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# AGRIPPINA, THEODORA AND FREDEGUND AS EVIL EMPRESSES IN THE HISTORIOGRAPHIC TRADITION\*

*Martijn Icks*

When contemplating character assassination, we are inclined to think first and foremost of attacks on living targets, such as candidates calling each other names in an election campaign, members of the opposition smearing an incumbent leader, or the press bashing an unpopular minister. When contemplating character assassins, most of us will think of politicians, spin doctors and journalists. Few will associate practices of smear and slander with historians, who may rather conjure up images of dusty archives and ivory towers. As professional scrutinizers and caretakers of the past, historians are not supposed to be partisan, but to provide impartial reconstructions of times gone by, based on a careful consideration of the evidence – in the words of the nineteenth-century historian Leopold von Ranke, to describe the past “as it has actually been” (Vierhaus, 1977). At the same time, their key role in recording and interpreting the past gives historians a considerable amount of control over the posthumous reputation of historical figures. While they are by no means the sole guardians of collective memory – monuments, stories, rituals and symbols all have their role to play – their verdict can definitely have a long-lasting impact. (See Burke, 1989 for history as social memory and the historian’s role in shaping it.)

Before historiography, the writing of history, became an academic endeavour in the nineteenth century, the potential of historians to establish or destroy the characters of the great men and women of the past was perhaps more evident. Modern academic debate on historical figures is a never-ending process of contesting and fine-tuning interpretations, of weighing arguments against counterarguments. In pre-modern times, most historians considered themselves less bound by strict notions of fairness and objectivity. Rather than seeing their portrayal of characters and events as one particular interpretation in an ongoing debate, they often presented their accounts as definitive. If they found an appreciative audience, their histories would still be read long after the kings, queens and generals they discussed had passed out of living memory. That made them a force to be reckoned with indeed. No matter how much effort a ruler made to polish his image during his lifetime, erecting grand monuments to his glory and displaying himself in splendour, he could not ultimately control how he would be remembered by posterity. Those writing the account of his reign often could, and did.

In this chapter, I will discuss three historical figures who have fallen victim to fierce character attacks in the historiographic record: the Roman empress Agrippina the Younger (15–59 CE), the Byzantine empress Theodora (c. 500–548 CE) and the Frankish queen Fredegund († 597 CE). It is no exaggeration to state that they are traditionally regarded as the most notorious imperial women of their respective cultures. All three lived in ancient or early medieval times, when historians were inclined to regard the writing of history as an expressly moralizing exercise, often allowing themselves ample room to shape the course of events into a compelling dramatic narrative and to portray historical figures as heroes or villains. (For a general discussion of Roman (imperial) and (early) medieval historiography, see Breisach, 1994, pp. 60–106; Lendon, 2002; Spiegel, 2002.)

Historiographic works are a relatively rare commodity for the ancient and early medieval world, in part because only a small elite had the required literary skills and leisure to write history, in part also because many works have not survived the ravishes of time. As a consequence, the posthumous reputations of Agrippina, Theodora and Fredegund have each in large part been established by a single hostile author: respectively, the historians Tacitus, Procopius and Gregory of Tours.<sup>2</sup> It is no coincidence that these perpetrators are all men, while the persons they wrote against are all women. Agrippina, Theodora and Fredegund were empresses and queens who wielded a remarkable amount of influence in patriarchal societies that tended to regard rulership as the exclusive domain of men, which made them stand out as potential targets for character attacks. (For Roman and early Byzantine empresses, see Bauman, 1992; Wood, 1999; Kunst and Riemer, 2000; Temporini–Gräfin Vitzthum, 2002; Kolb, 2010; for Merovingian queens, see Dailey, 2015.)

It will be the purpose of this chapter to examine how ancient and early medieval historians cast powerful women in a negative light. At times, I will also comment on the way these women's bad reputations related to the reputations of the men they were closely associated with, their husbands and sons. In my analysis, I will give due consideration to the five “pillars” of character assassination (see Chapter 1 of this volume): attacker, target, medium, audience and context. Among the questions to be addressed are the following: What were Agrippina, Theodora and Fredegund attacked for? How were these accusations related to their gender and the roles women were expected to play in ancient and early medieval cultures? Who were the historians who attacked them, what motivated their attacks and what audiences were they trying to convince?

Evidently, the three cases under discussion cover a broad range, from first-century Rome to sixth-century Constantinople and Merovingian France. In many ways, the historians responsible for the character attacks stand in different cultural and religious traditions from each other. Nevertheless, all three of them employ a moralizing historiographic discourse against female members of the ruling family. While it would be ill-advised to assume that these three cases are entirely representative of broader trends, their comparison allows us to explore the various ways in which such historiographic discourses could be put to use to engage in character assassination.

