

**NO ‘GREAT’ FLAVIAN WOMEN?  
PROCESSES OF SILENCING IN ANCIENT SOURCES  
AND (EARLY) MODERN SCHOLARSHIP**

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Researchers routinely stress that, compared to the Julian-Claudian period, the Flavian period had no ‘great women’. But what do these researchers mean by ‘greatness’? This contribution examines processes of inclusion and exclusion of women in ancient, early modern and modern historical narratives about the Flavian period. Drawing on the conceptual frameworks advanced by Linda Nochlin and Michel-Rolph Trouillot, the article argues for more complex and more diverse grand narratives about Flavian women: instead of continuing the practice of making these women ‘invisible’, we would gain more by focusing on the subtleties of the act of silencing in both past and present.

*Key words:* Flavian women, gender-based silencing, historiography, greatness, dynamics of power

*Introduction*

Were there really no ‘great’ Flavian women? It has become a scholarly commonplace to point out that the Flavian dynasty, which ruled the Roman Empire between 69 and 96 CE, lacked women whose conduct and opinions weighed on public affairs. Flavian women have been called ‘invisible’<sup>1</sup> and with no Flavian equivalent to the Julio-Claudian empresses Livia (59 BCE–29 CE) or Agrippina the Younger (15–59 CE).<sup>2</sup> The period of the Flavian emperors is consequently often omitted or reduced to the bare minimum in handbooks, companions and anthologies offering some kind of ‘grand narrative’ of upper-class (imperial) women in the Early Empire. In *L’émancipation féminine à Rome* (1978), for instance, Guy Fau devotes seventy-three pages to the women at the Julio-Claudian court, but only two pages to the women of the Flavian court. Similarly, Richard Bauman (1992:9) states that his study on Roman upper-class women’s involvement in politics would end with the demise of Nero because an examination of the women of the Flavian period and the periods thereafter requires ‘an entirely new

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<sup>1</sup> Hidalgo de la Vega 2003:58.

<sup>2</sup> Barrett 2005:385; Schmidt 2012:181; La Monaca 2013:192; Van Abbema 2016:296. See also Cenerini 2021:612.

set of parameters'.<sup>3</sup> Why the Flavian period needed 'a new set of parameters' was not explained, nor what these parameters should look like. More recently, Jasper Burns' *Great Women of Imperial Rome* (2007) allocates only one chapter to the Flavian Domitia Longina (ca. 50–130 CE), the wife of the emperor Domitian, whereas four chapters are devoted to Julio-Claudian women.<sup>4</sup> Why this discrepancy? Did women of the Flavian dynasty not achieve greatness? Or were their achievements just not great enough to get them included in grand narratives of the period?

In this article, I want to shed light on the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion in historiography that led to Flavian women being called 'invisible'. Leaning on the insights of Haitian anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1949–2012), my underlying premise is that an individual or a group is not invisible by themselves but is rendered invisible by others.<sup>5</sup> Power relations, both in near-contemporary Roman antiquity and in later historiography, defined and shaped historical and historiographical discourses on both women and men. It is important to point out from the outset that this article does not aim to 'give back' Flavian women their voices: after all, their voices are irrevocably lost and sheer force of will cannot reverse this process. Nor does it seek to add a token list of 'great Flavian women' to the existing historiography in the hope of thereby compensating for the imbalance. The article does aim, however, to question the assumptions underlying most extant historiography. Its aim is to argue for less simplistic and more inclusive histories.

*Assumptions about greatness and power in classical scholarship since the 17<sup>th</sup> century*

The question, 'were there really no great Flavian women?', is meant to be understood as rhetorical. It is inspired by Linda Nochlin's 1971 canonical essay 'Why have there been no great women artists?', and seeks to expand and redefine our standards for greatness.<sup>6</sup> Nochlin argues that a society's (real or supposed) lack of 'great women' lies in how spokespersons and stakeholders within that society define 'great' and 'greatness', and how those who then repeat and apply such terms

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<sup>3</sup> Yet, see, e.g., Van Abbema 2016, on the many continuities in women's lives in the first century CE, despite the changes in dynastic rule; see also Culham 1997:193 and Boyle 2003:1–2.

<sup>4</sup> Burns 2007. Included are Livia, Antonia, Agrippina the Elder and Agrippina the Younger.

<sup>5</sup> Trouillot 1995; see also below.

<sup>6</sup> Nochlin 1971, reprinted in Nochlin 2021.

champion these definitions by accepting them as the norm.<sup>7</sup> She encourages the reader to start a chain reaction in which existing definitions of greatness are questioned again and again. By doing this and continuing to do so, we can expose our ingrained prejudices and are eventually able to recalibrate existing social categories. Although Nochlin aims to criticize the status quo in art history, her appeal and method are equally valid in other disciplines and studies, such as research on women in antiquity.

