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Empresses Taking Charge

The Powerful Women of the Severan House in the Literary Sources

Martijn Icks

1 Introduction

Roman imperial women occupied an ambiguous position.¹ On the one hand, their supreme status and high visibility made them the ultimate yardstick of feminine virtue, which required their strict adherence to traditional norms such as domesticity, *pudicitia* and *modestia*. On the other hand, their closeness to the monarch and crucial role in perpetuating the dynasty opened up unprecedented possibilities to exert political influence, which was traditionally the prerogative of men. If the line between the public and the private was already blurred in a regular *domus*, as Emily Hemelrijk has argued, this was even more so the case in the *domus Augusta*, where seemingly private matters such as dinner conversations and sibling rivalry could have a major impact on affairs of state.² This ambiguity is already clear in the case of Livia, who famously spun the wool for her husband's clothes, as he liked to boast, but also served as one of his closest political advisors, participated in public events and maintained an impressive social network of her own.³ A few generations later, Agrippina the Younger wielded significant influence as the wife of one emperor and mother of the next.⁴

However, it is the Severan dynasty that is often characterised as the period during which female power in the Roman Empire reached its apogee. In particular, modern scholarship frequently credits the 'four Julias' as the true reigning

1 Much has been written about Roman imperial women in recent decades: see for instance Bauman 1992; Wood 1999; Kunst and Riemer 2000; Burns 2007; Kolb 2010; Bédoyère 2018; Carney and Müller 2021. For the sake of convenience, I will use the terms 'empress' and 'imperial woman' rather loosely for all prominent female members of the imperial family, regardless of whether or not they held the title *Augusta*.

2 Hemelrijk 2015, 11. For the blurring of public and private at the Roman imperial court, see Winterling 1997.

3 Suet. *Aug.* 73. For spinning wool as a female virtue, see Larsson Lovén 1998. For Livia's role as 'first lady' of Rome, see Barrett 2002; Burns 2007, 4–23; Kunst 2008.

4 Barrett 1996; Foubert 2006; Baus 2015.

powers behind the throne: Julia Domna, wife of Septimius Severus and mother of Caracalla and Geta; Julia Maesa, sister of Julia Domna and grandmother of Elagabalus and Severus Alexander; Julia Soaemias, mother of Elagabalus; and Julia Mamaea, mother of Severus Alexander. As the subtitle of Godfrey Turton's *Syrian Princesses* suggests, they were "the women who ruled Rome" and allegedly "worked with their feminine genius to maintain the stability of the Empire, holding the reins of government in fact if not in name". Michael Grant agrees, remarking that "the greater part of the civilised world was ruled by women" during the reigns of Caracalla, Elagabalus and Alexander.⁵ According to John Balsdon, Julia Domna surpassed even Plotina as "the most masterful Empress that Rome had yet experienced". In Jasper Burns' favourable estimate, Domna managed more than any previous empress "to combine beauty and brains with real political power", while he sees the career of Julia Mamaea as "the pinnacle of feminine influence on the administration of the Roman Empire". In a similar vein, Guy de la Bédoyère characterises the early reign of Severus Alexander as "really the reign of Maesa and Mamaea".⁶ Remarkably, all four of these women exerted their alleged influence as mothers and grandmothers over their (in part underage) sons and grandsons, while the emperors' various wives—such as Caracalla's Plautilla, Elagabalus' Aquilia Severa and Alexander's Orbiana—are not credited with any remarkable degree of influence over their husbands.⁷ Older studies tend to tie the presumed dominance of the four Julias to their Syrian origins, openly lamenting the 'Orientalisation' of the principate and the apparent decline of traditional Roman values, but more recent scholarship no longer puts much credence in such ethnographic explanations.⁸

Without a doubt, Domna, Maesa, Soaemias and Mamaea are prominently present in Severan representation.⁹ The imperial family was conceived as a *domus divina*, a divinely ordained unit whose members all had a share in the

5 Turton 1974, blurb text; Grant 1996, 4.

6 Balsdon 1962, 151; Burns 2007, 201, 224; Bédoyère 2018, 289. In a recent publication, Bertolazzi 2021, 459 likewise claims that "there is no doubt that [the Severan empresses] surpassed previous imperial women in both visibility and influence".

7 Although she was of course the wife of Severus, Domna's period as the reigning power behind the throne is usually only said to begin with the reign of her son Caracalla.

8 E.g. Domaszewski 1909, 148, 197; convincingly refuted by Kettenhofen 1979. Outside scholarship, the theme of the domineering Syrian empresses can also be found in literature and the arts: see Icks 2020.

