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THE LIMITS OF CUNNING:  
*Reassessing Sejanus' Influence Under Tiberius*

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*“intus summa apiscendi libido”*

*“Within his heart there was the lust of reaching great things”*

—Tacitus, *Annals* 4.1

Aelius Sejanus, *“cohortibus praetorii praefectum”*, was a central figure in Book 4 of Tacitus’s *Annals*.<sup>1</sup> With his cunning in the political landscape, he was able to earn Tiberius’s trust, rise to power, and scheme to overthrow him—although the scheme ultimately failed. The story of Sejanus represents the dangers of unchecked ambition in an autocratic regime, and how sycophants can destabilize a government. Tiberius, according to scholars and historians like Tacitus, was a careful ruler and a master of cloaking his thoughts.<sup>2</sup> It seems unlikely that someone as cautious as Tiberius, who could detect traps laid by dishonest senators, would be oblivious to Sejanus’s power-hungry intentions and actions. Sejanus therefore could not have been as cunning as Tacitus portrayed him to be.

Admittedly, Sejanus was indeed capable of manipulation. In *Annals* 4.1, Tacitus writes that Sejanus *“mox Tiberium variis artibus devinxit”*—“bound Tiberius [to him] by various skills”—so artfully that he made Tiberius *“sibi uni incautum intectumque”*—incautious and uncovered to himself alone.”<sup>3</sup> In 4.2, Sejanus carefully maneuvered the Praetorian guard into a single camp in Rome so that his soldiers could see their *“numeroque et robore.”* Sejanus does this to instill *“fiducia”* in his followers and create *“metus”* in others, demonstrating his understanding of the psychological effects his actions can have on others.<sup>4</sup> Sejanus was clearly gifted with the ability to *“paulatim inrepere”* (“gradually creep”) into people’s minds, such as when he met with his soldiers and addressed them by their names.<sup>5</sup> Although this specific example reflects persistence more than cunning, it demonstrates his ability to exploit others’ emotions.

Sejanus’s ambition grew stronger as he drew closer to obtaining power, leading to perhaps his most significant act of manipulation: the orchestration of Drusus’s death. This cold act of regicide in 4.3 demonstrates Sejanus’s willingness to corrode his morals in his quest for power. However, I think that 4.3 as a whole works against the characterization of Sejanus as the clever puppeteer. Tacitus writes that Sejanus decided to get closer to power in the imperial house in the *“occultior via”*—“more hidden way”; however, I am not sure why Tacitus includes this preface to the story about Drusus, because it is quite clear that a violent military coup against Tiberius would result in a regime in which Sejanus and his accomplices, even if he were the princeps, are fearful of retribution.<sup>6</sup> In any case, after Drusus *“animo commotior orto forte iurgio intenderat Seiano manus”* (“agitated in soul had

<sup>1</sup> Tacitus, *Annales*, ed. Henry Furneaux (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1907), 4.1.

<sup>2</sup> Barbara Levick, *Tiberius the Politician*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 1999).

<sup>3</sup> Tacitus, *Annales*, ed. Henry Furneaux (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1907), 4.1.

<sup>4</sup> Tacitus, *Annales*, ed. Henry Furneaux (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1907), 4.2.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. 4.2.

<sup>6</sup> Tacitus, *Annales*, ed. Henry Furneaux (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1907), 4.3.

extended a hand on Sejanus in a fight born by chance”), Sejanus decided to seduce Drusus’s wife, Livilla, whose uncle was Tiberius.<sup>7</sup> But it would surely raise suspicions against Sejanus if, after the “*recenti ira*” against Drusus, the latter suddenly died, regardless of whether “*fortuitus morbus adsimularetur*” (“an accidental illness might be simulated”) in 4.8.<sup>8</sup> Drusus and Tiberius, father and son, would have been on the same page. The dispute between Drusus and Sejanus would have frequented their discussions if what Tacitus writes is true, that the young prince had openly “*crebro querens incolumi filio adiutorem imperii alium vocari*”—“frequently protested that another was called deputy of the rule with an alive son.”<sup>9</sup> In this case, Tacitus’s “*orto forte*” (by chance) in 4.3 is puzzling in the timeline of things, because Drusus would have already known that Sejanus was his father’s right-hand man and would have started developing feelings of jealousy since then.<sup>10</sup> In addition, if Tiberius were as careful as he is portrayed to be by scholars, and if Tiberius truly considered Sejanus his close “*socium laborum*” (“ally of labors”), then I believe that he would have almost assuredly been aware of any significant developments in Sejanus’s personal life, in particular his divorce from his wife immediately before Drusus was poisoned. It seems far-fetched that a plot of this scale would go totally unnoticed, even with the added assumption that Tiberius was “*incautum intectumque*” around Sejanus.<sup>11</sup>

