

THE SOCIO-CULTURAL RELEVANCE OF *I, CLAUDIUS*

Harry Perlstadt, Oklahoma University Health Sciences Center

INTRODUCTION

An awareness of the past can often suggest alternative meanings and new interpretations of present day events. This awareness can arise not only from the work of historians and sociologists, but from the treatment of historical events in popular literature and drama. These alternative meanings and interpretations can be organized into sociological themes.

Historical fiction as a form of popular culture places unique constraints on both the creative artist and the enlightened audience. The overall plot is known and is confined to actual historical events and persons. The artist reveals mastery through the intellectual and emotional interactions and interpretations of the characters within the context; and the audience expresses its sophistication through the juxtaposition of current events which it has experienced with the historical events that the artist has realized.

I, Claudius was first published in 1934, and at that time one could have argued that the rise of the Roman Empire and its struggle against the barbarians represented the clouds of World War II, while the crippled Claudius and the forceful Livia represented Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt, ruthlessly protecting their culture and civilization against the onslaughts of barbarians from without and within. But I doubt that this was on the minds of the producers or viewers of *I, Claudius* in the Fall of 1977. The television production may be considered a British commentary on the America of the Viet Nam War era set in the early Roman Empire. What we see is the political machinations of the leaders of the Roman Principate to maintain their power and empire in the wake of domestic turmoil and intermittent guerilla warfare by the barbarians at the borders. What Americans have recently experienced is the political chicanery of two Presidents to preserve their power and world leadership in the face of social change at home and intervention in a civil war of self-determination in South East Asia. The focus of the television production of *I, Claudius* is not on the military problems at the Elbe or Danube but rather on the

visible rents in the social fabric of Roman society. Similarly, what we experienced first hand was not the television coverage of the war in Viet Nam but a series of powerful social movements and changes which challenged our political and cultural system.

In the opening credits of each program a snake slithers across the mosaic floor near the spilled cup of poisoned wine to symbolize insidious and powerful sexual forces (the snake) and political forces (the poisoned wine). In the Rome of Augustus and Claudius, these sexual forces included increased freedom for women with its challenges to traditional sexual identity, sexual roles and the status and stability of marriage and the family. The political forces include the rise to power of a commercial class and freedmen who could challenge the authority of the patricians, the increasing use of violence and extral-legal means to settle political disputes, and numerous unsuccessful attempts to restore the Republic.

Similar themes exist in contemporary American society. Women are emerging as equal participants in the occupational and sexual aspects of modern American life. There is a widening generation gap between college students and their parents over social and political issues, a movement of Hippies and communes which threatened the family and existing sexual morality, and an open concern over the rights of homosexuals. On the political side, Black Americans have achieved equal political rights and are demanding equal social standing. There are political assassinations and terrorist bombings, the corruption of law enforcement officials and agencies at a national level. President Johnson was forced to retire rather than run for another term and President Nixon resigned in the face of impeachment proceedings.

Romans of the early Principate lost any chance of restoring the Republic or regaining the golden age of Augustus. In fact, it was not so golden after all and we are tempted to cite this period as the beginning of the decline and fall of the Roman Empire. We also believe that by 1977, the United States had somehow succeeded in saving its Republic and in repairing

The first part of the nightmare concerns the family and socialization. One nightmare fragment is that women will not act responsibly once they attain social and sexual freedoms. Not only will they become more aggressive and assertive in competition with men, the nightmare suggests, but they will take unfair advantage of their charms and wiles in that competition. And once they are victorious, women will mask their power behind innocence and modesty. In *I, Claudius* we find Livia exploiting her position as religious confessor to the women in order to blackmail the men to carry out her will. She arranges murders and suicides of her enemies in this manner. She facilitates politically advantageous marriages on the one hand and then supplies the dissatisfied husband or wife with a more compatible bed partner while reaping the resulting political and social debts for her future use. And while doing all this she remains Caesar's wife and above reproach. Roman society while legally patriarchal, was ruled by women with all the graceful mastery of Renaissance Italian or the social fabric. In President Ford's terms, the national nightmare was over. But, in case we missed it, *I, Claudius* is that nightmare.

