

MESSALINA – OR: ONCE YOUR REPUTATION IS RUINED ...

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ABSTRACT *This article examines the construction and persistence of Valeria Messalina's reputation from antiquity to the present, focusing on mechanisms of sexual slander, character assassination, and narrative framing. Beginning with ancient historiography (e.g., Tacitus, Juvenal, Suetonius), the study shows how female sexuality was repeatedly mobilized to explain political dysfunction and to shift responsibility away from imperial structures. The article then traces the afterlife of these narratives in modern historiography, literature, film, comics, and digital media, demonstrating how Messalina became an enduring cultural shorthand for immoral female power. Drawing on gender-critical and reception-history scholarship, the paper argues that Messalina functions less as a recoverable historical individual than as a discursive figure shaped by patriarchal, moralizing, and class-based anxieties that continue to shape both scholarly and popular interpretations.*

KEYWORDS

MESSALINA, ROMAN EMPRESSES, CHARACTER ASSASSINATION, FEMALE SEXUALITY, HISTORIOGRAPHY, RECEPTION HISTORY

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HISTORY REPEATING?

If one were to string together all the modern and ancient prejudices against the Roman empress Messalina into a list of adjectives, it would likely read as follows: sexually promiscuous, adulterous, nymphomaniacal, seductive, sexually manipulative, immoral, influential, scheming, dominant, vengeful, murderous, morally corrupt. Some of these are timeless and still appear today in all sorts of press articles: In 2010, Carla Bruni, the wife of the then-French president, was vilified in an Iranian newspaper as a prostitute who deserved to die after she spoke out in support of an Iranian woman sentenced to death by stoning. The ultra-conservative Iranian newspaper Kaihan, which is widely regarded as having close ties to the regime in Tehran, wrote that Bruni had had several illicit relationships and was responsible for the failure of French President Nicolas Sarkozy's second marriage. Bruni was an immoral woman, a prostitute, and deserved to die. This orchestrated smear campaign was quite obviously primarily politically motivated.¹

In 2012, Bettina Wulff, the wife of the then-German president, sued media companies, television presenters, and Google. As a result, five-figure damages in some cases had to be paid. Members of her husband's party had spread rumors that she had worked as an escort before her marriage to the conservative politician. The lawsuit against Google was intended to prevent terms such as "red-light past" or "escort" from appearing when her name was entered in the search bar because of Google's autocomplete function.²

In 2017–2018, reports circulated that the First Lady of the United States had worked as an escort. Melania Trump filed a lawsuit – specifically against the Daily Mail – seeking \$150 million and was ultimately awarded approximately \$3 million in damages for defamation.³ Various magazines were forced to retract or correct their reports, but even today, so-called "investigative books" with titles such as "From the Whore House to the White House" are still circulating on the internet. Legal disputes surrounding a book by author Michael Wolff, in which he writes about connections between Melania Trump and Jeffrey Epstein, have recently come to light. The case stemmed from Wolff's allegations about Melania Trump, which she rejected as untrue and defamatory and countered with a defamation lawsuit. Although Wolff's counterclaim was dismissed on procedural grounds, a court ruling on whether his statements were in fact defamatory or protected by freedom of speech is still pending.⁴

¹ BBC News: "Carla Bruni attacked by Iranian newspaper", <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-11141301>.

² BBC News: *Google autocomplete and Bettina Wulff*, <https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-19542938>; Reuters: *Germany's former first lady fights escort rumours*, <https://www.reuters.com/article/business/germany-s-former-first-lady-fights-escort-rumours-idUSL5E8KAARF/>; Rhein-Zeitung: *Biografie Bettina Wulff: Die offenerherzigen Aufzeichnungen einer unglücklichen First Lady*, https://www.rhein-zeitung.de/biografie-bettina-wulff-die-offenerherzigen-aufzeichnungen-einer-ungluecklichen-first-lady_arid-482345.html.

³ BBC News: *Melania Trump sues over escort allegations*, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-39575680>; Courthouse News Service: *Melania Trump settles defamation suit against Daily Mail*, <https://www.courthousenews.com/melania-trump-settles-defamation-suit-daily-mail/>.

⁴ Michael Wolff: *Chasing Melania*, <https://michaelwolffnyc.substack.com/p/chasing-melania-how-to-sue-the-first>; Courthouse News Service: *Melania Trump wins dismissal of Michael Wolff's anti-SLAPP suit*, <https://www.courthousenews.com/melania-trump-wins-dismissal-of-michael-wolffs-anti-slapp-suit/>.

