

NO HONOUR IN DEATH: ANALYZING THE DEBAUCHEROUS DEATH OF EMPRESS  
VALERIA MESSALINA

by

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*Author's Declaration*

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

### *Abstract*

It is not a certainty that the life of the Julio-Claudian empress Valeria Messalina was any different from the lives of the empresses who preceded her. The written historical record is largely silent on her life before she married the emperor Claudius in 38 CE. During her time in the role of empress, the visual record is reasonably conventional, depicting her as modest, in draping garments, often with one or both of her children at her side. Little was written about her during her tenure as empress. What is securely known is that an official *damnatio memoriae*, the act of erasing a figure from history, followed her death. Statues of her were likely destroyed or stored. Inscriptions had her name damaged or gouged out. Coins with images of her ceased to be minted and may well have been destroyed. Messalina did not, however, disappear from the historical record, either visual or written. Some seventy years after her death Tacitus, Suetonius, and Cassius Dio wrote her – and her misdeeds – into the historical record. Her death scene is treated with such force that it is difficult to raise the possibility that Messalina was a conventional empress. A powerful death narrative, either positive or negative, colours the life of the deceased; to this day the name Messalina has not recovered from the condemnatory narratives surrounding her death. A comparison of the extant material evidence and written evidence will show the power of a negative death narrative and highlight how the memory of the empress Messalina suffered the consequences.

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*Dedication*

For the woman who has always been my biggest fan and my greatest inspiration.

I love you, Mom.

Now and always.

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## Introduction

Empress Valeria Messalina was of renowned lineage. A great grandniece of the emperor Augustus, first cousin to the emperor Nero, and the third wife of the emperor Claudius, yet she was killed by a member of the Praetorian guard in 48 CE.<sup>1</sup> Although a member of the imperial household, a descendant of both the Julian and the Claudian lines, and a part of the *gens Valeria* family which is one of the oldest family lines that stretches back to the men who were present at Lucretia's suicide, Messalina's funeral seems to have followed none of the customary rituals.<sup>2</sup> Importantly, she was not granted a burial where her life could be recalled with an inscription and where her family could visit with her, maintaining the familial connections between the living and dead. This is in large part due to that fact that she suffered a formal *damnatio memoriae*, an act that stripped her name and likeness from public inscriptions and statuary.<sup>3</sup> Yet, what impacted Messalina's memory the most was the fiercely condemnatory death narratives crafted by Tacitus, and to a lesser extent, Suetonius and Cassius Dio.<sup>4</sup> In fact, it is their accounts of Messalina's death that dramatically changed the way she was and still is seen.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For Messalina's pedigree, see Cargill-Martin, 2023, 42; for Messalina's death, see Tacitus, *Annals*, 11.36.

<sup>2</sup> Messalina's association with Lucretia goes back to her ancestor Valerius Poplicola who was one of the men listed in Livy's account of Lucretia's rape and subsequent suicide (*History of Rome*, 1.58). He was also later designated in 509 BCE as one of the two first consuls to serve the state (Livy, *Hist. of Rom.*, 2.2). This important legacy would not have been forgotten by Messalina's time and her family would have been of the most elite status in Augustan society (Cargill-Martin, 2023, 42).

<sup>3</sup> For members of the imperial household, the ritual of *damnatio memoriae* was the opposite of deification, with the disgraced emperor (or empress) being symbolically removed from remembrance in retrospective dishonour. Every single trace of the individual would be removed or publicly defaced (Whitling, 2010, 88).

<sup>4</sup> Tac., *Ann.*, 11.12-36; Cassius Dio, *Roman History*, 61.31; Suetonius, *The Lives of the Caesars: Life of Claudius*, 26.

<sup>5</sup> The reception of Messalina has focused upon her cunning, greediness, and most importantly, her sexual insatiability. This reception is so all-encompassing that it appears across various media. See the paintings: *I Modi: Messalina in the Booth of Lisisca* (1524), *The Orgies of Messalina* (1867-68) by Federico Faruffini, *Messalina in the Arms of the Gladiator* (1886) by Joaquin Sorolla. See also Joanne Renaud's article (2009) on "Toga Porn" which talks about the rise of Messalina depicted in porn throughout the 50's, 60's, 70's, and 80's and includes the line: "Scantly clad femme fatales like Messalina, Poppaea and Cleopatra prowl through palaces while manly centurions and gladiators glare at them lustfully or fight to death in the background". She

Writing years after her death, they recount how Messalina indulged in adultery, took a second husband, and then died a pitiable death. The details leading to her death are salacious. While her husband, the emperor Claudius, was away in Ostia in the year 48 CE, Messalina is described as taking a second husband and holding a sumptuous wedding banquet in celebration. Cassius Dio recounts that it was soon after when the freedman Narcissus told his emperor about the marriage, and convinced Claudius that the marriage was part of a coup plot to overthrow him.<sup>6</sup> When the freedman sensed Claudius beginning to soften towards his wife, he did not allow her into his emperor's presence. Instead, acting as if transmitting the emperor's instructions, he ordered Messalina's execution, a deed carried out by a tribune. Messalina could not kill herself, despite her mother's urging to do so in order to regain some honour by taking her own life.<sup>7</sup> In the end of her story and at the end of her life, Messalina is presented as being confronted with the consequences of her cruelty, power seeking, and indulging her sexual desires. Despite being the wife of the emperor, she is summarily run through with a blade.<sup>8</sup>

After her death, Messalina disappears from the historical record with no mention of her burial, which poses an interesting conundrum given our understanding of the complicated funeral practices the Romans enacted to ensure proper burial. For example, we know that when an elite individual died, women would undertake the important task of ensuring due honour and establishing a place where relatives and friends could maintain a connection.<sup>9</sup> To accomplish

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also appears in film such as the 1982 film "My Nights with Messalina" directed by Jaime J. Puig in which Messalina battles with Agrippina to have sex with a young druid boy.

<sup>6</sup> Cassius Dio, *Roman History*, 61.31.

<sup>7</sup> Tacitus, *Annals*, 11.37.

<sup>8</sup> Tac., *Ann.*, 11.38.

<sup>9</sup> See Ennius' *Annales* 155 for a description of high-ranking women washing and anointing the body of King Tarquinius and Virgil's *Aeneid* 4.683-4 for Dido's sister Anna calling for water to wash her sister's deceased body as she attempts to take the remains of her soul with a kiss. Virgil describes a woman's duties again in *Aeneid* 9.485-90.

this, a common set of rituals would unfold: a close female relative ensured that the deceased died with comfort and closeness, often giving the dying a final kiss in the hopes of catching their spirit as it passed from their body in their final breath. Afterwards, she would close their eyes while the surrounding family members would call their name aloud, beginning the formal lament.<sup>10</sup> From there, the female relatives began to prepare the body for viewing. They washed the body with warm water and anointed it with scented oils. Then, a coin would be placed into the mouth of the deceased as a symbolic fare for Charon, the ferryman who transported the dead in the Underworld. Afterwards, the jaw would be bound shut and the body would then be dressed in clean and pure clothing or wrapped in a funeral shroud. The body would then be placed in the atrium of the house with its feet facing the front door. The funeral ritual would be marked by the burning of incense, the lighting of torches, and the playing of funeral music.<sup>11</sup>

During the funeral procession, there was loud and public mourning. Actors were hired to walk with ancestral masks (*imagines maiorum*) of dead relatives who had held state offices to highlight the achievements of the family. Meanwhile, two female mourners would be hired and would walk in front of the bier with the relatives and friends following behind. One woman would pull at her hair while the other would raise her arms to display her grief. The necessity to display one's grief so publicly was especially important for the funerals of the elite because it highlighted the loss the community suffered alongside the family. Both men and women played a role in the public mourning of elite officials, with men giving a formal eulogy to describe the death as a loss for the political community while women lamented to highlight the familial loss.<sup>12</sup> Both were equally important forms of mourning as it meant showing the devastating impact of a

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<sup>10</sup> Walker, 1985, 9.

<sup>11</sup> Šterbenc Erker, 2011, 47; Hope, 2009, 71.

<sup>12</sup> Šterbenc Erker, 2011, 47-51; Hope, 2009, 75.

family member's death not only on their relatives and friends, but on the overall community as well. After the funeral, women were expected to embody the family's mourning so that the men could return to religious and public activities temporarily prohibited on account of a death and its ritual pollution.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, the importance of preparing and properly mourning the body was an important feature in the death of an individual, particularly the elite who relied on their memory being preserved with the proper rituals.

Despite the importance of proper burial rituals, the historical record does not explain what happened to Messalina's body after her death, but it seems unlikely that a conventional burial ritual occurred. Based on contemporary evidence we can posit that her body might have been given the traitor's treatment common during the empire, which was to cast her body upon the Gemonian Steps, or "Stairs of Mourning" as they were sometimes called, to place her body in full view of the forum.<sup>14</sup> Or perhaps she could have suffered a fate similar to her son Britannicus, which was a hasty funeral with no ceremony.<sup>15</sup> Unfortunately, we will likely never know for certain. Because of the *damnatio memoriae*, it is a fairly safe assumption that she did not receive burial within a family tomb, nor an epitaph on which her name, age, lineage, role, and accomplishments were recorded. A tomb gave family a place with which to connect with the deceased and also situated them within a familial nexus, connected to spouse or parents. As Carroll notes with respect to the tombs that were situated in massive quantity outside of Roman settlements:

The physical appearance of funerary monuments and the texts written on them made it possible for people to display and negotiate status, belonging, and social relations in the community. Ethnic and civic identities, education, public careers, professions, and

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<sup>13</sup> Šterbenc Erker, 2011, 55.

<sup>14</sup> Hope, 2000, 112.

<sup>15</sup> Suetonius, *The Lives of the Twelve Caesars: Nero*, 33.2.

complex family ties were expressed through these tombs and their commemorative inscriptions.<sup>16</sup>

Thus, epitaphs served as a powerful tool to commemorate the dead and provided relatives and friends a chance to connect with their deceased loved one and establish their own placement within society.

However, a funerary inscription also meant the life of an individual would be remembered and that their memory provided guidance on how others should live or even teach a lesson on how *not* to live.<sup>17</sup> Messalina's actions were considered to be so reprehensible that her behaviour could not even serve as a warning to others. Instead, she was systematically removed from all public viewing, her body was likely discarded or very hastily and simply buried without any of the public funerary rituals, and her memory was condemned to be remembered solely by the events of her death narrative, recounted years after her actual death. The space left by her memorial absence is more than adequately filled by the death narratives of Tacitus, Suetonius, and Cassius Dio. Her death scene is treated with such force that it is difficult to raise the possibility that Messalina was a conventional empress. A powerful death narrative, either positive or negative, colours the life of the deceased; to this day the name Messalina is synonymous with a woman who is power hungry, sexually insatiable, and shameless.<sup>18</sup>

It is the goal of this thesis to argue that the narratives of Messalina's death ensure that this characterization is largely unshakeable. As an entry point to her historical record, it discusses the

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<sup>16</sup> Carroll, 2011, 66.

<sup>17</sup> Carroll, 2006, 19.

<sup>18</sup> More recently, Benjamin Askew's play "In Bed with Messalina" (2009) which was performed at the Courtyard Theater in Hoxton in which a reviewer described Messalina as such: "Messalina is unwilling to apologise for her sexuality or for her adultery, which is both brave and slightly sad at the same time. She believes it is her right to 'come' and if her husband is unable to perform this duty, she owes him no further loyalty; she is exonerated from her matrimonial obligations." Varvarides, Lennie. "Theatre Review: In Bed with Messalina at Courtyard Theatre, Hoxton." *British Theatre Guide*.

importance of funerary monuments and narratives in establishing an individual's connection to the prevailing ideals and mores of the time. It begins with a brief overview of famous funerary inscriptions of women, Livy's famous death narrative of Lucretia, and the account of Arria Paeta's death. It does so to establish the part that funerary inscriptions and accounts about dying play in establishing ideal character and behaviours, in particular for women. The second chapter discusses what other cultural elements contributed to these ideals: laws, cult practices, and the comparison to virtuous women of Greek epics. The third chapter examines the historical record of Messalina that remains. This is largely a chapter that considers visual sources such as coins, sculpture, and cameos, and it establishes that within her tenure in the imperial household, Messalina was represented in ways that continued the tradition of representing women as modest, fertile, composed, and embedded within a familial nexus. The final chapter examines the death narrative of Tacitus and shows how it is written with such force that it has become *the* narrative by which Messalina is defined. Finally, the epilogue looks at the afterlife of Messalina and how different texts, movies, and other media have depicted her as a whore for almost two thousand years.

## 1. Death and Memory in Early Roman History

Few women appear in the historical record, yet fewer in early Roman history. When a record does appear in the early to late Republic, it is frequently in the context of a woman's death. A good number of women in early Republican Rome are known through their funerary inscriptions; in these are found some scant details of their lives. Another source for the lives and actions of women in the earlier Roman period appears in death narratives, such as the histories of Tarquinia, Horatia, and Tullia.<sup>19</sup> Funerary inscriptions and death narratives are important sources for recovering the norms and ideals to which women were expected to conform.<sup>20</sup> They are not, however, reliable sources for recovering historical details about their actual lives. In actuality, the deaths – and lives – of some women who appear in Livy, Plutarch, Dionysius of Halicarnassus, and other writers are almost certainly legendary and not “historical” as the term is currently understood. As stated above, these accounts describe the societal expectations and ideals directing the lives of women. These held throughout the Roman Republic, into the reign of the Julio-Claudian imperial households, and certainly, into the household of the emperor Claudius and his wife Messalina. Therefore, this chapter aims to analyze the idea of a ‘good death’ for women by looking at various funerary inscriptions and death narratives in which women who adhered to the ideal feminine virtues were awarded a good death and ever-lasting memory.

### Funerary Inscriptions

First, it is important to show how death inscriptions and narratives work to highlight a woman's accomplishments while simultaneously foregrounding, praising, or honouring a man,

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<sup>19</sup> Livy 1.11.6-9; 1.26.3-5; Tullia's death is not recounted in Livy but her killing of her father and subsequent exile is (1.46.7-48.8).

<sup>20</sup> For an in-depth discussion on women in early Roman history as *exempla* in Livy's *Ab Urbe Condita* see Tom Stevenson (2011). Stevenson focuses on many of the famous women of early Roman history such as the Sabine Women, Tarpeia, Horatia, and Lucretia.

most often her husband or father. I begin with the funerary inscription of Claudia, whose grave is dated roughly to 135-120 BCE. It reads as such:

Stranger, my message is short. Stand by and read it through. Here is the unlovely tomb of a lovely woman. Her parents called her Claudia by name. She loved her husband with her whole heart. She bore two sons; of these she leaves one on earth; under the earth she has placed the other. She was charming in converse, yet proper in bearing. She kept house, she made wool. That's my last word. Go your way.<sup>21</sup>

We learn very few very specific details about the woman whom this epitaph honours. What information is transmitted could easily be applied to many other tombstones as it accords with ideals contextualizing the lives of Roman women. Her tombstone entirely focuses on household ties and activities: she is a daughter, wife, and mother, loved and loving. Beyond that we know that she had two sons, maintained the house, and wove, and that she was proper in appearance. Nothing else is said about her. While it can be difficult to summarize the life of an individual in one epitaph, the lack of personal detail on Claudia's epitaph ensures her memory will focus on her fulfillment of cultural ideals. In the context of larger antiquity, this was by design, as the reference to woman's work often reflected a moral statement about not only the woman, but her husband as well. Having a proper wife who adhered to the virtues of being a mother and a housekeeper might suit the image of her husband better than if he had a wife he (and larger society) deemed inappropriate.<sup>22</sup>

We continue to see these themes in other funerary inscriptions. For example, a short inscription from the first century BCE describes Amydone, a wife with a grave marker that lists familiar attributes: "Here lies Amydone, wife of Marcus, best and most beautiful, worker in

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<sup>21</sup> *CIL*-1.2.1211, translator E.H. Warmington (1940).

<sup>22</sup> Dixon, 2001, 115.

wool, pious, chaste, thrifty, faithful, a stayer-at-home”.<sup>23</sup> Although her inscription is even shorter than Claudia’s it similarly highlights her most important qualities as a wife, such as her weaving, chastity, and her decision to remain in the home. Despite the entirety of her life being summarized in one line, it is a loving inscription because of how it preserves her memory as a woman who abided by the cultural norms and thus maintains her proper reputation even in death.

Also dated to the first century BCE, is a funeral eulogy for Murdia, delivered by her son, and inscribed on marble. First, it details the provisions of her will before the ending speaks to her personal virtues:

...For these reasons, praise for all good women is simple and similar, since their native goodness and the trust they have maintained do not require a diversity of words. Sufficient is the fact that they have all done the same good deeds that deserve fine reputation, and since their lives fluctuate with less diversity, by necessity we pay tribute to values they hold in common, so that nothing may be lost from fair precepts and harm what remains.

Still, my dearest mother deserved greater praise than all the others, since in modesty, propriety, chastity, obedience, woolworking, industry, and loyalty she was on an equal level with other good women, nor did she take second place to any woman in virtue, work and wisdom in times of danger.<sup>24</sup>

What is notable about this inscription is how it comments on the lack of diversity in women’s funerary inscriptions before it lists the same virtues that have previously been discussed with Claudia and Amymone. This shows how the ideals women were expected to uphold in life could impact their memory in death, because those who did not fulfill their feminine virtues would not be given a proper funeral. By highlighting what Roman society valued in women most, it also explains why there was such a strong reaction to women who did not safeguard their virtuous reputation. Later women like Messalina who disavowed their feminine virtues so publicly could

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<sup>23</sup> *CIL* VI.11602 = *ILS* 8402 = *CLE* 237 L, translator M.R. Lefkowitz & M.B. Fant (2016)

<sup>24</sup> *CIL* VI.10230 = *ILS* 8394. L, translator M.R. Lefkowitz & M.B. Fant (2016).

not have been given a proper epitaph in death because there was nothing left of their reputation to praise. Most importantly, they were not seen as deserving of such a loving epitaph because they did not accomplish the only good deeds women could achieve.

