Discuss the Changing Role of the Princeps under Tiberius.

The Role of the Princeps under Tiberius is characterised by growing autocratic rule and the illusion of dyarchic rule shattering. His reign can be divided into two parts, his rule from Rome and his rule from the island of Caprae; the former saw Tiberius maintaining the dyarchy in that he restrained autocratic rule and relied on the senate, whilst the latter sees increasing autocracy. This is due to a number of factors such as the character of Tiberius, the power play by Sejanus and Tiberius’ increasing disillusionment with the Senate.

The ascension of Tiberius to Princeps offers his initial attitude and provides insight into how he would have preferred Rome to be ruled. Upon the death of Augustus the Senate recognised the need for the rule of a Princeps lest Rome be once again consumed by civil war. However Tiberius was increasingly reluctant to take up the role of Princeps, as is suggested by his proposal to share power with the senate and their forcible rebuff. Tiberius made claims such as “only the mind of Divus Augustus was equal to such a burden” and upon accepting the necessity of accepting his role as Princeps still maintained that he “ought to be the servant of the senate”

The acceptance by the Senate for the need of a Princeps sat in opposition to Tiberius’ Republican ideology. Ancient sources hold the view that Tiberius’ reluctance was merely the workings of a hypocrite and one practiced at dissimulatio - “grand sentiments of this kind sounded unconvincing… he was… always cryptic” and further that it was always in his nature to become despotic in his autocratic powers. However the contemporary view is that Tiberius was both following the praeceptum of Augustus, who in 27 B.C. “had to be ‘persuaded’ to accept the imperial powers”, and maintaining the appearance of a Republic through the semblance of Senatorial power. And that, at this stage, was still wishing to uphold the dyarchy and rely on the Senate and the people.

Supporting the theory that Tiberius was reluctant to take power is that he “refused the title ‘Father of his country’” and other such titles, this was a change in the nature of the Princeps for Augustus had readily accepted said titles and suggests a future of decreasing power of the Princeps. Further Tiberius followed Augustan policy in transferring the courts to the Senate, increasing senatorial power and maintaining a reduced role of the Princeps, and rather than assume autocratic superiority Tiberius “showed great, even anxious, deference to the senators; so as not to give too much weight to his position as Princeps”.

A major point of criticism from Tacitus is that of the Treason Trials under the rule of Tiberius - “initiated an evil which for many years corroded public life”. Had Tiberius instigated the treason trials this would suggest the start of his autocratic rule, however this is not the case. Rather modern analysis has revealed

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1 Greg Rowe, Lives of the Caesars 48
2 Tacitus, Ann. 1. 11
3 Seut. Tib. 29
4 Tacitus, Ann 1.10
5 Salmon, A history of the Roman World 123
6 Tac. Ann. 1.70
7 Garzetti, Tiberius’ Administration, 25
8 Tac. Ann. 2.31
that the treason trials first appeared in 103 BC and Tiberius had merely attempted to formalise and standardise the process in an attempt to mitigate misuse (should the charge of *maiestas* be proven, the instigator of the case would receive a quarter of the victim's property). This was done by handing control of the trials to the Senate, the senators then proceeded to use the trials as a means of gaining favour with Tiberius whilst removing their own enemies.

In fact Tiberius did not favour the treason trials and Tacitus himself acknowledges the fact that Tiberius supported defendants with financial assistance - “He also gave certain senators financial assistance”⁹ - and threw cases out of the court which he did not deem as constituting treason - “He released Appuleia from liability under the treason law”¹⁰. Although by intervening in the court is a sign of growing autocratic rule, Tiberius only acted because Senators were accusing one another through the charge of *maiestas*, whose reference point was Tiberius as Princeps, in order to ingratiate themselves with him. Therefore it can be concluded that this was not the beginning of Dictatorial rule but rather an initial source of Tiberius growing cynicism of the Senate.

The trial of Tiberius’ friend Gnaeus Piso both furthers Tiberius disillusionment and increases tension between Tiberius and the widow of the favoured Germanicus, Agrippina. With Piso having been accused of poisoning the immensely popular Germanicus, Tiberius was forced to maintain a studied impartiality at the trial so that he would not be seen to favour his friend, nor aggravate Agrippina, and further by trying to regain control of Syria through militaristic force Piso had aggravated Tiberius and this needed to be controlled as well. Tiberius’ disguised intentions and the fact that he refused to release relevant documents led to rumours that it was “The malicious hadm of Tiberius which had removed the great hope for the future- Germanicus Caesar” and such “rumours were powerful in their depressive effect both upon Tiberius, and… his public standing”¹¹.

