7 Social Stereotypes and Historical Analysis: The Case of the Imperial Women at Rome[1]

Susan Fischler

> 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, wantonly treated the Roman empire as a toy. It was a tight-drawn, almost masculine tyranny: in public, there was austerity and, often as not, arrogance; at home, no trace of unchastity, unless it might contribute to power.[2]

The image of the domineering and power-hungry imperial woman at the heart of Roman political affairs is familiar to anyone who has read, or seen the television adaptation of, Robert Graves' work, *I. Claudius*. But as this extract from the *Annals* of Tacitus (c. AD 56–c.115), decrying the rise of Agrippina II shows, Graves had no need to use his creative energies to devise these characters: such depictions of Roman imperial women can be found throughout ancient historical writing on the imperial period. The portrayals of these women tell us more about Roman social attitudes than how elite women lived: they enable us to understand more fully gender relationships and their bearing on power structures at Rome, as well as how male attitudes toward gender and power influenced the depiction of women within ancient literary texts.

In my analysis of these images, their purpose and their meaning, I will focus on the period of the foundation of the Roman monarchy, known as the Principate, from the start of Augustus' sole rule in 31 BC to the death of Nero in AD 68 (the Julio-Claudian dynasty). Before turning to discuss the depictions of the imperial women, it is importance to consider first some basic premises which underlie the approach this chapter will take, and help to explain why women throughout history who are seen as powerful tend to be regarded with suspicion in contemporary, or near-contemporary, accounts of their times.

The first of these premises is that dominant groups within societies tend to develop their own sets of images or beliefs.[3] These images, or social

constructs, are always derived from relationships between those who hold power within a clearly-defined area of society and those who do not. They help to describe and justify power relationships. A primary example of such social structuring can be seen in the way in which gender is defined and represented: images of gender reinforce and explain the power-relationship between men and women. Despite their wealth and status, imperial women could not escape being constrained and defined by the Roman social construct of Woman (capital letters will be used throughout this chapter to denote constructed types or ideals).

In most pre-industrial societies, the socially-constructed role for women excludes access to positions of authority, by which I mean publicly-recognised offices which grant the holder the right to take independent action. Certainly, this was true at Rome, where women were legally restricted from holding constitutional office, and therefore, they were denied access to authority within the state. In certain circumstances, the socially-constructed role even excludes women from exercising influence, which I am defining here as being power exercised through informal channels.[4]

As the next logical step in this sequence, women who are perceived as having gained access to power are seen as having failed to conform to the accepted social construct for their gender in their given society.[5] This often (though not universally) makes the position of these women highly problematic and the source of tension. In the case of Rome, this tension can be seen in the sources, which are solely the product of that elite, dominant group whose position was most threatened by such women, i.e. the male members of the upper classes. It is not surprising, therefore, that in these works, the imperial women as individuals are often subsumed by their symbolic importance as Imperial Women.

The way in which a society deals with these 'problem' women, how it attempts to reconcile their position to the accepted image of women and resolve this dichotomy, can shed light on the socially-constructed role for women, at least among the elite classes. Moreover, it serves to illustrate the importance and the nature of gender definitions in that society, as well as the relationship between gender and power. Finally, it is of great use in that by understanding the role gender plays in the socio-political structure of Roman society, we can gain a better understanding of the context of the literary sources and therefore achieve a more sophisticated analysis of the presentation of women within these texts.

Before turning to look specifically at the evidence for the imperial women, we need to return to the first premise, that all societies construct images of groups which they define according to the values and interests of the dominant group, and briefly present a picture of the socially constructed image of the Roman elite woman.

THE SOCIALLY CONSTRUCTED ROMAN WOMAN

The first category of the socially constructed woman I will examine is the ideal Roman Matron, as seen, for example, in the following epitaph, which dates to the late second century BC:

> Stranger, my message is short: stop and read. Here is the unlovely tomb of a lovely woman. Her parents named her Claudia. She loved her husband with all her heart. She bore two sons. Of these she leaves one on earth; under the earth she has placed the other. She was charming in converse, yet gentle in bearing. She kept house, she spun wool. That is all. You may go now.[6]

This epitaph describes the archetypal Roman Matron, and as such, should not be assumed to be an accurate or complete description of Claudia: as with tombstones today, the message should not be taken at its face value. Tombstones with this length of inscription were expensive items, designed to commemorate the bereaved family by displaying the traditional virtues of the deceased. This purpose was served by describing the dead woman as maintaining the highest standards expected by her social class. Thus the virtues listed here represent a common motif which exemplifies the Roman Matron. The ideal woman was noted for her beauty, fertility and faithfulness to her husband, as well as her ability to run the household. In short, the image is one of a refined woman whose life focused on the needs of her family and household.

