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Above Suspicion: Discourses on Female Sexuality and Power in the Early Roman Principate
(43 B.C.E - 68 C.E)

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Abstract

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This thesis examines the discourse on women and political power during the early Roman Principate, beginning with the establishment of the Second Triumvirate in 43 B.C.E. and concluding with Nero's assassination in 68 C.E. By tracing the public perception of several prominent women throughout this period, this thesis seeks to situate the various portrayals of imperial women within a rhetorical tradition that evolved in response to the rise of a “covert autocracy” in the Principate and engaged with the historical memory of this transitional period. This project posits that the inclusion of imperial women in this discourse was a critical method through which the Romans sought to understand the transition from the Republic to the Principate. This discourse reflects the paradox between a functional autocracy and a constitutional system that still outwardly relied on the precepts of republican political culture, as well as a shift in the role of women in the state. With this, this project explores how the rhetoric of sexual morality served to control women’s public voice and political action, examining how allegations of sexual immorality, particularly accusations of *stuprum*, or adultery, served as “rhetorical topoi” to obscure and control imperial and aristocratic women’s transgressions against the regime, framing women's political subversion as mere adultery in a society that did not recognize women as legitimate political actors. Through a close reading of depictions of imperial women in material culture and literary texts, this work aims to problematize the acceptance of imperial women’s archetypal characterizations, peeling back the facade that misrepresentation, distortion, and political agendas have imposed on the historical memory of imperial women in the early Principate.

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Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
Chapter 1: Fulvia and Turia, Women in the Age of the Emperors.....	16
Chapter 2: Livia and Julia, the Women of the <i>Domus Augusta</i>	28
Chapter 3: Agrippina(s), Deciphering the Literary Tradition.....	52
Conclusion.....	71
Note on Abbreviations.....	74
Bibliography.....	76

INTRODUCTION

Upon hearing accusations of his wife Pompeia's infidelity, Julius Caesar promptly divorced her without further inquiry, asserting that "Caesar's wife must be above suspicion."¹ The inquiry was unnecessary; in the Roman world, the mere suggestion of *impudicitia*, loosely translated as "sexual immorality" or "vice,"² was enough to blacken the reputation of oneself and one's entire family. This would pose a particular problem for the imperial household, as familial concerns became concerns of state. Imperial women's political power and influence were also highly suspect.

In the Roman world, the political realm was the exclusive domain of men, and political participation was the cornerstone of elite male self-identification. Conversely, Roman culture idealized female domesticity and exclusion from public and political affairs,³ an ideal enshrined in law as women were legally prohibited from holding political office.⁴ Valerius Maximus expresses this ideal through a simple question and answer: "What business has a woman with a public meeting? If ancestral customs be observed, none."⁵ This did not, however, prevent women from participating in politics altogether, as they could engage in political matters privately, likely through influencing male relatives.⁶ Of course, there were some exceptional recorded instances of women publicly expressing their political opinions, receiving varying levels of praise and opprobrium.⁷ However, Romans had long been apprehensive of female influence, traditionally believing that women were susceptible to temptation and moral corruption, and that this

¹ Jennifer Speake, ed., *Oxford Dictionary of Proverbs*. 6th ed (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 1580.

² Rebecca Langlands, *Sexual Morality in Ancient Rome* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 2.

³ Mary Beard, *Women and Power: a Manifesto* (London: Profile Books Ltd, 2017), 17.

⁴ Anthony A. Barrett, *Livia: First Lady of Imperial Rome* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 116.

⁵ Valerius Maximus, *Memorable Doings and Sayings, Volume I*: 3.8.6. trans. and ed. D. R. Shackleton Bailey (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 324-325.

⁶ Barrett, *Livia: First Lady of Imperial Rome*, 116.

⁷ Beard, *Women and Power: a Manifesto*, 13.

predisposition, if left unchecked, “threatened the stability of the state.”⁸ Suspected violations of the strictures of sexual morality, *pudicitia*, were one such disruptive force. Thus, strict enforcement of *pudicitia* was crucial to preserve the stability of the state. The collapse of the Republic and the rise of the Principate would heighten these anxieties, challenging the notion of a male-exclusive political sphere as state control shifted to the domestic realm of the imperial *domus*, potentially vulnerable to the undue influence of its women. Whether these fears stemmed from reality or were merely imagined, the proximity of women to power within an imperial system ignited deep-seated concern regarding the implications of their influence. Quelling these fears required imperial women to live up to exacting moral standards.

Imperial women who lived up to such expectations were honored and even deified, while those perceived as failing to meet these expectations were reviled. However, these stereotypical depictions obscure far more complicated individuals with likely rich, complex personal lives and political motivations. Given the dearth of women’s voices in extant Roman literature, including the voices of imperial women, attempting to uncover the real lives of these women seems a Herculean task.

As Amy Richlin aptly points out,

contemplation of the icons of Roman ruling women leaves us with the uncomfortable feeling that we can hardly know the real women inside them at all; we seem to be looking at a long series of constructs, remade whenever women arrived at a certain kind of power. When we look at texts and objects to discover reality, it is as if we looked at a scene through a screen on a window; as we become interested in the screen and its properties, we suddenly notice that the scene is, in fact, painted on the screen itself.⁹

Richlin reminds us that the image of Roman women left to us in the historical record is primarily a facade. While there may be a desire to uncover and even rehabilitate the real women behind the

⁸ Guy de la Bédoyère, *Domina: The Women Who Made Imperial Rome* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 67.

⁹ Richlin, *Arguments with Silence*, 108.

proverbial veil, studying the facade is valuable in its own right. Understanding depictions of imperial women not as real people but as caricatures, “resonant metaphors for social and political disorder,”¹⁰ prompts consideration of how constructions of imperial women fit into broader social and political discourse, reflecting the preoccupations and concerns of a society in transition.

Such analysis reveals that portrayals of imperial women are in constant dialogue with one another and often inter-referential,¹¹ as the same caricatures appear in the guise of various imperial women, each adapted to align with the creator’s political narrative. Archetypes such as the *matrona*,¹² *dux femina*,¹³ *saeva noverca*,¹⁴ and adulterous woman thus reappear throughout our source material. Opposing traditions mirror and engage with each other: while the regime and its adherents constructed a positive image of imperial women that supported their political aims and dynastic interests, its detractors used hostile portraits to point out its failures.

This thesis examines the discourse on women and political power during the early Principate, starting with the establishment of the Second Triumvirate in 43 B.C.E and concluding with Nero's assassination in 68 C.E. By tracing the perception of publicly prominent women over the course of this long period, this thesis argues that the various portrayals of imperial women in the early Principate can be understood within a rhetorical tradition that evolved in response to the rise of a “covert autocracy”¹⁵ in the Principate and engaged with the historical memory of this transitional period.

¹⁰ Catherine Edwards, *The Politics of Immorality in Ancient Rome* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 36.

¹¹ Richlin, *Arguments with Silence*, 108.

¹² A Roman *matrona* was an upper-class, respectable married woman.

¹³ The term “*dux femina*” refers to the archetype of a “commander woman” who exercised illegitimate power by usurping it from men. Francesca Santoro L’Hoir, “Tacitus and Women’s Usurpation of Power.” *The Classical World* 88, no. 1 (1994): 6.

¹⁴ The term “*saeva noverca*” refers to the archetype of a wicked stepmother. Barrett, *Livia: First Lady of Imperial Rome*, 114.

¹⁵ John F. Drinkwater, *Nero: Emperor and Court* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 419.

Although the preoccupation with *pudicitia* had long been a focal point of Roman political polemic for both genders, I posit that the insertion of imperial women into this discourse was a critical method through which the Romans sought to make sense of the transitional period between the Republic and the Principate and the “intense political experimentation and evolution”¹⁶ it produced. This discourse reflects the paradox between a functional autocracy and a constitutional system still outwardly reliant on republican political culture, as well as a shift in the role of women in the state.

Throughout this study, I will explore how the rhetoric of sexual morality served to control women’s public voice and political action. With this, this thesis will examine how allegations of sexual immorality, particularly allegations of *stuprum*, or adultery, potentially served as “rhetorical topoi”¹⁷ to obscure and control imperial and aristocratic women’s transgressions against the regime, framing women's political subversion as mere adultery in a society that did not recognize women as legitimate political actors (though, of course, adultery and political action are not mutually exclusive).

Not unlike today, in the Roman world, accusations of sexual immorality had lasting implications: they discredited victims by reducing them to the stereotype of an adulterous woman, thereby obscuring their political agency and voice from history. Many modern historians have unfortunately inherited and perpetuated the tradition of presenting sensationalized accounts of imperial women’s sexual depravity without pausing to question the circumstances and motivations underlying these problematic portrayals.

¹⁶ Anthony A. Barrett, “Nero’s Women,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Nero*, ed. Shadi Bartsch, Kirk Freudenburg, and Cedric Littlewood (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 63.

¹⁷ Eric R. Varner, “Portraits, Plots, and Politics: ‘*Damnatio Memoriae*’ and the Images of Imperial Women.” *Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome* 46 (2001): 42.

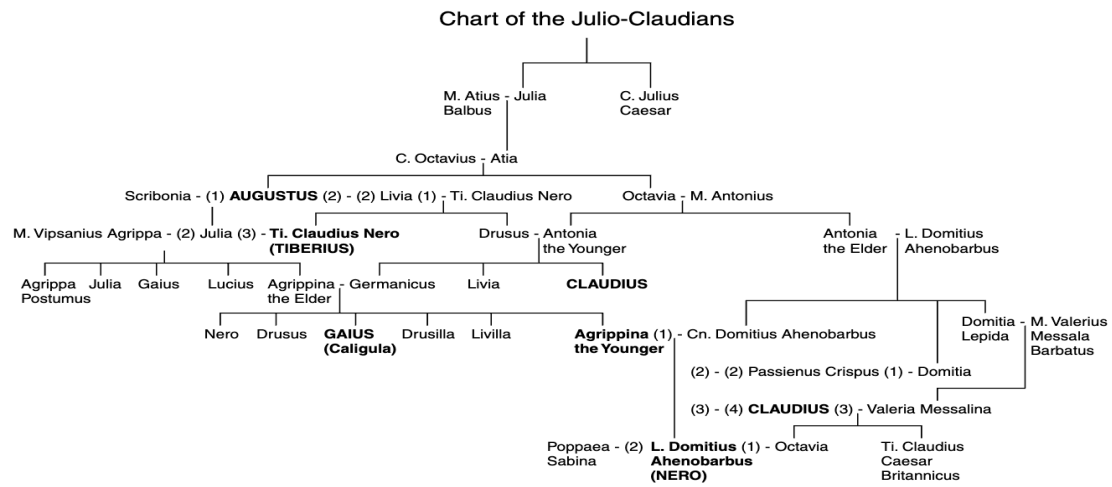
Through an in-depth examination of imperial women in material culture and text, I aim to problematize the acceptance of imperial women's archetypal characterizations, peeling back the facade that misrepresentation, distortion, and political agendas have imposed on the historical memory of imperial women in the early Principate.

The remainder of this introductory chapter will elaborate on my research topic, methodology, and research goals. First, I will situate my project within its historical context, highlighting its relevance to my research goals. Then, I will engage with existing academic literature, detailing the gaps my research hopes to fill. Next, I will outline my methodological approach to the source material and conceptual approach to analysis, as informed and inspired by the ongoing scholarly work in the field. Finally, I will elucidate the structure and trajectory of my project.

Historical Context: 'Julio-Claudian' Women

To clarify the intentions behind this project, I must first situate its central characters within their historical context. It is crucial to note that the term 'Julio-Claudian dynasty' is problematic; it is a convenient, retro-active label created by historians to clearly delineate a series of rulers of the Roman Empire descended from the intermarriage between the Julii and Claudii clans and is not a label that Romans of the period would have used or understood. The term's ongoing use tends to obscure the fact that the development of what was perceived as a 'dynasty' by later historians was, in reality, a tenuous and ongoing process contingent on a myriad of factors. Despite the term's problematic nature, it is still useful as a tool through which to understand the familial ties that bound the rulers of the early Principate and look at continuity and change within the state over the duration of the period.

What is referred to as the ‘Julio-Claudian dynasty’ began with Augustus, previously known as Octavian, with his ascent to power in 27 B.C.E and lasted for almost a century with five interrelated emperors: Augustus (27 B.C.E -14 C.E), Tiberius (14-37 C.E), Gaius Caligula (37-41 C.E), Claudius (41-54 C.E), and Nero (54-68 C.E), whose assassination marked the end of this imperial line.¹⁸



Genealogy chart of the Julio-Claudians, Judith Ginsburg¹⁹

Rather than focus primarily on these male actors, my research focuses on the women of the ‘Julio-Claudian’ connected imperial family, as these first generations of imperial women's newfound proximity to power and importance to dynastic continuity meant they became the targets of unprecedented criticism. None of the so-called ‘Julio-Claudian’ emperors were succeeded by their biological sons. With blood quickly becoming the critical requirement for imperial succession, the continued failure of this connected imperial family’s male line meant that legitimacy had to be passed down by female family members and the succession manufactured by adoption, meaning that the women of the family played a key role in preserving

¹⁸ De la Bédoyère, *Domina*, 312-315.

¹⁹ Judith Ginsburg, *Representing Agrippina: Constructions of Female Power in the Early Roman Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 133.

dynastic continuity and imperial stability.²⁰ As a result, this thesis will focus on how these women became crucial objects for constructing state identity and evaluating the regime.

Criticism of imperial women often had a moralistic undertone, as these women came to represent a regime that established itself as the restorer of morality in the wake of the turbulent collapse of the Roman Republic. Augustus, the progenitor of the 'Julio-Claudian' imperial line, rose to power after decades of civil war following Julius Caesar's assassination and the collapse of the Roman Republic. Framing himself as the savior of the *res publica*, Augustus spearheaded a moral revival. His moral program intended to revive a declining population using laws that promoted marriage, incentivized child-bearing, and criminalized adultery, such as the *Lex Julia* and *Lex Papia Poppea*.²¹ Such laws raised the expectations set on the women of his household, requiring them to act as paragons of virtues now enshrined in law.

Given that morality was central to the Augustan promise, criticism of the state's failures was often framed within moral criticism of imperial women. Accusations of sexual license were particularly prevalent and damning in the Roman context, as the essential role of the male head-of-household, or *paterfamilias*, was to exercise control, or *imperium*, over his female relatives. In this formulation, a woman's indiscretions also implicated the male relative who has failed to control her. The consequences of this are severe when the household in question is that of the imperial family.²²

Note on Sources

²⁰ De la Bédoyère, *Domina*, 3.

²¹ David Wheeler-Reed, *Regulating Sex in the Roman Empire: Ideology, the Bible, and the Early Christians* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), 4.

²² Ginsburg, *Representing Agrippina*, 124-5.

In pursuit of answers to my research questions, I will examine a combination of extant literary, epigraphic, and visual materials in translation. With this, I will explore excerpts from the works of various ancient Roman historians, including Velleius Paterculus,²³ Suetonius,²⁴ Tacitus,²⁵ and Cassius Dio.²⁶ To balance these histories with other types of ancient Roman literature, I will also analyze *controversiae*, poetry, and comedic dialogue. As each of these sources contains their own unique gaps and biases, I intend to read them primarily for their narrative value as sensationalized caricatures in which specific imperial women are cast into stereotypical roles that support the author's given agenda. Given that many of these sources were composed decades or even centuries after our designated period, they provide valuable insight into later generations of Romans' historical imagination of the early Principate. The histories, in particular, carry significant implications for the regimes under which they were produced, as the authors subtly draw comparisons between their time and that of the early Principate.

