

The Politics of Ancient Sexism

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Writing exists as a means of storing information through time with minimal room for misinterpretation. This serves to keep information from decaying for centuries, but it also means that every bias of the original author is transmitted through the centuries as a part of the writing. It is sometimes easy to forget that just as the information carried by a document won't change, every bias held by the author is equally well-preserved. An example of the insidious nature of such biases can be found in the primary sources on Roman history, in which the almost universally one-dimensional portrayals of influential women allowed them cheap attacks on their political enemies and easy praise for their allies. These flat portrayals influenced works from the weighty *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* to the now-televised novel *I, Claudius*. Even after almost two millennia, Roman historians' sexism is still hugely influential on the layperson's view of Rome, as popular histories and seventh grade textbooks often fail to critically analyze these historians' underlying motivations and biases. The ways that Romans used sexist portrayals to further their goals in writing histories should be examined and understood, not only to give a clearer picture of their own history, but also to shed light on how sexism and biased reporting historically have been used as tools to enforce the will of the powerful.

To start understanding how the biases of

historians affect their histories, it is essential to understand who the men behind the histories were. While there was some divergence among individual historians, as a body, they were wealthy, conservative men who had leisure time to write and a motivation for writing. To understand their motivations is essential, as ancient histories were written with a goal, an intent to use the past to comment on the present. The earliest historian discussed in this paper, Livy, lived during the transition from the Roman Republic to the Roman Empire. He wrote history for the explicit purpose of tracing "how with the gradual relaxation of discipline, morals first subsided, as it were, then sank lower and lower" (Livy, I, 9) to reach the depravity of his own time. In a history tracing moral decay, Livy uses shining models of morality to show the glories of the past. The biographer Plutarch chose his subjects for biographies based on whether they exemplified a specific virtue or vice to him. This means that his writings tend to show similar positive archetypes to those of Livy, as Plutarch's *Lives* resembles nothing so much as a collection of morality plays. Born in the last generation of aristocrats who still remembered the power that they had once held, and having served as a court official for the emperor Vespasian, Tacitus uses attacks on the women of the Julio-Claudian dynasty that preceded Vespasian to both attack the founders of the empire and legitimize Vespasian as a hero who ended a corrupt dynasty. One hundred years later, Cassius Dio, another man enjoying the fruits of imperial favor, uses positive tropes to paint the women of the Severan Dynasty in a positive light, expressing his gratitude for their favor. Written at the end of the fourth century CE, the *Historia Au-*

gusta is a major work from Rome's Christian whose portrayals are more one-dimensional than those of Plutarch, often casting the roles of hero or villain based on how friendly the person in question was to Christianity. In deciding how to cast women for their histories, ancient historians often resorted to tropes.

Four main tropes dominate the portrayal of women in Roman histories. These tropes include two positive and two negative portrayals. The first of these tropes, that of the virgin, was ideal for attempting to portray a golden past. The virgin trope shows a woman to whom purity is more important than anything, including her life itself, and illustrates the Romans' concern with sexual purity. The other positive trope is applied to compliment individuals rather than to show a time of more ideal morality. The mother trope hinges on the Roman idea of a perfect mother who had many children, raised them to be loyal to the state, and instilled in them her moral virtues. This is an excellent trope for flattery, as it extends a compliment not only to the mother, but also to her children, who show the virtues that she instilled in them. When someone is a beneficiary of a regime, or wants to paint an idealized picture of an individual instead of a time period, the mother trope allows them to do so. The negative tropes serve as inversions of positive tropes, with the trope of the slut being used to mirror that of the virgin. This portrayal allows historians to use a favorite form of slander, accusations of sexual indecency, to attack a woman's reputation in the most effective manner. The final trope, that of the poisoner, serves as an inversion of that of the mother, with a woman who seeks her own power through her offspring, instead of instilling in them

the virtues necessary to gain power. The poisoner archetype also inverts the mother archetype in its application, being used to slander mother and child instead of to laud them. By application of these tropes, the historians use women as tools to paint their desired picture of any historical period.

Because Livy's intent was to chronicle the fall of Roman virtue, it is unsurprising that he used the virgin trope to illustrate the virtues of the long-past golden days when Rome's moral foundations were solid. Livy's tale of the fall of the Roman monarchy features a woman, Lucretia, who exhibits a number of characteristics that fit the ideal of the virgin archetype. Lucretia was the wife of Collatinus, a cousin of the royal line. When Collatinus and a number of his fellow noblemen drunkenly decided to determine whose wife was best, Lucretia was distinguished from the other noblewomen in that she, even late at night, when the contest took place, was diligently weaving and tending to the affairs of her household, while the other wives partied. Lucretia's beauty and goodness tempted Sextus, son of the king, to rape her. After her rape, Lucretia summoned her husband and father and asked them to avenge her, before committing suicide, saying "not in time to come shall ever unchaste woman live through the example of Lucretia" (Livy, I, 58). The degree to which Livy portrays Lucretia's suicide as noble, as well as the degree to which she clearly believes that her rape was her fault, serve to highlight just how much moral value he ascribed to chastity and purity. This value is made even clearer in a subsequent myth, following the same pattern, about the maiden Verginia. About sixty years after Lucretia, a council of ten men (*decemviri*) was appointed with absolute power to create the Roman