There was also an alleged rumor that Sejanus “*Lygdi quoque spadonis animum stupro vinxisse*”—“bound the heart of the eunuch Lygdu in a foul manner,” and he told Tiberius directly of his son’s intention to poison him.<sup>12</sup> However, I think that there is a possibility that Sejanus might have cleverly invented this tale. With the power struggle between him and Drusus beginning to manifest, it would have been too suspicious if he had quietly dined at the table as Drusus suddenly collapsed mysteriously. Tiberius recognized that Drusus was upset with Sejanus’s proximity to the princeps, believing he was the next in line for the throne. Thus, if Drusus had a motive to poison his father, there would be no other reasonable explanation, because he would have believed that his father at this point favored Sejanus. It seems highly likely that this rumor was baseless because it was “*nullo auctore certo firmantur*” (“certainly established by no historian”), and that Sejanus might have invented this rumor to appear as a victim of accusations so outrageous that Tiberius would assume his innocence in these matters.<sup>13</sup>

On the other hand, there is a small chance that Tacitus himself created this rumor.<sup>14</sup> Not only does no reputable writer mention it, but it is also conveniently inserted right in the middle of sections 4.9 and 4.12, which are relatively lackluster sections about the princeps’ formal grieving process. Tacitus would have known that this section was not very riveting,

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. 4.3.

<sup>8</sup> Tacitus, *Annales*, ed. Henry Furneaux (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1907), 4.8.

<sup>9</sup> Tacitus, *Annales*, ed. Henry Furneaux (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1907), 4.7.

<sup>10</sup> Tacitus, *Annales*, ed. Henry Furneaux (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1907), 4.3.

<sup>11</sup> Levick, *Tiberius the Politician*, 1999.

<sup>12</sup> Tacitus, *Annales*, ed. Henry Furneaux (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1907), 4.10.

<sup>13</sup> Tacitus, *Annales*, ed. Henry Furneaux (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1907), 4.11.

<sup>14</sup> Ronald Syme, *Tacitus*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958).

so it was the perfect place to introduce a wild theory that supports his characterization of Sejanus as a master manipulator. In addition, after introducing the rumor, Tacitus lists a series of reasons for why people believed the rumor, such as “*sed quia Seianus facinorum omnium repertor habebatur*” (“but because Sejanus was considered the author of all crimes”) and “*ex nimia caritate in eum Caesaris et ceterorum in utrumque odio quamvis fabulosa et immania credebantur*” (“and from the hatred of others against both, any fanciful and extreme things were believed”), and finally “*atrociore semper fama erga dominantium exitus*” (“with the rumor always cruel towards the death of those ruling”).<sup>15</sup> Claiming that Tacitus might have fabricated some of the Annals without running the risk of sounding delusional is difficult, but the reasons the rumor succeeded are too perfect to be true. If the rumor did actually exist, which Tacitus hopes to convince us of, since he says “*set non omiserim eorundem temporum rumorem validum adeo ut nondum exolescat*” (“but I would not pass over a rumour of the time, the strength of which is not yet exhausted”), then Sejanus seems even more cunning for creating a theory against himself in the darkest of times.<sup>16</sup> In any case, it is difficult to be certain because of the tricky underlying nature of Sejanus’s character.