Considering the limitations and potential biases of these sources, I plan to supplement them with written and visual materials created in the period in hopes that including such materials will contribute to a more nuanced perspective.

The material record provides significant insight into the contemporary perceptions of these women at various levels, from the official to the ordinary, and across social strata. For instance, in the first chapter, I will consider epigraphic texts from the period, including funerary inscriptions²⁷ and sling-stone messages²⁸ from the period leading up to Augustus's establishment

²³ Vell. Pat. ed. and trans. A. J. Woodman (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2025).

²⁴ Suet. *Lives of the Caesars, Volume I: Julius. Augustus. Tiberius. Gaius Caligula.*, trans. J.C. Rolfe (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1914).

²⁵ Tac. *Ann. Books 1-5*, trans. Clifford H. Moore, John Jackson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1931).

²⁶ Cass. Dio, trans. Earnest Cary, Herbert B. Foster (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1914).

²⁷ Erik Wistrand, *The so-called Laudatio Turiae: Introduction, Text, Translation, Commentary* (Göteborg: Acta Universitatis Gothoburgensis, 1976).

²⁸ Emily Ann. Hemelrijk, "Imperial Women," in *Women and Society in the Roman World: a Sourcebook of Inscriptions from the Roman West* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 300-301.

of the Principate. Next, I will study the laws of the Augustan moral reforms, such as the *Lex Julia* and the *Lex Papia Poppea*, and how they were memorialized by Augustus in his *Res Gestae Divi Augusti*, factoring them into a discussion of the moral standard Augustus not only imposed on the state but his own household.²⁹

Finally, I will analyze imperial coinage, sculpture, and art as visual materials³⁰ as a form of state-sponsored propaganda, using the women of the imperial family to symbolize various goals such as morality, peace, prosperity, and dynastic continuity. Conversely, the deliberate destruction or defacement of portraits, inscriptions, statues, and other imagery creates a tangible record of the official condemnation of memory, or *damnatio memoriae*, of some of our central figures, contributing to a discussion of the potential motives behind condemnation.³¹

Historiographical Review: Methodology

Having identified primary sources for analysis, I now approach the question of the method of analysis. My choice of method will be guided by that of more experienced scholars.

Within the last twenty years of scholarship, there has been a significant shift in the approach scholars take to the primary source material. For instance, scholars have become increasingly skeptical of traditional sources, such as the accounts of Roman historians Tacitus, Suetonius, and Cassius Dio, now recognized as biased narratives rather than truthful historical accounts. As a result, the recent trend in Roman scholarship has been to read these traditional sources against the grain, situating the accounts, their authors, and their potential biases within their socio-political context. With this, some scholars have wisely chosen to balance these more

²⁹ Augustus, *Res Gestae Divi Augusti*, trans. Frederick W. Shipley (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1924).

³⁰ C.H.V. Sutherland, *The Roman Imperial Coinage, Volume I, From 31 BC to 69 AD*, 404 (London: Spink and Son Ltd, 2018), 72.

³¹ Varner, "Portraits, Plots, and Politics: 'Damnatio Memoriae' and the Images of Imperial Women," 42.

biased sources with material culture, whether that be epigraphic texts, coinage, or artworks. This approach has become more common with the recent acceptance and incorporation of new archaeological discoveries.

For instance, the work of Guy de la Bédoyère in *Domina: The Women Who Made Imperial Rome* provides an example of an excellent methodological approach to primary sources. De la Bédoyère acknowledges the flaws in his sources and handles them skeptically. Examining works by Roman historians such as Suetonius, Tacitus, and Dio, de la Bédoyère acknowledges that these sources were written by men who lived centuries after the imperial women they discuss and thus often feature gaps, ambiguities, and political agendas.³² Notably, he recognizes their tendency to play into cultural stereotypes about imperial women, which reductively depicted them as either chaste, venerable Roman matrons or corrupt, power-hungry villains. De la Bédoyère provides nuance to these sources by balancing them with evidence from imperial coinage, funerary inscriptions, statuary, and building projects. De la Bédoyère's balanced approach to his source material adds significant depth to his analysis and is a strategy I seek to emulate in my research. However, his analysis of the evidence leaves something to be desired, as he often uncritically accepts the negative assessments of the character of imperial women found in the works of Roman historians like Tacitus, Suetonius, and Dio.³³

Similarly, Judith Ginsburg uses this approach to significant analytical effect in her excellent book *Representing Agrippina: Constructions of Female Power in the Early Roman Empire*. Agrippina the Younger is often depicted as a one-dimensional villain in the historical record: a wicked stepmother, domineering wife, and ambitious woman willing to perform all kinds of sexual license, including incest, to attain power. Ginsburg strives to problematize this

³² De la Bédoyère, *Domina*, 10.

³³ De la Bédoyère, *Domina*.

stereotypical portrayal by situating this caricature within its narrative purpose of criticizing the regime. Through her astute analysis, Ginsburg contributes to understanding how cultural assumptions about women in power inform narrative constructions of imperial women. By taking a similar approach to the study of both Agrippina the Younger and imperial women generally, I will argue that portrayals of these women, both by the state and contemporary observers, tend to reflect conservative gender roles and cultural assumptions about women in power.³⁴

Methodology

Following the scholarly trend of reading conventional sources against the grain, my analysis will take a skeptical view of the historical accounts of Suetonius, Tacitus, Dio, etc. I firmly believe that recognizing the flaws in these sources and supplementing their material with contemporary legal codes, epigraphic texts, and visual materials will lend itself to a more nuanced analysis of my topic.

Lacking sources written by our central characters themselves, it is tempting to turn this project into a speculative history. While I acknowledge that some historical imagination is sometimes necessary, this project will avoid indulging in speculation, as it is a pointless endeavor. Instead, it will remain grounded in a close reading of the available sources, seeking to understand how contemporaries imagined the so-called ‘Julio-Claudian’ women and what this says about the socio-political environment in which these sources were created.

³⁴ Ginsburg, *Representing Agrippina*.

Historiographical Review: Conceptual Basis

As mentioned briefly above, one source of conceptual inspiration for this project came from the work of Richlin in her book *Arguments with Silence: Writing the History of Roman Women*. Richlin reminds us that the answer to any question of sexual morality in Ancient Rome “has different answers in law, history, moral exempla, gossip, and satire”³⁵ and encourages reading various materials in concert in order to paint a clearer picture. Of course, she also expresses healthy skepticism that what “actually happened” is recoverable in the first place, making the silence in the historical record a centerpiece of her argument. She questions how the Romans, filtered through the elite male imagination and tradition, reproduced knowledge about women in ways that often make their stories uncoverable by history. The work of Amy Richlin will be discussed further in the second chapter on the women of the *domus Augusta*, specifically regarding her work on the jokes attributed to his daughter Julia the Elder in Macrobius’s *Saturnalia*.³⁶

The legacy of Foucault has been highly influential in modern historical scholarship and, while worthy of note as a foundational concept, will only form one aspect of this project’s conceptual basis. David Wheeler-Reed elegantly summarizes Michel Foucault’s argument in *The History of Sexuality*,³⁷ saying that “sexuality, power, and control are always related,” albeit in complex and nuanced ways.³⁸ Foucault’s work encourages readers to understand sexuality not only as an essential method of social reproduction but also as one of control. The social construction of sexuality is both a way to control human behavior and an important paradigm through which human behavior is interpreted and understood. In other words, sexuality is a

³⁵ Richlin, *Arguments with Silence*, 6.

³⁶ Richlin, *Arguments with Silence*, 81-109.

³⁷ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction* (New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2012), 34.

³⁸ Wheeler-Reed, *Regulating Sex in the Roman Empire*, 10.

critical discourse through which people attempt to make sense of the systems of power under which they live.

When patriarchal social and political structures are thrown into chaos, women often bear the brunt of criticism. This was certainly true of the tumultuous period following the assassination of Julius Caesar and the development of an imperial regime, as the women of the imperial family's newfound proximity to power and importance to dynastic continuity meant they became the targets of unprecedented criticism. Inspired by the work of Mary Beard in *Women and Power: A Manifesto*, the conceptual basis grounding my exploration of contemporary depictions of imperial women is the theory of "re-privatization." Referencing traditional Greco-Roman gender roles that confined women to the home, Beard contends that the trivialization of women's roles in the public sphere served to "re-privatize" their public voice.³⁹ Applying this concept to my research, I anticipate that the image of Roman imperial women as sexually licentious, overly ambitious women also serves to "re-privatize" them. By criticizing women's public involvement in the regime, Roman authors reinforced cultural anxieties surrounding women in power, discouraging women from aspiring to influence and deterring men from allowing them to.

Intended Contributions to Historical Scholarship

My thesis project will contribute to existing scholarship by historicizing constructions of the imperial women of the early Principate within a rhetorical tradition that, appropriated by the regime and its critics, evolved in response to the transition from Republic to Empire.

In a profoundly patriarchal society like Ancient Rome, accusations of indiscretion implicated not only the woman herself but also her entire family. Therefore, questioning the

³⁹ Beard, *Women and Power: a Manifesto*, 23.

virtue of imperial women inherently called into question the state's legitimacy. Likewise, imperial women could be used as a propagandistic tool to advertise the state's success. By analyzing both favorable and unfavorable depictions of these women, I hope to draw nuanced conclusions about their symbolic role in the regime and analyze the transitional period from the Republic to the Empire as a pivotal moment that exacerbated cultural anxieties about the stability of the state and the role of women within it. While the works of the aforementioned scholars have certainly touched on this concept, my research will flesh out this paradigm as it applies to the early Principate.

I aim to critically examine the facade constructed by this rhetoric, acknowledging its silencing effect on women's voices in the historical record. Through the use of indirect evidence, I hope to dismantle the stereotypical portrayals and recognize the potential for imperial women to emerge as political actors.

Overall, I hope this project will promote a deeper understanding of how the portrayal of imperial women in this period was shaped by complex societal and political factors that continue to influence the dynamics between gender and governance today.

Structure of the Work

To give my thesis a coherent structure, I will divide it into three body chapters and a conclusion. The first chapter will examine the rhetorical tradition surrounding *pudicitia* and analyze it in the context of the civil war that immediately preceded the establishment of the Principate, helping us understand how this rhetoric would be influenced by the rise of a "covert autocracy."⁴⁰ The second chapter will explore the Augustan period, focusing initially on how Augustus's moral reforms shaped expectations for his regime and then examining the impact of

⁴⁰ Drinkwater, *Nero: Emperor and Court*, 419.

these reforms on key female figures in Augustus's life: his wife, Livia, and his daughter, Julia the Elder. The third chapter will examine the depictions of Agrippina the Elder and Agrippina the Younger, situating their portrayal in the perspectives of later generations interpreting this era within the historical context of the early Principate. Finally, the conclusory chapter will address the implications of these narratives, which work to "re-privatize" women and effectively silence their voices within historical discourse for posterity.

CHAPTER 1: FULIVA AND TURIA, WOMEN IN THE AGE OF THE IMPERATORS

Traditional Roman Womanhood

A woman's *pudicitia*, which we may loosely translate as chastity, was central to not only her reputation but that of her entire family. *Pudicitia* was a nebulous concept, referring not to just one female virtue but rather a whole set of virtues that relegated a woman's voice, reproductive capacity, and sexuality to the domestic sphere, or *domus*. Because the meaning of *pudicitia* was ambiguous and only fully evident in private, the perception of being *pudica* was often more important than reality.

The reliance on perception to determine one's *pudicitia* is well attested in Seneca the Elder's *Controversiae* 1.2, a *controversia*, or debate, which discusses the eligibility of a girl for the priesthood. Having been kidnapped and sold to a brothel, the young girl claimed to have preserved her *pudicitia* by convincing her clients not to violate her, until one refused to do so and she was forced to kill him and escape. Seneca suggests that the girl's *pudicitia*, and thus her eligibility for the office of priestess, has been compromised merely by the fact that her *pudicitia* is in question. Presenting the argument against the girl, he says that "no woman is *pudica* enough if questions are asked about her."⁴¹ Here, it is clear that the accusation of committing *stuprum* is in itself compromising.⁴² Recognizing this fact is crucial to grasping the central role of accusations of *impudicitia* in Roman political polemic. With this, a foundational assumption I make in this project is that the actual truth behind accusations of *impudicitia* is inherently secondary to the perception of *impudicitia*.

While women received praise for their domestic virtues, men were lauded for qualities that allowed them to excel in war and politics, both distinctly public functions. The distinction

⁴¹ Sen. *Controv.* 1.2, trans. by Michael Winterbottom (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974).

⁴² Rebecca Langlands, *Sexual Morality in Ancient Rome* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 31.

between Roman masculinity and femininity was intrinsically related to the separation between the public and private spheres, as Mary Beard emphasizes in her book *Women & Power: A Manifesto*. The relegation of women to the private sphere and the close association between masculinity and public speaking marginalized women's public voice. Such norms limited women's speech to supporting "feminine" interests: speaking out as victims or martyrs or in support of their families or other women. Conversely, women speaking on behalf of men or the community was considered detestable.⁴³

This chapter will examine the ways in which the chaotic period of political and social upheaval that followed the collapse of the Roman Republic thrust women into public view alongside their ascendant male relatives. As women's traditionally private roles became more publicly visible, they were exposed to the accusations of *impudicitia* and usurpation of traditionally masculine roles that often accompanied political discourse.

Civil War and the Age of the Emperors

The turbulent period of civil war that followed the death of Julius Caesar, often referred to as the *Age of the Emperors* for its warring generals, occasioned remarkable examples of women's political action. Largely out of necessity, female relatives stepped in for their menfolk on campaign or otherwise incapacitated. Such behavior was not new to the Roman world; while women could not hold political office and were strongly discouraged from public political participation, they were not entirely precluded from politics. Rather, it was expected that elite women would engage in the politics of their male relatives, albeit in a private rather than public capacity.⁴⁴

⁴³ Mary Beard, *Women and Power: a Manifesto* (London: Profile Books Ltd, 2017), 14.

⁴⁴ Celia E. Schultz, *Fulvia: Playing for Power at the End of the Roman Republic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 6.

What distinguishes the examples of women's political participation in this period from those that came before is the public-facing nature of these women's actions. Such women pushed the boundaries of traditional Roman womanhood for the sake of their male counterparts. In this section, we shall see that while some such women were praised for their bravery, loyalty, and dedication, others were condemned for their appropriation of traditionally masculine behaviors.

Turia

The *Laudatio Turiae*, one of Ancient Rome's most remarkable surviving funerary inscriptions dating to the Augustan principate, commemorates a husband's praise for his deceased wife, whom scholars call Turia.⁴⁵ Although the couple's real names are lost to history, the wife's deeds and acts of dedication to her husband and family have been memorialized. While typical epigraphs for Ancient Roman *matronae* tend to extoll their feminine virtues, such as chastity, piety, modesty of dress, wool-working, and more, the *Laudatio Turiae* does something unconventional for its time: it commends Turia for her extraordinary deeds in service of her husband and her family. Though this eulogy was likely to have been read aloud at Turia's funeral to an audience of family and friends, the author's choice to inscribe the message on her tomb points to his desire for it to be read by a wider audience. As such, the author undoubtedly sought to paint a picture of Turia, himself, and their marriage to be preserved for posterity.⁴⁶ This fact calls us to analyze the character of Turia presented in the text as a deliberate construction. As such, this analysis should offer us a foundational understanding of the language and rhetoric underlying these constructions while also gesturing towards the grey area between adherence to

⁴⁵ Erik Wistrand, *The so-called Laudatio Turiae: Introduction, Text, Translation, Commentary* (Göteborg: Acta Universitatis Gothoburgensis, 1976).