Such ideal standards would have served as a means of judging women and instructing them on their social role. Yet, as was often the case, this ideal was based on another ideal image, that of Rome as a traditional, small rural community struggling to survive. This latter image was entirely inconsistent with Rome of the last century BC, which had long been a complex, cosmopolitan society at the centre of a massive empire. By this period, the elite woman's daily life bore little relation to that epitomised by the ideal, if only because the vast influx of slaves into the city had made it unnecessary for elite women to take responsibility for menial household tasks.[7] Therefore, the ideal conflicted with the historical reality of daily life. Yet, as in other societies, the disjunction between image and reality is not significant or problematic; the ideal continued to serve its purpose, while some modifications were made to take into account the needs of daily existence, and especially the difficulties of running the household in the conditions of civil war which prevailed in the last century of the Republic (c. 133–31 BC).

An example of this evolved, socially approved role for elite women

which will be of particular value to later discussion, is provided by Plutarch, a Greek writer of the late first century/early second century AD. Plutarch draws the reader's attention to the behaviour of Octavia, who, despite her husband Mark Antony's rejection of her in favour of the Egyptian queen Cleopatra in the 30s BC, continued to act as the exemplary wife, staying at Rome and working for Antony's benefit in the traditionally prescribed fashion.

> She continued to live in her husband's house as if he were at home, and she looked after Antony's children, not only those whom she had borne him but also those of Fulvia [his previous wife], with a truly noble devotion and generosity of spirit. Moreover, she entertained any friends of Antony's who were sent to Rome either on business or to solicit posts of authority, and she did her best to help them to obtain whatever they wanted from Octavius [her brother]. But in this way she unintentionally did great harm to Antony's reputation, since he was naturally hated for wronging such a woman.[8]

Octavia's virtues here lie in the way she exemplified the behaviour of the Roman Matron, in contrast to the decadent, archetypally Eastern image of Cleopatra held by the Romans. She acted in a responsible fashion and continued to care for the household, as if her husband were still in Rome.[9] This role still included raising the children, but Plutarch makes it clear that she also looked after family clients and conducted household business.

This type of public activity was in no way atypical in the late Republic: that women were highly active in conducting family business has been well documented by others. Dixon (1983) has drawn together much evidence from the period of the late Republic which shows how elite women exercised patronage and used their influence with male members of their family to achieve what could be termed, by modern commentators, 'political' ends.[10] Such activities, while not conforming to the ideal, were nonetheless tolerated and even approved within the limited circumstances of tending to family concerns.

Just as there was an archetypal ideal role for elite women in this later period, so there was an equally revealing opposite, the Wicked Woman. The classic example is provided by Sallust (approx. 86–35 BC), in his work on the Catilinarian conspiracy at Rome in 63 BC, where he describes the attributes of Catiline's fellow conspirator, Sempronia. He states that a number of disillusioned upper-class women joined the conspiracy to overthrow the government:

> One of these women was Sempronia, who had often committed many crimes of masculine audacity. This woman was abundantly favoured by fortune in her birth and beauty, and in her husband and children. She was well read in the literature of Greece and Rome, played the lyre and danced more skilfully than was necessary for an honest woman, besides having many other accomplishments which ministered to voluptuousness. But she always held all things more dear than modesty and chastity. You could not easily judge whether she was less sparing of her money or her reputation. Her sexual desires were so inflamed that she sought men more often than she was sought by them . . . She often broke her promises, repudiated her debts and had been privy to murder; she was driven by her extravagance and poverty. Yet she was a woman of no little talent: she could write verses, bandy jests and use language which was modest, tender or shameless. In short, she possessed a great measure of wit and charm.[11]

Sallust's Sempronia is the classic transgressor of the female role. She has all the right attributes which she uses in all the wrong ways. Just like the ideal Roman Matron, she has beauty and wealth; fertility and charm. Sempronia is all the more worrying because Sallust has endowed her with traits of the ideal which she then threatens to use subversively. Sallust himself introduces the passage by saying she was typical of the *type* of woman attracted to Catiline's cause. Certainly, the inversion of the perfect Roman Matron image here suggests that is what she is meant to be: an example of the most wicked, immoral type of woman, who would undoubtedly wish to overthrow the state, and which Sallust's Roman readers would have no trouble recognising, just as we recognise within our own society the images of The Tart with a Heart or A Good Woman Gone Bad. The depiction here is so stereotypical that it begs the question of how useful it is to search for the historical woman behind the portrait, instead of simply accepting her as symbolic of the social disorder Sallust describes.[12]

The portraits of the imperial women must also be set in the context of those social ideals and expectations which were particularly applied to elite women. For example, the historian Tacitus wrote the following description of Poppaea Sabina, the wife of the emperor Nero:

> She was a woman possessed of all advantages but a character. For her mother, after surpassing the beauties of her day, had endowed her alike with her fame and her looks: her wealth was adequate to the distinction of her birth. Her conversation was engaging, her wit not without point;