### **The Rape of Lucretia**

Moving along to one of the earliest written accounts of a woman's death, we see a similar pattern emerge. The story of Lucretia, widely detailed by Livy in his *History of Rome*, describes Lucretia as the perfect wife despite the fact that we learn very little about her.<sup>25</sup> Her very introduction is through a man, her husband, telling us that his wife is extraordinary and the perfect example of how wives should behave. Notably, she never speaks a word and rather her perfect behaviour is then narrated by a male author. He writes:

The riders then went on to Collatia, where they found Lucretia very differently employed: it was already late at night, but there, in the hall of her house, surrounded by her busy maid-servants, she was still hard at work by lamplight upon her spinning. Which wife had won the contest in womanly virtues was no longer in doubt.<sup>26</sup>

As the entirety of Lucretia's characterization is defined by the men around her, we never learn anything substantial about her as an individual. Instead, she is defined by both her own adherence to proper feminine virtues and by the condemnation of the other wives not following said virtues in their husbands' absences. She is not out drinking with the other women, which considering women had been forbidden wine in the early years of Rome makes the other wives' actions even more scandalous, but rather she has remained at home in her husband's absence to see to the housekeeping.<sup>27</sup> In the eyes of the Romans, that is enough to declare her a virtuous

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<sup>25</sup> Other versions of Lucretia's story can be found in Dionysius of Halicarnassus' *The Roman Antiquities* (4.64-66), Dio's *Roman History* (11.13), Ovid's *Fasti* (2).

<sup>26</sup> Livy, *Hist. of Rom.*, 1.57.

<sup>27</sup> Dixon, 2001, 46.

woman who adheres to the social norms and expectations for good wives while equally condemning the other wives for their lack of good behaviour.<sup>28</sup>

Yet, Lucretia's virtue ultimately ends up being her downfall as well. Livy writes, "It was at that fatal supper that Lucretia's beauty, and proven chastity, kindled in Sextus Tarquinius the flame of lust, and determined him to debauch her."<sup>29</sup> What makes this situation particularly heinous is that part of what drives Tarquinius to assault Lucretia is because of her chastity and his desire to destroy her virtue.<sup>30</sup> Livy's word choice highlights Tarquinius' lack of restraint and depravity with words such as "flame of lust" and "determined to debauch her".<sup>31</sup> The characterization of Tarquinius ensures the reader sees him as the villain who has taken advantage of Collatinus' hospitality to defile his wife.<sup>32</sup> As for Lucretia, it highlights how she was truly a victim as Livy pauses briefly in his narration to once again remind his readers of Lucretia's proven chastity. By constantly repeating that she has proven her chastity, there can be no doubt from the readers regarding Lucretia's virtue, which is ultimately what makes her sacrifice at the end of her death narrative even more impactful.

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<sup>28</sup> Livy's version of Lucretia's story is notably the only extant source that highlights her devotion to wool working as an ideal virtue. Augustus viewed wool working as a traditional activity that was to be encouraged and it is likely that Livy focused on Lucretia's weaving to highlight her adherence to the Augustan *matrona* ideals. In other versions, there is not nearly the same focus on wool working. In fact, many do not even mention wool working at all. Cassius Dio does, but it seems he was doing so only in reference to Livy. Ovid also mentions Lucretia spinning wool in his *Fasti* (2.721-852); however, it reads more like a parody of Livy's account and is treated with exaggeration rather than the respect of Augustan ideals (Waters, 2013, 30; 35).

<sup>29</sup> Livy, *Hist. of Rom.*, 1.58.

<sup>30</sup> Arieti, 1997, 213.

<sup>31</sup> These words come from Aubrey De Sélincourt's English translation of Livy's *the Early History of Rome: Books I-V*; This lack of restraint is not unlike Messalina who Tacitus frequently characterizes as giving in to her insatiable lust (*Annals* 11.12; 11.26; 11.31; 11.35; 11.36).

<sup>32</sup> Later plays capitalize on Collatinus' hospitality by emphasizing the stormy night when Tarquinius arrives at Collatinus' home. This would have made it difficult for Lucretia to refuse hospitality, but doing so also likely prepared the ground for her self-defense (Dutsch, 2012, 196).

During the assault, Lucretia is not given any dialogue even though Tarquinius gets much of his own dialogue in which he threatens, pleads, and begs her to give into him.<sup>33</sup> Her characterization remains resolutely silent throughout the ordeal, despite the assault taking place in the one area that was dominated by women, the domestic household.<sup>34</sup> It is only when Tarquinius threatens to place Lucretia's dead body next to that of a slave, thereby implying that she had been unfaithful to her husband, that Lucretia finally concedes. Livy asserts, "Even the most resolute chastity could not have stood against this dreadful threat."<sup>35</sup> Lucretia's determination to preserve her reputation and to control the narrative surrounding her death ensures her memory is being controlled by her own actions and not by the man who attacks her.<sup>36</sup> If she did not give into him and he had killed her, Tarquinius would have been the one in control of her memory and thus her reputation as the most virtuous wife would have been destroyed.

Lucretia's silence, specifically during her assault, can be understood by modern audiences as a commentary on sexual assault throughout the Republic and early Imperial period. Instances of rape during these times would have likely been vastly unreported, as they are today, due to fears of stigma and later under Augustus' reign, severe legal punishments.<sup>37</sup> If rape victims were not likely to come forward with what had been done to them, there would hardly be any

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<sup>33</sup> Livy, *Hist. of Rom.*, 1.58.

<sup>34</sup> D'Ambra, 2007, 95. Households served as the repositories of a family's wealth and the matrons were responsible for making and processing the goods that the household produced. Ultimately, they were responsible if goods were spoiled or stolen.

<sup>35</sup> Livy, *Hist. of Rom.*, 1.58.

<sup>36</sup> A fact that is often ignored in Roman nationalist tradition is that Tarquinius was likely a relative of Lucretia's, meaning he could kill her and a slave to claim righteous outrage over witnessing her commit adultery (Dixon, 2001, 46).

<sup>37</sup> Olson, 2014, 186-7.

reason to record them or even care when a woman was raped, particularly as other founding myths deal with similar themes.<sup>38</sup>

And yet, the theme of women being raped, particularly in early Roman history, carries its own connotations. Livy likely would not have been concerned with the issues women faced after an assault, but rather he was interested in using rape as a vehicle of change, specifically on the military, political, and social fronts. Evidence shows that in times of political turmoil in which new roles were ascribed to citizens, the historical record integrated fiction to strengthen traditional gender roles.<sup>39</sup> Lucretia's assault and subsequent death establishes the norms in which other women were expected to follow well beyond the Republic.<sup>40</sup> And yet, Lucretia's inclusion in the founding of the Republic is also important because her assault and subsequent death serves as the catalyst for male bravery and heroism.<sup>41</sup> Essentially, the crime that is committed against her which leads to the tragic circumstances of her death motivates the men who may never have been pushed into action to establish the Roman Republic otherwise.

After she survives the ordeal, we finally get to hear from Lucretia herself. The fact that we do not hear from Lucretia until after the assault is not unusual as Mary Beard explains that the only time women are given a voice in the classical world is when they are being used as a martyr or a victim, particularly preceding their own death, or they are functioning as the

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<sup>38</sup> See Cicero, *De Re Publica*, 2.7-8; Livy, *History of Rome*, 1.9-13; Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Roman Antiquities*, 2.30 for the myth of the Rape of the Sabine Women or Livy, *History of Rome*, 1.3, for the story of Rhea Silvia, the Vestal Virgin who was raped by Mars and gave birth to the twins Romulus and Remus.

<sup>39</sup> El Hissy, 2020, 90.

<sup>40</sup> This will be explored further in Chapter Two, but especially in Chapter Four in which the example set by Lucretia's suicide can be used to condemn the death and memory of Valeria Messalina.

<sup>41</sup> El Hissy, 90. Here El Hissy is referring to the Sabine Women, however the concept can easily be applied to Lucretia, which only shows how transferrable the themes surrounding women were for ancient writers.

spokesperson for other women in a political setting.<sup>42</sup> This is evident in the account of Lucretia when she quickly summons her husband, her father and two of their most trusted friends only for them to find her with the news that she had been raped:

Tears rose to her eyes as they entered, and to her husband's question, 'Is it well with you?' she answered, 'No. What can be well with a woman who has lost her honour? In your bed, Collatinus, is the impress of another man. My body only has been violated. My heart is innocent, and death will be my witness. Give me your solemn promise that the adulterer shall be punished – he is Sextus Tarquinius. He it is who last night came as my enemy disguised as my guest, and took his pleasure of me. That pleasure will be my death – and his too, if you are men.'<sup>43</sup>

Livy depicts Lucretia as not only being unable to go on after her assault but as *unwilling*. She does not want to continue living after she has had her honour destroyed by the attack. The direct line: "What can be well with a woman who has lost her honour?"<sup>44</sup> tells the reader that any form of extra-marital sex, even rape, is a threat to a woman's chastity. Lucretia understands this and rather than risk bringing shame upon herself or her household, she is prepared to take her own life. This sets a strong precedent for other women, asserting that they too will be expected to have such resolution should they find themselves in a similar situation.

The reaction of the men to Lucretia's death highlights the strength of her character as they are more concerned with personal attachments and emotions surrounding the attack, rather than focusing on revenge against the man who assaulted her.<sup>45</sup> Yet, she remains determined to die for what was done to her as she views it as the only way to atone for the assault. She powerfully states, "Never shall Lucretia provide a precedent for unchaste women to escape what they

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<sup>42</sup> Beard, 2017, 13; 16.

<sup>43</sup> Livy, *Hist. of Rom.*, 1.57-8.

<sup>44</sup> Livy, *Hist. of Rom.*, 1.58.

<sup>45</sup> Livy, *Hist. of Rom.*, 1.58.

deserve.”<sup>46</sup> With these being some of the only words she speaks throughout the entire narrative, it makes her refusal to serve as the scapegoat for later women even more powerful. Like the women discussed earlier in this chapter, the memory of Lucretia’s proper behaviour is used as a moral statement for a man’s character; but in this case, it serves as such for several men, all of whom use the memory of Lucretia to defeat the final Roman king. Thus, the political symbolism of her death cannot be ignored: “Lucretia is not simply Lucretia, but the figure of violated Rome.”<sup>47</sup> And as her death proved, such violation cannot be ignored.

The act of Lucretia’s suicide is swift and efficient with Livy using only a few words to describe her death, “With these words, she drew a knife from under her robe, drove it into her heart, and fell forward, dead.”<sup>48</sup> It is so abrupt that it hardly feels like a fair end for the woman who essentially began the Republic, a time of shared power and the Romans’ proudest achievement, with her unjust death.<sup>49</sup> And yet, that is exactly the case of Lucretia’s suicide. Her death effectively pushes the men into action as they draw strength from her own show of bravery:

Brutus drew the bloody knife from Lucretia’s body, and holding it before him, cried: ‘By this girl’s blood – none more chaste till a tyrant wronged her – and by the gods, I swear that with sword and fire, and whatever else can lend strength to my arm, I will pursue Lucius Tarquinius the Proud, his wicked wife, and all his children, and never again will I let them or any other man be King in Rome.’<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Livy, *Hist. of Rom.*, 1.58.

<sup>47</sup> Edwards, 2007, 181.

<sup>48</sup> Livy, *Hist. of Rom.*, 1.58.

<sup>49</sup> Southon, 2021, xii.

<sup>50</sup> Livy, *Hist. of Rom.*, 1.58.

Using the memory of what she represented, a perfect wife who abided by ideal feminine virtues and who was unjustly killed, the men act upon her final request and bring an end to the monarchy.

The significance of Lucretia's weapon of choice in the act of her suicide also cannot be understated. Her use of a dagger allows her to briefly enter the masculine space as she arguably takes on a more masculine role than the men around her. For once, it is the woman who is acting bravely while the men stand weeping helplessly.<sup>51</sup> As a dagger is often associated with male-coded tasks, such as killing in battle, military training, sacrificing, or dying by suicide, her use of such a weapon to commit her own suicide means that she both subverts and confirms traditional gender norms.<sup>52</sup> Even as she wields the dagger, she does not fully remove herself from the feminine space as she only does so to protect the reputation of her feminine virtues. Glendinning even argues that the wielding of the dagger in this particular instance can be construed as feminine because Lucretia's use of it undoes the violence that was done to her and eradicates any unchastity caused by the attack, particularly as the dagger itself is a phallic shape.<sup>53</sup> In that way, she is much like the Homeric Andromache and Penelope, both of whom are capable of stepping into the masculine sphere before reverting back to the feminine.<sup>54</sup>

Most importantly, Lucretia's rape and subsequent suicide acts as a sacrifice for the Roman people. Her decision to use a dagger, a sacrificial weapon, is the primary indicator of her sacrifice as she is quite literally giving her life for the betterment of Rome.<sup>55</sup> After her death,

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<sup>51</sup> Livy, *Hist. of Rom.*, 1.58.

<sup>52</sup> Glendinning, 2013, 64-5.

<sup>53</sup> Glendinning, 2013, 65.

<sup>54</sup> Lucretia's similarity to Andromache and Penelope will be explored further in Chapter Two, pages 21-25.

<sup>55</sup> Livy, *Hist. of Rom.*, 1.58.

when Brutus kisses the bloodied dagger and then swears an oath to bring an end to the monarchy, he is participating in ritualistic behaviour and assuring everyone that the violence that follows is pure and justified.<sup>56</sup> Thus, her suicide serves as a larger sacrifice for the Roman people because had she not killed herself, the men might never have been pushed to action and the monarchy would have continued.

Notably, Lucretia is not mentioned again after her body is used as a sacrificial tool. Livy briefly mentions her body being carried from the home and into the public space so that others can see her dead body and they become outraged at the cruelty of the Roman king and his son, spurring the people into action.<sup>57</sup> Beyond that, we have no record of her funeral or of any monument to her; she is used to make a political statement and then she disappears altogether.<sup>58</sup> This is much like Messalina's treatment after death as she too is not given a proper burial nor is she given an epitaph for family and friends to visit. However, the difference is that Lucretia's memory lives on as a virtuous wife because of how she sacrificed herself for Rome, whereas Messalina's memory only lives on because of the condemnatory death narrative later written by Tacitus and other writers.<sup>59</sup>

### **Arria's Sacrifice**

The story of Lucretia would later go on to inspire other moments of feminine bravery and sacrifice, particularly in those of devoted wives. Pliny the Younger describes a woman who lived during the time of the emperor Claudius as being so devoted to her husband, Caecina Paetus, that when he was ordered to commit suicide but was unable to do so, she stabbed herself first.

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<sup>56</sup> Kliendienst, 1990, chap. 5.

<sup>57</sup> Livy, *Hist. of Rom.*, 1.58.

<sup>58</sup> Kliendienst, 1990, chap. 4.

<sup>59</sup> Refer to Chapter Four for a larger discussion on this topic.

Remarkably, she even told her husband that it did not hurt as a way to entice him to join her in death, “When chaste Arria handed to her Paetus the sword which she had herself withdrawn from her own entrails, she said, ‘If you can believe it, the wound I made does not hurt me, Paetus, but the one you will make, that one will hurt me.’”<sup>60</sup> Arria’s loyalty to her husband is profound, so much so that Pliny seems to admire her personal integrity and he even speaks of her achieving eternal glory for her actions.<sup>61</sup> Yet, this devotion harkens back to Lucretia and how both women spent their final moments in complete devotion to their husbands. Furthermore, Arria’s death similarly combines both the masculine and feminine ideals while her husband exhibits more feminine behaviour due to his cowardice. Paetus’ fear over killing himself feminizes him as his behaviour is typically associated with women. However, Arria takes on the role of the masculine figure and is even unafraid of the pain of death as she dies. Thus, the story of Arria and Paetus is an example of Lucretia’s story extending well beyond her death as others replicated her death in similar scenarios.

The ideals of the women discussed within this chapter all would have had some effect on how Messalina was expected to behave. Even though her life seemed ostensibly different from those described here, she surely would have felt the impact of their stories, particularly that of Lucretia’s, as her death defined the meaning of a good death for women, and it is her example that later women were expected to follow. However, Tacitus later inverts these ideals and death narrative in his characterization of Messalina, describing her as a scheming, greedy, and insatiable whore whose sexual urges nearly cost the empire. In Chapter Four, I will analyze how this reversal of feminine virtues and a good woman’s death transforms Messalina into an

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<sup>60</sup> Pliny the Younger, *Letters*, trans. J.B. Firth (Attalus, 1900) 3.16.

<sup>61</sup> Edwards, 2007, 193.

antithesis of Lucretia, which ultimately condemns Messalina to be forever remembered as a bad empress and wife, but an even worse woman.

## 2. Shaping the Feminine Ideal: Stories, Laws, and Norms

Lucretia's life and death are both exemplary: the way in which she lived as a wife is a model for other women to follow but her death is equally exemplary as the loss of so virtuous a woman serves as the spark that drives the Roman state to free itself from tyranny, shifting the constitution from monarchy to republic. While her death safeguards her virtue for all time, it also serves as a warning to women not to assert sexual assault without paying a penalty. These elements alone serve as forces that direct Romans, especially women, to maintain modesty, chastity, fidelity, and restraint. This chapter discusses different modes exerting pressure to conform to feminine ideals by looking at Livy's linking of Lucretia to feminine ideals displayed in Greek epics. The chapter also examines the force of legislation, terminology, and cult practice, all of which play a part in ensuring proper Roman character and behaviours.

Writing more than 500 years after Homer and the composition of the Athenian tragedies of the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE, Livy nonetheless connects his Lucretia with the most loyal ancient wives depicted in Greek epic and drama. He draws on identical motifs and shapes an unbroken connection between ideal wives of the Greek worlds with those in the Roman Republic and Empire. Although many women in Greek literature, both in prose and poetry, are described as adhering to this ideal household behaviour, this thesis will use Andromache, Hector's wife, and Penelope, Odysseus' wife, as the two prime examples of wifely virtues as they appear in ancient Greek literature. The portrayal of these women utilizes specific elements such as weaving and devotion to one's husband, which have been foregrounded from archaic Greece right up until the Roman Republic.