The analysis of a nightmare is not a rational procedure and seldom can a total sequence of thoughts and events be arranged to satisfy the requirements of rigorous academic scholarship. The national nightmare is a form of Durkheim's (1933) collective conscience which impinges on each of us and pulls us together as a society. Almost any attempt to analyze the collective conscience and the symbols that represent it necessarily destroy parts of that shared interpretation of historical events and dramatic portrayals.

SOCIOLOGICAL THEMES

Sociological themes can be employed to describe and analyze the major socio-cultural problems facing first century Rome and America in the 1970's. Two major problems focus on the family and the state. The family as a central organizational unit in society was being threatened by gender and generational conflicts. The state was facing conflicting demands for political and legal equality on the one hand and desires for continuing social deference and demeanor in the form of law and order on the other (Nisbet 1964; Taylor 1949).

French Bourbon salons (Durant 1944).

On this level, both Americans and Britains have come close to the sex-ploitation of political leaders. The British had a set of sex scandals the most famous of which involved Profumo, a cabinet minister. In America, President Kennedy is said to have carried on an affair with the movie star and "sex-goddess" Marilyn Monroe, and with a woman who claims to have been the mistress of two leading mobsters. Ted Kennedy was responsible for the accidental drowning of a young woman under questionable conditions. Several Senators and Congressmen have been found or named in compromising situations which have cost them their seats.

More disturbing is the intra family violence portrayed in *I, Claudius*. While we may occasionally wish to strangle a child or shoot a spouse, we do not go about it in such a cold blooded a manner. Livia poisons her husbands, her sons and her grandchildren. Antonia locks up her daughter Livilla and starves her to death. In a scene borrowed from television commercials and paraphrasing Samuel Becket's Henry II, Caligula wishes himself free of Gemullus's nagging coughing sound and soon finds his young nephew and potential successor murdered. The young innocent children of Sejanus are technically made of age through sexual abuse and then are legally murdered. Intra family violence and child abuse seemingly were everyday events in Rome. This is the generation gap at its extreme logical conclusion coupled with the unbridled temper of angry mothers.

A third nightmare fragment concerns the consequences of the breakdown of marriages and the rise of sexual promiscuity and the visibility of sexual deviance. Most Roman marriages involved a brief ceremony which generally came after a period of *usus*, literally customary usage, or in our terms cohabitation. If the woman absented herself from her husband's bed three nights a year, she was able to keep control of her personal property and wealth exclusive of the dowry and be legally free from male domestic authority. In whose house she spent those three nights was probably an open secret in order to justify her legal claims which may have had very little to do with the sexual context of the marriage. Nevertheless, jealousy and suspicion exists among

men and divorce was frequent. Many of the characters in *I, Claudius* were married three or more times. Julia, the daughter of Augustus, was married in turn to Marcellus, Agrippa, and finally Tiberius. And although she had five children by Agrippa, including Gaius and Lucius, Julia was a sexually independent woman and finally was exiled. Her daughter, also called Julia, behaved in a similar fashion and suffered an identical fate. On the male side we learn of the homosexual activities of Tiberius and the on-going sibling incest of Caligula.

Contemporary America fears that its rising divorce rate, its more open patterns of premarital sex and cohabitation and its well publicized communal living experiments will lead to social and cultural collapse. But these events in American life may be less general and more time specific than we think. The divorce rate rises as a result of hasty marriages contracted several years earlier during a time of war between individuals seeking security rather than for political alliances or the accumulation of property and wealth for a family or clan which motivated the Romans. Premarital sex and cohabitation exist not as part of a common law marriage ritual which provides the woman with more legal rights after marriage, but rather as part of a compromise between sexual maturity and economic dependence among young adults before marriage. Finally, the communal movement in the late 1960's and early 1970's appears now to be more of a symbolic rejection of certain aspects of American life styles rather than the absence of social and self control.

This sociological interpretation of the psycho-sexual aspects of the nightmare should not blind us to the definition of the situation as perceived by the silent majority or the moral majority. The concerns of these American "majorities" appear to parallel the concerns of early Christians with Roman society and, if defined as real, may have real consequences for the social fabric of America.

The Black civil rights movement in the United States was the culmination of about 100 years of emancipation in word but not deed. It began in the 1950's by challenging the established patterns of racial discrimination at the local level in the area of education and voting rights, and achieved several key victories in Supreme Court decisions. The generalized

fear was that uneducated Blacks would take over and replace the established White oligarchy in the South and force an end to status distinctions in education and social behavior by lowering standards and intermarrying. Gradual changes in the political and social status of Black Americans have resulted in election to public office and entrance into professional schools.