> she paraded modesty and practised wantonness. In public she rarely appeared, and then with her face half-veiled, so as not quite to satiate the beholder, – or, possibly, because it so became her. She was never sparing of her reputation, and drew no distinctions between husbands and adulterers: vulnerable neither to her own nor to others' passion, where material advantage offered, there she transferred her desires.[13]

This depiction of an empress bears a remarkable similarity to that of Sempronia, so much so that some scholars have been tempted to suggest that Tacitus based his portrait upon Sallust's.[14] Yet both portraits describe an inversion of the standard attributes of the Roman Matron, suggesting that this image of an elite woman 'gone bad' was a common cultural construct, just as the Roman Matron was. Tacitus did not need to draw on Sallust, then, to derive his depiction of Poppaea: both she and Sempronia are classic portrayals of the Roman 'wicked' woman. The most threatening women are depicted in our texts as turning virtue and society upside-down.

Imperial women of the Julio-Claudian age are often portrayed as transgressive, violators of the established female role and ideal. These portrayals were in keeping with the attitude of the age in which the authors, such as Tacitus, lived. By the second century, the Julio-Claudian period was regarded as an aberration in Roman history, a time when emperors violated the privileges, and threatened the lives, of senators and other leading figures at Rome.

To place this attitude in its historical context, it must be remembered that the Julio-Claudian period was an age of transition. Before the advent of Augustus, Rome had been governed by male representatives of the wealthy elite families, who formed the Senate, and by the assemblies of all male citizens. This so-called Republican form of government was seen as ensuring the support of the gods and the success of the state; naturally, it also guaranteed the political dominance of leading members of the elite. To attempt to change this form of government was seen by the Roman upper classes as anathema, and over the centuries a number of rising politicians had been assassinated for what were perceived as attempts to establish monarchical rule.[15] Augustus succeeded in imposing a new political order only by masking his monarchy in the language of Republican government and senatorial tradition; thus he was never referred to as a king, but as a leading man or *princeps* (and hence his regime is the Principate). In order to survive, Augustus and his Julio-Claudian successors had to perform a balancing act between the reality of absolute rule and the maintenance of the image of Republican government.[16] This included according the Senate, and the senators as individuals, the respect and privileges they felt were due

to them according to Roman tradition. Clashes between emperors and the senatorial order inevitably occurred in the first century, not only because individual emperors had difficulties maintaining this balance, but also because the elite themselves had yet to come to terms with their diminished status and their role within the regime. By the second century, some of these problems had been resolved, although the authors' depictions of themselves as living in a golden age of imperial and senatorial partnership and mutual respect may be attributed in part to a desire to stay in favour with the reigning emperor.

In contrast, these authors depicted the earlier period as one manifesting all the signs of great social and political disruption, into which they placed their chosen accounts of the lives of the imperial women. A literary tradition had already been established about the characters of each of the early imperial women, as well as the emperors and others close to the *princeps*. Many examples of violations committed by the imperial women which are found in the literary sources were derived from anecdotal evidence, much of which may have evolved years after events. Frequently the events described are said to have occurred in private, such as the imperial women's consultations with their various henchmen, casting some doubt on the historicity of the accounts. But the literary tradition is still of particular interest, for it suggests what needed to be recounted to justify the claim that imperial women had stepped out of line. It reveals what abuses were generally believed to be plausible and which were particularly reprehensible. In the tradition of imperial biography and character-drawing, those anecdotes which displayed reprehensible behaviour would have been chosen deliberately in order to illuminate the character of a 'bad' imperial woman for the reader, as seen in the case of Poppaea Sabina. Whatever their historicity (which is now unascertainable), lurid tales of intrigue were used by authors to illustrate the type of behaviour expected from such women, and were a response to the hostility which certain of these women had engendered in the governing classes.

This raises a number of questions about why certain imperial women warranted such a 'bad press', and thus returns us to our initial premises about the way societies react to women who might be seen to have untoward access to authority or power.

IMPERIAL WOMEN AS TRANSGRESSORS

> Agrippina [the younger], indignant at this and other things, first attempted to admonish him [the emperor Nero, her son] . . . . But when she

> found herself achieving nothing, she took it greatly to heart and said to him, 'It was I who made you emperor' – just as if she had the power to take his authority away from him again.[17]

Senior imperial women are often portrayed in literary texts as having access to imperial power, as in this case where Agrippina seems to be claiming she has the power to create emperors (note that the incident, described by Cassius Dio, took place behind closed doors). Why were these women deemed to be so threatening to imperial control of the state?

