

REPRESENTING THE SEVERAN EMPRESSES

Women as Rhetorical Devices in the Narratives of Roman Imperial Historiography

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A thesis submitted for the degree of

Master of Arts

September 2020



Abstract

This thesis examines the narrative and rhetorical functions of the Severan empresses – Julia Domna, Julia Maesa, Julia Soaemias, and Julia Mamaea – in the historiographical works by Cassius Dio, Herodian, and in the *Historia Augusta*. These works have fundamentally shaped our perceptions of the Severan empresses and the Severan era at large. These depictions, however, should not be taken at face value and are, as this thesis aims to show, best understood as rhetorical devices. By placing the depictions of these women in the broader context of the aims of Roman imperial historiography as a genre and the Roman historiographers' respective narratives and theses, this thesis argues that the characterisations of the Severan empresses were first and foremost determined by their rhetorical functions in the assessments of their male kin – particularly their imperial (grand)sons. The portrayals of the Severan empresses were furthermore formed by subverting the ideal of the *Augusta* and the official Severan representations of these women, by eastern stereotypes, and earlier historiographical depictions of other imperial women.

“And I have met my destiny in quite a similar way,
The history book on the shelf,
Is always repeating itself”

Benny Andersson, Björn Ulvaeus, Stig Anderson, *Waterloo*

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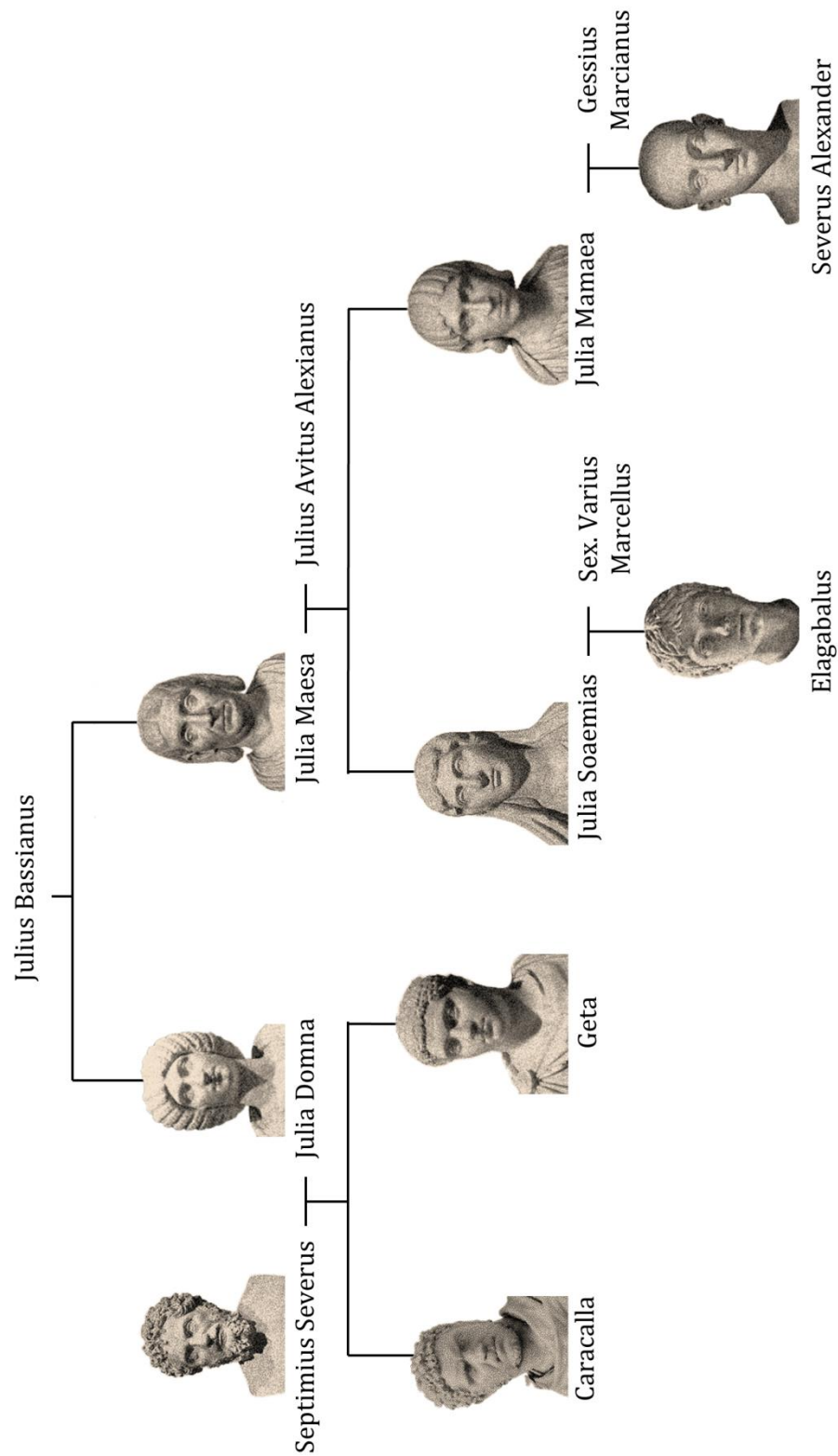
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Abbreviations

Amm. Marc. – Ammianus Marcellinus, *History*
Arist. *Eth. Nic.* – Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*
Aur. Vict. *Caes.* – Aurelius Victor, *History*
Cass. Dio – Cassius Dio, *Roman History*
Cic. *Brut.* – Cicero, *Brutus*
Cic. *De or.* – Cicero, *On the Orator*
Cic. *Mil.* – Cicero, *Pro Milone*
Cic. *Part. Or.* – Cicero, *A Dialogue Concerning Oratorical Partitions*
Diod. Sic. – Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History*
Flor. *Epit.* – Florus, *Epitome of Roman History*
Hdn. – Herodian, *History of the Empire from the Death of Marcus*
Hdt. – Herodotus, *Histories*
Juv. *Sat.* – Juvenal, *Satires*
Lactant. *Div. inst.* – Lactantius, *The Divine Institutes*
Livy – Livy, *The History of Rome*
Nep. *Att.* – Nepos, *Life of Atticus*
Ovid, *Fasti* – Ovid, *The Book of Days*
Philostr. *VS* – Philostratus, *Lives of the Sophists*
Pliny, *HN* – Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*
Plut. *Vit. Alex.* – Plutarch, *Life of Alexander*
Quint. *Inst.* – Quintilian, *Institutes of Oratory*
Quint. Smyrn. – Quintus Smyrnaeus, *Posthomerica*
Sall. *Cat.* – Sallust, *The Conspiracy of Catiline*
Sen, *Ira* – Seneca the Younger, *On Anger*
Sen. *Oct.* – Seneca the Younger, *Octavia*
SHA *Alex. Sev.* – Scriptores Historiae Augustae, *Life of Severus Alexander*
SHA *Diad.* – Scriptores Historiae Augustae, *Life of Diadumenian*
SHA *Geta* – Scriptores Historiae Augustae, *Life of Geta*
SHA *Heliogab.* – Scriptores Historiae Augustae, *Life of Heliogabalus*
SHA *M. Ant.* – Scriptores Historiae Augustae, *Life of Caracalla*
SHA *Opil. Marc.* – Scriptores Historiae Augustae, *Life of Macrinus*
SHA *Sev.* – Scriptores Historiae Augustae, *Life of Severus*
SHA *Tacit.* – Scriptores Historiae Augustae, *Life of Tacitus*
SHA *Tyr. Trig.* – Scriptores Historiae Augustae, *The Thirty Pretenders*
Strab. *Geo.* – Strabo, *The Geography*
Suet. *Iul.* – Suetonius, *Life of Julius Caesar*
Tac. *Ann.* – Tacitus, *Annals*
Thuc. – Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*
Val. Max. – Valerius Maximus, *Nine Books of Memorable Deeds and Sayings*
Verg. *Aen.* – Vergil, *Aeneid*

Severan Family Tree¹



¹ This family tree represents the academic consensus regarding the actual genealogical relations of the Severans. However, as will become apparent in this thesis, various Roman regimes and historiographers had alternating claims concerning the Severan genealogical connections. Family tree by author.

Acknowledgments

I wish to extend my thanks to the following people who boldly strived to steer this thesis from being, quality-wise, a *Historia Augusta* towards a *Historia Romana* and made me feel a little less of a “rogue scholar” and “shameless historical fantast” as Ronald Syme characterised the writer of the former.

At first, I want to thank my supervisor Dr. Saskia Stevens who with her great advice and deadlines kept me moving on my own narrative journey.

Secondly, I am indebted to Eline Veldman and Mischa Piekosz who, through their numerous reviews and video calls, offered me valuable insights and some levity in the writing process. Additionally, I would like to thank Arjen van Lil and Rogier van der Heijden for their reviews of this work.

Introduction

At the closing of the second century, the North-African general Septimius Severus ascended to the Roman imperial throne with the Syrian Julia Domna as his consort. Julia Domna bore Septimius Severus two sons, Caracalla and Geta, who shared the throne with their father until his demise. After this, the brothers became co-rulers of the Empire which lasted until a brotherly rivalry escalated so far that Caracalla had his younger brother killed barely a year into their co-emperorship.² In 217 AD, Caracalla, now sole emperor of the Empire, was himself murdered while relieving himself at the side of the road during a military expedition.³ After both her sons had met their cruel ends, Julia Domna is believed to have taken her own life in the same year.⁴ After Caracalla's murder, there was a short interlude in the Severan control of the Empire when the Praetorian prefect Macrinus claimed the throne. But he was swiftly defeated by the army of the new Severan emperor-to-be Elagabalus. This new imperial claimant was hoisted in the purple partially by the claim that he was in reality the biological son of Caracalla and Domna's niece Julia Soaemias.⁵ Julia Maesa (the sister of Domna) is said to have played a part in this genealogical forgery.⁶ The unpopular Elagabalus was, after four years on the Roman throne, deposed, murdered together with his mother and thrown into the Tiber, and replaced by his cousin Severus Alexander (also a grandson of Maesa) about whom it was also claimed that he was the child of Caracalla (and his mother Julia Mamaea).⁷ Mamaea would be one of his advisers during his reign and figure prominently in his imperial imagery until Severus Alexander was killed in 235 AD together with his mother. This constitutes the generally accepted history of the Severan period.

The Severan period was considerably bloodier and the reign of its emperors significantly shorter than the preceding Antonine period. Of the six⁸ emperors during this era, only Septimius Severus died of natural causes.⁹ This was new for the people experiencing this era; from the seven previous emperors from Nerva to Commodus only the last died an unnatural death. The volatile Severan period, lasting from 193 AD to 235 AD, can also be seen as a clear break in Roman political history in a different way: the system of the adoptive emperors that lasted most of the previous century was discarded to be replaced by an old-fashioned familial dynasty.

This volatile period in Roman history was a fascinating topic for both contemporary Roman writers – Cassius Dio and Herodian – and those of later centuries – the author of the *Historia Augusta* (hereafter

² Cass. Dio 78.(77).2; Hdn. 4.4.3; SHA *M. Ant.* 2.4.

³ Cass. Dio 78.(77).5; Hdn. 4.13.4; SHA *M. Ant.* 7.1.

⁴ Cass. Dio 79.(78).23–25; Hdn. 4.13.6.

⁵ Cass. Dio 79.(78).31; 79.(78).32; Hdn. 5.3.10.

⁶ Hdn. 5.3.10; SHA *Opil. Macr.* 9.4.

⁷ Cass. Dio 80.21.19; Hdn. 5.3.10; possibly insinuated by the *Historia Augusta*: SHA Alex. Sev 5.3.

⁸ Or seven if one counts Diadumenian, the ten year old son of Macrinus he proclaimed Caesar.

⁹ Although Roman historians speculated about attempts by Caracalla to kill Septimius Severus: Dio 77.(76).15.2; Hdn. 3.15.2.

abbreviated as *HA*) foremost. The nature of Roman historiography and the fact that works belonging to this genre should be composed of grand, political events, meant that the “Severan generation lived through far more history”¹⁰ than the preceding generation during the Antonines. In judging this era – often negatively – the historiographers focused on the eastern nature of this dynasty. While there had previously been emperors of non-Italian birth and ancestry, the Severans were the first of such a distinct eastern character as all the emperors of the dynasty (besides the North-African Septimius Severus) and their mothers hailed from Syria where they were part of the *Bassianus* family that came forth of the Emesene dynasty. The Severan (grand)mothers – the aforementioned Julias; Domna, Maesa, Soaemias, and Mamaea – were granted a central place in the dynasty’s centrally communicated imagery and propaganda in order to claim continuity and stability.¹¹

The Roman historiographers often depicted the Severan period as an age of decline and sketched an image whereby – to varying degrees – the oriental nature and the (bad) influence of the Syrian, imperial mothers (and grandmother) were dominant and emblematic of this dynasty and its negative aspects. While not offering a reliable narrative of the lives of these women, the sources do, however, illuminate a lot of Roman fears and prejudices regarding women and political power and its relationship to the East. To the Romans, the field of politics was indisputably a gendered space; a male space where women had no role to play. Some of these histories can convincingly be read as treatises on why granting women (or womanly men) political power is unnatural, un-Roman, and will only lead to political decline and chaos. The Roman historiographers often subverted the image of the ideal Roman empress and portrayed the Severan women as powerful, scheming, and un-Roman in order to judge – mostly – their sons negatively. The fact that the historiographers were no proponents of juvenile emperors meant that the roles of their (grand)mothers were inflated and the emperors were depicted as mother’s boys. These rhetorical characterisations of the various Severan women have proved to be instrumental for the formation of the modern academic understanding of these women.

This thesis is concerned with uncovering the rhetorical functions the Severan empresses had in the Roman historiographies and laying bare the *topoi* and the ulterior cultural and societal stereotypes towards women and the East. The Severan empresses had specific narrative functions in the various historiographical works that informed their characterisation. This thesis is not focused on measuring the historicity or the truthfulness of the depiction of these women, but in uncovering the workings of Roman historiography. Uncovering which of the sources most closely relates to the reality of the past is not productive because, as Henri Poincaré once astutely remarked according to Peter Munz, “there is no time over and above the various clocks we have. We can compare one clock to another clock; but we cannot compare any clock to time and it makes therefore no sense to ask which of the many clocks we have is correct. The same is true of any story,

¹⁰ Kemezis 2014, 1.

¹¹ This is examined In Chapter 2.

including historical narratives. We cannot glimpse at history. We can only compare one book with another book.”¹²

Historiography

The way the Severan empresses have been represented in Roman historiography has, unsurprisingly, had a lasting influence on the *nachleben* of the Severans and are still formative for modern characterisations of the empresses. Ideas concerning the easternness of the Severan dynasty and how primarily its femininity carried in it the seeds of imperial decline have been instrumental for the characterisation of the Severans through the ages. The idea of the Severan women as harmful agents was initiated and popularised by Alfred von Domaszewski.¹³ He attributed the decline of Rome to the presumed power of the cult of Emesa and the oriental *theosophy* these women brought with them. In a nutshell, the oriental nature and influence of these women were detrimental for the Roman Empire. Domaszewski conceived of this based on a literal reading of the primary sources and this idea remains influential.¹⁴ In the twenties of the last century, similar ideas were expressed by leading historians such as Johann Hasebroek.¹⁵ He stated that Julia Domna introduced Septimius Severus to oriental philosophy and encouraged him to move away from traditional Roman religion which resulted in decay. Nazi historians did not view the cultural, oriental impact as the primary sin of the Severan women, but rather the “racial mixing” of this dynasty.¹⁶ Again the Severan women were seen as bad influences. Domna was indirectly held responsible for the downfall of the Roman Empire; she, being Syrian, influenced her son “Rassebastard” Caracalla to pass the famous *Constitutio Antoniniana*, which had lead, according to Nazi thought, to the intermingling of races and the *semitisierung* of the Empire and the crisis of the third century.¹⁷ So, the Nazis had adopted sentiments regarding the Severan women and their oriental influence but had adapted it to a racial matter, not an ideological one per se. After the war, these racial connotations were discarded and the study regarding the Severan women continued as before the war in Germany.¹⁸ Karl Christ argued that the Severan women – especially Julia Maesa – were guilty of bringing their place of origin, Emesa, to Rome leading to its decline.¹⁹ A revisionist take, however, can be encountered in the popular historical work by Godfrey Turton entitled *The Syrian Princesses: The Women Who Ruled Rome, AD 193-235*.²⁰ Its title presents these women as the effective rulers of the dynasty. In this work, he attempted to change the idea of the presumed malevolence and corrupt nature of the Severan women and portrayed them as benevolent,

¹² Munz 1977, 221.

¹³ Domaszewski 1908, 223-224.

¹⁴ Levick 2007, 167.

¹⁵ Hasebroek 1921, 11-12.

¹⁶ Chapoutot & Fekl 2014, 198; The North-African Septimius Severus wed the Syrian Julia Domna. The later “Syrian” emperors married Italian Roman women.

¹⁷ Brewitz 1936.

¹⁸ For example: Altheim 1952; Kettenhofen 1979.

¹⁹ Christ 2009, 633-634.

²⁰ Turton 1974.

enlightened, influential women whose religious mission was to create unity between different peoples in the form of a monotheistic ideal. Turton hypothesised that if they had been successful, Christianity might not ever have succeeded. The idea of the Severan dynast as an oriental matriarchy – for better or worse – is something that we come across through the ages. Irfan Shahîd, for example, characterises the dynasty as an “Imperial Arab matriarchy”.²¹ The extraordinary power of the Severan empresses is accepted by Robert Lee Cleve who characterises the Severan emperors as “pawns of the Severan emperors.”²² Michael Grant, who defines the Severan era as a “changed Roman Empire”, typifies this period as an “extraordinary period in which women ran the Roman Empire”.²³ Contemporary historians still echo similar claims. Barbara Levick, in her monograph concerning Julia Domna, remarks that under Elagabalus and Severus Alexander “women seem to be its [the Empire’s] effective rulers.”²⁴ Tolga Aytürk claims the same thing when writing that “though Julia Maesa’s grandsons remained officially in charge, it was she and her daughters who were the true powers behind the throne for the next seventeen years.”²⁵ Even when a revisionist take is applied to the subject of the Severan women, the idea postulated by parts of the Roman historiography of incredible powerful women remains present. Where the female ambition of the Severan empresses was dangerous to the ancient historiographers, it is deemed inspirational by, for example, Colleen Melone whose Severan study takes a gendered Judith Butlerian approach and claims that the Severan women “pushed the limit” and deviated from the traditional Roman gender roles and through this defined their identities.²⁶ Additionally, Elizabeth Kosmetatou characterises the presumed ambition of the Severan empresses as follows: “the last Severan empresses had probably realized that they liked their acquired power and refused to relinquish.”²⁷ Specific characterisations of Severan women, such as Mamaea’s alleged love of gold and hoarding of money is taken from the historiographers and explained as wise.²⁸ These characterisations of the Severan period and the Severan empresses are born from a literal reading of ancient historiography although with a different value judgment.

In the last decades, however, there has been a much-needed turn towards archaeological sources – primarily numismatic – to reconstruct the lives of these women and their representation by the Severan regimes.²⁹ Increasingly, the consensus has arisen that the Severan women and their imagery showed them as quintessentially Roman; they were bestowed mostly the same titles, were connected mostly to the same deities, and broadly fulfilled the same (official) roles as the imperial women of the

²¹ Shahîd 1984, 42.

²² Cleve 1982, 157.

²³ Grant 1996, 48.

²⁴ Levick 2007, 1.

²⁵ Aytürk 2007a, 201.

²⁶ Melone 2015.

²⁷ Kosmetatou 2002, 414.

²⁸ Aytürk 2007b, 223.

²⁹ Baharal 1992; Kosmetatou 2002; Gorrie 2004; Lichtenberger 2011; Langford 2013; O’Grady 2015; Guenther 2017, among others.

preceding Antonine dynasty.³⁰ The archaeological evidence does not seem to fit with the image presented in the Roman historiographical works of the Severan empresses as women who time and again transgressed the boundaries of gender roles and were like eastern queens who hungered for power.³¹ In short, there are great discrepancies between the representation of these women by the Severan governments and the narratives regarding these women in Roman historiography. The recent studies that have uncovered more of the central imperial narratives concerning the empresses demand a return to the historiographical sources and a new critical examination of these sources. The current reconsideration of the historiographical accounts of the Severans does not seek to uncover historical truths – rather, it aims to uncover the specific narratives of these sources that have so markedly shaped our perspective of this transformative period.

Method

Ancient historiography did fundamentally not adhere to our current historiographical principles. It is primarily concerned with narrative. As Quintilian stated: “History is a kind of ‘prose poem’ and is written for the purpose of narrative rather than of proof.”³² It is therefore fruitful to view ancient historiography through the lens of literary narrative theory. As Adam Kemezis remarked:

“It [ancient historiography] consists mostly of linear narratives focusing around a relatively few discrete actors, be they individuals or collectivities such as “the Athenians.” Assuming one accepts that narrative structure is not inherent in historical events, but is imposed on them by the people describing them, then the phenomena associated with historical narratives, such as the worlds they create, are properties of the narratives themselves.”³³

Ancient historiography specifically sees no problem in creating narratives and using inventions to support their narrative needs. While for the longest time the works of Dio, Herodian, and the *HA* were primarily judged by the reliability of their factual content and whether their works were helpful for reconstructing the era they wrote about, recently a necessary turn has been made towards assessing them as literature.³⁴ This study is part of this new literary and narrative approach regarding these works.

According to Kemezis, the idea of historiographical narratives that create narrative worlds is particularly present with the contemporary

³⁰ Lusnia 1995; Gorrie 2004; Langford 2013.

³¹ As will become apparent in Chapter 2.

³² Quint. *Inst.* 10.1.31: *Est enim proxima poetis et quodam modo carmen solutum, et scribitur ad narrandum non ad probandum.*

³³ Kemezis 2014, 13.

³⁴ Dio and Herodian are, for example, treated as narrative works in: Hidber 2004a; Hidber 2004b; Hidber 2007; Pitcher 2018a; Pitcher 2018b; Hose 2007; Potter 2011; Kuhn-Chen 2002; Kemezis 2014; Syme argued decades ago already for a literary approach to the *HA*: Syme 1972.

writers of the Severan period (of whom Cassius Dio and Herodian are central to this thesis) because the volatility of the Severan era and the drastic political changes caused a re-imagining of the recent period and the past which led up to it.³⁵ However, this is not the case for the *HA* and the other late antique sources. The narratives these works created and the individual worlds they thereby envisioned must be individually regarded. Each of the studied authors shaped in their historiographical work a world with its own greater narratives and historical past. For example, the manner in which the *HA* connected its unique narrative of decline with the name “Antoninus”: in the *HA* the emperors who – according to the source – bore this name went through a process whereby each new Antonine was worse than his predecessor, ending with Elagabalus.³⁶ This particular narrative would not become clear when only focusing on one of the *Vitae* in the work.

Isolating individual biographies of the Severans is detrimental for the understanding of these narratives. They are just shackles in the grander chain of narrative. While engaging with the Severan biographies and histories in the context of the complete historical works sheds more light on their function in the narratives, these works did not come into existence in a vacuum, but were to a high degree formed by generic conventions. They were influenced by heaps of other works. Romans were not concerned with things as copyrights and originality. Ideas and themes were readily copied and applied. Intertextuality is thus important to this thesis. To successfully understand and recognise the rhetorical functions of the Severan women in these works, it is necessary to comprehend how their characterisations are built upon other depictions of imperial women, eastern stereotypes, and Greco-Roman ideas about the proper conduct of women.

The narrative purpose of historiography dealing with the imperial era was primarily a moralising one. It told about virtues and vices and had ultimately a binary goal. That is, to hold judgment over emperors and proclaim them as either good or bad.³⁷ In doing so, these lives were presented as *exempla* of how to live or not to live. Certain shorthand was used that signalled certain virtues and vices that befitted and detracted from the Roman ideal of the imperial character. The sorts of anecdotes, phrases, and examples that would show the good or bad nature of the emperors were highly standardised and are now identified as *topoi*. Often, thorough knowledge of the Roman attitudes and historiography is needed to identify these. For illustration, when reading Dio’s biography of Caracalla where it is claimed that this emperor was a fervent chariot racer, it can easily be interpreted as just a bit of trivia, but when the reader is familiar with other imperial biographies, they would notice that a shocking amount of bad emperors in works by a great variety of historiographers are said to have been avert charioteers.³⁸ The image of the charioteering emperor was embedded in the negative connotations that Romans had with chariot-racers and other people who offered their bodies for entertainment. To understand the workings of Roman historiography, it is thus important to be knowledgeable concerning these *topoi* and the greater, societal attitudes

³⁵ Kemezis 2014, 14.

³⁶ This *topos*, called the *Nomen Antoninorum*, will be further explored in Chapter 2.

³⁷ Mehl 2011, 21.

³⁸ Bell 2014, 496.

and stereotypes they are born from. The historiography dealing with the Severans is riddled with these kinds of *topoi*, most of which were based upon Roman and Greek attitudes regarding “the East” – where the Severans, of course, for the biggest part hailed from. The idea that in these texts the Severan women are still hidden, waiting to be untangled from the myriad of stereotypical characterisations, *topoi*, and rhetorical tools, is an attractive notion but they must primarily be regarded here as fictional characters who are loosely based in reality. Similar to how Plato used Socrates as a character in his philosophical works, it is commonplace for an ancient historian to use historical characters for their own moral arguments.³⁹

The narrative approach of this thesis means that both the overarching goals of Roman imperial historiography as well as the specific theses of the central historiographical works are taken into account. All three of the studied Severan historiographers operated in the same field, but had specific goals and ethic arguments that moulded their works and the representations of the Severan empresses. The narrative approach of this thesis acknowledges the vast importance of both the generic conventions and its archetypal characters as well as the respective views of the authors to the eventual representation of the Severan empresses. This approach is vital for understanding the rhetorical functions of the Severan empresses. Without it, I believe the depictions of the Severan empresses are not adequately understood which has resulted in an inconsiderate copying and dismissal of various aspects of their historiographical representations. Recent historiography regarding the Severan empresses has leaned too extensively on the ancient historiographers without sufficiently acknowledging the narratological patterns of these sources.

To uncover the rhetorical functions of the Severan women, this thesis will assume the following form.

Chapter 1 studies the genre of ancient historiography and examines how ideas regarding gender and foreigners have always been embedded in the genre. How the emergence of the Principate informed the presence of women in the historiographical genre is a chief subject. Roman historiographical works did not exist in a vacuum but were part of a web of influences, direct and indirect. Therefore the focus will be on the literature that was known and influenced the sources central to this study – Dio, Herodian, and the *HA*. Understanding the Greco-Roman perceptions of gender roles in East and West and how this relates to ancient virtues will prove to be vital to this study. To better understand these complicated matters, orientalist theory, as well as aspects of gender theory will be used as framework. In this thesis, the intersection on the Venn-diagram where orientalist theory and Gender theory overlap is explored.

In Chapter 2, the Severan narratives are studied. The various representations of the Severan regimes are examined before the historiographical sources and their theses are studied. Roman historiography might have had an overarching purpose, but this does not mean they can all be read the same way. The different authors had different

³⁹ Millar 1964, 79.

primary views and narrative worlds which determined their representation of the Severan period and, consequently, the Severan women.

In Chapter 3, the passages concerning the Severan women in these works are analysed. How are they deployed and to what purpose? In doing so, I will reflect on the broader cultural attitudes that are described in Chapter 1 and the individual goals of the sources examined in Chapter 2. Ultimately, I will attempt to form an encompassing view of the different levels of influences – societal, historiographical, and narrative – that have formed the respective representations of the various Severan women.

Chapter 1: Roman Historiography, its Machinations, and the Role of Women

To adequately understand the Roman sources central to this research of the Severan women, the broader landscape of ancient historiography with all its conventions, purposes, and developments must be explored. The sources dealing with the Severans are part of the Roman imperial historiography and it is therefore important to be aware of the workings and motivations of this genre of historiography. The primary goal of this chapter is to ascertain the role of women in Roman imperial historiography. What rhetorical purposes did they fulfil and how was this an inherent part of the genre? By examining the emergence of the genre of Roman imperial historiography following the advent of the Principate and studying the machinations of works by historiographers who proved to be instrumental in creating and consolidating the form of the genre, it will become apparent how women herein had a specific rhetorical role.

Besides studying the role of women overall, this chapter looks specifically at the role of imperial women, and imperial mothers. The objective of this chapter is to establish how women in Roman historiography were primarily a means, a tool, to judge the men – and society – around them. How women in historiography could be used to question a man's *virtus* and *romanitas* is thereby central.

While it is attractive to map the whole development of Greek and Roman historiography and include vast amounts of ancient sources, this is not feasible and – in the end – not productive for this study. Sources that are of tangible influence to the Severan histories and biographies are therefore centred, be they direct inspirations on the authors or of genre-establishing significance. The fact that orientalist themes are of great importance to this research and can explain parts of the ancient historiographical representation of the Severan women, means that later on in this chapter emphasis will be laid on orientalist themes in Greco-Roman historiography. The inherent connection of the East with femininity in the Roman psyche will thereby be studied.

1.1 The Development of Imperial Historiography

The sources concerning the Severans central to this study belong to the genre of Roman imperial historiography. It is important to understand how this genre became what it is and how certain societal changes were instrumental in the development of the genre, in particular those that occurred hand in hand with the emergence of the Principate during the reign of Augustus.

Roman imperial historiography remained firmly the domain of elite men as it had been during the Republic. Men of senatorial and equestrian classes continued to function as the empire's unofficial scribes. These men found themselves often in complicated relationships with the emperor and the imperial system overall. Senators could obtain more political influence by being included in the circle of imperial advisors.⁴⁰ An all-important

⁴⁰ Mehl 2011, 61.

development of the Principate that was of vital significance to the development of imperial historiography is related to the monopolisation of information. Matters of state were discussed in public during the Republic; senators received information first-hand and the people acquired governmental knowledge at local assemblies. During the Principate, however, matters of state were chiefly confined to the emperor and his inner circle of advisors. This is explicitly mentioned in Dio's account of Augustus.⁴¹ Government became obscured from the senatorial gaze. No longer was the senate floor, open to hundreds of people, the setting for Roman government, it was now the imperial palace located high above on the Palatine and only accessible to a select few from where the state was primarily governed. Imperial historiography therefore had to base itself more frequently on unverified news which often did not add up to more than scandalous gossip about the emperor and his family and inner circle.⁴²

The lack of transparency of the imperial system drove the historiographer to increasingly write about private matters. As a consequence of the change in politics, the prime topic of the genre became the relationship between the imperial court and senators.⁴³ And, while there had been a clear distinction between biography and history, during the early imperial age these borders became blurred and therefore easier to cross.

1.2. History and Biography in Roman Imperial Historiography

The Romans often envisioned the histories and biographies they wrote as belonging to different genres. In this thesis sources that are traditionally seen as historical – by both Romans as contemporary historians – as well as sources that are deemed to strictly belong to the biographical genre are discussed. The “proper” histories ideally dealt with important, consequential political events, while biographies were more occupied with the inner-workings and characters of its subjects and laying these bare by focusing on the subject's often more trivial deeds. According to Cicero, a proper history should focus on the *rebus magnis memoriaque dignis*: the important events worthy of memory.⁴⁴ This sentiment is broadly shared as it is echoed when Tacitus writes about there being “*pauca memoria digna*”⁴⁵ (not much worthy of memory), to write about when chronicling the consulships of Nero and Lucius Piso. The Ciceronian idea was enduring and was maintained into Late Antiquity.⁴⁶

⁴¹ Cass. Dio 53.19.

⁴² Mehl 2011, 62.

⁴³ Mehl 2011, 62.

⁴⁴ Cic. *De or.* 2.63.

⁴⁵ Tac. *Ann.* 13.31.

⁴⁶ Ammianus Marcellinus showed the predicaments of historians in writing about emperors and gave examples of topics that did not belong in history but were demanded to be included by the readers: *Dictis inpensiore cura rerum ordinibus ad usque memoriae confinia propioris convenerat iam referre a notioribus pedem, ut et pericula declinentur veritati saepe contigua, et examinatores contexendi operis deinde non perferamus intempestivos, strepentes ut laesos, si praeteritum sit, quod locutus est imperator in cena, vel omissum quam ob causam gregarii milites coerciti sunt apud signa, et quod non decuerat in descriptione multiplici regionum super exiguis silere castellis, quodque cunctorum nomina, qui ad urbani praetoris officium*

Biography had as objective the offering of a clear picture of the personality, vices and virtues of its chronicled subjects.⁴⁷ Here the Aristotelian ideas regarding the connection between deeds (ἥθος) and character (πρᾶξις) are important; it was thought that human qualities were not just perceivable through a person's deeds, but were also its result.⁴⁸ Consequently, Roman biographers would carefully choose small anecdotes regarding their subjects as to accurately communicate their idea of the subject's character and, in extension, their own judgments of said character. Arnaldo Momigliano stated with regards to this phenomenon, that "the borderline between fiction and reality is thinner in biography than in ordinary historiography."⁴⁹ Works firmly located in the biographical genre frequently slid towards sensationalist (bedroom) gossip and fell back on broad stereotypes and long-established *topoi*.

