

Biography, Women and Power*

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CELIA E. SCHULTZ, *FULVIA: PLAYING FOR POWER AT THE END OF THE ROMAN REPUBLIC* (Women in antiquity). New York: Oxford University Press, 2021. Pp. 144. ISBN 9780197601839. £19.99/US\$26.99.

JULIA HILLNER, *HELENA AUGUSTA: MOTHER OF THE EMPIRE* (Women in antiquity). New York: Oxford University Press, 2023. Pp. 432. ISBN 9780190875305. £22.99/US\$32.99.

Julia Hillner's life of Helena, mother of Constantine, is the twentieth volume published in OUP's 'Women in Antiquity' series, launched in 2010 with Duane Roller's biography of Cleopatra. An earlier and overlapping series on the same theme — Routledge's 'Women of the Ancient World' — began in 2006 and adds a further half-dozen titles to the portfolio, from *Olympias: Mother of Alexander the Great* by Elizabeth Carney to *The Women of Pliny's Letters* by Jo-Ann Shelton.¹ The pace of publication picked up in 2018 and two lives from the later Roman empire — of Melania the Younger by Elizabeth Clark and Sospittra of Pergamum by Heidi Marx — appeared alongside Celia Schultz's account of Fulvia in 2021, for example. Late republican and late antique women dominate the catalogue overall, with some empresses and exotic leaders in between, and alongside a smaller set of Hellenistic royalty.²

It is a representative pairing that is under review here, therefore, within the wider frame of the whole portfolio. Persistence and proliferation have led the OUP series to a dominant position in the field, at least in terms of monographs in English. Still, the prominence of OUP's products requires some wider reflection on both the nature of the biographical genre and the obvious biases of the content. The relationship between lives and history, broadly construed, need to be considered, together with the omissions in coverage, only partially filled in elsewhere.

This article opens with a general discussion about women, biography and historical studies informed in part by the ways that the two books under specific scrutiny here themselves engage with those questions, but also by wider generic debates. Two focused reviews follow, treating Schultz's life of Fulvia and Hillner's life of Helena separately, and assessing them as biographies. A fourth section focuses on issues of female power raised by these volumes. Biographical writing has spearheaded an increasing recognition of women as active participants in republican politics, at least in its latter stages.³ Susan Treggiari's *Servilia and her Family* (2019) is perhaps most significant in this respect, makes the most sustained set of arguments, but it is part of, and very much fortified by,

* My thanks to audiences in Stevenage and Oxford who participated in discussions on some of the general themes of this piece, though not the books reviewed here, and to the journal editor and reviewers for their patience and helpful comments.

¹ The precise relationship between the two series is unclear but they share editors — Ronnie Ancona and Sarah B. Pomeroy — and much of the brief series descriptions. For the Routledge publications, see: <https://www.routledge.com/Women-of-the-Ancient-World/book-series/ANWO>

² The full list can be found on the OUP online catalogue: <https://global.oup.com/academic/content/series/women-in-antiquity-wia/?cc=gb&clang=en>

³ Though Webb 2022 traces a longer tradition of women's political initiatives in the Republic.

a larger scholarly trend.⁴ The fortunes of imperial women (that is women who shared marriage or immediate family with the emperor) have been more mixed. Power has been ebbing away from them in biographical accounts, while Mary T. (Tolly) Boatwright's overall survey of the subject, *Imperial Women of Rome: Power, Gender, Context* (2021), comprehensively concludes that 'the evidence as a whole reveals imperial women's general powerlessness'.⁵ Hillner does not go that far in relation to Helena, but is certainly more cautious than Schultz, who has Fulvia unashamedly 'playing for power'.

There are questions, therefore, about whether the aristocratic women of the late Republic were actually more powerful than the imperial women of the Principate and beyond, contrary to previous assumptions. The follow-up question, however, is whether that is a meaningful or useful comparison to make. The politics of the Principate — the workings, exercise and pursuit of power — were not the same as in the Republic, on many levels. There were continuities but also ruptures and reconfigurations. Perhaps the first task is to create an analytics of female power which would allow such a comparison to proceed in a productive way. Indeed, that project seems essential to moving the discussion forward. Debates have been hampered by failures to define power, with quite different understandings leading to divergent conclusions about the same phenomena. The juxtaposition of these two biographies, recounting stories of women and power (among other things) in two distinct but not entirely dissimilar phases of Roman history, presents an opportunity in this respect. They will be put into dialogue with Boatwright's non-biographical *Imperial Women*, and other studies, in an attempt to build a shared framework within which to pursue these questions further.⁶

I BIOGRAPHY

'Memoirs and biography' is the bestselling non-fiction printed book category on Amazon, and the second bestselling for e-books.⁷ The figures vary by national market as well as format, but life writings always score highly in data about publishing sales and readers' preferences. These realities clearly drive the substance and success of the 'Women in Antiquity' series. Still, the biographical genre is a dynamic and diverse one, in both its academic and trade manifestations. David E. Nye's 'anti-biography' may not have gained much traction as a thing in itself, but some of the issues he foregrounded — such as the essentially networked and relational constitution of the individual, and the particularly problematic division between public and private that is constructed by life narratives which aim to reveal what someone was 'really like' underneath — have become key themes that biographers openly grapple with.⁸ Authors have experimented with a range of literary forms and techniques. This goes beyond an increased embrace of the fictionality inherent in the genre, into the innovative shapes and structures of Ruth Scurr's invented diary for John Aubrey, for example, or Sarah Bakewell's biography of Montaigne organised into twenty chapters each attempting to answer the question, 'how to live?'.⁹

⁴ See also importantly Flower 2018 on Servilia; and more generally e.g. Treggiari 2007; Brennan 2012; Osgood 2014; Rohr Vio 2019; 2022.