In the main, scholars tend to consider only female relatives of the men in power as the ‘great women of imperial Rome’. One of the earliest collections of great women of Roman antiquity which feature women of the Flavian period, is the 17<sup>th</sup> century *Histoire des impératrices* of an unknown author.<sup>8</sup> Intended to serve as a counterpart to the histories of Roman emperors from the author’s time, Anonymus/-a included 54 portraits of famous women, ‘some of them were grandmothers, mothers or aunts of emperors; others were sisters, wives, daughters or nieces...whatever merits they may have had, either for their high birth or for their fine qualities.’<sup>9</sup> Vespasia Polla (Vespasian’s mother), Flavia Domitilla I and II (his wife and daughter), Arrecina Tertulla and Marcia Furnilla (Titus’ first and second wives), Julia Titi (Titus’ daughter but wrongfully identified by Anonymus/-a as Domitian’s first wife ‘Julia Sabina’) and Domitia Longina (Domitian’s wife) are all included. The common denominator in the selection was a formal relationship, either through blood or marriage, with the ruling emperor.<sup>10</sup> A similar principle was applied in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century in Jacques Roergas de Serviez’ *Les femmes des douze Césars*.<sup>11</sup> Roergas de Serviez, however, was even more selective: only Flavia Domitilla I, Marcia Furnilla and Domitia Longina were

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<sup>7</sup> Nochlin’s titular question has been repurposed numerous times, especially in the field of art history; see, in particular, Druckman 2010; also Quinn 1999. Some of these inspired my own writing.

<sup>8</sup> Anonymus/-a 1646. Note that Giovanni Boccaccio’s *De mulieribus claris* (1362) does not include women of the Flavian period.

<sup>9</sup> Anonymus/-a 1646: preface.

<sup>10</sup> Keegan 2017:143.

<sup>11</sup> Roergas de Serviez 1899 (translated by George James from Roergas de Serviez 1718). Roergas de Serviez was born in the Languedoc (1679) and was a member of the chivalric order, *i.e.*, the Royal Military and Hospitaller Order of Our Lady of Mount Carmel and Saint Lazarus of Jerusalem United. Any scholarship on the author, including his literary poetics, classical education or view on women and gender roles, is nonexistent, which is surprising considering the popularity of his book and its impact on historiography and art history (*e.g.*, Ledbury 2004:570–573). English (1752 and later), Italian (1821–1822) and Dutch (1722) translations were published, and the English translation remained in print until 1932. Here, the English edition of 1899 is cited.

included in his narrative.<sup>12</sup> In a few sentences, the author sheds light on what, for him, characterizes ‘greatness’: ‘...only beauty, wit, virtue and courage distinguished Roman women from each other. Because they did not have access to magistracies, it was only by their individual merits that they made themselves noteworthy and acquired glory’.<sup>13</sup> When contemplating the merits of the empresses of the early imperial period, he makes it clear that, with the exception of Livia, the wives of both the Julio-Claudian and Flavian emperors fell short: ‘The other ladies (wives to those emperors who succeeded Augustus, and commonly called the twelve Caesars) had neither the abilities, greatness of soul, prudence, nor policy of Livia’.<sup>14</sup>

For the aforementioned 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century authors, one can assume that they thought of a household in which the norm was a legally wedded man and woman as pillars. Unions between Roman rulers and women not founded on legal marriage were therefore considered disruptive, shameful, and inappropriate.<sup>15</sup> Not surprisingly, women who fell outside these frameworks of ‘wives’ and ‘empresses’ were not included in the grand historical narrative, or, if they did find a place, were sometimes despised, even when the ancient sources (whether in literary texts or material culture) attributed to them an active role at the imperial court with a well-established visual profile or testimonies of their involvement in politics. An example is Roergas de Serviez’ treatment of Julia Titi, Titus’ daughter with whom, according to the ancient writers, Domitian had an incestuous relationship.<sup>16</sup> The ancient evidence assigns complete responsibility to Domitian and remains silent on her agency in the matter. In addition, Julia was included in the imperial propaganda and represented as a potential mother of future heirs, clearly incorporated into the dynastic schemes of the family instead of being shunned for her apparent profligacy.<sup>17</sup> Roergas de Serviez’ appraisal of her was nonetheless condemning: ‘Julia made no scruple of prostituting herself to him who a little before had despised her, and her behaviour in this respect plainly showed that disorderly appetites and

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<sup>12</sup> Though the author clearly wants to focus on ‘empresses’, his selection is *in stricto sensu* not without flaws since of all these women only Domitia Longina was the wife of a *ruling* emperor. Both Flavia Domitilla I and Marcia Furnilla were out of the picture when Vespasian and Titus accessed the throne. See also Keegan 2019:157.

<sup>13</sup> Roergas de Serviez 1899:xi (my own translation, adapted from the nineteenth-century translation by George James in Roergas de Serviez 1899).

<sup>14</sup> Roergas de Serviez 1899:480.

<sup>15</sup> See Hunt 2009, in particular chapter 1, on the existing hierarchies amongst women.