⁴⁶ Emily A. Hemelrijk, "Masculinity and Femininity in the 'Laudatio Turiae,'" *The Classical Quarterly* 54, no. 1 (2004): 186.

gender norms and female political action driven by necessity, which will be discussed later in this chapter.

The inscription highlights Turia's public voice in advocating for familial interests. It begins by referencing the tragic death of Turia's parents, who were murdered in their country estate the day before their wedding. Despite her youth, Turia worked hard to bring her parents justice and successfully advocated for her and her husband's interests in protecting her inheritance from relatives who wanted her father's property. During the civil wars that followed Julius Caesar's assassination, she supported her husband by sending him money, servants, and food. She further pleaded with authorities on his behalf during the proscriptions of the second triumvirate. When Octavian/Augustus restored her husband's civil rights, she endured Lepidus's humiliation in order to receive official confirmation. The description of these events reveals a common theme: Turia's husband acknowledges the essential role Turia played in protecting him throughout a turbulent political period and that she used her connections, resources, and public voice to do so.⁴⁷

As hinted at previously, the *Laudatio Turiae* is especially notable for its emphasis on a woman's public voice. The author depicts Turia taking an active public role that, at first glance, would seem more suited to men of the period. Naturally, this leads us to question the extent to which the *Laudatio Turiae* either subverts or plays into Roman gender conventions in its description of Turia's life and deeds. Indeed, the Romans sharply distinguished between ideal masculine and feminine qualities.

The description of Turia's public voice and self-sacrifice on her husband's behalf seems to conform to rather than subvert traditional gender norms. Thus, the inscription uses Turia's public deeds to support her depiction as a paragon of feminine virtue. The inscription shows Turia

⁴⁷ Wistrand, *The so-called Laudatio Turiae*.

speaking exclusively on behalf of her family's interest, challenging but never crossing the boundaries of traditional feminine propriety. In many ways, the description of Turia's advocacy recalls positive *exempla*, such as that of Hortensia.⁴⁸

However, the fact that Turia's actions outwardly conform to feminine norms in no way diminishes the exceptional nature of her character and her actions. For instance, although her actions fall within the acceptable realm of women's public speech, she is still attributed traditionally masculine *virtus* such as *constantia* (steadfastness) and *firmitas animi* (firmness of mind).⁴⁹ This seems less of an indication of a subversion of gender roles and more of a reflection of the gendered hierarchy of virtues. As Roman culture valued masculine qualities over their feminine counterparts, the husband's use of some masculine-coded qualities to describe his wife may be interpreted as an attempt to afford her higher praise, a kind of honorary masculinity.⁵⁰

Though the *Laudatio Turiae* is notable for centering on a woman's exceptional life and accomplishments, it is undoubtedly a product of the patriarchal culture in which it was produced and, as such, plays into the gender norms of its time.

In the following section on Fulvia, we will explore how instances of women's public speech and political involvement could be interpreted in vastly different ways depending on the author's intent. While Turia is celebrated in the *Laudatio Turiae* as the savior of her husband and family, Fulvia, in stark contrast, faces condemnation for notably similar actions. This stark contrast reveals that depictions of Turia and Fulvia represent two sides of the same coin. Both women, through their public engagement and defiance of societal norms, illustrate the complex dynamics of female agency in a patriarchal society, yet their legacies are molded by the biases of those who tell their stories.

⁴⁸ Beard, *Women and Power: a Manifesto*, 13.

⁴⁹ Wistrand, *The so-called Laudatio Turiae*.

⁵⁰ Hemelrijk, "Masculinity and Femininity in the 'Laudatio Turiae,'" 189.

Fulvia

Fulvia, the wife of Marcus Antonius (commonly referred to as Mark Antony)—one of the three triumvirs who divided the Roman Empire after Caesar’s death alongside Octavian and Lepidus—lived through one of the most turbulent and bloody times in Roman history. Largely vilified by ancient sources as a cruel, avaricious, and domineering woman, Fulvia's example establishes the standard for the harsh criticism faced by women who “stepped out of line” or were simply on the wrong side of history.

Most of the evidence we have about the life of Fulvia comes from her enemies or later writers who inherited that tradition. The Fulvia passed down to us through history is clearly a “product of the imagination” of hostile men⁵¹: we are left not with a picture of a real woman but rather a caricature of a woman who suborns traditional male roles in the pursuit of ultimate power. To this end, she is painted as the original power behind Mark Antony: controlling the Senate, participating in proscriptions (mass assassinations) of her enemies, and taking on military command.⁵² Her alleged appropriation of military command is especially integral to her characterization as a *dux femina*.

Through her domination of Antony, Fulvia’s image mirrors that of Cleopatra, who, through her association first with Julius Caesar and later with Mark Antony, was criticized as a foreign, Eastern influence on Rome. Following the tradition of Hellenistic kings featuring their wives in official coinage, we find several paired images of Antony and his wives in his coin issues in the period before the Battle of Actium,⁵³ including depictions of Octavia and Cleopatra and possibly Fulvia as well.⁵⁴ If the numismatic image in question is really Fulvia, then that

⁵¹ Schultz, *Fulvia: Playing for Power at the End of the Roman Republic*, 2.

⁵² Cass. Dio 47.8, trans. Earnest Cary, Herbert B. Foster (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1914).

⁵³ Judith Ginsburg, *Representing Agrippina: Constructions of Female Power in the Early Roman Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 133.

⁵⁴ David R. Sear, *Roman Coins and Their Values*, 4th ed, RIC 420 (London: Spink Books, 1988), 89.

would make her the first known Roman woman to be featured on her husband's coinage.⁵⁵

Although the practice of pairing images of the emperor and his wife on state-issued coinage was not adopted in the Roman West until the reign of Claudius, it would later become an important aspect of how the imperial regime promoted its image and dynastic lineage.

Fulvia is rhetorically situated as the precedent to Cleopatra in her domination of Antony. For instance, Plutarch says that Cleopatra owes Fulvia a debt of gratitude for training Antony to be "quite tamed and schooled at the outset to obey women."⁵⁶

Such caricatures were an integral way in which Antony's enemies both discredited him and deflected blame. As de la Bédoyère astutely posits, "blaming Fulvia and Cleopatra was a convenient way for Roman historians to avoid admitting that a man of Antony's status had been solely responsible for destroying himself."⁵⁷ The prevalence of this rhetoric in the historical record highlights the intense animosity that Mark Antony's enemies, particularly Augustus, successfully fostered against him.

This offers a compelling lens through which to examine the sexually charged rhetoric surrounding Fulvia. The stories of her subversion of sexual norms serve to both desex her and, by extension, to emasculate her husband. We will explore how her portrayals in various media reinforce this dynamic, presenting her in a way that supports the idea of her husband's submissive nature and vulnerability to female influence.

Fulvia's depictions clearly illustrate the co-construction of gender within Roman political discourse. They demonstrate that the portrayal of femininity in narratives about prominent

⁵⁵ Anthony A. Barrett, *Livia: First Lady of Imperial Rome* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 140.

⁵⁶ Plut. *Vit. Ant.* 10, trans. Bernadotte Perrin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1920).

⁵⁷ Guy de la Bédoyère, *Domina: The Women Who Made Imperial Rome* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 54.

women primarily serves as a means to evaluate the masculinity and political efficacy of their male counterparts.

Fulvia's Transgressive Sexuality

While extant texts do not readily accuse Fulvia of sexual impropriety, subversive sexuality is still an integral part of Fulvia's caricature. Though the character of Fulvia does not actively engage in *stuprum*, she inverts cultural assumptions about sexuality by attempting to dominate men. The idea of Fulvia as the sexually dominant partner in her marriage plays into an explicit critique of her as a *dux femina*, a "commander woman" who appropriates male political authority,⁵⁸ thereby painting her as an individual inherently dangerous to the state.⁵⁹

This is readily apparent in the sensational and even violent subversion of gendered norms that we see her engage in across her various portrayals. For instance, Cassius Dio recounts the particularly interesting anecdote that when the triumvirs called for the assassination of Cicero, a man who had oft spoken against her, she took his severed head and "after abusing it spitefully and spitting upon it, set it upon her knees, opened the mouth, and pulled out the tongue which she pierced with the pins that she used for her hair."⁶⁰ In this startling act of corpse abuse, Fulvia subverts gendered expectations and uses one of the traditional adornments of elite Roman women, a hairpin, in an act of sexually charged violence.

Fulvia is further presented as sexually transgressive and domineering in a highly satirized poem, which Martial attributes to Octavian/Augustus in Book 11 of his *Epigrams*:

Because Antony fucks Glaphyra, Fulvia has assigned
This penalty as mine: I need to fuck Fulvia too.

⁵⁸ L'Hoir, "Tacitus and Women's Usurpation of Power," 6.

⁵⁹ Schultz, "Fulvia: Playing for Power," 86-93.

⁶⁰ Cass. Dio 47.9, trans. Earnest Cary, Herbert B. Foster (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1914).

I should fuck Fulvia? What if Manius would beg
 That I have anal sex with him? Would I? Probably not, if I were wise.
 “But fuck, or let us fight,” she says. But what—is my life
 dearer than my dick? Let the war-trumpets sound.⁶¹

In this passage, sex with Fulvia is described as a punishment she attempts to impose on Augustus, which he compares to intercourse with an unappealing man. Such language is used to de-sex her, challenging her femininity by portraying her as an undesirable sexual partner.

Although attributing this quote to Octavian/Augustus is highly apocryphal, given the centuries’ distance between him and Martial, it nevertheless speaks to the prevailing attitude towards Fulvia established under Octavian and further propagated by generations of Roman writers. While such anecdotes presented Fulvia as a quasi-man, the taunts we will analyze in the next section trivialized her and reduced her back to a woman.

“Talking” bullets

With Antony on campaign in the East, Fulvia and her brother-in-law Lucius Antonius were left to defend Antony’s interests at home. Following the disintegration of the alliance between Octavian and Antony, Lucius and Fulvia raised an army in Italy on Antony’s behalf.⁶²

The subsequent siege of Perusia (modern Perugia) by Octavian in 41-40 B.C.E has left us with an exceptional record of the mudslinging that Fulvia suffered at this time, suggesting that this image of Fulvia was widely disseminated. To this end, I turn to one of the rare pieces of evidence of Fulvia’s reputation in her lifetime. So-called “talking” bullets, or lead sling bullets bearing inscriptions, were common in Roman warfare at the time. These bullets were often inscribed with either the military unit that used them or the name of their commanding officer or general. Not unlike inscriptions found in modern warfare, some contained taunting remarks

⁶¹ Martial, *Epigrams, Volume III: Book XI* 20. ed. and trans. D.R. Shackleton Bailey (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

⁶² Schultz, *Fulvia: Playing for Power at the End of the Roman Republic*, 76.

directed at the enemy. However, what sets this collection apart is the highly explicit nature of the messages. Direct references to Fulvia include such obscenities as "I seek Fulvia's clitoris" and "Fulvia, spread wide your arsehole."⁶³ "Heavy enough to cause serious injury,"⁶⁴ these bullets' messages were no innocent joke; rather, they blended sexually violent rhetoric with the threat of physical harm.

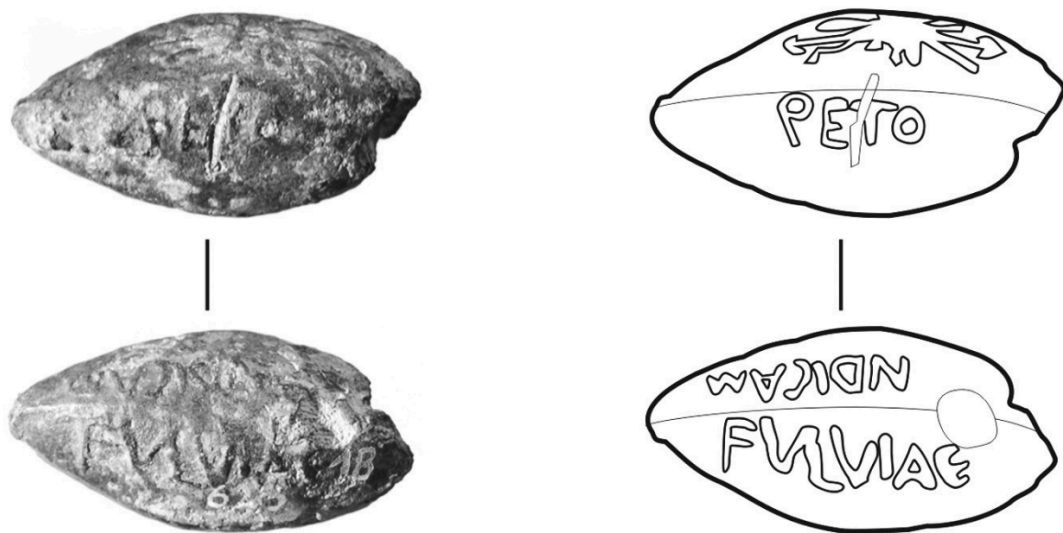


Image of lead sling bullet insulting Fulvia. L. Benedetti and S. Olmos.⁶⁵

Unfortunately, the identities of these messages' authors have been lost to history. The thought of ordinary soldiers writing these messages is particularly compelling, as it would point toward the preoccupation with Fulvia pervading social strata. Schultz, however, argues that the inscriptions on the sling bullets were not created by soldiers. She posits that the fact that the inscriptions are in relief indicates that they were produced using a mold, likely for widespread

⁶³ Emily Ann. Hemelrijk, *Women and Society in the Roman World: a Sourcebook of Inscriptions from the Roman West* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 300-301.

⁶⁴ Schultz, *Fulvia: Playing for Power at the End of the Roman Republic*, 98.

⁶⁵ Schultz, *Fulvia: Playing for Power at the End of the Roman Republic*, 96.

dissemination.⁶⁶ If true, this suggests that the crude messages were likely sanctioned by higher authorities within the military hierarchy, indicating a deliberate strategy to disseminate this sexual joke at Fulvia and Antony's expense among the troops. One can imagine a soldier receiving this message and having their fears relieved, incredulous that the opposing army had a woman at its helm.

This example makes clear how sexually violent rhetoric, in this case, humor, could be used to reduce women who stepped outside the domestic sphere deemed appropriate for them. This type of rhetoric was one medium through which the process of "re-privatization," as Mary Beard calls it, took place.⁶⁷ It is within the cultural context of the threat of sexual violence being weaponized against women who stepped outside the traditional Roman gender roles assigned to them that we may begin to understand how depictions of Roman imperial women as sexually transgressive worked not only to criticize their male counterparts but also to keep elite women confined to the domestic, rather than the public and political sphere.

Conclusion

The figures of Fulvia and Turia are, in many respects, foils of one another. Both were thrust into the public spotlight by circumstance—yet one was celebrated while the other was vilified. The dramatic contrast between these two portrayals highlights the starkly different ways opposing archetypes of the *matrona* and *dux femina* manifested in Roman literature and epigraphy, as female characters were molded into culturally recognizable stereotypes to suit the author/creator's desired message. The example of Fulvia and Turia provides a clear point of

⁶⁶ Schultz, *Fulvia: Playing for Power at the End of the Roman Republic*, 99.

⁶⁷ Beard, *Women and Power: a Manifesto*, 23.

reference from which to explore how these same archetypes were adapted in response to the rise of the Principate and the corresponding shift of women's roles in the state.

Fulvia and Turia remind us just how little we know about Roman women's real, everyday lives. Almost everything that has remained of them in the historical record has been distorted by men's agendas. This is especially true of the imperial women of the early Principate. In this uncomfortable gap between construction and reality, the voices of our female protagonists are muffled yet resonant.

