Staging power: a study of narrative patterns in Herodian's history of the Roman Empire

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4. STAGING, SELF-STAGING, AND OTHER THEATRICAL DEVICES

"Sur la scène s'agitent, en un défilé baroque, les empereurs…"[1].

4.1 Theatre and historiography

The closing section of the previous chapter, which dealt with Herodian's story of Didius Julianus' accession, has addressed how certain devices drawn from the theatre could be applied in the production of a specific historical narrative. In that episode, Julianus and his entourage are briefly cast as comic characters – a boastful, drunk general and a throng of parasites –, while Julianus' mad dash through the city on his way to the praetorian camp has clear comic overtones. These theatrical devices, I proposed, are part of a larger literary arsenal deployed by Herodian as an attempt to process a traumatic event (i.e. the so-called 'auction' of the Empire) through its re-scripting as a dramatic, specifically comic, scene. Applied in fact throughout the *History*, these efforts at theatricalization will be the focus of this final chapter[2].

Though my approach to these literary strategies will tend to concern theatre in a broad sense, it should first be noted that they can often be linked more closely to tragedy than comedy (Julianus' accession notwithstanding)[3]. The tragic leanings of Herodian' work might be explained, in part, through the inherent similarities between ancient tragedy and history, which are "both high mimetic genres, indebted to epic, much concerned with leaders and nobles, politics and wars, nations or individuals in lengthy conflicts, often describing sequences of events that span more than one generation of human experience"[4]. By contrast,

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[1] Roques 1990a, back cover.

[2] I use here notions of 'theatrical' and 'theatre' to talk about text and the performance of that text, but also more broadly, about the phenomenon of "the mimesis through which an audience is invited to participate in an event beyond itself" (ap. Potter 2016, 325-6). With Bartsch 1994, 10: "and although the theater proper need not be, and in fact usually is not, a factor shaping the interaction in question, the notion of theatricality borrows from the theater its terms, its emphasis on role-playing, and its focus on the function of the gaze." On the possible concerns with using the theatre as a conceptual tool in literary criticism, see e.g. Mundt 2012, 175-7.

[3] Given this predominant position of tragic over comic in Herodian's *History*, I will often use the term 'theatre' with a tragic connotation. Similarly, 'theatrical' and 'dramatic' are understood here as pertaining to the patterns, devices, themes, characters, structures of stage productions, and not in the (usually negative) sense of a bombastic, sensationalist literary style, allegedly so incompatible to 'good' or 'proper' historical work. See e.g. Fischer-Lichte 1995 for a brief overview of the notion of 'theatricality' in literary and cultural studies.

[4] Rutherford 2007, 504; on the mimetic aims of historiography in comparison with tragedy, see also Ullmann 1942; Walbank 1960, esp. 221-30; Fornara 1983, 126-37; Woodman 1988, 25-27; with the references cited in the next note.

comic plots and themes (at least in playwrights coming after Aristophanes, who himself worked – overtly – with political satire and contemporary topics) typically featured day-to-day existence and ordinary people. Since Herodian's story is mainly interested in bigger-picture events and imperial history, to the point where it streamlines many historical episodes, the author purposefully glosses over several aspects of everyday life that he deems unrelated to imperial business. Accordingly, specifically comic elements in the *History* tend to be used sparingly and only in particular instances, and do not run through the whole work like certain tragic attributes, such as the importance of fate or a moralizing discourse[5].

But beyond any distinction to be made between tragic and comic influences in the *History*, Herodian's work is permeated with the broader notions of staging and visualization. Citing Herodotus' story of Croesus (*Hist.* 1.34ff), Fornara has argued that the first (Greek) historians already "visualized episodes as if they formed the scenes of a play."[6] As a more or less recent strain in scholarship has shown, this has been an enduring practice, seen in many subsequent historians – if not, to varying degrees, most of them[7]. Certain dramatic tendencies can also be observed in both Greek and Roman authors[8], even though some, like Polybius, might themselves claim otherwise[9]. Parallel to these considerations on dramatic history-writing runs the ever-controversial question of 'tragic history', which would have flourished during the Hellenistic period with authors now lost or fragmentary[10]. Scholars disagree not

[5] On the presence of these tragic themes (and others) in ancient history, see e.g. Foucher 2000, esp. 778-9; Galtier 2011, 19-30. On comedy and history, see recently Baron 2017, with additional references: Baron discusses the relationship between poetry, and specifically comedy, and history, through an analysis of Duris of Samos' use of comic pieces (these boost the vividness of his own narrative, are markers of erudition, and serve as historical sources since they constitute contemporary (literary) evidence).

[6] Fornara 1983, 171-2. It could be worth considering this scenic conception of history-writing in imperial historians in connection with the fact that Greek tragedy (at least) had long been performed in the Roman Empire as excerpted scenes; see e.g. Jones 1993, 40.

[7] See, with additional references within, Griffin 2006 (on Herodotus); Ponchon 2008 (on Thucydides); Foucher 2000 (on Sallust, Livy, and Tacitus); Späth 1998 (on Sallust); Feldherr 1998 (on Livy); Ullmann & Price 2002 (on Josephus); Woodman 1993 and Galtier 2011 (on Tacitus); Gleason 2011 (on Cassius Dio), etc. – far from being exhaustive, this list has no such ambition and is given merely to impress the range of such practices within Graeco-Roman historiography.

[8] On the Latin side of the things, this tendency might have taken root in its own literature, namely the first epics and the *fabulae praetextae*, rather than having come directly from Greek models; on this point, see for instance Foucher 2000, 780-7.

[9] This defence appears in Polybius' famous criticism of the now lost Hellenistic historian Phylarchus (Polyb. 2.56-63); see Farrington 2016. Marincola 2013 argues that Polybius' argument is less about style than it is about Phylarchus' misrepresentation of facts and distortion of truth. Polybius' claims have also been picked up by Plutarchus (Plut., *Arat*. 38), who nevertheless used Phylarchus in his own *Lives* of Agis, Cleomenes, and Pyrrhus.

[10] Commonly interpreted through Aristotle's oft-cited distinction between poetry and history (Aristot., *Poet*. 1451a-b), fragments of Hellenistic historians like Duris of Samos, and Polybius' lengthy criticism of Phylarchus (cited above), tragic history is often criticized for its rhetorical style and loose approach to (what is deemed as) 'truth'. Cf. also Quint. 10.1.31: "History is very close to the poets. In a sense it is a prose poem, and it is written to tell a story, not to prove a point. Moreover, it is wholly designed not for practical effect and present conflicts, but to preserve a memory for future generations and for the glory of its author's talents." (*est enim proxima poetis, et quodam modo carmen solutum est, et scribitur ad narrandum, non ad probandum, totumque opus non ad actum rei pugnamque praesentem sed ad memoriam posteritatis et ingenii famam componitur*)

only on its criteria or its origins, but also on its very existence[11]; as such, it has often been called a 'modern invention'[12]. The point here is not to add to this vast debate, nor is it to place Herodian within that specific trend. For our present purposes, what is important to take away from these reflections is that dramatic writing *can* be positively combined with historiography, whatever the form or the extent to which this may take effect[13].

Following on from this long historiographical tradition, Herodian also displays such dramatic dispositions in his own praxis, in the pursuit of vividness and verisimilitude. While it would be difficult to argue that Herodian's *History* is wholly and consistently a tragic (and much less comic) history, the historian undeniably makes frequent use of techniques more commonly associated with the theatre. This feature of Herodian's writing has been underlined on occasion by scholars, but this has generally been viewed as a sign of the historian's poor method[14]. Marasco has also concluded that the historian's methods linked the work to the "modello della storiografia 'tragica'"[15] Against these generally negative conclusions, I aim, in this final discussion, to reassess Herodian's use of dramatic devices, as well as his application of a broader literary strategy of 'staging'. Combining intra- and intertextual approaches drawn from the previous two, this chapter looks into the use of techniques appropriated by a specific medium, theatre, in regards to the *History*'s structure, plot, and character types. A more extensive survey of the similarities between theatre and history will first lead to a short discussion around the notions of 'vividness', 'spectacle', and '(self-)staging'. From these fundamentals and how they can act on perception, representation, and story-writing, I will

[11] One enduring theory concerning (Greek) tragic history is that it originated from the Peripatetic school as a subversion of Aristotle's writings; see the arguments in Walbank 1955, 5-7 (against) and Brink 1960 (in favour). Genuine or not, this theory is at least worth noting for the idea of literary criticism practiced through history-writing, as well as its positive outlook on genre blending. On tragic history, see Walbank 1960; Brink 1960; Fornara 1983, 124-34; Longley 2013; Farrington 2016, etc.

[12] Walbank 1960, 233-4 even advocated a total rejection of the expression 'tragic history' from scholarship, since the term had been invented by modern critics "in order to reunite what few Greek writers were interested in dividing" (quote at 233).

[13] With this in mind, Polybius' emphatic effort to separate history from tragedy must in fact comfort their inherent similarities – thus the conclusions of Walbank 1960; with Feldherr 1998, esp. 165-8, through a reading of Livy.

[14] Already in Fuchs 1895-6; with e.g. Hohl 1950; Kolb 1972. More recently, however, see Molinier Arbo 2018, 193: "Bien qu'il s'en défende dans la Préface, on peut à bon droit classer l'écrivain parmi les historiens 'tragiques' et 'rhétoriques'"; with 194, citing the Issos description and overall episode: "En somme, l'*oikoumène* d'Hérodien n'est rien d'autre qu'une immense scène de théâtre, un décor se prêtant merveilleusement aux drames humains." Mundt 2012 has a slightly different outlook on the theatricality of Herodian's method of composition, which might tie in with notions of 'pré-cinéma' (broadly speaking, the idea that cinematic sensibilities existed before the materialization of cinema through technology, see e.g. Léglise 1958). In fact, Herodian's work has been called "almost cinematic" (Andrews 2019, 36; or Hekster 2017, 10: "een bijna filmisch beeld"), and has even been compared to sitcoms (Bekker-Nelsen 2014, 230-1).

[15] Marasco 1998, 2904, also noting its connections with Antonine historiography (anticipating, in a way, Kemezis 2014). Alföldy 1971c, 90-92 had already defined these passages as 'dramatic': the opposition between Pompeianus and Commodus (1.6.3-7); the dialogue between Pertinax and Laetus (2.1.5-11); Fadilla's plea to Commodus (1.13.1-4). Marasco 1998, 2906 also cites the following scenes: Pertinax's offer to Glabrio (2.3.3-4); the dialogue between Plautianus and Severus (3.12.9-11); Julia Domna's plea to her sons planning to divide the Empire (4.3.8-9); in addition to most of the *History*'s plot narratives. Alföldy 1971b, 433, considered that this dramatic tendency had Thucydidean influences. Castelli 2008, 115-16, n. 45 argues that these (negative) focus on tragic patterns, rather than language ("sobria e moderata").

then examine how Herodian can produce a 'stage' within the story and how characters are then made to perform scenes on that 'stage'. This first part concludes with certain key moments in which spectacle is experienced on multiple story levels, from an internal spectatorship to Herodian's readership.

A second part is devoted to characters and, more specifically, character *types*. Noting their schematized features, some scholars have likened Herodian's characters to "literary mannequins"[16] in order to underline their stock attributes and the absence of character depth. Echols remarked that Herodian's "men on all levels were given a curious sameness of character"[17]. Unsurprisingly, this alleged lack of personality of the characters, and especially the emperors, was used to argue for Herodian's 'bad' or 'lazy' writing[18]. I suggest instead that Herodian resorts, here again, to a strategy of balancing 'same' and 'different', namely to emphasize certain unusual characters and their impact, both narrative and political, on the story. In order to give close attention to these moments of characterization, I have chosen to focus in this section on two such examples, Maximinus and Julia Maesa, who are in Herodian's *History* somewhat unique, all the while belonging to popular types in ancient literature. Taking this intersection of the new and the familiar as a starting point, I propose to read these characters through a dramatic filter, in such a way that their portrayal influences the whole quality of their stories, the actions of other characters, and the space around them. Frequently called the 'barbarian' emperor, Maximinus is consequently depicted with so-called ('northern', as opposed to Heliogabalus' orientalism) barbarian attributes, both to illuminate and to explain certain elements of his character, as well as his policies. As Maximinus has been the object of several recent studies, I intend to lean fully into this 'barbarization' of the emperor and re-envision him as a dramatic character. The second character I examine is Maesa, as an incarnation of a powerful queen, in the likes of Cleopatra, Livia, or her own sister, Julia Domna. It is rather curious that, for all the authority Maesa displays in Herodian's *History*, to the point where she rivals even Heliogabalus himself, history has somewhat forgotten her. I delve into Maesa's character as shaped by Herodian, how she interacts with Heliogabalus, and how her personal will is made into the organizing principle of the greater parts of books 5 and 6.

Turning to plot types, I break down the deaths of three emperors into patterns of conspiracy narratives. Commodus' death is, in Herodian's version, a long and vivid story, formed around a typical recognition plot. However, once the emperor's initial conspiracy is found out, the targeted individuals come together to collude against Commodus in a mirror sequence of plot and counterplot. Similarly, Geta's murder at the hands of his brother Caracalla is reminiscent of infamous fratricides. Yet Caracalla succeeds into spinning an entirely different story, in which he recast himself as the victim of his brother's wrath. Ironically, Caracalla would meet his own end through Macrinus' elaborate scheme. In fact,

[16] Bird 1976, 85 (responding to Piper 1975): "Of the people he supposedly brought to life some are literary mannequins, others would not be out of place in the *Historia Augusta* or Robert Graves' fictional works."
[17] Echols 1961, 7, noting a similarity with Cornelius Nepos and adding that, "with Nepos, the career of one Greek general is very much like that of any other Greek general."
[18] Echols 1961, 6-7; Bird 1976.

Herodian shapes this episode as stage production put on by Macrinus, complete with a convoluted plot, a scapegoat, and fake emotions. I end this chapter with a discussion on the episode of the joint accession of Maximus and Balbinus, portrayed as an idealized image of days long past. Instead of reactivating old traditions, such as an elected college of rulers, the senators will merely stage a re-enactment of a distant past, comforting but lacking effective power in the present reality.

4.2 Spectacle and stage productions

The endurance (or not) of formal drama, that is tragedy and comedy, throughout the imperial period and across the Empire is a thorny question that has preoccupied many scholars over the years – I certainly have no pretention to add to this debate[19]. For our current purposes, let us simply assume that stage productions were still very much a part of social life in the Roman Empire, whether it was in the form of tragedy and comedy, or of mime and pantomime[20]. Probably, it was, at least during Herodian's time, a mix of both, perhaps with a predominance of the latter two modes[21]. Nevertheless, theatre remained an important aspect of Graeco-Roman public interaction. So suggests Herodian: when Severus cracked down on Byzantium for its previous alliance with Niger, the city, stripped of all its marks of prestige and *ciuitas* like theatres and baths (3.6.9), is described as having become a simple "village" (κώμη)[22].