<sup>16</sup> Suet. *Dom.* 22; Plin. *Ep.* 4.11.6–7; Juv. 2.29–33; Cass. Dio 67.3.

<sup>17</sup> Foubert 2021:99–100.

delicacy are incompatible'.<sup>18</sup> Although the author nowhere explicitly states that his condemnation of Julia is based on his dogmatic views on the nuclear family as the pillar of society, with 'wives' and 'empresses' as the only legitimate category, his portrait of Julia here and elsewhere in his text assumes such fantastic proportions that the reader can conclude little else.

But even the more generic and inclusive term 'imperial women' or 'Flavian women' departs from the assumption that power and influence were reserved only for those women who became members of the imperial family either through birth or marriage. What this categorization does not take into consideration, for instance, is a long-term view: which women in the long history of the emperor in question made it possible for an ascent to the throne in the first place; who stood at the cradle of the future emperor? In response to these questions, the catch-all term 'imperial women' works well for those imperial families in which succession was settled in their own dynastic circles. But for the Flavians, whose founder was a new man, this catch-all term misrepresents the picture as there were no 'imperial women' in the family prior to Vespasian's accession, as will be explained in more detail below. When we study the women in the Flavian family in more detail, it becomes clear that sex, gender and class hierarchies varied within and across cultures in the ancient Mediterranean, of which this particular family was a case in point.

To fully understand this, we should first take into account that power dynamics in any given society are not only shaped by those who are in a formal position of power, assigned to them through institutionalized procedures of, for instance, elections or hereditary membership to political bodies, but also by those who remain in the shadows of those formal power structures but impact on affairs of the state nonetheless. In Roman society, one's financial capital (*e.g.*, accumulated family wealth, ownership of estates or factories), religious responsibilities (*e.g.*, priesthoods or participation in religious festivals), military experiences (*e.g.*, actively fulfilling a role in battles, being present near the army during campaigns) or intellectual endeavours (*e.g.*, delivering speeches in public, partaking in public administration) could elevate an individual to a position of influence even when otherwise excluded from formally recognized positions of power such as magistracies, emperorship or even the informally recognized position of 'empress'. This created opportunities for women of all layers of society, from enslaved and freed women to women of substance outside the inner circle of the imperial family, women from the capital of Rome as well as the Italian peninsula and beyond.<sup>19</sup> 'Greatness', in other words, was not necessarily the prerogative of the women related to the emperor by blood or legal marriage.

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<sup>18</sup> Roergas de Serviez 1899:447.

<sup>19</sup> Hemelrijk 2015.

*The 'invisible' women of the gens Flavia and their place in history*

So far, this article has mainly focused on scholarly research on the Flavian period, problematizing the oft-repeated comment that 'Flavian women' were invisible or could not measure up to their predecessors. In part, I have argued, such statements stem from a centuries-long (consciously or unconsciously) reproduced and undefined sense of what makes someone 'great', on the basis of which membership into histories of 'imperial women' is granted. However, when we account for the complexity of power dynamics, we can broaden our view of the past and expand the playing field. At the same time, and this remained implicit in the first part of this contribution, we are of course also dependent on what the source material gives us. Sometimes the sources are just simply silent about some women. They were already rendered invisible in Roman antiquity itself.<sup>20</sup> However, if we collect all remaining evidence (and not just that which testifies to a woman's 'personality'), look back further than merely the time in which the emperor actually ruled (and do more than just 'measure' the impact of a woman on ongoing imperial affairs), and move away from narrow definitions of 'power', we can write a more inclusive history for the Flavian period.

When the Flavian family assumed supreme power Vespasian was sixty years old, and his heirs Titus and Domitian thirty and eighteen respectively. The matriarchs of the Flavian dynasty were long deceased when Vespasian became emperor. Titus' first wife had passed away and he was divorced from his second wife. For many scholars, these basic facts of life are sufficient to concentrate on Domita Longina, the living wife of a *ruling* Flavian emperor. Vespasia Polla, Vespasian's mother, and Tertulla, his grandmother, may well seem merely to be footnotes in our grand narrative of Roman imperial history, but to the Flavian dynasty they were of paramount importance. The Latin biographer Suetonius, who was fond of rumours, gossip and the anecdotal, goes to great lengths to emphasize the obscurity of Vespasian's background: he points out that diverging versions circulated for some of Vespasian's 'background stories'; for other rumours he could not find any evidence (Suet. *Vesp.* 1). Overall, the reader is left with the impression that the respectability of Vespasian's background predominantly stems from both his maternal ancestors and his paternal grandmother and her family.<sup>21</sup> In other words, these women mattered.

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<sup>20</sup> Trouillot 1995:26 argues that such silences occur within the historical process at four moments: during the original creation of sources, the subsequent storing of archives, the production of narratives, and the overall making of history.

<sup>21</sup> Vespasia Polla's father was a *praefectus castrorum*; her brother Vespasius rose to senatorial rank as a praetor (PIR V<sup>1</sup> 300).