Paradoxically, much of the answer to this question can be found in the socially accepted role of Roman Matron. Livia, Julia and the other imperial women were born into a society which demanded that they take part in activities outside the household in order to fulfil family responsibilities (this is one of a number of ways in which it can be seen that the classic distinction between the domestic and public domains was blurred in Roman society).[18] Hence the approval granted Octavia in the passage discussed above. They too, like many Roman elite woman before them, conducted family business and sought to influence any decisions taken by the head of the household in relation to the family and its concerns. However, the head of their household was the emperor and their family was Rome's ruling dynasty: thus the business of their family now included the running of the state. The proximity of the imperial women to the functioning of the state lent new meaning to normal family activities, and granted them the capacity for public acts of a new order. Furthermore, the access this apparently granted the women to the central authority within the Roman state was at odds with the constitutional settlements made between Augustus and the ruling classes at Rome in the early decades of the Principate, for only in a monarchy could women achieve such power within the state. As such, and consistent with my earlier premises, the position of the women was a source of tension, graphically revealing the contrast between Republican practice, in which women could never hold power within the state, and the new imperial order, which contained the threat that women might do so.[19]

There are a number of elements in the traditionally articulated role of the Roman matron which can be used to illustrate this phenomenon of the typical behaviour expected of elite women taking on connotations of political power in the case of the imperial women. I will only be discussing a few, pertinent examples here. The first examples will concern women as patrons. Patronage formed the cornerstone of Roman social relations: the passage regarding Octavia's activities shows its relevance for the public activities of elite women, as well as men. The second category of traditional female behaviour to be considered will be the influence which the senior women of

the household (the *matresfamilias*) could bring to bear on the emperor. A number of recent studies have stressed that the right to proffer opinions on family affairs and to have these opinions respectfully received was a fundamental part of the role of the senior woman in a Roman household in all periods, and this has particular relevance to the development of the role of the imperial women.[20]

Before examining these two categories, it is important to stress that the texts which describe the activities of the imperial women are the same ones which depend on social constructs to convey interpretations of the characters of individual women. Therefore, there is a danger that any analysis will merely be confusing aspects of these constructs with 'historical reality'. However, certain types of elite female behaviour are depicted in sources for the Republican period, as well as the imperial, in both positive and negative contexts, suggesting that to ascribe all descriptions of imperial women's conduct simply to the domain of the literary construct of the Imperial Woman would be too simplistic. It is clear that certain activities were, in themselves, a common and accepted part of elite female behaviour. In the case of the imperial women, these two categories of activity, patronage and influencing male relatives, are also attested in inscriptions, suggesting that, historically, the imperial women did engage in such activities.[21] However, the 'ordinariness' of such behaviour was altered by the circumstances in which it occurred. In response to these changed circumstances, literary depictions of the imperial women often portray the women's actions as transgressive, the unacceptable behaviour of the Wicked Woman.

The imperial women's role as patrons was a traditional one for the elite class which took on a new, political twist in meaning under the Principate. As with the example of Octavia, imperial women acted either directly themselves as patrons in aid of clients, or by interceding with male family members on behalf of clients (this last form of action is directly derived from the second category of behaviour we shall be looking at, i.e. the influence which women have with their male relatives). The combination of the imperial women's wealth and their close relationship to the emperor made them formidable patrons indeed, able to contribute greatly to their clients' needs in both these categories.

Firstly, both Livia and Antonia the younger, in their capacity as *matresfamilias* of the imperial family, were renowned for looking after the children not only of their own extended family, but of other senatorial families and foreign monarchs as well. That this resulted in certain bonds of obligation on both sides can be seen in a few notable examples. Suetonius, the imperial biographer writing in the early second century AD, noted the following in his *Life of the Emperor Otho*:

> His grandfather M. Salvius Otho, whose father was a Roman knight, while his mother was of humble birth, perhaps not even freeborn, became a senator through the influence (*per gratiam*) of Livia Augusta, in whose house he was raised, but he did not progress beyond the rank of praetor.[22]

In raising the boy, Livia replaced his mother, even to the extent of promoting his career beyond that which his parentage might suggest he could achieve.

Antonia could also act *in loco parentis* with regard to the children she raised. The best-documented example relates to a Judaean prince, Agrippa, son of Berenice, who was raised by Antonia with her son Claudius and whom she subsequently protected when he returned to Rome.[23] Both these examples provide noteworthy evidence for the superior, patronal relationships both Livia and Antonia maintained, all the more striking because one of the individuals was a senator and the other a foreign prince. These were typical examples of Livia's extensive patronage, as shown by Dio's record of the Senate's actions upon her death; they voted her an arch because 'she had saved the lives of so many, reared so many senatorial children and provided so many dowries for senators' daughters'.[24]

Within the household, women traditionally oversaw the operation of family affairs, owned slaves and were patrons of those slaves they emancipated from the household. At a time when the emperor's household staff were being used in imperial administration, the imperial women could conceivably be patrons of freedmen who were in some position of authority, for example, both Messalina and Agrippina the younger were said to be patrons of Claudius' influential freedmen Narcissus.[25] The family also had close contact with the praetorian guard, who acted as the protectors of the imperial household. For example, Livia and Tiberius jointly owned property in Gallia Narbonensis, over which Afranius Burrus was made procurator. This same Burrus later became praetorian prefect under Nero.[26] According to Tacitus, he owed his position to his proven loyalty to Agrippina the younger. Another example of the close relationship between an imperial woman and the prefect may be seen in Tacitus' account of the removal from office of the joint prefects Lucius Geta and Rufrius Crispinus because Agrippina believed they were still loyal to Messalina's memory; it was in their place that Burrus was appointed.[27]