The borders between history and biography, however, are not as clearly demarcated as the Romans often made it seem. Authors could traverse the perceived divide from history to biography. In Dio's histories he regularly crossed the line to outright biography as will be explored more in Chapter 2. The blurred line between history and biography seems to be prevalent in case of a lot of imperial writers who dealt with the deeds of emperors (which most of them do).⁵⁰ This is because both kinds of writing have a moralising purpose which means that judgments regarding the reigns of emperors are central to the genres. In some works this goal is quite transparent, while other writers were more wary of openly showing their own judgments and opinions and hid behind a veil of pretend objectivity. Whilst the Romans themselves envisioned a great distinction between the genres of history and biography, in reality the two are often quite similar or move from one to the other, especially in writing dealing with the imperial reigns. As established before, the shrinking of the governing class meant that historians of the imperial era were increasingly delegated to hearsay and unsubstantiated rumours. To maintain that a rigid

convenere, non sunt expressa, et similia plurima praeceptis historiae dissonantia, discurrere per negotiorum celsitudines adsuetae, non humilium minutias indagare causarum, quas si scitari voluerit quispiam, individua illa corpuscula volitantia per inane, [...], ut nos appellamus, numerari posse sperabit." Amm. Marc. 26.1.1.

⁴⁷ The purposes of biography are famously expounded on in Plutarch's biography of Alexander the Great: "οὔτε γὰρ ἱστορίας γράφομεν, ἀλλὰ βίους, οὔτε ταῖς ἐπιφανεστάταις πράξεσι πάντως ἔνεστι δῆλωσις ἀρετῆς ἢ κακίας, ἀλλὰ πρᾶγμα βραχὺ πολλάκις καὶ ῥῆμα καὶ παιδιὰ τις ἔμφασιν ἥθους ἐποίησε μᾶλλον ἢ μάχαι μυριόνεκροι καὶ παρατάξεις αἱ μέγισται καὶ πολιορκίαι πόλεων, ὥσπερ οὖν οἱ ζωγράφοι τὰς ὁμοιότητας ἀπὸ τοῦ προσώπου καὶ τῶν περὶ τὴν ὄψιν εἰδῶν, οἷς ἐμφαίνεται τὸ ἥθος, ἀναλαμβάνουσιν, ἐλάχιστα τῶν λοιπῶν μερῶν φροντίζοντες, οὕτως ἡμῖν δοτέον εἰς τὰ τῆς ψυχῆς σημεῖα μᾶλλον ἐνδύεσθαι καὶ διὰ τούτων εἰδοποιεῖν τὸν ἐκάστου βίον, ἐάσαντας ἑτέροις τὰ μεγέθη καὶ τοὺς ἀγῶνας." Plut. *Vit. Alex.* 1.2-3.

⁴⁸ Den Hengst 2010, 86; Arist. *Eth. Nic.* 1104A.

⁴⁹ Momigliano 1993, 56.

⁵⁰ Tacitus' focus on the private deeds of the emperors and their wives, for example, do not fit with the ideals of history-writing. The historiographers of the Severan era and late antique historians such as Ammianus Marcellinus were all interested in showing the personalities of their subjects.

demarcation between the two existed is to ignore the nature and fluidity of the imperial works and ultimately not beneficial for this study.

1.3. Inner Workings, *Exempla* and *Topoi*

Roman imperial historiography was bound in a high degree to generic conventionalities. These are often called *topoi*.⁵¹ In establishing an emperor as either good or bad certain *topoi* were employed. In Roman imperial historiography, *topoi* are often employed to illustrate the virtues or vices of an emperor and are a way to show the author's judgment of an emperor. The idea of an emperor as charioteer was in the introduction presented as an example. There are many more of these *topoi* – some more specific than others. One that will prove to be of central importance in this thesis is the *topos* of the bad advisor. Emperors and other historical figures were often judged by the people they took as council. This is related, as earlier established, to the identities of the (elite) historiographers who chronicled their lives. When, for example, the writer of the *HA* stated that Elagabalus listened to advice of dancers, barbers, and mule-drivers,⁵² this is a signal to the reader who immediately understood that this is not the proper conduct of a good emperor.

Roman historiography was primarily concerned with questions of morality and creating *exempla* for the reader to strive towards.⁵³ By relating tales of great or terrible deeds from the past, the author hoped his audience would take this as an example of how to live or how not to in order that they would defend Roman values and safeguard Rome's future. During the Principate, the emperor was supposed to be the greatest exemplary figure of all. He was supposed to be superhuman; being a candidate for deification, he should be exceptional and was presented as such in public through props such as wreaths and sceptres, entourages, and on monuments and coinage. This made him more of a public commodity than a private person. An emperor had to be imperial in all he did and retain his superhuman nature.⁵⁴ At the same time he should exhibit *civilitas*, allow freedom of speech, dress and behave modestly, respect the Republican offices such as the consulship, and act and dress himself as a private citizen.⁵⁵ The Roman emperor was a paradoxical figure; at the same time standing above the law but having to embody it and act as its protector, possessing near unlimited power but having to legitimise his powers through well-defined Republican offices, such as senator, tribune, consul, and *pontifex maximus*.⁵⁶ An emperor thus had to walk the tightrope of the ambiguous nature of his accepted power and his behaviour.

As Caroline Vout remarked "Roman historians rarely have more fun than when representing the emperor."⁵⁷ For a Roman historiographer to chip away at the carefully crafted pedestal of such a revered person must

⁵¹ The concept of the *topos* – as popularised by Ernst Robert Curtius – identifies certain tropes that seemingly belong to certain genres. See: Curtius 2013, 80.

⁵² SHA *Heliogab.* 12.2.

⁵³ Icks 2012, 477.

⁵⁴ Vout 2009, 261.

⁵⁵ Wallace-Hadrill 1982, 36-40.

⁵⁶ Tuori 2012, 114.

⁵⁷ Vout 2009, 261.

have been thrilling. Historiographers took great pleasure in subverting all the established ideas regarding the emperor and his presumed virtuous nature. To show how the supposed greatest of all, the *primus inter pares*, was in reality closer to the lowest of all was shocking, but the deviation from the ideal image of the emperor served also as an *exemplum malum*. Ancient writers overall posed the emperors as either saints or sinners. Augustus, Trajan, and Marcus Aurelius were, most of all, presented as good emperors and *exempla* to strive towards, while presumed degenerates such as Caligula, Nero, and Elagabalus were presented as among the worst monsters who ever wandered the earth.⁵⁸ Bad emperors were, according to Roger Dunkle, characterised by *avaritia* (greed), *crudelitas* (cruelty), *vis* (violence), *superbia* (arrogance), and *saecitia* (savagery).⁵⁹ The works of Roman imperial historiographers can therefore be read as treatises on leadership and virtue. The lives of good and bad emperors were thereby contrasted with each other in the narratives of the histories and the sequence of biographies. Plutarch's *Parallel Lives*, for example, explicitly contrasts two lives at a time to show these virtues and vices most clearly. However, in the case of most historiographers this contrasting of emperors was less explicitly presented in the form.

1.4. Manliness as a Virtue

In the creation of bad and good *exempla* in Roman imperial historiography, manliness is an important theme with many variations and one that is vital for the understanding of the historiographical function of the Severan empresses. A “real” Roman man should possess *virtus*, meaning “manliness”, a term related to the Latin *vir*, “man”. *Virtus* was to the Romans not a birthday present bestowed to new-born boys, it was not inherent to the male sex and was, once possessed, not “in the pocket” for the rest of a man’s life. It was something a man should aspire to and acquire through the proper channels of life; the biological adult man (*mas*) could achieve manliness through self-discipline and testing it in battle or through a political career.⁶⁰ The Roman man should be perpetually worried to lose his *virtus*. Allegations of effeminacy were commonplace in Roman discourse and were linked with physical, moral, social, and political weakness.⁶¹ Every undesirable trait for a male member of the Roman elite was termed “feminine”.⁶² Political figures were systematically, by their opponents, claimed to indulge in activities not in accord with the proper male conduct in an attempt to emasculate their carefully crafted images of manliness. In doing so, their place in public society and the political sphere was undermined. These methods are also central in Roman historiography as illustrations and judgments of their subjects.

Accusations of improper sexual appetites and behaviour proved to be an effective way to undermine the *virtus* of one’s opponent or literary subject as these kinds of accusations are innumerable and lasted for the

⁵⁸ Cass. Dio 74.11.2-5.

⁵⁹ Dunkle 1971, 13.

⁶⁰ Skinner 2013, 271.

⁶¹ Icks 2008, 484.

⁶² Edwards 2002, 80.

entirety of the Roman era. Sexual behaviour was overall a darling topic in ancient historiography. As Alastair Blanshard remarked “in order to have a sex life, one needs to have a life. In many ways sexuality is a form of biography, a way of putting acts into a personal narrative.”⁶³ It is Suetonius’ infamous biographical work that positioned sexuality as such a central theme into the genre of historiography.⁶⁴ Suetonius together with Tacitus are arguably the prime architects of the imperial development of the historiographical genre. They certainly consolidated the methods and topics of the genre – Suetonius existing more comfortably in the biographical end of the spectrum and Tacitus more on the historical side. Dio, Herodian, and the *HA* are unquestionably all heavily influenced by them.⁶⁵

In antiquity, great value was placed on a person’s capacity to contain their (sexual) desires. Self-control was a great good and thus an important virtue in historiography and specifically one that rulers had to possess.⁶⁶ Sexual dominance was all-important. Relating tales of the coital passivity was a prime way of showing sexual deviancy and lack of self-control of its subjects.⁶⁷ In the case of the emperors, a special emphasis on their sexual misconduct was particularly effective as the emperors presented themselves and, in extension, their family as the ideal Roman family and something to strive towards (see below). Roman historiographers seemed to have had particular fun in inventing or echoing stories regarding bad emperor’s sexual behaviours. Emperors being claimed to indulge in a bit of transvestism or claimed to perform whole drag acts is not surprising in the least in the context of judging manliness; dressing as a woman was of course one the least manly thing imaginable.

It has become apparent how questioning *virtus* was a prime theme of Roman imperial historiography and was an important part of communicating a subject’s badness. How Roman men engaged with their female kin is a central way to discredit them. This is examined in the next section of this chapter.

1.5. Concerning Emperors and their Female Kin

The focus on the emperor, his family, and his close circle as the primary theme of imperial historiography was established in the works regarding the Julio-Claudian emperors. Nowadays the claims that were made in these works regarding the women in the emperor’s life are still infamous. In these works, besides the emperor himself, the description of the women in his life have had the most intense *nachleben*. Who, for example, is not familiar with the idea of Augustus’ wife Livia as a murderous poisoner whose unnatural ambition was detrimental for those around her? Similarly, many people know of Messalina, the wife of Claudius, who was uncontrollable and supposedly challenged the prostitutes in Rome in her appetite for men. The manners in which the Severan empresses are presented are embedded in

⁶³ Blanshard 2010, 65.

⁶⁴ Vout 2009, 450.

⁶⁵ Icks 2012, 480.

⁶⁶ Vout 2009, 446.

⁶⁷ Illuminatingly, the word “*vir*” was also the word used to denote the active sexual participant. The act of a man taking the passive role in sex was sometimes called *pati muliebria*: “to suffer/be passive in the woman’s role. Parker 1997, 47.

the developments of the genre during this era and these narratives. I will present a variety of ways in which imperial women were represented. Besides this, the sexual deviations of imperial women will be studied; slut-shaming has always been an effective way to discredit women. By painting the family and inner circle of the emperor as wicked, a historiographer could question an emperor's *virtus* and manliness and depict him as unworthy of wearing the imperial toga.

A man's control over the women of his family was very important for holding on to the ideal of *virtus* – especially for an emperor. To understand this, the ideal place in society for women in the Roman mind must be looked at. It will become clear how female transgressions always reflected on the man and how the nature of the imperial family made this reflection of female (mis)behaviour even more effective. It is necessary to address the ideal roles of women in Roman society at large in order to understand how Roman historiography used these ideas for its own narratives.

1.6. Going Public: Female Transgressions into the Public Sphere

Women in Roman historiography are seldom subjects of the genre. They enter the narrative mostly as groups (e.g. the Sabine women) or as companions or family of the central men who are often political figures. The fact that women in the Roman world were preferably confined to the private and domestic sphere means that when they enter a historical text – which ideally tackles subjects concerned with the public deeds of men – it is through an act of transgression. In extension, their presence in historical writings also constitutes a transgression of the correct subject of 'real' history; the ideal subject of history being big political events worthy of remembrance. Something women should not be a part of.⁶⁸

Sallust's characterisation of Sempronia, the wife of the infamous Catilina who was suspected of attempting to overthrow the Republic is emblematic for the functions of women in Roman historiography. Her characterisation has correctly been interpreted as a warning for the perverting Catilinian conduct and the lack of male virtue in the Late Republic on the whole.⁶⁹ Sempronia is said to have possessed "*virilis audacia*" or "manly daring".⁷⁰ Even her positive talents such as her ability to write verse, make jokes, and being able to speak modestly, sweetly, and provocatively helped her characterisation as manly and dangerous.⁷¹ Sempronia functions in Sallust's work as a case in point of how traditional *romanitas* is threatened by Catilina and his effeminate lot who are perverted by luxury and greed (the corrupting power of luxury is discussed later this chapter). Sempronia herself is also an illustration for how both male and female virtues are corrupted by Catilina; she has disregarded the virtues expected of Roman women.

Female participation in public affairs regularly appears in ancient historiography to reflect how civic unrest goes hand in hand with social upheaval. This was also the case in earlier Greek historiography. In

⁶⁸ Milnor 2009, 277.

⁶⁹ Boyd 1987.

⁷⁰ Sallust *Cat* 25.

⁷¹ Milnor 2009, 280.

Thucydides' history regarding the revolution of Corcyra, women and slaves are said to have participated in the battle. The fact that women here did not operate in accordance with femininity is stated explicitly by Thucydides in the text: "The women also valiantly assisting them, pelting with tiles from the houses, and supporting the melee with a fortitude beyond their sex."⁷² Military and civic conflict was a time when gender roles were said to become blurred and the political figures whose side was deemed bad were portrayed as bringing the perverted upending of gender roles with them.⁷³

Not all women lived their lives away from the public eye. Elite women became more visible in public during the Late Republic and Early Empire and became thus slowly an acceptable topic for historiography. Brutus' mother Servilia, Octavian's sister Octavia and Antony's wife Fulvia, for instance, all were said to emerge on the public stage, primarily when communications between their male relations became more difficult.⁷⁴ Their role as giver of advice was accepted, but this was not limitless. On the contrary, an excessively influential and public woman was easily criticised and an easy way for a historiographer to negatively characterise her male relatives (whether it was true or not). The way Fulvia, Marcus Antonius' wife, had an excessive influence over her husband and did masculine things such as carrying a sword and hold a speech to the army was to show Antony as "weak-willed" and was probably a narrative precursor for his ultimate fate of being lead to his end by another powerful, unnatural woman, Cleopatra.⁷⁵ An advisory influence of women was not something inherently deemed bad in literature. Cicero and Cornelius Nepos both relate how Sempronia's mother Cornelia reprimanded her son Gaius for creating civic upheaval.⁷⁶ They do not comment on any atypical nature of this action; they seem to accept the validity of a mother's advice or critique. A mother's influence could either be interpreted as good and acceptable when she helped to launch her son's career or as depraved and corrupt when they were said to enrich themselves through their children.⁷⁷ Every mother's behaviour could therefore be turned into either a good or bad argument depending on the historiographer's intent.

The behaviour of women, whether in the private domain or their transgressions into the public and male sphere, is used to display the virtues and vices of political male actors and in extension their danger to the Roman state.

1.7. Imperial Women, Imperial Virtues

The emergence of imperial women in a more public capacity and as potent tools in the judgment of emperors is embedded in the creation of the *domus Augusta*, the dynastic propaganda that incorporated both male and female members of the imperial family. The emperor as exemplary figure to the Romans has been noted, but besides himself as *exemplum*, his whole family was posed as the ideal family. The first emperor, Augustus, presented his

⁷² Thuc. 3.74: παρὰ φύσιν = "that which is contrary to their nature".

⁷³ Boyd 1987, 198.

⁷⁴ Milnor 2009, 278.

⁷⁵ Delia 1991; Russell & Balot 1998.

⁷⁶ Cic. *Brut.* 211; Nep. *Att.* F 1.1.2.

⁷⁷ Skinner 2013, 264.

family as modest and his wife as the ideal Roman *matrona*.⁷⁸ An imperial woman, primarily a married one, was – from Livia onward – supposed to possess *pudicitia*, a virtue often translated as “chastity” but encompassing various additional wifely virtues such as: modesty, loyalty, and obedience.⁷⁹ This virtue is in Roman literature also bestowed upon Lucretia who killed herself after being raped instead of living in disgrace.⁸⁰ *Pudicitia* is contrasted with personal adornments; a wife should be dressed simply and not wear excessive amounts of make-up. This is related to the domestic role of producing wool.⁸¹ Later it will become clear to what extent this *pudicitia* and simple dress is connected with ideas of Romanness and contrasted with the lavishness of the East.

Roman historiographers could subvert the propagandistic image of the imperial women. Dio, for example, by heavily insinuating that Livia did not – in accordance with her imperially propagated image – act with *pudicitia*, suggested that Augustus did not, in fact, succeed with regard to his own policy.⁸² While Livia was posed by Augustus’ regime as a paragon for female virtue, the historians could not resist representing her otherwise and subvert her official image. She is presented as one of the most dangerous things in the Roman psyche: an ambitious woman. A historiographical characteristic of ambitious women was the willingness to murder her opponents.⁸³ This trait is connected with the desire of some imperial women to retain their imperial influence through their sons. When the Severan women will be discussed, it will become apparent that exactly the same kind of ambition is given to some of them. Tacitus bestowed on Livia the characteristics of a wicked stepmother.⁸⁴ When Tacitus introduced her he wrote how the craftiness of the stepmother (*novercae Liviae dolus*) was the cause for the deaths of Gaius and Lucius.⁸⁵ The idea of a woman with *pudicitia*, whose primary role is to safeguard the future of the dynasty, to murder children contains an enormous subversion. Wicked stepmothers as stock characters are continually represented in imperial historiography.⁸⁶ Imperial women, primarily ones bestowed with the title *Augusta*, were symbols for imperial fertility. Their presence ensured the dynastic future of the Principate and they were thus associated with a clear line of succession which was associated with stability.⁸⁷ They are often represented completely differently by the centre of imperial rulership than in historiography. As Marilyn Skinner says “The Roman *vir* is always poised

⁷⁸ Barrett 2002, 119.

⁷⁹ Roberts 2007, 81.

⁸⁰ Ovid, *Fasti* 2.725-2.844; Livy 1.58.7-1.58.12; Val. Max. 6.1.1.

⁸¹ Langlands 2006, 76.

⁸² Cass. Dio 54.16.3-5.

⁸³ Barrett 2002, 117.

⁸⁴ Barrett 2001, 172.

⁸⁵ Tac. *Ann.* 1.1.3.

⁸⁶ It has been argued that the emergence of the wicked stepmother in Roman literature was the result of, and response to, the increase of remarriage during the Late Republican and Early Imperial era. The emerging of more stepmothers and all the nervousness regarding inheritance resulted possibly in the idea of stepmothers as threatening. See: Noy 1991, 350; Watson 1995, 150-157; Ginsberg 2006, 112.

⁸⁷ Roberts 2007, 7.

precariously on a slippery slope leading to loss of manhood.”⁸⁸ By subverting the image of the docile imperial woman, the emperor himself is pushed down this slippery slope. A similar thing is also the case with the tale of Sempronia, wife of Catilina, where her public nature and manly behaviour makes Catilina and his goons more feminine. The centrally established ideal image of the imperial woman makes this *topos* of subversion and inversion even more effective.

To the Romans, sexual appetite was something belonging to the male sex. A woman who had too much of it became masculine.⁸⁹ For instance, in Sallust’s description of Sempronia, she was said to possess ‘*virilis audacia*’ in her pursuit for men.⁹⁰ In Tacitus’ account of Claudius it becomes clear again that ambition belongs to the realm of (real) men. In relating the empress-ship from Messalina to Agrippina Tacitus wrote:

“From this moment it was a changed state, and all things moved at the fiat of a woman – but not a woman who, as Messalina, treated in wantonness the Roman Empire as a toy. It was a tight-drawn, almost masculine tyranny”⁹¹

In doing so, Tacitus insinuated that the reins of the Empire were now in the hands of Agrippina. The empress’ demeanour is, through the phrase *quasi virile servitium*, identified as male. Tacitus’ Agrippina is made not much more than a showcase for nearly all that a woman can do wrong. She is playing the role of the *matron imperiosa* (commandeering wife) to contrast with Claudius’ characterisation of the *senex stultus* (old fool).⁹² Agrippina thereby used her sexuality as a means to obtain power, first over Claudius and later over Nero.⁹³

The idea that a woman could not be (sexually) controlled by her husband was seen as emasculating for him. Marital fidelity was a quality that every Roman *matrona* should possess.⁹⁴ By claiming a woman had committed adultery, she is in the literary tradition demoted from her status as *materfamilias*. In the case of imperial women this is even more harmful: it called into the question the husband and *paterfamilias* as well which in this case was the emperor himself. If an emperor could not control his wife’s or daughter’s chastity and behaviour, he lost his masculinity and authority.⁹⁵ Adultery takes an extra level of degeneration when the imperial

⁸⁸ Skinner 2013, 280.

⁸⁹ This is presumably why female prostitutes were the only Roman women allowed to wear togas. Their sexual craving meant that they stepped into the male domain. See: Duncan 2006, 270.

⁹⁰ Sall. *Cat.* 25.

⁹¹ Tac, *Ann.* 12.7: *Versa ex eo civitas et cuncta feminae oboediebant, non per lasciviam, ut Messalina, rebus Romanis inludenti. Adductum et quasi virile servitium.*

⁹² Ginsberg 2006, 23.

⁹³ Ginsberg 2006, 127.

⁹⁴ Ginsberg 2006, 122; The importance of these virtues is made clear by the amount of time these virtues are foregrounded in female funerary inscriptions. See: Forbis 1990.

⁹⁵ Edwards 2002, 53-57.

woman sexually engaged with someone of low rank.⁹⁶ This was a breach of the social hierarchy which was the emperor's duty to safeguard.⁹⁷ As earlier noted, the imperial family was seen – and propagated – as synonymous with the state. We see this idea of a family as personification of the state also in the myth of Lucretia where her rape and subsequent death is seen as an attack on the Roman state itself.⁹⁸ Adultery of imperial women could therefore also be seen as treasonous events. Often allegations of adultery from imperial women went hand in hand with the accusation of them being part of a conspiracy against the emperor.⁹⁹ An imperial *paterfamilias* who could not control his own household could also not be expected to control the Empire. Both his masculinity and political power were questioned – something that always went correspondingly.

1.8. Imperial Mothers

The role of the Severan imperial women in Roman historiography is for a big part determined by their role of mothers to young emperors. Imperial mothers were expected to possess the same virtues and exhibit the same behaviour as other imperial women, but in historiographical works they were often used in specific ways to showcase the unsuitability of their son's emperorship. Boy-emperors were overall no favourites of Roman historians and the senatorial class at large.¹⁰⁰

The reputation and status of a mother reflected on her children. This took on an even more important role in the imperial age. The importance of motherhood is also reflected in the amount of imperial women that were mothers when they were granted the title of *Augusta*.¹⁰¹ Julia Domna, Maesa, Mamaea, and Soaemias all carried that title and all were imperial mothers or (in the case of Maesa, grandmother). The title was certainly connected with fertility.¹⁰² Barbetta Stanley Spaeth argues that the wife of the princeps and mother of his heirs was seen as a kind of female equivalent of the *Pater Patriae*; she took on the maternal role over the whole empire.¹⁰³ She was seen as the *materfamilias* of the whole Empire.¹⁰⁴ The kind of personification of the Empire that an imperial mother could be is also present in Herodian's account of Julia Domna who, while trying to hold the Empire together during her sons' struggle, pondered that if they wanted to

⁹⁶ In the case of Messalina, the blemish on Claudius by his adulterous wife is undoubtedly enlarged by the claim that she started an affair with someone from a low social class; an actor named Mnestor: Cass Dio 60.22.5; or Agrippina with an imperial freedman named Pallas: Tac. *Ann.* 12.25.1; 12.65.2; 14.2.2.

⁹⁷ Ginsberg 2006, 125.

⁹⁸ Ginsberg 2006, 125.

⁹⁹ Ginsberg 2006, 126.

¹⁰⁰ In the next chapter it will be argued that the central thesis of Herodian's work is that older, more experienced emperors are better than the volatile younger ones. The *HA* echoed this sentiment: Hnd. 1.1.6; SHA. *Tacit.* 6.4-5.

¹⁰¹ Roberts 2007, 138-139.

¹⁰² Roberts 2007, 140.

¹⁰³ Spaeth 1996, 122.

¹⁰⁴ Tacitus wrote how the Senate considered granting Livia the title "Mater Patriae": Tac. *Ann.* 1.14.

split the Empire, they also had to divide her.¹⁰⁵ Being the mother or a sort of personification of the Empire meant that being a bad imperial mother implied being a bad mother for the Empire as a whole. The representational power of an imperial mother in historiography is therefore tremendous. The rottenness of a dynasty, imperial reign, and the Empire as a whole could be blamed on the imperial mother.

The earlier mentioned *topos* of the bad advisor is instrumental for the depiction of imperial mothers in Roman historiography. Roman emperors were expected to surround themselves with wise men and while mothers and women could play advisory roles behind closed doors, in narratives concerning young emperors the advisory role of the imperial mother was transformed to something unbecoming. It is the alleged dominion over them by their mothers that is most harmful for an emperor's reputation. In the historical narratives it is often the licentious nature of the youth and the inability of their mothers to steer them in the right direction – or their active guidance to the wrong path – that is the theme. Even when a woman was said to give good advice, it is still not accepted in these narratives because she does it because of her own ambitions. In the Flavian play *Octavia*, for example, Agrippina – Nero's mother – is described as “striving for personal sovereignty” (*regnum petens*) and wanting to reach for control of the sacred world (*imperio sacri*), a world where only a man could rule.¹⁰⁶ Imperial mothers were often depicted as ambitious women who sometimes became manlier. By doing so, their sons were reduced in their manliness. It can be defended that there is some inversion present here; the women transgressed to a male sphere and the boy-emperors remained children and often exhibited avarice and possessed a lack of self-control and thus lost manliness.

By holding on to power over their sons, imperial mothers were sometimes claimed to have engaged with their sons or close family in nefarious relationships. Claims of incestuous behaviour are abundantly present in Roman historiography. The marriage between Claudius and Agrippina is noted by Tacitus to be an incestuous one: a *nuptias incestas*.¹⁰⁷ J. Wolf Liebeschuetz believes that to the Romans incest – either marriage or close relations between close relatives – was seen as a violation of both divine and human laws.¹⁰⁸ Punishment for incest was therefore harsh.¹⁰⁹ In Roman historiography incestuous relationships in the imperial family are thus potent tools to discredit the family. The extremity of an imperial woman's incestuous actions could call divine vengeance over the Roman state, as she was sometimes seen as personification or mother of the state. When the Tacitean Agrippina or Julia Domna by the *HA* is claimed to have had incestuous affairs with their imperial kin, it is not only to emasculate her kin, but also to emphasise her extremely destructive effect on the Empire during their reign as a whole.

¹⁰⁵ Hdn. 4.3.8 – 9.

¹⁰⁶ Sen. *Oct.* 1.159, 156: *auda imminere est orbis imperio sacri*; Ferri 2003, 3-5.

¹⁰⁷ Tac. *Ann.* 11.25.8.

¹⁰⁸ Liebeschuetz 1979, 41-43; A good indication for the horror incest instilled in Romans: slaves could be tortured to give evidence against their masters when they were charged with this offence: Cic. *Part. Or.* 118; Cic. *Mil.* 59.

¹⁰⁹ Ginsberg 2006, 120-121.

It has become clear that women were used as potent tools to showcase the badness of their imperial male kin. The virtues an imperial woman should inhabit were clearly defined, known, and propagated and thus easily subverted. Inherent to all these subversion was – such as with nearly all negative accusations on an emperor's part – that he lacked manliness.

1.9. Oriental Influence

Another way to discredit Roman men and emperors in Roman historiography was by accusations of oriental behaviour. The paradigmatic concept of *Orientalism* as conceived of by Edward Said will play an important role in this section and in the background of this thesis. As already noted, ancient ideas concerning East and West are present in the primary sources concerning the Severans. Said's concept of Orientalism is based on the often negative and stereotypical views of the East. He wrote how the West's identity is formed through its view and differentiation of the East: "The Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience".¹¹⁰ This idea is also relevant for the study of ancient history. The Greeks and Romans used a – mostly fictional – view of the East where gender roles and ethics were radically foreign, to construct an identity for themselves. The construction of the Orient as the great 'Other' and, by extent, the construction and identification of the Self was of importance to ancient historiography from its inception in Greece and continued throughout antiquity. It is not surprising that Roman imperial historiography persistently dealt with stereotypes concerning different peoples. Greek historiography which was so influential to its Roman counterpart, had, from its emergence as a genre on, always been concerned with relating stories regarding different cultures and peoples. The curiosity regarding foreign behaviours remained present in the Greek and Roman psyches and enduring in Greek and Roman historiography.¹¹¹ In Roman historiography dealing with emperors, ideas regarding ethnicity are used to question the subject's *romanitas*. Just as was the case with *virtus*, *romanitas* – the possession of Romanness – was something that was not necessarily a matter of birth or inherent to one's ethnicity, but was an ever-changing cultural identity that could be obtained by adopting the appropriate cultural attributes.¹¹²

It will become clear that allegations of easternness aimed at emperors and imperial women were very much connected with ideas of manliness. The characterisations of the Severan dynasty were tightly woven together with the East in Roman historiography. In this thesis I will argue that the evaluation of an emperor's virtue and suitability for the throne is strongly connected to his "Romanness" or *romanitas* and that the prime methods to discredit an emperor – the questioning of his virtue and manliness as I have shown before – was directly connected with accusations of eastern behaviour.

¹¹⁰ Said 1978, 2.

¹¹¹ Strabo, for example, gives a Herodotus-esque bizarre etiological explanation for the dark skin of the Aethiopians by relating it to their proximity to the sun, an idea which Pliny adopted: Strabo 15.1.24; Pliny, *HN* 2.80.189.

¹¹² Lomas & Gardner 2020, 4.

1.10. Eastern Rulers and Allegations of Easternness in Roman Historiography

A Roman man should, in the first place, *be* Roman. His behaviour should be in accordance with Roman values and morals. When he behaved in a way that could be interpreted as eastern, he lost and betrayed his *romanitas* and, in extension, lost *virtus* and manliness. While not always explicitly stating that certain negative character traits have an eastern component, the implications are clear. Accusations that certain emperors lived luxuriously, for example, were not in accordance to the Roman ideal of self-control and living modestly.

Allegations of eastern behaviour by Romans were based upon Roman representations of eastern rulers. Tyranny and excessive luxury were the main traits associated with eastern rulers. An indication of this inherent characteristic with the East is the figure of Cambyses who was depicted as a despot with great wealth.¹¹³ Seneca used the excesses and cruelty of Cambyses, Harpagus, Xerxes, and Alexander the Great to showcase the similar negative traits of Sulla and Emperor Caligula.¹¹⁴ Another depraved eastern ruler alive in the mind of the Romans was the semi-mythical Sardanapalus, the last of the Assyrian kings.¹¹⁵ He is described as decadent to the grotesque extent and, after living a life of self-indulgence, to have perished because of an orgy gone wild. Tellingly, Sardanapalus is described as having engaged in cross-dressing and wearing make-up. The connection between eastern rulers, despotism, self-indulgence, and inherent femininity is thereby made.¹¹⁶ When emperors or imperial women were accused of harbouring an unhealthy love for wealth and luxury, this carried with it the accusation of eastern behaviour and a lack of *romanitas*. This eastern conduct held a corrupting power. Roman historiographers often used archetypal eastern people or characteristics in order to give their characters some rhetorical heft.

Julie Langford has shown how Pliny and Tacitus often attributed similar characteristics to imperial women, thereby posing women as being more susceptible to eastern characteristics.¹¹⁷ This is logical when recalling the inherent female character of the East in the Roman mind. It is therefore not surprisingly that women were often portrayed as reflections or instigators of eastern perversions in their male kin. Returning again to the now familiar tale of Sempronia and Catilina: as earlier noted, Catilina and his lot were also pictured as behaving luxuriously and possessing the negative trait of greed.¹¹⁸ Sallust's description indicated both their effeminacy as well as their non-Roman nature in this claim.

Dio was also not afraid to use long-established stereotypes regarding the East in his account of Cleopatra. He echoed sentiments from

¹¹³ Hdt. 3.

¹¹⁴ Sen. *Ira* 3.14-18.

¹¹⁵ Diod. Sic. 2.27.

¹¹⁶ Diod. Sic. 2.23.1; The life of this Sardanapalus was a blueprint for some characterisations of Elagabalus as becomes apparent in Chapter 3.

¹¹⁷ Langford 2013, 119.

¹¹⁸ Sallust, *Cat.* 25.