9 Much has been written about the presence of Severan women on coins, in inscriptions and other representational media: see for instance Ghedini 1984; Baharal 1992; Lusnia 1995; Kosmetatou 2002; Rowan 2011; Rowan 2012; Langford 2013; Nadolny 2016, 19–134; Günther 2016.

rule. Next to the title *Augusta*, the Julias could boast such remarkable honorifics as *mater castrorum*, *mater senatus* and *mater patriae*, among others. They made frequent appearances on imperial coinage; in fact, the similar proportions of silver struck for Domna, Maesa and Mammaea suggests that one of the six mint workshops in Rome was entirely devoted to the production of their coins.¹⁰ In addition, Domna was depicted on monuments such as the Arch of the Argentarii in Rome and the Arch of Septimius Severus in Lepcis Magna. However, we should be careful not to equate a high degree of visibility in imperial representation with actual political clout. In fact, several recent studies have questioned or nuanced the notion of Julia Domna as the influential eminence grise pulling the strings in the palace.¹¹ Due to the informal and nebulous nature of an empress' power, it is hard to draw any definite conclusions.¹²

Nevertheless, as our literary sources attest, contemporaries certainly credited the four Julias with an extraordinary amount of power. It will not be the purpose of this paper to establish whether or not they were justified in doing so. Instead, we will focus on the literary portrayals of Domna, Maesa, Soaemias and Mammaea as a topic of interest in its own right. How did the elite male authors responsible for our literary record characterise and evaluate imperial women who stepped out of their traditional gender roles? We will examine the three main historiographical and biographical sources for the Severan period: Cassius Dio, Herodian and the *Historia Augusta*. Dio, a Greek-speaking senator and contemporary of the Severans, devoted six of the eighty books of his *Roman History* to their reigns. Despite his close ties to the dynasty—especially to Severus Alexander, who appointed him to a second consulship—and the obvious need to take the sensibilities of the reigning monarch into account, his perspective is certainly not devoid of criticism. As a senator, Dio expected emperors to behave as *principes* and respect the dignity of the Senate, a mark several Severan rulers fell short of.¹³ Herodian wrote a generation later, when the Severan dynasty was already defunct, which meant he could dispense with the need to be careful in chronicling their feats and misdeeds. Although he used Dio as his main source, he was no senator himself and less concerned with senatorial dignity. Rather, it was his express desire to entertain his readers, res-

10 Rowan 2011, 246–247.

11 Levick 2007, 161–162; Langford 2013, 122; Scott 2017, 430.

12 A valiant effort is made by Nadolny 2016, who compares the literary sources with numismatic and epigraphic evidence, concluding that Domna, Maesa and Mammaea (but not Soaemias) did indeed wield an extraordinary amount of political influence.

13 Millar 1964; Barnes 1984; Nadolny 2016, 136–142.

ulting in a dramatic, embellished narrative riddled with factual inaccuracies.¹⁴ Even more unreliable is the *Historia Augusta*, a series of imperial biographies written by an anonymous author in Late Antiquity, most likely in the final decades of the fourth century. The work is brimming with scandalous stories, tall tales and inventions, and frequently contradicts itself. For the Severan period, the biographer appears to have used both Dio and Herodian, next to other sources.¹⁵

Clearly, then, we are dealing with three very different (but not independent) authors, writing in different time periods and from different perspectives. That makes it all the more interesting to see if we can establish any common patterns in their portrayals of the Severan empresses and the dominant roles they are said to have played at court. In the following, we will examine several themes that are touched upon in the works of Dio, Herodian and the *Historia Augusta* biographer. These include: 1) the empresses as plotters and schemers; 2) the empresses exerting control over their imperial (grand)sons; and 3) their sexual transgressions. In doing so, we will consider how the narratives of our literary sources have been influenced by gender discourses. Occasionally we will also touch on Orientalist notions. After all, the Syrian background of Domna, Maesa, Soaemias and Mammaea was frequently remarked upon. Greco-Roman authors were generally inclined to see the world of the 'East' as in many respects a mirror-image of their own, a place which turned traditional norms upside down—including those pertaining to masculinity and femininity.¹⁶ In this mirror world, rulers were frequently imagined to defy traditional gender expectations, with strong, capable queens such as Semiramis putting their effeminate male counterparts to shame.¹⁷ What role did such notions play in the literary depiction of the Severan empresses?

14 Sidebottom 1997; Nadolny 2016, 158–164.

15 Nadolny 2016, 179–185. The *Historia Augusta* purports to have been written by six different authors in the time of Diocletian and Constantine. Most scholars now accept that there was only one author. Cameron 2011, 743–782 has persuasively argued for a composition date in the 370s or early 380s.

16 Isaac 2004, 335–351 (about Syrians in particular); Gruen 2011 argues for more complexity in Greco-Roman perceptions of the 'Other'. The concept of Orientalism to describe Western notions and stereotypes about the 'East' was of course introduced by Edward Said: see Said 2003.