The impression given by Tacitus' stories is that the women were in a position to control imperial appointments. The basis for this premise can be found in the closeness of the women to the emperor's household staff and the household's development into an imperial institution, with associated power. Female influence over household appointments would have been

acceptable to Roman elite men but not in the context of the imperial household. Whether or not the women dictated the choice of prefect, many people in a position to be personally affected by the women's presumed power might well have feared that the devotion of the praetorians to the imperial family enabled the women to have access to, and even influence with, the major military power in the city. In the case of both the imperial freedmen and the praetorian prefects, it becomes apparent that as household affairs became imperial business, the women may have had and, as importantly, were feared to have greater access to power than many who could hold constitutional office.

A similar attitude can also be discerned in accounts of these women influencing the emperor in his decision-making, my second category of traditional female behaviour. The women's effectiveness as patrons depended on this influence, which also engendered great anxiety in the literary sources about the proper role of women within the imperial family. Not surprisingly, their close proximity to the emperor, coupled with this traditional role, was seen as a threat to the established order of the state. Claudius' reign provides the best examples of such fears. As a prelude to an anecdote, Dio casually notes, 'people were annoyed at seeing him a slave to his wife and freedmen'.[28] Suetonius also stresses the failure of an emperor who allows the affairs of state to drift out of his hands and into the control of his entourage:

> Completely under the control of [his freedmen] and his wives . . . , he acted the part not of a *princeps*, but of a servant, bestowing honours, army commands, pardons or punishments according to their interests or simply their desire or whim, and even that mostly in ignorance and naively.[29]

The fear was that if an imperial woman so chose, she might actually take over control of the state. The quotation from Tacitus at the head of this chapter more than illustrates such a concern over female domination.

The anxiety reached its greatest height when the imperial women violated what were seen as the primary functions of the emperor, thereby infringing upon his duty to the state and suggesting that power lay outside the emperor himself. Fundamental to the role of the emperor was his position as administrator of justice. As Millar (1977) and Talbert (1984), among others, have shown, the emperor had the right to hear cases as he saw fit, and he could exercise whatever amount of leniency he decided was appropriate.[30] Moreover, he was regarded as free to make his decisions in an arbitrary fashion, if he so chose, providing he was not seen to be overly-influenced by those outside the constitutionally defined political arena.

Consequently, the popular conception of the ideal emperor was the *princeps* who could be relied upon to exercise clemency and justice, two virtues which became central to imperial ideology. Thus, it became essential from the start of the principate that the emperor be seen to be acting in these areas as he chose, not as the imperial women dictated.

The examples of imperial women overstepping the bounds of acceptable influence in cases of jurisdiction permeate the literary sources, so I have chosen only a few to illustrate my point. The first is an early example: the Urgulania affair described by Tacitus.[31] Tiberius was sensitive to the risk of judicial abuse in his assessment of how to handle this case, which involved a friend of his mother, on whose behalf Livia had requested his intervention. He avoided a potentially embarrassing situation by arriving late at the trial. Asking for the support of the head of household in a court-case was not in any sense unusual or abnormal: as a friend and client, Urgulania deserved the family's protection. But all parties knew that if Tiberius had become involved, the imperial presence would have been tantamount to declaring Urgulania free from legal liability.

The crucial turning-point in judicial interference appears to take place under Claudius' reign, at a time when the emperor took a personal interest in a number of judicial cases and was involved in many prosecutions. The literary sources abound with examples of Messalina's and Agrippina's infamous abuses of the judicial system. Julia Livilla, Julia Drusi, Statilius Taurus, Domitia Lepida and many others, according to the senatorial tradition, all met their ends by the disgraceful manipulations of one or the other of these imperial consorts of the day.[32] Much of the hostility expressed toward Claudius' reign can be attributed to his alleged susceptibility to the influence of his wives and freedmen, specifically with regard to his judicial decisions. Cassius Dio pointedly upholds this tradition. For example, he notes Claudius' fondness for gladiatorial games and observes,

> After he had grown used to feasting his fill on blood and gore, he turned more readily to other kinds of murder. The imperial freedmen and Messalina were responsible for this: whenever they desired someone's death, they would terrify Claudius and as a result would be allowed to do anything they chose.[33]

Many of these accusations can be readily dismissed by sceptical modern readers, but their importance lies in what the authors (and presumably their ancient audience) thought *could* happen behind the closed doors of the imperial household. Through their household influence, the imperial women were believed to be able to dictate the judicial decisions of the court which most often dealt with senatorial cases.

