Monstrous Desires: The Negative Characterization of Women Close to Power in Cassius Dio's Roman History

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Introduction

The image on the cover of this thesis depicts one of the most gruesome acts attributed to a Roman woman by ancient historians. Lying in the center of the painting is Fulvia, the wife of Mark Antony, engaged in mistreating Cicero's severed head by sticking her hairpins into it. What the artist Pavel Aleksandrovich Svedomsky (1849-1904) chose as the subject matter for this painting is a passage from Cassius Dio's *Roman History* (47.8.4). What makes this passage particularly interesting is that it is most likely fictitious. Dio, who composed his *Roman History* around the beginning of the 3rd century CE, wrote about Fulvia's treatment of Cicero's head approximately 250 years after Cicero was decapitated, yet this passage is not attested in any other historical account before that of Dio.[1] If this passage is not based on any extant literary account, why did Dio chose to include it in his *Roman History*? Why did such an image of Fulvia come into being in the first place?

I will argue that we need to see this passage within the larger historical tradition surrounding Fulvia and, more generally, women close to power in Roman historiography. By the time Dio wrote this passage, the negative characterization of Fulvia was nothing new: her contemporaries, including Cicero himself, had already depicted her as an aggressive and cruel woman.[2] By accusing Fulvia of such a gruesome, unparalleled act as mutilating a corpse Dio firmly cemented his Fulvia within this same tradition while also adding a new element to it. What is more, this morbid anecdote can be said to summarize the essential information that Dio wants his audience to know about Fulvia as a person, and most importantly, as a woman.

This exaggeration of negative character traits found in earlier historical accounts is by no means unique to Dio's characterization of Fulvia: it applies to his portrayal of other historical characters as well.[3]

How does Dio characterize women close to the seat of Roman power? And, more precisely, what gender stereotypes does he deploy in depicting these women? These are the questions that I will set out to answer in this thesis.

The women on whom this thesis will focus are Fulvia (c. 80-40 BC), Messalina (c.20-48 CE) and Agrippina (c.15-59 CE).[4] What links these three women to Roman power are their husbands. The husband of Fulvia (chapter 1) was Mark Antony, the rival and colleague of Octavian, the man who was to become Rome's first emperor. Both Messalina (chapter 2) and Agrippina (chapter 3) were married to emperor Claudius at one point in their lives. The historical context in which these women operated are quite different, which is why I will introduce the historical evidence we have concerning these women at the start of each chapter. I will then give a short overview of the passages within the *Roman History* in which each of these women appear. The most important part of each chapter will consist of close readings of passages I have chosen to highlight because they contain Dio's most preposterous claims about these women. Such close readings can highlight not just how ancient ideas of gender are expressed within a large narrative structure, but also how they are reflected on a small scale, such as the choice of vocabulary. In a number of cases I will refer to the works of other ancient historians of the Roman Empire, most importantly Appian, Tacitus and Suetonius, in order to show how Dio's portrayal of Fulvia, Messalina and Agrippina differs from other accounts. Finally, I will compare Dio's characterization

[1] See note 37 below. Wardle (2013) dates Dio's writing of the *Roman History* between 194 and 229 CE.

[2] An exception to this is Cornelius Nepos' positive portrayal of Fulvia in his work on Atticus. See Weir (2008: 65-67).

[3] An example of this kind of exaggeration of the historical tradition applied to a male subject (Nero) is given by Pelling (1997: 119), who uses the term 'biographical distortion' to describe Dio's method of writing history.

[4] It is hard to determine the year of Messalina's birth, but scholars believe she was extremely young when she married Claudius. See Fagan (2002: 571) and De La Bédoyère (2018: 190). For Agrippina's date of birth see Barrett (1999: 269-271).

of these three women and analyze the similarities and differences between the portrayals of Fulvia, Messalina and Agrippina.

Cassius Dio (c.164-229 CE) was the author of several works in Greek. Although his *Roman History* is by far his most famous work, we know that he also wrote a work about dreams. Born in the province of Bithynia, Dio moved to Rome at a young age where he went on to have a successful political career. His *Roman History* was an ambitious work, originally consisting of 80 books, which dealt with the history of Rome from its beginning to the year 229 BC, the year Dio's second consulship ended.[5]

What complicates analyzing Cassius Dio's characterization of Fulvia, Messalina and Agrippina is the fact that a large part of his *Roman History* has been lost. Although books 47-48, in which Fulvia appears, have been completely preserved, this is not the case for books 60-61, the books in which Messalina and Agrippina play an important part. Part of the content of these books has been preserved in summaries, of which the one by Xiphilinus is the most important one, because it is directly derived from Dio's work and does not contain material from other sources, like the epitome of Zonaras does.[6] Christopher Pelling has warned against the fact that the writers of these epitomes make Dio appear more anecdotal than he already is and often choose to recount 'the most salacious and spectacular items.'[7] It is thus hard to judge to what extent Dio's characterization of Messalina and Agrippina as it appears in the summaries corresponds to the original passages from the *Roman History*.

A very different kind of difficulty for the scholar who examines Cassius Dio is the lack of accessible commentaries on his work. *Les Belles Lettres* have published a series of commentaries, but these unfortunately only cover the complete books of the *Roman History* (36-59).

When dealing with Dio's exaggerated claims about women, many scholars have either defended the historical accuracy of these claims or reprimanded Dio for not assessing his sources critically enough and not eliminating 'basically absurd material.'[8] Other scholars, such as Peter Keegan, have recognized that Dio's colorful anecdotes are part of the ancient tradition of writing history, and are more interested in how these anecdotes contribute to the characterization of a certain historical figure than debating the historical truthfulness of these accounts.[9] I am similarly not interested in assessing to what extent these accounts reflect historical truths, but intend to approach Cassius Dio's *Roman History* as a carefully constructed historical narrative, which is not so much an objective account of historical facts as a thrilling narrative written for an audience which was already familiar with a great deal of narratives concerning the history of Rome.

Although Cassius Dio has for a long time been neglected in classical scholarship, some work has already been published which compares Cassius Dio's work to that of other historians, such as Tacitus and Suetonius. This includes scholarship on the ancient historiographical characterization of women. Judith Ginsburg (2006), for instance, has compared how Agrippina is portrayed by Cassius Dio, Suetonius and Tacitus. Allison Weir (2008) and Peter Keegan (2020) have given an overview of how Fulvia appears in all of our extant sources. Less has been done when it comes to analyzing the characterization of women within Dio's *Roman History* itself. Until very recently there was no discussion concerning the role of women in Dio's work. This has changed with the publication of Caitlin Gillespie's chapter in the *Brill's Companion to Cassius Dio* (2023). In the chapter titled '*Women, Politics, and Morality in Cassius Dio's Roman History'* Gillespie's stresses Dio's use of women to 'frame [his] history of men' and to 'illustrate

[5] See Wardle (2013) and Keegan (2004: 15).
[6] See Gowing (1997: 2560-3) and Ginsburg (2006: 33 n.47)
[7] Pelling (1997: 124).
[8] C.f. Wood (2001: 257-8) and (Barrett 1999: 239) who take very different approaches to Dio's claims about Agrippina's behavior.
[9] E.g. Keegan (2020: 122).

moral failures in times of civil conflict.'[10] Although she lightly touches upon the fact that Dio sometimes masculinizes women and feminizes men as a means to criticize them, she does not further analyze how Dio deploys gender as a means to criticize a historical figure.[11] Peter Keegan (2004) has explicitly dealt with how gendered stereotypes contribute to the characterization of some of the women in Dio's work in his article '*Boudica, Cartimandua, Messalina and Agrippina the Younger. Independent Women of Power and the Gendered Rhetoric of Roman History*.' In this article Keegan has compared Dio's characterization of Messalina with that of Agrippina, a comparison that will turn out to be helpful for my analysis.

Dio's Fulvia, Messalina and Agrippina have not been compared to one another before, although there are compelling reasons to do so. First, the three of them are famously portrayed as 'bad women' by the ancient historical tradition.[12] Second, all of them are elite Roman women whose husbands were extremely powerful. Their subsequent closeness to power makes them vulnerable to the charge of acting 'too masculine' because they ran the risk of being perceived as encroaching on spaces, tasks and privileges which were thought to belong exclusively to men.[13] This in turn might have led ancient historians to feel compelled to discredit their political achievement if that is what the dominant narrative concerning these women, which was often influenced by propaganda, dictated.[14] To compare Messalina and Agrippina is quite an obvious choice, since Dio himself and Tacitus before him had already compared Claudius' wives to one another. However, as will become clear, Dio may actually have invited us to compare Agrippina to Fulvia as well, by depicting them both as abusers of corpses in a very similar setting. Messalina and Fulvia, on the other hand, seem to have shared a susceptibility for bribery.

Although my thesis centers around the characterizations of Fulvia, Messalina and Agrippina within the *Roman History*, I hope my research can also shed some light on how to interpret the negative portrayals of women close to power in other works and contexts. I believe that thinking in terms of ancient conceptions of gender can help us find the underlying logic behind such excessive and exaggerated scenes such as Fulvia's maiming of Cicero's head.

Ancient Greek and Roman Conceptions of Gender and Sexuality

In order to understand how Dio's negative characterization of Fulvia, Messalina and Agrippina functions, we must first understand in what ways gender could be used by ancient writers to negatively portray someone, as well as how sexuality could be deployed to the same effect, since one's sexual behavior played an important part in determining whether one successfully adhered to one's gender or not. We find this 'weaponization' of gender and sexuality in the invective of ancient rhetoricians, politicians, poets and anyone else who wished to discredit an opponent.[15] Ancient historians, who explained the course of history in terms of the personalities of the political players involved in shaping said history, made ample use of characterization too, which is why we find the same sexual and gendered

[10] Gillespie (2023: 439-449).
[11] See Gillespie (2023: 448).
[12] Weir (2008: 13-31) has given an overview of how modern scholarship has been influenced by ancient sources in their bias against Fulvia. See also Delia (1991: 206-208). Wood (2001: 259) speaks of the 'degree of hatred' displayed by Tacitus and Suetonius in their portrayal of Agrippina. See Späth (2019: 172) and Berlaire Gues (2019: 515 n.31) for the negative views ancient historians held against Messalina.
[13] See, among others, Keegan (2004: 121-122) Dickson (2002: 129) and note 25 below.
[14] This is most clearly the case for the historiographical tradition concerning Fulvia, which was heavily influenced by Octavian's propaganda. See Weir (2008: 67-74).
[15] The fourth chapter of Amy Richlin's *The Garden of Priapus* ('Graffiti, Gossip, Lampoons, and Rhetorical Invective') gives an overview of how charges of deviant sexuality were employed by Romans citizens, poets and politicians. For the evolution of gender and sexuality in Greek and Roman rhetoric, see Knust (2005: 17-25).

tropes in ancient historical works.[16] Cassius Dio's Roman History, as we will see, is no exception. To quote Kordula Schnegg: 'Die Römische Geschichte bietet eine breite Palette von negativen weiblichen Merkmalen.'[17]

So how was gender and sexuality employed to vilify others and which underlying assumptions about gender and sexuality made its use effective? In ancient Greek and Roman thought, sexual behavior was considered to be closely interlinked with structures of power and rationality. If one wanted to discredit a political male opponent, it was enough to accuse him of non-normative sexual behavior. What did and did not count as normal sexual behavior was informed by 'the use of anatomical orifices: vagina, anus and mouth.'[18]A male politician who enjoyed being penetrated by others and who enjoyed penetrating married women was unfit to rule, because he could not control his own excessive, unbridled sexuality.[19] Accusing a man of extravagance, gluttony or cowardice functioned in the same way: by giving in to his lust and emotions, a man betrayed his gender, since ruling over one's emotions was conceived of as the ultimate masculine virtue.[20] In other words, a 'bad' man was an unmanly man. Because he was not in charge of his own emotions he could not be expected to influence and control others.