law codes. The leader of this group, Appius, lusted after Verginia and had one of his clients declare the girl an escaped slave of his. Appius judged the case and, despite a mountain of evidence to the contrary, declared that Verginia was indeed an escaped slave. When Verginia's father, Verginius, heard this, he asked Appius for a moment alone, whereupon he stabbed his daughter, shouting "In the only way I can, daughter, I protect your freedom" (Livy, III, 45-58). This is portrayed as a heroic act that caused the Roman people to remove the corrupt *decemviri* from power. In these tales, two traits of the Roman attitude towards women become clear: they valued chastity, and their culture systematically promoted victim blaming. The fact that Livy's ideal women will die to protect their virginity is indicative of a toxic misogyny infecting the ideology of the Roman aristocracy.

Moving into histories that are more factual than legend-based, examples of the mother trope are more common, as there are real people who can be praised. Plutarch uses the trope of the ideal mother as a part of his moralizing, using the mothers not only to illustrate the virtue of Roman motherhood, but also to highlight the moral virtues of their children. Plutarch's first example of this archetypal mother is Cornelia Africana, daughter of a famed general and the mother of two famed politicians. She is portrayed as so dedicated to her late husband that she refused to remarry, even into an African royal family. Plutarch says that she was a good and principled mother and attributes the exceptional talents of her sons, Tiberius and Gaius, more to the quality of the education that she gave them than to any innate skill of their own. Julius Caesar's mother, Aurelia, is another woman por-

trayed with stereotypical moral firmness, praised by Plutarch as "a person of strict morals" (Plutarch 308). Plutarch was known for characterizations that allowed one trait to obscure all others, and through his portrayals of these ideal mothers, he revealed his ideals of Roman womanhood. Cassius Dio, a beneficiary of Julia Domna's patronage, asserts that that empress gave excellent advice and strove to make her violently bratty children harmonious with each other (Dio). These examples of women as mothers are the most positive portrayals given in Roman historical writings about events that actually occurred, and they show that Romans valued women of unyielding chastity who gave their children educations that prepared them to excel. Of course, the most important quality that the Romans saw in these women is simple: they were mothers, perpetuating the Roman state and implanting its morals in their children.

The women represented as poisoners have two significant deviations from the ideal Roman mothers: they want to possess personal power, and they put this desire above the welfare of the state. Historians use the poisoner archetype to disparage regimes that they dislike in two ways simultaneously: the fact that a powerful woman had influence on the emperor strips him of legitimacy, and making the closest woman in his life a murderer taints his reign. Thus, attacks on women, far easier to believe in an environment charged by sexism than attacks on men, served to undercut both them and the emperors with whom they were associated. This served as an effective way of using rhetoric to maintain the status quo, making it clear that if a woman deviated from the course that Roman society laid out for her, she would, however successful

her life, be categorized as an evil, selfish burden to the state. If a woman wanted to be remembered positively, she should have taken the path of quiet motherhood, seeking power for, instead of through, her children. The historian Tacitus uses this archetype to attack the founder of the imperial regime that he derides in futile frustration: as a member of the aristocracy, he attempts to keep the Senate the focus of his story "often to the discredit of the princeps (emperor)" (Usher 208). Usher asserts that Tacitus viewed women as "full of art and malice, but frail and fickle in their resolve," a trope that Tacitus felt must be fulfilled by any woman with access to as much power as the empress.

A prime example of the poisoner archetype is the first empress, Livia. Tacitus, perhaps feeling that the most influential empress should fit his views on women, describes her poisoning all of the chosen heirs of her husband, Augustus, until only her son Tiberius survives to inherit the empire. Tacitus classifies her as a "burden on the state" (Barrett 242) and blames Augustus's death on her impatience for Tiberius to rule. Tacitus's conjecture that Livia poisoned all of the heirs of Augustus, including the one who died a hundred miles away after being stabbed with a sword, is ludicrous and exemplifies the Roman suspicion of powerful women. Another woman placed in this trope, though possibly with more justification, is Agrippina the Younger, mother of Nero, who schemed to cast her husband Claudius's first-born out of his place as heir and then purportedly killed Claudius before he could have second thoughts about the succession. While accusing Livia of killing both Claudius and his son, Tacitus casts her as a scheming harpy "frightening in her hatred" (303)

of any competition for the eye of Claudius. While it is indeed possible that Agrippina was behind the deaths of Claudius and his son, it is equally possible that she is merely the victim of mud-slinging meant to delegitimize Nero, because if the historians had any real evidence against her, they would have used it in their histories. As it stands, Agrippina is simply a powerful woman who was the target of a smear campaign against her son. It is undeniable that Agrippina saw the young Nero as a means of ruling from the shadows, and it is likely that this desire for power was at least partly responsible for the universal condemnation that she received from the ancient sources. However, there is no way of knowing whether Agrippina was the



Livia Drusilla, standing marble sculpture as Ops, with wheat sheaf and cornucopia. Roman, 1st century CE

sneaking poisoner portrayed by historians or merely a woman who took advantage of good fortune when it came to her. By destroying her reputation, Tacitus destroyed that of Nero by proxy, casting the illegitimate succession of his first patron Vespasian as a necessary and just act.