Taking care of family clients and using private influence with the head of household for the benefit of those clients or others: these were the common pursuits of the traditional Roman Matron of the late Republic. At the core of most of the tales of female court intrigue is the presentation of behaviour which, in a politically different context, would have been expected from the women of such distinguished Roman families as the Julii and the Claudii. It was the change in the nature of the government which put the women in the position of being close to the centre of the state and laid them open both to the charges and to the actuality of being able to influence state affairs for personal gain: when the reins of the state were in the hands of only one man, then it became far easier for those without a constitutional office to have an effect on state decisions. As I suggested at the outset, it was this access to power, contrary to the social construct of the Roman Matron, which engendered the tension and anxiety seen in the senatorial sources. The portrayals of the imperial women, both the descriptions of their public behaviour as well as the anecdotes about their private lives, must be placed in the context of this conflict between approved roles for women and the threateningly powerful position of the imperial woman. Not all imperial women could achieve this power in reality, but due to the nature of the monarchy, they were all seen as having the potential to develop it.

THE IMPERIAL WOMEN AND THE STATE OF THE NATION

Thus the depictions of imperial women must be seen as more than simple historical presentations of individuals and their actions. The image of imperial women became weighed down by the expectations and fears of the male elite and so acquired added significance and symbolic meaning. Within the genre of history-writing (*historia*), these symbolic images became a standard motif, in part due to the nature of *historia* as a literary form in the imperial period. The aim of such literature had evolved under the Principate, so that its major concern was to explore relations between the emperor and the ruling classes (as seen by historians who were themselves members of that elite). The activities of the imperial women became a standard category which authors used to evaluate the quality of emperors. Thus, their consideration in historical literature was most often as one of a number of factors which depicted the quality and nature of a 'bad' ruler. By definition, 'good' emperors had wives and mothers they could control, who never overstepped boundaries set by convention. Yet, as shown above, even traditional behaviour was subject to reinterpretation when practised by an imperial woman: conventional or not, these women were now inherently a part of the Roman

state, and a threat to good government as defined by Roman elite men. Like the wicked Sempronia examined at the start of this chapter, imperial women were often depicted as embodying all the attributes of the Roman Matron which they used to turn the world of the elite upside-down and to threaten the running of the state. In this way, historians such as Tacitus and Cassius Dio, writing after the Julio-Claudian dynasty, used 'bad' imperial women as symbols of a state in disorder.

The presentation of the imperial women as symbolic of the state of the nation occurred in contexts other than that of literature written more than forty years after the events described. There are clear signs that in the contemporary political scene, the images of the imperial women could hold a potent message for those concerned about the nature of central government and therefore there were careful attempts by those in power to control these images.

Suetonius credited Augustus with a recognition of the importance of manipulating the picture presented by his household and especially by his female relatives. The emperor was depicted as seeking to promote their image as conforming to the most traditional ideals, strikingly reminiscent of those proclaimed in epitaphs, like the one described above:

> In raising his daughter and granddaughters, he even had them taught spinning and weaving, and he prohibited them from saying or doing anything unless they did so openly and it was such as might be recorded in the household diary.[34]

Obviously the aim was to emphasise the traditional nature of Augustus' household and, by extension, his regime. Yet, just as Augustus' government was in reality a revolutionary new order, so was the women's behaviour seen as undermining the conservative ideal. Suetonius followed up this observation by reminding his readers of the fate of Augustus' daughter Julia and her daughter, both of whom were exiled for adultery.[35]

Other emperors strove to limit public displays which were suggestive of female power within the imperial order. Tiberius sought to constrain the public life of his mother Livia by refusing honours voted to her by the Senate and by preventing her from playing a prominent role on state occasions.[36] Claudius was also said to have prohibited the awarding of state honours to women of his household.[37] He thus promoted an image of himself as having Republican leanings.

Yet, at the same time, the imperial government also promoted the image of these women as symbols of the new political order. To ensure the survival of his new regime and the unrivalled position of the imperial family within the state, Augustus needed the concept of dynastic descent to be

commonly accepted at Rome. The imperial women were used to symbolise the dynasty, an effective image because of their primary roles as mothers and consorts of emperors: it was, after all, their progeny who were to follow in Augustus' footsteps. Also, although the Roman elite may have feared the women's access to imperial power, the emperors must have felt that the women posed less of a threat than their male relatives, as women could not hold posts of authority, and therefore could not challenge the emperors directly for control of the Principate. In any case, it was clear from the outset that the prominent role of the Roman matron in the elite family meant that the imperial women could not simply be ignored, and so their public persona needed to be moulded into an image which would benefit the regime.