### **Agrippina and Tacitus**

It is hard to imagine a woman with better family connections than Julia Agrippina (15–59 CE), better known as Agrippina the Younger.<sup>3</sup> She was a descendant of Emperor Augustus, the founder of the Julio-Claudian dynasty, a granddaughter of Emperor Tiberius, a sister of Emperor Caligula, a niece of Emperor Claudius, whom she married, and the mother of Emperor Nero. If she had been born a man, she would have been a strong candidate for the imperial purple. Since that road was barred to her, she satisfied her ambitions by exerting influence through the men around her – particularly her husband Claudius (r. 41–54 CE) and her son Nero (r. 54–68 CE),

who finally freed himself from her meddling by having her murdered. Agrippina's high profile and strong-willed character have made her an irresistible object of study to modern historians, who tend to present us with a more nuanced view than that of the black-hearted harridan we encounter in most of the ancient sources (e.g., Barrett, 1996; Foubert, 2006; Ginsburg, 2006; Baus, 2015).

Agrippina's bad reputation has been established above all by Publius Cornelius Tacitus (c. 56–120 CE), generally regarded as the greatest historian of imperial Rome. Like most Roman authors, he belonged to the elite, having been born to a family of equestrian rank and later gaining admittance to the highest social class, that of the senators. His major historical works, the *Histories* and the *Annals*, the latter featuring Agrippina, were written in the early second century CE. They present us with a vivid, but gloomy picture of life in Rome under the emperors. Tacitus was a cultural pessimist who lamented the loss of freedom that one-man-rule had brought, particularly to his own senatorial class, whose attitude towards the autocratic Caesars he characterized as defined by flattery, unease and secret resentment. These themes will certainly have resonated with his primary audience, which consisted of fellow senators and other members of the Roman elite who had the leisure and cultural baggage to read history (Syme, 1958; Mellor, 2011; Strunk, 2017).

Tacitus's portrayal of Agrippina is extremely hostile – even more so than her notorious predecessor Messalina, she emerges as the great female villain of the *Annals*. It might seem strange that the historian devotes so much time and effort to the vilification of a woman who had passed away before he was five years old and whose heyday lay half a century in the past at the time of writing. His negative take becomes more understandable when placed in the context of the moralizing discourse of the time. Roman authors thought that history should be truthful, but also provide the reader with *exempla* (anecdotal examples) of virtue and wickedness; the former to inspire imitation, the latter to discourage it. Hence the heroic or reprehensible deeds of historical actors were celebrated or denounced to instil moral lessons (Roller, 2004; 2009; Mehl, 2014). In the *Annals*, Tacitus remarked that it was the historian's primary duty “to ensure that merit shall not lack its record and to hold before the vicious word and deed the terrors of posterity and infamy” (3.65). Throughout the work, emperors, empresses, senators and other individuals are constantly held up to moral scrutiny – and often found wanting.

Before we turn to Tacitus's attacks on Agrippina, it is good to stress that he was by no means the empress's original character assassin. In the tragic play *Octavia*, for instance, probably performed not long after Nero's death, she already appears in ghostly form as a cruel, ambitious woman who did not hesitate to murder her own husband. (See Kragelund, 2016 for a detailed discussion of the play.) In general, many negative stories about imperial women in historiographic works will have originated in contemporary rumours and allegations, meant to smear the men with whom they associated and to chastise them for overstepping gender boundaries (Ginsburg, 2006, pp. 106–107). Tacitus could tap into this hostile tradition to construct his own image of Agrippina.

### ***Attacks on Agrippina***

The theme of power and domination runs through Tacitus's account of Agrippina. Referring to her marriage to Claudius, which made Agrippina the undisputed “first lady” of Rome, the historian leaves no doubt who was henceforth in charge:

From this moment it was a changed state [*versa ex eo civitas*], 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 [*quasi virile servitium*].

(Annals 12.7)

The quote is significant for several reasons. Firstly, it paints a contrast between Agrippina and Messalina, Claudius's previous wife and the mother of his only son, Britannicus. While this empress had also been cast in a very negative light in the *Annals*, her image is that of a frivolous woman who shows no interest in political power for its own sake, but is driven by her insatiable sexual desires (Joshel, 1997). For Agrippina, as the reader will soon learn, power and control are everything. Secondly, the words *versa ex eo civitas* echo the words Tacitus had used at the beginning of the *Annals* to indicate the commencement of Augustus's sole rule after his victory at Actium: *verso civitatis statu*, "it was thus an altered world" (1.4.1). Agrippina is thus implicitly compared to Rome's first emperor, a clear hint that she and not Claudius holds the reins of government. This can also be gleaned from the fact that Tacitus's narrative does not focus on the emperor from this point onwards, but puts the spotlight on the empress instead (Ginsburg, 2006, pp. 19–21).

