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Women in Ancient Greece: A Sourcebook
Bonnie MacLachlan

Greek and Roman Sexualities: A Sourcebook
Jennifer Larson

Women in Ancient Rome

A Sourcebook

Bonnie MacLachlan

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With his adoption of the title Augustus (“Venerable”, “Consecrated by Ritual”) in 27 BCE, Octavian launched the Principate, since he was recognized as the first, or topmost leader (*princeps*) in Rome until his death in 14 CE. He kept the formal structures of the Republic but in effect this amounted to the launch of the Roman Empire, with himself as emperor. As a member of the Julian clan he merged this family line with the Claudians through his second marriage to Livia. The last descendant of the Julians on his mother’s side and the Claudians on his (adopted) father’s side was Nero, whose death in 68 CE ended the dynastic period known as the Julio-Claudian era.

As Octavian, Augustus had already been married twice, the second time when he was 17 (in 40 BCE) to Scribonia, who was his elder and had also been married previously and borne three children, including a daughter Cornelia Scipio. With Octavian/Augustus, Scribonia produced another daughter, Julia, but with Livia he had no children.

Augustan marriage legislation

The civil wars of the final century BCE in Rome had depleted the male population. This, together with a diminishing of paternal control over daughters and an increase in extramarital sexual activity, prompted Augustus to attempt to regain some control through legislation. The surviving record of this is found in later juristic writings: Gaius (*Institutes of Roman Law*, c. 160 CE), the *Epitome*, a work ascribed to Ulpian, a jurist of the second/third century CE, and *The Digest*, a compilation of Roman law assembled under the Emperor Justinian in the 6th century CE. Augustus’ law, the *Lex Julia* (issued probably in 18 BCE and taking its title from his family name), employed both rewards and penalties for the purpose of enforcement.

The section in the *Lex Julia* entitled *de maritandis ordinibus* legislation “about marriage between the orders” attempted to regulate marriage between social classes in order to control the legitimacy of children. Senators, together with their children and descendants in the male line, were not to marry women who were freed slaves or other women whose status was suspect.

“Freeborn men are forbidden from marrying a woman who earns her living as a prostitute, a procuress, a woman freed by a procurer or procuress, a woman taken in adultery, one that has been convicted in a public prosecution, or a woman who performs on stage.”

(Ulpian, *Epitome* 13.2)

Another section of the *Lex Julia (de adulteriis)* dealt with cases of adultery (understood as extramarital sex involving a married woman), and made it a public crime. The following stipulations were recorded by Julius Paulus, a jurist of the second/third century CE whose work was included in *The Digest*.

The father of the woman suspected of adultery was permitted to kill his daughter’s lover if caught, or at least to prosecute him; the crime was punishable by exile and confiscation of property.

“In the second chapter of the *Lex Julia* concerning adultery it is permissible for a father, either adoptive or natural, to kill with his own hands an adulterer caught with his daughter in his own house or that of his son-in-law, whatever his rank.” (1)

Her husband could kill the lover if he was considered to be of ill repute.

“A husband can only kill those caught in adultery who are ‘infamous’ and those who make a living by selling their bodies, slaves as well. His wife, however, he is prohibited from having the right to kill.” (4)

Although this prohibition was in place, the husband who committed a crime of passion was not treated harshly.

“It has been determined that a husband who kills his wife when she is caught in adultery is to be punished more leniently because he committed this act through a justified intolerance of suffering.” (5)

If the wife survived, the husband was obliged to divorce her; otherwise he would be prosecuted as a pimp.

“When the adulterer has been killed the husband must divorce his wife immediately and then within three days declare in public with which adulterer and in which place he had apprehended his wife.” (6)

“It has been determined that a man who does not immediately divorce his wife who has been caught in adultery is accused of being guilty of pimping.” (8)

The adulterous woman would be sent into exile on an island with limited resources. If her lover survived he would be exiled elsewhere.

“It has been determined that women convicted of adultery are to be restricted to one-half their dowry and one-third of their goods and relegated to an island; for the men convicted of adultery, with comparable exile to an island one-half their property is confiscated. They are relegated to different islands, however.” (14)

(Julius Paulus, *Sententiae* 2.26= *FIRA* 2, pp. 351–2)

The poet Horace, celebrating the peace and stability that he associated with the reign of Augustus, included brief praise for the *Lex Julia de adulteriis*.