Within the confines of this chapter, I shall offer only a few examples. The first is the depiction of the women on state coinage, which was allowed not only by Augustus but also all subsequent emperors. These portraits were probably not intended to be seen as a new and strikingly innovative means of honouring the imperial women (few women had ever appeared on Roman coinage previously). For one thing, they were rarely depicted as themselves, but more usually, in the guise of Roman goddesses, such as Diana or Ceres.[38] Similarly, senior women of the family were depicted in relief sculptures on altars dedicated to the worship of the gods of the crossroads (the *lares*) and the spirit (*genius*) of Augustus throughout the city of Rome. Here they appear in an almost priestly capacity, helping their husbands perform rituals frequently associated with family events, such as the worship of the deified (deceased) emperor or even the appointment of a young prince as priest (*augur*). Thus, family occasions were elevated to the status of state affairs and celebrated within the state cult.[39]

Instead of being straightforward tributes to the women themselves, both coin and altar portraits present a complex picture of dynastic and religious significance. Although it is unclear who was responsible for these depictions, the images contained therein are consistent with other honours extended to the imperial women.[40] This suggests not only imperial acquiescence, but also the creation of a consistent ideology associated with their public persona. In allowing the use of portraits of these women in the context of state ideology, the emperors firmly bound the images of the female members of their family to the image of the Roman state and to themselves as dynastic rulers.

The promotion of these women as the embodiments of two ideals, as women and as symbols of the imperial order, encouraged the development of the concept of linking the imperial women with the state and helps to explain their appearance in the historical literature as symbolic of the nature

of individual emperor's reigns. Not surprisingly, the reverse of the ideal was also used by ancient historians, so that the wives and mothers of discredited emperors were represented as Ideal Women Gone Bad (the Sempronia Syndrome).

At the heart of these representations lay the tension generated within Roman society by the imperial women's unusual status and the struggle to find a socially acceptable image and role for them. It is too simplistic to present the overall picture as being part of a conflict between the emperors, who were trying to promote dynastic government from above, and the Roman elite, who saw the women at the centre of the dynastic order as a threat to their own predominance. If this were the case, then few emperors would have permitted any public representations of their female relatives, as this would have damaged their own position with the senatorial order. In any case, such a picture is undermined by the fact that it was the Senate who voted honours to the women, while many emperors remained unsure of how prominent a role the women should be allowed in Roman society and the state. The various examples cited above of the symbolic importance of the imperial women suggest that both emperors and the elite felt highly ambivalent about the ideal place for imperial women within Roman society. Ultimately, no role could adequately rationalise their position within Roman power structures without there also being a change in elite perceptions of the Roman state and the place of women within its political structures. Therefore, the portrayal of these women in literary sources must be understood as a reaction to this tension and a product of the contradictory nature of the public role of the imperial women, which allowed the ideal matron access to the highest authority in the state.

NOTES

1. This article is substantially based on work presented in my doctoral thesis, see Fischler (1989). I wish to thank my colleagues Chris Wickham and Simon Esmond-Cleary for their help with the drafting of this paper, and especially Maria Wyke and Léonie Archer for their guidance, patience and editorial advice.
2. Tacitus, *Annales* (Tac., *Ann.*) 12.7.
3. For a recent, highly informative introduction to the social construction of gender, see Lorber and Farrell (1991). Also useful is Rosaldo and Lamphere (1974). Also see Spender (1989).

4. For discussion of the significance to women of the differences between power and authority, see Rosaldo (1974), pp. 20–1.
5. Sanday (1974) postulates that sexual antagonism develops or increases in societies in which there is a change in the sphere of activities of women resulting in an increase in their power or authority, without a belief system which legitimised or sanctioned power held by women, pp. 203–4.
6. *Inscriptiones Latinae Selectae* (*ILS*) 8403 = Lefkowitz and Fant (1982), p. 133, no. 134.
7. For the increase of wealth and slaves in Rome, see especially Hopkins (1978), pp. 8–56.
8. Plutarch, *Life of Antony* (Plut., *Ant.*) 54.3–5.
9. Another example from this period of an individual woman being praised for similar activities on behalf of her family during her husband's absence can be seen in the eulogy to Turia which was supposedly written by her husband (the so-called *Laudatio Turiae*), *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum* (*CIL*) 6.1527: her husband also commends her for her courageous intervention on his behalf with Lepidus, one of the generals who dominated Roman affairs during the proscriptions of 43 BC.
10. For example, Cicero appealed to Mucia Tertia, wife of the great general, Pompey, for her help in gaining Pompey's support, Cicero, *ad familiares* 5. 2; the people of Rome appealed to Caecilia Metella to intervene with Sulla, Plutarch, *Life of Sulla* 6.14–18; and Praecia was said to exercise such influence over Cornelius Cethegus that she could secure Lucullus' command in Cilicia, Plut., *Life of Lucullus* 6. See also Dixon (1988), esp. chapter 7.
11. Sallust, *The Catilinarian Conspiracy* (Sall., *Cat.*) 25.
12. As some scholars have attempted to do, see esp. R. Syme (1964), pp. 132–3, and, more recently, Boyd (1987). Both scholars, despite accepting that she has a symbolic importance within the text, nonetheless accept her existence as an historical personage. For further analysis of the ways Roman texts depicted 'aberrant' women as symbolic of social disorder, see Edwards (forthcoming).
13. Tac., *Ann.* 13.45
14. Syme (1958), p. 353.
15. A dominant theme of late Republican history, for example, note the assassination of Ti. Gracchus (133 BC) and other rebellious tribunes, as well as Julius Caesar (44 BC).
16. Augustus himself claimed to have restored the Republic *Res Gestae Divi Augusti (RG)* 34.1. Most introductions to the Principate discuss the so-called 'Republican facade'; for example, see Dudley (1962), pp. 124–7. For discussion of the imagery associated with maintaining this balancing act, see Zanker (1988).
17. Cassius Dio, *History of Rome* (Dio) 61.7.1–3.
18. The two case studies of the activities of Republican women provided by Carp (1986) support this scenario. Dixon (1983), pp. 91 ff., discusses the significance for gender roles of 'the absence of a clear distinction between the political and social areas of Roman life . . .'.
19. Thus the women's position was problematic regardless of their own person-