### **Weaving**

Weaving as a female pursuit is one such connection of an embedded model of behaviour. Considered to be largely a feminine task, spinning and working wool carried traditional connotations to virtue and chastity. Wool working meant that a woman was inside the house and engaged in an activity that brought honour and income to the household. Some believed that a woman who was too tired from the many hours of manual labour in weaving could then be relied upon to stay out of trouble.<sup>62</sup> These ideas did not disappear by the Imperial period either as the skill of wool working inspired thoughts of an old-fashioned wife, one who carried the sophisticated ability to labour over the loom. Suetonius describes how the women in Augustus' family made Augustus tunics and togas, even if they were supervising staff rather than doing the task themselves, since it represents how ideology withstood reality.<sup>63</sup> The fact that some of the most famous and perfect wives from ancient literature are also shown to be weaving is indicative of its importance in distinguishing good women from bad ones.

In Book 22 of Homer's *Iliad*, Andromache weaves right up to the moment of Hector's death. When her mother-in-law, Hecuba, begins to scream over the loss of her son, the shuttle drops from Andromache's hands as she rushes to see what has happened.<sup>64</sup> This is an important action as it shows Andromache's determination to maintain conventional order and practice even as their normal lives are inverted by Hector being at war. Andromache's dedication to maintaining feminine order in the household while Hector upholds the masculine order outside asserts the importance of weaving. It is one of *the* markers of her feminine, wifely duties that indicates the proper functioning of a household. Her continued weaving suggests that as long as she continues her duties as a proper wife, Hector's political and militaristic successes will

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<sup>62</sup> D'Ambra, 2007, 59.

<sup>63</sup> D'Ambra, 2007, 60; Suetonius, *Augustus*, 73.

<sup>64</sup> Homer, *Iliad*, 22.440-459.

continue. Once she drops the shuttle, the function of the loom comes to an actual and symbolic end.<sup>65</sup>

Penelope's use of weaving in the *Odyssey* appears in a different context although it too reveals a similar desire to uphold the household while a husband is away. Unlike Andromache, Penelope actively uses her weaving to trick her suitors and avoid marriage. The suitors are eager to marry her and assume the position and estates of Odysseus. Yet, Penelope holds them off for nearly three years with the lie that she must finish Laertes' funeral shroud to ensure she remains the perfect wife before she can remarry. At night she secretly unravels the work done during the day until she is caught by the suitors after a slave reveals the truth.<sup>66</sup> Notably, Penelope's trick is a contributing factor in her description as the perfect wife as it shows her immense loyalty to her husband. It also emphasizes how she is the perfect wife *for* Odysseus due to their like-minded tricks.<sup>67</sup> Her use of weaving to trick the suitors does not mark her out as duplicitous as her deceit maintains Odysseus' household, who we know was trying to return after the Trojan War.

It is not merely mythical women who dedicate their time to weaving. In his 4<sup>th</sup> century CE *Oeconomicus*, Xenophon frequently asserts that weaving is one of the essential skills for wives.<sup>68</sup> In this manual on successfully governing a household, he describes a girl inexperienced in being a wife and running a household due to her young age. However, he does note the one task that she has been well prepared for: weaving.<sup>69</sup> This highlights the importance of weaving in

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<sup>65</sup> Pantelia, 1993, 495-6.

<sup>66</sup> Homer, *Odyssey*, 2.86-115.

<sup>67</sup> Odysseus' epithets characterize him as being cunning, clever, and even deceitful in the many ways he operates throughout the epics. For example, he pretends to be insane when the Achaeans arrive in Ithaca to get out of fighting in the Trojan War. However, Palamedes saw through his deceit and placed his infant son in the path of the plow, forcing Odysseus to reveal himself to avoid killing his child (Hyginus, *Fabulae*, 95).

<sup>68</sup> Xenophon, *On Household Management (Oeconomicus)*, 7.5; 7.6; 7.36; 7.41.

<sup>69</sup> Xen., *Oec.*, 7.5-7.6.

a classical household as women were taught and expected to do the wool working above all other feminine duties. To emphasize this point, Xenophon later mentions how a wife who knew how to weave was twice as valuable to her husband.<sup>70</sup>

Lucretia's use of weaving is an obvious example of the Romans using similar themes in their literature as she was weaving when she was declared the winner of the contest to decide which wife was the most virtuous.<sup>71</sup> The implication that weaving is all that is needed to determine if a wife is good or not demonstrates the power of such an action and its association with women. However, as was discussed in the previous chapter with women like Claudia, weaving was also used on funerary epitaphs to distinguish good wives in death.<sup>72</sup> While Lucretia's death set the standard for later Roman women, it can equally be argued that the Homeric women influenced the depiction of Lucretia to establish her as the Roman standard of the Greek ideals.<sup>73</sup>

### **The Masculine versus Feminine Boundary**

A good wife was also depicted as having the ability to straddle the line between femininity and acceptable masculinity. The idea that a perfect wife should be able to temporarily step into the masculine domain while still retaining their feminine attributes is one that Andromache, Penelope, and Lucretia display clearly in their respective stories. Andromache famously does this in Book 6 of the *Iliad* when she begs Hector to abstain from the war and even

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<sup>70</sup> Xenophon, *Oec.*, 7.41.

<sup>71</sup> Livy, *Hist. of Rom.*, 1.57.

<sup>72</sup> See the following inscriptions for more examples: *CIL* 1.2.1211, *CIL* VI.11602 = ILS 8402 = *CLE* 237.L, *CIL* VI.10230 = *ILS* 8394.L, translator M.R. Lefkowitz & M.B. Fant (2016).

<sup>73</sup> It can also be argued that Livy was trying to directly relate Lucretia to later Augustan ideals as well, as his version of Lucretia's story contains many of the ideals of Augustan propaganda, such as working late at night and by lamplight, she sits amongst her women, and she is equally devoted to the task of wool working (Waters, 2013, 13-4).

provides him with battle advice to convince him to stay with his family.<sup>74</sup> In the end, she knows she must abide by her husband's decisions despite the misery she foresees for herself and their son. As Hector heads back into battle, Andromache returns to their home and collects her handmaidens around her to lament the coming loss of her husband.<sup>75</sup> Although Andromache is certain of Hector's impending death and what that will mean for her and their son, her ability to smoothly transition back into her wifely duties after counselling her husband on matters of war prove how easily she can see possibilities in both worlds, while still acknowledging and accepting her primary place and role within the palace, raising their children, weaving, and maintaining good order.

Penelope's characterization in the *Odyssey* often focuses on the similar traits she shares with her husband, namely craftiness and guile, to avoid marrying one of her suitors. Although, unlike Andromache or even Lucretia who do so in very masculine-coded ways, Penelope does so entirely from the perspective of a woman. She uses her knowledge of the domestic space such as weaving to gain the upper hand against her suitors and then she even tests Odysseus upon his return to make sure he truly is her husband by lying about moving their marriage bed.<sup>76</sup> Similar to her weaving, Penelope is not condemned for her decision to test her husband upon his return, but rather she is celebrated for knowing her domestic space well enough to test someone claiming to be her intelligent and crafty husband Odysseus.

The marital bed of Odysseus and Penelope is a similarly well-known symbol of the everlasting nature of their relationship. Odysseus built it using an olive tree that had been growing into his court and no man could move it from its place as Odysseus built the room around the

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<sup>74</sup> Homer, *Il.*, 6.429-39.

<sup>75</sup> Homer, *Il.*, 6.494-502.

<sup>76</sup> Homer, *Od.*, 23.178-205.

bed, fixing it in place.<sup>77</sup> Odysseus' anger over the mere suggestion of moving it from their bedchamber implies his fear that Penelope was being unfaithful as only a god could move an immovable bed.<sup>78</sup> However, we know that Penelope was aware of Odysseus' identity all along and was merely testing him to trick him into admitting his true identity.<sup>79</sup> This trick serves to highlight Penelope's fidelity to her absent husband as the bed still being in its original place implies her loyalty to her husband can withstand even the trickery of a god.<sup>80</sup>

Livy likewise deploys the importance of the marriage bed in his description of Lucretia's suicide. Like Odysseus and Penelope, Lucretia's marriage bed with Collatinus holds a similar importance in that it represents her adherence to wifely fidelity, modesty, and restraint which is then strengthened by her choice to take her own life. Her loyalty to her husband feels secondary to her desire to maintain her reputation as she tells her family that she will take her punishment despite being innocent of any wrongdoing.<sup>81</sup> Her complete refusal to return to her marriage bed after the assault solidifies her dedication to safeguarding her reputation as a chaste wife who is loyal to her husband. She and her family absolve her of blame, yet she still feels the need to prove her chastity by committing suicide to safeguard the sanctity of their marriage while her weeping husband looks on.<sup>82</sup>

## Terminology

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<sup>77</sup> Homer, *Od.*, 23.183-205.

<sup>78</sup> Gonzalez, 2004, 931. Homer was likely referring to the myth of Zeus and Alcmene in which he disguised himself as her husband Amphitryon which ultimately produced his Heracles (Apollodorus, *Library*, 2.4.8, Gonzalez, 2004, 932).

<sup>79</sup> Homer, *Od.*, 23.178-205.

<sup>80</sup> Gonzalez, 2004, 931-2.

<sup>81</sup> Livy, *Hist. of Rom.*, 1.58.

<sup>82</sup> Livy, *Hist. of Rom.*, 1.58.

The literary idealizing of women who remained indoors, weaving, supervising others to go about their housework, and maintaining the security of the marital bed engaged with cultural expectations and responding behaviours. So too did the cultural use of specific terminology to shape the behaviour of women. Women of the Roman Republic, especially married ones, were meant to ascribe to several specific values. *Pudicitia*, which has most often been translated to mean ‘chastity’ or more specifically ‘female chastity’, actually meant so much more than that to the Romans.<sup>83</sup> Various attempts have been made to put forth a better definition for *pudicitia*, with some translating it to mean ‘self-respect’ or ‘sense of decency’. Ultimately, *pudicitia* had many different facets of meaning and it possesses an inextricable link with *castitas* which is often used interchangeably.<sup>84</sup> What we know about the term has come by parsing through extant sources of male authors, often praising women for their *pudicitia* or condemning them for their lacking such a quality.<sup>85</sup> In its simplest context, *pudicitia* can be understood as a moral virtue that regulates sexual behaviour of women. While any woman would be expected to exhibit *pudicitia*, it mostly affected married women, who were expected to safeguard their virtue in such a way that it made their reputation impeachable.<sup>86</sup> Notably, the guarding of feminine virtue was a major theme of Lucretia’s story as she took her own life to safeguard the memory of her virtue. The story of Lucretia would have surely had an impact on the ways in which later Roman matrons were expected to carry themselves and display their *pudicitia*. In fact, in the aftermath of Lucretia’s suicide, a cult of *Pudicitia* was formed in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE, separated into two groups: one for

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<sup>83</sup> See Rebecca Langlands’ *Sexual Morality in Ancient Rome* (2006) to learn more about the many ways *pudicitia* was understood by the Romans.

<sup>84</sup> Langlands, 2006, 30.

<sup>85</sup> See Valerius Maximus’ *Memorable Doings and Sayings* (VI.1-2) where he praises Lucretia for inhabiting proper *pudicitia* and Ovid’s *Consolatio ad Liviam* (40-5) where he praises Livia for also displaying *pudicitia*. Adversely, Juvenal’s *Satires VI* is famous for condemning women who do not uphold proper *pudicitia*, even dedicating a passage specifically to Messalina (114-135).

<sup>86</sup> Langlands, 2006, 31; 38. Chapter Four, pages 54-60, will discuss Messalina’s absolute disavowal of this idealized norm of behaviour for women through her various affairs, public revelry, and bigamous marriage.

the patrician women and one for the plebian women.<sup>87</sup> This indicates a desire for women to follow *pudicitia* so strongly that they formed a cult to display their adherence to such values.<sup>88</sup>

The Roman idea of *pudicitia* certainly drew on Greek counterparts. In particular, the Greek ideal of *sophrosune* is notable in that it carried a similar definition.<sup>89</sup> Many of the women from Greek literature not only displayed these qualities but also provided the Romans with a template to follow when describing ideal women in their own stories. Andromache and Penelope are once again easy comparisons for later Roman figures like Lucretia as they too were written in a way that made them placeholders for masculine ideas of feminine behaviour.<sup>90</sup> Their characterization throughout not only the epics, but in later literature as well, shows how their depiction solidified their memory as being perfect wives whose reputations were untouchable.<sup>91</sup>

### **Laws in the Roman Republic & Early Empire**

In addition to the various methods used to control women's behaviour such as myths, terminology, restraint, and shame, the Romans also added legal strictures. The *Lex Oppia*, which was a law established in 215 BCE that was supposedly meant to alleviate the economic distress imposed by the Second Punic War, likely worked to limit the growing desire women had to

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<sup>87</sup> De La Bédoyère, 2018, 23.

<sup>88</sup> While only the most upstanding matrons were allowed to sacrifice to *Pudicitia*, the cult for the plebian women soon disbanded as many unsuitable women would join, likely in the hopes of creating good reputations for themselves (De La Bédoyère, 2018, 23). This shows that although there were ideals for female sexual behaviour, they were not always strictly followed.

<sup>89</sup> Langlands, 2006, 31.

<sup>90</sup> Helen provides another comparison as she too is seen performing feminine duties by weaving in Homer's *Iliad* 3.121-28 but then at 3.428-36, she warns Paris not to fight Menelaus, lest he risks dying at the hands of a much greater fighter. Like Andromache and Penelope, Helen also straddles the line between feminine and masculine.

<sup>91</sup> Even in Euripides' *Andromache*, where we see the consequences of the Trojans losing the war, Andromache is still shown to be a dutiful wife as she mourns the loss of her husband (1-55). Interestingly, Penelope's reputation that was established in the *Odyssey* supplants possibly pre-Homeric traditions that depicted her as being unfaithful to Odysseus and even birthing Pan with the god Hermes (Nelson, 2021, 43). Thus, implying that the Homeric tradition established her reputation as a proper wife so strongly that nothing could detract from it going forward.

display their wealth.<sup>92</sup> Comedies during that time suggest a growing number of women were challenging the boundaries of ideal behaviour or at the very least, there was a growing fear amongst men that women were gaining more wealth and power. Plautus' comedy, *the Pot of Gold*, references men taking wives who did not have dowries as they would not demand things that are purple and gold like wives with dowries might otherwise demand. This would effectively silence the wives with dowries as they would be forced to better their characters in an effort to find a husband.<sup>93</sup> The type of behaviour that would see a woman flaunting her wealth would have hardly fit into the strict ideals of *pudicitia*, which meant that methods had to be put in place to ensure women continued to abide by the social norms.

While the *Lex Oppia* sought to control women's ability to showcase their wealth, other methods were being used to control their sexuality. During the Roman Republic, the use of *stuprum* legislation was largely meant to handle adultery and control female sexuality through her family rather than more official channels like courts.<sup>94</sup> This allowed the men of any given household to take full responsibility for the reputation of their female family members while punishing any who did not adhere to the strict ideals. One instance of a father killing his daughter under this charge rather than marrying her to her freedman lover implies that she was no longer a viable candidate for marriage and in doing so, she brought shame to herself and her family. Valerius claims that her father would rather conduct a funeral than host such a shameful wedding.<sup>95</sup> While this type of treatment seems harsh to our modern sensibilities, the story of Lucretia is emblematic of the standard within which women were expected to maintain. Those

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<sup>92</sup> Ehrman, 2017, 809.

<sup>93</sup> Plautus, *The Pot of Gold*, 475-495.

<sup>94</sup> Olson, 2014, 184.

<sup>95</sup> Olson, 2014, 184; Valerius Maximus, 6.1.3.

who would not (or could not in the case of rape) risked facing harsh punishments inflicted upon them by their own male relatives.

By the Imperial period, punishment for women's adultery became more than a household responsibility as Augustus reformulated the laws to make it a criminal offence, which risked penalties such as a temporary exile and a monetary fine or even worse, permanent exile.<sup>96</sup> *Stuprum* played a role in these laws and punishments as well, particularly as its meaning became more restricted under the legislation known as the *Lex Julia et Papia-Poppaea* and encompassed any woman who was of marriageable status. Breaking these laws could even lead to the prosecution of both parties, although it was still the woman's status that mattered most in those charges. However, not every woman was directly affected as *stuprum* did not apply to women who were not considered to be of marriageable status, such as slaves, prostitutes, or women who had previously been charged with adultery.<sup>97</sup> In the case of the husband, the new laws meant that he could no longer kill his adulterous wife; however, he was expected to publicly repudiate her or else he risked being accused of pandering.<sup>98</sup>

The legislation of the *Lex Julia et Papia-Poppaea* was comprised of three laws: the *Lex Julia de Maritandis Ordinibus* of 18 BCE, the *Lex Julia de Adulteriis* also of 18 BCE and the *Lex Papia Poppaea* of 9 CE. All of these laws sought to promote marriage and childbearing among Roman citizens, while attempting to repress adultery and extra-marital sex.<sup>99</sup> These laws required all citizens to be married within a certain age, with female citizens being expected to be married

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<sup>96</sup> Olson, 2014, 184. Even members of Augustus' own household were not exempt from this punishment as his daughter, Julia the Elder, was permanently banished on the indictment of shamelessness (Seneca the Younger, *De Beneficiis*, 6.32). The Imperial period is also the first time sexual offenses became punishable public crimes rather than strictly being the responsibility of the *paterfamilias* (Evans Grubbs, 2002, 84).

<sup>97</sup> Olson, 2014, 184.

<sup>98</sup> Cantarella, 2016, 427.