We encounter several negative female stereotypes in Tacitus's portrayal of Agrippina. One of these is the image of the *dux femina* or "commander woman". Tacitus uses this term in a literal sense to refer to barbarian queens like the British Boudicca who lead their armies in the field, but also applies it to women who encroach on the masculine domain by aspiring to political and military influence (Ginsburg, 2006, pp. 112–116; see also Icks, 2017, pp. 71–74 for the literary depictions of Agrippina and Boudicca as authorial comments on a lack of "proper" male authority). According to the historian, Agrippina burned "with all the passions of illicit power" (13.2). Time and again during the reigns of Claudius and Nero, she attempts to cross boundaries that are meant to shut women out from political and military matters. Tacitus presents us with a series of examples: Agrippina sitting in state before the Roman standards receiving homage from captives of war, "the advertisement of her claim to a partnership in the empire" (12.37); Agrippina listening in on Senate meetings, which were moved to a different location for her convenience (13.5); Agrippina preparing to ascend the imperial tribunal while Nero was receiving a foreign embassy and only being prevented from doing so because her son hastily came down to greet her (13.5).

Yet no matter how domineering and power-crazy she may have been, Tacitus makes it clear that the empress could only exercise her will through the men she sought to control. Throughout the narrative, we see her scheming and deceiving to get her way. In her relationship with Claudius, Agrippina is clearly the dominant partner, manipulating the docile emperor to do her bidding through accusations, threats and pleas. Their roles appear to have been shaped after those of stock characters from comic theatre, with Agrippina playing the *matrona imperiosa* (commandeering wife) to Claudius's *senex stultus* (old fool) (Ginsburg, 2006, p. 23). Many of the empress's actions also fit another negative female stereotype, that of the *saeva noverca* or wicked step-mother: after all, she intrudes in her husband's family to rob the legitimate heir (Britannicus) of his inheritance and secure it for her own son – an inversion of the protective role mothers were supposed to play (Watson, 1995, pp. 192–197; Ginsburg, 2006, pp. 107–112). Nero, however, proved more difficult to control than Claudius, prompting Tacitus to comment that Agrippina was "capable of presenting her son with an empire but not of tolerating him as emperor" (12.64).

Other traits Agrippina is frequently associated with in the *Annals* include fierceness and ruthlessness. She is described as *ferox* and *atrox*, both words meaning "fierce" and usually applied to men; yet another indication that the empress is aspiring to a masculine role (Ginsburg, 2006, pp. 37–38, 41–42; see also Kaplan, 1979). The people who stand in her way tend to meet a grim

fate. Some of them fall victim to false charges, such as the noblewomen Lollia and Calpurnia, who roused Agrippina's jealousy as potential rivals for the affections of Claudius (12.22); or the tutors of Britannicus, who met exile or death because they stood in support of their pupil (12.41). At other times, the empress even stoops to murder – for instance in the case of the proconsul Junius Silanus, whom she has poisoned as a potential claimant to the imperial purple (13.1); and of course in the case of Claudius himself, who is removed to make room for Nero (12.66–67).

Finally, there are accusations of sexual transgression to be considered, a stock-in-trade of the “bad empress” in Roman literature (Ginsburg, 2006, pp. 116–130). Agrippina has no use for marital fidelity: she starts an affair with the imperial freedman Pallas, a powerful influence at court who had brokered her marriage to the emperor and later persuades him to favour Nero over Britannicus as his heir (12.25). Tacitus also highlights the incestuous nature of Agrippina's marriage to Claudius, who was her uncle (12.5–7).<sup>4</sup> Even more damning are the empress's actions in her final years, when her grip on Nero is slipping: in an ultimate attempt to bring him back under her spell, “she presented herself on several occasions to her half-tipsy son, coquet-tishly dressed and prepared for incest” (14.2). All of these transgressions are not committed from lust, but from ambition. The message is clear: when power was at stake, there was nothing Agrippina was not prepared to do.