17 Gambato 2000; Icks 2017, 67–70.

2 Plotters and Schemers

The image of the scheming empress had been part of the literary tradition since the beginning of the principate. It is not much of a stretch to interpret this image as an expression of elite male anxiety with regard to powerful women. Behind the doors of the *domus Augusta* lurked an opaque, treacherous world where members of the imperial family and courtiers vied for status and power. In this world, imperial women were key players, potentially wielding influence that not even the most dignified senators could match. Inevitably, their political meddling became the focus of rumours and speculation. Hence Livia could be portrayed as a ruthless assassin who removed anyone who blocked her son Tiberius' path to power—up to and including poisoning her own husband, to whom she had been married for over fifty years.¹⁸ Agrippina was imagined to be equally ruthless in her pursuit of the imperial purple for her son Nero, first side-lining Claudius' natural son Britannicus and then feeding him poisoned mushrooms once Nero's position as heir to the throne was secured.¹⁹

Compared to these notorious predecessors, the record for Julia Domna as a scheming empress is rather thin. Septimius Severus had already married her years before he made his bid for imperial power and marched on Rome. Allegedly, it was Domna's promising horoscope—she was predicted to marry a king—that had prompted his interest for her in the first place.²⁰ Her rise to power therefore did not invite exciting stories about a woman scheming her way to the top, nor did she have to manoeuvre to obtain the imperial purple for her children, as these were already the emperor's intended successors to begin with. Herodian does not anywhere in his work suggest that Domna was engaged in political machinations, while the *Historia Augusta* barely touches upon this aspect of her character.²¹ Only Cassius Dio presents us with a scheming empress, but even here the picture is mixed. The historian suggests that there was enmity between Domna and Severus' right-hand man, the praetorian prefect Plautianus, who “was always abusing her violently to Severus” and even tortured noblewomen to gather evidence against her. Domna is depicted very much as the victim in this scenario. Rather than engaging in power games

18 See note 3 for modern studies on Livia. Her political influence could also be presented in positive terms, for instance when she gives Augustus sound advice (Dio Cass. 55.14.1–22.2).

19 Ginsburg 2006 examines literary and visual representations of Agrippina: see also note 4.

20 Birley 1999, 72; *Hist. Aug., Sev.* 3.9; *Geta* 3.1.

21 The only instance in the *Historia Augusta* portraying Domna as a schemer is the remark (not elaborated upon) that she was “guilty of plotting” against her husband, Severus; *Hist. Aug., Sev.* 18.8.

with the prefect, she is said to have withdrawn to her philosophical studies and her circle of sophists.²² She does not even play a role in the eventual downfall of Plautianus, which is wholly attributed to Caracalla, although the author makes a point of mentioning that she rejoiced in his death.²³ When Caracalla later schemes against Geta and plots to murder him, Dio once again presents Domna in a wholly passive role. In fact, she is used as an unwitting tool by Caracalla to lure his brother into a fatal trap. The text presents her as a grieving mother, cradling her dying son in her arms.²⁴

On the other hand, Dio does twice associate Julia Domna with ‘craftiness’ (πανουργία), a trait he connects to her Syrian origins.²⁵ During the reign of Caracalla, she is alleged to have played an important role in government, as we will discuss in the next section, revealing a political side to her character. However, the depth of her ambitions only becomes clear during her final appearance in the *Roman History*, after Caracalla has been murdered and Macrinus has seized the throne. Allegedly, Domna was unwilling to return to private life after so many years in the centre of power, so she planned a counter-coup:

Then, as no change was made in her royal retinue or in the guard of Praetorians in attendance upon her, and the new emperor sent her a kindly message, although he had heard what she had said, she took courage, put aside her desire for death, and without writing him any reply, began intriguing with the soldiers she had about her, who were mutinous to begin with, were very fond of her, and were angry with Macrinus, and consequently held her son in pleasanter remembrance; for she hoped to become sole ruler and make herself the equal of Semiramis and Nitocris, inasmuch as she came in a sense from the same parts as they.²⁶

Domna’s desire to seize the throne may come as a bit of a surprise to the reader. No similar scene occurs in Herodian or the *Historia Augusta*. Andrew Scott has rightly pointed out that Dio’s narrative contains hints that Domna was already

22 Dio Cass. 76.15.6–7. All English translations of ancient texts are taken from the Loeb Classical Library editions. See Hemelrijk 1999, 122–128 for Domna’s circle; as she points out, the empress’ withdrawal from public life resembles that of a disgraced senator.

23 Dio Cass. 77.4.4. Scott 2017, 425–426 argues that Domna’s rivalry with Plautianus hints at her own political influence, because otherwise the prefect would not have turned against her. While that certainly makes sense, Dio evidently chooses to downplay Domna’s political agency in his account of this episode.

24 Dio Cass. 78.2.2–4; Herodian 4.3.8; 4.4.3 casts her in a similar role.

25 Dio Cass. 78.6.1a; 10.2; see also Mallan 2013, 747–749.

26 Dio Cass. 79.23.2–3.

vying for political influence during the reigns of her husband and son—such as her rivalry with Plautianus—but overstates the case when he claims that “Dio depicts Julia in a consistent manner, focusing on her foreignness and desire for power”.²⁷ After all, as we have just seen, several scenes present her first and foremost as a victim or pawn in the schemes of others, not as a political player in her own right. As Christopher Mallan argues, Dio’s portrayal of the empress primarily serves to underline the political and ethical points he wants to make. In earlier episodes, she acted as a foil to highlight the villainy of Plautianus and Caracalla, eliciting the reader’s sympathy for her plight, while in her final appearance in the text, she embodies the recurring theme of the powerful being unwilling or unable to give up their power.²⁸

