Title
Imperial Women and Succession in the Historia Augusta

Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/977221b8

Author
Tyra, Rachel

Publication Date
2018

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
RIVERSIDE

Imperial Women and Succession
in the *Historia Augusta*

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

in

History

by

Rachel Tyra

March 2018

Thesis Committee:
      Dr. Michele R. Salzman, Chairperson
      Dr. Denver Graninger
      Dr. Fariba Zarinebaf

The Thesis of Rachel Tyra is approved:

_____

_____

_____

Committee Chairperson

University of California, Riverside

Contents

1.1. Argument:

The *Historia Augusta* (hereafter the HA) is a compilation of Latin imperial biographies ranging from the reign of Hadrian to the reigns of the emperors Carinus and Numerian at the end of the third century. Based on the claims made in the HA, six authors, during the reigns of Diocletian and Constantine, contributed to the compilation of the *vitae*. But, most scholars agree that it was written sometime after the reign of the Emperor Constantine, although there is no consensus as to when during the fourth century it was written. Nor is there any agreement on the number of authors who actually wrote and contributed to the text.[1] As such, the HA is a problematic source to interpret and analyze.

Despite the uncertainties surrounding the production of the content in the HA, I contend it is important to analyze the HA as a cohesive literary work in order to understand both its literary and historic contributions. My thesis will focus on the thematic juxtaposition of imperial women within a range of the emperors profiled in the HA. I will show how imperial women serve as a literary device that creates thematic cohesion throughout the HA. In particular, I will focus on three women – Plotina, Faustina the Younger, and Julia Domna – who dominate the first group of lives in the HA. Each of these women function in the HA to validate the rule of an emperor particularly at the moment of his succession. Thus, I will argue that the HA is concerned especially with how authority and power are transferred and maintained in the person of

---

[1] I will discuss this in more detail below. But for a good overview of the HA see Mark Thomson, *Studies in the Historia Augusta*, Collection Latomus, volume 337 (Bruxelles: Éditions Latomus, 2012); Ronald Syme, *The Historia Augusta; a Call of Clarity*. (Bonn: R. Habelt, 1971).

the emperor, and that the women examined here show how the HA depicts the manner in which power is transferred from one emperor to another. This, in turn, will serve to address the question of how Roman imperial power is acquired and who can or should obtain it.

I specifically chose these three women – Plotina, Faustina the Younger, and Julia Domna – because they provide thematic cohesion between the first group of individual *vitae* in the HA, which includes the *vitae* from Hadrian it the Geta. Plotina, as one of Hadrian's supporters and the first female figure in the HA, provides a foundation from which to analyze the juxtaposition of women and imperial succession. Faustina the Younger and Julia Domna both continue the idea that imperial power in the HA is contingent on female support and connections. Moreover, as I will discuss, Faustina the Younger's and Julia Domna's characters appear in multiple lives of the HA and this provides thematic cohesion throughout the text as a whole. Lastly, I will show that these women play a vital role in the first thematic grouping of lives in the HA – which includes the *vitae* from Hadrian to Geta – and Plotina and Julia Domna bookend the beginning and end of this thematic group. Accordingly, these three women serve as useful case studies through which to analyze the HA's juxtaposition of women with imperial succession and power and a cohesion that unifies this text.

1.2. Background to the HA:

Most modern scholars do not believe the HA's claims about being written by six authors during the late third and early fourth century. This has led to a debate about when

and who wrote the HA that has dominated the historiography surrounding it.[2] The

debate concerning the authorship of the text gained momentum with Hermann Dessau,

who challenged the HA's claim of six separate authors writing the various imperial

biographies. Dessau claimed there was only one author using several pseudonyms.[3]

Since Dessau, many scholars, including Ronald Syme, Andre Chastagnol, and T.D.

Barnes, to name only a few have subscribed to a single author theory.[4] In fact, Syme

claims that if there was not one author, there was at least an interpolator, or earlier

corrector, who worked on the text, which would make it appear as though there was one

author.[5] I position myself primarily with the theory of single authorship, originated by

Hermann Dessau and supported by Syme, Barnes, and Chastagnol, among others. My

analysis reinforces the single author theory by focusing on the relationship between the

texts as constructed by the connections between women and succession.

---

[2] Alan Cameron summarizes the main debate of authorship beginning with Herman Dessau's original argument for a single author. He also suggests that there is a claim to multiple authors and a later fourth century editor that made the text "internally homogenous." However, he questions the veracity of this idea largely based on linguistic idiosyncrasies that can be attributed to a single author, or as he states, a single compiler. Alan Cameron, *The Last Pagans of Rome* (Oxford University Press, 2011), 743–745.

[3] This is following Peter White's claim about Dessau. Peter White, "The Authorship of the Historia Augusta," *The Journal of Roman Studies* vol. 57, (1967), 15.

[4] See Andre Chastagnol's Introduction T.D. Barnes "The Sources of the Historia Augusta." *Latomus*, vol. 155, 1978.

[5] Although Syme argues for one author, he admits it is difficult to analyze the text as a one complete source as opposed to the individual biographies. Syme, *The Historia Augusta: A Call for Clarity*, 18-21.

In regards to the dating, there is at least a general consensus among modern

scholars that the text was written in the fourth century, sometime after the date claimed in

the text of Diocletian's and Constantine's reigns.[6] However, there is a debate about

whether the text was written in the mid fourth century, around the 360's to 380's, or

during the late fourth century in the 390's.[7] Alan Cameron gives the HA a *terminus ante*

quem of (at the latest) 385. He suggests that the HA could not have been written later

than this because, unlike Syme's, Barnes's and Chastagnol's assertion that the HA relied

on sources like Aurelius Victor and Eutropius, Cameron believes the opposite may likely

be true.[8] Furthermore, Cameron also suggests a broad date range of 361 to 386 as the

terminus ante quem of the HA.[9] I am not seeking to prove, a precise date for the HA,

because my main focus will be the thematic structure of the text rather than the historical

accuracy. Nevertheless, I follow the theory that the text was written in the late fourth

century, again accepting Hermann Dessau's argument, to which Syme, Barnes, and

Chastagnol also subscribe. Unlike Cameron, I do believe that the HA is using later

sources, particularly Aurelius Victor. In fact, I will argue that the HA purposefully uses

---

[6] Even Alan Cameron, who claims the HA could have been written between 361-386 (one of the earlier date ranges among scholars) still supports the theory that the HA was written well after the reigns of Diocletian and Constantine. This theory goes back to Norman Baynes, who also dated the HA to before the death of the Emperor Julian. Cameron, *The Last Pagans of Rome*, 772; Norman H. Baynes, "The Date of the Composition of the Historia Augusta," *The Classical Review* 38, no. 7/8 (1924): 166.

[7] Mark Thomson and David Rohrbacher are more recent scholars who also support a late fourth century dating. David Rohrbacher, *The Play of Allusion in the Historia Augusta* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2016), 6–9; Thomson, *Studies in the Historia Augusta*, 1–10.

[8] Cameron, *Last Pagans of Rome*, 759-761.

[9] Cameron, *Last Pagans of Rome*, 770-778; T.D. Barnes supports a date range of after 360, but he puts the *terminus ante quem* at 394/5, which is the more commonly held date. Timothy D. Barnes, *The Sources of the "Historia Augusta"*. (Ed. Latomus, 1978), 17–18.

an inaccurate story from Aurelius Victor about Caracalla's marriage to his mother. In that case, the author appears to take a story he knows is false to create a humorous allusion, not unlike the allusions that David Rohrbacher recently argued are a main part of the HA's structure. According to Rohrbacher, these allusions create connection between the HA and other Latin texts, which are meant to have witty or humorous function.[10] This argument, coupled with my own argument about the HA's use of Aurelius Victor, forces me to assume a later *terminus ante quem* than Cameron.

In the end, the HA presents several complications for scholars. Because the details of authorship and date are obscure, which makes interpreting the purpose and tone of the text is difficult. Ultimately, this makes the text problematic as an historical and literary source. As a result, some scholars seek to relegate the text to being a poorly written forgery filled with fabrications and historical inaccuracies. However, others are not so willing to dismiss the HA entirely. For example, Clifford Ando described the HA as a literary satire useful for deconstructing political attitudes, but because of the fabrications, he suggested it is not the most useful historical text.[11] More recently, David Rohrbacher's book, has proposed that the HA is a useful as a literary source, which employs allusions in order to create connections with other sources, often for entertainment of the author and audience. In the end, the HA, as both a literary and

---

[10] For my example of the HA and Aurelius Victor see the section "Julia Domna: A New Dynasty" and ff. 173-176. Also, see Rohrbacher for his discussion on the use of allusion in the HA. Rohrbacher, *The Play of Allusion in the Historia Augusta*, 16–21.

[11] Clifford Ando, *Imperial Ideology and Provincial Loyalty in the Roman Empire*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 12–13.

historic source, is a problematic text. With a few caveats, however, it remains useful

literary resource, as well as one of only a few textual sources for the Third Century.[12]

1.3. The Structure of the HA Manuscripts:

In addition to the date and authorship of the text, there are other elements of the

HA that make analysis of the text difficult. The HA's manuscript tradition and the

organization of the lives of the emperors also has complications and discrepancies.[13] The

beginning of the text is controversial, mainly because the HA begins with the *de vita*

Hadriani. Since the HA lacks an introduction to the work, there is an assumption that the

text must be missing the opening and first *vita*. Furthermore, it has been taken for

granted that the HA was meant to be a continuation of Suetonius' *Lives* and, therefore,

should actually have begun with a "Life of Nerva."[14] Given the HA's construction as a

biting series of imperial biographies that have clear resonances, both in content and form,

with Suetonius, it is not unreasonable to make such an assumption. In fact, this belief is

so pervasive that Anthony Birley, in his translated volume of the HA, included his own

---

[12] Rohrbacher's discussion of women and allusion in the HA, suggests that there is a "traditional, satirical approach to woman." The allusions Rohrbacher shows connect the HA to Jerome and suggests a satirical image of masculine and feminine roles as a connection to Jerome and Christianity. My analysis is not focused as much on the HA's connection to outside material, but more on its internal connections as a cohesive text with a particular theme that questions the legitimacy of imperial succession and dynasty. Rohrbacher, *The Play of Allusion in the Historia Augusta*, 34-35; 116- 119.

[13] There is a lacuna between the *Gordiani tres* and *Valeriani duo* in the HA. Barnes discusses this. Barnes, *The Sources in the Historia Augusta*, 64-65. Along with Barnes, Andre Chastagnol's introduction provides excellent background on the HA's sources, the lacuna, and the manuscript tradition. See André Chastagnol, *Histoire Auguste: les empereurs romains des IIe et IIIe siècles* (Paris: R. Laffont, 1994).

[14] Anthony Birley posits that the HA author may have created a lacuna and started with Hadrian merely based on his lack of resources available to write those sources. See, Anthony Birley, "Rewriting Second and Third Century History in Late Antique Rome: The *Historia Augusta*," *Classica* 19.1, 2006, 21-23.

biographies of Nerva and Trajan that mimic the style of the HA lives as a way of bridging

gap between Suetonius and the HA.[15]

However, assuming the HA should have contained lives of Nerva and Trajan

diminishes it to a mere continuation of Suetonius and does not permit the text to stand

apart as its own document with its own historical context. There is nothing to suggest

the HA intended to be a mere continuation of Suetonius. In fact, Michael Meckler argues

the HA likely began with Hadrian as part of a clear thematic paradigm, which governs the

tone of the whole text. As Meckler states,

> To the original audience of the *Historia Augusta*, the figure of Hadrian
> was a combination of the best and worst aspects of monarchy…To place
> Hadrian at the beginning of a work examining two centuries of imperial
> rule - to make Hadrian, as it were, the *origo imperatoris* - may indicate the
> author's ambiguous feelings toward the institution of the emperor.[16]

Following Meckler's argument, the HA rather than merely acting as a continuation of the

Suetonian biographies, has a clear thematic reason for beginning with the Emperor

Hadrian. In doing so, the biographer sets a model of good and bad leadership in a single

person, just as Augustus served as Suetonius' *origo imperatoris* and model of

leadership.[17] In addition, Meckler's argument that this may indicate the ambiguity the

author feels toward imperial power, coincides with the fact that the HA author contradicts

---

[15] See the lives of Nerva and Trajan in Anthony Birley, *Lives of the Later Caesars: The First Part of the Augustan History: With Newly Compiled Lives of Nerva and Trajan* (Harmondsworth, Eng.; Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1976).

[16] Michael Meckler, "The Beginning of the 'Historia Augusta,'" *Historia: Zeitschrift Für Alte Geschichte* 45, no. 3 (1996): 369.

[17] For Augustus as a model see Erik Gunderson, "E.g. Augustus: Exemplum in the Augustus and Tiberius," in *Suetonius the Biographer: Studies in Roman Lives*, by Roy K. Gibson and Tristan Power (Oxford University Press, 2014), 130–45.

himself in the *de vita Hadriani*. He does this by asserting contradictory information

about the emperor that is both positive and negative. These contradictions have been

attributed to the belief that the HA is a composite work. For instance, M. Kulikowski,

following Ronald Syme's argument, suggests that the HA's *de vita Hadriani* essentially

combined at least two sources within the HA. Kulikowski argues one source depicted

Hadrian in a positive way. However, he contends a second source, Marius Maximus,

represents the invective intermixed within the *de vita Hadriani*.[18] This argument

explains the contradictory nature of de *vita Hadriani*, but it also undermines the HA

author's creative agency. Taking Meckler's argument into consideration, the

contradictions of the *de vita Hadriani* ought to be reevaluated as a purposeful thematic

design meant to create a sense of ambiguity.

Moreover, the choice of Hadrian as the *origo imperatoris* allows the author to

question not only the institution of the emperor, but also the legitimacy of imperial power

and succession. This is so because, the *de vita Hadriani* often presents contradictory

information about the emperor, which presents an equally contradictory image of Hadrian

as a "good" and "bad" emperor. The contradictions reflect the overall ambiguity toward

the institution of the emperor.[19] I will argue the HA is as much concerned with how and

who becomes emperor, as it is with imperial rule itself. Hadrian acts as a representation

for these concerns because of how the HA describes the ambiguous nature of his

---

[18] M. Kulikowski, "Marius Maximus in Ammianus and the Historia Augusta," *The Classical Quarterly* 57, no. 1 (2007): 244–56.

[19] See the section here, below: "Plotina: The *Origo Matronae*" and ff. 47 for more on the contradictory nature of the *de vita Hadriani*.

succession and his rule. Furthermore, I will show how the *de vita Hadriani* establishes

the way in which women play an important part in legitimizing power and establishing

succession through the *vitae* in the HA. In particular, Plotina's role in the *de vita*

Hadriani is essential to Hadrian's succession, as well as the general anxiety of imperial

succession that is an important thematic focus of the HA.

Although the HA should not be considered a continuation of Suetonius, the author

follows a similar format established by Suetonius' *de Vita Caesarum*. David Magie's

introduction to the Loeb edition of the HA shows that the common structure of the

biographies in the HA resembles Suetonius's structure in several key ways. For example,

throughout the biographies, the HA begins with the emperor's ancestry, followed by the

life of the individual before his ascent as emperor. Following this, the biographies

discuss the successes and failures of the emperor's reign and the successes and failures of

his personal character; and then his death, which, in some cases, comes very early into

the biography. Lastly, the biographies describe how the emperor was remembered in

death.[20]

Magie, like many other scholars, suggests that the emphasis on the especially

salacious and negative traits and characteristics, which are so pronounced throughout the

HA, is a result of Marius Maximus' influence on the text, as much, if not more than,

Suetonius' influence.[21] Yet, this is a problematic argument, since the works of Marius

Maximus no longer exist and there is no assurance of how they were written, or what

[20] Susan Ballou, David Magie, et al. *The Scriptores Historiae Augustae* vol. 1 (Cambridge, Mass.; London: Harvard University Press ; W. Heinemann, 1921), xvi–xx.

[21] Ballou, Magie. *The Scriptores Historiae Augustae* vol. 1, xvii–xviii.

details Marius included.[22]   Nevertheless, Syme, and T.D. Barnes, among others, have

noted the importance of Marius Maximus as a source for the HA.[23] Along with Marius

Maximus, Syme also suggests there was an unknown source, the *Ignotus*, employed by

the HA author.[24] The use of the *Ignotus* and Marius Maximus, as well as other sources,

such as the fourth century *Kaisergeschichte* and Herodian are one reason modern scholars

argue the HA is a composite work drawing together multiple sources. Yet, just as

assuming that the HA was a mere continuation of Suetonius restricts an analysis of the

HA, so too does only allowing the HA to function as a composite of other sources.

Instead, I intend to analyze the women of the HA as they function in the text, rather than

assuming that their depiction is predicated on other sources. I will show that the

connections between women and succession are the author's construction and support the

thematic questions about succession and the nature of the emperor.

The debate about the beginning and structure of the HA is part of the larger issues

surrounding the transmission of the original manuscripts. In general, there are several

manuscript branches, which form the whole manuscript tradition of the HA. Following

Susan Ballou and Ernst Hohl, the main manuscript, from which all other dominant HA

---

[22] Ronald Syme discusses how source analysis can be problematic, but also shows that the *HA* likely used at least Marius Maximus and another unknown source. He also shows how the four citations of Marius Maximus in the *Vita Hadriani* "are unfriendly in tone." Ronald Syme, "Marius Maximus Once Again" in *The Historia Augusta Papers* (Clarendon Press, 1983), 30-33.

[23] Barnes *Sources in the Historia Augusta*, 98-107; See also, Syme, "Marius Maximus Once Again" in *The Historia Augusta Papers*, 30-33.

[24] Kulikowski discusses this, drawing from a theory from Syme. See Kulikowski, "Marius Maximus in Ammianus and the Historia Augusta," 14–16.

manuscripts are derived, is the *Palatine Codex*.[25] According to Ballou, this text dates to

around the ninth century. Ballou dates the *Palatine Codex* to an earlier date than has

traditionally been ascribed, based on the script of the text, which closely resembles the

Carolingian miniscule scripts of the ninth century.[26] From the *Palatine Codex*, (hereafter

the P Codex) two other manuscript traditions originated. The *Bambergensis Codex* and

the *Excerpta Cusana* – an incomplete manuscript, which the Irish scholar, Sedulius

Scottus, compiled – were both created in the late 9th century to early 10th centuries.[27]

This is based on the fact that neither of these texts reflects any of the corrections,

additions, or major changes to the P Codex.[28] Accordingly, by the early 10th century, the

P codex underwent several changes through the work of its first corrector known as P^2.

This corrector also used a similar style of writing as the original P Codex and, since it

must have been compiled after the *Bambergensis Codex* and the *Excerpta Cusana*, Ballou

dates the P^2 corrector to the early 10th century. After this initial stage of corrections, the

P Codex was neglected for several centuries until the corrector, P^3, put the text through

another stage of corrections in the 14th century. Following these corrections, the P

---

[25] Susan Ballou, *The Manuscript Tradition of the Historia Augusta* (Leipzig: B.G. Teubner, 1914), 5–6.
Ernst Hohl,"Praefatio" Ernst Hohl, *Scriptores historiae Augustae*, vol. 1 (Lipsiae: In Aedibus B.G.
Teubneri, 1971), v–vi.

[26] Ballou, *The Manuscript Tradition of the Historia Augusta*, 5.

[27] Thomson argues that Scottus may have been working off an even earlier codex no longer in existence.
Thomson, *Studies in the Historia Augusta*, 91.

[28] Ballou does suggest that some scholars think that the *Excerpta Cusana* was earlier than the P Codex, and
not dependent on it, because the Lives were arranged in a different order. Thomson supports this. Ballou,
The Manuscript Tradition of the Historia Augusta, 76-82.

Codex continued to go through several more series of corrections.[29] The number of

correctors and the corruptions in the P Codex create complications for the manuscript

tradition of the HA, as well as for scholars, who use the text as an historical source.

Furthermore, according to Mark Thomson, the dominant manuscripts do not have

the biographies arranged in the same chronological order that is preserved in many of the

modern critical editions of the text, furthering the difficulty in textual analysis.[30] In fact,

the original P Codex has several differences in its order, which includes six of the lives

appearing out of chronological sequence. Along with the P Codex, the Scottus Codex

and Σ group also do not have the same chronological order. Like the P Codex, some of

the biographies are out of the order used in most modern editions. However, the

uncertain arrangement of the original text further shows the problematic nature of the

HA's manuscript tradition.[31] Thomson argues that when the HA is read following its

chronological order, as opposed to the order found in earlier manuscripts – an order that

may have been determined by the author – several important themes are lost. He also

suggests that when the HA is organized in the original order, three clear thematic

divisions occur in the text. The first thematic group, which contains the lives from

Hadrian to Geta, has the least fabricated material and relies heavily upon the lost works

of Marius Maximus as a source. [32] It is this thematic group that I will be analyzing.

---

[29] Ballou, *The Manuscript Tradition of the Historia Augusta*, 7-10.

[30] Thomson, *Studies in the Historia Augusta*, 90-93.

[31] Thomson, *Studies in the Historia Augusta*, 90-93.

[32] Thomson, *Studies in the Historia Augusta*, 90-94.