### Theodora and Procopius

If Agrippina had unsurpassed family connections, the opposite is true for Theodora (c. 500–548 CE), whose father was a Constantinopolitan circus bear trainer. She spent her early years in the entertainment business, working as an actress and possibly engaging in prostitution, although the latter may just be a slur. In a remarkable rags-to-riches story, she caught the eye of the future emperor Justinian (r. 527–565 CE), who was apparently so smitten by her beauty and sharp mind that he took her as his wife – a union only made possible after the repeal of a law forbidding men of senatorial rank to marry actresses. Once she had gained the throne on her husband's side, Theodora was not content to stay in the background, but played a prominent role in public affairs. Given her remarkable biography, it will come as no surprise that she has garnered more scholarly attention than any other Byzantine empress (e.g., Cesaretti, 2004; Evans, 2011; Potter, 2015).

Our main source of information on Theodora's life is the contemporary author Procopius of Caesarea (c. 500–555 CE), who hailed from a local aristocratic family and was involved in several military campaigns across the Mediterranean as the legal adviser and personal secretary of Belisarius, Justinian's foremost general. The three great works he produced give complementary accounts of Justinian's reign, but from very different angles. The *History of the Wars*, concerned with the regime's military activities, gives a critical but balanced assessment of the emperor; whereas the *Buildings*, commissioned by Justinian himself, is a panegyric to the man's architectural achievements (Rubin, 1954; Cameron, 1985; Kaldellis, 2004b; Treadgold, 2007, pp. 176–226). However, Procopius struck a much more hostile tone in his third work, the *Anecdota* or *Secret History*, revealing his thorough disillusionment with the imperial administration. In bitter terms, the author associates Justinian, Theodora and their cronies with tyranny, repression, corruption and greed. The resulting work is not a history in the traditional sense of the word, but rather calls to mind the Classical court orations of Lysias and Demosthenes, presenting a damning case against the individuals it seeks to attack (Treadgold, 2007, p. 209).

Evidently, caution was in order. The *Secret History* or *Anecdota* received those titles<sup>5</sup> for a reason: it was never published during the author's lifetime. In all likelihood, the work was

composed in the years immediately following Theodora's death in 548 CE. However, since Justinian was still alive, it would have been very risky, if not downright suicidal, to bring it out in the open. Procopius may have intended to incorporate the hostile material in the *Wars* after the emperor's death, but it turned out that Justinian would outlive him, so the opportunity never arose (Treadgold, 2007, p. 187; Kaldellis, 2010, pp. xxv–ii). Presumably, the *Secret History* circulated discreetly among factions which were opposed to the imperial regime and sympathized with Procopius's grim view of current affairs. The readership may have included aristocrats, clergymen, military officers, civil servants, provincials and philosophers who had been antagonized by Justinian's many innovative and often repressive measures (Beck, 1986, p. 23; Kaldellis, 2004b, pp. 1–2). There is no way to tell how widely the work was read, but it evidently managed to survive somehow, far outlasting its author as well as the targets of its vitriol.

### *Attacks on Theodora*

There is a remarkable dichotomy to Procopius's attacks on Theodora. Although allegations of sexual depravity play no role in her portrayal as empress, the detailed account of her youthful days as an entertainer in Chapter 9 of the *Secret History* focuses heavily on her lewd behaviour. Taking into account the ancient notion that character was constant, the moral flaws revealed in this chapter reflect badly on Theodora's later life as well, even if her conduct may then have been beyond reproach in this regard (Ziche, 2012–13, p. 318).

Procopius claims that the future empress started prostituting herself as soon as she was old enough to do so, putting "her whole body to work" for her customers (9.11–12). The author repeatedly stresses the shamelessness with which she put herself on display, stripping for any passers-by and climbing on a couch during a dinner party to lift her clothes up and make a spectacle of herself (9.14; 9.17). Particularly scandalous is the story that she had geese peck barley grains off her genitals in a stage act (9.20–21). Such tales fit a long-standing discourse depicting actors and prostitutes as infamous because they put their bodies on display for the pleasure of others (Edwards, 1997). Theodora's insatiable sexual appetite is another well-worn trope: she actively flirts with potential customers, especially beardless youths (9.15), complains that her body only has three orifices for penetration (9.18) and wears out dozens of virile lovers during all-night orgies (9.16).

Hartmut Ziche has suggested that the sexual slanders against Theodora are in line with invective against male tyrants, evoking notoriously lewd emperors such as Tiberius and Caligula. Based on this assumption, he argues that the stories depict Theodora as a "bad emperor" rather than a "bad empress" (Ziche, 2012–13). However, the historical figure most readily brought to mind by the scandalous account of the empress's youthful days is another notorious empress, the insatiable Messalina. The claim that Theodora could wear out numerous lovers in a single night is reminiscent of Pliny the Elder's claim that Messalina out-competed the most accomplished prostitute of her day by sleeping with twenty-five men in twenty-four hours (*Natural History* 10.172; Baldwin, 1987).