Vespasian's roots lay with the local elites of central Italy: his mother and father belonged to families in the Sabine region who had gradually improved their financial positions, enlarged their properties, and consequently had enhanced their social position.<sup>22</sup> Vespasia Polla urged her youngest son to climb the social ladder and rise from the equestrian rank to the more prestigious senatorial rank, a career on which his elder brother T. Flavius Sabinus had also embarked. She is often credited for her son's rise to supreme power. Suetonius (*Vesp.* 1) also mentions that Vespasian grew up under the care of his affluent paternal grandmother Tertulla on her estate in Cosa on the Tuscan coast. The author does not explain why he moved from his parents' house to his grandmother's, but one can assume that during this period his parents were abroad in Asia or with the Helvetii for the sake of his father's banking business. He allegedly stayed devoted to Tertulla's memory throughout his reign (Suet. *Vesp.* 2). Suetonius uses Polla and Tertulla to establish Vespasian's place among the Roman elite, emphasizing that they constituted an intrinsic link in a network of upwardly mobile local elites, whose connections and wealth allowed Vespasian and his brother to embark on their respective careers. Although the shortness of the passages in which he mentions these women might suggest the opposite, the mere fact that the writer names these women is certainly not meaningless: characterizing a new-man-turned-emperor by means of the women who supported him financially and who belonged to the local elites of the Italian peninsula emphasized that a new era had arrived, an era in which the political playing field was no longer monopolized by the traditional aristocracy.

During the last decades of the Roman Republic (83–31 BCE) and the course of the Julio-Claudian period (27 BCE–69 CE), the numbers of those few powerful aristocratic families that had dominated Roman politics for centuries had diminished as the result of civil wars, decreasing birth rates, assassinations and forced suicides under the first emperors. At the same time, Rome's political and administrative system continued to grow and this created unprecedented opportunities for freedmen and the non-senatorial elite, a process which Vervaet termed 'the imperial democratization of the Roman gubernatorial apparatus'.<sup>23</sup> It became clear to many members of the senatorial establishment that they had to reckon with new agents. Their monopoly was challenged; the balance of power had shifted. To maintain or increase their bargaining power, they had to incorporate these new players in their networks. Suetonius' spotlight on Vespasia Polla and Tertulla should be understood within the parameters of that changing world. It is not unlikely that Suetonius' own status as an equestrian played a role in recognising

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<sup>22</sup> On Vespasian's background, see Suet. *Vesp.* 1–2. Levick 1999:5–7; Wellesley 2005<sup>3</sup>:113–115.

<sup>23</sup> Vervaet 2016:43.

and appreciating the fundamental contributions that equestrian men and women made to the weal and woe of the Roman state.

As stated before, Titus' wives were also left out of the picture: death had deprived Titus of Arrecina Tertulla (the daughter of the praetorian prefect who had acclaimed Claudius as emperor), while divorce ended his marriage to Marcia Furnilla (a senatorial noblewoman whom Titus had married in ca. 63 CE). Both events took place before Vespaian rose to supreme power.<sup>24</sup> Suetonius does not state the reasons for Titus' divorce, though it is generally assumed that it was motivated by politics: Marcia was victimized in order to keep the Flavians safe. Marcia Furnilla belonged to the gens Marcia, of which several members had been found guilty (or guilty by association) of conspiracy during the emperor Nero's reign. She was the daughter of Antonia Furnilla and Q. Marcius Barea Sura, whose brother Barea Soranus – Marcia Furnilla's uncle – was tried for treason by Nero in 66 CE.<sup>25</sup> Marcia's uncle had befriended Rubellius Plautus, a great-grandson of the emperor Tiberius and in that sense a potential dynastic rival to Nero. This fact prompted Nero to have Marcia's uncle first exiled and later killed. Soranus' daughter Marcia Servilia Sorana – the niece of Marcia Furnilla – suffered together with her father: she was accused of having consulted magicians to bring about the downfall of the emperor and was condemned to death.<sup>26</sup> One can understand why Titus – and his father Vespaian – thought it best to loosen the ties with the Marcii, at least until the political climate improved.<sup>27</sup> The panoply of Nero's victims fanned out widely, and it must have felt as if it was only a matter of time before it would have reached the Flavians. The blow to Marcia Furnilla's reputation, whose future as a divorced woman remains unknown, was the proverbial 'collateral damage'.

All the women named above influenced the members of the Flavian dynasty in one way or another, whether through their connections, their wealth, or their reputations. None of them was of enough consequence to leave a clearly visible mark on court politics once the Flavians ruled the Roman empire. The two women who did have an impact during the reigns of Vespaian and Titus are the freedwoman Antonia Caenis and the Judaeian *regina* Julia Berenice, to whom we

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<sup>24</sup> Suet. *Tit.* 4.2. *FOS* 93 (with *PIR*<sup>2</sup> A 1073 for her father M. Arrecinus Clemens) and *FOS* 525. It is not certain who gave birth to Titus' only (surviving) child, his daughter Julia; a memorable feat, one would presume. Scholarship usually attributes that honour to Marcia Furnilla; see Levick 1999:27.

