SATIRE IN THE *HISTORIA AUGUSTA*

By

SHAWN GAIUS DANIELS

A DISSERTATION PRESENTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL OF THE UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA

2013
Matri meae
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First, I would like to thank my advisor, Dr. Victoria Pagán. When I began to read the *Historia Augusta* in the Summer of 2010, I was struck most by its humor. Dr. Pagán recommended that I turn to Northrop Frye and his *Anatomy of Criticism* to find a theoretical basis on which to understand the role of humor, and it is there that I found a definition of satire that took me on the road to the present work. A large portion of the bibliography and the majority of the organizational structure came from the many conversations we held over the past three years. Without her unflagging support and invaluable advice, this project would not have been completed.

I owe many thanks to Dr. Trevor Luke, of Florida State University. He found time, even at conferences, to speak with me individually about my research—once even driving down from Tallahassee to discuss a rough draft he had read the week before. His penetrating questions and moral support have kept me critical of my own work. I would also like to thank the other members of my committee, Dr. Andrew Wolpert, Dr. Kostas Kapparis, and Dr. Terry Harpold for sparing their time to help see that I accomplish this task.

I would like to thank several former teachers and professors for helping bring me to this point. Dr. Jeannette Marchand taught me how to be a proper scholar who could identify flaws in my own thinking and accept criticism from others. Dr. Bruce Laforse let me create an independent study and then served as the instructor for a year when the department could not fund an upper-level Greek course. Dr. Rebecca Edwards helped demystify the process of writing academic papers. She is also the one who recommended that I apply to the University of Florida when I began looking at graduate schools. Dr. Robert Hatch gave me constant material and mental support and
introduced me to a fascinating era of the Latin language even later than that of the
*Historia Augusta*. Mr. Jeff Mesko was the first to introduce me to the Latin language,
and it was his enthusiasm and sense of fun that convinced me to pursue the Classics as
a field. Finally, Mrs. Linda Breidenbach recommended, as far back as the fourth grade,
that I take Latin in high school. I am happy that I took her advice.

I must thank the various friends and acquaintances who have ensured that my
sanity remained (relatively) intact over my years in graduate school, the colleagues who
have supported my preposterous effort to rehabilitate the *Historia Augusta*, and my
family, who have cheered me on from afar. Above all, I want to thank all those who own,
operate, and frequent the Midnight. It has proven a haven countless times, providing
refuge and support in all my various trials in Gainesville.

Most of all, I wish to thank my mother, who has given me all the love and
encouragement I have needed and more. I could not even conceive of being where I am
right now if not for her. This dissertation is a testament to everyone who has influenced
me, and thus my research.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

| ACKNOWLEDGMENTS                                    | 4 |
| LIST OF TABLES                                     | 8 |
| LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS                              | 9 |
| ABSTRACT                                          | 11 |
| INTRODUCTION                                       | 13 |
| The *Historia Augusta*                             | 13 |
| Date                                              | 15 |
| Authorship                                         | 22 |
| Purpose                                            | 25 |
| Historical Setting                                 | 27 |
| SATIRE AND THE *HISTORIA AUGUSTA*                  | 33 |
| Biography and History                              | 34 |
| Academic Approaches to Satire                      | 40 |
| Formal Satire                                      | 43 |
| Menippean Satire                                   | 51 |
| Parody                                             | 57 |
| The Satiric                                        | 59 |
| FOOD, SEX, AND JOKES                               | 61 |
| Food                                               | 61 |
| Catalogues                                         | 66 |
| Sex                                                | 68 |
| Humor                                              | 76 |
| NARRATIVE AMBIGUITY                                | 86 |
| Internal Ambiguity                                 | 87 |
| Intermediate Ambiguity                             | 93 |
| External Ambiguity                                 | 95 |
| RELIGION IN THE *HISTORIA AUGUSTA*                 | 114 |
| Christianity in the *Vita Alexandri Severi*        | 118 |
| Christianity in the Rest of the *Historia Augusta* | 123 |
| Deification                                        | 127 |
Sacrifice ........................................................................................................................................... 132
Divination ........................................................................................................................................ 139
The Importance of Religion? ........................................................................................................... 144

POLITICAL APORIA .......................................................................................................................... 145

Nomen Antoninorum ....................................................................................................................... 148
Child Emperors ............................................................................................................................... 159
Senatorial Acclamations .................................................................................................................. 165

CONCLUSIONS ................................................................................................................................ 174

LIST OF REFERENCES ..................................................................................................................... 181

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH .................................................................................................................. 190
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1-1</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Important data concerning the *Historia Augusta*.
## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Full Name</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AEL.</td>
<td>Aelius</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ALEX. SEV.</td>
<td>Alexander Severus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AMM. MARC.</td>
<td>Ammianus Marcellinus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ANT. PIUS</td>
<td>Antoninus Pius</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AUR. VICT.</td>
<td>Aurelius Victor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AUREL.</td>
<td>Aurelianus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AVID. CASS.</td>
<td>Avidius Cassius</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CARAC.</td>
<td>Caracallus (Caracalla)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CARUS</td>
<td>Carus et Carinus et Numerianus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CASS. DIO</td>
<td>Cassius Dio</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CIC.</td>
<td>Cicero</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CLAUD.</td>
<td>Claudius</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CLOD. ALB.</td>
<td>Clodius Albinus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COMM.</td>
<td>Commodus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DIAD.</td>
<td>Diadumenus (Diadumenianus)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DID. IUL.</td>
<td>Didius Iulianus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ELAGAB.</td>
<td>Elagabalus (Heliogabalus)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GALL.</td>
<td>Duo Gallieni</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GORD.</td>
<td>Tres Gordiani</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HA</td>
<td>Historia Augusta</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HADR.</td>
<td>Hadrianus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HEROD.</td>
<td>Herodian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HOR.</td>
<td>Horace</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I.G.</td>
<td>Inscriptiones Graecae</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abbreviation</td>
<td>Full Name</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------</td>
<td>-----------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JUST.</td>
<td>Justin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JUSTIN.</td>
<td>Justinian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JUV.</td>
<td>Juvenal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MACR.</td>
<td>Macrinus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MARC.</td>
<td>Marcus Aurelius</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MAX.</td>
<td>Maximus et Balbinus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MAXIMIN.</td>
<td>Duo Maximini</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OLD</td>
<td>Oxford Latin Dictionary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PERS.</td>
<td>Persius</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PERT.</td>
<td>Pertinax</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PESC. NIG.</td>
<td>Pescennius Niger</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PROB.</td>
<td>Probus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>QUAD. TYR.</td>
<td>Quadrigae Tyrannorum (Firmus, Saturninus, Proculus, and Bonosus)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SEV.</td>
<td>Septimius Severus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SUET.</td>
<td>Suetonius</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TAC.</td>
<td>Tacitus (Historian)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TACIT.</td>
<td>Tacitus (Emperor)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TYR. TRIG.</td>
<td>Tyranni Triginta (The Thirty Tyrants)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VAL.</td>
<td>Duo Valerian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VERG.</td>
<td>Vergil</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Dessau recognized that, despite its claims, the *Historia Augusta* was written towards the end of the fourth century CE by a single man. This thesis has guided almost 125 years of scholarship, yet the ambiguity that permeates the *Historia Augusta* has left it without a fitting, or even coherent, interpretation. It has been described as panegyric for the emperor Julian, anti-Christian polemic, pro-pagan apology, or a trivial literary trifle that somehow survived the centuries. The *Historia Augusta* demands a single argument that can explain its eccentricities. The answer is satire.

Verse satire and Menippean satire were the primary exponents of the genre in antiquity, and the *Historia Augusta* shares much with them. Verse satire was scathing and erudite, Menippean satire exhibited ribaldry and poetic indulgence. Even parody, satire’s cousin, shares the collection’s silliness and generic inversion. The *Historia Augusta* demonstrates traces of all these genres but defies a precise label. To analyze its satiric content, we need to determine the commonalities of satire and explore their role in the *Historia Augusta*. These generic tropes are a fixation on the quotidian, narrative ambiguity, and a central critique that ultimately leaves the reader in a state of
aporia. These elements pervade the Historia Augusta and make it a generic pastiche, nominally biography but fundamentally satiric.

The Historia Augusta exhibits quotidian themes in its delight at demonstrating the sexual and gastronomic depravities of its emperors; in its constant puns and humor; and in its parody of biography, which emphasizes the personal over the political. The many inventions, both about itself and its subjects, imbue the Historia Augusta with deep ambiguity. These prove the presence of satire but not its meaning. The Historia Augusta briefly treats religion, but its aporetic effect is minimal compared with politics. There one sees ineffectual and corrupt emperors, a senate capable only of abject servility, and no hope for change. Devoting a work to meaningless institutions fosters aporia, but the Historia Augusta does not wallow. It offers a novel solution to this inexorable cycle of futility: laughter.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

The Historia Augusta

An analysis of the satiric elements in the Historia Augusta clarifies many of the long-standing problems that plague this 4th century CE collection of biographies. Although long viewed as haphazard biography or inferior history, the Historia Augusta uses elements of different satiric genres to hyperbolize the absurdities of its era. If one recognizes that the lies and exaggerations that fill the Historia Augusta lend it a satiric tone, then it becomes possible to appreciate it on its own terms as a critique of the social and political collapse in the late fourth century.

The collection, attributed to six authors who wrote at the turn of the fourth century,\(^1\) contains biographies of the emperors Hadrian through Carinus and Numerianus, although it might have included lives of Nerva and Trajan.\(^2\) Before Dessau’s groundbreaking 1889 article “Über Zeit und Persönlichkeit der Scriptores Historiae Augustae,” scholars treated the biographies like a philological puzzle. They freely emended the (admittedly problematic) text or mined the collection for whatever historical facts they could find, accepting what was not patently false.\(^3\) Yet similarities

---

\(^1\) Following the convention of Syme 1968, I will refer to the invented authors with double quotes. The six authors and their vitae are “Aelius Spartanus”: Hadriani, Aelii, Didii Iuliani, Severi, Pescennii Nigrii, Caracalli, Getae; “Julius Capitolinus”: Antoninii Pli, Marci Aurelii, Veri, Pertinacis, Clodii Albini, Opillii Macrini, Duorum Maximinorum, Trium Gordianorum, Maximi et Balbini; “Vulcacius Gallicanus”: Avidii Cassii; “Aelius Lampridius”: Commodi, Diadumeniani, Elagabali, Alexandri Severi; “Trebellius Pollio”: Duorum Valerianorum, Duorum Gallienorum, Tyrannorum Triginta, Claudii; “Flavius Vopiscus”: Aureliani, Taci, Probi, Quadrigarum Tyrannorum, Cari et Carini et Numerianii.

\(^2\) If the work is a continuation of Suetonius, then it should begin with Nerva. No trace of these biographies survive, however, and the theory on which their existence rests is speculative; see Momigliano 1954, 24; Meckler 1996.

\(^3\) E.g., Richter 1850, Mommsen 1878, Cornelissen 1883. Ballou 1914 summarizes the nature of early scholarship on the Historia Augusta and many of the textual problems. See Table 1-1 for a summary of contents.
exist within this supposedly heterogeneous group that deserved more careful examination. The first group of biographies, up to Elagabalus, follows a rough pattern of biography and subsidiary biography, or Nebenvita—the life of the full emperor, styled Augustus, followed by a biography of a secondary Augustus or an emperor-designate, given the title of Caesar. The main-series vitae are generally factual, but after the Vita Elagabali, fabrications begin to predominate. Paradoxically, this stark difference in historicity prevented any challenges on the apparent date and authorship of the work. It looks like a haphazard compilation of mediocre biographies. Dessau revolutionized the study of the Historia Augusta by suggesting that a single man wrote the work almost a century after its apparent date. All subsequent scholarship has emanated from Dessau's work, leading to the three major debates that have plagued the Historia Augusta: 1) When was it composed? 2) How many men wrote it? 3) What was its purpose? While others have answered the first two questions, I will provide a brief history of the problems to support the foundation on which my dissertation will rest. This project will focus on the third question.

Much modern scholarship still draws from the Historia Augusta whatever historical nuggets its outrageous biographies contain. Its value lies in its coverage of the “Crisis of the Third Century,” a tumultuous period which few other sources discuss. As a consequence, the inherent attributes of the collection—its lies, its humor, its literary character—have received little attention. One need only look at the state of the Historia

---

4 Syme 1971, 54-77. The information for the Nebenvitae comes almost entirely from the preceding biography. Syme 1968, 175-6, argues that the Vita Veri, the biography of Hadrian's short-lived co-regent, should not be relegated among the inferior lives.

5 E.g., Jones 1964, 37-76; Barnes 1967; Baldwin 1985; Burgess 1993; McLynn 1996, 316; Alston 1994, 114; Linderski 2003, 253-5.
Augusta Colloquium: once dedicated exclusively to the biographies, it has now broadened its scope to Late Antiquity generally to compensate for the decline in interest in its namesake. This indifference is the largest gap in modern scholarship on the Historia Augusta, and one which this project will begin to bridge.

Date

The Historia Augusta claims a composition under the reigns of Diocletian and Constantine (284-337 CE). The various “authors” directly address both emperors and offer dedications to notable men of the early fourth century. Before Dessau, nobody questioned these claims. Dessau, however, noted a number of peculiar features. First, passionate praise of Constantius Chlorus, which Dessau argued could not occur until after his principate ended in 306 CE; second, the use of Eutropius and Victor as sources; and finally, nomina which belonged to families only prominent in the late fourth century recur throughout the lives. The most important of these indications is the “Probus Oracle,” a passage from Vita Probi towards the end of the collection in which “Vopiscus” predicts resurgence for the Probus family—although his age has not yet seen it. In Late Antiquity, many men named Probus began to hold high positions in

---

6 Rohrbacher 2011.
7 Magie 1921, xi-xv details the attributions.
8 Dessau 1889, 339-44.
9 Dessau 1889, 361-74 argues against the use of a common source.
10 Dessau 1889, 374-8.
11 Dessau 1889, 355-9. HA, Prob. 24, Posteri Probi vel odio vel invidiae timore Romanam rem fugerunt et in Italia circa Veronam ac Benacum et Larium atque in his regionibus larem locaverunt. sane quod praeterire non potui, cum imago Probi in Veronensi sita fulmine icta esset ita ut eius praetexta colores mutaret, haruspices responderunt huius familiae posteros tantae in senatu claritudinis fore ut omnes summis honoribus fungerentur. sed adhuc neminem vidimus, posteri autem aeternitatem videntur habere non modum, “The descendants of Probus fled from the Roman republic, either because of hatred or fear of ill-will, and set themselves in Italia, around Verona and Benacus and Larium and in these areas. I could
government and society, bearing out the prophecy. Dessau recognized that the prophecy could not have been so accurate by chance—it must have been written after the renaissance of the great family, which did not begin until the last third of the fourth century. All indications suggest that the biographies were composed well into the fourth century CE, long after the traditional date.

The greatest virtue of Dessau’s methodology was that he did not rely upon subjective literary criticism but used his knowledge of the prosopography of the later empire to demolish the traditional date of the History August. Nevertheless, his article sparked an immediate controversy among contemporary scholars. Seeck and von Domaszewski sought to place the History August even later; Wolflin tried to disprove Dessau.12 Mommsen gave the most important response. Although he acknowledged that Dessau had incontrovertibly proven the existence of post-Constantinian traces in the History August, he could not reconcile such innovation with the long-standing tradition. He challenged Dessau by providing his own textual analysis; whereas Dessau focused on prosopography, Mommsen examined the collections usage of military titles and concluded that the biographies must have dated to the reigns of Diocletian and Constantine.13 Furthermore, the History August uses the term aureus for gold coins, yet Constantine minted a new coin, called the solidus.14 If, as Dessau argued, the

---

12 Seeck 1912, von Domaszewski 1918, Wolflin 1891.
13 Mommsen 1890, 231-42.
biographies were written long after the introduction of the *solidus*, one would expect to find that term denoting gold coins; since Mommsen found that *aureus* predominated, he believed that the biographies must have predated the new mint.\(^{15}\) Yet this still did not resolve the Theodosian traces which Dessau identified. To solve the dilemma, Mommsen conceived of two editors who compiled the *Historia Augusta* after the putative composition of the biographies. The first editor brought the various *vitae* together and interpolated his own comments, giving Mommsen an explanation for the stylistic similarities which existed across the six authors; the second *Redacteur* wrote under the emperor Theodosius.\(^{16}\) He inserted the Probus Oracle and features belonging to the end of the fourth century, and thus Mommsen explained the Theodosian traces which Dessau proved. Though a tendentious argument, it managed to uphold the core of the conservative view.

Neither Dessau nor Mommsen predominated at first, but in time the progressive arguments of Dessau began to eclipse those of Mommsen. Dessau had the advantage of explaining every peculiarity of the lives with a simple, albeit unorthodox, thesis. Mommsen, meanwhile, ignores the fraudulent nature of the *Historia Augusta*—when it abounds in lies, why should it concern itself with the minutiae of numismatics or military titles?\(^{17}\) The theory of the *Redacteurs* is hard to maintain. Although Mommsen argues

---

\(^{15}\) Mommsen 1890, 242-3.

\(^{16}\) Mommsen 1890, 273-8.

\(^{17}\) Mommsen 1890, 242-3 notes two mentions of *solidi*: HA, Alex. Sev. 39.8 *sed cum non potuisset per publicas necessitates, confluì eòs iussit et tremisses tantum solidosque formari*, “...but since he was unable [to mint quarter-*aurei*] because of the needs of the state, he ordered them to be melted down, and for only third-*aurei* and *solidi* to be made;” 39.10 *atque ex eo his materiae nomen inditum est, cum diceret plus largiendi hanc esse imperatori causam, si, cum multos solidos minores dare possit, dans decem vel amplius una forma triginta et quadraginta et centum dare cogeretur*, “and because of that [removing Elagabalus’ coins from circulation], they were given the name of their material, since he said that it was an inducement to the emperor to bestow greater largesses if, when he could give many smaller *solidi*, by
for the conservative argument better than any other scholar of the *Historia Augusta*, he cannot challenge the elegance of Dessau’s basic argument.

By the 1920s, Dessau’s influence had permeated scholarship so thoroughly that none could doubt the falsehood of the traditional date; nevertheless, conservative scholars wanted to retain as much as they could. Magie agreed with Dessau that the *Historia Augusta* could not belong to early decades of the fourth century, yet rejected the Theodosian dating. Likewise, Baynes argued for a compromise date, the mid-fourth century, and declared that the *Historia Augusta* was an encomium to the emperor Julian. Baynes demonstrated that none of Dessau’s arguments demanded a date in the late fourth century, yet he failed to prove his own date or disprove Dessau’s. Instead, he imposed a political interpretation which required a mid-fourth century date. Although his book offers insight into some motifs which recur throughout the biographies and rescues the *Historia Augusta* from the literary Kloake into which Mommsen cast it, the thesis does not hold.

The 1960s saw a renewed interest in pinpointing the date of the biographies’ composition. Cameron found seven allusions to Juvenal scattered throughout the *Historia Augusta*. Juvenal, and in fact all “Silver” Latin authors, had disappeared for

---

18 Magie 1924, vii-viii, xxx-xxxi.
19 Baynes 1926, 18.
20 Baynes 1926, 110. For the *Historia Augusta* as “eine Kloake,” see Mommsen 1890, 252.
much of the principate but enjoyed a revival of popularity at the end of the fourth century. These two facts further support Dessau’s thesis, to the detriment of Baynes’. Syme also took up the argument, using Dessau’s prosopographical methodology but comparing the names in the Historia Augusta not only to inscriptions, but also to a dateable literary work: the History of Ammianus Marcellinus. Syme first established Ammianus’ date—he appears to have completed Book 25 by 392 CE—then demonstrated at length that, in the Quadrigae Tyrannorum, the Historia Augusta betrays a number of parallels with Book 15 of Ammianus. In these passages, the author invents persons who, according to surviving records from the early fourth century, do not exist. These fabrications have odd similarities to actual events in Ammianus. To cite one example, Ammianus mentions a banquet held by a certain Africanus, governor of Pannonia, at which guests discussed with hope a prophecy of governmental change and were subsequently arrested for their overly free speech. The Historia Augusta,

22 Cameron 1964, 367-9; Cameron 2011, 399-420. Amm. Marc. 28.4, remarks that Juvenal is one of the popular texts among the upper classes of Rome: Quidam detestantes ut venena doctrinas, Iuvenalem et Marium Maximum curatore studio legunt, nulla volumina praeter haec in profundo otio contractantes, “Some men, scorning learning like poison, read Juvenal and Marius Maximus with rather intense passion, dealing with no texts besides these in their tremendous leisure.”

23 Syme 1968, 22.

24 Syme 1968, 25-71, summary on 68.

25 Amm. Marc. 15.3.7-9, inter has quaestionum suppliciorumque species diras, in Illyrico exoritur alia clades, ad multorum pericula ex verborum inanitate progressa. In convivio Africani, Pannoniae secundae rectoris, apud Sirmium poculis amplioribus madefacti quidam, arbitrum adesse nullum existimantes, licenter imperium praesens ut molestissimum incusabant; quibus ali optatam permutationem temporum adventare, veluti e praesagiiis affirmabant, non nulli maiorum augurio sibi portendi, incogitabili dementia promittebant. E quorum numero… comitatum principis…ita acriter inflammavit, ut sine deliberatione ulla Africanus, et omnes letalis mensae participes, iuuberentur rapi sublimes, “Amid these foul sorts of inquisitions and executions, there arose in Illyricum another doom, which went to the point of endangering many because of the foolishness of their words. At a banquet held by Africanus, rector of Pannonia Secunda, certain men, made drunk by excessively full cups, thinking that no judge was present, freely criticized their current regime as extremely vexing; some of them, as though giving an oracle, declared that the hoped-for change would come in time, yet others with unbelievable foolishness vowed that it was
meanwhile, in the controversial Letter of Hadrian (one of the many forgeries in the collection), records the emperor sending wine-cups to a friend, but advising him to “take care that our Africanus not use them too freely.” The name Africanus saw little usage in Hadrian’s day, further suggesting that the Historia Augusta did not invent but borrowed, perhaps unconsciously, from the greater historian. The agglomeration of details within such a narrow compass suggests Ammianus’ influence upon the biographies, and thus a terminus post quem of the late fourth century CE.

A date at or around 395 has taken hold in studies of the Historia Augusta. The introduction to the Vita Probi echoes the introduction to the Jerome’s Vita Hilarionis, dated to the 390. Recently, Cameron has challenged Syme’s dating. He rejects the idea that allusions in the text must point to the last decade of the fourth century, unconvinced by the evidence for the later authors who are thought to appear. He also points out that many of the historical events to which the Historia Augusta supposedly alludes were not exclusive to 390s, but to the latter half of the fourth century generally. The Probus Oracle predicts resurgence for the Probus family, which Sextus Petronius Probus had fulfilled by 371. The critique of child emperors, a motif of the Historia

prophesied to them by an ancestral oracle. From among their number, an informer so bitterly outraged the attendants of the emperor that, without any hearing, Africanus and all those who shared in the fatal meal were ordered to be snatched up.”

26 Syme 1968, 60-5.
27 HA, Quad. Tyr. 8.10, ...caveas tamen ne his Africanus noster indulgenter utatur.
29 Paschoud 2012 offers a systematic critique of Cameron 2011. Paschoud’s major complaint is Cameron’s exaggerated and polemical depiction of the history of Late Antique scholarship.
30 Cameron 2011, 746-50.
31 Cameron 2011, 773.
Augusta, readily applies to Gratian, who was sole Augustus in the west in 375, when he was only sixteen.\textsuperscript{32} Most importantly, he argues that scholars have adhered to 395 to support the notion that the Historia Augusta was part of the “pagan reaction” of the late fourth century.\textsuperscript{33} Given that he has proven this reaction to be a literary fiction, the arguments for the date of the Historia Augusta that start from that point also begin to erode.

Cameron’s historical arguments provide a valid counter-argument for the view that the Historia Augusta must date from around 395 CE, but his literary arguments are less persuasive. He assumes that an author learned enough to cite authors as diverse as Jerome, Claudian, and Ammianus would not be such a “bungler” as to expose his own fraudulence.\textsuperscript{34} Yet this assumes that the author wished to hide his identity. His lengthiest argument attempts to establish the priority of the Historia Augusta to Jerome’s Vita Hilarionis, by careful comparison of the texts with their common source, Cicero’s Pro Archia 24.\textsuperscript{35} Cameron argues that, because the Historia Augusta more closely follows Cicero than Jerome, even though both share the same departures from

\textsuperscript{32} Cameron 2011, 751.

\textsuperscript{33} Cameron 2011, 745.

\textsuperscript{34} Cameron 2011, 748.

\textsuperscript{35} Cameron 2011, 764-70. The most important passage for this purpose is Cic., Pro Archia 24, atque tamen <sc. Magnus ille Alexander> cum in Sigeo ad Achillis tumulum adstitisset; “o fortunate, inquit, adulescens, qui tuae virtutis Homerum praecognem invenieris.” et vere: nam nisi ilias illa exstisset, idem tumulus, qui corpus eius contexerat, nomen eius obrisset. Compare with HA, Prob. 1, inde est quod Alexander Magnus Macedo, cum ad Achillis sepulchrum venisset, graviter ingemescens “Felicem te,” inquit, “iuvenis, qui talem praecognem tuarum virtutum repperisti,” Homerum intellegi volens, qui Achillem tantum in virtutum studio fecit quantum ipse valebat ingenio…occidit, pro pudor! tanti viri et talis historia qualem non habent bella Punica, non terror Gallicus; Jerome, Vita Hilarionis 1, Alexander Magnus Macedo, quem vel aes vel pardum vel hircum caprarum Daniel vocat, cum ad Achillis tumulus pervenisset: “felicem te,” ait, “o iuvenis, qui magno frueris praecogn meritorum,” Homerum videlicet significans, porro mihi tanti ac tals viri conversatio vitaque dicendaque est, ut Homerus quoque, si adesset, vel invideret materiae vel succumberet.
Cicero’s text, then the *Vita Hilarionis* must have used the *Historia Augusta* as a source. Others have suggested that the *Historia Augusta* may have compared Jerome and Cicero, but given the complete mystery of the composition of the *Historia Augusta*, it is impossible to prove.\(^{36}\)

The exact date of the *Historia Augusta* will never be decisively known. The latest unambiguous reference Cameron grants is Aurelius Victor, writing in 361; Paschoud, challenging this interpretation, identifies a *terminus post quem* of 369.\(^{37}\) No one can rule out a significantly later date. The arguments that place the *Historia Augusta* in the aftermath of Julian’s death provide a useful counterpoint to the prevailing scholarly view but still need development to surpass the past century of analysis. Thus, for the purposes of this study, I will follow Syme in dating the *Historia Augusta* to roughly 395 CE.

**Authorship**

A related problem is the authorship of the collection. The biographies claim six different authors: “Aelius Spartanus,” “Julius Capitolinus,” “Vulcaci Gallicanus”, “Aelius Lampridius,” “Trebellius Pollio”, and “Flavius Vopiscus,” but Dessau doubted. Both “Julius Capitolinus” and “Aelius Lampridius” supposedly wrote more *vitae* of emperors than those attributed to them in the *Historia Augusta*.\(^{38}\) How, then, did the

---


\(^{37}\) Paschoud 2012, 380 places the *terminus post quem* at 369.

\(^{38}\) HA, Prob. 2.7-8, *et mihi quidem id animi fuit ut non Sallustios, Livios, Tacitos, Trogos atque omnes disertissimos imitarer viros in vita principum et temporibus disserendis, sed Marium Maximum, Suetonium Tranquillum, Fabium Marcellinum, Gargilium Martialeum, Iulium Capitolinum, Aelium Lampridium ceterosque, qui haec et tali non tam diserte quam vere memoriae tradiderunt,* “And indeed, it has been my intention to follow not the Sallusts, Livies, Troguses, and all the most learned men in composing the life and times of the emperors, but Marius Maximus, Suetonius Tranquillus, Fabius Marcellinus, Gargilius Martialis, Julius Capitolinus, Aelius Lampridius, and the others who have handed these and other things down to our memory not so much skillfully as honestly.”
compilation emerge? And why did some individual authors have a twenty-year gap between their dedications? Why did six different men share such idiosyncratic features, like the repetition of unusual phrases and a fondness for puns and other light verbal humor?

Dessau noted a number of similar traits recurrent throughout many the authors: identical phrasing when describing the appetites of a biographical subject, exhortations for the reader to turn elsewhere for cumbersome historical details, and puns on the names of the emperors.\(^39\) The details, although minor, accumulate such that it is likely a single hand composed the biographies. Yet this argument, unlike his argument for the date, had doubts. Again, Mommsen provided the earliest and most important response. In addition to the Theodosian Redacteur, Mommsen also suggested a second editor, this one shortly after the death of Constantine, who compiled and edited the biographical collections of the six authors into the present collection. As the editor selected the lives which would make up the Historia Augusta, he interpolated his own comments, giving the biographies their stylistic similarities.\(^40\) One need not dwell too long here, except to say that this theory, too, perished in time.

Baynes did not argue directly for either single or plural authorship, since it had no bearing on his ultimate thesis.\(^41\) He revealed his underlying assumptions at the end of his book, however, with a potential scenario for the creation of the Historia Augusta: two men, one writing a series of popular biographies, another wishing to flatter the emperor Julian; the latter asks the former to interpolate propagandistic passages and secure

\(^{39}\) Dessau 1889, 381-90.

\(^{40}\) Mommsen 1890, 273-8.

\(^{41}\) Baynes 1926, 73.
patronage for both.\textsuperscript{42} Although Baynes dismissed this explanation for the composition of the biographies, it nevertheless betrays his assumptions on authorship.

Syme subscribed to Dessau’s thesis and added his own contribution to the argument: not just stylistic similarities, but the countless lies and fabrications that occur in all six authors carry an air of scholasticism and reveal a single, playful intelligence behind the whole collection.\textsuperscript{43} Syme’s contributions are sound, but only support the older theory; his concluding thought on the problem? “It is better to surmise the one master hand. Six impostors, that is a fearsome thought.”\textsuperscript{44}

More recent articles in support of the unitarian thesis offer refinements to Dessau’s arguments.\textsuperscript{45} One, however, deserves specific mention. In 1979, using technology previously unavailable, Marriott published “The Authorship of the \textit{Historia Augusta}: Two Computer Studies,” the result of two statistical lexical analyses. In one analysis, by examining the number of words that appear in the sentences (defining “sentence” in such a way as to make the term homogeneous across all editors of the \textit{Historia Augusta}),\textsuperscript{46} Marriott found that the early \textit{vitae}, regardless of author, all plot similarly, while their companion subsidiary lives and the later biographies share similarities in style. They also plot differently against control compositions.\textsuperscript{47} This makes sense, for early \textit{vitae} depended upon reliable sources, while the other two classes are

\textsuperscript{42} Baynes 1926, 145-9.
\textsuperscript{43} Syme 1968, 176-91.
\textsuperscript{44} Syme 1968, 180.
\textsuperscript{45} E.g., White 1967, Adams 1972, Schwartz 1981.
\textsuperscript{46} Marriott 1979, 66.
\textsuperscript{47} Marriott 1979, 68-71.
the author’s invention. The second analysis examines the sentence structure, plotting how frequently the authors use different types of words at the end of each sentence. The authors plot almost identically to one another but differ significantly from the control authors, Ammianus and Aurelius Victor, which lends further credence to single authorship.\(^4\) Sansone challenged Marriott twenty years later by pointing out that, since the manuscripts have no punctuation, the computer models only show that the edition of the *Historia Augusta* in question had one editor. He only cited limited instances of different editors punctuating the *Historia Augusta* differently, however, and no one now doubts the unitarian thesis.\(^4\)

Few have ventured to identify the author of the *Historia Augusta*. Syme surmised a *grammaticus* playing in his idle hours.\(^5\) The name Nicomachus Flavianus has appeared, with some favor.\(^6\) For the purposes of this project, I will assume the single author, although I will forgo attempts to identify or disprove the identity of the author; this study will follow the modern scholarly consensus and assume a single author, but it will primarily examine the effect of his work, for which an understanding of his general milieu (identifiable by his seeming pro-senatorial tendencies) will suffice.

**Purpose**

Since explaining the “why” requires first an explanation of the “who” and “when,” the purpose of the *Historia Augusta* has never been satisfactorily treated or examined. Dessau, like previous scholars, thought the biographies mere bad history; he added the

---

\(^4\) Marriott 1979, 71-4.

\(^5\) Sansone 1990.

\(^6\) Syme 1968, 205-10.

\(^5\) Hartke 1940; Demougeot 1953, 361-82; Chastagnol 1994, clii.
twist that the author falsified the date and pluralized the authorship to give his shoddy composition the veneer of credibility and a greater marketability. Baynes’ entire book attempts to make the Historia Augusta a panegyric of Julian the Apostate. He argues that it is masked propaganda for Julian, since the characteristics of individual emperors echo the Apostate’s official. It is supposed to culminate in the Vita Alexandri Severi which combines them all. His thesis fails to convince, although his argument that the Historia Augusta has a special hatred for child emperors is insightful.

A popular trend in 20th century scholarship has been to argue that the Historia Augusta is covert pagan polemic or a plea to the Christian elite for toleration. Neither of these arguments convince, for they presuppose a level of animosity between paganism and Christianity that has been overstated, and they ignore the deep ambivalence that permeates the Historia Augusta. The most persuasive arguments come from Syme and Cameron. The former notes that many of the lexical oddities which pepper the biographies fit the mindset of a grammarian or a scholiast: elaborate lists of luxuries, numerous puns, stylistic sympathies with Servius and the Juvenalian scholia. While focusing upon the questions of date and authorship, Syme never abandons a quest for meaning. To him, the work stands as the idle amusement of a “rogue scholar.” Cameron sums up the confusion and messiness with complete

52 Dessau 1889, 348, 377. Succinctly stated on 348, “Irgend eine Tendenz verfolgen diese Fälschungen nicht; sie haben im Allgemeinen keinen höheren Zweck als den Raum zu füllen.” To help the book sell, 376.

53 Baynes 1926, 18.

54 Baynes 1926, 57-8.

55 E.g., Straub 1963, Alföldi 1964. See also Fundling 2006, 47-52; Cameron 2011, 745.

dismissal, saying “[t]he author of the HA was a frivolous, ignorant person with no agenda worthy of the name at all.”\textsuperscript{57} Both men strike at important truths about the Historia Augusta while making the error of attributing purpose and motivation to an unknown figure. Syme notes that the author’s humor stands out in the dark age in which he wrote, for he mocks both himself and the entire historical tradition.\textsuperscript{58} Cameron’s nihilism, although overly critical, shares sympathies with the collection’s bleak view of the state of human affairs. A satirical spirit lies at the heart of the Historia Augusta, which the present study will expose.

\textbf{Historical Setting}

The obscurity and misdirection which envelopes the Historia Augusta extends even to the era of its composition: neither antique nor medieval, neither pagan nor Christian, and poorly attested. The narrative ends before the accession of Diocletian (284 CE), whose personal charisma and reorganizational efforts helped stabilize the empire after the so-called “Crisis of the Third Century.” He carved the empire into manageable bureaucratic slices, appointed a second Augustus to help him rule, and designated two Caesares to succeed him and his co-regent. Diocletian did not solve all the problems facing Rome, but he offered peace during his reign and was the first emperor in decades to die in his bed. Soon, the system broke down. Diocletian resigned in 305 CE, compelling his co-Augustus to lay down his position as well. The Caesares, Constantius and Galerius, became Augusti and new Caesares were appointed, biologically unrelated to either of the new emperors. This decision, designed to end a

\begin{itemize}
\item[\textsuperscript{57}] Cameron 2011, 781.
\item[\textsuperscript{58}] Syme 1968, 206-8.
\end{itemize}
century of civil wars, instead created instability. Constantius appointed his son Constantine as *Augustus* after his death, bypassing the appointed *Caesar*; Constantine was removed, but to avoid war, Galerius grudgingly agreed to make him the *Caesar*.

The new scheme for the empire would not last. Soon, a new civil war erupted: Diocletian’s fellow *Augustus* reassumed the purple after his son, Maxentius, declared himself emperor. When Galerius died, Constantine forged an alliance with Gaius Licinius to battle Maxentius; when he was defeated, Constantine soon turned against Licinius and emerged sole ruler of the Roman Empire (325 CE).\(^{59}\) He also emerged a Christian and declared Rome a Christian empire. Although paganism was still officially tolerated, it lost its official sanction and prestige. Constantine was succeeded by his three sons, each of whom took their own share of the empire, with chaotic results: civil war, assassination, and illness took their toll, until only one member of Constantine’s bloodline still remained, Julian. He had already proven himself a capable administrator in the west, and his surviving literary output testifies to his intellect. He also attempted to restore the old gods to their former esteem within the empire, a radical departure from the intolerant reigns of Constantine’s devoutly Christian sons. His brief reign and untimely death are well-documented by the historian Ammianus Marcellinus, but his greatest accomplishment may be in buying paganism a few decades of tolerance before Christianity cracked down and criminalized the old religion.

After Julian’s death in 363 CE a new, albeit brief, dynasty arose. Valentinian, a rustic but tolerant and capable ruler, split the empire with his brother Valens, taking the Western half for himself and giving the eastern half to Valens. When Valens died in 379,

---

\(^{59}\) Jones 1964, 77-83.
the eastern empire was given to Theodosius, who gained nominal rule in 383 when the last of Valentinian’s sons died. Once again, the paucity of rulers created a vacuum which the ambitious sought to fill; Theodosius fended off two usurpers in the West, Magnus Maximus in 388 and Eugenius in 394. Theodosius died five months later, but in his sixteen years of rule he set the cultural tone that would ripen into the Middle Ages. Although paganism was not banned, all sacrifice throughout the empire was. Theodosius also oversaw the destruction of a number of pagan temples, including the Serapeum in Egypt, considered one of the wonders of the world. Christianity had established its dominance.

In 395, Theodosius’ sons assumed the throne, both as evangelistic as their late father. Although history would prove the security of the Theodosian reign, at least in the short-term, no contemporary could see that future. The previous decades and centuries had seen the repeated collapse and renewal of imperial rule, a constant cycle of good, bad, and psychotic emperors. Pagans had found their rights and religion curtailed by increasingly hostile rulers since the age of Constantine, with only Julian’s brief reign restoring to them any official sanction. If Ammianus’ enthusiasm is representative of his entire class, the death of Julian must have been devastating to pagan morale.

60 Jones 1964. For its grandeur, Amm. Marc. 22.16, *His accedunt altis sufflata fastigiis templa, inter quae eminet Serapeum, quod licet minuatur exilitate verborum, atriis tamen columnatis amplissim<u>s, et spirantibus signorum figmentis, et reliqua operum multitudine ita est exornatum, ut post Capitolium, quo se venerabilis Roma in aeternum attollit, nihil orbis terrarum ambitiosius cernat*, “Additionally, temples proud with high peaks, among which shines the Serapeum, which, although it is diminished by the cheapness of words, nevertheless is so adorned with the grandest columned atria, and breathing figures of statues, and with every variety of work that, after the Capitoline, by which ancient Rome makes itself eternal, one may see nothing more ostentatious in the world.”

61 Jones 1964, 170-82.
The emperor was absolute ruler, but he was not omnipotent. By Late Antiquity, power was diffused across three continents; a local magnate or a severe storm held more influence over a man’s life than the emperor or senate. The gradual translation of power from Rome to Constantinople, which effectively created a second eastern empire, reflects the decentralization of the time. Most citizens lived at a distance from the emperor. Even in major cities like Antioch, which the emperor frequently visited, the day-to-day power rested with a massive city council. Court intrigues had no place in a farming village of Gaul; high-level affairs meant less than the historical emphasis on the “big men” of history implies.

The psychology of the late empire was also complicated. The empire was still a symbolic body to people; when communities needed aid, they would turn to the hands of the emperor in the provinces, his local magistrates—and the further from the emperor, the more local they became. For most, life did not expand outside their village. The spirituality of the Late Antique mindset was well-suited to this secular change: the heavenly realm began to predominate in people’s thoughts, perhaps a natural corollary to the decreasing mundanity of religion. Outside of war and the machinations of the court, the power of the emperor was practically negligible. Yet people still saw the empire a major locus of power in their lives. When a community needed something adjudicated with no appeal, the emperor was the figure to whom they appealed and to whom they offered their thanks. An odd dichotomy arises: the

63 Brown 1992, 12.
emperor had little effective power over the daily life of his subjects, and that came to mean less as concern for this world was translated into the next. But when crisis and strife arose in the mundane realm, the emperor was still the traditional power to which one appealed. The rise of a more personal spirituality combined with the diminishing importance of the emperor suggests that citizens of the empire should have turned inward to solve their problems, but the imperial edifice continued to nurse their dependency. The hypocrisy of this contrast may reveal the attitudes that informed the satire of the *Historia Augusta*. In a time of crisis, a functionally independent people would turn to institutions that had proven incompetent. The response to this illogical cult of empire is the *Historia Augusta*, a work that maligns the government at every turn.

To demonstrate the satiric principles of the *Historia Augusta*, we will first explore the nature of ancient satire and its relation to this collection of biographies (Chapter 2). This investigation yields the key elements that suffuse all genres of satire: quotidian themes, narrative ambiguity, and moral exploration. An identification of the presence and character of the first two elements (Chapter 3, Chapter 4) demonstrates the positive presence of satire within the *Historia Augusta*. It is then possible to analyze the role that satire plays in the *Historia Augusta* by considering two of its major themes: religion (Chapter 5) and politics (Chapter 6). Seeing that the main effect of the *Historia Augusta* is not to impart biographical fact but to ridicule the imperial power structure, both the empire and the senate, we can create a more productive and interesting reading for this vexing collection.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Biography</th>
<th>&quot;Author&quot;</th>
<th>Emperors Covered</th>
<th>Reigns</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vita Hadriani</td>
<td>&quot;Aelius Spartianus&quot;</td>
<td>Hadrian</td>
<td>117-138</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vita Aelii</td>
<td>&quot;Aelius Spartianus&quot;</td>
<td>Aelius</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vita Antonini Pii</td>
<td>&quot;Julius Capitolinus&quot;</td>
<td>Antoninus Pius</td>
<td>138-161</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vita Marci Aurelii</td>
<td>&quot;Julius Capitolinus&quot;</td>
<td>Marcus Aurelius</td>
<td>161-180</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vita Veri</td>
<td>&quot;Julius Capitolinus&quot;</td>
<td>Verus</td>
<td>161-169</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vita Avidii Cassii</td>
<td>&quot;Vulcaci Gallicanus&quot;</td>
<td>Avidius Cassius</td>
<td>175</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vita Commodi</td>
<td>&quot;Aelius Lampridius&quot;</td>
<td>Commodus</td>
<td>180-192</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vita Pertinacis</td>
<td>&quot;Julius Capitolinus&quot;</td>
<td>Pertinax</td>
<td>192-193</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vita Didii Juliani</td>
<td>&quot;Aelius Spartianus&quot;</td>
<td>Didius Julianus</td>
<td>193</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vita Septimii Severi</td>
<td>&quot;Aelius Spartianus&quot;</td>
<td>Septimius Severus</td>
<td>193-211</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vita Pescennii Nigri</td>
<td>&quot;Aelius Spartianus&quot;</td>
<td>Pescennius Niger</td>
<td>193-194</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vita Clodii Albini</td>
<td>&quot;Julius Capitolinus&quot;</td>
<td>Clodius Albinus</td>
<td>195-197</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vita Caracalli</td>
<td>&quot;Aelius Spartianus&quot;</td>
<td>Caracalla</td>
<td>198-217</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vita Getae</td>
<td>&quot;Aelius Spartianus&quot;</td>
<td>Geta</td>
<td>210-211</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vita Macrini</td>
<td>&quot;Julius Capitolinus&quot;</td>
<td>Macrinus</td>
<td>217-218</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vita Diadumeniani</td>
<td>&quot;Aelius Lampridius&quot;</td>
<td>Diadumenianus</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vita Elagabali</td>
<td>&quot;Aelius Lampridius&quot;</td>
<td>Elagabalus</td>
<td>218-222</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vita Alexandri Severi</td>
<td>&quot;Aelius Lampridius&quot;</td>
<td>Alexander Severus</td>
<td>222-235</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Maximinus Thrax, Maximinus Thrax,</td>
<td>222-235</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vita Maximinorum</td>
<td>&quot;Julius Capitolinus&quot;</td>
<td>Maximus</td>
<td>235-238</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vita Gordianorum</td>
<td>&quot;Julius Capitolinus&quot;</td>
<td>Gordian I, II, III</td>
<td>238-244</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vita Maximi et</td>
<td>&quot;Julius Capitolinus&quot;</td>
<td>Pupienus Maximus, Balbinus</td>
<td>238</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Balbini</td>
<td></td>
<td>Balbinus</td>
<td>238</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vita Valerianorum</td>
<td>&quot;Trebellius Pollio&quot;</td>
<td>Valerian I, II</td>
<td>253-260</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vita Gallienorum</td>
<td>&quot;Trebellius Pollio&quot;</td>
<td>Gallienus I, II</td>
<td>253-268</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tyranni Triginta</td>
<td>&quot;Trebellius Pollio&quot;</td>
<td>Thirty Pretenders</td>
<td>258-274</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vita Claudii</td>
<td>&quot;Trebellius Pollio&quot;</td>
<td>Claudius</td>
<td>268-270</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vita Aureliani</td>
<td>&quot;Flavius Vopiscus&quot;</td>
<td>Aurelian</td>
<td>270-275</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vita Taciti</td>
<td>&quot;Flavius Vopiscus&quot;</td>
<td>Tacitus, Florian</td>
<td>275-276</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vita Probi</td>
<td>&quot;Flavius Vopiscus&quot;</td>
<td>Probus</td>
<td>276-282</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quadrigae</td>
<td></td>
<td>Firmus, Saturninus, Proculus, Bonosus</td>
<td>280-281</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tyrannorum</td>
<td>&quot;Flavius Vopiscus&quot;</td>
<td>Proculus, Bonosus</td>
<td>280-281</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vita Cari et Carini et Numeriani</td>
<td>&quot;Flavius Vopiscus&quot;</td>
<td>Numerianus</td>
<td>282-285</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 2
SATIRE AND THE HISTORIA AUGUSTA

It was amid the chaos at the end of the fourth century that an unknown author composed the Historia Augusta. Facing disaster, with the future uncertain and history offering no comfort, he chose an unusual response: to laugh. As if the sheer audacity of his fabrications were not enough (who would believe that the emperor Firmus swam with crocodiles?), he makes his laughter explicit with the word iocus, “joke,” and derivatives thereof sixty one times in the entire corpus.¹ The Historia Augusta sports with the reader, laughing with and at some of the darkest times and murkiest figures in Roman history. This diction evokes the world of comedy—for this study especially, the word ludus. It appears sixty seven times,² meaning variously a game, a show, or school;

¹ HA, Hadr. 11.5 (iniucundum), 12.4 (ioculariter), 15.12 (iucundissimum), 17.6 (iocus), 20.8 (ioca), 21.3 (ioculare), 25.9 (icos); Ant. Pius 11.8 (ioca), 13.2 (iucunditate); Marc. 15.1 (iociis); Verus 2.9 (iociis), 7.5 (ioca); Comm. 10.3 (iocis); Sev. 14.13 (iocati), 17.4 (iocundam), 22.4 (iocorum); Pesc. Nig. 3.5 (iucundissimus), 22.5 (ioci); Clod. Alb. 5.8 (iucum), 5.9 (ioco); Carac. 1.3 (iucunda), 5.6 (ioco), 10.6 (ioco); Geta 3.3 (ioco), 3.4 (ioco), 4.5 (ioco); Macr. 5.7 (iocius), 14.4 (iucundissimi); Elegab. 11.6 (iocularia), 26.6 (iocabatur); Alex. Sev. 37.10 (iocius), 38.1 (iocus), 44.1 (iociis); Maximin. 4.7 (iocatus), 28.8 (iucunda); Gord. 19.4 (iocantes), 31.4 (iucundus); Val. 8.1 (periocundus); Gall. 6.3 (iocom), 6.7 (iocabatur), 17.9 (iocari), 20.2 (iucunditatem); Tyr. Trig. 8.2 (ioco), 10.3 (ioco), 10.7 (iocularis), 31.10 (ioco), 33.2 (ioco); Aurel. 2.1 (iocando), 11.1 (iucundissime), 23.3 (iocatum), 30.4 (ioco), 41.1 (iniucundum), 47.4 (iucundissime); Tacit. 16.4 (iocati); Quod. Tyr. 12.6 (iucunda), 13.1 (ioco), 13.5 (ioco), 15.2 (iocius); Carus 14.2 (ioco), 14.3 (iocari), 16.8 (iocabatur). When spelled iuc- instead of ioc-, it often means “pleasant” or “pleasing” rather than “joke.”

