Power, Agency, and Imperial Politics:

The Case of Julia Augusti

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The idea of an imperial family, and of imperial women in Rome, was a novelty of the Augustan principate. As a single family gradually emerged as the institutional backbone of the state, this marked a departure from the Late Roman Republic. The Ara Pacis (9BCE), an altar of peace commissioned by the Roman Senate, honouring Augustus' return from Hispania and Gaul, exemplifies the centrality of the family to the principate and incorporates women into the image of the state in a way previously unseen. Augustus' only daughter, Julia the Elder, appears alongside her sons, Gaius and Lucius – she is brought into the image of the imperial family but in a way which accentuates her responsibilities within the domestic sphere, illuminating the tension between the public and private facets of her identity as an imperial woman. Notably, Republican convention had traditionally prescribed women's obligations to the domestic sphere. Even as some elite women crossed over into the male political domain, these instances were exceptional and met with scrutiny.[1] The *leges juliae* (18-17BCE) reinscribed such Republican precedents of gender, incentivising marriage and childbirth while punishing those who were unwed and criminalising adultery to impose a traditional ideal of family life.[2] The role of an imperial woman appears to be one of great contradiction – of unprecedented public prominence within a wider context where women were essentially reduced to their fecundity and fidelity. Thus, the question surfaces: in what capacity were imperial women integrated into public life – merely as mothers, wives, and daughters condemned to domestic responsibility, as genuine public figures, or as something in-between? This essay will address this question through a case study of Julia the Elder (39BCE-14CE), the daughter of Augustus, and will span the Augustan (27BCE-14CE) and Tiberian (14CE-37CE) periods. I will query how Julia's position manifested within the political sphere: her capacity to exercise legitimate political authority and the socio-political currency of her visibility. I seek to identify the sources of this status – Republican precedent or imperial innovation – and explore the private and public contexts in which power was wielded, in order to determine whether they can be reconciled with, or whether they subverted, gendered prescriptions. Further questions arise pertaining to Julia's agency. Did she step into public life at her own volition? Or was she merely a pawn in Augustus or Tiberius'

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[1] See Lewis Webb, 'Female Interventions in Politics in the *libera res publica:* Structures and Practices' in *Leadership and Initiative in Late Republican and Early Imperial Rome*, eds. Roman M. Frolov and Christopher Burden-Strevens (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2022), pp. 151-188 for a more comprehensive discussion of elite Republic women's transgressions into the public sphere – the structural foundations and limitations of their public profiles.

[2] *RGDA* 8.5, in *Res Gestae Divi Augusti: Text, Translation, and Commentary*, ed. and tr. Alison Cooley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 67; Cassius Dio, 54.16.3-7, in *Roman History, Volume VI: Books 51-55*, tr. Earnest Cary and Herbert B. Foster, Loeb Classical Library 83 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1917), pp. 323-325; Suetonius *Augustus* 34 in *Lives of the Caesars, Volume I: Julius. Augustus. Tiberius. Gaius Caligula,* tr. J. C. Rolfe, Loeb Classical Library 31 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1914), pp. 203-205.

wider imperial agendas? Finally, I will briefly discuss agency in terms of economic agency: Julia's wealth and right to owning property.

The limitations of the source material must be noted. Histories of the Augustan and Tiberian periods rely on male-authored documentation, which, coloured by the gender politics of their times, tend to underrepresent and misrepresent women. No first-hand or first-person accounts of Julia exist, meaning that at a personal level, she is essentially unreachable. The constraints of evidence are exacerbated as our main literary sources were composed after the periods of Augustus and Tiberius, namely, Suetonius' *Lives of the Caesars* and Cassius Dio's *Roman History* – written in the 2nd and 3rd centuries CE respectively. Engagement with literary sources must be critical of their contexts and cross-referenced where possible. While I will also deal with archaeological evidence, it is rather scarce for Julia, and the ambiguity of its origins, intentions, and interpretations pose similar challenges. Crucially, all traces of Julia are as constructs rather than as herself. The question of her agency is particularly difficult to answer, and any conclusions are largely conjectural. Nevertheless, these constraints must not discourage studies of women in antiquity, especially in a political and public capacity where men have taken the foreground. Efforts to write and rewrite their histories, although inescapably trapped within the patriarchal perversions of their time, are a vital reclamation of their individuality.