In Greek tragedy, we can see contemporary history peeking through in various instances (whether by way of brief allusions or extended metaphors), but only rarely does it constitute a play's subject matter. Aeschylus' *Persae* is our only extant such example, though a handful of other plays are recorded: *Sack of Miletus* and *Phoenissae* by Phrynicus (late sixth to early fifth century BC), *Themistocles* and *Pheraioi* by Moschion (third century BC), and perhaps the anonymous (and possibly) Hellenistic play *Gyges*[23]. As mentioned earlier, Aristophanes' comedies are, for that matter, an interesting counterpoint, since they deal frontally with contemporary (political) events and figures. On the Roman side, the *fabula praetexta* (regardless of its likely disappearance by the time of our historian) might also have

[19] See an overview in Jones 1993; with Dunbabin 2006, 191-2 and Potter 2006, esp. 394-6, both with additional references.

[20] The production of new plays likely waned at the turn of eras, though the 'classics' must have continued to be put on well into the imperial period, cf. Cass. Dio 62(61).17.3 and *SHA*, *Hadr*. 16.8, with an oblique reference in Herodian, at 3.13.3 (Severus used "plays and tales of long ago" [μύθων τε ἀρχαίων καὶ δραμάτων] of feuding royal brothers in his attempts at reconciling his sons). It should also be noted that tragic and comic pieces were included in rhetorical curricula, for their style, language, character composition, and production of the sublime (e.g. Quint. 10.65-72 and 97-100; even briefly in Marc. Aurel., *Med.* 11.6.1).

[21] On the likely predominance of mime and pantomime during the imperial period in Herodian's lifetime, see e.g. Csapo & Slater 1995, 369-70 ("while the old Atellan farce persisted well into imperial times in changed form"), 372-3 ("if mime was the successor to comedy, pantomime was the natural successor to tragedy"; cf. e.g. Suet., *Calig.* 57.9); with Potter 2006, 395-6.

[22] Rome would suffer a similar fate later under Maximinus, who raided the public funds and melted down every piece of decoration (7.3.5); on this action as part of Maximinus' 'tribalization' of the Empire, see below, [210-11].

[23] See an overview in e.g. Bowie 1997, 40-45.

influenced historiographical practices, since it was a place where history and (tragic) theatre met through the re-enactment of contemporary events, mostly the feats of the aristocratic families, during games and celebrations[24]. If this genre had probably lost currency by the time Herodian wrote the *History*, it seems reasonable to consider it would have left its mark on historiography, absorbed if you will in this other literary strand. This may have been especially so in the case of a piece of contemporary imperial history whose entire arrangement hinged on strong imperial figures[25].

What a show!

In any case, spectacle appears to have continued to be an important component of everyday life, even beyond the formal stage. Roman (upper) society, down to the very floor plans of the houses (cf. Vitr. 6.5.1-2), was built around a clear division between private and public space. Within the latter, conduct and interaction were grounded in highly codified principles (even rituals) of sociability. Following this, moral virtue and power were valued (in aristocratic circles) as attributes to be shown and seen and, accordingly, were liable to be carefully curated, even methodically 'staged'[26]. There were thus many occasions to see and be seen by others on the public 'scene', and the theatre (and amphitheatre) was a prime opportunity – not least because the sheer number of festival days set in the Roman calendar allowed for frequent outings[27]. And in fact, the theatre could even recreate social hierarchy within a single, closed location, since seating was pre-determined by one's rank or condition (cf. 1.9.3; 5.5.9)[28]. In this replica of real society, the show was as much off stage as it was on it[29]: "[a]ncient audiences were trained in active spectatorship and were not simply passive

[24] Appearing in the early stages of Roman drama, the first known examples come from Naevius in the third century BC, namely the *Clastidium* recounting the eponymous victory won over the Celts by M. Claudius Marcellus in 222 BC. The later *Octavia* (most likely from the second half of the first century AD), written by the anonymous author that moderns have taken to naming 'Pseudo-Seneca', is the only surviving complete *fabula praetexta* – though the play is not universally recognized as such. On *fabula praetexta*, see Manuwald 2001; with Flower 1995; Wiseman 1996, 154-5, etc.

[25] More generally, as Underwood 2019, 150 states: "There were almost no spectacle buildings constructed in the West after the end of the 3rd c., and, even though repairs and restorations on all types of buildings were common in the 4th c., they declined quickly thereafter." Since this architectural shift must have coincided with a decline of new plays, this might also have had a certain effect in the production of a 'dramatic' history such as Herodian's piece, even though some of these aspects were already found in much earlier historiography.

[26] Parallels may be drawn between this idea of public 'performance' and Herodian's own interest in emperors as public *personae* and not private individuals.

[27] Kyle 2014[2], 290: there were, in one year, 135 state-funded game days out of 230 festival days under Marcus Aurelius; also Veyne 1976, 702-3 (at the end of the second century: "quatre mois de vacances", in addition to the shows organized by the emperor).

[28] At least in principle; contrast Suet., *Aug.* 44 (in which a dress code is also mentioned) and *Claud.* 21 with *Dom.* 8.3. On theatre seating as a social metaphor, see e.g. Clavel-Lévêque 1984, 153-60; with Coleman 1990, 72-73 and Edwards 1993, 112-13. See also Rawson 1987, more generally on the political and social implications of theatre seating in Rome, especially under Augustus with the *lex Iulia theatralis*; the law may well have been applied to events held in the amphitheatre (at 86-87).

[29] According to Bartsch 1994, 2, the show, in situations of confrontation, might even be incidental: "[s]ince both emperor and populace are located in the audience, they themselves become the object of each other's attention rather than the stage, and the theater or circus merely the site for their clash."

recipients, but interactive agents." [30] As we will see below, Roman imperial power, in essence a very visible attribute, was a natural 'star', both in reality and in text[31].

Connected to this idea of a staged presence are the notions of the spectacle and the spectacular, which can be roughly defined through the intersection of public display, constructed narrative, entertainment, and glitzy pomp. This is in fact at the root of the ever-growing popularity of all sorts of shows in Rome, but perhaps especially the more violent ones like gladiatorial combats (*munera*), naval battles (*naumachiae*), and animal hunts (*uenationes*)[32]. Gladiator shows, in particular, have received much attention from scholars, namely for the ways in which it created a space for the experience and enjoyment of publicly sanctioned violence, in close connection to (the idea of) death[33]. Moreover, these events were associated early on to an exaltation of Roman martial virtues and became, by extension, a (symbolic) feature of *Romanitas*; Greek cities under Roman rule could put forward claims of 'Romanness' by producing such shows. All of this to say that the ubiquitous presence of games and shows in Graeco-Roman society, and especially its marked interest and exposure to publicly sanctioned violence, as well as its "increasing taste for realism on the stage"[34], must have had an impact on the sort of stories produced and the ways in which historical events could be processed and would have been (re)framed in naratives. This pervasiveness of spectacle has led Plass to note how it felt "natural to think of the Roman historians as writing political theatre."[35]

This understanding of spectacle, as part and parcel of society, circles back to the theory that the whole public space was in a fact a 'stage': as Martin comments, "from a performance perspective the landscape of everyday life outside the theatre is never flatly undramatic."[36] Accordingly, spectacles are a frequent occurrence in Herodian's *History*. As we have seen

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[30] Bakogianni 2015, 5, also noting how ancient spectacle "engaged all five of the spectators' senses".

[31] E.g. Gleason 2011, 46: "Dio also shares Tacitus' preoccupation with the theatricality of imperial power, and the consequent tension between appearance and reality."

[32] For a good overview of all these types of spectacles, see Potter 2006; also Martin 2007, on 'performance culture' in Greece and Rome, inside and outside the formal setting of the theatre. Beyond the dramatic stage, political suicide and public executions were other sorts of shows based in socially acceptable violence (see e.g. Coleman 1990; Plass 1995).

[33] Coleman 1990, 67, talking about public executions more generally: "the outcome of fatal encounters in the amphitheatre was predictably ritualized in terms of the transition to the underworld". Among the many studies on *munera*, see e.g. Wiedemann 1992 (1-54 on "Gladiators and Roman identity"); Plass 1995 (for an analysis based on game theory); Kyle 1998; Edwards 2007, 46-77 (with a focus on spectacle); Dunkle 2008; Kyle 2014[2] (269-73, for a brief survey of the main arguments on their functions), etc.

[34] Coleman 1990, 68, further explaining how "in the *damnationes* performed in the amphitheatre, dramatic scenes that had hitherto been acted out in the theatre as mere make-believe could now be actually recreated and played out 'for real'." Coleman also argues that humiliation, and therefore spectacle, was the central point of these executions, while death was "almost incidental" (at 69). Cf. Martial, *Spect.* 5.2 (*uidimus, accepit fabula prisca fidem*).

[35] Plass 1988, 10-11. Plass also argues: "Since public entertainment or displays by the emperor could in fact be an extension of politics by other means, there was at Rome an element of real make-believe that could lend events a fictional quality." (quote at 11)

[36] Martin 2007, 42. Cf. Coleman 1990, 73, from the perspective of theatricalized public executions: "to witness the enactment of myth here was to experience *not escapism but reality*" (my emphasis). Wessels 2006 talks about the intersections, and even fusion, between aesthetics and politics within the theatre in imperial times: "Das Theater wird damit endgültig zu einem Ort, in dem Politik nicht nur kommentiert, sondern in erster Linie gemacht wird." (quote at 9)

many times in the previous chapters, emperors would put on shows to garner the people's favour (e.g. Severus, 3.8.9-10: ποιεῖν κεχαρισμένα), could themselves be engrossed too deeply in games and shows to the point where they might neglect their duties (Commodus, Julianus, Niger, Caracalla, Geta, Macrinus, Heliogabalus) or politicize racing factions (Caracalla, Geta), and might even stage themselves as actors, gladiators, charioteers, or hunters (Commodus, Caracalla, Heliogabalus). Prime seating at the theatre is also described as having been a source of pride for Lucilla, Commodus' sister, and her eventual loss of this privilege in favour of her new sister-in-law Crispina is given as cause for serious grievance, even leading her to plot against her brother (1.8.4). Evidently the people too would gather at the theatre (or amphitheatre) during the many games and shows, but they would also come to invest these locations at times of great despair (cf. 1.12.5, against Cleander; 2.7.2, against Julianus, in favour of Niger)[37].

Beyond these specific instances, the very fabric of the *History* seems imbued with a sense of *spectaculum*, echoing perhaps the Polybian θεώρημα (cf. Polyb. 1.2.1)[38]. This idea can be extended to the creation of a 'stage' within Herodian's historical narrative itself, the production of a whole 'theatrical universe' seeping through the facts, people, places, and events that make up (Herodian's account of) the years 180-238 in Roman history. And through patterns, models, and dramatic devices, Herodian can bring his story to life before the 'eyes' of the reader. Owing to its impressionistic sequences, the *History* might, in fact, be "one of the most pictorial of all ancient narratives"[39], since "descriptions arguably become more vivid if they play on the fallibility of our 'pictorial' vision than if they try to fill in all the

[37] E.g. Vanderbroeck 1987, 77-81, 143-4; with e.g. Roueché 1984, more generally on acclamations, especially at a later period.

[38] See Molinier Arbo 2017, on the extraordinary (τὰ παράδοξα) and the marvelous (τὰ θαύματα) in Herodian: the *History*'s many emperors are "les principaux θαύματα de l'œuvre" (at 214).

[39] Vout 2009, 274; see also Potter 1999, 87-88. This idea already in Halévy 1860, iii: "c'est un narrateur et un peintre, plutôt qu'un historien dans l'acception philosophique du mot". More recently, Opelt 1998 has looked at Herodian's representation of fear and terror as a dramatic device. For de Blois 1998, 3416, Herodian is "a great dramatist". Cf. Zimmermann 1999a, e.g. 325: the reader can "als Beobachter einzelner Szenen das Geschehen gleichsam greifbar vor Augen haben." Zimmermann also argues that the dramatic colouring of the story offers "eine bemerkenswerte Unmittelbarkeit". Hidber 2006, 276 notes "die starke Tendenz zur Visualisierung". Castelli 2008, 120 talks about the "spettacolo della persuasione" as one of Herodian's most powerful tools of knowledge transmission. Potter 2011, 334 argues that Herodian's work "represents the sort of 'creative' historiography that plainly had an audience in the Roman world, reflecting spectacle while aiming to entertain rather than instruct." Gleason 2011, 74 notes: "Herodian is a very superficial author, but he is superficial in an interesting way. He is highly visual and fond of the tableau." With Bekker-Nelsen 2014, 227, comparing Dio and Herodian: "it must be acknowledged that in their re-enactment of past events, Herodian is often the more skilful of the two"; with 228: "Herodian's technique creates effective historical tableaux". And Hekster 2017: "Eén van Herodianus' bijzondere talenten is zijn vermogen beeldende scènes te beschrijven." Beyond strict enjoyability, this whole emphasis on 'vividness' and 'sight' can also tie in with historiographical authority, especially in the case of historians writing on contemporary subjects and claiming to have been firsthand witnesses (i.e. *autopsia*), such as Thucydides and Herodian. On *autopsia* in general, e.g. Schepens 1980; Woodman 1988, 15-23; Marincola 1997, 63-86; Pitcher 2009, 84-91; and for a particular discussion of the topic in Herodian, see Whittaker 1969-70, xxxi-xxxv; Hidber 2006 98-100 (Among many others, Strobel 1993b, 1353 dismisses entirely Herodian's "shameless" ("ungeniert vor seinem Publikum") claim of *autopsia*.) See also Mundt 2012, 184-5 on the presence of the (contemporary) historian as actor in their own story.

details"[40]. An argument can certainly be made to the effect of Herodian drawing from illustrated material, whether in their own descriptions or for the story they tell[41]. If Herodian did have access to such figurative pieces, this technique would however apply to only a handful of scenes. Making it the cornerstone of these descriptions would also reduce Herodian's method of composition to individual instances of 'observe and describe', instead of grasping it as a systematic writing strategy. As noted above, theatre and history can share many similarities, be it their subject matter, an emotional sensitivity, a moralizing overtone, or a propensity to vivid representation. While this approach has gained some traction in classical scholarship, studies have, so far, been concerned with the so-called major historians, and this 'dramatic turn' has yet to fully reach other, 'minor' ancient historians who, like Herodian, have been criticized by modern critics for their embellished style, excessive moralizing, and loose approach to 'truth'[42]. This final chapter is an attempt to read Herodian's use of theatrical devices in a positive light, not in terms of rhetorical flourish but of a coherent method of composition and, inevitably, of interpretation[43].

Creating the stage

It bears repeating that Herodian expresses throughout his history a marked sensibility to visualizing space, characters, and scenes. Part of this concern can be attributed to an extensive use of *enargeia* ("vividness", also [linked to] *diatyposis* and *phantasia*; lat. *euidentia*, *demonstratio*, *illustratio*), a common quality amongst ancient authors striving to bring speech and action to life before the 'eyes' of their readers or listeners, molding them into viewers (*ut pictura poesis*!)[44]. As noted by Allan, de Jong and de Jonge, "[s]uch effects will often result not

[40] Huitink 2017, 179, who, from an enactivist perspective, further argues that mental images, when involved, "need not specify more features than are relevant to the imagined experience at hand" (at 178).