In addition, within this first group, the *de vita Avidii Cassii* appears out of its normal order, often coming after the *de vita Commodii Antoninii*.[33] One important argument that comes out of the three groups is the fact that both the missing components at the beginning of the HA and the lacuna in the middle of the text seems to correlate with the thematic groups of lives.[34] If the original text did not have a chronological order to the lives, we can appreciate that the author may have been attempting a new style of imperial biography that was not necessarily a continuation of Suetonius. Furthermore, if the thematic structure of the text is not solely based on chronology then it is not unreasonable to assume that the HA author purposefully began with Hadrian.

Along with Thomson's argument, I follow T.D. Barnes' proposed grouping that suggests the HA biographies are grouped into different primary and secondary categories based on the sources of each biography and the emperor examined in it. In general, the primary lives contain the most sourced information and the secondary lives usually follow, recounting the information provided in the primary life, but also including more fabricated anecdotes.[35] For example, Septimius Severus and Caracalla are both primary lives and Geta is a secondary life.[36] In the first thematic group of the HA, there are a total of thirteen lives – four of which are secondary lives. The secondary lives are those

---

[33] Thomson, *Studies in the Historia Augusta*, 93.

[34] Thomson, *Studies in the Historia Augusta*, 91.

[35] Barnes also cites Mommsen's argument that the secondary lives contain mostly fabricated material and are compiled from the "main" or primary life. Barnes, *The Sources of the "Historia Augusta,"* 48–50.

[36] For more on the primary and secondary lives, see Mark Thomson's "Introduction. " Thomson, *Studies in the Historia Augusta*, 1-10. He provides background to the primary and secondary lives. He also provides background and a chart of the lives. See also, Rohrbacher, *The Play of Allusion in the Historia Augusta*, 8-9.

of usurpers or "underling" emperors and most of the information about these lives is spurious and draws heavily on the primary lives of Hadrian, Marcus Aurelius, Septimius Severus, and Caracalla.[37] Because of this, these four emperors dominate the first thematic group of the HA and accordingly, appear in connection to the other primary lives in the group as well as the secondary lives. Based on this, I chose the women who we associate with these four emperors and who play a dominant role in the lives of both the emperor and the secondary life associated with him. In all cases, the three women I will analyze play a key role in the succession of the emperor and his legitimacy as a ruler.

1.4. Approach to Analysis:

As stated, I will focus on the role Plotina, Faustina the Younger, and Julia Domna all play in the succession of Hadrian, Marcus Aurelius, and Septimius Severus, respectively. In addition, I also will examine the role that Faustina and Julia Domna have in other lives. In particular, the HA's Faustina plays a crucial role in Avidius Cassius' usurpation attempt; likewise, Julia Domna plays a critical role in the legitimization of Caracalla's power as emperor. Moreover, although Plotina only appears in the *de vita Hadriani*, she plays an important role as the woman in the first life of the HA. As such she sets the stage for the thematic tone of the HA's representation of imperial succession.

---

[37] Thomson, *Studies in the Historia Augusta*, 92-93.

In general, the role of women in Latin literature often embodies a sexual nature. Often women serve as elements of physical desire that are used to weaken the image of their male counterparts.[38] Where the woman exhibits power, that power is usually derived through sexual manipulation, as is the case with many of the women in Tacitus. For example, Tacitus' Messalina uses her role as Claudius' wife to control her husband, as well as her lovers. In fact Messalina, although shown engaging in political scheming, only seems to do so because of her own wanton desires.[39] Furthermore, even in cases where the woman is engaging as a mother figure, such as Agrippina with her son Nero, there is a suggestion of a sexual component in the relationship.[40] Where the woman is shown to exhibit power, particularly political, that power usually is derived through sexual manipulation.

Powerful imperial women were often cast as temptresses and conspirators in order to show the dangers of imperial power, as well as a way to undermine the authority of the emperor. This is not a new concept. It is as early as Sarah B. Pomeroy's discussion on the role of Roman women in the political sphere, as well as the early Augustan

---

[38] For arguments about Roman masculinity and gender constructions see Craig A. Williams, *Roman Homosexuality: Ideologies of Masculinity in Classical Antiquity*, (Oxford University Press, 1999), 132-137. Amy Richlin provides an analysis on invective against women, particularly in satire. She discusses how adultery is a common theme in invective against women and suggests that women are usually defined by their relationships to men and the family. Amy Richlin, *Arguments with Silence: Writing the History of Roman Women* (University of Michigan Press, 2014), 70–74. See Also, Ruth Mazo Karras. "Active/Passive, Acts/Passions: Greek and Roman Sexualities." *The American Historical Review* 105, no. 4 (2000): 1250–65.

[39] Sandra R. Joshel, "Female Desire and the Discourse of Empire: Tacitus's Messalina," *Signs* 21, no. 1 (1995): 50–82.

[40] See Judith Ginsburg, *Representing Agrippina: Constructions of Female Power in the Early Roman Empire*, American Classical Studies, v. 50 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 46–55.

legislation, which attempted to prevent adultery and divorce. As Pomeroy shows, these laws focused especially on preventing women from committing adultery.[41] Thus, examples from Tacitus and other Latin literature only highlight the fact that women and sexual manipulation are commonly paired to explain a woman's role.

Furthermore, this combination expresses more about the character of the male counterpart in the texts than it does the women. For instance, the example of Messalina in Tacitus highlights Claudius' weaknesses as a ruler.[42] And the example of Agrippina and Nero showcases how depraved and weak Nero was a ruler.[43] The HA is not unique in this regard. Sexual manipulation is a common theme that is shown with the women I will be analyzing in the HA. However, it is not the only form of manipulation women use in the HA. Despite this, it is important to understand the role of gender in Latin literature. As Amy Richlin underscores, male authors for male audiences largely devise sources for Roman history, which means they are not primary sources for the experiences of women in Rome. Because of the difficulty in sources, Richlin argues that the history of Roman women needs to incorporate a multitude of sources. As such, she includes laws, inscriptions, poetry, and other sources along with histories.[44]

---

[41] For Pomeroy's discussion of Roman women and adultery laws see her chapter "The Roman Matron." Pomeroy, 158–60.

[42] Joshel presents an argument about Tacitus' Messalina as a construction for understanding Roman attitudes to imperial power Joshel, "Female Desire and the Discourse of Empire," 52.

[43] Molly M. Pryzwansky, "Feminine Imperial Ideals in the Caesares of Suetonius" (Department of Classical Studies, Duke University, 2008), 47–52.

[44] Richlin, *Arguments with Silence*, 4–6.

In assessing the history of Roman women, I agree with Richlin. The sources need to be diverse in order to account for a lack of sources directly authored by women. However, in this case, I am not analyzing the political maneuverings and historical agency of women. Rather, I will analyze how the HA depicts women to question the legitimacy of imperial succession. More specifically, I will address the ways in which the HA presents and questions the legitimacy and efficacy of the emperor through the literary juxtapositions of women, who wield power comparable to the Emperor.

In particular, I will analyze the relationship between female characters and the Roman emperors of the HA, specifically in connection with imperial succession. As Rohrbacher has argued, the HA employed allusions throughout the text, which was a particularly common element of later Latin literature.[45] He also shows that the HA crafts elaborate allusions to create a complex, interpretative game for its audience, likely a selective literary group that would have recognized allusions to sources, such as Marius Maximus, Aurelius Victor, and the *Kaisergeschichte*. Rohrbacher suggests that these allusions are often humorous and generally meant to test the interpretive skill of the audience rather than to create an overarching political or religious message.[46] In contrast, I assert the intertextual allusions, which evoke these other Latin texts as well as create

---

[45] Rohrbacher, *Play of Allusion in the Historia Augusta*, 16-17.

[46] Rohrbacher employs Joseph Pucci's argument that allusion in literature requires a "full-knowing readers" in terms of audience. "Full-knowing" referring to individuals who had access or possession to the knowledge to make the connection with the allusion of *Play of Allusion in the Historia Augusta*, 45-46 and 72-86. See also Joseph Michael Pucci, *The Full-Knowing Reader: Allusion and the Power of the Reader in the Western Literary Tradition* (Yale University Press, 1998). And for background and definition on the concept of allusions see, Stephen Hinds, *Allusion and Intertext: Dynamics of Appropriation in Roman Poetry* (Cambridge University Press, 1998).

connections between the lives of the HA, reflect the an anxiety in Rome pertaining to the

stability and legitimacy of imperial succession in the later Empire.

2. Plotina: *Origo Matronae*

Beginning with the Emperor Hadrian, the HA immediately establishes its concern with the dubious nature of imperial succession and its disruption to the Empire. The HA's description of Hadrian's succession shows that Hadrian was not Trajan's unequivocal heir. His succession story is rife with dubious political manipulations that cast ambiguity on his legitimacy as emperor. As will be shown, the ambiguity of his legitimacy is then further emphasized in the HA's portrayal of his reign. Furthermore, Hadrian's succession establishes the way in which women play an important thematic part in legitimizing power and establishing succession throughout the lives in the HA.

Just as Hadrian's potential role as *origo imperatoris* in the HA acts as an important thematic guidepost, the role of Plotina in the *de vita Hadriani*, presents an image of her active political nature, particularly at the moment of imperial succession. Within the HA, women, particularly mothers and wives, play significant roles in the successes and failures of their male counterparts. Their juxtaposition against the figure of the emperor often acts as a comparative relationship in order to undermine or uphold the emperors' authority and by the same token either undermines or supports the legitimacy of the emperors' rule. Plotina's role in the HA exemplifies this relationship and, through her establishment as the "*origo matronae*," lays the groundwork for the issue of ambiguity of imperial succession represented throughout the HA.

In the case of Plotina, she acts as a key player in both undermining and legitimizing Hadrian's succession. Because of this, Plotina's involvement not only supports the ambiguity surrounding the Emperor's succession, but also implicitly

questions what qualifies as a legitimate succession. Since Plotina is integral to Hadrian's

dubious succession, she is integral to the initial sense of ambiguity that colors the HA's

depiction of Hadrian's reign.[47] Read as a whole, the role of Plotina in the HA ultimately

reflects the turbulent nature of succession that is characterized in other imperial

successions, especially those associated with Faustina the Younger and Julia Domna.

Although it is not unique to find women juxtaposed with emperors in Latin

sources, the HA's juxtaposition purposefully emphasizes an ambiguity about the

legitimacy of imperial succession. Yet, such juxtapositions of imperial women and

emperors do not typically emphasize ambiguity, rather they often provide a clear contrast

or counterpoint to the emperor's character. For example, Tacitus depicts some of the

most notorious women, such as Messalina and Agrippina the Younger, whose power is

only harmful to the stability of the Empire. Suetonius also incorporates stories of women

subverting masculine authority, which ultimately poses a threat to imperial power and the

Empire.[48] Yet in the HA, there is a distinct element of ambiguity associated with the

character of the women and their connection, specifically to succession.

---

[47] This ambiguity in the text of a 'positive' and 'negative' portrayal of Hadrian has been treated as a problem with the quality of authorship. Several scholars assume that based on the quality of the Latin and the contradictory portrayal of Hadrian that the text is a patchwork of other sources mingled with pure fiction. According to Michael Kulikowski's argument, the *de vita Hadriani* appears to be a composite drawing on the lost works of the Marius Maximus and another unknown author, who Kulikowski – following Ronald Syme's argument – calls *Ignotus*. However, this argument suggests that the author of Hadrian's life was simply compiling sources and not attaching, or creating an authentic version of Hadrian. Kulikowski, "Marius Maximus in Ammianus and the Historia Augusta," 244–45. Ronald Syme, *Historia Augusta Papers*, 14-16.

[48] Santoro L'Hoi especially shows the way Tacitus links Messalina's sexuality with power. Francesca Santoro L'Hoir, *Tragedy, Rhetoric, and the Historiography of Tacitus' Annales* (University of Michigan Press, 2006), 150–54. See also, Pryzwansky, "Feminine Imperial Ideals in the Caesares of Suetonius," 219–23. Sandra Joshel, "Female Desire and the Discourse of Empire: Tacitus's Messalina," 55-59.

Plotina's role in the HA, and particularly in the first thematic group of lives, is limited; she is only featured in the *de vita Hadriani*.[49] Thus, Plotina's role in the *de vita Hadriani* is not as extensive as some of the other women, which I will discuss. Her depiction in the HA is central to supporting Hadrian's career and his succession. In addition to the HA, Plotina also is featured in Cassius Dio and Pliny the Younger's panegyric. The fragments from Cassius Dio's *Roman History* depict Plotina as a modest, prudent, and honorable wife to Trajan.[50] Even in these other sources, her connection to Hadrian's succession is emphasized. Yet, as will be shown, her depiction in Cassius Dio differs greatly compared to her role in the HA.

The fact that Plotina is featured more prominently than any other woman in the *de vita Hadriani* (including Hadrian's own wife) suggests that the she is meant to be the main female character in the first biography.[51] Therefore, her main role as neither mother, nor wife, yet the wife of his adoptive father, helps establish the ambiguity of Hadrian's reign as presented in the HA. In order to cast Hadrian's succession as dubious,

---

[49] Wallinger compiles all instances of Plotina from the HA and analyzes her portrayal in the HA compared to other sources, especially Cassius Dio. Elisabeth Wallinger, *Die Frauen in der Historia Augusta* (Wien: Im Selbstverlag der Österreichischen Gesellschaft für Archäologie, 1990), 21–27.

[50] I will be discussing Plotina in Pliny and Cassius Dio further into this analysis. Julie Langford shows that women were often praised when they remained removed from politics. (She notes that Plotina received such praise from Pliny's panegyric. Likewise, Emily Ann Hemelrijk discusses how Plotina was adept at balancing her political maneuverings. Modesty, for example, was one of her prime attributes. She also later stressed her bond as the adoptive mother of Hadrian in order to get him to support her Epicurean schools. Julie Langford, *Maternal Megalomania: Julia Domna and the Imperial Politics of Motherhood* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), 92–93. Emily Ann Hemelrijk, *Matrona Docta: Educated Women in the Roman Élite from Cornelia to Julia Domna* (Psychology Press, 2004), 116–19. See also Rachel Meyers for Plotina's role on coins and in Trajan's court. Rachel Meyers, "Filiae Augustorum: The Ties That Bind in the Antonine Age," *Classical World Classical World* 109, no. 4 (2016): 487–505.

[51] Here, I am describing Plotina as a character because in this case I am focusing on the HA's own unique literary depiction of her, rather than as an actual historical figure.

Hadrian's promotion to emperor had to stem from a dubious source. Since the HA is

unclear about Plotina's relationship to Hadrian and the motivations for her support,

Hadrian's succession is tainted with ambiguity.

Plotina's character provides ambiguity in several ways. The first is the

ambiguous nature of her relationship to Hadrian. In the *de vita Hadriani*, she appears as

Trajan's manipulative wife, but she is not represented as Hadrian's adulteress lover, as

might have been expected. If there had been a "Life of Trajan," she would have featured

as Trajan's wife and her role in the marital function would have been more clearly

established as either a 'good wife,' or a 'bad wife'; as such, there would have been less

room to create an ambiguous character. Additionally, she is not represented as a distinct

maternal or marital figure in the *de vita Hadriani*. As a 'good mother,' her role would be

to guard and ensure the success of her son. As a 'bad mother,' she would overstep her

role and assume too much political power.[52] Yet, given that she appears as neither a

distinct wife or mother, it suggests a singularity for her character that is not represented in

other women who play such prominent roles in the HA lives – especially Faustina the

Younger and Julia Domna.

Plotina's role as benefactor and supporter serves as the perfect counterpoint to

distort Hadrian's position as a legitimate emperor. In one sense, her support legitimizes

his authority. The HA specifically claims her support leads to Hadrian's marriage into

Trajan's family and Trajan's adoption of Hadrian. However, her support also weakens

---

[52] Opper and Hemelrijk both consider Plotina to be stepmother figure in regards to Hadrian. Hemelrijk even claims she promoted it with Hadrian to maintain her own authority. Hemelrijk, *Matrona Docta*, 116–19. See Thorsten Opper for the connection between his marriage and succession. Thorsten Opper, *Hadrian: Empire and Conflict* (Harvard University Press, 2008), 59–60.

Hadrian's authority because it is predicated on the favor of a woman.[53] Plotina drives the

initial ambiguity in the *de vita Hadriani*. Yet, Plotina's actions do not just create

ambiguity surrounding Hadrian's succession. They make her an ambiguous character in

her own right through the way in which the author juxtaposes her deception against the

wishes of her husband. Plotina was a beloved empress and well known for her modesty,

which provided her enough influence to help secure Hadrian. Cassius Dio's account of

Hadrian's succession confirms Plotina played a role in it (though he claims in all other

respects she was a model empress) and Pliny the Younger's panegyric lauds Plotina's

modesty.[54]

Yet, the HA author does not allude to Plotina's background or remind the reader

of her authority and influence. In addition, her motivations for helping Hadrian remain

obscure throughout the *de vita Hadriani*. This is part of an even deeper question

concerning legitimate power and how those in power exert their authority. In the case of

Hadrian and Plotina, Plotina oversteps the boundaries of her power and usurps Trajan's

power. Hadrian's succession, therefore, is not only credited to a woman, but a woman

who usurped authority. This is first seen when Plotina served as a benefactor for Hadrian

---

[53] Caillan Davenport and Christopher Mallan argue that Cassius Dio favors Trajan and therefore there is no ill will presented against Plotina for her actions. Since Trajan is a 'good' emperor, she is a good wife. Also,. Pryzwansky, discusses the image of 'good' and 'bad' mothers and wives. Pryzwansky, "Feminine Imperial Ideals in the Caesares of Suetonius," 44–53. Caillan Davenport and Christopher Mallan, "Hadrian's Adoption Speech in Cassius Dio's Roman History and the Problems of Imperial Succession.," *American Journal of Philology* 135, no. 4 (2014): 654–55.

[54] Cassius Dio, 69.1.1-4. Translated by, Earnest Cary, and Herbert B Foster, *Roman History, Volume VIII: Books 61-70*, 1925 Loeb edition. Pliny the Younger, *Panegyricus* 83.2-8 translated by Betty Radice, *Letters, Volume II: Books 8-10. Panegyricus.*, 1969 Loeb Edition.

through her support of his marriage to Sabina, Trajan's great-niece. According to the *de vita Hadriani*,

> Denique statim suffragante Sura ad amicitiam Traiani pleniorem redit, nepte per sororem Traiani uxore accepta favente Plotina, Traiano leviter, ut Marius Maximus dicit, volente.[55]

> Finally, through the good offices of Sura, he was instantly restored to a friendship with Trajan that was closer than ever, and he took to wife the daughter of the Emperor's sister — a marriage advocated by Plotina, but, according to Marius Maximus, little desired by Trajan himself.[56]

Here, the alleged author if the *de vita Hadriani* – Aelius Spartianus – not only presents the contradictory nature that defines this *vita*, but also the important role Plotina played in securing Hadrian's advancement to imperial power. In this case, Hadrian is "restored to friendship" with Trajan and yet, later in the HA, it also is reported that Trajan was opposed and later regretted Hadrian's marriage because it brought him closer into the imperial family.[57] This presents a seemingly contradictory attitude, which creates ambiguity about Hadrian's role and relationship within Trajan's imperial administration. This ambiguity weakens Hadrian's claim as a rightful successor to Trajan.

Furthermore, it shows that Hadrian's hold on influence was predicated on Plotina's support. Despite Trajan's ambivalence about Hadrian's marriage, Hadrian is able to marry Sabina thanks to the support of Plotina. Other sources, like Cassius Dio, do

---

[55] HA*, de vita Hadriani* 2.10. Edited by Ernst Hohl. Vol. 1. Teubner , 1971. Unless otherwise stated, all my Latin excerpts come from this edition.

[56] HA*, de vita Hadriani* 2.10. Translation comes from the Loeb edition unless otherwise stated *Scriptores Historiae Augustae*. vol. 1. Translated by David Magie. Edited by Susan Helen Ballou. New York: G.P. Putnam & Sons, 1922 HA.

[57] Here, the HA shows Trajan regretted Hadrian's marriage to his niece. HA, *de vita Hadriani*, 2.10.

not contain this story, but it is essential to understanding the succession of Hadrian in the HA.[58] Ultimately, Trajan seems to oppose the marriage, since the HA describes Hadrian's marriage as "advocated by Plotina, but, according to Marius Maximus, little desired by Trajan himself."[59] Yet, Plotina overrides Trajan's wishes. This portrays Plotina as wielding substantial authority over her husband. It is not strange to think of a marriage as a pathway to power. It certainly was not the first time that marriage was used to attain power.[60] What is unusual is that Plotina's support of Hadrian overrides Trajan's own misgivings about the match, which ought to suggest that Trajan was not supportive of Hadrian's elevation into the imperial household.[61] Immediately after the HA claims Trajan opposed his marriage, it also describes Hadrian as accompanying Trajan in a Dacian war and *familiarius prosecutus est* – he was following as an inimate or, "on terms of considerable intimacy" with Trajan.[62]

Sabina, Hadrian's wife and Trajan's niece, is not as integral a character in the *de vita Hadriani* in comparison to Plotina. The HA's disregard for her role in Hadrian's life indicates Plotina is the more consequential woman and, therefore, supports my argument

---

[58] T. Corey Brennan, *Sabina Augusta: An Imperial Journey* (Oxford University Press, 2018), 51–54.

