Constructing the Past

Volume 12 | Issue 1 Article 7

2011

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Recommended Citation
Hosack, Kristen A. (2011) "Can One Believe the Ancient Sources That Describe Messalina?," *Constructing the Past*: Vol. 12: Iss. 1, Article 7.
Available at: http://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/constructing/vol12/iss1/7

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Abstract
This paper discusses the various ancient writings that discussed the empress Messalina. It ultimately concludes that the ancient authors wrote with profound biases, which discredits the accuracy of their negative accounts of her.

This article is available in Constructing the Past: http://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/constructing/vol12/iss1/7

Can One Believe the Ancient Sources That Describe Messalina?

Kristen Hosack

If readers were to believe everything the ancient sources wrote about the Empress Valeria Messalina, they might conclude that she was a conniving, sex-crazed megalomaniac who worked as a prostitute in her spare time. The historian Publius Cornelius Tacitus, the satirist Decimus Junius Juvenali (Juvenal), and the biographer Gaius Suetonius Tranquillius were Roman citizens who wrote slightly before and during the middle second century CE and are just some of the ancient authors who describe Messalina in unflattering ways. However, to what degree are these sources accurate representations of Messalina? It may be difficult to gain a coherent sense of Messalina's true character and behavior from the ancient sources, but it is possible to identify who she most likely was not and what she probably did not do. After all, each depiction of Messalina reflects certain personal biases and motives, such as Tacitus's dislike of Messalina's husband or Suetonius's tendency to gossip. In addition, the natures of history, satire, and biography can affect accuracy, as can the sources that each author used. For example, ancient historical writing's primary purpose was to provide lessons in morality, while biography tended to focus on anecdotal evidence, and satirical works employed exaggeration in order to be effective. Therefore, as a result of personal and literary biases, Tacitus, Suetonius, and Juvenal most likely provide exaggerated, fabricated, or intentionally one-sided portrayals of Messalina, which subsequently reduce the accuracy of their depictions.

One of the primary sources that discusses Messalina in the most depth is *The Annals*, by Tacitus. However, Tacitus's account of Messalina is questionable in several ways. First, Tacitus seems to have distinct motives for writing about Messalina that call into question the accuracy of his depiction. As historian Ronald H. Martin notes, Tacitus wrote within a senatorial tradition "that was hostile to Claudius from the outset" because Claudius reduced the power of the Senate.[1] Therefore, Tacitus was biased against Claudius for political reasons and as D. W. T. C. Vessey asserts, through "his account of the reign of Claudius runs the idea that the *princeps* himself was a man unworthy of his office."[2] Tacitus most likely uses Messalina to accomplish this goal, for he depicts her as constantly making her husband appear dim-witted and hesitant. By negatively characterizing Claudius through Messalina, Tacitus probably appealed to his elite audience, which certainly understood the power struggle between senators and emperors.[3] However, by using Messalina in this way, Tacitus most likely exaggerates certain aspects of her character in order to emphasize Claudius's own shortcomings.

Tacitus asserts that Messalina betrayed her husband and indulged her own passions by obsessively lavishing expensive gifts on her lover. Tacitus writes that Messalina gave him so many kinds of wealth and honors that it seemed like "the transference of fortune were already complete," for "the slaves, freedmen, and the trappings of the princeps were to be seen at the adulterer's house."[4] As a result, Messalina appears extravagant and obsessive. Tacitus then

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[1] Ronald H. Martin, *Tacitus* (London: Batsford Academic and Educational Ltd., 1981), 144. Martin clarifies the reason for such hostility by explaining how the Praetorian Guard secured Claudius's emperorship at the expense of the Senate. In addition, Mary Boatwright explains how Claudius tended to rely on freedmen instead of the senators or the equites, which further diminished the senators' power. Mary T. Boatwright, *The Romans: From village to empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 330.

[2] D.W.T.C. Vessey, "Thoughts on Tacitus' Portrayal of Claudius," *The American Journal of Philology* 92.3 (July 1971), 385.

[3] Mario Erasmo, *Roman tragedy: theatre to theatricality* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004), 119.

[4] Publius Cornelius Tacitus, *The Annals*, 11.12.3.

claims that Claudius "was ignorant of his own marriage" and was oblivious to the entire affair.[5] It is likely that Tacitus embellishes the extent of Messalina's gift-giving in order to more forcefully emphasize Claudius's oblivion and ignorance. After all, this particular situation probably did not happen in the way Tacitus describes it, for it seems unlikely that Claudius would have not noticed his entire fortune being transferred to another man. Therefore, Tacitus wanted to emphasize just how clueless Claudius was, which maintains the senatorial tradition of hostility. As a result, it is probable that he exaggerates Messalina's licentiousness and her obsessive character in order to achieve this goal, which makes his description of her less reliable.