² HA, Hadr. 3.8 (ludos), 8.2 (ludos), 9.9 (ludis), 19.2 (ludos), 23.12 (ludos); Marc. 4.9 (lusi[), 6.3 (ludos), 12.11 (ludos), 21.4 (ludi); Verus 2.9 (ludis), 4.6 (lusisse), 5.7 (lusum), 10.8 (ludibia); Avid. Cass. 6.3 (luderent); Comm. 2.8 (ludibrium), 11.11 (ludum); Sev. 1.3 (ludum), 3.5 (ludos), 4.6 (conludoribus); Pesc. Nig. 3.5 (ludos); Clod. Alb. 6.7 (ludis), 12.12 (ludicra); Carac. 1.6 (conludorem), 3.7 (ludibrium); Macr. 12.10 (ludi); Elagab. 9.2 (ludibrium), 22.2 (ludis), 23.2 (ludos), 25.7 (lusorio); Alex. Sev. 37.6 (Ludis Apollinaribus), 41.5 (luderent), 57.1 (ludos), 57.6 (ludis); Maximin. 2.4 (ludos), 19.5 (proludens), 25.3 (ludorum); Gord. 4.6 (ludos), 33.1 (ludis), 33.3 (ludis); Max. 1.1 (Ludis Apollinaribus), 8.4 (ludis, twice), 14.2 (ludis); Gall. 3.7 (ludos, four times; ludiariam), 4.3 (ludibiris, ludibria), 7.4 (ludorum), 8.3 (luserunt), 8.4 (ludis), 9.1 (ludere); Tyr. Trig. 31.7 (ludibrium); Claud. 5.5 (ludiorum), 11.8 (ludo), 13.6 (ludicr); Aurel. 8.4 (ludicra), 34.6 (ludorum, twice); Tacit. 16.3 (allusit); Probos 23.5 (ludis); Quod. Tyr. 5.6 (ludis), 13.1 (ludo), 13.2 (luderetur), 15.1 (lusorias); Carus. 19.1 (ludos), 19.2 (eluso), 19.3 (ludum), 20.2 (ludorum, twice), 20.3 (ludos, twice).
in the first sense, this word evokes a particular genre: satire.³ The Roman verse satirists refer to what they do as *ludere*, in contrast with the heavier poetry of tragedy and epic, just as biography is the lighter kin of history.⁴ Verse satirists play upon audience expectation and perception, sometimes leaving the true nature of their poetry obscure, much as the *Historia Augusta* misleads its readers as to its date, authorship, and content. The *Historia Augusta* alludes to Juvenal and drops the name of the original verse satirist, Lucilius (HA, *Pert*. 9.6). All these details suggest the presence of satire within the *Historia Augusta*.

**Biography and History**

On the surface, the *Historia Augusta* is imperial biography. Imperial biography eschews strict historicity in favor of moral instruction.⁵ Biography also emphasizes the personal more than history. Anecdotes on life and manners reveal more about a man’s character than his military prowess.⁶ While history emphasizes social and military affairs, the biographer clings to the more intimate details of significant figures’ lives and

³ *OLD* s.v. *ludus*; for its use in satire, Griffin 1994, 85. Usage as game/sport: HA, *Marc*. 4.9; *Verus* 2.9, 4.6, 5.7, 10.8; *Avid. Cass*. 6.3; *Comm*. 2.8; *Sev*. 1.3 (playing as judge); *Clod. Alb*. 12.12; *Carac*. 3.7; *Elagab*. 9.2; *Alex. Sev*. 41.5; *Maximin*. 19.5; *Gall*. 4.3, 8.3, 9.1; *Tyr. Trig*. 31.7; *Claud*. 13.6; *Aurel*. 8.4; *Tacit*. 16.3; *Quad. Tyr*. 13.1 (synonymous with *iocus*), 13.2; *Carus* 19.2.


⁵ Plut. *Demetrius* 1.6, οὔτως μοι δοκοῦμεν ἡμεῖς προθυμότεροι τῶν βελτιώνων ἔσεσθαι καὶ θεαταὶ καὶ μιμηταί βίων, εἰ μηδὲ τῶν φαύλων καὶ ψεγομένων ἀνιστορήτως ἔχοιμεν, “Thus does it seem to me that we will be more eager for the better both as watchers and imitators of lives, if we should not be ignorant of wretched and blameworthy.”

⁶ Plut. *Alexander* 1.2, οὔτε γὰρ ἱστορίας γράφομεν, ἀλλὰ βίους, οὔτε ταῖς ἐπιφανεστάταις πράξεις πάντως ἔνεστι δήλωσιν ἄρετης ἢ κακίας, ἀλλὰ πράγμα βραχὺ πολλάκις καὶ παιδιὰ τις ἐποίησε μᾶλλον ἢ μάχαι μυριόνεκροι καὶ παρατάξεις ἀι μέγισται καὶ πολιορκίαι πόλεων, "For neither do we write histories, but lives, nor a there altogether a demonstration of virtue or wickedness in the most outstanding deeds, but often a brief deed and word and jest made a show of character more than battles with a thousand dead and the greatest arrays of troops and pillages of cities.”
manners. The *Historia Augusta* adheres to these biographical conventions in principle, but with a twist.

   Suetonius is the closest extant model for the *Historia Augusta*.\(^7\) Towards the end of the *Historia Augusta*, “Flavius Vopiscus” declares that he models himself on several older biographers, including Suetonius.\(^8\) Of the others, only Marius Maximus seems historical; the *Historia Augusta* invents the rest.\(^9\) Later, “Vopiscus” praises Suetonius: he calls him the most accurate of biographers, and says that one should not marvel at him, for he is naturally succinct.\(^10\) Only Marius Maximus receives more attention. This reveals Suetonius’ influence on the *Historia Augusta*, but not how it acted upon the biography. In order to understand how the *Historia Augusta* plays with Suetonian biography, one must first see what made Suetonius’ biography unique.

   First, organization. Suetonius writes imperial biography, beginning with Julius Caesar and concluding with Domitian, shortly before his own involvement in politics begins.\(^11\) The *Historia Augusta* imitates him, starting with Hadrian and detailing the

---

\(^7\) Momigliano 1954, 24; White 1967, 118; Syme 1968, 94-102; Bird 1971. The *Historia Augusta* seems to have been modeled after Suetonius and may be a continuation of his biographies. It seems also to have drawn upon Marius Maximus (Dessau 1889, 379), but since the works of that biographer are not extant, it is impossible to say.

\(^8\) HA, *Prob.* 2.7.

\(^9\) Bird 1971, 9.

\(^10\) HA, *Quad. Tyr.* 1.1-2, *nam et Suetonius Tranquillus, emendatissimus et candidissimus scriptor, Antoninum, Vindicem tacuit, contentus eo quod eos cursim perstrinxerat, et Marius Maximus, qui Avidium Marci temporibus, Albinum et Nigrum Severi non suis propriis libris sed alienis innexuit. et de Suetonio non miramur, cui familiare fuit amare brevitatem*, “For both Suetonius Tranquillus, a most learned and frank author, was silent on Antonius and Vindex, satisfied that he had mentioned them in passing, and Marius Maximus, who put Avidius in the times of Marcus, Albinus and Niger in the times of Severus, put them not in his own books but someone else’s. And we are not surprised at Suetonius, for whom it was natural to love concision."

lives of successive emperors, princes, and pretenders, concluding with Carus, Carinus, and Numerianus—the immediate predecessors to Diocletian.

Suetonius’ style also deviated from previous biography. Plutarch is no Aristotle, but his style emulates the best of the Attic authors.\textsuperscript{12} Cornelius Nepos peppered his unadorned style with attempts at rhetorical flourishes, following Greek precedent.\textsuperscript{13} Suetonius writes directly and simply. When he transitions into the atrocities of Caligula’s reign, he says, “So far, we have spoken about him as though he were an emperor; now the rest must be told about him as a monster.”\textsuperscript{14} Physical descriptions of the emperors are terse, in accordance with earlier historical method.\textsuperscript{15} Suetonius, imperial Minister of Letters, also had both the means and disposition to introduce legal and personal documents.\textsuperscript{16} This was a radical departure for ancient literature, which considered such mundane items as laws and letters artless. Thus, when the Historia Augusta borrows this unique habit, the reader must take note.

The most important trend which runs through biography, at least for the Historia Augusta, is misrepresentation. To impart their morals, biographers would arrange material thematically, not in strict chronological order. They followed a rough chronology for their vitae (childhood, career, death), but within these categories they

\textsuperscript{12} Carney 1960.
\textsuperscript{13} Schmeling 1971, 12.
\textsuperscript{14} Suet., Caligula 22.1, Hactenus quasi de principe, reliqua ut de monstro narranda sunt.
\textsuperscript{15} Suet., Caligula 50, Statura fuit eminenti, colore expallido, corpore enormi, gracilitate maxima ceruicis et crurum, oculis et temporibus concavus, fronte lata et torua, capillo raro at circa uerticem nullo, hirsutus cetera, “He was of a great stature, pale complexion, huge body, extreme slenderness in his neck and thighs, hollow eyes and temples, a broad and grim forehead, little hair (and none on the peak), but bearded.”
\textsuperscript{16} Wallace-Hadrill 1984, 21.
illustrated their moral with any relevant tale. When Suetonius describes the public extravagances of Caligula, he interrupts himself to describe his most outrageous exploit (the construction of a bridge of boats across the Bay of Baiae\textsuperscript{17}) without clarifying when this spectacle occurred in relation to the others. Likewise, the private affairs of great men are likely the most fraudulent, for one cannot easily know the deepest secrets of the powerful. Campaign codicilli, trophies, and other memorials recorded success in war; where would one learn of Tiberius’ depravities in Capri, or Coriolanus’ demeanor before his mother?\textsuperscript{18} The published works of notable figures, and even a senatus consultum,\textsuperscript{19} preserved some personal details, but in biography, others must have come from hearsay and conjecture.

Biography never intended to imitate history or its faithfulness to truth. Suetonius may be pardoned for some of his errors: an unconfirmed or unprovable anecdote may not be true, but because it represented that person’s tradition—the sort of thing that person would do—it gains an element of plausibility. The Historia Augusta hyperbolizes this tendency; it is the soil in which its satire grows. The Historia Augusta offers many improbable passages, amplifying them until the emperors become caricatures of themselves. When Suetonius has Caligula say, “So beautiful a neck; and as soon as I order it, it will be removed,”\textsuperscript{20} the emperor probably never uttered those exact words; however, Suetonius chose them for their verisimilitude. The Historia Augusta abandons

\textsuperscript{17} Suet., Caligula 19.

\textsuperscript{18} Suet., Tiberius, esp. 44; Plut. Coriolanus 36.

\textsuperscript{19} The Senatus Consultum de Cn. Pisonem confirms that Livia acted to protect the family of the condemned Piso; Eck, Caballos, and Fernandez 1996.

\textsuperscript{20} Suet., Caligula, 33, tam bona cervix simul ac iussero demetur.
any pretense of plausibility. “Aelius Lampridius” describes a dinner-party in which the depraved emperor Elagabalus, in a fit of extravagance, dumps so many flower petals upon his dining freedmen that they suffocate.\textsuperscript{21} The plausible lie in Suetonius becomes outrageous hyperbole in the later biographer.

Marius Maximus also influenced the \textit{Historia Augusta}, although almost all knowledge of this author comes from the \textit{Historia Augusta} itself.\textsuperscript{22} He continued Suetonius, starting with Nerva and ending with Elagabalus—another \textit{Twelve Caesars}. He features prominently in the first half of the \textit{Historia Augusta} (the more reputable part of the work\textsuperscript{23}), but after Elagabalus he almost disappears.\textsuperscript{24} Syme’s exploration of Maximus’ role in the composition of the \textit{Historia Augusta} adds to the confusion, for he concludes that most of the mentions of the earlier biographer correspond not with a serious argument or salient fact, but a salacious tale.\textsuperscript{25} The chief factual source, according to Syme, is another, unknown imperial biographer, whom he calls “Ignotus.”\textsuperscript{26} Trying to reconcile these facts seems insurmountable at first, but an elegant solution presents itself.

\begin{footnotes}
\item[21] HA, \textit{Elagab.} 21.5, \textit{oppressit in tricliniis versatilibus parasitos suos violis et floribus, sic ut animam aliqui efflaverint, cum erepere ad summum non possent}, “He smothered his parasites in movable couches with violets and flowers, such that some breathed out their last since they could not crawl out to the top.”
\item[22] Syme 1968, 89-90, offers everything that is known.
\item[23] Syme 1968, 2; Bird 1971, 129.
\item[24] “Vopiscus” slanders him late in the work: \textit{Quad. Tyr.} 1.2, \textit{quid Marius Maximus, homo omnium verbosissimus, qui et mythist[\textit{h}istoricis se voluminibus inplicavit, num ad istam descriptionem curamque descendit}, “What about Marius Maximus, the wordiest man of all, who even wound himself up in his fantastical histories? Did even he sink to that description and care?”
\item[25] Syme 1968, 91.
\item[26] Syme 1968, 92-3.
\end{footnotes}
Contained within the DNA of biography is a strain of history. The High Empire even saw biography emerge as the chief historical genre, and understandably so. Ancient conceptions of history differ from modern scientific history that attempts to reconstruct the past as accurately as possible. Antiquity saw history as an ethical and rhetorical genre, less concerned with strict truth than instruction. This is supported by Cicero, who offers one of the few theoretical discussions of historiography. At *De Oratore* 2.62-3, he offers basic principles on the composition of history: that one should tell no lies, nor hesitate to tell the truth; to betray nor favor nor bias. This passage may seem to advocate for strict “truth” in its modern conception as a positive, objective truth, but Woodman argues that Cicero refers instead to the virtue of impartiality. *Ne quid falsi* and *ne quid veri* are parallel with *gratiae* and *simultatis*, suggesting that one need not avoid untruths absolutely, but only those that betray prejudice; the truth must be conveyed, even if it risks offense. Woodman further describes the construction of history in terms of rhetorical *inventio*, the creation of the probable or life-like. This device abounds the invented speeches that pepper every historian from Herodotus to Ammianus. Historical *inventio* is not in principle fraudulence or forgery, however. It is the representation of what happened or what was said within the bounds of

27 Stadter 2011, 536-7; Croke 2011, 573.

28 Cic., *De Oratore* 2.62-3, *Sed iluc redeo: videtisne, quantum munus sit oratoris historia?...Nam quis nescit primam esse historiae legem, ne quid falsi dicere audeat? Deinde ne quid veri non audeat? Ne quae suspicio gratiae sit in scribendo? Ne quae simultatis? Haec scilicet fundamenta nota sunt omnibus, “But I return to that point: do you see what a need the orator has for history?...For who does not know that the first law of history is not to dare to say anything false? Then not to fear to say anything true? That what has the hint of partiality does not appear in writing? Nor what has the hint of enmity? These are the foundations, known to all.”

29 Woodman 1988, 82-3.

verisimilitude. A speech might be invented, but it never exceeded what was probable, and no biographer or historian of merit would deliberately falsify a victory or a defeat to further his argument. This managed invention that unites history and biography divides them from the *Historia Augusta*. The blatantly untrue, ahistorical tendencies of the collection move it from the realm of verisimilitude into pure fiction. It cleaves to neither genre’s practice, demanding an alternative vehicle to explore its mysteries. That vehicle is satire.

**Academic Approaches to Satire**

The precise nature of its satire, however, defies simple analysis. The *Historia Augusta* demonstrates close ties with verse satire but cannot so identified because it is a work of prose. A modern solution is needed to resolve this quandary. Frye’s *Anatomy of Criticism* identifies four modes of literature: comedy, romance, tragedy, and satire, each of which has traces of its neighboring modes (comedy has traces of romance and satire, satire traces of comedy and tragedy, etc.). The *Historia Augusta* demonstrates the strongest correspondences with satire.\(^{31}\) Within satire are two subcategories: simple satire, which draws upon comedic themes, and irony, which borrows from tragedy. Pure satire has a definite target, while pure irony emphasizes “a theme of puzzled defeat.”\(^{32}\) Each subcategory has three phases, for a total of six phases of satire. Most satiric works combine elements of the six phases. The first phase is low-norm satire, in which a humble man serves as a foil in a mad world.\(^{33}\)

---

\(^{31}\) The work contains elements of romance, but its chief traits are satiric. One could not mistake the *Historia Augusta* for something like the *Alexander Romance*, much less *Daphnis and Chloe*.

\(^{32}\) Frye 1957, 225.

this role, often providing a rational counterpoint to imperial debauchery.\textsuperscript{34} The second phase introduces “the other,” an outlander unacquainted with the mores of “normal” society. The stranger’s virtues seem all the more virtuous for their uncultured origins, yet are unattainable, for one cannot escape one’s own society. This phase seldom appears in the \textit{Historia Augusta}, for the scope of late empire made it difficult to find a non-Roman, but it accounts for the rambling digressiveness in the \textit{Historia Augusta}.\textsuperscript{35} In the third phase, high-norm satire abandons reality and ventures into the fantastic, using impossible scenarios to throw human nature into high relief.\textsuperscript{36} Apuleius provides the classical example of this phase, using the impossible transformation of Lucius into a donkey to show humanity as it acts when it thinks no one is watching, but the divine councils of Menippean satire also fit.\textsuperscript{37} Because of the narrative constraints of biography, however, the \textit{Historia Augusta} never escapes reality. Even the most outrageous stories, although improbable, are still possible. One element of this phase, though, finds strong expression in the \textit{Historia Augusta}: catalogues. The \textit{Historia Augusta} abounds in lists of emperors’ bizarre appetites, which corresponds to another of Frye’s satirical tropes, catalogues of abusive terminology.\textsuperscript{38}

With the fourth phase, satire embraces tragic irony and examines the fall of a hero from a realistic, human perspective. Little of this phase appears in the \textit{Historia Augusta}.

\textsuperscript{34} The \textit{Historia Augusta} eschews a corollary element to this phase, the simple man’s anti-intellectualism, Frye 1957, 230.

\textsuperscript{35} Frye 1957, 234.

\textsuperscript{36} Frye 1957, 234-6.

\textsuperscript{37} Relihan 1993, 21, 95 and Weinbrot 2005, 7-8 exclude the \textit{Metamorphosis} from the category of Menippean satire based upon its lack of \textit{prosimetrum} and its romantic approach (for instance, in the tale of \textit{Cupid and Psyche} and the narrator’s religious salvation at the end). But compare Perry 1967, 242-3.

\textsuperscript{38} Frye 1957, 236.
Augusta. It prefers the fifth phase, fatalistic irony. Here, life’s tragedies appear cyclic; whatever good occurs, evil must supplant it—an elegant metaphor for the unstable imperial system. The sixth phase sinks into nihilism. It shows the human experience as only pain and misery. Modern dystopic works often utilize this phase, like George Orwell’s 1984 or Harlan Ellison’s I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream, but the Historia Augusta eschews such absolute pessimism. By contrasting the vices of the bad emperors with the virtues of the good, the author of the Historia Augusta acknowledges that evil, while inevitable, does not last.

Frye provides a useful rubric that allows one to see satire broadly in the Historia Augusta, but in order to define precisely its use of satire, I have turned to Griffin’s Satire: A Critical Reintroduction. The peculiar vice and virtue of his study is its comprehensiveness: he discusses examples and theory of satire from its most ancient exemplars to the nineteenth and twentieth century critics. Although Griffin only touches upon ancient satire, he demonstrates the continuity and characteristics of the genre that eluded ancient critics like Quintilian. Griffin’s most radical division of the genre breaks it into three forms: formal verse satire, Menippean satire, and “parody.”39 By exploring tropes of these three forms, we can arrive at a universal conception of ancient satire. Chapters 3 and 4 will explore how these tropes are deployed in the Historia Augusta.

39 Griffin 1994, 3, 98. I put quotes around “parody” because Griffin gives it a nuanced, qualified treatment, at other times identifying only formal verse and Menippean satire (id. 77) as genuine satire, while other genres can have satiric characteristics. When he includes parody in his tripartite division, he calls it the “parodic tradition,” although this includes all the forms of parody which will be discussed here.
Formal Satire

Roman verse satire, written in dactylic hexameters, is best known from Lucilius, Horace, Persius, and Juvenal. Although the four wrote in the same genre, their works (only three of which still survive in any quantity—extant Lucilius amounts to 1,200 disjointed fragments) show marked differences. The aim here will not be a full appreciation of the richness which these elements add to the poetry, but to identify the satiric "building blocks" from which an understanding of the ancient satiric and its relation to the Historia Augusta can emerge.

Juvenal states that everything that men do, quidquid agunt homines, will form the body of his satires. Thus, we might expect the most universal of human activities, eating. The extant texts do not disappoint. The fragments of Lucilius testify to the prominence of food in his satires, particularly as a tool to attack. Horace makes food the focus of several sermones, twice satirizing the pretensions of his fellow elites with lavish banquets (2.4, 2.8) and once inverting the principle by having the rustic Ofellus praise simple fare (2.2). Both Persius and Juvenal contrast rich feasts with humble meals to feed their indignation (Pers. 6; Juv. 4, 6, 11). Metaphors of food seem to

---

40 Ennius is the first to write saturae, but the sparse and fragmentary remains of his satires lead me to exclude them from analysis here; they contribute nothing that the other four will not. Another satiric trend, Menippean satire, represented by Varro, Seneca, and others, will be treated later.

41 Juv. 1.85-6, quidquid agunt homines, uotum, timor, ira, uoluptas, / gaudia, discursus, nostri farrago libelli est, “whatever men do, their prayers, their fear, their anger, their pleasure, their joys, their carryings-on, is the medley for my little book.”

42 Fragments 11, 46, 50-1, 70, 112-3, 126-132, 157-65, 199-207, 214-25, 236-7, 302, 315-7, 337-40, 350-1, 357-8, 465-6, 469-71, 480-6, 515, 533, 536-9, 581-2, 586-7, 595-606, 629, 662-3, 740, 759-68, 815, 817-8, 925, 966-7, 976-7, 986-9, 1019-37, 1055-6, 1220-43; Warmington 1935, 418-22 collects isolated words and phrases which he chose not to include in his numbered list. These pages have a few other mentions of food, but out of context, they contribute nothing more to understanding Lucilius’ satiric relationship with food than the numbered offerings. (context could reveal others, like Salerna = wine, 120, 213 may refer to a simple country feast, book 18 seems like it may be on gluttony). Griffin 1994, 119 cites Woodruff 1984, 163 which calls it the “mode of ‘reality,’ of the actual, of things as they are.”

43
marinate the entire body of Roman verse satire: Horace describes his ideal poetry like a recipe;\textsuperscript{43} Persius says that his poems will be \textit{aliquest decoctius}, “somewhat cooked down, something of a reduction” (1.244); and Juvenal calls his work a \textit{farrago}, a hodgepodge of the affairs of life.\textsuperscript{44} This hearkens back to the etymology of “satire” from \textit{satura lanx}, the “loaded plate,” which suggests a symbolic recipe-book for satire.\textsuperscript{45}

Alongside these earthy images sits an old definition of satire as a serious, moralizing genre that uses humor only to sweeten its bitter remedy for society’s ills.\textsuperscript{46} Horace himself seems to support this view when he asks of the reader, “why not learn with a laugh?”\textsuperscript{47} Griffin rejects this view,\textsuperscript{48} but it highlights the juxtaposition of the high and the low, the serious and the comic, which pervades all the verse satirists, the sharpest manifestation of which is low-brow humor. The fragments of Lucilius are peppered with tantalizingly obscene images,\textsuperscript{49} and while Horace wrote less scurrilous satire than his predecessor, he still incorporated the vulgar into his \textit{sermones}. In one

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext[43]{Hor., \textit{Sermones}. 1.10.9-15, \textit{est brevitate opus, ut currat sententia neu se / inpediat verbis lassas onerantis auris, / et sermone opus est modo tristi, saepe iocoso, / defendente vicem modo rhetoris atque poetae, / interdum urbani, parcentis viribus atque / extenuantis eam consulto. ridiculum acri / fortius et melius plerumque secat res}, “There is need for concision, so that your sentence flows and does not hinder itself with words that burden wearied ears; and there is need of diction now sad, often joyful, defending now the place of the orator and the poet, and besides that, of a cultured man, sparing his forces and thinning them out by design. The laughable generally cuts through great matters stronger and better than the bitter.”}

\footnotetext[44]{Gowers 1993, 108-219.}

\footnotetext[45]{Gowers 1993, 109-117 explores all the possible etymologies of the word: satyr plays, the “full plate” (\textit{lanx satura}), medley dishes, and \textit{leges per saturam}, laws that contained many topics. She clearly establishes that \textit{lanx satura} is the correct etymology, although the similarities between “satyr” and \textit{satura} likely influenced ancient satirists. See also Keane 2006, 7.}

\footnotetext[46]{Highet 1954, and Plaza 2006, 18-19, especially n. 45, which enumerates the advocates of the conservative view.}

\footnotetext[47]{Hor., \textit{Sermones} 1.1.24-5, \textit{ridentem dicere verum / quid vetat?}}

\footnotetext[48]{Griffin 1994, 35-6.}

\footnotetext[49]{E.g., fr. 61, \textit{in bulgam penetrare pilosam}, “to drive into a hairy bag,” fr. 1179, \textit{noctipugam}, “taken in the backside nightly,” translated by Warmington 1967 as “nightly-poked.”}
\end{footnotes}
poem, Cato recommends that a young man sate his lust with prostitutes rather than married women. The youth cries out that he would not wish to be honored for that! The reason? Because he prefers the forbidden flesh—or, as Horace terms it, *cunnus albus.*\(^{50}\) The garden-statue of Priapus drives off the witch Canidia with an apotropaic blast of flatus.\(^{51}\) Persius and Juvenal refer to the grossly natural and sexualized body with complete frankness.\(^{52}\) Base and scatological humor, just like food, is essential to ancient satire.

The common and quotidian in satire are self-evident, but if they are not mere palliative for satire’s precepts, what role do they play? Griffin sees in satire a strong element of irony and ambivalence.\(^{53}\) In this view, the juxtaposition of high didacticism and low humor undermines the supposedly lofty literary ambitions of the satirists and the morals they purport to explore. The clearest example is Juvenal 6, in which the satirist rails against the vices of women. A superficial reading sees this poem as simple

---

\(^{50}\) Hor., *Sermones* 1.2-31-6, *quidam notus homo cum exiret fornice, 'macte / virtute esto' inquit sententia dia Catonis; / 'nam simul ac venas inflavit taetra libido, / huc iuvenes aequom est descendere, non alienas / permolore uxores.' *'nolim laudari' inquit / 'sic me' mirator cunni Cupiennius albi,* "When a certain famous man left the brothel, the holy judgment of Cato says, ‘Be of righteous virtue! For as soon as filthy lust filled your veins, it is good for youths to come here, not to grin up others’ wives.’ ‘I would not like to be so praised for that!’ says Cupiennius, the worshipper of white pussy."

\(^{51}\) Hor., *Sermones* 1.8.44, 46-50, *non testis inultus…nam, displosa sonat quantum vesica, pepedi / diffissa nate ficus; at illae currere in urbem. / Canidiae dentis, altum Saganae caliendrum / excidere atque herbas atque incantata lacertis, / vincula cum magno risuque iocoque videres,* "I was not an unavenged witness, for, as great a blast as my swollen gut makes, I farted, my butt cleaving a fig-tree; yet they ran to the city! You would see the teeth of Canidia fall about, the tall head-dress of Sagana and her plants and lizard-enchanted chains with great laughter and as a joke." Horace includes a second fart in the subsequent poem (1.9.69-70), perhaps an allusion to his own crassness; Hooley 2006, 63.

\(^{52}\) Pers. 6.71-3, *ut tuus iste nepos olim satur anseris extis, / cum morosa uago singultiet inguine uena, / patriciae inmeiat uoluae?* "So that that grandson of yours, once he is filled up with the entrails of a goose, when an idle vein throbs in an uncertain groin, may squirt into his father’s lady’s snatch?"; Juv. 6.64, *Tuccia vesicae non imperat,* "Tuccia is not in charge of her pussy;" 9.1-4, *quid tibi cum uultu, qualem depresso habebat / Rauola dum Rhodopes uda terit inguina barba?* "Why do you go about with a face such as Ravola had when he was caught, while he scrapes Rhodope’s crotch with his wet beard?"

\(^{53}\) Griffin 1994, 35-94.
misogyny, but the men in the poem are equally contemptible. Claudius’ wife is rebuked for her wanton infidelities against the emperor, but this overlooks the emperor’s willful ignorance, as Tacitus and Suetonius describe. The uxorious Sertorius is rebuked for tolerating his domineering wife Bibula; if only she would grow ugly, he would throw her out—and become slave to another sexy spouse. The worst offender is the author himself, who devotes an entire poem to lambasting the evils and worthlessness of women at the cost of his own integrity. Why waste so much time on targets that do not deserve it? One cannot trust an immoral moralist. The other satirists follow the same pattern: Sermo 2.2 sets the worldly Horatian speaker alongside the simple, rustic Ofellus. The humble man advocates a life without extravagance, which the more urbane speaker admires but cannot adopt. A simple reading suggests a traditional appeal to simplicitas. On reconsideration, however, the reader is at a loss: who would want to live as simply as Ofellus? Is the speaker immoral for accepting the truth of Ofellus’ philosophy but not practicing it? Horace turns a Roman cliché into a matter for serious reflection.

Satirists also problematize their work with a variation on the recusatio. Whereas other authors apologize for their inability to write epic or tragedy, satirists broadcast, bemoan, and even brag about their meager audience. Lucilius seems to exclude from


55 Juv. 6.142-8, cur desiderio Bibulae Sertorius ardet? / si ucerum excutias, facies non uxor amatur. / tres rugae subeant et se cutis arida laxet, / fiant obscuri dentes oculique minores, /'collige sarcinulas' dicet libertus 'et exi. / iam grauis es nobis et saepe emungeris. exi / oeius et propega. sicco uenit altera naso,' “Why does Sertorius burn with desire for Bibula? If you should get at the truth, the face, not the wife, is loved. Let three wrinkles creep in and let hair dry skin loosen, let her teeth become dark and her eyes rather small; a freedman will say, ‘Collect your bags and go! You are now a burden to us and you are often blowing your nose. Leave, quickly, and make haste. Another woman comes with a dry nose.’”

56 By “problematize,” I mean “to create a series of problems for the reader to solve, or fail to solve.”
his audience the doctissimi and indoctissimi alike; he wants only the moderately learned elite to read his poems. Horace, in the close of his first book, claims that he assumed the mantle of satirist because his betters had already claimed the grand genres of epic and tragedy; satire he can handle, though still not as well as Lucilius. Persius does not deny his ability but rather the efficacy of his art, developing a sentiment first uttered by Horace: one or two people may read his book, perhaps no one. Juvenal, in a famous passage echoed by the Historia Augusta, states that his indignation will write his poems, although he is not up to the task.

The culmination of this authorial ambiguity is the complete abandonment of personal intent by identifying the satirical speaker not as the author but as an impersonal and unidentifiable persona. Because of satire’s intensity, it seems like an autobiography of the satirist: the journey of Horace-as-speaker with Maecenas could describe an actual political embassy on which the historical Horace joined; Juvenal’s descriptions in his third satire of the evils poisoning Rome—conniving Greeks and Jews,

57 Fr. 632-4, (ab indoctissimis) nec doctissimis legi me; Manium Mamlium / Persiumve haec legere nolo, Iunium Congum volo, “I do not want to be read by the extremely unlearned or by the extremely learned; I do not want Manius Mamlius or Persius to read these things; I want Junius Congus to do so.”

58 Hor., Sermones 1.10.36-7, 40-5, 48-9, turgidus Alpinus iugulat dum Memnona dumque / diffingit Rheni luteum caput, haec ego ludo…arguta meretricie potes Davoque Chremeta / eludente senem comis garrire libellos / unus vivorum, Fundani, Pollio regum / facta canit pede ter percusso; forte epos acer / ut nemo Varies ducit, molle atque facetum / Vergilio adnuerunt gaudentes rure Camenae: /… neque ego illi detrahere ausim / haerentem capiti cum multa laude coronam, “While swollen Alpinus cuts the throat of Memnon, and while he reshapes the muddy head of the Rhine, I play at these things…and with the witty whore and with Davus tricking the old Chremes, you have the power, you make your books to chat, the only one of the living, Fundanius; Pollio sings the deeds of kings with a three-step; perhaps keen Varies writes epic like no one, gentle and fine; the Muses nodded their approval, rejoicing in the Vergilian countryside…and I would not dare to rob from his hand the crown which sits there with great praise.”

59 Pers. 1.1, compare with Hor., Sermones. 1.4.22-3, cum mea nemo / scripta legat, “since no one reads my writings.”

60 Juv. 1.79-80, compare with HA, Macr. 11.4.

61 Anderson 1982, 3-10 and throughout. Adapted from Kernan 1959.
blackmailers, and impending death from wagons and roof-tiles—have been used to suggest a true snapshot of Rome or the poet’s authentic spirit. Yet treating the speakers as anything other than poetic constructions creates problems. Persius’ speaker is a learned but harsh cultural critic railing against the depraved poetry and morals of his time. Indeed, his critique of the poetic conventions of his day—that is, under Nero—can be read as pointed attack on the wastrel emperor’s artistic milieu. In life, however, Persius never published a verse; when his friends published his poems after his death, they changed the only phrase which might have offended the emperor. The apparent authenticity of the poet’s rage and his frequent use of the first person seem to legitimate his raillery, but the details of his life belie this pretense.

Griffin categorizes the qualities of satire under four headings: inquiry, provocation, display, and play. The former two characterize the ambivalent, philosophical side of satire, while the latter two represent the persuasive and declamatory elements of the genre. With inquiry, the satirist tests certain ideas or beliefs in the crucible of his poetry. Even the term *sermones* which Lucilius and Horace apply to their poems implies the dialectic and exploration of satire. Significantly, however,

---


63 Pers. 3.115-8, *alges, cum excussit membris timor albus aristas; / nunc face supposita feruescit sanguis et ira / scintillant oculi, dicisque facisque quod ipse / non sani esse hominis non sanus iuret Orestes*, “You grow cold when white fear has struck the hairs from your limbs; now, with torch aloft, the blood boils and eyes flash with anger, and you say and you do what Orestes himself, not a well man, would swear to be not of a well man.”

64 Sullivan 1978, 160.

65 The *Vita Persii* appended to the manuscripts of his works suggest that he was a quiet, bookish young man.

66 Griffin 1994, 39-94 calls them “rhetorics,” which I avoid for clarity.

these explorations never yield results. Horace’s *Sermo* 2.2 offers this sort of fruitless exploration: the poem can be seen as an indictment either of the speaker’s depraved culture or Ofellus’ primitive rusticity. The companion of inquiry, provocation, is the tendency for satire to challenge conventional standards and accepted truths. This challenge can be as simple as the difficulty of the author’s style. One expects a certain level of clarity in the act of communication, whether a legal brief, a narrative poem, or a restaurant menu; ancient satirists, however, confound this expectation. That our major source for the fragments of Lucilius is Nonius, who collected them for their lexical and grammatical oddity, suggests that satire challenged the reader from an early date.

Persius is one of the most difficult Latin authors: even his paradigmatic prologue poem, although only fourteen lines, is filled with obscure imagery, including the term *semi-paganus* that defies definition to this day.\(^{68}\) Juvenal is known for a discursive, paradoxical style.\(^{69}\) This is not the modern conception of paradox, but rather an explicit denial of what is considered conventional or orthodox: Juvenal 3 and 6, respectively, present the paradoxes “Rome is not Rome” and “women are no longer women.”\(^{70}\) Through provocation, the satirist seeks to “discomfit his reader, shake up his cherished values, and disrupt his orthodoxy.”\(^{71}\) Satire challenges its audience’s beliefs.

Persuasive speech, meanwhile, demonstrates the showmanship and ornament characteristic of imperial declamation.\(^{72}\) With display, an author attempts to dazzle his


\(^{69}\) Griffin 1994, 55-6.

\(^{70}\) Griffin 1994, 53.

\(^{71}\) Paulson 1967a, 135, in Griffin 1994, 54.

\(^{72}\) Griffin 1994, 71; Kaster 2001.
audience with a virtuoso performance, whether with the beautiful lines of Horace or with Persius’ “feverish display of erudition.”\textsuperscript{73} Juvenal delights in verbal venom, more it seems than the moral commonplaces that it upholds.\textsuperscript{74} He indulges not just in critique, but in the form of critique, presenting conventional moral arguments so powerfully that the presentation becomes the heart of the satire. While display seeks to impress an audience, play is a more solitary pursuit.\textsuperscript{75} Lucilius and Horace both used variations of \textit{ludus}, “play,” to describe their satires.\textsuperscript{76} Even at his most indignant, Juvenal plays with terms and images: a toad milked for its poison and colorful hyperbole lambasting women make the reader laugh at their sheer audacity. Implicit in play is joy, which helps explain the laughter that Juvenal’s fiery rants elicit and suggests a poet who, at least in some degree, delights in his own verbal skill.\textsuperscript{77}

So far, we have identified several characteristics of formal verse satire: content incorporating food and low humor; authors problematizing their satires’ content and meaning; and the categories of inquiry, provocation, display, and play. Although all of these categories appear in the \textit{Historia Augusta}, the biographies lack the explicit moralizing voice of satire and contain only brief smatterings of poetry. Furthermore, its playful wit does not mesh with the plain judgment of Juvenal’s cynical barbs or Persius’ obscure lines. Gentle wit and \textit{prosimetrum} suggest Menippean satire.

\textsuperscript{73} Scaliger 1594, 838.

\textsuperscript{74} Griffin 1994, 75.

\textsuperscript{75} Griffin 1994, 84.

\textsuperscript{76} Griffin 1994, 83-94.

\textsuperscript{77} Juv. 1.69-70, \textit{occurrit matrona potens, quae molle Calenum / porrectura uiro miscet sitiente rubetam}, “a powerful matron comes up, who mixes a toad in with smooth Calenian wine to offer her thirsty husband.”
Menippean Satire

The ancient exemplars of Menippean satire are varied—Menippus, Varro, Seneca the Younger, Petronius, Lucian, and Julian—but a number of commonalities unite them. The eponymous founder of the genre is Menippus, but too little of his work survives to analyze it. The most important detail is the title “Nekyia,” believed to relate someone’s journey to the underworld. In fact, journeys to the underworld to consult with the dead recur throughout Menippean satire. In his biography of Menippus, Diogenes Laertius calls the man a mocker, which gives an indication of later Menippean satire.

Varro was the first to write *Saturae Menippeae*. His works survive in fragment and summary—still more than Menippus'. The summaries are of especial interest because Aulus Gellius provides excerpts of actual Menippean satires that are otherwise lost. He even cites significant passages from some of Varro’s lost works, a boon for studying the history of early Menippean satire.

---

78 Relihan 1993 lists these authors with detailed analysis. Kirk 1980 provides a virtually complete list of Menippean satire, both ancient and modern.


80 At Cic., *Academica*. 1.8, Varro says that he followed Menippus: *et tamen in illis veteribus nostris, quae Menippum imitati non interpretati quadam hilaritate conspersimus, multa admixta ex intima philosophia, multa dicta dialectice, quae quo facilius minus docti intellegentur, luctunditate quadam ad legendum invitati*, “Nevertheless, in our old works, which we sprinkled with a fair amount of humor (for we were imitating Menippus, not translating him), a great deal of philosophy was mixed in from our inmost part; many things were said in dialectic, in order that the less learned might understand it more easily; we invited them to read it with a bit of fun.” Gellius, *Noctes Atticae* 2.18.7 bluntly calls them “Menipeans”: *quibus ille Menippus fuit, cuius libros M. Varro in saturis aemulatus est, quas alii ‘cynicas’, ipse appellat ‘Menipeas’.* “Based on which <sc. books> Marcus Varro was Menippus, whose books he emulated in his ‘Satires,’ which some people call ‘Cynical’ but he himself called ‘Menippean.’”

81 Kirk 1980, 5, gives all the titles, with both their Greek and Latin names (where both are known). The fragments themselves are collected in Astbury 2002.

82 Gellius, *Noctes Atticae* 1.17.4-6, 13.11-6, 6.16.1-5.
Varronian Menippean satire delights in wordplay and extensive lists; Varro parodies his own learned predilections by indulging them to comical excess.

In the Neronian age, Seneca offers the next extant—and first complete— Menippean satire with his travesty of Claudius’ deification, Apocolocyntosis. It demonstrates many of the elements assumed from fragments, such as the nekyia, and it introduces new ones, in particular the catascopia.83 In this “view from above,” the satire’s main character looks upon human affairs from a distance, granting (to the reader, if not the satiric actor) a detached view of human absurdity. Seneca also emphasizes the aporetic elements which the scraps of Varro only suggest: the antagonist of the whole work, Claudius, appears almost sympathetic, while most of the divine figures judging him are as foolish or wicked as the deceased emperor.84 The reader ends the brief satire unsure whether to judge the death of Claudius a comedy or a tragedy.

Petronius’ Satyricon is an outlier in the field of Menippean satire. It contains prosimetrum and seriocomic scenes, but it also has traits of a picaresque novel, such as raunchy humor and abundant amorality. These elements do not limit the Satyricon but enhance it. Almost every character in the work considers himself a moral paragon while embodying its opposing vice: Encolpius and Agamemnon cry out against the depredations of declamation, while in the Cena Trimalchionis, Trimalchio purports to aristocracy while hosting a grotesque parody of a banquet, replete with abysmal poetry, baroque food, and other signs of wantonness.85 Since everyone in the novel is a

83 Catascopia: Seneca, Apocolocyntosis 12-3; Nekyia: Seneca, Apocolocyntosis 14-5.

84 Relihan 1993, 75-7.

85 Petronius, Satyricon 1-5, 26-78.
hypocrite, the work metaphorically satirizes all of society. Nor does the *Satyricon* spare itself, for the *Cena Trimalchionis* critiques the poetic and literary inferiority of contemporary society, which, in a Neronian milieu, includes the *arbiter elegantiae* Petronius. *Aporia* returns too, with an unheroic hero in a world that implicates everyone in its evils. The lack of a *nekyia* seems to reject Menippean form, but it may have been found in one of the lost sections of the novel. In any case, the abundance of other traits overwhelm. Petronius has taken a novelistic framework and overlaid it with Menippean elements.

Lucian provides the most complete picture of Menippean satire. His essays, dialogues, and declamations incorporate all the elements discussed above, and he even includes Menippus as the chief actor in two complementary pieces: seeking supernatural wisdom, Menippus travels to heaven in the *Icaromenippus* (allowing him a *catascopia*); and in the *Nekyia*, he journeys to Hades (a formal *nekyia*). In both, he walks away in *aporia*, having learned nothing which he did not already know. Lucian also incorporated Menippean elements into many other non-Menippean works. In the *Vera Historia*, a shipful of men is carried up to the moon, allowing them a chance at *catascopia* if not *nekyia*. The *Dialogues of the Dead* involves Menippus travelling again to Hades, this time for a *nekyia* not of gods or heroes but of historical mortals; by the end, he counts himself among their number, forever trapped in the realm of the dead. In *Juppiter Tragoedus*, all the gods debate their own existence, and an atheist finds faith by reasoning that altars exist; therefore, the gods to whom they are dedicated must also

---

86 Schmeling 1996, 460 suggests that the work may have contained twenty-four books, while only one complete and two fragmentary books are extant.

87 Relihan 1993, 91.
exist. Like Petronius, Lucian has borrowed select elements of Menippean satire and superimposed them upon an existing generic framework, challenging the reader and his expectations. The concept of Menippean satire becomes more and more abstract; it becomes a tone or register that allows it to infuse different genres.

The final Menippean satire that could have influenced the *Historia Augusta* is the *Caesares* by Julian the Apostate. Emperors and great rulers, including Alexander the Great, Marcus Aurelius, and Constantine, compete before the gods for the right to sit on Olympus. Superficially, this work advances Julian’s official views: the supremacy of Marcus Aurelius, the wickedness of Constantine, the fraudulence of Christianity. The *spoudogeloion* and *prosimetrum* only enliven imperial doctrine. Yet the narrator, Julian himself, provides the framing device, pretending to relate a funny story he once heard.

Even the apostate’s vaunted model, Marcus Aurelius, cannot defend himself against charges that he apotheosized his wife and allowed Commodus to rule. The glory of

---

88 Relihan 1993, 114-6. Kirk 1980 includes these and many others in his catalogue of Menippean works.

89 Julian, *Caes.* 38.5, ὁ δὲ Κωνσταντῖνος, οὐχ εὐρίσκων ἐν θεοῖς τοῦ βίου τὸ ἄρχετυπον, ἐγγύθεν τὴν Τριφὴν κατιδὼν ἐδραμε πρὸς αὐτὴν· ἢ ὀπολαβούσα μαλακῶς...πρὸς τὴν Ἀσωτίαν ἀπῆγαγεν, ἵνα καὶ τὸν Ἡσυχὸν εὐρόν ἀναστρεφόμενον και προαγορεύοντα πάντα: «Ὅστις φθορεύς, ὅστις μιαφόνος, ὅστις ἐναγής καὶ βδελυρός, ἵνα θαρρῶν ἀποφανώ γάρ αὐτὸν τουτω τῷ ὑδάτι τοῦ βίου τὸ ἀρχέτυπον, κάν πάλιν ἔνοχος τοῖς αὐτοῖς γένηται, δύσω τὸ στῆθος πλήξαντι καὶ τὴν κεφαλὴν πατάξαντι καθαρῷ γενέσθαι», “Constantine, not finding the model for his life among the gods, looked right at Luxury and ran to her. She took him up gently and...brought him to Prodigality, where also he found Jesus, going about and saying to everyone: 'Whoever is a seducer, an adulterer, cursed and wretched, let him come and take heart! For I shall wash him with this water and at once show him pure, and if he commits these crimes again, I shall grant to him who beats his breast and him who strikes his head to become pure.”’ For more on Julian’s policies, see Potter 2004, 499-520.