Sexual allegations are exploited in political battles and used as weapons to harm opponents. Often these allegations are baseless, but not always: Beatriz Zamora López was the wife of Ricardo Jiménez Oreomuno and during her husband's third and final presidency. She was a controversial figure at the time because she had worked as a prostitute prior to her romance and marriage to Jiménez.⁵

When it comes to men and their (alleged) affairs, they often get off more lightly. This list could be extended indefinitely, but Silvio Berlusconi quickly comes to mind as a prime example of a man whose numerous affairs were forgiven and who ultimately emerged from the trials unscathed. Now that we're on the subject of leaders in Italy, it's worth taking a look at history – in this case, that of the Roman Empire. As an ancient historian, even without the relevant memes, one regularly thinks of its most prominent women and men, knowing full well that they are only the famous tip of the iceberg, but precisely those about whom we can make statements thanks to the relevant sources. The focus of this article is on the fourth Roman emperor, Claudius, and his entourage.

It is not easy to characterize Claudius in a few sentences; he was an idiosyncratic, unusual figure as emperor (Besl, 2025; Eck, 2002; Levick, 2015; Osgood, 2011). After Caligula's assassination in 41 AD, the Senate debated for several days whether, after some 70 years of imperial rule, it might not be better to return to a republic, but the emperor's bodyguards, the Praetorians, quickly took matters into their own hands and proclaimed the last remaining male representative of the family as emperor. This was surprising for several reasons: Claudius suffered from physical impairments (Suet. Claud. 2; 3; 30–31) that made him appear unsuitable for public office in the eyes of the Roman upper class.

Physically – and, according to some authors, mentally as well – disabled, he was treated with contempt as a child and kept away from the public by his family. From childhood onward, he was said to have been fearful and cowardly, indulging in gluttony and excessive drinking, dice games, and adultery. He was also said to have been prone to outbursts of anger and cruelty.

For this reason, he was long underestimated and marginalized by his family and the political elite. This isolation led him to devote himself intensively to his studies, particularly history and literature. During his 13 years as emperor, he sought to demonstrate that, despite his disabilities, he was just as capable in foreign policy as he was in economic policy, administrative reorganization, and much more. Modern ancient historians such as Dieter Timpe note that Claudius simply did not meet the "role expectations" of his people (Timpe, 1994, p. 35). For the Roman population, especially the aristocracy, such an appearance and demeanor were not befitting an emperor.

Both his contemporaries and future generations criticized him, not least because of his marital circumstances. He was married four times, and his third wife, Messalina, and his fourth wife, Agrippina the Younger, were particularly controversial – so much so that

⁵ Q Costa Rica: *Beatriz Zamora López: From prostitute to First Lady of Costa Rica*, <https://qcostarica.com/beatriz-zamora-lopez-from-prostitute-to-first-lady-of-costa-rica>.

even in ancient times, the words of the historian Cassius Dio (Cass. Dio 61.30.6) made the rounds, according to which Claudius allowed himself to be enslaved by his wives and executed his two sons-in-law because of them. The following discussion focuses on one of these fascinating women, namely Messalina.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF MESSALINA

Messalina came from an old, prominent Roman family (Cargill-Martin, 2023, pp. 42–44, 51–53; Strothmann et al., 2006). At the age of about 15, she married her uncle Claudius, who was nearly 50 years old, at a time when she could not have hoped that her husband would ever become emperor, because Caligula was still much too young and Claudius was a highly unlikely candidate to succeed him (Cargill-Martin, 2023, pp. 44–45, 77–82). The marriage produced two children, a daughter named Octavia and a son named Britannicus. Her position in the state and society changed abruptly with the assassination of Caligula and her husband's accession to the imperial title: cities and communities now celebrated her birthday, and she was allowed to take part in a triumphal procession (Suet. Claud. 17.3). Her image was minted on coins alongside her husband's. She felt she had reached the pinnacle of her power, even though she was never officially permitted to bear the title of Augusta (Cass. Dio 60.12.5; Cargill-Martin, 2023, p. 128). Both were criticized for choosing their own advisors, who, unlike in the past, did not come from long-established aristocratic families but were freedmen – and thus former slaves – on whose counsel both preferred to rely. But this is not the reason for a paper with this title.

Messalina is said to have lived the life of a nymphomaniac like hardly any other woman in history. Cruelty, seduction, prostitution, orgies, and a reputation for both promiscuity and political intrigue are typical accusations leveled against her by ancient authors (Larson, 2014, p. 268). She even persuaded other high-ranking women (and men) to join in, according to authors such as Juvenal, Pliny the Elder, Tacitus, Suetonius, Pliny, Cassius Dio, and Aurelius Victor. Worse still, her envy of younger, prettier women led to the targeted murders of these women, and rejection by men led to the same result.

