The Enigma of Claudius

by: Phyllis Young Forsyth

The recent television series "I, Claudius", based on the novels of Robert Graves, has rekindled interest in the man who was certainly one of the most enigmatic emperors of Rome. Even in antiquity, historians could not make up their minds about Claudius was he a fool, or a genius? The historian Josephus, for example, describes Claudius in one book as an able, independent ruler who was in total control of Roman affairs; in a second book, this same historian depicts Claudius as a bumbling fool, totally reliant upon the aid and advice of others. Modern historians continue to share this ambivalent attitude towards the man and his reign.

Tiberius Claudius Caesar Augustus Germanicus (to give him his official name) seems to have had serious health problems from the time of his birth in 10 B.C. His mother, Antonia the Younger, a daughter of Marc Antony, apparently experienced difficulty at Claudius' birth, and some medical historians now claim that Claudius suffered brain damage which left him disabled on the right side of his body and defective in his speech. Alternatively, other historians have proposed that Claudius' health problems were the result of a childhood bout with polio. Whichever is the case, Claudius' physical condition set him apart at an early age from other members of the Julio-Claudian household: as the historian Suetonius wrote, "nearly his whole childhood was so disturbed by various diseases that he became dull of wit and physically weak; and when he came of age to stand for a public office, his family deemed him incapable of fulfilling any such role".

Suetonius goes on to give a detailed description of Claudius: he was tall, good looking, and had an impressive head of hair; but he stumbled as he walked and had several unpleasant habits, such as "an uncontrollable laugh, a tendency to slobber at the mouth, a stammer, and a nervous tic, which became so bad under stress that his head would toss from side to side". No wonder that his family, and especially his mother, could see no meaningful future ahead for the youth, and Claudius spent many years in relative seclusion so as not to embarass the imperial family.

Yet, during these years, Claudius honed his intellect with extensive studies. He became a skilled philologist; he studied antiquities and became an authority on the Etruscans and Carthaginians; he was an expert interpreter of Roman law. Thus, the contradictions so frustrating to modern historians were already rooted: Claudius seemed both stupid and smart, ignorant and learned. This pattern was destined to continue his entire life, as his malformed body gave an impression of idiocy that tended to hide the ability latent within.

In 41 A.D., Claudius, now in his 50's, unexpectedly became emperor on the assassination of his mad nephew Caligula. Up to this time, Claudius' only experience in the public service had been a brief, and not too successful, term as consul during the reign of Caligula. Aside from that, Claudius had passed his time at court in the role of a buffoon, furnishing Caligula with a handy butt

for practical jokes. Suddenly the buffoon was emperor, and Rome seemed on the verge of a restoration of the old Republic.

That the imperial constitution survived is itself tribute to the skill shown by Claudius in the first months of his rule. Claudius quickly took control, showing a political astuteness that must have confounded both his friends and enemies. He treated the Roman senators with great respect, and even restored to the Senate powers long since allowed to lapse. He assumed a humble attitude, apparently having learned from his predecessors the dangers of arrogance. Gradually he developed a strong and efficient civil service to help in running the Empire and instituted a "cabinet" form of government designed to put able men in charge of public affairs.

Amongst the achievements of his reign can be mentioned his reform of the Roman treasury, his introduction of provincials into the Senate, his reform of taxation in order to relieve the poor of Rome, and his ambitious programme of public works. This latter programme included the construction of aqueducts, highways, and waterways to improve the lives of all citizens of the Empire; most spectacular was his rebuilding of Ostia, the port of Rome, to accommodate the ships and trade so vital to the economic and social well-being of Rome.

If his public life was thus succeeding beyond anyone's wildest dreams, Claudius' private life was meanwhile disintegrating. When he came to the throne, he was married to Valeria Messallina, a lovely but totally debauched woman. Her affairs became the talk of Rome, especially when she went through a public marriage with one Gaius Silius. Claudius could no longer ignore his wife's antics, and Messallina was executed in 48 A.D. Claudius' next step, however, was of the "out of the frying-pan into the fire" variety: he married his neice, Agrippina the Younger, a very ambitious young woman. It now seems clear that Agrippina married Claudius for one reason: to procure the imperial power for her son by an earlier marriage, Domitius Ahenobarbus, better known as Nero. From Claudius' adoption of Nero as his heir in 50 A.D. to his death four years later, his life was clouded by court intrigue; indeed, it may be that he welcomed the death brought by Agrippina's poisoned mushrooms in 54 A.D.

On the death of Claudius, his enemies enjoyed themselves with lampoons; one of these is still extant today: the Apocolocyntosis (usually translated as "The Pumpkinification of Claudius") by Seneca. This satire on the apotheosis of Claudius is full of low blows at Claudius' "stupidity" - for example, "Claudius began to give up the ghost, but couldn't find a way out for it", or, "Claudius, when he saw his own funeral, understood that he was dead". But, in all fairness, Claudius deserved better; and, in a sense, he had the last laugh - after all, he did become a god! And, when compared with the likes of Caligula and Nero, who today would begrudge him that honour?