90 Julian, *Caes.* 1, Πέφυκε γὰρ οὐδαμῶς ἐπιτήδειος οὔτε σκώπτειν οὔτε παρωδεῖν οὔτε γελοιάζειν. Ἐπεὶ δὲ χρὴ τὸ νόμῳ πείθεσθαι τοῦ θεοῦ, βούλει σοι ἐν παιδιᾶς μέρει μὴν διεξέλθω πολλὰ ἵσως ἔχοντα ὁκός αὐτὸς αὐτῷ οὕτω τῇ μητρίᾳ ἐκπαίδευσεν, “For I am not naturally able to mock or to lampoon or raise a laugh; but since it is necessary to follow the god’s command, do you want me to relate to you in a joking fashion many things which are probably worth hearing?”

91 Julian, *Caes.* 35, τὸ τέλος ἀπορούμενος ὁ Σειληνὸς ἐπιτίθεται τοῖς περὶ τὸν παῖδα καὶ τὴν γαμετὴν αὐτῶ δοκοῦσιν ὡς ὄρθως οὐδὲ κατὰ λόγον πεποίησαν, τὴν μὲν ὅτι ταῖς ἡρωίαις ἐνέγραψε, τὸ δὲ ὅτι τὴν ἑγεμονία τὴν ἐπέτρεψεν, “Silenus looked to the goal and stuck to the things concerning his child and his wife which seemed to have been done in an unorthodox way and against reason; namely, that he had enrolled
Olympus is tarnished, too, for all the competitors are allowed to stay among the gods, and Jesus himself, despised by Julian, resides among them. Julian draws upon the finest of the Menippean tradition to create a universe in which good goes unrewarded and evil unpunished; even the wickedest Christian faces no different fate from the noblest pagan. Attempts to draw a moral from this tale or to compare it with Julian’s more traditional works plunge one into a state of aporia. Julian subjects his views to a Menippean filter, covering the dark conclusions with humor and framing them in such a way that one cannot trust the conclusions.

_Nekyia, catascopia, aporia_: the exploration of ancient Menippean satire created a list of attributes which one might call “Menippean,” but they lack a theoretical framework. In his *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, Bakhtin identifies a seriocomic supergenre which he calls “menippea.” This category embraces a wide number of traditional Menippean satires, all united by fourteen characteristics: an increased comic element; freedom from history, legend, plot unity, and philosophical tradition; indulgence in the fantastic and in explorations of philosophical ideas; union of the fantastic with crude slum naturalism; contemplation of broad themes of universal importance; journeys to heaven and hell and correspondent dialogues of the dead; experimental fantasticality which changes the observed scale of life; representation and exploration of the abnormal states of the human mind; scenes of scandal and violation of normal behavior; strong juxtaposition; images of social utopia; frequent use of other genres inserted into the work; a resultant multi-leveled tone to the work; and a concern with

her among the heroines, and that he had bequeathed his throne to the boy.” The role of persona theory in Julian’s self-presentation here has not been sufficiently explored, but note Pack 1946, 151-7 which argues that the *Caesares*, in spite of its satiric nature, coheres with Julian’s other philosophical works.
contemporary issues, making it the “journalistic” genre in antiquity. Some have criticized this list for its comprehensiveness; it applies to so many works that “menippea” becomes a useless term applicable to any seriocomic piece of literature. Scholars have also said the same of Menippean satire proper, calling it a “baggy” genre. Every one of Bakhtin’s fourteen categories, however, appear in the Historia Augusta to varying degrees—no coincidence.

Bakhtin’s fourteen elements of menippea are too diffuse; they demand a finer analysis. Frye’s six phases of satire exist in the Historia Augusta and are important for my analysis, but Relihan’s Ancient Menippean Satire is most useful for identifying and arranging the Menippean content of the Historia Augusta. Whereas Bakhtin and Frye attempt to define “Menippean” in universal terms that can explain modern authors who write in that vein, Relihan explores its ancient origins, making his survey of singular value for assessing a work like the Historia Augusta. In addition to prosimetrum and spoudogeloion, Relihan sees aporetic endings as the crucial commonality uniting ancient Menippean satire. Aporia in a Menippean context suggests self-mockery and inconclusiveness; the theme of the work often comes back around on itself and both actor and reader are left unsure of the point of the whole exercise.

As with verse satire, the Historia Augusta contains many elements of Menippean satire and lacks some crucial ones. Although the Historia Augusta details episodes that

93 Weinbrot 2005, 16.
94 Elliott 1960, 186; Astbury 1988; Reardon 1991, 49. Kronenberg 2009, 5 doubts whether it has any value as a generic marker at all.
Firmus could hardly have eaten an ostrich per day—none of them reach the level of pure fantasy that one finds in Lucian or Julian. This fact means that the Historia Augusta also has no catascopia. This might be surmountable; indeed, the extant remains of Satyricon are mired in the same sort of ultra-heightened reality. What raises further doubts is the quality of the prosimetrum. Relihan notes that the poetry in all other Menippean satires furthers their story and satiric effect. Although the Historia Augusta has many snippets of poetry, much of it original, none of it transcends the quasi-prophetic citation of Vergil or the occasional verse at the emperor’s expense. The narrative proceeds all in prose. The Historia Augusta, for all its correspondences, cannot be strict Menippean satire.

**Parody**

Parody, the third main satiric genre identified by Griffin, presents unique difficulties in an ancient context. The earliest definitions of parody call it a humorous or mocking transformation of the art of the epic rhapsodists, changing words or verses from the well-known sagas to create an incongruous new piece. Quintilian altered the definition to something more familiar to modern readers, calling it a genre that consciously changed the form or content of any recognized literary work for humorous

---

95 HA, *Quad. Tyr. 4.2*, struthionem ad diem comedisse fertur.

96 Relihan 1993, 18, based on Mras 1914, 391.

97 E.g., HA, *Hadr. 2.8*, quo quidem tempore cum sollicitus de imperatoris erga se iudicio Vergilianas sortes consuleret, ‘quis procul ille autem ramis insignis olivae / sacra ferens? nosco crines incanaque menta / regis Romani, primam qui legibus urbem / fundabit, Curos parvis et paupere terra / missus in imperium magnum, cui deinde subbit,’ sors excidit, “And at the time, when he consulted the Vergilian lots, as he was concerning about the emperor’s opinion of him, the lot came out, ‘Who is that remarkable man, far from the boards of olive, carrying sacred items? I recognize the hairs and hoary chin of the Roman king, who will found the first city with laws, sent from meager Cures and a poor land to a great kingdom, to whom it will then submit.’”

98 Rose 1993, 6-20.
or critical effect. Nevertheless, it seems that few undertook it. The conservative epic tradition provides some short models, namely the Margytes and the Batrachomyomachia. Long-form non-epic parody is almost non-existent, either in extant texts or in the literary records. In fact, parody’s chief use in the classical world is as mode that colors literature, from evocations of tragedy in Aristophanes’ Frogs, to the echoes of Accius in Tiberius’ sententia (as quoted by Suetonius), oderint dum probent, “let them hate, so long as they approve.”

The ancient definition of parody does not satisfy. Rose’s Parody: ancient, modern, and post-modern will guide my treatment of parody, for it appreciates parody on its own terms. For a long time, parody was seen as a low genre, relegated beneath other often despised comic genres. Starting with Rose’s positive definition of the genre as “the comic refunctioning of preformed linguistic or artistic material” offers little to elucidate the satiric role that the genre can play. The details of her discussion are the most important part, particularly her statement that parody is fundamentally comedic and ambivalent. Strict parody only differs from satire in its imitation of its target and the necessity of a moralizing voice—a description which applies to the Historia Augusta.

99 Quintilian, Institutio Oratoria 6.3, ‘hereditas est quam uocant sapientiam’ pro illo ‘felicitas est’: seu fictis notis uersibus similes, quae παρῳδία dicitur, ‘Inheritance is what they call wisdom,’ for that line ‘Happiness is…’ or that is, like creations from known verses, which is called ‘parody.’

100 Lucian’s True History serves as an example of a novel whose main conceit is a prose parody of the tropes of epic poetry, but it changes its form so much that the novel should be read as parodic rather than strict parody. Catullus 64 could be seen as parody of epic or of wedding odes, but its length (408 lines) would hardly constitute a liber, much less an entire epos.

101 Aristophanes, Frogs 830-1533; Suet., Tiberius 59.2, compare with Warmington 1967, Accius fragment 168, oderint dum metuant, “let them hate, so long as they fear.”

102 Rose 1993, 9-10, discussing Scaliger’s use of the word ridiculus to describe it.

103 Rose 1993, 52.

104 Rose 1993, 47.
Yet Rose’s argument begins to falter when she attempts to differentiate parody from other genres. She enumerates several modern interpretations of genres, subgenres, or even tones of literature, contrasting them with parody to set it apart.\footnote{Rose 1993, 54-99: Burlesque and travesty; persiflage, 'pekoral,' plagiarism, and hoax; pastiche; quotation, 'cross-reading,' cento, and contrafact; satire; irony; and meta-fiction.} Compared to Griffin’s inclusionary approach to satire, Rose seems to limit her genre unnecessarily; parody can fit within and alongside virtually any mode of literary expression, and even satire can be written as parody. Rose’s work gives an excellent definition for parody to apply to the Historia Augusta, but the most significant lesson is to appreciate the fluidity of the concept of “genre.” Rose gives a clear framework for considering parody, but one which applies to few whole works in antiquity. Instead, the traits of parody appear in varying degrees throughout a variety of ancient works, from Cicero’s playful manipulation of Terence in the Pro Caelio to works like the True History, which incorporates parodic elements throughout. This distinction between strict parody and strict satire overlooks the strong correspondences between the two genres, which will be exploited for analyzing the Historia Augusta.

The Satiric

Each genre has its own special characteristics, but there is tremendous overlap between formal verse satire, Menippean satire, and parody; indeed, different commentators will give individual works or poems different labels depending upon their emphasis: Persius 4 can be read as a simple verse satire, but also as a parody of the Socratic dialogue; Lucian’s True History presents itself as a sort of prose parody of the serious epics that students of his day would have read, but it can also be read as a true
Menippean adventure. All three genres, even in their noblest expressions, tend towards a low style, whether in the crudeness of their humor or their indulgence in humor itself. They also tend to obfuscate their apparent meaning, verse and Menippean satire by casting doubt upon themselves, parody by deriding an existing model. Finally, the genres explore rather than define ideas; the satiric presents the reader problems with no solutions. Therefore, by demonstrating the low or quotidian themes, the narrative ambiguity, and moral explorations throughout the Historia Augusta, we can illuminate the satiric mode of the work, which drives the work and transforms it from shoddy biography into a meaningful critique of its time and of human affairs.

In what follows, I will demonstrate the prevalence of quotidian themes (Chapter 3) and narrative ambiguity (Chapter 4) in the Historia Augusta. The concentration of these tropes will prove the satiric identity of the Historia Augusta, which will allow for a new critique of the moral explorations that it pursues. I will examine the religious and political content (Chapters 5 and 6) of the Historia Augusta through the satiric lens, providing greater insight into its aporetic qualities. My method is to read through the Historia Augusta from the Vita Hadriani to the Vita Cari et Carini et Numeriani whenever possible, except where thematic considerations (like the religious focus of the Vita Alexandri Severi) demand special treatment.

---

106 Relihan 1993, 76, 202, 275 n. 17 suggests that it could even be seen as a parody.
CHAPTER 3
FOOD, SEX, AND JOKES

Biography inherently privileges the personal qualities of its subjects. The Historia Augusta continues and expands this tradition, not just exhibiting the base and quotidian but exulting in it. Such emphasis on food, sex, and humor guides one towards a satiric reading of the Historia Augusta.

Food

Perhaps the most frequent manifestation of daily life in the Historia Augusta is food. These are no mere loaves and fishes, however; the emperors’ plate is laid out in all its variety and excess. The first notable dish appears towards the end of the Vita Hadriani. While describing the emperor’s moral behavior, the author mentions Hadrian’s fondness for tetrapharmacum, a dish composed of pheasant, sow’s udder, ham, and pastry.¹ The casserole is mentioned twice more, once in the Vita Aelii and again in the Vita Alexandri Severi.² The latter passage only mentions it as a meal favored by Alexander Severus, but the Vita Aelii describes the dish as among the young Caesar’s “not disreputable but somewhat lavish” delights. “Aelius Spartanus” offers a different name, pentepharmacum, as well as a variation on the recipe (including peacock and

¹ HA, Hadr. 20.4, inter cibos unice amavit tetrapharmacum, quod erat de phasiano sumine perna et crustulo, “Among his foods, he singularly loved the tetrapharmacum, which was made of pheasant, sow’s udder, ham, and pastry.”
² HA, Ael. 5.3-5, huius voluptates ab iis qui vitam eius scripserunt multae feruntur, et quidem non infames sed aliquatenus diffuentes. nam tetrapharmacum, seu potius pentapharmacum, quo postea semper Hadrianus est usus, ipse dicitur repperisse, hoc est sumen phasianum pavonem pernam crustulatam et aprunam. de quo genere cibi aliter refert Marius Maximus, non pentapharmacum sed tetrapharmacum appellans, ut et nos ipsi in eius vita persecuti sumus, “His many delights are mentioned by those who wrote his life, and indeed they are not contemptible, but somewhat extravagant. For he is said to have invented the tetrapharmacum, or rather the pentapharmacum, which Hadrian afterwards always enjoyed; that is, sow’s utter, pheasant, peacock, ham-in-pastry, and wild boar. Marius Maximus says differently about this sort of food, calling it not pentapharmacum but tetrapharmacum, as we ourselves have followed in his life;” Alex. Sev. 30, ususque est Hadriani tetrafarmaco frequenter, de quo in libris suis Marius Maximus loquitur, cum Hadriani disserit vitam, “And he enjoyed Hadrian’s tetrapharmacum often, about which Marius Maximus speaks in his own books when he discusses the life of Hadrian.”
wild boar, and putting the pastry on the ham) which Marius Maximus, cited in the anecdote, still calls *tetrapharmacum*. None of the ingredients in isolation is especially exotic; the dish seems to be a simple *farrago* of conventional foods. Biographical and satiric precedents, however, imply a deeper meaning for the motif of the *tetrapharmacum*. By Plutarch’s maxim, moral instruction could be found in the most trivial of things, even an emperor’s eating habits. Suetonius’ emperors often indulge in elaborate fare, but chiefly the “bad” emperors, particularly Vitellius. He enjoyed the “Shield of Minerva,” a dish strikingly similar to the *tetrapharmacum* and composed of ingredients from all over the empire—Rome’s dominion symbolized on a platter. The *Historia Augusta* attempts to ameliorate the extravagance of the *tetrapharmacum*, but its Vitellian reminiscences could not escape an audience raised on Suetonius and Marius Maximus. This comparison causes no complications for the morally ambivalent Hadrian and Aelius, but Alexander Severus is a sainted figure in the *Historia Augusta*. The first important foodstuff in the collection introduces two key satiric markers: quotidian themes and, by the subtle complication of an apparently virtuous emperor, *aporia*.

---

3 Suet., *Vitellius 2*, Famosissima super ceteras fuit cena data ei adventicia a fratre, in qua duo milia lectissimorum piscium, septem avium apposita traduntur. Hanc quoque exsuperavit ipse dedicatione patinae, quam ob immensam magnitudinem clipeum Minervae πολιούχου dictitabat. In hac scarorum iocinera, phasianarum et pavorum cerebella, linguas phoenicopterus, murenarum lactes a Parthia usque fretoque Hispanico per navarchos ac triremes petitarum commiscuit, “A strange dinner, renowned beyond all the rest, was given to him by his brother, in which two thousand of the choicest fish and seven of birds are said to have been offered. He himself also surpassed this with the creation of a dish which, because of its great size, he often called the ‘Shield of Minerva the City-Protector.’ In it, he mixed up pikes’ livers, the brains of pheasants and peacocks, the tongues of flamingos, and the intestines of eels, which were sought out by navarchs and triremes from Parthia up to the shores of Spain.” See Gowers 1993, 36.

4 The author even opens the life in a panegyrical tone: HA, *Alex. Sev.* 1.1-2, Interfecto Vario Heliogabalo (sic enim malumus dicere quam Antoninus, quia et nihil Antoninorum pestis illa ostendit et hoc nomen ex annalibus senatus auctoritate erasum est) ad remedium generis humani Aurelius Alexander…accepit imperium, “After Varius Elagabalus was killed (for thus do we prefer to call him rather than Antoninus, because that plague demonstrates nothing of the Antonines, and this name was erased from the annals by the will of the senate), for the salvation of the human race, Aurelius Alexander…took control.”
Food is essential in satire; the genre’s etymology is culinary, from *satura lanx,* “the loaded plate.” It juxtaposes the material realities of the world with the satire’s seemingly lofty intentions.\(^5\) Gowers identifies four functions of food in satire, in ascending order of abstraction: a superficial culinary meaning, a social meaning, a philosophical meaning, and an aesthetic meaning.\(^6\) We can disregard the first and the last: the dish’s obvious role as food needs no elaboration, while its aesthetic value helps poetic satire to declare its adherence to neoteric ideals, a concern not shared by the late antique *Historia Augusta.*\(^7\) Even the social and philosophical aspects of food intermingle as the extravagance or humbleness of a dish leads the reader to moral judgment. So far, this is no different from biography’s use of food, but the ironizing tendencies of satire complicate the relatively simplistic moralizing of biography. To the “Shield of Minerva,” and thus the *tetrapharmacum,* may be compared Domitian’s great turbot from Juvenal 4, another grand and grotesque dish that lays the Roman Empire out on a plate. Gowers sees the first part of the poem, a seemingly disconnected episode involving one of Domitian’s flunkies, Crispinus, as a small-scale version of the main imperial theme that follows.\(^8\) The *Historia Augusta* was familiar with both authors; the *tetrapharmacum* may be, like Crispinus’ meal, the *hoeurs d’oeuvre* to the “Shield of

---


\(^6\) Gowers 1993, 157-8, that is, how the food functions as food, what it says about the relative social position of the consumer, what it says about the morality of the consumer, and finally, how the food fits into the artistic scope of the work. For example, in the discussion of the *tetrapharmacum,* the dish is plainly a comestible, the wide range of foodstuffs and their high cost suggests a patrician consumer, the extravagance of the casserole indicts the morals of the consumer, and the coarse combination of foods is ideally suited to the low genre of satire. Were the dish replaced with a honeyed tart, the aesthetic value could be judged fine and more suited to Horatian-styled poetry.

\(^7\) Pers. 1.125, …*aspice et haec, si forte aliquid decoctius audis,* “Look also at these things, if by chance you hear something rather cooked-down.” Hooley 2007, 88.

\(^8\) Gowers 1993, 206.
Minerva.” The food symbolically tells a tale of imperial corruption: Hadrian, Aelius, and Alexander Severus, none differing in their appetites, all masters of the empire going to enjoy the later equivalent of the “Shield of Minerva.” Why, then, does the author insist upon mitigating the vice of such a dish? Satiric inscrutability looms large over this casserole.

The tetrapharmacum is a conceivable dish; later, the collection abandons plausibility. Gallienus, the supreme villain of the latter half of the collection, twists basic foods to his will, making castles from apples and serving fresh wine, melons, and fruit fresh from the tree, all out of season. The emperor perverts the natural order to achieve marvelous results. His desires are literally unnatural. The first of the Quadrigae Tyrannorum, Firmus, consumes a whole ostrich each day and bests the renowned drinker Burburus (“Guzzler”) by downing two buckets of wine and staying sober (HA, Quad. Tyr. 4). The last emperor in the Historia Augusta, Carinus, would serve over a thousand pounds of various meats at banquets and would swim among apples and melons (HA, Carus 17.2-4). These debauched exploits amplify even the most outrageous satirical feasts: Domitian’s turbot and Trimalchio’s sausage-pig are single, exceptional instances while the emperors of the Historia Augusta indulge in these fantastical excesses regularly. These grand meals are the inverse of Ofellus’ dilemma in Horace, Sermo 2.2: they are repellent but enticing because of the extreme success they represent. The emperor Tacitus, meanwhile, sets a table so bland as to debase imperial

---

9 HA, Gall. 16, ac ne eius praetereatur miseranda solertia, veris tempore cubicula de rosis fecit. de pomis castella composit. uvas triennio servavit. hieme summa melones exhibuit. mustum quem ad modum toto anno haberetur, docuit. ficos virides et poma ex arboribus recentia semper alienis mensibus praebuit, “And, lest his lamentable cleverness be passed over, in the spring he made bed-chambers out of roses, he made castles of apples. He preserved eggs for three years. At the height of winter, he displayed melons. He showed how grape-must might be kept for an entire year. He gave green figs and apples fresh from the tree, always out of season.”
grandeur no less than his gluttonous successors. A banquet in the court of Tacitus might consist of a single chicken, with pig cheeks and eggs; he was “immoderate” in his passion for lettuce, getting a good night’s rest at so extravagant an expense; he preferred bitter foods and would only eat dry, salty bread (HA, *Tacit.* 11.1-3). The *Historia Augusta*, in the midst of the greatest debauchery, shows that extreme asceticism is an equally unappetizing alternative. It puts the reader in the place of Ofellus, forced to acknowledge that a simple, conservative meal holds no appeal. The *Historia Augusta* presents the extremes of the culinary spectrum and leaves the reader disgusted with both.

Food in all its quantity and variety appears most prominently in the form of catalogues. Shortly into the salacious second half of the *Vita Elagabali*, the author discusses some of the emperor’s various pleasures and notes that “he was the first to make stuffing of fish, the first to make stuffing of oysters and *lithostrea* and similar shellfish, lobsters and crayfish and squills.” If not for their novel preparation, most of these shellfish would be nothing uncommon to any wealthy table. Yet the diction is striking: the OLD called *insicia*, “stuffing,” a “very rare” word and makes no mention at all of *lithostrea*, a portmanteau of *lithos* and *ostrea* that can be translated literally as “rock-oysters.” At the peak of his gastronomic depravity, Elagabalus serves up for himself and others, among other things, camels’ heels, the combs of living roosters, flamingos’

10 The term “catalogue” evades strict definition; in general, I define it as a series of five or more like items, usually in asyndeton, that make the author’s stated point with almost excessive detail. Book 1, Chapter 13 of Rabelais’ *Gargantua and Pantagruel* offers a more modern model, in which Gargantua tells how he found an excellent wipe for his backside (a downy goose), first enumerating no fewer than fifty-nine of his previous failed efforts.

11 HA, *Elagab.* 19.6, *primus fecit de piscibus isicia, primus de ostreis et lithostreis et aliiis huiusmodi marinis conchis et lucustis et cammaris et scillis.* (Trans. Magie 1924, with some revisions)
brains, the heads of various birds, mullets' beards, sows' udders and wombs, and he uses pearls as seasoning instead of pepper (HA, Elagab. 20.5-21.4). Subsequent emperors eat an enormous variety of food, but none compared to Elagabalus. While part of the reason lies in the structure of the Historia Augusta, which contrasts the villainous Elagabalus with his saintly successor Alexander Severus, there also seems to be an element of satiric play in the enumeration and even invention of such foods. The Vita Elagabali is a fulcrum, hinting to the reader that what had come before, biographies which were reasonably factual or at least not ostentatiously fictive, are about to change.

Catalogues

After the lavishness of Elagabalus’ table, catalogues of food vanish. Comestibles appear only in individual episodes, like Firmus’ daily ostrich, but lists do not disappear altogether. The first biography in the collection also contains the first catalogue: “Aelius Spartanus,” when telling how Hadrian used to encourage the soldiers to emulate his virtue, forces thirteen separate examples into a single cum clause. The biographer further catalogues Hadrian’s contrasting attributes, the types of people whom Hadrian

---

12 The Historia Augusta similarly blackens the reputation of Gallienus unduly, in part to contrast him with his successor, Claudius; Magie 1932, 16-7.

13 HA, Hadr. 10, exemplo etiam virtutis suae ceteros adhortatus, cum etiam vicena milia pedibus armatus ambularet, triclinia de castris et porticus et cryptas et topia dirueret, vestem humillimam frequenter acciperet, sine auro balteum sumeret, sine gemmis fibula sagum stringeret, capulo vix eburneum spatham clauderet, aegros milites in hospitiis suis videret, locum castris caperet, nulli vitem nisi robusto et bona famae daret nec tribunum nisi plena barba faceret aut eius aetatis, quae prudentia et annis tribunatus robor inpleret, nec pateretur quicquam tribunum a milite accipere, delicata omnia undique summoveret, arma postremo eorum supellectilemque corrigeret, “He urged others by the example of even his own virtue, since we walked around armed even for twenty miles, banished couches from the camps, and porticos and grottos and gardens, often took very humble clothing, wore a belt without gold, used a blanket without gems or pins, put away a sword with a barely burnished hilt, saw sick soldiers in his own lodgings, took a place in the camps, gave place to no one unless he were strong and of good reputation, nor made on a tribune unless with a full beard or of that age which would meet the strength of the tribunate in wisdom and years, nor tolerated a tribune taking anything from a soldier, banished all frivolities everywhere, and finally, set their arms and goods aright.”
liked and disliked, and the buildings that he built and renovated. No thing in these lists alerts the reader to any peculiarity, only the artifice of such clauses. Subsequent catalogues create more substantial problems. In the *Vita Antonini Pii*, the emperor's extant building projects are listed: the temple of Hadrian, the Grecostadium, the Amphitheatre, the Tomb of Hadrian, the temple of Agrippa, the Pons Sublicius, the Pharus, the port at Caieta, the port of Tarracina, the baths of Ostia, the aqueduct at Antium, and the temples of Lanuvium. The *Vita Severi* contains a staggering list of forty-nine nobles put to death by the emperor without trial. The eternal testaments to Antoninus Pius' reign are rattled off like a grocery list and the noblest men of Rome are reduced to mere names. In form and moral impact, these lists evoke Menippean catalogues and satiric ambivalence.

14 HA, *Hadr.* 14.11, *idem severus laetus, comis gravis, lascivus cunctator, tenax liberalis, simulator simplex, saevus clemens et semper in omnibus varius,* “The same man was harsh and joyful, amiable and severe, lusty and a delayer, obstinate and generous, a pretender and honest, vicious and merciful—indeed, always variable in all things;” 16.8-10, *Sed quamvis esset in reprehendendis musicis tragicis comicis grammaticis rhetoribus facilis, tamen omnes professores et honoravit et divites fecit …in summa familiaritate Epictetum et Heliodorum philosophos et, ne nominatim de omnibus dicam, grammaticos, rhetores, musicos, geometras, pictureos, astrologos habuit,* “But although he was quick to scorn musicians, tragedians, comic poets, grammarians, rhetors, oratos, nevertheless he both honored all teachers and made them rich…he had Epictetus and Heliodorus in the greatest acquaintanceship, and, not to mention them all by name, grammarians, rhetors, musicians, geometers, painters, astrologers;” 19.10, *Romae instauravit Pantheum, saepta, basilicam Neptuni, sacras aedes plurimas, forum Augusti, lavacrum Agrippae,* “He restored the Pantheon at Rome, palisades, the basilica of Neptune, very many holy temples, the forum of Augustus, the bath of Agrippa.”


The *Vita Elagabali* stands out as the most egregious abuser of non-comestible catalogues. The emperor needed vehicles when he travelled for all his pimps, madams, whores, and "well-hung" men;\(^{17}\) he gives as a donative not coins or candy, but fatted cattle, camels, asses, and slaves.\(^{18}\) Lavish retinues and imperial largesse were facts of life under the emperors, but by turning them into catalogues of excess the *Historia Augusta* renders its biographical subject a satirical target. The silliest is the *senaculum*, a women’s senate whose various laws are enumerated: “what kind of clothing each might wear in public, who was to yield precedence and to whom, who was to advance to kiss another, who might ride in a chariot, on a horse, on a pack-animal, or on an ass, who might drive in a carriage drawn by mules or in one drawn by oxen, who might be carried in a litter, and whether the litter might be made of leather, or of bone, or covered with ivory or with silver, and lastly, who might wear gold or jewels on her shoes.”\(^{19}\) Such absurdity drives the episode out of the historical realm and into the satiric.

**Sex**

Derisive sexuality peppers the *Historia Augusta*: Commodus had wanton liaisons with men and women,\(^ {20}\) while Caracalla committed incest with Julia Domna.\(^ {21}\)

---

\(^ {17}\) HA, Elagab. 31.6, *causa vehiculorum erat lenorum, lenarum, meretricum, exsoletorium, subactorum etiam bene vasatorum multitudo.*

\(^ {18}\) HA, Elagab. 8.3, *Cum consulatum inisset, in populum non nummos vel argenteos vel aureos vel bellarium vel minuta animalia, sed boves opimos et camelos et asinos et cervos populo diripiendos abiecit, imperatorium id esse dictitans.*

\(^ {19}\) HA, Elagab. 4.4, *quae quo vestitu incederet, quae cui cederet, quae ad cuius osculum veniret, quae pilento, quae equo, quae sagmario, quae asino veheretur, quae carpento mulari, quae bovum, quae sella veheretur et utrum pellicia an ossea an eborata an argentata, et quae aurum vel gemmas in calciamentis haberent,* trans. Magie 1924. This could be an example of verbal play, for the term *senaculum* has literary precedent, not as junior senates but as waiting-areas before official assemblies of the senate; Mason 1987.

\(^ {20}\) HA, Comm. 2.8, *mulierulas formae scitioris ut prostitula mancipia per speciem lupanarium et ludibrium pudicitiae contraxit,* “Women of rather notorious form he brought as sex-slaves for the appearance of brothels and the mockery of their chastity;” 5.10-11, *ipsas concubinas suas sub oculis suis...*
Elagabalus is most notorious for his sexual atrocities: he raped a Vestal Virgin\textsuperscript{22} and was married to his male freedman Zoticus—using the verb for \textit{nubere} for “to marry,” the grammatical subject of which should be feminine.\textsuperscript{23} The \textit{Historia Augusta} emphasizes certain details of the Vestal affair to highlight the emperor’s debauchery, but according to Herodian, he did not merely rape her but married her, perhaps to legitimize his new religious scheme as head priest of the sun god, perhaps to quell criticism of his effeminate ways.\textsuperscript{24} Herodian depicts a wicked but politically motivated act; the emphasis

\textit{stuprari iubebat. nec inruentium in se iuvenum carebat infamia, omni parte corporis atque ore in sexum utrumque pollutus}, “He ordered his very own concubines to be debauched before his own eyes. Nor was he free from the disgrace of youths pushing into him, polluted in every part of his body and in his mouth on both sexes.”

\textsuperscript{21} HA, Carac. 10.1-5, \textit{Interest scire quemadmodum novercam suam Iuliam uxorem ducisse dicatur. quae cum esset pulcherrima et quasi per neglegentiam se maxima corporis parte nudasset, dixissetque Antoninus, “Vellem, si liceret,” respondisse furtur, “Si libet, licet. an nescis te imperatorem esse et leges dare, non accipere?” quo audito furor inconditus ad effectum criminis roboratus est nuptiasque eas celebravit quas, si scieret se leges dare vere, solus prohibere debuisset. matrem enim (non alicet nomine) duxit uxorem et ad parricidium iunxit incestum, si quidem eam matrimonio sociavit cuius filium nuper occiderat, “It is of interest to know how he is said to have taken his stepmother Julia for a wife. Since she was extremely beautiful and had stripped the greatest part of her body, as though by mistake, and Antoninus had said, ‘I should like it, if it is acceptable,’ she is said to have answered, ‘If it pleases you, it is acceptable. Or do you not know that you are the emperor and that you give laws, not obey them?’ And when he heard this, his disordered madness was strengthened to perform the crime, and he held a wedding which, if he knew that he truly gave the laws, he alone ought to have prevented. For he took his mother (she must not be called by another name) as wife and joined incest to parricide, if indeed he shared in marriage she whose son he had killed.”

\textsuperscript{22} HA, Elagab. 6.6, \textit{in virginem Vestalem inceestum admisit}, “He violated the chastity of a Vestal Virgin.”

\textsuperscript{23} HA, Elagab. 10.2-5, \textit{Zoticus sub eo tantum valuit ut ab omnibus officiorum principibus sic haberetur quasi domini maritus…nupsit et coit, ita ut et pronubam haberet clamaretque “Concide Magire,” et eo quidem tempore quo Zoticus aegrotabat, “Zoticus did so well under him that he was held in such a regard by all the heads of the offices, as though he were their master’s husband…he [Elagabalus] was married to him and bedded him, such that he even had a bridesmaid and shouted, ‘Ravish me, Cook!’ and that at a time when Zoticus was ill.” Treggiari 1991, 163 states that \textit{nubere} etymologically means “to veil oneself,” hence the feminine connotations.

\textsuperscript{24} Herod. 5.6.1-2, \textit{μετ’ ἐκείνην δὲ προσποιησάμενος ἔραν, ἣν δὲ καὶ τὰ τῶν ἀνδρῶν πράττειν δοκοῖ, παρθένου τῇ Ρωμαίων Ἑστίᾳ ιερωμένῃ…γυναῖκα ἔθετο, ἐπιστείλας τῇ συγκλήτῳ καὶ παραμυθησάμενος ὁσέβημα τε καὶ ἀμάρτημα τηλίκοτον, φήςας ἀνθρώπινον τι πεπονθέναι πάθος· ἐρωτὶ γὰρ τῆς κόρης ἐξαλωκέναι, ἀρμόζοντα τε καὶ σεβάσαμον εἶναι γάμον ἱερέως τε καὶ ἱερείας, “And after her, pretending to be in love so that he might seem to do a man’s deeds, he made a wife out of a virgin dedicated to the Roman Hestia [Vestal Virgin], writing to the senate and justifying his impiety and his youthful transgression, saying that he experienced some sort of manly passion, for he was stricken with love for the girl, and the marriage of a priest and priestess was proper and righteous.”
of the *Historia Augusta* lies in the grossly sexual aspects the episode. As to the second story, Zoticus receives no mention in Herodian. Dio Cassius tells of Zoticus and his rival Hierocles (whom Dio calls only Elagabalus’ marvelously endowed lover) who drugged Zoticus into impotence so the emperor would banish him.\(^{25}\) Both historians speak of Elagabalus’ effeminacy—it seems possible that Elagabalus was transgender.\(^{26}\) But the biography muddies the facts, suggesting that Zoticus was more than a failed affair; the author conflates Hierocles and Zoticus, with the effect that the reader believes that Elagabalus had intimate relationships with two powerful freedmen. Hierocles is not mentioned as a husband, but only as an influential freedman. The author of the *Historia Augusta* creates a false narrative to denigrate Elagabalus further than history allows.

In the *Quadrigae Tyrannorum*, Proculus’ appetites expand even beyond Elagabalus’: after taking one hundred maidens prisoner he wrote a letter to his kinsman Maecianus to assure him that, although he had only raped ten the first night, he had taken care of them all within fifteen days.\(^{27}\) Given the fraudulence of all the letters in the

---

\(^{25}\) Cass. Dio, 79.16, Αὐρήλιος δὲ δὴ Ζωτικός, ἀνὴρ Σμυρναῖος, ὃν καὶ Μάγειρον ἀπὸ τῆς τοῦ πατρὸς τέχνης ἀπεκάλουν, καὶ ἐφιλήθη πάνυ ὑπ’ αὐτοῦ καὶ ἐμισήθη, καὶ διὰ τούτο καὶ ἐσώθη…ὁ δὲ Ἱεροκλῆς φοβήθηκες μὴ καὶ μᾶλλον αὐτὸν ἑαυτῷ δουλώσηται, καὶ τι δ’ αὐτὸν δεινόν, οἷα ἐν ἀντερασταῖς εἴωθε γίγνεσθαι, πάθη, φαρμάκῳ τινὶ αὐτὸν διὰ τῶν οἰνοχοῶν, προσφιλῶν που ἑαυτῷ δύντων, ἐξεθήλυνε. καὶ ὁὔτως ἐκείνος ἀστυσίᾳ παρὰ πᾶσαν τὴν νύκτα συσχεθέεις ἀφηρέθη τε πάντων ὑπὸ ἐτετυχῆ, καὶ ἐξηλάθη ἐκ τοῦ παλατίου καὶ ἐκ τῆς Ῥώμης καὶ μετὰ ταῦτα καὶ ἐκ τῆς λοιπῆς Ἰταλίας· ὃ καὶ ἐσώσεν αὐτόν, “And Aurelius Zoticus, a Smyrnan whom they also called ‘Cook’ because of his father’s trade, was both greatly loved by him [Elagabalaus] and loathe, and for that reason he was saved…Hierocles, fearing that he [Zoticus] was enslaving him more than himself and that he might suffer something terrible from it, such as was wont to happen with romantic rivals, he utterly effeminate him with some sort of drug through cupbearers who were rather fond of him. Thus, he [Zoticus], seized with impotence the entire night, was removed because of what happened and banished from the palace and from Rome, and afterwards, even from Italy—which, in fact, saved him.”

\(^{26}\) Dugaw 1997, 8, in a review of Feinberg 1996, *Transgender Warriors (non vidi)*.

\(^{27}\) HA, *Quad. Tyr.* 12.7, *Proculus Maecianum adfini salutem dicit. centum ex Sarmatia virgines cepi, ex his una nocte decem invi; omnes tamen, quod in me erat, mulieres intra dies quindecim reddidi,* “Proculus to Maecianus his kinsmen, greetings. I have taken a hundred maidens from Sarmatia; I entered ten of them in one night. Nevertheless, because I had it in me, I made them all women within fifteen days.”
Historia Augusta, this absurd debauchery cannot be trusted. The biographies create a specific atmosphere, one mired in the lower bodily stratum and the grossly sexual world of satire.

The most illuminating sexual episode comes from the first biography in the collection. Hadrian is criticized for affairs, both heterosexual and non-pederastic homosexual. The reader should not then wonder to find Hadrian’s notorious lover, Antinous. We are in a fortunate position here to be able to compare the Historia Augusta with Dio Cassius. The story is essentially the same: that Antinous died in Egypt, was possibly sacrificed, and subsequently received lavish divine honors. The relative focus of each account, however, demands attention. Dio Cassius gives factual details (where Antinous was born, the tangible artifacts of his apotheosis), only editorializing insofar as he relates the disgrace into which the incident plunged Hadrian. The Historia Augusta emphasizes the personal aspects and humiliates the emperor, saying that Hadrian cried like a woman for Antinous and that he boasted of having written oracles for his cult. One might attribute these various presentations only to the differences between biography and history if not for two things. First, aposiopesis: while some say that Antinous was sacrificed, “others…well, what Antinous’ form and

Hadrian’s excessive lust show.” “Spartianus” catches himself, too overtaken with

---

28 HA, Hadr. 11.7, huic adiungunt quae de adultorum amore ac ruptum adulteriis, quibus Hadrianus laborasse dicitur, adserunt, “They put upon him the things which they say about his love of grown men and his affairs with married women, in which Hadrian is said to have toiled.”

29 HA, Hadr. 14.5, Antinoum suum, dum per Nilum navigat, perdidit, quem muliebriter flevit. de quo varia fama est, aliis eum devotum pro Hadriano adserentibus, aliis quod et forma eius ostentat et nimia voluptas Hadriani. et Graeci quidem volente Hadriano eum consecraverunt, oracula per eum dari adserentes, quae Hadrianus ipse compositisse iactatur, “While he was sailing the Nile, he lost his Antinous, whom he wept over like a woman. There is a different story about him, some saying that he was dedicated for Hadrian, others… well, what his beauty and the excess lust of Hadrian show. And the Greeks, with Hadrian’s permission, consecrated him, saying that oracles were given by him, which Hadrian himself boasted that he wrote.” Compare with Cass. Dio, 69.11.
emotion—in context, probably shame—and suggestively alludes to the tale he cannot tell. A device otherwise used only in the loftier genres of Latin literature is co-opted for biography and reduced in significance, from epic rage to false modesty.

The second indication of satire can be seen by a comparison with a similar historical episode: Claudius’ betrayal by and execution of his first wife. Tacitus offers a lengthy narrative of Messalina’s adultery and subsequent bigamy; the anxiety of Claudius’ minsters to reveal the truth to the emperor and the fallout as Claudius attempted to cleanse his court of faithless attendants; the machinations of Messalina to avoid execution and her ultimate, pathetic death (Tac. Annals 11.26-38). In the midst of his crisis, Claudius displays strength, exhibiting quiet dignity during the banquet at which he discovers the affair, but also cowardice and foolishness, asking whether he was still emperor or his wife’s new husband was in charge. Tacitus presents a detailed, nuanced account of this affair, showing it as both a personal and political crisis which Claudius handles ambivalently, sometimes with determination and other times with the silliness that otherwise tainted his career. His subsequent decision to remarry is characterized as being driven by his intolerance of the bachelor life, and the ultimate

---

30 Tac., Annals 11.38, nuntiatumque Claudio epulanti perisse Messalinam, non distincto sua an aliena manu. nec ille quaesivit, poposcitque poculum et solita convivio celebravit. ne secatis quidem diebus odii gaudii, irae tristitiae, ullius denique humani affectus signa dedit, non cum laetantis accusatores aspiceret, non cum filios maerentis. iuvitque oblivionem eius senatus censendo nomen et effigies privatis ac publicis locis demovendas. "And it was announced to Claudius as he was dining that Messalina had perished, although it was not made clear whether it was by her or another’s hand. Nor did he ask; and he demanded his cup and performed his customary tasks at the banquet. Not even in the following days did he give indications of hatred, of joy, of anger, of sorrow, of any human feeling at all, not when he looked upon the joyful accusers, nor when he looked up his mourning sons. And the senate aided in wiping out her memory by decreeing that her name and likenesses be removed from private and public places.”

31 Tac., Annals 11.31, satis constat eo pavore offusum Claudiut ut identidem interrogaret an ipse imperii potens, an Silius privatus esset. “It is sufficiently agreed that Claudius was overwhelmed with such hear that he asked over and over whether he had control over the empire, whether Silius was a private citizen.”
decision pushed along by the blatant sexuality of Agrippina. The tale concludes shamefully for Claudius, but within the parameters of his character that Tacitus had already established; likewise, Messalina is portrayed as manipulative, ambitious, and wicked. Although the description of the empress is seen through the lens of male privilege, the account of her acts is guided by history. Messalina's other appearances in the *Annals* are similarly unfair but nuanced. At one point she schemes with Suillius to kill a man, a major actor in the plot but not the sole mastermind. Another time she is actually moved to tears by her intended victim's pleas of innocence. Although she does not spare his life, she still manages to show complexity of character. When her sins are revealed, she abandons the bravado with which Tacitus otherwise portrays her. She constantly seeks and hopes for the emperor's pardon, even at the moment of death, and cannot force herself to take her own life. Tacitus' Messalina is a thoroughly selfish human, but human nonetheless, with a pathology that can be teased out from the biased depiction (*Tac.*, *Annals* 11.2).

Suetonius, meanwhile, tells the same story with many of the same details, editing them only further his moral purposes: he abridges the execution and expands upon the remarriage, adding the significant detail that Claudius hypocritically swore he would never marry again but soon weds Agrippina (*Suet.*, *Claudius* 26). Together, Tacitus and

---

32 Tac., *Annals* 12.1-2, *Caede Messalinae convulsa principis domus, orto apud libertos certamine, quis deligeret uxor Claudio, caelibis vitae intoleranti et coniugum imperiis obnoxio… Praevaluere haec adiuta Agrippinae inlecebris: ad eum per speciem necessitudinis crebro ventitando pellicit patrum ut praelata ceteris et nondum uxor potestia uxoriam iteretur,* “The house of the emperor was rocked by the slaughter of Messalina, with a contest raised among the freedmen of who would choose a wife for Claudius, as he could not bear the single life and was submissive to the rule of spouses…these plans won out, helped by the enticements of Agrippina: by constantly visiting him under the pretext of their kinship, she seduced her uncle, so that, being preferred above the rest and though not yet his wife, she soon enjoyed a wife's power.”

33 Pagán 2006, 67.
Suetonius present a balanced account of the Messalina saga. She is not a schemer at first but an accessory, one among many in the grandiose triumphal retinue for Claudius’ mediocre British campaign (Suet., Claudius 17). Suetonius shows from the outset that he cares less about Messalina the person or even Messalina the character than how she reflects upon the biographical subject. In the catalogue of Claudius’ wives who bore him children, she is reduced to a mere name (Suet., Claudius 27). Suetonius describes her and Narcissus’ scheme to murder Silanus only insofar as it reveals Claudius’ paranoia and gullibility; she is a faceless actor in the biographer’s morality play (Suet., Claudius 37). Suetonius does not paint a portrait of the empress as complex as Tacitus’, but that is not his goal. Moral biography trades in simple portraits. Suetonius and Tacitus create harmonious pictures of Messalina in the context of the generic ambitions of each, but the empress never quite exceeds the realm of probability.

Juvenal’s tenth satire provides another version of Messalina’s bigamy. Unlike the historical and biographical accounts, the satirical account eschews a strict narrative in place of a stylized account, emphasizing the depravity of all parties. The first half opens with an address to a hypothetical interlocutor: what would you tell to the man whom the emperor’s wife is determined to wed? The satire makes no pretense to objectivity, putting both reader and speaker on intimate terms with its subject. Juvenal describes Messalina’s lust and her desire to be married to her lover as the motivation behind the adultery; in fact, the lover Silius is cast in the position of fate’s hapless plaything. The second half of the poem suddenly switches from a hypothetical interlocutor to a direct address to Silius. The speaker asks the man with mock sympathy what choice he has:

---

34 Cox 1983, 12-16.
whether to refuse the marriage and die, or acquiesce and be killed by Claudius a short
time later. The emphasis shifts once more to the ignorance of the emperor, the last to
learn of his wife’s flagrant adultery. The satiric version gives Messalina all the power:
she is the subject of decisive verbs like destinat and controls her own fate, while the two
men govern only verbs in subordinate clauses and are relegated to a subordinate
position. Even so, the vignette ends on an ironic note, for Claudius will, in spite of his
incompetence, kill her (Juv. 10.329-45). Juvenal recasts the historical account in a
perfectly satiric vein, but one that follows generally the accounts of Suetonius and
Tacitus. In Satire 6, however, Juvenal accuses her of waiting for Claudius to fall sleep
and sneaking off to brothels to sate her lust, which surpassed the stamina of
professional whores and the willingness of pimps to keep their doors open. She would
then slink back home to the palace. The speaker concludes with a succinct enumeration
of Messalina’s more violent crimes—spells, poisons, infanticide—against which, he
says, the lust pales (Juv. 6.115-35). Yet why did the poet give only two lines to the more
terrible crimes but devote eighteen to the lesser? Juvenal operates in the satiric mode,
excoriating the willful adulteress (who again takes the active role, both grammatically
and conceptually) while playing with his audience’s expectations. What is more, neither
Tacitus nor Suetonius tell this story; Pliny the Elder mentions that Messalina once
competed against a prostitute and bested her in a contest of sexual endurance, but
even this lustful episode does not approach the magnitude of Juvenal’s charge.

