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# Pushing the Limit: An Analysis of the Women of the Severan Dynasty

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## **Pushing the Limit: An Analysis of the Women of the Severan Dynasty**

### **Abstract**

By applying Judith Butler's theories of identity to the imperial women of the Severan dynasty in ancient Rome, this paper proves that while the Severan women had many identities, such as wife, mother, philosopher, or mourner, their imperial identity was most valued due to its ability to give them the freedom to step outside many aspects of their gender and to behave in ways which would customarily be deemed inappropriate. Butler's theories postulate that actions create identities and that these identities then interact to form new possibilities for action. Using Butler's theories, this paper first examines the actions of the Severan women in order to determine their identities, and then analyzes the ways in which their various identities overlap allowing them to act in ways contrary to traditionally accepted gender roles. This method produces superior results because Butler's theories on the mingling of identities require scholars to view the Severan women as a product made up of many parts, rather than attempting to define the women based on a specific feature or only one identity. This paper concludes that the imperial identity of the Severan women was ultimately responsible for the differences between the imperial Roman women and average Roman women. This argument is significant because it proves that sources regarding empresses cannot be applied to typical Roman women, and *vice versa*.

### **Introduction**

Modern scholars often characterize women of the ancient Roman world by their lack of independence and legal rights, due to the commonly taught concept that women remained in the private sphere, while men enjoyed activities in the public sphere.<sup>1</sup> Study of the women of the imperial Roman families shows that these women enjoyed a high level of autonomy and self-governance. Applying Judith Butler's theory that actions create identity, this paper will study the actions of the imperial women of the Severan dynasty and the ways in which they both obeyed and defied typical gender constructs in order to determine the overlapping identities of the Severan empresses. After clarifying who the women were, I will then utilize Judith Butler's theories of identity to explain why the Severan women were able to act in ways contrary to

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<sup>1</sup> Susan I. Rotroff and Robert D. Lamberton, *Women in the Athenian Agora* (Athens: The American School of Classical Studies at Athens, 2006), 3-5.

traditional Roman gender roles. By applying Judith Butler's theories of identity to the Severan women, this paper will prove that while the Severan women had many identities, such as wife, mother, philosopher, and mourner, their imperial identity was most valued due to its ability to give them the freedom to step outside many aspects of their gender and to behave in ways which would customarily be deemed inappropriate.

This paper will first survey a brief history of the Severan dynasty, in order to provide background for the readers on this subject. Additionally, I will summarize modern scholarship regarding the Severan women. Next, I will discuss the various ancient sources I use in my paper, as well as the rationale for accepting them as reliable sources. Before reaching my analysis section, I will offer an overview of Judith Butler's theories and the ways in which they can be applied to my topic. I will begin my examination of the Severan women with Julia Domna focusing on the changes in her identities when her husband passed away and her son became emperor. Then I will discuss Julia Maesa, Julia Soaemias, and Julia Mamaea in chronological succession. Due to the subordinate role Julia Soaemias played to the other members of her family, she will have a briefer treatment. After sharing my concluding thoughts on the importance of the Severan women's imperial identity, I will briefly go into areas for future research.

### **History on the Severan Dynasty and Modern Scholarship**

In this section I will examine the history of the Severan dynasty, discuss current scholarship about the Severan women, and set up my own place in the arguments about these women. Everything scholars know about the Severan women relates back to the men in their lives. Therefore the history of the Severan dynasty and the lives of the Severan emperors are a big part of the analysis of the women of the Severan dynasty. Historians are given all of the

evidence regarding these women, biographies, coinage, and reliefs, from a male perspective, which contains no female voice. For example, the literary excerpts regarding these women come from biographies written by Cassius Dio and Herodian about the men in their lives. Therefore, in order to look at the women of this time period, this paper first examines the men through whom the information about the Severan women is transmitted. The analysis section of this paper will focus specifically on four women from the Severan dynasty, Julia Domna, Julia Maesa, Julia Soaemias, and Julia Mamaea. While the history does discuss the other women of the Severan dynasty, they have been excluded from the analysis section due to the lack of adequate evidence to analyze their lives.

During the Roman Empire, emperors often gained power through military strength. The Severan Dynasty ruled the Roman Empire from the late second to early third century CE. Lucius Septimius Severus, the first Severan emperor, was born in 145 CE to a family of equestrian rank in Lepcis Magna. Before becoming emperor, Septimius Severus was married to a woman named Paccia Marciana. There are surviving dedications made to her; however, very little is known about her.<sup>2</sup> She perhaps died sometime in the mid 180s. In 187 CE, Septimius married Julia Domna, a woman from an aristocratic family in Emesa, Syria, who was prophesied to marry a king.<sup>3</sup> Julia Domna gave birth to two sons by Septimius, Caracalla and Geta.<sup>4</sup>

Severus followed the traditional succession of offices as he rose in power, becoming a member of the senate under Marcus Aurelius. Severus became a consul in 190 CE during the reign of Commodus, and took the post of governor of Upper Pannonia the following year. After the assassination of Emperor Pertinax by the Praetorian Guard in 193 CE, Severus became engaged in a struggle for power in Rome. Through the Praetorian Guard, Didius Julianus was

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<sup>2</sup> *Inscriptions of Roman Tripolitania* no. 410 (1952).

<sup>3</sup> *Historia Augusta, Life of Septimius Severus*, 3.9.

<sup>4</sup> See Appendix 1 for a Severan Family Tree of Important Figures.

named emperor. Claiming to be avenging the murder of Pertinax, Severus gained the support of the army and marched on Rome, in order to seize power from Julianus.<sup>5</sup> Severus succeeded and was proclaimed emperor by the senate later that year. Knowing that Julianus had challengers besides himself, Severus proactively appointed Clodius Albinus as Caesar in order to make him an ally instead of an enemy.<sup>6</sup> Relying heavily on the army for support, Severus then attacked his rival Percennius Niger, who had been proclaimed emperor by his troops in Syria. Severus defeated Niger and continued his campaign by overpowering Niger's supporters. In Rome, Severus grew weary of the now useless Albinus and deposed him, raising his older son, Caracalla, to the rank of Augustus and making his younger son, Geta, a Caesar.

Severus introduced many new policies to the army. He increased their food rations, as well as their pay, permitted them to wear gold finger rings, and allowed soldiers to live with their spouses.<sup>7</sup> Severus also engaged in a massive building program. In addition to revitalizing his hometown of Lepcis Magna, Severus restored and rededicated many buildings in Rome, such as the Porticus Octaviae. During this time, Severus's closest advisor was Gaius Fulvius Plautianus, the Praetorian Prefect. Plautianus gained an unprecedented amount of power over Severus, controlling his decisions and casting a cloud of suspicion on his wife, Julia Domna.<sup>8</sup> Due to the amount of influence Plautianus held over Severus, others in power began to resent him, particularly Caracalla, who often spoke out against him.<sup>9</sup> Eventually, Plautianus was caught plotting treason, either of his own design or staged by Caracalla, and was executed, freeing Julia Domna from his accusations.

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<sup>5</sup> Herodian 2.9.10.

<sup>6</sup> Cassius Dio 74.15; Herodian 2.15.3.

<sup>7</sup> Herodian 3.8.5.

<sup>8</sup> Cassius Dio 76.14-15.

<sup>9</sup> Cassius Dio 77.2-3; Herodian 3.12.4.

The most common argument for scholars to discuss regarding the imperial women from Septimius Severus' reign is the ways in which they themselves and others utilized their public images. Scholars agree that the images of the Severan women, whether on coins, in writing, or created through titles and dedications, were used as a form of propaganda. Charmaine Gorrie, Julie Langford, Susan Sowers Lusnia, and Clare Rowan concur that Septimius Severus used the public image of his wife, Julia Domna, to push his own message. In "Julia Domna's Building Patronage, Imperial Family Roles and the Severan Revival of Moral Legislation," Gorrie argues that Septimius used the building program to promote an image of stability and prosperity brought on by the new imperial family.<sup>10</sup> Langford makes the similar argument that Septimius was using the image of Julia Domna to gain favor with the military, the Roman people, and the senate.<sup>11</sup> Lusnia claims that the representations of Julia Domna were a result of Septimius' desire to promote his family as a new dynasty.<sup>12</sup> Rowan disagrees with this argument, believing that the images were intended to demonstrate a continuity with the past, in order to add legitimacy to Septimius' reign. I concur that the Severan emperors used public images of the Severan women as a key method for presenting perceptions of their identity and will discuss the ways in which both Septimius and Caracalla used Julia Domna's image to help bring legitimacy to their claim to the throne.

Another discussion involving Julia Domna regards a letter written to her from the philosopher Philostratus. In *Greek Sophists in the Roman Empire*, G.W. Bowersock argues that the letter is a forgery, claiming that the timeline of references, such as one to Plutarch, is

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<sup>10</sup> Charmaine Gorrie, "Julia Domna's Building Patronage, Imperial Family Roles and the Severan Revival of Moral Legislation," *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte* 53, no. 1 (2004): 61-72.

<sup>11</sup> Julie Langford, *Maternal Megalomania: Julia Domna and the Imperial Politics of Motherhood* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013).

<sup>12</sup> Susann Sowers Lusnia, "Julia Domna's Coinage and Severan Dynastic Propaganda," *Latomus* 54 (1995): 119-140.

inaccurate.<sup>13</sup> Bowersock also notes similarities in word choice between the letter and the biography of Gorgias, asserting that these could only come from the letter being a forgery. Robert J. Penella denounces Bowersock's conclusion in his article, "Philostratus' Letter to Julia Domna."<sup>14</sup> He successfully rebuts Bowersock, explaining the reference to 'persuade Plutarch' not as an address to the specific person, but as a reference to Plutarch's work and followers. Penella also analyzes the biography of Gorgias and the section in the letter discussing Gorgias. Through his study, Penella demonstrates that the letter is not a copy of the biography, but rather they are two sources sharing comparable information about the same subject.<sup>15</sup>

Recent scholarship regarding Julia Domna has debated the dating and attribution of imperial titles given to her, as well as the authenticity of certain primary sources connected to her. Herbert W. Benario in his work "Julia Domna: Mater Senatus et Patriae," questions the dating of when Julia Domna was granted the titles of *mater senatus et patriae*, mother of the senate and the fatherland.<sup>16</sup> Benario discusses the difficulties presented to historians by Caracalla's issuance of the *damnatio memoriae*, damnation of memory, obscuring all images of, and references to, Geta. The *damnatio memoriae* disturbed many inscriptions, creating confusion about the chronology of certain titles. Benario argues that a logical study of certain inscriptions opens the door to the possibility that Julia Domna was honored with the titles of *mater senatus et patriae* before her husband's death. Benario's work differs from my own in that I will not be scrutinizing the timeline of titles given to the Severan women, but rather, I will be looking at the effect having these titles had on their identities.

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<sup>13</sup> G.W. Bowersock, *Greek Sophists in the Roman Empire* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), 105.

<sup>14</sup> Robert J. Penella, "Philostratus' Letter to Julia Domna," *Hermes* 107 (1979): 161-168.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 164.

<sup>16</sup> Herbert W. Benario, "Julia Domna: Mater Senatus et Patriae," *Phoenix* 12, no. 2 (1958): 67-70.