Women, on the other hand, could fail to be virtuous in more ways than their masculine counterparts. A woman was 'bad' if she behaved irrationally, a quality which was conceived of as inherently female.[21] Like the effeminate man, a bad woman was carried away by her insatiable lust, her excessive emotions and her pursuit of luxury. But women could also be criticized for displaying behavior that was thought of as being typically male.[22] A woman who actively pursued power was to be abhorred, because her desire to dominate others went directly against the construction of women as 'nonphallic, passive, submissive, and subordinate,' in every aspect of their lives.[23] This left little room for exemplary female behavior, which consisted of women 'staying at home, being quiet, beautiful, thrifty, and spinning wool.'[24] This ideal was of course rarely met, especially because some involvement with public Roman life was expected of elite women, but there were limits as to what was acceptable.[25] The women I have chosen to discuss al crossed this limit of acceptability and were subsequently reprimanded for it by male historians.

One last point worth mentioning when discussing the use of gender in characterization, is that we often find that the 'bad' behavior of women is used to characterize the men close to them. A man could be judged by the way his wife behaved, because he was ultimately held responsible for controlling her behavior.[26] Used this way, the negative characterization of a woman might be employed to reveal more about her husband than about herself.

With these gendered stereotypes in mind, let us turn to how Dio negatively characterized women with political power.

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[16] Knust (2005: 16-17). See Bauman (1992: 10-1) for the dislike of ancient historians of women involved in politics.
[17] Schnegg (2006: 269).
[18] Keegan (2020: 104).
[19] For the relationship between adultery and 'passive homosexuality' in men, see See Williams (1999: 143) and Richlin (1992: 91-2).
[20] See Williams (1999: 132-4) and Knust (2005: 22-8).
[21] Williams (1999: 134). For ancient (Greek) conceptions of womanhood, see Carson (1999).
[22] Knust (2005: 30-1).
[23] Knust (2005: 31).
[24] Knust (2005: 37). See also Treggiari (1991: 242-249) who has analyzed what ancient epitaphs can tell us about Roman marriage values for both men and women. North's 1977 article 'The Mare, the Vixen, and the Bee: "Sophrosyne" as the Virtue of Women in Antiquity' gives an overview of female virtues throughout Greek and Roman sources, from tragedy to philosophy and epic, including non-literary sources.
[25] Schultz (2021: 1-2).
[26] See Knust (2005: 43-4).

Chapter 1. Fulvia: The Greediest and Cruelest General

1.1 The Heads of State

Fulvia, born around 80 BC, lived through some of the most hectic times in Roman history.[27] Her parents were Marcus Fulvius Bambalio and Sempronia, both descendants of families who once held a lot of power but had lost influence over the last century.[28] Fulvia was married off to Publius Clodius Pulcher when she was just a teenager.[29] Her first husband, infamous for his involvement in the *Bona Dea* scandal, was brutally murdered by his political rival Milo in 52 BC.[30] Fulvia's subsequent public exposure of his abused body was notorious and heavily influenced the public sentiment against Milo.

Fulvia remarried to Gaius Scribonius Curio that same year, but their marriage only lasted for a short time; Curio died in 49 BC during a military operation. Fulvia's third and last husband was the famous Mark Antony. When Caesar was murdered in 44, Antony, being his co-consul, found himself at the head of the state. His power was soon challenged by Octavian, Caesar's young nephew. After initially being political rivals, Octavian and Antony decided to join forces, along with Lepidus, against the senate.[31] Their new union was fortified by Octavian's marriage to Claudia, Fulvia's daughter.

Their collaboration did not last, however. In 42 BC, Octavian was tasked with assigning land to veterans while Antony was away conducting business in the East. At some point Antony's brother, Lucius Antonius, who was consul at the time, decided to turn against Octavian and defend the landowners whose land Octavian was giving away. Mounting tensions led to the outbreak of the Perusine war in 41 BC.

Fulvia's close and active involvement in this civil war is confirmed by a myriad of ancient sources, most importantly by inscribed lead sling-bullets found at the site of the war, which proves that she was familiar to soldiers and that she should be seen as 'a commander in her own right, equivalent in military status to L. Antonius.'[32]

Fulvia died soon after the war, which was won by Octavian, after she took ill in Greece where she had sought refuge.[33]

Celia Schultz has stated that 'as far as the ancient tradition is concerned, Fulvia's main characteristics are greed and aggression, not lasciviousness.'[34] Dio's characterization certainly fits right into this tradition. His Fulvia does not hesitate to deploy violence in her pursuit of the two things she loves most: money and power, as we will see below. The amount of aggression Dio's Fulvia displays, however, is unparalleled in other sources.

The first time Cassius Dio mentions Fulvia is at the end of book forty-six. The only piece of information we are given is that Fulvia is the wife of Mark Antony (τῆς γυναικὸς αὐτοῦ, 46.56.3) and that her daughter, whom Fulvia begot in her previous marriage to Clodius, is to be married to Octavian. Fulvia is thus introduced as a mediator between Antony and Octavian and consequently as an agent of peace.

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[27] Schultz (2021: 5).

[28] Schultz (2021: 8-10). See Schultz (2021: 9) for Fulvia's family tree.

[29] The marriage was arranged by Fulvia's stepfather Murena. Schultz (2021: 18).

[30] The following summary of the events taking place throughout Fulvia's lifetime is based on the work of Schultz (2021).

[31] Schultz (2021: 86-87).

[32] Keegan (2020: 107). See also Weir (2008: 123) who names the following ancient sources: Velleius Paterculus (2.74.3), Plutarch (*Vit. Ant*. 10.5-6), Appian (*B. Civ.* 5.4.33), Florus (2.16.2) and of course Dio (48.10.4). The sling bullets were inscribed with insults such as 'I aim at Fulvia's clitoris' (*Fulviae landicam peto*). For more on the lead bullets see Hallett (2019: 152-157).

[33] Schultz (2021: 102-104).

[34] See Schultz (2021: 49). This characterization finds its roots in Cicero's *Philippics* (3.18), see below.

Our first impression of her is hence quite positive.

The next time we meet Fulvia, however, Dio makes it quite clear that our initial impression of a complacent matron was quite misguided. We are now in 43 BC, the year in which the triumvirs institute proscriptions, a 'relatively efficient mechanism for removing political enemies and raising cash'[35] in which Antony and Fulvia seem to partake with great enthusiasm:

> [1] ἐκεῖνος μὲν οὖν πολλούς, ὅσους γε καὶ ἠδυνήθη, διεσώσατο· ὅ τε Λέπιδος τῷ τε ἀδελφῷ τῷ Παύλῳ ἐς Μίλητον ἐκδρᾶναι ἐπέτρεψε, καὶ πρὸς τοὺς ἄλλους οὐκ ἀπαραίτητος ἦν· ὁ δὲ Ἀντώνιος ὠμῶς καὶ ἀνηλεῶς οὐχ ὅτι τοὺς ἐκτεθέντας ἀλλὰ καὶ τοὺς ἐπικουρῆσαί τινι αὐτῶν
> [2] ἐπιχειρήσαντας ἔκτεινε. τάς τε κεφαλάς σφων, εἰ καὶ σιτούμενος ἐτύγχανεν, ἐπεσκόπει, καὶ ἐπὶ πλεῖστον τῆς τε ἀνοσιωτάτης καὶ τῆς οἰκτροτάτης αὐτῶν ὄψεως ἐνεπίμπλατο. καὶ ἥ γε Φουλουία πολλοὺς καὶ αὐτὴ καὶ κατ' ἔχθραν καὶ διὰ χρήματα καὶ ἔστιν οὓς οὐδὲ γιγνωσκομένους
> [3] ὑπὸ τοῦ ἀνδρός, ἐθανάτωσεν· ἑνὸς γοῦν τινος κεφαλὴν ἰδὼν εἶπεν ὅτι "τοῦτον οὐκ ἠπιστάμην". ὡς δ' οὖν καὶ ἡ τοῦ Κικέρωνός ποτε ἐκομίσθη σφίσι (φεύγων γὰρ καὶ καταληφθεὶς ἐσφάγη), ὁ μὲν Ἀντώνιος πολλὰ αὐτῷ καὶ δυσχερῆ ἐξονειδίσας ἔπειτ' ἐκέλευσεν αὐτὴν ἐκφανέστερον τῶν ἄλλων ἐν τῷ βήματι προτεθῆναι, ἵν' ὅθεν κατ' αὐτοῦ δημηγορῶν ἠκούετο, ἐνταῦθα μετὰ τῆς χειρὸς τῆς δεξιᾶς, ὥσπερ
> [4] ἀπετέτμητο, ὁρῷτο· ἡ δὲ δὴ Φουλουία ἔς τε τὰς χεῖρας αὐτὴν πρὶν ἀποκομισθῆναι ἐδέξατο, καὶ ἐμπικραναμένη οἱ καὶ ἐμπτύσασα ἐπί τε τὰ γόνατα ἐπέθηκε, καὶ τὸ στόμα αὐτῆς διανοίξασα τήν τε γλῶσσαν ἐξείλκυσε καὶ ταῖς βελόναις αἷς ἐς τὴν κεφαλὴν ἐχρῆτο κατεκέντησε,
> [5] πολλὰ ἅμα καὶ μιαρὰ προσεπισκώπτουσα. καὶ οὗτοι δ' οὖν ὅμως ἔσωσάν τινας, παρ' ὧν γε καὶ πλείω χρήματα ἔλαβον ἢ τελευτησάντων εὑρήσειν ἤλπισαν·[36]
>
> (Cassius Dio 47.8.1-5)

So he [Octavian] saved many people, as many as he could. And Lepidus permitted his brother Paulus to escape to Miletus, and was not unmerciful towards the others. Antony, on the other hand, not only cruelly and mercilessly killed those

[35] Schultz (2021: 87).

[36] All translations are by me unless mentioned otherwise. I have consulted the Loeb translation.

> who were proscribed, but also those who attempted to save any of them. He viewed their heads, even if he happened to be eating, and he was satiated to the greatest extent by the sight of their extremely profane and lamentable condition. And she, Fulvia, caused the death of many persons herself as well, out of hatred and on account of their goods, and she even caused the death of some persons who were not recognized by her husband. Upon seeing the head of one such person, he said: 'I did not know this man.' And when the head of Cicero too was recovered for them (for, having be caught while fleeing, he was slayed), Antony brought forward many odious reproaches against it and then ordered that the head be displayed on the rostra, more visibly than the other heads, so that he might be seen there along with his right hand, just as it had been cut off, [the place] from where he was heard speaking publicly against him [Antony]. Fulvia, in turn, took hold of the head before it was carried away, and, being bitter against it and spitting upon it she placed it upon her knees and having opened its mouth she pulled out its tongue and pierced it through with the needles she wore on her head, all the while mocking it with many foul remarks. And yet even they [Fulvia and Antony] saved some people, those from whom they received more goods than they expected to gain from them being dead.

As mentioned in the introduction of this thesis, the passage in which Fulvia abuses the head of Cicero has not been attested in any other source, and was most likely an invention by Dio.[37] What makes the image of Fulvia abusing Cicero's lifeless head so powerful is, I will argue, that in depicting Fulvia penetrating Cicero's tongue with her hairpins, Dio is playing with Roman norms of gender.