[59] HA, *de vita Hadriani*, 2.10 in Ballou, Magie, et al. *The Scriptores Historiae Augustae* vol. 1. Loeb Edition.

[60] From the beginning the Julio-Claudians were infamous for this. Augustus promoted the marriage of his sister Octavia and maneuvered his daughter into several marriages. According to Tacitus' account, Agrippina the Younger and her supporters went to great lengths to bypass Roman law so she could marry her uncle. See Tacitus, *Annales* XII.7.2-5 in *Tacitus: The Annals, Books IV-VI, XI-XII*, trans. John Jackson (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1937).

[61] Opper argues that the marriage would have brought Hadrian closer into the household and presumably placed him as Trajan's heir. Opper, *Hadrian Empire and Conflict*, 44-45.

[62] HA, *de vita Hadriani* 3.2, Ballou, Magie, et al, *The Scriptores Historiae Augustae*. vol. 1. Loeb Edition.

that she is the "*origo matronae*," just as Hadrian is the *origo imperatoris* as Meckler

claims.[63] Because the *de vita Hadriani* focuses mostly on Plotina's role in Hadrian's life,

especially at such seminal moments as his marriage and succession, she acts as a thematic

cornerstone in the first group of lives in the HA. Yet, it does not make it clear what

Plotina's exact relationship is with Hadrian. Since Plotina's relationship to Hadrian is not

defined her motivation for helping Hadrian is also unclear, which makes her actions as

ambiguous as Hadrian's legitimacy as Trajan's successor. The text does not give any

indication as to why Plotina should favor Hadrian. This creates further complications and

ambiguity surrounding Hadrian's rise and succession.

Another way Plotina supported Hadrian was to ensure he was adopted by Trajan

and seen as his heir and successor. According to the HA,

> Nec desunt qui factione Plotinae mortuo iam Traiano Hadrianum in
> adoptionem adscitum esse prodiderint, supposito qui pro Traiano fessa
> voce loquebatur.[64]

> And the statement has even been made that it was not until after Trajan's
> death that Hadrian was declared adopted, and then only by means of a
> trick of Plotina's; for she smuggled in someone who impersonated the
> Emperor and spoke in a feeble voice.[65]

This passage suggests that Trajan was hesitant and it was really at Plotina's insistence

that Hadrian married Sabina. In fact, prior to this passage, the HA relates that Trajan had

confided in several of his friends that he did not want to adopt Hadrian, but instead had

---

[63] See this thesis' Introduction, section "Structure to the HA" above for my discussion on this.

[64] HA, *de vita Hadriani* 4.10.

[65] HA, *de vita Hadriani* 4.10. Ballou, Magie, et al, *The Scriptores Historiae Augustae.* vol. 1. Loeb
Edition.

favored Neratius Priscus.[66] Accordingly, both passages show important moments in

securing Hadrian's future power and authority. Plotina appears as the architect behind

both Hadrian's marriage and, as the above passage shows, Trajan's adoption of Hadrian,

which is the key element that legitimized his authority as the successor to the Emperor.

Based on the passage above, Hadrian's power was rooted in Plotina's favor, rather than in

Trajan's. Yet, Plotina's relationship and motivations for supporting Hadrian are

ambiguous and she is a non-traditional source to determine the succession of the

emperor.[67] Accordingly, it means Hadrian assumed power through potentially

illegitimate means.

Plotina's favor did not just secure Hadrian's adoption. Prior to this passage, the

HA credits her with gaining Hadrian a position as a legate and a second consulship.[68] In

fact, it is not just her favor, but, as the text describes, it is her zealousness for Hadrian that

ensures his success and advancement. Yet, behind all of Plotina's support is still Trajan's

continual reception and compliance with Plotina's wishes that ensures Hadrian's

advancement. However, that changes in regards to Hadrian's adoption. The HA alludes

to the fact that Trajan had changed his mind and it was only his illness and death that

---

[66] HA, *de vita Hadriani* 4.8.

[67] Marriage and adoption were common ways to forge alliances and provide a successor. Barbara Levick shows women were involved in this process, but it is unclear to what extent and how much influence they wielded. For instance, she cautions against, "overemphasize the power of imperial women in the matter of marriages." However, in discussing Plotina's role in Hadrian's adoption she uses it as an example of women wielding power. But, this could also be a common trope used to weaken Hadrian's legitimacy. Joshel makes a similar argument about Tacitus' use of Messalina against Claudius. See Barbara Levick, *Faustina I and II: Imperial Women of the Golden Age* (Oxford University Press, Incorporated, 2014), 28–31. and Joshel, "Female Desire and the Discourse of Empire: Tacitus's Messalina," 55-59.

[68] HA, *de vita Hadriani* 4.1-5.

prevented him from adopting another. In fact, the HA states, "There was, to be sure, a widely prevailing belief that Trajan, with the approval of many of his friends, had planned to appoint as his successor not Hadrian but Neratius Priscus…"[69] Thus, Trajan takes a passive role in these political dealings and Plotina takes the active role. Even with the support of friends, Trajan does not secure Neratius Priscus's position as his successor, which makes Plotina ultimately more effective than Trajan. Trajan's plan of replacing Hadrian was preempted by his death and Plotina's intervention, which secured Hadrian as the next emperor.

The concept of imperial adoption attracted attention early in Trajan's reign. For example, in Pliny the Younger's *Panygyricus,* written for Trajan, Pliny exhorts the emperor to be careful in his selection of an heir, just as Nerva had been careful in selecting Trajan. Pliny states,

> Nulla adoptati cum eo qui adoptabat cognatio, nulla necessitudo, nisi quod uterque optimus erat, dignusque alter eligi alter eligere. Itaque adoptatus es non ut prius alius atque alius in gratiam uxoris. Adscivit enim te filium non vitricus sed princeps, eodemque animo divus Nerva pater tuus factus est, quo erat omnium.[70]

---

[69] Frequens sane opinio fuit Traiano id animi fuisse, ut Neratium Priscum, non Hadrianum, successorem relinqueret, multis amicis in hoc consentientibus… HA, *de vita Hadriani* 4.8, Ballou*, et al. The Scriptores Historiae Augustae* vol. 1. Loeb Edition.

[70] Pliny the Younger, *Panegyricus* 7.4-5.

> No tie of kinship or relationship bound adopted and adopter; your only bond
> was that of mutual excellence, rendering you worthy either to choose or to
> be chosen. Thus you were adopted not as others have been hitherto, in order
> to gratify a wife; no stepfather made you his son, but one who was your
> prince, and the divine Nerva became your father in the same sense that he
> was father of us all. [71]

In this case, Pliny reminds Trajan of the difference in his adoption from others. Trajan

earned his adoption through merit rather than through the pressure of a wife. The

assumption is that Pliny is implying other adoption situations were forced through wives

as opposed to merit. Specifically, Pliny is harkening back to the situation of Augustus

when he adopted Tiberius, and Claudius when he adopted Nero.[72] Connecting with these

past examples would, of course, add weight and legitimacy to Pliny's point, namely, that

imperial adoption ought to coincide with merit. However, there is also the hint of a

subtle warning.

   The goal of the panegyric is to praise Trajan for his accomplishments, including

being good enough to merit his adoption and succession. But, lurking behind this praise

is the warning to secure an equally good successor to follow his reign.[73] Given the fact

that the Roman Empire had already seen the effects of bad successions beginning with

Caligula, it is not surprising that Pliny would want to exhort the importance of succession

---

[71] Pliny the Younger, *Panegyricus* 7.4-5. Both the Latin and translation are from the Loeb edition. Pliny the Younger, *Letters, Volume II: Books 8-10. Panegyricus*, translated by, Betty Radice. Harvard University Press, 1969.

[72] See note in the Loeb Edition, Radice makes this point. Pliny the Younger, *Letters, Volume II: Books 8-10. Panegyricus*, trans. Betty Radice, 338-339.

[73] Burgersdijk makes the argument that Pliny's *Panegyricus* is very concerned with the idea of securing a good successor for Hadrian. Furthermore, he draws a comparison between Pliny's concern and the HA's focus on the succession of good, bad, and neutral emperors. See Diederik Burgersdijk, "Pliny's Panegyricus and the Historia Augusta," *are Arethusa* 46, no. 2 (2013): 291–95.

by adoption. What is notable, however, is the timing of Pliny's panegyric. As a senator,

Pliny delivered the panegyric to the senate in September 100. It is unclear if either

Trajan or Hadrian was in attendance, but both would have been able to access a lengthier,

revised version of the speech later, which was given in installments over the course of

three days.[74] That same year Hadrian married Trajan's great grandniece, Vibia Sabina.

This put Hadrian in the Emperor's family line and clearly set him up as a successor.[75]

Therefore, given that the timing of the speech corresponded with Hadrian's rise in the

imperial household, the warning against women forcing adoptions could be directed

against Plotina's support for Hadrian. In this case, the HA's depiction of Plotina and

Hadrian's adoption appears to follow this tradition and uses it as a way to express the

potential threat of unwise adoptions and successors with which Pliny is clearly

concerned.

If Trajan had not wavered in his support for Hadrian, there would be no ambiguity

in regards to Hadrian's succession and authority. The HA author does not allow for this.

In the passage above, the HA claims that Plotina brought in another person after Trajan

had died in order to pretend to be the voice of Trajan and call Hadrian his heir and

successor.[76] In this way, Plotina becomes the voice of the emperor and there is a reversal

---

[74] Anthony Birley, *Hadrian: The Restless Emperor*, Repr (London: Routledge, 2001), 45.

[75] Birley discusses the possibility that Hadrian may have attended Pliny's speech. Anthony Birley, *Hadrian the Restless Emperor*, Routledge, 1997, 42-47. Also, see Thorsten Opper for the connection between his marriage and succession. Opper, *Hadrian*, 44–45. Even though Hadrian's marriage likely took place after the speech, there was probably a betrothal period and in some cases elite marriages could come after betrothal of up to two years. See Judith Evans Grubbs, *Women and the Law in the Roman Empire: A Sourcebook on Marriage, Divorce and Widowhood* (Psychology Press, 2002), 88–89.

[76] HA, *de vita Hadriani* 4.1-10.

of power. Thus, when Plotina helps secure Hadrian's succession, she does so by trickery, fooling everyone into following her command instead of Trajan's. Essentially, she takes or usurps the voice of the emperor.

Plotina takes on the active role of leadership and does what she must to secure the stable succession of her adopted son. Thus, she acts in a manner similar to women, such as Agrippina the Younger and, as I will show later, Faustina the Younger and Julia Domna. But, Agrippina the Younger serves as another example of a woman who usurps imperial command. A comparison of Agrippina and Plotina highlights the ambiguous nature of Plotina's role in the HA. For example, Tacitus and Suetonius accuse Agrippina the Younger of securing Nero's secession through trickery. However, in the case of Agrippina, her role in Nero's succession is shrouded in the sexual manipulation of Claudius, as well as her involvement in poisoning the Emperor in order to keep her son in power.[77] The portrayal of Agrippina is anything but ambiguous. She is clearly a villain intended to emasculate Claudius and undermine his authority. Her actions are stereotypical of powerful women, who are depicted as threats to the Empire. Usually this depiction is one way to criticize the emperor, especially in Suetonius and Tacitus.[78] In addition, Agrippina's actions on behalf of Nero are not ambiguous. She is clearly a mother looking to secure the succession of her son, which – based on the depiction in

---

[77] Tacitus. *Annales*, 67-69 and Suetonius *Life of Claudius* 44-45, in *Suetonius Vol. II The Lives of the Caesars, II: Claudius. Nero. Galba, Otho, and Vitellius. Vespasian. Titus, Domitian. Lives of Illustrious Men: Grammarians and Rhetoricians. ..Passienus Crispus (Loeb*, trans. J. C. Rolfe, Revised edition (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1914). Loeb Edition.

[78] Ginsburg, *Representing Agrippina*, 17.

Suetonius and Tacitus – proved detrimental to the overall wellbeing of the Roman Empire.

According to both Tacitus and Suetonius, Agrippina poisoned Claudius because he had transferred his support from Nero as his successor to Britannicus. Once Claudius' died, Agrippina concealed his death until Nero was proclaimed emperor.[79] Thus, like Plotina, Agrippina keeps the Emperor's death a secret and usurps the authority of the emperor in order to ensure the succession of Nero. But, unlike Plotina in the HA, Agrippina presents a clear threat as a politically powerful woman. She murders and manipulates in violent and destructive ways in order to achieve her ends. Her role in the succession of Nero raises questions about the efficacy of imperial power.

This is brought into sharper relief when we consider Molly M. Pryzwansky's analysis that Agrippina's deception surrounding Claudius's death also resembles how Suetonius described Livia's concealment of Augustus' death until Tiberius' succession was secured.[80] Yet, unlike Agrippina, Pryzwansky claims that Suetonius downplayed Livia's actual role in Tiberius's adoption, which highlights the active role Augustus had in the decision. In other words, in order to depict Augustus in positive way, Suetonius did not want Augustus's authority obstructed by his wife's actions.[81]

Furthermore, Pryzwansky shows that this has even earlier connections to Livy's account of Tanaquil, "who likewise hid the death of her royal husband, Tarquinius

---

[79] Tacitus. *Annales* 67-69 and Suetonius *Life of Claudius* 44-45.

[80] Pryzwansky, "Feminine Imperial Ideals in the Caesares of Suetonius," 93 and ff. 69.

[81] Pryzwansky, "Feminine Imperial Ideals in the Caesares of Suetonius,"72–82.

Priscus, until she could arrange the elevation of his adopted son, Servius Tullius."[82] In

this way, Tacitus and Suetonius are using a *topos* that connects Agrippina, not only to

other infamous Julio-Claudian women, but also to Tanaquil, a woman who used her

assumption of command in order to secure the succession of a king. Bauman refers to

Tanaquil as a *muliebris audacia* and claims she served the function as a "king-maker." [83]

Along with Romans' inherent bias toward women involved in politics, the fact that this

topos is connected to the depiction of a female "king-maker" implies how Tacitus and

Suetonius felt about Nero and imperial succession in general.

Tanaquil, as a king maker, represented a period in Roman history that

underscored the importance of a Roman Republic. Romans did not want a king and after

the cautionary example of Julius Caesar, the early emperors were careful to fashion

themselves as Republican leaders in Rome.[84] Accordingly, Agrippina's connection to a

"king-maker" not only illustrates the threat of politically powerful women to traditional

Roman Republican values, it also undermines the legitimacy of Nero's authority.

Because of Agrippina's actions, from the moment of his succession, Nero was cast as a

despot who had gained power through deceitful means.[85] In this way, the sources show

the threat manifest in Agrippina's political influence.

---

[82] Pryzwansky, "Feminine Imperial Ideals in the Caesares of Suetonius," 93. Also, see ff. 69-70.

[83] Richard A. Bauman, *Women and Politics in Ancient Rome* (London ; New York: Routledge, 1992), 10–11.

[84] Fergus Millar, *The Emperor in the Roman World: 31 BC-AD 337* (London: Duckworth, 1977), 614–616.

But, in the HA, Plotina in not described with the same characteristics of the *topos*. She is not sexually aggressive; there is no suggestion that she seduced either Trajan, or Hadrian in order to achieve her goals. And most importantly, while she manipulated the succession after his death, there is no suggestion that Plotina had a role in killing Trajan. Instead, Plotina stepped in after Trajan died and made sure there was a seamless transition after Trajan. Her role, therefore, acts as a stabilizing force for the Empire, rather than the violent upheaval that Agrippina's actions symbolized. Additionally, while her actions clearly undermined the authority of both Trajan and Hadrian, it is unclear whether the author intends for Plotina to be an indictment against Hadrian's rule. Her relationship to Hadrian is ambiguous, which makes her motivations unclear, as opposed to Agrippina, who had a clear relationship and motive for making her son Emperor over Claudius' other son.

Plotina is not the one who is supposed to determine imperial succession, but her role in helping Hadrian to imperial power does not necessarily usher in a bad age, the way Agrippina did when she assured imperial power for Nero. Thus, Plotina is at the heart of the ambiguity surrounding Hadrian's reign and also represents the way the HA juxtaposes women and succession. Plotina is more than a kingmaker. If we assume that Pliny described the ideal when he commended Trajan that "no stepfather made you his

[85] Calhoon shows that after having obtained power, Nero proved himself to be a tyrant through his actions. Calhoon further shows how the sources describe both Caligula and Nero in a similar fashion. In particular, she focuses on how Nero and Caligula are both prone to using poison as a way to assert their political control. For Nero, it should be remembered that Agrippina first used poison to secure his power. In other words, he copies his mother's bad behavior and therefore, she is responsible for creating and elevating a despot to power. Cristina Calhoon, "Is There an Antidote to Caesar?," in *Private and Public Lies: The Discourse of Despotism and Deceit in the Graeco-Roman World*, ed. Andrew J. Turner, James H. Kim On Chong-Gossard, and Frederik Juliaan Vervaet, Impact of Empire (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 274–280.

son, but one who was your prince," then Plotina usurps the role of the prince – essentially

becoming the Prince – in order to make Hadrian the Emperor. This makes Hadrian's

succession problematic and not ideal.

The HA could have omitted such a story. In other situations, the author has no

qualms about pure invention of stories for literary effect. This fact suggests that the

author could have merely created such a story regarding Plotina and used her as a vehicle

for his invective. It is also not accurate to assume the HA author would shy away from

tawdry or salacious information. For example, before Hadrian is adopted, the HA

suggests that he curried favor in Trajan's court through questionable means.

> Corrupisse eum Traiani libertos, curasse delicatos eosdemque saepe inisse
> per ea tempora, quibus in aula familiarior fuit, opinio multa firmavit.[86]

> That he was bribing Trajan's freedmen and courting and corrupting his
> favorites all the while that he was in close attendance at court, was told
> and generally believed.[87]

This passage shows that while Plotina was not using her favors in order to corrupt or

seduce Hadrian, he was not above using such tactics to further his own career. There is

also a suggestive tone about the methods Hadrian may have used in order to gain favor

and influence with Trajan's men. Accordingly, the HA describes Hadrian as *curasse*

delicatos eosdemque saepe inisse "courting and corrupting his favorites all the while…"

– meaning Trajan's favorite servants. However, a more literal translation is, "at that same

time he often attended to and obtained the favor of the *delicatos*." In this case the

---

[86] HA, *de vita Hadriani* 4.5-6.

[87] HA, *de vita Hadriani* 4.5-6, Ballou, et al. *The Scriptores Historiae Augustae* vol. 1. Loeb Edition.

delicatos can mean favorite servants, but it can also mean a paramour.[88] It is not clear what Hadrian's courting and corrupting included, but regardless it suggests that Hadrian's relationship with members of Trajan's household were not entirely appropriate. Since this passage comes just before the passage regarding Plotina's trickery with the adoption, it shows his inappropriate behavior combined with Plotina's actions served to secure his succession.

There also was clear precedent for assuming that Plotina's relationship with Hadrian was not as pure and platonic as suggested in the HA. Cassius Dio's account of the same story suggests an entirely different motivation on Plotina's part. Based on Cassius Dio's account, Plotina has a different and more concrete motivation for helping secure Hadrian's succession then in the HA. According to Cassius Dio,

---

[88] *A Latin Dictionary Founded on Andrews' Edition of Freund's Latin Dictionary Revised & Enlarged by Charlton T. Lewis, Charles Short,* Revised & enlarged edition (Oxford University Press, 1879). Provided by Perseus.Tufts.edu. Accessed February 15, 2018. Entry *delicatus*, II.A.

