

Tacitus' vivid portrayal of Livia, mother of Tiberius, as a scheming, evil stepmother has obscured from modern critics the fact that she rarely, if ever, appears "onstage." Through various devices, Tacitus reports even her most certain words and deeds at a remove; moreover, these tend to involve secrets and confusion. The phrase *uel dolus Liuiiae nouercae* (*Ann.* 1.3.3) that introduces her into the work, in the context of the death of Augustus' grandsons, manages to pack into four words practically the whole of her characterization in Tacitus. Besides the "stepmother" motif (*nouerca*), with its sinister, "behind the scenes" connotations, there is authorial insinuation masked as uncertainty (*uel*), characteristic deceit (*dolus*), and, in the context, something of a distance from the events: although this admittedly comes amidst background material before the *Annales* proper begins, it is by no means the last time Livia's activities will be referred to as having already occurred (indicated by the pluperfect tense or else otherwise made clear in the context), so that the reader does not "see" them happening.

Moreover, *dolus Liuiiae* is, grammatically speaking, an example of what is by far Tacitus' favorite way of referring to her, roughly a third of the time: with a noun, usually abstract, naming some quality or thing associated with or belonging to her, and her name or a word identifying her family role in (usually) the genitive. Thus it is not Livia or even Livia the Stepmother who might have killed Gaius and Lucius, but the *treachery* of Livia the Stepmother. Tacitus uses this construction far less frequently to refer to other figures; other imperial women like Agrippina the Elder or Messalina provide instructive counter-examples.

I will argue that this grammatical "distance" from the narrative is one of many strategies Tacitus uses to keep Livia offstage and so turn her into an almost abstract figure, rarely glimpsed, *possibly* (mis)directing affairs from an undisclosed location. When her actions become known or suspected, they do not usually clarify the situation at hand—and can even lead other characters to misunderstand it. She is thus a perfect expression of the atmosphere Tacitus creates in his narrative of the reign of her son, becoming another tool for the historian to convey Tiberian themes of absence, uncertainty, and discord.