After Plautianus' downfall, Severus spent most of the rest of his life peacefully living on the imperial estates in Rome and on the coast of Campania. He felt his sons, Caracalla and Geta, were too obsessed with the luxuries of Rome, which had corrupted them. Severus worked hard to lessen the hostility between the two brothers by reminding them of the importance of working together to rule Rome. When he received messages from the governor of Britain in 208 CE claiming that the barbarians were in revolt, Severus thought it was the perfect opportunity to remove his sons from the lavishness of Rome, as well as entertain the army, which was growing bored and therefore dangerous.<sup>17</sup> Even though Severus was sick with old age and nearly crippled, he joined his troops as they marched to Britain, although he was transported in a litter most of the way. Once in Britain, Cassius Dio reports that Caracalla, eager for power, began making attempts on his father's life.<sup>18</sup> Severus died on February 4, 211 CE of natural causes, even though his son continued to make attempts on his life, at one point attempting to bribe Severus' doctors to poison him with their treatments.<sup>19</sup> Severus left the empire to his two sons. His final words to them were, "be harmonious, enrich the soldiers, and scorn all other men."<sup>20</sup>

Following Severus' death, Caracalla and Geta became co-rulers of the empire. Caracalla, born Lucius Septimius Bassianus, and also called Antoninus, was the older of the two brothers, having been born in 188 CE. Caracalla married Fulvia Plautilla, the daughter of Plautianus, Septimius' closest advisor. Severus forced Caracalla into marriage in an attempt to mature him.<sup>21</sup> Caracalla hated Plautilla, whom he threatened daily to kill once he became emperor.<sup>22</sup> Following the execution of her father for treason, Plautilla was banished to Lipara under

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<sup>17</sup> Cassius Dio 77.11.

<sup>18</sup> Cassius Dio 77.14.

<sup>19</sup> Herodian 3.15.2.

<sup>20</sup> Cassius Dio 77.15.2, trans. Earnest Cary.

<sup>21</sup> Herodian 3.10.5.

<sup>22</sup> Cassius Dio 77.3.1.



Septimius Severus. When Caracalla became emperor he carried out his threat and had Plautilla murdered.<sup>23</sup>

Publius Septimius Geta was born only a year after Caracalla. This closeness in age is one of the reasons the two were constant competitors. By the time of their father's death, the brothers completely distrusted each other and were constantly suspicious of assassination attempts orchestrated by the other.<sup>24</sup> Neither was able to gain an advantage over the army, which gave equal loyalty to the brothers.<sup>25</sup> As a result, Caracalla and Geta were forced to work together, while they schemed against each other secretly. On December 26, 211 CE Caracalla succeeded in assassinating his brother. He quickly attempted to cover up the assassination by claiming self-defense.<sup>26</sup> While many people were suspicious, Caracalla was able to win over the support of the army by making many promises, which he then kept, such as giving them pay bonuses and increasing their rations.<sup>27</sup> Following Geta's death, Caracalla had his brother's supporters executed and imposed a *damnatio memoriae*.<sup>28</sup> With the *damnatio memoriae* Caracalla attempted to literally erase his brother's existence: coins depicting Geta were melted down, statues and reliefs bearing his image were destroyed, and poets were banned from using his name in plays.<sup>29</sup>

Caracalla ruled for another six years after the assassination of his brother. During this time Caracalla became beloved by the army, not only because he continued to gift them with money, but also because he acted like one of the soldiers by participating in manual labor, such

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<sup>23</sup> Cassius Dio 77.6.3.

<sup>24</sup> Herodian 4.1.1.

<sup>25</sup> Herodian 3.15.5.

<sup>26</sup> Herodian 4.4.4.

<sup>27</sup> Cassius Dio 78.3; Herodian 4.4.7.

<sup>28</sup> Herodian 4.6.

<sup>29</sup> Cassius Dio 78.12.5-6.

as digging ditches, eating the same food as the soldiers, and marching with the troops.<sup>30</sup>

Caracalla was known for being fond of Germans; his nickname, Caracalla, came from the name for the short cloaks Germans often wore.<sup>31</sup> He was also obsessed with Alexander the Great.<sup>32</sup>

In fact, Caracalla used this obsession as a decoy to visit Alexandria, where he slaughtered many of its citizens after receiving reports that the people of Alexandria were insulting him and his rule.<sup>33</sup> His quick temper made those around him fearful of his wrath, including Macrinus, a

general in the army. Macrinus worried that Caracalla suspected him of plotting an assassination.

Whether or not Macrinus was plotting treason, his fear led him actually to plot and succeed in the assassination of Caracalla in 217 CE.<sup>34</sup> Julia Domna passed away shortly after the assassination of her son.

Marcus Opellius Macrinus was a praetorian prefect under Caracalla. After assassinating the emperor, Macrinus took control of the empire, claiming that he did so out of a need for personal safety, and not a desire for power. His reign as emperor was short lived though, due to his inability to win the support of the army. Not only were they prejudiced against him because they had held a deep respect for Caracalla, but Macrinus worsened his situation by attempting to cut their pay and lessening the benefits they had previously received.<sup>35</sup>

At the time, Julia Domna's relatives were living in disgrace in Emesa, Syria. Her sister, Julia Maesa, had two daughters, Julia Soaemias and Julia Mamaea, with Julius Avitus, a former consul. Each daughter had a son of her own, Varius Avitus Bassianus and Gessius Alexianus Bassianus, respectively. Through Julia Maesa, the sister-in-law of Septimius Severus, the

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<sup>30</sup> Cassius Dio 78.10; Herodian 4.7.4-6.

<sup>31</sup> Herodian 4.7.3.

<sup>32</sup> Cassius Dio 78.7.

<sup>33</sup> Cassius Dio 78.22-23; Herodian 4.9.

<sup>34</sup> Cassius Dio 79.5.

<sup>35</sup> Cassius Dio 79.20.

Severan Dynasty was able to continue. Julia Maesa lived with her sister on the imperial estates, and only moved back to Emesa, their hometown, after Caracalla and Julia Domna's deaths. As the soldiers' dislike of Macrinus became more widespread, a rumor began circulating that Avitus and Alexianus were actually the sons of Caracalla.<sup>36</sup> The army seized the opportunity to replace Macrinus as emperor. At night, they smuggled the fourteen year old Avitus into camp and declared him emperor.<sup>37</sup> Macrinus attempted to suppress the insurrection by sending troops against the camp, but soldiers continued to desert to Avitus. Eventually Macrinus, fearing his inevitable loss, fled the battlefield, but was captured and killed by the praetorians.<sup>38</sup>

Avitus was a priest of the Phoenician god Elagabal and introduced the deity to Rome when he became emperor, later taking the god's name for his own. Julia Soaemias was the elder daughter of Julia Maesa and the mother of Elagabalus. She was originally married to Varius Marcellus, but later claimed that Caracalla, not her husband, had fathered her son. In "The Titulature of Julia Soaemias and Julia Mamaea: Two Notes," Benario argues that the title of *mater senatus*, mother of the senate, was used in descriptions of Julia Soaemias based on an inscription that he maintains could only logically be ascribed to Julia Soaemias.<sup>39</sup> Benario concludes that because of this title, Julia's political influence could be greater than most historians believe; however, he does not delve into this argument. While his analysis of the inscription was thorough, it was the only evidence he provided for his argument, which leaves the readers wanting more proof to support his conclusions.

At first believed to be the army's savior from Macrinus, Elagabalus quickly disappointed the Roman people. He refused to conform to Roman culture, wearing decadent and exotic

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<sup>36</sup> Herodian 5.3.10.

<sup>37</sup> Cassius Dio 79.31-32.

<sup>38</sup> Herodian 5.4.7-11.

<sup>39</sup> Herbert W. Benario, "The Titulature of Julia Soaemias and Julia Mamaea," *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* 90 (1959): 9-14.

clothing.<sup>40</sup> Elagabalus spent his time focused on religious rites, rather than ruling the empire and running the military. Elagabalus married and divorced three women in as many years during his reign. Cornelia Paula was the first wife of Elagabalus. They were married in 219 CE and divorced in 220 CE on the grounds that she had a blemish on her body. Less than a year later, Elagabalus had taken Aquilia Severa, a vestal virgin, as his wife. This marriage was considered to be incredibly controversial. Elagabalus received a lot of criticism for his actions, but he claimed that their marriage as a priest and a priestess was sacred. Shortly after, Elagabalus divorced Aquilia Severa and married for a third time. He took Annia Aurelia Faustina, a member of the family of Commodus, as his wife. Worried that the army was growing distressed by Elagabalus' behavior, his family convinced him to adopt his younger cousin, Alexianus, and appoint him as Caesar.<sup>41</sup> Alexianus was much more appealing to the Roman people, having been educated in the Greek and Roman fashion.<sup>42</sup> Elagabalus quickly recognized Alexianus as a threat to his power and attempted to assassinate him on multiple occasions. The praetorians, who were fond of Alexianus, decided to rid themselves of Elagabalus, whom they considered a disgrace, and assassinated him in 222 CE.<sup>43</sup>

Julia Mamaea, originally married to Gessius Marcianus, was the mother of Alexianus. Like her sister, Julia Mamaea claimed that her son was actually fathered by Caracalla. Julia Mamaea arranged Alexianus' marriage to his wife Salustia Orbiana.<sup>44</sup> Over time she became jealous of her daughter-in-law, and following the death of the girl's father, had her banished to Libya. During this time, Julia Mamaea's actions would have created an impression in the public's mind. Some scholars assert that the women of the Severan dynasty had influence over

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<sup>40</sup> Herodian 5.5.

<sup>41</sup> Herodian 5.7.1.

<sup>42</sup> Herodian 5.7.5.

<sup>43</sup> Herodian 5.8.8.

<sup>44</sup> Herodian 6.1.9.

their own images, so much so that they were able to alter the public's opinions through propaganda. Elizabeth Kosmetatou argues that Julia Mamaea attempted to use her public image to connect herself to Julia Domna, while also distancing herself from her sister, Julia Soaemias.<sup>45</sup> Imagery presented to the public was vital towards establishing perceptions of the identity and character of the empress. The projections and perceptions of the Severan women are the only evidence remaining that historians can analyze in order to attempt to determine who these women were.

Alexianus ruled Rome peacefully for many years; however, in 230 CE, the Persian king declared war against Rome. Alexianus, now known as Alexander, attempted to organize the army in battle, but with no military experience, he only succeeded in gaining a massive and bloody defeat, in which his men were forced to retreat. Shortly after, the Germans declared war against Rome as well. Rather than risking another embarrassing loss, Alexander made a truce with the Germans promising them gold and whatever else they asked for.<sup>46</sup> The Roman army was incredibly disheartened by Alexander's actions and began conspiring to establish a new emperor, from whom they felt they could benefit more.<sup>47</sup> Ultimately, the soldiers declared a commander in the army, Maximinus, emperor, and killed Alexander in 235 CE, ending the Severan Dynasty.

Some scholars have previously discussed the Severan women, Julia Domna, Julia Maesa, Julia Soaemias, and Julia Mamaea, in relation to the power they exerted. Robert Cleve, focusing on the reign of Severus Alexander, examined how these women were able to gain active roles in

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<sup>45</sup> Elizabeth Kosmetatou, "The Public Image of Julia Mamaea. An Epigraphic and Numismatic Inquiry" *Latomus* 61, no. 2 (April – June 2002): 398-414.

<sup>46</sup> Herodian 6.7.9.