Hadrian had not been adopted by Trajan …Yet he had received no distinguishing mark of favor from Trajan, such as being one of the first to be appointed consul. He became Caesar and emperor owing to the fact that when Trajan died childless, Attianus, a compatriot and former guardian of his, together with Plotina, **who was in love with him**, secured him the appointment, their efforts being facilitated by his proximity and by his possession of a large military force. My father, Apronianus, who was governor of Cilicia, had ascertained accurately the whole story about him, and he used to relate the various incidents, in particular stating that the death of Trajan was concealed for several days in order that Hadrian's adoption might be announced first. This was shown also by Trajan's letters to the senate, for they were signed, not by him, but by Plotina, although she had not done this in any previous instance. [89]

In Cassius Dio's version, Plotina was only one of the conspirators who assured Hadrian's adoption and succession. Just as in the HA, she is not accused of killing Trajan through murder, but she is accused of deceiving the Senate and the people about Trajan's real wishes. Unlike the HA, Cassius Dio gives a clear motivation for Plotina's actions. She was in love with Hadrian. The "him," in this case, being Hadrian, whose proximity and possession of a large military force secured the succession, namely Hadrian. In Cassius Dio's version, Hadrian appears more active as a potential threat in order to secure his own succession. However, in the HA, the succession appears mostly dependent on Plotina's actions and favor. In the case of the HA, Hadrian is the passive recipient, which strengthens Plotina's position and role in the HA as a kingmaker. Cassius Dio is not trying to portray Plotina as a king maker and even shies away from making her the only

---

[89] Cassius Dio 69.1.1-4. Translated by, Earnest Cary, and Herbert B Foster, *Roman History, Volume VIII: Books 61-70*, 1925 Loeb edition. Ἀδριανὸς δὲ ὑπὸ μὲν Τραϊανοῦ οὐκ ἐσεποιήθη… οὐ μέντοι οὔτ᾿ ἄλλο τι ἐξαίρετον παρ᾿ αὐτοῦ ἔλαβεν οὔθ᾿ ὕπατος ἐν πρώτοις ἐγένετο, ἀλλὰ καὶ Καίσαρα αὐτὸν καὶ αὐτοκράτορα τοῦ Τραϊανοῦ ἄπαιδος μεταλλάξαντος ὅ τε Ἀττιανοῦ πολίτης αὐτοῦ ὢν καὶ ἐπίτροπος γεγονώς, καὶ ἡ Πλωτῖνα ἐξ ἐρωτικῆς φιλίας, πλησίον τε ὄντα καὶ δύναμιν πολλὴν ἔχοντα ἀπέδειξαν. ὁ γὰρ πατήρ μου Ἀπρωνιανός, τῆς Κιλικίας ἄρξας, πάντα τὰ κατ᾿ αὐτὸν ἐμεμαθήκει σαφῶς, ἔλεγε δὲ τά τε ἄλλα ὡς ἕκαστα, καὶ ὅτι ὁ θάνατος τοῦ Τραϊανοῦ ἡμέρας τινὰς διὰ τοῦτο συνεκρύφθη ἵν᾿ ἡ ποίησις προεκφοιτήσοι. ἐδηλώθη δὲ τοῦτο καὶ ἐκ τῶν πρὸς τὴν βουλὴν γραμμάτων αὐτοῦ· ταῖς γὰρ ἐπιστολαῖς οὐχ αὐτὸς ἀλλ᾿ ἡ Πλωτῖνα ὑπέγραψεν, ὅπερ ἐπ᾿ οὐδενὸς ἄλλου ἐπεποιήκει.

active player in Hadrian's succession, which he avoids by describing Attianus's role, something the HA does not include.

Cassius Dio's account also somewhat excuses Plotina's political actions by suggesting it was brought on by her romantic feelings toward Hadrian. The translation describes Plotina as being in love with Hadrian. Cassius Dio actually says that Plotina secured Hadrian the appointment ἐξ ἐρωτικῆς φιλίας literally meaning "from amorous affection." [90] Plotina's actions were prompted by her love for Hadrian. In addition, by citing Attianus first as one of the Hadrian's conspirators, Cassius Dio spreads some of the blame of the deception, so that of Plotina is not the sole political mastermind, as in the HA. Plotina's actions are of a supportive lover, which makes Cassius Dio's characterization of Plotina look more like a kingmaker following Tanaquil's or Agrippina's example. Cassius Dio's version transforms Plotina into a female being led into action by her desires for her lover and being manipulated by the other male political maneuverers. Accordingly, Cassius Dio's account makes Plotina a more promiscuous figure than in this particular episode than the HA. The HA does not mention Attianus's role in helping secure Hadrian's adoption and succession and therefore, focuses solely on Plotina and Hadrian's ambiguous relationship. This supports my claim that Plotina the *origo matronae* of the HA story and elevates her as a key figure that creates ambiguity surrounding the legitimacy of Hadrian's succession.

Without a sexual relationship, the only other motivation for helping Hadrian is the semi-maternal relationship she has with Hadrian as the wife of Hadrian's adopted

---

[90] As shown in the passage above. Cassius Dio, 69.1.2.

"father"; her relationship to Sabina, Hadrian's wife, who was also Trajan's niece and grew up under Plotina in her household, also creates a familial connection.[91] Ultimately, Plotina is portrayed in the maternal role securing succession for Hadrian, who is presented in the filial role, not unlike Agrippina and Nero. Because of these actions, Plotina, as a dutiful mother, closely resembles the stereotypical good mother of the early Empire.[92] However, her relationship to Hadrian and her motivations for her actions and her role as a kingmaker are more ambiguous than earlier female figures, like Agrippina, Livia, and Tanaquil. This ambiguity follows the general theme of the *de vita Hadriani*, which depicts emperors in both positive and negative ways and sets the stage for dubious successions that threaten the legitimacy and authority of imperial power.

---

[91] Jasper Burns, *Great Women of Imperial Rome: Mothers and Wives of the Caesars* (London; New York: Routledge, 2007), 111–12. Pliny also commends the women for living together with no apparent rivalry. Pliny the Younger. *Panegyricus,* 83-84. Translated by Betty Radice. Harvard University Press, 1972. Loeb Edition.

[92] Pryzwansky goes into depth on how Plotina, particularly in the Panegyricus, represented a feminine ideal in the Roman world.For a discussion of the ideal imperial woman see, Pryzwansky "Feminine Imperial Ideals in the Caesares of Suetonius," 33-43.

3. Faustina the Younger: Dowries and Adulteries

Plotina's favor played an instrumental role in the HA's account of Hadrian's succession. However, her relationship with Hadrian is unclear. It is never explicitly indicated if her feelings were motivated by maternal, platonic, or amorous inclinations. Likewise, her ability to manipulate and secure Hadrian's success with Trajan is equally unclear. In looking at the role of Faustina the Younger in the HA, her relationship with her husband Marcus Aurelius and her son Commodus are far more clearly defined. Nevertheless, Faustina, like Plotina, plays an integral role in the successions of both her husband and her son.

Several late antique writers, such as Cassius Dio, Herodian, and Aurelius Victor, discuss Marcus Aurelius and the women surrounding him, especially Faustina the Younger. In fact, Marcus Aurelius's own *Meditations* discuss his relationship and feelings toward his wife.[93] However, within the context of the HA, Faustina receives significant attention, not only in connection with Marcus Aurelius, but also across multiple lives. As opposed to Plotina, whose actions were confined to the *de vita Hadriani*, Faustina the Younger appears in the primary *Vita Marci Antonini Philosophi* and the corresponding secondary *vita Avidius Cassius*. As already discussed in the section on "The Structure of the HA Manuscripts," the structure of the primary and secondary lives within the HA, often pairs the primary life with a secondary life. The HA author often includes information in the secondary life, which was included already in the

---

[93] Sextus Aurelius Victor, *Book on the Emperors*, translated by H.W. Bird (Liverpool University Press, 1994), 92 and ff. 4. See also Marcus Aurelius *Meditations*, 1.17.

primary life. However, the information in the secondary life usually contains more fabrications and inventions than the primary life.[94] In Faustina the Younger's case, she plays a dominant role in primary and secondary *vitae* – the *vita Marci Antonini Philosophi* and *Avidius Cassius*, respectively. She also is mentioned briefly at the beginning of the lives of *Commodus Antoninius* and *Antoninus Pius*. Since she is only mentioned briefly in *Commodus Antoninius* and *Antoninus Pius*, my discussion will focus on her role in the *vita Marci Antonini Philosophi* and *Avidius Cassius*.[95] The HA's depiction of Faustina, in both lives, provides a unique vantage point from which to analyze the thematic role of women in the succession and legitimization of imperial power.

Not only does Faustina appear in the primary and secondary lives, but each of these lives is purported to be written by different authors – Julius Capitolinus (*Vita Marci Antonini Philosophi*) and Vulcacius Gallicanus (*Avidius Cassius*).[96] Therefore, Faustina's portrayal in these accounts can be attributed to the larger themes throughout the HA rather than the themes within the context of a specific HA author and, although it is not my goal to prove single authorship, there is a consistency in the language of the text that supports a single author. More importantly, the descriptions of Faustina in the

---

[94] See section, "The Structure of the HA Manuscripts" and ff. 36 above.

[95] For all mentions of Faustina in the HA *Vitae* and not just those where she is specifically connected to the life, see Wallinger, *Die Frauen in der Historia Augusta*, 44–45.

[96] This is the only life that Vulcacius Gallicanus writes. There is a useful chart in Thomson's book. Thomson, *Studies in the Historia Augusta*, 17.

Vita Marci Antonini Philosophi and the *Avidius Cassius* each emphasize her role as either a wife or mother pertaining to securing imperial power.

In particular, in both the *vita Marci Antonini Philosophi* and *Avidius Cassius*, Faustina is connected to Avidius Cassius's attempted coup against Marcus Aurelius. In the beginning of Marcus Aurelius's reign, Avidius was a co-ruler and was given control of the Eastern provinces. He later was proclaimed emperor in the East and in Egypt in 175.[97] Marcus Aurelius was not prepared for the attempted coup and was completely caught off guard by the attempt. Cassius Dio even suggests that he was so caught off guard by the coup that he was forced into a quick treaty with the Iazyges against whom he had been fighting.[98] It is surprising that the HA includes the lives of usurpers, such as Avidius Cassius. It is certainly not in keeping with the Suetonian style of imperial biography.[99] However, the inclusion of such usurpers further adds to the HA's theme of questioning succession and transference of imperial power and those who could wield such power. This issue of usurpation will continue in the next section on Julia Domna. Julia Domna's son Caracalla murdered his brother and co-emperor Geta in order to achieve his succession of sole emperor. Additionally, as will be shown, Avidius Cassius and Caracalla both rely on women to provide them with the attempt at usurpation and in both cases the women play significant roles in their success.

---

[97] Anthony Birley, *Marcus Aurelius: A Biography* (London: Batsford, 1987), 183–86. Also, Barbara Levick, *Faustina I and II: Imperial Women of the Golden Age*, 84-85.

[98] Cassius Dio, *Roman History.* 72.17. Translated by Earnest Cary. Harvard University Press, 1927. Loeb Classical library Edition. Birley, *Marcus Aurelius*: *A Biography*, 184.

[99] Callu argues that the HA consistently shows the tenuous relationship between the position of usurper and legitimate emperor. See, Jean-Pierre Callu, O. Desbordes, and A. Gaden, eds., *Histoire Auguste*, Collection des universités de France (Paris: Belles Lettres, 1992), xxiv–xxv.

In the *vita Avidius Cassius*, Faustina takes over the narrative and becomes a central figure, especially compared to the same episode in the *vita Marci Antonini Philosophi*. And, more importantly, she is not nearly as vilified in this life as she is in the *vita Marci Antonini Philosophi*. According to both lives, it was rumored that Faustina had written to Avidius Cassius in order to persuade him to revolt and become emperor. In both lives, she does this at a time when she believed that Marcus Aurelius was very ill and possibly dying, because she believed he was too weak to secure the succession of their son Commodus. Therefore, she sought the aid of someone who might be able to protect her and her son and wrote to Avidius Cassius, asking for his help and suggesting he declare himself emperor. Avidius does this and tries to form a coup to take over the empire, which is ultimately unsuccessful.[100] The two lives diverge slightly in the way in which they present this event and how they treat Faustina.

In the *vita Marci Antonini Philosophi*, Faustina is presented as a wife concerned about her husband's ability to rule. According to the author, Julius Capitolinus,

> Voluit Marcomanniam provinciam, voluit etiam Sarmatiam facere, et fecisset, nisi Avidius Cassius rebellasset sub eodem **in oriente**. atque **imperatorem se appellavit**, **ut quidam dicunt, Faustina volente**, *quae de mariti* **valetudine** desperaret.[101]

---

[100] HA, *vita Marci Antonini Philosophi* 24-25 and *Avidius Cassius* 6.1-7.9.

[101] HA, *vita Marci Antonini Philosophi* 24.4-6 (the bold and italic words are my own inflection).

He wished to make a province of Marcomannia and likewise of Sarmatia, and he would have done so had not Avidius Cassius just then raised a rebellion in the East. This man proclaimed himself emperor, some say, at the wish of Faustina, who was now in despair over her husband's health…[102]

Following this statement, the HA suggests there was another rumor that involved Avidius Cassius fabricating a story of Marcus Aurelius's death in order to elevate himself as emperor. Ultimately, Avidius Cassius fails and is killed.[103] In contrast, the *Avidius Cassius* includes a similar account with a few important changes to the language. According to the author, Vulcacius Gallicanus

> Hic **imperatorem se in oriente appellavit**, **ut quidam dicunt, Faustina volente**, *quae valetudini Marci iam diffidebat et timebat, ne infantes filios tueri sola non posset*, atque aliquis exsisteret, qui capta statione regia infantes de medio tolleret.[104]

> Finally, while in the East, he proclaimed himself emperor, some say, at the wish of Faustina, who now despaired of Marcus' health and was afraid that she would be unable to protect her infant children by herself, and that some one would arise and seize the throne and make away with the children.[105]

The similarities in language either suggest a single author, or a single source that the two alleged authors were both using. This would not be an unreasonable assumption. The account of Faustina's involvement with Avidius Cassius' rebellion was not unique to the HA. Cassius Dio includes a similar rumor surrounding Avidius Cassius's attempted

---

[102] HA, *vita Marci Antonini Philosophi* 24.4-6. Ballou, Magie, et al, *The Scriptores Historiae Augustae.* vol. 1. Loeb Edition.

[103] HA, *vita Marci Antonini Philosophi* 24-25.

[104] HA, *Avidius Cassius* 7.1-2.

[105] HA, *Avidius Cassius* 7.1-2. Ballou, Magie, et al, *The Scriptores Historiae Augustae.* vol. 1. Loeb Edition.

rebellion. But, in Cassius Dio's account, he claims that Faustina feared for Commodus, specifically, because he was young and simple-minded. In other words, Dio's account focuses more on Commodus' weaknesses and Faustina's attempt to counteract them, which serves more as an invective against Commodus as a future emperor than as one against Faustina.[106] In addition, based on the fact that both the *vitae Marci Antonini Philosophi* and *Avidius Cassius* cite Marius Maximus, it is fair to assume that such an account was found in the now lost biographies of Marius Maximus.[107]

However, in both lives, after the rumor that Faustina encouraged Avidius Cassius is reported, the author offsets it with a different rumor, which was that Avidius Cassius acted alone. This secondary rumor is not included in Cassius Dio's account and since Marius Maximus appears to be associated with invective reports against emperors, it seems unlikely to have been included in his account.[108] In fact, Syme points out that Marius Maximus was cited later in connection to the rebellion and the HA author disputed the invective that he claimed Marius Maximus used to defame Faustina. Instead the HA author suggests that Faustina was not connected to the rebellion and, in fact,

---

[106] Cassius Dio 72.22-23 in *Cassius Dio*, translated by, Earnest Cary, and Herbert B Foster, *Roman History, Volume IX: Books 71-80.*, 1927. Anthony Birley also mentions the similarities between Cassius Dio's account and the HA. Birley, *Marcus Aurelius*: *A Biography*, 184.

[107] For the HA's interaction with Marius Maximus see *vita Marci Antonini Philosophi*, 25.10 and *Avidius Cassius*, 6.6; For a more thorough examination of the interpolation and issues with the text – particularly the *vita Marci Antonini Philosophi*, see Geoffrey William Adams, *Marcus Aurelius in the Historia Augusta and Beyond* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2013), 156–61.

[108] See Adams, *Marcus Aurelius in the Historia Augusta and Beyond,* 22-27, for a discussion on the sources used for the *vita* containing Marcus Aurelius' life. See also Barnes, *Sources of the Historia Augusta*, 97-102.

encouraged Marcus Aurelius to stop the rebellion.[109] Regardless, the similarities in these two episodes show that that they were constructed using a common source, be it a single author or otherwise. In addition, it would not be unfair to assume that the HA is following a common tradition that tentatively links Faustina with Avidius Cassius's coup during a period when she was under duress. As previously mentioned, Cassius Dio reports a very similar story. Nevertheless, even if the story were directly copied from a common source, it would serve only to highlight the ways in which the accounts are different. Despite the similarities there is a subtle, yet important difference between how each account describes Faustina's role.

In the case of the *vita Marci Antonini Philosophi*, the text claims that the rebellion was sparked ***Faustina volente, quae de mariti valetudine desperaret*** – "when Fausitna willed it, because she despaired concerning the health of her husband."[110] Even though Faustina is implicated in this rumor, her actions are shown as not prompted by some jealousy or aggression against her husband. Rather, her actions can be interpreted as those of a wife and empress concerned about her husband's ability to maintain rule. There is nothing, however, to indicate that her actions were motivated for the sake of her children.[111] The fact that she was acting out of desperation to ensure stability in the

---

[109] HA, *Avidius Cassius*, 9. See also Syme's discussion of Marius Maximus and this episode, Ronald Syme, *Emperors and Biography: Studies in the "Historia Augusta"*. (Clarendon Press, 1971), 128–30. Barbara Levick notes the differences between the HA and Dio. See Levick, *Faustina I and II: Imperial Women of the Golden Age*, 85-87. Also Rohrbacher *The Play of Allusion in the Historia Augusta*, 4-6.

[110] HA, *vita Marci Antonini Philosophi* 24.6-7, my translation.

[111] As previously noted, Levick also shows that the HA does not condemn Faustina the way Dio does, but she does not differentiate between the account in the *vita Marci Antonini Philosophi* vs. the *Avidius Cassius*. Levick, *Faustina I and II: Imperial Women of the Golden Age*, 84-85.

Empire at a time when her husband was unable, makes her involvement more complicated and her role in the HA more ambiguous as compared to other women in similar situations. Given the fact that in other cases where empresses have been involved with the succession and usurpation, the literature tends to condemn both the Emperor for being too weak to control his wife and the wife for involving herself in politics.

For example, when Tacitus discussed Messalina's attack on the first emperor Claudius (and her attempt to overthrow Claudius for her lover), he presents Messalina as irrational, manipulative, and prompted by her sexually debauched desires.[112] According to Sandra Joshel, Tacitus's account of the Emperor Claudius's wife, Messalina, reflects a senatorial tradition that was concerned with the power being directly wielded by the emperor.[113] However, in the case of Messalina and Claudius, as Joshel outlines, Messalina constantly manipulated Claudius in order to achieve both superficial and sexual desires. Ultimately, Messalina used her femininity and sexuality to achieve her goals and manipulate Claudius and even attempted to overthrow him through another marriage.[114] In contrast to Messalina, Faustina is not connected to Avidius Cassius as a lover. Her motivations are not prompted on his behalf, but because her husband was ill and she despaired his ability to maintain rule. Therefore, similar to Plotina, the claim that Faustina's relationship that led her to support Avidius Cassius's succession and

---

[112] Tacitus, *Annales* 31-38.

[113] Joshel, "Female Desire and the Discourse of Empire: Tacitus's Messalina," 53.

[114] Joshel also argues how Messalina's sexual desires were particularly exaggerated to the point that they had a savage and violent nature Joshel, "Female Desire and the Discourse of Empire: Tacitus's Messalina," 54 and 59-61.

usurpation is ambiguous. [115] However, unlike Plotina, Faustina's motivations for helping

the usurpations are clearly stated. She acted at a time when her husband is believed to be

in ill health and near death, and wanted to secure her son's position and safety.

Nevertheless, her circumstances are similar to the circumstances of Hadrian's succession

when Trajan died. Both she and Plotina stepped in when the emperor was unable to act

as the "kingmaker" and in some way even assume the role of the emperor.

In comparison, Faustina's representation in the *Avidius Cassius* focuses on her

role as a mother and empress more than as a wife. The author states, ***Faustina volente,***

quae valetudini Marci iam diffidebat *et timebat, ne infantes filios tueri sola non*

posset.[116] As in the *vita Marci Antonini Philosophi*, the HA suggests that Avidius was

prompted at Faustina's wish and that Faustina was concerned with the health of Marcus.

However, a significant difference in the language is the use of *maritus* vs. *Marcus*. In the

vita Marci Antonini Philosophi, Faustina is concerned the heath of her husband (*maritus*).

This emphasizes the relationship between Faustina, making that relationship the focus for

her actions. However, in the *Avidius Cassius*, her concern is for Marcus's health and is

immediately followed by her fear for her children's sake, which changes the focus for her

actions. Phrasing it this way immediately removes the focus of Faustina as Marcus's

wife and strengthens the focus on her as a mother. It changes the role she has in the

---

[115] As I will show, Faustina is depicted as an adulteress elsewhere in this Life. The fact that there is no
implication of adultery between Faustina and Avidius Cassius here only increases the ambiguity of
Faustina's motivations. See HA, *vita Marci Antonini Philosophi*, 9.1-8.

[116] "At the wish of Faustina, who now despaired of Marcus's health and was afraid that she would be unable
to protect her infant children by herself, and that some one would arise and seize the throne and make away
with the children." HA, *vita Avidius Cassius*, 7.1, Ballou, Magie, et al, *The Scriptores Historiae Augustae.*
vol. 1. Loeb Edition.

Avidius Cassius. Her motivations in the *Avidius Cassius* are moved by her fear for her children, because Marcus Aurelius was sick. His illness creates a threat, especially to Commodus. Because of this, Faustina allegedly sought out Avidius Cassius. Here, her role is as a mother is the main motivation for her actions. In contrast, the *vita Marci Antonini Philosophi* does not mention her fear for her children, but instead focuses on her concern for her husband. In that case, her main motivation was prompted by her marital relationship.