Plutarch's biography of the Egyptian queen where she is posed as the embodiment of the East: ambitious, luxurious, and a corrupter of men. She is used as explanation and cause for Marcus Antonius' vices. Her luxury and wealth corrupted him and ultimately led to his death.¹¹⁹ The corrupting nature of specifically eastern women can – with a degree of willingness – also be read in the Late Antique *Posthomerica* wherein, during the battle between Achilles and amazon queen Penthesileia, the Trojan women wanted to discard their weaving-wool, flung away the distaff, and join the battle, but are luckily reproached and kept inside the walls and swayed to return to their looms.¹²⁰

1.11. Gendering the East and its Corrupting Nature

The faraway places in ancient historiography were viewed as vastly different places; near mythological realms populated with peoples and creatures who were totally alien, both culturally as well as biologically. A kind of environmental determinism existed in the mind of the ancients and was responsible for the character traits of specific regions; the heat of the East made people slavish and the cold of northern Europe made people brutal. Greeks – and Romans after them – argued that they themselves lived in a sort of ideal Goldilocks zone that was responsible for bringing forth such moral and strong people.¹²¹ Physical differences were explained in this way as well as characteristics of the inhabitants.¹²² Herodotus, for example, related how in Egypt gender roles were radically different than in Greece. In Egypt gender roles were subjected to an unholy inversion.¹²³ The Greco-Roman “creation” of the amazons has also been viewed through the eyes of othering and as an inversion of gender roles.¹²⁴ In the literary portrayal of Amazons in the troy myth the battle between Achilles and queen Penthesileia it is not difficult to picture an undercurrent of the good male hero defeating the unnatural eastern woman.

Benjamin Isaac has shown in his thorough study concerning ancient stereotypes and “proto-racist” attitudes that, while the different eastern regions were from time to time imparted with slightly different characterisations, the East and its natives were, as a whole, primarily viewed as a monolithic unity: slavish, depended on luxury, decadent, lazy, and with a predilection for tyranny.¹²⁵ Rome associated moral weaknesses with femininity and the East. Luxury which was strongly associated with effeminacy was also strongly part of Rome's characterisation of eastern people.¹²⁶ Rome's creation of the East as feminine was part of their language to position themselves as male victors. A monument that shows the feminisation of conquered regions is the *Sebasteion*, a temple to Aphrodite and the Julio-Claudian emperors in Aphrodisias, where Roman emperors – as personifications of Rome – ravish and brutalise the female

¹¹⁹ Cass. Dio 51.10-11.

¹²⁰ Quint. Smyrn, 545-642.

¹²¹ Isaac 2006, 55-74.

¹²² Isaac 2006, 82.

¹²³ Hdt. 2.35.

¹²⁴ Blok 1995, 126-143.

¹²⁵ Isaac 2006, 492-500.

¹²⁶ Edwards 2002, 80.

personifications of conquered *ethne* and provinces. Rome is depicted as the powerful male in a world of weak females. Or – at least – once a place is conquered by Rome it is transformed into a weak and feeble woman for them to dominate.¹²⁷

Rome's attitude towards the East appears paradoxical; on the one hand people from the East were seen as weak, slavish, decadent, and feminine, on the other hand Rome had an eternal, nearly existential, fear of the power of the East. The old cultures of the East, Greece, and Asia were often feared to take their revenge on Rome's conquest. Oracles prophesied that power, so swiftly taken by the Romans, would sooner or later slip from their grasp and return to the East, leaving Rome in servitude or declining into obscurity.¹²⁸ The imperialistic conduct of the Romans was instrumental in the creation of the complex attitudes towards the East. Romans viewed themselves as the superior people and entitled to rule over eastern people. They held the great conviction that their own moral superiority was the source of their strength and constituted their right to rule over lesser people, but when this superiority was in some way diminished by foreign actors or influences, the very survival of the Empire became unsure.¹²⁹

Whereas Romans ought to be manly and possess self-control, "orientals" were, at their core, effeminate and weak and surrounded themselves with luxury contrary to the Roman ideals of moderation and simplicity (e.g. in dress, dining, and drinking).¹³⁰ Roman ideas regarding eastern luxury were particularly enduring and cause for fear. Juvenal, for example, claimed that in his time:

"We are now suffering the calamities of long peace. Luxury, more deadly than any foe, has laid her hand upon us, and avenges a conquered world."¹³¹

Different Roman authors blamed different historical events, victories, and peoples for opening the Pandora's Box of wealth and greed that had the power to pervert the proper Romans and rid them of their moral superiority. As the Severans were intimately connected with Syria, it is worthwhile to show how Syria was also explicitly blamed for degenerating Rome. Roman historian Florus positioned the conquest of Syria as Rome's original corrupting sin of getting into contact with greed:

"It was the conquest of Syria which first corrupted us, followed by the Asiatic inheritance bequeathed by the king of Pergamon. The resources and wealth thus acquired spoiled the morals of the age

¹²⁷ This is also visible in coinage. Judea, once "captured", is represented on coinage as a mourning woman: RIC II, part 1 (second edition) Vespasian 159.

¹²⁸ Lactant. *Div. Inst.* 7.15.11: *Cujus vastitatis et confusionis haec erit causa, quod Romanum nomen, quo nunc regitur orbis (horret animus dicere: sed dicam, quia futurum est) tolletur de terra, et imperium in Asiam revertetur, ac rursus Oriens dominabitur, atque Occidens serviet.*

¹²⁹ Isaac 2006, 305.

¹³⁰ Isaac 2006, 335-351.

¹³¹ Juv. *Sat.* 6.292-3: *nunc patimur longae pacis mala, saeuior armis luxuria incubuit uictumque ulciscitur orbem.*

and ruined the State, which was engulfed in its own vices as in a common sewer.”¹³²

Not blaming the East with pushing Roman morals in the sewer as Florus did in the fragment above, but still using the contaminating aspects of waterways as a metaphor, Juvenal famously compared the Syrian immigrants and behaviours as having turned the Tiber into the Orontes:

“It is that the city is become Greek, Quirites, that I cannot tolerate; and yet how small the proportion even of the dregs of Greece! Syrian Orontes has long since flowed into the Tiber, and brought with it its language, morals, and the crooked harps with the flute-player, and its national tambourines, and girls made to stand for hire at the Circus. Go thither, you who fancy a barbarian harlot with embroidered turban.”¹³³

Rome’s xenophobic association of foreign people with greed was present early in their history and subject to change; first it were the foreign people that dwelled in the south of Italy, after that mainland Greece, before finding its ultimate victim in Asia Minor and the Near East when conquest brought them there.¹³⁴ The imperialistic nature of Rome whereby contact with perverting races is unavoidable is implicitly part of concerns regarding the demise of Rome. Foreigners are found to be responsible for the vices of Romans; they could not be natural to Romans, but must be the result of immoral, external temptations.

Juvenal’s characterisation of the Syrians – illustrated in the passage above – is steeped in the belief that migrants carry their innate character traits with them and cannot fundamentally change them and discard their eastern vices. While eastern, or “weak”, people can influence and corrupt people from a strong environment, they, in turn, cannot positively or negatively influence people from the weak East. Consequently, migration always leads to deterioration. Italian Romans who migrated eastwards and were corrupted there, also adopted these corrupting traits and could, when they returned, spread their eastern stain.¹³⁵ Roman legions that moved east are in the sources always claimed to be corrupted, but armies that were stationed in Germanic regions were not corrupted by the sturdy, northern natures.¹³⁶ Roman migration to the East – and vice versa – was thus seen as incredibly dangerous. Through this lens must the coming to Rome of the

¹³² Flor. 1.47,7: *Syria prima nos victa corrumpit, mox Asiatica Pergameni regis hereditas. Illae opes atque divitiae adflixere saeculi mores, mersamque vitiis suis quasi sentina rem publicam pessum dedere.*

¹³³ Juv. Sat. 3.60-66: *non possum ferre, Quirites, Graecam Urbem. quamvis quota portio faecis Achaei? iam pridem Syrus in Tiberim defluxit Orontes et linguam et mores et cum tibicine chordas obliquas nec non gentilia tympana secum vexit et ad Circum iussas prostare puellas. ite, quibus grata est picta lupa barbara mitra;* The accusation of “Greek” influences here denotes everything eastern. The term “Greek” had become a nomen for everything eastern.

¹³⁴ Isaac 2006, 306.

¹³⁵ Isaac 2006, 308.

¹³⁶ Isaac 2006, 308-309.

Severan empresses and their sons be viewed. They could, in the mind of many Romans, only bring their innate bad natures with them and corrupt the proper Romans.

1.12. Conclusion

In this chapter, the nature and inner machinations of Roman imperial historiography have been examined. It has become apparent that imperial historiography focussed on the personal lives and inner circle of its subjects – primarily emperors. These sources aimed to make examples of their rulers by relating their deeds. Emperors were judged by a rigid moral framework. The reductive demand of an emperor was that he possessed and showed *virtus*. When historiographers deemed an emperor unworthy of the throne, they resorted to attack his manliness. His female kin were potent tools to do this. Connected with *virtus* was *romanitas*. By accusing emperors of eastern behaviour their *romanitas* was attacked. Roman gender roles were important to maintain; especially for an emperor. It was therefore very effective to relate tales of the immorality of imperial women as these would strongly taint the emperor's image. The fact that the Severan women hailed from the East means that their rhetorical potential was rather substantial and they could easily be used to negatively judge their male kin by. Their rhetorical use was twofold: their occasional characterisation as dangerous ambitious women was more potent because of their Eastern roots.

Chapter 2: Imperial and Historiographical Narratives

As I noted in the introduction, Roman historiography was primarily concerned with creating narratives. The assessments of imperial persona by Roman historiographers hold tremendous power and influence over the contemporary imagination of them. Think only of the names by which some of the Roman emperors are known to us: “Caligula”, “Caracalla”, and “Elagabalus”. These originally denigrating monikers, adopted – or invented – by Roman historiographers, possessed such character-defining force that they substituted their birth or chosen imperial names in popularity over time. As will become clear, the predominantly critical narratives regarding the Severan age by historiographers as Dio, Herodian, and the *HA* have overshadowed the central imperial Severan narrative. It is logical – and indeed correct – to distrust the propagandist self-representation of the Severan dynasty (or any dynasty for that matter), but the conflicting narratives of the Roman historiographical representation of the members of the dynasty should – in my mind – be distrusted in a similar fashion.

Roman imperial historiography has been used by contemporary historians to reconstruct the personalities and the degree of political influence of the Severan empresses. Their approach has, more often than not, had a rather loose and undefined method. Some claims by Roman historiographers are dismissed as fictitious while others are accepted without much explanation for the reason why. Thereby, the trustworthiness of Roman historiographers is assessed by their closeless to the events described.¹³⁷ Contemporary historians have also echoed the determinative power of the Syrian origin of the Severan women without adequately engaging with eastern stereotypes and archetypes as blueprints for the characterisation of these women. In *Rome and the Arabs: A Prolegomenon to the Study of Byzantium and the Arabs*, Irfhan Shahîd charts the Arab influence in the Roman and Byzantine world and includes the Severan women by way of their Arab heritage. To Shahîd, these women were radically formed by their Syrian background. The eastern background of the Severan empresses is also more subtly emphasised. Godfrey Turton’s *The Syrian Princesses: The Women Who Ruled Rome, AD 193-235* fits within this trend of foregrounding the eastern heritage of these women. Barbara Levick’s book on Julia Domna has the subtitle “Syrian Empress”.¹³⁸ These women are often seen through the lens of their heritage which is then used as explanation for every aspect of Severan government.

The methodology most contemporary historians use when engaging with the Severan historiographical accounts has dismissed and accepted certain claims made therein rather arbitrarily. Rumours of incestuous behaviour, for example, are commonly discarded as slanderous nonsense while the radical political influence of the Severan empresses that is claimed in Roman historiography is overall accepted. John Balsdon, for example, remarked that the claims of incest of Domna came forth from the

¹³⁷ For example: Melone 2015, 17.

¹³⁸ This is probably also in response to Anthony Birley’s monograph of Septimius Severus which has as subtitle “The African Emperor”.

“monotonously unimaginative” talk of the Roman populace,¹³⁹ while Michael Grant’s, Robert Lee Cleve’s, Tolga Aytürk’s, and Barabara Levick’s characterisations of – primarily – the post-Domna Severan empresses as the true rulers of the Empire (as discussed in the introduction) is clearly based upon their characterisations in Roman historiography and thus accepted. This loose approach has also left questions unanswered. Levick, for instance, admitted she could not fully answer the question of where Domna’s later incestuous characterisation in historiography originated.¹⁴⁰ I believe the narrative approach of this study can answer such questions.

The narrative approach that I employ in this study into the representations of the Severan empresses differs from previous approaches by not pursuing to uncover these women’s real characters and degrees of political influence, but to primarily engage with the historiographical works as works of fiction and moral rhetoric which were heavily influenced and formed by previous works of the genre. Furthermore, I will not view these works as narrative islands existing on their own with their own unique literary ecosystems, but as parts of archipelago intrinsically connected to other narratives, both historiographical as well as those that were part of the propaganda of the various Severan regimes.

In this chapter the central theses of the Roman authors dealing with the Severans are examined. It is of vital importance to place the Severans in the grander narrative of these histories and, consequently, to uncover the function of the Severan empresses in these works. In doing so, the importance of creating narratives is first examined. Then the narratives postulated by the Severan regimes, which have been subject of recent studies, shall be examined. Subsequently, the Roman sources central to this study are studied through the lens of narrative in chronological order of composition, that is: Cassius Dio, Herodian, and the *HA*. To successfully engage with Roman historiographical sources, it is important to uncover the grander narratives that the authors aimed to tell and the historic and ethic arguments that they put forward. By studying the works of these authors in this chapter, the focus will lie with the specific narratives and moral arguments that are central to their works and that are essential for a accurate reading of the Severan accounts therein.

2.1. Imperial Narratives regarding the Severan Empresses

Propagating narratives were essential to the success of an emperor’s reign. Important aspects of imperial narratives were their relation with previous rulers; they often positioned themselves as continuation of previous regimes or – conversely – as saviours from harmful tyranny which they, together with the commoners, had suffered through.¹⁴¹ The purpose of these narratives created by emperors and their administrations was the creation of imagined communities and to connect the people with the emperor and claiming their shared fortunes and suffering.¹⁴² The adoption of imperial narratives in historiography helped consolidate an emperor’s version of the past. It is important to know under which emperor a

¹³⁹ Balsdon 1977, 154.

¹⁴⁰ Levick 2007, 33.

¹⁴¹ Kemezis 2014, 4-6.

¹⁴² Kemezis 2014, 5-6.

historical work was written, finished, or started because, although these works were not simply vessels of imperial ideology, they often worked towards certain emperors and their narratives or actively against them. These historiographical works were influenced by dynastic propaganda to a large extent and are all connected with the emperor's attempts to relate his own reign, persona, recent history, and his own coming to power to the greater canvas of history. Often there existed a consensus between the imperial and historiographical narratives regarding the positioning and evaluation of historical events in the grander scheme of things. Below, it will be made clear that a historical consensus between imperial and historiographical actors did not mean that they were necessarily accepted as fact. Indeed, an accepted notion of history could in reality easily be subverted in historiography.

In recent scholarship, the importance for the imperial regime to create an image and appearance of good imperial virtues has been acknowledged.¹⁴³ The central imperial promulgation of virtues that belonged to good emperors was of formative power for his appraisal by the people.¹⁴⁴ The extent to which the imperial government endeavoured to create historical narratives that fitted their reign is therefore understandable. As in the introduction already briefly noted, recent studies into the representation of the Severan empresses by the imperial government have shown that an attempt was made to create a narrative of continuation and stability.¹⁴⁵

The most potent extant source to reconstruct the central Severan message and narrative regarding the Severan empresses is coinage. By looking at the gods and virtues these women were equated with, it is possible, to some extent, to uncover the imperial representation of these women and the Severan dynastic ideal overall. An extensive numismatic study into the representation of the Severan women is not a feasible enterprise for this current study. Let it suffice to summarise the most recent evaluations regarding the Severan empresses and coinage. Maternity is an important message in the representation of the Severan empresses. According to Julie Langford, 55% of the coins pertaining to Domna under Septimius Severus in Rome alluded to her literal or metaphorical motherhood.¹⁴⁶ This is not a correct reflection of the Domna coins produced



Fig.1. Reverse of Aureus (RIC IV Septimius Severus 175) showing Julia Domna flanked by Caracalla and Geta, emphasising the line of succession.

¹⁴³ Roller 2001; Gradel 2002; Sumi 2005.

¹⁴⁴ Tuori 2012, 112.

¹⁴⁵ Recently it has been argued that continuity indeed characterised the Severan era, at least with regards to their relationship with the Senate. By looking at this relationship through primarily non-historiographical sources, the Severan's claim of continuity does not seem as ludicrous as the historiographers made it seem. Of course, this is just one aspect where continuity can be proven. See: Eich 2005; Eich 2013.

¹⁴⁶ Langford 2013, 52.

empire-wide necessarily, but offers a good indication of the importance of this topic in relation to Domna. Taking into account that Septimius Severus was preparing the Empire to pass to his sons after his death, it is not surprising for him to propagate the motherhood of his wife. This can also be interpreted as communicating stability. After the hectic years of multiple imperial claimants prior to Septimius Severus' reign, the promise of a clear line of succession was an attractive prospect. Clare Rowan has shown in her thorough study of imperial ideology on the coins of the Severan empresses that motherhood, lineage, and the transfer of power remained the prime message regarding the Severan empresses after Domna.¹⁴⁷ Illuminatingly, Mamaea's coinage can be interpreted as telling a story of a restoration of Roman institutes after several transgressions by Elagabalus. The focus on Vesta on Mamaea's coinage may be because of Elagabalus' alleged desecration of this cult.¹⁴⁸ This also illustrates how there was not one Severan regime. On the contrary, the different Severan emperors had different ideas of the historical past and their place within it and thus also different narratives.



Fig.2. Aureus of Julia Mamaea (RIC IV Severus Alexander 359) connecting her with Vesta.

Besides numismatic evidence, a small corpus of archaeological sources exists that can offer an idea of the imperial message and representation regarding the Severan women. It was assumed for a long time that Domna's frequent appearance in inscriptions was a result of an oriental influence, but study of these inscriptions, coinage, and titles in comparison with those of earlier empresses have shown that her representation did not constitute a radical break with the earlier period.¹⁴⁹ Julie Langford has also argued that Domna was far less powerful than stated in traditional scholarship.¹⁵⁰ Drora Baharal has claimed that the coiffure of

¹⁴⁷ Rowan 2011; Rowan has also shown through quantitative numismatic research of coin hoards that Caracalla depicted his mother Julia Domna on about 18% of his coinage, that Elagabalus depicted his grandmother Julia Maesa on 18% and his mother Julia Soaemias on 7% of his coinage, and that Severus Alexander depicted his mother Julia Mamaea on 17% of his coinage. In contrast, their wives could not muster more than 3% of numismatic issues: Rowan 2011, 247. However, extrapolating imperial numismatic behaviour through coin hoards is a speculative affair: hoards are not necessarily direct reflections of the complete numismatic production.

¹⁴⁸ Rowan 2011, 272.

¹⁴⁹ Lusnia 1995, 119.

¹⁵⁰ Langford 2013, 83.

Domna – and thus in extension all Severan women – was purposely inspired by that of Faustina the Younger thus placing themselves directly in her tradition and fitting with Septimius Severus' narrative of continuity with the past.¹⁵¹

This thesis does not allow a more thorough examination of the Severan imperial representation of these empresses, but I believe their message is clear. The new evaluations regarding the numismatic presence and nomenclature of the Severan women sheds a light on the way they constituted no substantial break in this way. However, it is important to note this does not mean that this is proof that the Severan empresses held the same amount and form of actual power as previous empresses. Indeed, it only shows that the imperial messaging and representation of these women did not break with tradition. The Severan women were primarily defined by their motherhood. Similarly, the Roman historiographers – as will become apparent in the next chapter – are also foremost interested in these women as mothers. They took this representation and adopted or subverted it. The uncovering of the imperial Severan message and representation of its women offers a different narrative that can be used to contrast with the historiographical narratives. By getting a sense of the central Severan narrative it becomes possible to distinguish the subversions made by the historiographers.

Because of the incompleteness of the non-literary sources, reconstructing the specific Severan narrative regarding the Severan women is difficult. Consequently, it is logical that narratives of the historiographers have seen such traction.¹⁵² Historiography is, however, not always subversive from the imperial narrative. As will become apparent in the next chapter, the central narrative of the regime of Severus Alexander seems to be adopted to various degrees by the historiographers and resulted in their negative depictions of Elagabalus. They worked towards Severus Alexander which dictated their appraisal of his predecessor.

2.2. Severan Narratives in Historiography

The narratives of Roman imperial historiography are to a degree informed by their writers' social status. As discussed in Chapter 1, the Roman historiographers belonged primarily to the senatorial and equestrian classes. Besides this, the political situation of a historian's era – how the present was experienced – determined how the past was viewed and revised to clarify and judge the present situation.

Just as modern scholarship has sought to define the Severan era and place it in a political continuum (e.g. the beginning of a new period that

¹⁵¹ Baharal 1992; This is it to me rather doubtful, because a look at the numismatic depiction of wives of imperial claimants from the Year of the Five Emperors sees them all with very similar hairstyles. It might mean that they all were referring back to Faustina the Younger or this hairstyle was just the fashion of the time.

¹⁵² There are ancient mentions of an autobiography by Septimius Severus regarding the *omina imperii* of his coming to power which are occasionally echoed by the historiographers, but this work has sadly been lost in the hazardous currents of time. If this source would still be extant a sturdier alternative to the historiographical Severan narratives could have balanced out the powerful narrative worlds of the historiographers. Langford 2013, 50-51.

lasted through the whole third century with its crises, or as the end of a golden age), the Roman historiographers – those that lived through it as well as those that were born later – have also sought to situate this era in a grander political-historical narrative. The changes and continuations of this era have transfixed Roman authors and informed their own characterisation of this period. I already have referred to the respective Roman histories as narratives. In this section the specific narratives of the relevant historiographies is examined.

During the Severan period, reaching historical consensuses regarding the explosive recent past became more cumbersome. According to Adam Kemezis, for most of the history of the Principate the historiographical narratives had taken broadly the same consensus regarding the historical past as the emperors. This does not mean they were in agreement with it. However this still presupposed a common knowledge and understanding of the past and the claims of imperial conduct. Kemezis has argued that the Severan period constituted a decline in such unified narratives:

“We are still far from the ideologically fragmented world of the later third and fourth centuries. Nonetheless a crack is emerging in the edifice of imperial elite unity. For all that these authors and their rulers agreed on, they disagreed on the significance of recent historical events, and how those events were to be integrated into a larger story.”¹⁵³

This is because of the long and unified imperial message of the preceding Antonine period of stability connected to the demonstrable sequence of nonviolent successions. The fact that successions were peaceful made the imperially proposed narrative seem truthful and thus created a positive consensus of the period and system.¹⁵⁴ The Severans, with Septimius Severus as principal dynastic propagator, attempted to adopt the Antonine narrative leitmotif of stability,¹⁵⁵ but the reality and volatility of the political situation became increasingly more challenging to rhyme with the dynastic claims of stability and continuity. One could say that recent history as moulded by the Severans was deemed a “fake narrative”. It is this framework in which the historiographical sources regarding the Severans – primarily Cassius Dio and Herodian – should be placed.

Of the three sources that constitute the most extensive accounts of the Severan era, two – Cassius Dio and Herodian – were contemporary to the era, Dio having his political career simultaneously with the Severans and Herodian, likely, having experienced his youth during this era. To them the period’s instability, as will be made clear, was way more pressing. Their Severan accounts were part of recent history and of big importance to the vantage points of their work. Where Dio and Herodian were participants in

¹⁵³ Kemezis 2014, 7.

¹⁵⁴ Kemezis 2014, 7.

¹⁵⁵ For example by connecting Julia Domna with popular Antonine empress Faustina the Younger. This happened through the tale that Septimius Severus dreamt of Faustina preparing the wedding chamber for him and Julia Domna as related in Cass. Dio 75.3.1.

the Severan era, the writer of the *HA* was not. Written during a later era and by a person that has been characterised as a “rogue scholar” and “imposter”,¹⁵⁶ and, contrary to the Greek narratives of Dio and Herodian, written in Latin, this work constitutes an interesting break with the other preceding sources. The *HA* does not, however, exist in a vacuum; its narrative is still influenced by earlier incarnations of Severan historiography.

What must be kept in mind is that the historiographers central to this study were aware, to a certain degree, of previous authors and their works and were inspired and influenced by them. Narrative themes and characters were thus adopted, disregarded, or – attempted to be – stripped of their perceived fictitious embellishments.

2.3. Cassius Dio: A Change in History and in Narrative

The earliest, extant, extensive account of the Severan era was put to papyrus or parchment by the Greek-born Roman historian Cassius Dio. His political-historical work – *Historia Romana* – tells the story of Rome from its earliest beginnings when Trojan hero Aeneas set foot on Italian shores. The last five of eighty books of his histories deal with the Severan period, ending with a short account of the imperial reign of Severus Alexander.

Dio’s work has come to us via later copyists of whom we know that not every original phrase was loyally duplicated. Parts of the original text were compressed.¹⁵⁷ This means that the complete narrative wherein the Severan women appear might not be transferred word for word to us. The anecdotes of the Severan women in Dio, however, are believed to accurately present Dio’s original work.¹⁵⁸ Some additional mentions regarding the Severan women in Dio’s original composition may, however, be lost.

One could, by looking at the reconstructed index of his work in original form, conclude that Dio’s interests were primarily in the Republic, the Octavian era, and the Severan era, but this would forgo the important realisation that historians were, to an extent, reliant on their own historical sources to which they had access. And, as noted in Chapter 1, the monopolisation of information which occurred with the onset of the Principate, meant that, even if Dio had wanted to continue a thorough historical – as opposed to biographical – approach to the post-Augustan era, he would not have been able to. Either by necessity, narrative purpose, or both, Dio acknowledged the validity of the biographical approach in a work that claimed to be primarily historical.¹⁵⁹ A statement concerning the limited information of the Principate is mentioned by Dio in his account of Augustus’ reign:

“Nevertheless, the events occurring after this time can not be recorded in the same manner as those of previous times. Formerly, as we know, all matters were reported to the senate and to the

¹⁵⁶ Syme 1971, 13-14.

¹⁵⁷ The fragmentary sections of books 79(78)-80(79) that deal with the Severans can be reconstructed with the Eiptome of books 36-80 by Xiphilinus. Millar 1964, 1-4.

¹⁵⁸ Mallan 2013, 738.

¹⁵⁹ Brakke 2016, 78-79.

people, even if they happened at a distance; hence all learned of them and many recorded them, and consequently the truth regarding them, no matter to what extent fear or favour, friendship or enmity, coloured the reports of certain writers, was always to a certain extent to be found in the works of the other writers who wrote of the same events and in the public records. But after this time most things that happened began to be kept secret and concealed, and even though some things are perchance made public, they are distrusted just because they can not be verified; for it is suspected that everything is said and done with reference to the wishes of the men in power at the time and of their associates.”¹⁶⁰

Dio is open to his readers about the different approaches necessary for the description of various periods of Roman history. He does not try to hold on to the Ciceroan ideal of histories relating only the important political things worthy of remembrance, but shows his flexibility in using different methods and leaning into the biographical end of the spectrum of Roman historiography.

Dio made the step from history to biography regularly; sometimes even knowingly and openly (as in his account of Augustus and Domitian¹⁶¹), but his account of, for example, the Severan emperor Elagabalus, constituted a Suetonius-like approach to the imperial subject, focusing on his extravagances and shocking sexual behaviour. Kemezis interprets Dio's remark, “for our history now descends from a kingdom of gold to one of iron and rust, as affairs did for the Romans of that day”¹⁶² at the end of Marcus Aurelius' biography as meaning that the narrative of his work takes a similar downgrade as the emperors, e.g. Dio overtly stating that his work now diverts from the values of history-writing.¹⁶³ Kemezis identifies two of these narrative watersheds – in 27 BC and 180 AD – and four different “narrative modes”: Republic, *dynasteiai*, Principate, and contemporary.¹⁶⁴ This methodological inconsistency is not only born out of necessity because of availability of sources, but, it must be assumed, also, at least partially, related to the long writing process. The *Historia Romana* did not spring from the head of Dio fully-formed. Rather, it was the result of a ten year writing process. So inconsistencies in theme, characterisation, and

¹⁶⁰ Cass. Dio 53.19.1-3: οὐ μέντοι καὶ ὁμοίως τοῖς πρόσθεν τὰ μετὰ ταῦτα πραχθέντα λεχθῆναι δύναται. πρότερον μὲν γὰρ ἔς τε τὴν βουλὴν καὶ ἐς τὸν δῆμον πάντα, καὶ εἰ πόρρω που συμβαίῃ, ἐσεφέρετο· καὶ διὰ τοῦτο πάντες τε αὐτὰ ἐμάνθανον καὶ πολλοὶ συνέγραφον, κακὸν τούτου καὶ ἡ ἀλήθεια αὐτῶν, εἰ καὶ τὰ μάλιστα καὶ φόβῳ τινὰ καὶ χάριτι φιλίας τε καὶ ἔχθρᾳ τισὶν ἐρρήθη, παρὰ γοῦν τοῖς ἄλλοις τοῖς τὰ αὐτὰ γράψασιν τοῖς τε ὑπομνήμασι τοῖς δημοσίοις τρόπον τινὰ εὐρίσκετο. ἐκ δὲ δὴ τοῦ χρόνου ἐκείνου τὰ μὲν πλείω κρύφα καὶ δι' ἀπορρήτων γίνεσθαι ἤρξατο, εἰ δὲ πού τινα καὶ δημοσιευθεῖν, ἀλλὰ ἀνεξέλεγκτά γε ὄντα ἀπιστεῖται καὶ γὰρ λέγεσθαι καὶ πράττεσθαι πάντα πρὸς τὰ τῶν αἰεὶ κρατούντων τῶν τε παραδυναστευόντων σφίσι βουλήματα ὑποπτεύεται. καὶ κατὰ τοῦτο πολλὰ μὲν οὐ γιγνόμενα θρυλεῖται,

¹⁶¹ See: Cass. Dio 53.19.1-3; 67.8.1.

¹⁶² Cass. Dio 72.(71).36.4: τῶν τε πραγμάτων τοῖς τότε Ῥωμαίοις καὶ ἡμῖν νῦν καταπεσοῦσης τῆς ἱστορίας.

¹⁶³ Kemezis 2014, 97.

¹⁶⁴ Kemezis 2014, 98.

assessment can also be partly attributed to developments in time and opinion. I agree with Kemezis' identification of the different modes, but I think these are to a greater extent determined by the availability of sources than narrative purpose.

An overarching political agenda, however, can be identified in his work. Jesper M. Madsen has convincingly argued that Dio's work is critical of the familial dynasty and prefers the Antonine system of the adoptive emperors, which ended with the ascension of Commodus and consolidated with the reign of Septimius Severus who promoted his sons to co-emperors.¹⁶⁵ Dio presumably backed the Antonine system because of its ideal whereby the best of the senatorial class was adopted by the emperor and bestowed prime imperial power. Dio is a champion of the senatorial class and in his work judged emperors on their attitude towards this class. The degeneration of the Empire was by Dio avowedly posited in relating the death of Marcus Aurelius. Madsen has coined Dio's ideal political system an "enlightened monarchy" and argued that his whole history can be read as a treatise for his conviction that the adoptive system whereby a monarch is chosen from the most worthy men – senators – of the Empire was the best political system.¹⁶⁶ Dio might, with his work, have contributed to a debate or attitude within the political elite at the time of the Severans.¹⁶⁷ Dio was quite open about his preference for this kind of monarchic system; in his long tract about how the emperors were in effect monarchs who acquired all the previous separate Republican powers, he remarked:

"In this way the government was changed at that time for the better and in the interest of greater security; for it was no doubt quite impossible for the people to be saved under a republic."¹⁶⁸

This would have influenced his depiction of the Severan emperors tremendously. It would make the Antonine and Severan accounts in his work the central chapters and particularly prone to argumentation and illustration of his views. As David Potter wrote: "All in all in the last eight books, the events of Dio's lifetime appear as a memoir of the governing class."¹⁶⁹

The lives and deeds of the Severans are then not just bad *exempla* and innocent contrasts with the Antonines, but something more crucial. And while his Antonine emperors were not presented as being without fault, they were part of a system that was the best constitutional option. The fact that Dio saw the political elite as the backbone of stability is stated in an anachronistic speech relating to third-century sensibilities which he placed

¹⁶⁵ Madsen 2016, 138.

¹⁶⁶ Dio also seems to have been a great admirer of Augustus but been disappointed with the hereditary nature of the position and the degradation of rulership after him.

¹⁶⁷ Madsen 2016, 138.

¹⁶⁸ Cass. Dio 53.19.1: Ἡ μὲν οὖν πολιτεία οὕτω τότε πρὸς τε τὸ βέλτιον καὶ πρὸς τὸ σωτηριωδέστερον μετεκοσμήθη· καὶ γὰρ πού καὶ παντάπασιν ἀδύνατον ἦν δημοκρατουμένους αὐτοὺς σωθῆναι.