[41] E.g. Commodus' Severus' statue on the forum (2.9.6); paintings of Severus' battles and victories (3.9.12); Heliogabalus' painting hung in the senate house (5.5.7); Maximinus' paintings commissioned in celebration of his German victories (7.2.8). On Herodian's probable use of artwork, see Whittaker 1969-70, n. 2 *ad* 1.7.5, and n. 1 *ad* 7.2.8; Roques 1990a, 11, 200 n. 63 (*ad* 1.7.5); Sidebottom 1998, 2786-7; Potter 1999, 87; Potter 2016, 331-5.

[42] For instance, Pownall 2016, 160, in a review-discussion of Naas & Simon (eds) 2015 about Duris of Samos: "Nevertheless, the modern invention of the concept of tragic history has had a salutary effect on the scholarship on Livy, raising it out of the sterile morass of *Quellenforschung* and focusing upon the historian's actual aims and methods."

[43] So Foucault 1971, 158, discussing how interpretation is not about revealing an inherent signification, but about dictating (new) orientations that will lead to various interpretations: "Il s'agit de les faire apparaître comme des événements au théâtre des procédures." Discussing what she terms "moral history", Hau 2016 has argued for a mode of writing not inherently different from other types of 'emplotment' (ap. White 1973, 7: "the way in which a sequence of events fashioned into a story is gradually revealed to be a story of a particular kind"). See also Foucher 2000, 773: "rarement genre littéraire ne sera apparu aussi protéiforme"; and 801: "L'histoire nous apparaît donc de plus en plus comme un genre mixte, dont différents modes d'écriture se déclineraient en fonction du sujet traité, de la tradition à laquelle il se rattache et des effets recherchés."

[44] Cf. Plut., *de glor. Ath.* 347A, noting that the "vividness" (ἐνάργεια) of Thucydides' work could "make the reader a spectator" (οἷον θεατὴν ποιῆσαι τὸν ἀκροατήν). On *enargeia*, e.g. Aristot., *Rhet*. 3.1411b.24; *Poet.* 1455a.23-25; Cic., *Lucull.* 17 (in conjunction with *perspicuitas* and *euidentia*); Dion. Hal., *Lys.* 7-8 (and *ethopoeia*); *Rhet. ad Her.* 4.68 (here *demonstratio*); Quint. 4.2.63-64; 6.2.29-32 (and *phantasia*); 8.3.61ff; 9.2.40-44. See also Webb 2009, with bibliography, who deals with *enargeia* within a broader discussion of *ekphrasis*; Allan, de Jong & de Jonge 2017, in relation to the modern concept of immersion; Huitink 2017,

only in cognitive but also in emotional involvement of the audience."[45] Visible in most, if not all, genres, *enargeia* was also an important feature of ancient historiography – Lucian., *conscr. hist.* 51 even compares a successfully vivid narrative to the work of a 'Phidias of history'[46]. One notable application of this principle can be found in Thucydides' depiction of the final battle in the harbour of Syracuse (Thuc. 7.69-71)[47]. Broadly speaking, this 'vividness' could be produced through specific language chosen to create immediacy (e.g. switching to the present tense)[48], a dynamic tone, the use of internal spectators, or graphic descriptions supported by words translating sounds or images. Such techniques can also be found in Herodian's *History*: one particularly compelling example, as seen in chapter three, is its retelling of the final battle between Niger and Severus at Issos, built on vivid landscapes descriptions.

Another important strategy of Herodian's arsenal consists in the manipulation of time and space to create the 'stage' on which the stories will play out[49]. Herodian may slow down or hasten the story's tempo in order to create (textual) space for events that are considered either more decisive or more interesting. Following this, 'historical' time and narrative time do not always correspond to each other, or, in narratological terms: "[w]hile in the fabula events can be assumed to take up the same amount of time they would in real life, their duration in the story may differ"[50]. For instance, in the *History*, Pertinax's two-month rule is given a space of about twenty Loeb pages against the thirty dedicated to Alexander's 'long' rule of thirteen years. Similar techniques of narrative compression or expansion can be seen within a single rule: so Herodian allocates more than two-thirds of Severus' rule in the *History* to the many wars led by the emperor, although they represent only a quarter of his entire tenure[51]. This 'liberated' textual space is used to cover this short period in more detail, now that it can be broken into more self-contained scenes. In the case of Severus' many civil wars, more attention can then be given to character motivations, landscape, chain of events, and more generally to certain episodes, like Severus' long ploy against Albinus to make him take arms first. Slowing down the story's pace and creating more space for specific episodes can

from the perspective of second-generation cognitive studies and enactivism. On *enargeia* in historiography, see Walker 1993, with further references.

[45] Allan, de Jong & de Jonge 2017, 36.

[46] Plut., *de glor. Ath.* 347A: "the most effective historian is he who, by a vivid representation of emotions and characters, makes his narration like a painting." (καὶ τῶν ἱστορικῶν κράτιστος ὁ τὴν διήγησιν ὥσπερ γραφὴν πάθεσι καὶ προσώποις εἰδωλοποιήσας); cf. Walker 1993, 355-60; Foucher 2000, 779; Galtier 2011, 17-19.

[47] The scene was commented and praised namely by Plut., *de glor. Ath.* 347A and Dion. Hal., *Thuc*. 26-27; with Walker 1993, esp. 355-7.

[48] Allan, de Jong & de Jonge 2017, 44 argue that "[f]or narratees to experience an 'illusion of immediacy,' the role of the narrator as a mediating instance in the narration should be as invisible as possible." This idea circles back namely to the deliberateness of Herodian's anonymity, cf. above, [2, with n. 7].

[49] We have already seen how Herodian used the natural scenic shape of Issos and the (narrative) amalgamation of battles taking place in two very different periods, see above, [119-23].

[50] De Jong 2014, 92.

[51] On this point, Torres Esbarranch 1985, 44-49; Hidber 2006, 136-42; *id.*, 2007, 209-10; Castelli 2008, 106-7. This discrepancy in textual space has been used to argue for an unrevised work, especially in the later books.

also lead to the production of 'scenes' that share many features with drama, namely a fixed setting, action unfolding in 'real time', and a limited number of characters[52].

Performing the scenes

All of the *History*'s characters 'enter' and 'exit' the 'stage' at very specific moments: their first appearances come just when they need to 'intervene' in the story[53]. For instance, emperors, as the main characters and organizing principles of the entire narrative, leave the stage when they die[54]. This generally marks the end of an 'act' and the beginning of a new one. All other characters exit when they have accomplished their (narrative) goal, whether it ends in success or, more often, in failure, at which point they become irrelevant for the following events and are dismissed for good from the story. Moreover, characters in the *History* are sketched from familiar types, built around one or two defining attributes, such as arrogance, laziness, cruelty, 'barbarism', etc. As we have seen from our previous study of structural patterns and historical and literary models, Herodian also plays here on the tension between 'same' and 'different'. To shape imperial figures and particularly influential secondary characters, the historian modulates between instances of individuation and typification, so that he can focus on how, and when, his 'actors' might deviate from expected patterns of behaviour based on their apparent 'types' and what it could mean[55].

With stage acting come, quite naturally, props and costumes[56]. This idea of disguise, here noted most often by σχῆμα (both 'stage clothes' and 'deceit'), is a pervasive theme in Herodian's *History*[57]. As a costume for the exclusive use of the main characters, the imperial

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[52] On space, Zimmermann 1999a, 307 notes that Herodian's city of Rome is limited to a few "topographischen Fixpunkten" (i.e. the senate house, the imperial palace, the circus, and the praetorian barracks); Mundt 2012, 179ff adds the Temple of Peace and the Temple of Vesta to this list. Moreover, some of these dramatic scenes in Herodian's work also feature a few lines of dialogue, or perhaps a speech in *oratio recta*, though I do not consider this as a requirement. 'Dialogue' is only taken here as one of many theatrical devices employed by the historian to (re-)create and (re-)stage past events.

[53] See Vogel 2017 on the principles and protocols of character appearances in tragedy: "Der Auftritt ist Schaustellung und damit jener Augenblick, in dem die Person sich zu sehen gibt und vom Gesehenwerden der anderen durchdrungen wird." (quote at 11)

[54] Though the exact sequence of death-exit-notice-funeral and/or apotheosis-aftermath might vary; see Laporte & Hekster 2021, for an extended discussion on this point.

[55] Kraus 2010, 415, argues that the many colourful statements recorded by ancient authors on Tiberius and Germanicus allow to read them as "(complex) examples of certain basic 'folk models of character'"; she defines this idea (taken from Riggsby 2004, 166) as "a sort of interpretative stereotyping well known in ancient narrative genres." I come back to this strategy in section 4.3, by examining more closely Herodian's representation of Maximinus and Maesa.

[56] On props in ancient Greek drama, see e.g. Revermann 2013, with further references: "Props, as mini-narratives in their own right, are principal focalizers which bundle and condense meaning" (at 82); "As material objects props create spatial relationships and sub-spaces, and help to define character" (at 86). See also Taplin 1978, 77-100; with Chaston 2010 who approaches 'tragic props' (i.e. the shield, the urn, the mask) through cognitivism; and Gleason 2011, 39-41, from the perspective of identity theft and usurpation ("Props can be changed, and deportment too, since humans deliberately modify their exterior appearance in order to assume a status to which they are not entitled or to project inner qualities they may not possess." quote at 41).

[57] Talking about the rise of mime and pantomime ("a new kind of *acting*, which involved less high art and more dissembling, pretending, agility in changing roles quickly and adroitly"), Ullmann & Price 2002, 105-8 (quote at 106, emphasis original), discuss Josephus' novel use of δραματουργέω (either having coined it

purple is arguably the most iconic costume within the story; beyond the cloth itself, it is also a symbol of power, sometimes even assimilated to that power[58]. So its bestowal is often shown, in the *History*, as an essential, if not central, part of a proclamation[59]. According to Herodian, Maximinus refused the imperial honours offered to him by throwing off the purple, as if the cloak was the very expression of emperorship (cf. 6.8.6)[60]. Putting on or removing the purple had a direct impact on an individual's status: in this sense, this piece of clothing can also be viewed as a uniform, serving to mark the affiliation to a certain group and make tangible the powers and duties tied to a certain function[61]. Though this role was strictly theirs to play, certain emperors would also 'dress up' as other characters, veiling their primary designation through various costumes[62] – as Herodian's abundant use of *σχῆμα* throughout the work suggests.

Dressing up (or down) could serve many purposes. For instance, Commodus is shown to reinvent himself, while forsaking his heritage, as he shunned the purple to take up the part of a 'new Hercules' (1.14.8-9: *ἀποδυσάμενος… σχῆμα*; *λεοντῆν ἐπεστρώννυτο*; *ἀμφιέννυτό… ἐσθῆτας*)[63] and of a gladiator (1.15.7: *γυμνός*; 1.16.3: *ὅπλα… φέρων*)[64]. Likewise, Caracalla "became" Alexander (4.8.1-2: *ἦν*; *ἐν Μακεδονικῷ σχήματι*) and acted like Achilles (4.8.3-5; 4.9.3-

himself, or reflecting a shift during his time). The word itself is not in Herodian, though *ὑποκρίνομαι* and *δρᾶμα* are often used to denote plots or deceit: 1.10.5; 2.12.1; 2.14.4; 3.12.9; 3.13.3; 8.6.1. It might be interesting to note that all of these occurrences, except for the first (Maternus' plot) and last (the soldiers pretend to rejoice at the news of Maximinus' murder), concern Severus' reign, a character emphatically shown as lying and duplicitous. See also Gleason 2011, 41-42 on the deceptive implications of *σχῆμα*, though esp. in Dio's work.

[58] On the imperial purple, both in Herodian's work and more generally, see Bérenger 2020, 10-13, with further references. Cf. Gleason 2011, 41-42: "In the sphere of public action and religion, personal identification requires the right name, and the right clothes or *σχῆμα*." Coleman 1990 notes the importance of costumes in public executions framed in re-enactments, or in scapegoat rituals.

[59] So: Niger, 2.8.6 (above, [78]); Heliogabalus, 5.3.12 (below, [216-17]); Maximinus, 6.8.5 (below, [204-5]); Gordian I, 7.5.3 (above, [68-69]). Cf. also Quartinus, during a short-lived rebellion against Maximinus (7.1.9). As for Commodus, as he says himself, he was 'born in the purple' (1.5.5, with above, [44-45]).

[60] This passage in analyzed in detail below, [205-7].

[61] Quite similarly, new consuls *ordinarii* take office by "first" (1.16.3: *πρῶτον*) putting on the purple toga. Conversely, Severus demoted the praetorians guilty of Pertinax's murder not only through speech but also through the physical act of stripping them down (weapons, clothes, and military symbols). As noted by Eutrop. 9.27, Diocletian and Maximian marked their retirement as emperors by exchanging the purple for civilian clothing (*priuato habitu imperii insigne mutauit*).

[62] Cf. Cass. Dio 59.26.6, about Caligula's divine impersonations: ", to match the change of name he would assume all the rest of the attributes that belonged to the various gods, so that he might seem really to resemble them" (*πρὸς γὰρ δὴ τὴν τῶν ὀνομάτων μετάθεσιν καὶ τὸ ἄλλο σχῆμα πᾶν τὸ προσῆκόν σφισιν ἐλάμβανεν, ὥστε ἐοικέναι αὐτοῖς δοκεῖν*). See Zimmermann 1999a, 222-32, on the representation and functions of the 'costumes' of Commodus, Caracalla, Macrinus, and Elagabal in Herodian's work; with Cadario 2017 (with a focus on Commodus, though providing a general overview at 40-42).

[63] See further below, [227, with n. 233], on the many ways in which Commodus attempted to 'become' Heracles. Cass. Dio 73(72).17.1-4 also writes about many more costumes worn by the emperor: the charioteer uniform of the Green faction, a silk tunic to greet senators, a *chlamys* with a gold crown and a staff, a lionskin and a club, a costume of Mercury.

[64] For Galimberti 2014, 152 (*ad* 1.15.7-8), this seals Commodus' disavowal of Roman customs and triggers his definite loss of popular consent; see also Marasco 1998, 2845-6; with below, [227-9]. On the imperial palace as a symbol of the emperorship, and Commodus' rejection of it (in Herodian's work), see Pitcher 2017, 277-9; with below, [229-30].

4)[65]. To garner the favour of the German troops, Caracalla also donned Germanic armour and put on a blonde wig (4.7.3-4: *τὴν Ῥωμαϊκὴν ἀποθέμενος χλαμύδα ἠμφιέννυτο τὰ Γερμανῶν περιβλήματα; κόμας… ἐπετίθετο ξανθάς*)[66]. Macrinus, as we have seen above, wanted to imitate Marcus, as the model of good emperorship, though he was inspired, according to Herodian, not by Marcus' moral disposition but by his looks and body language only (5.2.3-4: *γένειον… ἀσκῶν*). By contrast, in his final flight across Asia minor, Macrinus tried to pass as an 'ordinary man' by ripping off the imperial mantle and putting on a traveller's outfit, but 'forgot' to switch out props too, keeping his imperial bodyguard and transport (cf. 5.4.7)[67]. With a similar strategy, Severus more successfully "escaped detection by tearing off his imperial cloak" (3.7.3: *ἀπορρίψαντα δὲ τὴν χλαμύδα τὴν βασιλικὴν λαθεῖν*) when he was knocked off his horse during the battle of Lugdunum against Albinus' army[68]. Unable to see Severus in his capacity as 'emperor', Albinus' forces thought themselves victorious until the opposing soldiers "mounted Severus on his horse and dressed him in his cloak" (3.7.5: *τόν τε Σεβῆρον τοῦ ἵππου ἐπεβίβασαν καὶ τὴν χλαμύδα περιέθεσαν*), so that Severus was 'made' once again into an emperor.