alities or activities. Nor was it simply a matter of the women progressing along a graduated scale from the private sphere to the public, *pace* Purcell (1986), pp. 87f. The honours which the women received were an attempt to legitimise their (unavoidable) access to central authority, see Fischler 1989), Ch. 11.

20. E.g. Dixon (1988), pp. 41–70, on the influence of mothers, primarily owing to their economic independence, cf. Dixon (1986) for the influence and support which Cicero's wife, Terentia, wielded within the family; Hallett (1984), less convincingly attributes the influence of women within Roman society overall to their familial role as daughters. For further elaboration of the argument presented here, see Fischler (1989), Chs 4, 9–10.
21. For epigraphic evidence of female patronage, see e.g. *ILS 8897* (Livia and Julia the Elder commemorated with their husbands as benefactors of two wealthy freedmen of Ephesus); *Inscriptiones Graecae ad res Romanas pertinentes* (*IGR*) 4.73 (the *demos* at Mytilene honoured Antonia Minor as patron); *IGR* 1.835 A and B (the demos of Thasos similarly honoured Livia and Julia the Elder). Epigraphic attestation of female intervention is much rarer (and would be unusual subject matter for a public inscription): Reynolds (1982), no. 13, records a letter of Augustus to the Samians, noting that Livia had requested that he grant them special honours. For more examples and further discussion, see Fischler (1989), pp. 58 ff.
22. Suetonius (Suet.), *Life of Otho* I.1.
23. Recounted by Josephus (b. AD 37/8), *Jewish Antiquities* 18.143; 156; 164–7; 179–86; 202–3; 236.
24. Dio 58.2.3.
25. For Messalina and Narcissus, see e.g. Suet., *Life of Claudius* 37 and Dio 60.14.3. Examples of Agrippina's association with him: Dio 60.33.3a; Tac., *Ann.* 12.57. Antonia Minor died before her freedman Pallas achieved his later standing under her son Claudius, but the younger Agrippina worked closely with him, Tac. *Ann.* 12.2; 3; 25; Dio *loc. cit.*
26. For evidence of Afranius Burrus' position as Livia's procurator, see Pflaum (1960/1), no. 13.
27. Burrus' loyalty to Agrippina, and his promotion over Geta and Rufrius Crispinus, Tac., *Ann.* 12.42.
28. Dio 60.28.2.
29. Suet., *Life of Claudius* 29.1.
30. Millar (1977), pp. 507 ff.; Talbert (1984), pp. 460–87.
31. Tac., *Ann.* 2.34.
32. For Messalina's instigation of Julia Livilla's death, see Dio 60.8.5. Julia Drusi's death was said to be due to Messalina's jealousy, Dio 60.18.4. Statilius Taurus was supposedly driven to suicide by Agrippina, Tac., *Ann.* 12.59. For further analysis, see Fischler (1989), pp. 346f.
33. Dio 60.14.1.
34. Suet., *Life of Augustus* 64.2.
35. Ibid., 65.1.
36. Tiberius rejected honours voted to her by the Senate, Suet., *Life of Tiberius* 26.2; 50.2–3; Tac., *Ann.* 1.14.1; Dio 57.12.4. For an example of Tiberius' attempts to limit her public prominence, see Dio 57.12.5.
37. Dio 60.12.5.

38. For example, for Julia as Diana, see Mattingly (1976), pp. 104–5, plate 4.2. For discussion of Diana as a patron-goddess of Augustus, see Zanker (1988), pp. 50–1; 66–7. For Livia as Ceres, see Mattingly (1976) I, p. 544, plate 14.8; 30–3, plate 22.20; pp. 34–43; 46–60.
39 Ryburg (1955), especially pp. 49–61 for iconographical analysis of altar reliefs depicting imperial women.
40. The overall picture is a complicated one associated with the development of the private household cult of the emperor into a new form of state worship. For greater detail, see Fischler (1989), pp. 251 ff. and for imperial ideology in general see Zanker (1988). Talbert (1984), pp. 379–82 provides a summary of the debate concerning who was responsible for choosing coin types.