Of course, one of the most striking aspects of the counter-coup episode is Domna’s expressed desire to “make herself the equal of Semiramis and Nitocris”. These were semi-legendary eastern queens who actively governed their kingdoms.²⁹ The empress’ scheming for dominance is hence placed in an ‘Oriental’ context and framed as un-Roman. While her bid for power would fail, Scott has plausibly argued that the association with the eastern queens foreshadows the reigns of the later Severan emperors, Elagabalus and Alexander, who hailed from Syria and stood under the influence of strong women. By projecting the domineering status of these later Severan empresses back onto Domna, Dio could use her as a bridge connecting the former to the latter half of the dynasty.³⁰ Moreover, as Mallan points out, the historian frequently associates Elagabalus with the debauched monarch Sardanapalus, the last in the line of Semiramis’ successors. Both rulers were notorious for their alleged effeminacy and were violently overthrown. Hence Domna-Semiramis and Elagabalus-Sardanapalus signalled the advent of an ‘Oriental’ style of monarchy in Rome, characterised by strong women seizing control and weak men unable to hold on to power.³¹

²⁷ Scott 2017, 429. See also note 24.

²⁸ Mallan 2013.

²⁹ Moscovich 2004, 364–365. Semiramis, Queen of Assyria, was loosely based on the historical Assyrian queen Sammuamat. There were two queens named Nitocris in the Greco-Roman tradition, one from Egypt and one from Babylonia; Dio is probably referring to the former.

³⁰ Scott 2017. As the author points out (414–415), Dio’s emphasis on Domna as the bridge between the two halves of the dynasty runs counter to the official narrative under Elagabalus and Severus Alexander, both of whom claimed descent from Caracalla.

³¹ Mallan 2013, 755–756. See Icks 2011, 98–101 for parallels between Elagabalus and Sardanapalus in Dio. For the juxtaposition of strong female rulers with effeminate male rulers in Greco-Roman historiography, including Semiramis and Sardanapalus, see Icks 2017.

Julia Maesa is generally more clearly portrayed as a scheming empress than her sister, at least in some accounts. In Herodian's retelling of the coup of Elagabalus, she is placed in the role of kingmaker. Allegedly, the old lady had lived in the imperial palace during the reigns of Severus and Caracalla, where she had managed to acquire fabulous riches. Now that Macrinus had sent her back to her hometown Emesa, she plotted to place her grandson on the throne. Herodian recounts how she spread a rumour among the soldiers that came to Emesa to watch Elagabalus perform ritual dances as high priest of Elagabal, alleging that her grandson was actually a bastard son of Caracalla. Enticed by the prospect of great riches, the soldiers invited Maesa and her family to secretly come to the army camp at night, where Elagabalus was immediately saluted as emperor and wrapped in a purple cloak.³² The account in the *Historia Augusta* is much briefer, but tells essentially the same story:

To these [soldiers], Maesa, or Varia as she was also called, declared that this Bassianus was the son of Antoninus, and this was gradually made known to all the soldiers. Maesa herself, furthermore, was very rich (whence also Elagabalus was most wasteful of money), and through her promises to the soldiers the legions were persuaded to desert Macrinus. For after she and her household had been received into the town by night, her grandson was hailed as Antoninus and presented with the imperial insignia.³³

Remarkably, Dio has a different version which assigns the role of kingmaker to a certain Eutychianus, a young man with close ties to the family. In Dio's account, he is the one who brings Elagabalus to the army camp at night and persuades the soldiers to revolt—doing so “without the knowledge of either his mother or his grandmother”, as the historian mentions explicitly.³⁴ Sonja Nadolny is undoubtedly right in seeing this as part of a conscious effort to dissociate Maesa from the priest-emperor's scandalous reign. After all, Dio finalised his *Roman History* under Severus Alexander, who was responsible for Maesa's *consecratio*, so he had a strong motive to cast her in a positive light.³⁵

Herodian, writing in post-Severan times, was not hampered by such considerations. His portrayal of Maesa is certainly less than flattering. Not only

32 Hdn. 5.3.2; 5.3.8–12.

33 *Hist. Aug., Macrinus* 9.4–6.

34 Dio Cass. 79.31.

35 Nadolny 2016, 149–152. As the author argues, Herodian's account of Maesa's active role in the coup may well be more historically accurate than Dio's version (168–169).

did she meddle in politics, but she even did so in the ‘masculine’ space of an army camp, which highlights how far her actions exceeded proper feminine roles.³⁶ Moreover, the author makes it clear that her scheming was not meant for the benefit of her grandson, but was motivated by purely selfish reasons. The old lady “would rather have risked any danger than live as an ordinary person, apparently rejected”, and “was anxious to get to the imperial palace she had been used to”.³⁷ Elagabalus is merely a pawn to achieve this end. When a few years into the reign Maesa notices that the praetorians are growing disgusted with her imperial grandson, she has no scruples in discarding him and hitching her wagon to Alexander’s rising star. While Julia Mamaea secretly distributes money to the praetorians to win their support (duplicating her mother’s role in the previous coup), Maesa keeps the boy protected from Elagabalus’ schemes, for “in addition to being enterprising [she] had many years of experience of living at the imperial palace”.³⁸ Maesa, in short, is a political creature through and through in Herodian’s account—and to a lesser extent in the *Historia Augusta* as well—excelling in hatching plots and foiling the schemes of rivals, including the emperor’s. Julia Soaemias and Julia Mamaea, on the other hand, are barely portrayed as schemers in any of the sources.³⁹