<sup>99</sup> Evans Grubbs, 2002, 83.

between twenty and fifty with all widows needing to re-marry within two or three years and divorcées within eighteen months. They also restricted who one could marry by banning the marriage between members of the senatorial order and former slaves, actors, prostitutes, condemned adulteresses, and more.<sup>100</sup> However, those who abided by these laws could also gain some rewards, such as the *ius trium liberorum* (“right of three children”) which freed women from needing to remarry even if they were between the ages of twenty and fifty and it also freed them from requiring male guardianship.<sup>101</sup> While evidence shows that there was a public outcry over Augustus’ legislations with the elite finding his laws too intrusive in their private affairs and it ultimately led to some modifications being made, the adultery legislation continued throughout antiquity with some changes being made under Constantine.<sup>102</sup>

The legitimacy of children must have been the chief concern for establishing laws which encouraged legitimate marriages and childbearing as well as protected women against assault. Considering Augustus had his own issues with designating a legitimate male heir for the empire, he required the help of his female relatives to accomplish what he could not in his own marriage.<sup>103</sup> One such attempt by Augustus to secure legitimate heirs was through his daughter Julia. The absence of a brother meant it became the daughter’s responsibility to produce a successor.<sup>104</sup> Her first marriage to Marcellus, the son of Augustus’ sister Octavia, produced no heirs. After Marcellus’ premature death, Julia married Agrippa and produced two sons and a daughter. Augustus promptly adopted both sons as his own, teaching them to read and write so that they sounded like himself. However, both adoptive sons died, leaving Augustus without an

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<sup>100</sup> Evans Grubbs, 2002, 84. For more on these laws and punishments, see Judith Evan Grubbs’ chapter “Marriage in Roman Law and Society” pages 81-101 (2002).

<sup>101</sup> Hallett, 2021, 77.

<sup>102</sup> Evans Grubbs, 2002, 84-5.

<sup>103</sup> Corbier, 1995, 178.

<sup>104</sup> Corbier, 1995, 182.

heir once again.<sup>105</sup> When considering the establishment of a future heir to the Roman Empire, the stress on the legitimacy of children beginning at the start of the Imperial period becomes clearer. It also explains Augustus' harsh treatment of his daughter's later improper behaviour and why there was such an emphasis on women remaining chaste.

Even the most important priestesses of Rome, the Vestal Virgins who served as the guardians of Rome's welfare, were not exempt from the penalties of disobeying the laws nor could they escape the death sentence imposed upon them if they broke their vows that required them to remain chaste. While these women were expected to uphold their duties for a minimum of thirty years, they would also be granted many privileges denied to other women, such as special seating in theatres and the ability to move beyond their gender and legal status as they were considered to be the only Romans without family.<sup>106</sup> As previously mentioned, these privileges also came with dangerous consequences for any Vestal who broke her sacred vows. If they let the sacred fire burn out on their watch, they would be beaten severely as punishment. Though perhaps least surprising of all, Vestal Virgins were meant to keep their virginity and any who were deemed unchaste during her tenure as a Vestal would be buried alive. Evidence shows that Vestals were even sometimes accused of being unchaste during times of political uprising and militaristic distress.<sup>107</sup> The harsh punishment of unchaste Vestal Virgins indicates how far the Romans were willing to go to ensure the *pudicitia* of women. It also shows how closely they viewed the sexuality of women with the protection of their state.

Throughout the Republic and the early Empire, women's lives were encompassed with implicit directions by funerary inscriptions, exemplars of wifely femininity in Greek literature,

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<sup>105</sup> Corbier, 1995, 182.

<sup>106</sup> Culham, 2004, 141-2.

<sup>107</sup> Culham, 2004, 143.

vocabulary, and cults of idealized feminine behaviour, as well as by various laws to maintain proper restraint, chastity, and fidelity. As the Republic shifted to the Empire, the ideals quickly evolved from merely expecting women to abide by certain ideals to directly ordering them or else risk severe legal punishments. By the time Messalina stepped into her role as empress, Augustus' laws had taken root in the Imperial period and had become the standard by which women were expected to live. It is no wonder given the oppressive laws designed to control a woman's ability to give legitimate children do we see a vehement condemnation of Messalina's actions, solidified by her treatment in death. And yet, as the next chapter will show, Messalina's life might have been no different than the lives of other women as she too likely lived a fairly conventional life.

### 3. Largely Unknown and Largely Conventional: The Pre-Death of Valeria Messalina

Not much is known about the life of Valeria Messalina and most of what we do know about her life comes from her time as empress.<sup>108</sup> Although later writers like Tacitus and Suetonius depict Messalina's time as empress as full of scheming and debauchery, the surviving imagery suggests the later written sources are not entirely truthful and unbiased in her portrayal. In fact, it is more likely that the circumstances of her death coloured her life and left Messalina with the reputation that she was wildly unfit as empress.<sup>109</sup> Stories such as Messalina defeating an accomplished prostitute in a competition by taking on the most sexual partners in one day or still being sexually dissatisfied after a night in a brothel are in stark contrast to the traditional empress depicted on surviving sculptures and coinage.<sup>110</sup> However, nothing in the extant material evidence suggests that Messalina's behaviour during her time as wife of the emperor was unacceptable. Rather, the imagery that has survived depicts her as being largely conventional, fitting into the traditional framework that has been carefully crafted for women to adhere since Lucretia's time. Thus, analyzing the surviving physical evidence plays an important role in contrasting the male-dominated rhetoric that has haunted Messalina's memory years after her death.

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<sup>108</sup> The sum of Messalina in the ancient sources before she becomes empress is one source, which details her family lineage. See Suetonius, *Life of Claudius*, 26.

<sup>109</sup> Seneca writes shortly after Claudius' death in his *Apocolocyntosis* in which he largely condemns Claudius' actions as emperor. He mentions Messalina three times throughout, but notably he is not condemnatory of her behaviour. While he briefly alludes to Messalina's potential affair with Silius, he is more interested in portraying Augustus' anger beyond the grave over Claudius' decision to kill Messalina (11). Considering our next source on Messalina's portrayal is not until Pliny the Elder in the late 70's CE, this is a notable portrayal because it suggests Messalina's life was not as scandalous as later writers suggest, particularly as Seneca would have surely been interested in detailing Messalina's sexual misconduct as a way to further mock Claudius as emperor. Instead, Seneca focuses on Augustus' anger over his relative's death, suggesting a possibility that Messalina might have been more conventional in her life than later writers would have us believe.

<sup>110</sup> Pliny the Elder, *Natural Histories*, 10.83, Juvenal, *Satires* 6.114-35.

Messalina's early life is almost entirely untraceable; even her age is still debated as her birth year was never properly recorded, which is not a surprise for women of that time. Women were largely kept outside the historical record until their marriage placed them in a position that was useful to the men and their households.<sup>111</sup> And yet, in Messalina's case, the lack of a firm date of birth can drastically change how we view her actions today.<sup>112</sup> There is nearly a nine year gap between the proposed birthdates of 17 CE and 26 CE, meaning Messalina could have been either thirteen or twenty-one when she married and twenty-one or thirty-one when she died.<sup>113</sup> Twenty-one seems far too late for someone of her status to be marrying, which means she was likely much closer to the age of thirteen when she married Claudius.<sup>114</sup> Although a woman of marriageable age in Roman law, she would have still been incredibly young and inexperienced when she was making decisions as the foremost woman in the imperial household.<sup>115</sup> Those decisions, which led to her untimely death, ultimately had a lasting effect on her reputation and treatment in later sources.

Once Claudius became emperor, Messalina's likeness would have been depicted in various formats to project the Julio-Claudian household as representative of a strong and fertile empire. Her sculptures would have been displayed publicly, thereby serving as an example to other women, teaching them how to behave, how to dress and even what to value.<sup>116</sup> If a woman

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<sup>111</sup> Cargill-Martin, 2023, 4; 44.

<sup>112</sup> See B. Levick, 1990, 55, for a useful discussion on why Claudius might have divorced his wife Aelia Paetina and married his cousin once removed, suggesting that it was Messalina's political connections and illustrious lineage.

<sup>113</sup> Cargill-Martin, 2023, 45.

<sup>114</sup> It is worth noting that there are scholars who believe Messalina was married once before she married Claudius, which would make the theory that she was already in her twenties when she married Claudius more plausible. However, Honor Cargill-Martin posits that if Messalina had been married prior to Claudius, the ancient writers would have mentioned it as a means to further damage her reputation (45).

<sup>115</sup> Cargill-Martin, 2023, 4.

<sup>116</sup> Wood, 1999, 1. The location of these sculptures can be debated. Wood suggests that they would have been found in the public forum alongside the emperor (1). However, Boatwright posits that anxieties around

was moderately literate, she would then be able to read the inscriptions and learn about how the imperial women represented marital harmony, good fortune, security, and other values for the empire as a whole. And Roman women did engage with the representations of imperial women. Sometimes, women would even read their wedding vows before a statue of an imperial woman so she could witness by proxy the legality of a woman's marriage.<sup>117</sup> To say that these sculptures held an important role in governing other women's behaviour would be a vast understatement. Messalina, during her time as empress, would have offered similar lessons and ideals for women to abide by. However, this also meant that when an imperial woman fell from grace, their vandalized and/or disappearing statues would also signal to women that a particular empress – and her actions – were no longer meant to be emulated.<sup>118</sup>

The importance of these statues and what they represented cannot be misrepresented as the traditional façade of the Roman imperial household was accomplished in part by using the public imagery of the women in his household.<sup>119</sup> To achieve this, the imagery of these women had to be presented in a specific way in order to successfully convey the message of modesty, fertility, and traditional values that Augustus first established with the Empire. One method of achieving this was through their hairstyles. Working with a stylist, they would design trendsetting hairstyles that would be arranged carefully to show not only their prosperity, but their alignment with the political or social agenda of the current emperor and his family.<sup>120</sup> Livia first popularized this technique by adopting a simple yet elegant hairstyle known as the *nodus*

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women in public spaces meant they would not have been found in the Roman Forum and in fact they remained rare throughout the first century CE. Instead, they would be found in areas like porticoes, temples, shrines, on the Esquiline, and in the Campus Martius, as well as a few other chosen places (Boatwright, 2011, 124-6).

<sup>117</sup> Wood, 1999, 1.

<sup>118</sup> Wood, 1999, 3.

<sup>119</sup> De La Bédoyère, 2018, 33.

<sup>120</sup> Kleiner & Matheson, 2000, 11-2.

that represented a woman's feminine virtue by highlighting her inner chastity and modesty and gave the idea of a woman of high moral character who adhered to the principle of restraint.<sup>121</sup>

The function of a carefully executed coiffure thus becomes imperative when analyzing the surviving imagery of Messalina for two reasons. First, it is possible that her likeness was not represented on coinage within Rome.<sup>122</sup> The surviving coinage that has been attributed to her likeness were minted by the provinces, which means surviving coinage attributed to her based on likeness requires knowledge of her specific hairstyle. Second, her fall from grace led to her images being destroyed in the *damnatio memoriae* ritual, which has made it difficult to discern her sculptures from that of her successor, Agrippina the Younger.<sup>123</sup> Fortunately, coins often combined the portrait face with a name. However, coins are also limited by their small scale and that they only show us a profile, which is why using coins and sculptures together is the best way to achieve the most likely identification.<sup>124</sup> But by starting with the surviving coinage, we can attempt to determine the few sculptures of Messalina that survived the *damnatio memoriae* through the analyzing of her hairstyle on the coinage we are more confident is her.

## Coinage

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<sup>121</sup> Kleiner & Matheson, 2000, 49. It is worth noting that Livia's hairstyle is often contrasted with the idea of Cleopatra's wild tresses. However, this comparison is a product of Augustan propaganda seeking to equate Cleopatra with an unrestrained foreign queen. Official coinage representing the Hellenistic queen depicted her as wearing a hairstyle like Livia's with a well-kept bun at the back of her head (Pina Polo, 2013, 186; Varner, 2008, 190).

<sup>122</sup> Wood, 1999, 274. While still worth noting, this is a relatively minor detail Wood chooses to include. There is little evidence to suggest that the Julio-Claudian empresses were being depicted on coinage within Rome during their tenure as empresses with any frequency. Earlier, Wood states that Livia had only been depicted on a coin struck within Rome once in her lifetime (89).

<sup>123</sup> Wood, 1999, 274.

<sup>124</sup> Wood, 2002, 35-36.

The first coin depicts the aforementioned side profile with Messalina on one side and the full-length image of Claudius' acknowledged living children on the other: Britannicus and Claudia Octavia, who are Messalina's children, and Claudia Antonia, who is Claudius' daughter from an earlier marriage (figure 1). Messalina's side profile is clearly distinguished, giving



Figure 1: Messalina (left) and Claudius' children (right). 43-48 CE. Caesarea Mazaca. 691591001. The British Museum.

insight into how her hair might have been styled. Notably, this hairstyle looks very similar to a popular sculpture that is strongly believed to represent Messalina in which she is depicted as



Figure 2: Sculpture believed to be Messalina. Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence. Carole Raddato.

sporting the unique hairstyle that made her recognizable (fig. 2). In it, her hair is parted down the middle and then crimped into narrow waves. Decorative curls also continue across the forehead which was a style that was common amongst women in the time from Tiberius and onwards.<sup>125</sup> The complicated pattern of this hairstyle would have allowed Messalina to exert power through her imagery as it would have required the help of a large retinue of slave women to arrange, thus implying her elite status.<sup>126</sup>

On other coins, Messalina is occasionally depicted as having a more simplistic hairstyle. One coin from Crete shows her

<sup>125</sup> Wood, 1999, 277-8.

<sup>126</sup> Kleiner & Matheson, 1996, 12.

with her hair in a bun at the nape of her neck but still sporting that band of curls across her forehead (fig. 3).

Likewise, official coinage of Livia depicts her with a remarkably similar hairstyle where she also has her hair styled into a bun that rests at the nape of her neck (fig.

4). The likeness of these two empresses was likely done on purpose. As the first Empress of Rome, Livia styled



Figure 3: Claudius (right) confronting Messalina (left). Struck circa 41-43 CE. Svoronos 25; BMC 9; McClean 7219; RPC I 1032. Classical Numismatic Group.

her hair in a neat and prim fashion, which still showed her attention to fashion. Her hair would be styled in waves at each side of her face that would then be drawn back into a simple chignon at



Figure 4: Livia depicted as Salus, Roman goddess of safety. 22-23 CE. Rome, Italy. 2361304. Reinhard Saczewski.

the nape of her neck. While not an overly complicated style, it still would have required the help of a few skilled ladies' maids to accomplish.<sup>127</sup> Ultimately, the image of an empress was open for interpretation and many who possessed the talent to depict the empresses differently would often do so.<sup>128</sup> However, depicting Messalina with a

hairstyle similar to Livia's implies that there was a desire to relate her to the first empress specifically and perhaps there was even a similar affection for Messalina that the creator of this coin wished to convey.<sup>129</sup>

Beyond affection, there may have been other messaging they wished to convey by associating the two women. Livia, who became synonymous with the messaging of fecundity,

<sup>127</sup> Wood, 2002, 38-39.

<sup>128</sup> Wood, 1999, 96.

<sup>129</sup> There is a great deal of evidence that Livia was well-liked and admired by many people for her generosity and the ways in which she used her wealth and influence to better Rome (Wood, 2002, 38).

modesty, and chastity, would have been a perfect exemplar for which to compare Messalina.<sup>130</sup> Had Messalina been participating in the sexual transgressions she was accused of it would hardly seem appropriate to compare her to the pinnacle of proper behaviour in the Julio-Claudian line. Certainly, this is further emphasized by their shared depiction as goddesses. Although Livia was not deified until after her death in 41 CE, she was depicted in the guise of a goddess long before that.<sup>131</sup> In fact, the representation of empresses as goddesses became a fairly common practice during the Julio-Claudian period with Cybele, Ceres, and Fortuna being the most popular goddesses as they carried connotations of prosperity and good fortune for the empire.<sup>132</sup> The depiction of empresses as goddesses on coinage was important as they were used in daily commerce around the empire making them widely dispersed and highly influential.<sup>133</sup>

As for Messalina, her fall from grace ensured she would not be deified after death like Livia. However, we do have evidence of her being represented as a goddess during her reign as well. Notably, the association with goddesses was particularly prevalent during Claudius' time, who minted several coins associating his female relatives with the fertility goddess Ceres.<sup>134</sup> Messalina's appearance on one coin shows her holding her children in one hand and a stalk of wheat in the other, which characterizes her as Ceres who was often



Figure 5: Claudius (left) and Messalina depicted as Ceres (right), holding their children, Britannicus and Octavia, in one hand and stalks of wheat in the other. 41-54 CE.

<sup>130</sup> See Anthony A. Barrett (2002) *Livia: First Lady of Imperial Rome* for a discussion on Livia's reputation. Livia's reputation for virtue was unsullied even if she had left her first husband for Octavian, she escaped any condemnation over her conduct. "She is the Vesta of chaste matrons, who has the morals of Juno and is an exemplar of *pudicitia* worthy of earlier and morally superior generations." (124-5).

<sup>131</sup> Kleiner & Matheson, 1996, 184.

<sup>132</sup> Kleiner & Matheson, 1996, 185.

<sup>133</sup> Kleiner & Matheson, 2000, 10.

<sup>134</sup> Foubert, 2015, 192.

depicted in this way as the goddess of fertility and the protector of marriage (fig. 5).<sup>135</sup>

Furthermore, it seems that Messalina was doubly associated with fertility as she was linked to the cult of the local goddess at Nicaea, Demeter Karpophoros.<sup>136</sup> It would have surely been important to represent her as such, particularly as the empresses became symbols of prosperity and moral rectitude for the empire, so did the emperor of whom they were closely related.<sup>137</sup>

### **Cameos**

There is also evidence of Messalina being depicted on cameos, objects made of gemstones that were popular exclusively during the Julio-Claudian period.<sup>138</sup> However, it is worth acknowledging that as we move away from coinage, certainty around the representation of Messalina becomes less confident. With coins, the names of who they were representing were often inscribed along the edges, definitively marking its subject. Other representations, such as cameos and sculptures, become difficult to discern. In Messalina's case, the *damnatio memoriae* played a role in this as it resulted in the ruthless excising of her name from all sculptures and inscriptions that once touted her virtuous ways.<sup>139</sup> As such, we must use methods such as analyzing her distinctive hairstyle to make our best guess as to who is being represented. However, given the uniqueness of cameos being made solely during the Julio-Claudian period, we are left with limited options, which makes identifying Messalina on cameos easier.<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> Ginsburg, 2005, 65.