First there is the gender of Cicero: As Jonathan Walters explains, the Roman ideal of masculinity depended on not being penetrated. This included (consensual) sexual penetration as well as other (non-consensual) instances of bodily boundaries being violated.[38] Cicero has been decapitated, a particularly humiliating fate, since decapitation was usually reserved for people of 'diminished civil status' whose penetrability made them 'not quite fully male.'[39] Turning Cicero into the 'penetrable' and thus feminine party automatically turns Fulvia and Antony into the 'masculine' party. But Dio goes one step further: He describes Fulvia as actively penetrating Cicero's body by sticking hairpins through his tongue. In other words, Fulvia is raping Cicero.[40]

[37] Bertrand and Fromentin (2014: 69 n.51) mention that this passage was further amplified by John of Antioch, who, in his *Chronicle* not only accuses Fulvia of piercing Cicero's tongue but also of cutting of his head herself, as well as giving the order to place the head on the rostra where Cicero had been heard speaking against Fulvia, not Antony (κατ' αὐτῆς). Bertrand and Fromentin think John might have been combining two different historical traditions. Homeyer (1964: 30 n.64) sees a parallel with Plutarch's *Life of Demosthenes* 28.4, where the tongue of the orator Hypereides is removed after his death. Bauman (1992: 84 n.18) believes Dio's account might be true, since 'There was a strong tradition for violent expressions of red rage against enemies.' Schubert (2002: 71 n.33) believes the amount of details this account contains points towards its authenticity, though the fact that this passage adds to Fulvia's overall negative characterization makes her somewhat cautious.

[38] See Walters (1998: 37-8).

[39] Richlin (1999: 196). This group of people included criminals, slaves, gladiators and prisoners of war.

[40] For the mouth being assimilated to the genital area in Roman thought, see Richlin (1992: 69). On the threat of oral rape being present in public speaking, see Richlin (1999: 198).

Different types of hair bodkins which are part of the collection of The British Museum. From left to right: first century golden hair bodkin (1872,0604.832), elaborately carved late first century bone hair bodkin (OA.245), bone hair bodkins found at Carthage, (1860,1002.90)

While portraying Fulvia performing an act that was conceived of as masculine, this passage also emphasizes Fulvia's femininity. The hairpins Fulvia uses are 'one of the defining articles of female adornment.'[41] They are what Janet Stephens calls 'hair bodkins' and were used to keep complex hairstyles in place and might have had a decorative function.[42] Fulvia thus turns an object symbolic of femininity into a phallic substitute.

The use of the word μιαρά (19) may recall the Greek tradition that frequently linked the female body to the idea of μίασμα, pollution.[43] It is worth noting that Fulvia's physicality has been stressed throughout this passage: her hands (15), her spit (16), her knees (17) and, most importantly, her head (18) are all mentioned, the latter of which creates a parallel between Cicero and Fulvia. Coming into such close contact with a woman's body would thus add to Cicero's insult, and reinforce the message that despite showcasing masculine behavior, Fulvia inhabits a female body.

If coming into contact with Fulvia's body pollutes Cicero the opposite is just as true. Like many other people around the world, Romans viewed corpses as sources of pollution and contamination.[44] People who voluntarily came into contact with corpses, such as undertakers and executioners, were marginalized by Roman society because they were seen as permanently stained by the pollution handling a corpse brought.[45] The image of Fulvia manipulating Cicero's head with her (presumably) bare hands and even placing it on her lap is thus meant to elicit revulsion from a Roman audience. Fulvia is

[41] Beard (2018: 45).

[42] For the varied usages and functions of hair bodkins, see Stephens (2008: 115-117). Stephens (2008: 117) also mentions some other interesting literary parallels for the use of hair bodkins as weapons: 'In Petronius (*Sat.* 21), Psyche pricks Encolpius' cheek with with a hair bodkin (*acu comataria*). In Apuleius (*Met*. 8.13), the young widow Charite wreaks vengeance on Thrasyllus, her suitor and murderer of her beloved husband, by gouging out both his eyes with a hair bodkin (*acu crinali*).'

[43] See Carson (1999: 86-7).

[44] Lennon (2022: 136-138) has summarized the theories brought forward by anthropologists as to why corpses have elicited and continue to elicit such visceral responses of disgust.

[45] See Lennon (2022: 135-164) for an overview of Roman ideology and behavior concerning death and the threat of pollution.

thus characterized as someone willing to go extreme lengths, including dirtying herself, to satisfy her bloodlust.[46] Or is it a desire for revenge that is driving her?

1.2 Out for Blood?

Some scholars have argued that the reason Fulvia would want to mutilate Cicero's head was because Cicero had insulted her in his *Philippics*.[47] It is true that Cicero's *Philippics* contain a lot of particularly unpleasant statements about Fulvia. In the third *Philippic* Fulvia is called 'the greediest and cruelest wife' of Antony (*avarissimae sed etiam crudelissimae uxoris*).[48] She is accused of coming up with elaborate schemes to make money (3.10 and 5.11),[49] and in his second *Philippic* Cicero makes sure to mention twice that both Fulvia's previous husbands had died, implying she might somehow have caused their deaths (2.11 and 2.113). Cicero even describes her as an avid onlooker of violent executions (3.4 and 5.22), going as far as to mention drops of blood splattering her face, which further characterizes her as 'a most cruel and bloodthirsty woman.'[50]

Dio does not, however, explicitly allude to this complicated history between Cicero and Fulvia. The only person who is mentioned to have been wronged by Cicero in this passage is Antony (13-14). What we have here is, most probably, a case of ellipsis: Dio relies on the general knowledge of his audience to fill in the blanks.[51] Earlier in his *Roman History* Dio had already foreshadowed Cicero's fate: his head would be displayed on the forum and insulted by 'some man and woman' (καὶ ἄνδρα τινὰ...καὶ γυναῖκα 38.29.3) if he were to continue to pursue his political career. Dio has thus established Fulvia as Cicero's political enemy to some degree, yet by leaving out the reason for which Fulvia might resent Cicero Dio creates the impression that Fulvia's act of mutilation is purely motivated by cruelty.

Another instance where Dio employs ellipsis to the same effect is when he describes Antony receiving the head which made him exclaim 'I did not know this man' (τοῦτον οὐκ ἠπιστάμην, 10). Unlike Antony, we know that this head belonged to a certain Caesetius Rufus who owned a building that Fulvia coveted. According to Appian (*B.Civ*. 4.29) Fulvia killed this man because he had refused her the building before the start of the proscriptions and she subsequently ordered for his head to be displayed on the very building which caused his death.[52] Dio's reference to Fulvia killing κατ' ἔχθραν καὶ διὰ χρήματα (8) is a subtle nod to Appian's story, but once again, by giving out very little information, Dio manages to create the impression that Fulvia killed without a motive other than the enjoyment of cruelty.

So how are we to interpret this extremely negative portrayal of Fulvia? What could be the function of this passage? In discussing the passage which deals with Antony and Fulvia mistreating Cicero's head, Alain Gowing states: 'Dio strove for lurid, grotesque effect, and even here was less interested in

[46] Lennon (2013: 96-97) tells the story of Tullia who drove a chariot over her father's corpse. Both Tullia and the street she rode through were subsequently described as polluted. Cf. Liv. 1.48.7. *contaminata ipsa respersaque*.
[47] See, among others, Bauman (1992: 84-85), Homeyer (1964: 30 n.64) and Stephens (2008: 117). Beard (2018: 43-45) places Fulvia's 'revenge' in the larger context of men silencing women. It is also worth bearing in mind that Cicero had (unsuccessfully) defended Milo, the murderer of Fulvia's first husband.
[48] *Phil*.13.18. For a close reading of this particular passage, see Keegan (2020: 110-111) who has analyzed the gendered and Orientalist rhetoric deployed by Cicero against Fulvia.
[49] See Schultz (2021: 85-86) and Keegan (2020: 110).
[50] Cic. *Phil*.3.4. See Weir (2008: 52). Cf. the same scene in Cassius Dio 45.13.2.3, where Fulvia is present but not identified by name. On the polluting quality of blood in Roman thought see Lennon (2013: 90-135).
[51] See De Jong (2014: 97-98).
[52] Fulvia's spiteful abuse of heads thus has a literary precedent. See Keegan (2020: 112). The historian Valerius Maximus (9.5.4) also tells the story of Antony reacting to the head of Caesetius Rufus, but Fulvia does not appear in his account, see Manuwald (1979: 204 n.223). For Appian's anecdote, see Schultz (2021: 88-89) and Bauman (1992: 84-85).

describing Cicero than in vilifying Antony, a tendency in line with his account of the proscriptions as a whole.' [53] Fulvia is entirely left out of Gowing's analysis, but if we read this passage as Dio's attempt to vilify Antony, we must admit that it vilifies Fulvia to the same extent, if not to a greater one. There is indeed nothing to suggest that Fulvia's actions are less relevant than those of Antony or that we should interpret the negative characterization of Fulvia as a means to criticize her husband. On the contrary, Antony and Fulvia are portrayed as equals by Dio, with the focus being on Fulvia's deeds. It is worth pointing out that Dio does not introduce Fulvia as 'Antony's wife' in this passage. She is ἥ γε Φουλουία (7) and her sudden appearance in this passage is further underscored by the word αὐτὴ (8) and the frequent use of the particle καὶ (7-8). The particles signal Dio is building up to an important part of the story, yet by delaying crucial information − the verb ἐθανάτωσεν (9) − until the end of the sentence, he effectively leaves his audience breathless with anticipation.

Fulvia's husband Antony, meanwhile, has been turned into the nameless τοῦ ἀνδρός (9). Furthermore, Dio has described their actions in such a way that they mirror each other: Antony's general treatment of the proscribed (3-7) is followed by that of Fulvia (7-9). We are then told that Cicero's head was brought to the both of them (σφίσι, 11) and how first Antony (11-15) and then Fulvia (15-19) treated the head. In Dio's final cynical remark Antony and Fulvia are again depicted as a team (οὗτοι, 19). The word order in the introductory sentences further suggests that both the behavior of Antony (ὁ δὲ Ἀντώνιος … ἔκτεινε, 3-5) and Fulvia (ἥ γε Φουλουία πολλούς … ἐθανάτωσεν, 7-9) is meant to contrast with the exemplary conduct of Octavian (ἐκεῖνος … πολλούς … διεσώσατο, 1).[54]

1.3 Waging War

The majority of Fulvia's appearances is in Dio's work are centered around her ruling over Rome along with her brother-in-law Lucius Antonius and the part both are said to have played in bringing about the Perusine war (48.4-7; 10-11; 12.2-3; 13.1). When the actual war takes place however, Fulvia disappears from the narrative, only to reappear at 48.15.2 once the war is over; she is said to have fled to her husband with her children (ἥ τε Φουλουία πρὸς τὸν ἄνδρα μετὰ τῶν τέκνων ἀπέδρα). After one last brief instance of being involved in political decisions (48.22.3) Fulvia is reported to have died, alone, in Sicyon (48.28.3). Her death, Dio tells us, led to the reconciliation of Octavian and Antony (συνηλλάγησαν) because they could blame their past antagonism on her (πρόφασιν τὸν θάνατον αὐτῆς πρὸς τὸ παρ' ἀλλήλων δέος).

It is while describing the events leading up to the war that Dio paints another striking image of Fulvia engaged in activities far removed from what was thought to be proper for women:

> [3] (…) Φουλουία δὲ τό τε Πραινέστε κατέλαβε καὶ προσεταιριστοὺς βουλευτάς τε καὶ ἱππέας ἔχουσα τά τε ἄλλα πάντα μετ' αὐτῶν ἐβουλεύετο, [4] καὶ τὰς παραγγέλσεις ὡς ἐκασταχόσε ἐχρῆν ἔπεμπε. καὶ τί ταῦτα θαυμάσειεν ἄν τις, ὁπότε καὶ ξίφος παρεζώννυτο καὶ συνθήματα τοῖς στρατιώταις ἐδίδου, ἐδημηγόρει τε ἐν αὐτοῖς πολλάκις; ὥστε καὶ ἐκεῖνα τῷ [1] Καίσαρι προσίστασθαι.
>
> (Cassius Dio 48.10.3-11.1)

[53] Gowing (1992: 156).

[54] See Gowing (1992: 258) and Lange (2020: 207) on Dio's wish to absolve Octavian of participating in the proscriptions.

> (…) Fulvia, on the other hand, seized Praeneste and having senators and knights as associates she deliberated all other things with them and she sent orders where needed. And why should anyone marvel at these things, when she even wore a sword at her girdle and gave the signals for battle to the soldiers, when she often gave speeches in their presence? And so these things too gave offence to the emperor [Octavian].