Juvenal (55–128 AD), the satirist, paints a detailed, extremely biased picture of the empress in about 20 lines:

Satires, 6.115–132: Then take a look at the rivals of the gods; listen to what Claudius had to put up with. When his wife realized her husband was asleep, she would leave, with no more than a single maid as her escort. Preferring a mat to her bedroom in the Palace, she had the nerve to put on a nightcap – that whore of an empress. Like that, with a blonde wig hiding her black hair, she went inside a brothel reeking of ancient blankets to an empty cubicle – her very own. Then she stood there, naked and for sale, with her nipples gilded, under the trade name “She-Wolf,” putting on display the belly you came from, noble-born Britannicus. She welcomed her customers seductively as they came in and asked for their money. Later, when the pimp was already sending his girls away, she left reluctantly, waiting until the very last moment to close her cubicle,

still burning with her clitoris inflamed and stiff. She walked away, exhausted by the men but not yet satisfied, and, a disgusting creature, her cheeks filthy from the smoke of the lamp, she carried the stench of the brothel back to the emperor's couch.

Tacitus (56–120 AD), the historian, writes in his *Annals* (Book 16): Rome was harmed under her and by her. In scandals such as those surrounding Poppaea and Mnester, he accuses her of destroying her rivals as well as of jealousy, greed, and unscrupulousness. She allegedly employed professional spin doctors and spun intrigues (Hausmann 2009, 149-151). Suetonius (69–122 AD), the biographer and archivist with a penchant for sensational exaggerations, reports similar things.

Cassius Dio (165–235 AD), the historian, writes about 100 years later (Book 60): Messalina, “the most depraved and lustful of women,” envied younger, prettier women. She accused them of adultery. She and the freedmen had manipulated Claudius. She also encouraged other women to “join in” and “imitate” her (60.14.3; 60.18.1–4).

Aurelius Victor (320–390 AD), the late antique historian, wrote (4.5): Claudius was led astray by the “arts of seduction” of his wife Messalina and also of his freedmen, to whom he was completely subservient. This led to misdeeds – and to “things that only the lowest scum of women and slaves are capable of committing when their husband and master is insane.” [...] “But when he had been dragged into depravity through the enticements of his wife, Messalina, and at the same time of his freedmen, to whom he had subordinated himself, not only were tyrannical acts committed, but also whatever the worst sort of women and slaves are capable of, if their husband or master is a fool. [...] Driven to even greater atrocities by this, she had forced certain women of the nobility, both married and unmarried, to act as prostitutes alongside her, like common whores, and men were made to participate. [...]”

In the most famous story, which would have a lasting negative impact on their reputation for centuries to come, Pliny the Elder, a contemporary of Claudius and Messalina (23/24–79 AD), reported a very special competition (Natural History, 10.83 (172)): “Claudius Caesar’s consort Messalina, thinking that this would be a truly regal triumph, selected for a competition a certain maid who was the most notorious of the professional prostitutes, and beat her in a twenty-four-hour contest, with a score of twenty-five.” The de facto empress of Rome as the winner of a 24-hour sex marathon? It does, however, fit into the picture painted by all these texts, in which Messalina is reduced to being a woman driven by her libido.

Yet there is also another side to Messalina. She should not be reduced to these more or less immoral aspects; one episode in particular deserves special consideration.

In 48 AD, Messalina had begun an affair with a young man from one of the most important families, Caius Silius. Although both were married, they are said to have entered into marriage themselves. This misalliance became politically and personally problematic, above all because Messalina gave her lover gifts from the joint property she shared

with Claudius. The emperor had Silius arrested and, shortly after a brief trial, executed. Other prominent members of the equestrian class were also executed under the same circumstances (Cargill-Martin, 2023, pp. 19–29; Krüpe, 2011, pp. 169–171; Panoussi, 2018, pp. 214–215).

This story has given rise to much speculation: from a dynastic perspective, it was reckless, as Messalina's son, Britannicus, was considered the most promising successor to the reigning emperor. Claudius may have forgiven Messalina for an affair, but he could not accept a public marriage in front of witnesses due to his already waning authority. Silius and Messalina must have known this. Such a marriage meant that one of the two men at Messalina's side was one too many, and one is inclined to believe that this was seen by contemporaries as preparation for the overthrow of Claudius. In other words, high treason. And even if one or two details raise questions about the seriousness of the "coup," Claudius at least had to view and assess it that way, according to the accounts of his confidants – even if he may have spared Messalina by a hair's breadth (Levick, 2015, p. 66; Meise 1969, pp. 152–169; Tac. Ann. 11.37.1ff). Pedro Barceló has brought this absurd episode into the present day:

