

Taken or Given?: The Marriage of Livia in Suetonius' *Caesares*  
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Flory (1988) has convincingly argued that Antony was responsible for the hostile slander that Octavian “stole” Livia from her former husband, Ti. Claudius Nero. It is curious, then, that Suetonius records Livia’s abduction in his sympathetic *Augustus* (*abduxit*, *Aug.* 62.2), only to write in the critical *Tiberius* that Nero gave her away (*concessit*, *Tib.* 4.3): why not have her surrendered in the *Augustus* and snatched in the *Tiberius*? Suetonius, furthermore, is the only extant author to write that Livia was both taken and given—Tacitus, by comparison, is consistent that Octavian abducted Livia (*Ann.* 1.10.5, 5.1.2), while Velleius (2.79.2, 2.94.1) and Dio (48.44.3) write unswervingly that Nero yielded her. Suetonius’ handling of the wedding, therefore, deserves closer scrutiny, an analysis that takes into account the biographer’s motives for including multiple, contradictory versions of the same story across the *Lives*.

Although Livia’s abduction might initially seem hostile, Suetonius uses the act in the *Augustus* to suggest that the future emperor mastered his wife. In so doing, he counters any suggestion that Augustus was dominated by Livia (cf. Tac. *Ann.* 1.1-10 on Livia’s overbearing behavior in Tiberius’ forced adoption and Augustus’ death). In the *Tiberius*, on the other hand, Suetonius portrays Livia as a meddling mother, so it suits his purpose in that *Life* to leave her untamed by her new husband. The biographer also enhances his negative picture of Tiberius by having him descend from Ti. Claudius Nero, a defeated man who must surrender the mother of his sons to his more successful rival.

A close-reading of the marriage of Livia and Octavian sheds light on Suetonius’ biographical methods. It reveals that he is not afraid of larger inconsistencies if they further his characterization of the subject at hand. The different versions of the wedding also underscore the fact that Suetonius uses female characters primarily to illuminate certain aspects of their associated men (Riemer 2000; Barrett 2002, 236). In the *Augustus*, the conquered Livia helps to paint the emperor as an autonomous man, the opposite of Suetonius’ uxorious and ineffective Claudius. In the *Tiberius*, on the other hand, the un-mastered Livia reveals Tiberius’ weakness by showing that he was at the whim of a willful mother. In both *Lives*, the manner of Livia’s marriage sets up the sort of character she will be in the biography: in the *Augustus* she is dominated and turns into a passive wife who reflects well on her husband; in the *Tiberius*, she is handed off to Augustus (but never conquered by him) and will, accordingly, become an intrusive mother to the discredit of her son.

Works Cited

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