<sup>47</sup> Herodian 6.8.4.

the government in his book *Severus Alexander and the Severan Women*.<sup>48</sup> Cleve argues that the Severan women did so by manipulating men with power. According to him, the Severan women were aware of their power due to the fact that they acted against others who threatened their power, such as when Julia Domna sent Julia Maesa's husband into exile in order to prevent him from gaining authority that might surpass her own. Cleve's work differs from my own in that I will be looking at the Severan women across the whole timespan of the dynasty. Additionally, I will not solely examine the power they exerted, but will look at all of the ways in which they stepped out of their gender roles.

The Severan dynasty was in constant peril of ending, as the emperors were forced to battle to obtain, as well as retain, their throne. Of the five Severan emperors in the dynasty, only the first, Septimius Severus, grew old enough to die from natural causes. The other Severan men all were assassinated. The Severans managed to rule the Roman Empire for forty-two years before permanently losing control. During this time, the lives of the Severan women, Julia Domna, Julia Maesa, Julia Soaemias, and Julia Mamaea weaved in and out of those of the Severan men, Septimius, Caracalla, Geta, Elagabalus, and Alexander. Previously scholars have examined the Severans in relation to the ways in which their images were used as propaganda, the dating of certain titles bestowed upon the Severan women, and the power the imperial women exerted during Alexander's reign. By examining the available evidence, I will analyze the actions of the Severan women, many of whom stepped outside of appropriate gender roles, to determine their identities.

## Sources

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<sup>48</sup> Robert Lee Cleve, *Severus Alexander and the Severan Women* (Los Angeles: University of California, 1982).

This section discusses the various sources, including written histories, numismatics, and inscriptions used as evidence in this paper for discussing the Severan women, as well as their trustworthiness. While none of the sources should be taken entirely at face value because scholars should always take into account potential biases of the author, some sources can be considered more reliable than others. Scholars should therefore keep in mind whether authors intended to praise or criticize various emperors and be mindful of the ways in which an author might be using the Severan women to support his opinion of an emperor. Of the written histories, this paper relies heavily on the histories of Cassius Dio and Herodian as sources for analyzing the Severan women through the men in their lives. The *Historia Augusta* is consulted in this paper; however, I declined to use it except for once, due to its lack of trustworthiness.

Cassius Dio was born in 164 CE to a prominent family in Nicaea, Byzantium. He held many distinguished offices during his life, including praetor in 194 and suffect consul in 204 in the court of the Severans.<sup>49</sup> In 202 CE, he began writing his *Historia Romana*, which he starts with the founding of Rome. Cassius Dio opens his work with the statement that it is his, “desire to write a history of all the memorable achievements of the Romans, as well in time of peace as in war, so that no one, whether Roman or non-Roman, shall look in vain for any of the essential facts.”<sup>50</sup> In regards to his sources, he claims that he has read almost everything that has been written about Rome; however, he only included the material that he saw fit to select.<sup>51</sup> He does not list his requirements for inclusion, yet he goes on to explain that while he writes in an eloquent and entertaining style, his history remains truthful, implying that he judged his sources

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<sup>49</sup> John William Rich, "Cassius Dio," in *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, ed. Simon Hornblower and Antony Spawforth, Oxford University Press, 2005.

<sup>50</sup> Cassius Dio 1.1.1, trans. Earnest Cary.

<sup>51</sup> Cassius Dio 1.1.2.

based on their trustworthiness.<sup>52</sup> Cassius Dio's history ends in 229 CE during the reign of Severus Alexander. Shortly after being honored by Severus Alexander and made a consul, the emperor began to fear for Cassius Dio's life as forces in Rome rose up out of jealousy. Severus Alexander bade Cassius Dio to serve the remainder of his consulship outside Rome. While he visited Severus Alexander a few times after this, Cassius Dio decided to retire and live out the rest of his life in Bithynia.<sup>53</sup> He died before the end of Severus Alexander's reign.

Cassius Dio can be trusted as a source when discussing the Severan dynasty. For sections of his work discussing earlier time periods, Cassius Dio would have been forced to rely on other literary sources for information; however, as a contemporary of the Severans, he would have been able to consult his own experiences, as well as first-hand accounts, to gather evidence. This is a major credit to Cassius Dio's reliability. Most literary sources that scholars are forced to rely on for ancient history were written well outside of the time period they are examining. That Cassius Dio is both a contemporary of the Severans and had direct interactions with them makes him an excellent source. Additionally, Cassius Dio's candidness and transparency in regards to his biases allow scholars to more accurately analyze his history. For example, Cassius Dio believed Septimius Severus, "possessed none of the qualities of a good ruler."<sup>54</sup> He claims that Severus made false promises to the senate and passed laws, but was then the first to violate them.<sup>55</sup> Additionally, Cassius Dio asserts that Septimius Severus ruined the youth of Italy by turning them into brigands and gladiators.<sup>56</sup> While some or all of his claims may be true, scholars should take into account that Cassius Dio thought Septimius Severus was an awful emperor when examining parts of his work for trustworthiness. Due to the fact that Cassius Dio

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Cassius Dio 80.5.1-3.

<sup>54</sup> Cassius Dio 76.7, trans. Earnest Cary.

<sup>55</sup> Cassius Dio 75.2.1-2.

<sup>56</sup> Cassius Dio 75.2.5.



lacked respect for Severus, Severus' actions should be interpreted with the awareness that they may not have been as bad as they are being presented. Cassius Dio can be used as a credible source when studying the Severan dynasty due to his chronological concurrency with the Severans, as well as his willing admittance of his biases.

The exact years of Herodian's life are unknown; however, his work spans the time period from 180 CE to 238 CE. Based on his own claims that he only wrote about history which he had experienced, scholars believe he lived from roughly 170 CE to 240 CE.<sup>57</sup> Herodian was a minor Roman civil servant from Antioch. His work, *History of the Roman Empire since the Death of Marcus Aurelius*, spans from the reign of Commodus to the reign of Gordian III. In the introduction, Herodian criticizes other writers for caring more about glory and the remembrance of their own names than truthfulness. He claims that they pay more attention to "phrasing and euphony" than accuracy, hoping their credibility will not be questioned if they are well liked.<sup>58</sup> Herodian chastises some writers for being flatterers or biased, and instead of writing truthfully, writing to gain the favor of a king or nobleman.<sup>59</sup> For his own work, Herodian refuses to use hearsay or unsupported evidence as sources.<sup>60</sup> Therefore, he chose to only write about history that was fresh in his own mind. Herodian ends his introduction with his thesis statement: "the emperors who were advanced in years governed themselves and their subjects commendably, because of their greater practical experience, but the younger emperors lived recklessly and introduced many innovations. As might have been expected, the disparities in age and authority inevitably resulted in variations in imperial behavior. How each of these events occurred, I shall

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<sup>57</sup> Herodian 1.1.3.

<sup>58</sup> Herodian 1.1.1

<sup>59</sup> Herodian 1.1.2.

<sup>60</sup> Herodian 1.1.3.

now relate in detail, in order of time and emperors.”<sup>61</sup> Herodian argues that younger emperors made inferior emperors; therefore, his treatment of the outcome of the reigns of Elagabalus and Alexander is tempered by his belief that naturally they would end poorly.

Similar to Cassius Dio, Herodian is considered a reliable source for being a contemporary with the Severans. While some of his work is anecdotal, these short stories can be interpreted to determine a general perception of the Severan women. Additionally, as his thesis states, Herodian has a poorer view of young emperors, whom he feels do not have the experience necessary to rule the empire. This bias is taken into account when looking at his histories of Elagabalus and Severus Alexander. Overall, Herodian is an appropriate source for examining the Severan dynasty due to his concurrency with the time period and awareness of his biases.

The *Historia Augusta* is a collection of Roman biographies of unknown origin. As a source it is very untrustworthy and is only used once in this paper. Both the dating and authorship of the collection are highly debated. The dating accepted by Ronald Syme, an authority on the *Historia Augusta*, is by Dr. Johne, who places its creation between 394 CE and 404 CE.<sup>62</sup> If this dating is correct, then the histories regarding the Severan dynasty were written two hundred years after the Severans ruled. This is problematic because the sources for the *Historia Augusta* are unknown. Any secondary or tertiary sources cannot be evaluated for their trustworthiness, if they exist at all. The *Historia Augusta* is also a problematic source to use because it contains claims that radically contradict other sources. One example of this is when the author claims that Septimius Severus’ first wife, Paccia Marciana, was the birth mother of Caracalla and that Julia Domna is actually Caracalla’s stepmother, whom Caracalla later

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<sup>61</sup> Herodian 1.1.6, trans. Edward C. Echols.

<sup>62</sup> Ronald Syme, “Propaganda in the *Historia Augusta*” *Latomus* 37, no. 1 (January – March 1978): 173-192.

married.<sup>63</sup> This statement is completely unsupported by all the other evidence, much of which directly contradicts it.

Ronald Syme advises scholars to view the *Historia Augusta* as a *mythistoria* written by a romantic, rather than as a history.<sup>64</sup> In a *mythistoria*, the writer is not intent on communicating the facts, but rather is focused on creative invention through which he can take a small detail and magnify it into a story. The *Historia Augusta* should be viewed as a work of fiction. As a result, Syme argues that scholars can never have full confidence in the information written in the biographies; however, they should continue to study the biographies in an attempt to gain some understanding from them.<sup>65</sup> As a result the *Historia Augusta* is only used once in this paper on page three to share an interesting anecdote about why Septimius chose Julia Domna to be his wife.

For legal history I have used Justinian as a source. Justinian became emperor in 527 CE and shortly after founded a commission to collect into one document all the valid imperial laws from the reign of Hadrian to his own.<sup>66</sup> The laws were then edited to ensure that they were clear, and did not contain any repetition or conflict. Additionally, Justinian included citations to the emperors who had originally issued the various laws. Justinian's codex of imperial laws can be used as a valid source when discussing the laws of the Severan dynasty, especially when they make specific reference to the Severans. Justinian includes in his work the writings of Ulpian, a Roman jurist who served in the courts of all four Severan emperors. These laws offer a better understanding of what was deemed appropriate and inappropriate behavior by the Romans.

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<sup>63</sup> *Historia Augusta*, Caracalla 10.1.

<sup>64</sup> Ronald Syme, "The Composition of the *Historia Augusta*: Recent Theories," *The Journal of Roman Studies* 62 (1972): 123-133.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>66</sup> "Justinian," in *Oxford Dictionary of the Classical World*, ed. John Roberts (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

The numismatics used in this paper focus on imperial coinage minted by the authority of the emperor, rather than provincial coins, which were created by local cities and reflect local cultures. Because of this, the imperial coins offer a more direct connection to the Severan women. Coins depicting the Severan woman were stamped with an image of an imperial woman on the obverse and with the name of a goddess or title with an accompanying image on the reverse. Similar percentages of silver coins minted with the images of the Severan women at various times throughout the dynasty suggest that there was a specific workshop dedicated to stamping the coins of the imperial women.<sup>67</sup> The pictures produced on coins of the Severan women represent the perceptions of the emperor who commissioned the design of the coin. Coins were a popular tool for propaganda because they were able to connect a person with a concept, such as *pietas* or *concordia*. Therefore, they speak more to the image the emperors were attempting to create, than the perception that the Severan women had of their own identity. However, Clare Rowan makes the argument that during the reign of the younger Severans, Elagabalus and Severus Alexander, the Severan women may have had influence over their own coinage, especially because during these time periods the “numismatic images of the imperial women give the suggestion of individuality.”<sup>68</sup> Thus, while most often numismatics were a tool used by the emperor to promote his own propaganda, it is possible that imperial coinage was also a method for the Severan women to express their own concepts of themselves.