“The home, chaste, is polluted by no debauchery; custom and written law have vanquished and driven out defiled wickedness. Mothers are praised for offspring who resemble their parents.

Punishment, close at hand, bears down on the crime of unchastity.” (Horace, *Odes* 4.5.21–4)

The focal point in cases of adultery was clearly the woman, while her husband had ready access to a variety of partners, with the exception of other married women.

Several decades later, in 19 CE, a *matrona* named Vistilia attempted to escape prosecution as an adulterer by registering as a prostitute, provoking the Senate to invoke the Julian law.

“In the same year the lust of women was curtailed by strict decrees of the Senate, and precautions were taken lest a woman make a profit from her body if her grandfather, her father or her husband had been a Roman of the equestrian class. For Vistilia, daughter of a praetorian family, had made open profession of prostitution on the aediles’ list – the custom preserved among our ancestors, who believed that with the public admission of shame there was sufficient penalty for the unchaste. It was also required of Vistilia’s husband, Titidius Labeo, to explain why he had disregarded the enforcement of the legal penalty in the face of his wife’s being exposed as a transgressor. And when he brought forward as an excuse the fact that the sixty days allotted for consultation had not yet elapsed it seemed sufficient to decide about Vistilia, and she was exiled to the island of Seriphos.”

(Tacitus, *Annals* 2.85)

There was considerable resistance to the severity of the *Lex Julia* and it was repealed then modified in 9 CE and presented as the *Lex Papia Poppaea* (taking the names of the consuls in office that year). In later juristic sources the laws are frequently referred to jointly, as the *Lex Julia et Papia*.

From the record of Gaius, it is clear that under the revised law, people who did not marry or who did not have children were penalized through a restriction in their access to inherited legacies.

“Further, childless persons by the Papian Law, because they did not have children, lose one-half their inheritances and legacies, those who were formerly thought capable of taking trust-gifts in full.”

(Gaius, *Institutiones* 2.286)

Under the new law there were more generous provisions for freed slaves. Cassius Dio, a historian of the third century CE, reported that all freeborn men apart from senators could now marry freedwomen and their children would be legitimate (*Roman History* 54.16.1–2). The reproductive success of both freeborn women and freedwomen who had produced three children was to be rewarded with freedom from guardianship (*tutela*).

“Women of free birth are released from guardianship by right of having three children; freedwomen, if they are under the legal guardianship of their patron or his children

may be released from statutory guardianship with four children. Those who have guardians of another type ... are released from legal guardianship with three children." (Gaius, *Institutes* 1.194)

The felt need to increase the birthrate led to further privileges for freedwomen. Under the *Lex Papia Poppaea* freedwomen who produced four children were even permitted to make wills, passing on a portion of their property to their children. An amount was also reserved for their patron, reckoned from the number of their children (Ulpian, *Epitome* 29.3–6). Together with their release from *tutela*, this would have awarded them the same independence that was enjoyed by the Vestal Virgins.

The anxiety around sexual immorality expressed in this legislation was frequently tied to concern over a general decadence that had begun in the Late Republic and continued into the Principate, doubtless in large measure the result of the affluence that came with the growth of Rome as an imperial power. A sign of this social instability, according to Horace, was the sexual laxity of women.

"The Dacian and the Aethiopian almost destroyed the city
that was taken up with internal strife.
One was dreaded because of the fleet;
the other was better at hurling arrows.
Prolific in sin, this age
first defiled marriage-bonds, then the family line and the homes:
springing from this source, devastation
has flooded over the fatherland and the populace.
The girl coming of age delights in Greek dances
and is instructed in accomplishments;
even now she contemplates illicit lovemaking
right down to her dainty finger.
Soon in the midst of the drinking parties of her husband
she seeks younger lovers, and does not choose
the one on whom she would bestow unlawful pleasures
swiftly when the lights are removed,
but openly, when bidden, she rises,
with the full knowledge of her husband, whether it is some peddler
or the captain of a Spanish ship
who pays dearly the price of shame."
(Horace, *Odes* 3.13–32)

That the sexual laxity of men was not regarded as a threat to the social order is reflected in an essay of Plutarch in which he offers advice to a bride and groom

and assumes that the husband will avail himself of the opportunities to have sex with household slaves.