35 Pliny the Elder, Naturalis Historia 10.172, Messalina Claudi Caesaris coniunx, regalem hanc existimans palmam, elegit in id certamen nobilissimam e prostitutis ancillam mercenariae stipis eamque nocte ac die superavit quinto atque vicensimo concubitu, “Messalina, the consort of Claudius Caesar, thinking this to be a royal honor, chose for that challenge the noblest of the prostitutes, a slavegirl of mercantile stock, and she bested her in a night and a day with her twenty-fifth bedding.”
I have lingered upon Messalina to demonstrate the different approaches offered by history, biography, and satire towards the same story. History and biography adapt a story for a particular narrative means while adhering generally to the facts. The satiric approach, meanwhile, is to exaggerate, to carry beyond all accepted measure and leave the audience befuddled by the end—exactly the approach adopted by the *Historia Augusta* toward Hadrian and Antinous.

**Humor**

Excessive food and sexuality should disgust the reader, but by the end of the *Historia Augusta* such scenes lose their impact; given such a concentration of fraud, the moral dangers of consuming an entire 200-pound bird per day have no traction. Instead, the scenes evoke another primal reaction: laughter. While Proculus is the most egregious example of ridiculous consumption, virtually every other gustatory scene in the *Historia Augusta* can be interpreted through the lens of humor. Likewise, scenes of sexual wrongdoing do not merely disgust the reader. Instead of suggesting forbidden desire (for what good Roman citizen would have wished to be wife to a slave?), the only response is laughter. Elagabalus so loved Hierocles that he often gave him kisses on the groin—something which shames the author even to say (*quod dictu etiam inverecundum est*), although he says it nonetheless. The image itself may shock a laugh out of the reader with its unorthodoxy, but the author’s false recourse to modesty cues one in to the true source of the episode’s humor: protestations of modesty mean little after the fact. In a society where rape provided the impetus of many theatrical

---

36 HA, *Elagab.* 6.5, *Hieroclen vero sic amavit, ut eidem inguinal oscularetur, quod dictu etiam inverecundum est.* *Floralia sacra se adserens celebrare,* "He so loved Hierocles that he would kiss the same man’s crotch (which is shameless even to say), saying that he was celebrating the rites of the *Floralia.*"
comedies, Proculus and his hundred maidens would inspire laughter through sheer excess. Debased sexuality can inspire laughter by mocking the debauched and the debaucher, but even the non-sexualized lower bodily stratum naturally invites humor. The Jews are said to have started a war after they were forbidden to practice circumcision, a custom and *casus belli* which would be absurd to a pagan.\(^\text{37}\) In fact, Dio tells the more probable story that the war actually began because of the founding of a temple to Jupiter in the province of Judaea.\(^\text{38}\) To change the cause of war from serious religious oppression to the lower bodily stratum makes the tale ridiculous.

Laughter also emerges from a key element of play: jokes. Slowly, under the pretext of genuine etymological research, the *Historia Augusta* offers various reasons why the emperor received his agnomen. In the *Vita Hadriani*, the virtues of Pius seem manifest: aiding an elderly relative, saving senators, conferring honors upon the deceased emperor.\(^\text{39}\) The treatment seems sound, but the nobility of these deeds is undercut in the *Vita Antonini Pii*: helping one’s father-in-law is no virtue, although failure to do so is a vice; Hadrian was not “in a rage” but suffered from some illness on which Pius merely gave advice; and the honors given to the deceased Hadrian were almost

\(^{37}\) HA, *Hadr.* 14.2, *moverunt ea tempestate et luidaei bellum, quod vetabantur mutilare genitalia*, “The Jews also started a war at that time because they were prevented from mutilating their genitals.”

\(^{38}\) Cass. Dio, 69.12.1-2, *ες δε τα Ιεροσολυμα πολιν αυτου αντι της κατασκαφεισης οικισαντος, ήν και Αιλιαν Καππωλωναν ωνόμασε, και ες τον τον ναον του θεου τοπιον ναον τω Διε ετερον αντεγειραντος πολεμος ουτε μικρος ουτε ολιγοχρονος εκινηθη*, “At Jerusalem, when he founded a city over top of the one that was destroyed, which he also named the Aelian Capitoline, and when he raised another temple to Zeus in the place of the temple to their God, a war neither small nor short-lived was begun.”

\(^{39}\) HA, *Hadr.* 24, *et Antoninus quidem Pius idcirco appellatus dicitur quod socerum fessum aetate manu sublevaret, quamvis ali cognomentum hoc ei dicant inditum, quod multos senatores Hadriano iam saeventi abripusset alii, quod ipsi Hadriano magnos honores post mortem detulisset*, “And Antoninus Pius is said to have been so-called because he lifted up his father-in-law, worn out in his age, with his hand; although some say that this cognomen was given to him because he had snatched away many senators from Hadrian while he was in a rage, and others because he had declared great honors for Hadrian after his death.”
universally reproved.\textsuperscript{40} That Pius stopped Hadrian from killing himself may be seen as interference with the proper course of an honorable Roman death,\textsuperscript{41} and to be "most merciful" is a dubious virtue in an emperor.\textsuperscript{42} A reader could feel contempt, confusion, or amusement at an author who willfully undermines his own work. All three attitudes are appropriate for satire.

Soon, the pretense of legitimate etymological research is abandoned and discussion of the emperors' names becomes an excuse to indulge in puns. In the \textit{Vita Avidii Cassii}, one of the \textit{Nebenvitae}, the author cites a supposed letter from Hadrian's coregent Verus wherein he calls Avidius \textit{avidus}, "greedy," for the throne.\textsuperscript{43} The Latin text puts the key words, \textit{Avidius} and \textit{avidus}, side-by-side to emphasize the pun. This

\textsuperscript{40} Ant. Pius 2.3-7, \textit{Pius cognominatus est a senatu, vel quod socier fessi iam aetatem manu praesente senatu levaret (quod quidem non satis magnae pietatis est argumentum, cum impius sit magis qui ista non faciat, quam pius qui debitum reddat), vel quod eos quos Hadrianus per malam valetudinem occidi iussaret, reservavit, vel quod Hadriano contra omnium studia post mortem infinitos atque immensos honores decrevit, vel quod, cum se Hadrianus interimere vellet, ingenti custodia et diligentia fecit, ne id posset admittere, vel quod vere natura clementissimus et nihil temporibus suis asperum fecit, "He was given the cognomen 'Pius' by the senate, either because he eased the age of his father-in-law (who was worn out then) with his hand before the senate (which is not a sufficient proof of great piety, since he is more impious who does not do those things than he is pious who performs what he ought), or because he saved those men whom Hadrian had ordered to be killed because of his poor health, or because he decreed honors boundless and tremendous honors on Hadrian after his death, against the wishes of all, or because, when Hadrian wanted to kill himself, he acted with great care and diligence so that he could not do it, or because he was, by nature, truly quite merciful and did nothing harsh in his day."

\textsuperscript{41} Grisé 1982.

\textsuperscript{42} Seneca, \textit{De Clementia}, written for the paradigmatic bad emperor, Nero, demonstrates the thin line between mercy and weakness. 1.3.4, \textit{Ad rem pertinet quærere hoc loco, quid sit misericordia; plerique enim ut virtutem eam laudant et bonum hominem vocant misericordem. Et haec vitium animi est...per speciem enim severitatis in crudelitatem incidimus, per speciem clementiae in misericordiam}, "It has a bearing on the question to seek at this juncture what is 'pity,' for the majority of men praise it as a virtue and call a piteous man good; and this is a vice of the spirit...for we fall into cruelty by the pretext of sternness, we fall into pity by the pretext of mercy."

\textsuperscript{43} Avid. Cass. 1.6-7, \textit{Vero autem illum parasse insidias ipsius Veri epistula indicat, quam inserui. ex epistula Veri: 'Avidius Cassius avidus est, quantum et mihi videtur et iam inde sub avo meo, patre tuo, innuituit, imperii}, "A letter by Verus himself indicates that he made plots against Verus. From Verus' letter: 'Avidius Cassius is avid, as it seems to me and has thus now become known under my grandfather, your father, for the throne.'"
statement cannot belong to Verus;\textsuperscript{44} the \textit{Historia Augusta} intentionally weaves an awful joke into the narrative. More follow: Pertinax was so-named because his father built his timber business \textit{pertinaciter}, “pertinaciously.”\textsuperscript{45} Septimius Severus (full name Caesar Lucius Septimius Severus Eusebes Pertinax Augustus) is said to have killed men for saying that he was truly \textit{severus}, “severe,” and \textit{pertinax}, “pertinacious.”\textsuperscript{46} The pretenders Pescennius Niger and Clodius Albinus have a poem written about them, supposedly translated from the Greek, stating that \textit{fuscus}, “the dark one” is best while \textit{albus}, “the white one” is merely good.\textsuperscript{47} Since the pun of \textit{albus} on \textit{Albinus} only works in Latin, it cannot be an authentic translation from Greek. The author has again inserted his own joking voice. The most egregious nominal pun is that the pretender Regalianus was driven to seek the thrown because of the declension of his name: \textit{rex}, \textit{regis}, \textit{regi}, \textit{Regalianus}.\textsuperscript{48} Sometimes the \textit{Historia Augusta} crafts its puns from authentic historical

\textsuperscript{44} The letters in the \textit{Historia Augusta} are universally considered to be forgeries by the author. See Homo 1926; Momigliano 1954, 25-6; Gabba 1981, 54.

\textsuperscript{45} \textit{HA}, Pert. 1, \textit{Publio Helvio Pertinaci pater libertinus Helvius Successus fuit, qui filio nomen ex continuatione lignariae negotiationis, quod pertinaciter eam rem gereret, imposuisse fatetur}, “The freedman Helvius Successus was father to Publius Helvius Pertinax, who is said to have given his name to his son because of the endurance of his timber business, since he conducted it ‘pertinaciously.’”

\textsuperscript{46} \textit{Sev.} 14.13, \textit{damnabantur autem plerique, cur iocati essent, alii, cur tacuisissent, alii, cur pleraque figurata dixissent, ut “ecce imperator vere nominis sui, vere Pertinax, vere Severus,” “Moreover, a great many were condemned for the reason that they had told jokes, others for the reason that they had stayed silent, others for the reason that they had said a great many figured expressions, such as ‘behold an emperor truly of his own name, truly pertinacious, truly severe.’”}

\textsuperscript{47} \textit{Pesc. Nig.} 8, \textit{Denique Delfici Apollois vates in motu rei p. maximo…versum Graecum huiusmodi fudisse dicitur: “optimus est Fuscus, bonus Afer, pessimus Albus.”, “Finally, the priest of the Delphic Apollo, amidst the greatest tumult in the republic…is said to have emitted a Greek verse of this sort: ‘The Swarthy One is the best, the African good, the White One the worst.’”}

\textsuperscript{48} \textit{HA}, Tyr. Trig., 10.6, \textit{Mirabile fortasse videatur, si quae origo imperii eius fuerit declaretur. capitali enim ioco regna promeruit. nam cum milites cum eo quidam cenarent, exstitit vicarius tribuni qui diceret: “Regaliani nomen unde credimus dictum?” alius continuo, “Credimus quod a regno”. tum iis quiaderat scholasticus coepit quasi grammaticaliter declinare et dicere, “Rex, regis, regi, Regalianus”. milites, ut est hominum genus pronum ad ea quae cogitant, “Ergo potest rex esse?” item alius, “Ergo potest nos regere?” item alius, “Deus tibi regis nomen imposuit”. “Perhaps it may seem strange if it should be stated what the beginning of his rule was; for he gained his reign by wonderful joke. For when some soldiers
circumstance. A senatorial wag recommends that the emperor Caracalla receive the
cognomen of Geticus in honor of his victory over the Getae—fully aware that that the
emperor had recently murdered his brother Geta. The emperor Aurelian requests a
similar name for himself in honor of his victory over the Carpi, *Carpisclum*, which is also
the name for a type of shoe. The constant humor degrades its imperial targets, but the
cringe-worthy quality degrades the biographies themselves.

Punning on names is not unique to the *Historia Augusta*. Suetonius notes that
Tiberius was so renowned for drinking during his days as a soldier that his full name,
Claudius Tiberius Nero, was punned into “Caldius Biberius Mero.” Even the Bible puns
on πέτρος being both the name “Peter” and the word for “rock.” The difference lies in
the tone and usage of the puns. Suetonius and Matthew merely relate the fact of the

---

49 HA, *Carac*. 10.6, *nam cum Germanici et Parthici et Arabici et Alamannici nomen adscriberet (nam Alamannorum gentem deicerat) Helvius Pertinax, filius Pertinacis, dicitur ioco dixisse, "Adde, si placet, etiam Geticus Maximus," quod Getam occiderat fratrem, et Gothi Getae dicerentur, quos ille, dum ad orientem transiit, tumultuariis proeliis deicerat, "For when Helvius Pertinax granted him the name of Germanicus and Arabicus and Alamannicus (for he had conquered the nation of the Alamanni), the son of Pertinax is said to have made the joke, ‘Add, if you please, also Geticus Maximus,’ because he had killed his brother, and the Goths would be called the Getae, whom he had conquered while he crossed to the east in chaotic battles."

50 HA, *Aurel*. 30.4, *Pacato igitur oriente in Europam Aurelianus rediit victor atque illic Carporum copias adfliget et, cum illum Carpicum senatus absentem vocasset, mandasse ioco furtur: "Superest, patres conscripti, ut me etiam Carpisculum vocetis." carpisclum enim genus calciamenti esse satis notum est, "Therefore, when the east was pacified, Aurelian returned to Europe as victor and struck down great numbers of the Carpi there, and although the senate had named his Carpicus while he was gone, he is said to have given a joking command: ‘It remains, Conscript Fathers, for you to name me also Carpisculum.’ For the ‘carpisclum’ is well-known to be a type of shoe.”

51 Suet., *Tibereius* 42, *In castris tiro etiam tum propter nimiam vini aviditatem pro Tiberio ‘Biberius,’ pro Claudio ‘Caldius,’ pro Nerone ‘Mero’ vocabatur, "In the camps, when he was a novice, he was ten called, because of his excessive passion for wine, ‘Biberius’ for Tiberius, ‘Caldius’ for Claudius, ‘Mero’ for Nero.”

52 Matthew 16:18, κἀγὼ δέ σοι λέγω ὅτι σὺ εἶ Πέτρος, καὶ ἔτι ταύτῃ τῇ πέτρᾳ οἰκοδομήσωμυ τὴν ἐκκλησίαν. "I say to you, Peter, that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church.”
pun to further their purposes: the biographer to demonstrate Tiberius’ drunkenness, the evangelist to relate the origins of his church and the nature of Jesus. The *Historia Augusta*, however, invents most of its puns, and for every pun which arguably advances some moral (as in the case of Septimius Severus) there are as many which serve no apparent end (like with Pertinax and Regalianus). The *Historia Augusta* entertains, it does not instruct.

One of the most interesting of these verbal jokes is the pluralization of the names of emperors. The first occurs in the *Vita Clodii Albini*, when the subject of the biography, wrongly thinking that he could claim the throne, gives an exhortation to his troops that, if the Republic still had its power, Rome would not have fallen prey to the Vitelliuses, nor the Neros, nor the Domitians.53 This rhetorical plural is a conventional but effective technique, common in all eras of Latin literature.54 Its third-person perspective characterizes a class of people: in the *Annals*, Tacitus often draws upon the name of Republican stalwarts to contrast the sad times of the empire.55 The *Historia Augusta* works differently. Whereas the rhetorical plural usually draws upon heroes of the past, here the pluralized persons are explicitly condemned. This too would not arouse too much notice if not for the subsequent frequency of this rare usage: six more times in the next eighteen books.56 This is comparable to Tacitus’ frequency, but not his sense of

---

53 *HA*, Clod. Alb. 13.5, *Si senatus populi Romani suum illud vetus haberet imperium, nec in unius potestate res tanta consisteret, non ad Vitellios neque ad Nerones neque ad Domitianos publica fata venissent*, “If the senate of the Roman people had its old power, so great a state would not stand in one man’s control, the public well-being would not have gone to the Vitelliuses or the Neros or the Domitians.”

54 Gudeman 1894, 236.

55 E.g., Tac., *Annals* 1.10, 1.28, 2.33, 16.22.

56 *HA*, Elag. 1.2, Alex. Sev. 9.4, Aurel. 42.6, Tacit. 6.4, Carus 1.4, 3.3. The reference in the *Vita Taciti* deserves special mention, for it combines both puns and pluralization: *enimvero si recolere velit is vetusta illa prodigia, Nerones dico et Heliogabalos et Commodos, seu potius semper Incommodos*...
decorum. The historian follows the rules of proper style, occasionally twisting them for effect, while the *Historia Augusta* neglects convention and bludgeons the reader with the unexpected—so much so that it becomes trite. Like a novice debater who has just discovered sarcasm, the effect is lost and descends to the realm of the laughable.

The *Historia Augusta* is not unique in its abuse of the rhetorical plural. Julian uses this same device in the same way in his *Caesares*, albeit less often. Amidst the real princes of note—Alexander, Augustus, Marcus Aurelius—the narrator also describes an assembly of second-class emperors, the Vindexes, Galbas, Othos, and Vitelliuses, whom the divine jester Silenus mocks as “the mob of the monarchs.”

Although Julian only indulges in the rhetorical plural once, his work, being a satire on emperors written in the midst of radical cultural upheaval, seems a likely influence for the *Historia Augusta*. The biography appropriates the satirist’s device and intensifies its satiric effect by constant usage.

The presence of so many jokes suggests a satiric context, but the text of the *Historia Augusta* is more than suggestive, abounding with *iocere* and its various derivatives. The rate of use accelerates as the collection continues. Puns and jokes, however, have a long-standing pedigree in ancient biography: Suetonius recalled a pun from Tiberius' drinking days, and Plutarch cited the comic poets who mocked Pericles

---

57 Julian, *Caes*, 7, Ἐπὶ τούτῳ πολλοὶ καὶ παντοδαποὶ συνέτρεχον, Βίνδικες, Γάλβαι, Ὀθωνες, Βιτέλλιοι. Καὶ ὁ Σειληνός· “Τούτων”, εἶπε, “τῶν μονάρχων τόν δήμον πόθεν ἐξεύρατε, ὦ θεοὶ;τυφόμεθα γοῦν ὑπὸ τοῦ κατινοῦ· φείδεται γάρ οὐδὲ τῶν ἀνακτόρων ταυτί τὰ θηρία. “Then, many people of all sorts came together, Vindexes, Galbas, Othos, Vitelliuses. And Silenus said, 'Where did you find the horde of these monarchs, Gods? We are blind from the smoke, for these kings' sacrifices of are unrestrained!'”
for his conical head.\textsuperscript{58} In fact, Suetonius uses \textit{iocere} and its derivatives with greater frequency than the \textit{Historia Augusta}: forty-three times over the course of just twelve biographies.\textsuperscript{59} Suetonius' usage, however, is very different. Words like \textit{iucundus} never introduce amusing anecdotes or scurrilous verse but describe people and events.\textsuperscript{60} \textit{locus}, which literally refers to a joke told, is often only a component of a more important event: for instance, Caligula once burnt a poet to death for a joke in an Atellan farce told potentially at the emperor's expense.\textsuperscript{61} The joke is not the focus but part of a more important narrative about the emperor's wickedness. Suetonius does not refrain from relating a joke if it is known, but he can content himself to write \textit{about} the joke. This stands in sharp contrast with the usage of jokes in the \textit{Historia Augusta}, which takes every opportunity to tell the reader a joke—even a fake one. Such emphasis on humor characterizes the satirical content in the \textit{Historia Augusta}.

In the \textit{Historia Augusta}, one can find humor in less obvious ways. In the \textit{Vita Commodi}, the author mentions how certain months were renamed in the emperor's honor: Commodus for August, Hercules for September, Invictus for October,
Exsuperatorius for November, and Amazonius for December.\textsuperscript{62} Again, the author appears to follow Suetonian precedent, for this episode calls to mind Claudius’ invention of novel letters of the alphabet.\textsuperscript{63} The \textit{Historia Augusta}, however, differs in two respects: first, it only mentions that “certain” months were renamed. In fact, Dio says that all twelve months were changed to honor Commodus.\textsuperscript{64} Moreover, he does not merely mention the new months, but it incorporates them later in the biography—including the months not explicitly mentioned before. The \textit{Historia Augusta} dates events in the Commodian calendar: the emperor earned the name “Germanicus” on the Ides of Herculeus, became a priest in all colleges thirteen days before the Kalends of Invictus, invaded German fourteen days before the Kalends of Aelius, and was ordered to be preserved in perpetuity eleven days before the Kalends of Romanus.\textsuperscript{65} Nowhere else

\textsuperscript{62} HA, \textit{Comm.} 11.8, \textit{Menses quoque in honorem eius pro Augusto Commodum, pro Septembri Herculem, pro Octobri Invictum, pro Novembri Exsuperatorium, pro Decembri Amazonium ex signo ipsius adulatoris vocabant.}

\textsuperscript{63} Suet., \textit{Claudius} 41.3, Novas etiam commentus est litteras tres ac numero veterum quasi maxime necessarias addidit, “He even created three new letters and added them to the number of the old ones, as though they were especially necessary.”

\textsuperscript{64} Cass. Dio 72.15, καὶ τέλος καὶ οἱ μῆνες ἀπ’ αὐτοῦ πάντες ἐπεκλήθησαν, ὥστε καταριθμεῖσθαι αὐτοὺς ὥστε καταριθμεῖσθαι τε Ἀμαζόνιος Ἀνίκητος Εὐτυχῆς Εὐσεβῆς Λούκιος Ἀὐρήλιος Κόμμοδος Ἄνθυγυς Ἡράκλειος Ἡρώδης Ὑπεραίρων, “And finally, even the months were all named after him, so that one may count them up thus: Amazonius, Invictus, Felix, Pius, Lucius, Aelius, Aurelius, Commodus, Augustus, Herculeus, Romanus, Exsuperatorius.

\textsuperscript{65} HA, \textit{Comm.} 11.13-12.7, \textit{nominatus inter Caesares quartum iduum Octobrium, quas Herculeas postea nominavit, Pudente et Pollione consulis. appellatus Germanicus idibus Herculeis Maximo et Orfito consulis. adsumptus est in omnia collegia sacerdotalia sacerdos XIII kal. Invictas Pisone Iuliano consulis, prefectus in Germaniam XIII Kal. Aelias, ut postea nominavit…cum patre appellatus imperator kal. Exsuperatorias Pollione et Apro iterum consulis. triumphavit X kal. Ian isidem consulis. iterum prefectus III nonas Commodias Orfito et Rufo consulis. datus in perpetuum ab exercitu et senatu in domo Palatina Commodiana conservandus XI kal. Romanas Praesente iterum consule, “He was named among the Caesars four days before the Ides of October, which he afterwards called Herculeus, in the consulship of Pudens and Pollio. He was called Germanicus on the Ides of Herculeus, in the consulship of Maximus and Orfitus. He was entered into all sacerdotal colleges as a priest 13 days before the Kalends of Invictus, in the consulship of Piso and Julian. He set out against Germany 14 days before the Kalends of Aelius, as he afterwards named it…along with his father, he was called emperor on the Kalends of Exsuperatorius, in the consulship of Orfitus and Rusus. He was given to be preserved forever by the army and the senate at his home, the Commodian Palace, 11 days before the Kalends of Romanus, when Praesens was consul again.”
does the *Historia Augusta* offer such detail; its commitment to Commodus’ ridiculous scheme is pure humor.

Vulgarity suffuses the *Historia Augusta*. Biography emphasizes the common and scandalous, but the thirty *vitae* of the *Historia Augusta* exaggerate and exult in these themes. Imperial indulgence is not merely extravagant, it is Petronian; jokes not only provide insight into the private world of an emperor but highlight the author’s wordsmanship; the worst emperors are not just worse than Nero or Caligula, they are worse than multiple Neros or Caligulas. The ubiquity of these low elements highlights their satiric qualities, turning every base indulgence into a comic scene. Some of the vulgarity may shock, some may entertain, some may be the bizarre play of a perverse imagination, but all is essential to the *Historia Augusta* and deepens its generic connections with the satiric.
CHAPTER 4
NARRATIVE AMBIGUITY

Narrative ambiguity manifests itself in the *Historia Augusta* through untruth. One might question the worth of historical truth in biography. While Plutarch was a remarkable steward of his sources,¹ Suetonius was no strict adherent to facts: Caligula’s appointment of a horse to the Senate is reported as rumor,² and the details in the *Vita Neronis* (particularly his physical description) were informed by the author’s preconceptions of Nero.³ None of these liberties, however, approach the license that the *Historia Augusta* takes with its subjects. In the Eastern empire miraculous lives of the Christian saints and of nigh-messianic pagans became popular,⁴ but in the Late Antique Latin world biographies both Christian and pagan cleaved to factual representations of men, whether the sensationalistic work of Marius Maximus, the polemic but largely non-supernatural biographies by Jerome, or the sensible imperial lives of the postulated *Ignatinus*.⁵ Biography in the West never fully abandoned a tradition of research and accuracy in its efforts to elucidate the character, and its authors always tried to present

¹ Lamberton 2001, 13-7. Even Plutarch’s *Vita Romuli* and *Vita Thesei*, though entirely mythical, rely upon what were held at the time to be valid and intellectually honest investigative methods; Wardman 1974, 161-8.

² Plass 1988, 9, on Suet., *Caligula* 55.3, *consulatum quoque traditur destinasse*, “he is said as well to have appointed <sc. the horse> a consulship;”

³ Barton 1994, 51-8. Suetonius’ account relies upon physiognomic tropes (e.g., that mottled skin is a sign of wicked femininity), and contradicts Plutarch’s description of the emperor’s appearance; see Barton 1994, 57-8, and the physiognomic treatises cited therin.

⁴ Cox 1983, 17-44. These include Eusebius’ *Life of Origen*, Philostratus’ *Life of Apollonius of Tyana*, and Porphyry’s *Life of Pythagoras* and *Life of Plotinus*.

⁵ Ammianus has the definitive statement on the worth of Marius Maximus: Amm. Marc. 28.4.14, *Quidam detestantes ut venena doctrinas, Juvenalem et Marium Maximum curatiore studi legunt, nulla volumina praeter haec in profundo oti contractantes*, “Certain men, scorning learning like poison, read Juvenal and Marius Maximus with excessive zeal, dealing with no other books besides these in their abundant leisure time.” For instance, Jerome, *De Viris Illustribus* avoids any attribution of miracles, instead focusing on the secular careers of various important figures. For *Ignatinus*, see Syme 1968, 92, 177, and Syme 1971, 30-53.
if not the strictly true then at least the probable. This is where the Historia Augusta differs, for it often violates even possibility.

The untruths in the Historia Augusta can be evaluated in two major categories: those false statements that can be verified by external sources and those made by the “author” about himself. Within these categories, the ambiguous elements fall on a spectrum of probability, ranging from the impossible at one extreme to the historically verifiable at the other. Most are somewhere in between, possible but unprovable. It is the interplay of the different points on the spectrum within a single work that mark satiric ambiguity in the Historia Augusta.

Internal Ambiguity

Ambiguity comes most obviously from falsehoods in the historical content of the Historia Augusta. The earliest examples are subtle: the emperor Hadrian is said to have been born at Rome, although another passage in the same biography suggests that the emperor’s family came from the city of Italica, one of his adoptive guardians, Acilius Attianus, is misnamed as Caelius Attianus, and the coregent Aelius’ praetorship is set in the same year that he was adopted, although he was actually praetor a few years

---

6 Quintilian, Institutio Oratoria 4.2.89, Sed utrumcumque erit, prima sit curarum ut id quod fingemus fieri possit, deinde ut et personae et loco et tempori congruat et credibilem rationem et ordinem habeat, “But whichever it will be, let the first of our concerns be that what we create can happen, then that it agrees with the character and the place and the time and has a believable reasoning and arrangement.” But this too is for oratory, not history or biography.

7 Compare HA, Hadr. 1.3, Natus est Romae…, “He was born at Rome,” with 1.1, Hadria ortos maiores suos apud Italicam Scipionum temporibus resedisse in libris vitae suae Hadrianus ipse commemorat, “Hadrian himself, in the books of his own life, recalls that his ancestors, having come from Hadria, settled then in Italica in the time of the Scipios.” Benario 1980, 44 indicates that it could be either.

8 HA, Hadr. 1.4, ac decimo aetatis anno patre orbatus Ulpium Traianum praetorium… et Caelium Attianum equitem Romanum tutores habuit, “And, in the tenth year of his life, bereft of his father, he had Ulpius Trajan, the praetorian, and Caelius Attianus, the Roman knight, as guardians.” The correct name is found on an inscription from Elba, Römische Mitteilungen 18.63-7, cited in Magie 1921, 4 n. 2.
before.⁹ The majority of the Vita Hadriani is genuine and factual,¹⁰ as is its Nebenvita, the Vita Aelii, which derives its content from its superior companion life.¹¹ The triviality of these early untruths belies the outrageous stories to follow.

The integrity of the Historia Augusta first shows cracks in the Vita Marci Aurelii. "Julius Capitolinus" says that Marcus Aurelius adopted Lucius Verus, which contradicts earlier declarations in the Historia Augusta.¹² The Vita Commodi contradicts Dio twice, first in its vicious characterization of the emperor’s praetorian prefect Perennis¹³ and again in its account of Commodus’ calendric changes. Even Herodian’s excoriation of Perennis cannot abolish its falsehood,¹⁴ and epigraphic evidence proves the Historia

---

⁹ HA, Hadr. 23.11-13, adoptavit ergo Ceionium Commodum Verum invitis omnibus eumque Helium Verum Caesarem appellavit…quem praetura honoravit, “therefore, he adopted Ceionius Commodus Verus, against the will of everybody, and called him Aelius Verus Caesar…whom he decorated with a praetorship;” Ael. 3.1-2. Adoptatus autem Helius Verus ab Hadriano…statimque praetor factus, “Moreover, Aelius Verus was adopted by Hadrian…and was at once made praetor.” See Magie 1921, 73 n. 3 and Birley 2000, 246.

¹⁰ For instance, Meckler 1996, 375, says the life “seems to be quite sound historically and may have provided an unassailable foundation for the author’s imaginative reworking of the authority of the past.”

¹¹ Syme 1971, 54-77.

¹² HA, Marc. 5.1, …ut sibi Marcum Pius adoptaret, ita tamen ut et Marcus sibi Lucium Commodum adoptaret, “…so that Pius would adopt Marcus, but such that Marcus too would adopt Lucius Commodus.” Compare with Ant. Pius 4.5, adoptionis lex huiusmodi data est, ut quemadmodum Antoninus ab Hadriano adoptabatur ita sibi ille adoptaret M. Antoninum, fratris uxoris suae filium, et L. Verum, Heli Veri, qui ab Hadriano adoptatus fuerat, filium, qui postea Verus Antoninus est dictus, “The law of adoption was given as such, that, just as Antoninus had been adopted by Hadrian, so would [Hadrian] adopt Marcus Antoninus, the son of his wife’s brother, and Lucius Verus, the son of Aelius Verus (who had been adopted by Hadrian), who afterwards was called Verus Antoninus.”

¹³ HA, Comm. 5.6, quos voluit interemerit, spoliavit plurimos, omnia iura subvertit, praedam omnem in sinum contulit, “Whomever he wanted to, he slew; he plundered many; he perverted all the laws; he gathered all the loot into his lap.” Compare with Cass. Dio, 72.10.1, ὁ μὲν οὖν οὕτως ἐσφάγη, ἥκιστα δὴ τοῦτο παθεῖν καὶ δι’ ἑαυτὸν καὶ διὰ τὴν πᾶσαν τῶν Ῥωμαίων ἀρχὴν ὀφείλων, “And so, <sc. Perennis> was thus killed, who deserved least of all to suffer this, both on his on account and for that of the entire empire of the Romans.”

¹⁴ Herod. 1.9.6, οἱ μέντοι περὶ τὸν Κόμοδον, ὅσοι τε εὐνοεῖν προσεποιούντο, καὶ πάλαι μὲν ἄπεχθως πρὸς τὸν Περέννιον διακείμενοι (βαρὺς γὰρ καὶ ἀφόρητος ἦν ὑπεροψίᾳ, καὶ ὑβριστικος ἦν ὑπεροψίᾳ, καὶ ὑβριστικος ἦν ὑπεροψίᾳ, καὶ ὑβριστικος ἦν ὑπεροψίᾳ, καὶ ὑβριστικος ἦν ὑπεροψίᾳ, καὶ ὑβριστικος ἦν ὑπεροψίᾳ, καὶ ὑβριστικος ἦν ὑπεροψίᾳ, καὶ ὑβριστικος ἦν ὑπεροψίᾳ, καὶ ὑβριστικος ἦν ὑπεροψίᾳ, καὶ ὑβριστικος ἦν ὑπεροψίᾳ, καὶ ὑβριστικος ἦν ὑπεροψίᾳ, καὶ ὑβριστικος ἦν ὑπεροψίᾳ, καὶ ὑβριστικος ἦν ὑπεροψίᾳ, καὶ ὑβριστικος ἦν ὑπεροψίᾳ, καὶ ὑβριστικος ἦν ὑπεροψίᾳ, καὶ ὑβριστικος ἦν ὑπεροψίᾳ, καὶ ὑβριστικος ἦν ὑπεροψίᾳ, καὶ ὑβριστικος ἦν ὑπεροψίᾳ, καὶ ὑβριστικος ἦν ὑπεροψίᾳ, καὶ ὑβριστικος ἦν ὑπεροψίᾳ, καὶ ὑβριστικος ἦν ὑπεροψίᾳ, καὶ ὑβριστικος ἦν ὑπεροψίᾳ, καὶ ὑβριστικος ἦν ὑπεροψίᾳ, καὶ ὑβριστικος ἦν ὑπεροψίᾳ, καὶ ὑβριστικος ἦν ὑπεροψίᾳ, καὶ ὑβριστικος ἦν ὑπεροψίᾳ, καὶ ὑβριστικος ἦν ὑπεροpsi
Augusta wrong on the details of the calendar. So many petty errors accrue throughout the early lives of the collection that their accumulated weight signals to the reader the more substantial inaccuracies of the later lives.

The Vita Severi is an excellent case study in the disintegration of narrative cohesion in the Historia Augusta. It claims that Commodus planned to offer the title of Caesar to Clodius Albinus, a pretender to Septimius Severus’ throne, and that Geta was given the name Antoninus. The first statement has no historical basis, while the second is contradicted by another “author” in the Historia Augusta. Caracalla even receives two distinct birth stories within this biography. Most of the Vita Severi is genuine; the Historia Augusta prefers to increase the degree of falsehoods rather than their quantity. This paradigm continues over the rest of the collection, culminating in the

---

15 Magie 1921, 292, n. 2.

16 For instance, HA, Comm. 17.10 claims that Commodus replaced the head of Nero on the Colossus with his own, but Nero’s head had long since been removed; Sev. 3.6 claims that a legion was near Marseilles that had not been stationed in the West for over a century, and never in Marseilles. Although the Historia Augusta has a very troubled manuscript tradition (Ballou 1914), it is unlikely that all these mistakes could be thus explained.

17 HA, Sev. 6.9, eodem tempore etiam de Cludio Albino sibi substituendo cogitavit, cui Caesareaeunum decretum auctore Commodo iam videbatur imperium, “At the same time, he even thought about replacing himself with Clodius Albinus, to whom it seemed good them to grant the title of Caesar, at Commodus’ insistence.” The text attempts to support its baseless assertions at HA, Clod. Alb. 2.1, 6.4-5, and 13.4.

18 HA, Sev. 10.5, unde Getam etiam quidam Antoninum putant dictum, ut et ipse succederet in imperium. 6 aliqui putant idcirco illum Antoninum appellatum, quod Severus ipse in Marci familiam transire voluerit, “So too do some think that Geta was called Antoninus because Severus himself wanted to cross over into Marcus’ family.” Reiterated at Sev. 16.4, 19.2, Get. 1, 5.3.

19 HA, Diad. 6.9, Getam vero, quem multi Antoninum negant dictum…, “But Geta, whom many say was not called Antoninus…”

20 From a former marriage: HA, Sev. 20.2, Antoninum scilicet Bassianum quidem ex priore matrimonio susceperat et Getam de Iulia genuerat, “Of course, he had begotten Antoninus Bassianus from his previous marriage and Geta from Julia.” From Julia: Sev. 3.9-4.2, eandem uxorem petiit, Iuliam scilicet, et accepit interventu amicorum. ex qua statim pater factus est… suscepitque Romae alterum filium, “He sought the same wife, that is, Julia, and wed hear with the help of his friends. He immediately became a father from her…and he had another son at Rome.”
Tyranni Triginta, in which the author invents several pretenders who never existed and forges outlandish honors for them, including a senatus consultum conferring honor upon the fictional brigand and pretender “Piso.” Patent lies pepper the last third of the Historia Augusta.

Nevertheless, kernels of truth appear throughout the entire collection. Herodian and Dio confirm many of the salacious tales concerning Elagabalus, including his effeminacy and probable transgenderism. Even the preposterous final biographies, which consist of little more forged imperial missives, contain some truth—the tales of such pretenders as Macrianus and Odenaethus in the Tyranni Triginta are internally coherent and accord with the testimony of Zonaras, while Firmus, Saturninus, Proculus, and Bonosus receive accurate introductions before the biography descends into fantasy. The Historia Augusta interweaves truth and falsehood.

Any reader would find it a challenge to reconcile such a baffling juxtaposition, but the Historia Augusta amplifies the obfuscation with ambiguous information that can neither be confirmed nor refuted. Marcus Aurelius is said to have been sparing of donatives, and Dio indeed records that he once refused his soldiers’ demand for one.

---

21 For the fake names Celsus, Saturninus, and Trebellianus, see Magie 1932, 84 n. 1 and Barnes 1972. The fake S.C. de Pisone appears at HA, Tyr. Trig. 21.3, Senatus consultum de Pisone factum ad noscendam eius maiestatem libenter inserui, “To learn of his glory, I have freely included the decree of the senate made about Piso.” The fraudulent decree then follows.

22 For instance, HA, Aurel. 30.5 claims that the emperor jokingly asked to be called “Carpisculus,” a term for a type of show, after conquering the Carpi; Tacit. 8.1 invents a liber elephantinus, a modification of the libri lintei; Claud. 6.4 and Prob. 8.7 drastically overestimate the number of the enemy slain by their emperors in battle.

23 See Magie 1932, 94-101, 104-7, and notes.

24 Cass. Dio, 71.3.3, καὶ τοῖς δὲ ἰσχυροτάτου ἀγῶνας καὶ λαμπρᾶς νίκης γεγενημένης, ὃμως ὁ αὐτοκράτωρ αἰτήθηκε παρὰ τῶν στρατιωτῶν οὐκ ἔδωκε χρήματα, “And indeed, after the most terrible struggle and a glorious victory had been obtained, all the same, the emperor, though petitioned by the soldiers, did not give them money.”
Yet numismatic records show that he relented on at least seven occasions, including a very generous bestowal upon his accession. The tale falls between the cracks of absolute truth or falsehood, complicating the narrative integrity.

Two of the most frequent frauds are the poetry that recurs throughout the lives and the bogus names that the author cites. The poems claim to have been translated from Greek into Latin by some inferior translator, but it seems that they are a product of the same imagination that produced the rest of the Historia Augusta. One, at least, is a pastiche of Vergil and Horace, although it claims to have been originally Hellenic. The quantity and shoddy quality of the verses, as well as the nearly identical apologies for the Latin translator, strongly suggest that the author invented them wholesale.

Nevertheless, two of these poems appear in ancient anthologies, showing that the Historia Augusta borrowed at least some of the poetry as it claims. The existence of the models for even two of the poems puts them all into doubt—except for those like the

---

25 HA, Marc. 23.2, ipse in largitionibus pecuniae publicae parcissimus fuit, “he himself was very sparing in the donatives of public funds.” Compare with his seven numismatically attested donatives: Cohen 1883, 41-4 n. 401-27 and Cass. Dio, 71.32.1, καὶ μετὰ ταύτα ἀνά διακοσίας δραχμάς αὐτοῖς κατένεμεν, ὅσον οὕτω πρῶτον εἰλήφασαν, “And afterwards, he distributed to them two hundred drachmas apiece, as many as had never before been received.”

26 The first such poem comes from HA, Pesc. Nig. 8.1, Optimus est Fuscus, bonus Afer, pessimus Albus. These poems are very frequent thereafter: e.g., HA, Pesc. Nig. 8.4.12.6; Macr. 11.4.11.6.14.2; Diad. 7.3; Alex. Sev. 14.4, 18.5.38.3-6; Maximin. 8.4; Aurel. 6.5, 7.2.

27 Den Hengst 2010, 130-9, argues convincingly that they are inspired by the poems of Ausonius.

28 HA, Pesc. Nig. 8.6, bis denis Italum conscendit navibus aequor / si tamen una ratis transiliat pelagus, “He set out upon the Italian sea with twice ten ships, if but one raft will cross the sea.” Compare with Verg., Aeneid 1.381, bis denis Phrygium conscendi naibus aequor, and Hor., Carmina 1.3.23-4, ...si tamen inpiae / non tangenda rates transiliant vada. First found by Dessau, cited in den Hengst 1981, 52. Den Hengst 2010, 152 also identifies Tacit., 31.9, erorem meum memor historiae diligentiae tuae eruditionis avertit, as influenced by Ausonius, Caesares 1-2, incipiam a divo percurruramque ordine cunctos / novi Romanae quos memor historiae. The phrase memora historiae only appears in these two passages in the whole of extant Latin literature.

29 The verses at HA, Gall. 11.8 are found in extended form at Riese 1870, 160 = Baehrens 1882, 103-4, and those at HA, Tyr. Trig. 11.5 have survived in the Greek original at Kaibel 1890, 355* (p32*).
“Greek” mixture of Vergil and Horace. Probability clashes against uncertainty, leaving the reader in *aporia*.

A similar problem emerges with the preponderance of seemingly false names. Some are authentic: epigraphic, historical, and numismatic evidence proves the existence of many of the characters that populate the *Historia Augusta*.\(^{30}\) On the other end of the spectrum are the names that are certainly false: “Eugamius” is otherwise unattested and has a very unusual name—perhaps an unsubtle allusion to the bane of Theodosius, Eugenius.\(^{31}\) Cordus is a fascinating example: cited first as “Aelius Cordus,” he turns into “Junius Cordus,” then returns to “Aelius” before becoming “Junius” again.\(^{32}\) In a more trustworthy author, an unknown name would be attributed to the reader’s ignorance, not the author’s incompetence. In fact, it was the quantity of unattested authorities in the *Historia Augusta* and the anachronism of their names (reminiscent of the late fourth century more than any other time) that suggested the true date of the collection. But many other names are uncertain: even the honest parts of the *Historia Augusta* are rife with misspellings, and some men may have simply fallen out of the historical record. When confronted with a stranger like Annius Cornicula or Fabius Ceryllianus,\(^{33}\) even the most diligent prosopographer would have to wonder if this man was the one who slipped through the cracks of history. The “authors” of the collection

\(^{30}\) E.g., see the notes in Magie 1921 for HA, *Hadr.* 5.10; *Marc.* 2.4; and *Avid. Cass* 1.1. Magie 1932 for *Tyr. Trig.* 3.

\(^{31}\) Syme 1971, 11; but see also 1-16 and Barnes 1972, 140-82.

\(^{32}\) First at HA, *Clod. Alb.* 5.10; the first change is at *Macr.* 1, the second at *Maximin.* 12.7, and the last in the same life at 27.7. Magie 1921, xviii, suggests that his name was Aelius Junius Cordus, but given that Cordus is mentioned nowhere else and that the citation at *Maximin.* 12.7, that a speech of Maximinus was his own, was borrowed from Herod. 8, this seems unlikely. The problem of Cordus is a striking example of the ambiguity which the biographies can raise.

\(^{33}\) HA, *Gall.* 17.2, *Carus* 4.3.
are themselves the most blatant and the cleverest of the inventions. Given the dearth of sources surviving from the Crisis of the Third Century, no ancient reader could have proven or refuted all the names.

Dependence upon the veracity of the *Historia Augusta* is a dilemma that the reader must face too often. In the *Vita Elagabali*, “Aelius Lampridius” claims that the emperor paved the streets of the palace with Lacedaemonian and porphyritic stone that endured to living memory—but it had recently been destroyed.\(^\text{34}\) This is a challenging statement on many accounts. First, it is directly contradicted by the subsequent life which claims that Alexander Severus first paved the palace with the so-called *opus Alexandrinum*.\(^\text{35}\) One statement at least must be wrong. The claim that the pavement was recently destroyed means that no contemporary reader could check the veracity of this report—especially since “recent,” within the biography’s fictional framework, would be decades before the actual publication of the book. The intermingling of truth and fiction strike the reader most forcefully here, for when the author mixes them with equal freedom there is no way to know under which rubric they should fall. Such a statement in the *Historia Augusta*, regardless of its inherent truth-value, contributes to the sense of *aporia* which suffuses the narrative.

**Intermediate Ambiguity**

A few elements of the *Historia Augusta* defy characterization as either internal or external, but share characteristics of both. Usually, these inventions seem organic to the

\(^{34}\) HA, *Elagab.* 24.6, *stravit et saxis Lacedaemoniis ac Porphyreticis plateas in Palatio, quas Antoninianas vocavit. quae saxa usque ad nostram memoriam manserunt, sed nuper eruta et exsecta sunt.*

\(^{35}\) HA, *Alex.* Sev. 25.7, *Alexandrinum opus marmoris de duobus marmoribus, hoc est porphyretico et Lacedaemonio, primus instituit, in Palatio.* "He was the first to create the ‘Alexandrian’ work of marble from two marbles, that is, porphyritic and Lacedaemonian stone.*
biography but enhance ambiguity based on their presumption of falsehood. The bogus names and “Greek” poetry are some examples, but more exist. The fake documents are most prominent. Suetonius was studious in his lives about citing the actual text of imperial speeches or missives; thus, the Historia Augusta includes many documents, but they are almost all fraudulent.36 They appear as early as the Vita Avidii Cassii, and even there the fraud is patent: the terrible pun on the name of the emperor, supposedly “avid” for rule. The most striking is the Letter of Hadrian from the Quadrigae Tyrannorum: purporting to be a letter from the emperor to his brother-in-law Servianus, it excoriates the Egyptians and has been proven to be false.37 Others, like Proculus’ letter about his hundred virgins, are so ludicrous as to defy probability. The simple fact that the last several biographies are composed almost entirely of these fraudulent documents darkens the entire enterprise of citation in the collection.

A critical feature of the Historia Augusta is the lacuna that appears in the middle of the collection: from Phillip the Arab through the first part of the reign of Valerian I and II, a maddening nothing confronts the reader. For most of the scholarly history of the Historia Augusta, the lacuna was considered legitimate, but within the past half-century the argument has been made that it is a deliberate omission on the part of the author.38 Den Hengst argues that this was to avoid offending the ruler under whom the author wrote, but the effect is to increase the sense of uncertainty that pervades the Historia Augusta, particularly when it refers over the next several lives to events that it should

37 Found at HA, Quad. Tyr. 8. Syme 1968, 60-5 argues against its authenticity.
have covered in the gap.\textsuperscript{39} Moreover, the lacuna picks up at one of the lowest points in the history of the empire, after the emperor Valerian had been taken prisoner by the Persian king Sapor; indeed, it opens with an anonymous, pathetic attempt at mitigating the disaster that was the capture of the emperor.\textsuperscript{40} The lacuna introduces tremendous ambiguity into the \textit{Historia Augusta}, as well as furthering one of the most important themes for the collection, the decline of empire.