Let us imagine that one of the most prominent statesmen in the world today – say, the President of the United States of America – after a brief stay outside Washington, were to be surprised upon his return to his official residence by the news that the First Lady had married one of his cabinet members with great fanfare. Meanwhile, this 'successor' is about to take over the reins of government in the White House, thereby ousting the incumbent president from the center of power. This scene reminds us of the script of one of those Netflix series that nowadays offer millions of viewers a mix of fact and fiction for entertainment. If this event were presented to us as serious news, we would probably take note of it with disbelief and file it under 'that can't be true,' then at best smile and not believe a word of it. (English translation, original quotation in German (Barceló, 2025, p. 177))

After her execution, the Senate – not the emperor – decided on her *damnatio memoriae* (condemnation of memory), a set of measures intended to erase the memory of an individual from public life. The implementation of her *damnatio memoriae* can be traced through various inscriptions. Tacitus writes that the Senate helped Claudius forget Messalina by deciding to erase her name and remove her statues from private homes and public places (Hahn, 1994, pp. 176–178; Tac. Ann. 11.38.3). "Oblivion was ordered by the Senate," writes Alexander Demandt (1997, p.106). "The future should know nothing of the shame associated with the name of the outlawed." (Demandt, 1997, p. 106). Claudius, for his part, also seemed to have had a strong interest in having his wife's name removed from official texts, because – aside from personal motives that may have existed on the part of the freedmen in his entourage and on the part of the emperor himself – the court scandal had damaged his authority and his reputation. It is not without reason that Juvenal writes, almost sympathetically, that Claudius had to endure his wife's behavior. Joan Smith has pointed out that he was the first emperor to order the murder of his current wife (2024, p. 191).

CHARACTER ASSASSINATION

If we look at the whole matter from the perspective of character assassination, we must note that Messalina was accused in particular of debauched and immoral behavior (nymphomania, numerous extramarital affairs, working in a public brothel, sex contests). She was said to have been scheming and cruel (murders of political opponents and rivals; personal acts of revenge, abuse of power) – and she was accused of high treason. If we compare these accusations with our reference work on character assassination, *The Routledge Handbook of Character Assassination*, we can identify the clusters typical of character assassination: name-calling, making allegations, ridiculing, exposing, disgracing, and erasing (Icks & Shiraev, 2014, p. 4; Samoilenko et al., 2020, pp. 11–24). What is fascinating, however, is that unlike some forms of modern character assassination, this one did not focus on the target's lifetime and perhaps a brief period thereafter but has continued to this day.

The exclusively male ancient authors and the predominantly male voices on Messalina from the last 2,000 years or so construct – indeed, portray – her as a selfish monster who murders both men and women. For Joan Smith, Juvenal's portrayal of Messalina is a pornographic male fantasy in which the *meretrix Augusta*, the “prostitute queen” (incidentally, a term of abuse used by Augustan historians for Cleopatra), dons a blonde wig before indulging in her vice (Smith, 2024, p. 162). For her, Messalina is a prime example of victim blaming: a young woman who tried to find her place within the narrow confines of a male-dominated society became the victim of femicide – and, posthumously, a sexual projection screen that would fuel male fantasies for centuries to come (Smith, 2024, p. 192).

Modern historians emphasize more than ever that authors such as Tacitus, in particular, deliberately manipulated their readers (Hausmann, 2009, p. 160; Panoussi, 2018, pp. 211–212, 223) in order to portray Messalina as a “sexual monster” driven by her urges and passions, who was capable of genuine human feelings such as compassion, but always suppressed them when they stood in the way of her long-term goals. Tacitus's portrayal of Messalina is intended, on the one hand, to serve his narrative strategies – not least as a critique of this branch of the Julio-Claudian family – and, on the other hand, to cement hierarchies. He also presents her as a counterpoint to Agrippina the Elder, whom he portrays as the quintessential Roman woman (Tac. Ann. 1.69): chaste, courageous, caring, and family-oriented. Messalina is none of these things.

For Sandra Joshel, however, the situation is more complicated; in Tacitus's narrative, sexuality, power, and violence cannot be separated from one another. To rationalize Messalina's sexuality as mere “political strategy” is indeed too simplistic. According to Joshel, one cannot simply classify her female desire as either pathological or completely rational; that would be thinking within patriarchal patterns of interpretation. In Tacitus's account, Messalina is a discursive figure who embodies female desire, imperial power, moral decay, and political powerlessness. Her sexuality takes the place of political analysis, her body serves as a projection screen for imperial fears, and her political engagement is both necessary and silenced (Joshel, 1997, pp. 222–239). This attempt to reconstruct

the multifaceted Messalina must remain unsatisfactory due to a lack of other sources, but given the heavily biased historical accounts, it is difficult to get close to the “real” Messalina. We have no letters or even diaries. The veil of history therefore allows only a few glimpses – an all too often frustrating realization for historians.

