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Portraits, Plots, and Politics: "Damnatio memoriae" and the Images of Imperial Women

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Source: *Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome*, Vol. 46 (2001), pp. 41-93

Published by: [University of Michigan Press](http://www.press.umich.edu) for the [American Academy in Rome](http://www.aarome.org)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4238780>

Accessed: 03/05/2013 13:46

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informal, if equally destructive, approach in which formal senatorial sanctions were largely disallowed, but *de facto* measures were tacitly enacted.⁶ Often, condemned imperial males are declared enemies of the Roman state, as was explicitly the case with Nero, Commodus, Pescennius Niger, Clodius Albinus, Plautianus, Geta, Macrinus (and his son Diadumenianus), Maximinus Thrax (and Maximus), Aemilian, and Maxentius.⁷ Cleopatra is the only woman who appears to have been charged with being a *hostis*, and this is almost certainly the result of her threatening position as foreigner and queen.⁸ The tragedy *Octavia*, which details the downfall and condemnation of Nero's first wife, questions the possibility or propriety of even using such a politically charged term as *hostis* against a woman.⁹

Ultimately, political condemnations are expressed concretely in mutilated, transformed, or warehoused portraits, effaced inscriptions, altered historical reliefs, and even damaged coins. Indeed, *damnatio memoriae* inexorably altered the record of Roman material culture and artistic production. While the important impact of *damnatio* on portraits of condemned emperors, especially in regard to the recarving of marble likenesses in the first century A.D., has been amply explored in recent scholarship, disentangling the historical narrative of condemned imperial women is infinitely more complicated because of imposed silences or deliberate misrepresentations of failed plots in which these women were complicit.¹⁰ Female political transgression is almost always veiled by Roman authors in the rhetorical topoi of alleged sexual misconduct. Nevertheless, as S. Wood has astutely noted, conspiracy and adultery can be closely linked and need not be mutually exclusive.¹¹ However, the concrete remnants of Roman condemnations, as preserved in deliberately disfigured or reconfigured marble portraits, erased inscriptions, and other altered commemorative monuments, provide an alternative, visual narrative and can help restore the lacunae in the historical sources. In fact, there was no gendered response to the negation of images, and the visual representations of condemned women were generally treated in the same manner, and for the same political reasons, as those of their male counterparts.

Missing or disfigured portraits and effaced honorific inscriptions constitute the negative trail of physical evidence left by the process of suppressing memory and as a result can be difficult to evaluate. Nevertheless, portraits that have been intentionally mutilated as a result of *damnatio* can be distinguished from images that have suffered incidental damage caused by the passage of time, natural disasters such as earthquakes or fires, the hazards of medieval lime kilns, and other kinds of postantique reuse. Incidental damage is usually random and can occur anywhere on a portrait. Intentional defacement, on the other hand, is almost always concentrated on the sensory organs, destroying the eyes, nose, mouth, and sometimes the ears, but leaving the rest of the image intact and still legible. In some cases, traces of the

⁶ Suet. *Claud.* 11.3; Dio 60.4.5–6; Vittinghoff 1936, 102; Jucker 1982, 110; Barrett 1990, 177.

⁷ Suet. *Ner.* 49.2; Dio 74.2.1; *SHA Comm.* 18.3–5; *SHA Sev.* 8.13; *SHA Pesc. Nig.* 5.7; *SHA Sev.* 10.2; *SHA Clod.* 9.1; Dio 75(76).16.2–5; *SHA Sev.* 14.7; Herodian 4.8; *SHA M. Ant.* 1.1; Eutr. 8.19; Dio 79(80).2.6; *SHA Max.* 15.2; *SHA Gord.* 11.1, 7–10; *SHA Max. Balb.* 1.4; Aur. Vict. *Caes.* 31.3.

⁸ Dio 50.4.4; Plut. *Ant.* 60.1.

⁹ *Octavia* 865–866; Bauman 1996, 89–90 cites Tacitus

(*Ann.* 6.10: *Quia occupandae rei publicae argui non poterant*, “since women could not be accused of seizing the state”) as evidence for women not being charged with seizing supreme power and hence being declared *hostes*. In the broader context of the passage, however, Tacitus is perhaps being both ironic and rhetorical.

¹⁰ Bergmann and Zanker 1981; Jucker 1981a; Pollini 1984; Kinney 1997; Flower 1998; Stewart 1999; Hedrick 2000; Varner, ed., 2000.