In either case, Faustina's actions are the result of Marcus Aurelius's illness and seeming inability to protect the Empire. Having Faustina step in and try to control the succession through a coup when her husband was apparently ill on his deathbed thematically resonates with Plotina's actions when Trajan was on his deathbed. In both cases, the women take over in order to determine the succession of the emperor and ultimately call into question the legitimacy of imperial succession.

In particular, Faustina is concerned about Marcus's health, on behalf of the well-being of her children. Her concern is that without Marcus, her children, particularly Commodus, the logical successor to his father, would be vulnerable. She assumes the role of protector and her fear is that she will not be able to perform this function without help. Thus, in seeking Avidius Cassius, she is not necessarily undermining the authority of the Emperor, or threatening him personally, rather she is addressing a potential threat to her son's succession and seeking to safeguard it. In many cases where mothers have been involved with the succession of their sons, they often are acting against the current emperor in order to elevate their son, especially when their son's succession was not

49

guaranteed. For example, Agrippina stands out as a mother who ensured her son, Nero's, rule. But Agrippina only achieved this through deception and the murder of her husband and the Emperor, Claudius.[117]

Faustina's alleged treachery was ultimately depicted as having the same motivation as Agrippina's treachery against Claudius, because, like Agrippina, Faustina went against her husband in order to ensure the succession of her son.[118] However, unlike Agrippina, Faustina's actions did not result in the murder of her husband and emperor. Faustina was acting in the best interest of the state and the safety of the imperial household, which are much different motivations then Agrippina's motivations for elevating Nero. Just as Agrippina wanted to secure the succession for Nero, Faustina also was concerned about how to secure the succession for Commudus. But, unlike Nero, Commodus always was intended to be Marcus Aurelius's successor, whereas Nero was not clearly Claudius's successor. Faustina did not want someone to seize the throne *away* from her son once her husband died.[119] Therefore, her role in this episode is not only as a potential threat to the Empire – through her support of a usurpation and civil war – but also as a force that attempted to secure and legitimize both Avidius Cassius's rule, as well as the future rule of her son.

---

[117] Ginsburg, *Representing Agrippina*, 25–30. See also, Pryzwansky, "Feminine Imperial Ideals in the Caesares of Suetonius," 235–36.

[118] Levick, *Faustina I and II: Imperial Women of the Golden Age*, 30–31.

[119] See Oliver Hekster for discussion of succession and adoption at this time. Hekster, *Emperors and Ancestors: Roman Rulers and the Constraints of Tradition* (Oxford University Press, 2015), 11-12.

Moreover, it is important to remember that Faustina, in both cases, is only rumored to have incited the rebellion. In the *Vita Marci Antonini Philosophi*, her involvement was ambiguous. But the *Avidius Cassius* does not give any credence to the rumor. In fact, the rebellion and Faustina's involvement controls the majority of the narrative in this *vita*. Faustina practically takes over the narrative as an active, strong force that not only does not support Avidius Cassius, but also fights against him. Within the text, there are several letters that go back and forth between Marcus Aurelius and Faustina. According to the letters, Faustina actually was concerned about Avidius Cassius posing a threat both to the empire as well as her children and for this reason sought Marcus Aurelius's support, asking him to seek vengeance on Avidius Cassius and his supporters.[120] In response to the contents of these letters, the author concludes that Faustina could not have been involved in Avidius's rebellion and absolves her. The contradiction within the text between Faustina's alleged participation in Avidius Cassius's coup and the author's claim that the story was false are reminiscent of the contradictory nature of the *de vita Hadriani*.[121] The contradictions in the HA make Faustina an ambiguous character. It is unclear whether she acted treacherously and helped Avidius Cassius. The lack of certainty spreads an uncertainty about the stability of Marcus Aurelius's authority. This uncertainty is further highlighted when Faustina urges Marcus Aurelius to take action against Avidius Cassius in order to secure his rule. According to the *Avidius Cassius*,

---

[120] HA, *Avidius Cassius*, 7-11.

[121] HA, *Avidius Cassius*, 11.1-2.

51

> Ex his litteris intellegitur Cassio Faustinam consciam non fuisse, quin etiam supplicium eius graviter exegisse, si quidem Antoninum quiescentem et clementiora cogitantem ad vindictae necessitatem impulit.[122]

> From these letters it can be seen that Faustina was not in collusion with Cassius, but, on the contrary, earnestly demanded his punishment; for, indeed, it was she who urged on Antoninus the necessity of vengeance when he was inclined to take no action and was considering more merciful measures.[123]

Here, Faustina urges Marcus Aurelius to take action and not allow a major threat to his reign and the reign of Commodus. Instead, Marcus Aurelius argues against vengeance and wants to show clemency. The HA complicates this further by claiming Marcus Aurelius used both Casear and Augustus as examples of effective clemency in leadership. Yet, it also led to Caesar's assassination.[124] Therefore, it is not clear if his lack of action is depicted as positive or negative. Nevertheless, it shows a tension between his authority and his wife – who felt it necessary to urge her husband to take action.

In addition to her role in the *Avidius Cassius*, Faustina is the figure, who legitimizes and secures Marcus Aurelius's authority and power as emperor. Although she was not behind the succession the way Plotina was, Marcus Aurelius admits that it was his adoption by Antoninus Pius and marriage to his daughter that put him in the line for succession and ultimately provided him with *imperium*. According to the HA, Marcus Aurelius claimed that,

---

[122] HA, *Avidius Cassius*, 11.1.

[123] HA, *Avidius Cassius*, 11.1 Ballou, Magie, et al, *The Scriptores Historiae Augustae*. vol. 1. Loeb Edition.

[124] HA, *Avidius Cassius*, 11.4-8.

"si uxorem dimittimus, reddamus et dotem." dos autem quid
habebatur? imperium, quod ille ab socero volente Hadriano adoptatus
acceperat.[125]

"If we send our wife away, we must also return her dowry." And what was
her dowry? The Empire, which, after he had been adopted at the wish of
Hadrian, he had inherited from his father-in-law Pius.[126]

What is the implication of this claim then? Who had the power? Marcus Aurelius was
the emperor and yet there is a fragility to the authority and power he possesses. His
claim emphasized the issue of how arbitrary the legitimization of the Emperor's power
could be and how easily it could be diminished or completely undermined. How serious
his belief was – that if he divorced his wife he would lose his command as emperor – is
unclear from the text, but whether it was an actual threat is not the point. In fact, it is
absurd to believe that he would have to step down as emperor, as though returning the
dowry. The HA was suggesting, in a humorous way, that Marcus Aurelius needed
Faustina's dowry more than her fidelity in order maintain his rule. Even though there is
no serious threat, this passage shows how important Faustina is to the concept of his
succession presented in the HA.

Based on this, Faustina's dowry is more than just money. Her dowry is the whole
Empire and the suggestion is that the Empire will remain under her control and she can
bequeath it to whomever she marries. Since Rome has no prescribed method for

---

[125] HA, *vita Marci Antonini Philosophi*, 19.9.

[126] HA, *vita Marci Antonini Philosophi*, 19.9, Ballou, Magie, et al, *The Scriptores Historiae Augustae.* vol.
1. Loeb Edition.

succession, Marcus Aurelius does not technically need Faustina.[127] Nevertheless, the

HA's portrayal here reflects how important relationships to women were. In addition,

this is also connected to Marcus Aurelius' adoption of Hadrian, who apparently approved

of Marcus Aurelius marrying Faustina and securing himself as Antoninus Pius's heir.

This establishes the thematic connection between Plotina and Faustina, who both proved

important to the marriage, adoption, and succession of Hadrian and Marcus Aurelius,

respectively. Ultimately, this serves as an elaborate rhetorical device. Nonetheless, it

clearly highlights the issue of legitimate power and succession so pervasive throughout

the HA. And, once again, a woman is at the heart of the issue.

In addition, Faustina is depicted as a treacherous, adulterous wife. The HA

depicts her infidelity as ultimately making a fool out of Marcus Aurelius. In particular,

he is described as a fool when he allows her lovers to advance in public office.[128] In this

case, her lovers benefit from a connection with her and gain more political power. In

turn, Marcus Aurelius's authority is discredited. Her adultery reflected badly on his

character.[129] In fact, her infidelity extended so far that it raised questions about the

legitimacy of Commodus as an heir and her own legitimacy as a wife. According to the

HA,

---

[127] Ginsburg, *Representing Agrippina*, 25–26.

[128] HA, *vita Marci Antonini Philosophi*, 29.1.

[129] For more on adoption and succession see Suzanne Dixon, *The Roman Family* (JHU Press, 1992), 111–13.For Early rules and standards on adoption in the Roman world see, Hugh Lindsay, *Adoption in the Roman World* (Cambridge University Press, 2009).; For rules on adultery, see Grubbs, *Women and the Law in the Roman Empire*, 82–87.

multi autem ferunt Commodum omnino ex adulterio natum, si quidem
Faustinam satis constet apud Caietam condiciones sibi et nauticas et
gladiatorias elegisse. de qua cum diceretur Antonino Marco, ut eam
repudiaret, si non occideret, dixisse fertur "si uxorem dimittimus,
reddamus et dotem." dos autem quid habebatur? imperium, quod ille ab
socero volente Hadriano adoptatus acceperat.[130]

Many writers, however, state that Commodus was really begotten in
adultery, since it is generally known that Faustina, while at Caieta, used to
choose out lovers from among the sailors and gladiators. When Marcus
Antoninus was told about this, that he might divorce, if not kill her, he is
reported to have said "If we send our wife away, we must also return her
dowry". And what was her dowry? the Empire, which, after he had been
adopted at the wish of Hadrian, he had inherited from his father-in-law
Pius.[131]

Here, Faustina's adultery is purposefully connected to the Marcus Aurelius's quip about

her dowry being the Empire. Yet, the question raised by this passage is much deeper than

issues of infidelity. Marcus Aurelius's masculinity is challenged through his willingness

to submit as a cuckold. In weakening his masculinity, the author explicitly questions his

ability to rule. Being an emperor meant being the head of the Empire. If Marcus

Aurelius could be cuckolded as the head of his own household, it raised the question of

whether he could maintain his position as head of the Empire.[132]   In addition, he claims

that if he does not submit as a cuckold then he is in danger of losing his right to rule the

Empire. Based on the passage, Marcus Aurelius regarded the Empire as the dowry he

received when he married Faustina. In other words, the HA's depiction of Marcus

Aurelius predicates his authority on Faustina, because his marriage secured his adoption

---

[130] HA, *vita Marci Antonini Philosophi*, 19.7-9.

[131] HA, *vita Marci Antonini Philosophi*, 19.7-9, Ballou, Magie, et al, *The Scriptores Historiae Augustae.*
vol. 1. Loeb Edition.

[132] Williams, *Roman Homosexuality*, 135–37.

and succession.[133] This suggests that at its core, Marcus Aurelius's power was derived

from his marriage and adoption. Thus, she secured his succession to imperial power and

her relationship with him assured his legitimacy as the successor of Antoninus Pius.

This passage reflects a paradoxical nature of Marcus Aurelius's imperial power: Faustina

weakens him through her adultery, but also legitimizes his reign through their

relationship.

Additionally, Faustina the Younger, as the wife of Marcus Aurelius, acts as a

counterpoint to the emperor's well-known and acclaimed virtuousness. Marcus

Aurelius's reign was acclaimed even in the fourth century as a model of a good emperor.

In particular, he was well known for his clemency.[134] This virtue was something he

showed to Avidius Cassius. In contrast, Faustina demanded that Marcus Aurelius

consider how Antoninus Pius dealt with rebellion. She claims that not taking decisive

action against Avidius Cassius is to disregard his duty to his wife and son.[135] This

suggests that the clemency of Marcus Aurelius actually serves to threaten his heir and his

wife. In this case, Faustina tells the emperor how he should act and reminds him of his

duty as emperor. Again, this serves to raise questions about imperial power and who

could wield it. This is also emphasized in the fact that the HA includes the rumor that

Commodus may be illegitimate. The fact that Commodus was Marcus Aurelius's son is

---

[133] Levick, *Faustina I and II: Imperial Women of the Golden Age*, 102–4.

[134] HA, *Vita Marci Antonini Philosophi*, 26.10. Also see Stephen A. Stertz, who discusses the attribution of Clemency and Marcus Aurelius's reception in the later fourth century. Stephen A. Stertz, "Marcus Aurelius as Ideal Emperor in Late-Antique Greek Thought," *The Classical World* 70, no. 7 (1977): 435.

[135] HA, *Avidius Cassius*, 9.5-11.7.

an important factor for his legitimate succession. However, the passage above includes information that creates ambiguity about Commodus' birth. Faustina's adultery not only creates ambiguity regarding Marcus Aurelius's authority as emperor, but it also creates ambiguity regarding Commodus's succession. Like Plotina, Faustina's character appears at moments when imperial power is in questions, i.e. the usurpation of Avidius Cassius, and Marcus Aurelius and Commodus' legitimacy as successors.

Another way in which Faustina created ambiguity about imperial power came in her more passive role as the recipient of Marcus Aurelius's honors. When Marcus Aurelius was ordered to the court of Antoninus Pius and put in a position of succession as Antoninus' adopted son, he was initially resistant to becoming an emperor and according to the HA, the Senate had to order him to assume the government of the state.[136] This lack of a desire for power actually legitimates Marcus Aurelius's rule and power. It follows along with the idea that good emperors maintain certain moral and ethical virtues. By claiming to conduct themselves ethically, these emperors conform to a standard of agreed upon authority, whether actual, or not.[137] Effectively, the HA presents Marcus Aurelius as a strong, humble leader; as such he is supposed to embody the proper virtues of an emperor, one of which was to abstain from a lust for power. However, Marcus Aurelius was not opposed to exalting his family and household. For instance, when he received his seventh salutation as *imperator*, he also declared Faustina (who was

---

[136] HA, *vita Marci Antonini Philosophi*, 6.6-7.10.

[137] Carlos F Noreña, *Imperial Ideals in the Roman West: Representation, Circulation, Power* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 37–93.

traveling with the army) the *mater castrorum*.[138] According to Barbara Levick, both the

title and Faustina's presence were unusual and potentially even regarded as "un-

Roman."[139] The fact that Faustina received unprecedented titles and acted in

unprecedented ways, by travelling with the camp, further complicates her character and

questions her role and Marcus Aurelius's authority.

Faustina acts as the thematic element that legitimizes and secures Marcus

Aurelius's authority and power as emperor. Although she was not behind the succession

process the way Plotina was in Hadrian's case, Marcus Aurelius admits it was his

adoption by Antoninus Pius and marriage to his daughter that put him in the line for

succession and ultimately provided him with *imperium*. He further claims that if he

should sever his relationship with his wife, he would forfeit that power. He would forfeit

the empire. What is the implication of this claim then? What was legitimate imperial

power? Marcus Aurelius was the emperor and yet he underscores the fragile nature of

that authority and power. His claim emphasized the issue of how arbitrary the

legitimization of the Emperor's power could be and how easily it could be diminished or

completely undermined. How serious his claim was – that if he divorced his wife he

would lose his command as emperor – is unclear from the text, but whether it was an

actual threat is not the point. In fact, it is absurd to believe that he would have to step

down as emperor, as though returning the dowry. Rather, the HA was suggesting a

questioning succession and imperial power. This is further questioned in response to the

---

[138] HA, *vita Marci Antonini Philosophi*, 26.1-9 and Levick, *Faustina I and II: Imperial Women of the Golden Age*, 78-79.

[139] Levick, *Faustina I and II: Imperial Women of the Golden Age*, 78.

emasculation of an unfaithful wife and a loss of connection to Antoninus Pius. That is assuming Marcus Aurelius felt threatened at all. Ultimately, this serves as an elaborate rhetorical device. Nonetheless, it clearly highlights the issue of legitimate power and succession so pervasive throughout the HA.

Moreover, Faustina's exploitative relationship with Avidius Cassius not only shows her involvement in the succession of a potential rival to Marcus Aurelius, it also reflects her role as a mother securing her son's future succession. Faustina embodies both the maternal and marital function in the HA. Unlike Plotina, whose relationship to Hadrian, and her motivations for securing his succession in the *de vita Hadriani* are unclear, Faustina's function, as a literary device, is more defined. Yet, like Plotina, Faustina was instrumental in creating the ambiguity concerning Marcus Aurelius, Avidius Cassius, and Commodus' authority and how they gain and maintains imperial power – driving themes of the HA. In contrast to women, like Messalina and Agrippina, who discredited Claudius' rule, Faustina and Plotina do not necessarily discredit the rule of Marcus Aurelius and Hadrian. While starting coups and playing kingmaker are problematic, their actions also serve to secure the succession of the emperor.

4. Julia Domna: A New Dynasty

Plotina and Faustina both stand out as dominant figures associated with the succession and legitimization of the emperor. Plotina acts as the *origo matronae,* which establishes the ambiguity regarding imperial power and succession. Faustina presented the dichotomy between the maternal and marital relationships in the HA, as presented throughout the primary and secondary lives. In Faustina's case, her political maneuverings are strongest and most positively portrayed when she was acting on behalf of her son and securing his succession, thus guarding the stability of the Empire. Yet, in her marital role, Faustina was not cast as a political maneuverer, but rather as an adulteress, whom Marcus Aurelius could not cast off without the threat of degrading his own authority. In the end, the political mother and unfaithful wife create as much ambiguity for Faustina's character as Plotina's relationship with Hadrian. However, these figures worked to create ambiguity concerning legitimate rule and succession and enhance on of the main themes of the HA, namely – what is a legitimate Roman emperor? Julia Domna continues this questioning theme through her connection to her husband in the *vita Severus,* as well as her sons in the *vita Antoninus Caracallus* and the *vita Antoninus Geta*.

Like Faustina, Julia Domna appears throughout several lives of emperors and is connected to the succession and legitimization of those emperors. In addition, Faustina and Julia both act as figures that connect the lives together, particularly between the primary (here, the *vita Severus* and *Antoninus Caracallus*) and the secondary lives (here, the *vita Antoninus Geta*.) In other words, not only are women in this first group of HA

lives thematically connected to the transitions of power, but they also are connected to the transitions in the lives in the HA.[140] This is a theme with which HA is particularly concerned. In Julia Domna's case, she not only represents a transition of power between Didius Julianus and Septimius Severus, and later her sons Caracalla and Geta, but also she is connected with a new age in the Roman Empire, through the transition from the Antonines to the Severan dynasties. Moreover, through her role in the succession of Septimius Severus, she is a part of the first succession of a non-Italian emperor.[141] Furthermore, after the succession of her husband, Julia Domna was at the forefront of Caracalla's reign, who, based on the HA's unbridled invective, was one of the worst emperors in the beginning of the third century.

Julia first appears in the HA in the *vita Severus*. According to the HA, Julia originally Domna attracted the attention of Septimius Severus after he became the legate of Lugdunensis and he was searching for a politically beneficial union.[142] At this time, the HA claims Septimius Severus' first wife of ten years had already died. Accordingly, he sought a new wife through the use of horoscopes in order to achieve an advantageous union. As such, the HA discusses Septimius Severus' early life and career without any mention of his first wife, except to say that she had died and he was looking for a new

---

[140] There are other examples in the first thematic group. Notably, other than the three women I am focusing on here, there also is Domitia Lucilla – the mother of Marcus Aurelius, who appears in the *vita Didius Iulianus*, and Faustina the Elder (the mother of Faustina the Younger), who appears in the vitae *Antoninus Pius* and *Verus*. Wallinger provides citations and summaries of the all the women in the HA. Wallinger, *Die Frauen in der Historia Augusta*.

[141] Barbara Levick, *Julia Domna, Syrian Empress* (London; New York: Routledge, 2007), 1–4.

[142] T.D. Barnes claims that prior to his legateship, Septimius Severus was without official employment and traveled around Athens dedicating himself to study. T. D. Barnes, "The Family and Career of Septimius Severus," *Historia: Zeitschrift Für Alte Geschichte* 16, no. 1 (1967): 92.

and propitious marriage. [143] In fact, the HA that Septimius Severus's first wife, Marcia,

was not even mentioned in Septimius's own accounts of that he wrote life.[144] Since the

HA relegates Septimius Severus's first wife to this initial comment, Julia Domna

becomes the main focus as his wife. Furthermore, there is also a clear reason for

Septimius Severus's choice of Julia Domna and it is the reason she plays such an

important role in the *vita Severus*. According to the HA,

> dein Lugdunensem provinciam legatus accepit, cum amissa uxore aliam
> vellet ducere, genituras sponsarum requirebat, ipse quoque matheseos
> peritissimus, et cum audisset esse in Syria quandam quae id geniturae
> haberet ut regi iungeretur, eandem uxorem petiit, Iuliam scilicet, et accepit
> interventu amicorum. ex qua statim pater factus est.[145]

> After this he was appointed to the province of Lugdunensis as legate. He
> had meanwhile lost his wife, and now, wishing to take another, he made
> inquiries about the horoscopes of marriageable women, being himself no
> mean astrologer; and when he learned that there was a woman in Syria
> whose horoscope predicted that she would wed a king (I mean Julia, of
> course), he sought her for his wife, and through the mediation of his
> friends secured her. By her, presently, he became a father.[146]

In this short passage, several important details are provided not only about Julia, but also

Septimius Severus and the importance of his marriage to her. The first detail to note is

that Septimius decided to remarry after he had become a legate in Lugdunensis.