Other characters too, in the *History*, could have a 'costume change', generally for nefarious purposes. Soldiers could dress as civilians to hide weapons under their cloaks or infiltrate a city (2.12.1: *ἐν ἰδιωτῶν σχήματι*, Severus' soldiers entering Rome)[69]. By contrast, Maternus, taking advantage of the Hilaria festival, in which "anyone can disguise himself as any character he wants" (1.10.5: *ἑκαστός τε ὃ βούλεται σχῆμα ὑποκρίνεται*), no matter the position, planned to dress up as a praetorian (1.10.6: *ἀναλαβὼν τὸ τῶν δορυφόρων σχῆμα*) in order to gain access to Commodus and strike him down. Even a building, in the *History*, could be disguised as another one: Herodian describes the transformation of Niger's private house (2.8.6: *τὴν αὐτοῦ οἰκίαν; ἰδιωτικήν*) into an imperial palace (*βασίλειον αὐλήν*), "decorated" (*κοσμήσαντες*) with all the insignia of emperorship, though they are likened to 'makeshift props' (*ἐξ αὐτοσχεδίου παρασκευῆς*) and featured only on the "outside" (*ἔξωθεν*). In addition to these props and costumes, the theatricality of Niger's accession scene in the *History* is enforced by the 'construction' of wider stage: having called a meeting to consult the troops about the latest news from Rome, Niger appeared on "a platform constructed for him" (2.8.1: *βήματος αὐτῷ κατασκευασθέντος*), at a "fixed date" (*ἐς ῥητὴν ἡμέραν*). Like engaged spectators, onlookers saw (*νομίζοντες*) these 'accessories' as official tokens, since they assumed the appearance and function of the original objects. Just like theatre props, these manufactured tokens possessed a strong power of suggestion, especially as 'focalizers' of the staging of

[65] See further below, [241-2], on Caracalla's elaborate imitations of Alexander and Achilles.
[66] According to Speidel 2009, 246, Caracalla might have actually influenced sartorial practices in the Roman army.
[67] Macrinus' extreme care for his looks and the story of his convoluted flight have been discussed at length above, section 3.3.3, dealing with *modi fugiendi*.
[68] This passage has also been analyzed in a discussion about the good and ways to deal with defeat in battle, in section 3.3.2.2.
[69] On the symbolic value of night and themes of covertness in this passage, see also above, [57; 61-62; 68; 128].

emperorship[70]. Accordingly, Antioch might even have been imagined as a 'new Rome', since anyway 'Rome' was where the emperor was (cf. 1.6.5) and the emperor was the one who wore the purple and the other imperial insignia[71].

Watching the show from within

There are a handful of moments in the *History* where Herodian 'stages' spectators within the story itself[72]. These instances of intradiegetic viewing seem to betray a certain recognition of the story's theatricality[73]. Commodus' adventus, for instance, is described just like a vision (1.7.2: ἐπιφανείς; ὤφθη): the man's striking beauty (1.7.5: ἀξιοθέατος), his burning and flashing eyes (θερμαὶ καὶ πυρώδεις βολαί)[74], his gleaming hair (φοιτῴη δι' ἠλίου), an imagined halo shining above him (αἴγλην τινὰ οὐράνιον). Truly it seemed a sight to behold (1.7.6: θεασάμενοι)[75]. In book 5, Herodian also casts the soldiers posted near Emesa as enraptured viewers of the dancing Heliogabalus (cf. 5.3.8-9)[76]. But when the emperor staged even more

[70] On this point, see Revermann 2013, 87, discussing the 'invisible' stage props: "by appealing to the audience's imagination – by forcing, even, the spectator to re-create them, individually, in their own 'theatre of mind' – these imaginary stage objects have a presence that arguably engages the spectator *even more* than a prop that is visible on stage" (emphasis original). Stressing the believability of Niger's proclamation (more than, perhaps, its reality), Herodian records that the provinces of Asia Minor sent ambassadors to him "as though he were the acknowledged emperor" (2.8.7: ὡς πρὸς βασιλέα ὁμολογούμενον). More generally, this dramatic angle to Niger's proclamation picks up on Herodian's multiple allusions to the Syrians' love of games and Niger's eagerness to delight them with frequent shows. In a way, Niger's investiture can be seen as yet another spectacle staged for the Syrians' pleasure.

[71] On this idea, see above, [98-99]. In Caracalla and Geta's (alleged?) project to split the Empire between themselves, Geta is even said to have considered Antioch or Alexandria as his new capital (4.3.7). Hekster & Kaizer, forthcoming, argue that the failure of all these 'alternative' Romes exemplify how non-Romans lacked what it took to gain and retain power. Their failures are only offset further by the crushing victory of the Italian Aquileia over Maximinus. (My thanks to Olivier Hekster for providing an early draft.)

[72] So Walker 1993, 362-3: "It is conceivable, then, even within the parameters of *ancient* literary theory, that the spectators in Thucydides' text serve as an emblem for the reader, promoting our visualization of the events [...] But, as we shall see, it is equally true that the *mise en abyme*, in its self-reflexivity, can call attention to the artificialities (and shortcomings) of representation, creating as a consequence a text concerned with discourse over and against representation." (emphasis original) See also Ward 2011, 14-18 for an overview of scholarship on the concept of internal spectatorship; Ward also analyzes instances of internal viewing in certain passages of the *History* (Marcus' reflections on past tyrants, Commodus' entrance in Rome, Elagabalus' introductory scene, Severus' civil wars, cf. 115-82).

[73] Some events are also described as θεάματα, somewhere between the ideas of 'sight' and 'spectacle' (though perhaps on a smaller scale than the examples cited above): Cleander's execution (1.13.5: τερπνὸν καὶ ποθεινὸν τῷ δήμῳ θέαμα); the soldiers at Pertinax's doors (2.1.5: θεασάμενος στρατιώτας ἐφεστῶτας); the massacre of soldiers by the mob in Rome in 238 (7.11.5: οἱ δὲ λοιποὶ στρατιῶται τοῦτο θεασάμενοι...); the departure of the victorious mob afterwards (7.11.9: θεασάμενοι αὐτοὺς οἱ στρατιῶται ἀπεστραμμένους...). A couple other instances might come close to the English idiom 'making a spectacle out of oneself': 1.3.4 παρεῖχέ τε τοῖς δήμοις ἑαυτὸν καταγέλαστον θέαμα (about Nero); 1.15.7: τότε σκυθρωπὸν εἶδεν ὁ δῆμος θέαμα (Commodus). See Walker 1993, *passim* on this application of *mise en abyme* in (Greek) historiography.

[74] The passage (τε γὰρ) θερμαί is heavily corrupted; suggestions are many and varied: ἰθεῖαι ("straight", "direct", "just", ap. Mendelssohn 1883); θερμαί ("hot", "glowing", ap. van Herweden 1884); αἴθρίαι ("clear", "bright", ap. Whittaker 1969-70); εὐρυθμοι ("rhythmical", "graceful", "well-proportioned", ap. Lucarini 2005). See Giangrande 1957, 263-4 for a discussion on this passage.

[75] See Ward 2011, 128-9 on the 'visibility' of Commodus' virtues in this passage. Commodus gave a similar 'show' as he passed through the Italian cities on his journey from the Danube to Rome, cf. 1.7.4.

[76] According to Herodian, Heliogabalus could even rival with statues of Dionysos (cf. 5.3.7); on this idea of the emperor being shown, or 'displayed', cf. below, [217-18].

extravagant productions once he arrived in Rome, senators and knights are depicted as unwilling spectators, even as they "stood round them in the order they sat in the theatre" (5.5.9: περιειστήκει… ἐν θεάτρου σχήματι; cf. 1.9.3)[77]. Similarly, the site of Issos is described, during Niger and Severus' final confrontation, as a 'battle stadium' (3.4.2: στάδιον μάχης). Issos, however, is made so not only figuratively by the events taking place there, but is even physically moulded by its landscape, with a hilly ridge creating terraces around the (battle)field (cf. 3.4.2) [78]. Taking advantage of these natural stands, people from the surrounding cities are said to have come 'watch' (3.4.5: θεάσοιντο) the show from this vantage point[79].

Through their staged response to the 'main event', this first 'tier' (or, if you will, front row) of spectatorship acts as a focalizer and can already engage readers in appreciating and interpreting these episodes: as Ward writes, "[v]isual narratives and narratives evoked through instances of viewing in Herodian, then, can be said to guide and at the same time challenge external readers."[80] With their own viewing experience, these internal spectators are made to lead readers by example, which creates another layer of imitation[81]. This 'original' audience thus acts "as an emblem for the reader, promoting our visualization of the events"[82]. What is more, internal spectators may even become, at some point within the larger narrative,

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[77] Cf. Tac., *Hist.* 2.62.2: "strict measures were taken to prevent Roman knights from degrading themselves in gladiatorial schools and the arena. Former emperors had driven knights to such actions by money or more often by force" (*cautum seuere ne equites Romani ludo et harena polluerentur. priores id principes pecunia et saepius ui perpulerant*).

[78] For an extended discussion on this passage, see above, section 3.2.

[79] *Teichoscopia* ('looking from the walls', often with the effect of cataloguing what is being seen) is a device used e.g. in Thuc. 7.69-71 (or 5.6-10 in a instance of *oroscopia*, from the 'mountains'), but also early on in Hom., *Il.* 3.161-244, where Helen, from the Skaian Gates, looks down to the plain below in order to identify the Achaeans for Priam.

[80] Ward 2011, 184; for Ward, Dio uses internal viewing in a entirely different way, "to comment, in large part, on the production of the text and his role as author." In a discussion about Herodian's interest in visual experiences, Gleason 2011, 74-76 argues that Herodian is "a relativist: things seem one way to some people, another way to other people. […] To him resemblance is entirely in the eye of the beholder." (quote at 75) This leads Gleason to view Herodian as a "social constructionist", while Dio is considered as an "essentialist" (at 76).

[81] Parallels may be found between Herodian and Dionysius of Halicarnassus who, ap. Walker 1993, 365, "employs metaphors from drama and hence introduces a 'second level' of representation into his narrative, constructing the reader as a spectator of events that transpire on the tragic stage." See also Schneider 2011, 14, discussing performance reenactements in particular, though history-telling can arguably be viewed as a type of such productions: "But most reenactments are staged with spectators invited and even encouraged to take part as active participants. In such cases, spectators are sometimes treated as sports fans, or as theatre audiences."

[82] Walker 1993, 363, discussing Thucydides, though certainly applicable to Herodian. In fact, so remarks Walker right after: "Clearly the most interesting and most detailed commentary on the visual element in Thucydides is provided not by the Greek novelists, nor yet by the rhetors of the Second Sophistic, but by historians who employ the language and visual imagery of Thucydides to describe an entirely different set of historical circumstances and events." On the possible plurality of spectators reflecting a range of emotions and interpretations of a given event, Walker 1993, 367-70; with Davidson 1991, 14 on Polybius' 'didactic arena': "Polybius provides us with an audience for the readers to model themselves on, together with a paradigmatic gaze and exemplary responses". Both comments can certainly be applied, to an extent, to Herodian's own work: Kemezis 2016, 368 claims that Herodian's readers are "attuned to visual representations." See also Ward 2011, 115-82 on instances of internal and external viewing in the *History*.

actors themselves: so the soldiers first enraptured by the 'vision' of Elagabalus come to assume a more active role, passing the word about this newcomer and eventually making him emperor. And in the particular context of a contemporary history, presumably "within the recent memory of [the] readers" (1.1.3: *ὑπὸ νεαρᾷ… τῇ τῶν ἐντευξομένων μνήμῃ*), the line between internal and external spectatorship is easily blurred: one might imagine that certain viewers staged in the story later became readers of Herodian's work, leading them to look at themselves looking at whatever 'show' was on. As we will see in this last chapter, spectacle within the *History* can thus exist on multiple levels, whether in the story proper, in Herodian's narration, or even through the staging, or self-staging, of the characters themselves[83].

4.3 Typecasting: producing dramatic figures

4.3.1 Character and characters

Organized *κατὰ χρόνους καὶ δυναστείας* (1.1.6), Herodian's story usually follows the ruling emperor, or the individual who will soon overthrow him successfully[84]. In the *History*, this centrality of the imperial figure affects all aspects of the storytelling, be it the overall structure, the episodes chosen, the story locations, or the activity of the rest of the characters. If the emperor stands at the centre of the story, then all other characters revolve around him and are defined by their relation to him[85]. We have already seen how this can also apply to competing emperors, namely through the contrasting introductions of Niger and Albinus. Moreover, one aspect central to Herodian's method of composition is, as seen in the previous chapters, the tension between 'same' and 'different', whether applied to narrative structure or the interpretation and (re)use of models. For characters, the principle is quite similar: broadly speaking, Herodian's imperial portrayals hover somewhere between stock figures and individualized characters. More specifically, Herodian uses familiar character patterns (or perhaps 'outlines'), while also creating space for attributes (made) unique to the individuals concerned. Pitcher has recently exemplified, based on a close reading of the portrayals of Severus and Maximinus, how Herodian's characterization techniques rely heavily on the 'metaphorical turn'[86]. This interplay of 'same' and 'different' within (imperial)

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[83] We might say, with Mundt 2012, 173: "Aus einem Leben wird ein Drama, aus einem Princeps ein Schauspieler, aus der Welt eine Bühne."

[84] E.g. Sidebottom 1998, 2814-15; de Blois 2003, 151; Hidber 2006, 150-2; *id.*, 2007, 207-10. Evidently, the case of years featuring multiple emperors at once (193-4 and 238) is more complex, although Herodian's tendency to divide his story into (mostly) self-contained episodes does a great deal to help preserve a somewhat linear storyline.

[85] E.g. Zimmermann 1999a, 324; with Pitcher 2017, 237: "In general, people receive characterizing detail in Herodian only to explain their actions in relation to the emperor of the day." It should be noted that, for more chaotic periods, like the year 238, secondary characters are perhaps less dependent on individual emperors than they are concerned with leadership and emperorship more generally. On the *History*'s structure, cf. also above, [37-38].

[86] Pitcher 2017, 249. For a recent overview of characterization in ancient literature, with additional references, see De Temmermann & van Emde Boas 2017; with Pitcher 2007, on characterization techniques in historiography.

characterization implicates, as with narrative structure and literary models, both intertextual and intratextual considerations[87].