What we see here is Fulvia being presented as a stereotypical *dux femina*, 'an aberration- an unnatural woman' because she engages in the field that was conceived of as exclusively masculine.[55]

The idea that Fulvia was not fully a woman because she had some link to warfare was already very present in other ancient sources, but Dio was the first one to explicitly depict Fulvia acting as a military leader. Velleius Paterculus had stated that nothing about Fulvia was female except her body and Plutarch had stated that she desired to rule the ruler and command the commander.[56] Most important for this tradition was an epigram Octavian himself wrote, in which he had his (now ex-) mother-in-law say 'either fuck me or let us fight' (*aut futue aut pugnemus*).[57]

The passage above shows that Dio was very aware of Octavian's opinion of Fulvia. The focus of the passage is not on the larger consequences Fulvia's actions had for Rome, but on the effect they had on the young Octavian, here already referred to as 'Caesar.'[58] It is telling that Dio does not tell us the content of Fulvia's address to the troops; the function of this passage is clearly to imply only that she crossed the boundaries of her gender by acting like a demagogue (ἐδημηγόρει), not to give Fulvia an actual voice.[59] Dio thus limits the political scope of Fulvia's actions and undermines the importance of her actions by stressing the 'freakishness' of Fulvia's behavior (καὶ τί ταῦτα θαυμάσειεν ἄν τις;).

1.4 Epilogue

Cassius Dio characterized his Fulvia as a powerful and cruel woman. Although her avarice is lightly touched upon, her cruelty is what is most emphasized. By repeatedly making use of ellipsis Dio created the impression that Fulvia did not kill out of revenge, but because she enjoyed violence. Dio gave Fulvia both masculine and feminine traits by emphasizing her penchant for violence. She appears to be masculine because violence, especially on the battlefield, was thought of as an exclusively masculine trait. However, the fact that Fulvia is seemingly overtaken by the desire for bloodshed so as to cross the Roman norms of gender and the proper treatment of the dead characterizes her as ultimately feminine.

Throughout her appearances in the *Roman History* Fulvia is presented as Octavian's opposite while being paired up with either her husband or his brother the consul. The three of them appear as equally dangerous enemies of the young man who was to become emperor, though Fulvia's gender makes her actions more incomprehensible and thus scarier than those of her male collaborators.

[55] Santoro L'Hoir (1994: 23-24). See also Wyke (2014: 354) and Keegan (2020: 106-107).
[56] See Wyke (2014: 84), Velleius Paterculus (2.74.2-3) and Plutarch (*Ant*.10.3).
[57] For more on the epigram, see Hallet (2019: 160-163) and Keegan (2020: 108).
[58] Another passage in which Octavian's opinion of Fulvia is given is 48.5.3.
[59] On gender and public speaking see Beard (2018: 16-17).

Chapter 2. Messalina: The Most Whorish and Wanton Woman

2.1 Sick With Envy

A century after the death of Fulvia, Valeria Messalina came as close to Roman power as a woman could get. Her husband Claudius was made emperor by the praetorian guard, eager to protect its position, after the murder of his nephew, the unpopular emperor Caligula.[60] Messalina, who had wedded Claudius a few years before, made a fine match for the new emperor.[61] Being related to Octavia, the sister of Augustus, through both her parents, she reinforced Claudius' claim to power.[62] By giving birth to a son, soon after Claudius became emperor, it appeared as though the Roman empire would be spared a crisis of succession for some time.[63] Claudius' reign was not stable however, and it appears as though the imperial couple was the target of coups from the start.[64] Messalina and Claudius ruled over Rome for seven years, but in 48 CE Messalina's life came to a brutal end in what some scholars have deemed a failed attempt at usurping Claudius' power.[65] Whether Messalina's relationship with Claudius was good, as some scholars have claimed, or not, she has been continuously described by ancient sources as a cunning and sexually voracious woman taking advantage of her feeble-minded husband, characterized by the '*tria uitia* tyranniques que sont *l'avaritia*, la *saevitia* et la *libido*.'[66] Dio's account of Messalina is, without a doubt, firmly inscribed within this same tradition.

Throughout the sixtieth book of his *Roman History* Dio makes Messalina's *saevitia* apparent by continuously portraying her as a murderer. She is said to have caused the death of many people through manipulating her husband (14.1-2) the use of false charges (8.4-6; 14.3-15.1; 29.6a; 31.2) and poison (27.4). In some cases the means of murder are not specified (15.5-16.3; 18.3-4). Her *avaritia* manifests itself through the selling of Roman citizenship and important offices (17.5-8). When it comes to her *libido*, Dio's Messalina seems to have been in the grip of what the ancients considered to be an excessive sexuality. She repeatedly cheats on her husband (18.1-3; 28.2-5; 31.1) and goes as far as to force unwilling men into having sex with her (22.3-5). Among the men she desires are Mnester, an actor, and Sabinus, a former general but now a gladiator. Both their professions were regarded as extremely lowly and it is telling that Messalina desired these base men.[67] All these extra-marital pursuits culminate in Messalina's desire to be married to more than one man at the same time (31.1).

So how does Dio introduce his Messalina? The first eight chapters of the *Roman History*'s sixtieth book are dedicated to Claudius' ascent to power and the subsequent actions he undertook as emperor, most of which consisted of repairing the damage done by Caligula. After reflecting on Claudius' actions,

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[60] For the reign of Caligula see De la Bédoyère (2018: 164-180). On his succession see pp. 180-182.

[61] Claudius and Messalina got married between 38 and 39 CE. Claudius had been married twice before his engagement to Messalina. See De la Bédoyère (2018: 176-177).

[62] For Messalina's family tree, see Wood (2001: 323).

[63] For the birth of Britannicus, see De la Bédoyère (2018: 182) and Wood (2001: 253).

[64] For the conspiracy of Annius Vinicianus see Cassius Dio 60.15.1-5.

[65] Fagan (2002: 571-7) has summarized the scholarly discussion concerning the murder of Messalina. He concludes that the ancient sources point towards Messalina becoming a liability because of her many affairs which inherently undermined the emperor's authority and endangered his claim to power.

[66] Berlaire Gues (2019: 515 n.31). Späth (2019: 172-173) has argued that the relationship between Claudius and Messalina might have been a loving one. On the ancient literary tradition that portrays Messalina in negative terms and the date of its establishment see Fagan (2002: 569). For Messalina's portrayal in Juvenal and Pliny see Wyke (2007: 324-325).

[67] Lennon (2022: 104-125) has summarized the ancient discourse concerning actors and gladiators. Both were (paradoxically) looked down upon by the citizens of Rome, because they put their bodies in the service of others. Lennon observes that the reason the elite might have wanted to keep these group marginalized was because, like politicians, they had the potential to influence large crowds.

Dio abruptly introduces Messalina, though her appearance has been anticipated for a while. At 60.2.4 Dio had already warned his audience that Claudius was ruled by slaves and by women at the same time (ἐδουλοκρατήθη τε ἅμα καὶ ἐγυναικοκρατήθη). The use of these verbs to describe Claudius' situation is quite striking. Both verbs are used very rarely and δουλοκρατέομαι was most likely coined by Dio. [68] The phrasing furthermore suggests an affinity between slaves and women. Both are, in the words of Ann-Cathrin Harders 'non-persons,' and the fact that they held power over Claudius reflects very badly on him.[69] Dio goes on to tell us that Claudius was easily taken advantage of, especially by means of drinking and sexual intercourse (ἔν τε τοῖς πότοις μάλιστα καὶ ἐν ταῖς μίξεσι).[70] So when Messalina is finally introduced we have been prepared to expect a fearsome and manipulative woman:

> [4] ταῦτα μὲν οὖν αὐτοῦ τε τοῦ Κλαυδίου ἔργα ἦν καὶ ὑφ' ἁπάντων ἐπῃνεῖτο· ἐπράχθη δὲ καὶ ἄλλα ἄττα τότε, οὐχ ὁμοιότροπα, ὑπό τε τῶν ἐξελευθέρων [5] αὐτοῦ καὶ ὑπὸ τῆς γυναικὸς Οὐαλερίας Μεσσαλίνης. αὕτη μὲν γὰρ τὴν Ἰουλίαν τὴν ἀδελφιδῆν αὐτοῦ, ὀργισθεῖσά τε ἅμα ὅτι μήτε ἐτιμᾶτο ὑπ' αὐτῆς μήτε ἐκολακεύετο, καὶ ζηλοτυπήσασα ὅτι περικαλλής τε ἦν καὶ μόνη τῷ Κλαυδίῳ πολλάκις συνεγίγνετο, ἐξώρισεν, ἐγκλήματα αὐτῇ ἄλλα τε καὶ [6] μοιχείας παρασκευάσασα, ἐφ' ᾗ καὶ ὁ Σενέκας ὁ Ἀνναῖος ἔφυγε, καὶ ὕστερόν γε οὐ πολλῷ καὶ ἀπέκτεινεν αὐτήν.
>
> Cassius Dio (60.8.4-6)
>
> These were the acts of Claudius himself, and they were approved by everyone; but certain other deeds were being carried out at that time, deeds that were dissimilar, by his freedmen and by his wife Valeria Messalina. She became angry with Julia, Claudius' niece, because she was neither honored nor flattered by her, and she became jealous because Julia was very beautiful and was often alone in Claudius' company; she had her banished, providing among other charges the charge of adultery against her, the reason for which Annaeus Seneca too had gone into exile, and not long after this she had her put to death.

Messalina, here referred to by her full name Valeria Messalina, is introduced as Claudius' wife. Unlike Fulvia, who acted in accordance with her husband, Messalina's behavior is explicitly contrasted with that of her husband (οὐχ ὁμοιότροπα, 2), whose deeds are applauded by the general public. Messalina, however, does not act alone in bringing about dishonorable deeds, but is mentioned in the same breath as Claudius' freedmen (τῶν ἐξελευθέρων, 2), the group of men Dio hinted at before through the use of

[68] A TLG search reveals that the verb δουλοκρατέομαι is not attested before Dio. The verb γυναικοκρατέομαι however was used by Plutarch in his *Moralia* (755c).
[69] Harders (2015: 203). See also Williams (1999: 135) who cites Cicero *Tusc*. 2.53, 55. Giving in to one's emotions likened a free Roman man to slaves and women. Pelling (1997: 125, especially n.34) has written on the differences between Suetonius' and Dio's portrayals of Claudius.
[70] Cassius Dio 60.2.6.

the verb δουλοκρατέομαι.[71] This collaboration with ex-slaves characterizes most of Messalina's subsequent appearances.[72]

What is most striking about Messalina introduction is that she is portrayed as someone plagued by vices considered to be typically feminine in ancient Rome, namely anger (ὀργισθεῖσά, 4) and jealousy (ζηλοτυπήσασα, 5).[73] This introduction is consistent with Messalina's characterization throughout Dio's work, in which she is presented as plotting someone's demise out of jealousy and/or anger on several other occasions:[74] Messalina is blamed for the death of another Julia of whom she was jealous at 60.18.4, and is said to have caused the death of members of the opposite gender after having been angered by the refusal of sexual favors. One of these men whom Messalina desired is Gaius Appius Silanus, her stepfather, which earns her the title 'most whorish and wanton' (πορνικοτάτη τε καὶ ἀσελγεστάτη).[75]

Whenever Messalina's murders are not motivated by erotic jealousy, we are told that she acts out of greed or in order to protect her reputation.[76] When it comes to describing how Messalina punished the men conspiring against her husband, Dio informs us that she, along with Claudius' freedmen, used the failed coup d'état as an excuse to commit horrible deeds (τῆς γὰρ ἀφορμῆς ταύτης…λαβόμενοι, 60.15.5): they spied on their political enemies, tortured them, and had them executed (60.15.5-16.1). Women were treated equally harsh as men, and after their executions their corpses were either thrown on the Gemonian stairs or decapitated and displayed outside the city (60.16.1-2). So like Fulvia, although in a less explicit manner, Messalina is associated with the abuse of corpses, something which according to Peter Keegan characterizes the perpetrator as 'un-Roman' and 'barbarian.'[77] The form that Messalina's revenge takes is so brutal that it overshadows the question whether punishing the conspirators might have been a sensible decision. Boundaries are overlooked: women are treated like men, the corpses of the elite like the corpses of lowly criminals. The fact that Messalina's and the freedmen's desire for revenge could be stopped by bribery only adds to 'her proximity to everything that is savage in nature.'[78] It is worth noting that while being credited with an enormous amount of deaths, Messalina never 'dirties her hands' in the literal sense. The use of false allegations and poison allow her to keep her distance between her body and her victims.