CHAPTER 2: LIVIA AND JULIA, THE WOMEN OF THE *DOMUS AUGUSTA*

*“Rome has become his house, public space has merged with private, and a letter to the Senate and an assembly of the people of Rome take the place of the family council.”*⁶⁸

The Augustan “Golden Age”

Following decades of turbulent civil war, unimaginable destruction, and catastrophic bloodshed, Augustus emerged as Rome's singular power. His preeminence had been hard-won, but he now found himself in the precarious position of exercising absolute power in a society that abhorred “tyrants,” so much so that his uncle and adoptive father, Julius Caesar, was murdered because of it.

By the late Republic, it had become clear that the republican system of government was highly dysfunctional. Nonetheless, republican values continued to hold a special place in the Roman political imagination, especially at this critical moment of transition when nostalgia for the “golden age” of the old republic was high. Taking advantage of this nostalgia, Augustus framed himself as the restorer of the Republic and adapted its language to support his rule. For instance, he painted himself as a *princeps*, “first citizen,”⁶⁹ and *primus inter pares*, “first among equals.”⁷⁰ Augustus wielded supreme power, but did so through the authority conferred on him by political offices, titles, and other honors granted to him by the Senate. In this manner, Augustus showcased his exceptional political savvy by recognizing that he could not establish a system of autocratic power rooted in constitutional change but rather must create one on the

⁶⁸ Richlin, *Arguments with Silence*, 101.

⁶⁹ Guy de la Bédoyère, *Domina: The Women Who Made Imperial Rome* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 79.

⁷⁰ De la Bédoyère, *Domina*, 109.

basis of his personal authority. To hold onto autocratic power in what Drinkwater elegantly describes as a “half-baked principate,”⁷¹ Augustus had to be a master of his public image.

Augustan Reforms

Part and parcel with the nostalgia for a return to a golden age was a longing for the revival of the traditional morality of Rome’s forebears, as many believed that the failures of the Republic were a direct result of the people’s moral lassitude. Augustus’s embrace of this position was not merely ideological but also pragmatic. The population of Rome had been ravaged by civil war, as many marriageable men died, and those left often avoided marriage altogether. In order to replenish the population, especially that of the male Roman elite from which soldiers and government officials were drawn,⁷² Augustus advanced a series of moral and social reform legislation intended to increase marriage rates and encourage the production of legitimate children.

These reforms consisted primarily of two laws. The first, the *Lex Julia*, passed in 18 B.C.E and encompassed the *Lex Julia de maritandis ordinibus* and the *Lex Julia de adulteriis coercendis* (i.e., laws governing marriage and adultery). Later, in 9 C.E., revisions to the original law were made via the *Lex Papia Poppaea*. Though passed two decades apart, these laws were often treated by Roman jurists as one and thus are difficult to distinguish from each other or establish the historical relationship between them.

The passage of these laws marked a notable incursion of the state in the private sphere, establishing a carrot-and-stick model in which desirable behavior was incentivized while undesirable behavior was punished. This model included bestowing privileges such as official

⁷¹ John F. Drinkwater, *Nero: Emperor and Court* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 12.

⁷² David Wheeler-Reed, *Regulating Sex in the Roman Empire: Ideology, the Bible, and the Early Christians* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), 4.

positions and expanded inheritance rights on those who married acceptable partners and went on to have children while imposing disadvantages on those who remained unmarried, did not remarry within a certain time after the death or divorce of their spouse, or married someone of an unacceptable social class. Further, adultery, defined exclusively as infidelity on the part of the wife, was made a punishable offense, and guilty parties were subject to divorce, disinheritance, and exile.

Augustus's reforms also provided incentives for married couples to have more children for the state. One such incentive was the *ius trium liberorum*, the right of three children, which granted special privileges to freeborn parents of three or more children and *liberti* (freed persons) with four or more children.⁷³ Importantly, this freed women from the requirement of *tutela mulierum*, or guardianship, and expanded their right to inheritance.⁷⁴

The significance of this development in women's legal status is best understood within the context of the historical trajectory of marital law and custom in Ancient Rome. Traditionally, Roman women were married *in manus*, meaning that when they married, they transferred from the *potestas*, or power, of their head of household, *paterfamilias*, into that of their husband. Over time, this traditional form of marriage was replaced in popularity by marriage *sine manu*, in which women would remain under the authority of their natal family after their marriage.⁷⁵ Following the death of her *paterfamilias*, the woman would fall under *tutela mulierum*, or the guardianship of a chosen man, often a male relative. Importantly, Vestal Virgins were never subject to *tutela* out of both respect for their position and the necessity that they appear unbiased and independent.⁷⁶ While women under *tutela* were technically dependent on the authority of

⁷³ Wheeler-Reed, *Regulating Sex in the Roman Empire*, 9.

⁷⁴ Anthony A. Barrett, *Livia: First Lady of Imperial Rome* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 124.

⁷⁵ Barrett, *Livia: First Lady of Imperial Rome*, 116.

⁷⁶ Lien Foubert, "Vesta and Julio-Claudian Women in Imperial Propaganda," *Ancient Society* 45 (2015): 194.

men, in practice, many such women were able to exercise significant freedom over their own affairs and, with some limitations, were able to inherit, own, and bequeath property.⁷⁷ Augustus's reforms stripped away even these formal restrictions for women with three or more children. Tracing the development of these laws and customs over time reveals a steady process whereby women exercised gradually increasing authority over their property and affairs.

Although Augustus's reform program offered women expanded rights and privileges in ways that, at first glance, may appear far ahead of its time, we must keep in mind that these reforms were not altruistic but pragmatic. To this end, Wheeler-Reed prompts us to consider a Foucauldian approach in our evaluation of the Augustan program, "all this garrulous attention which has us in a stew over sexuality, is it not motivated by one basic concern: to ensure population, to reproduce labor capacity, to perpetuate the form of social relations: in short, to constitute a sexuality that is economically useful and politically conservative?"⁷⁸

Indeed, most scholars agree that Augustus's reforms were designed to incentivize marriage and childrearing, reinvigorating a population ravaged by civil war. However, scholars differ in opinion on who these laws were intended to target and the message Augustus hoped to project through them.

Regarding the audience of these laws, Augustus's reforms appear specifically targeted to promote the reproduction of an elite class that can serve in the military and government in service of the preservation and further expansion of the empire.⁷⁹ It is essential to recognize that the laws were not uniformly enforced; privileges varied according to social status and, as we shall see, were even granted as an honor to some individuals close to the *princeps* despite their

⁷⁷ Foubert, "Vesta and Julio-Claudian Women in Imperial Propaganda," 194.

⁷⁸ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction* (New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2012), 34.

⁷⁹ Wheeler-Reed, *Regulating Sex in the Roman Empire*, 4.

not meeting the officially defined criteria. Boatwright, for example, enumerates the increasingly “conspicuous honors” granted to women of the imperial family, a trend that began under Augustus. For example, despite not having three children, Augustus’s wife Livia received honors like the *ius liberorum*, perhaps signifying her role in advertising the program and the privileges it afforded to women who met the exacting standards of *pudicitia* now enshrined in law.⁸⁰

Scholars like Wheeler-Reed, who situate Augustus’s reform program in conversation with modern conservatism and eugenics, are not far off the mark: they acknowledge that, like modern conservatism tends to support systems that benefit the white male elite, Augustus hoped to reproduce and reinforce a traditional system of ancestral customs that benefited the male Roman elite to the exclusion of the lower classes and women.⁸¹

Further, the intended message behind these reforms is particularly revealing. Ginsburg, taking her cue from Edwards, argues convincingly that the laws played a crucial role in the legitimization of the new regime.⁸² Rhetorically, Augustus’s moral reforms seem to evoke comparison with the not-so-distant republican past, recalling the belief that sexual immorality, particularly by women, was responsible for the breakdown of the republic. Edwards describes it this way, “[Augustus] may be seen as making a claim, in accordance with the conventions of Roman invective, that the Roman republic failed because its governing class was composed of men who were not men enough to control their own wives,”⁸³ such a comparison calls to mind the reputations of late Republican women reviled for their perceived political aggression, most notably Fulvia and Cleopatra, and the men like Mark Antony who they were said to have

⁸⁰ Mary T. Boatwright, *Imperial Women of Rome: Power, Gender, Context* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 20.

⁸¹ Wheeler-Reed, *Regulating Sex in the Roman Empire*, 13.

⁸² Judith Ginsburg, *Representing Agrippina: Constructions of Female Power in the Early Roman Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 124.

⁸³ Catherine Edwards, *The Politics of Immorality in Ancient Rome* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 47.

dominated. Through these reforms, Augustus painted himself, by contrast, as a restorer of traditional sexual morality and masculine virtue. That he sought to present himself this way is clear in the autobiographical account of his public life, the *Res Gestae*, where he advertises his contributions, “by the passage of new laws I restored many traditions of our ancestors which were then falling into disuse, and I myself set precedents in many things for posterity to imitate.”⁸⁴ Evidently, Augustus wished to present himself, and by extension his family, as the model of the traditional practices his laws sought to promote.⁸⁵ On this basis, imperial women became central figures in the discourse surrounding Augustus’s revival of traditional Roman morality, a discourse that carried significant implications for the perceived legitimacy and success of the regime. As we will discuss in a later section on the exile of his daughter Julia the Elder on the grounds of adultery, Augustus painting himself as a model to follow appears excessively hypocritical, a fact which later Romans did not hesitate to point out.

Notably, these developments transformed traditionally private and familial issues of marriage and reproduction into matters of state concern. Considering that the breadth of government control was necessarily limited in the ancient world, the genius of Augustus’s moral program was the use of social pressure as an enforcement mechanism, as individuals and the community regulated their own behavior in the pursuit of Augustus’s incentives.

In this way, Augustus was able to exert control over sexual behavior at the highest level. Wheeler-Reed argues that “the *ius liberorum* demonstrates that Augustus’s codification of morality in Ancient Rome transformed the entire process of sex into a public event. Rewards and punishments allowed the state to control women,”⁸⁶ and, I would argue, men as well.

⁸⁴ Augustus, *Res Gestae Divi Augusti* 8.5, trans. Frederick W. Shipley (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1924).

⁸⁵ Ginsburg, *Representing Agrippina*, 124.

⁸⁶ Wheeler-Reed, *Regulating Sex in the Roman Empire*, 10.

This shift is especially interesting when situated in the context of the “increasing tendency to view the imperial family and the state as synonymous.”⁸⁷ Imperial and aristocratic women, particularly the women of Augustus’s own family, were presented as models of this government-proscribed morality to be followed by the masses, projecting a message about traditional womanhood and child-rearing that had ripple effects across society.

Subsequent sections of this chapter will explore how the construction of Augustus’s regime and household blurred the distinction between the public and private spheres. We will also explore, in turn, how this dynamic influenced the perception of female members of Augustus’s family, shaping both their propagandized image and the ways they were recorded by history.

The Women of the Domus Augusta

The women of the *domus Augusta*, or imperial household, were expected to live up to the “semimythical”⁸⁸ and nearly unattainable standard of ideal Roman womanhood. For instance, Augustus advertised that his wife, sister, and daughter wove all of his clothes, recalling a well-known epitaph depicting Rome’s feminine ideal: “*domum servavit, lanam fecit*” (she keeps house, she makes wool).⁸⁹ As we shall see, Augustus deliberately strove to project an image of himself and his household that was closely aligned with his public aims. His female relatives’ conformity to these ideals was crucial not only to Augustus’s reform program but, eventually, also to his dynastic ambitions. It is unsurprising then that the women of Augustus’s family would become figures against which the success of Augustus’s moral reforms program would be measured by posterity.

⁸⁷ Ginsburg, *Representing Agrippina*, 124.

⁸⁸ Barrett, *Livia: First Lady of Imperial Rome*, 115.

⁸⁹ Barrett, *Livia: First Lady of Imperial Rome*, 115.

Livia

Like her husband, Livia was the first of her kind, the first so-called “empress” of Rome. In reality, the title of “empress” does not fully capture her unique position and status. The title “*Augusta*,” which is closest to what is colloquially understood by the term “empress,” was, in fact, not granted to Livia until 14 B.C.E., after Augustus’s death.⁹⁰ In the Augustan period, Livia’s role as wife of the *princeps*, while highly honored, was not yet an officially designated role. Rather, any influence that Livia had was largely grounded in the positive creation of public image and personal authority.

Many scholars see the denial of certain titles and honors to Livia in Augustus’s lifetime as a deliberate choice. Indeed, Livia’s relative absence from the visual representations of Augustus’s principate stands in stark contrast to the prominence of Mark Antony’s wives on his coin issues. If this choice was truly deliberate, then the motivation may have been twofold: to avoid invoking models of Hellenistic kingship that conflicted with the understanding of Augustus as *primus inter pares* (“first among equals”) and to distance Livia from negative association with widely despised female figures like Fulvia and Cleopatra. In a similar vein, Barrett posits that “Romans had watched with alarm during the final years of the republic as women with powerful personalities asserted themselves on the political scene. Livia’s dull normalcy was reassuring, and perfect for the times.”⁹¹ Perhaps with this concern in mind, Augustus would choose not to depict Livia on his official coinage, and she would not appear in an official issue (either in the guise of a goddess or *in propria persona*) until after Augustus’s reign.⁹²

⁹⁰ Barrett, *Livia: First Lady of Imperial Rome*, 51.

⁹¹ Barrett, *Livia: First Lady of Imperial Rome*, 114.

⁹² Ginsburg, *Representing Agrippina*, 57.

In a culture where rumors of promiscuity attached themselves to nearly every prominent political figure, especially women, it is surprising that Livia seems to have managed to maintain a fairly clean image as the ideal Roman *matrona*. Even in sources generally hostile to her, such as Tacitus, she lives up to the feminine ideal of the mythical past: “in domestic virtue she was of the old school.”⁹³ Livia’s *pudicitia* is represented as similarly implacable in a memorable anecdote from Cassius Dio, who recounts that “when some naked men met her and were to be put to death in consequence, she saved their lives by saying that to chaste women such men are no different from statues.”⁹⁴



Portrait bust, Julia Livia Augusta in typical nodus hairstyle. 1-25 C.E., Getty Villa Museum, Los Angeles, CA

⁹³ Tac. *Ann.* 5.1, trans. Clifford H. Moore, John Jackson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1931).

⁹⁴ Cass. Dio 58.2, trans. Earnest Cary, Herbert B. Foster (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1914).

Taking a cue from the “modesty and simplicity” favored by Augustus,⁹⁵ Livia was also known to dress in a modest and understated manner, a quality reflected in her statuary and portraiture. Bartman notes that, in contrast with the adornment found in depictions of other Roman women, Livia’s representation “border[ed] on ascetic.”⁹⁶

Such an overwhelmingly positive image had to be carefully cultivated, and this was achieved in part via public participation in religious rituals and association with cults related to womanhood and the family. This included restoring or acting as a benefactor to the Temple of Bona Dea Subsaxana (an ancient women’s healing cult), a temple to Fortuna Muliebris, and shrines to Pudicitia⁹⁷ and Concordia as well.⁹⁸ However, there is some significant scholarly debate over the nature of the association of Livia and other imperial women to the cult of Vesta that is worth briefly delving into.