Compared to emperors, secondary characters in the *History* tend to receive little attention[88]. Like events, these characters are also subjected to narrative streamlining. In broad terms, secondary characters are limited in number and often grouped together in an anonymous body ('senate', 'people', 'friends', 'retinue', etc.). At worst, they might even become part of the scenery. Of all the secondary characters, only a select few manage to stand out and appear in specific scenes (often family members of the emperors, praetorian prefects, generals, and conspirators), but not always those who are considered the most important by modern critics and historians. One oft-noted absence in Herodian's work is that of the jurist Ulpian (*ca* 170-223), who came to prominence in the early years of the third century as the assessor of Papinianus, then praetorian prefect (another famous jurist, Papinianus is himself absent in this story)[89]. Other characters, invested elsewhere with greater agency, are minimally featured by Herodian. For instance, if Julia Domna does appear in the *History*, her presence (and authority) is limited, at least compared to Dio's account[90]. Although some of these individualized secondary characters will come to play a meaningful part in Herodian's main story, they will still be made to move according to the emperor's fate, or that of the emperorship more generally[91]. To maintain the story's relative linearity and simplicity, these characters, just like new emperors, are only introduced when they are about to become relevant for the (main) plot[92]. Unlike future emperors, whose introductions are but the start of their (narrative) existence, it is as if these side characters simply do not exist outside of a specific scene or episode. Once they have served their limited purposes in the story, Herodian is quick to dismiss them, and the reader is almost made to forget about them altogether. These *ad hoc* appearances allow Herodian to generally keep the spotlight on the emperor and avoid the wandering into (too many) subplots, deemed irrelevant to the story of the emperorship.

4.3.2 The 'barbarian emperor'

Herodian's 'ethnographical' interests

As noted in most scholarship, Herodian inserts in the *History* several 'ethnographical' digressions, which provide explanations about certain character traits of an individual or a

[87] This strategy has been implied early on in scholarship, through the acknowledgement of Marcus as the 'benchmark' for all other emperors. Although often noted in several separate instances within the *History* (e.g. how Julianus, Niger, and Albinus all relate *to* Severus), this impetus has rarely been recognized as a comprehensive writing strategy that runs through the whole work.

[88] A book-by-book overview of the *History*'s secondary characters, outside of the imperial family "without whom it would have been difficult to construct any sort of history of the empire", can be found in Sidebottom 1998, 2789-92 (quote at 2789).

[89] But Whittaker 1969-70, xlvii-xlviii: based on *P. Oxy* 2565, Ulpian might have held the function of praetorian prefect only two years (or less), and his importance might have exaggerated, "largely on the evidence of Dio."

[90] See below, [224], on this discrepancy of Domna's character between the versions of Herodian and Dio.

[91] E.g. Hidber 2007, 199-200 (often through an "embedded focalization"); Pitcher 2017, 236-7.

[92] On the distinction used in this dissertation between plot and story, see above, [10-11].

group of people in relation to their origins[93]. Generally speaking, Herodian tends to conform to other (negative) views found in Greek and Latin literature[94]. For instance, Eclectus, Commodus' chamberlain and future murderer, is portrayed thus: "As an Egyptian (τὸ γένος Αἰγύπτιος) he was characteristically (πεφυκώς) given to act upon his impulses and be controlled by his emotions."[95] Similarly, Syrians are said to be "characteristically (φύσει) erratic people"[96], Pannonians are "natural and fierce fighters, but intellectually dull and slow-witted"[97], Britons are described as equally courageous and ruthless[98], Mauretanians are bloodthirsty and fearless (though not Macrinus)[99], Greeks are prone to infighting[100], Alexandrians are "by nature (φύσει) extremely frivolous"[101] and facetious[102], and Parthians are disorganized fighters, who are easily discouraged if they do not win immediately[103]. Both secondary characters and whole populations, especially non-Italian, are depicted through somewhat fixed portrayals, to the point that they almost become part of the story's backdrop[104]. These (alleged) cultural traits are used to quickly evoke an image or a context, with which the emperor, as main character, can engage or to which he can relate[105]. It seems, then, that this sort of ethnic characterization is derived, at least in part, from Herodian's streamlining techniques and serves similar purposes.

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[93] Whittaker 1969-70, n. 2. *ad* 1.17.6 argues that "H.'s interest in ethnic characterizations is to some extent motivated by his desire to explain the upheaval of his age"; with Widmer 1967, 38-44. Pitcher 2017, 237-8 summarizes: "the narrator is keen to stress at several points the idea that different peoples have different ethnic characteristics." A more general way to frame Herodian's interest would be to interpret these passages through the filter of 'exoticism', which might be defined with Moura 1992, 4 as "une rêverie qui s'attache à un espace lointain et se réalise dans une écriture".

[94] See e.g. the expansive survey in Isaac 2004.

[95] 1.17.6: ἦν δὲ τὸ γένος Αἰγύπτιος, τολμῆσαί τε ἅμα καὶ δρᾶσαι θυμῷ τε δουλεῦσαι πεφυκώς. On the depiction of Egyptians in Greek and Latin literature, see Isaac 2004, 352-70.

[96] 2.7.9: φύσει δὲ κοῦφον τὸ Σύρων ἔθνος; cf. also 2.10.6-8 (in a speech by Severus); 3.1.3; 3.11.8. Statements such as these have led scholars, such as Andrade 2013, 314, to argue that "Herodian disliked Syrians." More generally on literary representations of Syrians, Isaac 2004, 335-51.

[97] 2.9.11: πρὸς μάχας ἐπιτήδειοι καὶ φονικώτατοι, οὕτω καὶ τὰς διανοίας παχεῖς καὶ μὴ ῥᾳδίως συνεῖναι δυνάμενοι; cf. 3.7.2. Herodian seems to use somewhat interchangeably between Illyrians and Pannonians, see e.g. Whittaker 1969-70, *ad* 2.9.9. Cf. Dzino 2014, on the traditional traits of Pannonians and Illyrians.

[98] 3.7.2: καὶ γὰρ οἱ Βρεττανοὶ ἀνδρείᾳ τε καὶ θυμῷ φονικῷ οὐδὲν τῶν Ἰλλυριῶν ἀπολείπονται; cf. also 3.14.6-8. Britons tend to be considered in very similar terms as Gauls, see Isaac 2004, 95-96; 188-91.

[99] 3.3.5: οἱ δὲ Μαυρούσιοι ὄντες φονικώτατοι, καὶ διὰ τὸ θανάτου καὶ κινδύνων ῥᾳδίως καταφρονεῖν πάντα τολμῶντες μετὰ ἀπογνώσεως. Whittaker 1969-70, n. 1 *ad loc*.: "H. seems fascinated by the fierceness of the Moroccan *auxilia* who are mentioned more often than any other group".

[100] 3.2.8: ἀρχαῖον τοῦτο πάθος Ἑλλήνων; on Herodian's perceptions of this 'Greek malady', see Bekker-Nielsen 2014, 230-3: Dio Chrys., *Or.* 38 might have been a source for Herodian's narrative.

[101] 4.8.7: φύσει μὲν ὄντι τὰς γνώμας κουφοτάτῳ.

[102] 4.9.1-2: πεφύκασι δέ πως εἶναι φιλοσκώμμονες καὶ λέγειν εὐστόχους ὑπογραφὰς ἢ παιδιάς.

[103] 4.15.6: εἰωθότων ἀεὶ τῶν βαρβάρων ῥᾷστα ἀποκάμνειν ἐθελοκακεῖν τε, εἰ μή τι ἐν ταῖς πρώταις ὁρμαῖς κατορθώσουσι. Cf. Isaac 2004, 371-80.

[104] Unsurprisingly, many of these descriptions are also concerned with fighting styles and equipment, since they generally occur in the context of (external) battles, fought against foreign peoples, on the fringes of the Empire. A similar case could be made for landscape descriptions, see e.g. Laporte 2021a.

[105] Herodian may also be personally interested in so-called ethnography, or he may be concerned with supplying background information to his readership. None of these views are mutually exclusive. On the explanatory function of such passages in Herodotus, see e.g. Lateiner 1989, 145-62; Dewald 1997.

Furthermore, attributes suggested by Herodian to be culture-specific are also used in imperial characterization. For instance, Elagabalus' love of games and festivities, as well as his natural blatancy, may well be connected to his Syrian roots[106]. Likewise, Macrinus' luxurious tastes help cast him in the typical image of the oriental ruler (4.12.2; 5.2.4), although his Mauretanian origins are, perhaps curiously, not mentioned by Herodian[107]. Macrinus is even painted, in the *History*, as the complete opposite of the 'bloodthirsty Mauretanians': cowardly, partial to an easy lifestyle, not a particularly good warrior[108]. It is also interesting to note that, compared to the sweeping statements made about entire populations, Herodian's depictions of emperors engage with ethnic characterization less frontally. As protagonists of the *History*, emperors are given much more space to exist, and even evolve, within the text and enjoy individualized portrayals. Although Herodian's emperors have often been reduced to one-dimensional figures, caricatures, or clichés, their characterization is in fact less static than it appears[109]. Character traits of emperors are usually revealed or at least exemplified through action, instead of being listed in fixed descriptions, as is (generally) the case for secondary or background characters[110]. To be fair, the emperors in the *History* can only develop or transform to a certain extent and within a set frame (i.e. there are no radical shifts from one extreme to another), but they are also not the cardboard figures they have often been made out to be.

While Herodian's characterization is rarely grounded entirely in the emperors' origins, ethnicity may be used to support a more predominant theme, such Heliogabalus' religiosity or Maximinus' militarism. In the *History*, but also in other works, these two emperors embody two different types of 'barbarians', respectively 'eastern' and 'northern'[111]. Elagabalus, for

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[106] Cf. 5.8.4; the shrewdness of Maesa, a Syrian herself, is described as a trait acquired during her many years at court (5.8.3). On these two passages, see below, [220-3]. Pitcher 2017, 243, talking about Severus' initial characterization at 2.9.2 (ἀνὴρ τὸ μὲν γένος Λίβυς), claims that this portrayal is ethno-oriented: "Herodian's narrator does not supply ethnics for nobodies." But it should be noted that Herodian does not discuss the origins of every emperor, and that he also does not provide any (overt) description of Libyans. While Libyans are seen fighting twice, the first battle is won mostly through surprise and numbers (7.4.5-6; rather like Niger's Syrian troops), and the second ends in a great massacre (7.9.5-9). Hannibal, the great 'Libyan' general, is mentioned at 4.8.5. Severus' identification as a Libyan in Herodian could activate older resonances (e.g. Vergil., *Aen.* 1.338: *sed fines Libyci, genus intractabile bello*; 4.40: *genus insuperabile bello*). This image of Libyans however does not seem to be widespread in ancient historians: Sallust, for instance, only talks about the Libyans (and Gaetuli) as a primitive and uncultured people (Sallust., *Iug.* 18: *asperi incultique*). See Isaac 2004, 147-8; 201-2 on the ancient representations of Libyans.

[107] Macrinus' origins (he was born in Caesarea, Mauretania) are mainly noted by Dio at 80(79).11.1; 80(79).27.1; 80(79).32.1; they are not mentioned by the *Vita* (Macrinus is only said to be *humili natus loco*, at 2.1), nor by the Latin epitomists.

[108] Cass. Dio 79(78).27.1 notes in fact that Macrinus, as a Moor, was plagued by a "natural cowardice" (δειλίας ἐμφύτου). Other sources insist instead on the emperor's cruelty, though no particular connection is made between this trait and his origins, cf. *SHA*, *Macr.* 11.1-4; 12.1-11; 13.3; 14.1; Vict., *Caes*. 22.3.

[109] For references, see above, [186-7, with notes]; and more generally on Herodian's 'formulaic' style, [8-9, with notes].

[110] E.g. Zimmermann 1999a, 324: "dass die von den einzelnen Kaisern gezeichneten Porträts ihre Kontur nicht in erläuternden Kommentaren, sonder über den Ereignisablauf erhalten." Generally speaking, character in ancient literature is neither perceived nor represented as a static factor; see e.g. Gill 1983 (based esp. on readings of Plutarch and Tacitus); also Pitcher 2017, on Herodian.

[111] E.g. Aristot., *Pol*. 1327b; Vitruv., *de arch.* 6.1.3-4; with Dauge 1981, 467-510.

instance, is said to have had luxurious tastes and whims (cf. 5.5.3-4; 5.5.8-10) and did not show much interest in military affairs, beyond his initial coup against Macrinus. More importantly, his Syrian origins pervade his religion-oriented policies. Notably, once he became emperor, he still retained the office of chief priest of Elagabal (cf. 5.3.6; 5.5.3ff; 5.6.1ff; 5.7.2). This idea of foreignness adds to the ruler's general impiety (from the Roman perspective) and is sensible in his deep, religion-based restructuring of the Empire. Appealing also to modern eyes, Elagabalus' 'otherness' (or 'barbarism', or 'exoticism', or 'foreignness') has been vastly studied in recent years, and most scholarship features extensively Herodian's account[112]. Elagabalus' love of games and spectacles, in particular, but also the performance inherent to religious rituals, has led many scholars to investigate ideas of staging and self-staging, whether in terms of power, religion, ethnicity, or even gender[113].

Less obvious, perhaps, are the dramatic implications in Herodian's portrayal of Maximinus, since 'northern barbarian' types tend to be viewed, both by ancient and modern critics, in opposition to the city and civic life and, as such, theatre. But, as we will see in this next part, Herodian's Maximinus is portrayed through a dramatic type, and this affects not only his own character, but the entire story of his rule. Considered the first 'barbarian' emperor, Maximinus has consistently fascinated authors, whether ancient or modern[114]. Accordingly, this emperor has also received substantial attention amongst critics in the past decades – though perhaps to a slightly lesser extent than Elagabalus. Herodian's portrayal is once again headlined in this strand of studies, since the *History* is the only contemporary source left for this period. For instance, Martin talked about Maximinus' barbarian traits and their impact on the emperor's political and military activity[115]. Kemezis and Mecella further explored the idea of barbarism through the opposition of values associated to centre and frontier and the ability to freely move (or not) from one to another[116], while Moralee looks into Maximinus' image in later sources and its role in race politics[117]. Speidel and Andrews investigated how the notions of race and barbarism might shape the relations of soldiers or

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[112] In fact, the *History* is often exceptionally valued over Dio's *Roman History* or the *Historia Augusta*, namely for some of the historical data it provides (e.g. the god's black conical stone) or a somewhat restrained portrayal of the emperor; already in Bowersock 1975.

[113] There are (at least) three fairly recent monographs on Heliogabalus (de Arrizabalaga y Prado 2010; Icks 2012; Altmayer 2014), in addition to a good number of articles: e.g. Loriot 1975, 666-87, Scheithauer 1990; Sommer 2004 (on Heliogabalus as an example of the 'bad emperor'; cf. also Icks 2008) and 2008 (on the perceived dangers of his theocratic 'programme'): Gualerzi 2005 (on the sexual and gender implications of his figure); Mader 2005 (on his portrayal in the *Historia Augusta*, seen through a logic of ideological inversion); Naerebout 2008, esp. 150-8 (on his otherness explored through dancing); Bittarello 2008 (in a comparison with Otho about the type of the unmanly emperor); Mundt 2012, 181-2 (on his self-staging); Kemezis 2016 (on the main literary accounts of his demise); Bérenger 2017 (on how he legitimized his claim to the emperorship), etc. See also Hekster & Kaizer, forthcoming, on the depiction of the orient in Herodian, as a locus of "betrayal and failure".

[114] See Speidel 2016, 343 and Andrews 2019, 160-3 for a summary of modern views on Maximinus, as varied as the emperor being labeled a 'terrorist' (ap. Rostovtzeff 1926, 399; with Opelt 1998, 2943-5), or having in fact constituted "no scandalous anomaly" (Syme 1971, 189-90). Also Haegemans 2010, 1-13 for a good survey of the scholarship on Maximinus in connection with the so-called crisis of the third century.