⁵ Boatwright 2021: 282.

⁶ 'Mine is not a series of biographies of imperial women. Instead, I aim to explore them as a whole, and to investigate their activities and visibility over time' (Boatwright 2021: 3).

⁷ At least according to publicly available data: see e.g. <https://wordsrated.com/autobiography-sales-statistics/>. The most detailed book sales data are, however, proprietary and intentionally inaccessible; see e.g. Walsh 2022.

⁸ Nye 1983; see also Nye 2003. The phenomenon is discussed more generally by Prager and Hanneschläger 2017 and Ní Dhúill 2020: 141–70.

⁹ Scurr 2015; Bakewell 2010.

Roy Gibson tells the story of Pliny the Younger through overlapping regional narratives.¹⁰ He explicitly eschews a ‘cradle to grave’ approach on account of the large gaps in the evidential record and argues that geography, Pliny’s interactions with and investment in landscapes and localities, provides access to his individuality in a way that better reflects his own perspectives than any modern focus on reconstructing his psychology or revealing an inner life would.¹¹ Both Schultz and Hillner chose to proceed chronologically, despite acknowledging the challenges. ‘So far, we have reconstructed Fulvia’s early life based on what we know generally about growing up in an aristocratic Roman family and the education of Roman girls,’ says Schultz in wrapping up her opening chapter (18). Hillner takes the gaps in Helena’s life course to be more constitutive. The ruptures created by the social and political circulation of women were foundational to female existence, non-linearity and caesura were standard, and must be emphasised, not hidden.

Alongside the gaps, Hillner announces the ‘historically verifiable’ environment in which Helena moved and the female relationships surrounding her as the other pillars on which her book is based. She engages, that is, in telling a particular version of the networked, relational and situated, rather than misleadingly individualised, life. So too does Schultz, as she employs the general patterns of elite women’s upbringing, and positions Fulvia in a deft overall account of late republican politics. While this approach more accurately represents the essentially social nature of the self — that power and livelihood, creativity and prestige, were crucially collective projects in antiquity (as elsewhere) — it has some particular pitfalls for women. Their relationality and collectivity are often taken for granted, socially and epistemically prioritised, with agency, intersectionality and individuality paying the price.¹² One of the benefits of biographical writing is to challenge overgeneralised accounts of social systems, including those relating to sex and gender, through the focus on the specificities and contingencies of a single life. Feminist biography, in Liz Stanley’s formulation, asserts the ‘indomitable uniqueness of people who share social structural similarities’.¹³

Such assertions are useful, both in principle and in respect of Roman studies more concretely. The contingencies of the surviving evidence for women in the Roman world generates very strong dynamics towards synthesis and synchrony rather than specificity and individuality. Biographies can provide a valuable counter to those tendencies, especially if they explicitly reflect on that very issue. Their contribution is limited, however, indeed rendered problematic, insofar as only certain kinds of prominent women have their lives written up. Individuality threatens to become the prerogative of the rich and famous, and the question of whether, to what extent or in what ways, all women shared ‘social-structural similarities’ is unhelpfully avoided.

The problems are exacerbated by the focus on horizontal rather than vertical relationality, comparison and collaboration that characterises most of the ‘Women in Antiquity’ series. The individual women are located within their kinship networks and as part of various familial ventures. They are compared — in terms of roles and actions, representations and judgements — to their elite female peers and the men of their social groups. All of which is important, but it omits the many other women and men who enabled their roles and actions. Being a wife and mother in a leading republican family or the *domus Augusta* meant managing (at least co-managing) and depending on large enslaved and freed households. It entailed relations with enslaved, and perhaps freed, midwives, nurses and *paedagogi*, for example, dressers and menders, just to pick out

¹⁰ Gibson 2020.

¹¹ Gibson 2020: 13–18.

¹² Ní Dhúill 2020: 171–209.

¹³ Stanley 1995: 242.

some of the more directly relevant job titles which appear in the early imperial *columbaria* inscriptions.¹⁴ Name and title (perhaps also age at death) is not sufficient information to reconstruct a single life, but it does gesture to individuality as well as collectivity, perhaps suggesting a creative kind of group biography. Other approaches to illuminating the lives of a more diverse set of Roman women are also possible, embracing the fragmentary nature of the evidence. The essays edited by Brenda Longfellow and Molly Swetnam-Burland in *Women's Lives, Women's Voices. Roman Material Culture and Female Agency in the Bay of Naples* (2021), for example, are more socially encompassing in their explorations of female experience in the shadow of Mount Vesuvius, drawing on visual, epigraphic, material and architectural sources.

II FULVIA

Celia Schultz's biography of Fulvia is a slim volume, in accord with the series mission to provide 'compact and accessible introductions to the lives and historical times of women in antiquity'. Scholarly citations are limited and detailed debates about specific evidential issues rarely feature, though they are signalled and referenced. S. reads against the many hostile ancient accounts but without crossing too far 'into the territory of undue rehabilitation' (4). She deploys the full sweep of available evidence, rather than privileging the most scandalous — such as Cassius Dio's allegation that Fulvia mutilated Cicero's head after his death, piercing his tongue with hairpins, despite her absence from most accounts of his demise and its immediate aftermath.¹⁵ This range of material is then placed firmly in the context of what other aristocratic women were doing in the last decades of the Roman Republic, and what was said about it. This framing is fundamental to S.'s basic argument that Fulvia represents a version of normality for elite Roman women in abnormal times, an individual version but not atypical as the Roman Republic unravelled. Fulvia brought a particular background and personality to a career as an aristocratic woman for whom familial obligations necessarily included politics, as her political obligations included being a fertile and loyal wife.