"[In the case of] a man, then, in his private life, who is immoderate in his pleasures and dissolute, if he goes somewhat astray with a mistress or female slave, his wife must not be irritated or angry, but should reason that it is because he respects her that he shares his drunken behaviour, his intemperance and his wantonness with another woman."

(Plutarch, *Moralia* 140B)

Women of the imperial households

Women who became wives and mothers within the emperor's extended family functioned as tools of imperial succession, particularly if the emperor had but one child, a daughter. To promote the prospects of a favoured successor, the emperor could arrange the marriage of the man to the imperial princess. In other cases where the emperor wished to withhold such an opportunity, the young woman could be married off to a non-contender for power.

LIVIA

In 39 BCE, after only a year of marriage, Augustus divorced Scribonia, on the same day that she gave birth to their daughter Julia. Suetonius mentions Scribonia's severe temperament, and Augustus' resentment of her jealousy over a rival lover – likely Livia – as factors (“The Deified Augustus” 62.2, 69.1). The *princeps* took Livia as his wife when she was pregnant with her second son (Tiberius) and married to a prominent Roman, Tiberius Claudius Nero. The historian Tacitus (late first, early second centuries CE) describes her attracting Augustus by her beauty, and the pair dismissing convention to begin a life together. But in keeping with Augustus' attempt to restore old-fashioned morality, Livia seems to have earned an exemplary reputation as an ideal *matrona*.

“Then Caesar took her from her husband, overcome by passion aroused by her beauty. It is not clear that she was reluctant, and he was in such haste that he led her to his hearth while she was pregnant, without even allotting the interval of time for her to give birth ... In her upright management of the household she recalled that of an earlier era, although her cordiality went beyond that approved of by women in the past. She was a domineering mother, an agreeable wife and possessed a character suited to the political occupations of her husband.”

(Tacitus, *Annals* 5.1.1)

Cassius Dio, a historian of the imperial period, passed on a report of Livia's own comments about her performance as an indulgent wife of the *princeps*.

“When someone asked her how and by what actions she had prevailed over Augustus to such a degree she answered that it was by being perfectly chaste herself and by doing gladly everything that he approved and not meddling in any other of his affairs, and by pretending not to hear about or notice any of his sexual favourites.”

(Cassius Dio, *History of Rome* 58.2.5)

The ancient sources are fulsome both in praise for and hostility against Livia, with her detractors going so far as to implicate her in the death of Augustus, by administering poison. There is general agreement, however, that she was an important public figure, a “first lady” as no other Roman *matrona* had been previously. Dio reported that in 35 BCE, four years after Octavian married her, he awarded both Livia and his sister Octavia the same sacrosanctity that protected tribunes. This would save them from the verbal abuse being directed at Octavian and those close to him by supporters of Octavia's husband Mark Antony at a time when Octavia was being badly treated by him, and there was a vigorous propaganda battle between the two factions. The two women were also given the right to administer their estates without supervision by a guardian, and public statues of them were dedicated. All this awarded Livia and Octavia a visible and sanctioned public presence that had not been possible previously for women apart from Vestal Virgins (*Roman History* 49.38.1).

Both women were to suffer a mother's grief at the death of a son. In 23 BCE, Octavia's son Marcellus – Augustus' heir apparent – died from an illness that almost took the life of the *princeps*. In 9 BCE, Livia's younger son Drusus (brother of Tiberius) was killed by a fall from his horse as he was leading a campaign against German tribes on the banks of the Elbe. The reaction of the two mothers was discussed by Seneca, a Stoic who lived a half-century later under the Emperor Nero, in a moral essay of consolation for a woman of his time also bereft of a son. His stance as a Stoic led him to advise against indulging in the excessive grieving he associated with Octavia.

“Through her whole life [Octavia] remained just as she was at the funeral; I don't say that she did not have the courage to get up but she refused to be lifted up, deciding that a loss of tears was a second bereavement. She didn't want to have a single portrait of her beloved son, nor a single mention of him to be uttered in her hearing. She hated all mothers, and was most inflamed at Livia, because it seemed that the happiness promised to her had passed to the son of that woman [Tiberius]. Darkness and solitude were her most frequent companions; not even having a thought for her brother she rejected poems composed to celebrate the memory of Marcellus and other honours conferred by literary works, and closed her ears to all attempts at comforting her. She withdrew from her appointed duties

and, detesting the good fortune itself that shone too brightly around her from the greatness of her brother, she buried herself and hid herself away." (2.4)

Livia he described as much more restrained as she was observed accompanying the bier of her son while it made its way back to Rome.