<sup>25</sup> Tac. *Ann.* 16.32.3; Dio 62.21.1–2.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Schol. Juv. 6.552.

<sup>27</sup> In fact, after Vespaian ascended to power, Soranus was avenged: Musonius Rufus prosecuted P. Egnatius Celer, the driving force behind the conviction of father and daughter, for bearing false witness against Soranus and Servilia; cf. Tac. *Hist.* 4.10.

shall turn next. Modern scholars have been puzzled by the prominent roles of two ‘outsiders’ at the Flavian court, a *liberta* and a Jewish princess of the Herodian dynasty. The latter, Julia Berenice, is more often included in scholarly overviews of ‘Flavian women’ than the former, Antonia Caenis, an indication that somehow Berenice found more ‘acceptance among scholars’ as an influential courtier.<sup>28</sup> The fact that Berenice was of royal blood probably explains the implicit bias of modern scholars: the place of a royal princess at the centre of power seems easier to explain than that of a freedwoman. Whether it is a conscious decision or a subconscious reflex, instead of ignoring Antonia Caenis because she does not fit the definition – how vaguely articulated that may be – of a powerbroker, it would be more insightful to examine the developments in Roman society that allowed women of Caenis’ social position to impact on court politics the way she apparently could.

Antonia Caenis appears in Suetonius’ biographies of Vespasian and Domitian and in the *Roman History* of the senatorial author Cassius Dio, which we know courtesy of the Byzantine epitomist Xiphilinus. Considering the extensive treatment that other prominent women receive in these accounts, the relatively neutral assessment of Caenis is remarkable. Of the two, Cassius Dio is the only one who adds information that could be interpreted as criticism. Its epitomized version, however, makes it impossible to assess Cassius Dio’s original phrasing or to conjecture what damaging or apologizing tendencies, if any, the text might have had. Yet, the inclusion of this piece of information, as will become clear, may have resulted from the difference in social rank of the two authors – equestrian versus senatorial – and the traditionally held moral codes, political beliefs and consequent traditions that were associated with these ranks.

We should do well to remember that the imperial palace was a crowded meeting-place. It was the residence of the emperor, many of his relatives, their enslaved servants and free or manumitted members of staff. They interacted on a daily basis with members of the equestrian and senatorial elites during formal, ritualized events like the *salutatio* (the daily morning greeting of a patron by his clients) and less formal gatherings like dinner parties.<sup>29</sup> The relationships between all these people were based on balances of power: each individual consciously or unconsciously strove to strengthen his or her position against others in an attempt

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<sup>28</sup> Cenerini 2009, for instance, cites the ‘grandi figure femminili’ of the early imperial period. With the exception of Julia Berenice, all of them are female relatives of the emperors. Antonia Caenis is absent. The same applies for Freisenbruch 2010: Julia Berenice is included but Antonia Caenis is absent. The reverse also occurs, as for instance in Desse 2021 (Antonia Caenis appears alongside Domitia Longina). Notable exceptions are McCabe 1911, and Castritius 2002, who include both, though the former presents them as ‘pseudo-empresses’.

<sup>29</sup> Acton 2011:104; Foubert 2016:146.

to improve on their own quality of life.<sup>30</sup> The more bargaining power one had, the stronger one's position in the relationship. Rank, friendship, social networks, property, personality, even access to the emperor, were among the many factors that continuously influenced such balances of power. When one of these factors changed, the relationship needed to be renegotiated. Women took part in these interactions. Antonia Caenis was one of them.

At the beginning of his *Life of Vespasian*, Suetonius explains in one short paragraph how Vespasian married the above-mentioned Flavia Domitilla I, fathered three children with her but lost his wife and daughter before he became emperor, ending as follows:

*Post uxoris excessum Caenidem, Antoniae libertam et a manu, dilectam quondam sibi revocavit in contubernium habuitque etiam imperator paene iustae uxoris loco.*

After the death of his wife, he resumed his relations with Caenis, freedwoman and *amanuensis* of Antonia and formerly his mistress; and even after he became emperor, he treated her almost as a lawful wife (Suet. *Vesp.* 3; trans. Rolfe, *LCL*).

Caenis was a personal secretary of Antonia Minor, the mother of the Julio-Claudian emperor Claudius and grandmother of his predecessor Caligula. Dio Cassius tells us that Antonia had asked Caenis to write a secret letter to the then emperor Tiberius to disclose information on his right-hand Sejanus, after which she requested Caenis to destroy all evidence; the latter responded that it was of no use as her memory would always contain the contents of the letter, an incident that Cassius Dio (65.14.1–2) clearly considered praiseworthy. Caenis, in other words, had a position of trust at the Julio-Claudian court, which no doubt increased her bargaining power within the dynamics of Rome's court politics.