¹⁶⁹ Potter 2011, 331.

in the Augustan era.¹⁷⁰ Dio regularly used invented speeches and placed them in the historical past to argue his own points.¹⁷¹ To emphasise the worthiness of an emperor with a senatorial background, he bestowed these emperors with the ability to negotiate the tricky balance between absolute power and displays of modesty.¹⁷² Dio's work must be understood as a re-imagining of the entire Roman history through the present, fickle, Severan situation in which he lived and wrote.¹⁷³ Dio perpetually seemed to have struggled between his goals as a historian and his goal as an ethical writer. Sometimes the desire to write a history true to the ideals of accuracy wins and at other times his strong political and ethical opinions gained the upper hand.¹⁷⁴ The transition from Antonine to Severan was made to mirror those from the golden Early Republic to the *dynasteiai* of the Late Republic.¹⁷⁵ Additionally, the ending of the age of Augustus, who Dio positioned as an ideal monarch, was used as a narrative mirror for the degeneration of the Empire under the Severans.¹⁷⁶ It is thus not surprising that the Severans and their mothers seemed to mirror those of the Julio-Claudian era in characterisation.

As already stated, Dio wrote his work over a long period of time and so his ideas regarding subjects from his work changed also. Septimius Severus seems to have enjoyed, at first, the approval of Dio which he rapidly lost when mutilating his enemy's – Clodius Albinus' – corpse, sending his head to Rome, and – most importantly – when he allegedly subjected the Senate to a series of prosecutions.¹⁷⁷ Another act by Septimius Severus that Dio could not abide was his attempt to create a narrative whereby he positioned himself as Marcus Aurelius' adoptive son and established a continual history with the Antonines. This Severan narrative is vehemently questioned by Dio.¹⁷⁸ It was for Dio not acceptable that Septimius Severus with his dynastic scheme polluted the name of the Antonines which to Dio were shaped by – and emblematic of – their system of succession and enlightened monarchy.¹⁷⁹ It is clear that there were radically different interpretations and narrative explanations of the past by the two.

This subversion of the official Severan narrative is typical of Dio's work. His *Historia Romana* has been identified as an "oppositional history" and a "counter-narrative" to the Severan narrative.¹⁸⁰ Verena Schulz has, in

¹⁷⁰ Cass. Dio 52.19.1-3; Madsen 2016, 153.

¹⁷¹ See: Fomin 2016; This might also be related to the very Roman idea that the age of an argument or invention automatically granted it more legitimacy; think, for example, how every mathematical and ethic thought is placed with a few ancient thinkers such as Pythagoras.

¹⁷² Madsen 2016, 154.

¹⁷³ Kemezis 2014, 91.

¹⁷⁴ Mallan 2013, 736.

¹⁷⁵ Kemezis 2014, 103.

¹⁷⁶ Kemezis 2014, 120.

¹⁷⁷ Cass. Dio 76.7-8.

¹⁷⁸ Cass. Dio 76.7.4.

¹⁷⁹ Dio admitted to have written accounts of Septimius Severus' deeds and foretelling the imperial career of this man. This is still noticeable in the repetition of these *omina imperii*. See: Cass. Dio 73.23.

¹⁸⁰ "Counter-narrative": Kemezis 2014, 146-149; "oppositional history": Madsen 2016, 154-158.

her study of Dio's account of Domitian, proposed that the author intentionally subverted themes from panegyric literature which echoed official imperial propaganda.¹⁸¹ She calls this the "deconstruction of imperial representation". I propose that this theme of deconstruction is also very much present in Dio's accounts of the Severan empresses. He deliberately went against the specific, official image regarding the virtues of these women (and imperial women in general). This is exemplary of the lack of consensus regarding the recent past and how the narrative proposed by the imperial regime, the elite, and the historiographers differed. During the Severans, history was not immediately chiselled into stone but remained mouldable for a longer time with the consequence that alternative narratives were ever present in the Severan accounts.¹⁸²

One aspect that needs to be taken into account when engaging with Dio's work is his background. Besides his senatorial context, his Greek background must be considered. As noted in Chapter 1, to the western Romans of the imperial era, Greece was thoroughly located in the East. But, as Gerhard Aalders surmised, "Dio feels himself completely a Roman and identifies himself fully with the history and the traditions of Rome."¹⁸³ He talked in the first person as being a Roman; Italy is "this land which we inhabit"¹⁸⁴ and the toga is "the city garb we use in the forum."¹⁸⁵ And when talking about Greeks he did not include himself.¹⁸⁶ This does, however, not take into account the fluidity of Dio's narrative voice; he also regularly speaks of "the Romans" in third person, not incorporating himself. A group that he systematically identified himself with, however, is that of the senators.¹⁸⁷ Dio's referring to the senators as "us" might also point towards them as the expected readers of his work. His narrative voice is thus not the most illuminating with regards to Dio's identification. But he assumed the standard Roman attitudes present in historiography and did not shy away from criticising Greek conduct. His Greekness thus was not the radical influence on his work as might be anticipated. Indeed, he emphasised his *romanitas*. Fergus Millar stated that Dio's identification with Rome is "complete and unquestioned."¹⁸⁸ Dio adopted the Roman notion that Romans are superior to barbarians and Greeks.¹⁸⁹ As Glen Bowersock accurately noted, "it was possible for a proud Greek to be a Roman without any loss of national pride or abnegation of cultural tradition".¹⁹⁰ Dio's Greek heritage did not stop him from using orientalist language and themes in judging the Severans and their empresses.

It has become clear that Dio's work was not a static history that intended to pose an objective account of Roman history. Instead it was a deeply fluid narrative work that should be understood from the point of the

¹⁸¹ Schulz 2016, 277.

¹⁸² Kemezis 2014, 7.

¹⁸³ Aalders 1986, 283.

¹⁸⁴ Cass. Dio 1 F 1.3: τήνδε τὴν γῆν, ἣν κατοικοῦμεν.

¹⁸⁵ Cass. Dio 9 F 39.7: ἣν δὲ ἡ ἀστική, ἥ κατ' ἀγορὰν χρώμεθα.

¹⁸⁶ Aalders 1986, 283.

¹⁸⁷ Lavan 2013, 139.

¹⁸⁸ Millar 1964, 190.

¹⁸⁹ Aalders 1986, 284.

¹⁹⁰ Bowersock 1969, 16.

Severan period. Different narrative modes were employed depending on the discussed era, access to information, and argumentation. His Severan accounts – alongside that of Commodus – demarcated a radical change in story-telling mode and should be seen as an indictment of the new form of government. Dio wrote a counter-narrative to the official Severan message of stability and continuity which influenced his characterisation of the Severan empresses drastically.

2.4. Herodian: Conservative in Beliefs and Style

At first glance, Herodian and Dio have a lot in common; they both wrote in Greek, were likely from the East, and were, for the most part, critics of the Severan dynasts. But while about two decades have passed from Dio's completion of his work to Herodian's,¹⁹¹ the political situation had shifted which resulted in a different primary theme in Herodian's work.

Where Dio related the reign of the last of the Severans very briefly, Herodian offered a far more extensive narrative which continued into the reign of later third-century emperors which, to a large extent, informed the central thesis of the work. Herodian reacted in his work to a new normal that emerged in the age of the Severans and continued afterwards; namely that the sceptre of imperial rulership – from Caracalla on – was regularly placed in the small, pudgy hands of boy-emperors (or so does Herodian wanted us to envisage it).¹⁹² The dismissal of juvenile emperors was not a radical notion whatsoever, but in Herodian's work the inappropriateness of bestowing the imperial command to a youngster made up a central theme. The relative shortness of his work supposedly meant that Herodian did not spend ten years – as Dio had done – on this work. The central thesis thus is noted in the first book and continued to be just that for the rest of the work. Whereas Dio's thesis – the ideal of enlightened monarchy – was more naturally buried in the text,¹⁹³ Herodian had no time for such subtleties; after having given standard historiographical claims of operating on ideals of factual accuracy and relating important content (where, because of their customary nature, not much clarification of his specific method and goals can be gained), he announced his thesis upfront in the last lines of his introduction:

“The emperors who were advanced in years governed themselves and their subjects commendably, because of their greater practical experience, but the younger emperors lived recklessly and introduced many innovations. As might have been expected, the

¹⁹¹ The exact composition date of Herodian's work is unclear although most modern historians date his work either to the reigns of Philip the Arab (244-249), for example: Widmer 1967; Whittaker 1969; Zimmermann 1999, or Decius (249-251) or Trebonianus Gallus (251-253), for example: Alföldy 1971a; Timonen 2000; Polley 2003.

¹⁹² The Emperors that were “young” when they came to the throne that are present in Herodian's history are: Caracalla, Geta, Elagabalus, Severus Alexander, Gordian III, not including sons of emperors that were proclaimed co-rulers: Diadumenian, Gordian II, and when accepting the later date of Herodian's work: Herennius Etruscus, and Hostilian.

¹⁹³ Parts of Dio's first book, which are now lost, possibly contained an upfront elucidation on the work's themes.

disparities in age and authority inevitably resulted in variations in imperial behavior. How each of these events occurred, I shall now relate in detail, in order of time and emperors.”¹⁹⁴

The fact that most of the Severan emperors were adolescents when they were bestowed imperial titles meant that they, to Herodian, were questionable occupants of the Roman throne.

Herodian’s characterisation of the Severan era is clear in his introduction where he summarised this period as follows:

“A comparative survey of the period of about two hundred years from Augustus (the point at which the regime became a monarchy) to the age of Marcus would reveal no such similar succession of reigns, variety of fortunes in both civil and foreign wars, disturbances among the provincial populations, and destruction of cities in both Roman territory and many barbarian countries. There have never been such earthquakes and plagues, or tyrants and emperors with such unexpected careers...”¹⁹⁵

Herodian’s dark outlook makes his work the most realised Severan “decline-and-crisis historiography” (among which we can count Dio as well).¹⁹⁶ Just as Dio, whose work he used as a source, Herodian sees in Marcus Aurelius the ideal ruler after which, with the ascension to the throne of his biological son, Commodus, the rulers became weaker and imperial stability ceased to be a given. Although not outwardly stated, Herodian seems to have believed in the coming of the rusted, age of iron that Dio detected. As seen in the characterisation above, a decent amount of apocalyptic imagery is sprinkled in with his description of this age.

Where Dio was an innovator of the genre and displayed a high degree of playfulness with its conventions and explored the spectrum from history to biography to the fullest extent, Herodian’s work is thoroughly conservative; one might even say unimaginative. His work, *Ab Excessu Divi Marci*,¹⁹⁷ is even name-wise highly unoriginal; it is plainly taken from Tacitus’ *Annals* which had as original title *Ab Excessu Divi Augusti*. Herodian’s work harkens back to earlier historiography and takes the tools normally used to describe a peaceful era for the volatility of the Severan

¹⁹⁴ Hdn. 1.1.6: γὰρ οἱ μὲν τὴν ἡλικίαν πρεσβύτεροι διὰ τὴν ἐμπειρίαν⁵ τῶν πραγμάτων ἐπιμελέστερον ἑαυτῶν τε καὶ τῶν ὑπηκόων ἤρξαν, οἱ δὲ κομιδῇ νέοι ῥαθυμότερον βιώσαντες πολλὰ ἐκαινοτόμησαν· διόπερ εἰκότως ἐν ἡλικίαις τε καὶ ἐξουσίαις διαφοροῖς οὐχ ὁμοία γέγονε τὰ ἐπιτηδεύματα. ὥς δ’ ἕκαστα τούτων πέπρακται,⁶ κατὰ χρόνους καὶ δυναστείας διηγῆσομαι.

¹⁹⁵ Hdn. 1.1.4: εἰ γοῦν τις παραβάλοι πάντα τὸν ἀπὸ τοῦ Σεβαστοῦ χρόνον, ἐξ οὗπερ ἡ Ῥωμαίων δυναστεία μετέπεσεν ἐς μοναρχίαν, οὐκ ἂν εὖροι ἐν ἔτεσι περὶ που διακοσίοις μέχρι τῶν Μάρκου καιρῶν οὔτε βασιλειῶν⁵ οὕτως ἐπαλλήλους διαδοχὰς οὔτε πολέμων ἐμφυλίων τε καὶ ξένων τύχας ποικίλας ἐθνῶν τε κινήσεις καὶ πόλεων ἀλώσεις τῶν τε ἐν τῇ ἡμεδαπῇ καὶ ἐν πολλοῖς βαρβάροις, γῆς τε σεισμοὺς καὶ ἀέρων φθορὰς τυράννων τε καὶ βασιλέων βίους.

¹⁹⁶ Kemezis 2014, 227.

¹⁹⁷ Often named by the Latin translation of the title of the work *Ab Excessu Divi Marci*, but the original title in Greek is: τῆς μετὰ Μάρκον βασιλείας ἱστορία.

epoch.¹⁹⁸ His orderly tractate sits inharmoniously with the chaotic, dystopian recent past and present he envisioned. This has been read as a purposeful method whereby a peaceful narrative style from the Antonine era was used to contrast with the instability of the Severan and later age.¹⁹⁹ This might indeed be the case, although I think it is quite possible that Herodian may have preferred a more traditional way of writing and used this to give his work more legitimacy. I think arguing that Herodian knowingly contrasted his peaceful style with the volatility of the Severan era is probably granting the historian too much credit. In the next chapter where his Severan accounts are discussed, I believe it becomes clear that Herodian did not showcase the refinedness that would argue for this subtle, stylistic methodology. Herodian's love for Thucydides and Polybius also points in the direction that he simply preferred a more archaic – and perhaps detached – style.²⁰⁰

Modern scholars have often been a bit sniffy towards Herodian's work, judging it, for example, akin to a historical fiction.²⁰¹ Ernst Hohl called him "the Levantine wind-bag",²⁰² Edward Echols saw him as "a rhetorician, pompous, repetitive, and derivative",²⁰³ while Anthony Birley did not spare the historian in calling him "careless, ignorant and deceitful".²⁰⁴ Herodian, in contrast, sees himself as operating in a similar vein as Greek historians Thucydides and Polybius.²⁰⁵ It is then too easy to dismiss the validity of his work and question his historiographical intentions. Much weight has been placed on the truthfulness of ancient historical accounts in the evaluation of their worth and quality. This, to me, seems incorrect and unproductive; Herodian's work gives a, sometimes subverting, account of the age of the Severans. It constitutes a suggestion of how this era should be judged by its readers – and perhaps indeed how it was judged in his time.

Much can be learnt concerning Dio from his work. The same cannot be said of Herodian. Whereas Dio is present in his own work, offering glimpses of his own past, persona, and place in the grander scheme of events, Herodian never becomes knowable in the same manner. Consequently, the rudimentary philological questions regarding his work are much harder to answer. It has been conjectured that he came from Western Asia Minor and was possibly an imperial freedman or equestrian and that he held minor administrative posts.²⁰⁶ Kemezis has argued that Herodian actively clouded his own personhood.²⁰⁷ Perhaps he wanted his work to exist and be judged on its own merit or perhaps disclosing his

¹⁹⁸ Kemezis 2014, 227.

¹⁹⁹ Kemezis 2014, 229.

²⁰⁰ For Herodian's love of Thucydides and Polybius, see: Kemezis 2014, 228, Scott 2017.

²⁰¹ Herodian's work is characterised as "eine Art historischen Romans" in Alföldy 1971b, 431; Hidber sees the dismissive nature regarding Herodian in the modern dissappointments regarding his work's historical accuracy: Hidber 2006, 65–70.

²⁰² Hohl 1954, 5.

²⁰³ Echols 1961, 6.

²⁰⁴ Birley 1999, 204.

²⁰⁵ Kemezis 2014, 228.

²⁰⁶ Whittaker 1969; Alföldy 1971b.

²⁰⁷ Kemezis 2014, 307.

personal status would be detrimental for the assessment of his work. Additionally, by not disclosing his persona, Herodian could present himself as an omnipresent and omnipotent figure and chronicler. What is clear, though, is that his background and status do not openly play a big part of his narrative. The possibility that he came from Western Asia Minor has not stopped him from making orientalist claims and stereotypes regarding his eastern subjects. Just as Dio, Herodian's identification with Rome was "complete".

Where with Dio a more thorough understanding of the complete work is necessary for the uncovering of his ideas and the rhetorical functions, Herodian's accounts of the Severans can be read – theoretically – in isolation without losing any of its understanding. As Graham Andrews correctly noted: "Each scene is essentially self-contained, and its most basic meaning can be understood without reference to a wider narrative context."²⁰⁸ Just understanding Herodian's disdain for boy-emperors and the repetitive nature of his narrative is enough for a proper evaluation of his Severan writings.

Herodian's conservatism is not just in style and topic, but also in the traditional sense; one of his primary complaints regarding young emperors was that they introduced many innovations. In reading his Severan accounts and the use of its women, it is thus important to remember how Herodian is not an admirer of young emperors which, of course, most Severan emperors were. The imperial mothers fulfilled an important rhetorical function in proving Herodian's point that young emperors were unfit to rule and ultimately detrimental for the Empire.

2.5. The *Historia Augusta*: A Narrative of Denominative Determinism

Perhaps the most enigmatic historiographical source of the ancient world, the *Historia Augusta* has been subject of confusion and debate for centuries. While the text claims to be authored by six different writers, who all make appearances in the text, it is now believed – as first proposed by Hermann Dessau – that, in reality, one highly imaginative writer is responsible for the entire work.²⁰⁹ The *HA* has been evaluated in such varied phrasings as "nicht etwa eine getrübe Quelle, sondern eine Kloake" by Theodor Mommsen,²¹⁰ cleverly using the double meaning of "Quelle", while Ronald Syme saw in the work not so much a sewer as Mommsen had, but "a garden of delights, with abundant refreshment"²¹¹ and advised to regard the source as a *mythistoria* written by a romantic.²¹² Valuations of the work are clearly wide-ranging. This probably results from the fact that the work is the only historiographical source regarding a long stretch of imperial history – it told of the lives from emperors Hadrian to Carinus. It is now believed likely that earlier imperial *Vitae* – that of Nerva and Trajan – have been lost and were

²⁰⁸ Andrews 2019, 123.

²⁰⁹ Dessau 1889; this is still the academic consensus although recently, through computational studies, the possibility of a multiple authorship has again been suggested: Stover & Kestemont 2016. A similar computer study, however, was used decades ago to argue the idea of single authorship: Marriott 1979.

²¹⁰ Mommsen 1890.

²¹¹ Syme 1968, 4.

²¹² Syme 1972, 123-133.

originally part of the *HA* and that it thus was written as a continuation of Suetonius' work.²¹³ This would explain some of its motivations and style. It has been noted that the *HA* is to – another historian of his era – Ammianus Marcellinus what Suetonius was to Tacitus.²¹⁴ The *HA* sets itself apart from Dio's and Herodian's work by its inclusion of trivialities and sexual anecdotes which border on vulgarity. While Herodian, as already noted, has been – in my opinion falsely – accused of writing historical fiction, the *HA* can be accused of the same with much more ease. The unusual nature of the work, its inconsistencies, and anachronisms have resulted in the writer being characterised as a "rogue scholar"²¹⁵ and a "shameless historical fantasist".²¹⁶ More substantial identifications regarding his personhood are of purely conjectural nature. Where Dio was a known character, Herodian was decidedly less knowable, and the *HA*-author takes it even a step further and remains a complete enigma. Even the years of composition of the work are debated. Although the writer claimed to write the work on commission of Emperor Constantine and Diocletian, this is disputed. Nowadays a composition date after 395 AD seems to move towards academic consensus.²¹⁷ While this unusual and intriguing work has been taken apart academically and virtually every aspect has been studied, Syme implored taking a literary and narrative approach to the *HA* instead of a solely historical one and I enthusiastically accept his plea.²¹⁸

The *HA* is rife with themes, however only the relevant themes of the work which shed a light on the narrative and formation of its Severan accounts will here be studied.²¹⁹ The *HA* has been thoroughly dictated by its themes and creating specific narratives seems to have brought the writer the most creative pleasure. These themes dictated the length and importance of certain *vitae* and the moral judgments of the subjects. The biographies of the *HA* are divided between *Augusti*, co-regents, and pretenders. How the *HA* classified these people also has impact on the reliability of the accounts.²²⁰ Changes in literary quality are also determined by availability of sources. It has been hypothesised that the writer of the *HA* could not use the sources he had done for the biographies after Caracalla and resorted to use Herodian and, as for the rest, used his own lively imagination for these Lives.²²¹ The writer of the *HA* also based himself on a lost source now known as the *Kaisersgeschichte (KG)*.²²² Without focusing too much time on the *Quellenforschung*, it has been hypothesised that the *HA* used the *KG* which, in its turn, took inspiration from the lost works of

²¹³ Den Hengst 1984, 367.

²¹⁴ Den Hengst 1984, 367.

²¹⁵ Syme 1971, 13.

²¹⁶ Kemezis 2016, 348.

²¹⁷ Birley 2006, 19.

²¹⁸ Syme 1972.

²¹⁹ For a thorough and broad study concerning the themes of the *HA*, see: Burgersdijk 2011.

²²⁰ Burgersdijk 2011, 30.

²²¹ Burgersdijk 2011, 30.

²²² Davenport 2017, 87, 88; Syme 1968, 186; Mallan 2013, 751.

Marius Maximus.²²³ Whether the *HA* used Marius Maximus as its main source directly is disputed.²²⁴ Additionally, a lost work by an unknown historiographer now referred to by the mysterious nomer “Ignotus” has been suggested as source.²²⁵ However it must be remembered that, while fanciful and creative and with its own distinct themes, the *HA* did not emerge just as result of a highly imaginative mind. It is important to be aware of the moments when the *HA* diverted from the historiographical tracks that had been carved out by previous historians and trotted its own fresh route. However, to my mind, the writer of the *HA* prioritised his own narratives above any deference to previous historians, their narratives, or semblances of historical accuracy. Copious amounts of research have pondered over the question which parts of the *Vitae* used which sources and which parts were fabrications and such. To this study that is not of great consequence; the *HA*, in relating the lives of the Severans, had a distinct narrative theme that existed aside from which sources the writer had access to.

This theme or *topos*, so forming for the assessment and treatment of the Severans in the *HA* – that was written under the *noms de plume* Aelius Spartianus and Aelius Lampridius – is in academia called the *Nomen Antoninorum*.²²⁶ The writer of the *HA* crafted, in his work, a narrative wherein the imperial carriers of the cognomen *Antoninus* go through a gradual decline of worthiness of the name and thus of the imperial station. In other words, every subsequent emperor with the cognomen *Antoninus* is of – roughly – inferior quality than the one before him in the narrative. During the second century, the name *Antoninus* transformed, just as *Caesar* had done before, from a *cognomen* connected to a specific *gens*, to something akin to a title (although never reaching the same titular clout as *Caesar*).²²⁷ The author of the *HA* created a divine association with the name and related how a Carthaginian priestess made a prophecy regarding the name:

“...when she came to the emperors she bade him in a loud voice count the number of times she said Antoninus. Then, to the amazement of all, she uttered the name Antoninus eight times. All interpreted this to mean that Antoninus Pius would reign for eight years, but he exceeded this number and those who had faith in the priestess, either then or later, felt sure that her words had some

²²³ Davenport 2017, 88; The nature of the work of Marius Maximus is unclear. While often accepted as being a historiographer as the *HA* claims, François Paschoud has suggested that he was actually a satirical poet in the vein of Juvenal: Birley 2006, 21.

²²⁴ Scott 2018.

²²⁵ Syme 1968, 90-92; Syme 1971, 45-49; Barnes 1978, 102.

²²⁶ For more on the *Nomen Antoninorum* theme: Tropea 1899; Reusch 1931; Syme 1971; Barnes 1978; Den Hengst 1981; Scholtemeijer 1976; Scholtemeijer 1980; Burgersdijk 2011.

²²⁷ Burgersdijk 2011, 119; In the *HA*, the name *Antoninus* is used as a cognomen only once; it is used as a *signum* and *praenomen* for the rest of the time. This has been seen as indication of the changing Roman nomenclature of this era, see: Syme 1971, 84.

different meaning. And in fact, if all who bore the name Antoninus be counted, this will be found to be their number. For Pius first, Marcus second, Verus third, Commodus fourth, Caracalla fifth, Geta sixth, Diadumenianus seventh, Elagabalus eighth – all bore the name Antoninus; while the two Gordians, on the other hand, must not be placed among the Antonini, for they either had only their praenomen or were called Antonii, not Antonini.”²²⁸

In creating this narrative of denominative determinism, the writer of the *HA* did not shy away from bestowing and removing the Antonine name from the real historical figures. To make his narrative of decline more fitting he had to write a biography about Diadumenian, the son of Macrinus, who, according to him, carried the name: “his life, indeed, I should have combined with the achievements of his father, had not the name of the Antonines constrained me to publish a special discussion of the life of this boy.”²²⁹ Additionally, he incorrectly gave the Antonine name to Lucius Verus. This illustrates the importance of the *Nomen Antoninorum topos* and how this held priority over any attempt at historical accuracy.²³⁰ In the *HA* it is claimed that a certain poet was responsible for this narrative of degeneration of the bearers of the Antonine name.²³¹ However, to me, this points to a ploy to grant legitimacy to the writer’s own invented narrative. The question whether this narrative is originated by the *HA* does not matter much for this study. What is important is to note how influential this was for his evaluation of the Severan emperors. His depiction of these emperors needed to fit this model and Elagabalus, being according to the *HA* the last carrier of the Antonine name, is dictated to be turned into an obscene monster. His successor, Severus Alexander, is a contrast to the *exemplum malum* of Elagabalus described as an almost ideal ruler.

Additionally, whether a result of copying Herodian or a genuine view of the *HA*-writer himself, he asserted a similar disdain for juvenile emperors:

²²⁸ SHA, *Opil. Macr.* 3.1-5: *ubi ad principes ventum est, clara voce numerari iussit quotiens diceret Antoninum, tuncque adtonitis omnibus Antonini nomen octavo edidit. sed credentibus cunctis quod octo annis Antoninus Pius imperaturus esset, et ille transcendit hunc annorum numerum, et constitit apud credentes vel tunc vel postea per vatem aliud designatum. denique adnumeratis omnibus qui Antonini appellati sunt is Antoninorum numerus invenitur. enimvero Pius primus, Marcus secundus, Verus tertius, Commodus quartus, quintus Caracallus, sextus Geta, septimus Diadumenus, octavus Heliogabalus Antonini fuere. nec inter Antoninos referendi sunt duo Gordiani, qui aut praenomen tantum Antoninorum habuerunt aut etiam Antonii dicti sunt non Antonini.*

²²⁹ SHA, *Diad.* 6.1: *Haec sunt quae digna memoratu in Antonino Diadumeno esse videantur. cuius vitam iunxissem patris gestis, nisi Antoninorum nomen me ad edendam puerilis specialem expositionem vitae coegisset.*

²³⁰ It must be wondered, though, whether the reality of the historical situation had become obscured over time or whether the writer of the *HA* knew very well he was being deceitful. To answer this, a comparative study with other Late Antique source is necessary.

²³¹ SHA, *Opil. Macr.* 7.7.

“Indeed, if you should wish to consider those monsters of old, a Nero, I mean, an Elagabalus, a Commodus – or rather, always, an Incommodious – you would assuredly find that their vices were due as much to their youth as to the men themselves. May the gods forbend that we should give the title of prince to a child or of Father of his Country to an immature boy, whose hand a schoolmaster must guide for the signing of his name and who is induced to confer a consulship by sweetmeats or toys or other such childish delights.”²³²

This disdain, however, never was a main motif and was not presented as a theme upfront – like Herodian had done – but was expressed much later in the narrative. The author of the *HA* was not constrained and steered by this theme to the degree Herodian was.

2.6. Conclusion

Narratives were understood to be powerful tools in the Roman era and existed both inside historiography as well as outside of it. Consensuses between imperial regimes and the Empire's elite (and thus historiographers) regarding the recent past were less often reached during the Severan era and this continued into Late Antiquity. In historiography, authors could subvert the existing historical narratives or question the creation thereof. Roman historiographical works were thoroughly formed by their ethic arguments and narratives. Sometimes these narratives took the form as central theses of the work, as was the case with Dio's ideal of enlightened monarchy and Herodian's disdain for boy-emperors, but sometimes a narrative dictated only a part of a work as was the case with the *Nomen Antoninorum* theme present in the *HA*. If the varying views and narrative worlds of the studied historiographical works concerning the Severans need to be characterised as a whole, I would suggest their common point of departure is the historical development that saw the emergence of juvenile emperors as the new norm during this era. This change needed to be reconciled with the traditional understanding of Roman emperorship. This development and theme is, in all likelihood, also the reason for the overwhelming presence of their mothers in the narratives compared to other emperors and, as will become clear next chapter, why these authors looked back at earlier examples of imperial motherhood.

Having embarked on a tour of the narrative worlds of Dio, Herodian, and the *HA* and having identified their major narrative themes, I will now examine their respective Severan accounts to uncover the complete formative landscape of their Severan narratives and their representations of the Severan empresses therein.

²³² SHA. Tacit. 6.4-5: *enimvero si recolere velitis vetusta illa prodigia, Nerones dico et Heliogabalos et Commodos, seu potius semper Incommodos, certe non hominum magis vita illa quam aetatum fuerunt. di avertant principes pueros et patres patriae dici impuberes et quibus ad subscribendum magistri litterarii manus teneant.*

Chapter 3: Analysis of the Narrative and Rhetorical Functions of the Severan Empresses in Roman Historiography

In the previous two chapters the necessary societal and historiographical background and the specific narrative worlds of the Severan historiographers have been sketched in order to be able to grasp how the various depictions of the Severan women came to be. Now the actual portrayal of the Severan women in Roman historiography shall be examined. This is done in the chronological order of the Severan women. That is: Domna, Maesa together with Soaemias, and then Mamaea. Their narrative depictions are also analysed chronologically with regards to the authors. That is: first, Dio, then Herodian, and concluding with the *HA*. A degree of flexibility is necessary. Sometimes these women act together in the narratives and on some occasions it is beneficial to hint at things to come and to point out aspects that later become of greater importance. Chronology is therefore aspired to in this chapter but is not a dogmatic aim.

The historiographical sources here studied are often influenced by preceding works, also central to this study, and others, now lost. Consequently, occasionally strings of narrative DNA can be uncovered in later works that have been lifted from earlier works. Sometimes these threads fit within the specific narratives the respective authors wished to tell and sometimes these threads – incorporated possibly because of a desire to remain historically accurate or make the work fit in the consensus regarding the subject – stick out as a sore thumb. These occasions shall be identified and comparisons between the respective narratives are continually made. Through differentiation, the specific characters of the works become apparent.

3.1. Cassius Dio's Julia Domna

Julia Domna, the first Severan empress, entered the stage in book 75 of Dio's history when he related the character and deeds of Septimius Severus during and after the Year of the Five Emperors. Because Dio's judgment of Septimius Severus seemed to have changed over time (for the worse), his acceptance of central imperial narratives also changed over time. Domna at first is defined by her role as imperial wife. After the death of her husband, her role and depiction changed to realise her rhetorical function of judging her sons, and after the death of her sons, Dio's Domna underwent another character transformation in order to function as her own *exemplum malum*.

Modern historians interpreted Dio's portrayal of Domna in various ways. Fergus Millar²³³ and Erich von Kettenhofen²³⁴ both claimed that Dio had a positive attitude toward Domna. M. James Moscovich²³⁵ and Peter Swan²³⁶ read a mixed evaluation of the empress in Dio's text, and Barbara Levick characterised Dio's portrayal of Domna as hostile.²³⁷ Barbara Kuhn-

²³³ Millar 1964, 20.

²³⁴ Kettenhofen 1979, 10-12.

²³⁵ Moscovich 2004, 359.

²³⁶ Swan 2004, 6.

²³⁷ Levick 2007, 1.

Chen saw in Dio's depiction of Domna the same quality he bestowed on other women such as Messalina, Agrippina the Younger, and Faustina the Younger, namely a hunger for power.²³⁸ These various interpretations likely resulted from Dio's highly fragmented depiction of Domna, as shall become apparent next.

3.1.1. *Domna under Septimius Severus*

Domna first entered Dio's narrative as one of the signs – *omina imperii* – that foretold the imperial future of Septimius Severus. Dio stated that when Septimius Severus was about to marry Domna, he dreamt that Faustina the Younger, the wife of Marcus Aurelius, prepared their nuptial chamber in the temple of Venus which was located close to the palace.²³⁹ This account connected the Severans to the Antonines so it is likely that Dio here echoed a propagandistic account that was part of the official imperial historical narrative. This assumption is made probable because other connections between Domna and Faustina are identified as parts of propagandist Severan policy.²⁴⁰ Dio saw no reason or benefit to divert from the central imperial narrative at this point. As noted in the previous chapter, Dio seems to have been more positive of Septimius Severus early in his reign. Domna is here not presented as character but as symbol for dynastic continuity and her role as wife of Septimius Severus is here established.

The second mention of Domna – which occurred in the next book – is, untypically, primarily part of a characterisation of the Sejanus-like figure, Plautianus, prefect of the Praetorian Guard under Septimius Severus. Plautianus treated her badly and detested her openly in front of her husband.²⁴¹ After this claim, Dio accused Plautianus of torturing noble women and indulging in food and wine, and boys and girls.²⁴² The stereotypical accusations of a lack of self-control that are hurled at bad rulers – as established in Chapter 1 – are used here. Domna must be seen together with the tortured noble women here; Plautianus had no respect for these Roman *matronae*. Christopher Mallan has convincingly argued that this anecdote's primary goal is to establish Plautianus as a tyrant-like character.²⁴³ With some ease one can argue that this anecdote also constituted a critique on Septimius Severus as he allowed Plautianus, a subordinate, to disrespect his wife in front of him. Here Domna is for the first time used as rhetorical tool to judge the men surrounding her. Another enigmatic claim regarding Domna in this anecdote is that Plautianus' harassment was the reason that the empress started focusing on the study of philosophy and the company of sophists. Dio contrasted between the company Domna and Plautianus turned to as well as the noble causes in which Domna found solace and the perverse low behaviour that Plautianus turned to which constituted un-Roman behaviour and a sign of a lack of self-control.