Political life was a conventionally masculine prerogative and the antithesis to the domestic world which women inhabited. Existing historiography has largely concluded that Julia the Elder was politically passive – her position within the imperial family reinscribed the expectations of matrimony and motherhood, relegating her to the private sphere.[3] This interpretation aligns with Elaine Fantham's evaluation of Julia's matrimony.[4] Marriage was a characteristically political and strategic manoeuvre within the elite ranks of Republican society, setting a precedent for Julia's string of marriages not as her prerogative, but as a calculated political move enforced by her father. A precocious marriage to her cousin Marcellus in roughly 25 or 24BCE provides the first example of this.[5] Augustus was heavily involved in Marcellus' political career, favouring him as a successor, with his prospects bolstered by his marriage to Julia.[6] Although his poor health caused this union to be rather short-lived, Julia's successive marriage to her father's close friend Agrippa in 23BCE was

[3] See Ronald Syme, *The Roman Revolution* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1939) and Elaine Fantham, *Julia Augusti: The Emperor's Daughter* (Oxford: Routledge, 2006).
[4] Fantham, *Julia Augusti: The Emperor's Daughter*, pp. 29-31, 56-91.
[5] Dio, 53.27.5; Suetonius, *Augustus*, 63.1.
[6] See Dio, 53.26.1 and 53.28.3, for further details regarding Marcellus' political career.

similarly one of political expediency.[7] Fantham highlights how Julia's remarriage occurred at a crucial point of insecurity for the principate and thus was important for continuing confidence within the regime.[8] Compounded by Augustus' severe bout of illness (also in 23 BCE), Agrippa was marked out as his successor, receiving the imperial signet ring and cementing ties with his marriage to Julia.[9] Agrippa's death in 12BCE was followed by a final marriage to Tiberius, Augustus' stepson, in 11BCE, continuing this pattern of Julia's political stake in terms of Augustan succession, but only as a prospective wife.[10] Crucially, Julia's matrimony was not merely a matter of her family and their status – per Republican precedent – but was a mechanism for ensuring the stability and longevity of the state beyond Augustus' lifetime.[11] Any possibility of Julia's agency was even further relinquished due to this elevated political scale and exigency of her marriages.

Regarding Julia's marriages, her ties to such prominent, political and military men perhaps increased her accessibility to and activity within these public spheres. Despite Republican norms insisting on women's separation from military affairs, Mary Boatwright draws attention to evidence suggesting that Julia accompanied Agrippa to the provinces, flouting the conventional boundaries of a "woman's space".[12] Nicolaus of Damascus recounts that Julia accompanied Agrippa at some point during his Eastern tour between 16-13BCE, almost drowning in the flooding Scamander River and left by the citizens of Troy.[13] While the factual accuracy of this episode is certainly dubious, statue bases across mainland and Asiatic Greek cities honouring Agrippa and Julia, as well as Gaius and Lucius, may correspond to their presence in these regions as a family.[14] Julia may well have exercised political influence in the provinces in order to receive such commemoration, but it is more likely that such dedications were simply by virtue of her known imperial status. Similarly, in her marriage to Tiberius, Suetonius describes Julia's residence in Aquileia during the Balkan campaigns to be in

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[7] Ibid., 54.6.4-6; Suetonius, *Augustus*, 63.1.

[8] Fantham, *Julia Augusti: The Emperor's Daughter*, pp. See Dio, *Roman History*, 54.1-6 for further details. Military unrest broke out on the frontiers of Cantabri and Elephantine, while Augustus travelled to Sicily and as far as Syria to settle diplomatic affairs. Internal disputes over the election of consuls within Rome intensified the precarious circumstances.

[9] Dio, 53.30.2.

[10] Dio, 54.35.4; Suetonius, *Augustus*, 63.1.

[11] See Suzanne Dixon, 'The Marriage Alliance in the Roman Elite', *Journal of Family History*, 10:4 (1985), 353-378. for more on marriage as politically strategic during the Late Republic and Early Empire.

[12] Mary Boatwright, *Imperial Women of Rome: Power, Gender, Context* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), p. 260.

[13] Nicolaus of Damascus, 'On Virtues and Vices', Ex. 4, in *Nicolaus of Damascus: The Life of Augustus and The Autobiography: Edited with Introduction, Translations and Historical Commentary,* ed. and tr. Mark Toher, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), pp. 435-438.