Suetonius refrains from adding any specifics on Caenis' impact on the imperial reign, limiting himself to the 'love story' and, as has been pointed out above, framing it in such a way that it aligns with his portrayal of Vespasian as one of the 'good' emperors.<sup>31</sup> The epitome of Cassius Dio's book 65, however, includes the following:

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<sup>30</sup> Rojot 1991.

<sup>31</sup> See also Suet. *Vesp.* 21, where Suetonius implies that the emperor stayed true to Caenis until her death, after which – and not sooner – he turned to different concubines of whom none reached the same position in Vespasian's life as Caenis had achieved, so Suetonius seems to suggest. On Caenis, see more generally Wardle 2010; Charles and Anagnostou-Laoutides 2012; Tatarkiewicz 2012; Mustonen 2018.

πλεϊστόν τε διὰ τοῦτο ἴσχυσε, καὶ πλοῦτον ἀμύθητον ἤθροισεν, ὥστε καὶ νομισθῆναι ὅτι δι' αὐτῆς ἐκείνης ἐχρηματίζετο· πάμπολλα γὰρ παρὰ πολλῶν ἐλάμβανε, τοῖς μὲν ἀρχᾶς τοῖς δὲ ἐπιτροπείας στρατείας ἱερωσύνας, ἦδη δὲ τισὶ καὶ ἀποφάσεις αὐτοῦ πιπράσκουσα. ἀπέκτεινε μὲν γὰρ Οὐεσπασιανὸς χρημάτων ἔνεκα οὐδένα, ἔσωσε δὲ πολλοὺς τῶν διδόντων· καὶ ἡ μὲν λαμβάνουσα ἐκείνη ἦν, ὑποπτεύετο δὲ ὁ Οὐεσπασιανὸς ἐκὼν αὐτῇ ἐπιτρέπειν τοῦτο ποιεῖν ἐκ τῶν ἄλλων ὧν ἔπραττεν ὀλίγα δείγματα ἔνεκα διηγῆσομαι. (Byzantine summary of Dio 65.14.3–4)

This gave her the greatest influence and she amassed untold wealth, so that it was even thought that he made money through Caenis herself as his intermediary. For she received vast sums from many sources, sometimes selling governorships, sometimes procuratorships, generalships and priesthods, and in some instances even imperial decisions. For although Vespasian killed no one on account of his money, he did spare the lives of many who gave it; and while it was Caenis who received the money, people suspected that Vespasian willingly allowed her to do as she did. This was inferred from his other acts, a few of which, for the sake of illustration, I will relate (trans. Carey 1925).

Cassius Dio clearly considered her a powerbroker, someone who shaped public affairs. Her position at the Julio-Claudian court, the professional and personal relationships with some of the Roman elites that she undoubtedly would have forged during these years, perhaps even an inheritance that was left to her by Antonia,<sup>32</sup> would all have enabled her to create a financial foundation on which she could build to secure her position in Roman society. Assuming that Suetonius is right when he states that they had ceased to be lovers during his marriage with Flavia Domitilla I, rekindling her relationship with Vespasian would have strengthened her position. The juridical framework created through the *lex Iulia de adulteriis* (18 BCE) and the *lex Papia Poppaea* (9 CE) ensured that a *liberta* and a free-born citizen could not legally marry a man of a higher social status, which in this particular case seems to have benefitted Caenis' position rather than tarnished it: Roman law enabled Caenis to keep every gift Vespasian bestowed on her, whether in cash or in kind.<sup>33</sup> Archaeological and epigraphical evidence corroborate the assumption that Antonia Caenis was indeed a wealthy woman: inscriptions indicate that she owned enslaved persons herself, that she was a patron in her own

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<sup>32</sup> Though we have no evidence to back this hypothesis, it does not require a giant leap of faith as it was not uncommon for a patron to bequeath money or property to his or her freedmen and freedwomen; cf. Mouritsen 2011:242–243.

<sup>33</sup> Ulp. *Dig.* 24.3.1.

right to several freedmen and freedwomen, and that she owned a villa in the area of the Villa Patrizi outside the Porta Nomentana of which parts became known as the *balineum Caenidianum*.<sup>34</sup>

Solely because of her wealth, Antonia Caenis was a force to be reckoned with: she had the power and freedom to tie people to her, to invest, and to aid or refuse help as she saw fit. Having in addition the ear of the reigning emperor gave her a firm basis in the day-to-day practice of political lobbying within state politics. It should come as no surprise that Caenis functioned as a patron who could secure political positions and other benefits for her clients, as is suggested in Xiphilinus' epitome. This was not an unprecedented position for former enslaved persons, as the emperor Claudius' freedmen were able to do the same.<sup>35</sup> Her situation was different from these precedents mainly in that she was a woman, which might have been difficult to bear for the gender-conservative elite circles of Rome whose discourse ancient writers usually subscribe to and repeat.<sup>36</sup> It was, however, far less of a problem in the municipal circles of the other cities of the Roman Empire, the practices of which were well known in the capital, for most elite families in Rome had close ties with local elites, whether through patronage, the estates they owned, business association or family ties.