In his role as *Pontifex Maximus*, Augustus became responsible for the cult of Vesta. Although the *Pontifex* traditionally lived in a public house adjacent to the temple complex, Augustus remained in his home on the Palatine and established a shrine to Vesta there. Livia was said to be responsible for the maintenance of the cult of the Palatine Vesta, but whether this is true is circumspect. Some scholars argue that Livia’s association with the cult is evidenced by the honors and privileges she received. For instance, Dio tells us that in 35 B.C.E., Augustus “granted to Octavia and Livia statues, the right of administering their own affairs without a guardian, and the same security and inviolability as the tribunes enjoyed.”⁹⁹ Livia would later be granted further privileges in common with the Vestals, including the *ius trium liberorum* in 9 B.C.E and the right to sit with the Vestals at gladiatorial games. Foubert argues that, while these

⁹⁵ Barrett, *Livia: First Lady of Imperial Rome*, 118.

⁹⁶ Elizabeth Bartman, *Portraits of Livia: Imaging the Imperial Woman in Augustan Rome* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

⁹⁷ De la Bédoyère, *Domina*, 122.

⁹⁸ De la Bédoyère, *Domina*, 76.

⁹⁹ Cass. Dio 49.38, trans. Earnest Cary, Herbert B. Foster (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1914).

public honors and privileges mirror those granted to the Vestal Virgins, it does not necessarily point towards a deliberate association with the cult of Vesta. Rather, Livia and Octavia receiving these honors is strong evidence of their public visibility, as the *sanctitas* granted to tribunes was designed to protect those in public office from physical and verbal attacks. The conferral of these honors point toward the importance of their public, though unofficial, roles more so than a cult association and are particularly notable as the first instance of such honors being extended to women.¹⁰⁰ Interestingly, tribunician-like protections were not to be afforded to later imperial women, which scholars like Barrett speculate may be related to their dangerous association with public office, for which women were, of course, ineligible.¹⁰¹

Ulixes stolatus

Having discussed Livia's reputation at length, I turn now to the question of how this reputation may have manifested itself in political influence. Suetonius tells us that Livia's great-grandson, the later emperor Gaius Caligula, referred to her as *Ulixes stolatus*, or Odysseus in a *stola*,¹⁰² the traditional garment of the Roman *matrona* and a female equivalent of the male toga. The comparison between Livia and Odysseus is striking, whether taken in a positive or negative sense, it frames her as a woman of remarkable intellect and political savvy.¹⁰³

The *Consolatio ad Liviam*,¹⁰⁴ a poem of consolation addressed to Livia following the death of her son Drusus, gives us a hint about the nature of her influence. Though scholars

¹⁰⁰ Foubert, "Vesta and Julio-Claudian Women in Imperial Propaganda," 194.

¹⁰¹ Barrett, *Livia: First Lady of Imperial Rome*, 137.

¹⁰² Suet. *Aug.* 64.2. trans. J. C. Rolfe (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1914).

¹⁰³ Nicholas Purcell, "Livia and the Womanhood of Rome," *Proceedings of the Cambridge Philosophical Society* no. 32 (1986): 79.

¹⁰⁴ Pseudo-Ovid, *Consolatio ad Liviam*, trans. J. H. Mozley, revs. G.P. Goold. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1929).

debate the authorship¹⁰⁵ and date of this work, it nonetheless provides us with insight into the perceived source of Livia's power and influence.

What now avails thy character, thy whole life chastely lived, thy having so pleased so mighty a lord? And what with chastity to have crowned such a sum of dignities that it is the last among thy praises? What avails it to have kept thy mind upright against thy age and to have lifted thy head clear of its vices? To have harmed none, yet to have had the power to harm, and that none feared thy might? That thy power strayed not to theis Campus or the Forum, and that thou didst order thy house within the bounds permitted thee?¹⁰⁶

The *Consolatio* asserts that, contrary to the example of politically ambitious women like Fulvia, Livia refused to usurp the power of men (implied by reference to the male public spaces of the Campus Martius and Forum Romanum) and acted exclusively within the confines of what power and influence had been granted to her. In other words, her influence and *auctoritas* are all the more worthy of respect due to her restraint.

Her unimpeachable reputation for chastity and restraint may have translated into a measure of influence on her husband. For instance, the walls of an Aphrodisian theatre record a letter attributed to Augustus sent in response to the island of Samos's petition for free status.¹⁰⁷ The inscription recounts how, though he ultimately denies the petition, he is positively disposed toward the Samians largely out of a desire to "please his wife, who has been most energetic on their behalf."¹⁰⁸ Later, Augustus relented and granted the Samians their request.¹⁰⁹ Further, Suetonius writes of Livia's request that Augustus confer Roman citizenship on a man from Gaul and that although he denies the appeal, he consoles Livia by granting the man one of the essential

¹⁰⁵ This poem was traditionally attributed to Ovid, though modern scholars consider this apocryphal. Maurice Platnauer, *Latin Elegiac Verse: A Study of the Metrical Usages of Tibullus, Propertius, and Ovid* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 118.

¹⁰⁶ Pseudo-Ovid, *Consolatio ad Liviam*, trans. J. H. Mozley, revs. G. P. Goold. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1929).

¹⁰⁷ H. W. Pleket and R. S. Stroud, eds., *Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum*, 32-833. *Samos. Subscript of Octavian/ Augustus to Samos, 38 B.C.* (Brill, 1985).

¹⁰⁸ Barrett, *Livia: First Lady of Imperial Rome*, 198.

¹⁰⁹ Barrett, *Livia: First Lady of Imperial Rome*, 198.

rights of Roman citizens, freedom from tribute.¹¹⁰ These anecdotes demonstrate that, at least occasionally, Augustus publicly recognized Livia's influence. While he does not always accede to her requests, he shows a measure of deference to her through compromise.

Succession Crisis

While the Livia described above is in every way the ideal Roman matron, some ancient sources instead paint Livia as the archetypal *saeva noverca*, a wicked stepmother willing to kill the stepchildren that threaten her son Tiberius's path to succession. To get to the root of these portrayals, we must first explore the succession crisis that threatened the continuity of the Augustan promise.

When Octavian/Augustus married the pregnant and recently divorced Livia in 38 B.C.E., there would have been little doubt that the new couple would go on to have children; after all, both had already proven themselves capable. Unfortunately for everyone involved, they never did, leaving Augustus with only one child, his daughter, Julia the Elder, by his first marriage to Scribonia.¹¹¹

Having risen to power after the fall of the Republic and decades of civil war, Augustus would have been hyper-cognizant of the fact that the likelihood of the regime he established continuing after his death was tenuous. Augustus's power was based on his personal authority rather than any constitutional system, and the issue of succession not only threatened the continuity of the *Pax Augusta* he had created but also brought him dangerously close to revealing his monarchical ambitions. Without a son, his dynastic plans depended on his daughter Julia

¹¹⁰ Suet. *Aug.* 64.40.

¹¹¹ De la Bédoyère, *Domina*, 30.

producing healthy, capable sons who could live to adulthood, a feat in and of itself in ancient times.

As Augustus's only child, one can imagine that the pressure on Julia the Elder must have been immense. Augustus strictly managed her education. Suetonius tells us that "in bringing up his daughter and his granddaughters he even had them taught spinning and weaving, and he forbade them to say or do anything except openly and such as might be recorded in the household diary."¹¹² Undoubtedly, Augustus hoped to educate Julia and her daughters to embody the precepts of ideal Roman womanhood that were the foundation of his reform program. De la Bédoyère correctly posits that "Julia, like all the other women of the imperial household, was constrained within a framework defined by Augustus and according to tradition. Julia was to act as, and be, a showcase example of the moral strictures Augustus wanted to impose on wider Roman society."¹¹³

As we have discussed, the strict morality enshrined in Augustan law was intended to promote the production of legitimate offspring for the Roman elite. Similar logic may be applied to Julia, whose ability to produce legitimate children was an issue of paramount importance to the state. Like most Roman women, Julia's husbands were carefully arranged for her by Augustus. Her first marriage to her cousin Marcellus, Augustus's nephew by his sister Octavia, only lasted two years up until Marcellus's death in 23 B.C.E Julia was subsequently married to Augustus's general Agrippa, to whom she bore five children over the course of nine years: Gaius, Lucius, Julia the Younger, Agrippina the Elder, and Agrippa Postumus. After Agrippa's death in 12 B.C.E., Julia married her stepbrother Tiberius in a notoriously miserable marriage.

¹¹² Suet. *Aug.* 64.2.

¹¹³ De la Bédoyère, *Domina*, 85.

Julia's sons, Gaius and Lucius, were soon adopted by Augustus in hopes of shaping them into his future heirs. We can see Augustus's dynastic ambitions, as well as Julia's critical role in those ambitions, through coinage from the period. Dated to approximately 13 B.C.E., the silver denarius below pictures Augustus (obverse) alongside his daughter Julia and his two grandsons/adopted sons, Gaius and Lucius (reverse). Above Julia and her sons is a wreath called the *corona civica*, an honor Augustus tells us was awarded in honor of saving the lives of all Roman citizens.¹¹⁴ Considering the *corona civica* traditionally decorated the door of the awarded man's house, its presence in this image is thought to reference the domus Augusta to which Julia and her sons belong.¹¹⁵ This dynastic image highlights the connection between Augustus and his heirs apparent, Gaius and Lucius, through their mother, Julia. This recognition of Julia's dynastic importance is the first known instance of an imperial woman depicted on official coinage in her own right rather than in the guise of a deity.¹¹⁶



The British Museum, London, United Kingdom. Silver denarius. Head of Augustus (bare) right; behind, lituus (obverse). Portraits of Gaius Caesar, Julia the Elder, and Lucius Caesar. *Corona civica* above Julia (reverse).¹¹⁷

¹¹⁴ Augustus, *Res Gestae Divi Augusti* 34.2, trans. Frederick W. Shipley (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1924).

¹¹⁵ Ginsburg, *Representing Agrippina*, 59.

¹¹⁶ De la Bédoyère, *Domina*, 92.

¹¹⁷ C.H.V. Sutherland, *The Roman Imperial Coinage, Volume I, From 31 BC to 69 AD*, 404 (London: Spink and Son Ltd, 2018), 72.

In this way, the above coin serves the dual purpose of reminding viewers of the succession and projecting the values of proper domesticity and reproduction that Augustus claimed to return to Rome. As de la Bédoyère puts it, “the new role that Augustus offered the Romans was one in which women and symbols of women were a fundamental part of disposing of the memories of violence that had led to its creation, as well as acting as its saviors and protectors.”¹¹⁸ In this manner, this coin demonstrates how the domestic, private sphere was mapped onto the public sphere in Augustan visual rhetoric, emphasizing the newfound importance of women to the state.

To Augustus’s certain dismay, Gaius and Lucius died young. Their younger brother, Agrippa Postumus, later died in exile. These events meant that the direct line of descent from Augustus through Julia was, at least for now, put to one side. With this, Livia’s son, Tiberius Claudius Nero, quickly became the new heir apparent and was adopted by Augustus. Livia, whose own potential dynastic aspirations greatly benefited from this series of convenient deaths, was thereby accused by Roman historians like Tacitus of poisoning Tiberius’s competitors for the succession. Tacitus obliquely references the possibility, describing the boys’ deaths as caused by “untimely fate, or the treachery of their stepmother Livia.”¹¹⁹ While there is no credible evidence to support the claim that Livia murdered these children, the accusation aligns with the pervasive fear of *saevae novercae*, so-called “evil” stepmothers, and the danger they were assumed to pose their step-children in the Roman popular imagination.¹²⁰

¹¹⁸ De la Bédoyère, *Domina*, 70.

¹¹⁹ Tac. *Ann.* 1.3. Livia was technically Gaius and Lucius’s stepmother through the boys’ adoption by Augustus.

¹²⁰ Barrett, *Livia: First Lady of Imperial Rome*, 114.

Exile

As illustrated by the dynastic image above, the version of Julia portrayed in Augustan propaganda before her exile seems to live up to the ideals of womanhood set out for her. This image contrasts sharply with how subsequent events and later historians depicted her, a difference undoubtedly shaped by the sensational events of 2 B.C.E. In that year, Augustus was proclaimed *pater patriae*, or father of the fatherland, by the Senate. We might see this moment as the culmination of the gradual blurring of the line between the *domus Augusta* and the state during Augustus's reign. As the father of the nation, his daughter Julia became a "living metaphor for the state," in which the "morals of the body politic" are "mapped" onto the real bodies of women.¹²¹ Later that year, Augustus publicly accused Julia of adultery in a letter to the Senate and exiled her to the island of Pandateria off the coast of Italy.

Writing just a few decades later, Velleius Paterculus, the nearest contemporary writer to the event, tells us that...

there erupted in [Augustus's] house a storm that is foul to mention and makes one shudder to recall. His daughter Julia, completely unmindful of her great parent and husband, through her luxury and lust left undone nothing that a woman could do or experience in terms of shame, and she measured the greatness of her station by her license to sin, claiming as legitimate whatever she liked.¹²²

Paterculus goes on to name several men with which she is accused of adultery, each of whom he says "paid the same penalty for violating Caesar's daughter and [Tiberius] Nero's spouse that they would have paid for violating anyone's wife..."¹²³ that is exile, with which Julia was also punished.

These unprecedented and dramatic events no doubt captured the imagination of later Romans, a truth showcased to humorous effect in a series of scandalous witticisms and

¹²¹ Richlin, *Arguments with Silence*, 96.

¹²² Vell. Pat. 2.100, ed. and trans. by A. J. Woodman (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2025).

¹²³ Vell. Pat. 2.100, ed. and trans. by A. J. Woodman (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2025).

conversations the 5th-century writer Macrobius apocryphally attributes to Julia and Augustus in *Saturnalia*. Before diving into this material, I think it is important to engage with the historiography of its use in conversations about Julia the Elder. The example of Richard Bauman's book *Women and Politics in Ancient Rome* cautions against taking an uncritical approach to this source material. In his study of Augustus's daughter Julia the Elder's alleged adultery and subsequent exile from Rome, Bauman considers these anecdotes direct evidence of Julia "speaking for herself."¹²⁴ Considering that Julia was exiled in 2 B.C.E., this nearly 400-year time difference should have set off alarm bells.

Despite this, these fascinating anecdotes are nonetheless worthy of analysis. I once again take a cue from Amy Richlin in this matter, whose chapter "Julia's Jokes" effectively considers this unique text within its 5th-century and, possibly, Augustan context. Richlin explores the nuances of the attributed material, considering that witticisms attributed to Julia and Augustus, though not necessarily something they said, may have circulated in some form during their lifetime and later been co-opted by future generations of Romans like Macrobius to align with the author's historical moment, political agenda, and generic conceits.¹²⁵ While this interpretation is certainly plausible and highly compelling, I believe Richlin overlooks the most likely interpretation: that Macrobius engages with and adapts an inherited historical and rhetorical tradition around Julia that extrapolates her early life from her well-documented exile on charges of adultery. However, like Richlin, I am primarily interested in examining how later Romans understood Julia, and by extension, imperial women in general, as archetypes and political icons.

¹²⁴ Richard A. Bauman, *Women and Politics in Ancient Rome* (London: Routledge, 1992), 110.

¹²⁵ Richlin, *Arguments with Silence*, 84.

Having established a clear picture of our approach to the material, I now turn to the text itself. Below, we will find the idealized image of a dutiful wife and daughter in dialogue with Julia's negative image as an adulterer, and to surprising effect.