[14] See Boatwright, *Imperial Women of Rome,* p. 260 for specific references to statuary.

closer proximity to her husband.[15] Yet, this unconventional spatial mobility was ultimately tied to her responsibilities as a wife and merely a relocation of her private life rather than a transgression into the public. Agency in any sort of provincial public role is out of the question, but it is unclear whether Julia's travels had a propagandistic agenda, showcasing the unity of the nuclear family on which the future principate would be centred, was at Agrippa's command, or was out of Julia's own interest and curiosity.

Julia's political value was equally vested in her capacity to serve the state as the mother of its successor. Her obligations as wife and mother propped up the political opportunities of her male relatives. The extensive political privileges and accolades bequeathed to Gaius and Lucius (born 20BCE and 17BCE), initiated into administrative life 'upon their coming of age'[16], entitled with the *princeps iuventatis*, and given command over cavalry in 7BCE and 6BCE, demonstrate how Julia's children were perceived by Augustus as further opportunities to secure his succession.[17] Augustus' adoption of Gaius and Lucius, as he himself had no biological sons, is also noteworthy.[18] Adoption, with political interests in mind, was a well-established convention in Rome; an earlier example is given by Scipio Aemilianus (185BCE-129BCE), whose adoption intended to protect the lineage of revered Roman general, Scipio Africanus.[19] Augustus' own adoption by Julius Caesar, despite being blood-related as his great-nephew, was critical to his inheritance of the political order following Caesar's death as well as a matter of preserving the family name.[20] Returning to Julia, it can be assumed that there was an expectation imposed on her to continue producing children; specifically, male children, given their political value. The nature of her representation within the official iconography of the Augustan principate reiterates the domestic constraints of her participation in political life. Julia's sole depiction in imperial coinage is alongside Gaius and Lucius on the reverse of Augustus' bust, confirming how her political identity was not intended to exist in any capacity independent from men, in a similar vein to the Ara Pacis.[21] Moreover, Boatwright argues that the nature of Julia's imagery – relatively sparse and centred on her domesticity – is a testament to how she had no control over her representation, further lacking agency in this respect.[22]

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[15] Suetonius, *Tiberius*, 7.3.
[16] Suetonius, *Augustus*, 26.2.
[17] Dio, 55.9.9-10, 55.10.17-20.
[18] Suetonius, *Augustus*, 64.1.
[19] Alan Edgar Astin, *Scipio Aemilianus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), pp. 11-13.
[20] See Hugh Lindsay, 'Political adoptions in the Republic', 'Clodius and his adoption', 'The adoption of Octavian' in *Adoption in the Roman World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 169-189, for more on the Republican context of adoption.
[21] *RIC I* Augustus 405.
[22] Boatwright, *Imperial Women of Rome*, p. 127.

For Julia, to exist as an imperial woman was not an invitation into public life but was a reinforcement of her private obligations and domain. However, turning to 2BCE and her exile, there is an opportunity to redeem her agency outside the bounds and in defiance of her official position. The orthodox account of 2BCE is one of Julia's adultery and subsequent banishment subject to Augustus' *Lex Julia de adulteriis coercendis* (18BCE).[23] I must premise that accounts of Julia's sexual impropriety are especially susceptible to misogynistic scrutiny, moralisation, and dramatisation, and must be approached with caution to avoid drawing unhistorical conclusions. If we accept the widely corroborated evidence of her adultery as a baseline, a rather different picture of Julia emerges than one of her as a woman who was willingly used as a political pawn in her marital relations. While her sexual and interpersonal autonomy was rendered subordinate to the state, she reasserted her agency by conducting her own affairs. Furthermore, there was an inherent political implication for Julia's adultery given the aforementioned political significance of her matrimony. Kristina Milnor elaborates on this idea that Julia's adultery was public and political, referring to Seneca the Younger and Pliny the Elder's accounts as near contemporaries of Julia.[24] Julia's transgression is expressed 'not merely in terms of morality, but in terms of space and the public/private dichotomy'[25]. Seneca situates Julia's 'nocturnal revels'[26] in 'the very forum and the rostrum from which her father had proposed a law against adultery'[27]. Julia's debauchery is thus interpreted as an active political statement against the social policies of the Augustan era. Pliny goes further, accentuating Julia's position as a political opponent and threat, describing '[Augustus'] daughter's adultery and the disclosure of her plots'[28]. Pliny's Julia is not only licentious but an active conspirator; while the nature of her plots is ambiguous, Pliny does not equate Julia's adultery with