Emily Hemelrijk convincingly showed that the conventional subdivision of 'the elite' into senatorial, equestrian and decurial elites might apply to a large extent to Rome's *political* elites, but outside Rome, in the municipalities of the Roman Empire, a more diverse interpretation of what constitutes 'the elite' is needed, for the epigraphic evidence illustrates also the presence of *economic* and *religious* elites (e.g., rich businessmen and women, landowners of both sexes, *Augustales*, and so on).<sup>37</sup> Outside Rome it was clear that wealth, status, religious functions, and other spheres of influence enabled men and women of a servile background to count themselves amongst the powerbrokers of their communities. Vespasian, born an equestrian, whose career depended on the financial connections of relatives and friends, not least through his maternal ancestors, must have realized that the times had changed. Rome's senatorial elites might have resisted Caenis' presence at court, feeling that it did not go well with their traditional views on their 'way of

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<sup>34</sup> Whether these bathing facilities were open to the public or not, and whether the facilities took her name during or after her lifetime is unclear. Archaeological studies on this site are LTUR I s.v. 'Antonia Caenidis praedium', 7 (P. Baccini Leotardi); Cristofani 1978; Friggeri 1978; Weaver and Wilkins 1993; Nonnis 2009.

<sup>35</sup> E.g., Dio 60.17.8; 60.18.2.

<sup>36</sup> Nero's mistress, Claudia Acte, serves as the only closely paralleled predecessor to Antonia Caenis; on Acte more generally see Mastino and Ruggeri 1995; Wellebrouck 2017.

<sup>37</sup> See esp. Hemelrijk 2015:14–15.

life', but it did not change the fact that she was indeed one of 'the Flavian women' and an exceedingly influential woman to boot.

The arrival of Herod Agrippa I's daughter Julia Berenice in Rome, and her prominent role as an influential courtier, undoubtedly increased the elites' dilemma. We shall turn to her next and illustrate how she was, due to her status as an 'outsider', simultaneously both included and excluded in historical narratives.

Much has been written on the nature of the relationship between Titus and Julia Berenice, with assessments that range from a star-crossed lovers' true love story to a strategically maintained relationship of convenience, as well as on how Julia Berenice was used as leverage in a presumed power struggle between Titus and Vespasian's right-hand Mucianus and their respective followers. Scholars conjecture that Flavian patronage of literature and the arts contributed to the characterization of Titus and Julia Berenice as a contemporary version of Aeneas and Dido in an attempt to distance the new reign from the Orientalizing tendencies of the Julio-Claudian emperors Caligula and Nero.<sup>38</sup> I shall not repeat all these debates and conjectures, but limit myself to the observation that our interpretation of Julia Berenice's connection to Roman politics owes as much to the narrative strategies and craftsmanship of the ancient writers as it owes to modern scholarship's fascination with eastern queens. Ever since Theodore Mommsen in 1894 coined the phrase 'Kleopatra im kleinen', modern scholars have presented Berenice time and again as an echo of Cleopatra VII, though no ancient writer describes her in such terms.<sup>39</sup>

If the extensive scholarship on Julia Berenice teaches us anything it is above all how elusive and difficult to categorise non-Roman women are. We are in the dark as to the exact date of Julia Berenice's stay in the capital (presumably between 71 and 75/6, and again in 81), nor do we know when Caenis died (probably before 79), but it is not impossible that both lived in Rome and participated in court life at

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<sup>38</sup> Julia Berenice appears in Suetonius' *Life of Titus*, Flavius Josephus' autobiography, *War of the Jews* and *Antiquities of the Jews*, Cassius Dio's *Roman History*, Quintilian's *Institutiones*, the *Epitome de Caesaribus* and *Acts of the Apostles*. For references and detailed examinations of these sources, see e.g., Macurdy 1935:250–251; Krieger 1997 (on Flavius Josephus' representation of Berenice); Young-Widmaier 2002 (on Quintilian's representation of Berenice); Anagnostou-Laoutides and Charles 2015:27–35 (on the elegiac tendencies in the written sources); Macrae 2015 (on Suetonius' representation of Berenice). With regard to the power struggle between Titus and Mucianus, see more generally Crook 1951; Rogers 1980; Braund 1984.

<sup>39</sup> Mommsen 1894:540. See e.g., Macurdy 1935:252; Crook 1951:163; Levick 1999:184; Schwartz 2005:66; also Ilan 2022:138–145 for an extensive discussion of the (absence) of an ancient comparison between Berenice and Cleopatra.

the same time.<sup>40</sup> However, even without pushing the evidence so far as to imagine the elites paying calls to both women in their attempts to discover whose aid would advance them the most, it is clear that Julia Berenice's finances, political and social networks and her knowledge of Jewish politics and religious matters, turned her into an influential personage similar to Antonia Caenis.