We encounter a very different Theodora in the passages of the *Secret History* discussing her years on the throne. Here, we see her ruthlessly laying hands on the property of her subjects by any means possible, either alone or in collusion with her husband (e.g., 3.9; 11.40; 12.12; 15.22), while inflicting torture or death on anyone who rouses her wrath or stands in her way (e.g., 3.8; 3.9–11; 17.43–44). Although she and Justinian are presented as very different characters, they are both terrible persons, defined by greed and bloodthirstiness (Kaldellis, 2010, p. xxxiii). Procopius claims the emperor and empress often pretended to support different sides in legal disputes, but only to plunder the maximum amount of money from the disputants (10.19). In other matters,

the imperial pair were also in cahoots, pretending to advocate different causes or policies but secretly working together (e.g., 10.14; 10.23; 13.9; 14.8). The resulting impression is that of a thoroughly corrupt regime that never ceases to deceive and exploit its own subjects.

Unlike Tacitus, Procopius does not construct his narrative around the theme of a woman aspiring to masculine power, but that does not mean he was entirely comfortable with Theodora's prominent role at the Byzantine court. He laments that Justinian was so smitten with his mistress that he enabled her to "acquire extraordinary power and vast amounts of money", remarking that "the state itself became fuel for the fire of his passion" (9.31–32). Once she had become empress, Theodora gave herself airs, receiving foreign embassies and presenting them with gifts of money, "as if the Roman Empire<sup>6</sup> lay under her command, a thing that had never yet happened in all of history" (30.24). Allegedly, she "had no regard for the dignity of office or the rights of the state" (17.15), broke laws without hesitation when she was out to get someone (16.22), made herself inaccessible to the magistrates who wished to speak with her (15.13–16) and maintained a network of secret informers (16.14). All of this was bad enough, but Theodora went so far as to undermine male authority throughout the Empire, with devastating consequences for public morality:

It was during this time that the morals of all women too were corrupted. For they were given full license to cheat on their husbands and no risk or harm could come to them because of their behaviour. Even those convicted of adultery remained unpunished, because they would go straight to the empress and turn the tables by hauling their husbands into court through a countersuit, despite the fact that the men had been charged with no crimes.

(*Secret History* 17.24)

According to Procopius, Theodora and Justinian were of one mind in their opposition to virtue and common wellbeing. Whenever they discovered that one of their subordinates was a virtuous man, they reacted with dismay and hastened to destroy him (22.35). The emperor was "earnestly devoted to the constant destruction of mankind", an endeavour in which his wife was happy to assist him (13.8). Together, they succeeded in "[devastating] all of mankind and [visiting] disaster upon the entire inhabited world" (12.16). In fact, Procopius suggests that "these two never seemed to be human beings at all but rather murderous demons of some kind" (12.14). An acolyte who gains access to Justinian is certain he faces "the Lord of Demons himself, . . . seated on the throne right there in the palace" (12.26), while Theodora is also repeatedly associated with demonic forces (12.32; 22.28). Averil Cameron has pointed out that such accusations are to be expected: not only were demons a readily available explanation for evil or misfortune from a Christian perspective, but the charge also constitutes a neat inversion of imperial claims to a superhuman status (Cameron, 1985, pp. 56–57). If Justinian and Theodora boasted to be in league with the divine, suggesting the opposite became a fruitful strategy of attack.

### **Fredegund and Gregory of Tours**

Like Theodora, Fredegund († 597 CE) was not born to high nobility, but rose to power because she ignited a spark in a ruler's heart – in her case, King Chilperic I of Neustria (r. 561–584 CE). The latter belonged to the Frankish dynasty of the Merovingians, whose members ruled several oft-warring kingdoms in sixth-century France and environs. Probably starting out as a servant, Fredegund became the king's lover and eventually his spouse. Allegedly, Chilperic had his second wife, Galswintha, murdered to marry her, leading to a life-long feud between Fredegund



and Galswintha's sister, Queen Brunhilda of Austrasia. After her husband's death, she acted as regent for her infant son Chlothar II. Historical tradition paints Fredegund as a cruel, vindictive woman who did not hesitate to send assassins against anyone who stood in her way, but two recent biographies cast the queen in a more flattering light, calling attention to her positive qualities, such as her strong will and determination (Bernet, 2012; Farnoux, 2013).