Messalina’s character assassination, however, brings to mind another: that of Cleopatra. She was accused of similar things to Messalina, not least the sexually charged accusation of having been a “royal whore” – a portrayal that persists all the way to Bertolt Brecht’s *The Threepenny Opera* and beyond. The character assassination of Cleopatra is primarily attributable to the massive propaganda campaign waged by Augustus. During the late Republic and early Empire, defamations of women quite clearly served, in particular, as attacks on the men associated with them (Droß-Krüpe, 2021, p. 85; Grimm, 2006; Nebelin, 2011, pp. 36–39; Thurn, 2018, pp. 139–140). Yet the narrative is just as powerful as in the case of Messalina.

AND TODAY?

The character assassination of Messalina, which began during her lifetime, has continued for nearly 2,000 years. We are not only referring to ancient authors – who are more accessible than ever thanks to various modern translations – but also to “medical” terms such as the “Messalina complex”: The diagnosis of “compulsive sexual behavior” was added to the WHO’s *International Classification of Diseases* (ICD-11) in 2019. In such cases, the term “hypersexuality” is also used. Unfortunately, ancient authors and their biased accounts are not suitable as medical reports, but their descriptions reveal recurring patterns in which female sexuality is equated with political intrigue, moral decay, and destructive power – as exemplified by the figure of Messalina.

But we are also talking about books, novels, images, memes, reels, shorts, comics, and films that reinforce a very specific, very one-sided image of Messalina – or attempt to tell the story from the perspective of the “victim” without corresponding ancient sources:

Prosper Castanier, *L’Orgie romaine* (1897), Félicien Champsaur, *Messaline* (1890), Nonce Casanova, *Messaline. Roman de la Rome impériale* (1901/1902), Alfred Jarry, *Messaliné* (1901), Louis Dumont, *La Chimère. Pages de la Décadence* (1902), Félicien Champsaur, *L’Orgie latine* (1903), Alfred Schirokauer, *Messalina* (1910/1928), Robert Graves, *I, Claudius* (1934), Robert Graves, *Claudius the God* (1935), Alfred Duggan, *Three’s Company* (1954), Michael DuBois, *A Modern Messalina* (1968), Michael Grant, *Messalina* (1970), Jean d’Ormesson, *La Gloire de l’Empire* (1971), Allan Massie, *Claudius* (1989), Fiona Buckley, *Messalina: Empress of Rome* (1999), Birgit Furrer-Linse, *Valeria Messalina – Kaiserin von Rom* (2020) – a list of novels that is by no means exhaustive.

Some of these more or less successful novels will be briefly discussed below, as they exemplify the directions in which the topoi became established: Alfred Jarry (1873–1907) was a French writer, playwright, and avant-garde theorist who became famous primarily

as the “inventor” of “pataphysics” (“the science of imaginary solutions”). He belongs to a literary milieu encompassing Dadaism, Surrealism, and the theater of the absurd, whose work is characterized by grotesque exaggerations and parodies, as well as by the systematic questioning of authority, morality, and historiography. He deliberately distorts historical material and uses obscenity as an aesthetic device. It is not without reason that *Messalina* appeared in the German edition (1971) as part of the *Bibliotheca Erotica et Curiosa* series, which brings together a large number of erotic and sometimes pornographic works. In the foreword to the German edition by René Massat, it is stated – not without reason either – that Jarry always drew upon other authors when his primary sources, Juvenal and Tacitus, had gaps. According to Massat, Jarry was ahead of his time in distinguishing the historically verifiable account from the narratives transmitted by the ancient authors. This claim must be strongly contested for several reasons, but ultimately the novel uses Messalina merely as a projection screen for more or less explicit sexual anecdotes set within a framework already predetermined by Tacitus, Juvenal, and others.

Alfred Schirokauer (1880–1934) was a German writer, screenwriter, and film director who, from 1900 onward, worked as a writer alongside his career as a lawyer. *Messalina* (1910/1928) is one of a whole series of biographical novels he wrote. Schirokauer's novel, set in Caligula's Rome, is morally unrestrained, featuring a Messalina who is initially youthful and innocent, whose later reputation as the embodiment of female lasciviousness is contrasted here. Rome appears as a place of mass violence, sexualization, and sadistic power – a resonance chamber in which Messalina's personality only gradually becomes visible. His Messalina evolves from a youthful, almost transcendental beauty – who does not desire Caligula herself but is desired by him – into a seductress. She is initially a projection screen for collective longings and desires, although Schirokauer signals early on in the text that this beauty also possesses power: power over men, the people, and the masses.