3 Domineering (Grand)mothers

The Severan empresses were not just portrayed as conniving women who resorted to bribes and rumours to manipulate events. Our literary sources also present them as quasi-regents who were effectively in control of political affairs, reigning through their sons or grandsons. The prototype of such a domineering empress was Agrippina the Younger, who had allegedly first controlled her husband Claudius and later her son Nero as the true power behind the throne.⁴⁰ When she first rose to political prominence, Tacitus claims that

36 The notion of strong imperial women encroaching on the military sphere was a recurring theme in literary sources; e.g. Agrippina receiving homage from war prisoners before the Roman standards, which Tacitus describes as “the advertisement of her claim to a partnership in the empire” (*Ann.*12.37).

37 Hdn. 5.3.11; 5.5.1. Maesa’s motives are similar to Domna’s in Dio’s account; neither empress could stand the idea of a return to private life after so many years in the centre of power.

38 Hdn. 5.8.3–4. In the *Historia Augusta*’s account, Maesa does not scheme against Elagabalus, but instead urges him to make peace with Alexander; *Heliogab.* 15.6.

39 The just-mentioned episode in Herodian where Mamaea bribes the praetorians to support her son (5.8.3) is the exception to the rule.

40 Ginsburg 2006; see also note 4.

she instigated a “tight-drawn, almost masculine tyranny”, a phrase which neatly captures the reversal of gender roles associated with feminine rule. According to the view of Greco-Roman historians and biographers, a woman who seized the reins of government usurped the power that was rightfully man’s. Inevitably, this reflected badly on the masculinity of the emperors who were supposed to be in charge.⁴¹ As we will see, such notions definitely also played a role in the portrayal of the Severan empresses and the reigning men/boys in their families.

From the previous section, it will be clear that Julia Domna was not imagined as a domineering figure in the literary sources. Despite her alleged aspirations to become a new Semiramis or Nitocris towards the end of her life, we have already seen that several episodes describe how she was bullied or manipulated by Plautianus and Caracalla. In Dio’s account, it is only during the reign of her sole surviving son that Domna is credited with a prominent political role. As the historian alleges, Caracalla had “appointed her to receive petitions and to have charge of his correspondence in both languages, except in very important cases, and used to include her name, in terms of high praise, together with his own and that of the legions, in his letters to the senate, stating that she was well”. In addition, she is said to have held public receptions, just like the emperor did.⁴² While this passage has probably been quite influential in establishing Domna’s reputation as a powerful empress, Herodian and the *Historia Augusta* have little to record about her involvement in affairs of state. Even Dio’s narrative leaves no doubt that Caracalla remains firmly in control. When Domna chides him for wasting money, he is quick to dismiss her worries, indicating that his sword will guarantee a steady influx of revenue. According to Dio, the incident did not stand by itself: allegedly, the emperor never listened to his mother, even though she gave him “much excellent advice”.⁴³ The text places the pair in sharp contrast, with Domna representing sensible government and devotion to the study of philosophy, while Caracalla spends his time “staining himself with blood, doing lawless deeds, and squandering money”.⁴⁴ The passage should not be read as a plea for the virtues of feminine rule, but rather as a demonstration of Caracalla’s tyrannical qualities, with Domna serving as a positive counterpart for the occasion.

41 Tac. *Ann.* 12.7: *quasi virile servitium*; Icks 2017.

42 Dio Cass. 78.18.1–2.

43 Dio Cass. 78.10.4; 78.18.2.

44 Dio Cass. 78.18.1–3. Mallan 2013, 756–757 suggests that Dio draws parallels between the philosopher-rulers Domna and Marcus Aurelius on the one hand, and their unruly sons on the other.

The literary portrayal of Julia Maesa adheres more closely to the figure of the domineering empress controlling her imperial offspring—or at least attempting to. Dio, for reasons we have already discussed, tried to dissociate the old lady as much as possible from Elagabalus' regime. When the narrative puts her into focus, it is usually to show her opposing her unruly grandson: she objects to his plan to elevate his lover Hierokles to the rank of *Caesar*, and eventually starts loathing him for his misdeeds, coming to favour Alexander as a more worthy candidate for the purple.⁴⁵ Herodian, on the other hand, places Maesa squarely at the centre of Elagabalian politics. Not only did she allegedly orchestrate the young man's rise to power in the first place, as we have seen, but she is also the one who sets the affairs of the Eastern Mediterranean in order for him after the defeat of Macrinus, "because he was young and without administrative experience or education". The decision to move on to Rome is also prompted by her, as the narrative suggests.⁴⁶ However, it soon becomes clear that Elagabalus is not a very pliable puppet. When the teenage ruler insists on wearing his "strange, completely barbarous" priestly dress when he enters the capital, Maesa is horrified and tries in vain to persuade him to wear a Roman toga instead.⁴⁷ The episode serves to illustrate the emperor's 'Oriental', un-Roman character, but does not extend that characterisation to his grandmother, who is evidently much more in tune with the demands of Roman decorum. On another occasion, Maesa is more successful in influencing her imperial grandson, whom Herodian describes as "in most matters a thoughtless, silly young man". Resorting to flattery, she persuades Elagabalus that he should devote all his time to his priestly duties and should adopt his cousin Alexander as *Caesar* to deal with affairs of state.⁴⁸ Clearly, then, the narrative depicts Maesa as a deft manipulator of her fickle puppet emperor, but only up to a point, for even she is not always capable of keeping his whims under control.