This paper also uses inscriptions attributing official titles to the Severan women and information on their activities. Inscriptions are versatile sources because they can be used for many different reasons. Not only can they offer confirmation of information provided by literary sources, but they provide details about specific events and testify to the careers and activities of

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<sup>67</sup> Clare Rowan, “The Public Image of the Severan Women,” *Papers of the British School at Rome* 79 (November 2011): 246.

<sup>68</sup> Rowan, “The Public Image of the Severan Women,” 244.

prominent members of society.<sup>69</sup> Inscriptions can be incredibly valuable sources, as long as scholars familiarize themselves with the possible hazards that could be encountered while using inscriptions as evidence. Inscriptions do not often survive in the best condition. Some become fragmented or damaged over time from natural disasters, wars, exposure to weather, or deliberate attack. Additionally, some inscriptions were at one point written over with new text, destroying or obscuring the original message.<sup>70</sup> Fragmentary inscriptions have led to the practice of scholars using known information or convention to speculate on missing words or phrases. One of the potential pitfalls of using inscriptions as sources is relying too heavily on the reconstructed parts of passages and forgetting that they are opinion, not fact.<sup>71</sup>

Scholars must also be wary of the methods used to date particular inscriptions. Reliable forms of dating include references to specific events or dates in the text; analyzing the specific material an inscription is written on and connecting it to a defined period; dating other nearby, connected objects, such as dating a tombstone by analyzing the goods contained within the grave it marks; and dissecting the linguistic formulae and onomastic conventions within the text.<sup>72</sup> Examining lettering styles is not a dependable form of dating because preferred letter-forms were developed on a very local scale. A consistent evolution of lettering cannot be applied to large areas and should therefore only be utilized when examining purely local criteria.<sup>73</sup> Lastly, forgeries of inscriptions do exist; however, the majority of these were exposed a long time ago.<sup>74</sup> Luckily for scholars, most inscriptions that have been recorded still stand. When fact checking, scholars can seek out the existence of the original inscription, as well as make enquiries into

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<sup>69</sup> Lawrence Keppie, *Understanding Roman Inscriptions* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), 9.

<sup>70</sup> John Bodel, "Epigraphy and the Ancient Historian," in *Epigraphic Evidence: Ancient History from Inscriptions*, ed. John Bodel (London: Routledge, 2001), 47.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 49-51.

<sup>73</sup> Bodel, "Epigraphy and the Ancient Historian," 50.

<sup>74</sup> Keppie, *Understanding Roman Inscriptions*, 133.

other epigraphists who have, independently of the initial recorder, documented the inscription's authenticity. Overall, inscriptions can be beneficial forms of evidence, providing that scholars acquaint themselves with the potential risks that could arise from using them as sources.

The principal sources that will be used for this paper are the histories of Cassius Dio and Herodian, as well as imperial coinage; however, I will also utilize the legal codes of Justinian and inscriptions. Cassius Dio and Herodian are used most heavily due to their concurrency with the time period, as well as for their openness of their prejudices. Imperial coinage and inscriptions are used to discuss propaganda about the Severan women circulated by the emperors. Justinian is used as a legal source to establish a basis for appropriate and inappropriate behavior in ancient Rome. The images and actions presented by these various sources are the basis for my analysis of the Severan women using Judith Butler's theories.

### **Judith Butler**

Judith Butler talks about gender performance and the ways in which actions lead to the identification of gender, which provides an interpretative framework for the ways in which Severan women's actions led to the formation of their various identities. Additionally, Butler's concept of the matrix of identities, which accounts for the ways in which various identities interact with each other, creates the view of the Severan women as complex figures. Butler's theory rests on the assertion that gender is not defined by who a person is, but by what that person does. Acts lead to identity. A person's identity as a man or a woman does not lead them to act in a certain way, but rather the ways in which a person repeatedly acts define their identity.<sup>75</sup> If one were to repeatedly alter one's actions from those previously performed, one

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<sup>75</sup> Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," in *Performing Feminisms: Feminist Critical Theory and Theatre*, ed. Sue-Ellen Case (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 270; Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 33.

would take on a different identity.<sup>76</sup> For example, Julia Soaemias and Julia Mamaea did not always exist as adulteresses, but only took on that identity after claiming that their sons were conceived with Caracalla, not their husbands.

Furthermore, Butler argues that gender identity is acquired through performances directed by social sanction and taboo.<sup>77</sup> A person may choose which actions to perform, but society determines what identity those actions represent. Cultural systems determine gender systems, defining which actions categorize a person as male, and which actions categorize a female.<sup>78</sup> Thus, a person must work within one gender construct abiding by the socially sanctioned activities, those behaviors which have been deemed appropriate.

Additionally, the person must avoid performing any taboo actions, which disrupt the binary divide between the genders. For a person is one gender, in the sense that the person is not the other gender.<sup>79</sup> People must therefore continue to act within the binary constraints of their gender. When people perform taboo actions, acting against their previously established gender identity, they are confronted with punitive and regulatory measures enforced by society.<sup>80</sup> Since gender roles are defined by society, the performance of them has to be evaluated by society. Butler states, “acts are a shared experience and collective action.”<sup>81</sup> An action is never an individual experience. It is never simply a case of a person acting with or against society’s sanctions, but society’s opinion of whether or not the person is following the established normative behaviors. Since society decides what is appropriate and inappropriate, they must also evaluate the action in order to determine to which category it belongs. If the action is determined

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<sup>76</sup> Butler, “Performative Acts,” 271.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 73.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>80</sup> Butler, “Performative Acts,” 278.

<sup>81</sup> Butler, “Performative Acts,” 276.

to be taboo, then the person who performed the inappropriate action will face consequences as decided by society.

Without society's appraisal, an action cannot lead to identity. Not only does society evaluate actions in order to ascertain whether or not they meet the requirements for acceptable behavior, society also determines what identity is to be conferred based on their examination of the actions. For this reason, perceptions can occasionally be more important than actions. Even if a person did not commit a taboo act, if society perceives that the person did act inappropriately, then the person will receive disciplinary measures.<sup>82</sup> In these instances, one loses one's agency because even though one chose which actions to perform, alternate actions were ascribed to oneself. I will argue below that this was the case when Plautianus accused Julia Domna of being an adulterer, and because certain people believed she had performed the action, she was forced to face punitive measures. Plautianus took away Julia Domna's agency and imposed an identity on her.

Additionally, Butler argues that political agendas can redefine gender roles.<sup>83</sup> Gender roles are not stagnant, but can naturally change and be deliberately altered. Oftentimes, when this happens, it is in regards to a small sub-set of people. For example, when Julia Soaemias and Julia Mamaea claimed that they had each been intimate with Caracalla and that their sons were his, the women went unpunished for their adultery. Adultery was not sanctioned for all women, it was still taboo, but society was able to deem it acceptable for Julia Soaemias and Julia Mamaea to have committed adultery because it meant the continuance of the imperial line. The political agenda in finding a new emperor led society to alter gender roles to fit with their needs.

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Butler, "Performative Acts," 273.



The gender roles regarding adultery did not need to be changed for everyone, but were able to be redefined for a small group.

Not only can political agendas modify gender roles, but the interaction of multiple identities with each other can form new ways that are acceptable for people to act.<sup>84</sup> This is Butler's theory of the matrix. Differences that do not follow the typical pattern of the law exist due to products being created from a matrix.<sup>85</sup> The matrix is a grid of all a person's identities. When these identities interact with each other they form products that are diverse and stray from the original purposes of society. In doing so they open up new possibilities for what is considered acceptable. The imperial women were not direct copies of the stereotypical Roman woman, but were varied combinations of the identities which made up who they were. Average women were expected to act in certain ways, but with the added imperial identity the empresses were exposed to other accepted methods of behavior. Additionally, the varied products of the matrix create sub-groups which allow pushers of political agendas to contain more easily changes to small groups if they do not wish to make large scale changes.

In her article "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," Butler argues that performances of gender in theatrical contexts are less regulated by social conventions and taboos than gender acts in non-theatrical settings.<sup>86</sup> The acts, by existing on a stage and separate from the audience, allow individuals to disconnect themselves from the actions and to classify what they are viewing as being distinct from reality. Acts in a theatrical setting which contradict accepted societal gender rules are not subject to punitive measures because they are not viewed as actual disruptions to the viewer's beliefs about

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<sup>84</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 67.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>86</sup> Butler, "Performative Acts," 278.

appropriate gender roles. The stage allows individuals to view actions that take place on it as fantasy, rather than as actions that challenge approved social conventions.

Butler's stage can be expanded to the relationship between the Roman imperial family and the common people. The social gap between the masses and the few members of the imperial family was large enough to separate average citizens from the reality of the imperial family's actions. This disconnection from reality and everyday life of the imperial women's actions made it easier for society to accept moments in which the empresses acted in opposition to established gendered behaviors. Traditionally taboo performances of gender identity by the imperial women were not viewed as challenges to the systems of appropriate social behavior because the women were disconnected from common society by their high social class. They were set on a stage apart from the masses. As a result, the empresses did not need to oppose the regulations which had been imposed on the masses, but were able to obtain for themselves the changes they desired because society accepted that their actions were not representative of reality.

While Butler applies her theories about the formation of identity and the matrix to the topic of gender roles, they can be applied to the topic of identity as a whole, not solely gender identity. Even though Butler uses her theories to analyze a binary restrictive identity, in which a person is A to the extent that they are not B, this is not necessary for her theories to hold true. Identity roles still exist even when there is more than one other option for a type of identity. I have applied her theory on identity formation to the Severan women in order to distinguish the identities of the empresses according to their actions. The application of Butler's matrix theory enforces the concept that these identities cannot be viewed individually, but must be considered as a whole in order to explain why the imperial women were able to perform traditionally taboo

actions. Additionally, Butler's stage theory offers a potential explanation as to why the imperial identity was subject to less strict societal evaluation of behaviors than other identities.

Critics of Butler claim her work is too focused on the individual. Geoff Boucher argues that by concentrating on personal resistance, Butler overlooks the possibilities for and consequences of group struggle.<sup>87</sup> Her theories are therefore too isolated and difficult to apply to larger topics. While Butler's theories are directed towards the individual, this is not a concern for this paper. The purpose of this paper is to analyze each of the Severan women on a very personal level. Therefore it is beneficial to this topic to apply theories which were intended to be used to examine people as individuals and not groups.

Other detractors from Butler critique her for being too symbolic. Martha Nussbaum argues that as a gender and feminist theorist Butler is too disconnected from the reality of the current situation facing modern women.<sup>88</sup> Butler's work is too entrenched in theory and does not seek to become involved in active change. Nussbaum believes that it is the responsibility of feminist theorists to engage in reform movements.<sup>89</sup> Whether or not this holds true, the critique does not apply when using Butler's theories to examine ancient history. Since the women being studied are not modern, their situation cannot be changed or improved, as Nussbaum wishes.