The still youthful Messalina initially manages to fend off Caligula's advances, but he breaks her resistance and that of her parents. Within his circle, Messalina is sexualized, crossing the line from the seduced to the seductress – although Schirokauer does not allow any moral judgments to influence his text. His Messalina reflects all the contradictions that we can still discern today in ancient authors and modern interpretations: self-confidence and ignorance, pride and coming of age, goddess, empress, and later, whore. Her reputation takes on a life of its own; she is constantly reinterpreted. The text does not portray Messalina as a “wicked” character from the outset, but rather as a projection screen for predominantly male social desires. Her beauty, innocence, and first stirrings of sensuality are politicized and sexualized in a morally distorted environment. Her later reputation is not morally justified, but socially constructed. Messalina defines herself – albeit rarely – in defiance of social prejudices and is, in our understanding, a thoroughly “modern,” self-confident woman in the public eye.

Despite these tendencies, other versions took the opposite approach: the “contemporary” Messalina in Michael DuBois's *Messalina* (1968) is also self-confident, but driven by her lust: “Savage sex and sadism in this tale of a nymphomaniac who sapped men of their manhood in her frantic quest for sexual fulfillment.” [...] The ‘Messalina’ in the

following story is a woman with this kind of unending and insatiable sexual craving, and the pathology of this aberration is clearly evident in the portrayal of her character. She is brutal, unfeeling, concerned only with her own pleasure – which she never finds for long.” The allure of traditional clichés was apparently too powerful – or perhaps the potential sales figures were higher as a result.

Admittedly, novels (and films) are allowed to do something that historians are not allowed to do – but would sometimes like to do – namely, to move away from a well-founded factual situation toward alternatives, toward fiction. A novelist is not a historian. Both describe historical events, but with different interests. Fictional texts such as those presented above can offer different – and sometimes better – approaches to contexts, patterns, and behaviors than other works. At the same time, however, they always carry the risk of presenting their content and characters indiscriminately as historical truths and distorting history. In principle, (almost) anything goes in this genre: one may deviate from historical reality, but it must remain recognizable and comprehensible to readers. Fiction may lie, but it must not deceive (Noordervliet, 2008; Prange, 2009; von Brand, 2013, p. 147).

The cinematic adaptations of the material took similar directions early on. She has been portrayed in films since the beginning of the 20th century, with pithy poster quotes such as “Empress of Love in an era of sin!” (*The Affairs of Messalina*, 1951; Dir. Carmino Gallone) or “The most wicked woman” / “If Caligula were a woman, she would be Messalina!” (*Messalina*, 1960; Dir. Vittorio Cottafavi). In addition to these, Tinto Brass’s scandalous 1979 film adaptation *Caligula*, based on the book by Gore Vidal and financed by Penthouse for good reason, is particularly noteworthy. But *Messalina, Messalina!* (1977), directed by Bruno Corbucci, and *I, Claudius* (1976), the BBC television series which was based on Robert Graves’ immensely popular 1934 novel, also set standards in the media portrayal of Messalina.

Anja Wieber has devoted herself intensively to films about Messalina and has demonstrated that she has been a popular heroine (!) since the silent film era, but that at the turn of the 19th to the 20th century, she transformed from a femme fatale into a “vamp.” Based on her extensive research into the immensely influential *I, Claudius* – which was marketed both as a book and as a BBC production – it becomes clear that feature films also found their way into documentaries, meaning that their impact extended not only to tabloid culture but also to academia, education, and the mainstream alike. The advertising slogan for the 13-part series, “The family whose business it was to rule the world,” not only reduced a complicated story to a comparatively simple slogan, but also reduced its protagonists (Junkelmann, 2000, p. 113; Wieber 2021a, pp. 276–277).

In countless adaptations, the film *Messalina* follows the models of ancient authors, but is sometimes Christianized, sometimes exoticized, and in any case more sexualized than ever before due to influences from painting, fiction, and opera (Cargill-Martin, 2023, p. 1; Smith 2024, pp. 165–167; Wieber, 2021a, p. 289). What is fascinating is the insightful analysis in recent portrayals that Messalina’s sexuality grants her tremendous power in these film adaptations – and that she is well aware of it. Joan Smith has also pointed out

that *I, Claudius* is effective in part due to Sheila White's powerful performance – and that the book and film must also be interpreted as the misogynistic fever dream of Ranke-Graves, who was obsessed with his ideas about women's needs (Smith, 2024, p. 24). In her view, the women of the Julio-Claudian dynasty deserve a better, fairer, and more modern appreciation. This cannot be denied, but even after 2,000 years, these narratives remain enormously powerful, as we can see in this and other genres. 185 issues of the comic series *Messalina* were produced between 1966 and 1974, most of them featuring explicit covers. The series belongs to the genre of so-called "fumetti neri/erotici" and features fictional plots set against the backdrop of ancient Rome. Here, Messalina is a thoroughly powerful bisexual (!) woman at the side of an indisposed husband (Carlà, 2014). Staying with the genre: in a total of six hardcover volumes, Jean-Yves Mitton created a comic epic for adults between 2011 and 2016. He combines historical context, political intrigue, and erotic imagery in a series that is deliberately positioned as a graphic novel for adults, but of course also draws on clichés and motifs from ancient authors as well as those from the aforementioned books and films. In the famous BBC series *I, Claudius*, Messalina is portrayed by Sheila White – and later made her way onto the fan site "Female Villains"⁶, "devoted exclusively to female villains (i.e., villainesses) found in fictional media, such as movies and TV shows, as well as comics, video games, and even literature."