However, Tacitus's personal bias is not the only factor that affects his account, for the nature of the historical genre does as well. As J. S. Reid points out, one of the primary functions of history during antiquity was to "aid in the formation of individual moral character."[6] In fact, according to Reid, this function "underlies all the historical writing of Tacitus."[7] In order to provide a moral commentary, Tacitus attributes the potentially inaccurate motive of incontrollable lust to Messalina's adultery. To the ancient Romans, morality was closely related to the *mos maiorum*, the traditional customs and values of the ancestors; one of these customs was to avoid overindulging in lust and bodily excesses.[8] Because of its political and social implications, Romans thought that uncontrollable lust in general was immoral, but its implications for women were especially troubling. After all, the results of such overindulgence in lust could lead to adultery, the mixing of social classes, and noncompliance with the law, all of which had negative consequences for society.[9] Tacitus likely applies the characteristic of excessive lust to Messalina in order to explicitly draw the connection between uncontrollable lust and one of its negative consequences, adultery. As a result, Tacitus's characterization of her may not be entirely accurate.

Tacitus claims that even though she was already married to Claudius, Messalina decided to marry her lover, Silius, because she had "become sated with the simplicity of her adultery" and therefore needed something more to satisfy her uncontrollable lust.[10] As the result of this lust, she committed adultery with Silius, which disrupted the bonds of her family, caused her to disobey her husband, and made it difficult to determine the paternity of any of her future potential children, all of which could contribute to instability in traditional society. It is possible that Messalina married another man while she was still married to Claudius and thus committed adultery.[11] However, readers should be cautious to accept that she did so simply as the result of excessive lust. In fact, the historian Barbara Levick argues that in contrast to how Tacitus presents her, Messalina was in fact not "an adolescent nymphomaniac" and instead, used sex as a means of compromising and controlling politicians.[12] Therefore, if Messalina's marriage actually existed, it may have been for political reasons instead of mere lust. Indeed, Tacitus might inaccurately characterize Messalina as excessively lustful just so that he could provide an

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[5] Ibid., 11.13.1.

[6] J.S. Reid, "Tacitus as a Historian," *The Journal of Roman Studies* 11 (1921), 192.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Laura McClure, *Sexuality and gender in the classical world* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), 172.

[9] Rebecca Langlands, *Sexual morality in ancient Rome* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 134.

[10] Tacitus, *The Annals*, 11.26.1.

[11] Mary T. Boatwright asserts that Messalina conducted a "mock marriage" with Silius instead of a legal one. Boatwright, *The Romans*, 330.

[12] Barbara Levick, *Claudius* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 56.

example of a problem to which this lust could lead and therefore give a moral lesson to his readers. As such, his portrayal of Messalina may not be completely accurate.

It is also necessary to consider Tacitus's sources about Messalina in order to evaluate how he depicts her. For example, with respect to Messalina's marriage to Silius, Tacitus writes, "I am transmitting what was heard and written by my elders."[13] Because he does not specifically mention any particular "elders," it is difficult to determine from where Tacitus received his information, which makes it less credible, as does the fact that he relies on what he "heard," which was most likely gossip and oral traditions. This does not necessarily mean that the marriage did not take place, but it certainly casts doubt upon how it happened or at least the veracity of the lustful motive that Tacitus uses to explain its occurrence. Also, in Book IV, Tacitus reveals that he had consulted the memoirs of Agrippina the Younger, who "recalled for posterity her own life and the fates of her family."[14] If Agrippina wrote about Messalina in her memoirs, it probably would have been in a negative light, since Agrippina replaced Messalina as Claudius's wife, and their sons were in competition to be Claudius's heir.[15] Therefore, if Tacitus relied on Agrippina's memoirs as a source of information, it might have colored his own interpretation of Messalina. Thus, Tacitus's sources contribute to his potential inaccuracy and render his depiction less reliable.

Another primary source that discusses Messalina is Suetonius's *Life of Claudius.* Like Tacitus, Suetonius's depiction of the empress is not completely accurate. First, Suetonius discusses women within the context of the men in their lives, and as such, he discusses Messalina within the context of her husband Claudius. However, as historian Molly Pryzwansky asserts, Suetonius seems to categorize the twelve emperors about whom he writes as either "good" or "bad" and then weighs "the two categories against each other" so that the "'good' emperors have more *virtutes* than *vitia*, and vice-versa for the 'bad' *principes*."[16] As Przyzwanksy acknowledges, it is true that Suetonius mentions some positive aspects of Claudius's reign; however as a whole, Suetonius depicts him more often in a negative light, most likely in order to categorize him as "bad" and to show that his flaws outweigh his positive attributes. Because Claudius was not a completely "bad" emperor like Nero or Caligula, it seems likely that Suetonius needed to exaggerate and emphasize Claudius's negative attributes in order to fit him into this "bad" category, and he uses Messalina to accomplish this goal.