With the exception of the latter example, none of these murders allegedly committed by Messalina are said to be politically motivated. In fact, as many scholars have convincingly argued, Messalina would have had very practical reasons for wanting to get rid of certain powerful men and

[71] See Joshel (1998: 224) for the part freedmen played in the imperial household.

[72] For Messalina and the freedmen often acting and appearing together see Panoussi (2018: 224 n.61) and Pelling (1997: 121 n.18) and, among others, Cassius Dio 60.14.1, 60.17.5-8 and 60.30.6b.

[73] When ancient authors discuss ζηλοτυπία in the domestic sphere (as opposed to the public sphere) it was almost exclusively described as a trait belonging to women. For more on this particular passage, See Keegan (2004: 118). Konstan (2006: 222-230) has argued that translating the concept ζηλοτυπία with our modern concept of 'jealousy' fails to capture what ancient Greeks meant by employing the term. The Stoic definition of ζηλοτυπία was the feeling which occurs 'because another person has what we ourselves already possess.'

[74] See Cassius Dio 60.14.1-15.1 and 60.27.4.

[75] Cassius Dio 60.14.3.

[76] Asiaticus is murdered because of his property (διὰ τὴν οὐσίαν), Cassius Dio 60.29.6a. For the murder of Catonius Justus see note 79.

[77] Keegan (2004: 119). Keegan uses this terminology to discuss Dio's portrayal of Messalina and Boudica, but it can just as easily be applied to any other person.

[78] Because one desire (the desire for revenge) makes way for another (the desire for money). See Cassius Dio 60.16.2-3 and Keegan (2004: 119). Cf. Antony and Fulvia's behavior at 47.8.5.

women, as they all formed real threats to the imperial couple's power. [79] The most telling example of this is Dio's treatment of Julia Livilla's murder, which we saw above (60.8.4.5). Messalina's fear of Julia would have been well-founded, since she was directly related to Augustus and was the sister of the late emperor Caligula. Claudius' claim to power would have been much stronger if he decided to marry Julia, yet Dio chose to present her beauty as the cause of Messalina's jealousy, not her ancestry.[80]

2.2 Cheating The Emperor

It appears as though the impression that Dio wants us to have of Messalina is that of an unscrupulous woman who is completely overpowered by her emotions and has no political motives for resorting to violence. This view of Messalina is only further emphasized when Dio describes her sex life.

Dio was not the first one to portray Messalina as hypersexual. Pliny the Elder had already described Messalina as partaking in a contest against a professional prostitute, a challenge Messalina won by sleeping with twenty-five men over the course of one day.[81] Dio did however exaggerate the tradition that had been handed down to him.[82] Perhaps the most striking passage included in Dio's narrative of Messalina is the following one:

> [9] αὐτὸς μὲν οὖν ὁπλομαχίας ἀγῶνα ἐν τῷ στρατοπέδῳ, χλαμύδα ἐνδύς, ἔθηκε· τὰ δὲ δὴ γενέθλια τὰ τοῦ υἱέος αὐτοῦ οἱ στρατηγοὶ ἐθελονταὶ θέας τέ τινος ποιήσει καὶ δείπνων ἐώρτασαν. καὶ τοῦτο καὶ αὖθις, ὅσοις γε [1] καὶ ἔδοξεν αὐτῶν, ἐπράχθη. Μεσσαλῖνα δὲ ἐν τούτῳ αὐτή τε ἡσέλγαινε καὶ τὰς ἄλλας γυναῖκας ἀκολασταίνειν ὁμοίως ἠνάγκαζε, καὶ πολλάς γε καὶ ἐν αὐτῷ τῷ παλατίῳ, τῶν ἀνδρῶν παρόντων καὶ ὁρώντων, μοιχεύεσθαι [2] ἐποίει. καὶ ἐκείνους μὲν καὶ ἐφίλει καὶ ἠγάπα, τιμαῖς τε καὶ ἀρχαῖς ἤγαλλε, τοὺς δ' ἄλλους τοὺς μὴ συγκαθιέντας σφᾶς ἐς τοῦτο καὶ ἐμίσει καὶ πάντα τρόπον ἀπώλλυε. καὶ ταῦτα μέντοι τοιαῦτά τε ὄντα καὶ ἀναφανδὸν οὕτω [3] γιγνόμενα τὸν Κλαύδιον ἐπὶ πλεῖστον ἔλαθεν· ἐκείνῳ τε γὰρ θεραπαινίδιά τινα συμπαρακατέκλινε, καὶ τούς τι δυναμένους οἱ μηνῦσαι τοὺς μὲν εὐεργεσίαις τοὺς δὲ καὶ τιμωρίαις προκατελάμβανεν, ὥσπερ καὶ τότε καὶ

[79] On the possible political motivations behind the murder of Julia, the granddaughter of Tiberius, see Barett (1996: 99). For the murder of Gaius Appius Silanus, see Barrett (1999: 98-9). For Asiaticus see Levick (2015: 68-70) and Berlaire Gues (2019: 536-7). For Catonius Justus see Barett (1996: 100). The murder of Magnus, which is attributed to both Claudius and Messalina at Dio 60.29.6a is attributed to Claudius alone in Seneca's *Apocolocyntosis*. See Berlaire Gues (2019: 519 n.52).

[80] See Wood (2001: 254) and Berlaire Gues (2019: 525-6)

[81] See Plin. Nat. 10.171-2 and note 66.

[82] Harders (2015: 202 n.107) cites the following ancient accounts of Messalina's affairs that predate Dio's narrative: Juv. *Sat*. 10.329–345; Tac. *Ann*. 11.1–4, 12, 26–38; 12.7.5–7 and Suet. *Claud*. 26.2; 36. Joshel (1998: 230-235) has given a great overview of how Tacitus' deals with Messalina's sexual desire.

Κατώνιον Ἰοῦστον τοῦ τε δορυφορικοῦ ἄρχοντα καὶ δηλῶσαί τι αὐτῷ περὶ [4] τούτων ἐθελήσαντα προδιέφθειρε.

(Cassius Dio 60.17.9-18.4)

> He [Claudius] himself set up a fighting contest at the *Castra Praetoriana* while wearing a military cloak. The praetorian guards voluntarily celebrated the birthday of his son with the arrangement of some spectacle and a feast. And this was done again by those among them who felt like celebrating it. Messalina on the other hand, she behaved licentiously during this time and forced the other wives to behave in a similar licentious way and caused many women to commit adultery in the palace, while their husbands were present and watching. And those husbands she loved and cherished and she graced them with marks of honor and with offices, but the other husbands who did not abase themselves to this point, she hated and destroyed in every way. These deeds, being of such a nature and taking place before the eyes of all nevertheless escaped the notice of Claudius for the most part. She made some young maids lie with him and of those who were able to reveal something to Claudius she won some over with kind deeds and others with punishments, as she then for instance destroyed Catonius Justus in advance, the leader of the praetorian guard, because he wanted to disclose something to Claudius concerning these matters [i.e. Messalina's actions in the palace].

As in the passage cited above (60.8.4-6) Messalina's behavior is contrasted with that of others. Before introducing Messalina's actions Dio tells the story of how Claudius himself organized a gladiatorial contest for the praetorian guard and how the praetorian guards celebrated Britannicus' birthday. After these relatively innocent and potentially wholesome anecdotes Dio focuses on the events taking place in the palace at that time (ἐν τούτῳ).

So what was Messalina actually doing? Dio does not tell us rightaway. He builds up tension by using vague descriptive verbs: Messalina was behaving licentiously (ἠσέλγαινε) and forced other women to do the same (ἀκολασταίνειν ὁμοίως ἠνάγκαζε). What this shameful behavior entailed is only revealed at the end of the paragraph: Messalina forced these women to have sex with men other than their husbands (μοιχεύεσθαι ἐποίει) and was presumably doing the same. To make matters worse Messalina is said to terrorize elite men into allowing their wives to commit adultery (τιμωρίαις) and she is said to provide her husband with women to sleep with (συμπαρακατέκλινε). This has led Peter Keegan to describe Dio's Messalina as follows: 'She is an exhibitionist, a dominatrix, and a pimp.' [83] It is worth noting that Messalina is only a pimp to the extent that she provides women to men looking for sexual gratification, her husband in this case. Unlike emperor Caligula, whom Dio also depicted as a pimp, Messalina receives no payment for acting as a procuress.[84] Messalina's habit of forcing other women into committing adultery was thus not motivated by greed, but should be seen as an extension of her sexual desires.

The strangeness of the charges brought against Messalina by Dio are further heightened by the fact that she is said to reward husbands who comply with her abuse of their wives (τιμαῖς τε καὶ ἀρχαῖς ἤγαλλε). As Lien Foubert has pointed out, this passage reads like a caricature of the setting of *salutatio*,

[83] Keegan (2004: 120).
[84] See Cassius Dio 59.28.8 and Lennon (2022: 46-47).

the Roman practice of receiving elite guests in the morning and potentially granting them the honors and offices they desire.[85] Instead of rewarding her elite guests based on their (non-sexual) merits Messalina praises them for prostituting their wives, effectively turning the imperial palace into a brothel.[86]

This passage, which has no equivalent in other ancient sources, is paralleled at 60.31.1, where Messalina is said to prostitute herself within the palace (καὶ ἐμοιχεύετο καὶ ἐπορνεύετο). Just as Messalina might have had political reasons for ordering the murder of many members of the Roman elite, scholars have argued she might have had good reasons for starting sexual liaisons with other men.[87] This is, once again, not what Dio chooses to highlight in his narrative. Dio's decision to keep politics out of Messalina's sexual behavior becomes especially apparent when we compare Messalina's infamous marriage to Gaius Silius as told by Dio to the narratives of Suetonius and Tacitus.

Suetonius briefly mentions this marriage on three separate occasions whereas Tacitus deals with it extensively in chapters 30-8 of the eleventh book of his *Annales*. [88] According to Tacitus, the marriage between Messalina and Silius was initiated by the latter, who wanted to marry Messalina in order to take Claudius' place.[89] In Suetonius no conspiracy is confirmed, but we are told that Claudius feared Silius was trying to acquire the empire by exploiting his relationship with Messalina.[90]

The story that Dio tells is quite different and is worth analyzing as a whole. His narrative can be summarized as follows. While Messalina was married to Claudius she tried to fulfill her desire to be married to more than one man at once (ἐπεθύμησε καὶ ἄνδρας … πολλοὺς ἔχειν, 31.1-2) because her habit of cheating on her husband and prostituting herself did not provide sufficient pleasure anymore (οὐκ ἐξαρκοῦν οἱ, 31.1).

She eventually picked Silius as an additional husband and had him registered as such (ἄνδρα ἐπεγράψατο, 31.3). The claim that Messalina desired to be married to many different men seems to have been unique to Dio. It is not found in Tacitus, where only Messalina's desire to marry Silius is recounted.[91] Dio is thus amplifying the tradition surrounding this marriage, he 'exaggerates Messalina's one act of bigamy into a general desire on the empress's part to marry all of her lovers,' [92] creating an even more unhinged and unpredictable version of Messalina.