\textbf{External Ambiguity}

Internal ambiguity is divorced from the persona of the writer; the facts (or lies) stand on their own. The intermediate elements begin to violate the boundary between author and subject—the internal content of the biography confronts the external biographer. Explicit authorial self-insertion is a generic convention, so its presence in the \textit{Historia Augusta} makes sense; indeed, it is common to both history and biography as a means of assuring the veracity and authority of the writer.\textsuperscript{41} The \textit{Historia Augusta}, however, subverts this standard by placing its authorial interjections on all parts of the spectrum of probability. Such ambiguity argues for a satiric reading of the \textit{Historia Augusta}.

Isolated authorial interjections appear throughout the lives and tend very strongly towards the untrue end of the probability spectrum. The “author” first reveals himself

\textsuperscript{39} Den Hengst 1981, 70-2 and 2010, 197.

\textsuperscript{40} HA, Val. 1, \textit{Sapori regi regum vel soli: Si scirem posse aliquando Romanos penitus vinci, gauderem tibi de victoria, quam praefers. sed quia vel fato vel virtute gens illa plurimum potest, vide ne, quod senem imperatorem cepisti et id quidem fraude, male tibi cedat et posteris tuis}, “To Sapor, the King of Kings, or the Sole King: If I knew that the Romans could ever be utterly conquered, I would cheer you in the victory which you declare. But because that people, either by their fate or by their virtue, have tremendous power, see to it that it does not turn out badly for you and your descendants that you took an aged emperor, and that by deceit!”

\textsuperscript{41} Marincola 1997, 1-32.
towards the end of the biography of Hadrian. When the emperor grew ill and had to contemplate his succession, he first thought of his kinsman Servian; but then “Aelius Spartanus” reminds the reader that Hadrian had the man killed, as he has already mentioned—ut diximus. This first explicit appearance by the author in his own work offers little confusion, Servian’s compulsory suicide had indeed already been mentioned. One might question the skill of an author who tells the same story three times in a short span, but the truth of his assertion—that he told the story—cannot be doubted. Many authorial statements from the early lives (except for, significantly, the dedications) are equally uncontroversial. In the Vita Aelii, “Spartianus” makes isolated personal declarations: how little there is to say about Aelius, how the name “Caesar” became a title bestowed upon the emperor’s intended successor (with several potential etymologies of the word Caesar). The subjective statement brooks no objection, and the etymologies are supported by external evidence.

42 HA, Hadr. 23.2, factusque de successore sollicitus primum de Serviano cogitavit, quem postea, ut diximus, mori coegit, “And, after he became troubled about his successor, he thought first of Servian, whom he afterwards forced to die, as we have stated.”

43 HA, Hadr. 15.8, Servianum sororis virum nonagesimum iam annuum agentem, ne sibi superviveret, mori coegit, “Servian, his sister’s husband, already in his ninetieth years, he forced to die lest he outlive him.”

44 HA, Ael. 1.3, et quoniam nimis paucia dicenda sunt, “And since there are very few things to be said…”

45 HA, Ael. 2.3-4, Et quoniam de Caesarum nomine in huius praecipue vita est aliquid disputandum, qui hoc solum nomen indeptus est, Caesarem vel ab elephanto, qui lingua Maurorum caesai dicitur, in proelio caeso, eum qui primus sic appellatus est doctissimi viri et eruditissimi putant dictum, vel quia mortua matri et ventre caeso sit natus, vel quod cum magnis crinibus sit utero parentis effusus, vel quod oculis caesiis et ultra humanum morem viguerit, “And since the name of the Caesars needs to be discussed, especially in the life of this man who first assumed this name only, the most learned and intellectual men think that he who was first called ‘Caesar’ was so called either from an elephant (which is called the caesai in the language of the Moors) that was felled in battle, or because he was born from a dead mother, her belly cut open, or because he came from him mother’s womb with a full head of hair, or because he had grey eyes and thrived beyond human measure.”

46 An elephant appears on a coin of Julius Caesar, Cohen 1880, 17, n. 49; Pliny, Naturalis Historia 7.47 and Isidore, Etymologiae 9.3.12 offer being cut from the mother; Isidore, id. and Festus, De Verborum
Yet the biography concludes with the intention to compose *vitae* of all emperors from Julius Caesar through Diocletian. This is a motif of the "authors," to boast of writing programs that never existed, but it is also symptomatic of greater falsehood. Unlike the internal elements, the fraudulence grows both more intense and more complete. Earlier in the *Vita Hadriani*, the author explains that Hadrian had written an autobiography. This is unproblematic—Dio suggests the same. The *Historia Augusta* adds an element which is nowhere else attested, that it was published discreetly, under the names of several of Hadrian's freedmen. As Meckler points out, this is too convenient: a biography written under the names of several pretenders? It is code for the *Historia Augusta* itself. An old historiographical tradition, citation of eye-witnesses, also appears. It is the grandfather of "Vopiscus" whose rich and varied career—witness to Saturninus' accession in Palestine; confidante to a Gothic princess in Thrace,

Significatu 40 mention being born with hair. Originally cited in Magie 1921, 84-5 n. 4-7 (although he wrongly cites Festus, *De Verborum Significatu* 47).

47 HA, Ael. 7.4, *mihi propositum fuit omnes, qui post Caesarem dictatorem, hoc est divum Iulium, vel Caesares vel Augusti vel principes appellati sunt, quique in adoptionem venerunt, vel imperatorum filii aut parentes Caesarum nomine consecrati sunt, singulis libris exponere*, "It has been my intention to write up all those who were called either 'Caesars' or 'Augusti' or 'princes' after Caesar the Dictator, that is, Divine Julius, and those were adopted, and who were honored with the name of the Caesars as sons or parents of the emperors."

48 Most promise all the emperors up to the one under whom they are writing: "Julius Capitolinus," HA, *Maximin*. 1.1-3; *Gord.*, 1.1-5; "Vulcaci Gallicanus," *Avid. Cass.*, 3.3; "Aelius Lampridius," *Elagab.*, 35; *Alex. Sev.*, 64.1. "Flavius Vopiscus," who claims to end with Diocletian since that emperor and his successors needed a nobler hand, is the only one who (mostly) tells the truth, *Prob.*, 1.5; *Quad. Tyr.*, 15.10.

49 *Cass. Dio*, 69.11, τά τε γὰρ ἄλλα περιεργότατος Ἀδριανός, ὥσπερ εἴπον, ἐγένετο, "For Hadrian was excruciatingly deliberate in other matters, as he said."

50 HA, *Hadr. 16.1*, *Famae celebribis Hadrianus tam cupidus fuit ut libros vitae suae scriptos a se libertis suis litteratis dederit, iubens ut eos suis nominibus publicarent*, "Hadrian was so desirous of a great reputation that he gave books which he had written on his own life to his learned freedmen, order them to publish them under their own names."

51 Meckler 1996, 275.
Saturninus, and Diocletian; soldier in Persia under Carus and under Diocletian in Nicomedia—defies belief.

Yet to explore every miscellaneous comment is to overlook the fullest authorial interjections in the collection: the prefaces. They usually entail an honorific dedication of the imminent biography to an important imperial figure, either Constantine or Diocletian (the “reigning” emperor) or a notable figure at Rome, and they frequently provide the author’s justification for writing the biography. The Vita Aelii opens with a bald lie: “Aelius Spartanus” dedicates the biography to the emperor Diocletian, who had been dead for almost a century when the Historia Augusta was written. All of the prefaces commit this same fraud, setting the dramatic date of composition decades in the past. The misdirection and ambiguity are patent; the real question lies in what the reader should take from such an incongruity. This early in the collection, the frauds of the Historia Augusta would not strike the reader; someone unfamiliar with the collection’s strangeness would still think that it was genuine and that “Aelius Spartanus” wrote under Diocletian. By the end, however, the abundant humor, improbable situations, and incongruities like the “Probus Oracle” would make the falsity of the Historia Augusta clear. Critically, the last life is that of three men, Carus, Carinus, and Numerianus, who were finally bested and replaced by Diocletian. Since the dramatic action begins where the collection ends, it suggests to the reader a comparison between the lives in the

---

52 HA, Quad. Tyr. 9.4, 15.4; Carus 15.1, 13.3.
53 Syme 1971, 256.
54 HA, Ael. 1.1, In animo mihi est, Diocletiane Auguste, “It is my intention, Diocletian Augustus…”
55 Magie 1921, xii-v lays out the conservative interpretation of what the prefaces say about the “authors.” Of course, this is not the interpretation under which this dissertation operates.
collection, dated to the late second and third centuries, and the age immediately following, that of the author.

The preface to the *Vita Aelii* also follows traditional models of authorial self-assertion. “Spartianus” boasts of the originality of his undertaking while apologizing for its scantiness, since previous writers did not treat the *Caesares* and pretenders. The biography contains nothing original or novel, however, except for the “author’s” claim to have already written a series of biographies up to the emperor Hadrian. The reader could not know the truth, even after witnessing the constant mendacities of the later lives. Today, no one believes that the biographer wrote lives that replicated the efforts of Suetonius. The first preface intermingles blatant fraudulence and simple truth in such a way that the reader must reconcile conflicting notions of truth by the end of the *Historia Augusta.*

The preface to the *Vita Veri* is largely uncontroversial. It avoids any honorific dedication (Diocletian is addressed only once, at the end of the biography), only explaining its rationale for putting this biography after that of Marcus Aurelius although Verus died first. The only oddity is its inclusion in the first group of prefaces, for

---

56 There is some debate about the beginning of the *Historia Augusta*. Since the collection follows in the Suetonian tradition, and since there is already a supposed lacuna in the text, it is postulated that the *Historia Augusta* continued Suetonius and began with lives of Nerva and Trajan: Hohl 1927; Hartke 1950, 326-9. The countervailing view, that the biographies were meant to begin with Hadrian, is the majority opinion and that to which I subscribe. See Den Hengst 1981, 14; Meckler 1996.

57 *HA*, Verus 11.3, *cum adhuc post Marcum praeter vestram clementiam, Diocletiane Auguste, imperatorem talem nec adulatio vides et potuisse confingere*, “…since it does not seem that flatter could have fashioned such an emperor yet after Marcus apart from Your Clemency, Diocletian Augustus.”

58 *HA*, Verus 1.1-2, *Scio plerosque ita vitam Marci ac Veri litteris atque historiae dedicasse ut priorem Verum intimandum legentibus darent, non imperandi secutos ordinem sed vivendi; ego vero, quod prior Marcus imperare coepit, dein Verus, qui superstite perit Marco, priorem Marcum dehinc Verum credidi celebrandum*, “I know that the majority have thus dedicated the life of Marcus and Verus to the page and to history so that they grant that Verus must be put down first for their readers, not following the order of their rule but of their life; but because Marcus began to rule first, then Verus, who died while Marcus survived, I believed Marcus should be treated first, then Verus.”
Mommsen once called it one of the *Nebenvitae*, but it is now esteemed in its own right for the original information contained within. The next two prefaces touch upon the same problem of writing about *tyranni*, to which group the subjects of the biographies Avidius Cassius and Pescennius Niger belong.\(^59\) The concerns are legitimate: the only difference between *Augustus* and *tyrannus* is who emerged victorious. If an author writes about the loser he can draw the invidious gaze of the victor.\(^60\) The plea for toleration fits the paradigm established in the preface to *Verus*, but in the latter two lives the author emphasizes the contrast between himself and his predecessors more strongly and more paradoxically. In the earlier life, he knew that *plerosque*, “the majority” of previous authors had treated Verus before his co-regent Marcus Aurelius since Verus died first. Now in the *Vita Avidii Cassii* and the *Vita Clodii Albini*, because “Aelius Spartianus” will treat the second (and secondary) emperor after the first, he must explain his rationale in terms of his precedent. One may suspect whether any such tradition existed for a figure as minor as Verus, but like many suspect statements in the *Historia Augusta*, it cannot be proven. The prefaces to the *Vita Avidii Cassii* and the *Vita Pescennii Nigri*, taken together, make the suspicion stronger. In the first life, the author claims that no one has “shed light” on pretenders out of fear; in the latter, however, the excuse is that previous historians have distorted and neglected their histories, merely

\(^{59}\) *HA*, Avid. Cass. 3.1, *Sed nos hominis naturam et mores breviter explicabimus. neque enim plura de his sciri possunt, quorum vitam et inlustrare nullus audet eorum causa a quibus oppressi fuerint*, “But we shall briefly explain the man’s nature and character, for neither can many things be known about those whose live no one dares even to cast light upon because of those by whom they were crushed.” “Preface” may be an inaccurate term for the *Avidius Cassius*, since it appears in Chapter 3, but I follow den Hengst 1981, and it is indeed the earliest programmatic statement in the *vita*.

\(^{60}\) Den Hengst 1981, 19-24, describes how *tyrannus* came to mean “pretender” in Late Antiquity.
relating the barest facts. The Historia Augusta denies a tradition, then decries it, and still furnishes over ten paragraphs apiece on the two men.

At this point, the illusion of six authors remains. The different characterizations of the historical tradition may be attributed to the resources and attitudes of the “authors” of Avidius Cassius and Pescennius Niger, “Vulcadius Gallicanus” and “Aelius Spartanus.” But the true author shows his hand with the use of a singular phrase, in litteras mittere. The phrase occurs fifteen times in the Historia Augusta as the technical term for the composition of biography but nowhere else in the history of Latin literature. So striking is the phrase that it gave Dessau some of his strongest linguistic evidence to overthrow the conservative position concerning the authorship of the Historia Augusta. A phrase unprecedented in the Latin language used by two different “authors” in the same collection—the accumulation of peculiarities in these three words begins to expose the uncertainty in the Historia Augusta.

The preface to the Vita Getae, by comparison, offers no confusion; it only highlights one of the explicit themes of the Historia Augusta, the nomen Antoninorum.

61 HA, Pesc. Nig. 1.1, Rarum atque difficile est ut, quos tyrannos aliorum victoria fecerit, bene mittantur in litteras atque ideo vix omnia de his plene in monumentis atque annalibus habentur. primum enim, quae magna sunt in eorum honorem ab scriptoribus depravantur, deinde alia supprimuntur, postremo non magna diligentia in eorum genere ac vita requiritur, cum satis sit audaciam eorum et bellum, in quo victi fuerint, ac poenam proferre, “It is an uncommon and difficult thing to put into letters well those whom the victory of others has made tyrants, and so are hardly all the facts about them fully contained in monuments and annals. For first, the great things which are to their credit are distorted by authors, then other things are suppressed, and then people look into their birth and life with no great effort, since it is enough to lay out their boldness and the war in which they were conquered and their punishment.”

62 Den Hengst 1981, 25-6. At HA, Avid. Cass. 3.3; Elagab. 1.1, 18.4; Alex. Sev. 3.2, 3.5, 48.6; Gord. 21.5; Val. 8.3; Gall. 18.6, 19.1, 21.5; Aurel. 1.8, 24.9; Tacit. 11.7; Tyr. Trig. 6.7.

63 Dessau 1889, 386-7.

64 HA, Geta 1.1-2, Scio, Constantine Auguste, et multos et Clementiam tuam quaestionem movere posse cur etiam Geta Antoninus a me tradatur. de cuius priusquam vel vita vel nece dicas, disseram cur et ipsi Antonino a Severo patre sit nomen adpositum, neque enim multa in eius vita dici possunt, qui prius rebus humanis exemptus est quam cum fratre teneret imperium, “I know, Constantine Augustus, that many,
Unlike the unique phraseology of *in litteras mittere*, the honor accrued to the Antonine emperors and the corresponding honor in which that term was held is a motif of literature of the late empire. As such, its prominence in the *Historia Augusta* is noteworthy but does inherently prove falsehood. The final preface of the last *Nebenvita* retreats from the convolutions hinted at in the *Vita Pescennii Nigri* and moves towards the true side of the probability spectrum. The *Historia Augusta* foils all expectations.

The preface to the *Vita Macrini* begins to stretch the bounds of plausibility, introducing two of the greatest sins against authenticity that the author commits: invention of sources and hypocrisy.65 “Julius Capitolinus” complains once more about the paucity of information on pretenders and usurpers and then claims the mantle of good biography for himself by promising to write only what is “worthy of memory,” unlike the trivia of another biographer, Junius Cordus.66 “Capitolinus” has mastered the techniques of rhetorical self-aggrandizement; nevertheless, he cannot hide the fraud and hypocrisy. Junius Cordus is symptomatic of the problems of the *Historia Augusta*: an invented man dedicated to the very vices which inundate the *Historia Augusta* and which “Julius Capitolinus” decries. The preface to the *Vita Macrini* criticizes Cordus for including Your Clemency, can raise the question of why even Geta Antoninus is treated by me. Before I talk about either his life or death, I shall discuss why the name of Antoninus was granted to him by his father, Severus, for not much can be said in the life of a one who was erased from human affairs before he held power with his brother.” See Syme 1971, 78-88; den Hengst 1981, 28-35 and 2010, 145.

---

65 Den Hengst 2010, 139 suggests that this may be the original beginning of the collection, which the unknown author went back and completed with the lives from the *Vita Hadriani* to the *Vita Getae.*

66 HA, Macr. 1, *Vitae illorum principum seu tyrannorum sive Caesarum qui non diu imperaverunt in obscuro…nos tamen ex diversis historicis eruta in lucem proferemus, et ea quidem quae memoratu digna erunt…et lunio quidem Cordo studium fuit eorum imperatorum vitas edere quos obscurores videbat. qui non multum profecti*, “The lives of those princes, whether tyrants or Caesars, who did not rule long lie hidden in the shadows…Nevertheless, we shall bring to light what he have dug up from various historical sources, and those which will be worthy of memory…indeed, it was Junius Cordus’ passion to publish the lives of those emperors whom he saw as rather obscure. But he did not accomplish much…”
reporting trivialities, whereas proper biography should elucidate the character of its subject instead of indulging in gossip. Yet all the categories of “trivia” that are cited—when the emperor would go walking, change his food or clothes, advance men professionally—appear in the Historia Augusta, some in the lives of “Capitolinus.” Most striking is the last category, quos quando promoverit. What else would show the true nature of an emperor than whom he favored and for what reasons? Once the collection abandons Nebenvitae, the narrative ambiguity becomes considerably more pronounced.

The internal frauds of the Vita Elagabali are matched by its two prefaces. Following the model of Suetonius’ Vita Caligulae, “Aelius Lampridius” deals first with the emperor’s life and reign and then with the extravagances in which he indulged. The Historia Augusta, however, gives each section a lengthy preface, both of which expose its inherent fraud. The author claims that that he never would have committed Elagabalus’ life to writing if the world had not already seen so many “Caligulas and Vitelliiuses and Neros.” The sentiment is expressed with certain satiric indicators—the signal phrase in litteras mittere and the use of the rhetorical plural. These serve to highlight the fraudulence of the preface, for the author proceeds to offer an outlandish

---

67 HA, Macr. 1, nam et pauc a repperit et indigna memoratu, adserens se minima quaeque persecuturum, quasi vel de Traiano aut Pio aut Marco sciendum sit, quotiens processerit, quando cibos variaverit et quando vestem mutaverit et quos quando promoverit, “For he found few things, and those not worthy of remembrance, declaring that he would pursue every minor detail, as though we had to know how often Trajan or Pius or Marcus appeared, when he altered his food, when he changed his clothes, and whom he advanced and when.”

68 The first part of Suet., Caligula has no preface, while 22.1 has the famous quip, Hactenus quasi de principe, reliqua ut de monstro narranda sunt, “So far we have had to talk about the emperor; the rest shall have to be as though about a monster.”

69 HA, Elagab. 1.1, Vitam Heliogabali Antonini, qui Varius etiam dictus est, numquam in litteras misisset, ne quis suisse Romanorum principem sciret, nisi ante Caligulas et Nerones et Vitellios hoc idem habuisset imperium.
explanation for his supposed reservations. Since the world produces both good and evil, “Lampridius” says, one may derive some benefit by contrasting the lives of good emperors who died in their bed with the wicked who were killed.70 The comparison between nature and politics is clumsy, and his list of emperors includes four—Augustus, Vespasian, Titus, and Trajan—not treated at all in the Historia Augusta.71 Even the last element of comparison fails. Several sources suggest that Titus did not “enjoy a natural death” but was poisoned (or at least neglected) by Domitian, while some of the tyranni in the collection met fates far better than the hook.72

The first preface to the Vita Elagabali is a front. The Historia Augusta lavishes attention on Elagabalus to a degree afforded few others in the collection. The second preface protests that much in the emperor's life is unfit for publication; “Lampridius” will only what pertains to his luxury, since the emperor declared that he would live in that way.73 What follows is the longest stretch of extravagance in the Historia Augusta, offering every salacious detail of the emperor’s private life. The fraud of this preface is even more transparent than the first, for no distinction exists between the obscena of

70 HA, Elagab. 1.2, sed cum eadem terra et venena ferat et frumentum atque alia salutaria, eadem serpentes et cicures, compensationem sibi lector diligens faciet, cum legerit Augustum, Traianum, Vespasianum, Hadrianum, Pium, Titum, Marcum contra hos prodigiosos tyrannos

71 Accepting the theory that the Historia Augusta begins with Hadrian.

72 HA, Elagab. 1.3, simul intellegeat Romanorum iudicia, quod illi et diu imperarunt et exitu naturali functi sunt, hi vero interfici, tracti, tyranni etiam appellati, quorum nec nomina libet dicere, “at the same time, he will understand the judgment of the Romans, because some ruled for a long time and met a natural end, but others were killed, drawn, even called tyrants, whose names it gives no please to name.”

73 HA, Elagab. 18.4, De huius vita multa in litteras missa sunt obscena, quae quia digna memoratu non sunt, ea prodenda censui quae ad luxuriam pertinebant, quorum aliqua privatus, aliqua iam imperator fecisse perhibetur, cum ipse e privatis dicet se Apicium, imperatorum vero Othonem et Vitellium imitari, “Concerning his life, many foul things have been put into writing which, because they are not worthy of remembrance, I determined that I had to present those things which pertained to his luxury, some of which he is said to have done as a private citizen, others once he was already emperor, since he said that, of private citizens, he imitated Apicius, but Otho and Vitellius of the emperors.”
other authors and *quae ad luxuriam pertinebant* of “Aelius Lampridius.” The prefaces pretend to present a compiler of facts, constrained by the necessity of his task; in fact, they are ironic, misleading the reader and revealing the satiric nature of the *Vita Elagabali*, and thus the *Historia Augusta*.

Den Hengst rightly groups together the prefaces for the *Vita Maximinorum* and the *Vita Gordianorum*. These biographies are the first to group multiple emperors into one book, a pattern that will be repeated for the remainder of the collection.74 “Julius Capitolinus” explains his intention to compress multiple emperors into a single volume at the beginning of both lives, even mentioning that this deviates from his original design.75 But it was the original plan of “Aelius Spartanus” in the *Vita Aelii* to treat every emperor, *Caesar*, and pretender, each in his own book. If the author had not drawn attention to the change, it might have escaped the reader’s notice. The implication of a relationship between two “authors” suggests the fraudulence of the stated authorship.

In the *Vita Maximinorum*, a senator, Tatius Cyrillus, is cited as another biographer whom “Capitolinus” must follow.76 Like Junius Cordus, he appears nowhere else in the historical records; yet there is no evidence that he did not exist. He is also

74 The *Vitae Claudii*, *Aureliani*, *Taciti*, and *Probi* are the only books spared this compression.

75 *HA*, *Maxim*. 1.1, *Ne fastidiosum esset Clementiae tuae, Constantine maxime, singulos quosque principes vel principum liberos per libros singulos legere, adhibui moderationem, qua in unum volumen duos Maximinos, patrem filiumque, congererem;* “Let it be loathsome to your Clemency, greatest Constantine, to read all of the princes or the sons of the princes individually in individual books, I have used restraint in gathering into one volume the two Maximins, father and son;” *Gord*. 1.1-3, *Fuerat quidem consilium, venerabilis Auguste, ut singulos quosque imperatores exemplo multorum libris singulis ad tuam Clementiam destinarem,* “It had indeed been my plan, venerable Augustus, to give all the emperors individually to your Clemency, as many do, in individual books.”

76 *HA*, *Maxim*. 1.2, *servavi deinceps hunc ordinem, quem Pietas tua etiam ab Tatio Cyrillo, Clarissimo Viro, qui Graecae in Latinum vertit, servari voluit,* “I have accordingly preserved this order which your Piety also wanted to be preserved by Tatius Cyrillus, the Most Famous Gentleman, who translated Greek into Latin.”
said to be a translator of Greek sources into Latin, a statement which, in regard to the poems in the *Historia Augusta*, is a strong indicator of authorial invention—but not always. Cyrillus falls in the center of the probability spectrum, marked as a possible fraud by the ambiguity of his existence and practice. Incapable of proof or disproof, his existential ambiguity contributes to the satiric tone of the *Historia Augusta*.

The end of the preface to the *Vita Gordianorum*, meanwhile, pre-emptively apologizes in a dense period if the author babbles too long.\(^77\) One phrase vexes: *quam me urbane declinare confingo*. *Confingo* is the fulcrum of bafflement. Magie translates it as "the very thing I pretend cleverly to avoid," which is the most sensible reading.\(^78\) This translation, however, makes the author impute fraud and trickery upon himself, a violation of his *modus operandi*. A clever solution emerges from a law of Ulpian in Justinian’s *Digest*, which uses the phrase *homicidium in se confingere* to mean “to declare oneself guilty of murder,” turning the phrase into “what I declare cleverly that I shall avoid.”\(^79\) The use of Ulpian as the key to understanding this passage is telling, for he appears with unusual frequency in the *Historia Augusta*.\(^80\) The confusion is deliberate, meant to heighten the biography’s sense of aporia.

---

\(^77\) *HA*, *Gord*. 1.5, *sed ne ego, qui longitudinem librorum fugi multitudinemque verborum, in eam incurrisse videar, quam me urbane declinare confingo, iam rem adgrediar.*

\(^78\) Magie, 1924, 381; *OLD*, s.v. *confingo*.

\(^79\) Justin., *Digest* 48.18.1.27, *Primitium seruem, qui homicidium in se confingere metu ad dominum reuertiendi suspei tus esset, perseverantem falsa demonstratone damnasti*, "…you condemned a first-born slave who had been suspected of declaring himself guilty of murder out of fear of returning to his master, as he was continuing with false testimony…"

Starting with the *Tyranni Triginta*, every subsequent biography contains a preface which muses on either the aesthetics of biography or themes that lie at the core of the *Historia Augusta*. It opens with the curious declaration that “Trebellius Pollio” has so far not written historically or in a learned fashion, but conversationally. Like many utterances in the *Historia Augusta*, it functions on two levels. The *recesatio* of ability or power is a traditional poetic and political technique, an act of false modesty to inspire trust. The notion of disingenuity always predominates in a *recesatio*, however: had Rome been less opposed to kings, Caesar would gladly have worn a crown. The same applies to poetic *recesationes*—the poet sees himself as indeed worthy. This would fit with the mask of authority which the *Historia Augusta* wears, but the wary reader knows better. The collection does not stand upon style. This is an ambivalent statement of false modesty and startling honesty. As with *quam me urbane declinare confingo*, expectation and execution are balanced to leave the reader in a state of uncertainty.

The preface to the *Vita Aureliani* expands the ambiguity. “Flavius Vopiscus” creates an elaborate dramatic scene: during the *Hilaria*, he rides in a carriage with the City Prefect Junius Tiberianus. As they pass the Temple of the Sun, one of Aurelian’s building projects, the prefect laments to his biographer friend the lack of a Latin biography of the great prince, and “Vopiscus” vows to meet the task. The lies are thick

---

81 HA, *Tyr. Trig.* 1.1, *Scriptis iam pluribus libris non historico nec diserto sed pedestri adloquio.*


83 HA, *Aurel.* 1, *Hilaribus, quibus omnia festa et fieri debere scimus et dici, impletis sollemnibus vehiculo suo me et iudiciai carpento praefectus urbis...lunius Tiberianus accipit...sermonem multum a Palatio usque ad Hortos Varianos instituit et in eo praecipue de vita principum. cumque ad Templum Solis venissemus ab Aureliano princepe consecratum...quaesivit a me quis vitam eius in litteras retulisset. cui cum ego respondissem neminem a me Latinorum, Graecorum aliquos lectitatos, dolorem gemitus sui vir sanctus per haec verba profudit...accepi libros Graecos et omnia mihi necessaria in manum sumps, ex quibus ea quae digna erant memoratu in unum libellum contuli, “On the Hilaria, when we know that all*
and complex. Both prefect and biographer claim that the sources for Aurelian’s life can be found in *libri lintei*.\(^8^4\) The linen books, however, are a blatant anachronism, a humorous assertion of scholarly diligence that was outmoded by the fourth century.\(^8^5\)

The *Hilaria* mirrors the *Historia Augusta*, for it is a single name applied to multiple events. The most common *Hilaria* festival was on 25 March, when celebrants would join Magna Mater in celebrating the resurrection of Attis, but another dedicated to Isis fell on 3 November.\(^8^6\) The term could even apply generally to any private or public cause for celebration.\(^8^7\) Within its fictive construct, the *Historia Augusta* might refer to any of the three.

Junius Tiberianus, the travelling companion of “Vopiscus,” was a real man who held two prefectships, one from 18 February 291 to 3 August 292, the other 12 September 303 to 4 January 304.\(^8^8\) Thus, the conversation described in the preface “Vopiscus” could have fallen in either term of office, but not both. It also could have fallen during one of the general *hilaria*. Given that the *Vita Aureliani* claims to have been

---

\(^8^4\) *HA, Aurel. 1, quae omnia ex libris linteis, in quibus ipse cotidiana sua scribipraeceperat, pro tua sedulitate condiscis,* “And you shall learn everything <sc. that pertains to his life> from the linen books, in which he himself had ordered his daily affairs to be written, in accordance with your diligence.”

\(^8^5\) Livy, 4.7 cites Licinius Macer using *libri lintei* to support his more antiquarian claims. Ogilvie 1958, 40-6 suggests that they were merely lists of magistrates and not the full histories that “Vopiscus” promises.

\(^8^6\) Turcan 1996, 44-7; the *Chronograph* of Filocalus lists the November festival.

\(^8^7\) Smith and Wayte 1890 s.v. *Hilaria*.

\(^8^8\) Dessau 1889, 344-5; Mommsen 1890, 257.
completed only after the consulship of Furius Placidus in 354, neither is probable. 89 The ambiguity is deliberate, but the first *Hilaria* is the most attractive, for a substantial part of that festival was a Saturnalian masquerade where a common man could put on a mask and imitate anyone, even a senator. 90 The mind behind the *Historia Augusta*, in honor of the holiday, has adopted the *persona* of the biographer.

The preface to the *Vita Aureliani* also marks a significance appearance of another of the six “authors.” Talk falls by chance to “Trebellius Pollio,” the author of the preceding set of biographies. The city prefect criticizes his falsehood, but “Vopiscus” plays the *diabolus* and defends him(self), even raising the biographer to the level of Suetonius, Sallust, and Livy. 91 This is not the last time that the *Historia Augusta* will set itself in the historiographical tradition—not always to the same conclusion.

89 HA, Aurel. 18.4, *vidimus proxime consulatum Furii Placidi,* “we have seen very recently the consulship of Furius Placidus.”

90 Herod. 1.10.5, ἦρως ἀρχῇ ἑκάστου ἔτους ὡρισμένης ἡμέρας μητρὶ θεῶν πομπὴν τελοῦσι Ῥωμαῖοι· καὶ πάντα ὅσα παρ’ ἑκάστοις πλούτου σύμβολα κειμήλια τε βασιλέων ἄλειπα, τῆς θεοῦ προπομπεύει, ἀνέτος τὸ πάσι δέδοται ἐξουσία παντοδαπῆς παιδιᾶς, ἐκάστος τὸ υποκρίνεται ὑπὸ ἀνετὸς τοῖς δέδοται ἐξουσίαις, ὡς μὴ ῥᾳδίως διαγνῶναι τόν ἄλληθην, ως μὴ ῥᾳδίως διαγνῶναι τὸν ἐνδοτὰ καὶ τὸν μιμοῦμενον, “at the beginning of spring each year, on a day set aside for the mother of the gods, the Romans hold a parade, and all the tokens of wealth that they have among them, and the treasures of the kings, and the wonders of the forest and of craft go in procession before the goddess. Uncontrolled license for all sorts of play has been given to all, and each man plays what part he wants; nor is a position so great or remarkable that it is not permitted for he who wants to and is already engaged in it to play and to hide the truth, so that it may not be easy to distinguish the real man from the imitator.” See also Wiseman 1993, 124-5, 146.

91 HA, Aurel. 2, *Et quoniam sermó nobis de Trebellio Pollione…fuit adserente Tiberiano quod Pollio multa incuriosè, multa breviter prodidisset, me contra dicente neminem scriptorum, quantum ad historiam pertinet, non aliquid esse mentitum, prodente quin etiam in quo Livius, in quo Sallustius, in quo Cornelius Tacitus, in quo denique Trogus manifestis testibus convincerentur…Scribe, inquit, ut libert. securus quod velis dices, habiturus mendaciorum comites, quos historicae eloquentiae miramur auctores, “And since talk arose among us about Trebellius Pollio, with Tiberianus declaring that Pollio had put forward many things carelessly, many things briefly, but I disagreed, saying that no writers have not made up lies as far as pertains to history, offering up in fact that in which Livy, in which Sallust, in which Cornelius Tacitus, in which finally Trogus was refuted with plain proofs...he said, ‘Write as you please! You will speak as you please, to have as allies in you lies the authors of historical eloquence whom we admire.’”*
The preface to the *Vita Probi* offers important external remarks for analysis of the falsehoods in the *Historia Augusta*. It contains the strongest statement on historiographical aesthetics in the collection, opening with a florid (and not entirely unimpressive) declamation, recalling the greatest Latin historians and retelling the anecdote of Alexander the Great congratulating Achilles for having so great a eulogizer in Homer:

It is certain that Sallustius Crispus and Marcus Cato and Gellius, historians in their manner of judgment, put into writing that all of everyone’s virtues are as great as the want them to seem by the talent of those who wrote down the deeds of each of them. So it is that Alexander the Great of Macedon, after he had come to the tomb of Achilles, let out a profound groan and said, ‘Lucky are you, child, who found such a herald for your virtues.’

“Vopiscus” apologizes for this rhetorical exercise but says that he wants to reintroduce the great emperor Probus to general knowledge. He continues that he will even go as far as Maximian and Diocletian, if he lives long enough. The “author” promises nothing great except the continued memory of a great emperor, but the demonstrative *ille* deflates the false modesty. The author has already made himself equal with the greatest Latin historians and even Homer; modesty is not for him.

92 HA, Prob. 1.1-2, *Certum est quod Sallustius Crispus quodque Marcus Cato et Gellius historici sententiae modo in litteras rettulerunt, omnes omnium virtutes tantas esse quantas videri eas voluerint eorum ingenia qui unius cuiusque facta descripserint. inde est quod Alexander Magnus Macedo, cum ad Achillis sepulchrum venisset, graviter ingemescens, Felicem te, inquit, iuvenis, qui talem praecomes tuarum virtutum repperisti.*

93 HA, Prob. 1.3-6, 3 *Quorum haec pertineant, mi Celsine, fortassis requiris. Probum principem…scriptorum inopia iam paene nescimus…sed non patiar ego ille, a quo dudum solus Aurelianus est expetitus, cuius vitam quantum potui persecutus, Tacito Florianaque iam scriptis non me ad Probi facta conscendere, si vita suppetet, omnes qui supersunt usque ad Maximianum Diocletianumque dicturiae. neque ego nunc facultatem eloquentiamque pollicor sed res gestas, quas perire non patior,* "Perhaps you ask how this pertains to you, my Celsinus. We now almost do not know the emperor Probus because of a lack of authors. But I, the one who by whom Aurelian alone was long ago sought out, whose life I pursued as far as I could, as Tacitus and Florian were already written on, could not allow myself not to go to the deeds of Probus—if life remains, to speak of all those who remain up to Maximian and Diocletian. Nor do I now promise fluency and eloquence, but the hard facts, which I cannot allow to die."
“Vopiscus” then places himself in the ancient tradition, not following all the Livies, Sallusts, Tacituses, or Troguses, but a series of (as he describes them) more common authors, like Marius Maximus, Suetonius, Julius Capitolinus, and Aelius Lampridius, who write *non tam diserte quam vere*. This passage is significant for several reasons: the authors from whom “Vopiscus” distances himself are the same that he lauded in the *Vita Aureliani*. The second list of authors, meanwhile, introduces further ambiguity: the last two, “Julius Capitolinus” and “Aelius Lampridius,” are “authors” in the *Historia Augusta* whose works include the outrageous *Vita Elagabali*; the middle two, Fabius Marcellinus and Gargilius Martialis, are among the potentially invented names. Marius Maximus and Suetonius are real, but Ammianus inveighs against the former for his inferior quality. One good, authentic author out of six hardly qualifies as a group writing “not so much learnedly as truly.”

The preface to the *Quadrigae Tyrannorum* treats those same authors quite differently. Suetonius is said to have barely treated the minor pretenders Lucius Antonius and Gaius Vindex in his own lives out of his love of concision; yet Antonius

---

94 HA, *Prob. 2.7*, *et mihi quidem id animi fuit ut non Sallustios, Livios, Tacitos, Trogos atque omnes disertissimos imitarer viros in vita principum et temporibus disserendis, sed Marium Maximum, Suetonium Tranquillum, Fabium Marcellinum, Gargilium Martialem, Iulium Capitolinum, Aelium Lampridium ceterosque, qui haec et talia non tam diserte quam vere memoriae tradiderunt*, “And I had such a plan in discussing the life and times of emperors to imitate not the Sallusts, Livies, Tacituses, Troguses, and all the other most learned men, but Marius Maximus, Suetonius Tranquillus, Fabius Marcellinus, Gargilius Martialis, Julius Capitolinus, Aelius Lampridius, and all the rest who have passed down these and such things to memory not so much learnedly as truly.”

95 *Syme 1971, 47.*

96 HA, *Quad. Tyr. 1.1-2*, *Minusculos tyrannos scio plerosque tacuisse aut breviter praeterisse. nam et Suetonius Tranquillus, emendatissimus et candidissimus scriptor, Antonium Vindicemque tacuit, contentus eo quod eos cursim perstrinxerat…et de Suetonio non miramur, cui familiarire fuit amare brevitatem*, “I know that most have been silent on or quickly passed by the petty tyrants, for even Suetonius Tranquillus, the most faultless and frank writer, was silent on Antony and Vindex, satisfied that he had touched upon them in passing…and we do not wonder about Suetonius, to whom it was characteristic to love concision.”
was an irrelevant figure who was destroyed by bad luck before he threatened the emperor, while Vindex was given ample treatment in both the *Vita Neronis* and the *Vita Galbae*.\(^{97}\) Marius Maximus, meanwhile, is criticized for wordiness and *mythistorica volumina*, “mythistorical books,” as well as for discussing certain minor rulers in the life of the more important figure under whom they operated.\(^{98}\) *Mythistorica* is a neologism invented by the *Historia Augusta*, the meaning of which seems to be “historical works with lies intermingled.”\(^{99}\) “Vopiscus” undermines the characterization of Marius Maximus from the preface to *Probus* with a fanciful description that perfectly describes the *Historia Augusta* itself.

Even the critique of condensing the lives of lesser rulers fails, for although the cited examples—Avidius Cassius, Pescennius Niger, and Clodius Albinus—were treated separately earlier in *Historia Augusta*, “Vopiscus” folds into the biographies Florian, a minor *Augustus* who shared rule with Tacitus for a few months and whom the author mentions repeatedly, and Quintillus, a short-lived coregent with Claudius.\(^{100}\) The last book in the *Historia Augusta* combines three separate *Augusti* into a single volume. Den Hengst suggests that this variation in treatment represents a change of plan on the author’s part: having begun with the *Vita Alexandri Severi* and working through the *Vita

\(^{97}\) Suet., *Domitianus* 6.2 treats the brief uprising of Lucius Antonius Saturninus; for Vindex, see *Nero* 40-6; *Galba* 9.2, 11.2. The treatment of Vindex is, in fact, more thorough than many of the *Nebenvitae* or individual constituents of the *Tyranni Triginta*.

\(^{98}\) HA, *Quad. Tyr*. 1.1-2, *et Marius Maximus Avidium Marci temporibus, Albinum et Nigrum Severi non suis propriis libris sed alienis innexuit…quid Marius Maximus, homo omnium verbosissimus, qui et mythistoricis se voluminibus implicavit, num ad istam descriptionem curamque descendit? “And Marius Maximus joined Avidius with the times of Marcus, Albinus and Niger with those of Severus, not in their own particular books but in others…why does Marius Maximus, the wordiest man of all, who even has wrapped himself up in mythistorical tomes, not sink to that sort of description and concern?”

\(^{99}\) *OLD* s.v. *mythistoricus*, “fabulous, mixed with fables.”

\(^{100}\) Florian appears at HA, *Tacit.* 9.5, 13.6, 14.4, 16.4-5, 17.4; *Prob.* 1.5, 10.1, 10.8, 11.3, 13.3-4; *Quad. Tyr.* 1.4. Quintillus appears at *Claud.* 10.6, 12.3, 12.5, 13.2, 13.9; *Aurel.* 2.1, 16.1, 17.4, 37.5.
Cari et Carini et Numeriani, he extended the collection to include the series from the Vita Hadriani through the Vita Elagabali. But I am concerned not with how the author crafted the text, but the impact of the final collection. Contradiction and hypocrisy grow steadily more transparent across the Historia Augusta.

The last book treats three emperors, Carus, Carinus, and Numerianus. The preface to this vita does not indulge in pure fraudulence but rather surveys all of Roman history, from Romulus and Remus through the ancient kings, the Republic and Empire, up to the age of Diocletian. The survey is a departure from what the reader has come to expect from the Historia Augusta: an honest, cogent analysis of the vagaries of history. The preface indirectly recalls the first preface to the Vita Elagabali by stating that several good emperors, Aurelian and Tacitus and Probus, were felled by capricious fortune. This statement contradicts the moral of the earlier biography, but the true import of the preface lies in its solid analysis of the caprice of empire: some rulers good, others bad, and a constant succession of the two. It encapsulates everything that the previous biographies demonstrated and states the essential thesis of the Historia Augusta: there is no security in empire; the reign of any good emperor will only anticipate a worse one later; and any effort to ensure good rule will inevitably fail before the forces of history. The rest of this dissertation will explore the ramifications of this satiric conclusion.

---


102 HA, Numer. 1.1-3, Fato rem publicam regi eamque nunc ad summum evehi, nunc ad minima retrahi Probi mors satis prodidit. “The death of Probus led the nation to be ruled by fate, and for it to be conveyed now to the highest heights, now to be drawn back to the lowest lows.”
CHAPTER 5
RELIGION IN THE HISTORIA AUGUSTA

Religion has long interested scholars of the Historia Augusta.¹ Geffcken first provided the narrative that has guided subsequent studies of religion in the collection. He argued that, given the fierce animosity existed between pagans and Christians, the biographies are anti-Christian polemic.² The article is representative of twentieth century perceptions of Late Antique religious strife. Save for the brief reprieve of Julian, paganism successively lost its rights and privileges over the course of the fourth century, facing first unofficial discrimination then full proscription under Theodosius.³ Literate Christian society of the time despised the pagan faith.⁴ Scholars have sought—and found—evidence of a pagan backlash: the embassy of Symmachus, fighting to restore the altar of Virtue which was removed from the curia; the lost History of the elder Nicomachus Flavianus; the revolt of Eugenius against Theodosius.⁵ Until recently, this so-called pagan revival has dominated discussions of the late fourth century,⁶ creating a dramatic dichotomy into which every contemporary author cleaves: Christian and pagan.

Symmachus stood at the center of this putative pagan resurgence. Besides his petition to restore the altar of Victory, he freely discussed religious matters with his

¹ See especially Geffcken 1920; Baynes 1926, 56-7; de Labriolle 1934; Stern 1953; Straub 1963; Schwartz 1978.

² Geffcken 1920, 293; Bayne 1926 generally agrees; Momigliano 1960, 129-44 and Syme 1968, 139 argue that the Historia Augusta shows little interest in Christianity.

³ Moore 1919, 122-34; Jones 1964, 77-169.

⁴ Ambrose, Epistulae 17 and 18, written to Valentinian to decry the effort to restore the Altar of Victory; the Carmen Contra Paganos; Cameron 2011, 273-352 and throughout.

⁵ Moore 1919; Bloch 1945, 199-244; Jones 1964, 168-9; Coşkun 2004, 152-78.

⁶ O'Donnell 1978, 122-43 is an exception.
pagan correspondents and wrote with confidence to powerful and influential Christians.\(^7\) Seeing these acts as an attempted resurgence of pagan pride, modern scholars have identified a literary salon around him, a “circle of Symmachus” which sought to restore the gods to the literary and political world.\(^8\) Nicomachus Flavianus is another key figure for the pagan opposition. His *Annales* has been hailed as a literary bulwark of philosophical paganism and his translation of the *Life of Apollonius of Tyana* as a savage attack upon Christ himself, despite the fact that no trace of either work survives.\(^9\) His role in the attempted rebellion of Eugenius, the supposed last stand of paganism, heightens his mystique.\(^10\)

Cameron’s *The Last Pagans of Rome* explodes this simplistic view. He examines in detail the many arguments adduced over the generations and shows that what appear to be universal tensions between the two religions are, in fact, exaggerated or stereotyped polemics by Christian sources or mere modern invention. Symmachus was not some rabid pagan partisan but one of the most powerful men at Rome: he served as *praefectus urbi*, was appointed consul by the Christian emperor and consul even after supporting the usurper Maximus, and even helped Augustine establish himself in the political milieu at Rome.\(^11\) The senate was no exception; patrician favor towards

---

\(^7\) Ambrose, *Epistula* 17, 18; Symmachus, *Relatio* 3; *Epistula*. 1.13-43 (to Ausonius), 56-61 (to Sex. Petronius Probus), 10.3.

\(^8\) Moore 1919, 130; Smith 1976, 144-59; Cameron 2011, 360.


\(^10\) Bloch 1963.

\(^11\) Augustine, *Confessiones* 5.13.23. McGeachy 1949, 226-7 finds a Christian-to-pagan ratio of slightly less than 2:1; Cameron 2011, 376-7, modifies this interpretation and sets it at slightly more than 1:1.
Christianity grew as it became the path to power and influence. Symmachus was an influential man who happened to be pagan. He was no provocateur.

Nicomachus Flavianus was no zealot either. Cameron shows that Symmachus, who tailored his correspondence to the tastes and erudition of the recipient, only deals in superficial scholarship with Flavianus. If Symmachus had to dumb down his style to accommodate his friend, it is unlikely that the Annales was a work of any significant learning. Flavianus’ translation of the Life of Apollonius likely had no religious agenda, either; the original was known and respected by Christians for the exemplarity of its subject.