Fulvia's background was not as prestigious as Clodia's or Servilia's, to mention two other prominent late republican women who have received some biographical treatment.¹⁶ She was the only child of Marcus Fulvius Bambalio and his wife Sempronia — both from distinguished families which had disappeared from the list of consuls in the wake of the Gracchan crisis. Bambalio was Sempronia's second husband, and she married again, to L. Licinius Murena, a man on the political rise. It is uncertain whether Sempronia's earlier marriages were dissolved by death or divorce, which might have made a difference to Fulvia's childhood. Murena was instrumental in arranging her first marriage, but that does not entail that she was already part of his household, and, as S. stresses, her education would have followed a similar pattern regardless.

Fulvia married three times — to Publius Clodius Pulcher, Gaius Scribonius Curio and Marcus Antonius. All three unions seem to have been stable and successful, all were ended by death not divorce, and she provided all her husbands with children. A son and a daughter survived the first marriage, another son was added by the second, and two more in the third. Likely there were other pregnancies and births along the way. One of S.'s key points is that accusations of sexual impropriety were almost never levelled at Fulvia, in contrast to usual practice at the time, strongly suggesting that 'her behaviour

¹⁴ Treggiari 1973; 1975; Hasegawa 2005; Borbonus 2014.

¹⁵ Cass. Dio 47.8.3–5; cf. Vell. Pat. 66.1–67.4; App., *B Civ.* 4.20; Plut., *Vit. Ant.* 20.2 and *Cic.* 48.1–6; Flor. 2.16.2.

¹⁶ Skinner 2011; Treggiari 2019.

on this account was (nearly) irreproachable' (50). Instead, the impression is that Fulvia brought familial security and clear matronal norms to unions with men who required a solid domestic anchor as counterbalance to their individually more wayward tendencies: the fast living and sexual misdemeanours, recklessness and ambition which was mixed with their substantial skills, accomplishments and career successes.

The pattern began with Clodius. This marriage was, on the face of it, surprising. Fulvia's background was nowhere near as illustrious as Clodius's. But Clodius' early career was somewhat chequered and the Bona Dea scandal in 62 B.C.E. will have placed the daughters of Rome's most elite families out of reach, at least in the short term. Meanwhile, Clodius' association with Murena — Fulvia's stepfather — strengthened. This was an alliance worth cementing, especially given the lack of other options, and Fulvia had at least youth and wealth to offer on her own account. They were married before Clodius took up office as Tribune in 58, and in the following years it turned out she also had fertility, loyalty and commitment in abundance, though little concrete is heard of Clodius' wife until he was murdered. Then she entered into the limelight, co-producing a version (or perversion) of the traditional aristocratic funeral adapted to the particular circumstances and political contingencies, before helping to bring the murderer to justice in the courts. She proved more than capable of playing the role of the wronged and grieving widow in the requisite public spaces and was supported by other women (including her mother) in these dramas.

Curio and Antonius shared certain qualities with Clodius. Talented and successful but rash and impulsive, politically prominent and ambitious but given to personal excess — these traits may explain why Fulvia remarried twice. She did not need to, and what these men had to gain from union with Clodius' widow, a wealthy woman of proven fertility and matronal integrity, was more obvious than the benefits to her of re-entering matrimony. They might just have been her type, S. speculates, and Fulvia may also have wanted to stay directly connected to the ongoing, deepening power struggles of the day. She certainly succeeded on that score, and it was as Antonius' wife that she most clearly emerged as a political player in her own right, and as a particular focus for vilification. Attacked by Cicero in his conflict with her husband, Fulvia was also a convenient scapegoat in subsequent histories of the period.

In the *Philippics* Cicero essentially alleged that Fulvia was running Rome in the months after Caesar's assassination. Antonius — accused of more quickly obeying 'a most rapacious female' (*mulieri ... avarissimae*) than the senate and people of Rome — was the real target of Cicero's blistering assault, his wife merely a rhetorical means to that end.¹⁷ Still, there is other evidence for Fulvia's participation in Antonius' undertakings at the time, and together with his mother Julia she lobbied on his behalf after he had left for Mutina. These actions were exactly the kind now expected of women in leading families in such circumstances.

S. is sceptical about the allegations that Fulvia profited both personally and financially from the proscriptions instituted by the triumvirs, but more interested in stories surrounding their other early income-generating measure, that is, the proposed tax on the estates of the 1,400 wealthiest women in Rome. While Antonius' mother and Octavian's sister positively received a delegation of these women protesting against such an unfair and partisan move, Fulvia is reported by Appian to have rudely rebuffed them, not even letting them into the house.¹⁸ Her move is implicitly presented as one of arrogance, and perhaps also of competitive (and unreasonable) loyalty.

Loyalty was very challenging in the strained, messy and violent situation created by the return of Octavian to Italy after victory at Philippi in autumn 42 B.C.E. Appian presented

¹⁷ Cic., *Phil.* 6.4.

¹⁸ App., *B Civ.* 4.32; cf. Val. Max. 8.3.3; Quint., *Inst.* 1.1.6.

Fulvia and Antonius' brother (and consul) Lucius as attempting to defend Antonius' interests when Octavian's veteran settlement plans began to take shape.¹⁹ The situation became increasingly complicated and conflicted, but while Antonius' views were sought by all parties, they remained unknown.²⁰ Cassius Dio, on the other hand, was clear that Lucius and Fulvia were aiming at power for themselves — actually for her since she was in charge — and not acting on Antonius' behalf at all. But his is the most systematically hostile account. In contrast to Dio's parodic commander, Appian's Fulvia plays a supporting role as hostilities developed. She encouraged other Antonian generals to come to Lucius' aid once he was trapped in the Umbrian city of Perusia and 'collected reinforcements' herself, despatching them north under the command of Munatius Plancus.²¹ Octavia provided very similar military assistance to Antonius in 35 B.C.E.