In addition, we now see reels and shorts on relevant video sites that, thanks to AI, reproduce traditional clichés more than ever, but we also find things like a lascivious tin figure in the style of fantasy characters. Or a table dance club in Stuttgart (Germany), which, for unknown but obvious reasons, chose this Roman empress as its namesake.

HISTORY REPEATING ITSELF

There is a German proverb that is thought to have originated in the 20th century and that serves as the title for this article and which could be translated roughly as follows: Once your reputation is ruined, you can live quite freely. If one views Messalina as a victim, as a prisoner of a patriarchal system, one will not be able to agree with that. If one reduces her behavior to the purely sexual and attributes irrational decisions to her, certainly not either. However, that falls short.

As unpredictable as Messalina may seem when reading the ancient authors and their works uncritically, modern research finds much more logic in her actions. No, she wasn't "good." Too many murders, too much cheating, too many intrigues – even if we concede the exaggerations and biases of ancient authors, who were more interested in perpetuating their own narratives than in providing historically accurate accounts. Modern research does not deny that Messalina's motives could have been partly sexual or driven by jealousy. But we must tip our hats to her political acumen and instinct, for she was the most powerful woman in the Roman Empire for about a decade (Bauman, 1994, p. 172). Unfortunately, it is still difficult to determine where the historical tradition

⁶ Formerly known as *EvilBabes Wiki*: https://femalevillains.fandom.com/wiki/The_Female_Villains_Wiki; see also Cargill-Martin (2023, p. 9).

needs to be corrected, but it is quite clear that the extremely negative characterizations, in particular, need to be questioned (Eck, 2002, p. 105). In the case of some supposedly arbitrary murders, there are strong indications of concrete – perhaps even necessary – political motives.

And no, she is not a feminist role model. She operated within the patriarchal system and used it against her rivals. She also had to constantly defend or strengthen her own position. There were dangerous rivals – attractive women closer to the imperial family – and her position was not entirely secure. Nor were those of her children (Cargill-Martin, 2023, p. 10; Joshel, 1997, p. 230).

There is no truly convincing evidence to support the characterization of Messalina as the “whore of Rome” or “the empress of lust.” We should no longer view her merely as an adolescent nymphomaniac. It should also be noted that the claim that Claudius was controlled by Messalina and his freedmen is a malicious exaggeration, intended less to discredit her than to discredit him, the emperor. Every emperor who acted responsibly relied on advisors. Claudius chose different people than Augustus or Tiberius. The emperor’s trust in certain advisors was based primarily on competence and loyalty, and not so much on social rank. For members of the “old elites” from the senatorial or equestrian classes, this was an affront (Levick, 2015, p. 119). They feared a loss of power and control, a fear that manifested itself in several assassination attempts, which in turn led to the executions of members of the senatorial and equestrian classes – according to Suetonius, the total number of those executed ultimately exceeded 300 (Suet. Claud. 29.2). This dissent with the political elite and the mutual distrust are also reflected in historiography, because all of those male historians, biographers, and poets came from these classes. Thus, not only do we have a profoundly masculine veil over our texts and authors, but also one of class arrogance and bias. It is possible that one or two authors also had in mind the bon mot attributed to Cato the Elder, who is said to have remarked that women would be superior to men as soon as they were treated as their equals (Cato in Liv. 34.3).

And last but not least: sex sells ... even in antiquity. And still today. The posthumous, trans-epochal character assassination persists; the clichés prove resistant, and any modern historical analysis struggles against them. Yet moral standards have long since shifted. To revisit the story of the alleged rivalry between a well-known prostitute and the empress one last time: In 2025, we discussed internet phenomena such as the English woman who, as part of a self-promotion campaign, claimed to have had sex with over 1,000 men within 12 hours (!) and subsequently received an award from the adult entertainment website Pornhub.⁷ Any scandalization of women from antiquity in this regard pales in comparison to such proportions. In light of this, the 2,000-year-old narrative of outrage should actually fall silent – unless one wishes to continue legitimizing male dominance through such examples.