Suetonius writes that after Messalina's supposed marriage to Silius, Claudius "made a shameful and cowardly flight to the camp," all the while asking "whether his throne was secure."[17] Suetonius therefore depicts Claudius as weak and unsure of himself. Suetonius also asserts that although Claudius ordered the death of a man named Appius, it was only after "Messalina and Narcissus had put their heads together to destroy him," which suggests that it was easy for Messalina to manipulate her husband.[18] However, Suetonius may have falsely characterized Messalina as dominating and adulterous in order to present Claudius as cowardly, subservient to his wife, and easily influenced by others. He also most likely exaggerated Messalina's character and actions in order to highlight Claudius's negative attributes. In addition, given Suetonius's tendency to categorize, it seems likely that he would only mention those

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[13] Tacitus, *The Annals,* 11.27.1.

[14] Tacitus, *The Annals,* 4.53.2.

[15] Boatwright, *The Romans,* 330.

[16] Molly Pryzwansky, "Feminine Imperial Ideals in the *Caesars* of Suetonius," Ph.D. dissertation, Duke University, 2008, 10.

[17] Gaius Suetonius Tranquillius, *The Life of Claudius, 36.95-6.*

[18] Ibid., 37.2

examples of Messalina's behavior that make Claudius look weak and cowardly, which further distorts her character. As a result, his description of Messalina is not necessarily true.

The nature of Suetonius's genre and his tendencies as a writer also contribute to his lack of credibility with respect to his depiction of Messalina. According to Ronald Mellor, ancient biography was not intended to serve as history, for it was more anecdotal and did not demand strenuous research and analysis like history did.[19] Therefore, as Mellor notes, Suetonius was prone to including trivial gossip that "even he did not believe" as historical fact. [20] As such, Suetonius might have simply repeated facts about Messalina's life that while entertaining and scandalous, may not have been true. It seems likely that his audience would have encouraged his use of gossip, since his readers were members of the senatorial and equestrian class who probably would have enjoyed and understood gossip about other elites, even ones who lived in the past.[21] In addition, Gwyn Morgan notes that Suetonius had a tendency to generalize from gossip.[22] For example, Suetonius writes that besides marrying Silius, Messalina also committed many other shameful and wicked deeds.[23] However, he might have assumed that because she committed this one "wicked" deed, she must have committed all kinds of other horrible acts as well. Therefore, his allusion to her other negative behaviors may be the result of unreasonable generalization, which makes it hard to believe that they actually took place.

Suetonius's sources may also contribute to his unreliability with respect to Messalina. Suetonius had access to the imperial archives and the imperial court through his relationship with the emperor Hadrian. Therefore, he had direct access to the letters and writings of former emperors and eye-witness accounts of events.[24] However, Hadrian dismissed him from the court before he had started work on *The Life of Claudius*, and he therefore lost access to these sources. As a result, the biography of Claudius and the other works that he wrote after this time were considerably shorter and not as well-documented.[25] Thus, Suetonius probably only had access to the traditional histories and gossip, which as previously shown, were not necessarily reliable. As such, the nature of Suetonius's sources serves as additional proof that his representation of Messalina may not be entirely truthful.

Juvenal is a third ancient author who describes Messalina, for he writes about her in *Satire VI*. Even though not much is known about his personal life or biases, it is possible to critique his accuracy based on the genre in which he wrote, satire. The very nature of satire reduces Juvenal's credibility, for as Thomas A. J. McGinn notes, ancient satire is partially characterized by its goal of entertainment."[26] For example, Juvenal writes that Messalina would sneak out, "her black hair hidden under an ash-blonde wig," and then work "naked, with gilded nipples," demanding her payment in cash from her multiple clients.[27] Such vivid imagery makes the passage exciting to read, but it is likely embellished or even invented in order to entertain the

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[19] Ronald Mellor, *The Roman historians* (London: Routledge, 1999), 132, 149.

[20] Ibid. 154-5.

[21] Erasmo, *Roman tragedy*, 119.

[22] Gwyn Morgan, *69 A.D.: the year of four emperors* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 279.

[23] Suetonius, *The Life*, 26.2.

[24] Pat Southern, *The Roman Army: A Social and Institutional History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 25.

[25] Ibid.

[26] Thomas A. McGinn, *Prostitution, sexuality, and the law in ancient Rome* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 186.