Remarkably, in the *Historia Augusta* it is not Maesa, but Elagabalus' mother Julia Soaemias—here called Symiamira—who features as the domineering empress. Allegedly, the emperor was "wholly under the control of his mother' and 'did no public business without her consent". When he visits the Senate, he invites her to come with him, places her on the consuls' bench and lets her

45 Dio Cass. 80.15.4; 19.4. However, Maesa is presented in a less favourable light in 80.11.1, where she and Soaemias join Elagabalus in singing "barbaric chants" in honour of the god Elagabal.

46 Hdn. 5.5.1.

47 Hdn. 5.5.4–6.

48 Hdn. 5.7.1–2. As Nadolny 2016, 170–171 points out, in Dio's account there is no suggestion that Maesa prompted the emperor to adopt Alexander (80.17.2).

witness the drawing up of decrees. Hence “Elagabalus was the only one of all the emperors under whom a woman attended the Senate like a man, just as though she belonged to the senatorial order”, as the biographer remarks disapprovingly.⁴⁹ The story brings to mind Agrippina, who according to Tacitus had already encroached on this masculine domain by listening in on Senate meetings from behind a curtain.⁵⁰ As the *Historia Augusta* implies, Elagabalus and his mother went far beyond this infamous precedent. Symiamira is even put in charge of a Senate of her own:

He also established a *senaculum*, or women’s senate, on the Quirinal Hill. (...) But now under the influence of Symiamira absurd decrees were enacted concerning rules to be applied to matrons, namely, what kind of clothing each might wear in public, who was to yield precedence and to whom, who was to advance to kiss another, who might ride in a chariot, on a horse, on a pack-animal, or on an ass, who might drive in a carriage drawn by mules or in one drawn by oxen, who might be carried in a litter, and whether the litter might be made of leather, or of bone, or covered with ivory or with silver, and lastly, who might wear gold or jewels on her shoes.⁵¹

We can read this as a testimony to the fickleness of women, who reduce the serious business of politics to irrelevant discussions about clothing, etiquette and trinkets. Rather than proving herself a second Agrippina instigating an “almost masculine tyranny”, Symiamira emerges from this passage as a vapid person obsessed with trivialities. Obviously, it was a heavy indictment against Elagabalus’ masculinity that he allowed himself to be controlled by such a woman. The emperor’s woefully lacking qualities as a man and a ruler are highlighted in another passage, this time concerning his grandmother: “When he went to the camp or the Senate-house he took with him his grandmother, Varia by name, (...) in order that through her prestige he might get greater respect—for by himself he got none.”⁵²

49 *Hist. Aug., Heliogab.* 4.1–2. The allegation that Symiamira frequented Senate meetings is in all likelihood an elaboration of Dio Cass. 80.17.2, which claims that Maesa and Soemias attended a Senate meeting when the emperor adopted Alexander: see Schöpe 2014, 200; Nadolny 2016, 192. Elsewhere, the author of the *Vita Heliogabali* adds that Elagabalus even allowed his mother (or possibly his grandmother; the text only mentions “a woman”) to express her opinion in senatorial debates (12.3).

50 Tac. *Ann.* 13.5.

51 *Hist. Aug., Heliogab.* 4.3–4.

52 *Hist. Aug., Heliogab.* 12.3.

Finally, there is Julia Mammaea, the mother of Severus Alexander. Cassius Dio has little to say about her in his brief account of Alexander's reign, but she features prominently as a powerful empress in Herodian and the *Historia Augusta*.⁵³ During the reign of Elagabalus, Herodian records, Mammaea kept her son away from the emperor's disgraceful activities and made sure that he got a proper Greco-Roman education, with much emphasis on self-discipline and physical exercise. Likewise, the *Historia Augusta* mentions that Alexander had been "nurtured from his earliest boyhood in all excellent arts, civil and military", with Mammaea taking a leading role in his upbringing.⁵⁴ However, the evaluation of the empress in both works starts to diverge strongly once Alexander sits on the throne. Herodian now sets Mammaea up as the domineering mother who has her claws dug deeply into her son. While her attempts to shield the teenage ruler from corrupting flatterers and the enticement of "low desires" could still be interpreted positively, the historian leaves no doubt that her overbearing role is highly problematic.⁵⁵ Throughout his reign, Alexander is "completely dominated by his mother" and even obeys her when it goes against his better judgment, "the one thing for which he can be faulted".⁵⁶ A case in point is Mammaea's treatment of the emperor's wife: green with envy for having to share the title *Augusta* with another woman, the older empress keeps insulting her and eventually has her banished to Libya. Mammaea is also portrayed as greedy and forcibly confiscates property for her own gain—a trait typically associated with tyrants. In neither case does Alexander stand up to her.⁵⁷ Eventually, the soldiers start to despise him, as "business was conducted on the authority and advice of a woman, while he himself presented a picture of negligence and cowardice in his conduct of war".⁵⁸ The resulting uprising proves fatal for the emperor as well as his mother.