The first of these sayings reinforces the aforementioned idea of Julia as a "living metaphor for the state," as Macrobius has Augustus joke that "he had two daughters with whom he had to put up with—the republic and Julia."¹²⁶ The comparison between Julia and the state also serves to remind readers that while Augustus may indulge Julia, he ultimately has control over her as *paterfamilias*, just as he controls the state as *pater patriae*. A direct comparison is later made between the ideal Augustus expects his daughter to live up to, represented by his wife Livia, and her real behavior: "while serious and important men surrounded Livia, Julia was flanked by a flock of young men, and profligate young men at that. Her father warned her in a note that 'she should notice how great a difference there was between the two first ladies.' [Julia] replied elegantly, 'these young men with me will also become old men.'"¹²⁷ Here, Livia's positive paradigm is directly compared to Julia's negative one. Julia obstinately rejects the old guard and their pretense of decorum, exemplified by Augustus, Livia, and their social circle. Julia's response to Augustus further subverts expectations by diverting attention from the moral differences between herself and Livia's behavior and instead focusing on the generational gap between them.

The final quote Macrobius attributes to Julia is particularly scandalous; when she is asked how it is possible that all her children so closely resemble her husband, Agrippa, although "she made such public property of her body," she cleverly retorts, "Why, I never take on a passenger until the ship is full."¹²⁸ This statement is especially radical as it casts doubt on the viability of

¹²⁶ Macrobius, *Sat.* 2.5.4, ed. and trans. Robert A. Kaster (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).

¹²⁷ Macrobius, *Sat.* 2.5.6.

¹²⁸ Macrobius, *Sat.* 2.5.9.

the norms imposed on female sexual behavior within a dynastic context. By suggesting that she engages in adulterous behavior only when she is already pregnant, Macrobius's Julia unravels the conventional link between legitimate children and fidelity upon which normative chastity relies, throwing traditional notions of paternity into question.

Richlin, in line with Cameron, categorizes the *Saturnalia* as a nostalgic dialogue whose point of nostalgia is the Augustan past.¹²⁹ The obvious question becomes: what point does the depiction of a wayward emperor's daughter serve in this nostalgic reimagination of the Augustan Age? If we briefly consider Macrobius's 5th-century context, set against the backdrop of a Christianized Roman Empire experiencing an attendant rise in asceticism,¹³⁰ we encounter a Julia whose rebellious, flamboyant nature and fecundity, contrasting sharply with the ascetics of the era, would likely have captivated and amused the *Saturnalia*'s 5th-century audience.

Augustan Implications

Returning to our Augustan context, however, we must consider the implications of Julia's alleged adultery on the Augustan regime. As Augustus's only child, Julia's sexuality and reproduction had immense political implications; her fecundity would ensure the continuation of the regime. Julia was an important pawn in Augustus's dynastic scheme, enduring a series of arranged marriages over which she had little to no control. While it is impossible to say whether or not Julia really engaged in adulterous affairs, if she had, it may have been a way of exercising a modicum of control over her own life.

In any case, if we understand Julia as a living metaphor for the state itself, then Augustus's inability to control his daughter's behavior would likely have been seen by

¹²⁹ Richlin, *Arguments with Silence*, 102.

¹³⁰ Richlin, *Arguments with Silence*, 105.

contemporaries as revealing a weakness in his ability to govern the state; Augustus's hegemony is shown to be vulnerable to human fallibility. Augustus's shortcomings in this area highlight the hypocrisy of his reform agenda; how can he hope to impose laws on the public that he is unable to uphold within his own family? As Ginsburg succinctly puts it, "an emperor could hardly claim to be a guarantor of the moral order if he could not control female sexual license in his own household."¹³¹ Considering the importance of Augustus's moral legislation to his public image, Julia's indiscretions would have posed a serious threat to his reputation and legacy.¹³² Seneca the Younger reflects on this in *De Beneficiis*, stating that "[Augustus] divulged all these crimes, which, as emperor, he ought to have punished, and equally to have kept secret, because the foulness of some deeds recoils upon him who punishes them."¹³³ In this interpretation, Augustus's shockingly public denunciation and harsh punishment of his daughter may be seen as an attempt to recover his damaged reputation for *pudicitia*.

While up to this point, our sources, both ancient and modern, have been preoccupied with Julia's alleged licentiousness, further evidence complicates our understanding of the accusations made against Julia. Under the Augustan regime, the line between adultery and treason was increasingly blurred.¹³⁴ Edwards explains that "the law against adultery bore a disconcerting resemblance to that against treason—and adultery itself now took on a much more intimate association with political subversion."¹³⁵ The blurring between the crimes of adultery and treason is apparent in accounts of Julia's condemnation and exile.

¹³¹ Ginsburg, *Representing Agrippina*, 124.

¹³² Sarah T. Cohen, "Augustus, Julia and the Development of Exile 'Ad Insulam,'" *The Classical Quarterly* 58, no. 1 (2008): 213.

¹³³ Sen. *Ben.* 6.32, trans. John W. Basore (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1935).

¹³⁴ Cohen, "Augustus, Julia and the Development of Exile 'Ad Insulam,'" 213.

¹³⁵ Edwards, *The Politics of Immorality in Ancient Rome*, 61.

To this end, Velleius Paterculus names several notable men who were accused of adultery with Julia, including Iullus Antonius, the son of Marcus Antonius and Fulvia.¹³⁶ Although the majority of these men were punished with exile like Julia, Dio tells us that Iullus Antonius was either killed or forced to commit suicide,¹³⁷ an assertion which Tacitus supports, “owing to the incontinence of his daughter and granddaughter, whom he expelled from the capital while penalizing their adulterers by death or banishment.”¹³⁸ Interestingly, death was a punishment not usually inflicted on adulterers but rather reserved for those guilty of violations of *maiestas*, the violation of a sacrosanct individual.¹³⁹ Bearing this evidence in mind, it appears that Antonius was implicated not simply for adultery but also for involvement in a plot of some kind against the regime. If this assertion holds true, the joint implication of Julia and Iullus could lend credence to the notion advanced by several scholars that her condemnation was driven at least in part by political motives.

Equally compelling evidence comes from the location given to Julia’s acts of adultery in the literary tradition: the Forum Romanum, specifically on the rostra and the statue of Marsyas. As the historic center of Roman civic and political life, the Forum was an exclusively male space and a shocking location in which to find Julia’s adulterous liaisons. Seneca the Younger details her colorful misdeeds in the Forum...

The deified Augustus banished his daughter, who was shameless beyond the indictment of shamelessness, and made public the scandals of the imperial house—that she had been accessible to scores of paramours, that in nocturnal revels she had roamed about the city, that the very forum and the rostrum, from which her father had proposed a law against adultery, had been chosen by the daughter for her debaucheries, that she had daily resorted to the statue of Marsyas, and, laying aside the role of adulteress, there sold her favors, and sought the right to every indulgence with even an unknown paramour.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁶ Vell. Pat. 2.100.

¹³⁷ Eric R. Varner, “Portraits, Plots, and Politics: ‘*Damnatio Memoriae*’ and the Images of Imperial Women,” *Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome* 46 (2001): 57.

¹³⁸ Tac. Ann. 3.24.

¹³⁹ Varner, “Portraits, Plots, and Politics,” 61.

¹⁴⁰ Sen. Ben. 6.32, trans. John W. Basore (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1935).

Ignoring the dubious and sensationalized nature of the claim that Julia engaged in public sex and even sex work in the Forum, placing these transgressive acts on the rostra from which her father proclaimed his moral legislation may be a historical distortion of the potentially public and political nature of her behavior. The combined weight of this evidence indicates that part of the motivation behind Julia's condemnation and exile may have been political¹⁴¹ (of course this does not rule out the possibility that adultery could have occurred as well). Some scholars advance the notion that this evidence points directly to her involvement in a conspiracy against Augustus, while that explanation is certainly plausible, I would say the truth of the matter is impossible to know for sure. What seems abundantly clear to me, however, is that Julia's condemnation likely had a political component, or else it might not have justified the lengths to which Augustus went in spite of the damage to his reputation and the legitimacy of his rule—whether she rebelled against her father or had simply become inconvenient, however, is up for debate.

Evidently, accusations of sexual immorality carried political implications, and the two concepts were closely associated in the literary tradition, especially with regard to imperial women. This seems to support the notion that allegations of adultery could, in some instances, have been fabricated in order to discredit politically subversive women in the imperial court, as women were seen as illegitimate political actors and, therefore, could not be charged with crimes like treason. By framing their "crimes" in this way, the regime reinforced traditional gender power structures and undermined the political influence of these women.

Regardless of the exact motivation behind Julia's exile, which we may never know, the effect was the same—allegations of adultery were an extremely effective tool to discredit and remove those who had displeased the *princeps*. As we will explore in the following chapter, Julia

¹⁴¹ Varner, "Portraits, Plots, and Politics," 58.

the Elder's exile, as the first inflicted on an imperial woman,¹⁴² would establish an important precedent that future emperors of the 'Julio-Claudian' line would follow and expand upon.

Conclusion

If Julia was indeed charged with adultery in part to disguise her involvement in political intrigue against the regime, then that points to a significant rhetorical innovation under Augustus. By reappropriating the rhetoric of sexual morality from the idealized Roman past, the Augustan regime not only advanced its political agenda and dynastic aims but also weaponized familiar political invective against intransigent or inconvenient imperial and aristocratic women. This, in turn, facilitated the denigration of these women's public image and justified their swift removal from the political landscape. Subsequent 'Julio-Claudian' emperors would follow suit.

As we discovered with Macrobius, future generations of Roman writers inherited this rhetorical tradition and expanded on it, adapting these constructions to narratives that sought to understand the dynamics of their own time through the lens of their past.

Overall, the reduction of these women to their sexuality—whether legitimate and reproductive or subversive and adulterous—served to systematically discredit their characters, distort their histories, and silence their oppositional voices, not only during their lifetimes but for posterity.

¹⁴² Varner, "Portraits, Plots, and Politics," 57.

CHAPTER 3: AGRIPPINA(s), DECIPHERING THE LITERARY TRADITION

Like her mother and sister before her, Agrippina the Elder was sentenced to exile on the orders of a close male relative, her father-in-law Tiberius, in 29 C.E. Tacitus tells us that after she committed suicide in exile, Tiberius denigrated her memory with accusations of charges of *impudicitia* and adultery with Asinius Gallus.¹⁴³

Agrippina the Elder stands out as one of the few imperial women of this period who, despite her condemnation, is generally exonerated by the ancient literary tradition. Even Tacitus, who seems generally to have reveled in sexual intrigue, calls the imputations against Agrippina's character "scarcely credible."¹⁴⁴ Instead, these charges are framed as having been fabricated in order to satisfy Tiberius's personal vendetta against the family of his by-then-deceased rival Germanicus. As we have discussed in previous chapters, the fabrication of adultery charges, whether by the regime or by ancient authors, was common. To this end, Ginsburg reminds us that "imputations of incest, adultery, and other sexual transgressions...were part of the stock in trade of political invective...such insinuations of sexual misconduct were regularly employed to denigrate the character of the person under attack without any expectation that the audience would necessarily find the charges credible."¹⁴⁵ Credible or not, charges of *impudicitia* seemed to stick to imperial women in the historical record. Having already established the destructive effect of rumor on imperial women's reputation both in life and after death, Agrippina presents a complicating case, one that eschews these notions of permanence and whose image is largely rehabilitated.

¹⁴³ Tac. *Ann.* 6.25, trans. Clifford H. Moore, John Jackson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1931).

¹⁴⁴ Tac. *Ann.* 6.26.

¹⁴⁵ Judith Ginsburg, *Representing Agrippina: Constructions of Female Power in the Early Roman Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 118-119.

Agrippina the Elder's chastity is sharply contrasted with her daughter Agrippina the Younger's ignominy. There is thus a tendency among historians to, as L'Hoir simply puts it, see her as the "'good' Agrippina."¹⁴⁶ Instead of questioning whether the depiction of one Agrippina as "good" and the other as "bad" reflects historical truth, I intend to explore the historical factors that may have contributed to such opposing representations of this mother-daughter pair. In other words, I seek to explain why authors like Tacitus, writing decades later, found accusations of Agrippina the Elder's *impudicitia* "scarcely credible"¹⁴⁷ but considered the veracity of similar (and worse) accusations against Agrippina the Younger a sort of universally acknowledged truth.

While many historians, blinded by the force of the literary tradition, hastily assume that this difference stemmed from the disparate characters of our real-life Agrippinas, I believe this notion is misguided. At the risk of sounding trite, I contend the most compelling answer to our question lies in the age-old maxim, 'history is written by the victors.' By this, I mean that both depictions of Agrippina can be satisfactorily explained by placing them within a comprehensive understanding of the historical context in which their stereotypical depictions were initially established and the ways in which later Roman historians, influenced by these enduring attitudes preserved in collective historical memory, adapted pre-existing attitudes to suit their desired narratives.

Tacitus's Agrippina the Elder

Germanicus and Agrippina the Elder were the undisputed "dream ticket" of Augustus's potential successors.¹⁴⁸ This is unsurprising, given their unparalleled pedigree. Germanicus, renowned general, military hero, and grandson of Livia through her son Drusus, and Agrippina

¹⁴⁶ L'Hoir, "Tacitus and Women's Usurpation of Power," 18.

¹⁴⁷ Tac. *Ann.* 6.25.

¹⁴⁸ John F. Drinkwater, *Nero: Emperor and Court* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 36.

the Elder, the granddaughter of Augustus through her mother Julia the Elder, together represented the ultimate union between the Julian and Claudian sides of the imperial family. The two would go on to produce six surviving children, one a future *princeps*, and the other a future *Augusta*. For these accomplishments, the couple was wildly popular. Although Tiberius had adopted Germanicus as his successor, the relationship between Tiberius and his popular, younger relatives appears to have been highly contentious.

While on campaign with her husband, Agrippina earned the love of the military for herself and her children. Tacitus recounts Agrippina's engagement with the military while on campaign with her husband Germanicus and imagines Tiberius's enraged response...

Had not Agrippina prevented the demolition of the Rhine bridge, there were those who in their panic would have braved that infamy. But it was a great-hearted woman who assumed the duties of a general throughout those days; who, if a soldier was in need, clothed him, and, if he was wounded, gave him dressings. Pliny, the historian of the German Wars, asserts that she stood at the head of the bridge, offering her praises and her thanks to the returning legions. The action sank deep into the soul of Tiberius, "There was something behind this officiousness; nor was it the foreigner against whom her courtship of the army was directed. Commanding officers had a sinecure nowadays, when a woman visited the maniples, approached the standards and took in hand to bestow largesses—as though it were not enough to curry favor by parading the general's son in the habit [dress] of a common soldier, with the request that he should be called Caesar Caligula [Bootikins]! Already Agrippina counted for more with the armies than any general or generalissimo, and a woman had suppressed a mutiny which the imperial name had failed to check."¹⁴⁹

Tacitus's portrayal of Agrippina the Elder plays into the archetype of a *dux femina*, as, like Fulvia, she attempts to usurp male power by "assuming the duties of a general."¹⁵⁰ Unlike in the example of Fulvia, however, the assessment of Agrippina the Elder's subversion of gender norms is ambiguous rather than exclusively negative. For instance, while Tacitus criticizes her for her "haughty temper"¹⁵¹ and aspirations to power ("Agrippina, impatient of equality and athirst for

¹⁴⁹ Tac. *Ann.* 1.69.4.

¹⁵⁰ L'Hoir, "Tacitus and Women's Usurpation of Power," 9.

¹⁵¹ Tac. *Ann.* 6.12.

power, had sunk female frailty in masculine ambition ”¹⁵²), he also praises her as a “great-hearted woman” who, by keeping herself and her household chaste, protected her vulnerable children from those who would do them harm. To this end, he says, “to distribute poison among the three [male children] was impossible; for their custodians were patterns of fidelity, Agrippina’s chastity impenetrable.”¹⁵³

While the story of Agrippina’s military heroism is particularly remarkable and certainly worthy of further analysis, it is impossible to substantiate. Therefore, I put it aside to explore Tacitus’s possible motivation for portraying Agrippina the Elder with the characteristics of the *dux femina* archetype. The most compelling answer, in my opinion, is that it serves primarily as excellent foreshadowing of his later portrayal of her daughter Agrippina the Younger, who, as we will discuss later in this chapter, is a *dux femina* in the most pejorative sense.

