final touch of hypocrisy, or possibly the last look upon his doomed mother gave pause even to that brutal spirit.

5 A starlit night and the calm of an unruffled sea appeared to have been sent by Heaven to afford proof of guilt. The ship had made no great way, and two of Agrippina's household were in attendance, Crepereius Gallus standing not far from the tiller, while Acerronia, bending over the feet of the recumbent princess, recalled exultantly the penitence of the son and the re-entry of the mother into favor. Suddenly the signal was given: the canopy above them, which had been heavily weighted with lead, dropped, and Crepereius was crushed and killed on the spot. Agrippina and Acerronia were saved by the height of the couch-sides, which, as it happened, were too solid to give way under the impact. Nor did the break-up of the vessel follow: for confusion was universal, and even the men accessory to the plot were impeded by the large numbers of the ignorant. The crew then decided to throw their weight on one side and so capsize the ship; but, even on their own part, agreement came too slowly for a sudden emergency, and a counter-effort by others allowed the victims a gentler fall into the waves. Acerronia, however, incautious enough to raise the cry that she was Agrippina, and to demand aid for the emperor's mother, was dispatched with poles, oars, and every nautical weapon that came to hand. Agrippina, silent and so not generally recognized, though she received one wound in the shoulder, swam until she was met by a few fishing-smacks, and so reached the Lucrine lake, whence she was carried into her own villa.

6 There she reflected on the evident purpose of the treacherous letter of invitation and the exceptional honour with which she had been treated, and on the fact that, hard by the shore, a vessel, driven by no gale and striking no reef, had collapsed at the top like an artificial structure on land. She reviewed as well the killing of Acerronia, glanced simultaneously at her own wound, and realized that the one defense against treachery was to leave it undetected. Accordingly, she sent the freedman Agermus to carry word to her son that, thanks to divine kindness and to his fortunate star, she had survived a grave accident; but that, however great his alarm at his mother's danger, she begged him to defer the attention of a visit: for the moment, what she needed was rest. Meanwhile, with affected unconcern, she applied remedies to her wound and fomentations to her body: Acerronia's will, she gave instructions was to be sought, and her effects sealed up, — the sole measure not referable to dissimulation.

7 Meanwhile, as Nero was waiting for the messengers who should announce the doing of the deed, there came the news that she had escaped with a wound from a light blow, after running just sufficient risk to leave no doubt as to its author. Half-dead with terror, he protested that any moment she would be here, hot for vengeance. And whether she armed her slaves or inflamed the troops, or made her way to the senate and the people, and charged him with the wreck, her wound, and the slaying of her friends, what counter-resource was at his own disposal? Unless there was hope in Seneca and Burrus! He had summoned them immediately: whether to test their feeling, or as cognizant already of the secret, is questionable. — There followed, then, a long silence on the part of both: either they were reluctant to dissuade in vain, or they believed matters to have reached a point at which Agrippina must be forestalled or Nero perish.

After a time, Seneca so far took the lead as to glance at Burrus and inquire if the fatal order should be given to the military. His answer was that the guards, pledged as they were to the Caesarian house as a whole, and attached to the memory of Germanicus, would flinch from drastic measures against his issue: Anicetus must redeem his promise. He, without any hesitation, asked to be given full charge of the crime. The words brought from Nero a declaration that that day presented him with an empire, and that he had a freedman to thank for so great a boon: Anicetus must go with speed and take an escort of men distinguished for implicit obedience to orders. He himself, on hearing that Agermus had come with a message from Agrippina, anticipated it by setting the stage for a charge of treason, threw a sword at his feet while he was doing his errand, then ordered his arrest as an assassin caught in the act; his intention being to concoct a tale that his mother had practiced against the imperial life and taken refuge in suicide from the shame of detection.

8 In the interval, Agrippina's jeopardy, which was attributed to accident, had become generally known; and there was a rush to the beach, as man after man learned the news. Some swarmed up the sea-wall, some into the nearest fishing-boats: others were wading middle-deep into the surf, a few standing with outstretched arms. The whole shore rang with lamentations and vows and the din of conflicting questions and vague replies. A huge multitude streamed up with lights, and, when the knowledge of her safety spread, set out to offer congratulations; until, at the sight of an armed and threatening column, they were forced to scatter. Anicetus drew a cordon around the villa, and, breaking down the entrance, dragged off the slaves as they appeared, until he reached the bedroom-door. A few servants were standing by: the rest had fled in terror at the inrush of men. In the chamber was a dim light and a single waiting-maid; and Agrippina's anxiety deepened every instant. Why no one from her son — nor even Agermus? Had matters prospered, they would have worn another aspect. Now, nothing but solitude, hoarse alarms, and the symptoms of irremediable ill! Then the maid rose to go. "Dost thou too forsake me?" she began, and saw Anicetus behind her, accompanied by Herculeius, the trierarch, and Obaritus, a centurion of marines. "If he had come to visit the sick, he might take back word that she felt refreshed. If to do murder, she would believe nothing of her son: matricide was no article of their instructions." The executioners surrounded the couch, and the trierarch began by striking her on the head with a club. The centurion was drawing his sword to make an end, when she proffered her womb to the blow. "Strike here," she exclaimed, and was dispatched with repeated wounds.