As Nadolny remarks, Herodian probably had literary motives for his hostile portrayal of Mammaea: with the perverted Elagabalus out of the picture, the author needed someone else to act as a contrasting figure to Alexander, and Mammaea fitted the bill. The *Historia Augusta*, on the other hand, presents Alexander as a more or less ideal ruler, so painting him as a pathetic 'mother's

53 A fragment from Zonaras (12.5) which describes Mammaea taking over the reins of government has sometimes been attributed to Dio, but actually derives from Herodian: see Nadolny 2016, 157–158.

54 Hdn. 5.7.5; *Hist. Aug., Alex. Sev.* 3.1; 14.5.

55 Hdn. 6.1.5–6.

56 Hdn. 6.1.10.

57 Hdn. 6.1.8–10. Mammaea's tyrannical tendencies are also highlighted by the fact that she has the father of Alexander's wife killed when he tries to stand up for his daughter.

58 Hdn. 6.8.3. Mammaea is explicitly blamed for the failure of Alexander's reign: 6.9.8.

boy' definitely would not do.⁵⁹ In the biographer's account Mammaea still plays a prominent role in affairs of state, to the extent that she "seemed to have an equal share in the rule", but no longer looms large as an overbearing presence controlling her son. Except for one brief reference to her avarice, her tyrannical tendencies have also been removed from the narrative.⁶⁰ As the text makes clear, Alexander holds the empress in high regard, but is also capable of making independent decisions and of occasionally contradicting her.⁶¹ For the first and only time in our accounts of the Severan age, we are presented with a loving and balanced relationship between mother and son.

4 Sexual Transgressions

It might seem strange to devote a section to sexual transgressions in an analysis of powerful imperial women, but only until we realise that power and sexuality are closely intertwined in Greco-Roman literary discourse.⁶² As the head of the *domus Augusta*, it was the emperor's responsibility to guard the *pudicitia* of the female members of his household. Failure to keep their sexuality under control could be constructed as an indication of weak rule, for an emperor who could not keep his own house in order could hardly be expected to govern well. Tacitus' narrative about Messalina provides a prime example: not only did her adulterous affair with a senator signal Claudius' weak rule and lacking masculinity, but she even became a direct threat to his position when she secretly married her lover.⁶³

According to the *Historia Augusta*, Julia Domna engaged in many adulterous affairs when she was married to Septimius Severus, a statement the author connects to the allegation that she was also guilty of plotting against the emperor.⁶⁴ However, neither claim is substantiated. The only possible hint in a contemporary source that Domna might have been unfaithful to her husband comes from an anecdote in Dio. Allegedly, the empress engaged in conversation with the wife of a Caledonian, joking about the freedom of British women to engage in sexual relations with men. The woman replied that "we fulfil the demands of nature in a much better way than do you Roman women; for we consort openly

59 Nadolny 2016, 176–177, 199.

60 *Hist. Aug., Alex. Sev.* 14.7.

61 *Hist. Aug., Alex. Sev.* 20.3; 25.10; 26.9.

62 For Roman sexuality, see Hallet and Skinner 1997; Skinner 2005.

63 *Tac. Ann.* 11.12; 26–38. See Joshel 1997 for an excellent analysis.

64 *Hist. Aug., Sev.* 18.8. See also note 22.

with the best men, whereas you let yourselves be debauched in secret by the vilest". While it is possible to read this remark as a veiled allusion to Domna's own sexual liaisons, that does not seem likely, as Dio never addresses the theme again in his portrayal of the empress. We should probably rather interpret the comment as a general critique of the deplorable state of Roman morals, reflecting Dio's own pessimistic perspective.⁶⁵

In Herodian, we find an allusion to another notorious sexual practice Domna was rumoured to engage in. As the historian records, the Alexandrians cracked many jokes at the expense of Caracalla and his mother, mocking the former for the murder of his brother and calling the latter Jocasta, a name synonymous with incest.⁶⁶ Herodian has nothing further to report on this allegation, but in the *Historia Augusta* the incest rumours are presented as fact. For unclear reasons, the anonymous author alleges that Domna is not Caracalla's mother, but his stepmother. The emperor develops a passion for her and, encouraged by Domna herself, takes her hand in marriage. Thus "to fratricide he added incest, for he joined to himself in marriage the woman whose son he had recently slain".⁶⁷ Of course, Domna is hardly the first imperial woman who stands accused of incestuous relations with the emperor; similar stories are told about Caligula and his sisters, as well as about Nero and his mother.⁶⁸ Incest is thus a stock character trait of the 'bad emperor' in the literary tradition, but it also signals an unusual closeness between the ruler and the imperial woman in question. The fact that Domna is such a willing partner in this scandalous liaison and even encourages her son testifies to her depraved morals, but perhaps also hints at her intention to control the emperor through sex. Just as Agrippina tried to keep Nero in her grip by presenting herself to him "coquetishly dressed and prepared for incest", the "very beautiful woman" Domna seduces Caracalla by displaying "a considerable part of her person, as it were in carelessness".⁶⁹