<sup>136</sup> Angelova, 2015, 96.

<sup>137</sup> Ginsburg, 2005, 65.

<sup>138</sup> Fischer, 2024, 1-2.

<sup>139</sup> Varner, 2004, 2.

<sup>140</sup> Fischer, 2024, 2.

The use of cameos was believed to have been shared amongst intimate circles consisting mostly of members of the imperial court due to the cost that it took to produce them. Although it is difficult to ascertain their exact use, the most likely scenario was that they were used to spread imperial ideology.<sup>141</sup> This certainly seems to be true in the cameos believed to represent Messalina. Figure 6 depicts a woman with the exact same hairstyle as Messalina was shown to wear in figure 1. This makes it easy to determine her likeness on the cameo even without a name



Figure 6: Cameo of Messalina alongside her children, Britannicus and Octavia. Sardonyx. 40-42 CE. Sailko.

specifically stating who it represents. In this cameo, Messalina is depicted alongside a cornucopia as well as her two children, Britannicus and Octavia, and wearing a laurel crown (fig. 6). The messaging with which they were trying to associate Messalina was clear – she represented fecundity, victory, and power. Like the stalks of wheat, the cornucopia was associated with fertility, abundance, and prosperity and could be depicted alongside the personification of goddesses such as Venus, Ceres, Pax, Tellus, and Abundantia.<sup>142</sup> However, the cornucopia combined with her

children, specifically Britannicus who is represented inside the cornucopia, achieves the affect of highlighting her personal fertility as a mother and abiding by the child-bearing laws Augustus put into place years before.<sup>143</sup> More importantly, she is providing Rome with an heir. The laurel crown in her hair is also an important feature as it was a common symbol for peace, eternity,

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<sup>141</sup> Foubert, 2011, 11.

<sup>142</sup> Prusac, 2011, 80.

<sup>143</sup> For more information on Augustus' laws that implemented these requirements on women, see Tacitus, *Annals*, 3.25.

victory, and the supreme ruler.<sup>144</sup> The connotations between Messalina and the idea of her reign representing good things for Rome is evident.

Other cameos of Messalina come with similar messaging while also highlighting her adherence to convention. Figure 7 depicts Messalina on a chariot alongside her husband,

Claudius. Again, we see her hair is very similar to figure 1, suggesting that it is her and not Agrippina the Younger, Claudius' third wife, who replaced her on much of the surviving sculptures.<sup>145</sup> Messalina's attire is also more defined in this image, showing her conventionally dressed in a *stola*. The article of clothing known as the *stola* was popularized in Latin literature by Augustan cultural policy to signify the ideal Roman wife. As such, Julio-Claudian women were often seen dressed in a *stola*



Figure 7: Claudius and Messalina on a chariot. Sardonyx. 1<sup>st</sup> century CE. Sailko.

to represent their adherence to the strict feminine virtues legalized by Augustus.<sup>146</sup> Notably, the *femina stolata* that was popularized in Augustan literature was actually an exception to the rule of public life as it was mostly used as festive garment.<sup>147</sup> And yet, its association with the ideal Roman wife makes it apparent why it became synonymous with the portrayal of the Julio-Claudian empresses. In creating legislature to control female sexuality, he had to also ensure his own household abided by his laws. This ensured that all the women in his line were presented as

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<sup>144</sup> Rogić, Anđelković Grašar & Nikolić, 2004, 343.

<sup>145</sup> Wood, 1999, 247.

<sup>146</sup> Radicke, 2022, 299-300.

<sup>147</sup> Radicke, 2022, 300.

exhibiting ideal behaviour, even if reality did not often match up with the ideals of their portraiture.<sup>148</sup>

In another cameo, Messalina is even more conventionally dressed wearing the same *stola*, but with her head covered as she is depicted alongside her husband and children once again (fig. 8). Similar themes of fecundity, victory, and triumph are clear with the presence of their children, the laurel crowns, and a chariot pulled by centaurs as they trample their enemies. Messalina is once



Figure 8: Cameo depicting Claudius and Messalina in a victory triumph. Also known as the “Hague Cameo”. Rijksmuseum van Oudheden.

again depicted as Ceres and is positioned in the post of honour with Claudius at her side depicted as Jupiter and holding his thunderbolt. Each member of the family, children included, are shown to be wearing laurel crowns to amplify their victory.<sup>149</sup> Once again, Messalina is depicted as embodying the feminine virtues expected of the empresses of the Julio-Claudian line. Even if these cameos were only distributed amongst the members of the imperial court, it is apparent that efforts were made to depict Messalina in this way, which hardly aligns with her current reputation as a sexual deviant.

## Sculptures

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<sup>148</sup> Augustus’ own daughter, Julia the Elder was banished for her alleged sexual deviancy. When citizens tried to intercede on her behalf, Augustus is said to have cursed them “with like daughters and like wives” (Suetonius, *Augustus*, 65).

<sup>149</sup> King, 1885, 47.

Finally, sculptures of Messalina embody much of the same themes as the aforementioned coins and cameos. In fact, the best surviving sculpture that is believed to represent Messalina is the perfect example of all important attributes Julio-Claudian empresses were expected to embody (fig. 9).<sup>150</sup> She wears the *femina stolata* which modestly covers her head while holding her son, Britannicus, to highlight her fecundity and her adherence to the feminine virtues established by Augustus. Although it might not be officially confirmed, it is strongly believed that this sculpture represents Messalina because the hairstyle is extremely similar to the one Messalina was often represented as wearing. Her hair is parted down the middle and then crimped into narrow waves. Decorative curls also continue across the forehead without division in the middle part which was a style that was common amongst women in the time of Tiberius and onwards.<sup>151</sup> The complicated pattern of this hairstyle would have allowed Messalina to exert power through her imagery as it would have required a large retinue of slave women to accomplish, thus implying her elite status.<sup>152</sup>

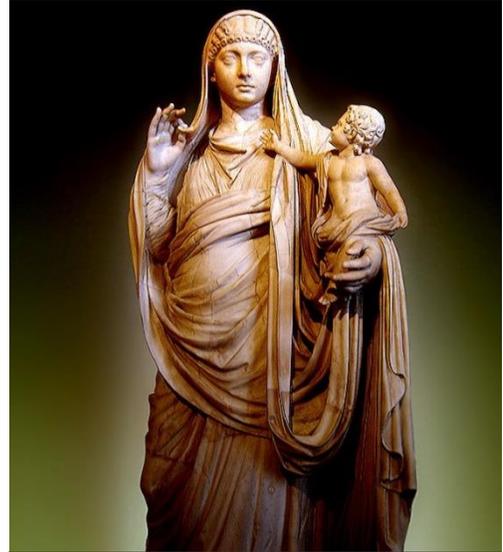


Figure 9: Messalina holding Britannicus. Marble. ca. 45 CE. Louvre Museum: Department of Greek, Etruscan and Roman Antiquities. Ma 1224 (MR 280). Ricardo André Frantz.

This sculpture can easily be described as the perfect representation of feminine attributes. Not only does she cover herself modestly to highlight her chastity, but she also carries her son to

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<sup>150</sup> Trimble explains that elites were often represented with the same bodies and that is because replication of imagery allowed for emphasis on the commonalities and shared aspects (201). Considering this, it can be posited that the imperial family used certain typologies to further their idea of a “good” representation versus a “bad” one. In the case of Messalina, we see her represented in the extant material sources as a good empress, but Tacitus depicts her as the exact opposite.

<sup>151</sup> Wood, 1999, 277-8.

<sup>152</sup> Kleiner & Matheson, 1996, 12.

mark her fertility. This type of sculpture would have surely been the type that was used to teach women, specifically married ones, how to dress and how to style their hair. By holding Britannicus in her arms, Messalina also signified to the women who looked upon her sculpture that she too cared for the well-being of her children and for the future prosperity of later offspring.<sup>153</sup> Her eyes looking straight ahead might even be a nod to her beauty and to the fact that she was known for having remarkably beautiful eyes, enough that they stood out to ancient writers who were writing about her long after she had died. Even Juvenal, who was no friend to Messalina in his writing, mentions the striking beauty of her eyes in his *Satires*.<sup>154</sup> Ultimately, Messalina's image conformed to the long-standing idea of respectability and fertility for the empire, which is a pattern seen in the portrayal of empresses throughout the Julio-Claudian dynasty.<sup>155</sup>

Therefore, Livia is once again the woman by which we must compare Messalina. As the first official Empress of Rome, she would have set the standard for all the women who followed and certainly Messalina would have been keen to copy her imagery.<sup>156</sup> A famous sculpture of Livia depicts her similarly dressed as Messalina, wearing a *stola* that modestly covers her head and drapes across the rest of her body (fig. 10). The uniformity between the two images was by design as sculptures of Julio-Claudian empresses would

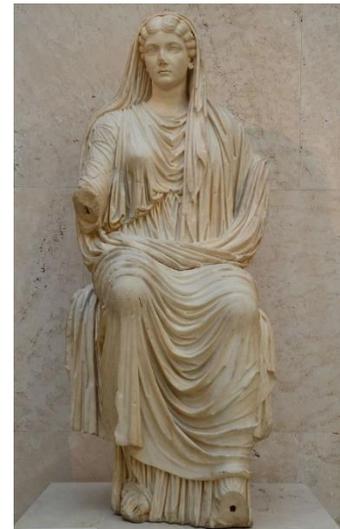


Fig. 10: Empress Livia Drusilla. 14-19 CE. Paestum, National Archaeological Museum of Spain, Madrid. Carole Raddato.

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<sup>153</sup> Wood, 1999, 1-2.

<sup>154</sup> Cargill-Martin, 2023, 84; Juvenal, *Satires*, 10. Notably, Juvenal is insulting her, but he makes the comment that her eyes are so beautiful that they are enough to bring the youth to destruction.

<sup>155</sup> Wood, 1999, 280.

<sup>156</sup> Messalina was nearly given the title of *Augusta*, much earlier than Livia, making her closest to Livia in accomplishments (Cassius Dio, *Roman History*, 60.12). Cargill-Martin states that Livia was a woman in her sixties before she was granted the title of *Augusta*, meanwhile Messalina was little more than twenty years old and just three weeks into her term as empress (150).

often be made uniform to show an essential commonality among elites in the empire.<sup>157</sup> Both also appear very simple in their appearance, highlighting the modest virtues first instilled by Augustus.<sup>158</sup> Small details like their hairstyles and the slight difference in their faces are really the only things that distinguish these two empresses from each other.

The surviving imagery of Messalina portrays a woman who was conventional in appearance without any hint of the woman who engaged in the debauchery the ancient writers accuse her of participating. Perhaps it can even be argued that her life was not very noteworthy due to the representation of her image following the conventional guidelines for women so closely. Instead, the understanding of her life is entirely marred by the circumstances of her death, relegating her to the memory that she was sexually insatiable and power hungry. In the next chapter, analysis of the ancient sources, particularly Tacitus' account of her death, will continue to analyze how the death of Messalina dramatically altered the perception of her life as the material evidence depicts an empress who adhered to the traditional norms and ideals.

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<sup>157</sup> Trimble, 2011, 325.

<sup>158</sup> Augustus once advised a group of Roman senators who were complaining of bad female behaviour to do as he did and firmly establish household rules that the women must obey. The senators were confused and demanded to know what rules he imposed upon Livia. Augustus supposedly responded with a few banal ideas surrounding how he restricted her dress, appearance and public demeanor (Wood, 1999, 11).

#### 4. The Destruction of Valeria Messalina.

The conventionality of Empress Messalina's life depicted in the previous chapter is in stark contrast to the way Tacitus and other authors describe her in her death.<sup>159</sup> No longer is she the traditional wife, veiled for modesty, and representing the fecundity of the empire. Instead, she is transformed into a sexual deviant who throws a Bacchic wedding to her lover in an attempt to overthrow the emperor. The change from modest wife to insatiable whore is in large part due to Tacitus, who provides us with the longest and most detailed version of Messalina's death.<sup>160</sup> Although other accounts exist, they do not cover her death to nearly the same extent.<sup>161</sup> Both Cassius Dio and Suetonius are the two longest sources that cover Messalina's death after Tacitus, but they do so in fewer chapters and with lesser detail of her behaviour leading up to her death.<sup>162</sup> By contrast, Tacitus' account spans thirteen chapters and seems to embody all the themes of the other versions, detailing the many affairs of Messalina along with her political cunning and sexual insatiability. And yet, even with his account of her death being the longest of the three writers, only one chapter discusses her actual death scene.<sup>163</sup>

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<sup>159</sup>Other accounts of her death include Suetonius (*The Lives of the Twelve Caesars: Claudius* 39), Cassius Dio (*Roman History* 61.31).

<sup>160</sup> Tacitus, *Annals*, 11. Throughout this chapter, the translation of J.C. Yardley will be used.

<sup>161</sup> Other authors like Juvenal (*Satires*, VI.114-135) and Pliny the Elder (*Natural Histories*, 10.83) discuss Messalina's behaviour and actions but do not write about her death.

<sup>162</sup> Dio similarly describes Messalina as an adulteress and a harlot, accusing her of enticing other elite women to act the same way. He also briefly discusses the alleged marriage to Silius and alludes to affairs with other men as well. Finally, he summarizes her death in one line, saying she was slain by Claudius in the gardens of Asiaticus (*Rom. His.*, 61.31). Suetonius' account draws on the same themes while further highlighting her political cunning. He asserts that Claudius was a servant to Messalina's whims, even signing the contract for her dowry for her marriage with Silius (*Claudius*, 29). Further, he depicts her as frequently conspiring with the freedman Narcissus to destroy the emperor (*Claud.*, 37). Finally, he describes her death in one line by simply stating that Claudius had put her to death (*Claud.*, 39).

<sup>163</sup> While the written evidence is overwhelmingly negative, the extant material evidence depicts Messalina positively. This is discussed in detail throughout Chapter Three.

At the beginning of his account, Tacitus acknowledges the unbelievability of such a dramatic death narrative, asserting:

I am well aware that it will seem incredible that, in a city that knows all and conceals nothing, any members of the human race could have been so reckless. Even more incredible that a consul-designate, on a prearranged date with signatories present, should have come together with an emperor's wife 'for the purpose of having legitimate children'! Incredible that she heard the words of the auspices, took vows, and sacrificed to the gods! That they took their places for dinner with guests, that there were kisses and embraces, and that they finally spent the night together freely as a married couple! But nothing in my account has been invented for sensationalism; it is what our elders heard and passed down in writing.<sup>164</sup>

Despite his insistence otherwise, Tacitus' account raises many questions about the believability of Messalina's death narrative. His inclusion of the elders passing down their knowledge along with his choice of language, such as the repeated use of the word "incredible" and other phrases like "could have been so reckless" and "nothing was invented for sensationalism" all work to suspend disbelief in his audience. As Joshel aptly points out: "By anticipating his readers' belief, Tacitus's aside solicits their faith in his own story and its representation of Messalina's desire."<sup>165</sup> Thus, this chapter aims to analyze Tacitus' account of Messalina's death and how he manipulates the themes discussed earlier in this thesis to show how her death narrative destroyed her reputation in the historical record, effectively condemning her to be remembered as the 'Whore Empress'.

### **The Beginning of the Affair**

The listing of Messalina's alleged extra-marital affairs is by far one of the longest sections in Tacitus' account of her death. In fact, the entire narrative leading up to her death

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<sup>164</sup> Tacitus, *Annals*, 11.26.

<sup>165</sup> Joshel, 1995, 57. Joshel also discusses how Tacitus himself uses the word '*fabulosus*' which translates to story-like or theatrical, meaning even he could not deny the sensationalism of his account.

discusses Messalina's affair with Gaius Silius followed by two more chapters detailing her affairs with other men. The desires of Messalina and her many lovers is a trope used to devastating effect when Messalina is barred from the palace and speaking with her husband which ultimately leads to her death at the end of Book Eleven.<sup>166</sup> The combined insult of Messalina's affair with the elite nobleman Silius along with having many other lovers ensures Messalina is seen as deserving of such a terrible death. The themes and structure of Messalina's death narrative function similarly to Lucretia's own death, which indirectly serves to transform Messalina into the antithesis of Lucretia, portraying her actions, speech, ideals, and ending as the opposite of all proper wifely virtues.

Thus, we must begin with the narrative leading up to Messalina's death, as we did with Lucretia's death in Chapter One. At the beginning of his account, Tacitus describes Messalina's affair with Silius as such:

For she had developed a passion for Gaius Silius, the best-looking of Rome's young men, and so much so that she chased Junia Silana, a woman of noble descent, from her marriage and then assumed possession of her now-unattached lover. Silius was not oblivious to the disgrace and risks involved; but refusal meant certain death, there was some chance of escaping notice, and at the same time the rewards were great. He therefore consoled himself with simply letting the future take its course and enjoying the present. As for Messalina, she made regular visits to the man's house, and not secretly, either, but with a large retinue; she hung on his arm when he came out of doors; and she lavished riches and honours on him.<sup>167</sup>

His choice to begin the account of Messalina's death with a summary of their affair is notable as it is an affair that is marked by "bizarre sexual practices" and the implicit plans of the two aiming

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<sup>166</sup> This is a trope commonly seen with women in positions of power such as many of the Hellenistic queens in which they too were described as sexually voracious. See Macurdy's book (1975) in which she spends the entirety of the book analyzing the depiction of powerful Hellenistic queens starting from Olympias and ending with Cleopatra.