Butler's theories are particularly applicable to this topic because her matrix theory allows for a person to have overlapping and interconnected identities. In many cases, the Severan women would only be viewed through one lens, either as women or imperial family members or scholars. Butler's theories allow these women to be studied not as parts, but as whole people. Rather than separating out the roles of the imperial women and viewing them individually,

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<sup>87</sup> Geoff Boucher, "The Politics of Performativity: A Critique of Judith Butler," *Parrhesia*, no. 1 (2006): 114.

<sup>88</sup> Martha Nussbaum, "The Professor of Parody," *New Republic* 220, no. 8 (February 1999): 39.

<sup>89</sup> Nussbaum, "Professor of Parody," 38.

Butler's matrix encourages scholars to consider the ways in which these identities interact with each other to create an actual person.

### **The Severan Women**

This paper examines the actions of the Severan women in order to determine who they were, as well as why they were able to be who they were. The Severan empresses were able to act in ways which were not traditionally considered acceptable for Roman women by taking on identities that might not normally be accessible to average women. The Julias of the Severan dynasty are well-known for their tendency to step outside of their gender roles. The main reason they were able to do this was due to the addition of an imperial identity to their matrixes. The Severan women realized early on how important this aspect of their identity was and made sure to do whatever they needed to in order to hold onto their identity as members of the imperial family. The following sections focus on Julia Domna, Julia Maesa, Julia Soaemias, and Julia Mamaea.

### **Julia Domna**

The key identities of Julia Domna were wife, mother, philosopher, adulteress, political advisor, symbol of the dynasty, and member of the imperial family. There were three periods of coinage for Julia Domna: when she was in favor with Septimius, when Plautianus was in power, and when Caracalla was emperor. The greater part of Julia Domna's coinage during the early part of Septimius' reign connected her with the goddesses *Pietas*, *Iuno Regina*, and *Venus Victrix*, Piety, Juno the Queen, and Venus the Victorious respectively.<sup>90</sup> All of these were goddesses traditionally connected with Roman empresses.<sup>91</sup> Her connection with *Pietas* represented her devotion to the gods, the state, and her family. *Iuno Regina* symbolized her role

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<sup>90</sup> Rowan, "The Public Image of the Severan Women," 250.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 251.

as the mother of the imperial family, just as *Iuno Regina* was the mother of the divine family. *Venus Victrix* embodied the success and victory of the Severan family. These various concepts represented by Julia Domna's connections with the goddesses functioned together to demonstrate the empress' sexual virtue, as well as the stability she helped bring to the Rome by giving birth to imperial sons.<sup>92</sup>

Another part of Julia Domna's identity, which was heavily portrayed before her son Geta's death, was the continuity she helped establish between the Severan dynasty and the preceding Antonine dynasty. Following the struggles Septimius Severus had faced to become emperor, he wanted to emphasize his right to rule by underlining his family's connections with the previous dynasty. Though not minted as heavily as the previous goddess coins mentioned, Septimius Severus had coins struck with an image of Julia Domna on the obverse with reverse types specifically meant to remind citizens of the Antonine empresses, specifically the goddess Cybele who was first depicted on a coin issued for Faustina the Elder, the wife of Antoninus Pius.<sup>93</sup> Additionally near the beginning of Septimius Severus' reign in 195 CE, Julia Domna was awarded the title *mater castrorum*, mother of the camps. Not only did this title reinforce the relationship between the imperial family and the army, but it also established another mental connection between Julia Domna and the Antonine dynasty, particularly Faustina the Younger, who was the earliest empress to be granted the title.<sup>94</sup> The title of *mater castrorum*, and subsequent link to the Antonines, came at an advantageous time for Septimius Severus, who had organized his official adoption as a son of Marcus Aurelius that same year.<sup>95</sup> Septimius Severus used propaganda to shape Julia Domna's identity in order to help to bring legitimacy to his reign.

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Rowan, "The Public Image of the Severan Women," 251-2.

<sup>94</sup> Barbara Levick, *Julia Domna: Syrian Empress* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 56.

<sup>95</sup> Lusnia, "Julia Domna's Coinage," 123.

The people of Rome identified Julia Domna as the wife and mother who would ensure the continuance of the empire. Besides being a reminder of the Severans link to the previous dynasty, she had also born heirs who would carry on the imperial line. Julia Domna's identity centered on being the matriarch of the imperial family. Her role as first woman of the empire was continuously reinforced. Arguably, during the beginning of Septimius' reign, her identity as a mother was most notable to society, due to the implications that came along with it, such as the stability she brought to the empire.

The use of Julia Domna as a form of propaganda came almost completely to a halt when Septimius Severus' advisor, Plautianus, managed to obtain almost complete control over the emperor. One of the ways he did this was by distancing the emperor from his wife, Julia Domna. Plautianus would repeatedly insult her to Septimius Severus and claim she was an adulteress, based on evidence he gathered from interrogating and torturing other women of the nobility, according to Cassius Dio.<sup>96</sup> The claim that Plautianus tortured aristocratic women can reasonably be considered an exaggeration by Cassius Dio, who very clearly judged Plautianus harshly for his treatment of Julia Domna; however, Plautianus did make accusations of adultery against the empress.

The Romans viewed adultery through different lenses depending on whether the husband was caught committing adultery or the wife. Husbands were exempt from facing punishment for committing adultery. In 197 CE in response to a petition, Severus and Caracalla declared that wives have no right to bring criminal charges of adultery against their husbands and that men reserved this privilege.<sup>97</sup> If a husband, however, caught his wife committing adultery, the law

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<sup>96</sup> Cassius Dio 76.15.1.

<sup>97</sup> Justinian, *Codex* 9.9.1.

required him to divorce her immediately or be met with consequences of his own.<sup>98</sup> This law comes from the *lex Julia*, or Julian law by Augustus, according to Julius Paulus, a Roman lawyer who was active in Rome during the Severan dynasty.<sup>99</sup> Julius Paulus can be used as a trustworthy source because he was contemporary with the Severans. *Pauli Sententiae*, or the opinions of Paul, the work which discusses the *lex Julia* is sometimes doubted for its authenticity, due to the fact that it was compiled in the third century CE after Paul's death; however, Constantine I confirmed the origin of the work.<sup>100</sup> Furthermore, the Julian marriage laws discussed by Paul are corroborated by other sources. According to Justinian, Alexander asserted that it was common knowledge that if a husband did not divorce his wife, then he had no legal grounds to accuse her of adultery.<sup>101</sup> A woman's greatest virtues were chastity and modesty, and the most important qualification for achieving these virtues was obeying the sanctity of the marriage bed.<sup>102</sup> If a woman was successfully convicted of adultery, she lost half of her dowry, a third of her possessions, and was consigned to exile on an island.<sup>103</sup> When women committed adultery, it was considered much more damaging because it brought into question the parentage of the children. Husbands wanted to be positive that, when they passed away, the children inheriting their property and titles were their true descendants. The Romans believed that there was no way for a woman to make amends for bearing a bastard, for in doing so she betrayed the gods, her ancestors, and her fatherland.<sup>104</sup> For this reason, women faced severe consequences if they were caught in the act of adultery.

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<sup>98</sup> Paul, *Opinions* 2.26.8.

<sup>99</sup> "Julius Paulus," in *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, ed. Simon Hornblower and Antony Spawforth (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

<sup>100</sup> Judith Even Grubbs, *Women and the Law in the Roman Empire: A sourcebook on marriage, divorce and widowhood* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 2-3.

<sup>101</sup> Justinian, *Codex* 9.9.11.

<sup>102</sup> H. Thesleff, ed., *The Pythagorean Texts of the Hellenistic Period* (Abo, 1965), 151-4.G.

<sup>103</sup> Paul, *Opinions* 2.26.14.

<sup>104</sup> H. Thesleff, ed., *The Pythagorean Texts of the Hellenistic Period* (Abo, 1965), 151-4.G.

The accusations of adultery made by Plautianus lowered Julia Domna's status. By claiming that Julia Domna was an adulterer, Plautianus made her one in essence. Plautianus was able to take away her agency and impose his own fabricated identity onto Julia Domna. Even though she was not an adulteress, his accusations made her one in the eyes of society because, according to Judith Butler, identity is created through society's evaluations of people's actions.<sup>105</sup> An identity cannot be formed solely through the performance of certain actions. It is necessary for the society to evaluate a person's performance and then place them within an identity. For this reason the perception of a person's actions can be more important than their actual actions. While Julia Domna did not perform actions that would classify her as an adulterer, such as by having sex with men other than her husband, Plautianus claimed she did and was successfully believed by society. Therefore, since society believed she had performed sexual acts with other men, they categorized her as an adulteress, thus making that part of her identity. Since being an adulterer went against the accepted actions of a woman, Julia Domna was forced to face the punitive results of going against her gender role. In this instance, society's reprisal forced Julia Domna to retreat from public life and the political sphere. Plautianus' execution redeemed Julia Domna by ending his control over her identity and the subsequent belief that she was an adulterer, restoring her to a place of appropriate gender conduct.

The coinage of this time period demonstrates Julia Domna's lowered status. Septimius significantly decreased his use of Julia Domna as a form of propaganda. During the height of Plautianus' power from 203 CE to 205 CE, there is a significant decrease in coins bearing Julia

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<sup>105</sup> Butler, "Performative Acts," 276.



Domna's image.<sup>106</sup> This has been attributed to Plautianus' attacks on Julia Domna, which reduced her prominence at court.<sup>107</sup>

Julia Domna took up an interest in philosophy following her condemnation by Plautianus. She turned away from engagement in politics for a period and, instead, passed her time with sophists.<sup>108</sup> During this time she commissioned Philostratus to write the *Life of Apollonius of Tyana*, a Pythagorean philosopher who traveled the Mediterranean.<sup>109</sup> At one point, she even procured the rhetoric chair at Athens for Philiscus.<sup>110</sup> Julia Domna's interest in philosophy persisted even after Plautianus' death, as she maintained a society of philosophers at court.<sup>111</sup>

While female patronage was nowhere near as widespread as male patronage in Rome, Julia Domna's involvement in philosophy was not uncommon for imperial women. The majority of female patrons were members of the imperial family.<sup>112</sup> Their close proximity to the emperor and constant presence at court brought them in contact with educated men, who sought out desirable patrons to advance their careers. Imperial women made excellent patrons due to their wealth, educational background, and direct line of access to the emperor, whom ultimately every man aspired to have as a patron.<sup>113</sup> Imperial women were able to wield a great amount of power as patrons, choosing which men they wished to help advance in prestige. When Julia Domna turned away from politics after being accused of adultery, she entered a world that still allowed her to exert a great amount of influence, while appearing to Plautianus to have become less of a threat to his control over Septimius.

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<sup>106</sup> Lusnia, "Julia Domna's Coinage," 130.

<sup>107</sup> Rowan, "The Public Image of the Severan Women," 250-251.

<sup>108</sup> Cassius Dio 76.15.1.

<sup>109</sup> Philostratus 1.3.3.

<sup>110</sup> Philostratus, *Vitae Sophistarum* 622.

<sup>111</sup> Mary Gilmore Williams, "Studies in the Lives of Roman Empresses," *American Journal of Archaeology* 6, no. 3 (Jul. – Sep. 1902): 274.

