

Guy de la Bédoyère. *Domina. The Women Who Made Imperial Rome*. Yale University Press. 2018. Hardcover. \$35.00. ISBN: 978-0-300-23030-7. 408 pp. 32 color illus. + 3 maps.

The scandal, murder, and incest of the early emperors and their family members continues to delight audiences and capture their imaginations. Most notably in *I Claudius* and recently in *Game of Thrones*, historical, pseudo-historical, and fictional women seeking power are regularly portrayed as scheming, destabilizing, and dangerous figures. This book, building on an already saturated field, adds another popularizing narrative of the Julio-Claudian women into the mix. Guy de la Bédoyère states in his foreword that “even though the only reason the dynasty survived was because of the female bloodline, there has not, to this author’s knowledge, been any attempt to write a narrative history of the period in terms of the women of the imperial Julio-Claudian family and their milieu” (p.x). His endnote for this statement however, betrays this bold statement. In it, he cites three books that do, for the most part, exactly that.¹ However, de la Bédoyère’s focus on the primary sources (the endnotes predominantly contain only the ancient source reference and rarely add engagement with scholarly discussions of those passages) makes it difficult to determine to what extent other secondary scholarship and these more popularizing narratives have informed and influenced his own narrative.

The introduction largely details the issues with any attempt to reconstruct the history of this period and especially the actions of the women. Many of the warnings here are familiar to scholars and, although he raises many important issues regarding how far we can trust sources when reconstructing narratives, he largely ignores many of his own warnings in subsequent chapters. To illustrate this point, compare his warning of whether or not we can trust quoted letters, using Aulus Gellius as an example on p.13, and his use of that same letter to prove his point about Augustus’ intentions for Gaius and Lucius on pp.109-110.

The first chapter aims to provide some of the background for the presentation of women in historical sources. de la Bédoyère here acknowledges that female virtue and positive portrayals of women in the ancient sources are linked to specific expectations of how women are to behave. He even recognises that there are also many literary tropes at play in the representation of particular women. However, as with the ignored warnings from the introduction, the later narrative chapters gloss over the possibility of a literary characterisation of these women and instead chooses to present them as acting in exactly the way that the ancient sources record.

¹ Burns, J. 2007. *Great Women of Imperial Rome: Mothers and Wives of the Caesars*. Routledge.
Freisenburch, A. 2010. *The First Ladies of Rome: The Women Behind the Caesars*. Jonathan Cape (both include more than just the Julio-Claudian women).
Chrystal, P. 2015 *Roman Women: The Women Who Influenced the History of Rome*. Fonthill.

de la Bédoyère's stated purpose is to write a narrative history of the Julio-Claudian period through the lives of the empresses and other imperial women. The main body of the text is thus divided into nine chapters, titled both with a date range and the name of a particular Julio-Claudian woman (or in some cases women). This organisation lends itself to confusion and repetition. The most obvious of these is the digression about Agrippina the Elder and Germanicus as well as the Sejanus affair which take up almost half of the "The Dowager Empress and Matriarch: Livia" chapter from which Livia herself is largely absent. Agrippina then gets her own chapter which focuses more on the later period of her life following the death of Livia (and this chapter continues the narrative up to 41 CE, eight years after Agrippina's death, and ends with a discussion of Caligula's relationship with his sisters). In addition, at times the narrative reads more like a modern summary and retelling of Suetonius, Tacitus, and Dio, rather than a presentation of how the women of the imperial family shaped the dynasty.

Although flagged in the foreword and introduction, the epilogue, with its focus on the Severan women (specifically Julia Soaemias and Julia Mamaea) seems strange and out of place. It attempts to draw a connection to how these women's power built on the foundations created by the Julio-Claudian women while minimizing the importance of women for the intervening dynasties. It is also unfortunate that the production quality of the book also falters in this section with pages appearing to be smudged and out of focus.

The major issues with the presentation of ancient sources aside, this volume contains some helpful resources for both scholars and a more public audience alike. Unlike many other more popularizing narratives, de la Bédoyère goes beyond the traditional literary sources to include engagement with statuary, art, and coinage. Much of this engagement suffers from a similarly uncritical approach, but their inclusion does raise the profile of some of these extremely important sources for the Julio-Claudian period. The colour plates inserted in the middle of the book are of excellent quality and showcase many of these important visual sources. Appendix 2 comprises family trees which focus on a particular female member of the imperial family's descendants rather than tracing the emperors' lineage. In addition, the first four family trees (of Octavia – by her first and second marriages, of Livia, and of Julia the Elder) help guide the reader through the confusion of names and relationships presented throughout the book. Likewise the glossary of names and other appendices are a valuable resource for readers as the sheer volume and similarity of names can be extremely overwhelming even for scholars who work in this area.

Intended for a popular audience, this work will most likely frustrate scholars in this field as the use of sources is uncritical and misleading. Yet, for a popular audience, I believe that many readers will find this work equally confusing and problematic. The repetition of events and the organisation of the work exacerbates the issues associated with the same, or similar, names being used for individuals within and spanning generations. The author's choice to also narrate familial

connections within larger narratives rather than directing readers to the helpful family trees in the appendices evokes further frustration (for example the paragraph on Messalina's lineage on pp.177-8).

In conclusion, scholars looking for a quick reference guide to the ancient sources which discuss particular events or individuals from the Julio-Claudian period will find the endnotes a useful resource, but will likely be irritated with the treatment of those sources and the narrative. Readers hoping for a presentation of how these women "made imperial Rome" must look elsewhere. Anyone looking for a new or revised examination of the role of Roman imperial women will be disappointed. This book does little more than summarize the main literary sources, privileging particular narratives over others where contradictions or discrepancies arise with limited discussion of why one narrative was chosen over another, and obfuscating the historical narrative of the period by presenting many of the common literary tropes for the characterisation of women in positions of power as historical fact.

GWYNAETH MCINTYRE
UNIVERSITY OF OTAGO