

Costuming Lucilla in 20th and 21st -Century Screen Productions

Ancient sources are indifferent or hostile to Lucilla, widowed wife of Lucius Verus and daughter of Marcus Aurelius, known primarily for her involvement in a plot against her brother, the emperor Commodus (*HA Marc.* 9.4-6, *Verus* 2.4; *Dio* 72/73.4.5; cf. Ward 2004, 2009).

Screen productions have offered various motives to explain her opposition to Commodus, creating sympathetic figures in late twentieth-century epic films (*The Fall of the Roman Empire* [1964], *Gladiator* [2000]); more recently, a Netflix docudrama has offered viewers a sexually opportunistic and power hungry vixen (*Roman Empire: Reign of Blood* [2016]). This paper examines how Lucilla's clothing in successive productions has emphasized her maternal, sexual, or political aspects: while not all three portrayals of Lucilla address all aspects, her composite sartorial presence is encoded within a larger, evolving discourse concerning the proprieties of women in power. By tracking the on-screen depiction of an ancient Roman woman whose gender was, by some interpretations, her greatest obstacle to becoming a Caesar, we are better able to recognize changes in our own views of acceptable female authority: does a woman need a buttoned up pantsuit to lead a country, or will tasteful exposure of femininity (even sexuality) do the trick?

Sophia Loren's gracefully earnest portrayal of Lucilla in the *Fall of the Roman Empire* (1964), has earned little recognition, perhaps because her famously sensual beauty remains consistently, if authentically, concealed. In her initial moments on screen, Loren's Lucilla is clad in a fur-trimmed cloak and headdress in wintry Germania; she exits Rome, and the film, wearing a dull, loose-fitting *stola* and cloak that fully cover her body. Connie Nielsen's Lucilla in *Gladiator* dons clothing inspired by the paintings of Lawrence Alma-Tadema, a gloss on Hollywood's tradition of historical films, rather than a reflection of the elite Roman woman

(Coleman 2004, 50-1). Janty Yates' costumes failed to meet academic standards of authenticity, but garnered the film an Oscar for best costume design (2001)—a reminder of the dilemmas faced by production teams in evaluating competing claims of aesthetics, authenticity, and the dictates of current fashion (cf. Cyrino 2004). Nielsen's Lucilla also enters the film in concealing clothing, though her opulent lifestyle, rather than her modesty, is marked by the full fur cloak covering her as she reclines in a luxurious carriage on route to Germania's border. Back in Rome, elegantly draped gowns and gauze barely cover Lucilla's shoulders, suggesting the contours of the actress's lithe figure, without explicitly revealing them.

It is in Netflix's docudrama, *Roman Empire*, that the character's costumes most clearly articulate her sexuality. While not completely at variance with evidence for the elite woman's clothing (she wears a *palla* and *stola* in some scenes), plunging necklines and color changes reflect directly on the political ambitions of Lucilla (Tai Berringer-Blades), ambitions facilitated by sexual misconduct. In a red silk garment with a V-neck revealing ample cleavage, she admits to Commodus the motive for her attempted coup: resentment at her brother's birthright to rule Rome ("I never asked to be born a woman"). Generic requirements have impacted Lucilla's transformation, as she is extracted from the historical epic and confined to a small screen, relatively low-budget production. Contemporary gender politics, however, have also made their mark: the most blatant comment on the limitations of Lucilla's gender is spoken by her most recent incarnation, one produced during the first US election that saw a woman running as the nominee of a major party—a Lucilla whose visual iconography and narrative trajectory restrict her to a sexual creature in search of power for its own sake.

Works Cited

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