"On the long journey in which she followed behind the remains of her son Drusus, with so many funeral pyres burning throughout the whole of Italy, she was inflamed as if she were losing him again each time a fire burned. But as soon as she laid him in the tomb she put aside at one time both her son and her sorrow, and did not grieve more than was appropriate for Caesar or fair to Tiberius, who was still alive." (3.2)

(Seneca, *Consolatio ad Marciam*)

Despite Augustus' high regard for Livia (and his marriage legislation), he may not have observed strict marital fidelity, according to Suetonius. (The biographer frequently includes salacious personal details that must be read with caution, given the highly charged political atmosphere of the Principate.)

"And not even his friends deny that he indulged in adultery, although they justify this as not committed from lust but from design, so that he more easily might investigate the plotting of his adversaries through their women. Mark Antony upbraided him with – beyond the hasty marriage to Livia – taking the wife of a man of consular rank into the bedroom from her husband's dining room in plain view, and returning her to the dinner-party with her ears blushing in shame and her hair in disarray. [Further,] that Scribonia was divorced because [she complained too freely at the influence of his mistress, that liaisons were obtained through his friends who stripped and inspected mothers of families and grown virgins, just as if Toranius the slave-dealer were putting them up for sale."

(Suetonius, "The Deified Augustus" 69.1)

Suetonius adds that in his later life Augustus developed a preference for deflowering virgins, who were delivered to him even by Livia (71.1). He was kissing his wife as he died, however, while uttering the words "Live mindful of our marriage-bond, and farewell!" (99.1).

JULIA

Augustus' daughter Julia was first married to Marcellus, the son of Octavia (her aunt). When Marcellus died from illness in 23 BCE, Julia was only 15.

Augustus quickly arranged a second marriage to a man his own age, his trusted commander-in-chief Marcus Agrippa, who was obliged to divorce his wife, a daughter of Octavia. The following year Julia gave birth to her first son Gaius and two daughters, and a son Lucius Caesar followed. These were succeeded by a son born after his father's death, Agrippa Postumus.

Macrobius, writing four centuries later but using as his source Domitius Marsus, a writer of the Augustan period, describes Julia at 38 as witty, well-read and popular.

"... she took advantage of both fortune and her father. Her love of literature and her extensive learning – which were easily acquired in that household – and particularly her gentle disposition toward others and her even temper, won the woman enormous popularity. Those who were aware of her vices marvelled at such contrasting virtues." (2.5.2)

Macrobius' source attributes to Julia the following reply to one of her companions who was impressed at the resemblance of Julia's children to Agrippa, despite her promiscuity.

"When those people who were aware of her sexual indiscretions marvelled at how her children seemed to resemble Agrippa when she was making the potency of her body so generally available she said, 'I never carry a passenger except when the boat is full.'" (2.5.9)

(Macrobius, *Saturnalia*)

Agrippa died in 12 BCE, and Augustus then arranged for Julia to be married to Livia's son Tiberius, although he was already married to a daughter of Agrippa, with one child and another expected (Suetonius, "The Deified Augustus" 63.1–2, 64.1). Suetonius described Tiberius' distress at his imposed divorce.

"... he was forced to divorce [Vipsania] and marry Julia, daughter of Augustus, in short order. This he did with no small amount of mental anguish, both because he was attached to his relationship with [Vipsania] Agrippina and because he disapproved of the conduct of Julia, since he had observed that she was after him even while her last husband was alive – something that was in fact broadly believed. After the divorce he grieved over the separation from [Vipsania] Agrippina, and on one occasion when he saw her by chance he followed her with a look so happy and so tearful that they took care that she never again came into his sight."

(Suetonius, "Tiberius" 7.2)

Julia's third marriage was an unhappy one. Tiberius abandoned Rome for Rhodes, staying for seven years and leaving Julia alone in the city. In the year

2 CE, Augustus could no longer ignore her sexual laxity. Seneca echoes the report of several others who recorded the difficult decision the princeps felt obliged to make, to punish his daughter in keeping with his own legislation against adultery.