In order to celebrate her marriage Dio's Messalina gives Silius valuable possessions which were not her own (as we are explicitly told), but belonged to her lawful husband (τοῦ Κλαυδίου, 31.3). Silius not only receives imperial heirlooms from Messalina but also a palace (οἰκίαν αὐτῷ βασιλικὴν ἐχαρίσατο, 31.3) and the office of consul (ὕπατον αὐτὸν ἀπέφηνε, 31.4). Of these three extravagant gifts only the first appears in Tacitus' account. [93] I would argue that Dio is here playing with the Roman custom of paying a dowry: Messalina gives away material belongings that not only do not belong to her, but are actually owned by the man she is already married to, in order to woo the man she has chosen as a husband for herself. She is thus stealing twice from Claudius, by giving his material belongings away as well as herself.[94]

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[85] Foubert (2016: 143-4).

[86] See Foubert (2016: 144) and Späth (2019: 172).

[87] Levick (2015: 63) and Späth (2019: 172) have both argued that Messalina's sexual liaisons might have been part of securing a future for her son Britannicus.

[88] Suetonius *Claudius* 26.2, 29.3 and 36.

[89] See Tac. *Ann*. 11.26 and Joshel (1998: 230-231) for an analysis of this passage. What motivates Tacitus' Messalina to marry Silius is her desire to acquire *infamia*.

[90] *adultero Silio adquiri imperium credidisset,* Suetonius *Claudius* 36.

[91] Cf. Tac. *Ann.* 11.26.

[92] Fagan (2002: 569).

[93] Cf. Tac. *Ann*. 11.12 *servi liberti paratus principis apud adulterum visebantur*. On the displacement of Claudius' possessions in Tacitus' narrative, see Joshel (1998: 231).

[94] On dowries and the division of possessions between Romans husband and wife see Treggiari (1991: 325; 365).

Claudius fails to take notice of the illicit marriage (τὸν γοῦν Κλαύδιον ἐλάνθανεν, 31.4) but is finally warned by his freedman Narcissus during a trip to Ostia. Narcissus, in an attempt to get Claudius to agree with getting rid of Messalina, frightens him (ἐκφοβήσας, 31.5) by telling him that Messalina intends to murder him and put Silius in his place (τῆς Μεσσαλίνης ἐκεῖνόν τε ἀποκτενεῖν καὶ τὸν Σίλιον ἐς τὴν ἀρχὴν ἀντικαθιστάναι μελλούσης, 31.5). Narcissus' tactic works. Claudius apparently puts up no resistance while Narcissus travels back to Rome and murders Messalina (ἀπέσφαξεν, 31.5).

With the exception of Narcissus' lie there are thus no politics involved in Dio's narrative of the marriage between Messalina and Silius. The marriage is presented as initiated by the salacious Messalina out of sexual boredom, not out of a desire to rule over Rome. What is more, the important part Silius played in Tacitus' and, to a certain degree, Suetonius' narratives of the same event has completely disappeared in Dio's narrative. Silius does not appear as an agent and does not seem to have had a say in Messalina's decision to marry him. Even within Narcissus' fictitious account of the coup taking place in Rome it is Messalina who is presented as the instigator of the event, not Silius. Dio's narrative thus stands apart from that of his predecessors by not only leaving out the desire to overthrow Claudius as the motive behind Messalina's marriage to Silius but also by depicting Silius as a minor, passive character within the larger narrative of Messalina's downfall.

2.3 Epilogue

At first glance, Dio's Messalina is characterized by negative traits which were considered to be typically feminine in antiquity: she is overruled by her emotions and desires, which lead her to behave in very dangerous ways. Her sexual jealousy and frustration kills people and so does her greed. Although she is portrayed as a murderer, Messalina does not have literal blood on her hands: she is very skilled at having others do her bidding without ever resorting to physical, masculine violence.

But Dio's Messalina does cross the boundaries of gender: she appears to have felt entitled to dispose of the belongings of the state and her husband as she pleased. All of the sexual acts in which she engages are, furthermore, initiated by her. She treats men and women as sexual objects at her disposal and deprives the men she loves of their agency. The palace, both the seat of imperial power and the imperial domestic sphere, is transformed into a brothel in Messalina's hands.

Most of Messalina's outrageous acts are shared with Claudius' freedmen and are directly contrasted with the deeds of her husbands. Politics, if mentioned at all, are of secondary importance to Dio's portrayal of Messalina. Her revenge on those who tried to overpower her husband is presented as motivated by lust for blood. The same goes for her unlawful marriage to Silius. Where Tacitus explicitly states the marriage served Silius' political ambitions, and where Suetonius hints towards the same, Dio frames the marriage as just another instance of Messalina being driven by unreasonable sexual desires.

Chapter 3. Agrippina: The Cleverest Usurper

3.1 A Tooth for a Tooth

Emperor Claudius was quick to remarry after the murder of Messalina. The woman he married in 49 CE was none other than Julia Agrippina Minor, sister of the late emperor Caligula and daughter of the beloved general Germanicus and Agrippina Maior, granddaughter of Augustus.[95] Agrippina had been married twice before her marriage to the emperor and was already the mother of a son, Lucius

[95] For Agrippina's family tree see Wood (2001: 329).

Ahenobarbus.[96] He was both a potential heir for Claudius to adopt as well as proof of the fact that Agrippina was fertile.[97] Agrippina was, in short, the perfect candidate to replace the late emperor's wife. Indeed, Claudius seemed to have been pleased with his new wife. One year after their marriage Agrippina was given the title of *Augusta,* an honor Messalina had not been granted, and her son Lucius was adopted by the emperor and rebaptized Nero.[98] Material evidence such as public statues dedicated to Agrippina throughout the empire attest to the fact that she was both a popular and influential figure outside of the imperial palace as well.[99]

Agrippina's presence at court took on a new dimension in 54 CE when Britannicus − the son of Messalina and Claudius − died of a sudden illness, with the emperor soon following him. Ancient historians unanimously attributed their deaths to the use of poison, although Susan Wood is right in pointing out we cannot prove either of them did not die of other causes.[100] Whether this was a case of foul play or not, the seventeen-year-old Nero was now emperor with his mother to rule at his side. Although initially enjoying a lot of power at the start of Nero's principate, Agrippina fell out of favor with her son somewhere between 55 and 59 CE.[101] Her death in 59 CE is famously attributed to him.[102] The fact that she was declared a public enemy of Rome just after she died makes it indeed very likely that her death was ordered by Nero.[103]

A lesser known but interesting fact about Agrippina is that she was the author of a work about the Julio-Claudian family, including herself. Although it has not come down to us, we know that Tacitus and Pliny the Elder consulted it for their respective works.[104] Agrippina's autobiographical writings would have provided a nice counterbalance to the ancient historical tradition concerning her, which is decidedly negative. One important reason for this might be that our ancient sources were written in the knowledge that Nero, Agrippina's son, would go on to become one of the most despised emperors Rome had ever seen.[105]

Cassius Dio's portrayal of Agrippina shares many of the same negative traits we find in the accounts of Tacitus and Suetonius, although I will argue there are meaningful differences. What is more, Dio even shows some interest in rehabilitating Agrippina's image halfway throughout his narrative.

As mentioned in the introduction of this thesis, what makes assessing Dio's characterization of Agrippina difficult is that all what is left of the books in which she plays an important part are summaries. It is thus hard to judge what the narrative structure of these books must have been like originally and whether Agrippina's presence in books 60-61 was as important as the epitomes suggest.

Before Dio introduces Agrippina in his sixtieth book as being both a very clever and very terrible woman (δεινοτάτη, 32.2.1) who 'made Claudius her own' (Κλαύδιον ἐσφετερίσατο) as soon as she came to live in the palace, she has already appeared a couple of times before in Dio's narrative as the sister of Caligula. Here Agrippina is named in one breath with her other sisters, if she is named at all, and is

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[96] See Barrett (1999: 95-98) for Agrippina's marriage to Gaius Crispus and the idea that Agrippina had been involved in his sudden death. For Ahenobarbus see De la Bédoyère (2018: 182-3).

[97] See Wood (2001: 254-256).

[98] Levick (2015: 81-82).

[99] See Wood (2001: 250-251).

[100] See Wood (2001: 263-264; 268). For the accounts of the death of Britannicus, cf. Tac. *Ann*. 13.15-17 and Cassius Dio 61.1.2. and 61.7.4. For the accounts of the death of Claudius, see note 110 below.

[101] See Levick (2015: 88) and Wood (2001: 264-5), who assesses Agrippina's popularity based on her appearance on coins and monuments.

[102] Cf. Cassius Dio 61.12-13, Suet. *Nero*. 34.1-4 And Tac. *Ann*.14.4-8. Wood (2001: 269 n.70) also mentions lines 593-645 of the Ps-Senecan play *Octavia*.

[103] Wood (2001: 251). For why Nero might have wanted to get rid of his mother, see Wood (2001: 269).

[104] Tac. *Ann*. 4.53 and Pliny *Nat*. 7.46. See also Barrett (1999: 233) and Wood (2001: 257).

[105] Wood (2001: 259). See also the words of Nero's father Domitius in Cassius Dio 61.2.3-4.

presented as the victim of Caligula's incestuous desires.[106] Dio also tells the story of how Caligula banished Agrippina and Julia for allegedly maintaining an improper relationship with their brother-in-law Lepidus.[107] In these narratives Agrippina predominantly appears as a faceless victim,[108] but from the moment Agrippina is married to Claudius Dio portrays her as the perpetrator of many crimes: she is said to have acted as an evil stepmother towards her stepson Britannicus (60.32.1-2; 32.5; 33.10-11),[109] to have seduced Claudius (60.31.6) and to have had an adulterous relationship with Seneca (61.10.1-2). She is accused of exploiting her entourage in order to amass wealth for her son (60.32.3; 61.6.5) and of repeatedly having people murdered (60.32.3; 32.4; 33.2b; 61.6.4; 6.5). Her most famous victim is of course her husband Claudius, and Dio has Agrippina play an especially active part in causing his death by having her prepare the fatal poison herself.[110]

So far Dio's characterization of Agrippina does not differ much from that of Suetonius and Tacitus.[111] But, once again, Dio has chosen to include a particularly gruesome anecdote in his narrative which we do not find in any other author:[112]

> [4] ἤδη δέ τινας καὶ τῶν ἐπιφανῶν γυναικῶν ζηλοτυπήσασα ἔφθειρε, καὶ τήν γε Παυλῖναν τὴν Λολλίαν, ἐπειδὴ τῷ Γαΐῳ συνῳκήκει <καὶ> ἐλπίδα τινὰ ἐς τὴν τοῦ Κλαυδίου συνοίκησιν ἐσχήκει, ἀπέκτεινε. τήν τε κεφαλὴν αὐτῆς κομισθεῖσαν αὐτῇ μὴ γνωρίσασα τό τε στόμα αὐτῆς αὐτοχειρίᾳ ἀνέῳξε καὶ τοὺς ὀδόντας ἐπεσκέψατο ἰδίως πως ἔχοντας.
>
> (Cassius Dio 60.32.4)
>
> She now destroyed some of the distinguished women because she was jealous, including Lollia Paulina, because she had lived with Gaius [Caligula] in wedlock and she had cherished some hope of marrying Claudius. She [Agrippina], not recognizing her head, which was brought to her, opened its mouth with her own hand and inspected how unique [to Lollia] the teeth were.

What is most striking about this passage is how similar it is to 47.8.3-4, where Fulvia abuses the head of Cicero.[113] In both passages the use of hands to handle the corpse's head is underscored[114] and

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[106] Cassius Dio 59.3.6, 59.22.6 and 59.26.5-6.

[107] Cassius Dio 59.22.8-9. Lepidus was the husband of Drusilla.

[108] Barrett (1999: 240) argues that the anecdote about Lepidus serves to introduce Agrippina 'in association with adultery and immorality.' Rather than functioning as a negative introduction for Agrippina's character, I would argue this passage stresses Caligula's immoral behavior, not that of his sisters.

[109] See Ginsburg (2006: 34). For an analysis of the trope of the *saeva noverca* itself see Ginsburg (2006: 107-112).