What tends to be forgotten in debates on Julia Berenice is the centuries old practice of keeping foreign royalty in the capital: kings who visited Rome voluntarily; those who were captured and put on display together with their families; sons and daughters of kings and queens who were sent to Rome to be educated amongst the Roman elites; royalty as part of official embassies; even hostages to ensure the compliance with Roman decrees of their native states. Julia Berenice's presence as foreign dignitary in Rome was certainly not a novelty.<sup>41</sup> As a Roman citizen and as a woman in her forties, experienced in both life and politics, after three marriages and with two adult sons, she would have been a sought-after acquaintance. This was especially so for the women in Rome's unofficial women's network, the *ordo matronarum*, who would have realized the benefits of having a Flavian connection through Julia Berenice.<sup>42</sup> The main difference between Antonia Caenis and Julia Berenice was not necessarily their respective status as a freedwoman versus a Roman citizen of royal blood but the inability of Julia Berenice to stay in the background. In contrast with Caenis who lived outside the Porta Nomentana, Berenice lived with Titus in the city centre and in the imperial palace and attended meetings in which legal matters were discussed. Whether or not she did so upon invitation by Vespasian is, in a sense, irrelevant.<sup>43</sup> For those courtiers, in particular those with marriageable daughters, sisters or nieces who were hoping that Titus would remarry, Berenice was conspicuously in the way. So, despite the fact that she was not an 'imperial woman', nor a 'Flavian woman', her presence must have shaped the behaviour and actions of those around her. Even though the source material does not allow us to quantify her impact on public life, to write her out of our grand narratives would do an injustice to the complexities of Flavian society. The same applies to the other women mentioned in this contribution.

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<sup>40</sup> Possible dates for Berenice's arrival in Rome and the source material that corroborates these conjectures are discussed in Crook 1951:167; Rogers 1980:91; see Braund 1984 for a detailed discussion of the date of Berenice's arrival to and exit from the city.

<sup>41</sup> Hekster 2010:52 gives an overview of previous appearances of foreign royalty in Rome.

<sup>42</sup> Scholars have called the upper-class women's network *conventus matronalis* or *ordo matronarum*. It assembled on special occasions (often for religious reasons) but undoubtedly also maintained informal lines of communication. See Hemelrijk 1999:11–14.

<sup>43</sup> Convincingly so suggested by Young-Widmaier 2002.

### *Conclusion*

Linda Nochlin (1971) urges us to not attempt to find ‘great artists’ – or, by analogy, ‘great Flavian women’ – but rather to question the societal dynamics that stand in the way of women achieving great things, to assess the criteria that define ‘greatness’, and to identify who sets and upholds such criteria. When we analyse source material, whether art (in Nochlin’s example) or ancient texts and images (in ours), we need to read ‘against the grain, to question the whole art-historical apparatus which contrive to ‘put them in their place’; in other words to reveal the structures and operations that tend to marginalize certain kinds of artistic production while centralizing others.<sup>44</sup> A lack of elaborately written testimonies about women of the era does not absolve us from making an attempt to speculate what their lives might have looked like.

So, what made these women in the lives of the Flavian emperors invisible to both ancient writers and modern scholars? The untimely deaths of some of these women, that is, before Vespasian and Titus became emperor and heir-to-the-throne, made them seem irrelevant to the ancient writers, despite some of these women being instrumental to the Flavian rise to power through their wealth and connections. Authors deemed narration of life stories irrelevant for their audiences’ understanding of the Flavian dynasty, with Suetonius, who does cite the importance of Vespasia Polla and Tertulla, the notable exception. The Flavians themselves also played a part in the politics of selection and the silencing these women. Suetonius indicates that he tried but failed to uncover the details of Vespasian’s family background, suggesting that the imperial family chose not to disclose specifics about their own ancestry. Did they feel it inappropriate or embarrassing to emphasize their ‘humble’ background as equestrians? Was it acceptable to honour the memory of the women in their family and draw attention to their wealthy backgrounds, but not of the men? Or did the men in the family’s history not have good reputations and was it better to let the past be, lest it may tarnish the new emperor’s reputation? We can of course only guess, but raising such questions to begin with opens up new avenues for research.

Then, as now, ‘womanhood’ was a dynamic socio-cultural construct and its meaning and relevance is constantly (re)assessed. Because of an almost dogmatic single-minded focus on the wives of the emperors – or, in the absence of those, the nearest female relatives – scholars seem to have turned a blind eye to the complexity of the balances of power in Flavian politics. Women who did not belong to the category of close relatives but who did make an appearance as powerbrokers in the ancient literature have often been marginalized by (early)

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<sup>44</sup> Nochlin 2021:100.

modern historians. Yet, we shall do the complexity of the Roman imperial period more justice when we are less selective with the ancient evidence and do not structure our historical narratives with criteria such as ‘wives’, ‘empresses’, ‘imperial women’ or even the ‘Flavian women’ of this article’s title.

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