The slut stereotype is interesting: it is applied to women who are already secure in power, demonstrating that the Romans were not only uncomfortable with the idea of women seeking power but immensely distressed when women possessed it. In a work that illustrates this stereotype, Tacitus's sexism is again in play, as are the pro-Agrippina sources from which he likely derived his history of Messalina, leading him to portray Claudius's third wife as a perfect example of the slut archetype. The *Historia Augusta* gives an interesting example of this archetype in Julia Domna, contrasting with Cassius Dio's portrayal of her as an example of the mother archetype. Written in the Christian period of Roman history, it is unsurprising that this later work attempts to delegitimize Julia Domna, a famous patron of pagan philosophy. A smear campaign against her illustrates how the goals of the *Historia Augusta*, a moralizing work of gossip, cause it to differ in structure from the panegyrics of Dio's work. These uses of the slut archetype serve to completely delegitimize women who come to power through marriage by undermining the faithfulness that was an integral component of marriage.

Valeria Messalina, the wife of Claudius before Agrippina, was the subject of a smear campaign by her successor that portrayed her as unfaithful, scheming, and dangerous. Not only was Messalina accused of the rather standard plot to assassinate

the emperor, but she was also accused of being so open in her adulteries that she had a contest with a famous prostitute to see who could have the most sex in a day — and she won. Messalina is unfortunate in that none of her true character has been preserved, and the rumors spread by political opponents have so overwhelmed her story that she appears to modern historians as a portrait of all of the accusations of sexual deviancy that can attach themselves to a Roman woman. She is accused of a secret marriage as a conspiracy to overthrow Claudius, of moonlighting as a prostitute, and of stealing imperial property to decorate her love nest. None of these claims are supported by evidence, and many of them are likely spurious, but they were used against her by her successor with a remarkable degree of success. Agrippinan constituents used sexist portrayals to legitimize Agrippina's position as Claudius's fourth wife, and this irreparably harmed Messalina's image. Julia Domna, portrayed by Cassius Dio with the mother archetype, is seen as a prime example of the slut stereotype in the more fanciful *Historia Augusta*, where she is called "notorious for her adulteries" (415). When the historians writing the histories differ in their goals and their relations to the regime, they use two vastly different stereotypes to portray the same woman. While the poisoner archetype is used to attack women who obtained power through their sons, the slut archetype serves to delegitimize the marriages of the women who held power through their husbands.

There is a counterargument to be made against these accusations of Roman sexism, but it is centered on just one woman, Pompeia Plotina, the wife of the conqueror Trajan. Plotina is portrayed

by the historians as a woman who held power and was, for the most part, worthy of respect. However, it is important to note that we know about her life mainly from the moralizing *Historia Augusta*, which used a sequence of poor portrayals to teach lessons about Roman morality 250 years later. By portraying a good empress in Plotina, the *Historia Augusta* gained more latitude to disparage empresses who, by contrast, did not live up to its moral code. Beyond the weakness of relying on a single woman as a counterexample to the sexism that place multitudes of other Roman women into narrowly defined boxes, there is another problem with the argument that the positive portrayal of Plotina contradicts Roman historians' sexism. Plotina did not seek power. She used it once she had it, and did so in admirable ways to increase her subjects' quality of life. But she had no son to pass power to after Trajan's death, and the historians, beyond their fear of attacking any aspect of the life of one of their favorite emperors, found that their tropes simply did not fit. Plotina had no son to secure the throne for. She did not need to seek pleasure by draining the treasury of the empire at its most prosperous; it already provided wealth enough. Beyond that, she did not seek to put herself into masculine political roles, instead using her power to improve the empire-wide welfare programs, which Roman men were not as jealous of as they were of military and bureaucratic positions. While Plotina was doubtless a remarkable woman, and it is unfortunate that few records of her reign survive, it is nonetheless clear that she does not serve as a valid counterexample to Roman sexism.

These tropes portray powerful Roman women's lives in a way that can be determined by ask-

ing only two questions: "Did she have children?" and "Did she seek power?" This is troubling not only for historians, who are forced to try to paint a fuller picture of these women from scant evidence, but also for anyone who attempts to gain a basic understanding of Roman history. The biased nature of the sources tends to perpetuate a narrative that, at times, is only tangentially related to the truth. It is important, not only historically but also in the modern day, to assume that any source that portrays a person one-dimensionally does so to spread its own bias. It is necessary, therefore, for anyone who wants to develop a true understanding of the aspects of particular issue to read more stories that paint a fuller picture of the person in question. Beyond this, if we desire to step beyond these sexist portrayals of the past, it is imperative to tell more stories of women. The paucity of information, a few sentences per book at most about any particular woman, serves to reduce the narrative to the dour sexism of a few misogynistic writers, without anyone giving opposing narratives that create a fuller picture of their lives.

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