

BOOK REVIEW

Imperial Women. Power, Gender, Context. By Mary T. Boatwright. Oxford, UK and New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2021. Pp 382. Hardback, \$99.00. ISBN: 9780190455897.

The Romans, unlike the Byzantines or the Chinese, had only emperors, never empresses. Imperial women are, therefore, the wives, mothers, sisters, daughters and female relatives of the emperor. These women could not rule and had no legitimate power of their own, especially any power institutionalized in traditional military and political commands; thus, they could never have wielded tribunician power or *maius imperium*. Yet, in spite of these restrictions, they were present, albeit marginally, in Rome's highest circles, and they became involved in the empire's political, military, social and religious business and were often key to the new and shifting power dynamics of the Principate.

Mary T. Boatwright's study is not a series of biographies of imperial women, but rather a chronological study of the *mores*, laws and evolving structures of the most significant functions and venues of Rome's imperial women. The investigation of these women clarifies the image and functioning of Rome's Principate as well as its gender roles. In Chapter 1, the author begins by putting the spotlight on Livia, wife of the first *Princeps*, and probes the powers imperial women were granted or were thought to have had. In Chapter 2, the author turns to Roman law and its impact on imperial women. Chapter 3 inspects the growing importance of the imperial family, the so-called *domus Augusta* as an institution within the wider context of the Roman family. Chapter 4 explores imperial women's involvement in the religious activities of the Principate. In Chapter 5, Boatwright traces the imprint imperial women made on the capital city of Rome through their movements and presence as well as by monuments associated with them. A brief Chapter 6 looks at a related type of public modeling, imperial women's representation through sculpture and relief. Finally, Chapter 7 explores the connections of imperial women to Rome's military forces and the provinces.

The Principate, as Augustus designed it, was an unofficial dynastic system that was unstable and often self-contradictory. The contradiction lay in the fact that,

although Augustus intended a hereditary monarchy, there was no legal way to pass the Principate on to an heir. How this sleight of hand was accomplished evolved under each emperor. This meant that no emperor could be isolated from the imperial house and imperial women. Someone had to produce the successors. The importance of women for the imperial image and for legitimacy of the dynasty is reflected in many ways and women, of course, understood their key role in the perpetuation of the Principate. When Livia said she “made Tiberius emperor” she was not half wrong. Women gave birth to all the emperors, and the influence that an imperial mother could have is incalculable. Nero, for one, felt he had to eliminate it by force.

As women got more visible, men got nervous. As much as the patriarchal Romans would have liked to have kept women in their traditional roles, women’s activities seem to leak out of the boundaries. No barrier ever keeps out a determined violator. The problem with focusing on women’s legal rights and traditional social positions is that women often did not follow the rules. Many did, but they were not the ones who made history. First of all, power is not only something you are given; it is something you take. It does not rely on titles. Although a woman could not be emperor, she could indeed be an *éminence grise*. They may not have had official power, but they had influence. It is not surprising, therefore, that this book’s substantive chapters begin and end with activities that Romans considered most inappropriate for women – politics and the military – areas in which imperial women’s visibility was most shocking.

Although women were not supposed to act independently or flaunt their resources and proximity to power in any way, this never stopped women with ambition. Their influence was due to their inclusion in the imperial court. They were present at decision-making events and they asserted their influence behind the scenes. It was Livia who helped get Otho his senatorial status. It was Messalina who had Gaius Silius designated as consul. She also involved herself in the trials held *intra cubiculum principis*. Cenis and Lysistrate sold access to the emperor. Agrippina interfered with the praetorian prefects, weighed in on senatorial decisions, attempted to sit in on the Senate and took on prominent positions. Nor was influence restricted to just the women related to the imperial house. It was Piso’s wife Plancina who was implicated in her husband’s lobbying of Roman troops, insubordination toward Germanicus and Tiberius and other un-Roman activities. After being accused on poisoning Germanicus, Piso was executed and Plancina committed suicide.

Later emperors purposely tried to keep women in their place and avoid the mistakes of the Julio-Claudians. Yet the influence continued. Hadrian may have become emperor, but it was Trajan's wife Plotina who supposedly engineered the succession. By the Severan dynasty, Julia Mamaea, the over-bearing mother of Alexander Severus, was accused of engineering Ulpian's promotion to praetorian prefect and then plotting against him with two other prefects. The same woman finagled with the Praetorian Guard to assassinate Elagabalus and make Alexander Severus emperor.

The sources show men complaining about all these things. They railed against women's visibility, their successes and their transgressions. Women with influence were targeted as peddling influence and imperial favors. The sources often portray the more powerful women as sexual transgressors. Women could be accused, slandered and scapegoated even when they were innocent. No matter how virtuously they might fill their traditional roles, they could easily be condemned.

Book reviewing forces one to quibble, but one of the nagging questions about women's transgressions is whether the charges included treason. Were adultery charges against imperial women possibly a cover for treasonous activity? Several ancient sources suggest they were. Boatwright speaks of adultery being tantamount to treason, but could it be that it is the other way around? Did emperors prefer to use adultery as a charge rather than publicly admit that their own family members were trying to kill them? There is a considerable body of work that accepts that *maiestas* was sometimes involved behind the scenes. Much of the literature is more recent than those she cites. There is no discussion of the validity of the judgements of those who argue for treason. Rome's monarchy, after all, had the highest rate of assassination of any empire ever. Imperial women's access to the emperors alone would make them useful tools to a would-be assassin. It would be no surprise if women were involved.

The author is well aware that the literary accounts are usually inadequate and often tendentious and that modern conjectures can slip into conspiracy theory. There is a difference, however, between a real conspiracy and conspiracy theory as a literary trope. The work of Victoria Pagán would have been useful here.

¹ Boatwright is under no obligation to agree with the interpretations of these authors, but enough evidence has been put forward by reputable scholars to at least suggest the possibility that women's role in removing emperors might be worth considering. The author is also free to dismiss such ideas showing where the

arguments are in error, but when there is no reference to their work whatsoever, readers are given an incomplete picture of the situation.

This *lacuna* aside, Boatwright has certainly done her due diligence with evidence from legal codes, coins, inscriptions and other sources less familiar to the general reader. She has more than adequately proven how the many elements of imperial women's lives remained constant over the two and a half centuries that this book surveys. Of course, particular roles and images fluctuated. From Octavia through Julia Mamaea, imperial women were supposed to exemplify womanly virtues, especially deference, obedience and family support. Many did; many did not. Most importantly, Boatwright reminds us that these were real individuals in heady circumstances and under intense scrutiny and pressure. Hemmed in by social custom, stereotyped as madonnas or whores, blocked from employment, maligned by gossip, damned in memory and blamed for Rome's failings, still they persisted. How they survived and flourished within the strictures of their day is a worthwhile story that is finally brought to light in this enlightening and thorough study.

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¹Examples: *Conspiracy Narratives in Roman History*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004; *Conspiracy Theory in Latin Literature*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 2012; "Toward a Model of Conspiracy Theory for Ancient Rome," *New German Critique* 103 (2008), 27-49; "Shadows and Assassinations: Forms of Time in Tacitus and Appian," *Arethusa* 39, 2 (Spring 2006), 193-218.