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[23] Dio, 55.10.12-14; Pliny the Elder, 7.149, in *Natural History, Volume II: Books 3-7*, tr. H. Rackham, Loeb Classical Library 352 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1942) p. 605; Seneca the Younger, 'De Brevitae Vitae', 4.5, in *Moral Essays, Volume II: De Consolatione ad Marciam. De Vita Beata. De Otio. De Tranquillitate Animi. De Brevitate Vitae. De Consolatione ad Polybium. De Consolatione ad Helviam*, tr. John W. Basore, Loeb Classical Library 254 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1932), p. 299; 32.1, *Moral Essays, Volume III: De Beneficiis*, tr. John W. Basore, Loeb Classical Library 310 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1935), p. 431; Suetonius, *Augustus*, 65.1; Velleius Paterculus 2.100.3 in *Velleius Paterculus*, ed. and tr., Anthony J. Woodman, Loeb Classical Library 152 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2025), pp. 271-273.

[24] Milnor, Kristina, '*Suis omnia tuta locis*: Women, place, and public life in the age of Augustus', unpublished PhD thesis, University of Michigan (1998), pp. 38-45. Milnor more broadly speaks on the spatial gender politics of the Augustan period.

[25] Ibid., p. 40.

[26] Seneca the Younger, *Moral Essays, Volume III: De Beneficiis*, 32.1.

[27] Ibid., 32.1.

[28] Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, 7.149.

her political opposition but seems to refer to an independent incident and form of political participation.

These accounts are underscored by an external desire to see Julia's power and agency, perhaps as Julia's agency amplifies the subversiveness of her purportedly public and political actions against the imperial family. The disjuncture between the official imperial representation and expectation of Julia and these interpretations is curious. Even if the finer details of Julia's adultery cannot be confirmed, this overall impression of her as politically formidable is relatively contemporary – notably the case for Seneca, Pliny, and Velleius Paterculus, all of whom are writing in the Julio-Claudian period. Seneca's additional remark, it was the 'second time [Augustus was alarmed by] the need to fear a woman in league with an Antony'[29] regarding Julia's adultery with Mark Antony's son, Iullus Antonius, is particularly striking. Equating Julia with Cleopatra, a foreign queen, suggests she was clearly perceived as a genuine political force within the principate and in her own right – here, Julia is the object of Augustus' fear. However, this view of Julia as the agent of her adultery does not endure in the historiographical tradition. For Cassius Dio, Julia's adultery as a public intervention remains male-centred – she is a political pawn within Antonius' schemes against the principate.[30] Moreover, Julia's specific charge of adultery aligns with a broader literary trend of sexual slander. On the whole, Jennifer Knust argues that morality, particularly sexual morality, was a political currency of the Republican period.[31] Attacks on morality were commonly employed to destabilise political legitimacy and respectability for both genders. Fitting into this rhetorical precedent, it can be said that Julia was sufficiently and enduringly influential and politically significant – or at least perceived as such – to warrant such an extensive record of sexual slander. While the source of this political and public status was certainly not in any official capacity, there exists a case for redeeming Julia's power and agency as a political player under Augustus.

Nevertheless, any form of political visibility or opportunity was surrendered in Julia's exile – even if it had been limited under Augustus. As the conditions of her banishment were extended under Tiberius, Julia's identity as an imperial woman was essentially nullified – she effectively disappeared from imperial iconography and the written record. If we consider her adultery as an assertion of political or at least personal agency, it was certainly her only autonomous political

[29] Seneca the Younger, 'De Brevitae Vitae', 4.5.
[30] Dio, *Roman History*, 55.10.12-17.
[31] Jennifer Knust, 'Sexual Slander and Ancient Invective' in *Abandoned to lust: sexual slander and ancient Christianity* (New York City, NY: Columbia University Press, 2006), pp. 32-33.

action and her last. Julia's exile similarly placed constraints on her economic agency, though I must first contextualise her economic standing before her banishment. Republican women were afforded a greater degree of autonomy in economic ownership compared to political activity as wealth and property existed within the private sphere. The most important distinction between men's and women's economic rights was the *tutela mulierum,* in which the authorisation of an appointed male *tutor* was required in important legal and economic transactions. Augustus' introduction of the *ius trium liberorum* in the *leges juliae* (18BCE), giving women who had birthed three children freedom from *tutela*, including Julia in 18BCE, is thus notable.[32] Yet, the extent to which *tutela* was an obstacle to economic agency and, accordingly, the effect of the *leges juliae* is contested. For Kit Morrell, the *leges juliae* merely codified an existing trend of women's economic liberation.[33] Especially for elite women, the *ius trium liberorum* had a marginal impact; elite women in the Republic accrued substantial amounts of wealth and made economic decisions at their own volition. Antti Arjava affirms this argument, claiming that the *tutela* was most burdensome for freedwomen.[34] It is anticipated that prior to her exile, Julia was economically autonomous but in a way that adhered to Republican conventions and was enclosed within the domestic sphere – her imperial status had a negligible effect.

