



Caesars' Wives: Sex, Power, and Politics in the Roman Empire

Annelise Freisenbruch

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In scandals and power struggles obscured by time and legend, the wives, mistresses, mothers, sisters, and daughters of the Caesars have been popularly characterized as heartless murderers, shameless adulteresses, and conniving politicians in the high dramas of the Roman court. Yet little has been known about who they really were and their true roles in the history-making schemes of imperial Rome's ruling Caesars—indeed, how they figured in the rise, decline, and fall of the empire.

Now, in *Caesars' Wives: Sex, Power, and Politics in the Roman Empire*, Annelise Freisenbruch pulls back the veil on these fascinating women in Rome's power circles, giving them the chance to speak for themselves for the first time. With impeccable scholarship and arresting storytelling, Freisenbruch brings their personalities vividly to life, from notorious Livia and scandalous Julia to Christian Helena. Starting at the year 30 BC, when Cleopatra, Octavia, and Livia stand at the cusp of Rome's change from a republic to an autocracy, Freisenbruch relates the story of Octavian and Marc Antony's clash over the fate of the empire—an archetypal story that has inspired a thousand retellings—in a whole new light, uncovering the crucial political roles these first "first ladies" played. From there, she takes us into the lives of the women who rose to power over the next five centuries—often amid violence, speculation, and schemes—ending in the fifth century ad, with Galla Placidia, who was captured by Goth invaders (and married to one of their kings). The politics of Rome are revealed through the stories of Julia, a wisecracking daughter who disgraced her father by getting drunk in the Roman forum and having sex with strangers on the speaker's platform; Poppea, a vain and beautiful mistress who persuaded the emperor to kill his mother so that they could marry; Domitia, a wife who had a flagrant affair with an actor before conspiring in her husband's assassination; and Fausta, a stepmother who tried to seduce her own stepson and then engineered his execution—afterward she was boiled to death as punishment.

Freisenbruch also tells a fascinating story of how the faces of these influential women have been refashioned over the millennia to tell often politically motivated stories about their reigns, in the process becoming models of femininity and female power. Illuminating the anxieties that persist even today about women in or near power and revealing the female archetypes that are a continuing legacy of the Roman Empire, Freisenbruch shows the surprising parallels of these iconic women and their public and private lives with those of our own first ladies who become part of the political agenda, as models of comportment or as targets for their husbands' opponents. Sure to transform our understanding of these first ladies, the influential women who witnessed one of the most gripping, significant eras of human history, *Caesars' Wives* is a significant new chronicle of an era that set the foundational story of Western Civilization and hung the mirror into which every era looks to find its own reflection.

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