⁷ Tia Billinger, known professionally as Bonnie Blue: <https://web.archive.org/web/20260213132626/https://www.thetimes.com/life-style/sex-relationships/article/bonnie-blue-interview-1000-men-normalisation-porn-dd6rcq8gqhttps://www.imdb.com/de/title/tt37738006/>;

But that's not the case, the outrage and scandal just won't die down. It's still just too tempting to pigeonhole Messalina as a femme fatale. However, we must constantly remind ourselves that we consume our historiographical coffee through a thick layer of male traditions and prejudices.⁸ Or, as Anja Wieber (Wieber, 2021b, p. 512) put it, powerful women in antiquity are either killed or domesticated or erotically disarmed or narratively delegitimized. Especially in films, these women are not portrayed as ancient protagonists, but as projection screens for fear of female power or criticism of monarchy, or as focal points for contemporary gender debates (Wieber, 2021b, p. 504).

Therefore, it is more important than ever to be aware of the limitations of these traditions and their authors. Beware of unreliable narrators. More than ever, we should therefore give voice to genuinely female perspectives – their inner views, their perspectives. And their view of history. Not in the sense of exclusivity, but in the sense of a deliberately polyphonic chorus. It is not without reason that, in addition to timeless male fantasies, we also have very modern, feminist projects such as the BBC production *Mothers, Murderers and Mistresses: Empresses of Ancient Rome* (2018), featuring the scholarly expertise of ancient historian Catharine Edwards (Birkbeck College, University of London). Together with Honor Cargill-Martin's *Messalina* and Joan Smith's *Unfortunately, She Was a Nymphomaniac*, these and other works cited in this article paint a more nuanced picture of Messalina today – one that stands in contrast to the lustful, Peeping Tom perspective of the past 140 years or so. But of course, it cannot bridge the 2,000-year gap or overcome the massive male bias in our sources and authors – a bias that, thanks to modern algorithms and AI-based "reconstructions," will likely persist into the future whenever we ask, "Who was Messalina?" The historical, real Messalina is barely recognizable behind these "filters" on our lens.

Historical comparisons are almost always flawed – and it makes no sense to compare Messalina with the "modern" women mentioned at the beginning. Yet they all have one thing in common. In societies that are, in each case, heavily male-dominated, they become the targets of character assassination, sexualized and degrading ad hominem attacks, and are treated as supposedly powerless pawns of male actors, some of whom are unknown. These attacks are well documented. However, we should not assume that all these women – or Messalina, whose "power" likely rested on far more than just beauty and sex – were inevitably powerless or victims. If we are aware that the smear campaign against her continues, we can recognize and expose modern media projections and the perpetuation of old prejudices for what they are – regardless of the example. And if we succeed in doing this with Messalina, we may be able to do the same now and in the future in other cases and with other women (and men). Then history will truly teach us something.

Perhaps we would be disappointed if we met her. And perhaps it is therefore quite fortunate for the field of ancient history that time travel is still not only fiction, but science fiction.

⁸ As Honor Cargill-Martin (2023, p. 9) observes, "Messalina's vilification is the best introduction you can get to the dangers of navigating womanhood within the misogynistic patriarchy that we call the birthplace of Western civilization, rationality, and liberty. But the anxieties about a powerful woman – worse, a young powerful woman, worse yet, a young powerful sexual woman – that seep, palpably, from every sentence written about Messalina, are more than just a good introduction to the realities of ancient prejudice." The continuing popular reception of Messalina is also illustrated by *The Female Villains Wiki* (formerly *EvilBabes Wiki*).

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MESALINA ILI KAD JE REPUTACIJA JEDNOM UNIŠTENATA...

Florian Krüpe

SAŽETAK U ovom se radu istražuju izgradnja i postojanost ugleda Mesaline (lat. Valeria Messalina) od antike do danas, s posebnim naglaskom na mehanizme seksualnog klevetanja, uništavanje reputacije i narativnog uokvirivanja. Polazeći od antičke historiografije (primjerice, Tacita, Juvenala i Svetonija), studija pokazuje kako se ženska seksualnost opetovano koristila za objašnjavanje političkih disfunkcija i preusmjerenje odgovornosti s carskih struktura. U radu se potom prati daljnji život tih narativa u modernoj historiografiji, u književnosti, na filmu, u stripu te u digitalnim medijima. Pokazuje se kako je Mesalina postala trajna kulturna oznaka za nemoralnu žensku moć. Oslanjajući se na rodno-kritička istraživanja i studije povijesti recepcije, u radu se tvrdi da Mesalina funkcionira manje kao povijesna osoba čiji se stvarni lik može rekonstruirati, a više kao diskurzivna figura oblikovana patrijarhalnim, moralizatorskim i klasno utemeljenim strahovima, koji i dalje utječu i na znanstvena i na popularna tumačenja.

KLJUČNE RIJEČI

MESALINA, RIMSKE CARICE, UNIŠTAVANJE REPUTACIJE, ŽENSKA SEKSUALNOST, HISTORIOGRAFIJA, POVIJEST RECEPCIJE

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