The rebellion of Eugenius and the role that Nicomachus Flavianus played in it have assumed grand proportions which do not fit the facts. When Valentinian II died, Eugenius claimed the western throne and refused to step down. He eased the official hostility against paganism but was himself a Christian. The conflict came to a head at the Battle of the Frigidus, where Theodosius broke Eugenius’ army and reclaimed the western empire. These are the facts. Later Christian authors sought to reshape the secular narrative into a religious victory: divine winds reflecting the western army's missiles back at them and Flavianus' suicide immediately after his demons forsake him. The true event was a political struggle between ambitious men, and Flavianus happened to be a pagan on the wrong side of history.

---

13 Cameron 2011, 386-9.
14 Cameron 2011, 554-8.
15 Cameron 2011, 93-131; Roberts and Salzman 2011, xxxix-xli.
16 E.g., Rufinus, Ecclesiastical History. 2.33; Ambrose, Epistula 57, 61; Socrates, Ecclesiastical History 5.25. See also Salzman 2002, 191-224.
Antique polytheism was not conducive to zealotry. Unlike Christianity, the mainstream of ancient religion was grounded in the material world. Apart from the mystery cults, the old gods promised their adherents no great rewards or punishment in the afterlife. Worship consisted of rituals centered on nature, war, birth, prosperity, political stability—the stuff of this world, not the next. When the empire survived after the gods were officially abandoned, there was little reason for the common classes to stay with an emotionally distant religion whose only promise, material security, had been disproven by the success of Constantine and the failure of Julian. Traditional paganism was dealt its mortal blow long before Theodosius banned sacrifice. The realities of the late fourth century argue against the view that the elite classes attempted to preserve the old religion as a righteous cause. Nobles found their paths to power in hereditary priesthoods, but these were costly and engendered little emotional investment. The reward for honoring the old gods had been prestige; once that was lost, the aristocracy had no reason to cultivate their old priesthoods. Many professed pagans enjoyed prestigious positions in the imperial superstructure as late as 400 CE, but the new generations must have seen that the road to the senate house ran through the cathedral.

Cameron revolutionizes the view of religion in Late Antiquity by correcting long-held but poorly supported truisms. His reassessment shows that the conflict between pagans and Christians in the late fourth century was less the clash of vibrant ideologies than the smothering of a defunct system under its massive and ever-growing successor.

17 Scheid 2003, 18-9; Davies 2004, 1-17.
Thus, the role of religion in the *Historia Augusta* must be reevaluated. No longer is it sufficient to read the *Historia Augusta* as pagan panegyric, anti-Christian polemic, or a desperate plea for tolerance. By examining the interplay of Christianity and paganism through the lens of satire, the satiric motivation of the *Historia Augusta* will begin to emerge.

**Christianity in the *Vita Alexandri Severi***

According to Birley, over half of the explicit mentions of Christianity in the *Historia Augusta* come from the *Vita Alexandri Severi*.\(^{20}\) Given the panegyrical tone of this biography, how Alexander Severus treats Christianity should illuminate the faith's reception in the *Historia Augusta*. Its first mention in the *vita* is very simple: *Christianos esse passus est* (HA, *Alex. Sev.* 22.4). The simple structure invites a colorless reading, that the emperor merely left Christians be. Satire does not allow such simplicity. Reflection renders the phrasing ambiguous. While *patior* could convey a neutral sense of allowance, it also suggests suffering.\(^{21}\) Such a reading turns Alexander Severus' benevolent inaction into a begrudging political compromise: he suffered the Christians to live. The linguistic ambiguity then splinters into a variety of emotional reactions: depending on the reader's attitude towards Christianity, one reading would create favor for the emperor, the other antipathy. A simple sentence fractures under the weight of its satiric burden, creating an aporetic tone that colors the rest of the life.

Christianity next appears seven chapters later, when “Aelius Lampridius” notes the emperor's intention to include Christ in his *lararium* alongside Apollonius, Orpheus,

---

\(^{20}\) Birley 1991, 42-3 identifies ten mentions of Christianity: HA, *Sev.* 17.1; *Elagab.* 3.5; *Alex. Sev.* 22.4, 29.2, 43.6-7, 45.7, 49.6, 51.7-8; *Aurel.* 20.4; *Quad. Tyr.* 7.4-8.7.

\(^{21}\) *OLD* s.v. *patior*.
and Abraham. Apollonius and Orpheus both represent traits of Jesus—the one a miracle worker, the other a survivor of a trip to the underworld. Abraham represents the Jewish faith, a monotheistic religion which enjoyed protection (if not full integration) with traditional polytheism but began to suffer more directly under increasingly Christian rule. The juxtaposition of these semi-divine figures with Jesus would, at the least, have puzzled a reader. Ancient paganism saw no conflict in this sort of religious syncretism, but the rise of Christianity changed the politics of religion. A Christian would balk at the inclusion of Jesus among the deified emperors and other pagan numina, especially Apollonius. What seems a magnanimous gesture becomes a confusing statement on the emperor's religiosity. The puzzlement is compounded by the emperor's intention to build a temple to Christ and to include him in the pantheon. The Historia Augusta heightens the ambivalence of this passage with the anecdote that Hadrian had attempted the same but was prevented by advisors who predicted the dominance of

---

22 HA, Alex. Sev. 29.2, si facultas esset, id est si non cum uxore cubuisset, matutinis horis in larario suo, in quo et divos principes sed optimos electos et animas sanctiores, in quis Apollonium et, quantum scriptor suorum temporum dicit, Christum, Abraham et Orfeum et huiusmodi ceteros habebat ac maiorum effigies, rem divinam faciebat, “If he had the opportunity, that is, if he had not slept with his wife, during the daylight hours, in his lararium where he kept both the deified emperors (but those deemed best) and rather holy spirits, among whom were Apollonius and, as a writer of his time says, Christ, Abraham, and Orpheus, as well was other of that sort, and the likenesses of his ancestors, he performed his religious duty.”


26 Eusebius, Contra Hieroclem; Augustine, Epistulae 138.18. See also Cameron 2011, 554-8.

27 HA, Alex. Sev. 43.6, Christo templum facere voluit eumque inter deos recipere, “He wanted to build a temple to Christ and include him among the gods.”
Christianity if it were legitimized. Not only is this a post eventum omen like the Probus Oracle, but it complicates the beatified tone of the biography. The argument slips from the lofty realm in which Alexander Severus dwells to the more ambivalent world of Hadrian, where Christianity is not a complement to paganism but a threat. Alexander Severus becomes self-destructively naïve, and the apparently pro-pagan tone of the Historia Augusta is undermined by the truth: the broad acceptance of Christianity did in fact destroy paganism. The satiric attitude towards religion begins to coalesce: the noblest pagan’s attempts to integrate the old faith and Christianity are an affront to both, while the morally ambivalent emperor Hadrian recognizes that such an act will doom paganism. There is no equitable solution, just resignation.

Elsewhere in the biography, Alexander Severus seems almost evangelistic. First, he proposes a new method to introduce candidates for the office of rationalis:

He said that it was unseemly, since the Christians and Jews did it in electing priests who had to be ordained, for it not to be done for the governors of provinces, to whom the fortunes and lives of men were entrusted.29

The conclusion: this is how the Christians and Jews appoint priests, and it would be unseemly for Roman officials not to do the same. One can read this declaration two ways: the emperor either praises foreign customs over Roman, implicitly setting oriental

28 HA, Alex. Sev. 43.7, quod et Hadrianus cogitasse fertur, qui templam in omnibus civitatibus sine simulacris iusserat fieri, quae hodieque idcirco, quia non habent numina, dicuntur Hadriani, quae ille ad hoc parasse dicebatur; sed prohibitus est ab his, qui consulentes sacra reppererant omnes Christianos futuros, si id fecisset, et templam reliqua deserenda, “And Hadrian is said to have thought of it as well. He had ordered temples to be built in all cities without statues; and so, because Hadrian is said to have made them for this, they are today called ‘Hadrian’s,’ since they do not have gods. But he was prevented by those who had read the omens and discovered that everyone would become Christian if he had done it, and that the remaining temples had to be abandoned.”

29 HA, Alex. Sev. 45.6, dicebatque grave esse, cum id Christiani et Iudaei facerent in praedicandis sacerdotibus, qui ordinandi sunt, non fieri in provinciarum rectoribus, quibus et fortunae hominum committerentur et capita.
priests equal to Roman governors; or he slanders Jews and Christians by implying that however stringent eastern peoples are in choosing mere priests (*qui ordinandi*), the Romans should at least meet that stringency in their election of rulers. The passage is studied ambiguity.

Next, in a debate between a Christian church and *popinarii*, "cook shop keepers," the emperor sides with the church:

> Because Christians had occupied a certain place which had been public and the *popinarii* said that it was owed to them, he wrote that it was better for a god to be worshipped there in any way at all than for it to be surrendered to *popinarii*.

The emperor seems to support the Christians, but Roman literature has a long tradition of decrying *popinae* as epicenters of debauchery and political unrest. It would take a vile institution to be worse than a *popina*. The conclusion of the passage emphasizes the delicacy of the decision, for Severus would prefer that a god be worshipped *quemadmodumcumque*, "in any way at all," than the space *dedatur*, "be surrendered" to the storekeepers. The cumbersome neologism *quemadmodumcumque* emphatically qualifies the emperor's support of Christianity, while the negative valence of *dedatur* recalls the contempt in which cookshops were held. The story turns from passionate support of Christianity to a parable on the evils of *popinae*. A church is less evil than a cookshop, not better.

In final Christian anecdote of the *Vita Severi Alexandri*, "Aelius Lampridius"

---

30 HA, *Alex. Sev.* 49.6, *cum Christiani quendam locum, qui publicus fuerat, occupassent, contra popinarii dicerent sibi eum deberi, rescrispsit melius esse, ut quemammodumcumque illic deus colatur, quam popinariis dedatur.*

31 Compare Cic., *In Catilinam* 2.4; *Philippicae* 3.20; Tac., *Histories* 3.83; Juv. 8.158-62, 172-6, 11.78-81; Suet., *Nero* 26; *Vitellius* 13.

32 *OLD* s.v. 1) *quemadmodum*, compare *qui* and *quicumque*; 2) *dedo*. 
describes the punishment that soldiers suffered for trespassing with a grim joke:

If anyone had turned from the road into someone's property, he was subjected, in light of the quality of his station, either to clubs or to rods or to death; or, if the man's rank surpassed all these things, to the most severe slanders, when he said, 'Do you want to be done in your field what you are doing in another's?'

The injustice of the anecdote casts doubt on the piety of the emperor, and the hyperbolic superlative *gravissimae contumeliae* seems to mock the class disparity. The rebukes themselves consist of a mere rewording of the Golden Rule. Alexander Severus was very fond of the Golden Rule, which he learned from Jews or Christians. Although this is undeniably a value of both Judaism and Christianity, it is not particular to either; in fact, it has been espoused by virtually every religious and philosophical movement throughout history, pagan included. To transfer such a commonplace to the Christian realm privileges that faith over pagan cults, but it also implicates Christianity in the darkly humorous scene of punishment. The *Historia Augusta* does not just credit Christians and Jews for the phrase—its blames them. An uneasy tableau is laid, wherein a righteous emperor acts unrighteously, an honorable phrase is used for disgrace, and Christianity shares responsibility for both good and bad.

---

33 HA, Alex. Sev. 51.6, *si quis de via in alicuius possessionem deflexisset, pro qualitate loci aut fustibus subiciebatur in conspectu eius aut virgis aut condemnationi aut, si haec omnia transiret dignitas hominis, gravissimis contumeliis, cum diceret: “visne hoc in agro tuo fieri quod tu alteri facis?”*

34 HA, Alex. Sev. 51.7, *clamabatque saepius, quod a quibusdam sive Iudaeis sive Christianis audierat et tenebat, idque per praeconem, cum aliquem emendaret, dici iubebat: “quod tibi fieri non vis, alteri ne feceris.” quam sententiam usque adeo dilexit, ut et in Palatio et in publicis operibus perscribi iuberet, “And he used to proclaim it rather often, as he had heard it from certain men, either Jews or Christians, and held to it, and he ordered it to be uttered through a herald when he corrected someone: ‘What you do not want done to you, do not do to another.’ He so cherished this saying that he ordered it to be inscribed on the Palatine and on public works.”*

35 Wattles 1996, 3-76.

36 Even though the text includes Jews in the anecdote, they primarily feature in the *Historia Augusta* as fodder for humor (HA, *Hadr.* 14.2, the Jewish revolt caused by a ban on circumcision; *Elagab.* 28.4, the emperor thinks Jews eat ostriches; Alex. Sev. 28.7, the emperor called *archisynagogus* because of his
The *Vita Alexandri Severi* shows a progression in the emperor's attitude towards Christianity, from mere toleration to heartfelt support, bordering upon preference for the new faith over traditional paganism. One could stop there, reading the biography as unqualified praise of the faith which the most praise-worthy emperor supports. Yet the interplay between Alexander Severus and Christianity is nuanced, undermining the favor in which the emperor seems to hold the religion and in which the reader should hold the emperor. The *Historia Augusta* neither praises nor condemns the faith, just as it does not praise or condemn Alexander Severus. Both attitudes exist simultaneously in conflict with each other, a synthesis which results in *aporia*.

**Christianity in the Rest of the *Historia Augusta***

The ambivalence that the *Historia Augusta* demonstrates towards Christianity in the *Vita Alexandri Severi* might suggest opposition to the religion, but comparison with other mentions of the faith suggest otherwise. Septimius Severus supposedly forbade conversion to Judaism and Christianity (HA, Sev. 17.1-2). This decree is related in a very general *res gestae*, and since Severus is an ambivalent figure in the collection, the passage resists clear interpretation. The moral failings of Elagabalus, however, engender no confusion. One could scorn his effort to bring Christianity (as well as every other religion) under the fold of his own cult, but a subtle lexical quirk foils such a

---

Syrian ancestry), as objects of sympathy (Sev. 17.1, the emperor imposes heavy penalties for converting to Judaism; Carac. 1.6, young Caracalla refuses to acknowledge those whom he deems responsible for his Jewish friend's beating), and once in a favorable light (Claud. 2.4, discussion of Moses living 120 years).

37 HA, Elagab. 3.4-5, *id agens, ne quis Romae deus nisi Heliogabalus coleretur. dicebat praeterea Iudaeorum et Samaritanorum religiones et Christianam devotionem illuc transferendum, ut omnium culturarum secretum Heliogabali sacerdotium teneret*, "Doing that [bringing other gods into his own temple] so that other god would be worshipped at Rome except Elagabalus. Moreover, he said that the religions of the Jews and Samaritans and the Christian *devotio* should be transferred there, so that the priesthood of Elagabalus would hold the secrets of all cults."
reading. Elagabalus wants to absorb the Christian *devotio*. This term appears often
within the *Historia Augusta*, always emphasizing the patriotic fidelity of a person or
people. Historically, the early Christian community defined themselves by their
dedicated not to the state but to the church. Indeed, that is the chief usage in Christian
authors of *devovere* and related words; in pagan authors it often suggests the opposite,
sorcery and infernal magic. The *Historia Augusta* singles out Christianity with this
term, playing upon its various meanings to emphasize the otherness of the Christians
and the peculiarity of their fealty. Christianity is not just another victim of Elagabalus' despotism but a distinctly un-Roman one. Even in the biography of the worst emperor in the collection, the reader is robbed of any easy answers.

The final two mentions of Christianity come towards the end of the collection.
When the emperor Aurelian hears that the senate hesitates to open the Sibylline books he writes a letter chiding them for hesitating *proinde quasi in Christianorum ecclesia*. The target of his ire is not Christianity, however. The senate has abdicated its official responsibility to the state and to its citizens’ welfare. Aurelian instructs the senate in patronizing detail, reminding them that there is no shame in seeking help from the gods and that they have plenty of funds with which to act. He refers to himself at first in the

---

38 In this sense HA, *Elagab*. 9.1; *Gord*. 11.5; *Max*. 8.6, 11.3; *Gall*. 14.1; *Tyr. Trig*. 12.16; *Claud*. 14.2, 16.3, 18.2; *Aurel*. 9.2. It has a religious connotation when used as a finite verb: *Elagab*. 18.3; *Gord*. 11.1; *Quad. Tyr*. 8.2.

39 *OLD* s.v. *devovere*, *devotio*. It original described a rite of expiation, but it seems to have lost this meaning by Late Antiquity; on *devotio* in the Republican era, see Edwards 2012, 239-43.

40 HA, *Aurel*. 20.5, *miror vos, patres sancti, tamdiu de aperiendis Sibyllinis dubitasse libris, proinde quasi in Christianorum ecclesia, non in templo deorum omnium tractaretis*, “I am astounded, holy fathers, that you hesitated for so long in opening the Sibylline books, just as though you doing business in a Christian church, not in a temple of the gods.”

41 HA, *Aurel*. 20.6-8, *agite igitur et castimonia pontificum caerimonissque sollemnibus iuvate principem necessitate publica laborantem. inspicientur Libri; si quae facienda fuerint celebrentur; quemlibet
third person, like a parent talking to a small child. The framing device of a letter highlights the senate's failures. In the *Quadrigae Tyrannorum*, “Flavius Vopiscus” almost criticizes Christians, implicitly grouping them and Samaritans among various charlatans and malcontents. This sentiment is elaborated in the fraudulent Letter of Hadrian, which lambasts the Egyptians for their misdeeds, especially religious. Christians, Jews, and worshipers of Serapis are all deceitful and hypocritical, feigning worship of whatsoever god they choose, imposing their pretended faith on any visitor, all the while pursuing their true object of devotion, money:

Hadrian Augustus to the Consul Servian, Greetings. Egypt, whose praises you used to extol to me, my dearest Servian, I have learned to be wholly wasted, shiftless and flitting about at every buffet of rumor. There, those who worship Serapis are Christians, and they are devoted to Serapis who call themselves bishops of Christ. No one there, not the high-priest of the Jews, not the Samaritans, not a presbyter of the Christians, is not a mathematician, or a haruspex, or a trainer. The patriarch himself, when he comes to Egypt, is forced by some to worship Serapis, by others Christ. They are the most unruly, most shallow, most harmful race of men, a rich, wealthy, fertile state in which no one may live at leisure...there is one god

---

42 HA, Quad. Tyr. 7.4-5, sunt enim Aegyptii, ut satis nosti, viri ventosi, furibundi, iactantes, injuriosi, atque adeo vani, liberi, novarum rerum usque ad cantilenas publicas cupientes, versificatores, epigrammatarii, mathematici, haruspices, medici. nam in eis Christiani, Samaritae, et quibus praesentia semper tempora cum enormi libertate displiceant, “For the Egyptians, as you well know, have been found to be fickle, wrathful, boastful, harmful and so very shallow, libertines, desirous of new things even in public lampoons, versifiers, epigrammatists, mathematicians, haruspices, doctors. For among them are Christians, Samaritans, and those whom the current times always displease with their tremendous license.”
among them, the coin. The Christians worship it, the Jews worship it, everyone worships it, even the nations.\textsuperscript{43}

Syme rightly notes that the letter's overriding interest is not religion; if it were, \textit{gentes}, "pagans," would escape calumny.\textsuperscript{44} The \textit{Historia Augusta} targets Egyptians of every persuasion. In both passages, the condemnatory tone seems to implicate Christianity, but the church itself stands outside the fray.

The strong presence of Christianity is a testament its ascendence in the fourth century. Nevertheless, paganism was not dead—indeed, it remained the dominant religion during the time period treated by the \textit{Historia Augusta}. Birley identifies every instance of a pagan ritual act or thought in the \textit{Historia Augusta}, including evocations of the gods and quasi-religious mentions of \textit{fortuna}.\textsuperscript{45} Most of these details are extraneous, a necessary product of discussing the events of the second and third centuries or simply phrases fossilized in the Latin language. To determine the impact of the pagan elements in the \textit{Historia Augusta}, attention should be paid to specific categories of religious practice that are described. To accomplish this, I have organized paganism in the \textit{Historia Augusta} into three general categories: deification, sacrifice, and divination.

\textsuperscript{43} HA, Quad. Tyr. 8, Hadrianus Augustus Serviano consuli salutem. Aegyptum, quam mihi laudabas, Serviane carissime, totam didici levem, pendulam et ad omnia famae momenta volitantem. illic qui Serapem colunt Christiani sunt, et devoti sunt Serapi qui se Christi episcopos dicunt. nemo illic archisynagogus Iudaeorum, nemo Samarites, nemo Christianorum presbyter non mathematicus, non haruspex, non aliptes. ipse ille patriarcha cum Aegyptum venerit, ab aliis Serapidem adorare, ab aliis cogitur Christum. genus hominum seditosissimum, vanissimum, iniuriosissimum; civitas opulenta, dives, fecunda, in qua nemo vivat otiosus… unus illis deus nummus est. hunc Christiani, hunc ludaei, hunc omnes venerantur et gentes.

\textsuperscript{44} Syme 1968, 64-5, although he declares the text's antipathy towards Christianity.

\textsuperscript{45} Birley 1991, 29-51. I have not included several of the categories which Birley enumerates, including every mention of the gods by name, with the words \textit{deus} or \textit{numen}, or acclamations. The Olympian gods and unspecified \textit{dei} and \textit{numina} are invoked in a very formulaic way. \textit{Fortuna} and \textit{fatum} receive no mention within a cultic context, being treated apparently like our modern semi-personified Luck or Chance. Acclamations will be treated as a political phenomenon in Chapter 6.
Deification

Deification of the imperial family became common in the late empire. Accordingly, its ubiquity in the *Historia Augusta* is not unusual; its treatment is. The first person deified is Hadrian's lover Antinous. This immediately raises concerns, for no pagan source corroborates the *Historia Augusta*. Dio says that ἁγάλματα were raised for Antinous, but these could be statues of him as a god or meant as offerings to the gods, not necessarily statues to his cult. Aurelius Victor is even more ambiguous, calling them only *statuas* in honor of Antinous after he sacrificed himself for Hadrian. Pagan authors downplay the *Divus Antinous*. Meanwhile, Christian authors, some who were alive when Antinous died, describe his apotheosis with elaborate, mocking detail.

One might suspect hyperbole or invention on the part of the Christians, but an obelisk erected to Antinous-Osiris proves that Hadrian's lover was in fact deified. The *Historia*...
Augusta, in a passage already full of irony, eschews the sanitized pagan depiction and offers the Christian perspective which emphasizes the deification’s disgrace. Such scorn adumbrates the attitude toward deification in the rest of the Historia Augusta.

One of the possible reasons that Antoninus Pius earned his righteous sobriquet was his deification of Hadrian (HA, Hadr. 24). He did not accomplish this goal without resistance, however; the senate opposed Hadrian’s apotheosis (HA, Ant. Pius 2.3-7). The Historia Augusta often exposes the senate to ridicule, but it also portrays Hadrian ambivalently. This tension creates a quandary: if the senate is wrong, then the patrician heart of Rome is not only powerless but wicked. If Pius is wrong in granting divine honors to the late emperor, then it degrades not only his pietas but even the worth of deification itself. The rite loses its meaning if it is granted even to the unworthy. Deification is again made suspect, and the reader must choose between a contemptible senate and a meaningless religion.

Later, the Historia Augusta invents deifications that never occurred. Avidius Cassius, hearing from the empress Faustina that Marcus Aurelius had perished (he had not), claimed the purple for himself and deified Marcus Aurelius in an effort to calm the soldiery (HA, Avid. Cass. 7.1-3). Most of this episode is unproblematic, for Dio corroborates every detail except the deification. The Historia Augusta claims the salacious biographer Marius Maximus as its source and adduces forged letters to support its claim, but this evidence actually undermines the authenticity of the story. Marcus Aurelius is one of the few emperors in the Historia Augusta worthy of divine

---

53 Cass. Dio, 71.22-7, through the Epitome of Xiphilinus.

54 HA, Avid. Cass. 9.5-10.10. It further problematizes the story, using the letters to portray Faustina as innocent of collusion.
honors; such an abortive and ultimately false deification cheapens the worth of the rite when he actually receives it. It is also claimed that Geta was deified by his brother and murderer, although in fact Caracalla inflicted damnatio memoriae upon him (HA, Geta 2.8-9). That Caracalla was later deified creates a gross juxtaposition (HA, Carac. 11.5-6). The actual Divus Antoninus ought never have been; the worthy one had to be invented.

The deification of the elder Gordians is prominent, mentioned three times in three separate lives. "Julius Capitolinus" mentions the fact twice in simple declarative statements without any further comment (HA, Maximin. 24.3; Gord. 16.4). The Vita Maximi et Balbinii complicates this simple narrative with pseudo-scholarly analysis: some say that only Gordian I was deified, but Junius Cordus attests otherwise. To undermine its original assertions only to reaffirm them with a fraudulent source casts casts an aporetic cloud over the entire episode.

The Tyranni Triginta contrives a novel abuse for deification. It describes a senatus consultum which apotheosized Piso, a petty assassin and warlord who only appears in the pages of the Historia Augusta. This is the nadir of deification and a

---

55 HA, Max. 4.1, Prima igitur relatio principum fuit, ut duo Gordiani divi appellarentur. aliqui autem unum putant appellatum, seniorem videlicet, sed ego libris, quos Iunius Cordus affatim scripsit, legisse memini ambos in deos relatos, "Therefore, the first task of the emperors was for the two Gordians to be called divine. Some think that one was called such, namely the elder, but I remember that I read in the books which Junius Cordus wrote well enough that both were conferred among the gods."

56 HA, Tyr. Trig. 21, Senatus consultum de Pisone factum ad noscendam eius maiestatem libenter inserui: die septimo kal. iuliarum cum esset nuntiatum Pisonem a Valente interemptum, ipsum Valentem a suis occisum, Arellius Fuscus, consularis primae sententiae, qui in locum Valerianii successerat, ait: 'consul, consult!' cumque consultus esset 'divinos' inquit 'honores Pisoni decerno, p. c., Gallienum et Valerianum et Saloninum imperatores nostros id probatuos esse confido, 'I have gladly included the senatus consultum which was made about Piso to let his grandeur be known: seven days before the Kalends of July, when it was announced that Piso had been killed by Valens, and Valens himself by his men, Arellius Fuscus, a consular with the right of first opinion, who had succeeded to Valerian's position, said, ‘Consul, consult!’ And when he was consulted, he said, 'I decree divine honors for Piso, conscript fathers; I trust that our emperors Gallienus and Valerian and Saloninus would approve of that.'
suiting satiric prelude to the next two biographies, the *Vita Claudii* and the *Vita Aureliani*. Claudius and Aurelian are among the most highly regarded emperors in the collection and duly take their place among the gods. But after so many *vitae* denigrating apotheosis, such lavish deifications, replete with satiric lists of the luxuries attendant upon the ceremony, seem hollow.

Not every emperor's deification suffers. When Antoninus Pius is deified, he receives glowing praise for his piety, mercy, talent, and righteousness.\(^{57}\) Doubts may linger about the emperor's *pietas*, but the other characteristics—his *clementia*, *ingenium*, and *sanctimonia*—are abundantly and unambiguously demonstrated throughout the life. Another figure defies these standards: his wife Faustina. At her death, she receives more honors than even her husband,\(^{58}\) but she seems unworthy of them. She is chided for her excessive liberty and reckless life, which her noble husband laments but hides out of shame.\(^{59}\) She also scolds the emperor's stinginess towards his family, at which the emperor lectures her in proper economics.\(^{60}\) These passages

\(^{57}\) HA, *Ant. Pius* 13, *a senatu divus est appellatus cunctis certatim adnitetibus, cum omnes eius pietaatem, clementiam, ingenium, sanctimoniam laudarent*, “He was called divine by the senate with everyone striving eagerly since all praised his piety, mercy, talent, and righteousness.”

\(^{58}\) HA, *Ant. Pius* 6.7-8, *tertio anno imperii sui Faustinam uxorem perdidit, quae a senatu consecrata est delatis circensibus atque templo et flaminicis et statuis aureis atque argenteis; cum etiam ipse hoc concesserit, ut imago eius cunctis circensibus poneretur. statuam auream delatam a senatu positam suscepit*, “In the third year of his reign, he lost his wife Faustina, who was consecrated by the senate and conferred with circuses and a temple and *flamines* and statues both gold and silver. Because he granted it that her image be carried in all circuses, he undertook for a golden statue to be constructed which the senate had granted.”

\(^{59}\) HA, *Ant. Pius* 3.7, *de huius uxore multa dicta sunt ob nimiam libertatem et vivendi facilitatem, quae iste cum animi dolore compressit*, “Many things have been said about his wife because of her excessive license and the frivolity of her living, which he suppressed with sorrow in his heart.”

\(^{60}\) HA, *Ant. Pius* 4.8, *cum ab uxorre argueretur quasi parum nescio quid suiis largiens, dixerit: *stulta, posteaquam ad imperium transivimus, et illud, quod habuimus ante, perdidimus*, “When he was challenged by his wife, as though whatever donative he was giving to his family was too little, he said, ‘Foolish woman! After we passed into the empire, we lost even that which we had before!’”

130
juxtapose the finest expression of manhood with a wife who has none of her husband's qualities—yet who also receives deification. The *Historia Augusta* trivializes the emperor’s honors with its slanders against the *Diva Augusta*.

Faustina I is not the only member of the imperial house who receives an undeserved deification. Marcus Aurelius deifies his co-regent Verus and his wife, the younger Faustina.\(^61\) Verus is a thoroughly average person, meant for neither Elysium nor Tartarus (HA, *Verus* 1.3-5). Faustina is portrayed as sexually voracious, while her historically good relationship with her husband, the citizens, and the soldiery is downplayed.\(^62\) The common thread of unworthy deification runs through the both lives, demeaning the divine honors due to the truly righteous.

The *Historia Augusta* paints a bleak picture of the rite of apotheosis in Late Antiquity, but it merely follows its literary predecessors. Seneca mocks Claudius; Tacitus scorns Theophanes, a man who earned deification from his personal relationship with Pompey; even Suetonius, in his accounts of the deification of Claudius, emphasizes the hollowness and transience of the honor (Suet., *Claudius* 45; *Nero* 33.1). Yet Suetonius also treats the godhead of Julius Caesar and Augustus with respect. Julius Caesar, Augustus, and Claudius are the only recipients of deification that Suetonius treats at length. He seems to direct his critiques at the object of deification more than the

---

\(^61\) HA, Marc. 15.3, *Tantae autem sanctitatis fuit Marcus ut Veri vitia et celaverit et defenderit, cum ei vehementissime disponerent, mortuumque eum divum appellaverit*, “Moreover, Marcus was of such righteousness that he hid and defended Verus' vices, although he found them utterly repugnant, and he called him divine after his death;” 26.5, *petit a senatu ut honores Faustinæ aedemque decrearet, laudata eadem cum impudicitiae fama graviter laborasset. quae Antoninus vel nesciit vel dissimulavit*, “He asked the senate to decree honors and a temple for Faustina, and she was praised, although she had suffered badly with a reputation of indecency. Antoninus either did not know it or lied about it.”

\(^62\) For Verus, Birley 2000, 158; for Faustina, Marc., *Med*. 1.17, *τῇ γυναῖκα τοιαύτην ἔναι, οὕτωςι μὲν πείθηνον, οὕτω δὲ φιλοστοργον, οὕτω δὲ ἀφελή*, “[I am thankful] that my wife is such a woman, so obedient, so tender, so artless.” She was also given the name *mater castrorum*, Birley 2000, 178.
institution itself.\textsuperscript{63} The \textit{Historia Augusta} makes the majority of its living gods unworthy of the honor, even if that requires fabrication. In this, it follows the satiric tradition of Julian's \textit{Caesars}, in which even Marcus Aurelius is portrayed as a dullard (Julian, \textit{Caesares} 9.5-14). The Romans had no misconception that \textit{Divi Augusti} could be made and unmade subject to the whims of times and men, but in the \textit{Historia Augusta} the rite becomes secularized, demeaning those that lay at the center of the act.

\textbf{Sacrifice}

The \textit{Historia Augusta} abounds in sacrifice: Birley identifies forty-three separate episodes in which an emperor performs or receives the benefits of ritual sacrifice.\textsuperscript{64} In spite of this bounty of material, the \textit{Historia Augusta} only expresses a selective interest in it. Its first depiction comes when Hadrian survives an assassination attempt while sacrificing.\textsuperscript{65} Nothing in the text suggests that this should be seen as a slight upon the ritual, nor in many other episodes: Avidius Cassius is said to be a \textit{contemptor sacrorum}; Commodus pollutes the worship of Mithras; the coals fail while Pertinax tries to sacrifice to his \textit{lares}.\textsuperscript{66} The central figure in each is the emperor, usually scorned because of his

\textsuperscript{63} Suet., \textit{Julius} 88.1, \textit{Periit sexto et quinquagensimo aetatis anno atque in deorum numerum relatus est, non ore modo decernentium sed et persuasione volgi}, “He died in his fifty-sixth year and was set among the number of the gods, not only in the mouth of those who decreed it but also at the will of the people;” \textit{Aug.} 97.1, \textit{Mors quoque eius, de qua dehinc dicam, divinitasque post mortem evidentissimis ostentis praecognita est}, “His death also, about which I shall speak next, and his divinity after death, were known in advance by most obvious signs;” 100.4, \textit{Nec defuit vir praetorius, qui se effigiem cremati euntem in caelum vidisse iuraret}, “Nor was there lacking a former praetor who swore that he had seen a figure of the burnt body going to heaven.”

\textsuperscript{64} Birley 1991, 36-7.

\textsuperscript{65} HA, \textit{Hadr.} 7.1, \textit{Nigrini insidias, quas ille sacrificanti Hadriano conscio sibi Lusio et multis alius paraverat, cum etiam successorems Hadrianus sibimet destinasset, evasit}, “He escaped Nigrinus’ traps, which he had prepared against Hadrian while he sacrificed, with Lusius and many others as his co-conspirators, although Hadrian had already chosen his successor.”

\textsuperscript{66} HA, \textit{Avid. Cass.} 3.4, \textit{Fuit his moribus, ut nonnumquam trux et asper videretur, aliquando mitis et lenis, saepe religiosus, alias contemptor sacrorum, avidus vini item abstinenis, cibi adpetens et inediae patiens, Veneris cupidus et castitatis amator}, “He had such a character that he sometimes seemed savage and
disrespect towards proper sacrifice.

In fact, unholy sacrifice appears in only two vitae: Didius Julianus and Elagabalus. In his madness, Didius Julianus calls upon magi to perform various foul rituals.\textsuperscript{67} These peregrine rites are undoubtedly evil—the magi sacrifice \textit{quasdam non convenientes Romanis sacris hostias}.\textsuperscript{68} Pronounced un-Romanness dominates the scene. The \textit{Historia Augusta} goes further with Elagabalus, portraying him as the antithesis of all that Rome represents, particularly in religion. His attempts to subsume all faiths under his personal cult and make himself a god-king prefigure his darkest ritual villainy, the sacrifice of children.\textsuperscript{69}

Religion in the \textit{Vita Elagabali} highlights Elagabalus’ perverse otherness, so at first his refusal to ascend the Capitoline Hill to renew vows for the state seems like

\begin{quote}
harsh, sometimes sweet and gentle, often religious, other times a scorners of ritual, greedy for wine and likewise abstemious, covetous for food and tolerant of hunger, lusting after sex and a lover of chastity;" Comm. 9.6, \textit{sacra Mithriaca homicidio vero polluit}, "But he polluted the rites of Mithras with murder;" Pert. 14.3, \textit{et cum apud lares sacrificaret, carbones vivacissimi extincti sunt, cum inflammari solet}, "And when he was sacrificing in his household shrine, very lively coals were snuffed out, although they were accustomed to burn."
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{67} HA, \textit{Did.} 7.9-10, \textit{fuit praeterea in Iuliano haec amentia, ut per magos plerique faceret, quibus putaret vel odium populi deleniri vel militum arma conpesci. nam et quasdam non convenientes Romanis sacris hostias immolaverunt et carmina profana incantaverunt et ea, quae ad speculum ducunt fieri, in quod pueri praeligatis oculis incantato vertice respicere dicuntur, Iulianus fecit}, "Besides that, Julianus’ madness was such that he did very many things through magi, with which he thought that either the hatred of the people might be eased or the arms of the soldiers might be checked; for they burnt some sacrifices that were not in keeping with Roman rites and uttered wicked spells, and Julianus did those thing which they think are done before a mirror, into which boys are said to to look after their eyes are covered up and their head chanted over."

\textsuperscript{68} Cass. Dio, 73.16.5 goes even further and say that he sacrificed children, although the context and source seem different from those of the \textit{Historia Augusta.}

\textsuperscript{69} HA, \textit{Elagab.} 8.2, \textit{omne denique magorum genus aderat illi operabaturque cottidie, hortante illo et gratias dis agente, quod amicos eorum invenisset, cum inspiceret ex ea puerilia et excruciaret hostias ad ritum gentilem suum.} "Finally, every sort of magus was with him and worked daily, while he was urging them and giving thanks to the gods because he had found their friends, since he would inspect the innards of children and torture victims for his heathen ceremony."
another evil act. The Capitoline Hill was symbolic head of the Roman government and
the site of several critical imperial sacrifices, the most prominent of which in the Historia
Augusta are dedicatory vows and triumphal sacrifice. Traditionally, the vows on the
Capitoline consisted of two ceremonies, a thanksgiving to and renewal of the state’s
contract with the gods on 1 January and a prayer for the health of the emperor and his
family on 3 January. Both were largely transactional, promising continued sacrifices to
the gods in exchange for their protection, but neither of these feature in the Historia
Augusta. It is never specified what sort of vota the emperors take; that few emperors
inaugurate their reigns on the New Year due to the previous emperor’s assassination
suggests that most of these dedicatory prayers are for the salus principis.

Triumphs, for all their pomp and grandeur, had always retained the potential for
satirization. Even Pompey’s grand triumph to celebrate his victory over the pirates and
Mithridates was open to critique. Cicero scorned its extravagance, while Suetonius
notes that Pompey, who staged the Clytemnestra in his triumph to evoke his eastern
victory, later divorced his wife for her affair with Caesar, whom he scornfully called
“Aegisthus.” Seneca phrases it eloquently: “small sins are punished, great ones are
celebrated in triumph.” Antiquity had an ambivalent perception of the Capitoline Hill,

---

70 HA, 15.7, deinde in Capitolium ad vota concipienda et perficienda sollemnia ire noluit, omniaque per praetorem urbanum facta sunt, quasi consules illic non essent, “Then he did not want to go to the Capitoline to take the oaths and perform the rites, and everything was done through the urban praetor, just as though there were not consuls there.”
71 Richardson 1992, 68-70.
72 Scheid 2003, 102.
73 Beard 2007, 7-41.
74 Cic., Ad Familiares 7.1.2-3, Suet., Julius 50.
75 Seneca, Epistulae 87.23, nam sacrilegia minuta puniuntur, magna in triumphis feruntur.
but its cynical reception in the *Historia Augusta* transforms it into a corrupt site.

Pertinax is the first emperor in the collection to perform sacrifice on the Capitoline. His consecration is a study in neutrality, neither good nor bad, only the establishment of an emperor. The remark that his wife was named *Augusta* at the exact time of his sacrifice frames the anecdote, which becomes more pointed in the next chapter when Pertinax refuses her that title (*HA, Pert. 5.4*). The emperor’s powerlessness over personal affairs is juxtaposed with his concurrent effort to establish his power over the state. This scene establishes a pattern for Capitoline worship in the *Historia Augusta*, where the rite itself is conducted properly but yields an ironic outcome.

Severus is the next to visit to the Capitoline Hill, for sinister reasons. He holds a triumph for his victory over Didius Julianus, his rival in civil conflict. The scene evokes a Sullan nightmare, with praetorian standards dragged along the ground and soldiers taking up quarters as though the city were occupied. This is a perversion of the typical triumph, which entailed an unarmed emperor leading a joyous parade. Appearing within the walls of Rome in military garb at the head of a violent army, Severus becomes a tyrant who has taken the city. This scene is complete fantasy. Dio recounts the event as a marvelous spectacle in which the emperor dismounted and entered unarmed and

---

76 *HA, Pert. 5.4,eadem die qua Augustus est appellatus, et Flavia Titiana uxor eius Augusta est appellata, iis horis quibus ille in Capitolium vota solvebat, “On the same day when he was named Augustus and at the very hours when he was giving his oaths upon the Capitoline, Flavia Titiana his wife was named Augusta.”*

77 *HA, Sev. 7.1, Ingressus deinde Romam armatus cum armatis militibus Capitolium ascendit. inde in Palatium eodem habitu perrexit, praelatis signis quae praetorianis ademerat supinis non erectis, “Then, having entered Rome in arms, with armed soldiers, he mounted the Capitoline. Then he made for the palace in the same clothing, with the standards which he had taken from the praetorians borne before him on the ground, not raised.”*

78 Beard 2007, 225. Note that soldiers entered the city in arms, Beard 2007, 244, but when led by a conspicuously de-militarized general in a rejoicing city, they lose some of their martial aspect.
in civilian clothing. The Historia Augusta turns Severus into warlord and turns Capitoline sacrifice into a dark shadow of its true and proper glory. This attitude is emphasized in Severus’ second visit, a sort of ovatio conducted with a certain Plautianus—whom he thereafter murders. The Historia Augusta condenses the story into one sentence, immediately turning an act of fraternity into a disgrace. An oath upon the Capitoline means nothing. The nefas is compounded in the Vita Caracalli: the emperor ascends the Capitoline Hill and speaks with kindness to several men whom he intends to kill.

The investiture of Maximus and Balbinus is not itself disgraceful, but immediately afterwards the people begin to clamor for Gordian III to be installed as Caesar. The intensity of the popular upswell is initially downplayed but is eventually described as opposition to the imperio Maximini. The tale accords with Herodian’s account, except

---

79 Cass. Dio, 74.1.3-5, esp. 3, πράξας δὲ ὁ Σεουήρος ταῦτα ἐς τὴν Ῥώμην ἔσηε, μέχρι μὲν τῶν πιλῶν ἐτί τε τοῦ Ἱπποῦ καὶ ἐν ἑν ἑσθήτι ἱππικῇ ἔλθων, ἐντεύθεν δὲ τὴν τῇ πολιτικῇ ἀλλαξάμενος καὶ βαδίσας, “Having done these things, Severus entered Rome, coming between the gates on horse and in cavalry clothing, but then switching into civilian clothing and walking.”

80 HA, Sev. 14.7, postea iterum cum Plautiano in gratiam rediti et veluti ovans urbem ingressus Capitolium petiit, quamvis et ipsum procedenti tempore occiderit, “Afterwards, he again returned to favor with Plautianus and, as though holding an ovatio, he entered the city and made for the Capitoline—although he killed even him later.”

81 HA, Carac. 3.2, altera die Capitolium petii. eos quos occidere parabet adfabiliter est adlocutus, “On another day he mounted the Capitoline. Those whom he was preparing to kill he spoke with sociably.”

82 HA, Maxim. 3.2-3, Egressi igitur a senatu primum Capitolium escenderunt ac rem divinam fecerunt. deinde ad Rostra populum convocarunt. ubi cum orationem de senatus sententia et de sua electione habuissent, populus Romanus cum miliibus, qui forte convenerant, adclamavit, “Gordianum Caesarem omnes rogamus,” “Therefore, after they left the senate, they first climbed the Capitoline and performed sacrifice. Then they summoned the people to the Rostra, where, after they had given a speech about the opinion of the senate and their election, the Roman people, along with the soldiers who had gathered, gave this acclamation: ‘We all want Gordian Caesar!’” 8.2-3, sed dum in Capitolio rem divinam faciunt, populus Romanus imperio Maximi contradixit. timebant enim severitatem eius homines vulgares, quam et senatui acceptissimam et sibi adversissimam esse credebant. quare factum est, ut diximus, ut Gordianum adulescentulum princem peterent, “But while they were performing sacrifice on the Capitoline, the Roman people spoke against the rule of Maximus, for the commoners feared his harshness which they thought to be both most pleasing to the senate and most hostile to them. Therefore, it came about, as we have said, that they sought the young Gordian as emperor.”
that he describes the opposition to the emperors as a riot (Herod. 7.10.5-9). By
downplaying the unruliness of the crowd, the *Historia Augusta* turns a mob into an
indignant body of citizens. This episode does not vilify the Capitoline rituals like the *Vita
Severi* and the *Vita Caracalli* but instead renders them moot: the people of Rome
override the apparent will of Jupiter Optimus Maximus, not with violence but with the
justice of their cause.

Gallienus, a major villain of the *Historia Augusta*, also visits the Capitoline Hill.
After deceitfully butchering the Byzantines, the emperor holds a grand triumph. The
*Historia Augusta* makes no pretense about this sham celebration but nevertheless
describes it with the greatest detail of any journey to the Capitoline to that point,
enumerating the grandeur of the parade with an elaborate list and affording Gallienus
tremendous prestige for a hollow honor (HA, *Gall*. 7.4-8.5). The people are not fooled by
this *homo ineptus* and indulge in their characteristic *facetiae*, pretending to support a
variety of the *Tyranni Triginta* who rose up against Gallienus.83 The entire scene
becomes a Menippean farce, replete with extraordinary luxury and mime-ish mockery.

After degrading the Capitoline Hill throughout the collection, the last imperial visit
is anticlimactic. Aurelian’s triumph demonstrates greater lavishness than even that of
Gallienus and suffers from no shameful associations—his worst crime is actually an act
of fiscal responsibility, giving the people a crown of bread instead of their expected

---

83 HA, *Gall*. 9.1, *Hac pompa homo ineptus eludere se creditid populum Romanum, sed, ut sunt
Romanorum facetiae, alius Postumo favebat, alius Regaliano, alius Aureolo aut Aemiliano, alius
Saturnino, nam et ipse iam imperare dicebatur*, “The foolish man believed that he tricked the Roman
people with this parade; but, as are the games of the Romans, one favored Postumus, another
Regalianus, another Aureolus or Aemilianus, another Saturninus. For he too was said now to be
emperor.”
crown of gold. As with his deification, however, Aurelian’s triumph is hollow. His predecessors have polluted the Capitoline Hill and robbed it of any dignity it once had. No matter how spectacular the ceremonies which he holds there, Aurelian cannot restore the dignity of the state.

We return now to Elagabalus and his refusal to ascend the Capitoline. If it is the symbolic center of the corruption and failure of the state, then what does it say that the worst emperor in the collection is the only not to pollute it? His refusal is juxtaposed with his foil in the collection, Alexander Severus, who not only visited the Capitoline every seven days when he was in the city but added an additional visit to celebrate his victory over the Persians—which, according to Herodian, was far more qualified than the Historia Augusta suggests. At the center of the collection, the paired lives of Elagabalus and Alexander Severus embody the satiric mode most vividly. The most disparaged emperor in the collection avoids the pollution of Capitoline sacrifice while the

84 HA, Aurel. 33-4, Non absque re est cognoscere qui fuerit Aureliani triumphus. fuit enim speciosissimus...denique vix nona hora in Capitolium pervenit, sero autem ad Palatium. sequentibus diebus datae sunt populo voluptates ludorum scaenicorum, ludorum circensium, venationum, gladiatorum, naumachiae. “It is not without benefit to learn what was Aurelian’s triumph, for it was most glorious...finally, at barely the ninth hour, he arrived at the Capitoline, but slowly to Palatine. On the following days, delights were given to the people: plays, circus games, hunts, gladiators, ship fights...”

