

POWER, AGENCY, & IMPERIAL POLITICS: THE CASE OF JULIA AUGUSTI

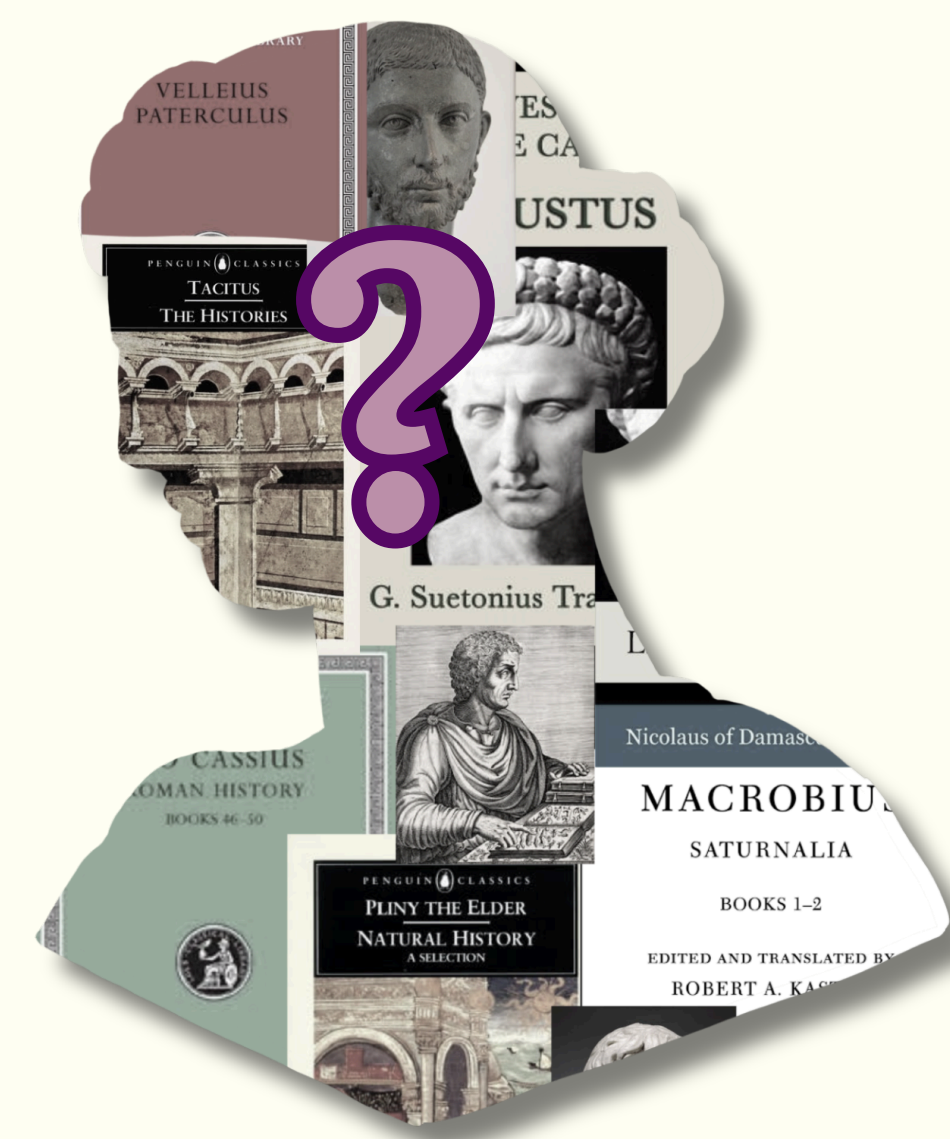


Introduction

The Augustan Principate (27BCE-14CE) heralded the emergence of the emperor and imperial family in a Roman context. As a stark departure from the institutions of the Republic, the imperial family came to the fore as the backbone and political apparatus of the state. I have set out to explore and evaluate the space occupied by imperial women; **were imperial women uniquely public, political, and transgressive figures?** Contextualised by the *leges Juliae* (18-17BCE), which emphasised the rigidity of and expectations to fulfil traditional gender roles in Augustan Rome, I have grappled with the **idea of the imperial woman as one rife with contradictions and novelty.** A **focused case study on Julia Augusti**, the only daughter of the first emperor Augustus has formed the scope of this project.

Methodology: The Dilemma of Sources

Studying women in antiquity is fraught with challenges, most notably, the constraints of primary source material. Studies of the Augustan and Tiberian periods **rely on male-authored documentation** and are coloured by the gender politics of their times. Women's marginalisation in political and public realms was matched with a **lack of recognition and underrepresentation in the historical record** – giving precedence to such political and public affairs. Approaching the **matter of imperial women as purportedly powerful and transgressive, documentation is especially prone to vilifying and misrepresenting these women** as historical actors. Furthermore, **no first-hand or first-person accounts of Julia exist**, meaning that at a personal level, she is essentially unreachable, while 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.** Although I have corroborated literary evidence with archaeological sources, this type of evidence is rather scarce for Julia. The ambiguity of its origins, intentions, and interpretations pose similar challenges. Crucially, **all traces of Julia are as constructs rather than as herself.**



Key Themes & Conclusions

THE 'PUBLIC' VERSUS THE 'PRIVATE'

The gender binary bifurcated the public and private spheres. The former, being a masculine prerogative, and the latter, a feminine reserve.

The reconciliation of private roles and responsibilities within new public contexts was a recurring theme in my research.

Julia was **afforded a greater degree of public visibility and political participation where these public roles aligned with her ultimately domestic identities as a mother and wife.**

In Augustan succession, her marriages were a means to secure Julian lineage in succession, while her fertility was a means of producing heirs, demonstrating her political stake.

REPUBLICAN PRECEDENT VERSUS IMPERIAL INNOVATION

Recent scholarship has dispelled the view that women were barred from any forms of public participation under the Republic, especially in upper echelons. **What distinguished the power wielded by imperial women as opposed to elite women, then?** Economically, Julia's imperial status had a rather negligible influence, whereas it is politically that she stands out given her proximity to the centre of power (her father) and high stake in the politics of succession – the imperial family was both a private and public institution.

POWER AND INFLUENCE VERSUS AGENCY

Power and influence is not synonymous with agency. Thus, while the **case for Julia's political influence and stake can be made, this is paradoxically at the expense of her agency.** She is politically active by virtue of her position as a mother and wife, however in doing so, these **domestic functions are co-opted by a state agenda and controlled by Augustus and Tiberius**, compromising her agency. Julia's adultery may allow us to redeem her agency, but her banishment vanquishes any economic, political, or personal prerogatives.

THE QUESTION OF WOMEN IN ANTIQUITY AND MARGINALISED HISTORIES

Perhaps the most vital takeaway from this project pertains to the objective of History. Even where politics, public affairs, concepts of power, and agency predominate, **History should not only seek an interest in the powerful.** Marginalised by their contemporaries and in a similar vein, by historians, my intention was to **give voice to the often untold stories of women in antiquity.** Julia Augusti was by no means a central political figure; rather, she lived within the constraints of her gender and domestic obligations as a wife and a mother. Still, there is an extent to which she existed unconventionally, and indeed, politically. **Unpacking the nuances of the gender politics and power dynamics of past times, we can gain a more holistic and inclusive picture of public life, even as it remains the case that patriarchal forces kept women out of the foreground.**