The rather spectacular assortment of sling bullets from the siege of Perusia confirms rather than changes the picture. Fulvia does not feature amongst the positive or proprietary messages (nor does Lucius, only Antonius), that is, the missiles labelled with the name of their commander or legion or similar, but among the negative, mostly sexual, abuse aimed at the enemy. She does so on the same terms as her opponents — Peto [I]andicam Fulviae/ 'I'm aiming for Fulvia's clit' is matched by Pet(o) Octav[i]a(ni) culu(m)/ 'I'm aiming for Octavian's arsehole' — if not her allies.²² Lucius was certainly denigrated as bald, and perhaps invited together with Fulvia to open his arsehole to incoming fire, though that bullet is now lost. More importantly, Octavian is the main target of such sexual insults and aggression, as also the main beneficiary of positive nominations and acclamations.

The resources Fulvia mobilised did not alter the outcome. Faced with starvation, Lucius surrendered in 40 B.C.E. Fulvia was allowed to leave Italy with her children. Antonius met up with them — and his mother — in Athens, having already decided, so Appian says, that his wife and brother were to blame for events at Perusia.²³ Fulvia then moved to Sicyon and Antonius left her there ill when he headed to Italy and confrontation with Octavian. She died not long after. Antonius received the news as he was opening negotiations with Octavian. He was upset, but everyone recognised the beneficial timing. Fulvia could now function as a convenient scapegoat, a 'meddlesome' woman with her own motives whose demise allowed Octavian and Antonius to be reconciled.²⁴ That is, of course, not the end of the story, and S. goes on not only to recount the fate of Fulvia's children, but also to outline aspects of her own cultural afterlife, from Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* to the novels of Steven Saylor and Colleen McCullough.

S. recounts Fulvia's life as a version of late republican political history, as a narrative of the 50s and 40s B.C.E. in which she makes various appearances, illuminating its dynamics and historiography. This is not a very personal story. 'Strong-willed' and 'independent', 'daring' and 'fearless' are the main adjectives used to describe her character, all of which are very general labels. The first two could also be applied to other prominent elite women of the late republic such as Clodia, Servilia and Terentia, but perhaps not the last two. That is the point which S. wants to make. Behind all the rhetorical hostility, if the more extreme and obviously exaggerated episodes in Dio are bracketed off, Fulvia emerges as a woman with political acuity and standing, able to defend her husbands' interests and her own, a valued ally of consuls and generals. She was also a woman who behaved as a proper *materfamilias*: her husbands succeeded, her children flourished, and

¹⁹ App., *B Civ.* 5.14–23.

²⁰ App., *B Civ.* 5.21.

²¹ App., *B Civ.* 5.33.

²² Benedetti 2012 is the fullest collection of the stones. These are nos. 5 and 7 respectively. Schultz investigates the objects in detail at 97–100.

²³ App., *B Civ.* 5.52.

²⁴ App., *B Civ.* 5.59 and 62.

her almost spotless sexual reputation contrasts strongly with that of the men she was married to. This combination had become normal for female members of Roman aristocratic families in the late Republic. Fulvia simply performed her role more boldly, more centre-stage, than her peers; that is where her 'indomitable uniqueness' lay, or at least where it can be now be discerned.

III HELENA

Julia Hillner's life of Helena is a weighty tome which delves deeply into questions of evidence and scholarly debates. The sources — both literary and material — are far more numerous and substantial than for Fulvia, though no less problematic, and this volume is extensively illustrated and footnoted. It is a more traditional academic volume than Schultz's. The critical, integrated, relational and contextual methodology that H. sets out in the introduction is essentially shared, however, though aspects are explained, discussed and enacted in greater detail. She also explicitly foregrounds the question of power from the outset. Constantine awarded his mother the title of 'Augusta' in 324 C.E. and she appeared on coins and in a range of other Constantinian imagery, but featuring in imperial ideology and display need not equate with power. Helena's role in representations of rule, however significant in itself, may have been a very small part of her own identity and lived experience. Proximity to the emperor always generates particular opportunities for agency and action, but no indications of individual opinions or activities distinct from those of Constantine survive, in contrast to the situation for some other imperial women. One reason for this may lie in the fact that Helena did not come from an aristocratic background, well-networked and resourced. She had no alternative source of influence and authority, nor indeed other family interests to pursue. 'Dependency' is an overarching theme in Helena's life as much as power, H. asserts.

The structure of the book reflects a different kind of non-linearity in Helena's life than characterised Fulvia's. Family relationships and politics interacted to produce a particular profile of historical visibility. This is a story in four parts. The first covers questions about Helena's origins, her meeting and life with Constantius, including the birth of Constantine, while the second explores the period when she was 'off-stage', 'cast aside' by Constantius so that he could make a politically expedient match, and separated from her son. She reappears in the sources, and enters onto the public stage, about ten years after Constantine was proclaimed Augustus at York in 306, a decade into the protracted post-tetrarchic struggles for succession, and remained there until her death in 328/9. Part four considers the ebbs and flows of Helena's emergence as an exemplary Christian empress up until around 600. A different approach is required for the second section, which investigates the careers of the tetrarchic women in whose footsteps Helena followed when she rejoined her son, and for the final, posthumous sequence. The great benefit of a roughly continuous narrative which takes the story through the third century crisis, the Tetrarchy, its break-up, the eventual Constantinian triumph and beyond, is that it allows H. to analyse the ramifications of the tetrarchic experiment for women in real detail, and so illuminate key dynamics of power and family. The tetrarchic system had contradictory effects in this respect. On the one hand, the wives of the *augusti* and *caesares* were institutionally stripped of their dynastic value and the visibility of imperial women in official representations decreased remarkably in the first decade of the Tetrarchy. On the other hand, the existence of four emperors surrounded by female kin meant that the number of imperial women proliferated, while marriage alliances continued as a political tool, within and beyond the tetrarchic structure. Traditional family interests played an obvious role in disrupting the continuity of that

structure, after its founders Diocletian and Maximian first abdicated in 305. Individual contenders adopted divergent strategies in relation to the ideological and associative resources provided by their female kin, and displayed different attitudes to dynasty-scaping.