“The deified Augustus sent into exile his daughter, unchaste beyond the curse of unchastity, and made public the scandals of the imperial household: that she had accepted adulterers in swarms, that she had roamed through the city with her nightly revelling; that the Forum itself and the rostra from which her father had carried the law against adultery had suited his daughter for debauchery; that there had been a daily flocking to the statue of Marsyas, when she turned from adultery to prostitution and sought the right to every form of licence with any unknown adulterer. Hardly able to control his rage he had made public these scandals that had to be punished by the princeps but also should have been kept quiet, inasmuch as the disgrace of some misdemeanours also turns on the one who punishes them. Later, when with time passing embarrassment had followed his rage, groaning that he had not suppressed in silence what he had been unaware of for so long until it had been shameful to speak out, he often cried out ‘none of this would have happened to me if either Agrippa or Maecenas had been alive!’” (Seneca, *De Beneficiis* 6.32)

Tacitus provides the details of Julia’s punishment and records her death after Tiberius came to power.

“In the same year (14 CE) Julia died; some time before she had been imprisoned by her father for her shameful behaviour on the island of Pandateria and then in the town of the Regini who live by the Sicilian strait. She had been married to Tiberius when her sons Gaius and Lucius were in the prime of their life, but she had despised him as being beneath her. This was, to be sure, the private reason why Tiberius would withdraw to Rhodes. When he obtained imperial power he left her to die, having been banished, destitute through privation and slow decay, disgraced and bereft of all hope after the murder of (her son) Agrippa Postumus. He thought the murder would go unnoticed because of the long duration of her exile.” (Tacitus, *Annals* 1.53)

Tacitus informs us that Julia’s daughter (bearing the same name) was also convicted of adultery by Augustus and banished to an island off the Apulian coast. She fared better than her mother in exile: for the 20 years before her death she was supported by Livia who, Tacitus tells us, “secretly undermined her stepdaughters while they were flourishing but openly displayed compassion toward them when they were cast down” (*Annals* 4.71).

AGRIPPINA THE ELDER

Livia also played a role in the life of Julia’s daughter, Agrippina (referred to as “Agrippina the Elder” to distinguish her from her daughter of the same name). She was married to Germanicus, the son of Tiberius’ brother Drusus (therefore a grandson of Livia). Tacitus’ record indicates that there were serious tensions in the imperial household between Tiberius and Germanicus, whom Augustus had obliged Tiberius to adopt as his heir, and between Livia and his wife Agrippina.

“[Germanicus] was perturbed by the secret hatred coming from his uncle and grandmother – the motives of which had a more severe impact because they were undeserved. The truth of the matter was that the memory of Drusus was still alive among the Roman populace, and it was believed that had he been in possession of imperial power he would have restored liberty to the people, whence the same goodwill and hope was placed in Germanicus. The young man possessed the disposition of an ordinary citizen, exceptional affability – in contrast to Tiberius with the arrogance and inscrutability of his speech and expression. Female friction added to this, with the stepmotherly provocations of Livia visited on Agrippina, and Agrippina herself fairly excitable, were it not that through her moral integrity and love for her husband she converted an otherwise ungovernable temper to the good.”

(Tacitus, *Annals* 1.33)

In 14 CE, Augustus died and Tiberius assumed imperial power. Agrippina, with her husband and his legions in Gaul, garnered popularity among the soldiers by introducing her sixth child, Gaius, to the army in a military outfit that included small versions of the legionaires’ hobnailed boots (*caligae*). These soldier-booties would earn him the name “Caligula”, and sympathy for the mother and child among the soldiers would serve to quell a serious mutiny in the field (Tacitus, *Annals* 1.40–4).

The following year, Germanicus found himself and his soldiers in danger of being trapped in Germany while a smaller contingent of the army was in Gaul on the other side of the River Rhine with Agrippina. As Germanicus and his troops, pursued by the Germans, made a dash to cross the river, Agrippina quelled a panic-driven rush to combat the onslaught by tearing down the bridge, which would have meant certain destruction for her husband and his army. According to Tacitus, when the report of this reached Tiberius it served to further inflame the new emperor’s antagonism toward Germanicus and his wife.