9 So far the accounts concur. Whether Nero inspected the corpse of his mother and expressed approval of her figure is a statement which some affirm and some deny. She was cremated the same night, on a dinner-couch, and with the humblest rites; nor, so long as Nero reigned, was the earth piled over the grave or enclosed. Later, by the care of her servants, she received a modest tomb, hard by the road to Misenum and that villa of the dictator Caesar which looks from its dizzy height to the bay outspread beneath. As the pyre was kindled, one of her freedmen, by the name of Mnester, ran a sword through his body, whether from love of his mistress or from fear of his own destruction

remains unknown. This was that ending to which, years before, Agrippina had given her credence, and her contempt. For to her inquiries as to the destiny of Nero the astrologers answered that he should reign, and slay his mother; and "Let him slay," she had said, "so that he reign."

10 But only with the completion of the crime was its magnitude realized by the Caesar. For the rest of the night, sometimes dumb and motionless, but not rarely starting in terror to his feet with a sort of delirium, he waited for the daylight which he believed would bring his end. Indeed, his first encouragement to hope came from the adulation of the centurions and tribunes, as, at the suggestion of Burrus, they grasped his hand and wished him joy of escaping his unexpected danger and the criminal enterprise of his mother. His friends in turn visited the temples; and, once the example had been given, the Campanian towns in the neighborhood attested their joy by victims and deputations. By a contrast in hypocrisy, he himself was mournful, repining apparently at his own preservation and full of tears for the death of a parent. But because the features of a landscape change less obligingly than the looks of men, and because there was always obtruded upon his gaze the grim prospect of that sea and those shores, — and there were some who believed that he could hear a trumpet, calling in the hills that rose around, and lamentations at his mother's grave, — he withdrew to Naples and forwarded to the senate a letter, the sum of which was that an assassin with his weapon upon him had been discovered in Agermus, one of the confidential freedmen of Agrippina, and that his mistress, conscious of her guilt, had paid the penalty of meditated murder.

11 He appended a list of charges drawn from the remoter past:— "She had hoped for a partnership in the empire; for the praetorian cohorts to swear allegiance to a woman; for the senate and people to submit to a like ignominy. Then, her ambition foiled, she had turned against the soldiers, the Fathers and the commons; had opposed the donative and the largess, and had worked for the ruin of eminent citizens. At what cost of labor had he succeeded in preventing her from forcing the door of the senate and delivering her answers to foreign nations!" He made an indirect attack on the Claudian period also, transferring every scandal of the reign to the account of his mother, whose removal he ascribed to the fortunate star of the nation. For even the wreck was narrated: though where was the folly which could believe it accidental, or that a ship-wrecked woman had dispatched a solitary man with a weapon to cut his way through the guards and navies of the emperor? The object, therefore, of popular censure was no longer Nero — whose barbarity transcended all protest — but Seneca, who in composing such a plea had penned a confession.

12 However, with a notable spirit of emulation among the magnates, decrees were drawn up: thanksgivings were to be held at all appropriate shrines; the festival of Minerva, on which the conspiracy had been brought to light, was to be celebrated with annual games; a golden statue of the goddess, with an effigy of the emperor by her side, was to be erected in the curia, and Agrippina's birthday included among the inauspicious dates. Earlier sycophancies Thræsea Paetus had usually allowed to pass,

either in silence or with a curt assent: this time he walked out of the senate, creating a source of danger for himself, but implanting no germ of independence in his colleagues. Portents, also, frequent and futile made their appearance: a woman gave birth to a serpent, another was killed by a thunderbolt in the embraces of her husband; the sun, again, was suddenly obscured, and the fourteen regions of the capital were struck by lightning — events which so little marked the concern of the gods that Nero continued for years to come his empire and his crimes. However, to aggravate the feeling against his mother, and to furnish evidence that his own mildness had increased with her removal, he restored to their native soil two women of high rank, Junia and Calpurnia, along with the ex-praetors Valerius Capito and Licinius Gabolus — all of them formerly banished by Agrippina. He sanctioned the return, even, of the ashes of Lollia Paulina, and the erection of a tomb: Iturius and Calvisius, whom he had himself relegated some little while before, he now released from the penalty. As to Silana, she had died a natural death at Tarentum, to which she had retraced her way, when Agrippina, by whose enmity she had fallen, was beginning to totter or to relent.

13 And yet he dallied in the towns of Campania, anxious and doubtful how to make his entry into Rome. Would he find obedience in the senate? enthusiasm in the crowd? Against his timidity it was urged by every reprobate — and a court more prolific of reprobates the world has not seen — that the name of Agrippina was abhorred and that her death had won him the applause of the nation. Let him go without a qualm and experience on the spot the veneration felt for his position! At the same time, they demanded leave to precede him. They found, indeed, an alacrity which surpassed their promises: the tribes on the way to meet him; the senate in festal dress; troops of wives and of children disposed according to their sex and years, while along his route rose tiers of seats of the type used for viewing a triumph. Then, flushed with pride, victor over the national servility, he made his way to the Capitol, paid his grateful vows, and abandoned himself to all the vices, till now retarded, though scarcely repressed, by some sort of deference to his mother.