Rome at the time of Augustus and Claudius faced a similar type of challenge from a rising commercial class and freed slaves. Many of the commercial class were not city born Romans but had migrated from the outlying districts of Italy which had been under Roman rule for several generations. As such they were not full citizens and could not ordinarily expect to hold certain public offices or be able to marry into the patrician families. In *I, Claudius* we meet Sejanus, the son of an equestrian or middle class landowner who was adopted as a young man by a wealthy ex-Counsel of the Aelian family. This provides Sejanus with the entry to political and social power. He is portrayed as the rising "new man" of his generation, an exception to the rule that only patricians govern. He helped organize and lead the Praetorian Guards which supported the Principate and he was essentially the main route of political access to Tiberius.

Although he eventually achieves a position in the Senate because of his adoption years earlier, his origins are held against him. Sejanus is portrayed as a loving husband until his political ambitions require a divorce, and as a loving father who regrets that his children will be murdered along with him. But he cannot marry Livilla, who is simultaneously the granddaughter of Livia, the niece and widowed daughter-in-law of Tiberius, and the sister of Claudis. Livilla is part of a tight family circle that will not permit an outsider like Sejanus to gain entry. In short, Sejanus represents a rising social class that cannot become an equal in patrician society.

This frustration led to a second aspect of the political nightmare - the attempts to circumvent the law and resort to violence to settle political differences. Since the rising commercial class and freedmen could not attain high office, they could use their newly created wealth as a political weapon. Sejanus was not above bribery and trickery to manipulate votes and election

campaigns. Through his leadership of the Praetorian Guards he becomes head of the equivalent of the secret service with the power to eliminate assassination plots against the emperor. Trumped up conspiracies were part of the game and elimination of opponents through murder was acceptable. Livia maintained an unintentional secret police through her blackmail of confessed wives and their husbands. And although Rome was a military state, it was not a civil police state. Law enforcement was a function of the family.

While the existence of bribery and payoffs is not unknown in American history, the scope of defense department financial kickbacks and campaign contribution solicitation involved the major corporations in the country. It was comparable only with the 1920's Teapot Dome Scandal and the last days of the Grant Administration in 1876. The use of the CIA for internal spying and the FBI as agent provocateurs was something well beyond ordinary dirty American politics. Rome, then, provides not only an apt comparison, but also adds to the nightmare the realization that the Republic could be lost.

The unsuccessful desire of many of the characters in *I, Claudius* to restore the Roman Republic perhaps is the most relevant of all the themes to modern society. The Roman Republic (509-30 B.C.) was actually an oligarchy or rule by a few patrician families which rotated the offices among themselves from year to year. As the conquests expanded the territory to be governed, problems of citizenship and administration arose which required stability in leadership.

In the last 100 years of the Republic (133-30 B.C.) the patricians were split into two factions, the optimates who favored the traditional oligarchy, and the populares who sought the support of the commercial classes. Julius Caesar was a populaire who was killed by the optimates in an attempt to preserve the oligarchy. In 30 B.C. Octavian was named tribune for life and essentially ended the oligarchy. During the reign of Augustus and Tiberius, whenever a conspiracy was uncovered or suspected, it was to restore the Republic and to end the principate.

But we must recall a hidden ambiguity: did the conspirators mean by the restoration of the Republic a return to the oligarchy and rule by

the patricians, or did restoration mean returning to a more open political decision making process involving greater numbers of citizens and the commercial class. Clearly those involved in the principate of Augustus and Tiberius were against either outcome of the restoration of the Republic and successfully sought to prevent it. The consequences of this policy lead to reigns of terror and eventually to the near anarchy of Nero.

In this light, the American Watergate nightmare can be both relived and relieved. The Nixon White House with its Praetorian like office of the President isolating the President from certain concerns and issues, the very confusing Nixon proposals for welfare reform on the one hand and federal revenue sharing on the other, and the whole gamut of dirty tricks, bribery and coverups with regard to election campaigns in the name of protecting democracy, the strengthening of localism through federal intervention, and bringing peace through increased war abroad and conspiracies at home, left many dazed and disoriented. The final confrontation over impeachment was at once interpreted as ending the Republic and role of the President and as preserving the Republic and the role of the President.