Julia Maesa and Julia Mamaea are not associated with any sexual transgressions in the literary sources. However, Julia Soaemias definitely is. While she only plays a very minor role in the accounts of Cassius Dio and Herodian,

65 Dio Cass. 77.16.5; Mallan 2013, 742–743. Scott 2017, 420 n. 28 is inclined to interpret the remark as a veiled comment on Domna's promiscuity.

66 Hdn. 4.9.2–3.

67 *Hist. Aug., Ant.* 10.1–4; see also *Sev.* 21.7. Other late antique sources also mention the pair's incestuous relationship: *Eutr.* 8.20; *Aur. Vict. Caes.* 21; *Epit. de Caes.* 21.5.

68 Caligula and his sisters: *Suet. Calig.* 24.1; Dio Cass. 59.11.1; 59.22.6. Nero and his mother: *Suet. Ner.* 28.2; *Tac. Ann.* 14.2.

69 *Tac. Ann.* 14.2; *Hist. Aug., Ant.* 10.2.

the *Historia Augusta* makes her a more important character in the narrative, describing her as follows:

(...) she lived like a harlot and practised all manner of lewdness in the palace. For that matter, her amour with Antoninus Caracalla was so notorious that Varius, or rather Elagabalus, was commonly supposed to be his son. The name Varius, some say, was given him by his school-fellows because he seemed to be sprung from the seed of 'various' men, as would be the case with the son of a harlot.⁷⁰

Soaemias' amorous affair with Caracalla, presented as a fiction or at best a possibility in older sources, has in this passage been elevated to uncontested fact.⁷¹ Together with the emperor's *nomen gentilicium* Varius, it is used to portray her as a lascivious woman who sleeps with countless men. There is perhaps a hint of Orientalism here: not only did the Romans associate unbridled lust with the world of the 'East', but the name Symiamira which the author uses for Soaemias sounds quite similar to Semiramis and may suggest a parallel between the two. Like Soaemias, Semiramis played an active political role and was alleged to have had many sexual partners.⁷² There is also a clear parallel with Elagabalus himself, whom the biographer portrays as exceptionally depraved. Allegedly, the emperor considered it "the chief enjoyment of his life to arouse the lusts of the greatest number". The link between mother and son is emphasised when both are killed together: "With him was also slain his mother Symiamira, a most depraved woman and one worthy of such a son."⁷³

5 Conclusion

Our main accounts of the four Julias exhibit many tropes associated with powerful women in the Greco-Roman literary tradition. The empresses appear as devious schemers plotting to overthrow emperors and advance their own offspring; as domineering (grand)mothers who have seized power for themselves; and as depraved women whose sexual transgressions signal the corruption at

⁷⁰ *Hist. Aug., Heliogab.* 2.1–2.

⁷¹ Compare Dio Cass. 79.31.3; Hdn. 5.3.10. However, note that the *Historia Augusta* still denies that Elagabalus was actually Caracalla's son, remarking he had "used the name Antoninus without valid claim, wishing to be thought the son of Antoninus" (*Heliogab.* 17.4).

⁷² See Icks 2017, 68–70, with further references.

⁷³ *Hist. Aug., Heliogab.* 5.5; 18.2.

the heart of imperial power. At the same time, it is remarkable how inconsistently these tropes are applied. Julia Maesa may be a kingmaker in one narrative while hardly wielding any political influence in another; Julia Soaemias features as either a voracious maneater or as a bland minor character barely worth noticing; and Julia Mamaea is portrayed as an overbearing mother with tyrannical tendencies, but also as a beloved and respected advisor. These inconsistencies are even more apparent when they occur within one and the same account. Thus Dio's Julia Domna can appear as a pitiable victim of the machinations of the men around her, only to emerge as a woman burning with ambition to set herself up as supreme ruler in a later passage, while Mamaea's character basically transforms from benign to malign in Herodian's history after Alexander has replaced Elagabalus as emperor. Although there are some evocations of powerful eastern queens in the texts, especially Semiramis, these also appear haphazardly: the theme of an 'Oriental' style rule by women remains mostly undeveloped. The reason for this is probably that the four Julias never truly take centre stage in the narratives about the Severan dynasty. Their primary literary function is to reflect on the virtues and vices of the emperors (or sometimes powerful courtiers such as Plautianus) with whom they are associated, and whom they can either resemble, be contrasted against, or dissociated from. For the most part, their characterisation is therefore dependent on the portrayal of the reigning monarch. In that sense, at least, the Syrian empresses never really managed to step out of the looming shadow of the men who were the nominal wielders of power.

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