<sup>167</sup> Tac., *Ann.*, 11.12.

to supplant Claudius' throne.<sup>168</sup> Already, the reader is given a sense of Messalina's lack of restraint, both in her pursuit of an already married man and with her inability to contain the extent of her affection for him. Furthermore, he characterizes Messalina as actively pursuing a sexual relationship with a married man when she herself is already married. Briefly, Messalina becomes the hunter and Silius the prey as she "chased Junia away" and "assumed possession of her now-unattached lover".<sup>169</sup> By comparison, Lucretia is depicted as being passive throughout Livy's account, even during her assault. While Messalina is out in public, actively pursuing a man she is interested in, Lucretia is at home attending the household when Tarquinius first discovers her.<sup>170</sup> Simply put, Lucretia doing what is expected of her preserves her chastity, even in the aftermath of her assault, whereas Messalina's disregard of wifely ideals sets her on the path of destruction.

As Tacitus takes issue with the public nature of the affair, he places the blame on Messalina, highlighting her lack of restraint through her regular visits and bestowing Silius with elaborate gifts. Expensive gifts such as slaves, freedmen, and chattel given so publicly sent its own message about her intentions, particularly as she gifted him such things from the emperor's coffers thereby implying the possibility of the empire being passed on to Silius.<sup>171</sup> This is again indirectly suggested by Tacitus when he describes Silius initial reluctance to have an affair with the empress so publicly given the considerable risks he faced. And yet, the rewards he could

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<sup>168</sup> Tac., *Ann.*, 11.26.

<sup>169</sup> Juvenal also likens Messalina to a hunting animal, claiming she took the name "She-Wolf" when she would hunt for sexual satisfaction in brothels late at night (*Satires* VI 114-135).

<sup>170</sup> Livy, *His. Of Rom.*, 1.57.

<sup>171</sup> Vessey, 1971, 393.

potentially receive were great.<sup>172</sup> Still, there is a level of Silius' reluctance that places the blame of the affair entirely on Messalina even if he was scheming to gain his own reward.

### **The Characterization of Gaius Silius**

Although Tacitus implies that Messalina is the active agent and Silius is the passive participant, he chooses to focus on their relationship and on Silius in detail because lying beneath their affair is the possibility that they are plotting. Tacitus thus provides many details because these feed into the sense that their relationship is not just about desire, but also about usurping the power of the emperor. For this reason, Tacitus focuses on Silius' political career and lineage, particularly as Silius was a powerful man in his own right.<sup>173</sup> He was a member of the Senate and had successfully enforced the *Lex Cincia*, a law which forbade the acceptance of money or gifts when pleading a case, before Claudius repealed the law at the request of others.<sup>174</sup> He had also been elected as a consul designate for 49 CE, but was executed in 48 CE before he could assume the position.<sup>175</sup> Notably, his father, also named Gaius Silius, had once been equally powerful and an accomplished military general. He had received an honorary triumph for his successes against the German barbarians and was elected consul in 13 CE.<sup>176</sup> However, the elder Silius also met an early fate in the form of suicide, perhaps even a forced suicide, after he and his wife were accused of extortion and treason under the emperor Tiberius.<sup>177</sup>

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<sup>172</sup> Tac., *Ann.*, 11.12. Tacitus contradicts himself later when he mentions how Silius wanted to end their private affair in favour of a wedding but Messalina was hesitant (11.26).

<sup>173</sup> Tac., *Ann.*, 11.12.

<sup>174</sup> Tac., *Ann.*, 11.5-7.

<sup>175</sup> Tac., *Ann.*, 11.5.

<sup>176</sup> Tac., *Ann.*, 1.72 / Dio, *Rom. His.*, 56.28.

<sup>177</sup> Tac., *Ann.*, 4.18-19. It is worth noting that Silius' wife was close friends with Agrippina the Elder, who became an enemy to Sejanus, the man who launched the attack on Silius which led to his suicide.

His father's history and untimely death might not have had an impact on Silius prior to his involvement with Messalina, but it certainly played a role in his portrayal by Tacitus afterwards. In fact, Silius is described as displaying the statue of his father in the vestibule of his home, which angers Claudius to the point of making threats.<sup>178</sup> The reason for this is that the public and private lives of the male elite had little distinction, which means that the veneration or the possession of particular images could be seen as a threat to political stability. Anyone who possessed the private images of men who had been declared enemies of the political order could be viewed as an 'unfit citizen' and deprived of their rights.<sup>179</sup> By displaying the statue of his disgraced father in his home, Silius was effectively associating himself with an acknowledged enemy to the empire. Further, Tacitus describes the presence of the Neronian and Drusian heirlooms that had accrued in Silius' household as payment for his debauchery.<sup>180</sup> This is notable as images drew their meaning not only from what or who they represented, but the surrounding imagery as well.<sup>181</sup> Having Silius' father on display next to imperial images that represent the Nero family and the Drusian family, both of Claudius' own bloodlines, suggests that guests to Silius' home were meant to think of his father and lineage in reference to the Imperial family and their shared history. As the son of a disgraced general participating in his own traitorous behaviour, that type of representation could not stand.

### **The Characterization of Messalina**

As for Messalina, her actions at the beginning of her affair with Silius is in stark contrast with Lucretia's behaviour. Rather than remaining sequestered in the home like Lucretia, she

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<sup>178</sup> Tac., *Ann.*, 11.35.

<sup>179</sup> Gregory, 1994, 91.

<sup>180</sup> Tac., *Ann.*, 11.35.

<sup>181</sup> Gregory, 1994, 85.

makes regular visits to Silius' home and often rewards him with lavish gifts and honours.<sup>182</sup> Even as an empress, she would not have been exempt from household management, even if her work only entailed supervising the staff, it was still important work that was tasked to the women of the household.<sup>183</sup> Also, she would have been responsible for maintaining family ties and child rearing, yet Tacitus does not connect her with her children, Octavia and Britannicus, except for when she is using the idea of them to save herself.<sup>184</sup> Messalina's disavowal of her wifely duties in favour of a public affair put her in direct contrast with all the ideals placed upon women since Lucretia. By contrast, Lucretia does not leave her home and instead attends to the household and does the weaving in her husband's absence, asserting that she is pursuing the goal of growing the household's wealth – both literally by weaving goods that might be sold and figuratively, fulfilling her wifely and maternal duties. Collatinus is confident in knowing what his wife is doing, no matter the time of day or night.<sup>185</sup>

### **The Characterization of Claudius**

As for Claudius, he is completely oblivious to Messalina's extra-marital affairs, suggesting he does not know what is going on even in his own household.<sup>186</sup> To further prove this point, Tacitus spends the next several chapters of Book Eleven highlighting all the things Claudius does for Rome as the emperor, while the affair of Messalina and Silius continues to

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<sup>182</sup> Tac., *Ann.*, 11.12.

<sup>183</sup> D'Ambra, 2007, 94.

<sup>184</sup> Tac., *Ann.*, 11.34. Dixon (1992) discusses the importance of family in the Roman context, suggesting that the family would have been considered to be the main basis of economic production and would secure the redistribution of wealth and property through marriage and between generations upon death. However, they were also considered to be a refuge from other problems in life. They go on to discuss how Augustus spoke about how Augustus was prepared to travel to other provinces to fulfill his duty, but he was much happier in the presence of his family (28-9).

<sup>185</sup> Livy, *Hist. of Rom.*, 1.57.

<sup>186</sup> Tac., *Ann.*, 11.13.

happen in the background.<sup>187</sup> He begins the next chapter with the line, “Claudius, oblivious to his matrimonial situation, was busy with his duties as censor”.<sup>188</sup> This is then followed by twelve chapters in which he describes said duties and how he helped the Roman people. For example, he passed edicts that chastised public misbehaviour after an ex-consul and some elite women were abused, he produced legislation to curb the severity of creditors, had fresh spring water diverted into the city, and was even declared ‘Father of the Senate’ for the many actions he took to rid the Senate of immorality.<sup>189</sup> And yet, these examples are merely a clever tool Tacitus uses to portray Claudius’ own shortcomings by contrasting his successes to his inability to maintain his own household. An emperor punishing others for the dignity and reputation of an ex-consul and some elite women whilst being completely ignorant to his own wife’s corruption was an irony Tacitus was eager to portray.<sup>190</sup> Furthermore, the time Tacitus spends on depicting this contrast highlights the uneven nature of their roles as *paterfamilias* and *materfamilias* of the Roman state. Lucretia and Collatinus are united in the management of their household whereas Messalina’s unwillingness to participate in her own duties sets a dangerous precedent for the head household of the Roman Empire. Messalina was meant to set an example for women, but by carrying on such a public affair, she was presenting the wrong image of the imperial household.

### **The Affair Continues**

By the time Tacitus returns to the affair, a year has passed, and Messalina has become bored with the affair. He writes:

The adulterous affair going too easily, Messalina became bored and began to drift into bizarre sexual practices. At this point Silius himself started to push for a swift end to their secrecy; either he was suffering from a fatal delusion, or he thought that the remedy for

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<sup>187</sup> Tac., *Ann.*, 11.13-25.

<sup>188</sup> Tac., *Ann.*, 11.13.

<sup>189</sup> Tac., *Ann.*, 11.15; 11.25.

<sup>190</sup> Vessey, 1971, 394.

the dangers hanging over them lay in acts that were themselves dangerous. They had not come so far just to wait for the emperor's old age, he told her.<sup>191</sup>

Messalina is once again shown as being insatiable and lacking restraint, highlighted by the fact that a year long affair with her lover was no longer enough to satisfy her. Instead, she was eager to seek out even greater sexual practices to satiate her desires. And yet, this is the first instance in which Tacitus implies the danger Messalina's lack of restraint poses to the empire. He preys on the fear of Messalina using Silius to usurp Claudius as emperor by marrying Silius. A public affair and gifts were scandalous enough, but by actively taking steps to marry one another, they were no longer suggesting potentially overthrowing the emperor but actively taking steps to do so.<sup>192</sup> Tacitus remarks on this by writing that they could not wait for old age to kill Claudius, but instead they had to marry to accomplish their ultimate goal.<sup>193</sup>

Tacitus presents Messalina as being aware of what was at stake in this affair. Yet, he also presents her as being self-interested, balancing out her desire for security with her desire for Silius. As such, she is not thrilled at the idea of going ahead with a wedding right away, but her hesitancy is not out of love for Claudius or out of respect for her current marriage, but rather out of fear of losing her own power once Silius took the power of princeps for himself.<sup>194</sup> Their affair has huge implications for the security of Rome. Yet, the move to marriage was different for each of them. Messalina wanted to be a wife for the sake of the scandal, Tacitus writes, "She passionately desired the title 'wife' because the notion was utterly scandalous – and that, for the

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<sup>191</sup> Tac., *Ann.*, 11.26.

<sup>192</sup> The emperor's household was frightened by these steps, fearing a change of regime and Claudius is later believed to fear this same thing too as he kept asking if he was still princeps and Silius a private citizen (Tac., *Ann.*, 11.28; 11.31).

<sup>193</sup> Tac., *Ann.*, 11.26.

<sup>194</sup> Tac., *Ann.*, 11.26.

profligate, is the ultimate pleasure.”<sup>195</sup> As for Silius, he was eager to access the power and control of Rome, which Tacitus describes as a “fatal delusion”.<sup>196</sup> Regardless of their reasons, both are traitors and their actions pose a threat to the empire.

### **The Alleged Wedding**

According to Tacitus, Messalina and Silius’ wedding upheld many of the necessary formalities, including a sacrifice. And certainly, the components he describes do fall into the category of a formal wedding: the advance announcement of a date, invitations for witnesses to attend, a formal ceremony, the bride listening to the auspices, the sacrifice to the gods, the bride lingering amongst the guests and kissing the groom before finally, the consummation of the match.<sup>197</sup> Yet, there are other elements that are noticeably absent such as the simulated abduction of the bride, the carrying of torches, the accompaniment of the bride by the children of living parents and the bride’s anointment of her new home with pig or wolf fat on the doorposts.<sup>198</sup> The inclusion of some features while excluding others casts doubt on whether this was truly a wedding and not a celebration to a god. And as Hersch rightfully points out, neither Tacitus, Juvenal nor Suetonius would have been eyewitnesses to the allegedly scandalous affair they claim was a wedding.<sup>199</sup> However, Tacitus’ careful description is meant to provoke feelings of both fascination and contempt over the sheer incredulity of such a lavish affair. Readers are not

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<sup>195</sup> Tac., *Ann.*, 11.26.

<sup>196</sup> Tac., *Ann.*, 11.26.

<sup>197</sup> Treggiari, 1991, 169.

<sup>198</sup> Hersch, 2014, 225. A dowry and the marriage bed were also missing from Tacitus’ account (Treggiari, 1991, 169).

<sup>199</sup> Hersch, 2014, 226. According to Tacitus, this does not really matter as he was given the description from his elders who heard of the wedding and passed it down to him in writing. And yet, he admits that even his sources did not view the wedding and are relying solely on the details they heard post the alleged wedding (11.27).

meant to be shocked by the lavishness of the wedding, but rather the ostensible normality of it all.<sup>200</sup> Ultimately, the adherence to a traditional wedding is the crux behind Tacitus' anger.

And by Roman law, he had a reason to be outraged.<sup>201</sup> A wedding while still married to another was considered bigamy and it was strictly prohibited in Roman law under similar legislation that was put in place by Augustus to criminalize acts such as *stuprum* (rape) and *adulterium* (adultery).<sup>202</sup> The term *aliena materfamilias* is found within the same legislation and it quite literally means “another man’s wife”, proving that there was a concern about second marriages threatening the sanctity of the institution of marriage.<sup>203</sup> However, it was only charged as bigamy if they knowingly married someone else while married to another man.<sup>204</sup> As this would have been the case for Messalina and Silius, who would have surely understood the laws surrounding bigamy, it makes their decision to have a wedding seem unbelievable. And yet, that is the genius of Tacitus' storytelling, because it once again highlights Messalina's lack of restraint as her perilous desire to be another man's wife is ultimately what leads to her death.

Tacitus gives his own explanation for Messalina's reasoning to marry Silius, despite the risks. He writes that it was too dangerous for the couple to continue with their secret affair rather than marry each other openly. Silius being unmarried, childless, and willing to adopt Britannicus made him the perfect husband for Messalina, who was eager to secure her son's future. Once married, Messalina could remain empress with all the power that such a position entailed but

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<sup>200</sup> Hersch, 2014, 224.

<sup>201</sup> This is arguably manufactured outrage which Tacitus uses to manipulate his audience into sharing his anger. Again, his use of the word “incredible” three times throughout his account of the wedding suggests the sheer incredulity of the entire affair.

<sup>202</sup> Treggiari, 1991, 278-9.

<sup>203</sup> Treggiari, 1991, 279.

<sup>204</sup> Treggiari, 1991, 279.

they would find safety in deposing Claudius who would not be prepared for such treachery.<sup>205</sup> This lends credence to the theory that Messalina, fearing the growing power of Agrippina the Younger and her son, looked to replace Claudius with someone amenable to keeping her son in a position of power.<sup>206</sup> However, what some scholars fail to consider is that this marriage would have risked Messalina and her son far more than any threat Agrippina could have posed. And it did, as Messalina was executed in 48 CE, while Britannicus died a few years later in 55 CE, likely poisoned by Agrippina.<sup>207</sup> The supposed plot against Claudius is in direct opposition to the political cunning Messalina has otherwise been attributed by many of the same scholars who proposed the theory that she was doing it to protect herself against Agrippina. As the empress, she would have had no need to buttress her position at court by risking everything in an open marriage for a man who could not provide her any more guarantee of safety, no matter his connections.<sup>208</sup>

The characterization of Messalina's lack of restraint continues in the description of the wedding. Despite the wedding having traditional components, Tacitus makes it clear that it is anything but traditional. He describes their wedding day as such:

Messalina's extravagant behaviour was wilder than ever. Autumn was well advanced, and she was staging a tableau of the grape-harvest throughout the house. Presses were in operation, vats were overflowing, and there were women dressed in animal skins leaping about like maenads sacrificing or driven into a frenzy. Messalina herself, her hair streaming, brandished a thyrsus, and beside her was an ivy-garlanded Silius, wearing boots and tossing his head, while all around them rose the din of a dissolute chorus.<sup>209</sup>

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<sup>205</sup> Tac., *Ann.*, 11.26.

<sup>206</sup> Levick, 1990, 65.

<sup>207</sup> Tac., *Ann.*, 13.16.

<sup>208</sup> Fagan, 2002, 574.

<sup>209</sup> Tac., *Ann.*, 11.31.

The imagery Tacitus is trying to invoke with his description is obvious. Wine, maenads, Messalina brandishing a thyrsus, and the utter lack of restraint and modesty all conjure the familiar figure of the god Bacchus and his maenad followers. Bacchus, otherwise known as Dionysus, is the god of wine-making, orchards and fruits, vegetation, fertility, festivity, insanity, ritual madness, religious ecstasy, and theatre.<sup>210</sup> Euripides' *Bacchae* gives us our best source on the maenads, describing them as women from Thebes who were first driven mad by Dionysus as punishment for lying about his conception and divine paternity.<sup>211</sup> These women are often identified by the thyrsi they carry, the animal skins they wear, and their hair is typically loose and crowned with ivy and other foliage.<sup>212</sup> Yet, it is their actions that truly identify them as something that falls outside of convention. Under the influence of Dionysus, these women would take to the mountains to partake in ritual frenzies that would culminate in the dismemberment of their victims and the consumption of their flesh.<sup>213</sup>

By depicting Messalina as holding the thyrsus amidst a chaotic party full of wine and revelry, Tacitus ensures her marriage to Silius is seen with similar connotations. Indeed, even having some of the guests be described as maenads leaves little to the imagination as to the kind of party Tacitus was trying to describe. However, there is little mention of Silius, even as he is described as participating in the chaos, as the majority of the criticism is directed at Messalina as she is the one being depicted akin to the maenads by her attire and behaviour. This comparison also indirectly comments on Messalina's abandonment of conventional social norms. Women

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<sup>210</sup> "Dionysus." In *A Dictionary of Reference and Allusion*: Oxford University Press, 2010. <https://www-oxfordreference-com.uwinnipeg.idm.oclc.org/view/10.1093/acref/9780199567454.001.0001/acref-9780199567454-e-572>.