Therefore, his decision to remarry came at a moment when he had already started to

achieve success and recognition in his military and political career. In the HA, Septimius

---

[143] HA, *vita Severus* 3.8. Burns suggests he was in Gaul when he proposed marriage to Julia, but likely met her when her was a solider in Syria. Burns, *Great Women of Imperial Rome*, 183–84.

[144] HA, *vita Severus* 3.1-2. However, he apparently set up statues to her after he became Emperor.

[145] HA, *vita Severus* 3.8-9.

[146] HA, *vita Severus* 3.8-9, Ballou, Magie, et al, *The Scriptores Historiae Augustae*. vol. 1. Loeb Edition.

Severus's timing to pick a new wife (and not just any wife, but one who will be advantageous for him) corresponds with his career ambitions. It is not surprising to see marriage used in this capacity, but the particular timing here is important because it reflects Septimius's own concerns to achieve an advantageous marriage that corresponds to his ambitious nature.[147] The HA emphasizes this by the fact that Septimius sought a union to secure more power and authority for himself and even used horoscopes to find a wife that would be useful to his career. He picked a wife who was foretold to marry a king. Essentially, the HA claims he sought a divinely ordained wife, who would bring her husband power.[148] However, as Barbara Levick shows, this was potentially dangerous for Septimius Severus. The advertising of such a horoscope could anger Commodus – who was the emperor at the time. Because of this, it is likely that the story of Julia's horoscope was not circulated until after Septimius Severus was proclaimed emperor.[149] Yet, the HA includes it as a primary reason for Septimius Severus marrying Julia. This suggests that Septimius Severus always intended to be the emperor and marrying Julia helped accomplish that goal. By agreeing to marry Severus, Julia transitively agrees to help make him emperor through her association. This makes Julia Domna as much of a kingmaker as Plotina and Faustina the Younger.

---

[147] See Anthony Richard Birley, *Septimius Severus: The African Emperor* (London ; New York: Routledge, 1999), 75–77.; Marriages were legally contracted arrangements – even contracts found around and near Syria included the legal provisions and specifications, such as a dowry, for both parties. See Grubbs, *Women and the Law in the Roman Empire*, 133–35.

[148] HA, *vita Severus* 3.9-4.1.

[149] Levick, *Julia Domna: Syrian Empress,* 29-30.

In order to legitimize his succession as emperor, Septimius Severus used this story as a way to promte himself. In this case, his marriage suggests that he is predestined to rule as emperor and therefore, his marriage portrayed as an important element as his image as a legitimate Roman ruler. This story of Julia Domna's marriage to Septimius Severus is not recorded in the other sources. Neither Cassius Dio, nor Aurelius Victor mentions it, and even Herodian, who contains a detailed account of Septimius Severus's many portents foretelling his rule, fails to make a connection to his marriage with Julia.[150] The HA focuses on this connection between divine auspices, marriage, and Septimius's legitimacy as an emperor. Julie Langford argues that the HA likely used Septimius's autobiographic accounts as a source for this.[151] Yet, it also could be an invention of the HA author. Either way, it is clear the HA thrusts Julia forward as a central figure connected with Septimius's succession. Ultimately, the HA's version of Septimius Severus's marriage to Julia Domna underscores the fact that Septimius, unlike his Antonine predecessors, was not adopted as an heir and, therefore, has to assert legitimacy to his rule. One of the first ways the HA depicts Septimius's legitimacy as emperor is through his marriage to Julia Domna.

In addition, the above passage also claims that Septimius was talented at astrology. While this alone is not necessarily shocking, it is interesting to note that the

---

[150] Herodian 2.9.1-13 in *Herodian*, translated by, C. R Whittaker (London: Heinemann, 1970). Loeb Edition.

[151] Langford also makes the argument that the horoscope was meant to promote Septimius Severus's legitimacy and he would have been "horrified" to have it construed as Julie having authority and influence over him. Langford, *Maternal Meglomania* 5, 60 and ff.5, 163 ff. 78-79.

Emperor Hadrian was described with the same talent.[152] Connections to the past

Antonine dynasty was essential to Septimius's early reign and was something that he

encouraged through coinage and even his posthumous adoption as Marcus Aurelius's

son. The HA recognizes Septimius Severus's attempts at continuity with the Antonines

during his reign and weaves this into the text. In particular, the HA author draws parallels

between Hadrian and Septimius Severus. For instance, in the *vita Aelius*, the author

claims that *fuisse enim Hadrianum **peritum matheseos** Marius Maximus usque adeo

demonstrat*[153] "For Marius Maximus thus described that Hadrian was an expert

astrologer." This language, which describes Hadrian as *peritum matheseos*, is almost

identical to the language in the above passage, which described Septimius Severus as

matheseos peritissimus. This type of linguistic allusion between the two texts creates a

connection between Septimius and Hadrian that is a basis for comparison between the

two *vitae* in the HA.[154] This connection, particularly at the moment of Septimius

Severus's marriage and subsequent predestined rule casts Septimius Severus in a similar

nature to Hadrian, who – as was shown – had an ambiguous succession through Plotina's

manipulations.

Yet, this is not the only case of a connection between Hadrian and Septimius

Severus. According to the *vita Severus*, Septimius, prior to his appointment as legate of

---

[152] HA, *de vita Hadriani* 26.7.

[153] The HA also claims that some suggest that it was a Sibylline prophecy rather than the Virgilian Oracle. HA, *vita Aelius* 3.9.

[154] See Rohrbacher's use of Joseph Pucci's argument that allusion in literature requires a "full-knowing readers" in terms of audience and his discussion on the use of allusion as a way to draw connections between two texts. Rohrbacher, *Play of Allusion in the Historia Augusta*, 16-21 and 45-46.

Lugdunensis, came to Rome and encountered a man reading the *de vita Hadriani* – the text does not specify the author of this particular *vita*. Upon meeting this stranger and his reading materials, the author claims Septimius considered it a sign of his future success.[155] It does not provide any reasoning for Septimius considering this a sign. The reader is left to assume a connection between Septimius Severus and Hadrian. It is clear that Septimius Severus's assumption was meant to show that he connected his future with Hadrian's. Thus, the *vita Severus* should be read in comparison to the *de vita Hadriani*.

There are other instances between the HA's portrayal of Hadrian that further this relationship with Septimius Severus. In another instance, in the *de vita Hadriani*, the HA author describes Hadrian as consulting a Virgilian oracle when he was concerned that he had lost favor with Trajan. According to the text the Oracle responded,

> Quis procul ille autem ramis insignis olivae
> sacra ferens? nosco crines incanaque menta
> regis Romani, primam qui legibus urbem
> fundabit, Curibus parvis et paupere terra
> missus in imperium magnum, cui deinde subibit…[156]

> But who is yonder man, by olive wreath
> Distinguished, who the sacred vessel bears?
> I see a hoary head and beard. Behold
> The Roman King whose laws shall establish Rome
> Anew, from tiny Cures' humble land
> Called to a mighty realm. Then shall arise…[157]

---

[155] HA, *vita Severus* 1.6.

[156] HA, *de vita Hadriani*, 2.8.

[157] HA, *de vita Hadriani*, 2.8, Ballou, Magie, et al, *The Scriptores Historiae Augustae*. vol. 1. Loeb Edition.

In this passage the Virgilian oracle informs Hadrian that the new Roman King will be grey-haired and bearded (in other words, Hadrian). In the very next passage, the author claims that Hadrian received two other intimations of his future rule. One of the foreshadowings was another prophetic message quoted from Apollonius of Syria and his marriage with Trajan's grandniece, which was supported by Plotina.[158] Hadrian receives a prophecy that claims he will be the new king of Rome. Literally, *regis Romani*. In comparison, Julia Domna is prophesized to marry a king, *regi*. Hadrian and Septimius Severus are the only emperors in the first thematic group that are specifically called *rex*.[159] In both cases, there is a direct connection to a prophecy that supports their legitimacy as a successor. Furthermore, both cases come in connection to an advantageous marriage and, in Hadrian's case, Plotina's support was instrumental to that marriage. Therefore, this connection between Hadrian and Septimius Severus extends to Plotina and Julia Domna, both during marriages that foreshadowed the succession of their respective emperors. Lastly, this passage also depicts on of Hadrian's omens as coming from a Syrian. A small detail, yet in connection to the rest further connects Julia Domna, who was also a Syrian.

In the case of the comparison of Faustina, where she allegedly encouraged Avidius Cassius's rebellion out of concern for Marcus Aurelius's health, two different authors supposedly wrote the two lives of Marcus Aurelius and Avidius Cassius. As

---

[158] HA, *de vita Hadriani*, 2.8-10.

[159] Based on a word digital word search through *Perseus Digital Library* for rex and all its declined forms in the lives from the *de vita Hadriani* through the *vita Antoninus Geta*. http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:2008.01.0508 (Accessed March 19, 2018)

suggested above, the different authors each manipulated a shared account in order to direct the focus to Faustina's marital and maternal roles. However, in case of the comparison between Hadrian and Septimius Severus (everything from the *peritum matheseos* to the connection of the *de vita Hadriani* in Septimius Severus) were all written by the same alleged author, Aelius Spartianus.[160] These connections, therefore, should be understood as a purposeful thematic construction that connects Hadrian to Septimius Severus.

This is particularly important to the thematic structure Thomson proposes for the first group of Lives in the HA manuscript tradition.[161] The relationship created between Septimius and Hadrian reflects the fact that Septimius is the start of a new dynasty, as well as a new period in the Roman Empire. The HA's thematic construction between Hadrian and Septimius Severus emphasizes this through the depiction of the questionable nature of imperial rule within the first thematic group. Septimius Severus' dynasty brought with it foreign rulers including Septimius Severus, who was the first foreign ruler from non-Italian descent.[162] His reign, along with his sons lives, Caracalla and Geta, are the last lives in the first thematic group of the HA. The uncertainty of Septimius Severus's succession, an individual outside of the Antonine dynasty and as the first

---

[160] Aelius Spartianus wrote the de vita Hadriani, Aelius, Didius Julianus, Severus, Prescennius Niger, Anotoninus Caracallus, and Geta.

[161] Referring to the three thematic groups designed by Mark Thomson. See Thomson, *Studies in the Historia Augusta*, 90-93 and my discussion of the thematic groups above under the section, "The Structure of the HA Manuscripts."

[162] Levick, in particular, discusses the Syrian origins of Julia and the African background of Septimius Severus and questions the extent they were part of the Severan dynasty's identity, as well as the portrayal in the sources. Levick, *Julia Domna, Syrian Empress*, 24–28.

foreign, Roman emperor resonates with the initial ambiguity of succession and imperial authority established by Plotina in the *de vita Hadriani*.

The fact that Hadrian was an ambiguous ruler with a dubious succession is mirrored in the story of Septimius Severus. This not only supports the argument that Hardian was the *origo imperatoris*, but reflects the larger theme of the HA as a whole work, namely the nature of the emperor. The HA is concerned with succession, because the HA is particularly concerned with who can become a Roman Emperor. The first thematic group of lives begins by raising questions about who can and should be able to acquire power and then ends with a dubious foreign leader, who not only succeeds outside of the Antonine line, but also like Marcus Aurelius, is responsible for creating a detrimental succession in the form of his son Caracalla.

Like Hadrian, at the heart of Septimius Severus's succession and rule is his wife Julia Domna. Julia was from a prominent family in Emesa, Syria and her father was a daughter of an important priest.[163] This meant a marriage to her created important alliances for Septimius Severus.[164] Despite what the HA claims about Septimius finding her through auspicious means, it is likely that Septimius first became acquainted with Julia and her family when he toured Syria as a legate in the province.[165] This supports the argument that the story of Julia being predestined to marry an emperor was probably

---

[163] According to Elizabeth Wallinger, the name Domna was not included in any of the ancient texts that discuss Julia. However, the name does appear on some of the imperial coins. Elizabeth Wallinger, *Die Frauen in der Historia Augusta*, 84-85.

[164] Langford, *Maternal Megalomania*, 6–7.

[165] Barnes, "The Family and Career of Septimius Severus," 92.

not circulated until after Septimius Severus had already become emperor.[166]

Nevertheless, the use of the story underscores Septimius Severus's precarious position as a new, foreign emperor that was not connected to any of the preceding emperors. His succession lacked a marriage and adoption that connected him to the Antonines. In fact, Septimius Severus actually attempted to connect himself with the Antonine line by claiming Marcus Aurelius had adopted him and that he was the brother of Commodus.[167] This claim to Marcus Aurelius and Commodus not only connects him with legitimate leadership, but also to the Antonine line, which included Hadrian and therefore created continuity between his rule and an already established ruling dynasty was an important part of Septimius Severus's early imperial propaganda.[168] In addition to connecting himself directly to the Antonines, Septimius Severus also established Julia Domna in connection to the Antonine line. Therefore, the HA's recognition of the connections in the text is a reflection of the how Septimius Severus promoted his legitimacy.

---

[166] Levick, *Julia Domna, Syrian Empress,* 29-32.

[167] The HA claims Septimius Severus desired to be a member of Marcus Aurelius's family. HA, *vita Severus* 10.4-6. For Septimius' purposeful connection of Julia to Faustina the Younger; see Charmaine Gorrie, "Julia Domna's Building Patronage, Imperial Family Roles and the Severan Revival of Moral Legislation," *Histzeitalte Historia: Zeitschrift Für Alte Geschichte* 53, no. 1 (2004): 62–65. For the Severan stylization as an Antonine and imperial propaganda, see Drora Baharal, "The Portraits of Julia Domna from the Years 193-211 A.D. and the Dynastic Propaganda of L. Septimius Severus," *Latomus*, 1992, 113–18.

[168] Manders and Wallace-Hadrill discuss the construct of imperial power and the power negotiations that included the use of propaganda. But it is necessary to divorce the concept of propaganda – as a form of influencing and communicating power – with the modern 20th century connotations. Also, Wallace-Hadrill employs Max Weber's theory of charismatic leadership, as does Harris. See Erika Manders, "Mapping the Representation of Roman Imperial Power in Times of Crisis," in *Crises and the Roman Empire: Proceedings of the Seventh Workshop of the International Network Impact of Empire, Nijmegen, June 20-24, 2006*, ed. Impact of Empire Workshop, Olivier Hekster, and et al., vol. 7, Impact of Empire (Leiden ; Boston: Brill, 2007), 275–80. Andrew Wallace-Hadrill, "The Emperor and His Virtues," *Historia: Zeitschrift Für Alte Geschichte* 30, no. 3 (1981): 298–99. For another look at Weber and the use of charismatic leadership in discussing Roman imperial ideology see, Ando, *Imperial Ideology and Provincial Loyalty in the Roman Empire*, 27–32.

The connections between the Marcus Aurelius and Septimius Severus were an important part of the propaganda in the early years of Septimius' reign. As Drora Baharal shows, Septimius Severus contrived to make his family, especially Julia Domna, look like the Antonines both is coins and statuary in order to present continuity between his rule and the Antonines. He also presented Julia's image early in his reign in a fashion that mimicked Plotina's and Faustina's hairstyles and features and he also portrayed Julia and his sons in a similar fashion to Marcus Aurelius and Faustina.[169] In addition, according to Langford, he had Julia named the *mater castrorum*, which was a title originally given to Faustina by Marcus Aurelius.[170] These title, portraits, inscriptions, and numismatic evidence all show a coordinated effort on the part of Septimius Severus to build a link between himself and the Antonines, in order to legitimize his succession as Emperor. This type of propaganda is clearly represented in the material sources and evidence. Following this example, the HA is using a familiar trope that Septimius, himself, promoted; however, the HA links these tropes so as to focus on his succession with his marriage to Julia in a way that the other sources did not.

The HA depicts Septimius Severus's search for an advantageous marriage as reaching an apex during his military career. The fact that he looked into his horoscope and was searching for a wife, one who could enhance his power and authority, suggests he was already contemplating his usurpation, a violent and treasonous act that would not

---

[169] Baharal, "The Portraits of Julia Domna from the Years 193-211 A.D. and the Dynastic Propaganda of L. Septimius Severus," 113–18.

[170] Langford, *Maternal Megalomania*, 31–38.

have been considered legitimate and could have ended his career and life if found out.[171]

Septimius Severus's actions not only underscore his desire to be the successor to the

emperor, but they also show that he knew he would need to legitimize his imperial

power. One of the main ways the HA shows him doing this is through his marriage and

connection to Julia. The way in which the HA juxtaposes Septimius Severus's marriage

to Julia with the overthrow of the Emperor Didius Julianus and Septimius Severus's

subsequent succession, supports the idea that his marriage played a role in his succession

as emperor. Ultimately, the prophecy about Julia marrying a ruler came true and serves

as the HA's implication that Julia acts as a necessary agent to imperial succession.[172]

Julia's marriage to Septimius Severus is not the only way in which Julia

legitimizes an emperor's succession. According to the HA, Julia also married her

'stepson,' Caracalla. In this marriage she also acts as a necessary agent in legitimizing

Caracalla's succession and usurpation of his brother, Geta. Julia Domna's role as both a

mother and wife alters between the three versions found in the lives of Septimius

Severus, Antoninus Caracalla, and Antoninus Geta. In each *vitae*, Julia serves a different

role, which emphasizes the questionable legitimacy of each figure. However, the HA,

along with other fourth century sources, seems to be confused about the relationship

between Julia Domna and her son Caracalla, who is portrayed as Julia's stepson. Both

Herodian and Cassius Dio are clear about the fact that Julia Domna is the mother of both

---

[171] Langford describes the importance of divine favor and its use by Septimius Severus. Langford, *Maternal Meglomania,* 67-70.

[172] After marrying Julia, the HA describes Septimius Severus' military career and his service to Commodus. Immediately following this short description, Septimius challenges Didius Julianus. HA, *vita Severus* 3.9-5.11.

Caracalla and Geta. Scholars attribute the fabrication of Julia's and Caracalla's relationship in the HA to the use of the later fourth century sources, such as the *Kaisergeschicte* (KG) and Aurelius Victor.[173] It could be, and likely is, a fabrication developed intended as an invective, which was not unique, particularly for Julia Domna. For example, Herodian suggests there were rumors that claimed Julia was called a Jocasta.[174]

However, many suggest that the HA's use of Julia Domna's marriage to Caracalla originated from another source. For instance, according to Michael Meckler, the story of Julia Domna seducing her stepson into marriage so closely follows the account of the fourth century historian, Aurelius Victor, that Meckler believes the HA merely copied Victor's account, or a similar one in the KG. The content of both stories is almost identical except, quite notably, in the presentation of Julia Domna.[175] But, why use Victor for this story when the HA had full use of good sources through the *vita Severus*

---

[173] Although it is debated if Victor is responsible for the HA's version of this episode. For example, H.W. Bird suggests the inaccurate detail about Julia being Caracalla's stepmother comes from the KG or even possibly Marius Maximus. As a fourth century source, the KG may have included such false information, but it seems less likely for a source such as Marius Maximus that was contemporary with Herodian. More importantly, this particular version of Caracalla's seduction and marriage to Julia does not appear in Eutropius or the *Epitome de Caesaribus*. Therefore, because of the strong similarities, historians, such as Meckler, suggest that the HA used Aurelius Victor for this account. See Aurelius Victor, *Book on the Emperors*, 113, note 4. And Michael Meckler, "Caracalla and His Late-Antique Biographer: A Historical Commentary of the Vita Caracalli in the Historia Augusta" (University of Michigan, Classical Studies, 1994).

[174] Herodian *History of the Empire* 4.9.3. This was a double insult because Jocasta also had a pair of rival sons, Eteocles and Polynices, and she committed incest. But Herodian only reports this as a rumor meant to disparage Caracalla and Julia and he does not mention any illicit marriage. See *Herodian* Books I-IV. Translated by C.R. Whittaker. Harvard University Press, 1969. (Loeb Edition) see pg.423 ff.3.

[175] See Meckler, *Caracalla and His Late-antique Biographer;* H.W. Bird also supports this argument, but also suggests that it is an error that originally could have come from Marius Maximus. This is unconvincing given that the other third century sources like Cassius Dio and Herodian do not include it. See Aurelius Victor, *Book on the Emperors*, 113, note 4. See also Wallinger, *Die Frauen in Der Historia Augusta*, 86-87.

and well into *vita Antoninus Caracallus*? Since sources such as Marius Maximus

certainly would not have inaccurately portrayed Julia as Caracalla's stepmother, the fact

that the HA records this fabrication in the vitae *Severus, Antoninus Caracallus*, and

Antoninus Geta, suggests that the author purposefully decided to deviate from Marius

Maximus – his dominant source in these lives – and, instead, record the relationship using

Victor's version.[176] In fact, the same alleged author, Aelius Spartianus, directly cites

Marius Maximus in *vitae Severus* and *Antoninus Geta*, but does not directly cite him in

the *vita Antoninus Caracallus* where he includes Victor's account of Julia and Caracalla's

marriage.[177] This further emphasizes the purposeful use of an alternate account of Julia

and Caracalla's relationship from another source other than Marius Maximus.