Helena began her life a long way from either the social or geographical centres of Roman power. The sources are many and varied on these matters, but H. argues that Drepanon in the Propontis is the most likely candidate for Helena's place of origin and that she was born between 248 and 250 into a family of low status, '*vilissima*' as the earliest account labels her.²⁵ She might well have met Constantius — part of a military escort accompanying the emperor Aurelian eastwards in the early 270s — at an inn, as subsequent tales recount, where sexual services would have been part of the hospitality on sale, without having to believe any of the more lurid or explicitly redemptive later narratives. The legal nature of the relationship they then formed is somewhat unclear. It came under scrutiny in antiquity, and has been much discussed since. H. emphasises the military context as key to understanding here. Constantius came from a Balkan army family, from a social grouping on the rise but still a long way from the traditional elite, and soldiers had a pragmatic approach to marriage. The union seems to have been well established. They may have simply assumed they were married, or would be more formally when Constantius retired from service. Constantine was born in Naissus, a city on the military road in Upper Moesia, probably in 274 or 275, and the boy enjoyed a stable family life for over a decade. Constantius was often away, having been promoted to command a cavalry unit, but his interest in his son was unfailing.

He had other interests too, and his career advanced rapidly. The details are uncertain, but Constantius was on a trajectory towards imperial power which required that he leave Helena behind and marry Theodora, the daughter of the (co-)emperor Maximian, sometime in the late 280s. He seems to have continued to support Helena financially, but Constantine ceased to be part of her household, and what life was like between around 289 and 317, between roughly her fortieth and seventieth years, can only be a matter of speculation. It is in those decades that H. locates her gradual conversion to Christianity, though the theme of Helena's Christian identity is systematically downplayed throughout the biography. Eusebius in his *Life of Constantine* claimed she was converted by her son, but that is hardly surprising in a text focused on the persona of the first Christian emperor.²⁶ Some later church historians reversed the roles, or at least the chronology, which seems more likely.²⁷ Helena surely encountered the growing urban Christian communities in the period before she was reunited with her son, may have witnessed martyrdoms, or been drawn into the pastoral care networks of ecclesiastical institutions, like other women without male protectors. Her faith probably developed independently of Constantine's, therefore, though easily aligned with his when the time came.

The main way in which H. fills this gap in the record is with discussion of other tetrarchic women — Theodora (who produced three sons and three daughters surviving to adulthood) and her youngest sister Fausta, who was married to Constantine early in the complex succession struggle (probably in 307); Romula the mother of the tetrarch Galerius; and his wife Valeria (Diocletian's daughter). Three themes emerge from this shift in focus. First, that a web of intermarriages linked all the tetrarchic and post-tetrarchic players, creating both conflicts and confluences of allegiance. Secondly, there were significantly expanded numbers of imperial women involved in the system, sometimes brutally curtailed by execution and murder. Thirdly, H. draws attention to

²⁵ *Origo Const.* 2.2.

²⁶ Euseb., *Vit. Const.* 47.2.

²⁷ e.g. Theodoret, *Historia ecclesiastica* 1.18.1.

the political innovations involved in the divine honours awarded to Romula on her death and the impressive mausoleum dedicated to her, and in the titles and images of Valeria which circulated more widely. It is also worth commenting on the relatively restricted social circles from which almost all these women and men came. Three of Theodora's children with Constantius did marry into the old senatorial elite, however, marking a change of direction.

Constantine followed Galerius' lead in his deployment of the women around him in the final phase of the succession struggle, against Licinius, who was married to his half-sister, Constantia. An initial tussle was followed by the settlement at Serdica in 317, which constituted a new imperial college. Licinius and Constantine were *Augusti*, their infant sons Licinianus and Constantine (II) — born in 315 and 316 respectively — were Caesars, as was Crispus, Constantine's adolescent son by an earlier, less formal relationship. Fausta gave birth to another son later that year (Constantius II), and Constantine's dynasty building was ramped up along with his eastern ambitions. Helena may have lacked antecedents of her own, but she was imperial mother and was now presented as such, first on coins minted in Thessalonica in 318 or 319 which showed the profiles of Fausta and Helena, 'noblest of women' (*nobilissimae feminae*), and then on coinage which circulated more widely. H. emphasises the 'revolutionary' nature of Constantine's decision to put his mother as well as his wife on coins. Rare, but not unprecedented, representations of the living mother of the emperor were deployed in very particular circumstances and for particular ends, and this was no exception. She carefully analyses the changing iconography through to Constantine's final victory in 324, arguing that these adjustments demonstrate the significance of the visually promotional work Helena's image did.

In 324, after Constantine finally defeated Licinius, both Fausta and Helena were granted the title of *Augusta*, while Constantius (II) replaced Licinianus as Caesar. Constantine's sole rule was thus announced in full dynastic fashion, and once Constantia was widowed, she was also reintegrated into her brother's family and court, at entry level, '*nobilissima*' on coins minted in Constantinople a couple of years later, for example. Unity was short-lived. In 326 something happened to destroy Constantine's trust in his oldest son Crispus; he was executed (or forced to commit suicide) and his name erased from public monuments. Fausta died not long after, and may also have incurred memory sanctions, though much is unclear. Indeed, uncertainty surrounds both deaths, and any possible connection between them. Aurelius Victor, writing only decades after the events, explicitly states that the explanation is 'unknown', but greater distance led later authors to offer a range of storylines, describing Crispus and Fausta variously as lovers and conspirators, or antagonists and co-accusers.²⁸ Helena was implicated in some of these tales. Gendered stereotypes abound in these narratives, some of which also emphasise their tragic parallels, serving to obscure the course of events even further. Two points are clear. One is that insofar as either Fausta or Helena are granted agency in these texts it is on personal terms; they act from lust, jealousy or despair, not ambition. Secondly, whatever the backstory, Fausta's demise left Helena as the most important woman in the Roman Empire, hailed as 'creator' (*genetrix*) of the Constantinian house in inscriptions erected in Rome from 326 onwards.