The more complex question to answer, then, is why the characterization of Agrippina the Elder as a chaste and venerable Roman matron persisted while the depiction of her as an adulteress did not. Disregarding the potential that Agrippina’s real character had a direct impact on her characterization, Tacitus’s representation of Agrippina seems most likely the inheritance of a rhetorical tradition around her that sprung up following her exile at the hands of Tiberius.

After her husband Germanicus died in 17 C.E., allegedly under dubious circumstances, Agrippina the Elder returned to Rome with her children and Germanicus’s cremated remains. As the grieving widow of the beloved Germanicus and the granddaughter of the deified Augustus, Agrippina undoubtedly enjoyed a high level of popularity and prestige.¹⁵⁴ Tacitus’s narrative speaks to this point, which tells us that when Tiberius wrote a letter to the Senate condemning

¹⁵² Tac. *Ann.* 6.25.

¹⁵³ Tac. *Ann.* 6.12.

¹⁵⁴ Guy de la Bédoyère, *Domina: The Women Who Made Imperial Rome* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 145.

Agrippina, “the people, carrying effigies of Agrippina and [her son] Nero, surrounded the curia, and, cheering for the Caesar, clamored that the letter was spurious and that it was contrary to the Emperor’s wish that destruction was plotted against his house.”¹⁵⁵ Although this exact scene may have never occurred, it is well within the bounds of reasonable historical imagination to envision public outcry against the removal of a popular imperial woman like Agrippina the Elder.

Considering our sources tell us that Tiberius only accused Agrippina of adultery after her death in exile, Ginsburg compellingly argues that Tiberius likely fabricated these accusations in order to blacken her character and thus deflect the public outcry against her death.¹⁵⁶

Rumors easily attached themselves to their victims in the Roman world, especially when those rumors were about the most mysterious yet conspicuous members of elite Roman society—imperial women. Popular outcry alone, then, would likely not have been enough to prevent the image of Agrippina the Elder as an adulteress from cementing itself in the annals of history. The defining moment for Agrippina the Elder’s legacy, then, was the accession of her son Gaius Caligula to the principate.

Rehabilitation: Agrippina the Elder in Epigraphic and Visual Representations

Following her exile, the majority of Agrippina the Elder’s images—including portrait busts, statuary, coinage, and inscriptions—were damaged, destroyed, or removed from public display. She was publicly denigrated; her birthday was declared a *dies nefastus*, an ill-omened day, and after her death in exile in 33 C.E., she was denied burial in the Mausoleum of her grandfather Augustus.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁵ Tac. *Ann.* 5.4.

¹⁵⁶ Ginsburg, *Representing Agrippina*, 119.

¹⁵⁷ Eric R. Varner, “Portraits, Plots, and Politics: ‘*Damnatio Memoriae*’ and the Images of Imperial Women,” *Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome* 46 (2001): 57.

Her son Gaius Caligula becoming the next *princeps* would mark a turning point in Agrippina the Elder's postmortem image. Like his predecessor Tiberius, Caligula traced his legitimacy to imperial rule to his progenitor Augustus, to whom he was biologically related, unlike Tiberius, through his mother, Agrippina the Elder. His association with Augustus was doubly important, considering that it was the primary justification of his right to rule. De la Bédoyère argues that unlike his predecessor Tiberius, Gaius Caligula "had no qualifications whatsoever to serve as emperor other than [his] birth. [He] had fought no wars, had no political careers, and had served in no useful capacity whatsoever."¹⁵⁸ Thus, the rehabilitation of Agrippina the Elder's disgraced image was crucial to justify and advertise his claim to the throne of his forebears.

Suetonius tells us that soon after his succession, Caligula began a propaganda campaign to rehabilitate the image of his mother and family that Tiberius's persecution had so dramatically damaged. First, in a show of conspicuous "filial piety,"¹⁵⁹ Caligula personally traveled to Pandateria to recover his mother and brother's remains from exile and had them interred in the Mausoleum of Augustus in 37 C.E.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁸ De la Bédoyère, *Domina*, 163.

¹⁵⁹ Suet. *Calig.* 15.1 trans. J. C. Rolfe (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1914).

¹⁶⁰ Emily Ann. Hemelrijk, *Women and Society in the Roman World: a Sourcebook of Inscriptions from the Roman West* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 304.



A large marble block commemorating Agrippina the Elder from the Mausoleum of Augustus in Rome.¹⁶¹

The funerary inscription Gaius Caligula dedicated to her is a clear example of dynastic propaganda, as it associates his mother, and by extension himself, with their most dynastically significant male relatives...

The bones of Agrippina, daughter of Marcus Agrippa, granddaughter of the deified Augustus, wife of Germanicus Caesar, mother of the princeps Gaius Caesar Augustus Germanicus (Caligula).¹⁶²

Caligula's propagandistic goals are also evident in the official coinage issued during his reign. Under Gaius Caligula, Agrippina the Elder became the first imperial woman to receive the honor of being explicitly identified with her name in the legend of a Roman coin. Caligula commissioned various issues of aurei and denarii from the imperial mints at Rome and Lugdunum, each with a portrait of the emperor and his titles on the obverse and his mother and her titles on the reverse.¹⁶³

¹⁶¹ *Epitaph of Agrippina the Elder*. 37 A.D. Marble.

¹⁶² Hemelrijk, *Women and Society in the Roman World*, 304.

¹⁶³ Ginsburg, *Representing Agrippina*, 62.



Gold aureus. Bust of Gaius, legend C CAESAR AUG GERM PM TR POT (obverse). Bust of Agrippina the Elder, legend AGRIPPINA MAT C CAES AUG GERM (reverse).¹⁶⁴

Another Caligulan issue devoted both the obverse and reverse of a bronze sestertius to Agrippina the Elder. The obverse features her portrait and titles, while the reverse portrays a *carpentum*, or ceremonial cart, with the legend SPQR MEMORIAE AGRIPPINAE. The legend and *carpentum* on the reverse reference the ceremonial mode of transportation that Agrippina's image would take to attend the funerary games and sacrifices Caligula declared in her honor.¹⁶⁵



Bronze sestertius. Bust of Agrippina the Elder, legend AGRIPPINA M F MAT C CAESARIS (obverse). *Carpentum* drawn by two mules, legend SPQR MEMORIAE AGRIPPINAE (reverse).¹⁶⁶

These visual materials demonstrate the importance of Agrippina the Elder's rehabilitated image in the legitimacy politics of Gaius Caligula's reign. Agrippina the Elder's honor is also reinforced and enhanced by association with the status of her male relatives. This mutual process of honor conferral was an essential method by which Caligula rehabilitated his once-disgraced family and asserted his claim to his inheritance as the great-grandson of the deified Augustus

¹⁶⁴ RIC I# 21, N# 247138, Numismata.

¹⁶⁵ Suet. *Calig.* 15.

¹⁶⁶ RIC I# 55, N# 247172, Numismata.

Having been rehabilitated by Gaius Caligula, his successor Claudius (Agrippina the Elder's brother) and his wife Agrippina the Younger would continue to honor her memory. Taken together, posthumous depictions of Agrippina the Elder created under the reigns of Caligula and Claudius far outnumber the images that survived of her from her lifetime.¹⁶⁷

Understanding Agrippina the Elder's Characterization in the Literary Tradition

Gaius Caligula's passionate efforts to rehabilitate his mother's reputation, combined with the persistence of this endeavor during Claudius's reign and her popularity among the people, provide a clearer understanding of the relatively positive attitude toward her expressed by Tacitus and others. As we shall explore in the next section, the importance of this postmortem image to Agrippina the Elder's lasting legacy becomes even more apparent when compared to the prevailing attitudes toward her daughter Agrippina the Younger.

In any case, it appears that whatever public denigration Agrippina the Elder suffered at the hands of Tiberius was likely forgotten by a willing populace as her image and memory were restored, rehabilitated, and publicly honored, first by her son and later by her brother and daughter. Tacitus appears to have adopted this prevailing attitude and used it to his advantage by portraying Agrippina as the sympathetic victim of Tiberius's corruption and cruelty toward Germanicus and his family.

Agrippina the Younger

Agrippina the Younger first comes into focus in our sources during the reign of her brother Gaius Caligula. One of three surviving sisters, alongside Drusilla and Livilla, Agrippina the Younger and her siblings comprised the entire imperial family at the time. As such, the sisters

¹⁶⁷ Varner, "Portraits, Plots, and Politics," 62.

enjoyed a high level of public visibility and were extensively honored.¹⁶⁸ As Dio tells us, they were granted the privileges of the Vestal Virgins,¹⁶⁹ the right to watch games from the imperial box, and inclusion in the oaths of allegiance to the emperor. Suetonius describes the language of the oaths, “he caused the names of his sisters to be included in all oaths: ‘and I will not hold myself and my children dearer than I do Gaius and his sisters;’ as well as in the propositions of the consuls: ‘favor and good fortune attend Gaius Caesar and his sisters.’”¹⁷⁰

In 37 or 38 C.E., Caligula also honored his sisters with a remarkable bronze sestertius depicting him and his titles on the obverse and the three sisters in the guise of personifications of *securitas*, *concordia*, and *fortuna*, representing the harmony and unity of the imperial house.¹⁷¹



Bronze sestertius. Gaius Caligula with titles in the legend (obverse). Agrippina as *Securitas* (left), Drusilla as *Concordia* (center), and Livilla as *Fortuna* (right). All three sisters are named in the legend and hold cornucopias.¹⁷²

Some scholars, like De la Bédoyère, read the story of Caligula’s incestual relationship with his sisters onto this coin,¹⁷³ focusing especially on Drusilla’s assimilation to *Concordia*, which was sometimes associated with marital concord. However, I tend to agree with Ginsburg’s interpretation that this coin served two main purposes, the first being to honor his sisters as part

¹⁶⁸ Ginsburg, *Representing Agrippina*, 11.

¹⁶⁹ As discussed in Chapter 2, equating these rights with those of the Vestal Virgins is probably anachronistic and likely not an association the so-called ‘Julio-Claudian’ emperors intended to make. Rather, the rights granted were likely privileges that they had in common with the Vestal Virgins, which may explain some of the confusion among later Romans like Cassius Dio.

¹⁷⁰ Suet. *Calig.* 15.3.

¹⁷¹ Ginsburg, *Representing Agrippina*, 66.

¹⁷² RIC I# 33, N# 247150, *Numismata*.

¹⁷³ De la Bédoyère, *Domina*, 171.

of his program to rehabilitate his family's image, the second to look towards the future dynastic possibility of one of his sisters' children succeeding him.¹⁷⁴

In 38 C.E., Drusilla died and was granted a lavish funeral and deification. Despite the honors granted to the sisters, it appears that the relationship between the surviving siblings quickly deteriorated. A year later, Agrippina the Younger and Livilla were banished on charges of adultery, allegedly with Caligula's male lover and the deceased Drusilla's now-widowed husband Lepidus. Once again, the waters between charges of adultery and conspiracy are muddied. Caligula is said to have behaved "as though he had defeated some enemies,"¹⁷⁵ donating three swords or daggers to the Temple of Mars Ultor, the avenger of Julius Caesar. This donation would have clearly implied his escape from a plot by Lepidus, Agrippina, and Livilla against his life and, by dedicating the weapons to Mars the avenger, sanctioned the vengeance inflicted on the perpetrators. If this is true, Caligula certainly intended to create the public perception that the trio had been implicated in a conspiracy against him.

Another "theatrical" anecdote surrounding her exile requires a comparison between Agrippina the Younger and her mother. After Lepidus is executed, Agrippina the Younger is forced to carry her "lover" Lepidus's ashes back to Rome in a "bizarre parody of her mother's earlier journey to Rome with the ashes of the dead Germanicus."¹⁷⁶ Not only does this story contrast the adulterous behavior of Agrippina the Younger with the chastity of Agrippina the Elder, but Agrippina the Younger's exile to Pandateria forces comparison to her grandmother Julia the Elder.

The symmetry in the depictions of these three generations of women suggests either a deliberate attempt by Caligula to demean his sister through comparisons with both positive and

¹⁷⁴ Ginsburg, *Representing Agrippina*, 68.

¹⁷⁵ Cass. Dio 59.22.7, trans. Earnest Cary, Herbert B. Foster (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1914).

¹⁷⁶ Ginsburg, *Representing Agrippina*, 15.

negative models, an effort by later historians to create narrative intrigue, or possibly a combination of both. As we shall see in the next section, Tacitus masterfully implies a comparison between Agrippina the Younger and her predecessors.

Archetypes of Women in Power: Agrippina the Younger in the Tacitean Narrative

“It is very easy to see Agrippina as a pantomime villain; that was, after all, how Roman historians regarded her because of the way she had broken out of woman’s traditional role. They were also outraged by the irredeemable allegations of incest that surrounded Agrippina. The mud stuck.”¹⁷⁷

Dux Femina

While the Agrippina the Younger we are introduced to in Tacitus’s Caligulan books is a relatively passive character who is victimized by her brother’s excesses, sexual perversions, and cruelties, the woman we meet during Claudius’s reign is the exact opposite of passive. Once recalled from exile by her uncle, Agrippina immediately bursts onto the scene as a political force to be reckoned with.

Following Claudius’s disastrous union with Messalina, he is quickly in the market for a new wife. Tacitus describes the competition between his *liberti*, or freedmen, over who will select his next wife that Claudius, the speed of the selection deemed necessary because of his “impatience of celibacy and his docility under wifely government.”¹⁷⁸ Tacitus’s statement that Claudius is subservient to his wives reminds readers of the political implications of his marriage, the freedmen are not only deciding on Claudius’s new wife but on a new head of state. Claudius’s submission to wives and freedmen represents an inversion of the social order. The

¹⁷⁷ De la Bédoyère, *Domina*, 205.

¹⁷⁸ Tac. *Ann.* 12.1.

emperor's supreme political power is suborned by his social inferiors, constructing an image of him as a weak and ineffective ruler.¹⁷⁹

Claudius's freedman, Pallas, advocates on behalf of Agrippina the Younger, emphasizing her status as Augustus's great-granddaughter and the daughter of Germanicus while extolling her virtues as a potential stepmother to Claudius's children.¹⁸⁰ By emphasizing Agrippina's role as a future stepmother, Tacitus foreshadows his subsequent characterization of her as a *saeva noverca*.

In Tacitus's version of events, Claudius does not need very much convincing to marry Agrippina, as she had already seduced him, "she so effectually captivated her uncle that she displaced her rivals and anticipated the position by exercising the powers of a wife."¹⁸¹ Here, Claudius's motivation for marrying Agrippina is primarily personal rather than strategic. In actuality, however, the union between Claudius and Agrippina the Younger was an ideal dynastic union made at the perfect time.

Following the assassination of Caligula by his praetorian guard in 41 C.E., Claudius was proclaimed emperor by the same praetorian guard, ascending to the role of *princeps* under extremely dubious circumstances.¹⁸² The damage to his authority caused by his irregular succession was exacerbated by the fact that he lacked political experience, possessed some kind of physical or mental disability, and, most importantly, was not related to either Augustus or the *gens* Julia.¹⁸³ These factors contributed to several threats to his authority, including the plot against him that eventually led to his first wife Messalina's execution. Marriage to Agrippina the Younger, the great-granddaughter of Augustus, went a long way towards bolstering Claudius's

¹⁷⁹ Tac. *Ann.* 12.1.