According to the *vita Severus*, Septimius, on his deathbed, was pleased to leave

behind two sons that could serve as Augusti for the Roman people. Septimius considered

it a similar accomplishment to Antoninus Pius, who also left two adopted heirs.[178]

However, Septimius Severus was able to leave his own sons, namely, Bassianius (who

later became known as Caracalla) and Geta, who was *de Iulia genuerat* –"born from

Julia."[179] The HA accurately calls Geta *de Iulia genuerat*, but somehow records that

Julia was Caracalla's stepmother - *noverca*. This inaccuracy becomes more suspect

---

[176] Along with the *vita Antoninus Caracallus* Julia Domna is also called Caracalla's stepmother in the HA, *vita Severus*, 21.7 and the *vita Antoninus Geta* 7.3.

[177] In the *vita Antoninus Geta* the author cites Marius Maximus once in the beginning. HA, *vita Antoninus Geta*, II.1-2 and once in the HA, *vita Severus* 5.7. See also Thomson's chart. Thomson, *Studies in the Historia Augusta* 94.

[178] HA, *vita Severus*, 20.1-3.

[179] HA, *vita Severus*, 20.3.

further on in the life. The HA author claims that Septimius Severus's deathbed hope of leaving behind two Augusti was ultimately all in vain, because Caracalla was such a monstrous individual.[180] In particular, Caracalla is so monstrous because he killed his brother Geta and married his stepmother.

There are two crucial points that indicate the HA author was purposefully using this story, despite knowing that Julia was the birth mother of Caracalla. The first point comes from Caracalla's birth hinted at in the *vita Severus*. One inaccuracy leveled at the *vita Severus* is that it implies Caracalla was born in 186 instead of 188.[181] Regardless, the actual date in the same passage from the *vita Servus* where Septimius decides to marry Julia, states that while a legate in Lugdunensis and after having secured Julia as a wife he was immediately made a father.[182] (This is quoted in the first passage above.) The particular line here is short and ambiguous. It does not name the child that was born, but the timing and location are correct for Caracalla's birth, even if the exact date is not. Not specifically naming the particular child born in this passage seems to purposefully obscure the fact that it was Caracalla. This is particularly emphasized later, when the *vita Severus* further claims that Septimius Severus had his second son with Julia– clearly meaning Geta. Given that the only known children of Septimius Severus are Caracalla and Geta, and the HA explicitly names Julia as having two sons, there is a subtle contradiction in the HA's claim that Julia is Caracalla's stepmother. This does not just

---

[180] HA*, vita Severus*, 20.4-5.

[181] Barnes, "Family and Career of Septimius Severus," 92. Also, see Ballou, Magie, et al., *The Scriptores Historiae Augustae.* vol. 1. Loeb Edition, 377 ff.6; 278 ff.2

[182] HA, *vita Severus* 3.8-9.

create a contradiction in the text, but it also creates an ambiguity in the relationship between Julia and Caracalla.[183]

Despite hinting that Julia was Caracalla's birth mother, the *vita Severus* later refers to Julia was a *noverca* – stepmother.[184] In fact, Julia specifically is referred to as a *noverca* in all three of the Lives in which she appears.[185] In the *vita Antoninus Caracallus*, the term *noverca* is specifically leveled at Julia at the moment of marriage to her stepson. She is only called a *noverca* once in the *vita Antoninus Caracallus* and specifically when she seduces him into marriage.[186] In contrast, the term *mater* is used three times in the *vita Antoninus Caracallus* to describe Julia, as well as in the *vita Severus* in order to specifically counteract the use of the term *noverca*.[187] Given the insinuation of Caracalla's birth to Julia in the *vita Severus*, contrasted with the later use of the term *noverca*, the HA appears to cast doubt on its own legitimacy as a source. At the very least, the HA creates doubt about the birth and relationship of Caracalla to Julia.

---

[183] HA, *vita Severus* 4.1-3; Robert Panella argues that the story of Julia being a stepmother and wife of Caracalla, in part, comes Herodian, who claims the Alexandrians accused her of incest and called her "Jocasta." But even in this case she was not a stepmother. Robert J. Penella, "Caracalla and His Mother in the 'Historia Augusta,'" *Historia: Zeitschrift Für Alte Geschichte* 29, no. 3 (1980): 382. Herodian 4.9.3; Also see Birley, *Septimius Severus*: *The African Emperor* 75-77 and Barnes "The Family Career of Septimius Severus" 92-94 for an overview of Caracalla and Geta's births.

[184] HA, *vita Severus*, 21.

[185] See HA, *vita Severus*, 3.8-9; 21.7; *vita Antoninus Caracalla*, 10.1-2; *vita Antoninus Geta*, 7.3.

[186] For more on the term *noverca* see Pryzwansky, "Feminine Imperial Ideals in the Caesars of Suetonius," 92-93, ff. 66; also Michael J. G. Gray-Fow, "The Wicked Stepmother in Roman Literature and History : An Evaluation," *Latomus* 47, no. 4 (1988): 741–57. I do not agree with all of Gray-Fow's claims, but he does open up the discussion about stepmother's as a trope. And see Jo-Ann Shelton, *The Women of Pliny's Letters*. (Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2012), 228–34.

[187] *Mater* is used three times in the *vita Antoninus Caracallus* in order to describe Julia's and Caracalla's relationship. See HA, *vita Antoninus Caracallus*" 2.10, 11.

Raising doubt about Caracalla's actual relationship to Julia makes his marriage to her all the more heinous and further establishes him as a corrupt, debauched ruler.

The second crucial point, which indicates the HA author purposefully fabricated the story of Caracalla's marriage to his stepmother, is that the HA records Julia responding to Caracalla's lust. Julia's response in the HA deviates from Victor's account of the same moment in a significant way. Aurelius Victor's account is as follows,

> Namque Iuliam **novercam**, cuius facinora supra memoravi, forma captus coniugem affectavit, cum illa factiosior aspectui adolescentis, praesentiae quasi ignara, semet dedisset intecto corpore, asserentique: **"Vellem, si liceret, uti"**, petulantius multo (quippe quae pudorem velamento exuerat) respondisset: **"Libet? plane licet."**[188]

> For, captivated by her beauty, [Caracalla] desired as a wife his *stepmother*, Julia – of whose crimes I have recounted above – when she, being more eager for power, gave herself with uncovered body to the sight of the young man, as though unaware of his presence, and he declared, "**I would like to, if it was permitted to enjoy,**" with great wantonness (indeed, she had stripped off her modesty with her clothes) she responded, "**You want to? Certainly, it is permitted**."[189]

In comparison the HA's *vita Antoninus Caracallus* records the same incident as follows,

> Interest scire quemadmodum **novercam** suam Iuliam uxorem duxisse dicatur. quae cum esset pulcherrima et quasi per neglegentiam se maxima corporis parte nudasset dixissetque Antoninus, **"vellem, si liceret,"** respondisse fertur, **"si libet, licet.** *an nescis te imperatorem esse et leges dare, non accipere*?" … si sciret se leges dare vere, solus prohibere debuisset.[190]

---

[188] Aurelius Victor, *Liber de Caesaribus*, 21.3-4.

[189] The translation is my own. H.W. Bird's translation is "I should like, if I may to…" and "You want to? Certainly you may." I think in this case *licet* should be understood as "permit," in order to question the legal status of their relationship. Aurelius Victor, *De Caesaribus*. Translated by H.W. Bird. Liverpool University Press, 1994.

[190] HA, *vita Antoninus Caracallus* 10.1-4.

> It is interesting to know in what manner it is said [Caracalla] took Julia, his ***stepmother***, as a wife, who, since she was very beautiful and as though through negligence, had exposed herself by a great portion of her body, Antoninus [Caracalla] said, "**I would want to, if permitted**;" it is reported that she responded, "**If you want to, it is permitted.** *Or do you not know that you are the emperor and you give the laws, you do not receive them?"* ...if he understood that he gave the laws, (then he would understand) that he alone ought to prohibit this.[191]

According to Aurelius Victor, Julia merely acts as a seductress to fuel Caracalla's lust. The HA also claims that Julia initiated the seduction by exposing herself to Caracalla. Upon seeing her naked, the HA's Caracalla has a similar response as in Victor. Likewise, Julia initially responds in a similar fashion as in Victor. However, following her initial response, the HA records Julia as questioning Caracalla's imperial power. The dialogue here presents a reversed power relationship between Caracalla and Julia. In the HA, Caracalla appears unsure of how to achieve his desire for Julia. Julia's response to his desire reminds him of his power as the emperor. Although her guidance leads to an illicit and debauched marriage, Julia Domna is the one who instructs Caracalla on how to use his power, albeit in a perverted way. The perversion is not just because her instruction leads to incest, but also because it opens the door for a tyrannical ruler abusing imperial power. Nevertheless, Julia acts as a voice of authority that instructs Caracalla. In fact, Julia's main question here is, "don't you know what having imperial power means?"

The implication of this question resonates throughout the first thematic group of lives in the HA. In this case, the passage ends with the claim that if Caracalla truly understood what imperial power meant he would not have married Julia. In other words,

---

[191] The translation is my own. HA, *vita Antoninus Caracallus* 10.1-4.

the HA implies Caracalla does not understand the rights and rules of Roman imperial power. Furthermore, Julia's role in the *vita Antoninus Caracallus* ultimately determines how he will use his imperial power, which means his tyrannical rule is secured through Julia. In the HA, this fabrication of Caracalla's and Julia's relationship to question raises questions about the legitimacy of Caracalla's imperial authority.

This question of imperial power, however, is not just one for Caracalla, but also one asked throughout the HA. Accordingly, Julia's role thematically parallels the role of Plotina and Faustina the Younger. For example, Plotina, like Julia, also appears as a securer of Hadrian's rule. As previously shown, according to the HA, Trajan only adopted Hadrian, because of Plotina's favor.[192] In fact, it is not just her favor, but also her zealousness for Hadrian that ensures his success and advancement. Trajan's support for Hadrian seemed to waver toward the end of his life in the HA. But, his plan of replacing Hadrian was preempted when Plotina hid knowledge of his death until Hadrian's succession was secured. Furthermore, the HA claims that Plotina brought in another person after Trajan had died in order to pretend to be the voice of Trajan and call Hadrian his heir and successor.[193] In this way, Plotina becomes the voice of the emperor and there is a reversal of power not unlike the reversal of power in Julia's actions and instructions toward Caracalla. When Plotina helps secure Hadrian's succession she does so by trickery, which is not completely different to the seduction Julia to manipulate Caracalla.

---

[192] HA, *de vita Hadriani* 4.1-10.

[193] HA, *de vita Hadriani* 4.1-10.

79

Furthermore, while there is no suggestion of any illicit relations between Hadrian and Plotina, the HA does hint that Hadrian did have inappropriate dealings with Trajan's freedmen, at the same time he was currying favor with Plotina.[194] This hint at debauchery further emphasizes the ambiguity of Hadrian's rule. It is not clear whether the HA considers Hadrian a good emperor. In fact, the HA is accused of being self-contradictory in regards to Hadrian. It presents both a positive and negative portrait of the Emperor.[195] This ambiguity about Hadrian sets the tone for the rest of the lives in the first thematic group. Plotina is at the core of Hadrian's dubious succession, which forms the basis for the ambiguity of his reign and also sets up one of the main themes of the text, namely: who should have imperial power. In the case of Plotina, she acts as a key player in both undermining and legitimizing Hadrian's rule. Plotina's involvement in Hadrian's succession not only supports the ambiguity surrounding the emperor's rule, but also serves as the other bookend in the first thematic group of HA lives.

In the end, it is Plotina's direction that determines who should have power. Similarly, Julia instructs Caracalla about what having imperial power meant. Thus, HA's first thematic group begins with a questionable succession and ambiguous leader, and ends with the full-blown tyrannical, rule of Caracalla. As such, both Plotina and Julia serve as foils to Hadrian and Caracalla's rule in order to undermine the authority of the

---

[194] HA, *de vita Hadriani* 4.5.

[195] Michael Kulikowski argues that the use of Syme's *Ignotus* and Marius Maximus explains the seemingly contradictory nature of the HA's Hadrian, which is both positive and negative. Kulikowski, "Marius Maximus in Ammianus and the Historia Augusta," 244-247.

emperor. If women serve as the foundation of imperial authority it raises questions, more

broadly, about the legitimacy of the imperial rule.[196]

---

[196] See Anthony Birley's *Hadrian: The Restless Emperor* and *Septimius Severus*: *The African Emperor* for
a good overview of the history of each emperor's reigns, as well as the traditions in various sources.
However, Birley does not acknowledge the fourth century tradition of Julia as Caracalla's stepmother. This
tradition is often overlooked as an error, here I am seeking to show that it played a role in the thematic
structure of the HA. Elisabeth Wallinger's *Die Frauen in der Historia Augusta* goes through all the
citations made in the HA referring to Plotina and Julia Domna and discusses their respective roles.
Wallinger, *Die Frauen in der Historia Augusta*, 21-27 and 82-90.

<div align="center">

5. Conclusion:

</div>

A major theme in the HA is how authority and power are transferred and maintained in the person of the emperor. In order to activate this theme throughout the HA *vitae*, women play a vital role in the HA's portrayals of how power is transferred from one emperor to another. They also serve to raise one of the main questions of the HA; how Roman imperial power is acquired and who can, or should, wield it. In the first thematic grouping of lives, from Hadrian to Geta, Plotina, Faustina the Younger, and Julia Domna all have a comparable relationship to one another through their interactions with the emperors, as well as their involvement in succession. Accordingly, these three women provide a lens through which to analyze the HA's cohesion.

In his book, *Marcus Aurelius in the Historia Augusta and Beyond*, Geoff Adams argues that the HA biographies, following a Suetonian influence, have a "moralizing tendency" throughout the *vitae*.[197] This tendency means that the lives fall into three main categories; "good" emperors, "bad" emperors, and a combination of the two. Within these categories, Adams places Marcus Aurelius in the "good" emperor category and places Caracalla among the "bad" emperors. However, Adams labels both Hadrian and Septimius Severus as a combination of the two. This follows with the argument that the *de vita Hadriani* is purposefully ambiguous because of the contradictory positive and negative characteristics attributed to Hadrian.[198]

---

[197] Adams, *Marcus Aurelius in the Historia Augusta and Beyond*, 39

[198] Adams, *Marcus Aurelius in the Historia Augusta and Beyond*, 37-40.

I agree with Adams's assessment of "good," "bad," and "combination" categories in terms of how the emperors are portrayed. However, I argue that there is more than a "moralizing tendency" behind these categories. Even Adams admits that there are – unsurprisingly – sufficient negative criticisms about the "good" emperors to provide a humanizing quality.[199] Despite the categories, I have shown there is a commonality among the emperors associated with the issue of succession. Regardless of their supposed category, (and this thesis has explored every emperor from Adams's three categories) there has been a question about the legitimacy of the emperor's claims to be a successor.

Plotina is important to this analysis because she was the *origo matronae*. She set the stage for the thematic framework that is instrumental in understanding the roles of the other women. Since I accept that the *de vita Hadriani* is the first *vita* in the HA, then Plotina, as a main character in the early portion of that life, sets not only the tone for the rest of HA's depiction of Hadrian's reign, but also the overarching theme in the succession of emperors, namely, ambiguity. Plotina's actions in taking charge of Hadrian's succession when Trajan was on his deathbed elevated her position as not just a kingmaker, but as the emperor. She literally took on the role that belonged to Trajan. Furthermore, her relationship and motivation for ensuring Hadrian's reign (not only through his succession, but also through his marriage into the imperial household through Trajan's great-niece) are not clearly conveyed in the HA. The ambiguity of her relationship and motivations is mirrored in the ambiguity concerning the legitimacy of

---

[199] Adams, *Marcus Aurelius in the Historia Augusta and Beyond*, 39.

Hadrian's succession. Since Plotina secured Hadrian's secession when it was not her right to do so, it implies that Hadrian was not a legitimate successor, yet he was also not a usurper, which emphasizes the ambiguity surrounding his succession and subsequent reign.

The HA portrays Faustina the Younger's character as ambiguously as Plotina's. Consequently, the successions of Marcus Aurelius, Avidius Cassius, and Commodus are all dubious. Marcus Aurelius's succession is clearly the least dubious because he was legitimately married to Faustina and adopted by Antoninus Pius. Yet, even in Marcus Aurelius' case, the HA humorously questions how much his reign was his and how much belonged to Faustina as a "dowry."

Furthermore, Faustina's actions in promoting Avidius Cassius's usurpation also connect her to his failed succession. Yet, Faustina acts when it appears Marcus Aurelius is unable just as Plotina assumed the role of Trajan on his deathbed. This connection creates ambiguity about how legitimate Avidius Cassius's succession would have been if he had succeeded and it further complicates Hadrian's succession. If both these women determine succession when their husbands are ill or dying, it raises the question – what differentiates a usurper like Avidius Cassius from a legitimate emperor like Hadrian?

Lastly, Faustina's character is further complicated by the rumors that claim she was an adulteress. Her actions not only hurt Marcus Aurelius's authority by attacking his masculinity, they also present a problem for Commodus's legitimacy as an heir. Commodus was Marcus Aurelius's successor specifically because he was his son. However, if that was not true then it immediately makes him illegitimate as a successor.

Since the HA purposefully makes Commodus's parentage ambiguous, it also potentially makes his succession invalid.

This question of who could be emperor is continued through Septimius Severus and his successors, Caracalla and Geta. Septimius Severus and his direct successors serve as the end of the thematic group that Hadrian began. Septimius Severus is also considered an ambiguous emperor, since he is neither "good" nor "bad." This increases his connection to Hadrian and provides a bookend to the first thematic group of *vitae* in the HA. Julia Domna also enhances the connection to Hadrian and Plotina specifically. When Caracalla was unsure of his role as emperor, she assumed it for him in order to define his powers. Her actions mimic both those of Plotina and of Faustina the Younger. Like Plotina, Julia Domna speaks for the emperor. In addition, her actions, speaking for Caracalla and marrying him, show support for an emperor who murdered his brother in order to secure his rule. In other words, the HA depicts Caracalla as usurping his brother's rule and Julia Domna helping to legitimate it, which is not unlike Faustina and Avidius Cassius, except Julia and Caracalla are successful. In the end, both women secure the rule of their sons as successors, but that succession is not only dubious but detrimental to the state, since Commodus and Caracalla are both "bad" emperors.

Julia is also accused of adultery against Septimius Severus. According to the HA Septimius Severus "was less careful in his home-life, for he retained his wife Julia even though she was notorious for her adulteries and also guilty of plotting against him."[200] In

---

[200] HA, *vita Severus*, 18.8; *domi tamen minus cautus, qui uxorem Iuliam famosam adulteriis tenuit, ream etiam coniurationis.*

this case, not only is there an assertion that she committed adultery, but the author goes on to say she also may have plotted against Septimius Severus. This allegation is similar to that used against Faustina and her alleged involvement with Avidius Cassius. This connection to Faustina in her adultery and subsequent debauchery with her "stepson" casts aspersions on the succession of Caracalla in the same way that Julia's adultery cast aspersions on Commodus's birth and succession. Ultimately, this connection between Faustina and Julia, coupled with the connection to Plotina, creates a thematic arch in the first group of lives in the HA. Plotina's and Julia's ambiguous relationship with Hadrian and Caracalla raise questions about the legitimacy of imperial succession. Likewise, Faustina's and Julia's debauchery further undermines the legitimacy of their sons as successors.

The connections between these women and the succession of emperors create cohesion throughout the first thematic group of HA lives. Moreover, the theme they connect is not merely one of "moralizing tendencies." Whether the emperor is represented as "good," "bad," or a "combination," the question of the succession's legitimacy is always raised. Because of this, the HA questions the legitimacy of the system of imperial succession, not just the figure of the emperor.

Accordingly, I conclude that the HA is concerned with succession. One of the main themes in the HA is the nature of the Roman Emperor and who legitimately can serve in that role. This theme is emphasized in the first group of lives in the HA, especially through the depictions and comparisons of imperial succession. It continues to resonate throughout the HA past the first thematic group of lives and reaches a pinnacle

in the *Tyranni Triginta*, which includes an account of thirty usurpers who claim to be legitimate Roman Emperors. The Empress Zenobia is included in this group. Zenobia appears in four *vitae* of the third and last thematic group of the HA.[201] She plays a major role in the *Gallieni Duo, Tyranni Triginta*, *Divus Claudius*, and *Divus Aurelianus*. Ultimately, as Queen of Palmyra, Zenobia successfully raised an army and conquered several Roman provinces in the east, including Egypt.[202] While she was conquering Roman territory, she also issued coins that showed her image with the words *Zenobia Augusta*.[203] Zenobia's actions reflect her effort to style herself as a new type of ruler connected to the Roman tradition. The depiction of Zenobia in the HA further shows her success at styling herself as a new type of Roman ruler.

According to the HA, Zenobia was the wife of Odaenathus, a Palmyrene king, who also commanded Roman troops against the Persians during the Emperor Valerian's reign. When the Persians captured Valerian, Odaenathus seized power in the East and

---

[201] I use Mark Thomson's grouping of lives; Thomson, *Studies in the Historia Augusta*, 91-93.