It was late in 326 that Helena began her famous tour of the Eastern provinces, including Palestine. This is the best-documented period of her life and the most influential in forging her reputation, with both later ancient and modern commentators generalising about her power, status and spiritual commitments from their reading of this episode. H. strives to deconstruct dominant myths and assumptions about this journey, demonstrating how little is certain about the itinerary, purposes and logistics. It built on Helena's sojourn in

²⁸ Aur. Vict. *Caes.* 41.11 (*incertum*). Cf. e.g. Zonar. 13.2; Philostorgius, *Historia ecclesiastica* 2.4.

Rome from 324, when Constantine was still in the east. She provided a crucial imperial presence, supported Constantine's extensive building programme and engaged with the Roman aristocracy, all with reasonable success. Helena's task in the East was not dissimilar. H. locates the journey very much in the tradition of Hadrian's progress around the Empire, rather than as the pilgrimage modern scholars have tended to view it as. The main purpose was broadly political, about imperial engagement and display, but that does not preclude other aims or experiences: 'the distinction between sacred travel, educational sightseeing and a state visit is not particularly helpful' (214).

In the fullest surviving discussion of Helena's travels, Eusebius described her as showering gifts on the citizens of every city she visited, on the soldiery and the poor.²⁹ She freed people from prison and the mines as she went, and had them recalled from exile; that is, as H. makes clear, she oversaw local instantiations of the imperial amnesties Constantine announced after his victory over Licinius.³⁰ Eusebius emphasised that Helena 'dedicated' or 'established', in wondrous style, two monuments at biblical locations in Jerusalem, which were then further embellished, decorated and supplemented by Constantine.³¹ These must be, as H. shows, the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem and the so-called Eleona church on the Mount of Olives. There is no reference to Helena in relation to the building prompted by discovery of Christ's tomb in the area formerly occupied by the Temple of Venus in Jerusalem, that eventually became the whole ecclesiastical complex of the Holy Sepulchre. What emerges is a rather piecemeal and pragmatic approach to church building in Palestine, with Constantine the most significant driver, encouraged by Macarius, bishop of Jerusalem, and Helena able to influence things on the ground.

Shortly after returning from her travels, in late 328 or early 329, Helena died, having reached 80 years of age. She received a funeral with full imperial honours and her body was placed into a splendid mausoleum, attached to a church, on the Via Labicana in Rome. There was commemorative building in Constantinople too, for example, along with gifts to churches in Palestine. She was not deified (though Constantine would be), but neither is any reference made to her baptism. H. draws attention to the contents of Helena's will, as recorded by Eusebius, in which she left everything she had 'accrued' (*hupērxe*) to her son and grandsons in equal parts.³² There is no mention of legacies to churches or religious foundations, and the language of possession is vague. This underlines the point that Helena had no inherited patrimony of her own; all her holdings had been allocated to her by the emperor, and effectively reverted to him. Not long after her death, Constantine took a different dynastic turn, building stronger links with his half-siblings, and reconfiguring his succession plans along more tetrarchic lines. Helena's contribution was diminished, and, though she and Theodora appeared on commemorative coins a few months after Constantine's death in summer 337, that was to present an image of harmony after a dynastic bloodbath, the opening episode in another protracted and violent succession struggle. Living women were involved in the conflict too, and H. focuses on Constantina, one of Constantine's daughters, who was successively married to two different players in the drama and was active in the religious realm too.

Constantine's descendants largely ignored Helena, but she emerged as an exemplary Christian empress under the Theodosians, and H.'s final chapter outlines this development through the late fourth and fifth centuries, along with the propagation of a range of legends around her life and deeds. The model Helena offered became almost

²⁹ Euseb., *Vit. Const.* 3.44.

³⁰ Euseb., *Vit. Const.* 2.31–32.

³¹ Euseb., *Vit. Const.* 3.43.

³² Euseb., *Vit. Const.* 3.46.

inescapable as Christian rule of the empire unfolded, though its utilisation was varied. It was even available to women outside the Empire. The Thuringian princess and Merovingian abbess Radegund deployed the example of Helena in the most distinctive and autonomous way.³³

This is a very rich and rewarding, though sometimes overwhelming, book: as much group biography as single narrative. H.'s Helena takes a particular shape in that collective portrait, as one of a set of tetrarchic women who had much in common. What made her distinctive was the accident of giving birth to a very successful imperial contender who become the first Christian emperor, with all the attendant historiographic ramifications. Constantine's approach to dynasty building, selected from amongst several alternatives, certainly helped. A particular version of competitive legitimation played out, adapted from earlier imperial patterns and their more recent reworkings. H. allows for the possibility that it was Helena's influence which kept Constantine's half-siblings — Theodora's children — dynastically sidelined until after her death: an interpretation not indicated in the sources but often suggested in modern scholarship, though other explanations are also available. She allows, therefore, a variation on a traditional form of female family politics in monarchic systems: working against the children of the wife who replaced her more than for her own children or grandchildren, who stayed central to Constantine's succession plans. But H. is generally unconvinced by arguments or assumptions that Helena can be seen acting in her own interests or on her own account as distinct from her son's. There is no evidence she had her own patronage network or was ever petitioned directly, for example, unlike Livia, Plotina or Julia Domna.³⁴ Even Constantia, Constantine's half-sister, is depicted as a more independent actor.³⁵ Helena had agency but operated within the frameworks Constantine set out, pushing forward his building programmes in Rome and Jerusalem, or engaging with the Roman aristocracy, local elites in the East and Palestinian Christian communities. Her son obviously trusted her, both in terms of loyalty and effectiveness, and Helena was clearly able to learn and grow into her position as mother of the emperor, vital representative of imperial rule, but there were limits too.