85 HA, Aurel. 43.5, Capitolium septimo quoque die, cum in urbe esset, ascendit, templa frequentavit, “He climbed the Capitoline every seventh day when he was in the city; he went to the temples often.”

86 HA, Aurel. 57.1-3, dimisso senatu Capitolium ascendit atque inde re divina facta et tunicis Persicis in templo locatis contionem huiusmodi habuit: “Quirites, vicimus Persas. milites divites reduximus. vobis congiarium pollicemur, cras ludos circenses Persicos dabimus.” Haec nos et in annalibus et apud multos reperimus. sed quidam dicunt a servo suo eum proditum non vicisse regem sed, ne vinceretur, fugisse. quod contra multorum opinionem dici non dubium est iis qui plurimos legerint. nam et amississe illum exercitum dicunt fame, frigore ac morbo, ut Herodianus auctor est contra multorum opinionem, “After the senate was dismissed he mounted the Capitoline and so, after the sacrifice was performed and Persian tunics were placed in the temples, held an assembly of this sort: ‘Romans, we have conquered the Persians, we have made out soldiers rich. We promise a donative to the soldiers; tomorrow we will give Persian circus games.’ We have found these things both in the annals and in many authors, but some say that he was betrayed by his slave and did not conquer the king but fled, lest he be conquered. To those who have read many authors, this is no doubt said contrary to many people's opinion. For they say that he lost the his army due to hunger, cold, and illness, as the author Herodian is contrary to many people's opinion.” Compare Herod. 6.6.3.
paragon of virtue drowns in it. The religious significance of the Capitoline Hill ultimately serves as a critique upon the state of empire.

**Divination**

One of the many methods that the Romans used to foresee the future was Haruspicy, the ritual examination of animals' entrails by a trained expert, the *haruspex*. Under the Empire, this practice was wholly absorbed into the fabric of Roman life, but as the rule of emperors became the norm and haruspicy ceased to have any significance in the appointment of the *princeps* or the decisions that he subsequently made, the practice fell into disuse and disrespect. Only after the assassination of Commodus, when imperial claimants sought divine sanction, did its practice re-emerge. Thus *haruspices* feature prominently in the *Historia Augusta*. They are first mentioned in the *Vita Severi* among the omens of the emperor's death. In a grim mistake, a *haruspex* accidentally takes Severus to the wrong temple to sacrifice and then brings out black victims (HA, *Sev*. 22). The soothsayer's incompetence inspires little confidence in the art.

Haruspices are attacked twice towards the end of the collection. The *Vita Taciti* tells of an omen regarding the dead princes Tacitus and Florian. Supposedly, a member of their line would arise after one thousand years, rule over all the lands, and return

---


power to the senate, a prophecy that the “Flavius Vopiscus” treats with total contempt.\(^90\)

In the fraudulent Letter of Hadrian in the *Quadrigae Tyrannorum*, *haruspices* are included among the Egyptians' various disgraceful occupations.\(^91\) These scenes undermine no political figure; haruspicy itself is held up for contempt. Meanwhile, the other mentions are neutral or even positive, and they are grounded in the imperial plane: plausible omens of the impending death or regency of a particular emperor, or a non-religious comment on their professional accommodations in society.\(^92\)

The negative reception of *haruspices* in these two passages fits the satiric mold of the *Historia Augusta*. The Letter of Hadrian is rife with ambivalent elements, while the prophecy in the *Vita Taciti* displays several traits common to the *Historia Augusta*:

“Vopiscus” claiming that one of his inventions is actually the product of scholarly diligence, the use of *iocere* to suggest play or mockery, a humorously sardonic tone at the expense of the offspring of Tacitus and Florian. Above all is the comment that the prophecy would have had more credibility if it had seen not one thousand years into the

---

\(^90\) HA, Tacit. 15-6. …*quo tempore responsum est ab haruspicibus quandocumque ex eorum familia imperatorem Romanum futurum seu per feminam seu per virum, qui det iudices Parthis ac Persis, qui Francos et Alamannos sub Romanis legibus habeat…postea tamen senatui reddat imperium et antiquis legibus vivat, ipse victurus annis centum viginti et sine herede moriturus. futurum autem eum dixerunt a die fulminis praecipitati statuisque confractis post annos mille. non magna haec urbanitas haruspicum fuit, qui principem talem post mille annos futurum esse dixerunt…et Floriani liberi et Taciti multi extiterunt, quorum sunt posteri, credo, millesimum annum exspectantes. in quos multa epigrammata scripta sunt, quibus iocati sunt haruspicies imperium policentes, “At that time, the interpretation from the *haruspices* was that a Roman emperor would arise at some point from their family, either on the distaff side or the male, who would set judges over the Parthians and Persians, who would hold the Franks and the Alamanni under Roman law…moreover, he would later return power to the senate and live by the ancient laws, and he would live one hundred twenty years and die without an heir. They also said that, based on the day of the lightning strike and the breaking of the statues, he would be born after one thousand years. It was no great skill for the *haruspices* who predicted that such a prince would be born after one thousand years…and there have been many children of Florian and Tacitus, their descendants, who have, I believe awaited that thousandth year. Many epigrams have been written on those, in which *haruspices* who promise rule are mocked.”

\(^91\) HA, *Quad. Tyr.* 7.4, 8.3.

future, but one hundred. One hundred years after the death of Tacitus would be 376 CE—the era of publication for the Historia Augusta. The morally uncertain stories were likely fabricated: it is impossible to believe that a peasant farmer named Antoninus had a goat born on his land with a purple mark on its head, and that he slew it to avert the prediction of a haruspex that an Antoninus would be the next emperor, and that this foreshadowed Geta's murder.\footnote{Especially given the text's interest in the nomen Antoninorum, Syme. 1971, 78-88. HA, Geta 3.5-6, fuit etiam alius omen: nam cum in villa cuiusdam Antonini, plebei hominis, agnus natus esset, qui vellus in fronte purpureum haberet, eadem die atque hora qua Geta natus est, audissetque ille ab haruspice post Severum Antoninum imperatorum, ac de se ille auguraretur sed tamen talis fati timeret indicium, ferro eum adegit. quod et ipsum signo fuit Getam ab Antonino interimendum, ut postea satis claruit, "There was also another omen, for because a lamb was born on the estate of a certain Antoninus, a pleb, which had purple fleece on its forehead, on the day and hour when Geta was born, and because he had heard from a haruspex that Antoninus would rule after Severus and thought it referred to himself but feared it as a sign of such a fate, he slew it with a blade. That too was a sign that Geta would be killed by Antoninus, as became sufficiently clear afterwards."} This heightens the confusion surrounding the presentation of haruspicy.

The social background of haruspicy explains in part its reception in the Historia Augusta. Ancient soothsayers occupied a continuum of authorization, ranging from those fully integrated into the imperial hierarchy through membership in the ordo haruspicium to private consultants that were often the object of scorn and persecution. This latter group performed a variety of functions, including divination, prophecy, and expiation.\footnote{Scheid 2003, 123-6.} Even in the Christian era, Constantine forbade private haruspicy while allowing public haruspicy to continue.\footnote{Codex Theodosianus 9.16.1-2. See also Curran 1996, 70.} Haruspices were not a single class of people but a diverse group united by the common practice of extispicy; thus, their reception should vary depending upon the type being treated. Haruspices are meaningless to the Historia Augusta except as an interjection of class consciousness.
A curious phenomenon in the *Historia Augusta* is the prophetic consultation of Vergil. In the *Vita Hadriani*, a young Hadrian consults these so-called *Sortes Vergilianae* to determine Trajan's feelings towards him. A passage about the greatness of Numa hints at Hadrian's future rule.⁹⁶ In the *Vita Alexandri Severi*, the emperor's various talents recall a *Sors Vergiliana* which predicts his future greatness.⁹⁷ Both prophecies come from the sixth book of the *Aeneid*, in which Aeneas meets with the Cumaean Sibyl and witnesses the parade of Rome's future leaders. Book 6 also highlights ambiguities in Aeneas' character and the depiction of his *pietas*: he assumed the drowning of his helmsman Palinurus was accidental, but upon meeting his shade he blames the gods; he weeps for *amor* upon seeing Dido, which his *pietas* denied him on the surface; Anchises tries to demonstrate the virtues of Rome's future leaders, but the hero focuses upon the dead youth Marcellus. The book ends with Aeneas' exit from the underworld through the ivory gate of lies, casting an aporetic pall over the entire scene.⁹⁸ The *Sortes Vergilianae* are the epic complement to the *Historia Augusta*.

⁹⁶ HA, Hadr. 2.8, quo quidem tempore cum sollicitus de imperatoris erga se iudicio, Vergilianas sortes consuleret, Quis procul ille autem ramis insignis olivae / sacra ferens? nosco crines incanaque menta / regis Romani, primam qui legibus urbem / fundabit, Curibus parvis et paupere terra / missus in imperium magnum, cui deine subibit. “At that time, since he was troubled about the emperor's feelings towards him, he consulted the Vergilian lots: 'But who is that carrying the sacred items on the boughs of mighty olive? I know the hair and hoary chin of the Roman king, who will found the first city with laws, sent from his meager Cures and poor land into a great empire, which he shall come upon.'” Compare with Verg., *Aeneid* 6.808-12

⁹⁷ HA, Alex. Sev. 14.4, ipse autem, cum parentis hortatu animum a philosophia musicaque ad alias artes traduceret, Vergili sortibus huiusmodi inlustratus est: Excudent alii spirantia mollius aera,/credo equidem vivos ducent de marmore vultus, / orabunt causas melius caelique meatus/descrivent radio et surgentia sidera dicens; / tu regere imperio populos, Romane, memento. / hae tibi erunt artes pacisque imponere morem, / parcere subiectis et debellare superbos, “Moreover, since he turned his mind from philosophy and music towards other arts at the encouragement of his father, he was enlightened by Vergilian lots of this sort: 'Some will beat the breathing bronze rather gently, I believe; indeed, they will make living faces from marble; they will better beseech the reasons and motions of the heavens, they will describe them with a ray and will say the stars are rising. Remember, ye Roman, to rule the nations with empire. These will be your arts, to impose the custom of peace and to spare the conquered and to defeat the proud.'” Compare with Verg., *Aeneid* 6.848-54.

⁹⁸ Mackie 1988, 114-41; Clausen 1964, 146-7.
Fittingly, they are invented. The use of literary oracles was not unprecedented:

Lots had long been drawn from passages of Homer, and Augustine describes his own consultation of *Sortes Biblicae*. The *Sortes Vergilianae*, however, first appear in the *Historia Augusta* and are not otherwise attested until the Middle Ages. Even within the *Historia Augusta* their description is inconsistent. The verb for gathering the *sors* in the *Vita Hadriani* is *excidere*, “to fall out,” implying a traditional lot falling from a vessel. This contradicts a remark at the end of the first Vergilian prophecy, that “some said that [the oracle] came from the Sibylline verses,” the consultation of which involved reading passages from the Sibylline books. That “Aelius Spartanus” seems not to know how to consult the *Sortes* and conflates them with an established oracular tradition indicate their invention. The *Historia Augusta* highlights its trickery by introducing additional Vergilian oracles at a variety of sites across the Mediterranean. The subjects of four *vitae*—Pescennius Niger, Clodius Albinus, Alexander Severus, and Claudius—consult the oracle at Delphi, Apollo at Cumae, Fortuna Primigenia at Praeneste, and an unspecified oracle in the Apennines, respectively. The first three boasted established

---


102 HA, *Hadr. 2.8, Sors excitit, quam alii ex Sibyllinis versibus ei provenisse dixerunt, “So the lot fell out, which some said had come to him from the Sibyline verses.” Rives 2007, 159, 188-9.

103 HA, *Pesc. Nig. 8, compare with Verg. *Aeneid* 1.381; Clod. 5.4, compare with *Aeneid* 6.857-8; Alex. Sev. 4, compare with *Aeneid* 883; Claud. 10, compare with *Aeneid* 1.265, 278, 6.869.
mantic traditions, but all provide their pilgrims with Vergilian oracles in the imagination of the *Historia Augusta*. Most of these oracles also come from Book 6 of the *Aeneid*, a fitting source given its Sibylline context and abundance of prophecy. The *Sortes Vergilianae* are a *ludus* that turns ancient oracles into satiric fonts and Vergil himself into the satiric *vates*.

**The Importance of Religion?**

The religious content of the *Historia Augusta* is varied and satirical, but hardly polemical. The studied ambivalence demonstrated towards Christianity should not be read as an indictment of the faith but as an exploration of its role in Late Antique Roman society. The *Historia Augusta* acknowledges the revolutionary influence Christianity had upon society and the goodness that lies at its heart but also its capacity for abuse under the wrong influence. Indeed, traditional paganism suffers worse under the gaze of the *Historia Augusta*—but only by association with the imperial house. Most pagan rites receive a neutral valorization. They are part of the cultural foundation upon which the *Historia Augusta* builds its parodic biography. Deification and sacrifice on the Capitoline Hill are exceptional for the abuse they suffer, abuse that never strays beyond the emperor's orbit. The invented *Sortes Vergilianae* become a vehicle for play and critique upon the emperors. The *Historia Augusta* has little interest in religion itself apart from its satiric potential: an aporetic critique upon the government of the later Roman Empire.

---

104 The oracular mention of the Apennines at HA, *Claud.* 10.4 and *Quad.* *Tyr.* 3.4 may represent genuine practice. Although not counted among the ten Sibyls of antiquity (Takács 2008, 62, 159 n.2), the 15th century romance *Il Guerriro Meschino* (Canto 6.20) and the 16th century atlas of Ortelius, *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum*, speaks of an Apennine Sibyl—in the general area of a chain of the Appenines now called the *monti sibillini*.


CHAPTER 6
POLITICAL APORIA

After the beneficent reign of Aurelian and the promise of Probus, "Vopiscus" says that hopes rose for a new golden age:

For although in the course of time, built up or assaulted by various upheavals, now by some distress, now by changing fortune, [the Republic] endured almost everything which mortality endures in a single man, after a multitude of evils it seemed that it would now stay safe, with constant good fortune…¹

Assassination foiled that hope, and the *Vita Cari et Carini et Numeriani* begins with a lengthy discursus on political history and reality under the Empire.² No other passage in the collection matches the elegance or passion of this diatribe, and its position as the final preface attests its thematic importance for the *Historia Augusta*. The previous prefaces all advanced the collection's satiric tendencies, primarily by reversing the audience's expectation: dedications to emperors long dead, inventions of impossible scenarios, traditional pseudo-modest *recusationes* of ability that underscore true deficiencies. The last preface offers the most radical reversal: the truth. It surveys the entirety of Roman history, from the earliest kings up to the subjects of the present biography, Carus, Carinus, and Numerianus.

Given the collection’s nominal familiarity with Pompeius Trogus, this passage invites some comparison with universal history.³ This genre, arising after the conquests

---

¹ HA, Car. 1.1, *nam cum ducta per tempora variis vel erecta motibus vel adficta, nunc tempestate aliqua nunc felicitate variata omnia prope passa esset quae patitur in homine uno mortalitas, videbatur post diversitatem malorum iam secura continuata felicitate mansura*.

² HA, Car. 1-3.

³ Pompeius Trogus, an Augustan universal historian whose Latin *Historiae Philippicae* covered the empire of Alexander the Great up to the domination of Octavian. His works are lost, but a table of contents and Late Antique epitome survive, affording relatively detailed knowledge of the structure and substance of his work. He appears at HA, *Aurel. 2.1* and *Prob. 2.7*, although there is no indication of what influence he
of Alexander the Great, sought to relate the history of the entire known world. This broad perspective allows for reflection on the inevitabilities of civilization, the collapse and succession of empires, the role of chance or providence in human affairs. The Historia Augusta, however, differs in two key respects. First, it only treats history from the Roman perspective. Foreign peoples only appear in relation to the Italian throne: featureless opponents, empty straw men, or former subjects elevated to the principate. More substantially, the Historia Augusta lacks the inherent optimism of universal history. Polybius views Roman ascension as natural and eternal, Diodorus Siculus earnestly believes in the lessons that history can provide to posterity. Even Trogus, whose extant epitome seems devoid of any serious philosophical aims, praises the civilizing imperialism of Augustus and offers a broad East-to-West path for history that seems, at the least, to represent a guiding hand to history; at most, the inevitability of Rome’s ultimate rule.

---


Polybius 1.1.5-1.2.7, τίς γὰρ οὕτως ὑπάρχει φαύλος ἢ ῥάθυμος ἀνθρώπων ὡς οὐκ ἂν βουλοίτω γνώναι πῶς καὶ τίνι γένει πολιτείας ἐπικρατηθέντα σχεδὸν ἄπαντα τὰ κατὰ τὴν οἰκουμένην οὕς ὁλοὶς πεντήκοντα καὶ τρισίν ἔτεσιν ὑπὸ μίαν ἄρχην ἔπεσε τὴν Ῥωμαίαν, ὁ πρῶτος οὕς εὐρίσκεται γεγονός,...Ρωμαῖοι γε μὴν οὐ τινὰ μέρη, σχεδὸν δὲ πάσαν πεποιημένην τὴν οἰκουμένην ὑπήκουν αὐτοῖς, ἀνυπόστατον μὲν τοὺς ὑπάρχουσι πάσιν, ἀνυπέρβλητον δὲ καὶ τοὺς ἐπιγινομένους ὑπεροχὴν κατέλιπον τῆς αὐτῶν δυναστείας, "For what man is there so mean or careless that he would not want to know how and by what sort of governance almost everything in the world, since it is subject to such dominion, fell under the sole rule of the Romans in not even fifty three years, which is not found to have previously happened...the Romans, having made not mere parts but almost the entire world obedient to them, established supremacy of their dominion, unstoppable to all those currently living and not to be outdone by those who will come after;" Diodorus Siculus 1, Τοῖς τὰς κοινὰς Ἰστορίας πραγματευσαμένοις μεγάλας χάριτας ἀποπέμειν δικαιον πάντας ἀνθρώπως, ὅτι τοῖς ἰδιοις πόνοις ύψελεῖται τόν κοινὸν βίον ἐφιλοτιμήθησαν, "It is right for all men to give great thanks to those who busy themselves with general histories, since they struggled to help the general welfare with their particular efforts."

Just., 44.5.8, Nec prius perdomitae provinciae iugum Hispani accipere potuerunt, quam Caesar Augustus perdomito orbe uictoria ad eos arma transtulit populumque barbarum ac ferum legibus ad cultiorem uitas usum traductum in formam provinciae redegit, "Nor could the Spanish have borne the yoke of provincial mastery before Caesar August, with all the world mastered, brought his conquering..."
The preface to the *Vita Cari et Carini et Numeriani* suggests none of these things, focusing instead upon the recurrent evils that beset the state. The ouster of Tarquinius Superbus only came with grievous loss.\(^7\) “Flavius Vopiscus” glosses the rise of the Republic with one word before emphasizing the sack of the city; its equally terse resurgence is eclipsed by the Pyrrhic Wars.\(^8\) Even the *pax Augusta* is sneeringly dismissed because of its price: liberty.\(^9\) Indeed, the preface boasts that only Romulus founded a perfect city,\(^10\) glossing over the rape and fratricide on which that tale rests.

The *Historia Augusta* treats the Roman Empire like a zombie, an atavistic power lumbering through history, too bloated from its own success to die. The *Fatum* that opens the preface, that has always ruled the state and always will, is not divine providence but inevitable entropy.

The preface covers every emperor up to Carus, including those already treated in the *Historia Augusta*. Their reception here is consistent, the same random alternation of forces to them and lead the uncouth and fierce people, moved by laws to a more civilized sort of life, to provincehood." This is in fact the last sentence of Justin's *Epitome*, although whether it is how Trogus ended the original is unclear; Alonso-Núñez 2002, 107.

---

7 HA, Car. 2.4, *vigit igitur usque ad Tarquinii Superbi tempora nostra res. publica, sed passa tempestatem de moribus regiis non sine gravi exitio semet ulta est*, "So did our republic thrive until the times of Tarquinius Superbus, but after it endured that storm, it avenged itself on the king's character not without heavy loss."

8 Car. 2.5-6, *adolevit deinde usque ad tempora Gallicani belli, sed quasi quodam mersa naufragio capta praeter arcem urbe plus prope mali sensit quam tumebat bonis. reddidit se deinde in integrum, sed eo usque gravata est Punicis bellis ac terre Pyrrhi ut mortalitatis mala praecordiorum timore sentiret*, "Then it grew until the times of the Gallican war, but as though it were sunk by some shipwreck, with the city taken except for its citadel, it almost perceived more evil than it boasted of good. It made then itself whole again, but it was so ravaged by the Punic Wars and the dread of Pyrrhus that it sensed the evils of its mortality with a gut-wrenching fear."

9 Car. 3.1, *per Augustum deinde reparata, si reparata dici potest libertate deposita*, "Then it was restored by Augustus, if ‘restored’ it can be called when liberty is discarded."

10 Car. 2.2, *ut a Romulo incipiam, vero patre ac parente rei publicae, quae illius felicitas fuit, qui fundavit, constituit roboravitque rem publicam atque unus omnium conditorum perfectam urbem reliquit!*, "To start with Romulus, the true father and sire of the republic—what good fortune for he who founded, built, and strengthened the republic and alone left a perfect city for all its inhabitants!"
good and bad. The Historia Augusta implicates itself in the downward spiral of Roman history, highlighting its satiric tendency to critique governing powers. This tendency is demonstrated with three motifs: the nomen Antoninorum, critique of child-emperors, and senatorial acclamations. Their reception demonstrates that nothing can be counted upon under empire, neither joy nor sorrow, neither prosperity nor want. The entire collection becomes an ironic tribute to bathetic futility.

**Nomen Antoninorum**

The accession of Antoninus Pius inaugurated a dynasty so influential that forty years after the death of its last legitimate heir Septimius Severus had himself adopted by the late Marcus Aurelius and renamed his son “Antoninus.”¹¹ Thus arose the political and literary motif of the nomen Antoninorum. Amidst the turmoil of the third century, it was legitimate for aspiring emperors to indulge in this sort of political theatre to place themselves in a favorable position to seize the throne, but the Historia Augusta exaggerates the influence of the Antonine name beyond all proportion, to the detriment of the emperors that supposedly bore it.

The early mentions of the nomen Antoninorum only hint at the disgraces it will later suffer. Pius is offered and rejects a proposal by the senate to change the month “September” to “Antoninus,” an action that fits his relative virtue.¹² More questionable is Marcus Aurelius' bestowal of an Antoninian college of priests upon his disreputable colleague Verus in conjunction with his deification.¹³ The negative context of apotheosis

---

¹¹ Syme 1971, 79.

¹² HA, Ant. Pius. 10.1, mensem Septembrem atque Octobrem Antoninum atque Faustinum appellandos decrevit senatus, sed id Antoninus respuit, “The senate decreed that the months of September and October be called ‘Antoninus’ and ‘Faustinus,’ but Antoninus rejected this.”

¹³ HA, Marc. 15.3-4, tanta autem sanctitatis fuit Marcus ut Veri vitia et celaverit et defenderit, cum ei
and the unworthiness of Verus combine to stain the name of the Antonines, even before the death of the second true Antonine.

The motif accelerates in the *Vita Commodity*. "Aelius Lampridius" names the young emperor-to-be Commodus Antoninus. Since he was the legitimate son of Marcus Aurelius he was rightly an Antonine, but so was his twin brother, Titus Aurelius Fulvus Antoninus. The *Historia Augusta* calls him simply Antoninus, a nickname adopted in no other ancient source. The remnants of Dio make no mention of Commodus' twin, and Herodian obliquely refers to him only by the nickname *Verissimus*. This is not itself odd, for Commodus' twin died young, but the *Historia Augusta* emphasizes that the boy died in spite of the fortuitous predictions of *mathematici* (HA, Comm. 1.4). Here, the satirizing of religion highlights the fallibility of the *nomen Antoninorum*—not even the gods can halt the fall of an Antonine. It is only after his twin's death that Commodus receives the name “Antoninus,” a designation of the heir-apparent. Commodus is the last of the true Antonines, but that honor is gained only with qualifications. The disgrace of Commodus' reign shows that the dynasty died with his twin brother.

After Commodus' assassination, the senator Pertinax claimed the throne, leading

---

vehementissime displicerent, mortuumque eum divum appellaverit...flaminem et Antoninianos sodales et omnes honores qui divis habentur eidem dedicavit...Moreover, Marcus was of such righteousness that he both hid and defended the failings of Verus, although they displeased terribly, and he called him ‘divine’ after his death...he also granted him a flamen and Antoninian sodales and all the honors that are given to the deified.”

HA, Comm. 1.4-5, *cum autem peperisset Commodum atque Antoninum, Antoninus quadrimus elatus est, quem parem asteroid curt Commodo mathematici promittebat,* "Moreover, although she had begot Commodus and Antoninus, Antoninus whom the mathematicians promised would be equal to Commodus because of the course of the stars, was buried when he was four years old."

Herod. 1.2, τῷ βασιλεύοντι Μάρκῳ θυγατέρες μὲν ἐγένοντο πλείους, ἄρρενες δὲ δύο. τῶν δὲ ἄρρενων τούτων ὁ μὲν ἔτερος κομιδή νέος τὸν βίον μετήλλαξε (Βηρίσσιμος δ’ ἦν ὄνομα αὐτῶ), τὸν δὲ περίοντα Κόμοδόν τε καλούμενον ὁ πατήρ μετὰ πάσης ἐπιμελείας ἀνεκδέχομαι, "Many daughters were born to the emperor Marcus, but two sons. Of these sons, one ended his life quite early (Verissimus was his name), but the father raised the one who survived and was called Commodus with every care."
to a period of unrest such as the empire had not seen since 69 CE and which was not quelled until the accession of Septimius Severus. In an effort to solidify his authority, Severus proclaimed himself the son of Marcus Aurelius and gave to Caracalla, his son and heir, the name Antoninus. The political efficacy of this move does not diminish its cynicism, which becomes the foundation of the motif in the Historia Augusta. Towards the end of the Vita Severi the future depredations of Caracalla detract further from the nomen Antoninorum. This debased reincarnation of the nomen Antoninorum does not restore the glory of a dynasty tainted by Commodus, it makes a travesty of it.

Geta's relationship with the nomen Antoninorum is puzzling. When Severus bestows the name Antoninus upon Caracalla, the political nature of the act is emphasized: it is foremost a tool to remove Geta's hope of seeking the throne. Yet a story then follows that Severus, upon hearing an omen that an Antoninus would succeed him, gave Geta that name as a precaution—or so some believe. Geta's imperial inheritance is denied then safeguarded within three sentences, a confusion that the Historia Augusta only deepens. The Vita Caracalli implies that Geta received the

---

16 For a more factual account of events than that offered by the Historia Augusta, see Potter 2004, 93-125.  
17 HA, Sev. 22, vixit denique in odio populi diu Antoninus, nomenque illud sanctum diu minus amatum est, "Finally, Antoninus lived for a long time hated by the people, and that holy name was for a long time less beloved..."

18 HA, Sev. 10.3, et cum iret contra Albinum, in itinere apud Viminacium filium suum maiorem Bassianum adposito Aurelii Antonini nomine Caesarem appellavit, ut fratrem suum Getam ab spe imperii, quam ille conceperat, summoveret, "And when he marched against Albinus, on the journey at Viminacium he named his elder son Bassianus 'Caesar,' with the name 'Aurelius Antoninus' added on, in order to remove his brother Geta from the hope of rule that he had developed."

19 HA, Sev. 10.4-5, et nomen quidem Antonini idcirco filio adposuit, quod somniaverat Antoninum sibi successorum. unde Getam etiam quidam Antoninum putant dictum, ut et ipse succederet in imperium, "And so he placed the name of Antoninus upon his son because he had dreamed that an Antoninus would succeed him. So to certain men think that Geta was called Antoninus, so he would be the one to succeed him in rule."
titles of Caesar and Antoninus from the army, while in the Vita Getae, Severus, possibly influenced by his prophetic wife, reconsiders giving Caracalla sole access to the throne. Discussion of the nomen Antoninorum should end there, but it continues: Severus wanted the name to become an imperial title like Augustus, and he gave it in honor of Marcus Aurelius or Antoninus Pius. There follow several prophecies of Geta's fratricide, the undercurrent of which is that only Caracalla was called Antoninus. A few sections later the puzzle of Geta's nomenclature is revived, but with a slight variation: Severus supposedly gave it to Caracalla after returning from the Parthian war, and only

20 HA, Carac. 1, Ex duobus liberis, quos Septimius Severus reliquit Getam et Bassianum, quorum unum Antoninum exercitus alterum pater dixit, Geta hostis est iudicatus, Bassianus autem obtinuit imperium, "Of the two sons that Septimius Severus left, Geta and Bassianus, of whom the army named one Antoninus, his father the other, Geta was deemed an enemy, but Bassianus gained power."

21 HA, Geta 1.3-7, Septimius Severus quodam tempore cum consulisset ac petisset ut sibi indicaretur quo esset successore moriturus, in somniis vidit Antoninum sibi successurum. quare statim ad milites processit et Bassianum, filium maiorem natu, Marcum Aurelium Antoninum appellavit. quod cum fecisset, vel paterna cogitatione vel, ut quidam dicunt, a Iulia uxore commonitus, quae gnara erat somnii, quod minori filio hoc facto ipse interclusisset aditum imperandi, etiam Getam, minorem filium, Antoninum vocari iussit. itaque semper ab eo in epistulis familiaribus dictus est, cum si forte abesset scriberet, 'Salutate Antoninos filios et successores meos.’ sed nihil valuit paterna cogitatione vel, ut quidam dicunt, a Iulia uxore commonitus, quae gnara erat somnii, quod minori filio hoc facto ipse interclusisset aditum imperandi, etiam Getam, minorem filium, Antoninum vocari iussit. itaque semper ab eo in epistulis familiaribus dictus est, cum si forte abesset scriberet, 'Salutate Antoninos filios et successores meos.’

22 HA, Geta 2.2, fuit autem Antoninus Geta etiam ob hoc ita dictus quod in animo habuit Severus, ut omnes deinceps principes, quemadmodum Augusti, ita etiam Antonini dicerentur, "Moreover, Geta was also called 'Antoninus' because of what Severus had in mind, for all emperors then to be also called 'Antonines' in the way they were called 'Augusti.'"

23 HA, Geta 3.7-9, fuit etiam aliud omen ingens, ut postea exitus docuit, hostes facinoris quod eventum: nam cum infantis Getae natalem Severus commendare vellet, hostiam popa nomine Antoninus percussit. quod tunc nec quaesitum nec animadversum, post vero intellectum est, "There was also another great omen, as his death afterwards showed, which occurred: for when Severus wanted to celebrate the birth of the young Geta, a priest named Antoninus struck the victim, which was then neither looked into nor noticed, but afterwards was understood."
some say that Geta earned it.\textsuperscript{24} What had been a certain fact and object of lengthy discourse at the beginning of the biography now descends into uncertainty. That Geta seems never to have borne the \textit{nomen Antoninorum} at all leads one into \textit{aporia}.\textsuperscript{25}

The creation of an honor for Geta that never existed and that denigrates Caracalla’s genuine title mirrors the treatment of the brothers’ divination. The \textit{Vita Getae} is an encomium of Geta, emphasizing or inventing his noble qualities. In other historical accounts he is more ambivalent. Herodian calls Geta more moderate than his brother but still acknowledges his capacity for crime.\textsuperscript{26} Dio considers both equally vicious.\textsuperscript{27} The \textit{Historia Augusta} contrasts the legitimate honors conferred upon an unworthy emperor with the invented honors given to his brother, who was in truth of questionable integrity.

One of the strongest markers of imperial rule in the early third century is undermined in every capacity.

\textsuperscript{24} HA, \textit{Geta} 5.3, \textit{Post Parthicum bellum cum ingenti gloria pater floret}, \textit{Bassiano participi imperii appellato Geta quoque Caesaris et Antonini, ut quidam dicunt, nomen accepit}, “After the Parthian War, when the father was flush with tremendous glory, since Bassianus was called Assistant to the Empire, Geta also, as some say, took the name ‘Caesar’ and ‘Antoninus.’”

\textsuperscript{25} Magie 1924, 32, n.1; Syme 1971, 78-88.

\textsuperscript{26} Herod. 4.3-4, ταύτην δὲ τὴν τιμὴν ἐκθείσασθεν οἱ παῖδες τὸν πατέρα ἐπανήλθον ὡς τὸ βασίλεια. ἐξ ἑκείνου δὲ ἢ ἰδῆ φανερῶς ἐστασιάζον πρὸς ἀλλήλους, ἔμισσον τε καὶ ἐπέβουλευον· πάντα τε ἐπρατεν ἐκάτερος πειρώμενος τὸν ἀδελφὸν ἀποσκευάσασθαι ἐξ αὐτῶν τε μόνον περιαγαγεῖν τὴν ἀρχήν... ἵδια γὰρ αὐτῶν ἐκάτερος ἐπέστελλε τοὺς λανθάνον καὶ ὑκείοντα, μεγάλας ὑποσχέσει πρὸς αὐτὸν ἄνθρωπων. καὶ τὸ γε πλείστον μέρος ἕκα τοῦ Γέταν ἐξελπείτο· φαντασίαν γὰρ ταὐτοπεδείκνυτο, "The sons, revering this honor, returned to their father at the palace. But they strove with one another for their own sakes quite openly; they hated and plotted against each other. Both did everything as they sought to kill their brother and bring sole rule to himself... for each on their own account secretly sent letters and made friends, drawing people to them with great promises. The greatest part looked at Geta, for he offered a certain appearance of reasonableness."

\textsuperscript{27} Cass. Dio, 77.7, οἱ δὲ τοῦ Σεούριου παῖδες, ὁ τε Ἀντωνίνος καὶ ὁ Γέτας, οἷον παιδαγωγοῦ πινος ἀπηλλαγμένοι τοῦ Πλαυτιανοῦ, οὐδὲν ὃ τι οὐκ ἔποιον. καὶ γὰρ καὶ γυναῖκας ἦσαν καὶ παῖδες ὑβρίζον χρήματα τε παρέβαλεν, καὶ τοὺς μονομάχους τοῦς τὴν ἀρματιλάτας προσπαθηρίζοντο, τη μὲν ὁμοίητι τῶν ἔργων ζηλούντες ἀλλήλους, τῷ δὲ ἀντισπουδάξειν στασιάζοντες· εἰ γὰρ τῷ ἐτέρῳ προσεθέτο, πάντως ἀν τό ἐναντίον ὁ ἐτέρος ἄνθρεστο, "Since the children of Severus, both Antoninus and Geta, were freed from Plautianus as though from some pedagogue, there was nothing that they did not do. In fact, they violated women and outraged boys. They stole money and associated with gladiators and charioteers, rivaling one another in the likeness of their deeds and striving in their competition, for if one took a side, the other would absolutely choose the opposite."
The *nomen Antoninorum* did not die with Caracalla. His praetorian prefect Ofellus Macrinus claimed the throne and, in order to secure his claim, gave his son Diadumenianus the names *Antoninus* and *Caesar*. A third Antonine dynasty emerged, wholly unconnected with the Pius and Marcus. The *Historia Augusta* exploits this misappropriation. The *Vita Macrini* early claims that, upon his accession, Macrinus named himself Severus and Antoninus, yet he never bore the latter name. Such a fraud expands upon the satiric importance that the Antonine name already developed. Macrinus gave the name Antoninus only to his son, which is reaffirmed later in the *Vita Macrini*. In the reign of Antoninus Pius the priestess of Caelstis, a Carthaginian prophetess, suddenly uttered the name *Antoninus* eight times during a reading for the proconsul of Africa. At first thought to refer to the length of Pius' reign, the utterance came to be understood as the total number of men who would bear the Antonine name:

> When the prophet of Caelstis in Carthage, who is accustomed to sing the truth when she is inspired by the goddess, predicted under Antoninus Pius, who as proconsul was asking about the public welfare, as he was accustomed, and about his empire, predicted the future and it came to the emperors, she gave the order to tally how many times she said 'Antoninus.' Then, to the amazement of all, she said the name 'Antoninus' eight times. But since everyone believed that Antoninus Pius would rule for eight years and he surpassed this number of years, there was agreement even among

---

28 Cass. Dio, 79.37, ἐπιστολῆς προοιμίως, καὶ τοι καὶ Κάισαρα καὶ αὐτοκράτορα αὐτὸν ὄνομάσας, καὶ τὰ γραφέντα ὡς καὶ παρ᾽ ἀμφοτέρων ἐπισταλέντα προδηλώσας, ἐνέγραψεν ἐν τῇ διηγήσει τῶν πεπραγμένων τῆς μὲν τοῦ Διαδουμενιανοῦ προσηγορίας ἐπισταλένσας, τῇ δὲ τοῦ Ἀντωνίνου, καὶ τὴν ἑχόντος αὐτοῦ καὶ ταύτην, παρέλιπεν, "At the beginning of the letter, he wrote that he had named him both Caesar and Emperor and had given instruction for missives to be regarded as though they were written by both of them; and in telling of the deeds, he mentioned the name Diadumenianus, but left out that of Antoninus, although he also bore that." See also Potter 2004, 151.

29 HA, Macr. 2, Occiso ergo Antonino Bassiano Opilius Macrinus, praefectus praetorii eius, qui anteā privatas curarat, imperium arripuit, humili natus loco et animi atque oris invercundi, sequē nunc Severum nunc Antoninum, cum in odio esset omnium et hominum et militum, nuncupavit, "Therefore, after Antoninus Bassianus was slain, Opilius Macrinus, his praetorian prefect who had previously taken care of his private affairs, seized the empire. He was born in a humble station and was shameless in spirit and talk; and he named himself now Severus and now Antoninus, although he was hated by all, both the men and the soldiers."
the credulous that the prophet meant something else either then or afterwards. Finally, when all who were called Antoninus are counted up, that is found to be the number of the Antonines.\textsuperscript{30}

Like the Probus Oracle, this \textit{post eventum} prediction defies belief. Although it pretends to veracity—explaining that the later Gordiani were not \textit{Antonini} but \textit{Antonii}—falsehood still predominates. Among the eight \textit{Antonini} is Geta:

Indeed, the Antonines were: Pius first, Marcus second, Verus third, Commodus fourth, fifth Caracalla, sixth Geta, seventh Diadumenianus, eighth Elagabalus. The two Gordians must not be set among the Antonines, who either had only the praenomen of the Antonines or were in fact called ‘Antonius,’ not ‘Antoninus.’ So it is that Severus called himself ‘Antoninus,’ as most say, and Pertinax and Julianus and likewise Macrinus, and this name was kept beyond what is appropriate by the Antonini who were the true successors of Antoninus. Some say this, but others accordingly say that Diadumenianus was called Antoninus by his father Macrinus, in order to remove Macrinus from the suspicion of the death of Antoninus among the soldiers.\textsuperscript{31}

Macrinus may have chosen to give his son the name \textit{Antoninus} to counter the suspicion that he had murdered Caracalla, or simply because the people would not accept a ruler without the \textit{nomen Antoninorum}.\textsuperscript{32} The \textit{Historia Augusta} cultivates a sense of importance and fraudulence around the \textit{nomen Antoninorum}, just as the Antonine

\textsuperscript{30} HA, Macr. 3.1-3, \textit{vates Caelestis apud Carthaginem, quae dea repleta solet vera canere, sub Antonino Pio, cum sciscitante proconsule de statu, ut solebat, publico et de suo imperio futura praedicaret, ubi ad principes ventum est, clara voce numerari iussit quotiens diceret Antoninum, tuncque adtonitis omnibus Antonini nomen octavo edidit. sed credentibus cunctis quod octo annis Antoninus Pius imperaturus esset, et ille transcendent hunc annorum numerum, et constituit apud credentes vel tunc vel postea per vatem alium designatum. denique adnumeratis omnibus qui Antonini appellati sunt is Antoninorum numerus inventur.}

\textsuperscript{31} HA, Macr. 3.4-8, \textit{enimvero Pius primus, Marcus secundus, Verus tertius, Commodus quartus, quintus Caracallus, sextus Geta, septimus Diadumenus, octavus Heliogabalus Antonini fuere. nec inter Antoninos referendi sunt duo Gordiani, qui aut praenomen tantum Antoninorum habuerunt aut etiam Antonii dicti sunt non Antonini. inde est quod se et Severus Antoninum vocavit, ut plurimi ferunt, et Pertinax et Julianus et idem Macrinus; et ab ipsis Antoninis, qui veri successores Antonini fuerunt, hoc nomen magis quam proprium retentum est. haec alii. sed alii idcirco Antoninum Diadumenum a Macrino patre appellatum ferunt, ut suspicio a Macrinio interfecti Antonini militibus tolleretur.}

\textsuperscript{32} HA, Macr. 3.9, \textit{ali vero tantum desiderium nominis huius fuisse dicunt, ut, nisi populus et milites Antonini nomen audirent, imperatorium non putarent, "But some say that the desire for this name was so great that, unless they people and the soldiers hear the name 'Antoninus,' they would not think it imperial.”}
dynasty began to wane.

The *Vita Elagabali* exploits the motif fully. Elagabalus is immediately identified as an Antonine. Two explanations emerge:

Moreover, he was the priest of Elagabalus, or Jupiter, or the Sun, and he had taken the name Antoninus for himself either to prove his birth or because he knew that that name was so dear to the people that even the parricide Bassianus was loved because of the name.\(^3\)

The first is the genuine reason: although Dio is fragmentary for the life and reign of Elagabalus, he tells how Elagabalus’ scheming mother had her son falsely called Antoninus as a boy.\(^3^4\) The second reason, a literary invention, sheds light on what the name Antoninus had turned into by the third century: a name invested with the glory of its original holders but now divorced from their blood and character. The passage reminds the reader of the paradox of Elagabalus: he was an Antonine, and the last of the Antonines, but a false Antonine.\(^3^5\) The preface to the *Vita Elagabali* address to the emperor Constantine, whose nobility purportedly honored the title as it deserved:

But as for the name up to now, although he polluted that holy name of the Antonines, which you, Most Holy Constantine, so honored that you made

---

\(^{33}\) HA, Elagab. 1.5, *fuit autem Heliogabalii vel Iovis vel Solis sacerdos atque Antonini sibi nomen adsciverat vel in argumentum generis vel quod id nomen usque adeo carum esse cognoverat gentibus, ut etiam parricida Bassianus causa nominis amaretur.*

\(^{34}\) Cass. Dio, 78.32, *τόν τε γὰρ Ἀουπίτον, δὲ Μάρκον Αὐρήλιον Ἀντιωνίνον ἕδε προσηγόρευον, περιφέροντες ὑπὲρ τοῦ τείχους, καὶ εἰκόνας πινᾶς τοῦ Καρακάλλου παιδικὰς ὡς καὶ προσφερεῖς αὐτῶ ἀποδεικνύντες, παιδὰ τε ὄντως αὐτὸν ἔκεινου καὶ διάδοχον τῆς ἀρχής ἀναγκαίον εἶναι λέγοντες, “For they carried Avitus, whom they already addressed as Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, around above the wall, and they furnished some childhood likeness of Caracalla as being similar to him as well, and they said that he was in fact his child and the necessary heir to the throne.”

\(^{35}\) HA, Elagab. 1.7, *postremo cum accepit imperium, Antoninus appellatus est atque ipse in Romano imperio ultimus Antoninorum fuit, “after he took power, he was named 'Antoninus,' and was in fact the last of the Antonines on the Roman throne;” 33.8, Hic finis Antoninorum nomini in re publica fuit, scientibus cunctis istum Antoninum tam vita falsumuisse quam nomine, “This was the end of the name of the Antonines in the republic, as everyone knew that this Antonine was as much a fraud in his life as in his name;” 34.6, et quoniam hic ultimus Antoninorum fuit, neque postea hoc nomen in re publica loco principum frequentatum est..., “And since he was the last of the Antonines and this name has not been subsequently been used in the state among the emperors...”*
Marcus and Pius golden among the Constantii and Claudii like they were your ancestors, adopting the virtues of the ancients that agree with your character and are lovely and dear to you... Implicit in this reverence is the notion that Constantine has been tainted by the pollution of the Antonine name. The nomen Antoninorum enabled Elagabalus, one of the worst emperors in the historiographic tradition, to claim the throne by feigning a connection to another of the worst Roman emperors. The Historia Augusta exaggerates this corruption into contemporary events.

Although Elagabalus was considered the last of the Antonines, the Historia Augusta does not abandon the motif of the nomen Antoninorum. The Vita Alexandri Severi suggests that Alexander was offered the name but refused it, even though he was more closely related to Caracalla than Elagabalus. The fiction is elaborated in a farcical scene between the emperor and the senate, wherein the senators, with repeated acclamations, try to offer him the name while he desperately tries to reject it.

---

36 HA, Elagab. 2.4, sed de nomine hactenus, quamvis sanctum illud Antoninorum nomen polluerit, quod tu, Constantine sacratissime, ita veneraris, ut Marcum et Pium inter Constantios Claudiosque, velut maiores tuos, aureos formaveris, adoptans virtutes veterum tuis moribus congruentes et tibi amicas caras...

37 HA, Alex. Sev. 5.3, delatum sibi Antonini nomen a senatu recusavit, cum hic magis adfinitate Caracallo iungeartur, quam ille subditivus, “He refused the name of Antoninus when it was offered to him by the senate, although he was connected to Caracalla by a closer kinship than that fraud.” No source records this offer from the senate, and the mothers of Elagabalus and Alexander Severus were sisters, making them equally unrelated to Caracalla; Magie 1924, 187, n.5.

38 HA, Alex. Sev. 6-13. An illustrative sample: 7.1-8.4, et cum egisset gratias Alexander, adclamatum est: "Antonine Alexander, di te servent. Antonine Aureli, di te servent. Antonine Pie, di te servent. Antonini nomen suscipias rogamus. praesta bonis imperatoribus ut Antoninus dicaris. nomen Antoninorum tu purifica. quod ille infamavit tu purifica...Antonine, aveas." Et post adclamationes Aurelius Alexander Caesar Augustus: "Gratias vobis, patres conscripti, non nunc primum sed et de Caesareano nomine et de vita servata et Augusti nomine addito et de pontificatu maximo et de tribunicia potestate et proconsulari impero, quae omnia novo exemplo uno die in me contulistis." et cum diceret, adclamatum: "Haec suscepsi. Antonini nomen suscipe...Aurelius Alexander Augustus: "Ne quaeso, patres conscripti, ne me ad hanc certaminis necessitatem vocetis," After Alexander gave thanks, there was an acclamation: ‘Antoninus Alexander, let the gods preserve you! Antoninus Aurelius, let the gods preserve you! Antoninus Pius, let the gods preserve you! We ask that you take the name of Antoninus. Surpass the good emperors that you may be called Antoninus! Purify the name of the Antonines! Which that one disgraced, purify!... Hail, Antoninus!’ After the acclamations, Aurelius Alexander Caesar Augustus said, ‘Thank you, conscript
Alexander Severus duly scorns Commodus, but ranks Bassianus among the bravest names.\(^{39}\) Bassianus could refer to either Caracalla or Elagabalus—or both.\(^{40}\) The \textit{Historia Augusta} plays with nomenclature and presents the reader with an unsavory choice. In response to the senate’s entreaty that he rehabilitate the \textit{nomen Antoninorum}, Alexander fears the burden of a name that has become ill-omened and originated with a family to which he cannot even pretend to belong.\(^{41}\) He is one of the emperors most deserving of the mantle of the Antonines, yet he recognizes that he cannot possess it. Ultimately, Alexander Severus never takes the name. The senate's hopes that the name will be purified are frustrated. Not even the paragon of the \textit{Historia Augusta} can save the \textit{nomen Antoninorum} from its inexorable decline.