²³⁸ Kuhn-Chen 2002, 239.

²³⁹ Cass. Dio 75.3.1.

²⁴⁰ Langford 2013.

²⁴¹ Cass. Dio 75.15.6-7.

²⁴² Cass. Dio 75.15.7.

²⁴³ Mallan 2013, 741.

The third anecdote of Dio's account of Septimius Severus' life where a role is given to Domna is his account of a witty exchange between Domna and a Caledonian woman about sexual morality. In this account Domna japed about the free sexual morality of the Caledonian women. The Caledonian woman remarked in turn that Caledonians have it better arranged than Romans with regards to sexual politics because the Caledonian women are not secretive about their extra-marital sexual activities while the Roman women act similarly to them but in secret.²⁴⁴ This should not be read as an accusation by the Caledonian woman – or of Dio – on Domna's part personally. It is instead presented as a dialogue between two different cultures personified in these two women. This anecdote should, on one side, be viewed through the lens of ethnography with which ancient historiography remained entangled to some extent and, on the other side, as a critique from Dio concerning the indecent sexual conduct of Roman women overall. Contrasting barbarian and Roman morals has been identified as a trend in Roman historiography.²⁴⁵ Anthony Birley has suggested that Dio in this passage hints at infidelity on Domna's part which would become a way of prime characterisation for her.²⁴⁶ This is certainly the case, but I concur with Christopher Mallan, that this should primarily be read as a remark against all Roman women.²⁴⁷ The fact that the emperor is responsible for the sexual morals of the Roman populace means that this anecdote can additionally be read as a critique on Septimius Severus' failure to guarantee the proper sexual conduct of the Romans – especially Roman women. As noted in Chapter 1, Augustus made the restoration and safeguarding of the proper sexual conduct of his subjects a part of the imperial portfolio. Domna is in this anecdote thus an indirect and subtle tool for the moral castigation of her imperial husband.

These three short accounts form the presence of Domna in Dio's history of Septimius Severus. In relation with the considerable length of Dio's account of Septimius Severus, she appears rather limitedly and mostly to negatively judge Plautianus by. Dio was more subtle in his use of Domna as a tool to showcase Septimius Severus' character, but her role in Dio's work has barely started. Her role as mother is a much sturdier rhetorical tool and Dio heartily used her to beat her son Caracalla with.

3.1.2. *Domna under Caracalla*

To Dio, Caracalla was a brute man whose act of fratricide was as big a moral transgression as conceivable. As elucidated in Chapter 1, imperial mothers of young, bad emperors were said to either have pushed their sons towards their debauchery by their own wickedness or to have been unsuccessful in their attempts to steer them in the right direction through advisory acts. Domna's characterisation straddles both types in Dio's description of the Empire under Caracalla. On the one side she is presented as quite a noble woman – in accordance with the Roman ideal of an *Augusta* –, but, on the

²⁴⁴ Cass. Dio 77.16.5.

²⁴⁵ Dorey 1969, 14; Mallan 2013, 743.

²⁴⁶ Birley 1971, 267: in the 1999 republishing of the book, this statement is however removed. Clearly, Birley did no longer believe this.

²⁴⁷ Mallan 2013, 750.

other side, she is still held, partially, accountable for Caracalla's destructive demeanour.

In Dio's powerful and tragic account of Geta's murder at the behest of Caracalla – an event concealed to observers and thus perfect for a writer to let their most gruesome and poetic imagination take the helm – Domna is present at the event. She is induced by Caracalla to summon Geta and himself to her rooms in order to stage an attempt at reconciliation between the warring brothers (which sheds a light on her and perhaps other *Augustae's* – presumed – authority and accepted duties). It is there in Domna's arms that Geta is, according to Dio, murdered.

“who [Geta] at sight of them [centurions] had run to his mother, hung about her neck and clung to her bosom and breasts, lamenting and crying: “Mother that didst bear me, mother that didst bear me, help! I am being murdered.” And so she, tricked in this way, saw her son perishing in the most impious fashion in her arms, and received him at his death into the very womb, as it were, whence he had been born; for she was all covered with his blood, so that she took no note of the wound she had received on her hand. But she was not permitted to mourn or weep for her son, though he had met so miserable an end before his time (he was only twenty-two years and nine months old), but, on the contrary, she was compelled to rejoice and laugh as though at some great good fortune; so closely were all her words, gestures, and changes of colour observed. Thus she alone, the Augusta, wife of the emperor and mother of the emperors, was not permitted to shed tears even in private over so great a sorrow.”²⁴⁸

In this shocking tale, Geta is poetically returned to his mother's breast and womb and to his role as infant son. This is not uncommon; Herodian kills, in his respective history, Geta's great-nephew Severus Alexander, for example, in a very similar manner emphasising his youthfulness. Where to Herodian – as below will be shown – this constituted a harsh criticism of the emperor's youthfulness and unworthiness of the imperial throne, here this is, to my mind, not the case. Geta's return to a youthful state and the explicit mentioning of his age of death (with a specificity evocative of Roman tombstones of children) seemed to aim at eliciting feelings of compassion

²⁴⁸ Cass. Dio 78.(77).2: πρὸς τε τὴν μητέρα, ὡς εἶδε σφας, προκαταφυγόντα καὶ ἀπὸ τε τοῦ αὐχένος αὐτῆς ἐξαρτηθέντα καὶ τοῖς στήθεσι τοῖς τε μαστοῖς προσφύοντα κατέκοψαν ὀλοφυρόμενον καὶ βοῶντα· “μήτερ μήτερ, τεκοῦσα τεκοῦσα, βοήθει, σφάζομαι.” καὶ ἡ μὲν οὕτως ἀπατηθεῖσα τὸν τε υἱὸν ἐν τοῖς ἑαυτῆς κόλποις ἀνοσιώτατα ἀπολλύμενον ἐπέιδε, καὶ τὸν θάνατον αὐτοῦ ἐς αὐτὰ τὰ σπλάγχνα τρόπον τινά, ἐξ ὧν ἐγεγέννητο, ἐσεδέξατο· καὶ γὰρ τοῦ αἵματος πᾶσα ἐπλήσθη, ὡς ἐν μηδενὶ λόγῳ τὸ τῆς χειρὸς τραῦμα ὃ ἐτρώθη ποιήσασθαι. οὔτε δὲ πενθῆσαι οὔτε θρηνῆσαι τὸν υἱόν, καίπερ πρόωρον οὕτως οἰκτρῶς ἀπολωλότα, ὑπῆρξεν αὐτῇ (δύο γὰρ καὶ εἴκοσι ἔτη καὶ μῆνας ἑννέα ἐβίω), ἀλλ’ ἠναγκάζετο ὡς καὶ ἐν μεγάλῃ τινὶ εὐτυχίᾳ οὔσα χαίρειν καὶ γελᾶν· οὕτω που πάντα ἀκριβῶς καὶ τὰ ῥήματα αὐτῆς καὶ τὰ νεύματα τὰ τε χρώματα ἐτηρεῖτο· καὶ μόνη ἐκείνῃ, τῇ Αὐγούστῃ, τῇ τοῦ αὐτοκράτορος γυναικί, τῇ τῶν αὐτοκρατόρων μητρί, οὐδ’ ἰδίᾳ που ἐπὶ τηλικούτῳ παθήματι δακρῦσαι ἐξῆν.

for mother and son and, in contrast, contempt for Caracalla. The mentioning of the “impious” (άνόσιος)²⁴⁹ way that Geta died might at first glance refer to his begging for help by his mother, but referred to Caracalla’s order of assassination and the profane act of fratricide. The fact that “όσιος” or *pietas* was such a prerequisite for emperors to possess (as Augustus had established) and because of Dio’s negative view of Caracalla, I believe that the mentioning of impiety of this situation is directed at Caracalla, the perpetrator of the murder. Dio did, moreover, not really view Geta as a real emperor: “after this Antoninus [Caracalla] assumed the entire power; nominally, it is true, he shared it with his brother, but in reality he ruled alone from the very outset.”²⁵⁰ Dio thus felt no need to describe, judge, and discuss Geta’s virtues and vices in the same manner as other emperors in his work. Dio offered a distinctly different account of the death of Geta than found in other contemporary sources. Philostratus, one of the important sophists surrounding Domna, wrote, for example, that Geta was put to death because of his attempt at Caracalla’s life.²⁵¹ If this was the “official” position regarding the death of Geta as propagated by Caracalla, a stance which Mallan has taken,²⁵² Dio purposefully diverted from it, meaning he threw out the official position and Caracalla’s moulding of recent history. It might also show that Caracalla’s attempt to create a historical consensus was not successful and was broadly assumed untrue. This is a persuasive view as Dio wrote how Caracalla “took possession of the legions, after crying out the whole way, as if he had been the object of a plot and his life were in danger.”²⁵³ This consolidates my view that the accusation of the impiety of the matter in which Geta is killed in his mother’s arms is aimed at Caracalla.

This anecdote should be read as showing the sacrilegious behaviour and bad character of Caracalla which is illustrated and contrasted with the noble conduct of his mother. Just as was the case with Plautianus, Domna is done a great injustice and exhibited great restraint and self-control, something that should be the traits of the men undertaking the injustices against her. The fact that she is a woman undoubtedly made the contrast in morality even more compelling. Where Domna should be careful not to show any emotions and was forced to control everything, even the colour of her face in order to show no sorrow about the loss of her youngest son, Caracalla is, in the following sentence, described as crying out as if in distress,²⁵⁴ a clear indication of him not being able to control himself. The account that Domna was not allowed to mourn for her youngest son also constitutes an accusation on Caracalla’s part. Roman women were responsible for the lamentation of the dead so that their memory remained alive.²⁵⁵ The forbiddance regarding the mourning for Geta is likely true and

²⁴⁹ For a thorough semantic investigation regarding the term “άνόσιος”, see: Peels 2015.

²⁵⁰ Cass. Dio 78.(77).1.1: Μετά δὲ ταῦτα ὁ Ἀντωνῖνος πᾶσαν τὴν, ἡγεμονίαν ἔλαβε· λόγῳ μὲν γὰρ μετὰ τοῦ ἀδελφοῦ, τῷ δὲ δὴ ἔργῳ μόνος εὐθὺς ἤρξε.

²⁵¹ Philostr. VS 608.

²⁵² Mallan 2013, 745.

²⁵³ Cass. Dio 78.(77).3: Ὁ δ’ Ἀντωνῖνος καίπερ ἐσπέρας οὔσης τὰ στρατόπεδα κατέλαβε, διὰ πάσης τῆς ὁδοῦ κεκραγὼς ὡς ἐπιβεβουλευμένος καὶ κινδυνεύων.

²⁵⁴ Cass. Dio 78.(77).3.

²⁵⁵ Erker 2011, 40.

connected to his well attested *damniatio memoriae*.²⁵⁶ Interestingly, Dio emphasised Domna's role as *Augusta*, emperor's wife, and mother when saying she was not allowed to shed tears. Apparently, it was unheard of that an emperor could force his mother, especially an *Augusta*, of something like this. This sheds some light on the actual status of these women. Dio cast away the narrative as propagated by Caracalla and created a narrative in which Caracalla is vilified and a subversion of the ideal mother-son relationship is established. The contrast between the mother and son is a theme that Dio returned to repeatedly.

The proper advisory role of an elite mother is bestowed on Domna, but – such is the case with bad sons – Caracalla does not heed the advice of his mother: “Neither in these matters nor in any others did he heed his mother, who gave him much excellent advice.”²⁵⁷ The difference of mother and son is further accentuated by the claim that Caracalla made Domna responsible for a lot of petitions and correspondence, and that she held public receptions as emperors did.²⁵⁸ While this anecdote reads as a celebration of Domna, in reality it is primarily a critique regarding Caracalla. He allowed a woman to take a leading role in the governing of the Empire. The improper nature of this public participation into matters of state is implied. Besides her political affairs, her interest in philosophy is used to contrast with her son's unbecoming behaviour:

“But, while she devoted herself more and more to the study of philosophy with these men, he [Caracalla] kept declaring that he needed nothing beyond the necessities of life and plumed himself over his pretended ability to live on the cheapest kind of fare”²⁵⁹

Caracalla is then said to engage with all kind of contemptible men such as freedmen, sorcerers, and magicians.²⁶⁰ Domna dealt with the highest men of the Empire and the emperor, contrastingly, with the lowest. Julie Langford has correctly noted that the negative characteristics of female irrationality, capriciousness, and self-serving, normally bestowed on imperial women, were now given to Caracalla while Domna becomes the male imperial ideal.²⁶¹ This constitutes a similar inversion as was the case with Dio's account of Plautianus and Domna.

It may seem that Dio's Domna was a thoroughly admirable woman who was not blamed for anything and formed a paragon of Roman female and imperial fortitude and was represented as a virtuous woman to the extreme extent. This is, however, not the case. She is also indirectly blamed for Caracalla's behaviour. Not because she did not give him good advice, but on basis of her ethnicity. Dio was a stern believer of the idea that easternness was a perverting actor. Not only because of the perverting

²⁵⁶ See, for example, the famous Berlin Tondo with the removed face of the young Geta.

²⁵⁷ Cass. Dio 78.(77).18.2: οὐδὲ ἐπέιθετο οὔτε περὶ τούτων οὔτε περὶ τῶν ἄλλων τῇ μητρὶ πολλὰ καὶ χρηστὰ παραινούσῃ.

²⁵⁸ Cass. Dio 78.(77).18.2-3.

²⁵⁹ Cass. Dio 78.(77).18.3.

²⁶⁰ Cass. Dio 78.(77)17.

²⁶¹ Langford 2013, 119.

nature of eastern behaviour, but also of blood. Dio attempted to characterise Caracalla on the ground of his parenthood and his partial influence by different regions.

“Antoninus [Caracalla] belonged to three races; and he possessed none of their virtues at all, but combined in himself all their vices; the fickleness, cowardice, and recklessness of Gaul were his, the harshness and cruelty of Africa, and the craftiness of Syria, whence he was sprung on his mother’s side.”²⁶²

Dio blamed Caracalla’s negative character traits on his non-Italian parentage. Gaul is added because of his presumed fixation of this region; the name “Caracalla” that was jokingly attributed to him was because of his wearing of a Gallic hooded cape. Admittedly, Dio did not repudiate the existence of virtues that these foreign people had – although he could not be bothered to name them –, either way, Caracalla did not possess them. In another fragment, Caracalla’s and his mother’s easternness is again blamed for his personality and – in extension – his unsuitability for the imperial throne:

“In everything he was very hot-headed and very fickle, and he furthermore possessed the craftiness of his mother and the Syrians, to which race she belonged.”²⁶³

So Domna is blamed here, not because of her behaviour but on the ground of her Syrian vice, that of craftiness which she passed on to her son.

Domna became a narrative tool for the evaluation of Caracalla as a bad emperor during the accounts of his reign. Her good behaviour was contrasted with his bad behaviour and her ethnic background was used by Dio as explanation for her son’s behaviour. The moment Caracalla came to his bloody end, the narrative and characterisation of Domna changed once again.

3.1.3. *Domna after Caracalla’s death*

When Caracalla was stabbed to death while emptying his bladder at the side of the road, Dio’s Domna was not so much sad for the loss of all her children, but afraid to lose her position:

“Thus she mourned, now that he was dead, the very man whom she had hated while he lived; yet it was not because she wished that he were alive, but because she was vexed at having to return to private life.”²⁶⁴

²⁶² Cass. Dio 78.(77).6.1a: Ὅτι τρισὶν ἔθνεσιν ὁ Ἀντωνῖνος προσήκων ἦν, καὶ τῶν μὲν ἀγαθῶν αὐτῶν οὐδὲν τὸ παράπαν τὰ δὲ δὴ κακὰ πάντα συλλαβὼν ἐκτίσατο, τῆς μὲν Γαλατίας τὸ κοῦφον καὶ τὸ δειλὸν καὶ τὸ θρασύ, τῆς Ἀφρικῆς τὸ τραχὺ καὶ ἄγριον, τῆς Συρίας, ὅθεν πρὸς μητρὸς ἦν, τὸ πανοῦργον.

²⁶³ Cass. Dio 78.(77).10.2

²⁶⁴ Cass. Dio 79.(78).23.1: ὃν γὰρ ζῶντα καὶ ἐμίσει, τὸν αὐτὸν τοῦτον τότε τετελευτηκότα ἐπόθει, οὐχ ὅτι ἐκείνον ζῆν ἠθέλεν, ἀλλ’ ὅτι αὐτὴ ιδιωτεύουσα ἦχθετο.

In this section the degree in which she represented a tool to judge Caracalla by becomes clear as Domna lost any identifiable individual characteristics and became just the archetype of a historical character afraid of losing their power. No longer being a mother, her central characterisation and purpose is lost. Throughout Dio's work there are characters who find it impossible to take a step back and return to the private station from where they originally came when confronted with the prospect of losing power.²⁶⁵ Both men and women are claimed to have had these fears. The reader of Dio's history would, while reading this account of Domna, have a similar characterisation freshly in their minds. Faustina the Younger, namely, had relatively recent in the narrative feared returning to the private domain leading up to the death of her husband Marcus Aurelius. This had enticed her to plot against the state in an attempt to gain power.²⁶⁶ Men and women could, according to Dio, make strange and dangerous jumps when the walls of the private domain came cornering in. When Cleopatra was about to be stripped of her diadem, Dio claimed that she preferred death.²⁶⁷ Domna's characterisation after the death of her sons is solely based on this fear. Just as Dio's Faustina, Domna began plotting to gain power, but Domna surpassed Faustina in her ambition and sought the sole rulership of the Empire. In relating this questionable tale, Dio went all in and established a theme that he returned to in his account of Elagabalus; he equated her with Assyrian (female) rulers:²⁶⁸

“...for she hoped to become sole ruler and make herself the equal of Semiramis and Nitocris, inasmuch as she came in a sense from the same parts as they.”²⁶⁹

Domna's easternness steadily crept into Dio's account and arrived here at its ultimate form. Domna is suddenly nothing more than an emblem of dangerous eastern femininity and absurd notions that women can rule. This is not the first time that Dio's likened powerful, foreign women to these queens; Dio also connected Boudicca to them.²⁷⁰ They thus were not necessarily only connected with powerful eastern women, but Domna's Syrian heritage certainly made the comparison more obvious.

When it became clear that Domna's ambitious plan of sole rulership would not work, she decided to take her own life. Dio suggested that her death was inevitable as she had breast cancer which had been dormant but which she prompted to become active when she punched herself on the breast in lamentation when hearing of her son's death.²⁷¹ Dio's final

²⁶⁵ Mallan 2013, 752.

²⁶⁶ Cass. Dio 71.22.3.

²⁶⁷ Cass. Dio 51.11.2.

²⁶⁸ There are, however, two powerful semi-historical queens named *Nitocris* known to us. One Assyrian and one Egyptian. It is also possible that Dio referred to the Egyptian one here; For a study into the Greek and Latin literary references to Semiramis, see: Eilers 1971.

²⁶⁹ Cass. Dio. 79.(78).23.3: ὅπως αὐταρχήσῃ τῇ τε Σεμράμιδι καὶ τῇ Νιτώκριδι, ἅτε καὶ ἐκ τῶν αὐτῶν τρόπων τινὰ χωρίων αὐταῖς οὖσα, παρισυμένη.

²⁷⁰ Cass. Dio. 62.6.2.

²⁷¹ Cass. Dio 79.(78).23.3.

assessment of Domna's life and the lesson the readers should learn by reading this account is that:

“...no one could, in the light of her career, regard as happy each and all who attain great power, unless some genuine and unalloyed pleasure in life and unmixed and lasting good fortune is theirs.”²⁷²

This conclusion seems primarily focused on the last section of her life detailing the events after the demise of Caracalla when she suddenly became a character fixated on power. During the reign of Caracalla, Domna is described as a person with plenty of high imperial tasks, but never as an overly ambitious woman.

It has become clear that Dio's Domna was by no stretch of the imagination a static character. Her role and function underwent two big changes. At first she had a limited presence in the narrative and played just a subtle role in evaluating her husband. She did, however, play a substantial role in judging Plautianus. When Caracalla came to the throne, Domna acquired a more complex function; one of contrast, inversion, and ethnical clarification of her son's behaviour and personality. Additional to the similar comparative role she took in the characterisation of Plautianus, her motherhood granted Dio to use her in a more effective way. Once Caracalla died and Domna ceased to be a mother, she lost her prime function in the narrative and Dio resorted to change her once again and fell back on *topoi* and very broad stereotypes. One that is specific for his work, the *topos* of the refusal of relinquishing attained power, and one societal stereotype, concerning the ambition of eastern women. Domna is equated with eastern queens, a trend that Dio continued and which reached its completest form in his account of the reign of Elagabalus who he often named by the eastern moniker *Sardanapalus*.

The various modern opinions regarding Dio's judgment of Domna seem to be based on the accentuations on different sections in Dio's work. It is not fruitful to regard Dio's Domna as one person; it is far more effective to regard her as a character with a three-part nature. So, whether Dio's account of Domna is either a positive or negative assessment, a question that has interested modern historians, is not really relevant in my opinion. There is not one Domna in Dio's account, but rather three different characterisations dependent on their narrative and rhetorical purpose.

3.2. Herodian's Julia Domna

Just as Dio, Herodian was most interested in Domna's role as a mother. She did not play a part in the Herodian narrative concerning Septimius Severus. She first entered the stage in proper fashion after the demise of her husband in Britain. Because of Herodian's emphasis on the struggle between the imperial brothers during their co-emperorship, Domna was pushed to the foreground. Before the body of their father had turned cold, the brothers were already quarrelling during their return to Rome.²⁷³ After

²⁷² Cass. Dio 79.(78).24.2-3: ὥστε τινὰ ἐς αὐτὴν ἀποβλέψαντα μὴ πάνυ πάντας τοὺς ἐν ταῖς μεγάλαις ἐξουσίαις γενομένους μακαρίζειν ἂν μὴ καὶ ἡδονὴ τις αὐτοῖς τοῦ βίου καὶ ἀληθὴς καὶ ἀκράτος καὶ εὐτυχία καὶ ἀκραφνῆς καὶ διαρκῆς ὑπάρχη.

²⁷³ Hdn. 3.15.6.

their father's funeral in Rome, open hostility followed and plotting against each other began properly, according to Herodian.²⁷⁴ The sibling rivalry became so heated that a break-up was suggested; the Empire was to be split in half, with Caracalla to establish himself in Byzantium and Geta in Chalcedon. Cities that could serve as new capital cities were thereby suggested.²⁷⁵ The fear of the demotion of Rome as capital might still have been present during this era as Suetonius claimed people feared this during the reigns of Julius Caesar and Marcus Antonius.²⁷⁶ This is the moment that Herodian had Domna enter the discussion to put a stop to this foolishness. In the story that followed, Herodian played with the idea of the imperial mother as mother to all Romans and as personification of the Empire at large:

“So much for the proposals, to which almost everyone assented with expressions of gloom and heads bowed. But Julia cried out, “My sons, you have found a method of partitioning the land and the sea; between the continents you say lies the barrier of the Pontic sea. But what about your mother? How do you propose to partition her? How am I supposed to divide and carve up this unhappy body of mine? Very well, kill me first and each of you take a part of my torn body to your territory and bury it there. In this way I can be shared out between you along with the land and the sea.” With these words she began weeping and crying out. Then she threw her arms around them both and drew them into an embrace, trying to reconcile them. Everyone was overcome with pity and the council broke up. The scheme was rejected and the two brothers returned, each to his own palace quarters.”²⁷⁷

Domna is here presented as a kind of saviour of the unity of the Roman Empire and safeguarder of Rome as the capital city. The peace between the brothers is however of a short duration; during the same year and just a few sentences in Herodian's narrative later, bloodshed became inevitable. The exact wording of the murder of Geta is unknown because of a lacuna in the text. After this gap, the narrative continued with the following description:

“Geta was mortally wounded and died spilling his blood on his mother's breast. After the murder Caracalla was the first to jump up and run from the chamber. Rushing through the whole palace, he

²⁷⁴ Hdn. 4.3.1.

²⁷⁵ Hdn. 4.3.6.

²⁷⁶ Suet. *Iul.* 79.3.

²⁷⁷ Hdn. 4.3.8-9: ταῦτα δὴ αὐτῶν διατυπούντων οἱ μὲν ἄλλοι πάντες σκυθρωποῖς προσώποις ἐς γῆν ἔνευσαν· ἡ δὲ Ἰουλία “γῆν μὲν” ἔφη “καὶ θάλασσαν, ὧ τέκνα, εὐρίσκετα ὅπως νείμῃσθε, καὶ τὰς ἡπείρους, ὡς φατε, τὸ Πόντιον ρεῖθρον διαιρεῖ· τὴν δὲ μητέρα πῶς ἂν διέλοισθε, καὶ πῶς ἡ ἀθλία ἐγὼ ἐς ἐκάτερον ὑμῶν νεμηθεῖην ἢ τμηθεῖην; πρῶτον δὴ ἐμὲ φονεύσατε, καὶ διελόντες ἐκάτερος παρ’ ἐαυτῷ τὸ μέρος θαπτέτω· οὕτω γὰρ ἂν μετὰ γῆς καὶ θαλάττης ἐς ὑμᾶς μερισθείην.” ταῦτα δὲ λέγουσα μετὰ δακρύων καὶ οἰμωγῆς, ἀμφοτέροις τε τὰς χεῖρας περιβάλλουσα καὶ ὑπὸ τὰς ἀγκάλας λαβοῦσα, συνάγειν ἐπειρᾶτο. πάντας δὲ οἴκτου καταλαβόντος διελύθη τὸ συνέδριον, ἣ τε σκέψις ἀπεδοκιμάσθη, ἐκάτερός τε ἐς τὰ ἑαυτοῦ βασιλεία ἀνεχώρησε.

shouted out that he had escaped a great danger and only just been saved.”²⁷⁸

Herodian’s account formed the same subversion as Dio’s regarding the Caracallan narrative in which the emperor claimed he himself was in fact in danger of being slaughtered. Herodian wrote how Caracalla accused Geta of what he did himself – having swordsmen burst into the room where he and his mother resided, attempting to kill him. Caracalla stated that his murder of Geta thereafter was only natural because Romulus had done the same after being taunted by his brother.²⁷⁹

Just as Dio, Herodian used the image of Geta as dying in his mother’s arms, but, contrary to Dio, this version lacks any *pathos*, poetic meaning, or rhetorical heft. Neither are we necessarily meant to feel sorry for either of them nor is this a way to bring characteristic contrast to the brothers. This is where the peaceful mode of narration of Herodian becomes apparent which was spoken of in Chapter 2. Where Geta was for Dio a victim and more or less an innocent kid, Herodian, with his dislike of youthful emperors, presented Caracalla and Geta as two sides of the same coin and as possessing evenly distributed depravity. The fratricide could have gone either way according to Herodian. As such, there is no differentiation in their characterisation.

Where Dio equated Domna with eastern queens, Herodian, through an anecdote that both hinted at their hidden relationship as well as illuminating Caracalla’s character, stated that some Alexandrian people called his mother “Jocasta” because of her belligerent sons; the Severan brother’s conflict reminding them of Jocasta’s sons Eteocles and Polynices and the ultimate fratricide that followed. It is not farfetched to assume that this identification of Domna with Jocasta is also a disguised accusation of incest – Jocasta being the mother of Oedipus. In the post-Herodian characterisation of Domna’s and Caracalla’s relationship, incest was a prime subject (this will become clear in the study of the Severan narrative in the *HA* below). Perhaps the earliest historiographical seed of this claim can be found here. If this is the case, it is unclear whether Herodian here just hinted at existing rumours regarding the two or whether he invented this improper relationship. Herodian used this anecdote also to characterise Caracalla as a brute. He wrote that Caracalla, hearing these jokes, became angry and plotted the destruction of the people who made these jokes.²⁸⁰

The death of Caracalla at the behest of Macrinus also resulted in the death of Domna. Herodian remarked that she died either by her own hand or on order of Macrinus.²⁸¹ No post-Caracallan narrative or characterisation of Domna is present in Herodian. Herodian’s Domna was absent in the accounts of her husband Septimius Severus and played a minor role in the account of the life of Caracalla. She only played a role in the conflict between

²⁷⁸ Hdn. 4.4.3: Γέτας μὲν δὴ καιρίως τρωθεὶς, προσχέας τὸ αἷμα τοῖς τῆς μητρὸς στήθεσι, μετήλλαξε τὸν βίον· ὁ δ’ Ἀντωνῖνος κατεργασθέντος αὐτῷ τοῦ φόνου προπηδᾷ τοῦ δωματίου θέων, φερόμενός τε δι’ ὅλων τῶν βασιλείων ἐβόα μέγαν κίνδυνον ἐκπεφευγῆναι μόλις τε σωθῆναι.

²⁷⁹ Hdn. 4.5.4-5.

²⁸⁰ Hdn. 4.9.3.

²⁸¹ Hdn. 4.13.8.

her two sons and her character is only defined by her admirable speech regarding the breaking up of the Empire hereby showing the danger to the unity of the Empire these two emperors formed. Domna stopped one of the – to Herodian – so dangerous innovations that young emperors often brought. Herodian did not occupy himself with painting Domna as a dangerous eastern influence on the Empire. Neither is Caracalla bestowed eastern vices as luxury. Instead, Herodian's Caracalla had more affinity with the roughness of the soldier's life.²⁸²

3.3. The *Historia Augusta's* Julia Domna

The characterisation of Domna in the *HA* diverted radically from the woman as portrayed in Dio's and Herodian's respective works. The writer of the *HA* saw in Domna a vile, incestuous character which was perhaps seeded by Herodian's history.²⁸³ Domna's central function remained the showcasing of the character of Caracalla who is here – surprisingly – not her son but her stepson. The construction of Domna as a sexually vile and traitorous character constituted a definite break in her Roman portrayal as Aurelius Victor claimed the same.²⁸⁴ Whether the *HA* originated this new historiographical tradition is unclear. The shortness of Aurelius Victor's account means that the *HA* had to invent parts to fill his more extensive narrative. It has also been suggested that both took inspiration from a common source.²⁸⁵ Whatever the case is, the *HA* constitutes the most extensive extant historiographical source of the Late Antique characterisation of Domna (and the other Severan women).

Domna is first mentioned in the life of Septimius Severus where immediately her prime characterisation as a lewd woman is established.

“For all that, he [Septimius Severus] was less careful in his home-life, for he retained his wife Julia even though she was notorious for her adulteries and also guilty of plotting against him.”²⁸⁶

The association between an adulterous woman and a treacherous woman is clear here. This passage follows a summary of Septimius' deeds. This claim of him having an adulterous wife positions him directly as an un-ideal ruler. In the *HA's* ultimate evaluation of the emperor, Septimius Severus is judged favourable though as what befell the Empire under his sons' rule is characterised as being much worse:

“After his death the opinion that all men held of him was high indeed; for, in the long period that followed, no good came to the state from his sons, and after them, when many invaders came

²⁸² For example: Hdn. 4.7.6.

²⁸³ Herodian's equation of Domna with Jocasta.

²⁸⁴ Aur. Vict. *Caes.* 21.

²⁸⁵ Davenport 2017, 87.

²⁸⁶ SHA *Sev.* 18.8: *domi tamen minus cautus, qui uxorem Iuliam famosam adulteriis tenuit, ream etiam coniurationis.*

pouring in upon the state, the Roman Empire became a thing for free-booters to plunder.”²⁸⁷

This fragment shows that the *HA*-writer also saw the Severan period – at least after Septimius Severus – as a history of decline and crisis. Whether this sense of the Severan period as crisis is based on the historiographical sources the *HA* used – think of Herodian’s apocalyptic descriptions – or whether it was also the common historical consensus of the age in which he wrote is unclear.

The relationship between Caracalla and Domna is pictured as thoroughly perverse. The *HA* maintained the narrative wherein Caracalla murders Geta, although Geta is here his half-brother instead of full brother. Afterwards Caracalla entered in a relationship with Geta’s mother and his own stepmother, Domna. She is imagined as a beautiful woman who exposed her body in some capacity to her stepson who, stimulated by her beauty, stated – with a degree of hesitation – his desires toward her which Domna encouraged by stating that he is the emperor and does not have to submit to laws and thus has permission to engage with her in an incestuous liaison.²⁸⁸ Afterwards they entered into marriage. The *HA* emphasised how this was especially deplorable for an emperor, because he was the person responsible for forbidding these kinds of acts:

“By these words his violent passion was strengthened for the perpetration of a crime, and he contracted a marriage, which, were he in truth aware that he made the laws, it were his sole duty to forbid. For he took to wife his mother (by no other name should she be called), and to fratricide he added incest, for he joined to himself in marriage the woman whose son he had recently slain.”²⁸⁹

Domna is not presented as a tragic character who is forced into this detestable situation, but instead is presented as encouraging it, her ambition not stopping her from indulging in a bit of incest and joining into marriage with the murderer of her son. The eastern connotations of royal incestuous relationships were possibly clear for the readers of this passage. Hellenistic incestuous marriages of eastern royal families likely remained part of the Roman memory of the past and informed stereotypes. The fact that the Severans had such eastern characteristics in the *HA* certainly connected this behaviour with their background.