[110] Ginsburg (2006: 35) argues this is one of the passages in which Dio clearly portrays his Agrippina as an agent. cf. Cassius Dio 60.34.2-3, Suet. *Claud*. 44.2. and Tac. *Ann*.12.66-67.

[111] Ginsburg's (2006) comparative work convincingly shows how each of these three authors display the tropes of the evil stepmother, the sexual transgressor and the *dux femina* in their respective portrayals of Agrippina.

[112] Cf. the murder of Lollia Paulina in Tac. *Ann*. 12.22.

[113] The thematic similarity between these two passages has been noted by Gowing (1992: 154 n.33) and Barrett (1999: 123).

[114] Cf. αὐτοχειρίᾳ and ἔς τε τὰς χεῖρας (…) ἐδέξατο 47.8.4.

there are some close parallels in the syntax as well: κομισθεῖσαν αὐτῇ echoes ἐκομίσθη σφίσι (47.8.3) whereas τό τε στόμα αὐτῆς (…) ἀνέῳξε parallels τὸ στόμα αὐτῆς διανοίξασα (47.8.4).

The passage, according to Peter Keegan 'essentializes the depth of Agrippina's depravity' and displays 'her insensitivity to customary boundaries of taste and her detachment from expected female sensibilities.'[115] Once again Dio uses the post-mortem treatment of enemies to show how readily his female characters are willing to transgress the boundaries of Roman norms.[116]

What sets this deed of Agrippina apart from the similar action that Fulvia carried out is the gender of the victim. Lollia Paulina, like Agrippina, is a woman.[117] Agrippina, as the aggressor, is still masculinized, but Lollia Paulina could not be more feminized, i.e., be more of a passive victim of Agrippina and her inquisitive fingers than she already is. And yet Lollia's gender should have spared her from this humiliating fate. As Jean-Louis Voisin has remarked, ancient historical literature contains only very few examples of elite female Roman citizens being decapitated, so her gender still adds to the abnormality of this scene. [118]

Although this has not been argued before, I believe that this particular passage also serves to underscore how frightfully clever (δεινή) Agrippina is. To try to identify a corpse in a deteriorated state by its teeth is no small feat, and one that is still applied by forensic researchers today.[119] A small passage in Pliny reveals why, according to Anthony Barrett, Agrippina might have paid so much attention to the teeth of others: she herself had double canine teeth on her upper right jaw.[120]

3.2 Becoming Messalina?

Despite resembling Fulvia in the way she treats her enemies, Dio explicitly compares Agrippina to her predecessor Messalina by telling us she soon turned into Messalina herself (καὶ ἡ μὲν ταχὺ καὶ αὐτὴ Μεσσαλῖνα ἐγένετο, 60.33.2.1). There are indeed notable similarities between Dio's portrayal of both women. Like Messalina, Agrippina acts in accordance with the freedmen (60.33.3a; 61.3.2), murders women out of jealousy (60.32.4; 33.2b), uses poison (60.34.2-3; 61.6.4) and deploys 'fear and favors' to control those around her (τὰ μὲν φόβῳ τὰ δὲ εὐεργεσίαις, 60.32.1).[121] Most importantly, both women have total control over Claudius. [122] Both are, in short, 'distortions of the ideal of the elite Roman woman.' [123] If Dio has described these women in such a similar way, it is because they serve a similar function: their appearance in books 60 and 61 is used, according to Pelling, as 'a device for ordering and articulating the narrative.'[124] They are 'phases' of Claudius live and serve to color the reader's opinion of

[115] Keegan (2004: 119).
[116] Boudica is another female character Cassius Dio accuses of severely maltreating corpses. See Keegan (2004: 117-118) and Cassius Dio 62.7.
[117] For biographical information on Lollia Paulina, see Barrett (1999: 109).
[118] Voisin (1984: 263). Aside from Lollia Paulina Voisin has identified Claudia Octavia and Julia Soaemias as undergoing this same fate.
[119] As a search on 'Lollia Paulina' in the catalogue of the Leiden University Library reveals.
[120] See Pliny *Nat.* 7.71 and Barrett (1999: 47; 123). Bauman (1992: 182), who (rightly) doubts the historical accuracy of this passage, believes Dio might have been 'confused' because of Pliny's anecdote. Voisin (1984: 277-278) believes Agrippina's inspection Lollia's teeth is part of a trope where a person who ordered an execution proceeds to mock their victim's appearance.
[121] Cf. Cassius Dio 60.18.3 τοὺς μὲν εὐεργεσίαις τοὺς δὲ καὶ τιμωρίαις.
[122] Späth (2019: 173) has stressed how unlikely it is that Claudius' wives were able to implement important decisions without Claudius' consent. 'The record of Agrippina's actions and of the events for which cooperation with between husband and wife was clearly indispensable , even though Claudius is not mentioned, is long.'
[123] Keegan (2004: 119).
[124] Pelling (1997: 121).

him.[125] This does not mean Messalina and Agrippina lack agency or depth: they often appear to be more active than Claudius does, and Dio is more interested in mapping out their thought-processes than describing Claudius' inner-life.[126] But in the end, their function is to provide a background against which emperors rule or fail to do so:[127] the emperors in their cases being the exploitable, passive Claudius and the evil, effeminate Nero.[128]

To say that Agrippina behaves exactly like Messalina would be misleading, however. Sexual misconduct, which played a central part in Messalina's characterization, is much less present in Dio's portrayal of Agrippina and is implied rather than outrightly stated.[129] And whereas politics were deliberatively left out of Messalina's narrative, they are an essential part of Agrippina's characterization.

We previously saw how Messalina had Julia Livilla – Agrippina's sister – executed for flirting with Claudius while being 'too beautiful' (60.8.4.5). Although Agrippina is accused of the same vice as Messalina at 60.32.4, namely that of being jealous (ζηλοτυπήσασα), the political implications of Lollia Paulina courting Claudius are made very clear this time by stressing Lollia's previous claim to power (τῷ Γαΐῳ συνῳκήκει) and her desire to take Agrippina's place (ἐλπίδα τινὰ ἐς τὴν τοῦ Κλαυδίου συνοίκησιν ἐσχήκει).

Agrippina is further portrayed as someone who shows great awareness of how to manipulate the citizens of Rome: when Claudius falls ill, Agrippina has her son promise a horse race to celebrate Claudius' recovery, because she knows it will please the masses (τῷ τε πλήθει, 60.33.9). She is even said to have instigated a riot over the sale of bread (θόρυβόν τινα γενέσθαι παρασκευάσασα, 60.33.10) to put pressure on her husband so that he would name Nero his successor, an anecdote we do not find in other authors.[130]

Agrippina's public presence is repeatedly stressed (60.33.3a; 60.33.7; 61.3.1-4) and is always presented as something negative and shameful, although it could have been interpreted as her fulfilling the duty of representing the *domus Augusta*.[131]

Agrippina's lust for power culminates in her desire to be called Claudius' equal (ἰσοκρατὴς τῷ Κλαυδίῳ…ὀνομάζεσθαι, 60.33.12) because nothing could satisfy her anymore (οὐδὲν δὲ ἀρκοῦν τῇ Ἀγριππίνῃ ἐδόκει 60.33.12). This recalls Dio's use of the same verb when he described Messalina's desire to have several husbands (οὐκ ἐξαρκοῦν οἱ ὅτι καὶ ἐμοιχεύετο καὶ ἐπορνεύετο, 60.31.1). It is thus clear that what sex was to Messalina, power is to Agrippina.[132] This means that, compared to her predecessor, Agrippina appears to behave in a much more masculine way.[133] Once again this crossing of gender boundaries is not meant to evoke feelings of admiration in the reader[134] but serves to underscore

[125] See Pelling (1997: 120).
[126] See Pelling (1997: 121 n.19).
[127] See Späth (2019: 171-2) and Harders (2015: 203-204).
[128] For Dio's portrayal of Nero see Gowing (1997: 2564-2588), especially 2580-2583 for charges of effeminacy.
[129] See Keegan (2004: 121). Of special interest is how Dio deals with the rumors concerning the incestuous relationship between Agrippina and Nero. He expresses doubts as to whether Agrippina really was courting her son but does believe that Nero was in love with his mother. See Cassius Dio 61.11.3-4 and Ginsburg (2006: 52).
[130] Although Suetonius and Tacitus also mention the social unrest caused by a shortage of grain, they do not blame it on Agrippina. Cf. Tac. *Ann*. 12.43 and Suet. *Claud*. 18.2. and see Barrett (1999: 138).
[131] See Späth (2019: 173). Criticizing Agrippina's public appearances is not unique to Dio's account, see for instance Tac. *Ann*. 13.5. For how Tacitus' portrayal of Agrippina influenced Dio, see Ginsburg (2006: 33).
[132] See Keegan (2004: 120-121), who mentions that amassing money seems to have been important for both.
[133] This gendered contrast was already present in Tacitus' account. According to him, whereas Messalina acted *per lasciviam*, Agrippina's rule was *quasi virile*. See Tac. *Ann*. 12.7 and Barrett (1999: 103).
[134] Although Joshel (1997: 242-243) argues that (Tacitus') Agrippina's desire for political power is 'comprehensible and at least malelike, as opposed to Messalina's chaotic and implicitly female fooling around.'

Agrippina's excessive desire to have political influence far beyond what was proper for a Roman *matrona* to have.[135]

3.3 A Tragic Turn

Although Peter Keegan has asserted that Dio's portrayal of Agrippina is 'unremittingly negative,'[136] I would like to argue that, after the murder of Claudius and Nero taking on the role of emperor at 61.1.1-2, Dio takes a more sympathetic approach in portraying Agrippina. Whereas she previously acted as a villain usurping Claudius' power, we now find her playing the part of tragic heroine as she slowly starts to lose her grip on Nero. Agrippina's tragic downfall is best summarized by the three passages in which she is granted direct speech.

The first time Dio lets Agrippina speak, is when Agrippina's receives the prophecy that her son will one day be emperor and kill her, a prophecy Dio's readers know will indeed come true:

> [2] ἀκούσασα δὲ ταῦθ' ἡ Ἀγριππῖνα παραυτίκα μὲν οὕτως ἐξεφρόνησεν ὡς καὶ αὐτὸ τοῦτο ἀναβοῆσαι "ἀποκτεινάτω με, μόνον βασιλευσάτω," ὕστερον δὲ καὶ πάνυ μετανοήσειν ἐπὶ τῇ εὐχῇ ἔμελλεν.
>
> (Cassius Dio 61.2.2)
>
> Hearing this Agrippina was straightway so out of her mind that she shouted this very thing aloud: 'Let him kill me, only let him be king', but afterwards she would deeply regret her wish.

Unlike Dio's readers, Agrippina does not recognize the true value of these words. Instead of taking them as a warning, the usually clever Agrippina acts 'frenzied' (ἐξεφρόνησεν) and expresses her joy over her son's future as a ruler. This makes for a beautiful case of dramatic irony: her initial happiness will not last long, we are told.

The next time Agrippina speaks is when she realizes she has no longer power over her son. Not because Nero has finally become emancipated but because of the influence his lover, the freedwoman Acte, exerts on him:

> [1] ἐλυπεῖτο δὲ καὶ ἡ Ἀγριππῖνα μηκέτι τῶν ἐν τῷ παλατίῳ διὰ τὴν Ἀκτὴν μάλιστα κυριεύουσα (…)
>
> [3] ὑπερήλγησε καὶ εἶπεν αὐτῷ ὅτι "ἐγώ σε αὐτοκράτορα ἀπέδειξα", ὥσπερ ἀφελέσθαι τὴν μοναρχίαν αὐτοῦ δυναμένη·
>
> (Cassius Dio 61.7.1-3)
>
> Agrippina too was vexed because she no longer was the absolute master of the palace because of Acte (…)
> She was in a great amount of pain and told him [Nero] 'I made you emperor', as if she could take his sovereignty away.