[27] Decimus Junius Juvenali (Juvenal), *Satire VI*, 6.120, 6.123-4, 6.125.

reader, which is one of the purposes of ancient satire. As a result, descriptions such as these might not be entirely reliable.

In addition to its entertainment value, another objective of ancient satire was to criticize society by using hyperbole and "hugely exaggerated and emphasized features," as Paul Allen Miller asserts.[28] From a literary standpoint, exaggeration is effective because humorous and outrageous situations can prevent readers from being overly defensive and unreceptive to an underlying message. Because Juvenal is a satirical writer, he too exaggerates his examples in order to criticize certain elements of society; as such, Juvenal's description of Messalina should be understood within this context. Juvenal may exaggerate the story of Messalina in order to criticize or make a commentary on a number of aspects, including discouraging the institution of marriage, as Sandra Joshel asserts, or criticizing the degeneration of society, as J.S. Reid suggests.[29] In order to make his commentaries satirical and therefore more effective, Juvenal likely embellishes the lustful character of Messalina and the magnitude and frequency of the actions that she pursues as a result of this lust.

For example, Juvenal claims that a man should not get married because it is inevitable that his wife will cheat on him, and he cites Messalina as proof. Messalina not only cheats on her husband, but does so as a low-class prostitute, presumably night after night.[30] Given his motive for writing, it seems likely that Juvenal exaggerates Messalina's actions. In doing so, he creates an outrageous, unlikely, and thus effective situation that conveys an underlying message, which would have been Juvenal's goal as a satirist. In addition, as William J. Dominik asserts, Juvenal's elite audience would have perfectly understood these satirical techniques.[31] Therefore, Juvenal probably did not have to limit his exaggeration for fear of his readers' misinterpretation or misunderstanding. Accordingly, the description of Messalina in *Satire VI* is not likely a reliable source of information about her.

Even without the context of Juvenal's motives and the inherent nature of satire, Juvenal's exaggeration is evident. It is highly unlikely that Messalina would have been able to disguise herself beyond recognition solely with a cloak, sneak out frequently without waking Claudius, work all night as a prostitute, and then sneak back in without Claudius noticing, even though upon her return, she carried "home to her Imperial couch the stink of the whorehouse."[32] What is more, if Juvenal's purpose was to criticize the institution of marriage, or any other aspect of society, he would only have included negative examples of Messalina. By purposefully selecting which characteristics to include in his writing, Juvenal may distort her true nature and behavior. Therefore, given these criticisms, Juvenal's characterization of Messalina is most likely not an accurate representation of her actual actions and character. Instead, it is the product of extreme exaggeration, which reduces its credibility.

Juvenal's sources for his information about Messalina are also revealing. First, according to Gilbert Highet, a historian who analyzed Juvenal's sources, Juvenal primarily read and studied history "in order to find illustrations which would be dramatic, or laughable, or odd."[33] This supports the idea that Juvenal only included the anecdotes that would illustrate his points. Highet

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[28] Paul Allen Miller, *Latin verse satire: an anthology and critical reader* (London: Routledge, 2005), 377.

[29] Sandra R. Joshel, "Female Desire and the Discourse of Empire: Tacitus's Messalina," *Signs,* 21. 1 (Autumn, 1995); J.S. Reid, "Tacitus," 191.

[30] Juvenal, *Satire VI*, 6.115-132.

[31] William Dominik, *Roman eloquence: rhetoric in society and literature* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 112.

[32] Juvenal, *Satire VI*, 6.118-19, 6.116, 6.131-32

[33] Gilbert Highet, "Juvenal's Bookcase," *The American Journal of Philology,* 72.4 (1951), 371.

also thinks it is reasonable that Juvenal would have used Tacitus as a source, especially for information about historical figures such as Messalina.[34] Because Tacitus had his own biases and problems of inaccuracy, he was most likely not a reliable source of information. In addition, Tacitus does not mention that Messalina worked as a prostitute. If Juvenal used Tacitus as a primary source, yet characterizes her as a prostitute, then it seems likely that he either fabricated the story or at least exaggerated another version of it.

Therefore, through careful study of the works of Tacitus, Suetonius, and Juvenal, it is possible to conclude that these ancient authors do not accurately depict Messalina. After all, their personal prejudices and motives affect their writing and most likely cause them to modify or exaggerate Messalina's character and actions. The genres in which these authors wrote, the audiences for whom they wrote, and their sources also influence their works, and are therefore another source of potential inaccuracy. As a result, the descriptions of Messalina in the works of Tacitus, Suetonius, and Juvenal are exaggerated, invented, or intentionally misleading, which means that they are not entirely accurate representations.

[34] Highet, *Juvenal's*, 373.