Our main source for the history of Merovingian France, including the life of Fredegund, is Gregory of Tours (c. 538–594 CE). Hailing from an aristocratic family with roots in the senatorial nobility of Roman Gaul, he became bishop of Tours in 573 CE, a prestigious post which brought him in contact with the highest circles of power. Despite his many responsibilities, Gregory found time to pen an impressive oeuvre, including many saints' lives. His magnum opus was without a doubt the *History of the Franks*,<sup>7</sup> whose books 5 to 10 provide a detailed narrative of the politics, murders and intrigues in the various Frankish kingdoms of his day and has earned him the honorific "father of French history". Although the historian tends to keep himself in the background, he was often personally involved in these affairs and had met many of the people he wrote about (Goffart, 1988, pp. 112–234; Verdon, 1989; Dailey, 2015).

In all likelihood, Gregory envisioned a broad and varied readership, ranging from kings, queens and aristocrats to clerks, monks and pious laymen. In particular, he may have aimed his *History* at the many pilgrims who came to visit St. Martin's grave at Tours. The work has a clear moral message, describing how pious people are trying to lead a good life in a world rife with violence and sin (Dailey, 2015, pp. 1–15). Fredegund was definitely among the sinful as far as Gregory was concerned – perhaps more so than any other major character in the *History*. It would be fair to say that the relation between the bishop and the queen was less than amiable. Gregory held her personally accountable for the murder of a good friend, Bishop Praetextatus of Rouen. He also had close ties to the Austrasian court, where Fredegund's arch enemy Brunhilda was an influential figure; she shared his devotion to St. Martin and was involved in his promotion to the position of bishop of Tours (Venantius Fortunatus, *Carmina* 5.3; Dailey, 2015, pp. 142–145).

In one remarkable passage of the *History*, Gregory relates how he was summoned to court by King Chilperic on the charge of slandering his wife. Allegedly, he had accused Fredegund of adultery, a charge which reflected badly on the king as well (5.49). Although the bishop managed to get acquitted and hence escaped a death sentence, it shows he had to be careful in what he said and wrote about powerful people who were still alive. Nevertheless, the *History of the Franks* is full of terrible tales about Fredegund – perhaps because its author feared the queen less than he feared the king.

### ***Attacks on Fredegund***

Although Gregory's narrative does not focus on Fredegund to the extent that Tacitus's narrative focused on Agrippina, the Frankish queen emerges as an equally terrifying figure. Whenever she is mentioned in the *History*, she is usually engaged in acts of violence, murder and torture. It has been suggested that we should regard Fredegund's pursuit of violence as part of a strategy of revenge against adversaries by which the Merovingian aristocracy, men as well as women, restored their wounded honour and hence confirmed their position at the top of the social hierarchy (Gradowicz-Pancer, 2002). However, Erin Dailey contests the assumption that women independently and openly using violence was accepted practice in Merovingian France (Dailey, 2015, pp. 156–159). At any rate, it seems clear that Gregory's stories about the violent actions of Fredegund are not meant as a recommendation, but aim to portray her as a dangerous, cruel and ruthless woman.

Reading the *History of the Franks*, one gets the impression that the Neustrian queen spent most of her time sending out assassins against anyone whose death would bring her political gain or whom she felt had wronged her in some way. She is implicated in many of the murders and attempted murders that riddle Gregory's work, although her involvement often appears to be based on little more than rumour. Allegedly, Fredegund was responsible for the assassination of King Sigebert I of Austrasia (4.51). The historian suggests she may also have had a hand in the deaths of Merovech and Clovis, Chilperic's sons from a previous marriage (5.14; 5.39). Others she is alleged to have sent assassins against include Queen Brunhilda of Austrasia, King Guntram of Burgundy and King Childebert II of Austrasia, although she failed to have them killed (7.20; 8.44; 10.18). In addition, there are numerous references to Fredegund inflicting gruesome torture on her victims, including her own servants and failed assassins (e.g., 5.39; 6.32; 6.34; 7.15; 7.20; 8.41). There are even hints that the queen was involved in witchcraft, which was closely associated with poison, for instance in the story that she drugged two reluctant assassins to make them carry out her will (8.29) and in her denouncement as *malefica* by a royal envoy, a word that can mean both "witch" and "evil-doer" (7.41; Dailey, 2015, pp. 136–138).