This trial was immediately followed by the suspicious death of Tiberius’ adopted heir, Drusus, who was suspected of being poisoned. These events are the pivotal point in the reign of Tiberius, as it is in the ensuing political tension and suspicious environment that Lucius Sejanus acquired unprecedented power. And, as put by Greg Rowe, “The breach in Tiberius’ Principate opened with the deaths of Germanicus and Drusus”¹².

Tacitus himself concedes that Tiberius prior to this point had been ruling with “national stability and domestic prosperity” and that the “cause and beginning of the change lay with Lucius Aelius Sejanus, commander of the Guard”¹³. For Sejanus had enhanced the importance of the Praetorian guard by establishing the *castra Praetoria* so that all the guard were housed in one place. This marked the beginning of a change in the source of power for the *Princeps*; whilst Augustus and Tiberius had both been backed by the Senate for the role, future *Princeps* would have a source of power founded on the backing of the Praetorian guard and it was the establishment of the *castra Praetoria* that laid the foundation for their power as they were in effect the private army of the *Princeps* garrisoned within the

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⁹ Tac. *Ann.* 2.35  
¹⁰ Tac. *Ann.* 2.48  
¹¹ Shotter. *Tiberius Caesar* 34  
¹² Rowe. *Tiberius*. 52  
¹³ Tac. *Ann.* 4.1
walls of Rome. Further Sejanus had played upon Tiberius growing distrust and suspicion to secure himself as the sole advisor of Tiberius - “To Sejanus alone the otherwise cryptic emperor spoke freely and unguardedly.”

In 26 AD Sejanus induced Tiberius, who had given up on the Senate, to move to Caprae and thus began the second part of his reign. The move to Caprae changed the role of the Princeps fundamentally, as no longer was Tiberius maintaining the appearance of a dyarchy and no longer was he interested in involving the Senate in his decisions. The effect of this is clear in the ancient sources as the move is seen as a place to indulge certain appetites - “On retiring to Caprae he made himself a private play-house, where sexual extravagances were practised for his secret pleasure”, where he ruled through “long and wordy letters”.

The scathing portrayal by Suetonius represents the view that it was the move to Caprae that began the despotic tyrannical rule of Tiberius.

H.H. Scullard summarises the impact of Tiberius retiring to Caprae on the role of the Princeps beautifully in “although he still attended to public business, his retirement had serious constitutional repercussions: it was one thing for the Senate to debate matters in the emperor’s presence, and another to have to seek his views by correspondence and await the replies of one who was their princeps but not in law their dominus”. There could be no returning from the constitutional impact of retiring to Caprae; Tiberius had shattered the illusion of a Republic and Senatorial Power permanently, and from here the role of the Princeps only became more and more dictatorial in nature.

At first the move to Caprae resulted in Tiberius increasingly relying on the power and ability of Sejanus to govern in his absence. And whilst the Augusta Livia, Tiberius mother, lived, Sejanus was unable to expound and abuse his power - “While the Augusta lived there was still a moderating influence… Sejanus, too, had not ventured to outbid her parental authority”. However upon her death “the reigns were thrown off” and Sejanus immediately acted to banish Agrippina and Nero, and further his political power and influence.

The extent of Sejanus’ power can be seen in the statues erected of Sejanus alongside those of Tiberius and the fact that Tiberius allowed for the marriage of Sejanus to Livilla. Previously Tiberius had refused to allow this marriage as Sejanus was an equites and Livilla of the royal family; that the marriage occurred not only positioned Sejanus within the royal family and from there provided a basis to wriggle his way into the further power but also highlights Tiberius’ growing dependance on him. In addition Sejanus held consulship with Tiberius in 31 AD- this was an extraordinary honour as the last person to move from equestrian rank to consulship had been Pompey.

It is important to understand the machinations of Sejanus because his understanding of the power and role of the Princeps is what allowed him to ascertain status and position outside of his birth and rank. He

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14 Tac. Ann. 4.1
15 Seut. Tib. 43
16 Scullard. A History of Rome. 277
17 Tac. Ann. 5.2
18 Tac. Ann. 5.2
19 Scullard. A History of Rome. 277
understood that “power was now the prerogative of the princeps, not people nor faction… the princeps was the source of the only form of patronage which counted… that even though he [Sejanus] was chief trusted minister, he had no authority of his own.”