The importance of the events of the past 20 years or so is perhaps best summed up in the "confession" of Livia herself. She had marked for death many prominent men including some of her grown children and grandchildren. Her reason was that they had urged the restoration of the Republic and were therefore a challenge to her power and the succession of her descendants to the positions of Augustus Caesar. She tells Claudius, "This republicanism is a persistent taint in the family. Your grandfather had it . . . It's no use arguing with you republicans. You refuse to see that one can no more reintroduce republican government at this stage than one can reimpose feelings of chastity on modern wives and husbands. It's like trying to turn the shadow back on the sundial: it can't be done."

The political assassinations that have plagued America during the past 20 years were traumatic, but were generally attributed to mentally unstable or politically isolated individuals rather than important or powerful

Concluded on page 170

made. In any case, the potential for making normative decisions subjectively exists. Faced with alternatives, some of which are destructive, realizable values exist which can provide the premises for appropriate choice.

Behavior takes time. The time requisite for the completion of one's implied goals takes place in the context of historic time. External conditions are subject to change. One can not rely simply on the fulfillment of attitudes. One must encounter, judge, and relate to the world in a meaningful way, with goals which transcend the immediate moment of action.

As one can generalize existential reality to an ultimate idergy, and time to eternity, one can generalize self to be subsumed under 'humanity'. One can generalize principles of transcendent choice to ultimate purposes which become intrinsically valued precisely because they give ultimate meaning to experience. The quest for consummation of the restless feeling of self-dom, the denial of which is despair and alienation, is the task of everyone. Ultimate values must have the property of being realized, or it is an empty game.

Man experiences a reality which has a subjective truth totally independent of the statements that are made. Man may 'know' that reality without being able to express it. Similarly, man may well hold values and act in terms of them without being able to articulate them. Unless ultimate values become mixed only with sentiments, which have the property of unarticulated affective judgments, the human being must accept the task of expressing in words and through deeds those values which give meaning and direction. The proof of the two are vastly different. Statements of fact sometimes lend themselves to the discipline of linear and sequenced experience, as in an experiment. Man, in his own subjective experience is the sole judge to ultimate meaning. Pangs of guilt may be the price of error in this regard, but it is the individual's integrity which is at stake.

The pursuit of values requires moments of self-awareness in the face of alternative courses of action. It is not a mere intellectual exercise, worried through in a social or behavioral vacuum. Rather, it is in the facing of an active life where options carry enormous consequences that the quest for values is tested. What is the price one is willing to pay for

some ultimate good? One's fortune? One's honor? One's life?

Life. Not merely in the sense of dramatic martyrdom, though that is not excluded, but in the totality of all the time one has left on earth. In committing one's life, one's fortunes and honor are inextricably woven, one may realize ultimate values. The converse is certainly true. Playing only for the moment with small stakes where one neither risks nor finds ultimate values leads one to recognize a life spent in vain. I may be wrong. Idergy may be my idle dream. But I would rather be wrong and cling to the view I have of humanity than be right with the dismal truth that all is for nothing.

PERLSTADT

From p 170

families or party factions. The fear that these would lead to a coup d'etat is mitigated by the continuity of leadership and the adherence to Constitutional procedures and mandates. Nevertheless, the political nightmare is uncomfortably close to reality.

Viewers of *I Claudius* were both fascinated and horrified as the television drama performed an almost ritualistic function of explaining the present through exploring an allegory based on the past. Those historical events could not be changed by the writers or producers any more than the audience could change its most recent political and social experiences. But knowing what could have been and realizing that a different path was taken by the more recent past makes it relevant for the contemporary audience.

REFERENCES

Durant, Will, 1944. *Caesar and Christ*. NY: Simon & Schuster.

Durkheim, Emile, 1933. *The Division of Labor in Society*. NY: Free Press-Macmillan Co.

Nisbet, Robert A., 1964. "Kinship and Political Power in First Century Rome" in Werner J. Cahnman and Alvin Boskoff, editors, *Sociology and History: Theory and Research*, NY: Free Press-Macmillan Co.

Slater, Philip E., 1968. *The Glory of Hera: Greek Mythology and the Greek Family*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Taylor, Lily, 1949. *Ross Party Politics in the Age of Caesar*. Berkeley: University of California Press.