The positioning of Domna as a stepmother makes her part of the *topos* of the wicked stepmother that, as noted in Chapter 1, was a staple of Roman imperial historiography. The *HA*’s Domna has some hints of Suetonius’ and Tacitus’ Agrippina. Indeed, Caillan Davenport correctly

²⁸⁷ SHA. Sev. 19.6: *Iudicium de eo post mortem magnum omnium fuit, maxime quod diu nec a filiis eius boni aliquid rei publicae venit, et postea invadentibus multis rem publicam res Romana praedonibus direptui fuit.*

²⁸⁸ SHA M. Ant. 10.2.

²⁸⁹ SHA M. Ant. 10.3-4: *quo audito furor inconditus ad effectum criminis roboratus est nuptiasque eas celebravit quas, si sciret se leges dare vere, solus prohibere debuisset. matrem enim (non alio dicenda erat nomine) duxit uxorem et ad parricidium iunxit incestum, si quidem eam matrimonio sociavit cuius filium nuper occiderat.*

characterises the Late Antique portrayal of Caracalla as “a second Nero.”²⁹⁰ He has noted how the manner in which Domna presented herself to Caracalla is similar to the way in which Tacitus’ Agrippina appears to Nero, “coquettishly dressed and prepared for incest”.²⁹¹ Agrippina and Nero were the blueprints for the Severan incest narratives of the *HA* (or of the works it was based on). The claim of the *HA* that Caracalla wanted to murder Domna thus can be read as an invention mirroring Nero who murdered his mother.²⁹²

The *HA*’s evaluation of Caracalla sees him being defined as “the most cruel of men, and, to include all in a single phrase, a fratricide and committer of incest, the foe of his father, mother, and brother”.²⁹³ Domna is presented as the vilest of imperial women and seems to be based on earlier accounts of imperial incest. Caracalla is named a foe to Domna and she is indeed treated ghastly by her stepson in the narrative, but where, with accounts of other historians, Domna is mostly presented as a noble counterpart who had to endure Caracalla’s monstrous behaviour, in the *HA* sympathy for her is taken away by the claims of incest which she herself encouraged. The *HA* copies the tradition of Domna as a pitiful character in the life of her son, but the rumours of incestuous behaviour which might have its seeds in the account of Herodian, changes her character. However, in the end, she is still a rhetorical figure with the aim of showcasing the depths of Caracalla’s degeneracy. The unwholesome relationship between the two also had stronger implications for Caracalla. He, being the emperor, should protect the chastity and morality of sexual relationships. Levick has stated with regards to Domna that: “Stories of her adultery and incest have yet to be dealt with, but they were only to be expected when a woman has acquired power.”²⁹⁴ John Balsdon wrote that: “their [Caracalla’s and Domna’s] relations were good; so good, in fact, that the poisonous talk of the Roman gutter, in its monotonously unimaginative way, spread whispers of incest.”²⁹⁵ While Balsdon accurately notes the repetitious nature of the claims of incest, I suggest this notion of repetition needs to be placed foremost in the Roman historiographical genre. I propose, in answer to Levick, that, by using a narrative methodology, it has become apparent that the claim of incest came forth from the narrative blueprint that Agrippina formed for the treatment of young, bad emperors and that, of all people who could commit incest, the emperor was far out the worst, him being the official protector of sexual mores. Furthermore, as related in Chapter 1, imperial women were often showcased as ideals of *pudicitia* which was effective to subvert.

3.4. Conclusion Julia Domna

All three of the studied works are most interested in Domna’s role as mother. Dio and Herodian seemed to have a similar understanding of

²⁹⁰ Davenport 2017, 87.

²⁹¹ Tac. *Ann.* 14.2.1: *coptam in incesto paratam*.

²⁹² SHA *M. Ant.* 3.3; SHA *Geta* 7.3; Tac. *Ann.* 14.1-5.

²⁹³ SHA *M. Ant.* 11.5: *omnium durissimus et, ut uno complectamur verbo, parricida et incestus, patris, matris, fratris inimicus*.

²⁹⁴ Levick 2007, 33.

²⁹⁵ Balsdon 1977, 154.

Domna although Dio gave her multiple characterisations. The *HA*-author, however, stepped into – or created – a novel narrative wherein the most rudimentary understanding of the historical subjects – their genealogical relationship – has changed. Whether this is born from a desire of the *HA*-author (or someone he based his narrative of) to comply with long-established archetypes such as the wicked stepmother or whether there was just some historical mistake whereby the real relationship became obscured over time, is not clear.

The narrative and rhetorical functions that Domna was bestowed by the Roman authors radically determined her depiction. All three of the authors aimed to characterise Caracalla as a bad emperor. His mother – or in case of the *HA*, stepmother – played a fundamental part in achieving this. Whether it was by representing Domna as the archetypal, noble *Augusta* to contrast with her (step)son or as a dangerous ambitious creature, her depiction was primarily determined by this narrative purpose. All three of the authors are most interested in Domna as an imperial mother and *Augusta*. This role offered the most rhetorical muscle and the ideal of the imperial mother could be used as archetype or as something to subvert.

These subversions in the narratives are regularly copied by contemporary historians in their characterisations of Domna without considering the rhetorical functions. Michael Grant, for example, builds forth on Dio's claim that Domna took over copious amounts of governing duties from her son Caracalla and states that Domna was also the driving force behind her husband's pursuit of absolute power and had a pivotal role in his policy-making.²⁹⁶ The narrative inversion of Caracalla's and Domna's roles in the narrative is faithfully adopted and expounded on in the modern characterisation of Domna. Colleen Melone furthermore remarks that: "The Julias of the Severan dynasty are well-known for their tendency to step outside of their gender roles."²⁹⁷ I would, conversely, argue that their occasional portrayal as possessing traditionally male characteristics – such as Domna when she takes on governmental functions – and their moving into the male political domain is foremost a way for the Roman historiographers to emphasise their immorality and invert their behaviour with that of their sons and pose their sons as lacking in *virtus* as well as upenders of Roman mores.

Much of Dio's characterisation of Domna is accepted by, for example, Melone. Except her adultery: she sees Domna's characterisation as adulterer as being born from Plautianus' accusations against her.²⁹⁸ Besides this, Melone sees in Dio's highly *topos*-induced characterisation of Domna's clinging to power after her sons' deaths not a standard characterisation of the fear of returning to the private sphere, but the fears to not engage in the things that had become part of her identity: philosophy and politics which the imperial station had made acceptable for her to pursue but was

²⁹⁶ Grant 1996, 45-46.

²⁹⁷ Melone 2015, 27.

²⁹⁸ Melone 2015, 31; There is some merit in this as a possibly lowered prominence and status of Domna during Plautianus' prime influence at court (203-205 AD) might be confirmed by the reduced depiction of Domna on coinage during these years: Rowan 2011, 250-251.

however not deemed appropriate to common Roman women.²⁹⁹ Melone identifies roughly the same stages in Domna's characterisation as I have. But where I attribute the various emphasises on traits mostly to narrative demands, Melone sees in them a mirror of reality.³⁰⁰

Additionally, the characterisation of Dio's Domna as crafty is wholly because of her eastern background. It is therefore surprising that Irfhan Shahîd connects this stereotypical characterisation that is used by Dio to explain Caracalla's personality with a purely hypothetical assumption that Domna was partially behind the *Constitutio Antoniniana*. He hypothesised that her provincial background might have moved her to break down the distinction between the centre and provincial periphery.³⁰¹ This argument hinges on a faithful reading of Dio, because Shahîd refers to Dio's claim that this edict was an honour for the non-Romans of the Empire.³⁰² Shahîd conjectures that Dio's characterisation of Domna and Caracalla as "crafty" might have something to do with the role of Domna in this edict instead of seeing through the stereotypicality of this characterisation.

I believe that looking for explanations of Domna's historiographical representation in rhetorical functions and eastern stereotypes has proven to be productive in answering questions which traditional approached could not.

3.5. Cassius Dio's Julia Maesa and Julia Soaemias

While Dio's Julia Domna operated on her own accord, the Severan women after her are by Dio presented occasionally as operating in groups and without much discernable differences in characterisation. To look at them individually and try to separate them would be a disorderly affair. So, while the continuation of the discussion regarding the Severan women cannot be as neat and orderly as desired, this will however be the most comprehensible way.

After the death of Caracalla, a short interlude occurred in the Severan control of the Empire as Macrinus, the leader of the praetorians under Caracalla, laid claim on the dominion of Rome. He, being the first emperor not of the senatorial class, went against Dio's ideal of enlightened monarchy. In describing Macrinus' reign, Dio returned to the *omina imperii* to explain the signs indicating the shortness of his reign (just over a year).³⁰³ The shortness of Macrinus' reign is because of the promotion of Elagabalus as emperor. Exactly how Elagabalus is promoted to the imperial station according to Dio is a bit of muddled matter because of holes in the transmission of the text. However, it seems clear that one Eutychianus was the instigator of the affair. This Eutychianus posed Elagabalus as the natural son of Caracalla born out of wedlock with Julia Soaemias and sneaked him

²⁹⁹ Melone 2015, 49.

³⁰⁰ Melone 2015, 38: "By the end of her life, Julia Domna had changed from a mother and an accused-adulterous outcast to philosopher and a political advisor who had to guard her emotions, as well as present the image of a virginal divinity, yet the whole time she managed to maintain her imperial identity. Julia Domna took on her later identities in life in order to maintain her imperial identity."

³⁰¹ Shahîd 1984, 35.

³⁰² Dio 78.9.5.

³⁰³ Cass. Dio 79.(78).25.

into the army's camp – without the knowledge of his mother Soaemias and grandmother Maesa – to present him as the new Augustus. He dressed Elagabalus in similar clothes as Caracalla had worn in his youth to show the likeness and familial connection.³⁰⁴ Surprisingly, the Severan women played a lacklustre role – in contrast with the accounts that will later be discussed – in Dio's narrative of the initiative for Elagabalus ascent to imperial power. As this part of Dio's histories is much more concerned with Macrinus, Elagabalus and his female kin do not make a big appearance until the deciding battle between Macrinus and Elagabalus. Here Dio wrote how Gannys, the general of Elagabalus' army, having spent his life in luxury – insinuating the eastern perversion of the army – put up a weak fight on their part until Maesa and Soaemias intervened. These women leapt down from their chariots at the battlefield and by means of their lamentations stopped Elagabalus' men from fleeing and encouraged them to fight.³⁰⁵ Dio made no explicit moral judgments regarding the presence of these two women on the battlefield, but the ancient reader would likely have understood the transgressive nature of this action. The weak, eastern army had to be bolstered to fight and secure victory by the actions of women. As noted in Chapter 1, in historiography bad rulers were often claimed to bring with them corrupted gender roles which was often exemplified through manly women. With some effort, this anecdote can be read as Dio foreboding the unnatural gender aspects that will permeate throughout Elagabalus' reign and the invalidity of his coming to power and the incorrectness of his investiture.

Dio referred to Elagabalus with mocking names. One of these is *False Antoninus* (Ψευδαντωνῖνος).³⁰⁶ As stated in Chapter 2, the name *Antoninus* became more and more an imperial title. Dio cleverly played with both the titular and denominative meanings of the name. Both Elagabalus' validity of the throne and his parentage is questioned. The claim that Caracalla – whose regnal name was *Antoninus Pius* and who is often called *Antoninus* in Dio's account – really fathered Elagabalus is hereby also implicitly questioned. Dio subtracted from the official Severan narrative which claimed the biological connection between the two emperors.³⁰⁷

During book 80, the last book of Dio's histories, Elagabalus became the central character and the narrative takes a turn. Josiah Osgood has typified Dio's account of Elagabalus as a "secret history", an attempt to bring into the light the vile hidden life of the emperor in the vein of Seneca's *Apocolocyntosis* and the later Procopian account of Emperor Justinian.³⁰⁸ In this way Dio could easily convey his judgment regarding the reign of Elagabalus as "an outrage" as Fergus Millar defined it.³⁰⁹ Dio continued his creative nomenclature regarding his subjects. Caracalla became, later in the

³⁰⁴ Cass. Dio 79.(78).31.

³⁰⁵ Cass. Dio 79.(78).38.

³⁰⁶ For example: Dio 80.(79).1: Ὁ δὲ δὴ Ἀουῖτος εἶτε Ψευδαντωνῖνος εἶτε καὶ Ἀσσύριος ἢ καὶ Σαρδανάπαλλος Τιβερίνός τε.

³⁰⁷ The Elagabalan genealogical claim seems to have lost permanently as illustrated by the Severan family tree in the front of this thesis which mirrors the current academic consensus.

³⁰⁸ Osgood 2016, 179.

³⁰⁹ Millar 1964, 169.

narrative, instead of *Antoninus* referred to as “Tarautus” after a famous small and ugly gladiator to whom the emperor supposedly bore a considerable likeness.³¹⁰ Besides *Tarautus*, Dio called the emperor “Caracallus”, a name which has clearly stuck and referred to a Gallic cloak the emperor favoured. This nickname emphasised his un-Roman brutishness. Elagabalus, in the first sentence of book 80, is named “False Antoninus”, “the Assyrian”, “Sardanapalus”, and “Tiberinus”. “False Antoninus” and “Sardanapalus” are the names Dio continuously used in his text to denote the young emperor. Bequeathing derogatory names to “political opponents” appears to be the practice for millennia. As earlier noted, while relating the last moments of Domna’s life, Dio equated her with two eastern queens, here he continued this device and radicalised it by mentioning Elagabalus’ real name just a handful of times.³¹¹ “The Assyrian” is a clear name referring to his specific Syrian heritage. “Sardanapalus”, conversely, was – as discussed in Chapter 1 – the Roman name for the semi-mythical last ruler of the Assyrian Empire who was said to have worn make up and been a slave to his wealth and desire for luxury.³¹² Dio used the reign of this king as blueprint for his Elagabalan account and, additionally, hinted at his audience how Elagabalus should be perceived. It has been hypothesised that the extensive use of sinister sobriquets for Elagabalus is because of the *damnatio memoriae* that was put onto his name.³¹³ While this term is often associated with the destruction of a person’s memory it is, instead, best understood as the act of dishonouring someone’s memory.³¹⁴ If Dio indeed operated in accordance with the *damnatio memoriae* that befell Elagabalus, he accepted the central imperial narrative that was established in the period after Elagabalus’ reign. This may very well be the case, because, as shall be discussed below, Dio’s description of the reign of Severus Alexander seems to reflect a narrative of a return to normalcy and a disavowal of the tyrannical past, a common theme in the narratives created by emperors when they came to the throne.³¹⁵

The Severan women are claimed by Dio to have accompanied Elagabalus in much of his eastern behaviour. Implementing a facetious Suetonian trope, Dio claimed he would not describe certain despicable events, before extensively listing these exact events:

“I will not describe the barbaric chants which Sardanapalus, together with his mother and grandmother, chanted to Elagabalus [the god], or the secret sacrifices that he offered to him, slaying boys and using charms, in fact actually shutting up alive in the god’s temple a lion, a monkey, and a snake, and throwing in among them

³¹⁰ Dio hereby possibly subverted the imperial representation of Caracalla as presented through sculpture. For more on the historiographical deconstruction of imperial visages and Roman historiographical tendencies for physiognomy, see: Swain & Boys-Stones 2007; Gladhill 2012.

³¹¹ A numerical study would not be waterproof because of some missing lines of the Late Antique copies and the occasionally compressive tendencies of the copyists.

³¹² Diod. Sic. 2.

³¹³ Syme 1971, 145, 146.

³¹⁴ Osgood 2016, 179.

³¹⁵ Kemezis 2014, 5-6.

human genitals, and practising other unholy rites, while he invariably wore innumerable amulets.”³¹⁶

Here the narrative arrived at its fullest realisation of orientalism, eastern stereotypes, and fear mongering. One can wonder if the emphasis on the slaying of boys and the feeding of human genitals to various animals is some kind of metaphor for the emasculating force of the reign of Elagabalus and the East which had entered Rome. This would fit with Dio’s claim that Elagabalus sought to become more like woman with help of a surgical incision.³¹⁷ Additionally, the fact that Dio related the desire of Elagabalus to castrate himself to the deed of circumcising himself by discussing them in the same sentence created a muddled mound of eastern, feminine, and religious stereotypes that all are presented as – literally – emasculating.³¹⁸

While Dio’s account of the Severan women and the emperor performing weird oriental rites is very serious and condemning in itself, its reprehensibility in the context of Dio’s work becomes even clearer once the whole of Dio’s histories is considered. As mentioned in Chapter 2 of the current study, Dio did not shy away from a discreet bit of historical forgery in representing – or inventing – speeches. In an extensive speech attributed to Maecenas, Dio offered his own views of introducing foreign rites:

“Those who attempt to distort our religion with strange rites you should abhor and punish, not merely for the sake of the gods (since if a man despises these he will not pay honour to any other being), but because such men, by bringing in new divinities in place of the old, persuade many to adopt foreign practices, from which spring up conspiracies, factions, and cabals, which are far from profitable to a monarchy. Do not, therefore, permit anybody to be an atheist or a sorcerer.”³¹⁹

Writing his history during the Severan era, the connection between the recent history he wrote about and this speech from book 52 are clear. Dio likely incorporated it so that his criticism of Elagabalus would be more effective. Besides the Severan empresses joining Elagabalus in his absurd eastern behaviour, his mother Soaemias is claimed to have had an affair with Gannys, the general of Elagabalus armies and guardian-like person to

³¹⁶ Cass. Dio 80.(79).11: Ἵνα δὲ παρῶ τάς τε βαρβαρικὰς ῥῆδὰς ἃς ὁ Σαρδανάπαλλος τῷ Ἐλεγαβάλῳ ἤδε τῇ μητρὶ ἅμα καὶ τῇ τήθῃ, τὰς τε ἀπορρήτους θυσίας ἃς αὐτῷ ἔθνε, παῖδας σφαγιαζόμενος καὶ μαγγανεύμασι χρώμενος, ἀλλὰ καὶ ἐς τὸν ναὸν αὐτοῦ λέοντα καὶ πίθηκον καὶ ὄφιν τινὰ ζῶντα ἐγκατακλείσας, αἰδοῖά τε ἀνθρώπου ἐμβάλων, καὶ ἄλλ’ ἅττα ἀνοσιουργῶν, περιάπτοις τέ τισι μυρίοις ἀεί ποτε χρώμενος.

³¹⁷ Cass. Dio 80.(79).16.7.

³¹⁸ Cass. Dio 80.(79).11.1.

³¹⁹ Cass. Dio 52.36.2-3: καὶ προσέτι τὸ μὲν θεῖον πάντῃ πάντως αὐτός τε σέβου κατὰ τὰ πάτρια καὶ τοὺς ἄλλους τιμᾶν ἀνάγκαζε, τοὺς δὲ δὴ ξενίζοντάς τι περὶ αὐτὸ καὶ μίσει καὶ κόλαζε, μὴ μόνον τῶν θεῶν ἕνεκα, ὧν ὁ καταφρονήσας οὐδ’ ἄλλου ἄν τινος προτιμήσειεν, ἀλλ’ ὅτι καὶ καινὰ τινὰ δαιμόνια οἱ τοιοῦτοι ἀντεσφύροντες πολλοὺς ἀναπειθουσιν ἀλλοτριομεῖν, κάκ τούτου καὶ συνωμοσίαι καὶ συστάσεις ἐταιρεῖαι τε γίνονται, ἅπερ ἥκιστα μοναρχία συμφέρει. μήτ’ οὖν ἀθέω τινὶ μήτε γόητι συγχωρήσης εἶναι.

Elagabalus. The *pudicitia* of Soaemias as *Augusta* is, in doing so, questioned. Gannys exited Dio's narrative by a mortal blow of Elagabalus' hand, because Gannys pressured Elagabalus to not live luxuriously (something Gannys himself was earlier in the narrative blamed for).

Dio alternated between portraying Maesa and Soaemias as dangerous and low eastern women and as ideals of Roman *matronae*. Dio did credit them, for example, by placing them in line with the elite and esteemed people of Rome when relating the tale of Elagabalus' escapades as charioteer:

"...foremost men of his suite, both knights and imperial freedmen, and the very prefects, together with his grandmother, his mother and the women, and likewise various members of the senate, including Leo, the city prefect..."³²⁰

In this passage, the degenerate act of Elagabalus of having the most respected people of Rome watch him charioteer is told. Maesa and Soaemias are included in this list to show how high members of the court were forced to watch this. Another instance of Maesa being used in the text as archetypal ideal of an *Augusta* is when she is portrayed as giving good advice to her grandson. In the extreme emasculating account where Elagabalus is said to have started a serious affair with a low charioteer and slave named Hierocles and called himself this man's wife and rejoiced in being beaten by him, his grandmother Maesa offered advice opposing his behaviour, but Elagabalus threatened her when she did.³²¹ This fits within the *topos* of a young emperor ignoring good advice and an *Augusta* was the ideal person to have as the ignored advisor.

The Severan women played a role in the narrative concerning the demise of the young emperor. Elagabalus, who had adopted his cousin Severus Alexander, was quickly losing favour because of his sordid behaviour. He was jealous of his popular cousin who was protected by his mother, grandmother, and soldiers.³²² Maesa had shifted her support towards her other grandson, the son of Julia Mamaea, Severus Alexander.³²³ The mothers of the two boys were scheming to get the soldiers to support their respective sons.³²⁴ This comes close to the stereotype of imperial women as treacherous individuals. After Elagabalus made an attempt on his cousin's – and adopted son's – life, the praetorians killed the young emperor. He was eighteen years old when he died.

"His mother, who embraced him and clung tightly to him, perished with him; their heads were cut off and their bodies, after being stripped naked, were first dragged all over the city, and then the

³²⁰ Cass. Dio 80.(79).14.2: καὶ ἱππῆς καὶ Καισάρειοι, καὶ οἱ ἑπαρχοὶ αὐτοὶ ἢ τε τήθη καὶ ἡ μήτηρ καὶ αἱ γυναῖκες καὶ προσέτι καὶ τῶν ἐκ τῆς βουλῆς ἄλλοι τε καὶ ὁ Λέων ὁ πολίρχο.

³²¹ Cass. Dio 80.(79).15.4.

³²² Cass. Dio 80.(79).19.2.

³²³ Cass. Dio 80.(79).19.4.

³²⁴ Cass. Dio 80.(79).20.

mother's body was cast aside somewhere or other, while his was thrown into the river."³²⁵

Dio, again, lets his imperial subject die in the arms of his mother, but here it bears none of the *pathos* and dramatic meaning it did with the account of Domna and Geta.³²⁶ It is stated matter-of-factly with no summary of her morality.

Dio's characterisation and rhetorical use of Maesa and Soaemias alternated between them being examples of eastern depravity and, primarily in case for Maesa, as standard stock characters of imperial womanhood who gave good advice only to be ignored. They are not outwardly blamed for Elagabalus' wrongdoings, but their eastern nature, by definition, is problematic and worked tarnishing on his character. Dio's belief that foreign and dangerous practices should not be admitted into Rome reflects negatively on Maesa and Soaemias who were part of this development.

3.6. Herodian's Julia Maesa and Julia Soaemias

While Julia Domna is nowadays seen as a paragon of imperial female power, in reality her sister Julia Maesa has, in all likelihood, made a deeper footprint in the soil of Roman history. This is certainly how Herodian depicted her. Where Dio gave the job of king-maker of Elagabalus to Eutychianus with Maesa as just the fiscal facilitator, Herodian assigned this questionable honour completely to Maesa. Herodian introduced Maesa by her background, stating that she was a Phoenician and wrongly claimed that she was named after the Syrian city of Emesa where her family hailed from.³²⁷ Together with her eastern heritage she is immediately given a distinctly eastern trait, wealth.³²⁸

Herodian wrote how the army, when stationed in the East, came upon the lavishly decorated temple of the god Elagabalus where a beautiful boy-priest in expensive barbarian garb was performing the rites to this god. Especially the soldiers, Herodian remarked, became bewitched and captivated by the beautiful, dancing boy who is described as resembling a

³²⁵ Cass. Dio 80.(79).20: καὶ αὐτῷ καὶ ἡ μήτηρ (περιπλακεῖσα γὰρ ἀπρίξ εἶχετο) συναπόλετο. καὶ αἱ τε κεφαλαὶ αὐτῶν ἀπεκόπησαν, καὶ τὰ σώματα γυμνωθέντα τὸ μὲν πρῶτον διὰ πάσης τῆς πόλεως ἐσύρη, ἔπειτα τὸ μὲν τῆς γυναικὸς ἄλλως πως ἐρρίφη, τὸ δὲ ἐκείνου ἐς τὸν ποταμὸν ἐνεβλήθη; Where Dio has Geta clinging to his mother Domna while being murdered, he inverted this mother-son dynamic and had the mother cling to the son when describing the deaths of Soaemias and Elagabalus.

³²⁶ The repetitiveness of the Severan empresses dying together with their sons should now be clear. If this was indeed how it occurred every time, this would point towards the radical connectivity of these women with their son's reigns and to what extent they were considered an extension or central to their sons reigns. This is convincing when taking into account the loose *damnatio memoriae* that befell various Severans and their mothers and how there are multiple material sources that attest the destruction of statues and inscriptions related to the Severan empresses, see: Varner 2001.

³²⁷ The name "Maesa" is believed to come from the Arabic "Masa", meaning to "walk with a swinging gait", see: Shahîd 1984, 41, accepted by Birley: Birley 1999, 222.

³²⁸ Hdn. 5.3.2.

statue of Dionysus – thereby insinuating a kind of intoxicating quality to this boy.³²⁹ The perverting nature of the East and the specific danger this had to soldiers is here indicated. This boy, incidentally, was named Bassianus and would be the later Emperor Marcus Aurelius Antoninus Augustus (Elagabalus) with help of his imperial grandmother:

“The soldiers used to go regularly to the city and to the temple, supposedly to worship, but they enjoyed watching the lad. Some of them were clients of Maesa and people who had fled to her for protection. Because they admired the boy, she told them (what may or may not have been true) that he was actually the natural son of Antoninus [Caracalla], although it was assumed he had a different father. Antoninus, she said, had slept with her daughters when they were young and able to bear children, at the time when she was living in the palace with her sister. When the soldiers heard this, they passed the news on gradually to their fellow soldiers, and soon made it so publicized that it got round the whole army. The story went that Maesa had loads of wealth, all of which she was willing to distribute to the soldiers if they restored the empire to her family. The soldiers agreed that, if the family came secretly during the night, they would open the gates to take them all in and would declare the son of Antoninus emperor. The old woman agreed to this because she would rather have risked any danger than live as an ordinary person, apparently rejected.”³³⁰

Maesa is here presented as a woman who is unwilling to return to her private station and wants to return to the imperial palace on the Palatine. Not yet reaching the desperation of falling from power as the *topos* in Dio’s work where he painted Domna with, but a similar theme nonetheless. Maesa is presented by Herodian as ruling the Empire together with her grandson’s advisors and being persuasive in her wishes as her determination to return to Rome was followed:

“The immediate business in the East was dealt with by his grandmother and his circle of advisers because he was young and without administrative experience or education. But he did not delay

³²⁹ Hdn. 5.3.8.

³³⁰ Hdn. 5.3.9-11: φοιτῶντες οὖν οἱ στρατιῶται ἐκάστοτε ἐς τὴν πόλιν, ἕς τε τὸν νεῶν ἰόντες θρησκείας δὴ χάριν, τὸ μειράκιον ἡδέως ἔβλεπον. ἦσαν δέ τινες ἐξ αὐτῶν καὶ πρόσφυγες οἰκεῖοί τε τῆς Μαίσης, πρὸς οὓς ἐκείνη θαυμάζοντας τὸν παῖδα, εἴτε πλασαμένη εἴτε καὶ ἀληθεύουσα, ἐξεῖπεν ὅτι ἄρα Ἀντωνίνου υἱὸς ἐστὶ φύσει, τῇ δὲ ὑπολήψει ἄλλου δοκοίη· ἐπιφοιτῆσαι γὰρ αὐτὸν ταῖς θυγατρᾶσιν αὐτῆς νέαις τε οὖσαις καὶ ὡραίαις, καθ’ ὃν καιρὸν ἐν τοῖς βασιλείοις σὺν τῇ ἀδελφῇ διέτριβεν. ὅπερ ἐκεῖνοι ἀκούσαντες, τοῖς συστρατιώταις κατ’ ὀλίγον ἀπαγγέλλοντες διαβόητον ἐποίησαν τὴν φήμην, ὥς ἐς πᾶν χωρῆσαι τὸ στρατιωτικόν. τῇ δὲ Μαίση ἐλέγετο σωροὺς εἶναι χρημάτων, ἐκείνην δὲ ἐτοίμως πάντα προέσθαι τοῖς στρατιώταις, εἰ τὴν βασιλείαν τῷ γένει ἀνανεώσαιτο. ὥς δὲ συνέθεντο, νύκτωρ εἰ κατέλθοιεν λαθόντες, ἀνοίξειν τὰς πύλας καὶ δέξεσθαι ὅπαν τὸ γένος ἔνδον βασιλέα τε καὶ υἱὸν ἀποδείξειν Ἀντωνίνου, ἐπέδωκεν ἑαυτὴν ἢ πρεσβῦτις, ἐλομένη πάντα κίνδυνον ἀναρρῖψαι μᾶλλον ἢ ἰδιωτεύειν καὶ δοκεῖν ἀπερρῖφθαι.

long in setting out for Rome, where Maesa particularly was anxious to get to the imperial palace she had been used to.”³³¹

Maesa is portrayed as having abundant amounts of power, while also being characterised as an advisor who could not control her imperial grandson. Where Dio portrayed Maesa as fully taking part in the eastern habits and excesses of Elagabalus, Herodian has Maesa advise Elagabalus to present himself as more Roman:

“Any Roman or Greek dress he [Elagabalus] loathed because, he claimed, it was made out of wool, which is a cheap material. Only seric silk was good enough for him. He appeared in public accompanied by flutes and drums, no doubt because he was honouring his god with special rites. Maesa was extremely worried when she saw this, and continually tried to persuade him to change into Roman clothes now that he was going to come to Rome and enter the senate house. If he was wearing a strange, completely barbarous dress, he would straight away offend the spectators who were not used to it and considered this kind of finery more appropriate for women than men. But Antoninus rejected the advice of the old woman and anyone else’s attempts to persuade him.”³³²

Maesa is presented as attempting to make Elagabalus behave as a Roman should, possessing *romanitas* and the imperial quality of dressing modestly which contrasted the feminine luxurious oriental garb he favoured. She is presented here as the ideal *Augusta* who offered good advice. This good advice was, as so often happened in Roman historiography, ignored.

A substantial summary of Elagabalus’ barbaric eastern deeds and behaviours is given by Herodian. One of the worst was the accusation that Elagabalus married a Vestal Virgin.³³³ Hereby not only introducing abhorrent eastern habits, but breaking the divine Roman laws. His mockery of marriage is not befitting an emperor who should protect this. When Elagabalus started to behave more erratic, Maesa became gripped by the fear that his reign might not have the longevity she desired and that she would become a private citizen yet again.³³⁴ Earlier this fear was hinted at, but here it was

³³¹ Hdn. 5.5.1: τὰ τε τῆς ἀρχῆς ὑπεδέξατο, διοικηθέντων αὐτῷ κατὰ τὴν ἀνατολὴν τῶν ἐπειγόντων ὑπὸ τε τῆς μάμης καὶ τῶν συνόντων φίλων (αὐτὸς γὰρ ἦν νέος τε τὴν ἡλικίαν, πραγμάτων τε καὶ παιδείας ἄπειρος), οὐ πολλοῦ χρόνου διατρίψας εἶχε περὶ ἔξοδον, σπευδούσης μάλιστα τῆς Μαΐσης ἐς τὰ συνήθη ἑαυτῇ βασιλεία Ῥώμης.

³³² Hdn. 5.5.4-6: Ῥωμαϊκὴν δὲ ἢ Ἑλληνικὴν πᾶσαν ἐσθῆτα ἐμυσάττετο, ἐρίου φάσκων εἰργάσθαι, πράγματος εὐτελοῦς· τοῖς δὲ Σηρῶν ὑφάσμασι μόνοις ἡρέσκετο. προΐει τε ὑπὸ αὐλοῖς καὶ τυμπάνοις, τῷ θεῷ δὴθεν ὀργιάζων. ἡ δὲ Μαῖσα ταῦτα ὀρώσα πάνυ ἥσχαλλε, πείθειν τε λιπαροῦσα ἐπειρᾶτο μεταμφιέσασθαι τὴν Ῥωμαίων στολὴν μέλλοντά [τε] ἐς τὴν πόλιν ἀφίξεσθαι καὶ ἐς τὴν σύγκλητον εἰσελεύσεσθαι, μὴ ἄλλοδαπὸν ἢ παντάπασι βάρβαρον τὸ σχῆμα ὀφθὲν εὐθὺς λυπήσῃ τοὺς ἰδόντας, ἀήθεις τε ὄντας καὶ οἰομένους τὰ τοιαῦτα καλλωπίσματα οὐκ δάνδρασιν ἀλλὰ θηλείαις πρέπειν. ὁ δὲ καταφρονήσας τῶν ὑπὸ τῆς πρεσβύτιδος λεχθέντων, μηδ’ ἄλλω τινὶ πεισθεῖς.

³³³ Hdn. 5.6.3.