<sup>112</sup> Emily A. Hemelrijk, *Matrona Docta: Educated Women in the Roman Elite from Cornelia to Julia Domna* (London: Routledge, 1999), 126.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*

Julia Domna's identities as a philosopher and patron were unusual for a woman of common birth; however, her identity as a member of the imperial family allowed her to assume these additional identities. Being a patron and an intellectual allowed her to exercise a different type of control over court than the power she had held while in good favor with the emperor. While Plautianus had succeeded in displacing Julia Domna from the emperor's side, he was not able to lower her status to that of a common woman. Julia Domna was therefore able to retain her imperial status and the ability to act outside her gender role as a woman, while remaining inside the accepted spectrum of actions for a member of the imperial family. Nonetheless, according to Cassius Dio, Julia Domna rejoiced when word was brought to her of Plautianus' death.<sup>114</sup>

When Septimius Severus died six years later, Julia Domna was tasked with reconciling her sons taking on the identity of mother. At one point the brothers attempted to divide the empire in half, in order to rule separately, but Julia Domna begged them to think of her. She cried, "Earth and sea, my children, you have found a way to divide... But your mother, how would you parcel her? How am I, unhappy, wretched - how am I to be torn and ripped asunder for the pair of you?"<sup>115</sup> Julia Domna succeeded in convincing them to keep the empire together, but not to reunite as brothers. Caracalla and Geta became very suspicious of each other, knowing that each was plotting against the other.<sup>116</sup> Caracalla tricked his mother into asking Geta to meet with him, claiming he was going to offer peace. Instead, he had his guards waiting in ambush. They rushed forward when Geta entered the room and struck him down. Geta bled out in his mother's arms.<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> Cassius Dio 77.4.4.

<sup>115</sup> Herodian 4.3.8-9, trans. Edward C. Echols.

<sup>116</sup> Cassius Dio 78.2.1.

<sup>117</sup> Herodian 4.4.3.

Julia Domna was not allowed to mourn for her son, but instead was forced to act happy and support Caracalla's claim that Geta had died attempting to assassinate him.<sup>118</sup> This was completely at odds with typical mourning rituals of Roman women. Women were responsible for mourning and lamenting the dead in order to keep the memory of the deceased alive.<sup>119</sup> The female relatives prepared the body of the deceased for burial and walked in the funeral procession.<sup>120</sup> Women's mourning lasted for ten months or longer following a family member's death and was done to preserve her own honor, as well as to satisfy the spirit of the deceased.<sup>121</sup> Caracalla prevented Julia Domna from participating in the appropriate Roman funerary practices following Geta's death. She was not allowed to mourn for her son and from then on Julia Domna was forced to guard her emotions because Caracalla had her watched closely for any signs of dissent.<sup>122</sup>

Following Geta's death, Julia Domna was forced to perform actions to take on the identity of the dutiful, loving mother of Caracalla in order to protect her own life, rather than being allowed to become a grieving mother for the son she had lost. Caracalla's power over Julia Domna required her to take on an identity that was at odds with the one she would have normally taken as a mourner. While this new identity went against society's expectations for the appropriate actions one must perform following a death, Julia Domna was not punished for her abnormal behavior. This was due to the fact that Caracalla redefined what was considered acceptable behavior. Judith Butler theorizes that political agendas can redefine gender roles and other identities by altering society's perceptions of proper behavior in order to align with the

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<sup>118</sup> Cassius Dio 78.2.5.

<sup>119</sup> Darja Sterbenc Erker, "Gender and Roman Funeral Ritual," in *Memory and Mourning: Studies on Roman Death*, ed. Valerie M. Hope and Janet Huskinson (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2011), 40.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, 47-9.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>122</sup> Cassius Dio 78.2.6.

desired political outcome.<sup>123</sup> Caracalla wanted the Roman people to accept him as the lawful emperor and to not condemn him for killing his own brother. With his authority as emperor, Caracalla was able to institute new guidelines for suitable actions in response to Geta's death, which amounted to pretending that Geta had never existed. Julia Domna's performance as a loving, cheerful woman was essential to Caracalla's agenda.

Following Geta's death, Caracalla imposed a *damnatio memoriae*, damnation of memory, on his brother, in which all inscriptions and reliefs depicting him were erased. During this time, Caracalla's coinage of Julia Domna shifted away from her identity as the mother of the imperial family and instead focused on her as a divine figure, in order to aid the eradication of Geta's memory. Julia Domna was connected much more frequently with the virgin goddesses Diana and Vesta.<sup>124</sup> Julia Domna was associated with these goddesses most likely due to their virginal statuses and lack of children. Caracalla avoided connecting Julia Domna with goddesses who represented motherhood and family, a topic he wished to escape. Instead, by depicting Julia Domna with Diana and Vesta, he focused the public's attention on the divine aspects of the goddesses, and therefore the divine aspects of the empress, rather than the motherly ones. Since his father had succeeded in instituting a clear line of succession with the Antonine dynasty, Caracalla was able to take emphasis away from his bloodline and draw attention to the divine support for his rule. Additionally, after the death of Geta, coins abandoned the use of the title MAT. AVGG, *mater augusti* or mother of the emperors, the second 'G' representing that she had two sons.<sup>125</sup> The representation of Julia Domna as a mother following the death of one of her sons at the hands of the other may have been too uncomfortable and offered too much of a reminder of an event that Caracalla wanted the people to forget.

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<sup>123</sup> Butler, "Performative Acts," 273.

<sup>124</sup> Rowan, "The Public Image of the Severan Women," 254.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

Julia Domna succeeded in proving her loyalty to her son by accepting his rule and abiding by the *damnatio memoriae* and, as a result, during his reign she enjoyed more influence and power than she ever had under Septimius Severus.<sup>126</sup> Julia Domna was responsible for going through Caracalla's mail and deciding what was worthy of his attention and what was unimportant.<sup>127</sup> In addition to his correspondence, Julia Domna was in charge of receiving petitions and holding receptions for prominent men.<sup>128</sup> A stone inscription in the city of Ephesus contains Julia Domna's response to a petition claiming that she will work on behalf of the city's interests with her son.<sup>129</sup> The inscription is addressed from Julia Domna to the citizens of Ephesus. While Julia Domna mentions that she will pray together with her sweet son, Julia Domna, not the emperor, is indicated at the beginning of the inscription as the dispatcher of the message. The inscription does not contain an explanation as to why Julia Domna is responding to the petition, instead of Caracalla. The lack of justification suggests that no explanation was necessary due to the fact that Julia Domna responding to petitions had become common place. Indeed, Cassius Dio credits Julia Domna with giving her son good advice, even though he did not always choose to follow it, such as when she scolded Caracalla for wasting money.<sup>130</sup>

Julia Domna's involvement in politics contradicted the typical role of women. Roman women were forbidden from taking on political positions, whether through public office or through the courts.<sup>131</sup> Women were not allowed to bring requests on behalf of others to the courts because it was considered unfavorable to their modesty to become involved in other people's lawsuits by taking on the role of a man.<sup>132</sup> Julia Domna was able to get involved in

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<sup>126</sup> Lusnia, "Julia Domna's Coinage," 136.

<sup>127</sup> Cassius Dio 79.4.

<sup>128</sup> Cassius Dio 78.180.

<sup>129</sup> *L'Annee Epigraphique* 1966, no. 430 (1968).

<sup>130</sup> Cassius Dio 78.18, 78.10.4.

<sup>131</sup> Ulpian, *The Digest of Justinian* 50.17.2

<sup>132</sup> Ulpian, *The Digest of Justinian* 3.1.1.5

what was typically considered a male pursuit due to the intermingling of her various identities. Butler argues that a person's assorted identities interact with each other to form new ways that are acceptable for a person to act.<sup>133</sup> While the average woman was only able to act in a certain set of ways in regards to politics, with the added identity of being imperial, the empresses were given other accepted methods of behavior. These additional avenues for appropriate behavior allowed imperial women to become involved in politics, something which their gender did not allow for, but their social status did. This matrix of identities enabled imperial women to alter what was considered acceptable for a small group, the subset of imperial women, without causing large disruptions to society by attempting to alter what was deemed acceptable for the larger group, all Roman women.

Upon Caracalla's death, Cassius Dio claims that Julia Domna mourned, not for his death, but because she would be forced to return to the private sphere and give up her imperial power.<sup>134</sup> This statement fits with Cassius Dio's description of the relationship between Caracalla and Julia Domna, whom he claims had been forced to hide her true feelings of distaste towards her son ever since he killed his brother.<sup>135</sup> Her imperial status had given Julia Domna the opportunity to get involved in the world of philosophers, as well as the world of politics, which would have been nearly impossible to become a part of if she was a woman of a lesser social status. In regards to the majority of women, the Romans thought that it was, "not appropriate for a woman to be a philosopher, just as a woman should not be a cavalry officer or a politician..."<sup>136</sup> In fear of losing her imperial status and the benefits that came along with it, Julia Domna began plotting with the soldiers who had been fond of her son, in order to make

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<sup>133</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 67.

<sup>134</sup> Cassius Dio 79.23.1.

<sup>135</sup> Cassius Dio 78.2.6.

<sup>136</sup> H. Thesleff, ed., *The Pythagorean Texts of the Hellenistic Period* (Abo, 1965), 151-4.G.

herself the sole ruler of the empire.<sup>137</sup> Macrinus quickly squashed her plans for rebellion and, rather than live in exile, Julia Domna killed herself.

In conclusion, at the height of Plautianus' power during the reign of Septimius Severus, Julia Domna found herself and her identity subject to the control of outside forces. Society's response to Plautianus' claims of adultery made clear that Julia Domna's actions were not as important as society's perception and evaluation of her supposed action. Julia Domna was forced to face the punitive measures of being an accused adulterer. Following Plautianus' and then later Septimius' deaths, Julia Domna took firmer control of the public's perception of her identity, and emphasized her status as a member of the imperial family in order to engage in activities, such as involvement in politics, that would not normally be classified as acceptable roles for Roman women, but were acceptable for empresses.

While the sources do repeatedly cast Julia Domna in a positive light and Caracalla in a negative one, their reliability is not discounted by their bias. Multiple sources agree on the basic facts of Caracalla's reign and Julia Domna's involvement in it. Following Geta's murder, Julia Domna became a dutiful subject of Caracalla by abiding by his *damnatio memoriae*. In doing so, she retained her position of importance within the imperial family and was able to exert influence at court that a common Roman woman would not have been able. By the end of her life, Julia Domna had changed from a mother and an accused-adulterous outcast to philosopher and a political advisor who had to guard her emotions, as well as present the image of a virginal divinity, yet the whole time she managed to maintain her imperial identity. Julia Domna took on her later identities in life in order to maintain her imperial identity.

### **Julia Maesa**

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<sup>137</sup> Cassius Dio 79.23.3.

Julia Maesa lived in Rome with her sister, Julia Domna, and her family. She was accustomed to politics and court life.<sup>138</sup> As the sister of an empress, Julia Maesa held a high position at court and enjoyed the same benefits her sister had held from being a member of the imperial family. Her imperial-class status meant that Julia Maesa most likely received an education as well.<sup>139</sup> Julia Maesa had spent well over twenty years of her life enjoying the lifestyle of the imperial court when Caracalla died and the Severans were disposed. When Macrinus became emperor, Julia Maesa lost the influence and power she had once held when her brother-in-law ruled.