[115] Martin 2006; with Burian 1988; Zimmermann 1999a, 252ff; Hidber 2006, 225-9.

[116] Kemezis 2014, esp. 242-5; Mecella 2017.

[117] Moralee 2008.

senators with the emperor[118]. Building on these previous discussions regarding Maximinus' 'otherness', this next section will examine the theatrical aspects of Herodian's depiction of Maximinus as 'barbarian' (or 'half-barbarian') and their impact on the emperor's story unit as well as on the *History* at large.

Casting the 'barbarian emperor'

Maximinus' introduction in the *History* comes up directly after a long passage on the army's unhappiness at Alexander's attempt to negotiate with the Germans. Reluctant to start another war, Alexander had offered them an enormous settlement in exchange for peace, to the outrage of the Roman troops (6.7.9-10). The army's indignation quite naturally sets the stage, in Herodian's story, for the arrival of a new character. Following Herodian's usual pattern of 'linear usurpation'[119], any new character to be introduced at that moment and at length could reasonably be expected (by the reader) to become the next emperor. This individual would also likely be the complete opposite of the incumbent or, at least, possess whatever qualities were found lacking in the current emperor: in this case, his successor would need to show a strong military disposition to contrast with Alexander's mild character, deemed overly so by his army.

Enter Maximinus, whose presentation by Herodian revolves around his military career, but also around his Thracian origins: "In the army there was a man called Maximinus, from one of the semi-barbarous (μιξοβαρβάρων) tribes of the interior (ἐνδοτάτω) of Thrace"[120]. Herodian explains how Maximinus had quickly risen through the ranks, gaining the "charge of legions and commands over provinces"[121]. Maximinus had also been noticed by Alexander,

[118] Speidel 2016; Andrews 2019, 159-86.

[119] I use here the phrase 'linear usurpation' to describe the narrative sequencing that has emperors be usurped by individuals who possess their (perceived) missing qualities: Niger brings the competence and likeability that Julianus lacks; Severus' efficiency wins over Niger's procrastination; Elagabalus' position and popularity within the military are more desirable than Macrinus' convenient appointment, etc.

[120] 6.8.1: ἦν δέ τις ἐν τῷ στρατῷ Μαξιμῖνος ὄνομα, τὸ μὲν γένος τῶν ἐνδοτάτω Θρᾳκῶν καὶ μιξοβαρβάρων. Martin 2006, 95-96 already sees in this introductory τις the mark of Herodian's disdain for Maximinus. Cf. *SHA*, *Maximin.* 2.5 (*semibarbarus*). Maximinus' exact place of birth was and remains unknown, which likely adds to his mystique. Although the emperor is said to be 'Thracian' by Herodian (and the *SHA*), the word may in fact designate a wider region than the actual Roman province, which has led some scholars (with the added support of a few inscriptions) to consider Moesia inferior as Maximinus' birthplace. The ninth-century Byzantine chronicler Syncellus identifies Maximinus as 'Mysian', cf. Sync. 442 (= Adler & Tuffin 2002, 521), but this seems to be an anomaly. See Haegemans 2010, 49-52 and Speidel 2016, 342-50 for a discussion of the evidence and scholarship. For Mecella 2017, 193-4, Herodian's use of μιξοβάρβαρος might be closer to Suetonius' *semibarbari*, who were *peregrini* admitted to the Roman senate, while Moralee 2008, esp. 80-82 argues that these terms "constituted a vocabulary of racial differentiation" (quote at 81). It should be noted that this is a unique occurrence in Suet., *Caes*. 76.3 (*quosdam e semibarbaris Gallorum*; notably applied to Gauls). See Chauvot 1995, 255-71, for a discussion on the general use of the term; Chauvot argues that the *SHA*'s use of *semibarbarus* has cultural implications, rather than strictly geographic or ethnic. See also Chastagnol 1994, 641-2.

[121] 6.8.1: στρατοπέδων τε ἐπιμέλειαν τῶν ἐθνῶν τε ἀρχάς. See Whittaker 1969-70, n. 2 *ad loc.* for a summary of the possible positions held by Maximinus; with Haegemans 2010, 52-56 and my next note.

who appointed him to the formation of recruits[122]. While Herodian had, throughout Alexander's reign, impressed upon the emperor's general aversion to violence and war, the author now explains that Maximinus fulfilled his military duties "with great care" (6.8.2-3: μετὰ πάσης ἐπιμελείας, trans. mod.). According to Herodian, Maximinus was vastly appreciated (εὔνοιαν πολλήν) for his hands-on attitude and for the numerous gifts he would bestow upon the soldiers[123]. This, so Herodian shows, is how Maximinus gained both their affection and loyalty.

At first glance, Maximinus' military skill is depicted by Herodian as a positive trait, allowing him to advance his career and helping him transcend his initial condition. In the context of Alexander's military failures, the battle-ready Maximinus would, arguably, seem like the better option. Accordingly, Maximinus' introduction in the *History* smoothly segues into the beginning of another power changeover: blaming the incumbent emperor for past defeats against the Parthians, current delays on the German front, and his general submission to his mother, the soldiers agreed that Alexander should be replaced by Maximinus (6.8.3-4). Their decision, according to Herodian, was also motivated by their "general inclination to revolt" (6.8.4: πρὸς τὸ καινοτομεῖν ἐπιτήδειοι) and a desire to see whether their situation could improve under a new government better suited to their tastes and interests[124]. Some of the more pervasive themes in Herodian, military greed and irresponsibility are also strong markers of bad character for an emperor who indulges, even enables, these vices – such as we have seen for Commodus, Julianus, Severus, Caracalla, etc.[125]. In that regard, Maximinus' early association to the army, as well as his own military background, would serve to nudge him to the side of bad emperors[126]. By the time the character first appears at the end of book 6, soldiers and praetorians have been consistently painted in a negative light, blamed for their terrible actions (e.g. Pertinax's murder) or for undue influence over the emperor(ship) (e.g. Julianus' proclamation). And, while Herodian recognizes Alexander's most salient flaws, the historian does not approve of the soldiers' coup against him, especially considering their chosen alternative.

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[122] See Speidel 2016, 346-50 and 354 on Maximinus' so-called office of *praefectus tironibus* and the identity of these recruits; with 351-4 on their possibly joint initiative to overturn Alexander and proclaim Maximinus; see also above [34, n. 64].

[123] This close relationship to the troops is similar to those of Severus (e.g. 2.11.2) and Caracalla (e.g. 4.7.4-7; 4.13.7) with their own soldiers.

[124] 6.8.4: "On top of their general inclination to revolt, the soldiers found the current state of the empire annoying because of the length of Alexander's rule, and unprofitable now that all his munificence had dried up" (ὄντες οὖν καὶ ἄλλως πρὸς τὸ καινοτομεῖν ἐπιτήδειοι, καὶ τὸ μὲν παρὸν τῆς ἀρχῆς βαρὺ διὰ μῆκος ἐξουσίας ἡγούμενοι ἀκερδές τε ἤδη πάσης προανηλωμένης φιλοτιμίας).

[125] For Martin 2006, 98-102, these are, at least in how Maximinus embodies them, traits typical of a 'barbarian'.

[126] If that is the case, then is Herodian's (seemingly) positive take on Maximinus' military skill only rhetorical, designed to create a dramatic 'tyrannical revelation'? Not necessarily: one thing to remember is that Herodian's imperial characterization usually works in strong contrasts, perhaps especially so between two consecutive emperors. And in fact Maximinus is Alexander's perfect opposite, in *all* aspects. As noted earlier, the *History*'s imperial portrayals are usually dynamic and the same attributes can be more positive or more negative, depending either on the character's status or the sphere of activity; see Pitcher 2017, 238-42.

In Herodian's story, Maximinus' accession is depicted as the direct result of a military action. To emphasize this point, Herodian even gives the soldiers the greater agency in the whole sequence: "they planned" (6.8.4: ἐβουλεύσαντο); "they gathered" (6.8.5: ἀθροισθέντες); "they threw the purple, imperial cloak" (πορφύραν ἐπιβαλόντες βασιλικήν); "they proclaimed him emperor" (αὐτοκράτορα ἀναγορεύουσιν). Within the whole passage devoted to his nomination, Maximinus is only the subject of two sets of coordinated participial clauses. One should be considered as an authorial aside, about Maximinus' possible involvement in the whole affair (6.8.5: εἴτε ἀγνοοῦντα… εἴτε προκατασκευάσαντα), while the other (προελθόντα καὶ ἐπιστάντα αὐτοῖς τὸν Μαξιμῖνον) doubles as the object of the main clause (ἀναγορεύουσιν). Maximinus thus appears to be subjected to the soldiers' decisions and actions. Despite his scepticism over the man's innocence in these proceedings, Herodian clearly minimizes Maximinus' activity in his stories of the plot against Alexander and of the ensuing proclamation[127]. Not in the least an apology for Maximinus, the spotlight put on the army in this episode might instead stress the novelty of a changeover born solely out of a military action, while also foreshadowing Maximinus' general incapacity to rule.

Playing the part

In Herodian's story, Maximinus' "first reaction was to refuse (παρητεῖτο) and to throw off (ἀπερρίπτει) the purple"[128]. While παρητεῖτο is the usual verb used by Herodian to describe a formal rejection of power, Maximinus' refusal interestingly does not include the customary excuse of old age[129]. In fact, his *recusatio* is not expressed through words, either in direct or indirect speech, but is instead performed. Maximinus' refusal matches in physicality his appointment by the soldiers, both only conveyed through the act of throwing on or off the purple, as the symbol of emperorship[130]. Now offered this honour at sword point, Maximinus is said to have finally consented to it, albeit "under protest and in spite of himself" (6.8.6: ἄκων μὲν καὶ οὐ βουλόμενος, trans. mod.). While Maximinus is given a few speech-verbs (6.8.6-7: παρητεῖτο, εἰπών, παραγγέλλει), there is no actual dialogue depicted between him and the soldiers, merely armed threats (ἐνέκειντο ξιφήρεις, ἀποκτενεῖν ἀπειλοῦντες). Although the *History*'s *recusationes* usually have a certain sense of ceremony about them, Maximinus'

[127] Compare with *SHA*, *Maximin*. 7.4 (*subito inmissis militibus, ut quidam dicunt, ab ipso, ut alii, tribunis barbaris*); *Alex*. 59.7 (*multi dicunt a Maximino inmissos tirones… eum occidisse, multi aliter*); Oros. 7.18.8 (*sed militari tumultu apud Mogontiacum interfectus est*); Eutrop. 8.23 (*periit in Gallia militari tumultu*); 9.1 (*ad imperium accessit sola militum uoluntate*); Aurel. Vict., *Caes*. 25.1 (*potentiam cepit suffragiis legionum*); Ps.-Vict. 24.3 (*tunc etiam Maximinus regnum arripuit, pluribus de exercitu corruptis*). See Moralee 2008, 75-76, on the preference of the military over racial theme in fourth-century authors.

[128] 6.8.6: ὅ δὲ τὰ μὲν πρῶτα παρητεῖτο καὶ τὴν πορφύραν ἀπερρίπτει·

[129] Cf. 2.3.3 (Pertinax); 4.14.2 (Adventus); 7.5.7 (Gordian I).

[130] Revermann 2013, 82 argues that stage props, such as my understanding of the purple in the *History*, are "mobile signs, meaning that they are capable of replacing any other sign system"; props may even "evolve into being used as primary vehicles for generating theatrical meaning, in the absence of which the plays start losing their point" (also at 82).

refusal is pushed further towards performance through its physical mimicry of the act[131]. Moreover, Maximinus' perfunctory refusal and his ensuing contrived acceptance operate on two levels. First, both acts point to the author's scepticism about Maximinus' innocence: whereas Herodian had earlier raised the question without expressly taking a stance, his second comment addresses Maximinus' ambitions in a plainer fashion. But more importantly, both elements show the new emperor's inexperience in political affairs, namely his failure to understand standard inauguration practices, and an excessive deference to the military[132]. By portraying a physical, violent exchange between the soldiers and their candidate, Herodian clearly distinguishes Maximinus' nomination from others, in which the senate was still given a part to play[133].

Once proclaimed emperor by the army, Maximinus' first (depicted) action was to persuade the soldiers to get rid of Alexander as soon as possible[134]. This sets the tone for the rest of his rule, which would be marked with great bloodshed. As noted previously, Herodian is usually careful in laying out the event sequence of a power transition. For instance, while generally disapproving of Commodus, the author marks a clear separation between his murder and Pertinax's inauguration, in order to disconnect the new emperor from any possible association to the plot against his predecessor[135]. Proclaiming a new emperor during an ongoing reign, regardless of its quality, is frowned upon by the author – this has been made especially clear through the contrasting accession sequences of Commodus and Caracalla. As with Macrinus, Herodian seems to find highly dubious the combination of murderer and new

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[131] This passage is similarly interrupted by a second authorial aside, in which Herodian reports that Maximinus spread stories (ὡς ἔλεγε) about prophecies announcing his future appointment: "(though the story is that oracles and dreams had frequently in the past predicted such a fortune for him)", (6.8.6: πολλάκις αὐτῷ πρότερον, ὡς ἔλεγε, χρησμῶν καὶ ὀνειράτων τὴν τοσαύτην τύχην προειρηκότων). I interpret the genitive absolute as existing outside of the main narrative, as a piece of external insight into Maximinus' psyche provided by Herodian as author-narrator. On such "incises de rumeur", see Fournier 1946, 207-8.

[132] By comparison, Maximinus would later give a respectful but authoritative speech to the army in reaction to Gordian's proclamation and the senate's rebellious actions. Although an argument could be made in favour of different statuses (i.e. not yet emperor vs. ruling emperor) requiring different approaches, Severus' first speech (cf. 2.10.2-9; and even Niger's for that matter, cf. 2.8.2-5) is very similar to Maximinus' later call to arms. Herodian also notes, somewhat disparagingly, that that speech had been written by some of his friends (7.8.3); cf. *SHA*, *Maximin.* 2.5. An interesting contrast based on literacy can be made with Gordian, whom the *Historia Augusta* records as having written several poems earlier in his life (*SHA*, *Gord.* 3; this information, however, is not found elsewhere).

[133] Herodian sets Gordian's proclamation by the Libyan rebels in a similar context of armed threat (above, [64-68]), but the presence and placement of a speech may allude, through the basic dichotomy of senate-discourse vs. military-physical violence, to the coming senatorial ratification. Consider both proclamation-phrases: πορφύραν ἐπιβαλόντες βασιλικὴν αὐτοκράτορα ἀναγορεύουσιν (6.8.5, Maximinus) and χλαμύδι πορφυρᾷ περιβάλλουσι σεβασμίαις τε τιμαῖς προσαγορεύουσιν (7.5.3, Gordian). Slight differences may be noted on the use of ἐπιβάλλω ("throw on") vs. περιβάλλω ("throw round", but also "put on", "clothe"), as well as on the syntactical construction of a main verb and a participle (ἐπιβαλόντες, ἀναγορεύουσιν) vs. two coordinated main verbs (περιβάλλουσι, προσαγορεύουσιν). When compared to Gordian's passage, these elements in Maximinus' case help bring out the rashness of a military proclamation. There might also be a nuance to be made between Herodian's use of ἀναγορεύω ("proclaim") vs. προσαγορεύω ("proclaim", but also "greet"); on this last point, see Roques 1990b, 40-41.