³³⁴ Hdn. 5.7.1.

made explicit. According to Herodian, Maesa started to scheme and persuade Elagabalus to adopt her other grandson, Severus Alexander, as his son.³³⁵ In Dio's narrative this decision is presented as being Elagabalus' own plan. Here the unnatural adoption of a teenager by another teenager is blamed on Maesa as a way to stay in power. She convinced Elagabalus to do this by remarking this would mean he could focus on his god and divine functions while matters of state would be given to Severus Alexander who would become Caesar under him.³³⁶ Herodian's central thesis of the unsuitability of youngsters on the imperial throne dictated him to emphasise the ridiculous nature of this idea:

"Alexander was appointed Caesar and shared the consulship with Antoninus [Elagabalus]. When the latter entered the senate to have it ratified, everyone made a complete farce of it by voting as they were told and declaring the emperor himself to be a father at his age of about sixteen, and Alexander his son, when now in his twelfth year."³³⁷

Elagabalus thus accepted Maesa's ridiculous plan, but he became increasingly jealous of his cousin-son's popularity and plotted to kill him. These attempts, however, were foiled by Maesa who was familiar with imperial intrigue.³³⁸ The soldiers, hearing of Elagabalus' attempt at the life of Severus Alexander, resorted to murder Elagabalus and his mother.³³⁹ Upon the death of her one grandson, Maesa's other grandson came to the imperial throne thus safeguarding her position in the imperial palace. She, together with Julia Mamaea, tutored the new young emperor.³⁴⁰ After surrounding the new emperor with plenty of good advisors, Maesa died:

"After a long period of this type of government in the empire, Maesa, already an old woman, died and received imperial honours and deification, according to Roman practice."³⁴¹

The trajectory of Maesa's life in Herodian sees her first bringing Elagabalus' to power. She tried to control his bad behaviour, but she was unable to extinguish the fire she herself had lit. Herodian probably adopted the *topos* of fear of returning to private life from Dio in his characterisation of Maesa. This fear resulted in her scheming and having a big influence on the imperial events of the day. She sort of repents for her sin of putting Elagabalus on the imperial throne by promoting Severus Alexander and

³³⁵ Hdn. 5.7.1.

³³⁶ Hdn. 5.7.2.

³³⁷ Hdn. 5.7.4: ἀποδείκνυται δὴ Καῖσαρ ὁ Ἀλέξανδρος, ὑπατός τε σὺν αὐτῷ Ἀντωνίνῳ. κατελθὼν τε ἐς τὴν σύγκλητον ταῦτα ἐκύρωσε, γελοιότατα ψηφισαμένων πάντων ἃ ἐκελεύοντο, πατέρα μὲν ἐκεῖνον δοκεῖν ἔτη γεγονότα περὶ που ἑκκαίδεκα, τὸν Ἀλέξανδρον δὲ υἱὸν τοῦ δωδεκάτου ἐπιβαίνοντα.

³³⁸ Hdn. 5.8.3.

³³⁹ Hdn. 5.8.8.

³⁴⁰ Hdn. 5.8.9.

³⁴¹ Hdn. 6.1.4: ἐπὶ πολὺ δ' οὕτω τῆς ἀρχῆς διοικουμένης, ἡ μὲν Μαῖσα πρεσβῦτις ἤδη οὖσα ἀνεπαύσατο τοῦ βίου, ἔτυχέ τε βασιλικῶν τιμῶν, καὶ ὥς νομίζουσι Ῥωμαῖοι.

being a good advisor to him and gathering wise men around him. Maesa has a decidedly bigger role in the development of Roman history in Herodian than she had in Dio. As will become apparent, Herodian's characterisation of Maesa has swayed more modern historians.

Elagabalus' mother Julia Soaemias stands out by her absence in Herodian's narrative. She is huddled together with Mamaea in her characterisation of an adulterous woman who had an affair with Caracalla. Herodian claimed this was something she, together with her sister and her mother, bragged about:

"Both the daughter of Maesa, and the old lady herself, used to boast of the adultery of Antoninus (Severus' son), to make the troops think the boys were his sons and so favour them."³⁴²

Herodian found it hard to decide whether to characterise these women as promiscuous or as scheming. If they only falsely claimed their children were the biological sons of Caracalla when they in reality were not, their characterisation of adulterous women became less potent. While Herodian in all likeliness did not believe the genealogical scheme, he did not make it completely explicit and thus could pose Soaemias (and Mamaea) as both scheming and adulterous at the same time. He mentioned the Severan attempt at creating a historical narrative of biological continuity between Caracalla and Elagabalus, but he did not present it as historical fact or consensus but as something that never reached this stage. This is what Kemezis meant when stating that during the Severans historical consensus were less often reached.

3.7. The *Historia Augusta's* Julia Maesa and Julia Soaemias

The *HA's* narrative of the sexual wantonness of the Severan era finds its fullest realisation in the eye-watering account of the life and deeds of Elagabalus. Julia Maesa, Soaemias, and Mamaea are introduced in the biography of Macrinus where the now familiar investiture narrative of Elagabalus is related. Maesa is described as being expelled from the imperial palace through Macrinus' arrogance.³⁴³ The richness of Maesa is noted and also claimed to be the reason of Elagabalus' wasteful attitude towards money.³⁴⁴ Maesa's money is, according to the *HA*, the reason for the legions to desert Macrinus and join Elagabalus' cause and hail him as the new Roman emperor – or literally; as the new *Antoninus*.³⁴⁵ The *HA* thus sides with Herodian in posing Maesa as the central player in Elagabalus' investiture. The central role of Maesa, Soaemias, and Mamaea in the coming to power of Elagabalus is noted when it is stated that Macrinus, on hearing the news regarding his new competitor, marvelled at the audacity of the women and regarded them with contempt.³⁴⁶

³⁴² Hdn. 5.7.3: Ἀντωνίνου τοῦ Σεβήρου παιδὸς μοιχείαν ἀμφότεραι αἱ Μαΐσης θυγατέρες αὐτὴ τε ἡ πρεσβῦτις ἐσεμνύνετο πρὸς τὸ τοὺς στρατιώτας στέργειν τοὺς παῖδας, υἱοὺς ἐκείνου δοκοῦντας εἶναι.

³⁴³ SHA *Opil. Macr.* 9.1.

³⁴⁴ SHA *Opil. Macr.* 9.5.

³⁴⁵ SHA *Opil. Macr.* 9.5-6.

³⁴⁶ SHA *Opil. Macr.* 10.1.

The *Vita Heliogabali* of the *HA* is made up of two parts; a narrative part in which the reign of the emperor is told chronologically and a second non-narrative part where all the perverted deeds of Elagabalus that did not fit in the more narrative first part are listed. The *HA* opens its biography of Elagabalus with the tantalising statement that the life of such a vile person should normally not have been submitted to parchment:

“The life of Elagabalus Antoninus, also called Varius, I should never have put in writing – hoping that it might not be known that he was emperor of the Romans –, were it not that before him this same imperial office had had a Caligula, a Nero, and a Vitellius. But, just as the selfsame earth bears not only poisons but also grain and other helpful things, not only serpents but flocks as well, so the thoughtful reader may find himself some consolation for these monstrous tyrants by reading of Augustus, Trajan, Vespasian, Hadrian, Pius, Titus, and Marcus. At the same time he will learn of the Romans’ discernment, in that these last ruled long and died by natural deaths, whereas the former were murdered, dragged through the streets, officially called tyrants, and no man wishes to mention even their names.”³⁴⁷

In stating the desire for the erasure of Elagabalus’ emperorship from the record and the minds of the Romans, an echo of the *damnatio memoriae* may be perceived.

In Elagabalus’ life in the *HA* the dangers of gifting political power to women is made explicit. He, being the last of the Antonines, as result of the *nomen antoninorum topos* that the *HA* follows, had to be depicted as the zenith of imperial depravity and the high degree of political meddling of women is fundamental for this characterisation. In this biography, the destructive forces of femininity are fully explored. Both in the young emperor’s personal life as well as in his policies, which, according to the *HA*, saw women gaining political influence to a degree not seen in Rome before or after. Femininity is positioned as a danger to the Roman state and part of a foreign interfering power.

Elagabalus is claimed to have been wholly under control of his mother Soaemias, who is here named *Symiamira*.³⁴⁸ The author of the *HA*

³⁴⁷ SHA *Heliogab.* 1: *Vitam Heliogabali Antonini, qui Varius etiam dictus est, numquam in litteras misissem, ne quis fuisse Romanorum principem sciret, nisi ante Caligulas et Nerones et Vitellios hoc idem habuisset imperium. sed cum eadem terra et venena ferat et frumentum atque alia salutaria, eadem serpentes et cicures, compensationem sibi lector diligens faciet, cum legerit Augustum, Traianum, Vespasianum, Hadrianum, Pium, Titum, Marcum contra hos prodigiosos tyrannos. simul intellet Romanorum iudicia, quod illi et diu imperarunt et exitu naturali functi sunt, hi vero interfecti, tracti, tyranni etiam appellati, quorum nec nomina libet dicere.*

³⁴⁸ Perhaps this is because of the similarity to the name *Semiramis*, the name of the semi-mythical Assyrian queen that also inspired Dio for his later characterisation of Domna. The *HA* also likened Zenobia to Semiramis (as well as to Dido and Cleopatra) (SHA *Tyr. Trig.* 27.1) and, like Soaemias, claimed that Zenobia attended public gatherings like a man. The supposed transgressions of these women into male spaces might have warranted their equation with Semiramis or she functioned

remarked that the emperor did no public business without her consent.³⁴⁹ Soaemias is thus painted as a controlling mother who in effect held the reins of the Empire in her hands. After this statement, she is immediately said to have lived like a harlot and that her liaisons with Caracalla were so notorious that Elagabalus was supposed to be his son.³⁵⁰ The *HA*-writer seems to have been less critical of the notion that Elagabalus was Caracalla's biological son. In the biographies of Caracalla and Macrinus, Elagabalus is straightforwardly called his son.³⁵¹ Other times, Soaemias' harlot-like behaviour is claimed to have resulted in Elagabalus nickname *Varius*, because he was fathered by various men.³⁵² The *HA* does not discuss the possibility that the genealogical link between Caracalla and Elagabalus is a Severan propagandist scheme contrary to Dio's and Herodian's assessments of this dubious lineage. The *HA* is rather inconsistent in its genealogical definition of the kinship of Caracalla and Elagabalus, but maintains Soaemias' sexual depravity.

The extent in which it was claimed that women were the effective rulers of the Empire during Elagabalus' reign is seen in the account how Soaemias gained access to the Senate:

"Then, when he [Elagabalus] held his first audience with the senate, he gave orders that his mother should be asked to come into the senate-chamber. On her arrival she was invited to a place on the consuls' bench and there she took part in the drafting – that is to say, she witnessed the drawing up of the senate's decree. And Elagabalus was the only one of all the emperors under whom a woman attended the senate like a man, just as though she belonged to the senatorial order."³⁵³

This deeply subverting act by Elagabalus and Soaemias is reminiscent of similar claims regarding Agrippina who, by Tacitus, is described as having attended senate meetings silently and hidden behind a curtain.³⁵⁴ Whether the writer of the *HA* (or a source he based himself on that claimed a similar thing) was aware of Tacitus' account (which is likely), or, whether it was a new invention, the incredibly profanity of this act is clear.³⁵⁵ Where Agrippina at least had the sense to remain silent and not offend the senators with her physical appearance, Soaemias is depicted as openly taking part in the Empire's legislation. The detail that she was seated on the bench of the

as blueprint for the representation of Soaemias and Zenobia. However, this is all rather speculative.

³⁴⁹ SHA *Heliogab.* 2.1.

³⁵⁰ SHA *Heliogab.* 2.1.

³⁵¹ SHA *M. Ant.* 9.2; *Opil. Macr.* 9.2.

³⁵² SHA *Heliogab.* 2.2.

³⁵³ SHA *Heliogab.* 4: *Deinde ubi primum diem senatus habuit, matrem suam in senatum rogari iussit. quae cum venisse, vocata ad consulum subsellia scribingo adfuit, id est senatus consulti conficiendi testis, solusque omnium imperatorum fuit, sub quo mulier quasi clarissima loco viri senatum ingressa est.*

³⁵⁴ Tac. *Ann.* 13.5.1.

³⁵⁵ The fact that the writer of the *HA* also appears to have used Tacitus' description of Agrippina as inspiration for the life of Domna points towards him being familiar with Tacitus' work.

consuls who were traditionally among the most powerful men of the Empire is no accident. By seating Soaemias there, the author of the *HA* showed how, during the reign of Elagabalus, women upended the authority of the sacred constitutional magistracy. The *HA* also placed, in another segment, Maesa in the Senate: “he [Elagabalus] [...] entered the senate, inviting his grandmother to the session and escorting her to a seat.”³⁵⁶ Directly after the account of Soaemias entering the Senate, the *HA* expounded on the bizarreness of women in government. As if the participation of a woman in the Senate was not adequately understood by the reader as unnatural, ridiculous, and undesirable, the *HA* related how Elagabalus created a special women’s senate:

“He [Elagabalus] also established a *senaculum*, or women’s senate, on the Quirinal Hill. [...] under the influence of Symiamira [Soaemias] absurd decrees were enacted concerning rules to be applied to matrons, namely, what kind of clothing each might wear in public, who was to yield precedence and to whom, who was to advance to kiss another, who might ride in a chariot, on a horse, on a pack-animal, or on an ass, who might drive in a carriage drawn by mules or in one drawn by oxen, who might be carried in a litter, and whether the litter might be made of leather, or of bone, or covered with ivory or with silver, and lastly, who might wear gold or jewels on her shoes.”³⁵⁷

The absurdity of women in power is by the *HA* showcased through this *senaculum*. While men made the important rules regarding the government of the Empire, women were only interested in unimportant, trivial matters. The writer of the *HA* showed in this fragment how these trivialities are so embedded into the female psyche that, even when women were bestowed any amount of political power, they could not focus on serious stately affairs. The ridiculousness of women harbouring political power is in this account emphasised in order to emphasise the absurdity of Elagabalus’ conduct.

The reign of Elagabalus is portrayed as a bizarre inverted era wherein women held most of the power. The young emperor himself is also made as female as possible in his biography. It is, for example, heavily insinuated that he indulged in passivity in sexual conduct.³⁵⁸ He is also

³⁵⁶ SHA *Heliogab* 15.6: *...processit ad senatum, avia sua ad senatum vocata et ad sellam perducta.*

³⁵⁷ SHA *Heliogab* 4.3-4: *Fecit et in colle Quirinali senaculum, id est mulierum senatum, in quo ante fuerat conventus matronalis, sollemnibus dumtaxat diebus et si umquam aliqua matrona consularis coniugii ornamentis esset donata, quod veteres imperatores ad finibus detulerunt et iis maxime quae nobilitatos maritos non habuerant, ne innobilitatae remanerent. sed Symiamira facta sunt senatus consulta ridicula de legibus matronalibus: quae quo vestitu incederet, quae cui cederet, quae ad cuius osculum veniret, quae pilento, quae equo, quae sagmario, quae asino veheretur, quae carpento mulari, quae boum, quae sella veheretur, et utrum pellicia an ossea an eborata an argentata, et quae aurum vel gemmas in calciamentis haberent.*

³⁵⁸ SHA *Heliogab* 5.1; 5.3.

claimed to have performed as a transvestite and played the role of Venus in a staging of the myth of Paris and acting in a sacrilegious and sexually depraved manner.³⁵⁹ Additionally, he is connected with the eunuchs of the oriental cults.³⁶⁰ The absence of male genitals is a consistent phenomenon in the Roman imagination of the East. Eunuchs are in the *HA* equated with eastern rule and often part of the downfall of emperors.

“It must be added, furthermore, that he [Severus Alexander] never had eunuchs in his councils or in official positions — these creatures alone cause the downfall of emperors, for they wish them to live in the manner of foreign nations or as the kings of the Persians...”³⁶¹

Mentions of how Severus Alexander during his reign dismissed and disliked eunuchs are plentiful.³⁶² The two young emperors are differentiated in morality and degree of easternness through their attitudes towards eunuchs which were, in a sense, personifications of the emasculated East.

The *HA* used the life of Elagabalus as a treatise regarding the argument that giving power to women or feminine men is detrimental to the success of the Empire and an unhealthy and absurd notion. This is connected with Elagabalus’ eastern habits whose ethic transgressions are most clearly shown in Elagabalus’ religious policies. The interconnectedness of gender, sexual, and religious transgressions are shown in the claims that Elagabalus violated the chastity of a Vestal Virgin and tried to carry away the sacred shrine to the goddess and place it in the *Elagabalum*, the Palatine temple to the Syrian god Elagabalus.³⁶³ The East is invading Rome, upending the traditional Roman mores. The biography of Elagabalus reads as a listing of all the most grotesque Roman stereotypes concerning the East. Particularly the second half of the biography, which constitutes a summation of the emperor’s vices, consists of all imaginable eastern immoralities, mostly focusing on wealth, luxury, ridiculously extravagant banquets, and sexual depravity. One of which is the famous smothering of his guests under a floral avalanche.³⁶⁴ The contempt for the Senate is also shown in the claim that Elagabalus called them “slaves in togas”.³⁶⁵ The women in his life are barely mentioned in this non-narrative second part regarding his extremities, besides how his grandmother, Julia Maesa, who protested that Elagabalus was in danger of squandering all his money.³⁶⁶ The *topos* of the *Augusta* as a giver of good advice is, besides this instance, absent in this narrative.

The writer of the *HA* wrote how the depravities and un-Roman behaviour of Elagabalus were so offensive to the Romans soldiers that they

³⁵⁹ SHA *Heliogab* 5.4-5.

³⁶⁰ SHA *Heliogab* 7.2.

³⁶¹ SHA *Alex. Sev.* 66.3: *huc accedit quod eunuchos nec in consiliis nec in ministeriis habuit, qui soli principes perdunt, dum eos more gentium aut regum Persarum volunt vivere.*

³⁶² For example: SHA *Alex. Sev.* 66.4.

³⁶³ SHA *Heliogab* 6.6-9.

³⁶⁴ SHA *Heliogab*. 21.5.

³⁶⁵ SHA *Heliogab*. 20.1: *mancipia togata.*

³⁶⁶ SHA *Heliogab*. 31.4.

turned away from him and favoured his cousin, Severus Alexander.³⁶⁷ In the end, the soldiers resolved to murder Elagabalus and “set the state free”.³⁶⁸ The death of Elagabalus and his mother took place in a similar fashion as in the other discussed histories. The death of Soaemias is also explicitly mentioned at the end of the *HA*’s Elagabalan narrative:

“With him was also slain his mother Symiamira [Soaemias], a most depraved woman and one worthy of such a son. And the first measure enacted after the death of Antoninus Elagabalus provided that no woman should ever enter the senate, and that whoever should cause a woman to enter, his life should be declared doomed and forfeited to the kingdom of the dead.”³⁶⁹

This section ends the historical narrative of the *HA*. The admittance of women into the male senatorial sphere can thus be read as the effective conclusion of the biography and the greatest sin of Elagabalus’ astronomically sinful reign. The death of Elagabalus is to the *HA* also the death of the last of the Antonines:

“He was the last of those in public life to bear the name Antoninus, and all knew that in the case of this Antoninus his life was as false as his name.”³⁷⁰

With the biography of Elagabalus the so-called *Nomen Antoninorum* motif comes to an end. The biography of Elagabalus thus constitutes a palpable break in the grand narrative of the *HA*.

3.8. Conclusion Julia Maesa and Julia Soaemias

Where Dio’s Maesa played a role in the investiture of Elagabalus, primarily as financial supporter and encourager of the troops, but taking a supportive role to Eutychianus, Herodian granted Maesa a much larger role in the promotion of her grandson. Herodian blamed Maesa’s unnatural ambition to remain at the centre of Roman power as resulting in Elagabalus reign. The *HA*-author sided with Herodian with regards to the scope of Maesa’s role. While contemporary historians regularly emphasise Dio’s historical reliability over Herodian’s, this Herodian narrative seems to be the most influential over time. The absence of much of a discernable character – besides eastern and sometimes as archetypal *Augusta* – in Dio makes historians opt for the more extensive characterisation in Herodian; even when this is primarily based on the *topos* of fear of returning to the private sphere. Balson, for example, adopted this *topos*-induced characterisation: “she [Maesa] felt an acute nostalgia for life – indeed for palace life – in

³⁶⁷ SHA *Heliogab.* 15.1; 15.3.

³⁶⁸ SHA *Heliogab.* 16.5: *liberandam rem publicam*.

³⁶⁹ SHA *Heliogab.* 18.2-3: *Occisa est cum eo et mater Symiamira probrosissima mulier et digna filio. cautumque ante omnia post Antoninum Heliogabalum ne umquam mulier senatum ingrederetur, utique inferis eius caput dicaretur devovereturque per quem id esset factum*.

³⁷⁰ SHA *Heliogab.* 33.8: *Hic finis Antoninorum nomini in re publica fuit, scientibus cunctis istum Antoninum tam vita falsum fuisse quam nomine*.

Rome”.³⁷¹ The role of Maesa as kingmaker is then emphasised. Melone adopts the same stance as Herodian and the *HA* concerning Maesa’s involvement in the promotion of Elagabalus instead of Dio’s, thus making Maesa more influential.³⁷² Herodian’s and the *HA*’s more substantial role of Maesa’s in Elagabalus’ investiture might be to emphasise the regime’s gendered depravity. Additionally, Melone accepts the cunningness that is bestowed on Maesa out of a typically ethnographic and stereotypical drive and sees this as part of her actual character.³⁷³ Guy De La Bédoyère also followed the greater role of Maesa as told in Herodian and the *HA* in his work on Roman empresses, emphasising that Maesa and her daughters “proceeded with zealous and unanimous determination to turn the Roman world into their personal dominion.”³⁷⁴ Soaemias is bestowed fewer extensive characterisations and purpose in the narratives.³⁷⁵ She is seen defending her son and depicted as a harlot. She is often huddled together with her sister and her mother. Possibly, the actual visibility of Maesa made her a more potent rhetorical tool and subject for subversion.

Using a narrative approach, the emphasis on the more substantial role of the Severan women in the accounts of Herodian and the *HA* can easily be explained as underscoring the juvenile character of Elagabalus and the dangerous gendered perversions that he brought to Rome and not necessarily as a reflection of their true influence and character.

3.9. Cassius Dio’s Julia Mamaea

In the brief account of Severus Alexander’s reign, which shortness he attributed to the lack of sources and his own absence from Rome,³⁷⁶ Dio attempted to create a narrative wherein the filth of the previous emperor, Elagabalus, is – together with his corpse in the Tiber – washed away and Rome is cleansed. A return to normalcy seems to be the theme of this section. The Elagabalan debasing conduct is contrasted with the appropriateness and Roman character of the reign of his cousin; the bad *exemplum* is followed by a good *exemplum*. This narrative of the return to normalcy and restoration of Rome is depicted by the banishment of the god Elagabalus who the previous emperor had brought to Rome, thus behaving in accord to the speech of Maecenas.³⁷⁷ A consensus of the past seems to be

³⁷¹ Balsdon 156.

³⁷² Melone 2015, 39; she cites Hdn. 5.3.10.

³⁷³ Melone 2015, 43.

³⁷⁴ De La Bédoyère 2018, 284; He also attempts to distill character traits of Maesa from numismatics and certainly showed how not to do it in his painful attempt that makes historiography as basis for reconstructing ancient characters suddenly appear ideal: “Julia Maesa was, if her coin portraits are anything to go by, a grim-faced and humourless woman with all the charm of an ageing iceberg. The more unforgiving examples show her with a double chin and her hair (or wig) severely tied back and coiled on the back of her head.” De La Bédoyère 2018, 284.

³⁷⁵ This mirrors her – compared to Maesa – smaller presence in Elagabalus’ propaganda when extrapolating Elagabalus’ imperial propaganda on Clare Rowan’s numismatic study mentioned in Chapter 2.

³⁷⁶ Cass. Dio 80.1.2.

³⁷⁷ Cass. Dio 80b.21.2; This presumably does not mean that the cult to the god was banned from Rome, but that the *baetylus*, the black stone, in which capacity the god was worshipped, returned to Emesa in Syria whence it came.

reached between the emperor and the historian. Dio seemed to have written a history that overlapped with the official creation of the recent past under Severus Alexander. The fact that Dio's work ended with the life of Severus Alexander means that it – or this section – was probably published during his reign. As such, it is logical that Dio chose to echo this regime's narrative.

In a surviving fragment, whose original locus in Dio's narrative we cannot be sure about, but seemingly belonging to the beginning of the account of the reign of Severus Alexander, it is stated that:

“When the false Antoninus had been put out of the way, Alexander, the son of Mamaea, and his cousin, inherited the supreme power. He immediately proclaimed his mother Augusta, and she took over the direction of affairs and gathered wise men about her son, in order that his habits might be correctly formed by them; she also chose the best men in the senate as advisers, informing them of all that had to be done.”³⁷⁸

This anecdote concerning Julia Mamaea must be viewed as representing the right behaviour of an imperial mother; she knew that her young son needed to be surrounded by wise men – preferably senators in Dio's mind – and should not want to seek sole control over her son and pursue her own unnatural ambitious desires.

3.10. Herodian's Julia Mamaea

Julia Mamaea is possibly the most fascinating of Herodian's Severan women. The mother of Severus Alexander goes through multiple character changes as her rhetorical function changes. In the account of Elagabalus' reign she is not differentiable with regards to characterisation from her sister Soaemias; they both brag of their infidelity and both protect their sons. Herodian's portrayal of Mamaea became intriguing in the biography of Severus Alexander. Here Herodian seemed to occasionally forget his primary goal of the narrative: that young emperors are undesirable and he should therefore not be too positive about the last of the Severans. The turns in appraisal of Severus Alexander and Julia Mamaea in Herodian's narrative are overall whiplash-inducing. Where previously the faults of the sons are sometimes subtly blamed on their mothers, here any semblance of subtlety is discarded. Herodian explored the thorough rhetorical potency of imperial mothers in historiography and how their conduct reflects on their sons.

In telling the tale of the rivalry of Elagabalus and Severus Alexander, Herodian told how Mamaea shielded her son from indulging in similar abhorrent practices as Elagabalus who wished his adopted son would join him in his erratic behaviour. She instead provided the right teachers to

³⁷⁸ Cass. Dio F 80b: Τοῦ δὲ Ψευδαντωνίνου ἀναιρεθέντος Ἀλέξανδρος ὁ Μαμαίας, ὁ ἐκείνου ἀνεψιός (οὕτω γὰρ οἱ παλαιοὶ τοὺς ἐξαδέλφους ὠνόμαζον), τὴν αὐταρχίαν ἀπεκληρώσατο. ὃς αὐτίκα τὴν οἰκείαν μητέρα Μαμαίαν Αὐγουσταν ἀνείπεν, ἥ τὴν τῶν πραγμάτων οἰκονομίαν μετακεχείριστο, καὶ περὶ τὸν υἱὸν σοφοὺς ἄνδρας συνήγαγεν, ἵνα δι' ἐκείνων αὐτῷ τὰ ἥθη ρυθμίζοιτο, κάκ τῆς γερουσίας τοὺς ἀμείνονας συμβούλους προσείλετο, ἅπαν πρακτέον κοινουμένη αὐτοῖς.

educate her son.³⁷⁹ This characterisation of Mamaea as a good imperial mother who surrounded her son with good advisors and educators was at first continued in the narrative of the reign of Severus Alexander. In the beginning of his account of the reign of the young Severus Alexander, Herodian seems to have copied Dio's narrative of a return to normalcy and the proper Roman ways being reinstated after the radical eastern depravity of the Elagabalan conduct. Herodian echoed the sentiment that foreign gods are returned to their rightful place and how people who were appointed wrongly to high offices were stripped of their positions.³⁸⁰ Mamaea is presented as gathering wise men around her son to facilitate his education as she had done before and all seemed to be well in the Empire. However, as already seen, Dio's account of Severus Alexander is very short and is not really a full history or biography. Herodian aimed to write a whole history of the young emperor's reign and thus could not lean on Dio's narrative. Dio's characterisation of Severus Alexander also does not fit in his central thesis of unsuitability of young emperors. Mamaea's act of providing a good education for her son is something Herodian copied from Dio (most likely, although other then-existing narratives, either historiographical or not, might have influenced this narrative theft). However he now had to make a drastic turn; Mamaea had to become a bad influence on the young boy so he could be characterised as bad. Herodian turned her in a controlling woman:

“Mamaea, left alone with her son, still tried to control and dominate him. Realizing that he was now a young man in his prime, she was also afraid that his youthful vigour might perhaps be encouraged by his unrestricted position of power and drive him to commit some of the crimes associated with his forebears.”³⁸¹

Although Herodian attributed her with the admirable fear that her son might become similar to his despicable ancestors, this sentiment seemed to reflect Herodian's own fear of adolescents who are bequeathed unlimited power. Mamaea then acted on this fear in a way that gives the impression of being admirable; people who were able to corrupt the young emperor were shielded from the palace and Mamaea urged her son to occupy himself with judicial work all day long so he could not turn towards depravities.³⁸² Ironically, the closing of the palace for perverting people does not work, because, Severus Alexander should not be afraid of those who would enter the palace but who was already there. The most perverting agent is locked inside with him, namely his mother as will become clear.

After this anecdote, Herodian offered a characterisation of the young Severus Alexander, painting a picture of a good, benevolent, and forgiving

³⁷⁹ Hdn. 5.7.4.3-5.7.5.

³⁸⁰ Hdn. 6.1.3.

³⁸¹ Hdn. 6.1.5: Μαμαία μόνη τῷ παιδί καταλειφθεῖσα ὁμοίως αὐτοῦ ἄρχειν τε καὶ κρατεῖν ἐπειρᾶτο. ἤδη τε ὁρῶσα ἐν ἀκμῇ τὸν νεανίαν γενόμενον, καὶ δεδοικυῖα μὴ ἄρα ἡλικία ἀκμάζουσα ὑπηρετούσης ἀδείας τε καὶ ἐξουσίας ἐς τι τῶν γενικῶν ἀμαρτημάτων ἐξοκεῖλη, πανταχόθεν ἐφρουρεῖ τὴν αὐλήν.

³⁸² Hdn. 4.1.5-6.

ruler, not tainted by bloodshed.³⁸³ He identified the shortcomings of his mother, Mamaea, thusly:

“Alexander also found fault with his mother and was very much upset to see her avarice and absolute obsession with money. She alleged that she was saving it in order to enable Alexander to make a generous *ex gratia* payment to the troops without difficulty. But she was making a private hoard. This cast a certain cloud upon his reign, though Alexander opposed and deplored her forcible confiscation of some people’s inherited property.”³⁸⁴

Herodian here typified his mother’s conduct and vices as reflecting badly upon her son’s reign.

Severus Alexander realised the faults in his mother’s character and a good emperor would be able to reprimand and control his mother. Herodian judged the emperor by his failure to keep his mother in check. He succeeded in this by emphasising the mother-son dynamic and the emperor’s youthfulness. To achieve this, Herodian had to show the depravity of Mamaea. He achieved this by sketching Mamaea as an ambitious and jealous woman who, after having provided her son with a wife, banished her from the palace when her son wishes to transfer the title *Augusta* to his new bride.³⁸⁵ This anecdote shows aspects of the *topos* of the fear of losing power which Herodian also attributes to Mamaea’s mother in the previous book. Mamaea’s cruelty is emphasised as the father of the discharged wife layed charges against Mamaea, and Mamaea in turn wanted him executed and his daughter exiled to Libya.³⁸⁶ These actions are not in accordance with Severus Alexander’s wishes but, being too weak to control his mother, he gave in to her wishes. Herodian remarked that this is the only one of his faults:

“Completely dominated by his mother, he did exactly as he was told. This was the one thing for which he can be faulted; that he obeyed his mother in matters of which he disapproved because he was over-mild and showed greater respect to her than he ought to have done”³⁸⁷

Mamaea’s characterisation is primarily based on eastern stereotypes. Mamaea’s easternness, which at first played no big part in her characterisation, gradually proved to be of formative influence on her

³⁸³ Hdn. 6.1.7.

³⁸⁴ Hdn. 6.1.8: ἤτιᾱτο δὲ καὶ τὴν μητέρα καὶ πάνυ ἥσχαλλεν ὁρῶν αὐτὴν οὖσαν φιλοχρήματον καὶ περὶ τοῦτο ὑπερφυῶς ἐσπουδακυῖαν. προσποιουμένη γὰρ ἀθροίζειν αὐτὰ ἵνα ἔχοι τοῖς στρατιώταις ἀφθόνως καὶ ῥαδίως ὁ Ἀλέξανδρος χαρίζεσθαι, ἰδίᾳ ἐθησαύριζε· καὶ διέβαλλεν ἔσθ’ ὅπῃ τοῦτο τὴν ἀρχὴν, αὐτοῦ ἄκοντός τε καὶ ἀσχάλλοντος οὐσίας τινῶν καὶ κληρονομίας ἐξ ἐπηρείας ὑφαρπασάσης ἐκείνης.

³⁸⁵ Hdn. 6.1.9.

³⁸⁶ Hdn. 6.1.9-10.