Next, I will critique Tacitus’s claim that Sejanus was “*isdem artibus victus est*” (“conquered by these same weapons”).<sup>17</sup> Did cunning ways actually conquer Sejanus? According to historians, Tiberius became warped and unbalanced in his later years, but this change likely occurred gradually.<sup>18</sup> Tiberius might have become more prone to bad judgments about people; there are testimonies that Tiberius was slow to anger but that his outbursts were formidable.<sup>19</sup> Repressing anger and being hesitant to escalate conflicts are not particularly savvy ways of dealing with conflict resolution. It seems unlikely that Sejanus would have been conquered cunningly by Tiberius, although sections 4.1 through 4.34 do not reveal by whom Sejanus was allegedly betrayed before his execution.<sup>20</sup> According to other sources, such as Josephus, Livilla’s mother Antonia made Tiberius aware of Sejanus’s plot to overthrow him before Sejanus’s death, painting Tiberius as even more clueless than he was in 4.8.<sup>21</sup> Perhaps Sejanus simply overextended his circle of trust; whether it was Antonia or another person, historians believe Sejanus was likely betrayed by confiding in someone who eventually exposed his plans to Tiberius and his allies, notwithstanding other possible types of slip-ups that he could have made. In any case, Sejanus’s situation with Livilla shows the limits of his cunning. Although seducing her may have seemed like a shrewd move to gain influence within the imperial family, it was also a very reckless decision. By aligning himself so intimately with Livilla, Sejanus left a trail of suspicion that stemmed from his underestimation of the long-term risks of having powerful, well-

<sup>15</sup> Tacitus, *Annales*, ed. Henry Furneaux (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1907), 4.11.

<sup>16</sup> Tacitus, *Annales*, ed. Henry Furneaux (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1907), 4.10.

<sup>17</sup> Tacitus, *Annales*, ed. Henry Furneaux (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1907), 4.1.

<sup>18</sup> David Shotter, *Tiberius Caesar* (London: Routledge, 1992).

<sup>19</sup> Shotter, *Tiberius Caesar*, 1992.

<sup>20</sup> Shotter, *Tiberius Caesar*, 1992.

<sup>21</sup> Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 18.6, trans. Louis H. Feldman, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965).

connected enemies who might catch up to his personal life. The possibility that Antonia ultimately exposed Sejanus demonstrates that his alliances may not have been as solid as he believed, which was a fundamental flaw in his planning.

Although Sejanus used ruthless methods to satisfy his ambitions and undoubtedly sowed chaos within the government, it should be acknowledged that he used his cunning to stabilize Rome during a time of division. In 4.17, there was tension between Tiberius and Agrippina's supporters as Tiberius resented that the pontiffs honored the young Nero and Drusus equally. Tiberius, known to be quite bitter, confronted the pontiffs. Although he only rebuked them mildly due to their status, he suspected Agrippina's influence, which only increased tensions. At that point, Sejanus said "*ac ni resistatur, fore pluris*" ("and if resistance were not made, the [supporters of Agrippina] would be more numerous").<sup>22</sup> This, along with his suggestion "*neque aliud gliscentis discordiae remedium quam si unus alterve maxime prompti subverterentur*" ("and there is no other remedy for the gliding discord than if one or the other should be overthrown most readily") revealed how well Sejanus understood the inherent vulnerabilities in the fragile imperial system.<sup>23</sup> The fact that Sejanus "*incusabatque diductam civitatem ut civili bello*" ("was accusing the captured city of being in a civil war") shows that he understood Tiberius's perspective on the political climate, even though Tiberius was particularly good at repressing his feelings.<sup>24</sup>

At this point, Sejanus had endeared himself to Tiberius and was now exploiting the emperor's growing mistrust of the Senate and the Roman aristocracy. However, Sejanus's growing influence also made him more reliant on using intimidation tactics to control his subjects. In 4.18, Tacitus writes, "*Qua causa C. Silius et Titium Sabinum adgreditur. amicitia Germanici perniciosa utrique*"—"from which cause [Sejanus] attacked C. Silius and T. Sabinus. The friendship of Germanicus was fatal to both."<sup>25</sup> It is difficult to argue that Sejanus's new methods of retaining power, such as outright killing the leaders of the rival faction, are cunning. On the other hand, this methodical abuse of power in a system without many checks and balances could perhaps be Tacitus's broad critique of Tiberius's system, showing that even if Tiberius himself was a cautious man, the narrow channel of imperial power would eventually be threatened by sycophants looking for a meteoric rise to the top.

In 4.19, we see another example of Silius using his cunning nature to prosecute supporters of Agrippina. The supporters in question were Silius and Sosia Galla, husband and wife, who "*caritate Agrippinae invisa principi*"—"were hated by the princeps because of Sosia's love of Agrippina".<sup>26</sup> To prosecute them, Sejanus cleverly exploited an old feud involving them and Varro: "*immissusque Varro consul qui paternas inimicitias obtendens odiis Seiani per dedecus suum gratificabatur*".<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, he likely told Tiberius to refuse to deny Silius's

<sup>22</sup> Tacitus, *Annales*, ed. Henry Furneaux (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1907), 4.20.