Helena's background was key to these limits for H. It was, therefore, not just that Constantine was 'the source of Helena's official image, including its timing and location, and (as recognised by Eusebius) the ultimate authority behind her recorded deeds' (11), but on a more basic, and encompassing, level she 'needed his support to become part of the imperial family, to have access to funds, and to maintain an aspect of respectability. She even needed him to be remembered' (12). Even less of Helena's personality comes across in this account; therefore, Helena's 'indomitable uniqueness' is essentially a matter of happenstance and accident.

IV WOMEN, POWER AND POWERLESSNESS

Schultz and Hillner both adopt, implicitly or explicitly, nuanced approaches to female power. They recognise its limits, but neither would label their subjects 'powerless', in contrast to Boatwright's conclusion to her survey of imperial women from Octavia to Julia Mamaea.³⁶ The chapters of her book chart a series of negative findings, across

³³ Radegund is the next recipient of a biography in the OUP series: Dailey [forthcoming](#), due out in September 2023.

³⁴ Kathryn Welch is working on a biography of Livia in the OUP series: in the meantime, see Barrett [2002](#); on Plotina's activities, see van Bremen [2005](#). Levick [2007](#), on Julia Domna, was in the Routledge 'Women of Antiquity' series.

³⁵ Hillner [2017](#).

³⁶ Boatwright [2021](#).

topics ranging from what might be described as imperial women's 'constitutional' and legal position as well as their familial function, through to more representational roles on coins and in public statuary, and covering religious and military themes in between — all with a distinct central focus, mostly on the city of Rome itself. These negative findings are ably supported by the contemporary literary sources, by Tacitus' and other elite male historians' critiques and denunciations of imperial women. Boatwright considers their views to be pretty programmatic and concordant in emphasising that imperial women's most important roles were as 'acquiescent helpmeets to the emperor'.³⁷ Above all, they were not to act independently or flaunt their resources and proximity to power in any way.

It is worth setting out the spaces without female power, the places where Boatwright looks for it and finds it missing, in a bit more detail. After a few extraordinary rights granted Octavia and Livia in 35 B.C.E., no powers or privileges fundamentally distinct from those of other elite women in Rome were voted or approved for the women of the imperial family. They could not order others into battle, make binding administrative or economic decisions, or convict or absolve another in a legal proceeding. Indeed, they seem to have been peculiarly vulnerable to legal charges and hefty punishments. The *domus Augusta* or *domus divina*, as the imperial household was increasingly known, was certainly a cornerstone of the Principate, and women played a key role in its construction, in the corporate image of primacy that it enacted. They were very much subsumed into that collective project, however, and found it difficult to gain individual visibility or traction. Similarly, visual depictions of imperial women on coins may have become more frequent, especially after 128 C.E., and, together with their inclusion in imperial cult and the annual rhythms of prayers and vows, must have contributed to the increasing awe surrounding the imperial family, but none of those moves should be confused with power or influence. Those female presences and representations worked for the *domus divina*, for the legitimacy and reach of the emperor, but not for the women themselves. The religious domain may be the arena in which imperial women had the highest profile, received the most honour, but 'even here they had little agency and were sidelined'.³⁸ Imperial women were not much in public in Rome, either in person or associated with buildings and statues. In so far as they did make a material imprint, it was mostly as wives and mothers, and usually after they were themselves dead and out of sight. In form, the sculpted depictions of imperial women resemble those of elite Roman women more generally, indeed were characterised by a certain indeterminacy overall. The women of the Severan dynasty were somewhat 'aberrant' in their association with Rome's military, not just in literary sources but also in material evidence.³⁹ Generally there was a sharp conceptual separation between women and armies, though imperial women did accompany the emperor on his travels reasonably regularly.

Some of these claims are more contentious than others. The point that neither visibility nor publicity equate with power is one of growing scholarly agreement. The prominence of images of imperial women speaks to issues of legitimacy and ideology, not the position of the women themselves, and they can and should be studied accordingly. Recent work on the Severan women, particularly well represented on coins, inscriptions and monuments, has made a virtue of this very distinction.⁴⁰ Hillner productively follows in these footsteps in her analysis of the varied tetrarchic strategies in relation to public visual portrayals of their women. These official representations did confirm women's institutional integrity, that they had a significant place within the system, but no more than that.

³⁷ Boatwright 2021: 9.

³⁸ Boatwright 2021: 123.

³⁹ Boatwright 2021: 248.

⁴⁰ Langford 2013; Rowan 2011; 2013.

There is similar consensus on women's lack of 'constitutional' powers — powers granted on the same basis as they were to emperors or Republican magistrates (and their ilk) — and, indeed, on the family focus of their political actions. Women made political moves in the interests of their husbands and children as much as themselves; both Schultz and Hillner accept if not emphasise that point, as have many others. Indeed, for Schultz this familial quality is constitutive of female power in the Roman republic, it endows it with shape and substance, and establishes its place in the political framework of the *res publica*. The situation is more complex for Hillner, who sees some imperial women — not Helena — active on their own account, or at least less clearly within the confines of the *domus divina*, as well as in support of their sons or husbands. Still, both of them construe the corporate dimension of female political agency more positively than Boatwright allows. Power does not have to be wielded by an individual on their own behalf to count. That is an unsustainably narrow definition.⁴¹ Indeed, there is a sense in which Roman men were also familial political actors. Men and women were differently positioned in relation to family power, certainly, but both partook.