³⁸⁷ Hdn. 6.1.10: τοῦτο δ’ ἂν τις μόνον ἔσχεν ἐγκαλέσαι αὐτῷ, ὅτι δὴ ὑπὸ περιττῆς πραότητος καὶ αἰδοῦς πλείονος ἢ ἐχρῆν τῇ μητρὶ, ἐν οἷς ἀπηρέσκετο, ὁμως ἐπείθετο.

portrayal by Herodian. Her desire for money has already been noted by Herodian. This character trait would now be continually stated in the text. Another negative trait of Herodian's Mamaea was her corruption of her son's manliness. In his account of the wars Severus Alexander waged in the East, Herodian painted a picture of a just ruler, loved by the people and behaving with benevolence.³⁸⁸ However, not all was well in the young emperor's conduct; he failed to lead his armies to the field of battle. In conjecturing a reason for the loss of the Roman troops, Herodian suggested blame rested with Mamaea:

"But Alexander failed them by not invading with his army. Perhaps it was due to fear—no doubt he wanted to avoid risking his own life and limb for the Roman empire. Or his mother may have restrained him because of her womanly timidity and excessive love for her son. She used to blunt Alexander's efforts to behave bravely by convincing him that it was other people's job to take risks for him, not his to get involved in the battle. It was this which brought about the end of the invading Roman army."³⁸⁹

Herodian literally notes how his mother's feminine quality of timidity or cowardice ("γυναικεία δειλία") stopped Severus Alexander from exhibiting manliness ("ἀνδρείαν") and behaving daringly on the battlefield ("κινδυνεύειν"). Manliness, as discussed in Chapter 1, could be obtained on the battlefield. The gendered dichotomy of these traits is made explicit by unambiguously contrasting Mamaea's feminine "δειλία" – cowardice – with its antonym, "ἀνδρείαν", located in the next sentence. Mamaea prevented her son from acting like a man and her corrupting female vices stopped him, quite literally, from achieving manhood. The denial of Severus Alexander's manhood is a continual theme in Herodian's narrative and the emperor's mother is blamed for it.

Continuing the narrative, Herodian related how Severus Alexander got ill while in the East. His mother is not the only corrupting factor, the climatological difference was also having an influence on him and making him depressed ("δυσθυμία").³⁹⁰ His armies likewise became ill and many men died, leading to a loss in Severus Alexander's reputation.³⁹¹ The young emperor is also presented as preferring chariot racing and living luxuriously to waging war.³⁹² Here his manliness is again questioned. Mamaea does not pop up in the narrative for a while and when she does it is only as negative trait to point at:

³⁸⁸ Hdn. 6.4.2; 6.5.6.

³⁸⁹ Hdn. 6.5.8-9: ἔσφηλε δὲ αὐτοὺς ὁ Ἀλέξανδρος μήτε εἰσαγαγὼν τὸν στρατὸν μήτε εἰσελθὼν, ἢ διὰ δέος, ἵνα μὴ δὴ αὐτὸς κινδυνεύοι ψυχῇ καὶ σώματι ὑπὲρ τῆς Ῥωμαίων ἀρχῆς, ἢ τῆς μητρὸς ἐπισχούσης γυναικεία δειλία καὶ ὑπερβαλλούσῃ φιλοτεκνία. ἤμβλυσε γάρ αὐτοῦ τὰς πρὸς ἀνδρείαν ὁρμάς, πείθουσα δεῖν ἄλλους ὑπὲρ αὐτοῦ κινδυνεύειν, ἀλλὰ μὴ αὐτὸν παρατάττεσθαι ὅπερ τὸν εἰσελθόντα Ῥωμαίων στρατὸν ἀπώλεσεν.

³⁹⁰ Hdn. 6.6.1.

³⁹¹ Hdn. 6.6.3.

³⁹² Hdn. 6.7.10.

“So the young men, [...] admired Maximinus’ courage and despised Alexander for being under his mother’s control and for the fact that business was conducted on the authority and advice of a woman, while he himself presented a picture of negligence and cowardice in his conduct of war. They reminded themselves of the eastern disasters due to his procrastination and how he had shown no sign of bravery or enthusiasm when he came to Germany.”³⁹³

Maximinus, who later became emperor, is praised because of his manliness, while Severus Alexander is emasculated and portrayed as a mother’s boy. His mother is also blamed for the lacklustre salaries of the armies as they “criticized his mother’s rapacity and miserliness over money.”³⁹⁴ The critics of the emperor called upon the soldiers to desert their stingy lad and cowardly boy tethered to a woman (“γύναιον μικρολόγον καὶ μειράκιον δειλὸν μητρὶ δουλεῦον”³⁹⁵) and defect to Maximinus who was a real man (“ἀνδρὶ”), honourable (“γενναίῳ”), temperate (“σώφρονι”), and moreover a fellow-soldier (“συστρατιώτῃ”).³⁹⁶ Perhaps Herodian echoed here the official narrative of Maximinus’ regime where he is posed as a real man in contrast to Severus Alexander, the mother’s boy.

Herodian then related the tale of Severus Alexander’s death which occurred in his tent while Maximinus was outside hailed as the new emperor:

“There [in his tent], the reports say, he waited for his executioner, clinging to his mother and weeping and blaming her for his misfortunes.”³⁹⁷

The final moments of Severus Alexander’s life mirror that of his predecessors, Elagabalus and Geta who, by Herodian, are both depicted in their final moments as infants clinging to their mother.³⁹⁸ This demonstrates perhaps also the way Herodian perceived these emperors – as eternally young. Severus Alexander is portrayed as a young boy, unceremoniously dying in his mother’s arms, while his actual age of death was around 27. The blaming of his misfortunes on his mother mirrors the view Herodian had regarding the corrupting influence of this wealth-obsessed, ambitious woman. It is possible, with some imagination, to see Herodian’s Mamaea as a personification of the East, a force that perverted good rule and halted the coming to fruition of manliness. In his final summary of Severus Alexander after relating his death,

³⁹³ Hdn. 6.8.3: τοῦ Μαξιμίνου ἔχαιρον, τὸν δὲ Ἀλέξανδρον ἐπέσκωπτον ὡς ὑπὸ τῆς μητρὸς¹ ἀρχόμενον, καὶ διοικουμένων τῶν πραγμάτων ὑπ’ ἐξουσίας τε καὶ γνώμης γυναικός, ῥαθύμως τε καὶ ἀνάνδρως τοῖς πολεμικοῖς προσφερομένου ἐκείνου.

³⁹⁴ Hdn. 6.9.4: οἱ δὲ τὴν μητέρα ἐμέφοντο ὡς φιλάργυρον καὶ τὰ χρήματα ἀποκλείουσιν.

³⁹⁵ Hdn. 6.9.5.

³⁹⁶ Hdn. 6.9.5.

³⁹⁷ Hdn. 6.9.6: ὁ δὲ Ἀλέξανδρος τρέμων καὶ λιποψυχῶν μόλις ἐς τὴν σκηνὴν ἐπανερχεται· τῇ τε μητρὶ περιπλακεῖς, καὶ ὥς φασιν, ἀποδυρόμενός τε καὶ αἰτιώμενος ὅτι δι’ ἐκείνην ταῦτα πάσχει,⁸ ἀνέμενε τὸν φονεύσοντα.

³⁹⁸ Mamaea’s goal to stop her son from ending up as one of his despicable ancestors ultimately failed. He met his end, according to the repetitive Herodian, in a similar manner.

Herodian surmised how Severus Alexander's reign would have been remembered as a big success were it not for his mother.

"So Alexander [and his mother] met his end after a rule of fourteen years which, as far as his subjects were concerned, was without fault or bloodshed. Murder, cruelty and injustice were not part of his nature; his inclination was towards humane and benevolent behaviour. Indeed, his reign would have been notable for its complete success, but for the blame he incurred through his mother's faults of avarice and meanness."³⁹⁹

During his account of Severus Alexander's life, Herodian was uneven in his judgment of the emperor and his mother. Early, he is seen copying the restoration narrative that Dio told in his short account, afterwards he established Severus Alexander as a good emperor with some shortcomings attributed to his mother. Then, in the actual treatment of the emperor's life, Herodian got carried away and offered plenty of bad deeds by the emperor which he mostly blamed on his mother. The final verdict regarding the emperor's life then comes somewhat as a surprise, because his evaluation of the emperor gradually declined during the narrative, but ends relatively mild. Perhaps the overall societal consensus regarding the emperor was positive and Herodian, in the end, could not stray too far from this as his work would then be deemed as factually inaccurate.

3.11. The *Historia Augusta's* Julia Mamaea

The *HA's* characterisation of Severus Alexander is already specified at the end of the biography of Elagabalus:

"Of these [the following emperors] the most righteous and the most worthy of careful narration was [Severus] Alexander (who was emperor for thirteen years, whereas the others ruled but for six months or at most for one or two years)..."⁴⁰⁰

The longevity of Severus Alexander's reign is seen as a virtue and a feature of the stability that his reign brought with it. The return to normalcy, a *topos* for rulers who followed the rules of tyrants, is explicitly present in the narrative of the *HA*.⁴⁰¹ As noted in Chapter 2, the narrative in which an emperor portrayed himself as also having lived through the destructive tyranny of previous eras is clearly recognisable here and communicated through a scene of a crowd celebrating Severus Alexander. "You too have

³⁹⁹ Hdn. 6.9.8: τέλος μὲν δὴ τοιοῦτο κατέλαβε τὸν Ἀλέξανδρον [καὶ τὴν μητέρα], βασιλεύσαντα ἔτεσι τεσσαρεσκαίδεκα, ὅσον πρὸς τοὺς ἀρχομένους, ἀμέμπτως καὶ ἀναίμωντί· φόνων τε γὰρ καὶ ὠμότητος ἀκρίτων τε ἔργων ἀλλότριος ἐγένετο, ἔς τε τὸ φιλάνθρωπον καὶ εὐεργετικώτερον ἐπιρρεπής. πάνυ γοῦν ἂν ἡ Ἀλεξάνδρου βασιλεία εὐδοκίμησεν ἔς τὸ ὁλόκληρον, εἰ μὴ διεβέβλητο αὐτῷ τὰ τῆς μητρὸς ἐς φιλαργυρίαν τε καὶ μικρολογίαν.

⁴⁰⁰ SHA *Heliogab.*35.2: *scribere autem ordiar qui post sequentur. quorum Alexander optimus et cum cura dicendus est, annorum tredecim princeps, semestres alii et vix annui et bimi.*

⁴⁰¹ SHA *Alex. Sev.*15.

endured the foul tyrant, you too had reason to grieve that the filthy and foul one lived. The gods have cast him forth root and branch, and you have they saved," had the writer of the *HA* have the crowd shout.⁴⁰² Severus Alexander is portrayed as a noble and primarily moderate ruler, contrasting with the tyrannical decadence of his predecessor.

"He forbade men to call him Lord, and he gave orders that people should write to him as they would to a commoner, retaining only the title Emperor. He removed from the imperial footwear and garments all the jewels that had been used by Elagabalus, and he wore a plain white robe without any gold, just as he is always depicted, and ordinary cloaks and togas."⁴⁰³

The removal of the eastern extravagances and luxuries from Severus Alexander's footwear works metaphorically as a sign of the stripping of Rome from its oriental features and luxury introduced during the reign of Elagabalus. As earlier established, this seems to have been part of the central message of Severus Alexander's regime. This allying with the imperial narrative was wholeheartedly done in Dio's work and remnants of his restoration narrative were still part of Herodian's work. The *HA* also seems to adhere to the central history as created by the regime of Severus Alexander. Apparently, this central imperial narrative reached a stage of consensus.

The writer of the *HA* stated how Severus Alexander had followed a thorough education in a plethora of fields.⁴⁰⁴ Where in the other accounts Mamaea is made responsible for the education and surrounding of good advisors surrounding Severus Alexander, this is in the *HA* not an overt motif. The return to normalcy and the goodness of Severus Alexander is showcased by ending the biography with a list of the men that were part of his council. These good men had kept Severus Alexander on the right path.⁴⁰⁵ Mamaea's role in the education of her son is in her bidding her son he would turn away from philosophy and music to other pursuits, which he did.⁴⁰⁶ This account is followed by a reproduction of an oracle of Vergil in which it is stated that others (non-Romans) will create more beautiful artworks, and others will be better orators, but the Romans shall be the best rulers.⁴⁰⁷ Mamaea is here involved in setting her son on a path to emperorship as this account took place before his ascension to the Roman thrones and was part of the *omina imperii*. She is here, because of this oracle, also connected with steering her son away from arts that would not prove to be Rome's forte and were the strengths of foreigners. She thereby

⁴⁰² SHA Alex. Sev. 6.4: *impurum tyrannum et tu perpessus es, impurum et obscenum et tu vivere doluisti. di illum eradicarunt, di te servarunt.*

⁴⁰³ SHA Alex. Sev. 4.1-4.2: *Dominum se appellari vetuit. epistulas ad se quasi ad privatum scribi iussit servato tantum nomine imperatoris. gemmas de calciamentis et vestibis tulit, quibus usus fuerat Heliogabalus. veste, ut et pingitur, alba usus est nec aurata, paenulis togisque communibus.*

⁴⁰⁴ SHA Alex. Sev. 3.1.

⁴⁰⁵ SHA Alex. Sev. 68.

⁴⁰⁶ SHA Alex. Sev. 14.5.

⁴⁰⁷ SHA Alex. Sev. 14.5, taken from: Verg. *Aen*, 6.848-854.

fits in somewhat with the good advisors earlier mentioned with which the biography is ended. The characterisation and importance of these men which forms the last sentence of the narrative is rather telling:

“These are the men who made the Syrian a good emperor, as likewise evil friends caused native Romans to seem evil, even to posterity, for they burdened them with the weight of their own iniquities.”⁴⁰⁸

This repeats an earlier topic by the writer of the *HA* where he, pretending to address Emperor Constantine, answered this emperor’s invented question how a Syrian can become so great an emperor. According to the writer of the *HA*, it is all in the good counselling; a bad man can be persuaded by good advisors to behave well, but a good emperor will certainly be dragged down by bad advisors.⁴⁰⁹ The prime achievement of the council was suppressing the Syrian emperor’s oriental urges. Mamaea’s steering of her son towards more Roman pastimes can be seen in the same light. The writer of the *HA* additionally remarked that Severus Alexander did not like being called a Syrian and tried to suppress the knowledge of his heritage by creating an alternative family tree.⁴¹⁰ To the writer of the *HA*, this suppressing of his ethnic determinism and becoming of a good Roman was an extraordinary achievement and the only way in which he could become a worthy emperor.

The *HA* created a specific narrative for Severus Alexander in which he is equated with his namesake Alexander the Great who is posed as a great inspiration for the young ruler.⁴¹¹ Perhaps the youthful coming to power of the two Alexanders originated this comparison.⁴¹² It is said that Mamaea bore Severus Alexander on the anniversary of the death of the Macedonian king and in a temple dedicated to him.⁴¹³ Mamaea’s characterisation can be read as being partially inspired by Alexander the Great’s mother, Olympias. Similar to the mother of Alexander the Great, Mamaea had a dream foretelling the birth of a great man. Mamaea dreamt of bearing a purple snake on the night before the birth of her son, prophesying his royal purpose. This account is placed among a long list of *omina imperii* preceding the birth of Severus Alexander.⁴¹⁴ Perhaps these dreams are part

⁴⁰⁸ SHA *Alex. Sev.* 68.4: *hi sunt qui bonum principem Syrum fecerunt, et item amici mali, qui Romanos pessimos etiam posteris tradiderunt, suis vitiis laborantes.*

⁴⁰⁹ SHA *Alex. Sev.* 65.4.

⁴¹⁰ SHA *Alex. Sev.* 28.7; 44.3; This account of genealogical forgery might indicate the muddled historical awareness regarding the genealogies of older Roman dynasties during Late Antiquity. This might be connected to the fact that Domna, in the *HA*, is positioned as Caracalla’s stepmother instead of mother.

⁴¹¹ SHA *Alex. Sev.* 5.1.

⁴¹² Perhaps the adoption of Alexander the Great as example by Severus Alexander was true and done in order to suggest a filial kinship with Caracalla, who also is said to have had affinity for the Macedonian king. For Caracalla’s affinity with Alexander the Great, see for example: Hdn. 4.8.1-2.

⁴¹³ SHA *Alex. Sev.* 13.1.

⁴¹⁴ SHA *Alex. Sev.* 14.1; Plutarch claimed that Olympias dreamt of a thunderbolt hitting her womb after which she became pregnant of her godlike son. She is also claimed to have slept with snakes in her bed. These two accounts are modified in

of the original official narrative as propagated by the Severan regime and copied by the *HA*. These specific dreams are however not found in the other discussed histories.

Interestingly, Severus Alexander is sometimes named “the son of Mamaea” in the *HA* which the writer claimed to be how he was called by many.⁴¹⁵ It is hard not to read this as a criticism of his mother and his young age. The few years – around 13 – Severus Alexander had when he came to the throne is undoubtedly the reason for this, perhaps slightly condescending, name. It also insinuated that his mother was responsible for much of the imperial government which the *HA* echoes in the claim that when Severus Alexander came to imperial power, being a boy, he and his mother shared the rule of the Empire in equal parts.⁴¹⁶ The judgment of the writer on these matters is rather vague and fluid if not unpredictable.

Mamaea is later in the text painted as a revered woman, but with a covetous and money-hungry nature.⁴¹⁷ Mamaea is here suddenly endowed with the vices of her eastern ancestry. This slapdash archetypal characterisation is given in a throwaway sentence and hanging rather forlorn in the text with no direct rhetorical or narrative purpose. It therefore feels like an obligatory characterisation taken from some other source with no deeper purpose. Later it will become clear how this also does not match with the *HA*’s ultimate evaluation of her. Here a lost strand of older narrative code is uncovered that by some narrative mitosis has been copied into the *HA* and later will be contradicted in the same biography. These type of radical inconsistencies are the reason for the bad image of the *HA*.

Later on in Severus Alexander’s biography, the *HA* offers an anecdote wherein Mamaea and Severus Alexander’s royal consort Memmia reprimanded Severus Alexander for his rule which was too gentle and too informal. This fits with the *HA*’s characterisation of Severus Alexander as someone who was modest, refused the titles the Roman Senate and people tried to bestow on him, and wore very modest clothes.⁴¹⁸

“Finally, when his mother Mamaea and his wife Memmia [...] would often upbraid him for excessive “informality, saying, “You have made your rule too gentle and the authority of the empire less respected,” he would reply, “Yes, but I have made it more secure and more lasting.” In short, he never allowed a day to pass without doing

creating the narrative of Mamaea dreaming about bearing a purple snake the day before the birth of her son. Plut. Vit. Alex. 2.2-3.

⁴¹⁵ SHA Alex. Sev. 3.1: *Alexander igitur, cui Mamaea mater fuit (nam et ita dicitur a plerisque)*; 5.2: *hic Mamaeae Alexander*.

⁴¹⁶ SHA Alex. Sev. 14.7.

⁴¹⁷ SHA Alex. Sev. 14.7.

⁴¹⁸ The (ceremonious) refusal of titles goes back to Emperor Augustus who made a big deal of refusing all kinds of titles and privileges. This later became a staple of investiture now known as *recusatio imperii*. For more on this phenomenon, see: Béranger 1948; Icks 2012.

some kind, some generous, or some righteous deed, and yet he never ruined the public treasury.⁴¹⁹

This is an enigmatic account as it does not become clear directly whether the *HA* speaks its own view through the women or through the emperor's response. In the grand scheme of the *HA*'s appraisal of the young emperor, I would lean towards the latter although the inconsistent nature of the work makes it impossible to definitively state. In this characterisation it is also possible to read the *HA*'s equation of Severus Alexander with that great other Alexander who supposedly behaved akin to an equal to his generals.

In relating the death of the young emperor, the *HA* typifies both his and his mother's characters. This continued the rather muddled and unfocused appraisal of Mamaea. First the writer of the *HA* stated that Severus Alexander "did everything in accordance with his mother's advice, and she was killed with him."⁴²⁰ This insinuates a negative assessment of the emperor as a mother's boy. The negative qualities of his mother were earlier stated by the *HA* and therefore this claim might have been intended as negative. But later a new characterisation of Mamaea is offered which poses her as a good person: "But as for Alexander, to return to my theme, he was himself a most righteous man and followed the counsels of a righteous mother."⁴²¹ Suddenly her council is something rather positive. However, afterwards he started a treatise on the importance of wise men around an emperor and naming the specific wise men who counselled Severus Alexander.

The writer of the *HA* set Mamaea occasionally up for a certain rhetorical use, but in the end this set up fizzled out and remained hazy. The Chekhov's gun of her characterisation was never properly fired. The big inconsistencies, both in characterisation of Mamaea, the extent to which she influenced him, and whether this advice was good or bad is no solid position in the *HA*. Whether the unique and "fraudulent" nature of the source is the culprit of these discrepancies or whether it is born from a rather random copying of sources and sentiments is debatable and, likely, connected.

3.12. Conclusion Julia Mamaea

Whether it was Dio's absence from Rome – as he claimed himself – or the publication of parts of his work under Severus Alexander, it is clear that his short account of the reign of Severus Alexander complied with the official narrative of this regime. Herodian, afterwards, basing himself on Dio, had a hard time escaping from this persuasive narrative. He adopted multiple elements of the official Severan and Dio's narratives and afterwards attempted to steer the narrative to his own thesis regarding juvenile

⁴¹⁹ SHA Alex. Sev. 20.3-4: *denique cum ei nimiam civilitatem et Mamaea mater et uxor Memmia, Sulpicii consularis viri filia, Catuli neptis, saepe obicerent et dicerent, "Molliorem tibi potestatem et contemptibilem imperii fecisti," ille respondit, "Sed securiorem atque diuturniorem." dies denique numquam transiit, quando non aliquid mansuetum, civile, pium fecit, sed ita ut aerarium non everteret.*

⁴²⁰ SHA Alex. Sev. 60.2: *egit omnia ex consilio matris, cum qua occisus est.*

⁴²¹ SHA Alex. Sev. 66.1: *Sed ut ad rem redeam, Alexander quidem et ipse optimus fuit et optima matris consiliis usus est.*

emperors. In the end, the characterisations of Mamaea and her son seem to bounce between the official narrative and his own theme without much conviction. The writer of the *HA*, similarly, struggled to escape from the positive consensus regarding the reign of Severus Alexander, perhaps being influenced by Herodian

Perhaps an invention by the historians or part of narrative remnants of propaganda by Maximinus Trax, Severus Alexander's depiction as a cowardly mother's boy is contrasted with the older and militaristic figure of his successor. The narratives of Herodian and the *HA* may have been caught in between the propagandistic self-characterisations of the two regimes and their own respective theses.

Julia Mamaea is written about as forming the pinnacle of feminine influence of the Severan administration of the Roman Empire by Michael Grant which in turn is echoed by Aytürk.⁴²² When reading Herodian and the *HA* and neglecting the negative connotations of these claims, it is indeed possible to end at the attractive notion that Mamaea was a very powerful woman which indeed she might have been. However reaching this conclusion solely through historiographical sources seems to me a risky affair. Aytürk's narrative bases itself on different Roman historical accounts depending on which narrative fitted her own best or which she deemed to be the most accurate. This method is emblematic for many contemporary approaches regarding the Severan women.

As has been discussed earlier, luxury was intertwined with the East in the Roman psyche to a radical extent. The characterisation of the various Severan women as indulging in money hoarding and living luxuriously thus should be primarily understood as a character trait that was bestowed on them free of charge together with their easternness. Additionally, imperial women were regularly connected with this vice.⁴²³ It is therefore questionable how Aytürk, for example, accepts Mamaea's supposed avarice which is claimed by both Herodian and the *HA*. Instead of noting the stereotypical nature of this accusation, she resorts to find another way to acquit Mamaea of these charges. Aytürk states that Mamaea was in fact wise because her hoarding of money was in the end a way to procure money for the military conquests later on in Severus Alexander's reign.⁴²⁴ Aytürk resorts to clear Mamaea of the charges by desperately searching for a positive explanation in the context of the historical narrative of the historiographers, but not through simply noting the likeliness of it being part of an archetypal depiction of eastern and imperial women which it in reality was.

3.13. Conclusion

This chapter has shown how the respective Severan women were used in several ways to credit or discredit their male kin. Seldom are they used to make ethical claims regarding people outside their family. This was only explicitly the case with Domna's contrasting with Plautianus by Dio. Dio formed another rarity in that he made a Severan empress – Domna – a specific *exemplum malum* in the end as he told the story of her demise. In

⁴²² Grant 1996, 48; Aytürk 2007, 224.

⁴²³ For example: Tac. *Ann.* 12.7.

⁴²⁴ Aytürk 2007, 223.

the cases of the other Severan empresses and the other discussed historiographers, the women were solely meant as actors in the narrative plays and pose as rhetorical tools for evaluating their sons. It has also become clear that their role as mothers is the most important aspect of their characters (as it was in their official Severan representation). All three of the primary Severan historiographers give Domna, for example, rather lacklustre (or non-existing) roles in the accounts of her husband and suddenly magnified her role in the accounts of her sons. The potency of the imperial mother in creating imperial *exempla* in Roman historiography has become apparent. Because all three authors are, to an extent, critical of the reigns of juvenile emperors, the roles of their mothers became more substantial. These women were so thoroughly connected with their sons' reigns that their fates often corresponded with their sons' bloody demises. This was likely in reality also more or less the case, but the historiographers use it to denote the unmanly deaths of the young emperors. The rhetorical roles of the Severan women were both in their depiction as ideal *Augustae* and as dangerous, ambitious, eastern women. Sometimes the Severan women acted not in accordance to their own specific characterisations bestowed on them by the authors, but as emblem of ideal imperial motherhood or as the ideal *Augusta*. Occasionally, through the text, historiographers hinted at the ideal role of imperial women and their high status and respect – think of Dio's Domna and Caracalla's conduct against her.

A light has been shone on the extensive degree in which some of the Roman historiographers copied motifs from previous authors even if these did not fit comfortably within their own respective narratives and assessments. Both Herodian and the *HA* seem to have adopted sentiments regarding Mamaea which did not naturally fit their own narrative. This clumsy copying behaviour of these authors may not correctly reflect on the genre of imperial historiography as a whole as both these authors have been hailed as con-historians as discussed in Chapter 2. The copying of narrative strands might have been compelled by the pursuit of historical accuracy, the reverence for preceding authors, or the success of the central imperial narrative. Of the separate narratives pertaining to the respective Severan regimes, the restoration narrative of Severus Alexander has been the most successful in reaching a level of consensus. This is a narrative that has been accepted as the common historical narrative after which subversions could be made. The success of the central narrative by Severus Alexander is also tangible in the accounts of Elagabalus. The depicting of Severus Alexander's predecessor as an eastern tyrant fits within Severus Alexander's restoration narrative of him returning normalcy to Rome and distancing himself from eastern aspects. Imperial narratives by Maximinus' regime might have influenced Herodian and the author of the *HA*, although it did not succeed in supplanting Severus Alexander's narrative.

Conclusion

This thesis has taken a narrative approach to the study of the Severan empresses in Roman imperial historiography. I have attempted to show the extent to which this genre was bound by generic conventions and used stereotypes and archetypal figures. I have shown how the narrative methodology I have used has resulted in a better understanding of the way the portrayals of the Severan women in Roman historiography came to be. The Severan empresses fulfilled specific roles in the genre: the judgment of emperors and the creation of *exempla*. I have argued that the significant presence and influence of the Severan empresses in the works of Dio, Herodian and the writer of the *HA* did not necessarily reflect reality, but was primarily determined by the respective theses of the historiographers, the depictions of imperial mothers in earlier historiographical works that became archetypal, stereotypes and fears regarding the East, and – especially – the aversion to the reigns of young emperors. I have showcased the entwined nature between femininity and easternness and how the Severan women, to some extent, were judged by their eastern nature which proved to be so easily to connect to their femininity. The fact that emperors were judged through ideas of *virtus* and *romanitas* made these women the extraordinary rhetorical devices that they were.

The narrative approach this thesis has taken has considered the influences on the creation of the respective historiographical narratives and has shown the extent to which the authors based their characterisations on earlier representations – both historiographical as well as represented by the Severan regimes – and how these regularly conflicted with the central theses of their works and resulted in muddled characterisations. The attempt at writing an “accurate” history and the historical consensus regularly clashed with the moral arguments that the historiographers wished to make. The depictions of specific regimes and its central characters in Roman historiography were often influenced by official narratives by subsequent rulers. The narrative approach taken by this thesis has pointed towards the consensual power and influence on the historiographers and the importance of awareness of these narrative forces. The self-representation of Severus Alexander’s regime has been highly determinative for the various representations of the reign of Elagabalus. Additionally, the depiction of Severus Alexander by Herodian and the *HA*-author might have been influenced by the imperial narrative of Maximinus Thrax. The representations of the Severan empresses thus did not exist in a historiographical vacuum, but engaged with other sorts of narratives.

It has become apparent that the portrayals of the Severan empresses by Cassius Dio, Herodian, and the author of the *HA* were to a high degree determined by their motherhood which had as narrative purpose the judgment of their sons (and grandsons in Maesa’s case). Their role as mothers are invariably what defined them. As this was also their prime characterisation in the official Severan propaganda, the historiographical sources took this identification as a starting point and occasionally accepted their official representation as paragons of imperial motherhood, but frequently subverted it. Despite the nuances regarding differences in views, the historiographers, to various degrees, all grappled with what appeared to

become the new normal whereby boys and adolescents became the sole rulers of Rome. This determined the unusual frequent presence of the women in these narratives. Imperial mothers seemed to have been acceptable advisors, but they could easily be used to showcase the young emperor's unworthiness of the throne. In characterising the various Severan women, the studied historiographers regularly based themselves on archetypal female figures. Whether through semi-mythological eastern queens or earlier historiographical representations of imperial empresses, the historiographers used archetypal shorthands to characterise the Severan empresses and thus communicated to the readers how they should be perceived within their narratives.

I have argued for the evaluation of female characters in Roman imperial historiography through the lens of rhetorical purpose and to take a prudent attitude towards the attempts of distilling facts – and especially character traits – regarding imperial women from Roman historiography. Historians have used Roman historiography as basis for their own characterisations of the Severan women. Hereby, a lack of concrete methodology seems to be a commonality. Some Roman historiographers are seen as more trustworthy than others, but the formative nature of their respective narratives and ethic arguments are often not considered sufficiently. These narratives are stripped of the aspects modern historians think inaccurate without an adequate understanding of the machinations of the genre and the role women played therein. The desire to reconstruct the character traits of specific famous ancient people and, in this way, to get close to people whose images are now – at most – only preserved to us in stone, gold, silver, or bronze is an understandable aspiration. Roman historiography, at first glance, appears to be an ideal source for this reconstruction of personalities, but its narrative and rhetorical machinations nearly always took precedence over accuracy of depictions of character. Furthermore, Roman historiography centred on men and had no particular interest in uncovering the inner lives and real characters of women. Therefore, attempting to gain any sense of the real historical women from Roman historiography is a hazardous objective.

Regarding imperial women, Roman imperial historiography is primarily a potent source for the study of the attitudes of elite men towards them and what constituted the ideal Roman empress. Their characterisations function mostly on a saint or sinner dichotomy that possibly reflected the Roman male view of women. This dichotomy hinged on the Roman fear of women throwing aside their distaff and transgressing into the male public political sphere. The extent to which political influence of imperial women was acceptable was rather undefined and could therefore rhetorically be used as both a positive and negative matter.

Occasionally, the various characterisations of the Severan women were, as has become apparent, modelled on the lives of the Julio-Claudian empresses as chronicled by historiographers as Tacitus and Suetonius. In this thesis it was not possible to compare the Severan and Julio-Claudian empresses to the full extent. I therefore suggest a more thorough comparative study between historiographical representations of Severan and Julio-Claudian empresses. In doing so, a better understanding of the repetitive and archetypal nature of Roman historiographical representations of imperial

women can be gained. Such research would steer away from attempting to distill facts from fiction regarding imperial women in historiography and recognise that it is only through male eyes that we can observe these women. Whether in coinage, inscriptions, statues, or indeed historiography, these women are solely represented as men saw them. Paradoxically, by highlighting these male narratives and representations and noting their aims, these women might finally be able to cast away these narrative chains and be free of them.

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Pictures

Front Cover:

Bust hypothesised to be depicting Julia Domna, photographer: B. Saint-Pol, Glyptothek Munich, Inv. 354.

Severan Family Tree:

Bust of Septimius Severus, photographer: wikipedia user "Anagoria", Altes Museum Berlin, Inv. Sk 382.

Bust of Julia Domna, photographer: M. Nguyen, Musée des Beaux-Arts de Lyon, Inv. X 482-115.

Bust of Caracalla, photographer: unknown, Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli, Inv. 6033.

Bust of Geta, photographer: wikipedia user "ChrisO", Louvre Museum, Inv. Ma 1076 (MR 512).

Bust of Julia Soaemias, photographer: unknown, Antalya Archeological Museum, Perge collections, Inv. 3270.

Bust of Elagabalus, photographer: unknown, Palazzo Nuovo, Musei Capitolini, Inv. MC0470.

Bust of Julia Mamaea, photographer: unknown, Palazzo Nuovo, Musei Capitolini, Inv. S 457.

Bust of Severus Alexander, photographer: unknown, Museo della Civiltà Romana, Inv. XIR212398.

Figures:

Figure 1: RIC IV Severus Alexander 359, photographer: unknown, British Museum, 1867,0101.789.

Figure 2: RIC IV Septimius Severus 175, photographer: unknown, American Numismatic Society, 1959.228.33.