“Meanwhile a rumour circulated that the army had been surrounded and that a hostile column of Germans was marching against the Gauls. If Agrippina had not

prevented the bridge over the Rhine from being destroyed there were those who would have dared that outrage out of panic. But it was a woman with prodigious courage who assumed the duties of a leader during those days, who, if some soldier was in need or was wounded, supplied equipment and dressings. Gaius Pliny, who gave an account of the German wars, reported that she stood at the approach to the bridge, bestowing praises and thanks to the returning legions. This penetrated the soul of Tiberius all the more deeply: not only was that attention without an ulterior motive, but her enthusiasm for the soldiers was not directed against a foreign enemy. There was nothing left for commanders to do when a woman visited the maniples, approached the standards, lay her hand to the bestowing of bonuses – as if she did not court them enough by daring to parade the son of the general dressed in the regalia of a common soldier, and to request that he be called ‘Caesar Caligula!’”

(Tacitus, *Annals* 1.69)

Two years later, Tiberius recalled Germanicus from Germany and sent him to supervise the Eastern provinces. A friend of the emperor’s, Gnaeus Piso, was sent as governor of Syria with instructions to keep an eye on the activities of Germanicus. Piso, however, soon incurred the displeasure of the emperor and the Senate by acting independently and with cruelty, and tensions grew into open hostility between Piso and Germanicus. Germanicus fell ill, raising the suspicion that he had been poisoned by the governor.

As he lay dying, Germanicus denounced Piso (Tacitus, *Annals* 71.1) and gave final instructions to his wife.

“Then turning to his wife he begged her, on behalf of the memory of himself and for the children they had in common, to strip off her fierceness of spirit, to bend her will in the face of furious fortune, and when she returned to Rome not to irritate those stronger than she by rivalling them for power.”

(Tacitus, *Annals* 2.72)

After Germanicus died, Agrippina sailed for Rome with her six children, carrying the ashes of her husband. In the city the announcement of the death of such a popular leader inflamed passions to such a degree that all civic life was suspended. An enormous contingent of mourners met her boat as she disembarked at Brundisium, and funeral tributes were held in the Italian colonies as Germanicus’ remains were carried in procession to Rome. Tiberius and Livia did not appear in public.

Tacitus describes the consternation of Tiberius on the day when the ashes were placed in the Mausoleum of Augustus, when the streets were full of mourners lamenting the loss of a city saviour and praising Agrippina.

“Nothing, however, struck more deeply into Tiberius’ heart than the feverish devotion of people for Agrippina, when they called her an ornament to her country, the last of Augustus’ blood-line, a peerless model of old-fashioned virtue. Turning to the heavens and the gods they prayed for the preservation of her offspring and that they might outlive those who had done them wrong.”

(Tacitus, *Annals* 3.4)

An important document came to light at the end of the twentieth century, when several copies of a *Senatus Consultum* (a Senatorial Decree) were found in Spain, attesting to the fact that Tiberius had requested an investigation into Piso’s behaviour toward Germanicus and the imperial household. A public trial was held in which Piso was accused of savagery and sedition. The former governor then committed suicide, and there was some suspicion that Tiberius played a role in his death. A significant detail in the Senatorial Decree, which would have been disseminated throughout the Empire, is its singling out for commendation the imperial women who were relatives of Germanicus. Of Livia (his grandmother), it stated:

“That the Senate praised greatly the moderation of Julia Augusta and Drusus Caesar (father of Germanicus), imitating the justice shown by our *princeps*, and that this Order observed that these individuals had not demonstrated a greater devotion to Germanicus than fairness in holding back their full judgements until the case of the elder Cn. Piso was heard.”

Of Agrippina, Germanicus’ wife, Antonia (his mother) and Livia his sister, it stated

“That also of those others connected to Germanicus Caesar by a close relationship [the Senate] had strong approval – for Agrippina, whom [in the view of the Senate] the memory of the deified Augustus by whom she had been greatly esteemed and of her husband Germanicus, with whom she had lived in unique harmony, and so many children born by a birth most auspicious for those who survived, [the Senate] render their esteem.

Likewise of Antonia, mother of Germanicus Caesar who, having experienced a single marriage – to Drusus, father of Germanicus – has displayed through the integrity of her character that she was worthy of such closeness to the deified Augustus, and of Livia, sister of Germanicus Caesar, about whom both her grandmother and her father-in-law and at the same time paternal uncle, our *princeps*, declared to be excellent – persons in whose judgement, even if she did not belong to the house, she might deservedly take pride, and much more so as a woman bound by such close personal ties.