Gregory goes into great detail about the conflict between Fredegund and Bishop Praetextatus of Rouen, who was accused of supporting a rebellion against Chilperic. The historian, who was involved in the trial, presents his colleague and friend as an innocent victim of the ruthless queen, claiming that Fredegund tried to bribe him to help her take Praetextatus down. Although Gregory refused, the other bishops who were present at the trial sided with the royal couple, leading to the man's conviction and exile (5.18). When Praetextatus returned to Rouen after Chilperic's death, Fredegund had him stabbed by one of her lackeys while he was celebrating Easter mass; an astonishing testimony to her godlessness and lack of respect for episcopal authority. The queen even came to gloat at his deathbed, hypocritically promising him to punish the assailant. However, the bishop was not fooled, telling her that she had been "the cause of much evil in this world" (8.31). (See Gradowicz-Pancer, 2003 for a detailed discussion of this episode.)

Apart from the pain and death she inflicted on her victims, Fredegund was also a bad queen because she failed as a mother (Dailey, 2015, pp. 131–134). She frequently came to blows with her daughter Rigunth, who relentlessly scorned her for her low birth. This led to an infamous episode in which the queen lured her daughter to a chest full of necklaces and jewels, inviting her to take whatever she wanted. When Rigunth complied, "her mother suddenly seized the lid and slammed it down on her neck. She leant on it with all her might and the edge of the chest pressed so hard against the girl's throat that her eyes were soon standing out of her head" (9.34). Gregory also relates how Fredegund was prepared to abandon her infant son Samson to his fate when he fell ill without even having him baptized (and thus endangering his chances of going to heaven), apparently afraid that she would catch the disease (5.22). When two of her other children caught dysentery, she temporarily repented of her sins, but the children died anyway (5.34) and the irredeemable Fredegund was soon back to her old tricks.

King Chilperic is treated in somewhat milder terms than his wife; in fact, Gregory at times suggests that he committed evil deeds on her instigation (e.g., 5.18; 5.39). However, after reporting the king had passed away, the historian provides a scathing obituary, characterizing the deceased monarch as "the Nero and Herod of our times" (6.46). This strongly suggests that Gregory was holding back his contempt while it was still too risky to voice it openly; after all, Tours fell under the dominion of Chilperic for most of the first half of his episcopate (Wood, 1993, pp. 254–257). Strikingly, the historian appears to have had no such reservations in reporting the murderous exploits of Fredegund. Yet one charge he did not level against her in books 5 and 6 of the *History* was adultery; undoubtedly, his trial for slander had taught him that this

was a no-go area as far as Chilperic was concerned. Only in later books, written after the king's death, did he raise doubts about Fredegund's marital fidelity; most notably in his remark that her son Chlothar was "said to be" [*dicitur*] fathered by Chilperic (8.31; Wood, 1993, pp. 257–259).

Dailey has commented on the way Gregory's narrative consistently contrasts Fredegund with her arch enemy, Queen Brunhilda of Austrasia. Where the former is portrayed as a bad influence on her husband, a bad mother and a cold-blooded murderess, the latter is portrayed as a charming spouse, a devoted mother and an innocent victim of several assassination attempts. However, taking other sources such as the *Fredegar Chronicle* into account, Brunhilda's ruthless politicking does not appear all that different from Fredegund's. She certainly died an ignominious death: torn apart by horses on conviction of possibly as many as ten (!) charges of regicide. It seems, then, that Gregory's oppositional portraits of the two queens tell us more about his own preferences and allegiances than about their actual moral fibre. By stressing the virtues of the one, real or alleged, the vices of the other became all the more appalling (Dailey, 2015, pp. 118–140).

## Conclusion

The vivid portraits of Agrippina, Theodora and Fredegund painted by hostile historians leave the reader with the strong impression that these were horrible people, representing the very worst that monarchical rule – particularly female monarchical rule – had to offer. In this chapter, I have made no attempt to establish the truth or falsehood of the many allegations hurled against these women. (Considering the fragmentary and biased nature of the evidence, that would be no mean task, to say the least.) Reading the *Annals*, the *Secret History* and the *History of the Franks*, however, it seems clear that these works make every effort to cast their targets in a negative light, constantly emphasizing their flaws, downplaying or ignoring their strengths and interpreting their acts in the worst possible way. As such, they are clearly attempts at character assassination.<sup>8</sup>

The empresses discussed in this chapter emerge as distinct personalities whose individual vices and foul deeds are measured by the varying cultural standards of their detractors. Clearly, first-century Rome was a very different place from Merovingian France and Procopius was a very different author from Gregory, with different ideas on proper and improper behaviour for imperial women. Nevertheless, on a general level there are some clear similarities in the way Agrippina, Theodora and Fredegund are presented as "evil". All three are accused of abusing their power to inflict harm on their subjects, either through "legal" means such as rigged trials, or clandestinely through the employment of poison or daggers. In this respect, their behaviour is not much different from that of numerous alleged (male) tyrants in history, from Tiberius to Vladimir Putin.