Sources pay relatively little attention to Julia's economic standing. The only explicit mention of her property is in Suetonius, as Augustus ordered the destruction of her villa as part of her banishment.[35] This can be interpreted as a statement on exile as a suppression of her agency in all senses, relegating her rights to her assets and any economic prerogatives. Julia's favourable economic position as a high-status woman was destabilised, and her financial dependency on her father was reinstated as her only means of acquiring funds was through yearly allowances provided from 4CE onwards.[36] As Tiberius rescinded this allowance, Julia was 'left to perish of destitution and slow decline'[37] in Tacitus's account, exemplifying how she could not provide for herself in exile.[38] An inscription which refers to Julia as having manumitted a certain Celos and his father, perhaps attesting to her slave ownership, emerges as conflicting evidence. While erected in 41CE, the precise dating of the manumission is highly contested. Jerzy Linderski has assumed that the manumission

[32] Dio, 54.16.1; Suetonius, *Augustus*, 34.1.
[33] Kit Morrell, '*Tutela mulierum* and the Augustan marriage laws', *Eugesta,* 10 (2020), 91-92.
[34] Antti Arjava, 'The End of *Tutela Mulierum*', *Journal of Roman Studies,* 114 (2024), 96-100.
[35] Suetonius, *Augustus*, 72.3.
[36] Suetonius, *Tiberius*, 50.1.
[37] Tacitus, 1.53, in *Histories: Books* 4-5. *Annals: Books* 1-3., tr. Clifford H. Moore and John Jackson, Loeb Classical Library 249 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1931), p. 333.
[38] See also Dio, 57.18.1; Suetonius, *Tiberius*, 50.1-2.

took place during Augustus' lifetime and before her exile; we can expect Julia to have owned slaves at this point.[39] However, Jane Gardner prescribes a date following Augustus' death and Livia's adoption as Celos' mother is accounted as a freedwoman of Julia Augusta.[40] Gardner insists that slave ownership was out of the question during Julia's exile, suggesting instead that Livia had sent Celos' mother to Julia around 4CE, during which her son was born and subsequently acquired by Julia. Working around the conventions of slave ownership, Gardner is fairly certain of Julia's complete loss of economic rights under exile. Thus, Julia's exile had a decisive impact on her agency beyond the political domain, reinstating her economic dependence on male relatives and denying her rights to economic ownership.

Overall, I have sought to explore what it meant to be an imperial wife, mother, and daughter in Augustan and Tiberian Rome through a case study of Julia the Elder. I conclude that what outwardly appears as Julia's political participation and public transgression was paradoxically reliant on, and emphasised, her traditional roles within the private sphere. As Augustus' only biological offspring, Julia's political involvement largely concerned the matter of succession. Yet, as his daughter, Julia's political value was male-centred – her marriages were a means for Augustus to secure Julian lineage in succession, while her fertility was a means of producing heirs. These domestic parameters further defined her representation and iconography. Furthermore, as Julia's matrimony and maternity – ordinarily private affairs – were co-opted by a state agenda and subject to state intervention, she was stripped of any agency. The matter of her adultery reinforces the political stakes of her interpersonal relationships, while providing an opportunity to redeem her agency in acts of rebellion. Julia's affairs were not merely an issue of her sexual impropriety, but had political implications given that her matrimony was inextricably intertwined with Augustan succession, and perhaps even political intentions. Still, her exile essentially nullified any of her imperial prerogatives as well as more traditionally accepted forms of agency. This is exemplified as Julia's rights to private wealth and economic ownership had largely adhered to Republican convention, however, were rescinded in her exile. Interestingly, a comparison between Julia's political and economic standings highlights the exceptionalism and novelty of her position as an imperial woman in its political manifestations. Regardless of overwhelming constraints, Julia's political visibility and influence demonstrates a clear break with republican precedent.

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[39] Jerzy Linderski, 'Julia in Regium', *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik*, 72 (1988), 181-200

[40] Jane F. Gardner, 'JULIA'S FREEDMEN: QUESTIONS OF LAW AND STATUS', *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies*, 35 (1988), 94-100.

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