That of these women the Senate commended equally both their most steadfast grief and in their grief their moderation.”

(*Senatus Consultum de Cn Pisone Patre* 137–47)

As the result of tensions in the imperial household, fomented by Tiberius' prefect (equivalent to his Chief of Police) and not eased by Agrippina's headstrong nature, Tiberius left Rome for Capri. He sent letters to the city banishing Agrippina and her eldest son. Agrippina the Elder starved herself and died in exile.

AGRIPPINA THE YOUNGER

Upon the death of Tiberius in 37 CE, Agrippina's son Gaius became emperor. He is better known in the records as Caligula, the nickname he received during his childhood among the Roman cohorts. His rule was marked by violence, accusations of treason and plots against his life. His two sisters Livilla and Agrippina were caught up in the web of suspicion of plotting against him, and were exiled.

Four years after his accession, Caligula was assassinated. Claudius, brother of Germanicus, succeeded him, and recalled the younger Agrippina and Livilla (his nieces) from exile. Livilla would be exiled once again, as a consequence of the sexual jealousy of Claudius' third wife Messalina, and this time she died of starvation. Agrippina married again, to a wealthy man of consular rank but not a contender for imperial power. Considerably older than she, he died not many years after their marriage. Messalina, as lusty as she was vindictive according to the sources, took her own life when hunted down on orders from Claudius after she had celebrated publicly a "marriage" with another man during Claudius' absence (Tacitus, *Annals* 11.31–7). At the age of 32 in 41 CE, Agrippina the Younger married for the third time and became the fourth wife of Claudius (her uncle). To optimize the chances of her son Nero becoming Claudius' successor, she saw that he was betrothed to Claudius' daughter Octavia and that the emperor adopted Nero, who was older than Claudius's natural son Britannicus and would therefore stand a good chance of superseding him as emperor when Claudius died. Ancient sources agree that Agrippina's shrewd (and at times ruthless) acquisition of power as empress was considerable.

Claudius died in 54 CE (probably poisoned by Agrippina) and Nero became emperor at the age of 17. Initially Agrippina maintained control over him but it was inevitable that this would be resented by her teenage son who turned to others for mentoring, in particular the moral philosopher and writer Seneca. The sources covering the next five years are filled with speculation over the motives behind Nero's final decision to kill his mother, whether this was motivated by his mistress Poppaea Sabina who would ultimately become his wife (Tacitus, *Annals*

1.45) or the urging of others hostile to Agrippina. Before the end, rumours also circulated that he was committing incest with Agrippina (Tacitus, *Annals* 14.2; Suetonius, "Nero" 28.2; Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 61.11.3–4).

The final act was committed in 59 CE, and Tacitus' description is one of the most memorable vignettes in Latin literature. Nero chose as the setting a festival of Minerva celebrated at the resort town of Baiae on the Bay of Naples. He invited his mother to join him and welcomed her warmly. At the festival she occupied a seat of honour and the two feasted and embraced each other. After midnight they went to the shore where several vessels were moored, one decked out in honour of Agrippina. Nero had arranged for it to be outfitted with a device that would collapse the roof over his mother, break up the boat and drop her into the sea. When she was on board the device was activated but she survived. Nero panicked and sent soldiers to kill her, accusing her of conspiracy to kill him.

"The gods presented a night brilliant with starlight and the tranquility of a calm sea, as if for a demonstration of the crime. The vessel had not gone far, with two of her closest companions accompanying Agrippina. One of these, Crepereius Gallus, stood quite near the helm, with Acerronia at her feet while she lay back on her couch recalling with delight the repentant mood of her son and the recovery of her maternal influence.

At a given signal the ceiling of the place caved in, weighed down with a lot of lead; Crepereius was crushed and died immediately. Agrippina and Acerronia were saved by the projecting sides of the couch that were too strong to give under the weight. And the breakup of the boat did not follow; there was commotion among everyone and the majority who were unaware of what was going on stood in the way of those who were in on the plot. It seemed best to the rowers that they tip the boat on one side and thus sink the boat, but no agreement on an immediate plan was reached among them and others, by pressing for a contrary option, provided the opportunity for a gentler casting into the sea. Acerronia quite unwisely shouted the while that she was Agrippina and called for help for the emperor's mother; she was killed by poles and oars and what projectiles from the boat that fortune offered. Agrippina was silent and to that extent less recognized, although she received one wound on her shoulder. By swimming, then by meeting up with some small boats she was carried to the Lucrine Lake and was brought to her villa.