Just when it seems that the cycle of Antonines has ended, it undergoes a lame renaissance. The \textit{Vita Gordianorum} provides a clumsy, overwrought epilogue to the \textit{nomen Antoninorum}. The \textit{Historia Augusta} offers schizophrenic accounts throughout its pages about the names that were applied to the emperors Gordian, sometimes calling them Antoninus, other times explaining that this mistake arose because of confusion

\begin{quote}
 fathers, and not the first time, but for the name of Caesar and the preservation of my life and the addition of the name of Augustus and the supreme pontificate and the tribunician power and the proconsular power, all of which you have bestowed upon me, extraordinarily, in a single day. And after he said this, there was an acclamation: 'You took those, take the name of Antoninus!'...Aurelius Alexander Augustus said, 'Do not, I ask you, conscript fathers, do not call me to this need for conflict!'
\end{quote}

\(^{39}\) \textit{HA, Alex. Sev. 9.1-2, ...quid Bassiano fortius? nam Commodi meminisse nolo, qui hoc ipso deterior fuit quod cum illis moribus Antonini nomen obtinuit}, "What is braver than 'Bassianus'? For I do not want to recall that of Commodus, who was worse than this because he took the name 'Antoninus'?"

\(^{40}\) Only the \textit{Historia Augusta} and Herodian call Elagabalus 'Bassianus;' \textit{HA, Macr. 8.4, 9.4; Herod. 5.3.6.}

\(^{41}\) \textit{HA, Alex. Sev. 9.7, Neque ego, patres conscripti, idcirco timeo istud venerabile omnibus nomen accipere, quod verear in haec vita delabatur vita, ut nos nominis pudeat, sed primum disiplicet alienae familiae nomen adsumere, deinde quod gravari me credo}, "Nor do I, conscript fathers, thus fear to take to that name that all revere because I fear that my life will slide into these vices, that I will become ashamed of the name, but because it chiefly displeases me to take the name of another's family, then because I will be burdened."
with their actual name, Antonius.\textsuperscript{42} This is an invented controversy, for only the \textit{Historia Augusta} records that anyone mistook the Gordiani Antonii for Antonini.\textsuperscript{43} Moreover, although the majority of these statements come before the \textit{Vita Severi Alexandri}, they reappear with almost comical force in the \textit{Vita Gordianorum}. Gordian I is said to have written copiously on the Antonines, including an epic called the \textit{Antoniniad}.\textsuperscript{44} Such a ludicrous fiction after two \textit{vitae} and a lacuna brings the reader groaning back to the old motif. “Julius Capitolinus” then produces a letter from the elder Gordian calling his son Antoninus.\textsuperscript{45} The confusion climaxes when “Capitolinus,” defying all previous arguments, says that the Gordians came from both families.\textsuperscript{46} Where once the untruths

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{42} E.g., \textit{HA}, Macr. 3.5; \textit{Elagab.} 18.1, \textit{quamvis cognomine postea Gordianos multi Antoninos putent, qui Antonii dicti sunt, non Antonini}, “Although many think that the Gordians later received the cognomen ‘Antoninus,’ although they were called ‘Antonius,’ not ‘Antoninus,’” 34.6-7, \textit{ne quis error oriatur, cum duos Gordianos narrare coepero, patrem et filium, qui se de Antoninorum genere dici volebant: non nomen in illis primum fuit sed praenomen, deinde, ut in plerisque libris invenio, Antonii dicti sunt, non Antonini}, “Lest any mistake arise when I begin to tell of the two Gordians, father and son, who wanted to be considered of the race of the Antonines: that was not their first name, but the praenomen; and then, as I find in many books, they are called ‘Antonius,’ not ‘Antoninus;” \textit{Gord.} 4.7-8, \textit{scripsit et laudes soluta oratone omnium Antoninorum qui ante eum fuerunt. tantum autem Antoninos dilexit ut sibi quoque, ut multi dicunt, Antonini, ut plerique autem adserunt, Antonini nomen adscripserit. iam illud satis constat quod filium, Gordianum nomine, Antonini signo inlustraverit, cum apud praefectum aerari more Romano professus filium publicis actis eius nomen inserebat}, “He wrote also, in a lavish speech, praises of all the Antonines who came before him. Moreover, she so cherished the Antonines that, as many say, he bestowed the name Antoninus upon himself; but as the majority declare, ‘Antonius.’ It is sufficiently agreed, however, that he honored his son, named Gordian, with the title ‘Antoninus,’ since he inserted his name with the prefect of the treasury in the public acts when he acknowledged his son in the Roman fashion.”
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{43} Magie 1924, 388, n.2.
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{44} \textit{HA}, Gord. 3.3, \textit{scripsit praeterea, quemadmodum Vergilius Aeneidos et Statius Achilleidos et multi alii Alexandriados, ita etiam ille Antoniniados, hoc est Antoninum Pl lum et Antoninum Marcum versibus disertissimis libris triginta}, “Moreover, just as Vergil wrote an \textit{Aeneid} and Statius an \textit{Achilleid} and many other an \textit{Alexandriad}, so too did \textit{<sc. Gordian>} write an \textit{Antoniniad}, that is, of Antoninus Plus and Marcus Antoninus, in thirty books of very artful verse.”
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{45} \textit{HA}, Gord. 5.3, \textit{Neque gratius mihi quicquam, patres conscripti, neque dulcius potuisistis efficere, quam ut Antoninum Gordianum proconsulem ad Africam mitteturis}, “Nothing pleases me more, conscript fathers, nothing sweeter could happen that for you to send Gordian Antoninus to Africa as proconsul.”
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{46} \textit{HA}, Gord. 17, \textit{Hic...litteris et moribus clarus fuit praeter nobilitatem, quam, ut nonnulli, ab Antoninis, ut plurimi, ab Antoniiis duxit; si quidem argumento ad probandum generis qualitatem alii hoc esse desiderant...quod Antoninorum cognomine semper est nuncupatus, quod Antonium filium suum ipse significari voluit in senatu; quae singula videntur familias designare. sed ego Iunium Cordum sequor, qui dicit ex omnibus his familiis Gordianorum coaliuisse nobilitatem. idem igitur natus patri primus ex Fabia
\end{quote}
at least cohered within a given biography, the internal inconsistencies in the *Vita Gordianorum* highlight the fraudulent nature of the *nomen Antoninorum.*

**Child Emperors**

One of the curious preoccupations of the *Historia Augusta* is the age of emperors, particularly at their accession. This motif has long been recognized, but no systematic effort to explain it has endured the course of time. Its first appearance in the *Vita Marci Aurelii* merely hints at the coming theme, for it tells that Hadrian passed over Marcus in choosing a successor because of his young age. This sensible plan...
assumes greater significance in the *Vita Pescennii Nigri* and the *Vita Clodii Albini*. Both offer similar stories, that Severus had originally planned on choosing Pescennius Niger and Clodius Albinus as his successors because his sons were too young. Yet the details of the stories do not mesh. In the first, the alleged source is Severus' autobiography, which states that the emperor, even while at great hostilities with Niger and Albinus, would have selected them to rule instead of his sons. The second cites Marius Maximus and claims that Severus, influenced by his own biases and by his wife's influence, changed his mind and crushed the two in war. The incongruity suggests that this attitude of hostility against young rulers was an invention of the *Historia Augusta*. In the case of Severus' sons it held true, for Caracalla, in spite of the love felt for him in later years through the *nomen Antoninorum*, was a terrible ruler. But soon Severus is shown criticizing Pescennius Niger for his advanced age. The *Historia Augusta* doubts its own motif at its inception.

The lengthiest statement against child-emperors comes from the *Vita Taciti*, in

---

50 HA, *Pesc. Nig.* 4.7, *in vita sua Severus dicit se, priusquam filii sui id aetatis haberent ut imperare possent, aegrotan tem id in animo habuisse, ut, si quid forte sibi accidisset, Niger Pescennius eodem et Clodius Albinus succederent, qui ambo Severo gravissimi hostes estiterunt. unde apparebat, quod etiam Severi de Pescennio iudicium fuerit,* "In his autobiography, Severus say that, before his son were of such an age that they could rule, he had in mind, as he was growing ill, that Pescennius Niger and Clodius Albinus should succeed him and anything by chance happened to him, although they were both terrible enemies to Severus. So Severus' judgment on Pescennius is revealed;" *Clod. Alb.* 3.4, *Nec negari potest, quod etiam Marius Maximus dicit, hunc animum Severo primum fuisse, ut, si quid ei contingerebat, Pescennium Nigrum et Clodium Albinum sibi substituere. sed postea et filii iam maiusculis studens et Albini amor invidens sententiam mutasse atque illorum utrumque bello oppressisse, maxime precibus uxoris adductus,* "Nor can it be denied, as Marius Maximus says, that Severus' first plan was to appoint Pescennius Niger and Clodius Albinus in his place if something happened to him. But afterwards, being partial to his young sons and jealous of the love for Albinus, he changed his min and crushed both of them in war, being especially influenced by his wife's entreaties."

51 HA, *Pesc. Nig.* 5.1, *si Severo credimus, fuit gloriae cupidus Niger, vita fictus, moribus turpis, aetatis provectae, cum in imperium invasit,* "If we believe Severus, when Niger assaulted the empire he was greedy for fame, false in his life, foul in his character, of an advanced age."
which the senator Maecius Faltonius Nicomachus delivers an impassioned plea in the curia, begging the emperor not to let his young sons succeed him. It contains not only critique of child-emperors but also praise of elderly rulers; however, a closer look reveals the emptiness of these declarations. Hartke notes that when Nicomachus exhorts Tacitus to “imitate your Nervas, your Trajans, your Hadrians,” he fails to define the nature of the imitation. The natural assumption would be the principle of adopting one’s successor that marked the Five Good Emperors, but the Historia Augusta never uses the word adoptare. Citing the model emperors with a rhetorical plural abstracts the process. Throughout the speech the senate is foremost. Nicomachus opens by praising the abilities of his magnificus ordo, and throughout addresses his audience as patres conscripti. Nicomachus removes personal agency from Tacitus and instead invokes the senate’s authority. He credits the senate for the election of an “elderly emperor,” and peppers his speech with colorful flourishes, contrasting two triads of emperors in

---

52 For example, HA, Tacit. 6.2, seniorem principem fecimus et virum qui omnibus quasi pater consulat. nihil ab hoc inmaturum, nihil praeproperum, nihil asperum formidandum est, “We have made emperor an elder, and a man who looks out for all like a father. Nothing rash, nothing hasty, nothing cruel must we fear from him;” 6.4, enimvero si recolere velitis vetusta illa prodigia, Nerones dico et Heliogabalos et Commodos, seu potius semper Incommodos, certe non hominum magis vitia illa quam aetatum fuerunt. di avertant principes pueros et patres patriae dicit impuberis et quibus ad subscribendum magistri litterarii manus teneant, “For if you wish to recount those ancient monstrosities, your Neros, I mean, or Elagabaluses or Commoduses (or rather, the ever-Incommodious), certainly their failings no more those men than of their age. Gods forbid boys be called emperors and youths be called fathers of the country, indeed, those to whom schoolteachers put their hands for correction;” 6.8 teque, Tacite Auguste, convenio...ne parvulos tuos, si te citius fata praevenerint, facias Romani heredes imperii, “I beseech you, Tacitus Augustus...not to make your young boys heirs of the Roman empire, if fate should take you too soon.”

53 HA, Tacit. 6.9, quare circumspace, imitare Nervas, Traianos, Hadrianos. ingens est gloria morientis principis rem publicam magis amare quam filios, “Therefore, examine, imitate your Nervas, your Trajans, your Hadrians. Great is the glory for a dying empire to love the republic more than his sons.” Hartke 1950, 120-2.

54 HA, Tacit. 6.1, Semper quidem, patres conscripti, recte atque prudenter rei publicae magnificus hic ordo consultit, neque a quoquam orbis terrae populo solidior umquam exspectata sapientia est, “Always, conscript fathers, has this glorious order given right and proper counsel to the republic, nor has any nation in the world ever sought sounder advice.”
rhetorical plurals and even punning on Commodus. This is a performance, an
inauthentic act meant not for the emperor but for Flavianus' senatorial audience. Tacitus' sons are only significant insofar as they represent a challenge to the senate's ability to select an emperor; Tacitus himself is relevant not because of his age (his actions are portrayed throughout the vita as almost offensively bland and doddering) but because he was the first emperor in decades to be chosen by the senate. The acclamation in the Vita Probi, which says that Probus was inferior to Tacitus only in years but surpassed him in all else, emphasizes the hollowness of Nicomachus' diatribe.\textsuperscript{55} This passage, which first carries an air of philosophical uprightness, is nothing more than a cynical performance for the benefit of an insular audience. Ultimately, it was in vain: Tacitus died on campaign, and his successor, Florian, was appointed by the soldiers without senatorial approval.

This superficial philosophical opposition to child-emperors fails in practice. Both Commodus and Caracalla became sole emperors before their twentieth years and had shared the throne with their fathers even younger.\textsuperscript{56} Although the Historia Augusta excoriates their villainy, it also emphasizes the important role that they played for their successors as standard-bearers of the nomen Antoninorum and symbols around which the soldiers could unite. Diadumenianus only served with his father and died at age ten. He never had the opportunity to show his vices or virtues, but that does not stop the slander. His brief and derivative biography concludes with letters criticizing his savage father for sparing the lives of rebels. They were supposedly written by Diadumenianus—

\textsuperscript{55} HA, Prob. 11.8, ...aetate Tacite posterior, ceteris prior.

\textsuperscript{56} Potter 2004, 85-6, 110, 133-9.
or perhaps his teacher.⁵⁷ “Aelius Lampridius” casts doubt on Diadumenianus’ hypothetical brutality, then produces another inauthentic letter to emphasize his violence.⁵⁸ So many inconsistencies within such a narrow compass are baffling. The fabrication of a negative child-emperor in Diadumenianus is so transparent that it undermines the entire motif.

The *Vita Elagabali* and the *Vita Severi Alexandri* are thematic complements: Elagabalus exemplifies the cruel and incompetent child-emperor while Alexander Severus’ biography assumes the proportions of panegyric. Despite these contrasts, historically they had much in common. They were relatives, they were deeply indebted to their mothers for their position, and they gained the throne in their early teens.⁵⁹ Historically, Alexander Severus was a relative non-entity, significant for the influence of his mother and councilors rather than any personal virtue.⁶⁰ The effusive praise that the *Historia Augusta* lavishes upon Alexander Severus is curious, especially since it undermines the child-emperor motif. The problem deepens, for the youth of Elagabalus is obscured while that of Severus is emphasized: the age of the former is never discussed, while the latter is called *iuvenis* often—even at his assassination at age

---

⁵⁷ HA, Diad. 8.5-8, *Patri Augusto filius Augustus. non satis, mi pater, videris in amore nostro tenuisse tuos mores, qui tyrannidis affectatae conscios reservasti...feriendi sunt isti, si vis esse securus,* "Son Augustus to Father Augustus: My father, you do not seem to have kept your character in your love for us, as you have spared men who were accomplices in attempted tyranny...they must be slain, if you wish to be safe."

⁵⁸ HA, Diad. 8.9, *hanc epistulam quidam ipsius, quidam magistri eius Caeliani ferunt, Afri quondam rhetoris, ex qua appare, quam asper futurus iuvenis si vixisset,* "Some say that this letter was his, others that it was his teacher, Caelianus, a former African rhetor, by which it becomes clear how harsh the youth would be if he had lived."

⁵⁹ HA, Diad. 9.1, *Exstat alia epistula ad matrem ab eodem destinata talis:* "Dominus noster et Augustus nec te amat nec ipsum se, qui inimicos suos servat,* "There survives another letter written by him to his mother, as follows: ‘Our Lord and Augustus loves neither you nor himself, he who spares his enemies.’"

Not only does the *Historia Augusta* miss an opportunity to further its theme of the wickedness of child-emperors, it contradicts it.

Gordian III, who came to the throne at thirteen, ruled well and prosperously for six years. He enjoys a decent reception in the *Historia Augusta* for all but his age. Valerian II and his brother the younger Gallienus receive the briefest treatment of young emperors. It is said only they were born nobly and died deplorably. These child-emperors are hardly villains. They become pathetic martyrs. Although the *Historia Augusta* purports to criticize child-emperors in principle, in practice it emphasizes their virtues.

The *Vita Cari et Carini et Numeriani* tells how the emperor Carus, while attempting to unify his new empire after the death of Probus, was compelled to set his elder son Carinus in charge of the West since Numerianus was too young. The

---

61 E.g., HA, *Alex. Sev.* 50.2, *ia.m vero ipi milites iuvenem imperatorem sic amabant ut fraterm, ut filium, ut parentem, "But the soldiers already loved the young emperor like a brother, like a son, like a father;"* 56.10, *iuveni imperatori, patri patriae, pontifici maximo. per te victoriam undique praesumimus, "To the young emperor, the father of the country, the supreme pontiff! We seize victory everywhere because of you!"* 61.6-7, *ipsum plurimis ictibus confonderunt. alqui dicunt omnino nihil dictum sed tantum a militibus clamatum "Exi, recede," atque ita obturacatum iuvenem optimum. "They pierced him with many strokes. Some say that nothing at all was said, but that the soldiers only shouted, 'Go! Retreat!' and so was the best youth butchered."

62 HA, *Gord.* 31.4-5, *Fuit iuvenis laetus, pulcher, amabilis, gratus omnibus, in vita iucundus, in litteris nobilis, prorsus ut nihil praeter aetatem deesset imperio. amatus est a populo et senatu et militibus ante Philippi factionem ita ut nemo principum, "The youth was merry, handsome, affable, pleasing to everyone, joyful in life, fine in his learning, such that nothing beside his age wanting for the empire. He was loved by the people and the senate and the soldiers, before Phillip's insurrection, like no other emperor." For his reign, Potter 2004, 229-36.

63 HA, *Val.* 8.2, *nihil habet praedicabile in vita, nisi quod est nobiliter natus, educatus optime et miserabiliter interemptus, "He has nothing noteworthy in his life, except that he was nobly born, given the best education, and slain wretchedly;"* Gall. 19.1, *Hic Gallieni filius fut, nepos Valeriani, de quo quidem prope nihil est dignum quod in litteras mittatur, nisi quod nobiliter natus, educatus regie, occasus deinde non sua sed patris causa, "He was the son of Gallienus, the grandson of Valerian. There is almost nothing about him worth putting to paper except that he was nobly born, royally educated, then slain, not for his actions but his father's."

64 HA, *Car.* 7.1-2, *Ita quidem ut Carinum ad Gallias tuendas cum viris lectissimis destinaret, secum vero Numerianum, adulescentem cum lectissimum tum etiam disertissimum, duceret. et dicitur quidem saepe
Historia Augusta presents this as the wrong decision. Carinus is a terrible ruler, while Numerianus reminds one of Alexander Severus both in his youth and in his virtue. We must return to the diatribe in the preface. The history of Rome is the cycle of its rulers, kings and consuls and princes, all of varying quality. The series of emperors after Augustus proved that the key to the principate was not the current emperor, but his successor. One breath separated the republic from a new Caligula or Nero. Given the youth of these archetypal tyrants, the emphasis that the Historia Augusta lays upon child-emperors makes sense. Yet aged emperors are equally liable to vice and evil, and even a young man can be murdered and inaugurate a new, better ruler. Commodus, Caracalla, and Elagabalus are all young men and vicious rulers, but one could hardly find a better emperor, according to the collection, than Alexander Severus. Such ambivalence invites a satiric reading of the motif of child-emperors. The contrast between the negativity associated with the motif and Alexander Severus’ seeming sainthood suddenly becomes soluble. Despite protestations against child-emperors, young rulers are the same in practice any other emperor: disappointingly mediocre.

Senatorial Acclamations

A central theme in the evolution of the Roman Empire is the ever-diminishing importance of the senate. Once the true seat of power, the curia lost sole authority
after the arrival of the emperors. This new font of power did not rob them of all respect, however. Only the maddest of the early emperors passed decrees without the approval of the senate, and they lasted but briefly. This stalemate endured through the first two centuries of modern era until the sudden murder of Commodus drove the Praetorian Guard to elect a new emperor. The choice, Pertinax, was a sensible and respectable candidate, but he was foremost the choice of the guard. His presentation before the senate was pro forma; their rejection would be ill-advised. Even this compromise candidate failed the greedy expectations of the soldiery, who soon murdered him and cast about for another replacement. Two candidates emerged, a member of the guard named Sulpicianus and a high-ranking senator, Didius Julianus. Through what has alternately been described as “an auction” or “bribery,” Julianus won the principate, and the soldiers forced the senate to accept him as the new emperor. He was assassinated less than three months later.

By the end of the second century CE, the senate had become a vestigial institution without even the power granted to it by Augustus. Yet the Roman aristocrats could not forget the sway they once held. Tacitus laments this loss of prestige under the empire. The Historia Augusta seems to share these pro-senatorial sympathies, but

by the Divine Hadrian, it is as follows: 'Consider, conscript fathers, whether or not it is more just...’‘; 27.9.1, Imperatoris Seueri oratione...et sunt uerba eius huiusmodi: Praeterea, patres conscripti, interdicam tutoribus et curatoribus...si creditor, qui pignori agrum a parente pupilli acceperit, ius exsequetur, nihil nouandum censeo, "In a speech by Emperor Severus...and its words are as follows: 'Moreoever, conscript fathers, I shall forbid tutors and caretakers...if a creditor who accepts a field from the student's parent as a surety follows the law, I decree that nothing shall change." The difference in tone—conciliatory and respectful in one, domineering and imperative in the other—suggests that, even if some emperors treated the senate with its former honor, that was merely an optional courtesy. Talbert 1984, 290-302.

---


67 Compare Tacitus, with his emphasis on extraordinary trials for maiestas and the presentations of quasi-heroic senators like Cremutius Cordus and Thrsea Paetus; Tac., Annals 4.34-5, 16.21-35.
this perceived tendency is undermined by a careful reading of the senate’s words and actions, particularly their acclamations.⁶⁸

In antiquity, an *acclamatio* referred to any unanimous outcry by a group of people, usually of repetitious, almost ritualistic formulae. They could appear in a private, public, or religious context, but in the *Historia Augusta* they are most often addresses by the senate towards the emperors.⁶⁹ Despite claims to the contrary, they are also all inventions.⁷⁰ For example, the acclamation to Valerian on his consulship is instructive: it was supposedly given under Decius on 27 October 251—several months after the emperor’s death!⁷¹

Although much of the specific content of the acclamations in the *Historia Augusta* follows established historical formulae, their fictitious nature emphasizes their peculiarities. The first acclamation appears in the *Vita Avidii Cassii*, where the senate praises Marcus Aurelius for his mercy in sparing the family of Avidius Cassius. The deed and the sentiment are likely true, but the senate goes further, wishing to confer honors upon Commodus, including tribunician power.⁷² This acclamation sees its sequel in the

---


⁷⁰ Baldwin 1981, 146-9. They perhaps are based on traditional senatorial language. There are strong verbal parallels between the acclamation given in 438 CE upon reception of the Theodosian and the acclamation in the *Historia Augusta*. As it stretches credibility to believe that the text was written late in the 5th century CE, the parallels must represent a socio-cultural pattern.

⁷¹ Baldwin 1981, 143.

⁷² HA, Avid. Cass. 13.2-4, *Antonine pie, di te servent. Antonine clemens, di te servent. Antonine clemens, di te servent...progeniem tuam robora. fac securi sint liberi nostri. bonum imperium nulla vis laedit. Commodo Antonino tribuniciam potestatem rogamus, praesentiam tuam rogamus, “Righteous Antoninus, gods keep you! Merciful Antoninus, gods keep you!...we seek the proper power for Comomdus. Strengthen your offspring, see that our children are safe! No power injures a good empire. We seek tribunician power for Commodus Antoninus, we seek your presence!”*
Vita Commodi. After Commodus’ assassination, the senate lambasts him for his depravity. Many of their complaints follow formulae of cursing, but the first words of the acclamation are interesting: the demand that the honors conferred upon the emperor be removed. These are the same honors that the senate had so obsequiously sought earlier for Commodus. Although power in Late Antiquity lay with the soldiers, the vestigial forms of republicanism remained, and in a purely legalistic sense the senate still conferred public legitimacy. In the Historia Augusta, the senate exercises that power by seeking power for an unworthy figure, then withdrawing it only after such a move is irrelevant. The senate’s own actions expose their failure and inefficacy. The acclamationes become the locus of senatorial futility.

The third acclamatio is Alexander Severus’ recusatio of the nomen Antoninorum. The senators’ obsequiousness debases not only the Antonine name but also their own order. Despite his wicked reign, Caracalla receives effusive praise in the acclamation as the first emperor to bear the nomen Antoninorum. In the chaos that followed his assassination many of his sins were forgiven, yet by the conceit of biography that gradual process of emotional reconciliation is compressed to within a few pages. Immediately after the tyrant’s murder, when the senate wants avoid the same fate, it

73 A brief sample: HA, Comm. 18.3-4, Hosti patriae honores detrahantur. parricidae honores detrahantur. parricida trahatur. hostis patriae, parricida, gladiator in spoliario lanietur. hostis deorum, carifex senatus...,”Let honors be stripped from the enemy of the country! Let honors be stripped from the parricide! Let the parricide be drawn! The enemy of the country, the parricide, the gladiator will be torn asunder in arena! The enemy of the gods, the butcher of the senate...”

74 HA, Alex. Sev. 7.3, iniuriam Bassian tu vindica, “Avenge the injury to Bassianus!” Although “Bassianus” can refer in the Historia Augusta to either Elagabalus or Caracalla, mentioned as a source of ambiguity, the first and obvious reading would have it apply to Caracalla. The satire implicit in the name comes upon reflection.

75 Potter 2004, 146-51, shows how the military authority of Macrinus, the immediate successor of Caracalla, was quickly demolished by the fiction that Elagabalus was the son of Caracalla, and the love that the soldiers showed him for that.
decries Caracalla; they would rather have anyone but that murderer. Later, when the senate wants to flatter a new emperor, it honors Caracalla. In these acclamations, the magnificus ordo seems cowardly and self-serving.

The acclamation in the Vita Maximini is an interesting study of Roman ethnography. “Julius Capitolinus” plays with Maximinus’ foreign extraction, describing him as he runs circles around Severus’ steed and consumes Vitellian quantities of food and drink. The biography casts Maximinus in an ancient minstrel show, a characterization further developed by his subsequent savagery. Maximinus killed innocent men, employed delatores, and generally offended the Romans with his barbarity. Perhaps worst of all, he was named without the prior consent of the senate. These accumulated offenses finally drove the senate to name Gordian

76 HA, Macr. 2.3-4, quamvis senatus eum imperatorem odio Antonini Bassiani libenter acceperit, cum in senatu omnibus una vox esset: "Quemvis magis quam parricidam, quemvis magis quam incestum, quemvis magis quam impurum, quemvis magis quam interfectorum et senatus et populi," "<everyone hated Macrinus>...although the senate gladly accepted him as emperor out of their hatred for Antoninus Bassianus, when in the senate all cried with a single voice: ‘Anyone other than the parricide, anyone other than the pervert, anyone other than the foul man, anyone other than the murderer of the senate and the people!’"

77 HA, Maximin. 3.3, tum volens Severus explorare quantus in currendo esset, equum admisit multis circuitionibus, et cum senex imperator laborasset, neque ille a currendo per multa spatia desisset, ait ei: "Quid vis, Thracisce? num quid delectat luctari post cursum?" tum "Quantum libet," inquit, "Imperator."...bibisse autem illum saepe in die vini Capitolinam amphoram constat, comedisse et quadraginta libras carnis, ut autem Cordus dicit, etiam sexaginta, "Then, wanting to test his strength at running, Severus let his horse go in many circuits, and the aged emperor, when he had grown tired and <Maximinus> had not ceased after a great distance, said to him: 'What do you want, Thracian? Surely you would not want to wrestle after a run?' He said, 'Whatever you want, Emperor.'...moreoever, people agree that he often drank a Capitoline amphora of wine in a single day, that he ate a full forty pound of meat (or as Cordus says, even sixty)."

78 HA, Maximin. 13.5, Sed cum Romani eius crudelitatem ferre non possent, quod delatores evocaret, accusatores inmitteret, crimina fingeret, innocentes occideret, damnaret omnes quicumque in iudicium venissent, ex difussimis hominibus pauperrimos faceret nec alius nisi malo alieno pecuniam quasseret, deinde sine delicto consulares viros et duces multis interimeret...contra eum deflectionem pararunt, "But since the Romans could not bear his cruelty, since he summoned delatores, accepted accusers, forged crimes, killed innocents, condemned all who had happened to come to trial, made the richest men terribly poor and sought money in no way other than at someone else’s expense, and killed many former consuls and many generals for no reason...they prepared a revolt against him."

79 HA, Maximin. 8.1, Sed occiso Alexandro Maximinus primus e corpore militari et nondum senator sine
emperor and give him an acclamation. Within four chapters, Gordian and his son are dead.80

The Historia Augusta deepens this failure of the senate by inventing a novelty, the tacitum senatus consultum, on the authority of the fraudulent “Junius Cordus”:

Junius Cordus says that it was a secret decree of the senate...so that nothing would come to Maximinus...but at once, Maximinus found everything out, such that acquired a copy of the secret decree of the senate, which had never happened before.81

Intrigue permeates this passage and creates an expectation that the senate, by using this desperate device, might achieve something. They do not. Even their most calculated efforts at independence are thwarted by a barbarian.

Despite the ostensible barbarity of Maximinus, many of his greatest excesses in fact exhibit ancient Roman virtues. In battle, he is the reincarnation of Mars. He attempted to resign his post after seeing the excesses of Elagabalus, but such was his valor that the emperor demanded him back and Maximinus never had to make amends. He subsequently earned command of a legion, then of all military forces at Rome.

Without the commentary given by the Historia Augusta, Maximinus seems like the classic ideal of soldiery. Some of his plain barbarism even has mitigating factors: when the soldiers at Rome appointed Gordian to usurp the throne while he was on campaign, he raged violently.82 The Historia Augusta explains his savagery as a natural result of

dequito senatus Augustus ab exercitu appelatus est..., "But after Alexander was killed, Maximinus was the first from the military corps who was not yet a senator to be called Augustus by the army without a decree of the senate..."

80 Gordian is acclaimed at HA, Maximin. 16 and hangs himself at 19.2.

81 HA, Gord. 12.1-13.1, Dicit Iunius Cordus tacitum senatus consultum fuisse...ne res ad Maximinium perveniret...sed statim illa...omnia comperit Maximinus, ita ut exemplum senatus consulti taciti acciperet, quod numquam antea fuerat factitatum.

82 Maximin. 17.1-2, Ubi hoc senatus consultum Maximinus accepit, homo natura ferus, sic exsersit, ut non
facing so many threats as emperor; it is the degree of his reaction that is inappropriate, not his anger itself.\textsuperscript{83} The \textit{Vita Maximini} evokes Juvenal 3: the most Roman man at Rome is barbarian, and the strongest opponents of his ur-\textit{Romanitas} are the fathers of the city.

The acclamations before Claudius and Tacitus are, as Baldwin neatly puts it, “pulmonary feats,” but they read like tokens of abject servility.\textsuperscript{84} “Trebellius Pollio” introduces a novelty in the \textit{Vita Claudii}, tallying the number of times that individual phrases are cried out by senators. The quantity is outrageous: forty, sixty, even eighty times apiece for individual phrases.\textsuperscript{85} “Flavius Vopiscus” repeats the new pattern in the \textit{Vita Taciti}.\textsuperscript{86} The depiction of the \textit{acclamatio} in the \textit{Historia Augusta} is not wholly unprecedented: the acclamation in 438 for the reception of the Theodosian Code records many repetitions from the senate, while a fragmentary 6th century CE honorific

\begin{quote}
\textit{hominem sed belum putares. iaciebat se in parietes, nonnumquam terrae se prosternebat, exclamabat incondite, arripiebat gladium, quasi senatum posset occidere.} "When Maximinus received this decree of the senate, being a savage man in nature, he so seethed that you would think him not a man but a beast. He cast himself against walls, sometimes threw himself onto the ground, shouted incoherently, snatched up his sword as though he could kill the senate."
\end{quote}

\begin{verbatim}
\textsuperscript{83} Maximin. 11.1-6, Fuit etiam sub eodem factio desciscentibus sagittariis Osrohenis ab eodem ob amorem Alexandri et desiderium, quem a Maximino apud eos occisum esse constabat, nec aliud persuaderi potuerat...his rebus in dies inmanior fiebat, ferarum more, quae vulneratae magis exulcerantur, "There was also at that time a rebellion of Osrhoenian archers revolting from him out of their love and desire for Alexander, whom they thought was killed by Maximinus and could not be persuaded otherwise...because of these matters, he grew more terrible day by day, like beasts who grow worse the more they are wounded."
\end{verbatim}

\begin{verbatim}
\textsuperscript{84} Baldwin 1981, 143.
\end{verbatim}

\begin{verbatim}
\textsuperscript{85} HA, Claudia, di te praestent," dictum sexagies. "Claudi Auguste, te principem aut qualsis tu es semper optavimus," dictum quadragies. "Claudi Auguste, te res publica requirebat," dictum quadragies. "Claudi Auguste, tu frater, tu pater, tu amicus, tu bonus senator, tu vere princeps," dictum octogies. "$\textit{Claudius Augustus, gods keep you!}$ Said sixty times. "$\textit{Claudius Augustus, we have always hoped for you as our prince or one like you!}$ Said forty times. "$\textit{Claudius Augustus, the republic needed you!}$ Said forty times. "$\textit{Claudius Augustus, you are our brother, you are our friend, you are our good senator, you are truly our emperor!}$ Said eighty times." And so on.
\end{verbatim}

\begin{verbatim}
\textsuperscript{86} HA, Tacit. 5.
\end{verbatim}

171
inscription from Aphrodisias records similar practice in the provinces. The importance lies in the details. The Theodosian acclamation sees a maximum of twenty-eight cries apiece, only for two phrases; most are under twenty. The inscription from Aphrodisias records no single verbatim repetition, but rather a slight modification on a phrase four times. These numbers come nowhere near forty or eighty repetitions that appear in the Historia Augusta. The total quantity tells a slightly different story: the acclamations for the Theodosian Code outnumber those in the Vita Claudii and the Vita Taciti combined, though not nearly by the 28:80 ratio of the individual cries.

The most salient difference between historical acclamations and those in the Historia Augusta is self-determination. Every senatorial acclamation in the Historia Augusta toadies to the emperor. Their boldest assertions are sycophantic pleas to give additional honors to one of the emperor’s family. In the Theodosian acclamation, while the senators duly fawn over the emperor they also make sensible declarations to ensure the rule of law: that copies should be made, to prevent forgery; that changes should not be instituted, to ensure uniformity; that copies should be kept at public expense for the benefit of all. Under the emperors, the acclamation became one of the last tools that the senate could use to assert its will. In the Historia Augusta, it betokens the senate’s spinelessness.

---

87 Maas 2010, 3-4; Roueché 1984, 191-4. Granted that the latter acclamation is from a radically different context, it still provides an interesting and rare comparandum.

88 “Suppressors of informers, suppressors of chicanery!” and “Through You our honors, through You our patrimonies, through You our all!” Translated in Maas 2010, 4.

89 “Many years for the emperors!” “Many years for the eparchs!” “Many years for the Senate!” “Many years for the metropolis!” Translated in Roueché 1984, 194.

90 In HA, Claud. 4: 244; Tacit. 5: 160; Theodosian Code: 453.

91 Roueché 1984, 182-3.
The failures of the senate in the *Historia Augusta* are numerous. The senate’s only grasp at power—indeed, its only legitimate exercise of authority—comes from the failed appointment of a small number of emperors whose reigns could be measured in months. Unlike the emperors who were the true power in the Mediterranean, the senate in its final analysis enjoys no positive valence. There is no Alexander Severus of the senate. The superficial honor to which the *Historia Augusta* pretends only highlights the pathetic incompetence of this once-illustrious body, in a satire that betokens satire at its best.
Chapter 1 introduced the key scholarly problems with the Historia Augusta, including the persistent mysteries of its date and authorship. This survey illuminates the puzzling nature of the biographies and grounds my own interpretation. The most intractable problem is a clear identification of its meaning, for which I propose a satiric interpretation. In Chapter 2 the various manifestations of ancient satire are laid out. Particular emphasis is given to verse satire and Menippean satire in order to demonstrate the stylistic and thematic similarities that the Historia Augusta shares with these more storied genres. Verse satire is represented most fully by the poets Horace, Juvenal, and Persius. They tackle heavy cultural and intellectual issues and challenge the reader to agree or disagree with their assessments. All three treat their exercises as a sort of play: Horace uses the verb ludere, “to play;” Juvenal delights in his venomous verse; Persius’ complex and erudite poems reveal an uncanny intelligence that finds pleasure in arcane efforts. Above all, the satirists share an interest not only in moral or intellectual critique but also in exposing the futility of such efforts. They create personae that seek to revolutionize whatever system strikes their eye, but aside from hollow declamation they prove nothing and accomplish less. The defining feature of verse satire is aporia, perplexity that arises from ambiguity and frustrated expectations.

Menippean satire is a permutation of satiric tropes. Most of its earliest exemplars are so fragmentary as to offer little enlightenment on the development of the genre, but commentary by Aulus Gellius and the extant models of Seneca, Petronius, Lucian, and the emperor Julian show that the genre was more than prosimetrum and spoudogeloion. Menippean satire can deal with high politics or confine itself to the
dinner plate; it can explore the existential dilemmas and joke about defecation. It treats the same subjects as its strict verse cousin, but with an air of fantasy. Like modern science fiction, the conceits of nekyia and catascopia place human figures in superhuman contexts to explore the nature of human existence—an ultimately pointless exercise. From Olympus, everything looks small. Inevitably, the Menippean mindset leaves the reader in the same state of aporia as verse satire.

Parody is a genre closely related to satire, with its emphasis on the reappropriation of generic forms. Although the blatant untruths of the Historia Augusta parody the biographical genre, it is not strictly parody; it contains too much authentic material. Neither is it verse satire nor Menippean satire. Rather, the Historia Augusta exhibits content from all three modes: quotidian themes, narrative ambiguity, and moral exploration. These are the universal constants of ancient satire. They permeate the Historia Augusta and allow it to be understood as a work of literature.

Chapter 3 subdivides quotidian themes into its chief constituents: food, catalogues, sex, and humor. As one of the chief modes of conspicuous consumption in antiquity, food figures prominently throughout the Historia Augusta. The tetrapharmacum serves as a case study of the various ways in which food is deployed. It appears first in the Vita Hadriani and the Vita Veri, where it is described and named inconsistently: sometimes it is made from four animals, sometimes from five, and even then it is still called tetrapharmacum. The emperor Alexander Severus is said to have enjoyed it, a curious pleasure for the collection’s paragon of virtue given the negative moral valence imparted by the dish. Through this morally ambiguous food of uncertain identity, the Historia Augusta serves up a dish comprised of several key satiric traits.
Long, exhaustive lists also form part of the satiric quotidian. The *Historia Augusta* deploys them frequently, detailing Antoninus Pius’ building program, the victims of Septimius Severus’ wrath, and Elagabalus’ worst sexual atrocities in a few terse phrases. Acts great and terrible are enumerated in catalogues whose elements are robbed of their individual worth.

Sex is one of the most primal, primary, and taboo human actions—a natural complement to satire. It is also another way in which emperors can exercise their excess. Incidents of mere derisive sexuality, like Elagabalus’ *bene vasati*, are frequent and outrageous, but the *Historia Augusta* exercises art in its depictions of debauchery. Hadrian is mocked for his licentious relationship with Antinous and his unmanly reaction to his death. This does not quite accord with other ancient accounts of the affair, nor does it match the more factual tone that Tacitus and Suetonius give to a similarly sensational story, Claudius’ cuckoldry by his wife Messalina. The tale of Antinous more closely follows the tone of Juvenal’s sensational depiction of the empress, demonstrating the satiric attitude in the *Historia Augusta* towards imperial lust.

Humor also features prominently. Capitalizing upon the notorious Jewish custom, the *Historia Augusta* pretends that a ban on circumcision led to an uprising in Palestine (the real reason was more prosaic and less Rabelaisian). The “authors” even insert their own jokes—among the transparent frauds are a number of quips and bad puns that suggest an author at play. The four categories of the quotidian bleed into one another, but all leave the *Historia Augusta* firmly situated in the world of the base and common, a key trait of satire.

Chapter 4 examines the narrative ambiguity of the *Historia Augusta*. Untruths
within the biographies have long been noted, but there is also a great deal of factual material. Sometimes, a true story in one life has fabrications inserted in another. Poems are often cited in translation from the Greek original, but several contain verbatim citations from Latin authors and puns that only work in Latin. All seem false—except for the small minority that have been found in obscure fragments and medieval collections. This ambivalence can be categorized into internal ambiguity and external ambiguity. Internal ambiguity consists of the uncertain or false statements made about the historical figures of the *vitae*. Historical, epigraphic, and numismatic sources can help determine when these ambiguous statements are misreported or even invented. Such untruths appear throughout the *Historia Augusta* and contribute to the first degree of narrative ambiguity. When the reader cannot trust the accuracy of the source, he doubts the value of the entire work. Subtler and more damning is external ambiguity, the lies that the *Historia Augusta* tells about itself. These are ubiquitous; not just the invention of six authors and the retrojection of composition decades into the past, but less obvious statements that defy explanation. The “authors” cite translations of poetry that likely never existed, literary sources that are otherwise unattested, and even family members that could never have been. Yet there is always a hint of doubt—enough details are true that, without absolute proof, certainty is impossible. The most conspicuous authorial interjections come from the prefaces that introduce various *vitae*. Nearly all take the form of a direct address by the “author,” usually to Diocletian or Constantine. The deliberate anachronisms are compounded by a general sense of uncertainty. “Flavius Vopiscus” claims to have ridden in a carriage with the city prefect, Junius Tiberianus, on the *Hilaria*. Tiberianus existed, but “Vopiscus” did not. Two major *Hilaria* occur in the
Roman calendar, each one during a different prefectship that Tiberianus held. The faint glimmers of truth are confounded by endless uncertainty, leaving the reader in *aporia*. Ambiguity is a fundamental and satiric component of the *Historia Augusta*.

The great abundance of satiric tropes leads to the conclusion that the *Historia Augusta*, in spite of its ostensible biographic origin, can be assessed better through the lens of satire. Chapter 5 explores the satiric potential of religion. The role of Christianity has dominated considerations of religion in the *Historia Augusta*, centered on an exaggerated notion of tensions between pagans and Christians. Although Christianity quickly eclipsed the old faith after it was legitimized by Constantine and Christian polemicists rail venomously against their polytheistic neighbors, Cameron demonstrates that less biased accounts offer a very different view of the fourth century. Pagan aristocrats were concerned more with maintaining their traditional power than fostering their religion. Classical literature was the purview of intellectuals from both religions. Even the Battle of the Frigidus, traditionally seen as the final showdown between paganism and Christianity, was actually a war between two Christians for political supremacy.

Accordingly, the relationship between the *Historia Augusta* and religion demands reevaluation. Christianity appears most prominently in the *Vita Alexandri Severi*. Alexander Severus, the paragon of the collection, seems friendly towards the religion, at first suggesting a positive reception for Christianity. Closer analysis of each episode, however, reveals ambiguity in the specific phrasing. Alexander Severus’ support for Christianity is often qualified; when he unambiguously supports Christianity (including Jesus in his *lararium*, for instance), the historical context suggests that this virtuous
emperor might engage in questionable behavior. Conversely, Christianity receives a superficially negative reception in the rest of the Historia Augusta, but this hostility too is undercut. Every impression of Christianity, whether good or bad, is qualified upon reflection. Such studied ambivalence is a hallmark of satire but is too dispassionate to be the satiric target. The traditions and rites of the old religion are treated with similar neutrality, except where they touch the imperial family. Deification itself is not disrespected but rather its use as conventional imperial honor. Sacrifice on the Capitoline Hill, a rite reserved in Late Antiquity for ceremonies centered on the emperor, is deplored. Thus it is odd that the villain Elagabalus refuses to ascend the Capitoline Hill while Alexander Severus does so more than any other emperor. Religion therefore points toward the target of the Historia Augusta: imperial politics.

Emperor and senate are both subjected to harsh critique in Chapter 6, through the depiction of the nomen Antoninorum, child emperors, and senatorial acclamations. After the reigns of Antoninus Pius and Marcus Aurelius, the Roman people viewed the name Antoninus as a mark of authority and good rule; according to the Historia Augusta, they would not accept an emperor without the name. Commodus’ villainy could not besmirch it, Severus honored Caracalla with it, and Elagabalus drew upon its influence to legitimize his reign. Despite the name’s importance, the Historia Augusta highlights the degradation it suffered. It invents additional Antonini, even after Elagabalus. It even creates the illusion of scholarly discourse to pretend that its inventions are the product of rigorous research. The descent of the nomen Antoninorum from Antoninus Pius to Elagabalus is exaggerated, becoming a symbol for empire in Late Antiquity—all good must fail.
The biographies seem to savage young emperors, but their analysis is qualified. Maecius Faltonius Nicomachus seems to offer clearest critique of child emperors, but his bluster amounts to feeble aggrandizement of the senate, characteristic of all that body accomplishes in the *Historia Augusta*. Their greatest contributions are *acclamationes*, ritualized chants in approbation of the emperor. The most famous historical example occurred in 438 CE, when the senate greeted a letter from their emperor with an *acclamatio*. Structurally, it differs little from the acclamations in the *Historia Augusta*, but its content reveals a senate that, amidst its fawning, makes sensible demands of the emperor to ensure equity. The senate in the *Historia Augusta* acclaims its emperors only to dote upon them. The authentic practice is corrupted to highlight the failures of the senate of Late Antiquity.

The crisis of the third century inaugurated a period of political instability that endured through the fourth century in the Eastern Empire and even longer in the West. It was amidst this turmoil that the unknown author of the *Historia Augusta* composed his biographies. Its various frauds and infelicities have traditionally been seen as in indication of inferiority, but I have demonstrated that these traits imbue the biographies with a satiric tone, the primary target of which is politics in Late Antiquity. With the palace offering no stability and the senate capable only of abject servitude, a savvy observer would have had no hope that the future would promise anything different. Rather than wallow in the tragedy of politics, the *Historia Augusta* presents a ludicrous vision of life under empire.
LIST OF REFERENCES


BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Shawn Gaius Daniels is a native of Vandalia, Ohio. In 2008 he received a BA in Latin and a BA in Greek with honors at Wright State University in Dayton, Ohio. Since 2008, he has studied at the University of Florida and completed his PhD in 2013.