In addition to losing the advantages she had possessed as a member of the imperial family, when she was sent back to Syria she also lost one of her identities. Without the prestige of a connection to the imperial family, Julia Maesa would no longer be able to perform certain actions which had defined who she was. According to Butler, actions lead to identity. When a person is incapable of performing certain actions, which they had previously performed, they must act in different ways, therefore becoming a different person.<sup>140</sup> This loss of identity was too much for Julia Maesa, who quickly began plotting to regain power. She spread the story that her grandsons, Elagabalus and Alexander, were the true born sons of Caracalla, who had slept with her daughters Julia Soaemias and Julia Mamaea when they lived in the palace.<sup>141</sup> Although the story was originally started by Julia Maesa, Julia Soaemias and Julia Mamaea quickly confirmed the claim. The rumor spread throughout the army becoming common knowledge. When Julia Maesa offered to pay the soldiers if they would help restore her family as the legitimate rulers of the empire, many agreed and helped sneak Elagabalus into the camp in order

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<sup>138</sup> Cassius Dio 79.30; Herodian 5.3.2.

<sup>139</sup> Hemelrijk, *Matrona Docta*, 57.

<sup>140</sup> Butler, "Performative Acts," 271.

<sup>141</sup> Herodian 5.3.10.



to start a rebellion.<sup>142</sup> Julia Maesa, Julia Soaemias, and Julia Mamaea willingly risked their reputation as respectable women, in return for the opportunity to return to an imperial lifestyle and the benefits that came along with it.

Butler argues that through the performance of identity the achievement of certain appropriate actions can become more important than certain inappropriate actions which were performed in order to accomplish the preferred action.<sup>143</sup> In these instances, taboo actions become acceptable for a small subset of people. This is the case with Julia Soaemias' and Julia Mamaea's adultery. The continuation of the imperial line was determined by society to be more important than the violation of the women's required gender role as non-adulterers. In fact, later, Julia Soaemias and Julia Mamaea boasted about their adultery with Caracalla in order to increase the soldiers' love for Elagabalus and Alexander.<sup>144</sup> The desire for the continued existence of the imperial line altered social conditions to allow women to have adulterous relationships with the emperor as long as they resulted in children who could extend the longevity of the Severan dynasty. Julia Soaemias and Julia Mamaea were not punished for their actions as adulteresses because in this specific instance it was more important to have heirs to Caracalla. Julia Maesa and Julia Soaemias were able to rally the men of the army to fight for their sons to displace Macrinus and to make Elagabalus emperor.

At one point during the ensuing battles the men began to lose hope, but Julia Maesa and Julia Soaemias rallied the men's spirits by rushing among them encouraging them to stay and fight, according to Cassius Dio.<sup>145</sup> During the Severan dynasty the role of women in relation to the army was in flux. There were never any female soldiers in the army, and traditionally

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<sup>142</sup> Herodian 5.3.11-2.

<sup>143</sup> Butler, "Performative Acts," 276.

<sup>144</sup> Herodian 5.7.3.

<sup>145</sup> Cassius Dio 79.38.

soldiers were not allowed to marry. However, in order to gain favor with the military, Septimius Severus had legalized marriage for soldiers.<sup>146</sup> These new wives would most likely have lived in the settlements that often sprouted up around military forts.<sup>147</sup> Even with this change, the chance of women becoming involved in military affairs is extremely low. Cassius Dio's claim that Julia Maesa and Julia Soaemias were among the troops as a battle was beginning is most likely an exaggeration; however, it reinforces the perspective presented by the author that Julia Maesa and Julia Soaemias routinely acted outside traditional gender roles. Warfare was not a socially acceptable place for Roman women, and yet Julia Maesa and Julia Soaemias took on positions of military authority, encouraging the men to battle. The armies of Elagabalus succeeded in deposing Macrinus and returning the Severans to the throne. Herodian attributes the entirety of Elagabalus' rise to power to Julia Maesa and her eagerness to return to the life she had become accustomed to in Rome.<sup>148</sup>

Julia Maesa's power over Elagabalus was not complete though. For example, at one point along the journey to Rome, she tried to convince the youth to adopt Roman clothing because she knew that his appearance in foreign clothing would be considered barbaric and even offensive to some.<sup>149</sup> However, Elagabalus refused her advice. Over time, Elagabalus' eccentricities became worse. He introduced the Syrian god Elagabal, of whom Elagabalus was a priest, to the Roman pantheon, which normally would not have caused an uproar, except that Elagabalus declared that Elagabal was greater even than Jupiter.<sup>150</sup> His most scandalous insult to Roman culture was when he married and defiled a Vestal Virgin, who was sworn to the goddess

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<sup>146</sup> Herodian 3.8.5.

<sup>147</sup> Pat Southern, *The Roman Army: A Social & Institutional History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 78-9.

<sup>148</sup> Herodian 5.5.1

<sup>149</sup> Herodian 5.5.5.

<sup>150</sup> Cassius Dio 80.11.

Vesta and vowed to remain chaste and a virgin for her whole life.<sup>151</sup> Elagabalus' actions were a clear violation of a sacred Roman law.<sup>152</sup> Elagabalus made the situation even worse when he later divorced the woman and married for a third time, making a mockery of marriage.<sup>153</sup> Julia Maesa feared that the soldiers were beginning to resent Elagabalus for his foreignness and disrespect for Roman culture, as well as his sexual eccentricities, such as wearing make up.<sup>154</sup>

Elagabalus' mother did not appear to have as much of a problem with his eccentricities as his grandmother did. In fact, Julia Soaemias' coinage associates her very closely with Elagabalus' religious practices. Julia Soaemias' coinage connects her heavily with *Venus Caelestis*, the divine or heavenly Venus.<sup>155</sup> In a study done by Clare Rowan, ninety-seven percent of the coins of Julia Soaemias examined in the hoard evidence depict *Venus Caelestis* on the reverse.<sup>156</sup> Julia Soaemias is the only empress to link herself with this goddess in coinage, and overall, mention of the goddess is quite sparse, resulting in very little information being known about her.<sup>157</sup> *Venus Caelestis* could represent Ourania, a Carthaginian goddess who was married to the god Elagabal during Elagabalus' reign.<sup>158</sup> Otherwise, the goddess could be a Roman variation of an Aphrodite-type goddess from the Emesene pantheon.<sup>159</sup> In either instance, Julia Soaemias' coins closely connect her with the exotic religious activities of her son. Julia Soaemias maintained the identity of a Syrian religious devotee, even when Syrian culture was becoming unpopular with the Roman people due to Elagabalus' eccentricities. Unlike her mother, Julia Maesa, Julia Soaemias did not recognize the threat Elagabalus' religious activities

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<sup>151</sup> Herodian 5.6.2.

<sup>152</sup> Cassius Dio 80.9.3.

<sup>153</sup> Herodian 5.6.3.

<sup>154</sup> Herodian 5.7.1.

<sup>155</sup> Rowan, "The Public Image of the Severan Women," 261.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*, 262.

<sup>157</sup> Kosmetatou, "The Public Image of Julia Mamaea," 405.

<sup>158</sup> Rowan, "The Public Image of the Severan Women," 263.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*

posed to his rule. Instead, her connection with the emperor was reinforced with the emphasis of her religious identity. Julia Soemias would be no help to Julia Maesa in attempting to curb Elagabalus' behavior.

In order to ensure that she remained close to power, even if Elagabalus was killed, Julia Maesa convinced her grandson to adopt Alexander, his cousin, as his heir. Julia Maesa demonstrated her Syrian identity in persuading Elagabalus to name Alexander his successor by bending the truth to convince Elagabalus of something that he might not normally consider, showcasing the craftiness that was often associated with the Syrian people. Instead of fighting with him about his religious eccentricities, Julia Maesa claimed that Elagabalus was spending too little time on his divine duties because he was dividing his attention with the human affairs of the realm. She suggested that he entrust these duties to his cousin, Alexander, so that he could focus on more important religious matters.<sup>160</sup> Julia Maesa's Syrian heritage was an important part of her identity because, unlike her daughters who had spent most of their lives in Rome, Julia Maesa was born and grew up in Antioch. This gave an added dimension to her identity, allowing her to participate in actions that may not have been acceptable for Roman women, such as being cunning and becoming involved in political intrigues.

Later, Elagabalus became jealous of Alexander and attempted to get rid of him.<sup>161</sup> Julia Maesa and Julia Mamaea thwarted all of Elagabalus' plots and began bribing the army to favor Alexander.<sup>162</sup> For example, Herodian claims that only those chosen as trustworthy by Julia Mamaea were allowed to handle Alexander's food and drink, for she feared Elagabalus would attempt to poison Alexander.<sup>163</sup> As a result of the bribes and Elagabalus' unlikeable behavior,

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<sup>160</sup> Herodian 5.7.2.

<sup>161</sup> Cassius Dio 80.19.2.

<sup>162</sup> Herodian 5.8.3

<sup>163</sup> Herodian 5.8.2.

the soldiers favored Alexander heavily over Elagabalus. When Elagabalus' attempts to kill Alexander became too much, the soldiers had the emperor and his mother, Julia Soaemias, executed.<sup>164</sup>

After Alexander became emperor, Herodian claims that while Alexander bore the title, his mother and grandmother were responsible for the actual imperial affairs, and that they took a moderate and reasonable approach to the administration of the empire.<sup>165</sup> Herodian said this about the women's administration because after the turbulent reign of Elagabalus, Julia Maesa and Julia Mamaea attempted to pacify the empire by demonstrating that Alexander was a fair and amiable ruler. Eventually, Julia Maesa and Julia Mamaea chose an advisory council for Alexander from among the Senate to help him rule.<sup>166</sup> This helped restore peace to the Roman people, the army, and the senators by demonstrating that Alexander did not intend to rule overconfidently like his cousin, but would take others' opinions into consideration when making decisions.<sup>167</sup>

Julia Maesa acquired power abnormal for a Roman woman by taking on the identity of being the matriarch of the imperial line, modeling the ways in which her sister, Julia Domna, obtained influence. Power in the Severan dynasty was passed down to the males through the female line due to the blood link between Julia Domna and Julia Maesa, which gave the women of the family a certain amount of power over the men. Additionally, even though Elagabalus married, power remained with the female relatives instead of being taken up by the wives, due to a lack of heirs.<sup>168</sup> After losing power and her imperial identity when Macrinus displaced the Severan line, Julia Maesa restored the Severan line by claiming that her grandsons were the sons

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<sup>164</sup> Cassius Dio 80.20.

<sup>165</sup> Herodian 6.1.1.

<sup>166</sup> Herodian 6.1.2.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid.

<sup>168</sup> Rowan, "The Public Image of the Severan Women," 248.

of Caracalla. While in doing so her daughters admitted to committing adultery, an act commonly violating accepted gender performance, Julia Mamaea and Julia Soemias were not punished for their actions because fulfilling the favored action of continuing the imperial line was determined by society to cancel out the women's undesirable behavior. Julia Maesa, however, was unable to control the grandson she had placed in power, and so she plotted to position her other, more pliable, grandson on the throne. All of Julia Maesa's actions were driven by the motivation to maintain power, which as a woman she could only achieve by being a member of the imperial family.