¹⁸⁰ Tac. *Ann.* 12.5.

¹⁸¹ Tac. *Ann.* 12.3.

¹⁸² Mark Reasoner, *Roman Imperial Texts: A Sourcebook* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 67.

¹⁸³ Reasoner, *Roman Imperial Texts: A Sourcebook*, 67.

legitimacy.¹⁸⁴ To marry Agrippina, his niece, Claudius had to seek a special dispensation from the Senate to circumvent the law against uncle-niece marriages, which had previously been deemed incestuous.¹⁸⁵

Tacitus introduces their marriage with the striking claim that “from this moment [Rome] was a changed state, and all things moved at the fiat [order] of a woman...it was a tight-drawn, almost masculine tyranny.”¹⁸⁶ Agrippina’s domination of Claudius and her appropriation of his political power manifests itself in her characterization as a *dux femina*, like her mother before her. With this archetype almost certainly in mind, Tacitus recounts the supplication of a defeated British military leader, Caratacus, to the princeps and his wife in 50 C.E...

the prisoners, freed from their chains, paid their homage to Agrippina also—a conspicuous figure on another tribunal not far away—in the same terms of praise and gratitude which they had employed to the emperor. It was an innovation, certainly, and one without precedent in ancient custom, that a woman should sit in state before Roman standards: it was the advertisement of her claim to a partnership in the empire which her ancestors had created.¹⁸⁷

We might imagine Tacitus’s ancient readership shocked as Agrippina publicly asserts her political power by presenting herself as a sort of co-ruler alongside Claudius. Agrippina’s usurpation of traditionally masculine political and military roles further contributes to the reader’s understanding of Claudius as an inept and ineffective ruler.

Saeva noverca

Tacitus hints at the theme of Agrippina the Younger as a *saeva noverca* even before her marriage to Claudius. During the debate between Claudius’s freedmen over who would choose his next wife, a dominating theme is the importance of selecting a stepmother who would not

¹⁸⁴ Ginsburg, *Representing Agrippina*, 70.

¹⁸⁵ Tac. *Ann.* 12.7.

¹⁸⁶ Tac. *Ann.* 12.7.

¹⁸⁷ Tac. *Ann.* 12.42.

attempt to advance her own children over Claudius's biological son Britannicus.¹⁸⁸ This debate, juxtaposed with the selection of Agrippina, who already has a son of her own with interests to promote, foreshadows Britannicus's demise.

Tacitus's Agrippina goes to great lengths to sideline Britannicus and promote Nero. In 51 C.E., Agrippina the Younger's son by Domitius Ahenobarbus, Nero, was granted the *toga virilis*, marking his coming of age as a man and his entrance into public life at the young age of thirteen. A master of sartorial politics, Agrippina sought to influence public opinion by way of the boys' disparate clothing, "Britannicus rode past in the juvenile white and purple, Nero in the robes of triumph. 'Let the people survey the one in the insignia of supreme command, the other in his puerile garb, and anticipate conformably the destinies of the pair!'"¹⁸⁹

Tacitus's Agrippina successfully works through the freedman Pallas to persuade Claudius to adopt Nero, "the emperor yielded to the pressure, and gave Domitius [Nero], with his three years' seniority, precedence over his son."¹⁹⁰ Along with his adoption, Nero was granted various official roles and honors, as well as betrothal with Claudius's daughter, Octavia.¹⁹¹ At the same time, Agrippina was granted the title Augusta, the first living wife of the emperor to receive such a distinction.¹⁹² Claudius's adoption of Nero effectively sidelined his biological son, Britannicus, as Nero was favored for succession as the older of the two boys.

While Nero was raised in status as Claudius's future heir, Tacitus's Agrippina works to diminish Britannicus even further. After Britannicus accidentally greets Nero by his pre-adoption name, Domitius, Tacitus's Agrippina convinces Claudius to remove Britannicus's inner circle, comprised of his freedmen and tutors, by claiming that "unless they removed the mischievous

¹⁸⁸ Tac. *Ann.* 12.2.

¹⁸⁹ Tac. *Ann.* 12.41.

¹⁹⁰ Tac. *Ann.* 12.25.

¹⁹¹ Drinkwater, *Nero: Emperor and Court*, 15.

¹⁹² Drinkwater, *Nero: Emperor and Court*, 36.

influence of those who inculcated this spirit of hostility, it would break out in a public catastrophe.” In response, Claudius “inflicted exile or death on the best of his son’s preceptors, and placed him under the custody of the substitutes provided by his stepmother.”¹⁹³

Finally, Tacitus accuses Agrippina of killing Claudius to secure her son’s succession. After his death, he notes that she “precludes [Britannicus] from leaving his room,” and despite others inquiring about him, she presents Nero to the world as the new *princeps*.

Tacitus’s Agrippina is the quintessential evil stepmother. Following in Livia’s footsteps, she goes to great lengths to remove all who threaten her son’s ascent to power. Ginsburg suggests that the *saeva noverca* archetype was a manifestation of familial dysfunction. In this interpretation, then the presence of a *saeva noverca* in the imperial house would have been read as a “symbol of dysfunction in the state.”¹⁹⁴ This fits in nicely with the view that Tacitus’s history is primarily intended to trace the fall of the *domus Caesarum* and that one way he makes his point is by depicting the imperial family as dysfunctional. This interpretation seems highly plausible, though I would add that the *saeva noverca* archetype was not only used to present the imperial family as dysfunctional but also to call into question the legitimacy of rulers such as Tiberius and Nero, who were favored over others with direct biological ties to the preceding emperor.

Sexual Transgressor, Incestuous Woman, and Domineering Mother

Sexual transgression is a consistent theme in the depictions of Agrippina the Younger. Importantly, she exploits each act of sexual transgression for political ends—to plot against

¹⁹³ Tac. *Ann.* 12.41.

¹⁹⁴ Ginsburg, *Representing Agrippina*, 112.

Caligula, to control Claudius's influential freedmen, to manipulate Claudius and expropriate his power, or, most famously, to retain influence over her son Nero.¹⁹⁵

Thus, what stands out about Agrippina's sexual relationships is their political rather than hyper-indulgent nature. Tacitus makes this distinction abundantly clear by juxtaposing Agrippina and her predecessor, Messalina...

From this moment it was a changed state, 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: in public, there was austerity and not infrequently arrogance; at home, no trace of unchastity, unless it might contribute to power.¹⁹⁶

The change from Messalina to Agrippina is presented as the replacement of the head of state.

Where Messalina's rapacious lust is feminine in nature, Agrippina's is "almost masculine" in that she exploits her sexuality to gain political power. This characterization recalls the masculine model of sexual intrigue set out by predecessors like Augustus, who was said to have affairs with the wives of prominent men, acts which were "committed not from passion but from policy, the more readily to get track of his adversaries' designs through the women of their households..."¹⁹⁷

By acting according to Augustus's example, the Agrippina of the literary tradition inverts the hierarchical social mores that defined sexual relationships in the Roman world—Agrippina becomes the instigator of sex and the dominant partner. While for men like Augustus, "adultery was associated with power and masculinity,"¹⁹⁸ for women like Agrippina, it did not convey the same advantages. Like in our earlier example of Fulvia, Agrippina's disruption of sexual norms served both to desex her and emasculate her male relatives, whose weakness and effeminacy made them vulnerable to sexual manipulation and liable to cede over control of the state to a woman. As L'Hoir argues, "since a major theme of the *Annales* is the fall of the *domus*

¹⁹⁵ Drinkwater, *Nero: Emperor and Court*, 310.

¹⁹⁶ Tac. *Ann.* 12.7.

¹⁹⁷ Suet. *Aug.* 69.1, trans. J. C. Rolfe (Harvard University Press, 1914).

¹⁹⁸ Catherine Edwards, *The Politics of Immorality in Ancient Rome* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 48.

Caesarum, Tacitus may be indicating that women's usurpation of male power is symptomatic of a more serious malady: the appropriation of male imperium, both military and civic, that will, unless arrested, enervate and finally consume the state.”¹⁹⁹

Understanding Agrippina the Younger's Characterization in the Literary Tradition

Recalling the idea that Tiberius accusing Agrippina the Elder of adultery may have originated as an attempt to deflect blame for her death, Ginsburg posits that Agrippina the Younger's reputation for sexual immorality may have originated in similar circumstances.²⁰⁰ While generally plausible, this does not quite explain the emergence of the incest narrative, as Nero would have been unlikely to implicate himself in such a way.

To this end, Ginsburg suggests that the incest narrative likely arose from anxiety surrounding the practice of endogamous marriage within the imperial family, while the implication of Caligula, Claudius, and Nero in incest serves to degrade their characters as they become not only the subjects of Agrippina's manipulation but also the perpetrators of an unforgivable religious and social taboo that "threaten[ed] the security of the state.”²⁰¹

Though I agree with Ginsburg's assessment, I believe it important to note the historical contingency of these events and their potential effect on Agrippina the Younger's enduring villainization in the historical record.

On June 9th, 68 C.E., Nero's principate ended in his suicide, the culmination of what later Roman historians would see as the steady deterioration of the 'Julio-Claudian' imperial line. Nero's death kicked off a period of chaos and civil war from 68 to 69 C.E. Despite his enduring

¹⁹⁹ L'Hoir, "Tacitus and Women's Usurpation of Power," 5.

²⁰⁰ Ginsburg, *Representing Agrippina*, 119.

²⁰¹ Ginsburg, *Representing Agrippina*, 121.

popularity among the populace even after his death,²⁰² Nero became the first Roman emperor to be condemned as an enemy of the state.²⁰³

Returning to the initial framing of this chapter, in order to understand Agrippina the Younger's characterization in the extant literary tradition, it is essential to understand that Agrippina's character is inextricably linked to the negative assessment of the Caligulan, Claudian, and Neronian principates, with Nero perhaps being the most significant of these. Had this imperial line not ended with Nero, then the version of Agrippina presented in the literary tradition might have been quite different.

²⁰² Eric R. Varner, "Nero's Memory in Flavian Rome," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Nero*, ed. Shadi Bartsch, Kirk Freudenburg, and Cedric Littlewood (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 239.

²⁰³ Suet. *Ner.* 49.2.

CONCLUSION

The advent of the Principate under Augustus irrevocably blurred the lines between the public and private spheres. A single family had become the center of the state, and as a consequence, its women were thrust into the public eye.

The retrospective understanding of the 'Julio-Claudians' as a continuous 'dynasty' was not a foregone conclusion but rather a tenuous and often chaotic process in which an autocratic system of government developed and a connected family established itself at the heart of the state. In large part due to the repeated failure of direct male succession within the 'Julio-Claudian' imperial line, the women of the family became crucial figures in legitimizing the rulers of the early Principate, connecting the sitting emperor to their imperial progenitor, Augustus, and serving as a symbol of continuity from one ruler to the next. In turn, the honor these women received through their relationship with the emperor augmented their public visibility and their perceived influence. This complex process of mutually conferred honor played an essential role in the construction of the state and the legitimization of its rulers.

Despite their relative public visibility, the ordinary Roman must have known little about these women's private lives—what they did know was largely shaped by imperial propaganda, including inscriptions, visual art, public spectacle, and official declarations of either praise or condemnation.

Augustus and his descendants fashioned themselves as champions of traditional morality. However, the very nature of the Principate compelled imperial women to step out of the private sphere to which women were traditionally confined, thus opening themselves up to intense public scrutiny. In an attempt to solve this paradox, the regime made the *pudicitia* of its women a central element of its public image. The emphasis on imperial women's *pudicitia* was a crucial

aspect of the co-construction of gender dynamics and politics within the state; the perception of imperial women's *pudicitia* was inextricably linked to the perception of their male counterparts as legitimate and politically effective.

The early Principate was unequivocally a period of “intense political experimentation and evolution”²⁰⁴ as the people living through it adjusted to a tenuous and still developing political system. Consequently, they adapted old practices in innovative ways suited to the newfound political landscape. Drawing on the republican tradition of accusation in political invective, political actors in the early Principate weaponized allegations of sexual misconduct against their rivals. Unsurprisingly then, the women of the early Principate were confronted on all sides by hostile rhetoric attacking their *pudicitia*, not only from critics of the regime but occasionally from the regime itself.

When the *domus Caesarum* collapsed under Nero, subsequent generations of Romans must have sought answers amidst the limited information available to them—turning to rumor, speculation, and political invective—which had, in turn, been shaped by cultural assumptions and norms regarding gender, sexuality, status, and power. The explanatory frameworks they created, therefore, relied heavily on the rhetorical topoi of sexual morality and female archetypes.

The values of the Roman body politic were thereby “mapped”²⁰⁵ onto the physical bodies of imperial women, and imperial women's sexualities became a critical aspect of the discourse through which generations of ancient Romans attempted to make sense of the perceived success or failure of the imperial regime. Later Romans' memory of the gradual decline and eventual collapse of the later-called ‘Julio-Claudian dynasty’ thus came to be understood through the

²⁰⁴ Barrett, “Nero's Women,” 63.

²⁰⁵ Richlin, *Arguments with Silence*, 96.

narrative of women's sexual subversion, usurpation of masculine political roles, and corruptive influence. Such constructions brilliantly illustrate the "force of rhetorical thought on history."²⁰⁶ In turn, the discourse surrounding the so-called 'Julio-Claudian dynasty' became an important locus for negotiating the appropriate role of women within the Roman state, a precedent that subsequent generations of Romans would actively engage with.

Consequently, the real lives of these women were subsumed into caricature, their voices "re-privatized,"²⁰⁷ and their stories irrevocably lost to history. What remains is a facade that, even in its outward simplicity, belies the convergence of historical circumstances, state-constructed images, public perception, and collective memory.

²⁰⁶ Donatien Grau, "Nero: The Making of the Historical Narrative," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Nero*, ed. Shadi Bartsch, Kirk Freudenburg, and Cedric Littlewood (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 274.

²⁰⁷ Mary Beard, *Women and Power: a Manifesto* (London: Profile Books Ltd, 2017), 23.

Note on Abbreviations

Classicists and ancient historians conventionally abbreviate references to ancient source materials. While this shorthand serves to simplify citations for scholars, I believe it is incompatible with the need to modernize classical scholarship and make ancient history more accessible to a wider audience of interested readers. The pursuit of accessibility is especially important for this project, as I aim to problematize and historicize the acceptance of stereotypical depictions of the women of the early Roman Principate—and, by extension, powerful women throughout history—among both academic and general audiences.

To this end, I have included a chart of all abbreviations that appear in this thesis below for ease of reference.²⁰⁸ The English translations of the primary sources referenced in this chart are listed in the bibliography under primary sources.

Abbreviations	Abridged
Cass. Dio	Cassius Dio
Mac. <i>Sat.</i>	Macrobius <i>Saturnalia</i>
Plut. <i>Vit. Ant.</i>	Plutarch <i>Vitae Parallelae (Parallel Lives). Antonius (Antony).</i>
Sen. <i>Controv.</i>	Seneca (the Elder) <i>Controversiae</i>
Sen. <i>Ben.</i>	Seneca (the Younger) <i>De beneficiis</i>
Suet. <i>Aug.</i> <i>Calig.</i> <i>Ner.</i>	Suetonius <i>Divus Augustus</i> <i>Caligula</i> <i>Nero</i>
Tac.	Tacitus

²⁰⁸ *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 4th ed, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

<i>Ann.</i>	<i>Annales (Annals)</i>
Val. Max.	Valerius Maximus
Vell. Pat.	Velleius Paterculus

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