[202] Alaric Watson emphasizes how important Egypt was for the Roman Empire, particularly for the grain supply. In Augustus's reign, Egypt was established as the province directly controlled by the Emperor and Tacitus's account of Tiberius anger at Germanicus for visiting Egypt reflects its early importance to the figure of the emperor. Furthermore, Zenobia, who also styled herself in the image of Cleopatra, conquered Egypt similarly to Augustus at Actium. Yet, even when she is conquered by the Emperor Aurelian, she is allowed to remain alive and takes up residence in Rome. See Alaric Watson, *Aurelian and the Third Century*, Reprinted (London: Routledge, 2004), 82–83. For Tacitus's account of the importance of Egypt, see Tacitus *Histories* 1.11. For Augustus's final conquest in Egypt see Suetonius *Divus Augustus* 17.4. For a comparison of Augustus and Cleopatra to Aurelian and Zenobia, see Richard Stoneman, *Palmyra and Its Empire: Zenobia's Revolt against Rome* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), 4–5. For Zenobia's defeat and life in Rome see HA, *vita Divus Aureliaus*, 33-34.3. See also, HA, *Tyranni Triginta*, 30.27.

[203] Prudence Jones, "Rewriting Power: Zenobia, Aurelian, and the *Historia Augusta*," *Classical World* 109, no. 2 (2016): 223–25.

vied for imperial rule over Gallienus, the son of Valerian.[204] Odaenathus, by fighting

with several Roman generals, Aureolus and Macrianus, was made *imperator* in the

East.[205] Eventually, Odaenathus, along with his eldest son was killed by his cousin.[206]

However, the *Tyranni Triginta* also claims that Zenobia was involved in the conspiracy to

kill Odaenathus and Herodes. In connection with this, the *Tyranni Triginta* claims that

Zenobia was the stepmother of Herodes, Odaenathus's eldest son and his successor and

even states that she treated Herodes with *novercali animo*, "a spirit of a stepmother."[207]

Furthermore, the *Tyranni Triginta* also suggests she did this in order to secure the

succession of her own two sons.[208] But, it is also stated in the *Gallieni Duo* that

Zenobia's sons were too young to succeed so she assumed power for herself.[209]

Ultimately, Zenobia is defeated by the Emperor Aurelian and forced to march in his

triumph. However, Aurelian spares her life and the *Tyranni Triginta* claims that she

remained in Rome and lived as a Roman matron near the palace of Hadrian.[210]

     Zenobia's story, throughout the four *vitae* in which she appears, thematically

resembles the accounts of Plotina, Faustina the Younger, and Julia Domna. Like Julia,

---

[204] HA, *Gallieni Duo*, 1.1-5.

[205] HA, *Gallieni Duo*, 3.1-5.

[206] The alleged author, Trebellius Pollio, of the *Gallieni Duo* is also the alleged author of the *Tyranni Triginta*. HA, *Gallieni Duo*, 13.1-5.

[207] HA, *Tyranni Triginta*, 16.3.

[208] HA, *Tyranni Triginta*, 15-17.3.

[209] HA, *Gallieni Duo*, 13.2-3.

[210] HA, *Tyranni Triginta*, 30.27.

Zenobia is cast as a *noverca*, a stepmother. Furthermore, she also involves herself in a

conspiracy to secure the succession of her own children, similar to the actions of Faustina

the Younger. In the end, she takes control of the Palmyrene Empire when her husband

dies and she exerts command similar to Plotina's actions to secure Hadrian's rule. Even

the fact that the HA claims she lived near the palace of Hadrian serves as an important

element that connects Zenobia to the *origo imperatoris* in the first thematic group.

Nevertheless, unlike Plotina, Faustina the Younger, and Julia Domna, Zenobia's

favor and relationship to her husband did not help secure and legitimize his succession.

Instead, his role as a Roman general served to legitimize and secure her own claim as a

successor.[211] Thus, Zenobia is cast similarly in the "kingmaker" trope, but she makes

herself king as opposed to her husband or son.   Zenobia's role thus serves as the climax

of the whole *Historia Augusta*. There are lives that follow after the four lives in which

she appears, but they are short and two of them are lives of multiple emperors, which I

suggest reflects a growing weakness of the emperors.[212] For this reason, I propose that

Zenobia acts as the culmination of the HA's concern regarding imperial power.

According to Prudence Jones, Zenobia's depiction in the *Historia Augusta* destabilizes

"the assumption that power is Roman and masculine."[213] Zenobia's complete

destabilization of Roman assumptions of power shows a complete evolution from the *de

vita Hadriani*. In the beginning, the HA created doubt about the legitimacy of the

---

[211] Stoneman, *Palmyra and Its Empire*, 78–79.

[212] These are the *vitae Tacitus*, *Probus*, *Firmus Saturninus Proculus et Bonosus*, and *Carus et Carinus et Numerianus*.

[213] Jones, "Rewriting Power: Zenobia, Aurelian, and the Historia Augusta," 222.

Hadrian's succession. The legitimacy of his succession was ambiguous because a woman determined it. The HA then concludes the first thematic group of lives with the succession of a new and foreign dynasty serving as Roman Emperors. By the end, Zenobia presents a new kind of threat: the loss of the Empire to the most "un-Roman" looking emperor, a foreign queen.

Based on this, I submit that the thematic connection between women and succession plays an important role in how we should read the HA. According to Burgersdijk, "One of the main themes in the *Historia Augusta* is the rotation among good, bad, and neutral emperors—with special attention to usurpers, who are categorized in the same way."[214] I agree with Burgersdijk that the characterization of the emperor is an important theme, but I also suggest that the question of who can become a Roman emperor is the larger theme of the whole text. Furthermore, the allusions that create connections between Plotina, Faustina the Younger, Julia Domna, and Zenobia are not just playful inventions as Rohrbacher has argued.[215] Although, Rohrbacher rightly states that concern about imperial succession is not new to Latin literature, the HA's juxtaposition of women and succession, which culminates in a deterioration of multiple and even foreign rulers, shows a genuine anxiety that has a purpose beyond the playful.

I propose that this anxiety has a particular resonance with the courts of Honorius and Arcadius at the end of the fourth century. The ineffectual court of Honorius in the west where Stilicho had tremendous influence over Honorius and through marriage

---

[214] Burgersdijk, "Pliny's Panegyricus and the Historia Augusta," 291–92.

[215] Rohrbacher, *The Play of Allusion in the Historia Augusta*, 134.

alliances between his daughters and Honorius. Stilicho is in the same "kingmaker" role

as Plotina and Julia Domna.[216] In the eastern court of Arcadius, the empress, Aelia

Eudoxia, was able to garner influence, because Arcadius was an ineffectual ruler.[217]

Ultimately, I posit that the HA was deeply concerned about the question of succession

and who could be a Roman Emperor because this was the the concern that Roman elites

had at the end of the fourth century and into the early fifth century.

---

[216] Holum shows that Stilicho married Honorius to both of his daughters. Honorius married the second daughter after the first one died. Kenneth G. Holum, *Theodosian Empresses: Women and Imperial Dominion in Late Antiquity*, (University of California Press, 1989), 9-10, 49.

[217] Kenneth G. Holum, *Theodosian Empresses: Women and Imperial Dominion in Late Antiquity*, 49-59.

Primary Sources

Cassius Dio. *Roman History*, Volume IX: Books 71-80. Translated by Earnest Cary. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1927. Loeb Edition.

———. *Roman History*, Volume VIII: Books 61-70. Translated by Earnest Cary. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1925. Loeb Edition.

Herodian. Translated by C. R Whittaker. London: Heinemann, New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1970. Loeb Edition.

Pliny the Younger. *Letters, Volume II: Books 8-10; Panegyricus*. Translated by, Betty Radice. Harvard University Press,1969.

The Scriptores Historiae Augustae. Vol. I-III. Translated by Susan Ballou and David Maggie. Cambridge, Mass.; London: Harvard University Press; W. Heinemann,1921-1932. Loeb Edition.

Scriptores historiae Augustae. Edited by, Ernst Hohl. Lipsiae: In Aedibus B.G. Teubneri, 1971.

Sextus Aurelius Victor. *Book on the Emperors*. Translated by H.W. Bird. Liverpool University Press, 1994.

Sextus Aurelius Victor. *Liber de Caesaribus: praecedunt Origo gentis Romanae et Liber de viris illustribus urbis Romae, subsequitur Epitome de Caesaribus*. Edited by Franz Pichlmayr. Leipzig: B.G. Teubner, 1970.

Suetonius. *The Lives of the Caesars,* vol. II. Translated by J. C. Rolfe. Revised edition. Harvard University Press, 1914. Loeb Edition.

Tacitus. *The Annals*. Books IV-VI, XI-XII. Translated by John Jackson. Harvard University Press, 1937. Loeb Edition.

———. *Histories* I. Translated by John Jackson. Harvard University Press, 1962. Loeb Edition.

Bibliography

A Latin Dictionary Founded on Andrews' Edition of Freund's Latin Dictionary Revised & Enlarged by Charlton T. Lewis, Charles Short, E. A. Andrews, William Fre (1956). Revised & Enlarged edition. Oxford University Press, 1956. Perseus.Tufts.edu

Adams, Geoffrey William. *Marcus Aurelius in the Historia Augusta and Beyond.* Rowman & Littlefield, 2013.

Ando, Clifford. *Imperial Ideology and Provincial Loyalty in the Roman Empire*. Classics and Contemporary Thought 6. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000.

Arbo, Agnès Molinier. "Dion Cassius Versus Marius Maximus? Éléments De Polémique Entre Les 'Romaika' Et 'L'histoire Auguste'" *Phoenix*, Vol. 63, No. 3/4 (Fall-Winter/automne-hiver 2009). 278-295

Baharal, Drora. "The Portraits of Julia Domna from the Years 193-211 A.D. and the Dynastic Propaganda of L. Septimius Severus." *Latomus*, 1992, 110–18.

———. Victory of Propaganda: The Dynastic Aspect of the Imperial Propaganda of the Severi : The Literary and Archaeological Evidence, AD 193-235. Oxford: Tempus Reparatum, 1996.

Ballou, Susan. *The Manuscript Tradition of the Historia Augusta*. Leipzig: B.G. Teubner, 1914.

Barnes, T. D. "The Family and Career of Septimius Severus." *Historia: Zeitschrift Für Alte Geschichte* 16, no. 1 (1967): 87–107.

———. T*he Sources of the "Historia Augusta*. Ed. Latomus, 1978.

———. "The Composition of Cassius Dio's 'Roman History,'" *Phoenix* 38, no. 3 (1984): 240–55.

Bauman, Richard A. *Women and Politics in Ancient Rome*. London ; New York: Routledge, 1992.

Baynes, Norman H. "The Date of the Composition of the Historia Augusta." Th*e Classical Review* 38, no. 7/8 (1924): 165–69.

Birley, Anthony Richard. *Hadrian: The Restless Emperor*. Repr. London: Routledge, 2001.

———. *Lives of the Later Caesars: The First Part of the Augustan History*: *With Newly Compiled Lives of Nerva and Trajan*. Penguin Books, 1976.

———. *Marcus Aurelius*: *A Biography*. London: Batsford, 1987.

———. S*eptimius Severus: The African Emperor*. London; New York: Routledge, 1999.

Boatwright, Mary T. "The Imperial Women of the Early Second Century A.C.," *The American Journal of Philology* 112, no. 4 (1991): 513–40.

Brennan, T. Corey. *Sabina Augusta: An Imperial Journey*. Oxford University Press, 2018.

Burgersdijk, Diederik. "Pliny's Panegyricus and the Historia Augusta." *Arethusa* 46, no. 2 (2013): 289–312.

Burns, Jasper. *Great Women of Imperial Rome: Mothers and Wives of the Caesars.* London; New York: Routledge, 2007.

Calhoon, Cristina. "Is There an Antidote to Caesar?" In Private and Public Lies: The Discourse of Despotism and Deceit in the Graeco-Roman World, edited by Andrew J. Turner, James H. Kim On Chong-Gossard, and Frederik Juliaan Vervaet, 271–94. *Impact of Empire.* Leiden: Brill, 2010.

Callu, Jean-Pierre, O. Desbordes, and A. Gaden, eds. *Histoire Auguste*. Collection des universités de France. Paris: Belles Lettres, 1992.

Cameron, Alan. *The Last Pagans of Rome*. Oxford University Press, 2011.

———. "Literary Allusions in the Historia Augusta," *Hermes*, 92. Bd., H. 3 (1964). 363-377

Charmaine Gorrie. "Julia Domna's Building Patronage, Imperial Family Roles and the Severan Revival of Moral Legislation." *Histzeitalte Historia: Zeitschrift Für Alte Geschichte* 53, no. 1 (2004): 61–72.

Chastagnol, André. *Histoire Auguste: les empereurs romains des IIe et IIIe siècles*. Paris: R. Laffont, 1994.

Davenport, Caillan, and Christopher Mallan. "Hadrian's Adoption Speech in Cassius Dio's Roman History and the Problems of Imperial Succession." *American Journal of Philology* 135, no. 4 (2014): 637–68.

Dixon, Suzanne. *The Roman Family*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992.

de Blois, Lukas. "The Perception of Emperor and Empire in Cassius Dio's 'Roman History,'"*Ancient Society* 29 (1998): 267–81.

Dmitriev, Sviatoslav. "'Good Emperors' and Emperors of the Third Century," *Hermes*, 132. Jahrg. H. 2 (2004)

Festy, Michael. "De L'"Epitome de Caesaribus" à la "Chronique" de Marcellin: l'" Historia Romana" de Symmaque le Jeune," *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte*, Bd. 52, H. 2 (2003), 251-255

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

Gorrie, Charmaine. "Julia Domna's Building Patronage, Imperial Family Roles and the Severan Revival of Moral Legislation," *Histzeitalte Historia: Zeitschrift Für Alte Geschichte* 53, no. 1 (2004): 61–72.

Gray-Fow, Michael J. G. "The Wicked Stepmother in Roman Literature and History : An Evaluation." *Latomus* 47, no. 4 (1988): 741–57.

Grubbs, Judith Evans. *Women and the Law in the Roman Empire: A Sourcebook on Marriage, Divorce and Widowhood*. Psychology Press, 2002.

Gunderson, Erik. "E.g. Augustus: Exemplum in the Augustus and Tiberius." In Suetonius the Biographer: Studies in Roman Lives, by Roy K. Gibson and Tristan Power. Oxford University Press, 2014.

Harvey, Brian K. "Two Bases of Marcus Aurelius Caesar and the Roman Imperial Succession," *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte*, Bd. 53, H. 1 (2004): 46-60

Hekster, Olivier. Emperors and Ancestors: Roman Rulers and the Constraints of Tradition. Oxford University Press, 2015.

———. ""All in the Family" The Appointment of Emperors Designate in the Second Century," in *Administration, Prosopography and Appointment Policies in the Roman Empire: Proceedings of the First Workshop of the International Network Impact of Empire (Roman Empire, 27 B.C. - A.D. 406), Leiden, June 28 - July 1, 2000*, ed. Impact of Empire Workshop (Brill Academic Pub, 2001).

Hemelrijk, Emily. *Hidden Lives, Public Personae: Women and Civic Life in the Roman West.* Oxford University Press, 2015

———. Matrona Docta: EducatedWomen in the Roman Élite from Cornelia to Julia *Domna*. Routledge, 1999.

Hemelrijk, Emily Ann. *Matrona Docta: Educated Women in the Roman Élite from Cornelia to Julia Domna.* Psychology Press, 2004.

Hinds, Stephen. *Allusion and Intertext: Dynamics of Appropriation in Roman Poetry.* Cambridge University Press, 1998

Holum, Kenneth G. *Theodosian Empresses: Women and Imperial Dominion in Late Antiquity*. Univversity of California Press, 1989.

Jones, Prudence. "Rewriting Power: Zenobia, Aurelian, and the Historia Augusta." C*lassical World* 109, no. 2 (2016): 221–33.

Joshel, Sandra R. and Sheila Murnaghan, eds., *Women and Slaves in Greco-Roman Culture: Differential Equations*. London; New York: Routledge, 1998).

———. "Female Desire and the Discourse of Empire: Tacitus's Messalina." *Signs* 21, no. 1 (1995): 50–82.

Kulikowski, M. "Marius Maximus in Ammianus and the Historia Augusta." *The Classical Quarterly* 57, no. 1 (2007): 244–56.

Langford, Julie. *Maternal Megalomania: Julia Domna and the Imperial Politics of Motherhood*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013.

Levick, Barbara. *Faustina I and II: Imperial Women of the Golden Age*. Oxford University Press, Incorporated, 2014.

———. *Julia Domna, Syrian Empress*. London; New York: Routledge, 2007.

L'Hoir, Francesca Santoro. *Tragedy, Rhetoric, and the Historiography of Tacitus' Annales*. University of Michigan Press, 2006.

Lindsay, Hugh. *Adoption in the Roman World*. Cambridge University Press, 2009.

Lusnia, Susann Sowers. "Julia Domna's Coinage and Severan Dynastic Propaganda," *Latomus* 54, no. 1 (1995): 119–40.

Manders, Erika. "Mapping the Representation of Roman Imperial Power in Times of Crisis." *In Crises and the Roman Empire: Proceedings of the Seventh Workshop of the International Network Impact of Empire, Nijmegen,* June 20-24, 2006, edited by Impact of Empire Workshop, Olivier Hekster, and et al., Leiden ; Boston: Brill, 2007. 275–90.Mazo Karras, Ruth. "Active/Passive, Acts/Passions: Greek and Roman Sexualities." *The American Historical Review* 105, no. 4 (2000): 1250-1265

Meckler, Michael. "Caracalla and His Late-Antique Biographer: A Historical
      Commentary of the Vita Caracalli in the Historia Augusta." Dissertation,
      University of Michigan, Classical Studies, 1994.

———. "The Beginning of the 'Historia Augusta.'" *Historia: Zeitschrift Für Alte
      Geschichte* 45, no. 3 (1996): 364–75.

Mellor, Ronald ed., *The Historians of Ancient Rome*, 2nd ed (New York: Routledge,
      2004).

Meyers, Rachel. "Filiae Augustorum: The Ties That Bind in the Antonine Age."
      Classical World 109, no. 4 (2016): 487–505.

Millar, Fergus. *The Emperor in the Roman World: 31 BC-AD 337*. London: Duckworth,
      1977.

Momigliano, Arnaldo. "An Unsolved Problem of Historical Forgery: The Scriptores
      Historiae Augustae," Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes, Vol. 17,
      No. 1/2 (1954), 22-46

Noreña, Carlos F. *Imperial Ideals in the Roman West: Representation, Circulation,
      Power*. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011.

Opper, Thorsten. *Hadrian: Empire and Conflict.* Harvard University Press, 2008.

Penella, Robert J. "Caracalla and His Mother in the 'Historia Augusta.'" *Historia:
      Zeitschrift Für Alte Geschichte* 29, no. 3 (1980): 382–84.

Pomeroy, Sarah B. *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves: Women in Classical
      Antiquity*. New York: Schocken Books, 1975.

Pryzwansky, Molly M. "Feminine Imperial Ideals in the Caesares of Suetonius."
      Dissertation, Department of Classical Studies, Duke University, 2008.

Pucci, Joseph Michael. *The Full-knowing Reader: Allusion and the Power of the Reader
      in the Western Literary Tradition.* Yale University Press, 1998.

Richlin, Amy. *Arguments with Silence: Writing the History of Roman Women*. University
      of Michigan Press, 2014.

Rohrbacher, David. *The Play of Allusion in the Historia Augusta*. University of
      Wisconsin Press, 2016.

Shelton, Jo-Ann. *The Women of Pliny's Letters*. Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2012.

Stertz, Stephen A. "Marcus Aurelius as Ideal Emperor in Late-Antique Greek Thought." *The Classical World* 70, no. 7 (1977): 433–39.

Stoneman, Richard. *Palmyra and Its Empire: Zenobia's Revolt against Rome.* Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992.

Syme, Ronald. *Emperors and Biography: Studies in the "Historia Augusta".* Clarendon Press, 1971.

———. *The Historia Augusta; a Call of Clarity*. Bonn: R. Habelt, 1971.

———. *The Historia Augusta Papers.* Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983;

Thomson, Mark. *Studies in the Historia Augusta*. Bruxelles: Éditions Latomus, 2012.

Wallace-Hadrill, Andrew. "The Emperor and His Virtues." *Historia: Zeitschrift Für Alte Geschichte* 30, no. 3 (1981): 298–323.

Wallinger, Elisabeth. *Die Frauen in der Historia Augusta*. Wien: Im Selbstverlag der Österreichischen Gesellschaft für Archäologie, 1990.

Watson, Alaric. *Aurelian and the Third Century*. Reprinted. London: Routledge, 2004.

White, Peter. "The Authorship of the Historia Augusta." *The Journal of Roman Studies* 57, no. 1/2 (1967): 115–33.

Williams, Craig A. *Roman Homosexuality: Ideologies of Masculinity in Classical Antiquity. Ideologies of Desire.* Oxford University Press, 1999.