[135] See Keegan (2004: 121-122).
[136] Keegan (2004: 118). See also Barrett (1999: 240) who calls it 'uniformly hostile.'

As in the passage quoted above, Agrippina is misjudging the situation she is in, as the sentence starting with ὥσπερ makes clear. She is losing the grip she had on her son, as well as her grip on reality. The passage is rich in pathos: Agrippina's pain is stressed twice (ἐλυπεῖτο, ὑπερήλγησε) which makes her pointless appeal to Nero's gratitude pitiable rather than arrogant. What is interesting is that Dio blames this change in Nero's behavior on another woman, not on Nero himself. This is not the only time Agrippina's downfall is blamed on a woman in Nero's life.[137] According to Dio, it is because of Sabina Poppaea − Nero's second wife − that Agrippina was murdered. When Sabina learned of the rumor concerning the alleged incestuous relationship between Agrippina and Nero, she urged her husband to kill his mother after falsely claiming Agrippina intended was plotting against him (ἐπιβουλεύουσάν οἱ αὐτὴν, 61.12.1).[138] Nero lets himself be persuaded and comes up with a complicated plan to murder his mother (61.12.2-3). His initial plan of having his mother drown fails; Agrippina manages to escape and goes home (61.13.2-4). Her reaction upon seeing the assassins sent after her is nothing short of heroic:

> [5] ἰδοῦσα δέ σφας ἐκείνη ἔγνω τε ἐφ' ἃ ἥκουσι, καὶ ἀναπηδήσασα ἐκ τῆς κοίτης τήν τε ἐσθῆτα περιερρήξατο, καὶ τὴν γαστέρα ἀπογυμνώσασα "παῖε", ἔφη, "ταύτην, Ἀνίκητε, παῖε, ὅτι Νέρωνα ἔτεκεν"
>
> (Cassius Dio 61.13.5)

She, upon seeing them, understood for what reasons they were coming, and leaping up from the bed she teared her clothes off, and laying her stomach bare she said: 'Anicetus, [139] strike this, because it gave birth to Nero.'

This is the first time since the start of Agrippina's 'tragic narrative' that Agrippina acts composed as opposed to delirious. She is in control of her fear, and by bravely facing her death and not offering resistance to the men sent to murder her she behaves like an exemplary tragic heroine.[140] Her last words might even be interpreted as her aspiring to male heroic virtue. By referring to her womb as something external to her (ταύτην) she places herself outside of her body and rejects the part she played in conceiving Nero.[141]

The fact that Dio gives Agrippina a voice at this particular point in her story is telling. As Mary Beard has argued: '(…) women are allowed to speak out as victims and as martyrs, usually to preface their own death.'[142] Now that Agrippina has become a victim and her words have lost their power to influence others, she is allowed to speak.

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[137] See Keegan (2004: 121) and (2006: 52).
[138] For the part Sabina plays in Tacitus' account of the same event, see Ginsburg (2006: 47-8).
[139] Anicetus was one of Nero's freedmen, See Cassius Dio 61.13.2.
[140] Cf. Polyxena's behavior in Euripides' *Hecuba* 557-565. For Agrippina's less heroic death in other accounts, see Suet. *Nero*. 34.4 and Tac. *Ann*. 14.8.
[141] Seneca's Medea (*Med*. 1012-1013) threatens to put a sword through her womb is she finds out that she is carrying a child by Jason. Agrippina's final words are taken from Tacitus *Ann*. 14.8 '*protendens uterum "Ventrem feri" exclamavit*.'
[142] Beard (2018: 13).

3.4 Epilogue

Although initially playing the part of one of Caligula's nameless victims along with her sisters, Dio's Agrippina is reintroduced at the end of book 60 as the Agrippina ancient audiences were familiar with through the work of Tacitus and Suetonius. Armed with sharp wit, Dio's Agrippina does not hesitate to use violence to get what she desires most: power. This wish to rule over others was thought to be an exclusively masculine trait, but the fact that Agrippina's every move is informed by this desire, along with the fact that, had she been a proper matron, she would neither have had nor pursued this desire in the first place, underscores the irrationality and thus reprehensible femininity of her behavior. Her desire to rule over Rome is presented as a desire that knows no bounds and culminates in her wish to be called Claudius' equal, a wish which is presented as entirely unreasonable.
Dio later presents a less threatening version of Agrippina after Nero's ascent to power. Other women now take center stage and manipulate Nero in doing their bidding. As Agrippina's influence over Nero wanes, Dio allows his audience to feel more pity, even sympathy, for the previously cruel Agrippina. Her characteristic acumen has now made way for folly and misjudgments and it is only when she is about to be murdered that she recovers her coolness. It is while being in this rather pathetic state that Agrippina is allowed to speak.

Conclusion

Cassius Dio's Fulvia, Messalina and Agrippina are not simply 'bad women', they are highly dangerous women. Like the typical 'bad woman', they are portrayed as overruled by a wide array of emotions and desires, among them greed, lust, vindictiveness, bellicosity, jealousy and a desire to dominate. Unlike most regular women however, these three women are depicted as able to meet their wicked needs through exploiting their husbands' political power.

A recurring motif throughout the passages from Cassius Dio's work discussed in this thesis thus seems to have been that women, who are potentially irrational at best and immoral at worst, being so close to the seat of Roman power are inherently dangerous. It is thus no wonder that the most striking similarity between these three women is how often Dio accuses them of participating in bringing about someone's death. His Fulvia, Messalina and Agrippina are well-established murderers, with Agrippina being the most homicidal of the three since she is said to have prepared the poison meant to kill Claudius herself, though Fulvia appears as the most cruel through Dio's recurring use of ellipsis.

Although their murders are said to have been motivated by a variety of reasons, all three are accused of murdering people in order to gain the riches of their victims. Fulvia and Messalina are even said to have spared a victim if they were willing to pay enough, revealing that their political reasons for murdering someone was just a front for greed.

Another gruesome similarity between these three women is the way they treat the corpses of their enemies. It was not sufficient for Dio to portray Fulvia and Agrippina as 'conventionally' aggressive. The fact that they encroached on male dominated spaces and privileges should have been excluded by their gender. Therefore their aggressivity and ambition needed to reflect this abnormality. Their mistreatment and direct handling of the corpses of their enemies perfectly reflects the nonconformity of their personalities and the horror of women trying to behave like men. Dio conveyed Fulvia's and Agrippina's disregard of the boundaries of gender by transposing it to other Roman norms of conduct that ought to be respected, in this case that of the proper treatment of corpses.

This would explain why Messalina too is accused of defiling corpses, although to a lesser degree. Since she is portrayed as largely apolitical and thus less masculine, she does not appear as being actively involved in the act of defilement herself. Instead, she lets other people carry out the abuse of corpses for her.

What unites Messalina and Agrippina is that both of them are 'ruled' by a very clear desire, that at one point in their respective narratives can no longer be satisfied by what they already have: Messalina desires to undertake a sexual adventure that will outdo her habit of prostituting herself and Agrippina wants to be emperor.

Dio is less clear when it comes to describing what motivates Fulvia. Is it cruelty? Vindictiveness? Lust for power? Fulvia's sporadic appearances throughout the *Roman History* do not provide a satisfying answer. Consequently, Fulvia appears less as a memorable literary character than Messalina and Agrippina, and more as a pawn in the complex political game unfolding in Rome at the end of the first century BC.

Where these women additionally differ from one another is in the expression of their sexual desires. Both Messalina and Agrippina are accused of improper sexual conduct in the form of adultery, but this is far more present in Messalina's narrative than it is in that of Agrippina. Fulvia, on the other hand, is never accused of any form of sexual misconduct, although I have argued we can read her abuse of Cicero's head as (figurative) rape. This absence of allegations of adultery and sexual jealousy against Fulvia might be partly explained by the difference in historical contexts: Messalina and Agrippina were the wives of an emperor. Their important ancestry was what made them essential for the emperor's reign. This meant that charges of adultery were an extremely serious charge and could be interpreted as wanting to overthrow the emperor, as we saw in the case of Messalina's marriage to Silius, although Dio did not make this political implication explicit. This also meant that any woman who rivaled the emperor's wife in ancestry was a very serious opponent, which might explain why, as we have seen, Messalina and Agrippina are often depicted eliminating female rivals, while Fulvia never is.

Fulvia, Messalina and Agrippina share characteristics which were thought of as typically masculine or feminine. As mentioned above, the fact that all of them are ruled by their desires and emotions characterizes them, first and foremost, as female. Most of Messalina's narrative centers around her pursuit of fulfilling her sexual desires; she is consequently the most feminine of these three women. Yet the fact that she acts as a sexual predator by forcing men and women into sexual acts they do not want to commit also shows a domineering and thus masculine side to her character. Her giving away the belongings of her husband and the state to whomever she pleases furthermore shows her encroaching on masculine privileges.

Whereas politics where deliberately left out of Messalina's characterization, they are an essential part of the narratives concerning Fulvia and Agrippina: both are said to have ruled over Rome at one point in time and both are very involved in what is taking place in and around Rome. This characterizes them both as automatically hypermasculine, since desiring to possess political power was not proper for a Roman matron. Fulvia, who is portrayed as a general on the battlefield, the masculine sphere par excellence, is characterized as the most masculine of the women I have discussed here.

What is striking about these three women is that they are often work together with men in bringing about their nefarious deeds: Fulvia and Antony are, quite literally, partners in crime in book 47 of the *Roman History*. In book 48 Fulvia closely collaborates with Antony's brother Lucius. Messalina acts almost always together with Claudius' freedmen, and Agrippina collaborates with them too, though to a lesser degree.

If Fulvia and Messalina often act in pairs, their behavior is also frequently compared to that of others. Messalina's behavior is contrasted to that of her husband Claudius, who, when compared to her, acts in exemplary ways. The same can be said about the behavior of Fulvia, which is contrasted to that of the admirable Octavian and is sometimes even evaluated through his eyes.

This leads us to consider how the behavior of these women reflect on the men in their lives. We have seen that most scholars interpret the negative portrayals of Messalina and Agrippina as indicative of how weak of an emperor Claudius was, which is further underscored by the fact that he was ruled by ex-slaves.

The negative portrayal of Fulvia, however, should not be seen as badly reflecting on her husband Mark Antony, since both are portrayed in a negative, yet equal way. Fulvia, like Antony and his brother, is portrayed as one of Octavian's many fearsome opponents.

As we have seen throughout the chapters in this thesis, Dio was very familiar with the previous historical accounts concerning Fulvia, Messalina and Agrippina. His characterizations of these women fit the established traditions, though Dio is not afraid to add exaggerated claims to his portrayals of these women which have no precedents in earlier extant literary sources.

I believe that adding innovative and extreme scenes to the narratives of women who were already negatively portrayed by earlier historical authors was Dio's way to offer new and exciting elements for his readers, while also offering images of these women the audience would be familiar with. As we have seen, every form of exaggeration displayed in Dio's characterization of Fulvia, Messalina and Agrippina can be traced back to earlier historical portraits of these women. Dio's claims thus 'make sense' because they fit well-established portraits of these women. Fulvia and Agrippina's respective mistreatments of corpses can be accepted because these women had a reputation of being aggressive, whereas Messalina using the imperial palace as a brothel is compatible with earlier claims of hypersexual activity.

It would be interesting for further research to see how Dio characterizes women with political power who had the additional disadvantage of being non-Roman, such as Boudica and Cleopatra. What would also be interesting would be to look at how Dio characterizes women close to Roman power who had entered the historical records as 'good' women, such as Livia. Does Dio follow the historiographical tradition concerning these women, or does he still criticize them for being involved in the political, masculine sphere? Lastly, although this thesis has exclusively focused on the use of gendered stereotypes to characterize 'bad women', it would be worthwhile to see how Dio employs these same stereotypes to characterize men the historiographical tradition had identified as 'bad', such as Caligula and Nero. Thinking in terms of gender and what was expected of men might explain why these 'bad emperors' were accused of deviant sexual behavior.

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