The narrowness of the definition of power Boatwright seems to be operating with also emerges from her striking exclusion of what Barbara Levick termed empresses' 'all-important influence' from its ambit.⁴² She does mention Livia's influence, for example, but as something separate, whereas Levick sees it rather as a particular form of power. A looser and less direct form, more negotiated, but no less significant for that. Indeed, both Levick and Julie Langford identify influence and *auctoritas* as comparable constructions, informally constituted, built by the interplay of initiative and acceptance, always risking the alternative condemnatory label of *potentia*.⁴³

It is not just the division between a narrow, formalistic definition of power and a broader, more diffuse and dynamic one that shapes this debate, but also different approaches to the sources, especially but not exclusively the literary sources. To what extent are elite male authors such as Tacitus and Cassius Dio to be read as making active interventions into debates about the conduct of imperial women, making actively regulatory efforts, rather than enacting established rules and judgements, for example, and how coherent or fractured is the messaging? Why is praise for female moderation and restraint to be treated so differently from the same praise for men? One of the key themes of Pliny's *panegyric* for Trajan is the *moderatio* of the new princeps, that he is a man who exercises self-restraint in respect to all the power and glory available to him, who only accepts some of the vast honours offered, not all.⁴⁴ The same formulations appear in relation to imperial women, that they could have asked for more from the emperor, but did not, because of their *modestia*.⁴⁵ They knew how the game worked, how to make requests that would not be refused, to avoid the excessive and troublesome, just like Trajan. The Principate was precisely that kind of negotiation, that kind of balance, for women and men.

These negotiations are richly illustrated by the *senatus consultum de Pisone Patre* (SCPP), with increasing attention now being paid to the section dealing with Livia and the pardon of Piso's wife Plancina. The 'most surprising' detail in an inscription full of novelties, says Alison Cooley in her new text, translation and commentary, this segment is also important to Boatwright, and to Josiah Osgood's contrary arguments about Livia as a 'senatorial' as

⁴¹ The issue of individual *versus* family or collective power in antiquity is usefully addressed in van Bremen 1983 and 1996.

⁴² Levick 2014: 5.

⁴³ Levick 2014: 6; Langford 2013: 12

⁴⁴ For a summary, see e.g. Roche 2011: 5–10.

⁴⁵ Hadrian's speech for Matidia (*Inscr. Ital.* IV 1 77) line 28 (see now Jones 2004); see also e.g. Cass. Dio 69.10.3a.

much as an ‘imperial’ woman.⁴⁶ For the senate publicly explained that it decided to remit Plancina’s punishment after Tiberius interceded at the request of his mother. Livia had convinced her son, setting out just reasons for her plea, and:

... the Senate considers that to Iulia Augusta, who has served the state superlatively not only in giving birth to our Princeps but also through her many great favours towards men of every rank, who rightly and deservedly ought to have supreme influence in what she asked from the Senate, but used that influence sparingly, and to the supreme piety of our Princeps towards his mother, support and indulgence should be accorded ...⁴⁷

The formulations are contorted, but this is as much about Livia’s entitlement as her restraint, as much ‘celebration’ of women’s intervention in politics as ‘embarrassment’, just to pick out some conflicting threads of recent discussions, which need to be woven together.⁴⁸ It certainly gives formal recognition to the influence of imperial women.

If women’s power is understood as somewhat ill-defined and negotiated, often indirect and collaborative, then it was accessible to both imperial and Republican women. Not all took up the opportunities offered, and certainly not equally; furthermore, circumstances might be determinative. Still, there are grounds for comparison, for more explorations of continuity and change. Both biographical and more structural approaches have benefits in this respect.

* * *

Schultz and Hillner’s volumes offer much to those interested in Roman women and Roman history, those interested in female power, its contingencies and limits. There is a question about what they offer to those interested in Fulvia and Helena as individuals, however, or at least as individual personalities. Some kind of ‘indomitable uniqueness’ does come through, though it is a bit vague, as much a matter of principle as detail. But it is an important principle, and both biographical writing and analysis of shared social structures, intersecting hierarchies, have their place in the study of the Roman world. There needs to be more work on non-elite women to complement the stories of the great and the good, but the methodologies being developed in some of the biographical enterprises can help there too.

The crucial role of both basic social structures and narratives of significant political change in setting out, expanding on and analysing the lives of Fulvia and Helena makes the relationship between these biographies and history clear. It also renders them, and most of the other volumes in the series, pedagogically useful. These are books that do multiple work on course reading lists. They provide general introductions (and usually more) to the position of women, largely elite women (though Helena is a partial exception to that rule), in the Roman Republic, later Roman Empire or wherever, explaining the basic patterns of the female life course in these societies. They offer effective overviews of the main political developments of the period and other significant shifts and movements. They are methodologically reflexive, explicit and integrative: combining critical readings of literary texts with all the available material evidence, from statues to sling bullets, architecture to coins. Set in times when the relationships between women and power were more fluid than usual, reshaped by multiple forces and actors as broader patterns of governance were variously fractured and reconstituted, the two make interesting reading together.

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⁴⁶ Cooley 2023: 209; Boatwright 2021: 41–4; Osgood 2022.

⁴⁷ SCPP lines 114–19; trans Cooley.

⁴⁸ Boatwright emphasises restraint (2021: 41–4); Osgood, entitlement and celebration (2022: 202–3); Cooley sees embarrassment while also drawing out a number of countervailing points (2023: 209–16).

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