### **Julia Mamaea**

Julia Mamaea worked hard to ensure that her son became emperor and remained in power in order to retain her imperial identity. Julia Mamaea had Alexander educated by the Greek and Roman standards, in order to make him more pleasing to the Roman people.<sup>169</sup> Additionally, Julia Mamaea gave money to the praetorians to guarantee their favor towards Alexander.<sup>170</sup> Julia Mamaea acted within her role as a mother, placing the interests and protection of her son before her own desire to protect her image, which was disrupted when she took on a more assertive role. Julia Mamaea became associated with *Juno Conservatrix*, Juno the Preserver, in her coinage following the defeat of Elagabalus.<sup>171</sup> The association with *Juno Conservatrix* symbolized the empire's liberation from the rule of Elagabalus and the return to traditional religious practices.<sup>172</sup>

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<sup>169</sup> Herodian 5.7.5.

<sup>170</sup> Herodian 5.8.3.

<sup>171</sup> Rowan, "The Public Image of the Severan Women," 268.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*, 269.

Julia Mamaea controlled Alexander's daily life, as well as his visitors. She feared that as a young man in a position of power, he might devolve into a life of debauchery.<sup>173</sup> So, she kept him away from flatterers and persuaded him to spend most of his time in the courts. Julia Mamaea was attempting to ensure that her son followed the appropriate societal actions of a Roman man, so that he was not punished like his cousin Elagabalus, who was stripped of his power and executed for acting in foreign and eccentric ways, which would also result in Julia Mamaea's fall from the imperial family. Julia Mamaea played a large role in running Alexander's life, which was not atypical of widows during the Roman Empire. Usually, a widow would request a guardian to oversee the inheritance of her child, but would continue to raise and care for the child herself.<sup>174</sup> Additionally, the widow was responsible for overseeing the guardian. If she felt that the guardian was untrustworthy or was acting in a fraudulent manner, then it was her responsibility to bring her concerns to the court, or else she could be punished for not appropriately protecting her child's interests.<sup>175</sup> Julia Mamaea retained control over her prepubescent son's life as most widows would have.

According to Herodian, Julia Mamaea arranged for Alexander to be married to a woman of the aristocracy in 225 CE; however, Julia Mamaea quickly became jealous of the girl's influence over her son and had her banished, even though Alexander was fond of her.<sup>176</sup> Julia Mamaea was able to exert a great deal of authority over her son due to both his age (he was only thirteen years old) and his lack of a father to temper her influence. Boys typically reached adolescence around fourteen years old and were not considered adults until a few years after

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<sup>173</sup> Herodian 6.1.5-6.

<sup>174</sup> Grubbs, *Women and the Law in the Roman Empire*, 236.

<sup>175</sup> Ulpian, *The Digest of Justinian* 26.10.1.6, 38.17.2.34, 38.17.2.42

<sup>176</sup> Herodian 6.1.9.

that.<sup>177</sup> Additionally, Herodian asserts that Alexander was especially susceptible to his mother due to his “excessive amiability and abnormal filial devotion.”<sup>178</sup> By keeping other people from getting close to Alexander and by maintaining her position as sole guardian, Julia Mamaea ensured she would be able to continue to exert influence over her son. Doing so meant that she could remain in a place of favor at court and retain her imperial identity.

Herodian criticizes Julia Mamaea for her love of gold. He claims that she was always in a relentless pursuit of money and would pretend to be gathering money for Alexander to pay the troops, but was really hoarding it all for herself.<sup>179</sup> While this presentation of Julia Mamaea may seem contradictory to Herodian’s previous claims that she bribed the troops to support her son, it follows with the development of his bias. Herodian writes positively about Julia Maesa and Julia Mamaea when he discusses their overthrow of Elagabalus; however, once Alexander becomes emperor, and Julia Mamaea continues to exert control over him, Herodian seems to lose the favor he once held for her and begins to present her in a negative light.

Julia Mamaea did whatever was necessary to hold onto her imperial identity. She turned against her own sister and nephew when they risked the Severan imperial status by engaging in eccentric behaviors which were negatively affecting public opinion. During Alexander’s reign, Julia Mamaea ensured that he was well-liked and a good Roman citizen, making it clear that he was not reminiscent of his cousin, Elagabalus. While Julia Mamaea was very controlling during Alexander’s reign, her actions cannot be attributed to someone who was attempting to seize power from her son, rather everything she did resembles a mother who was shaping her son to become a good emperor who could maintain his power. She helped him create an advisory council from the Senate, ensured he had a good, formal Roman education, and steered him away

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<sup>177</sup> Grubbs, *Women and the Law in the Roman Empire*, 236.

<sup>178</sup> Herodian 6.1.10.

<sup>179</sup> Herodian 6.1.8.



from debauchery. While she is criticized for being overly involved and domineering during Alexander's reign, Julia Mamaea did what she felt was necessary to secure Alexander's throne and her place as a member of the imperial family. As the last Severan woman remaining, Julia Mamaea had witnessed all the Severan downfalls which had come before and knew exactly how easy it was for an emperor to be dethroned.

## **Conclusion**

The Severan women boasted a multitude of identities, some common for a woman, such as wife, mother, or sister, others not as much, such as philosopher, political advisor, or adulteress. However, the most influential identity the Severan women had was empress or mother of an emperor. An imperial identity allowed these women to act in ways completely at odds with their gender roles and to suffer often, though not always, little to no consequences. The imperial status brought benefits to their other identities too, such as being imperial patrons with the best philosophers and entertainers jostling for their attentions. An imperial identity allowed the Severan women freedom from excessive societal restraints, though they still had to follow some rules. This identity was able to exert such a high level of control over the system of identities due to the structure of Roman society.

According to Butler, society is what determines appropriate and inappropriate behaviors for various identities.<sup>180</sup> In the Roman Empire, the emperor led Roman society through his control over the dominion. As long as he had a firm command over the empire, with a few exceptions, he could influence the majority of the Roman people to accept whatever identity roles he established. The Severan women must have recognized that by remaining close to the

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<sup>180</sup> Butler, "Performative Acts," 276.

emperor they had the best chance of maintaining their own agency, as well as having influence over the categorization of various identity roles. After having the identity of adulteress imposed on her by Plautianus, Julia Domna did whatever she had to in order to maintain a relationship with the emperor and control her own agency. Even though she was forced to watch one of her sons die in her arms at the hands of the other, Julia Domna contained her emotions and abided by Caracalla's *damnatio memoriae* of Geta. Her obedience was rewarded because she was able to maintain her imperial status and the benefits that came along with it. The Severan women were willing to do whatever was required in order to hold onto their position in the imperial family. Julia Soemias and Julia Mamaea both admitted to adultery, an offense potentially punishable by exile. Julia Maesa betrayed her own daughter and Julia Mamaea her sister, rather than lose the empire. The Severan women knew the benefits that came along with being a member of the imperial family and were unwilling to lose that part of their identity matrix.

The women of the Severan dynasty were not actively challenging feminine gender roles, but rather their imperial identity meant that typical gender constructs did not apply as rigidly to them. This analysis of the identities of Severan women proves that the actions and daily lives of imperial women cannot be used to study the lives of common Roman women. The imperial status of the Severan women meant that they were able to enjoy benefits, such as freedom from excessive societal constraints, which lower-class Roman women would not have been likely to experience.

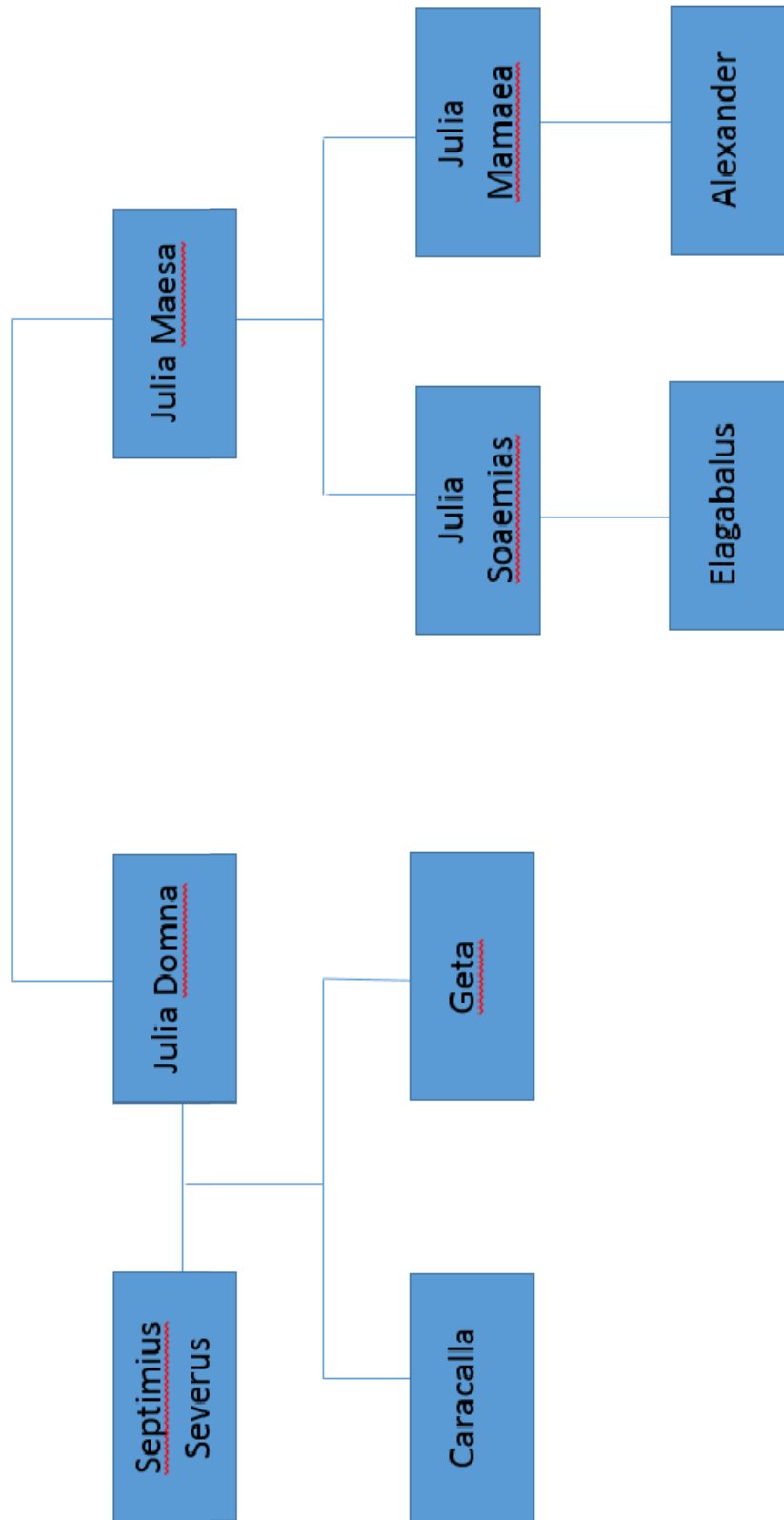
### **Future Research**

While this paper analyzed the ways in which imperial women obeyed and defied typical gender roles for Roman women, as well as why they were able to do so, it would be interesting to see a comparison between the imperial women and the Vestal Virgins, who also did not follow

the traditional gender roles of Roman women, though for different reasons and in different ways. While there are few primary sources regarding Roman women, a direct comparison between these two would even further emphasize the importance of not categorically applying the sources that do exist to all women.

Additionally, while I explored the relationships of the Severan women with various goddesses, due to a lack of primary sources, I did not investigate the role the empresses played in the imperial cult. This would be a further avenue to examine for potential identities of the imperial Severan women.

Appendix  
1.



Severan  
Family  
Tree  
of  
Important  
Figures

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