However, in the case of these empresses there is an aggravating factor: their gender. The historians who write about them problematize the wielding of power by women to varying degrees. For Tacitus, Agrippina's ability to transgress the limitations of her sex and take on a semi-despotic role through the manipulation of her husband and, to a lesser extent, her son, was a dire sign of the deterioration that imperial rule had brought to Roman politics (Ginsburg, 2006, pp. 131–132). Procopius and Gregory did not place so much emphasis on the usurpation of male power by Theodora and Fredegund, but also raised issues with the agency they acquired as imperial women, such as the great influence they had on Justinian and Chilperic. Without question, all three historians make it clear that Agrippina, Theodora and Fredegund did not meet the standards to which they held women in general and imperial women in particular. Many of the character attacks they launch against the empresses relate to their gender, ranging from bad motherhood and the domineering of their husbands to hints of witchcraft and uncontrolled sexuality. Instead of acting as female role models, the notorious trio fails to live up to feminine ideals.

The dynamics of character assassination vary from case to case. Tacitus smeared an empress who had been dead for decades at the time of writing. However, Gregory and Procopius partook in mudslinging against imperial women who were either still alive or whose good reputation was still upheld by the current regime. We can classify the allegations in the *Secret History* and the *History of the Franks* as vertical attacks, in the sense that they were aimed at targets who wielded much more power, prestige and resources than the historians writing against them. This means that Procopius and Gregory took a very real risk when they engaged in character assassination. As we have seen, they employed various strategies to protect themselves. Procopius kept his damning writings secret for all but a like-minded in-group, while Gregory postponed the publication of particularly offensive allegations (such as Fredegund's adultery) to an opportune time.

The significance of these character attacks should not be underestimated. In times without anything resembling a critical and independent press, very few means were available to challenge the positive self-images broadcast by those in power. Dress, ceremony, sculpture and other media would have made Agrippina, Theodora and Fredegund awe-inspiring figures to many contemporaries. Writing history was a way to voice an alternative point of view and reveal the ugly face of power behind the façade, at least to later generations. As Procopius wrote in the introduction to his work:

And yet in the end I was moved to write the history of these deeds by the following consideration, namely that it would also be made perfectly clear to future tyrants that punishment was almost certainly going to befall them on account of their wickedness, as it did those in my narrative. In addition, their deeds and characters would be publicized in writing for all time, which might give some pause to their illegalities.

(*Secret History* 1.8)<sup>9</sup>

Perhaps tyrants were not always punished, at least not during their lifetimes. But through their critical assessments of the high and mighty, Tacitus, Procopius and Gregory helped to set and guard the socio-political norms of their times. Those norms applied to both genders, but imposed particularly strict limitations on female power. Women who refused to play by the rules, or gave off that impression, put their legacy in peril. Regardless of their qualities, they might very well end up as evil empresses.

## Notes

- \* My thanks to Jennifer Keohane and Marlena Whiting for their helpful comments.
1. For the sake of convenience, I will use "imperial" and "empresses" when discussing all three women together, while using "royal" and "queen" when talking exclusively about Fredegund.
  2. Other authors have also written about these female rulers: for instance Suetonius and Cassius Dio in case of Agrippina, Malalas in case of Theodora and the author of the *Fredegar Chronicle* in case of Fredegund, but their works have not reached the same level of influence and will be left out of consideration.
  3. Agrippina Minor in Latin. She was a daughter of Agrippina the Elder (Maior).
  4. Allegedly, Agrippina and her sisters had committed incest with their brother Caligula as well; see Suetonius, *Life of Caligula* 24.1; Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 59.3.6. Unfortunately, Tacitus's account of this period has been lost.
  5. *Anekdotia* means "unpublished material" in Greek. As is often the case with ancient texts, these titles were only assigned to the work in early modern times.
  6. Where modern scholars are inclined to make a (somewhat arbitrary) distinction between the Roman and the Byzantine Empire, the Byzantines themselves did not do so.
  7. The current title dates from the late Carolingian age. In fact, in his work Gregory expresses no particular interest in Frankish identity or the Franks as a people.

8. As we established in our theoretical framework (Chapter 1 of this volume), character attacks do not have to be exclusively or even mainly grounded in falsehoods.
9. Compare the similar sentiment voiced by Tacitus in *Annals* 3.65, quoted earlier in this chapter.

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