There she reflected how for this purpose she had been summoned by a deceptive letter and treated with a special tribute, and how it had occurred not far from shore, how the boat, not driven by winds nor dashed on the rocks, had been broken up in its upper part as if by a mechanism that was made on land. Thinking about the killing of Acerronia, as soon as she looked at her own wound she realized that the only remedy against the treachery was not to think about it. She sent her freedman Agerinus to report to her son that by the kindness of the

gods and his good fortune she had avoided a grave disaster. She begged him to put off the duty to visit, although he might be alarmed at the danger posed to his mother. For the moment she needed rest. Meanwhile, pretending that she was safe she applied ointments to her wound and poultices to her body. She gave orders that Acerronia's will be found and her property to be sealed. And in this alone did she act without disguise.

Meanwhile, when the danger to Agrippina was broadcast as if it had happened by accident, everyone, as soon as each person heard of it, rushed to the shore. Some climbed on the projecting piers, others the nearby boats. Others, whose bodies allowed it, waded into the sea. Some reached out their arms. The whole shore was filled with lamentations, prayers and shouting – different in the questions asked or unclear in the answers given. An enormous crowd streamed to the place with torches, and when they realized that she was safe they hastened to congratulate her until they were dispersed by the sight of an armed and threatening force of men. Anicetus surrounded the villa with a stationed guard, and having broken down the door dragged off the slaves who were in his way until he came to the door of her bedroom. A few were standing there, while the others had been frightened away by terror at the break-in. A small lamp was in the chamber and one slave-girl. Agrippina grew more and more anxious because no one had come from her son, not even Agerinus. The appearance of things forebode other than a happy outcome: now solitude and then sudden uproarings and signs of the worst disaster. Exclaiming, when the slave-girl was leaving, 'Are you too deserting me?' she looked around and saw Anicetus, accompanied by Herculeius the captain of the trireme and Obaritus, a centurion with the fleet. If he had come in order to see her he should report that she had recovered, but if he was about to carry out a crime she did not believe it had anything to do with her son. He had not given orders to kill his parent.

The attackers stood around her couch and the captain of the trireme first struck her head with a cudgel. Then, to the centurion who reached out to kill her with his sword bared she cried 'Strike my womb,' and with many wounds she was slain." (Tacitus, *Annals* 14.5–6, 8)

Nine years later, in 68 CE, Nero was faced with a revolt from within the military, was declared a public enemy by the Senate and beaten to death. Before the assassins arrived, he persuaded his private secretary to do the deed. With this the Julio-Claudian era reached its end.

The Latin elegiac poets

During the Principate of Augustus, a genre of personal love poetry flourished that had developed from Hellenistic forbears, composed in the elegiac metre hence referred to as Latin Love Elegy. Many of these poems were written in an autobiographical style, presenting a poet-lover smitten by a domineering mistress who is given a name, and readers ancient and modern have attempted to use the poetry as evidence for a new kind of woman in the first century CE, one that challenged the traditional constraints placed on *matronae*. They argue that this could help explain the severity of Augustus' legislation regarding marriage and adultery. More recent readings, however, argue for the poetic portraits of sophisticated, sexually liberated and controlling women as part of the poets' artifice. The ultimate focus in the poems, in this view, is not the presentation of a "New Woman" but the male poet himself, engaged in a literary dialogue with contemporary and previous poets and exploring the artistic potential of posturing as someone who is at the mercy of both a woman and Love itself.

PROPERTIUS

Propertius, born in the mid-first century BCE, composed four books of elegiac verse. In many of these poems his relationship with a woman called Cynthia is the focus. Her name appears as the first word in the first poem of the collection.

"Cynthia first imprisoned me, unhappy man, with her eyes;
before then I had been infected with no passion.
But then Love subdued my look of stubborn pride
and with feet planted firmly pressed my head down
until he taught me to disdain chaste girls –
the shameless fellow – and to live my life without design."
(1.1.1–6)

The poem closes with advice to other lovers to avoid his tragic situation, one that he, however, will endure heroically.