

Allusion and Feminine Transgression: Zenobia in the *Historia Augusta*

Throughout the *Historia Augusta* (hereafter *HA*), a biographical study of Roman emperors from the fifth century CE, the author recounts the events of Palmyrene queen Zenobia's fight with Rome and her subsequent defeat. As the narrative is heavily influenced and skewed by authorial intent, the *HA* is often ignored for its historiographic contributions (Thomson 2012). Despite its historical inaccuracies, the *HA* tacitly employs allusion to earlier Roman authors to draw comparisons for its own literary subjects (Rohracher 2015). The author of the *HA* tactfully interweaves genres of historiography, epic, and biography—standing out among earlier and contemporary authors for its conscious reception and reaction to previous texts—to convey the ultimate truth about history by problematizing earlier literature and historians (Wiseman 1993). Alluding to previous characterizations of women in literature, notably Plutarch's Cleopatra and Virgil's Dido, the author attempts to distinguish himself in the classical literary tradition by critiquing and breaking rules specific to each genre.

Zenobia appears in several biographies within the *HA*—Gallienus, Thirty Tyrants, Claudius, and Aurelian—and from the first mention of her, the author overtly masculinizes Zenobia. The queen's martial abilities are highlighted ("Tyranni Triginta" 30.14, 30.16), and she is likened to the status of a worthy opponent ("Aurelian" 26.3), a literary motif traditionally employed to legitimize Rome's fight against an enemy (Gruen 2011). Zenobia also appears as having independence and bodily autonomy, uncharacteristic for women in the ancient world ("Tyranni Triginta" 30.12). The author even illuminates the parallels between Zenobia and Aurelian as rulers before his victory over her, associating both with honorable characteristics

such as *severitas*, *virtus*, and *tenebat imperium*, which ultimately would legitimize Aurelian's defeat of the Palmyrene queen and aggrandize the emperor (Langlands 2006).

The author of the *HA* clearly sought to portray Aurelian, Zenobia's primary foe, in a positive light (Thomson 2012). To accommodate the characterization of the emperor after he defeats Zenobia, her masculinization prior to the Palmyrene defeat conspicuously differs from her depiction after Aurelian's victory. This shift in her characterization is distinct from Zenobia's previously underemphasized femininity. The author fabricates correspondence between the Roman emperor and the Palmyrene queen, in which Aurelian demands her surrender and characterizes her as fearing like a woman ("Aurelian" 26.5). After Zenobia is caught fleeing the battle, she is paraded in a triumph weighed down by jewels ("Tyranni Triginta" 30.24-26) and further denigrated by Aurelian when he forces her to assimilate to the customs of a Roman matron ("Tyranni Triginta" 30.27).

This shift mirrors a similar dynamic in other literary texts that depict eastern women losing power to Roman men. Although in literature female rulers appear to have authority, this is merely a mirage shadowed by the inevitability of their subjugation to Rome. Using Plutarch's *Life of Antony*, the author draws parallels between Cleopatra and Zenobia by accentuating the masculine features of both ruling queens. Additionally, the author references Virgil's Dido when describing Zenobia and her assumption of power after her husband's death ("Tyranni Triginta" 30.2). Although initially masculinized, both Dido and Cleopatra's reigns deteriorate after their contact with Roman men; they become distinctly feminized and both eventually commit suicide. While Zenobia does not commit suicide in the *HA*, she is stripped of her queenship and forced to assimilate to Roman customs. The author's intentional decision to mirror this previous approach

to threatening female rulers in literature acts as a piece of counterpropaganda for those who doubted Aurelian's ability to defeat Palmyra: Zenobia's defeat was inevitable.

This conscious literary shift—which transposes Zenobia from an overtly masculine Palmyrene ruler to an undeniably feminine, Romanized, defeated opponent—characterizes Zenobia under the reign of Aurelian in a way that ultimately praises the emperor. While this depiction serves to aggrandize the image of Aurelian, it also glorifies the work of the author himself. The changing depiction of Zenobia displays the author's ability to manipulate his own text as a propagandistic piece by incorporating and manipulating previous literary depictions of notable females—Cleopatra and Dido—to elucidate his defense of Aurelian as a successful Roman ruler.

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