[134] In the *Vita*, Maximinus is proclaimed emperor after Alexander's death (*SHA*, *Maximin.* 8.1: *occiso Alexandro*).

[135] On Pertinax's involvement, see earlier discussion, [53-60].

emperor within a single individual. In Maximinus' case, the blending of roles and sequence order corresponds both to a feature of problematic rulers and to the specificity of problematic years, i.e. 193-4 or 235-8. In addition, although inaugural speeches are not always featured in Herodian (e.g. Caracalla and Geta, Heliogabalus, Gordian I)[136], such a lack in Maximinus' episode adds to the overall atmosphere of physical violence. Invested, according to Herodian, only as the result of a military decision, Maximinus nonetheless claimed full imperial powers. To illustrate further Maximinus' extreme militarism, Herodian reports that the new emperor doubled the soldiers' pay, announced large bonuses, and issued full pardons (6.8.8)[137]. If there was any doubt to be had about the nature of Maximinus' forthcoming rule, his first actions as emperor firmly establish the type of government he would lead.

Performing the barbarian

Looking at other accounts of Maximinus' reign, we can see that the emperor's image in ancient literature is consistently negative. Maximinus' so-called 'half-barbarian' origins[138], his equestrian rank, and his military provenance are key reasons for his particularly bad reputation. In addition, most authors coming after Herodian eagerly attribute two 'imperial firsts' to Maximinus: the first 'barbarian' to assume the office and the first emperor put in power solely through military action, without any senatorial intervention[139]. These two 'feats' also magnified each other, serving to firmly anchor Maximinus' 'barbarian' figure in collective imagination. 'Tragic' barbarians have been studied in detail namely by Edith Hall, who looked into on the mechanisms of creating, sanctioning, and perpetuating stereotypes about 'barbarians' within fifth-century Athenian tragedy. Important (dramatic) contributions to the

[136] To varying effects: Caracalla and Geta, see above, [47-48]; Heliogabalus, [217-18]; Gordian I, [68-72],

[137] As Herodian shows, Maximinus' extravagant promises would lead, albeit indirectly, to his ruin: these increased expenses would put a heavy strain on the provinces, causing in turn steep tax rises. Such a case occurred in Africa, for instance, where the local élite would eventually rebel against the procurator and even proclaim a new emperor, cf. 7.4.4ff. A similar pattern of Maximinus provoking his own downfall is found during the siege of Aquileia, where causation is more immediate, cf. 8.4.5; 8.5.7. According to Mecella 2017, 189-90, Aquileia acts as a stand-in for Rome, as an "emblema della romanità", against which Maximinus was laying siege; see also Christol 1990, 136-8, with Sotinel 2005, 7-10 on these passages (it is a "description de la cité idéale, une véritable utopie civique, quintessence de la romanité", quote at 9), with 10-15 on Aquileia's status during the third century.

[138] Interestingly, Ps.-Vict. 25.1 (*Iulius Maximinus Thrax, ex militaribus*) is the first and only ancient occurrence for Maximinus' now-famous nickname 'Thrax', cf. Bruun 2003, esp. 90. *SHA*, *Maximin.* 1.4-7 features an invented genealogy; Chastagnol 1994, 641-2 has argued that this emphasis on Maximinus' origins in the *Vita* is directed more at the emperor's lack of education and rural background, than strictly his ethnicity (cf. *SHA*, *Maximin.* 2.5: *uix adhuc Latinae linguae*). Victor qualifies Maximinus as *litterarum fere rudis* (Vict., *Caes*. 25.1). A similar implication can be found in Herodian's own work, when the historian remarks on Maximinus having been "a shepherd-boy once" (6.8.1: πρότερον μὲν ἐν παιδὶ ποιμαίνων); on this passage, see Martin 2006, 95-96. According to Goffart 1988, 81 and n. 295, these "amusing details" about Maximinus' origins (esp. as depicted in the *SHA*) are used by sixth-century historian Jordanes in the *Getica*, where the emperor is frequently used as "bringer of comic relief".

[139] Cf. Vict., *Caes*. 25.1 (*primus e militaribus… potentiam cepit suffragiis legionum. quod tamen etiam patres, dum periculosum aestimant inermes armato resistere, approbauerunt*); Eutrop. 9.1 (*ad imperium accessit sola militum uoluntate, cum nulla senatus intercessisset auctoritas*); Oros. 7.19.1 (*nulla senatus uoluntate imperator ab exercitu*). In *SHA*, *Maximin*. 8.1: *sed occiso Alexandro primum e corpore military et nondum senator sine decreto senatu Augustus ab exercitu appellatus est*. Bersanetti 1965, 9-20, states, based on epigraphic material, that Maximinus became emperor through co-optation.

image of the 'boorish' Thracians were likely Sophocles' *Tereus* (possibly a first 'barbarization' of the mythical figure, now lost), Euripides' portrayal of Poseidon's son Eumolpus in *Erechtheus*, the Aeschylean Lycurgus, Polymnestor's character in Euripides' *Hecuba*; on the portrayal of Thracians in Athenian tragedy[140]. Although it can be reasonably argued, namely with Moralee, that a full 'racialization' of Maximinus' image would only emerge later in the fourth century[141], Maximinus' character in the *History* nevertheless puts on several traits of the stereotypical barbarian, picking up the cues of the 'tragic barbarian' already laid out in classical drama.

First, Maximinus simply looks the part of the 'barbarian emperor'. Had there been any 'casting requirements' for his role, he would fit them perfectly. Herodian insists time and again on Maximinus' unique stature: in fact, Maximinus was recruited into the army and ascended quickly through the ranks "because of his physical size and strength" (6.8.1: διὰ μέγεθος καὶ ἰσχὺν σώματος, trans. mod.)[142]. The perception of Maximinus' imposing bearing, closely tied to his military skill, undergoes a similar transformation through his acquisition of power. This is a common theme in ancient literature, where monstrosity is (fully) revealed through power[143]. At first a notable soldierly asset, Maximinus' physique quickly becomes a symptom of imperial badness. At the beginning of book 7, Herodian even describes the newly proclaimed emperor as a man "of such frightening appearance (τὴν ὄψιν φοβερώτατος) and colossal size (μέγιστος τὸ σῶμα) that there is no obvious comparison to be drawn (ὡς μὴ ῥᾳδίως… ἐξισοῦσθαι) with any of the best-trained Greek athletes or warrior elite of the barbarians."[144] The fact that, in Herodian's portrayal, Maximinus could easily tower over any other quickly goes beyond admiration, instead veering into terror: Maximinus' looks are certainly inhuman, but they are monstrous rather than divine[145]. According to Herodian,

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[140] See Hall 1989, 104-10 (famous figures); 122-7 (vices in opp. to Platonic virtues); 137-8 (as fighters).

[141] Moralee 2008, 55-58; 76-82, remarks that, despite the mix of race and class in ancient portrayals of Maximinus, scholarship has tended to focus on one or the other, but not quite both together; he also contextualizes modern trends of study on Maximinus and 'barbarism'. On ancient perceptions of and attitudes towards barbarism and race, see Isaac 2004, with additional references in its long introduction.

[142] Cf. 7.1.2 (διὰ μέγεθος καὶ ἰσχὺν σώματος); 7.1.6 (διὰ σώματος μέγεθος καὶ ἰσχὺν καὶ ἐμπειρίαν πολεμικήν); 7.1.12 (μέγιστος τὸ σῶμα); echoed in *SHA*, *Maximin.* 2.2 (*magnitudine corporis conspicuus*); 2.6 (*magnitudinem corporis Seuerus miratus*); 3.6 (*longitudine autem corporis et uastitate et forma atque oculorum magnitudine et candore*); 6.8 (*magnitudine tanta… police ita uasto*); 9.3 (*ob magnitudinem corporis uirtutisque*). See Pitcher 2017, 240-1 on the similarities between the physical description of Caracalla and Maximinus in Herodian. Burian 1988, 244 supposes that Herodian did not see Maximinus personally, but was inspired by the emperor's portrayal on coins. On Maximinus' absence from Rome, Haegemans 2010, 83-86.

[143] Cf. Scheid 1984; also Pitcher 2017, 240-1 on this particular shift.

[144] 7.1.12: ἦν δὲ καὶ τὴν ὄψιν φοβερώτατος, καὶ μέγιστος τὸ σῶμα, ὡς μὴ ῥᾳδίως αὐτῷ τινὰ μήτε Ἑλλήνων τῶν σωμασκούντων μήτε βαρβάρων τῶν μαχιμωτάτων ἐξισοῦσθαι.

[145] According to the *Historia Augusta*, the man himself might have aspired to a more divine comparison (*SHA*, *Maximin.* 9.3: *cum inmortalem se prope crederet ob magnitudinem corporis uirtutisque*). Interestingly, the *Vita* had previously recorded that Maximinus, *uir temporis sui fortissimus*, was often nicknamed 'Hercules', 'Achilles', 'Hector', and 'Ajax', but this comes prior to his accession and, more importantly perhaps, in a confrontation with the *impurissimus* Elagabal (*SHA*, *Maximin.* 4.9-5.1). Once emperor, the 'hero' becomes beast: Maximinus is henceforth called 'Cyclops', 'Busiris', 'Sciron', 'Phalaris', 'Typhon', and 'Giant', after mythical or legendary characters all notoriously cruel (*SHA*, *Maximin.* 8.5). On imperial nicknames, see further Bruun 2003; with Corbeill 1996, 57-60, 74-98 more generally on names and nicknames in political invective. To pick up on the idea that Maximinus might have been his own worst enemy (as exemplified by

Maximinus also manifested the "bloodthirsty temperament derived from his ancestors and his country" (7.1.2: τό τε φονικὸν πάτριον ἔχων καὶ ἐπιχώριον) and "by his birth and normal behaviour he was a barbarian" (φύσει δὲ ἦν τὸ ἦθος, ὥσπερ καὶ τὸ γένος, βάρβαρος). Another trait considered to be typical of 'barbarians' was the love of money, which Maximinus forcibly displayed through harsh exactions and heavy taxation (7.3.1-6)[146]. Although Maximinus may have initially displayed a few promising attributes, his accession confirms his assigned character – savage, cruel, barbarian.

As Herodian's Maximinus continues to embody more fully the type of the 'barbarian emperor' as he settles into the emperorship, he also grows more and more insecure about his position[147]. What had allowed Maximinus to move up the ranks in the army and ultimately reach the throne now becomes a source of great worry for him. It almost seems that Maximinus, "conscious" (7.1.1: συνειδώς) of the general animosity towards him and of its causes, responds by diving even deeper into his 'casting' type. This shift in Maximinus' character is said to have caused a "great change" (7.1.1: πολλὴν τὴν μεταβολὴν) in the Roman Empire, a "complete transformation" (7.1.1: μετάγειν πάντα) from Alexander's government[148]. It is as if this version of Maximinus, once invested with the emperorship, embraces, and even internalizes, the collectively imagined 'barbarian emperor', tapping into all the clichés associated to such a character[149]. In a way, Maximinus might even be *performing* his own character.

A few other emperors of the *History* were also faced with (the fear of) prejudice, whether on the basis of class or race, and their responses to this vary. In a similar position, Alexander and Elagabalus had opposite reactions to the tension between their origins and the perceptions and expectations of Roman society: Elagabalus completely embraced his heritage, even seeking to 'orientalize', or better yet 'Syrianize', Rome and its institutions, while Alexander rather attempted to 'Romanize' himself through a classical education and the cultivation of traditional, even Republican, values[150]. As mentioned earlier, in the case of Macrinus, issues of ethnicity are never, at least in Herodian's story, addressed so directly,

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his defeat at Aquileia), it is striking to note that several of the emperor's previous alter egos were the heroes who defeated the monsters tied to his new monikers. See Burian 1988, 236-8 on Maximinus' represented monstrosity in the *Vita*.

[146] Also indirectly at 7.12.6-7, in which popular ruin was caused by a fire set by the praetorians. See Haegemans 2010, 113-30, on Maximinus' financial policy.

[147] This is what we might call the 'tyrant's paradox': so Xenophon's Hiero claims, the more powerful a tyrant becomes, the more anxious, isolated, and miserable he gets. This ties in with the theme of the *princeps clausus* (the 'secluded emperor') treated explicitly in *SHA*, *Alex*. 66.2-3 and *Aurel.* 43.1-4; with Chastagnol 1994, clxii-clxiv.

[148] Pitcher 2017, 242 notes the structural contrast between the openings of book 6 and 7.

[149] Alluding to Scheid 1984, Christol 1990, 132, n. 40 notes that Maximinus' story is a not the typical story of a tyrant, since "tout de suite la nature profonde de Maximin se révèle".

[150] This was already Maesa and Mamaea's plans, which the emperor also pursued himself. According to the *Vita*, Alexander "wished it to be thought that he derived his descent from the race of the Romans, for he felt shame at being called a Syrian" (*SHA*, *Alex.* 28.7: *uolebat uideri originem de Romanorum gente trahere, quia eum pudebat Syrum dici*; Alexander's embarrassment is stated again at 44.3 (*stemma generis depinxerat*) and 64.3). See, e.g., Chauvot 1994.

other than a vague and implicit connection with his taste for luxury[151]. But Macrinus himself, in his inaugural letter to the senate (5.1.2-8), tackles potential concerns about class, making a case for his personal character against Caracalla's pedigree. According to Herodian, Macrinus' words were fairly well received by the senators, though they are said to have been more relieved to be free from Caracalla than actually convinced by Macrinus' argument (5.2.1). Like Maximinus, Pertinax was also concerned about the senators' reaction to his nomination, due to his origins (cf. 2.3.1)[152]. However, in Herodian's idealizing narrative, Pertinax's good character and reputation would easily outweigh any hesitation due to his condition (2.3.3; 2.3.11). Inspired by Marcus' example, Pertinax had proven his own worth throughout his long career: while externally the character might be shaped by Herodian, internally Pertinax does not perform the part of a good ruler, but simply *is*.