<sup>23</sup> Tacitus, *Annales*, ed. Henry Furneaux (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1907), 4.34.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. 4.34.

<sup>25</sup> Tacitus, *Annales*, ed. Henry Furneaux (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1907), 4.18.

<sup>26</sup> Tacitus, *Annales*, ed. Henry Furneaux (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1907), 4.52.

<sup>27</sup> Tacitus, *Annales*, ed. Henry Furneaux (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1907), 4.66.



request to delay the trial until Varro's consulship ended: "*precante reo brevem moram, dum accusator consulatu abiret, adversatus est Caesar.*"<sup>28</sup> He was also the mastermind behind the corrupt legal procedure. Sejanus clearly convinced Silius and Sosia that they could not escape the charges presented against them: "*nec dubie repetundarum criminibus haerebant, sed cuncta quaestione maiestatis exercita*", and so with their fates sealed, Silius promptly killed himself: "*Silius imminentem damnationem voluntario sine praevertit.*"<sup>29</sup> In this case, Sejanus relied on exploiting existing tensions, which were effective in the short term. However, Sejanus's heavy-handed tactics and growing preference for brute force over subtlety eroded his safety. In a sense, Sejanus had to become more opportunistic after coming to power, exploiting Varro's personal vendetta, since his enemies would know about him before he knew about them. This contrasts with the past, when Sejanus had carefully planned conspiracies against people whom he had made his targets long before they realized the threat that he posed.

Part of the reason why Sejanus rose to power under Tiberius might have been because the princeps saw himself, a master manipulator, in Sejanus.<sup>30</sup> If true, he must have known of Sejanus's desire for power. However, the fact that Tiberius was complicit in Sejanus's rise makes the emperor's judgment questionable. Was he tolerating Sejanus's overreach because he himself was wary of the Senate? We cannot forget that Sejanus consolidated the Praetorian Guard into a single camp, which, from Tiberius's point of view, reinforced his ability to rule through fear.<sup>31</sup> This perspective makes Sejanus less of a cunning mastermind and more of an instrument for Tiberius, with Tiberius allowing him to flourish until he becomes too dangerous to ignore. Of course, this theory would force us to accept that Tiberius voluntarily lowered his guard to let someone similar to him in ruling style do his dirty work for him. Perhaps Tiberius believed he could mold Sejanus into a more mature ruler, making him more strategic than he might have been during his rise. Sejanus was no stranger to using third parties like Lygdus. Still, in the case of prosecuting Silius and Sosia, during which Tiberius's influence was probably showing its early signs, he used the sophistication of the law to assist him in crushing his enemies. In this sense, Tiberius himself was the true master manipulator over Sejanus, turning him into a tyrant and someone worthy of replacing him.<sup>32</sup>

There are other signs that Sejanus picked up on things from Tiberius, such as when Sejanus easily exploited divisions within the ruling class to show the fragility of the imperial system. By accusing Agrippina's supporters of "*gliscentis discordiae*" ("growing discord"), Sejanus cleverly framed himself as a defender of stability while actively undermining the system. However, it is hard to say whether this says more about the regime's vulnerabilities than Sejanus's brilliance. His new reliance on intimidation and opportunism made him

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid. 4.66.

<sup>29</sup> Tacitus, *Annales*, ed. Henry Furneaux (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1907), 4.66, 4.68.

<sup>30</sup> Levick, *Tiberius the Politician*, 1999.

<sup>31</sup> Tacitus, *Annales*, ed. Henry Furneaux (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1907), 4.2.

<sup>32</sup> Ronald Syme, *Tacitus*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958).

vulnerable to betrayal, as seen with Antonia. To be even more critical, one could claim that he rose to power because of favorable temporary alliances, rather than his political acumen.

Sejanus was undoubtedly skilled at manipulating people, but he relied on opportunistic tactics, unlike Tiberius. In addition, Tiberius mistrusted the Senate and Agrippina's supporters when Sejanus became relevant, so it might be dangerous to attribute much of Sejanus's success to his cunningness and shrewdness. His story demonstrates how the Roman imperial system was a fertile ground for sycophants like himself to rise to power, but in the same vein, a fertile ground for them to fall as quickly as they grew. Ultimately, Sejanus's life epitomizes the corrosive effects of seeking power at all costs, and along with it, the nontrivial human cost of political ambition.



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