<sup>211</sup> See the ancient Greek tragedy *the Bacchae* written by Euripides for a complete understanding of his portrayal of the maenads.

<sup>212</sup> Hedreen, 1994, 49.

<sup>213</sup> Topper, 2012, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781444338386.wbeah17480>.

possessed by Dionysus were believed to be compelled to abandon their domestic obligations of housework and child-rearing in favour of worshipping the god.<sup>214</sup> In Euripides' *Bacchae*, one of the first women who Dionysus turns into a maenad boasts about her abandonment of her feminine duties:

Now, Father, yours can be the proudest boast of living men. For you are now the father of the bravest daughters in the world. All your daughters are brave, but I above the rest. I have left my shuttle at the loom; I raised my sight to higher things – to hunting animals with my bare hands.<sup>215</sup>

As explored in Chapters One and Two, the loom signified a woman adhering to the proper feminine virtues. By abandoning it, she was both literally and symbolically turning her back on the behaviours expected of women. This is in stark contrast with Lucretia who is depicted as doing all the required behaviours of an ideal wife such as weaving, remaining indoors, maintaining the household, and most importantly, guarding her chastity. Messalina's depiction as a maenad saw to the complete disavowal of all those ideals and made her the exact opposite of Lucretia.

### **The End of the Affair**

After Claudius learns of Silius and Messalina's wedding, Tacitus describes Messalina as resorting to conventional norms and ideals. Her attempt to use the help of the Vestal Virgin Vibidia, the pinnacle of Roman chastity, implies that Messalina was hoping to remind Claudius of her adherence to these virtues.<sup>216</sup> The use of her children can also suggest a similar attempt to return to the feminine virtues along with fertility as she attempted to remind Claudius of the heirs

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<sup>214</sup> Kraemer, 1979, 67.

<sup>215</sup> Kraemer, 1979, 68; Euripides, *The Bacchae*, 1232-38.

<sup>216</sup> Tac., *Ann.*, 11.34.

she provided for him and the empire.<sup>217</sup> Although Messalina's attempts to get to Claudius fail, the involvement of Vibida does suggest Tacitus was not being entirely truthful in his account of Messalina's death.<sup>218</sup> He describes Vibida's entrance as being "highly indignant" which suggests she viewed the lack of a trial for Messalina's alleged crimes as unfair.<sup>219</sup> And yet, Narcissus' brushing off of Vibida suggests Tacitus' own attitude towards the involvement of a Vestal Virgin, ridding her from the narrative before she can truly make a case for Messalina's behaviour.

### **The Other Lovers**

Afterwards, Tacitus interrupts the story of Messalina and Silius with a list of Messalina's earlier affairs. This choice makes no sense in the temporal narrative and is completely unnecessary in the telling of Messalina's affair with Silius. Yet, it serves as an important tool for Tacitus to continue highlighting her lack of restraint and destroying her reputation. What follows is two chapters worth of names of various men, all of whom are accused of once having an affair with the empress. Tacitus lists several Roman knights as being executed for their involvement with the empress: Titius Proculus, Vettius Valens, Pompeius Urbicus, Saufeius Trogus. He also names Decrius Calpurnianus, Sulpicius Rufus, and Juncus Vergilianus as receiving the same penalty.<sup>220</sup> He does not stop there and also names the Roman knight Traulus Montanus as her lover as well as Suillius Caesoninus and Plautius Lateranus, though he states that they were

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<sup>217</sup> Tac., *Ann.*, 11.34.

<sup>218</sup> The involvement of a Vestal Virgin is notable given their relation to chastity and preservation of the state. A Vestal coming to Messalina's defense raises questions about whether Messalina was truly guilty of the alleged affairs she is accused of having. Considering the harsh punishments a Vestal faced for breaking her vows, including death, it seems unlikely one would come to Messalina's defence unless there was a valid reason to do so.

<sup>219</sup> Tac., *Ann.*, 11.34.

<sup>220</sup> Tac., *Ann.*, 11.35.

unwilling to participate in the affairs. Of the three, only Traulus Montanus was put to death for the affair while the other two escaped death but were punished in other ways.<sup>221</sup>

Then, he goes on to describe the affair with the actor Mnester, who was the other most well-known lover of Messalina, though he too was described as being unwilling to develop a relationship with the empress. This disinterest supposedly had no effect as she was so enamored with him that she had a statue made for him out of bronze. When Mnester did not immediately return her affection, she spoke with Claudius who then ordered Mnester to obey her, which resulted in their eventual affair.<sup>222</sup> Notably, Cassius Dio also highlights Claudius' ineptitude as a husband alongside Messalina's insatiable sexual transgressions as Claudius unknowingly orders another man to have an affair with his wife, thereby helping her to continue her behaviour. In the end, Mnester is described as being executed for his affair with Messalina, like the many other men listed previously. Although, the actor attempts to appeal to Claudius' mercy by reminding him of his order to obey Messalina, this has little affect on his outcome. The freedmen convince Claudius to execute the actor, claiming that the emperor should not concern himself with one actor when so many better men had already been executed.<sup>223</sup>

Like Silius, Mnester's status in society had an effect on how the affair was portrayed. The theatre in general was a complicated notion for Roman writers, who saw it as a space where obscenity, lust, and political subversion occurred, while actors were seen as ambiguous, lustful individuals whose words could not be trusted.<sup>224</sup> Mostly, this is a result of actors *infamia* status in Roman society, which restricted them from all civic privileges and holding office.<sup>225</sup> Their

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<sup>221</sup> Tacitus, *Ann.*, 11.36.

<sup>222</sup> Dio, *Rom. Hist.*, 60.21.

<sup>223</sup> Tac., *Ann.*, 11.36.

<sup>224</sup> Edwards, 2009, 99.

<sup>225</sup> Greenidge, 1977, 68.

combined lack of status along with the reputation for sexual deviancy made the actor Mnester a particularly outrageous choice for Messalina's lover. As actors did not have ancestry to draw upon, thus leaving them with no power base or status, an actor's power was directly related to the power they would be given if an emperor (or in this case empress) deemed them a personal favourite.<sup>226</sup> Once again, Tacitus is implying that Messalina is taking the status of someone undeserving and attempting to raise them to a position they do not belong, effectively breaking the status quo of Roman society.

In total, Tacitus lists twelve men, including Silius and Mnester, as being the lovers of Messalina. By highlighting the number of affairs, it shows just how little restraint Messalina has when it comes to her own sexual urges. Whether it is a knight, a senator, or an actor, Messalina is unable to control her desires and goes completely against the wifely virtues she is expected to uphold. This is a theme that other authors capitalize on as well. Juvenal, Cassius Dio, Suetonius, and even Pliny the Elder all write about Messalina similarly to Tacitus, further condemning her memory as an uncontrollable sexual deviant and further proving the power of Messalina's death narrative.

### **Messalina: The Anti-Thesis of Lucretia**

However, part of what makes Tacitus' portrayal of Messalina so impactful is how her death mirrors the death narrative of Lucretia. All of the values such as chastity, modesty, fertility, and restraint that Livy first instills in Lucretia are inverted in Tacitus' depiction of Messalina and used to condemn her further.<sup>227</sup> The complete removal of the feminine ideals from Messalina's characterization ensures that her death is seen as one that she deserves and that the woman

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<sup>226</sup> Edwards, 2009, 131.

<sup>227</sup> For a full analysis of Lucretia's death, see Chapter One, pages 10-17.

depicted in the extant material evidence cannot be remembered without the associated shame of her death. Instead, all that survives is the image created by various writers and amplified by Tacitus.

The actions leading to both women's deaths are the first major difference. On Lucretia, Livy asserts, "The riders went on to Collatia, where they found Lucretia very differently employed: it was already late at night, but there, in the hall of her house, surrounded by her busy maid-servants, she was still hard at work by lamplight upon her spinning."<sup>228</sup> Whereas Messalina is described as, "Messalina's extravagant behaviour was wilder than ever... Messalina herself, her hair streaming, brandished a thyrsus, and beside her was an ivy-garlanded Silius, wearing high boots and tossing his head, while all around them rose the din of a dissolute chorus."<sup>229</sup> Lucretia's devotion to her husband and his household is so great, that she stays inside and is awake late into the night attending to her wifely duties whereas Messalina is outside of the home participating in a Bacchic celebration with another man. The ideal Tacitus is drawing upon is obvious. By being outside of the home, Messalina was not abiding by the strict feminine ideals and is instead jeopardizing her chastity and modesty. Her characterization is more in line with the other wives in Livy's story as she is outside of the home participating in wine and revelry.<sup>230</sup> However, by remaining at home, Lucretia is instantly dubbed the winner of the contest that seeks to declare the most virtuous wife.<sup>231</sup> If Lucretia was meant to embody the Augustan ideals of the proper *matrona*, then Messalina's improper behaviour further highlights her complete disavowal of societal expectations.<sup>232</sup>

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<sup>228</sup> Liv., *His. Of Rom.*, 1.57.

<sup>229</sup> Tac., *Ann.*, 11.31.

<sup>230</sup> Livy, *His. Of Rom.*, 1.57.

<sup>231</sup> Livy, *His. Of Rom.*, 1.57.

<sup>232</sup> Waters, 2013, 14.

Next, Livy's account demonstrates the ways in which a woman should guard her chastity when faced with outside temptations. When Tarquinius attacks Lucretia, she does not give into him no matter how many threats or entreaties he uses. Livy writes, "Sextus urged his love, begged her to submit, pleaded, threatened, used every weapon that might conquer a woman's heart. But all in vain; not even the fear of death could bend her will."<sup>233</sup> Although this assault does eventually lead to Lucretia's death, she does not give into the growing pressure from Tarquinius to sacrifice her chastity. Instead, she only yields once he threatens the very thing she is trying desperately to protect – her chastity.<sup>234</sup> As for Messalina, Tacitus' entire account of her death works to highlight her inability to safeguard her chastity by highlighting her many extra-marital affairs. However, the specific attention he pays to how Messalina initially pursued Silius is arguably the most damning to her characterization. Now she is no longer trying to maintain her chastity but is actively taking steps to disavow those ideals in her pursuit of a man with whom her infatuation "bordered on insanity".<sup>235</sup> Unlike Lucretia, her chastity is not threatened by an outside force but rather she is the one pursuing the threat. The way in which she does it so desperately also works to highlight her contrast with Lucretia who was equally desperate to avoid the loss of her chastity and who ultimately sacrificed herself and her chastity to help the Roman people.<sup>236</sup>

After the assault, Lucretia is resolute in the moments leading up to her death. She does not want her assault to become an excuse for other women and says, "As for me, I am innocent of fault, but I will take my punishment. Never shall Lucretia provide a precedent for unchaste

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<sup>233</sup> Livy, *His. Of Rom.*, 1.58.

<sup>234</sup> Livy, *His. Of Rom.*, 1.58.

<sup>235</sup> Tac., *Ann.*, 11.12.

<sup>236</sup> See Chapter One, pages 16-17 for a greater discussion on this topic.

women to escape what they deserve.”<sup>237</sup> In Tacitus’ account, Messalina is shown as wavering on her decision to take her own life, despite the urging of her mother to commit suicide to reclaim some honour:

...[Messalina’s mother] was now urging her to not to wait for the executioner. Her life was over, she told her, and all that remained was to seek death with honour. But the woman’s mind, corrupted by debauchery, had no spark of decency left in it. There were tears and lamentations, uselessly prolonged...<sup>238</sup>

She does not have the mental fortitude like Lucretia to be courageous in her final moments and so she is unable to do the honourable thing – which is killing herself. Tacitus’ word choice here is significant because not only is he disgusted with Messalina’s inability to kill herself, but he also finds her lack of restraint over her own emotions to be something worth mocking. Further, he is directing his audience to respond similarly with words like “corrupted by debauchery” and “uselessly prolonged”. In failing to safeguard her chastity, Messalina is the opposite of Lucretia in that she is unable to kill herself to regain some of the decency with which she has lost.

Another notable feature in both their deaths is the participation of men. During Lucretia’s death, the men listen to her speak and comfort her. Most importantly, they make a promise to avenge her assault. Livy writes, “The promise was given. One after another they tried to comfort her. They told her she was helpless, and therefore innocent; that he alone was guilty. It was the mind, they said, that sinned, not the body: without intention there could never be guilt.”<sup>239</sup> In comparison to Messalina, Tacitus frequently uses intention to assert her guilt which is then emphasized by her being alone once Claudius discovers what she has been doing. “Meanwhile, with only three companions – so alone did she suddenly find herself – she walked the whole

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<sup>237</sup> Livy, *His. Of Rom.*, 1.58.

<sup>238</sup> Tac., *Ann.*, 11.37.

<sup>239</sup> Livy, *His. Of Rom.*, 1.57.

length of the city and then set out on the road for Ostia on a cart employed for garden refuse. There was no pity from anyone; her atrocious crimes outweighed everything.”<sup>240</sup> Again, Tacitus’ use of language controls the reader’s reaction to the text. First, he paints the image of her walking throughout the town and even has her ride a cart full of waste to show how far she has fallen. Then, he specifically states that she receives no pity due to her egregious crimes outweighing even the possibility of redemption. She has fallen so far from the established ideals that no man, not even her husband, is willing to support her any longer nor do they take the time to listen to her, the Vestal Virgin Vibidia, or her children.<sup>241</sup>

### **The Death of Messalina**

In the end, Messalina’s death happens very quickly. Throughout her death narrative that spans thirteen chapters, only a few short lines at the end discuss the moment of her death: “That was when Messalina first understood her situation. She took a blade and, as she fumbled with it, vainly trying to put it to her throat or breast, she was run through by a sword-thrust from the tribune.”<sup>242</sup> Similarly, Lucretia’s death is described in one line: “With these words she drew a knife from under her robe, drove it into her heart, and fell forward”.<sup>243</sup> The difference in their deaths is that Lucretia gets several lines beforehand to speak for herself and explain how her

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<sup>240</sup> Tac., *Ann.*, 11.32.

<sup>241</sup> Claudius did tell Narcissus to inform Messalina that he would listen to her the following day. However, Narcissus, fearing Claudius would forgive Messalina, ordered the execution of the empress without the emperor knowing (11.37). When Claudius later learns of Messalina’s death, he is described as having no reaction whatsoever, even for his children who are visibly mourning the loss of their mother (11.38). Narcissus essentially murdered the empress behind the emperor’s back but Tacitus chooses not to comment on that and instead frames it as Narcissus doing what needed to be done.

<sup>242</sup> Tac., *Ann.*, 11.38. The short length of Messalina’s death is not new. Edwards explains that in Tacitus’ *Annals*, imperial women were rarely given the opportunity to kill themselves. Rather, he preferred to explain their deaths in brief sentences and leave the question as to who is really responsible ambiguous. For example, both Julia the Elder and Agrippina the Elder are given a few lines each explaining their deaths as starvation (Edwards, 2007, 196; Tac., *Ann.*, 1.53; 6.25). In Messalina’s case Tacitus does explain who kills her, yet the ambiguity is in whether the account is reliable.

<sup>243</sup> Livy, *His. Of Rom.*, 1.58.

death is her own choice. Afterwards, she controls her death by taking the dagger and stabbing it into her own heart.<sup>244</sup> By contrast, Messalina does not speak throughout her entire death narrative and is instead described as shrieking or crying at various moments, further highlighting her lack of restraint.<sup>245</sup> Even her mother is not given a specific speech even as she encourages her daughter to kill herself before the executioner in the hopes of saving some honour.<sup>246</sup> Messalina does not have the courage to kill herself and instead her death is handled by the tribune.<sup>247</sup> Ultimately, Tacitus makes it clear that she does not receive any honour or pity with her death because it was her inability to protect her chastity that led her to her destruction.

Their shared use of a dagger in their deaths is important as both are used in vastly different ways. While Lucretia is able to kill herself, Messalina fails to do so and is then killed with a sword-thrust by the tribune.<sup>248</sup> Still, the intention to use a dagger in Messalina's case was there. Edwards argues that the penetration of Messalina's body is a symbolic rape by a victim who is far removed from the supremely innocent Lucretia.<sup>249</sup> This might suggest that the use of the dagger is exclusive to women like Lucretia who are brave enough to safeguard their virtues, whereas Messalina symbolically proving that she was unable to do the same only highlights her utter lack of adherence to such virtues. Further, Lucretia's use of a dagger acts as a sacrifice as it is her blood that Brutus uses to justify the violence to come.<sup>250</sup> However, Messalina is unable to kill herself with the dagger and is instead run through with a sword by a member of the

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<sup>244</sup> Livy, *His. Of Rom.*, 1.58.

<sup>245</sup> Tac., *Ann.*, 11.34; Mary Beard explains that women in classical texts would only get to speak if they were being used as a martyr or a victim, particularly before their death (2017 13; 16). As Messalina is not being used for either purpose, she is not given her own dialogue.

<sup>246</sup> Tac., *Ann.*, 11.37.

<sup>247</sup> Tac., *Ann.*, 11.38.

<sup>248</sup> Liv., *His. Of Rom.*, 1.58; Tac., *Ann.*, 11.38.

<sup>249</sup> Edwards, 2007, 198.

<sup>250</sup> Livy, *His. Of Rom.*, 1.58.

tribune.<sup>251</sup> This is a clever subversion of expectations because it denies Messalina the status of being a sacrifice while also denying her the same respect that Lucretia's death commands. Instead, she is portrayed as a coward who cannot sacrifice her life to benefit the Imperial household, even though it was her misbehaviour that damaged its reputation.