¹¹ Wood 1999, 38–39. See also Barrett 1996, 20–21.

the process of condemnation has crucial repercussions for the development of the visual iconography of imperial women from the Augustan through the Constantinian periods. Ironically, the physical evidence for these condemnations reaffirms the vital political significance of imperial women and demonstrates that male ancient historians promulgated a gendered dialogue of suppression and distortion.¹⁴

1. Collateral Condemnations

Collateral *damnationes*, in which likenesses of imperial women were removed, destroyed, or disfigured together with those of the condemned emperor, were common occurrences. During the first century, the memories and monuments of two empresses, Milonia Caesonia and Poppaea Sabina, were condemned in conjunction with those of their husbands, Caligula and Nero. Milonia Caesonia became Caligula's fourth and final wife at the end of A.D. 39 or early in A.D. 40; she may have been pregnant at the time of the marriage and bore the emperor one daughter, Julia Drusilla, in A.D. 40.¹⁵ Both Caesonia and Drusilla were assassinated together with Caligula during the *Ludi Palatini* on 24 January A.D. 41.¹⁶ Caesonia is one of only three empresses, murdered together with the reigning emperor, whose assassinations are recorded in the ancient sources.¹⁷

Caligula was succeeded by his uncle Claudius. Upon his accession, Claudius did not permit the Senate to formally condemn Caligula.¹⁸ He did, however, allow the images of his predecessor to be removed from public display and his name erased in inscriptions, constituting a *de facto damnatio*.¹⁹ At the same time, any portraits that had been produced of Caligula's last wife and infant daughter would have been removed. And indeed, there are no surviving sculpted portraits of either Caesonia or Julia Drusilla, and Caesonia's name is erased in inscriptions.²⁰ Caesonia's own illustrious familial connections through her mother Vistilia to

¹⁴ See Kampen in Kleiner and Matheson, eds., 1996, 14; Wood 1999, 261.

¹⁵ On Caesonia see Plin. *HN* 7.5.39; Suet. *Calig.* 25.3; Dio 59.28.7; Joseph. *AJ* 19.190; Raepsaet-Charlier 1987, 454–455, no. 550. On Drusilla see Suet. *Calig.* 25.3–4; Dio 59.28.7; Raepsaet-Charlier 1987, 376, no. 438.

¹⁶ Suet. *Calig.* 59; Dio 49.29.7; Joseph. *AJ* 19.190–200; Wiseman 1991; Hurley 1993, 214–215.

¹⁷ The other two empresses, Julia Soemias and Julia Mamaea, were murdered with their sons, Elagabalus and Severus Alexander.

¹⁸ Suet. *Claud.* 11.3; Dio 60.4.5–6; Vittinghoff 1936, 102; Bleicken 1962, 104–105; Rollin 1979, 165; Jucker 1982, 110; Barrett 1990, 177; Varner, ed., 2000, 96.

¹⁹ Dio 60.4.5 reports that Claudius allowed the portraits of Caligula to be removed at night.

²⁰ Cagnat 1914, 173. As a result of Caesonia's relatively brief tenure as empress, and Drusilla's extreme youth, likenesses of the mother and daughter were probably not

produced in large quantities. However, Caligula's obvious affection for his wife (Suet. *Calig.* 25.3) and pride in his infant daughter (Suet. *Calig.* 25.4; Dio 49.28.7) would have ensured that their portraits were, in fact, disseminated in the last year of his reign, A.D. 40. Caesonia's portrait has been identified on a coin from Carthago Nova in Spain, where she is associated with *Salus Augusta*; Sear 1988, 110, no. 624 with fig. The attempt by Fuchs 1990, 107–114 to identify a sardonix cameo in Paris (Bibliothèque Nationale, Cabinet des Médailles; see Megow 1987, 40–41, 303–304, no. D 39, pl. 18.1) as representing Milonia Caesonia, Julia Drusilla, and the goddess Roma is unconvincing. The identification of the portrait as Agrippina Minor and Nero, with Roma, seems much more likely (Trillmich 1983, 22–26). Despite the evidence of Rubens's seventeenth-century engraving of the cameo, the child emerging from the cornucopia is clearly male, and the physiognomy and hairstyle of the main female figure finds close parallels in numismatic and sculpted portraits of Agrippina Minor, as pointed out by Wood 1992, 230–231, fig. 11; 1995, 467–470; and 1999, 305–306, fig. 133. Ghedini 1987, 197–203 has also tentatively identified Caesonia on a sardonix alabastron in Berlin (Staatliche Museen). Ghedini further proposes that the alabastron