The role of Sejanus inside the private household of Tiberius must be understood in terms of his role in the Principate; that is to say that by acquiring position and favour with Tiberius he gained position and favour with Rome and the Senate. This marks the changing authority position of the *Princeps* in that not only was it becoming more autocratic, but it was also influencing the authority positions beneath it.

The final act that removed all semblance of dyarchy and placed Tiberius in the likes of dictatorship is the Reign of Terror following in the wake of the fall of Sejanus. Although secluded on the island of Caprae and surrounded by the forces of Sejanus- who was conspiring against Gaius, Tiberius’ heir, and Tiberius himself—Antonia managed to warn Tiberius of the schemes of Sejanus and his alleged involvement in the poisoning of Tiberius’ son Drusus. The way in which Tiberius dealt with the betrayal of his most trusted minister gives clue to the utter subservience of the Senate and the fear of the people in general to the power of the *Princeps*. For Tiberius did no more than send a letter denouncing Sejanus to the Senate and yet “all with one voice denounced and threatened him”.

The *auctoritas* that Tiberius now displayed without discrepancy is most aptly suggested in the satires of Juvenal: “ ‘Who informed, who gave him away, what witnesses proved it?’/ ‘Nothing like that. A large, long-winded letter arrived from Capri.’/ ‘Fine… I ask no more’.”

This satire alone paints a clear picture how the role of the *Princeps* had changed since Tiberius first took power, to the point where he was now despotic.

The fact that Tiberius had been betrayed removed any illusions of trust he still maintained, he became overly suspicious and remained at Caprae. This was very controversial as before his seclusion could be accounted for by the machinations of Sejanus, however after Sejanus’ fall it is clear that Tiberius had given up trying to involve the Senate in his decisions.

Although the number of treason trials definitely increased as a result of this disillusionment, it is important to note the role of Macro, Sejanus’ replacement, who was actively intent on removing memory and followers of his predecessor. The *Ferocitas* displayed by Tiberius during these final years is captured in Tacitus - “Because capital punishment of a virgin was unprecedented, she was violated by the executioner, with the noose behind her.”

Despite all these, and the belief that he was leading a life of lust, the Empire was still incredibly well run from Caprae.

However it must be noted that Tiberius did not rule by any “legally defined, cut and dried rights… simply he had means of indicating what would please him and men bowed to his wishes.” Upon his death his will revealed the full extent of a ‘dynastic succession policy’ in that he named his relatives Gaius and Gemellus equal heirs. Thus it can be seen by the end of Tiberius reign, the *Princeps* had become the

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20 Leadbetter. *The Courtier Sejanus*. 7
21 Leadbetter. *The Courtier Sejanus*. 8
22 Cassius. *Fall of Sejanus* 7
23 Juvenal *Satires* 60
24 Tac. *Ann.* 5.3
25 Levick *Imperial Control*. 228
26 Shotter *Principatus Ac Libertas* 243
27 Rowe *Tiberius* 59
Domine of the Principate; ruling both through and in his family rather than relying on the Senate and People.

The Senate’s point blank refusal to accord him divine honours posthumously indicates that he was not loved; yet simultaneously there is no evidence to suggest that his memory was condemned despite the increasingly autocratic control that he possessed. And despite the colouring of ancient sources due to dislike of the Principate ‘neither in ancient nor in modern times has his character won wholehearted approval’.

Tiberius made several errors in judgement such as the power invested in Sejanus, the Treason Trials and the move to Caprae. However, as put my E. T. Salmon, “He was called upon to preside over a delicately balanced system in which one party (The Princeps) possessed the real authority and another part (the Senate) the semblance of it... is it surprising if he was guilty of occasional errors of judgement in discharging it?”

Tiberius’ reign can be seen as a shattering of the *imago libertatis* and the illusion of the dyarchy. Despite best initial intentions- due to the nature of Tiberius’ character, the nature of the Senate during his reign such that they induced suspicion and mistrust, and the machinations of politically aspiring persons- the role of the Princeps under the reign of Tiberius irrefutably shifted from the remains of Republican sentiment to unadulterated autocratic dictatorship.

Works Cited


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28 Salmon *History of the Roman World* 145
29 Seneca *de clem.* I.4.3.
30 Salmon *History of the Roman World* 146