Another important aspect is the location of her death. Lucretia's death taking place in her bedroom, an arguably female dominated space, further emphasizes her devotion to her virtue. However, Messalina's death takes place outside of the home and notably, she never returns to the domestic space again. Instead, Narcissus bars her from entering the home and he uses her affair with Silius as the reason for sending her away.<sup>252</sup> Messalina then flees to the Gardens of Lucullus where she is later killed. The irony of this location is that Tacitus began Book Eleven with the description of how Messalina acquired the gardens from the nobleman Asiaticus through scheming and deception, which resulted in Asiaticus' death.<sup>253</sup> Because the narrative presence of gardens is often associated with feminized pleasure and self-gratification, Messalina's location at her death provides Book Eleven with a symmetry that shows her indulging in all of her desires to then being killed in the very gardens she killed for under similar accusations.<sup>254</sup> Again, this is different from Lucretia who remains in her home throughout the entire narrative, associating her

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<sup>251</sup> Tac., *Ann.*, 11.38.

<sup>252</sup> Tac., *Ann.*, 11.34.

<sup>253</sup> Tac., *Ann.*, 11.1-3. Further to this, Tacitus claims that Messalina saw her acquisition of the gardens as an added benefit to her disposal of her rival Poppea, who was believed to be Asiaticus' lover. She had Asiaticus accused of sexual misconduct, bribery, homosexuality, and adultery with Poppea. The irony of Book Eleven beginning with Messalina seeing that another is accused of similar crimes to what she herself is later accused of is one that Tacitus was surely eager to capitalize on. He later goes on to describe Asiaticus' noble death where he refused to accept the "easy" death of starvation (11.3). Again, this is in contrast with Messalina's death at the end of Book Eleven in which she is unable to kill herself and must be killed by a member of the tribune (11.38).

<sup>254</sup> Stackelberg, 2009, 596.

with the ideals of virtue and domesticity as much as Messalina's location associates her with her lack of restraint and sexual misconduct.

Finally, the legacy of their deaths is also handled very differently. Lucretia's death sparks a movement in which the men depose the final Roman kings and establish the Roman Republic.

The men quite literally use her bloodied dagger to incite necessary action:

While they stood weeping helplessly, Brutus drew the bloody knife from Lucretia's body, and holding it before him cried: 'By this girl's blood – none more chaste till a tyrant wronged her – and by the gods, I swear that with sword and fire, what ever else can lend strength to my arm, I will pursue Lucius Tarquinius the Proud, his wicked wife, and all his children, and never again will I let them or any other man be King in Rome.'<sup>255</sup>

Thus, not only did her suicide effectively safeguard her reputation as a chaste woman who adhered to proper feminine virtues, but her death also serves as the catalyst to usher in a new and better era of Roman history. This is very different from Messalina's ending, whose name disappears from the historical record after her death.<sup>256</sup> Even in his own account, Tacitus stops referring to Messalina by her name after announcing her death, he writes, "The Senate helped him [Claudius] to erase her memory, decreeing that her name and statues be removed from private and public locations".<sup>257</sup> Her death does not begin any revolutions nor does it serve a broader purpose seeing as the *damnatio memoriae* sought to erase her memory entirely.<sup>258</sup>

Empress Valeria Messalina disappears as though she never existed at all.

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<sup>255</sup> Livy, *His. Of Rom.*, 1.58.

<sup>256</sup> While Lucretia is not given a proper epitaph or burial customs, her memory lives on positively almost as though she did not need an epitaph to highlight her good deeds because the flourishing of Rome acts as the safeguard of Lucretia's memory.

<sup>257</sup> Tac., *Ann.*, 11.38.

<sup>258</sup> As previously mentioned on page 35, torn down statues did often serve as a warning that an individual's actions were no longer meant to be emulated. Yet, as discussed on page 5, the lack of a public burial for Messalina implies her actions were so reprehensible her memory was not meant to even serve as a warning to others.

Tacitus' account of Messalina's death spends more time highlighting her sexual promiscuity and disavowal of conventional norms for women than her actual death. And yet, by depicting her death in this way, he has effectively destroyed any reputation of a conventional empress from the historical record. The truth is we will likely never know the true Empress Messalina, but she will not be allowed to fade into obscurity as one of the last empresses of the Julio-Claudian dynasty, and that is because of Tacitus' portrayal. Her life and death will forever be marred by the account of her extra-marital affairs and her inability to kill herself when faced with the consequences of her actions.

## Conclusion

For the Romans, the purpose of the *damnatio memoriae* was to condemn an individual to oblivion, erasing their memory by eradicating their images and inscriptions. This response would be an institutional decree against a Roman who was declared an enemy of the state and signal the conscious forgetting of a person as though they had never existed.<sup>259</sup> On memory, Plato writes: “... Whatever is imprinted we remember and know as long as its image lasts, but whatever is rubbed out or cannot be imprinted we forget and do not know.”<sup>260</sup> Evidently, memory was a serious subject to the Romans and certainly memory after death was vastly important for the elite and powerful individuals who sought to be remembered as part of Rome’s recorded history.<sup>261</sup> And yet, it seems as though the effort put into actively forgetting an individual, removing them from the public view and destroying any semblance of their likeness, had the opposite effect of what was intended. Now, the names of individuals who suffered the *damnatio memoriae* (Livilla, Messalina, Domitian, Geta, as well as many others) are remembered as though they did not suffer their erasure from history at all. Humans are curious by nature and for them to learn about individuals who were banished from Roman thought, it makes them want to learn more, to dig into what caused such a fate and try to understand the real person behind the *damnatio memoriae*. However, in the case of someone like Messalina, their true identity might be lost behind the circumstances of their fate, condemning them to a reputation that might not be true at all.

When it comes to the *damnatio memoriae* suffered by women, it is much more difficult to disentangle the historical record surrounding their lives and deaths than it is to do for men. This

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<sup>259</sup> Hackworth Petersen, 2011, 1.

<sup>260</sup> Plato, *Theaetetus*, 191E; Hackworth Petersen, 2011, 1.

<sup>261</sup> Hackworth Petersen, 2011, 1.

is because of the imposed silence and deliberate misrepresentations of women who were allegedly complicit in failed plots.<sup>262</sup> Returning briefly to the origins of Rome, Tarpeia was the daughter of a Roman commander who was killed by the Sabine soldiers when she let them into the city of Rome under the promise of jewelry. They crushed her to death with their shields, which Livy writes was because she was not just a traitor, but a greedy traitor who demanded the shields of the soldiers as payment.<sup>263</sup> The story of Tarpeia proves just how harsh treatment was for women who not only did not adhere to the strict virtues put before them but who actively betrayed Rome in the process. Participating in acts of sexual misconduct was often another way in which women who were involved in political transgressions were portrayed by the Roman authors.<sup>264</sup> However, as Wood points out, adultery and conspiracy can be closely linked but should never be mutually exclusive. The institution was designed to inspire women to use sexual relationships to pursue their own ambitions, whether to inspire bonds of affection or gain a weapon of blackmail.<sup>265</sup>

Messalina was not the first woman to suffer accusations of sexual misconduct after her death and certainly not the only Julio-Claudian to face such accusations either. Julia the Elder, Augustus' daughter, was similarly accused of prostituting herself, though she did not suffer through the *damnatio memoriae*.<sup>266</sup> As Wood argues, scholars are justified in the skepticism of ancient accounts regarding women like Julia, but they should not go to the opposite extreme and believe all conspiracies either.<sup>267</sup> The same can be argued for Messalina, who does not have enough surviving evidence about her life to justify her relegation as a sexual deviant, particularly

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<sup>262</sup> Varner, 2001, 42.

<sup>263</sup> Livy, *Hist. of Rom.*, 1.11.

<sup>264</sup> Varner, 2001, 42.

<sup>265</sup> Wood, 1999, 38-39; Varner, 2001, 42.

<sup>266</sup> Seneca, *De Beneficiis*, 6.32.1.

<sup>267</sup> Wood, 1999, 39.

as we see a pattern of powerful women in the Julio-Claudian line being accused of sexual impropriety when they were deemed to step beyond the feminine space.<sup>268</sup> One should exercise caution when engaging with the memory of Messalina as ancient authors like Tacitus and Juvenal have condemned her memory to go beyond being forgotten. Instead, she is remembered as a crazed nymphomaniac who tried to overthrow her husband with an ostentatious wedding to another man.

A surviving sculpture of Messalina gives an idea as to how the Romans treated her imagery after the *damnatio memoriae*. Figure 11 represents the head of Messalina wearing the turret-crown of Cybele and a laurel wreath. It is currently on display at the Dresden Albertinum and is commonly referred to as the Dresden, which is how I will refer to it from here on as well. Like other extant images of Messalina explored earlier in this thesis, we are able to determine its subject by its hairstyle. The coiffure is extremely similar to what has been previously associated with Messalina with only a small difference at the back of the head, which was likely only done to accommodate the head piece.<sup>269</sup>



Figure 11: Messalina. 41-48 CE. Marble. Dresden Albertinum, inv. 358.

However, the unique damage that was done to the sculpture is another method to determine the likeness of who it is meant to represent. Wood argues that the Dresden woman was

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<sup>268</sup> Among women like Julia the Elder and Valeria Messalina, Livilla is accused of being seduced by Sejanus to conspire against her husband, Drusus (Tac., *Ann.*, 4.3) and Agrippina the Younger was also accused of sexual misconduct (Tac., *Ann.*, 13.13).

<sup>269</sup> Wood, 1992, 223.

well loved when the sculpture was made, which is emphasized by her deification as Cybele.<sup>270</sup> However, the splitting of the face in four sections suggests it was hit by a blow to the back of the head.<sup>271</sup> This most probably occurred at the end of the woman's life and signals a falling from grace because any person who was deified during life who then later became an embarrassment was allowed to keep their statues intact.<sup>272</sup> A public fall from grace, like the *damnatio memoriae*, would certainly mean the destruction of all likeness of the individual.

Unfortunately, the representation of Messalina has not improved with time. An image dated to the 1400's shows Messalina burning in hell alongside Tiberius and Caligula as they discuss the severity of their sins (fig. 12). While she does appear alongside two other members of the Julio-Claudian line, it is interesting how she is the only woman, particularly as other women of the same dynasty did not die with their reputations completely intact. The inclusion of Messalina in this image suggests that out of all the Julio-Claudian women who were deemed as being sinful by the artist, Messalina's sins were considerably worse. While she is not overtly sexualized in this image, it is clear by her mere presence, given what she is known for, that she is being condemned for her sexual transgressions.



Figure 12: Tiberius, Messalina, and Caligula Reproach One Another in the Midst of Flames. Folio. 1413-1415. Artist unknown, lido.getty.edu-gm-obj112365. Google Cultural Institute. Image modified.

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<sup>270</sup> Wood, 1992, 226.

<sup>271</sup> Wood, 1992, 219.

<sup>272</sup> Wood, 1992, 226.

Other artists do highlight the sexuality of Messalina and choose specifically to depict her in brothels and sexual encounters. Figure 13 depicts Messalina participating in an orgy with guests surrounding her in various states of undressed. Although the participants in this painting seem willing, the artist could have been pulling on the writings of Cassius Dio in



Figure 13: The Orgies of Messalina. 1867-1868. Frederico Faruffini.

which he accuses Messalina of not being satisfied with her own adultery and compelling the wives of high-ranking Roman officials to behave similarly.<sup>273</sup> Meanwhile, other artists employ the image of her Bacchic wedding to Silius that was described by Tacitus.<sup>274</sup> In one image, there is nudity, drinking, and celebrating in excess with a particular focus on the women participating in such behaviour (fig. 14). Here, Messalina's sexual promiscuity, along with all the women who join her, is put on full display. Instead of safeguarding the image of a conventional wife, Messalina is seen to disregard those virtues entirely whilst also compelling other women to do the same.

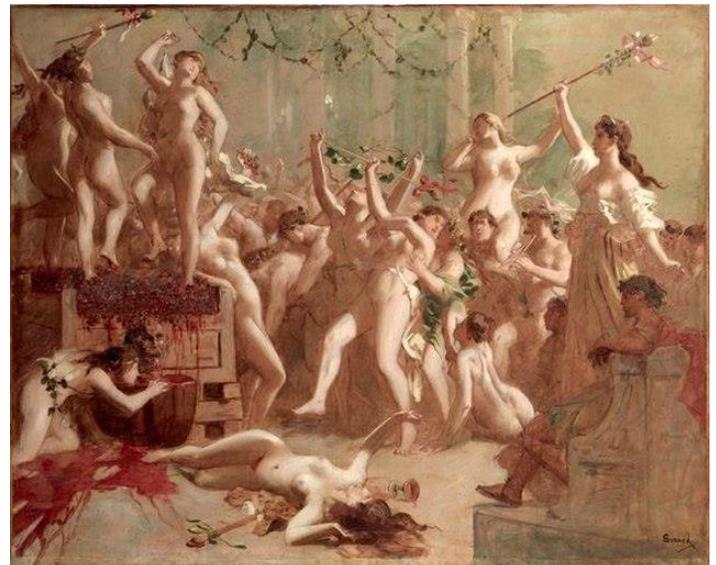


Figure 14: Harvest feast given by Messalina in the palace of Claudius in honor of her lover Silius. 1860-1937. Oil on canvas. Gustave Surand.

<sup>273</sup> Dio, *Rom. Hist.*, 61.31.

<sup>274</sup> Tac., *Ann.*, 11.27.



Figure 15: Messalina. Marble. 1884. Eugène Cyrille Brunet. Museum of Fine Arts of Rennes. D.2007.3.1.

Messalina’s overly sexualized reputation continues to follow her through various art forms. A sculpture from the late 1800’s depicts her nude and lounging on a bed (fig. 15). And in a movie poster, she is seen as wearing a revealing outfit that is not at all similar to the conventional attire she was depicted as wearing in the extant material evidence (fig. 16). An excerpt from the

Wikipedia page about the movie illustrates just how much the movie plays on her overtly sexual reputation: “Valeria Messalina, the wife of the Roman Emperor Claudius, is known for her wantonness. When she is attacked by the crowd, the philosopher Manus saves her. Messalina falls in love with him, but he loves Thysla. Messalina insists that he become her lover. As he refuses, he is taken by force to the palace.”<sup>275</sup> Even more recent movies capitalize on Messalina’s reputation, with the erotic art film *Nymphomaniac* (2013) casting actress Tabea Tarbiat to play the fallen empress. Like all the images previously discussed, the movie plays on the themes of Messalina’s reputation as a sexually insatiable deviant along with many other characters.<sup>276</sup>



Figure 16: Poster of the film *Messaline* (1910). Directed by Zecca and Andréani.

<sup>275</sup> Wikipedia contributors, "Messaline (film, 1910)," *Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia*, [https://fr.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Messaline\\_\(film,\\_1910\)&oldid=186909340](https://fr.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Messaline_(film,_1910)&oldid=186909340) (Page consulted on October 5, 2021).

<sup>276</sup> For more examples of Messalina’s representation in later artwork see Honor Cargill-Martin’s book *Messalina: Empress, Adulteress, Libertine – The Story of the Most Notorious Woman of the Roman World* (2023).

Now, a simple Google search of Messalina's name will bring up titles such as: "This Empress Was the Most Dangerous Woman in Rome", "The Sexually Insatiable Messalina", "The Making of a Bad Woman (2000 Years Ago)", "The Empress Messalina: Whore or Victim?".<sup>277</sup> While not every article seeks to condemn her to the same narrative, many do not look past the male writings and instead similarly denounce her as a sexually frustrated nymphomaniac. Perhaps where the *damnatio memoriae* ritual failed in removing her entirely from the historical record, it did succeed in destroying any memory of a conventional woman. With so little information about her life having survived, we are left with the biased male writings, many of whom were writing after she had died. And yet, it is their words that have followed Messalina's reputation.

However, even within their writing, we get a semblance of how well-loved and respected Messalina truly was during her life. She came from a powerful bloodline of old Roman aristocracy and the new imperial family, which gave Claudius a much needed connection with Augustus and the older Roman aristocracy.<sup>278</sup> Cassius Dio states that the Senate voted to grant Messalina the title of *Augusta* for the birth of her son, Britannicus.<sup>279</sup> Juvenal mentioned her beauty, even with his contempt for her and other women like her.<sup>280</sup> And the extant sculptures show a woman who was beloved enough to have her imagery associated with not only Livia, but

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<sup>277</sup> This search was done on March 16, 2024 by typing in the words "Empress Messalina" and the titles were taken from these articles: <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/history-magazine/article/messalina-sex-politics-power-ancient-rome-empress>, <https://medium.com/lessons-from-history/the-sexually-insatiable-messalina-3077bbf41cd7>, <https://lithub.com/the-making-of-a-bad-woman-2000-years-ago/>, <https://historyandarchaeologyonline.com/the-empress-messalina-whore-or-victim/>. All articles had publication dates from the last few years, with the oldest being published in 2022. Evidently, Messalina's close association with sexual misconduct is still alive and well, even as we try to untangle the real woman from the slander she endured by Tacitus and other male authors.

<sup>278</sup> Cargill-Martin, 2023, 42.

<sup>279</sup> Dio., *Rom. Hist.*, 60.12.

<sup>280</sup> Juv., *Sat.*, 6.

important deities like Cybele and Ceres as well. Like anyone, Messalina was a multi-faceted individual who was likely gaining power very quickly for a woman of her age, which was bound to make her critics nervous. Could it be possible that her rapid growth in power made her male contemporaries, such as the freedman Narcissus, anxious and thus resulted in his betrayal and condemnation of her memory? Possibly. After all, Cassius Dio attributes the majority of Messalina's downfall to her betrayal of the freedman Polybius, which turned the freedmen against her and resulted in her death.<sup>281</sup> Unfortunately, we are likely never to learn what truly happened to Messalina, if her betrayal of the freedmen is to blame for her downfall or if she did truly partake in extra-marital affairs that resulted in her death.

However, as this thesis has proven, it is not so easy as to simply scratch out a name or face and forget the individual ever existed. The story of Valeria Messalina has proven that. Even with the attempts made to erase her from history, images of her still survive in coinage and accounts of her life and death are still discussed in the historical record. She persists even as her name and memory are altered, leaving curious minds to investigate further into the true life and death of Empress Valeria Messalina.

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<sup>281</sup> Dio, *Rom. His.*, 60.31.

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