Unlike other 'foreign' emperors in the *History*, Maximinus is subjected to prejudice based on both class and race, which are here very closely tied together, even complementing each other. Maximinus' response to these preconceptions is comparable to Elagabalus' strategy: fully embrace the image they project, but also the one that is projected onto them through fear, ignorance, and layers of socio-literary (mis)representation. However, if Elagabalus sought to integrate Rome, and more generally the Empire, into his grand vision of a 'Elagabalian' kingdom, Maximinus would take his own 'performance' outside the capital, and even away from any trace of (Roman) *urbanitas*[153]. Perhaps through an awareness of the stigma around his origins, Maximinus came to despise the city, and with it its noblemen and intellectuals[154]. Like other usurpers before him, he quickly got rid of Alexander's friends and advisers, but the purge also served to remove any individual "who had the advantage of being aware of their nobility" (7.1.3: μηδενὸς αὐτῷ παρόντος ᾧ νέμειν αἰδῶ ἀνάγκην ἔχοι), leaving him 'surrounded' only by his own army[155]. In line with the idea that subjects conform to their rulers' character, said army, during the Gallicanus-Maecenas induced riot in Rome, was even perceived by the population as "behaving towards them like barbarians" (7.12.3: ὡς ὑπὸ βαρβάρων πάσχουσι)[156]. Himself waging a war against the city for what it represented and to pre-empt its eventual rejection of him, Maximinus can be viewed as seeking to recreate his

[151] See n. [75] and [76] of this chapter.
[152] On this passage, see above, [62-66].
[153] Martin 2006, 101-2, building on a discussion of space in the work of the third-century panegyrist Eumenius in Chauvot 1998, 51: "Cette barbarisation de l'espace se manifeste par une disparition du fait urbain, qui est aussi une regression temporelle: ainsi est donnée de façon saisissante une définition de la Barbarie, à la fois négation de la civilisation urbaine et émergence du passé au cœur du présent; les villes étaient envahies par les forêts et habitées par les bêtes sauvages, écroulées dans les ruines du passé".
[154] Cf. 7.1.2: δεδιὼς μή τι τῇ συγκλήτῳ καὶ τοῖς ὑπηκόοις εὐκαταφρόνητος γένηται. Similarly, in *SHA*, *Maximin*. 9.1: *nam ignobilitatis tegendae causa omnes conscios generis sui interemit, nonnullos etiam amicos, qui ei saepe misericordiae paupertatis causa pleraque donauerant*.
[155] Herodian comments that Maximinus would be "like a man living in a fortress" (7.1.3: ἴν' ὥσπερ ἐξ ἀκροπόλεως).
[156] Motta 2017, 68-74: "La distinzione di strati sociali più corrotti nell'ambito del δῆμος indica la volontà di Erodiano di precisare e delimitare responsabilità politiche al suo interno" (quote at 71; the distinction is indicated by the particular use of ὄχλος).

earlier tribal lifestyle, away from Rome and detached from its urban and social conventions[157]. Though it was certainly a strategic location to fight on the Danubian front, the capital of Pannonia inferior, Sirmium, became Maximinus' unofficial headquarters for some time (cf. 7.2.9; 7.3.4)[158].

A staged opposition?

Finally, in addition to showing how Maximinus embraced his barbarian image after his proclamation, Herodian also stages Maximinus *staging himself* in various political affairs. In most cases, Maximinus is made to produce a narrative in which he was not the persecutor, as outer perceptions would suggest, but rather the victim[159]. Having been 'subjected' to the army's will for his imperial appointment, Maximinus similarly 'falls prey' to prejudiced senators and aristocrats in Rome. Early on in his rule, Maximinus was faced with a general conspiracy said to have been supported by centurions, senators, and ordinary people alike (7.1.4-8). According to Herodian, the plot might have been led by a certain Magnus, a "patrician consular" (7.1.5: τῶν εὐπατριδῶν τε καὶ ὑπατευκότων)[160]. The complete opposite to Maximinus' 'half-barbarian', career military officer, Magnus was the ideal opponent.

All of Magnus' implication, in Herodian's retelling, is framed in indirect turns and an impression of hearsay: Magnus "was accused" (7.1.5: διεβλήθη)[161]; "it was alleged that his plan was to be as follows" (ἡ δὲ συσκευὴ τοιαύτη τις ἐλέγετο ἔσεσθαι)[162]; Magnus "was alleged to have

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[157] According to Herodian, Maximinus' harsh exactions in the cities of the Empire even gave the "appearance of a siege" (7.3.6: ὄψις πολιορκίας). For Hilali 2007, 61 and n. 18, p. 60 the African rebellion against Maximinus stemmed from "une résistance à une politique fiscale qui a empêché le peuple de pratiquer un mode de vie à la romaine." Gagé 1964, 292-4 also argued that opposition to Maximinus was an effort to preserve "un type de vie latine, ornée de loisirs, de spectacles, de luxe" (quote at 293). These ideas are briefly implied by Herodian (7.3.6): "Some of the lower classes turned to opposition and set a guard round the temples, prepared to be slaughtered and killed in front of the altars rather than see their country plundered." Though see Haegemans 2010, 83-84: "Maximinus' absence from Rome was probably not a conscious move. The importance of his lack of interest in the capital must not be overemphasised." Whether or not Haegemans' point is valid, my interest here is Herodian's *representation* of these events, which conveys a wilful separation from Rome and civic ideals on Maximinus' part. So Christol 1990, 133: "Hérodien se livre à une reconstruction pleine d'observations qui font de Maximin l'image inversée de l'empereur idéal et de l'homme civilisé."

[158] Departing for Rome when the senate elected two new emperors, Maximinus would ultimately never make it to the capital – at least, not alive. According to Christol 1990, 138-40 and Hilali 2007, 65, Rome would eventually triumph over Maximinus, as the procession and presentation of the emperor's severed head all across Italy on its way to the capital would illustrate, a parody of sorts of the imperial tours and *aduentus*.

[159] In others, Maximinus would instead emphasize his success and glory: to commemorate his 'success' in Germany, the emperor had commissioned huge paintings of his 'victories' and had them displayed right in front of the senate house (7.2.8). Both strategies are of course to the emperor's advantage, since he can 'expose' the elite's biases towards him, while confirming his military superiority.

[160] Note the phrasing used by Herodian for Magnus' introduction, similar to the presentation of emperors or other serious pretenders; cf. below, [211, with n. 162].

[161] Like the conspiracy had been 'denounced' (7.1.4: συνωμοσία τις διαβληθεῖσα); note how διαβάλλω can also (though not always) indicate falsehood, as 'slander', 'calumniate', 'mislead'; cf. *LSJ*, s.v. διαβάλλω, V-VI.

[162] It may be worthwhile to note the repeated use of the indefinite τις (7.1.4: συνωμοσία τις; 7.1.5: συσκευὴ… τις), which may serve to trivialize the story, or even dismiss it; recall how Maximinus' introduction featured such a depreciatory τις (6.8.1); cf. above, [203, with n. 120].

influenced" (7.1.7: ἐλέγετο… ἀναπεῖσαι)[163]. Though Herodian provides a detailed account of the plot and its discovery, the historian appears rather sceptical of its authenticity: "Such was the story (φήμη) of the plot (διαβολῆς), which may have contained some truth, or was possibly manufactured (συσκευασθεῖσα) by Maximinus. It is difficult to say with accuracy, because it remains unproven (ἀνεξέλεγκτος)."[164] Interestingly, while Herodian offers two explanations (εἴτε… εἴτε), both remain weighed down by suspicion: either the plot was entirely fabricated, or it has 'some measure' (ἀληθὴς ὑπάρξασα) of truth, but only that[165]. Finally, Herodian seems to play, throughout the story, on the tension between 'plot' and 'fabrication' with words such as διαβολῆς (and διαβάλλω) or συσκευή (and συσκευάζω). Likewise, the line is not always clear between reliable accounts and dubious hearsay (φήμη, λέγομαι), since Herodian also uses these same turns in other instances where they apply to (what is held to be) accurate information[166]. Still, whether the plot was real or not, Herodian shrouds its tale in enough suspicion that one is led to believe that it might have been part of (Herodian's staging of) Maximinus' self-staging as a 'victim of the State'[167]. This would prove to be a self-fulfilling prophecy: after surviving a few other conspiracies, similarly recorded by Herodian[168], Maximinus would die at the hands of his own troops. Maximinus' soldiers, incensed by their defeat against the Aquileians who themselves had been fortified by the election of a promising new pair of emperors in Rome, would eventually turn against him.

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[163] Such a concentration of allegations does not seem to be found elsewhere in the *History*, although a similar aspect of hearsay can be found in the rumours surrounding e.g. the cause of death of Caracalla's favourite freedman, Festus (4.8.4), or Macrinus' escape plans (5.3.11).

[164] 7.1.8: ἡ μὲν τῆς διαβολῆς φήμη τοιαύτη ἐγένετο, εἴτε ἀληθὴς ὑπάρξασα εἴτε ὑπὸ τοῦ Μαξιμίνου συσκευασθεῖσα· ἀκριβὲς δὲ εἰπεῖν οὐ ῥᾴδιον, ἐπεὶ ἔμενεν ἀνεξέλεγκτος. Cf. *SHA*, *Maximin.* 10.5: *et istam quidem factionem Maximinus ipse finxisse perhibetur, ut materiam crudelitatis augeret*. On this conspiracy, see Loriot 1975, 672-3.

[165] The same sort of phrasing was used to frame Maximinus' accession and the military coup that led to it (6.8.5: εἴτε ἀγνοοῦντα… εἴτε προκατασκευάσαντα), though Herodian had then seemed more disposed to believe the genuineness of Maximinus' surprised reluctance. On alternative explanations, cf. above, [144, with n. 154].

[166] φήμη is regularly used to mean 'news', e.g. 1.4.8, Marcus' death; 1.7.1, Commodus' decision to return to Rome; 2.8.7, Niger's proclamation in Antioch, etc.

[167] Opelt 1998, 2945 interprets Maximinus' speech to the army (7.8.4-8) as an unsuccessful attempt to refute his damaging image as "Terrorherrscher", which the emperor claimed to have been created and promoted by his enemies.

[168] A second conspiracy against Maximinus quickly (at least in Herodian's story) followed, led by the Osrhoene archers, who deplored Alexander's murder (7.1.9-11; see Speidel 2016, 356-7). According to Herodian, the archers forcefully chose and proclaimed emperor Quartinus, a consular who had been a friend of Alexander's – note the resemblance to Maximinus' own 'contrived' accession (7.1.9: ἁρπάσαντες ἄκοντα καὶ οὐδὲν προειδότα; οὔ τι βουλόμενον). However, the plot is said to have been betrayed by a certain Macedo, who hoped to gain Maximinus' favour. A third uprising occurred sometime later in Libya, where Gordian I was proclaimed emperor; cf. 7.6.9ff. This usurpation led to the defection of several provinces and the senate's endorsement of the Gordians, encouraged by the successful mutiny against Vitalianus and the ensuing rumours of Maximinus' death. A final rebellion, emerging from the senate, led to the joint nomination of Maximus and Balbinus. Like Commodus before him (cf. 1.13.7, after Cleander's betrayal), Maximinus is also said to have been embittered by the quick succession of the two first conspiracies (cf. 7.1.12), though he was already quite bloodthirsty to begin with (καὶ πρότερον οὕτω πεφυκυῖαν).

4.3.3 The empress

Female characters in the History

Among a reduced cast of secondary characters in the *History*, fewer still are women[169]. Some are only mentioned in passing, such as the wife and daughter of Julianus, the daughter of the Parthian king Artabanus (i.e. Ziyanak; 4.10.2), or the many wives of Heliogabalus (i.e. Julia Cornelia Paula, 5.6.1; Julia Aquila Severa, 5.6.2; Annia Aurelia Faustina, apparently also a relative of Commodus, 5.6.2). They remain anonymous, are given neither lines nor action, and are subjected to an emperor's person and activity. These characters are merely instrumentalized to highlight a particular aspect of an emperor's character. An (imagined) proposal of marriage to (the unnamed) Ziyanak is used to show Caracalla's duplicity, while Heliogabalus' many weddings reflect his frivolous character. Julianus' wife and daughter play a somewhat more consequential role (along with a throng of parasites, they convince him to make a bid for the emperorship), though their 'action' is screened through Julianus' own activity. There is in fact no interaction between the characters, and Julianus only suffers their 'action' (2.6.7: πείθουσιν… αὐτόν). As noted in the previous chapter, Herodian can emphasize Julianus' inadequacy to rule by crediting the man's decision to his dinner companions. Though these roles in the *History* are not, in essence, specific to women, but rather to secondary characters more generally, it should be noted that the actual sociopolitical limitations of women tend to exclude them from other, more consequential parts.

There are, however, a certain number of female characters enjoying a more important presence in the work, which is often reflected through a named 'role' and a (relative) autonomy of action or speech: Lucilla and Fadilla (two sisters of Commodus), Crispina (wife of Commodus), Marcia (a favourite concubine of Commodus), Julia Domna (wife of Severus and mother of Geta and Caracalla), Plautilla (daughter of Severus' prefect Plautianus and wife of Caracalla), Julia Maesa (sister of Julia Domna and grandmother of Heliogabalus and Alexander), Julia Soaemis (daughter of Julia Maesa and mother of Heliogabalus), Julia Maesa (daughter of Julia Maesa and mother of Alexander). These women, however, generally have a limited influence on the story and are mostly used as foils to emperors in order to undermine their capacity as leaders and main characters. Faced with an ignorant or inept ruler, these female characters might be invested with superior lucidity and competence – and this serves to create a sharper contrast with the emperors.

Accordingly, these women tend to come up in critical situations, and especially during the reign of young emperors (e.g. Commodus, Caracalla, Heliogabalus, Alexander – though, to be fair, a larger number of secondary characters in general can be noted in these cases[170]). Fadilla, for instance, dared first to warn her brother against Cleander's ambitions. According to Herodian, her words encouraged others around Commodus to denounce the prefect, eventually leading the emperor to take heed and have Cleander killed (1.13.1-4). Marcia pre-

[169] This section on Maesa is a freely translated and (quite substantially) expanded version of an argument presented in Laporte 2021b, 373-7.

[170] This can perhaps explain, at least in part, Julia Domna's relative absence during Severus' reign and her increased presence during the joint rule of her sons.

empted her own execution at the hands of Commodus by conspiring first against the emperor with the help of Laetus and Eclectus (1.16-17). All three had been sentenced to death by Commodus for opposing his plans to appear in gladiatorial costume from the barracks during the Saturnalia. As noted previously, this action, though partly self-interested, also served to free the whole population from Commodus' tyranny. Leading the counter-plot in Herodian's retelling, Marcia stands out from most of the other female characters at play in the *History*. And yet, despite an extended presence and her leadership in a critical action, even Marcia comes to disappear from the narrative in favour of her male associates. Though Marcia, as Herodian records, is part of the initial discussion on potential successors to Commodus, Laetus and Eclectus end up taking over from her for the rest of the proceedings, eventually putting Pertinax in power (2.1.3-5).

Kuhn-Chen, in her brief survey of the women of the *History*, has noted how they all tended to be driven by imperial ambition (*Herrschsucht*) and, to a lesser extent, vanity (*Eitelkeit*); even in the case of Alexander's successful regency, which benefitted the entire Empire, a lust for power is the only motivation ascribed to Maesa and Mamaea[171]. As noted by several scholars, there is, in the portrayal and intervention of most of these characters, a certain taste for drama and, perhaps more interestingy, certain aspects of 'tragic historiography'[172]. Maesa's portrayal in the *History* is arguably the most conclusive to that effect, since she is given ample space to move, speak, and act as a fully fledged character. Her importance has been noted in most scholarship, although briefly and often dismissed as another of Herodian's exaggerations[173]; if the centrality of her role is accepted (at least within the internal logic of the *History*), then its narrative implications have generally remained understudied[174]. Rowan, however, has observed how Maesa's part "brings an intriguing tension into the history."[175] Nadolny has analyzed more extensively Maesa's role and her motivations in the *History*, especially in comparison with her presence in Dio's work[176]. As we will see below, Maesa's storyline follows that of an emperor, in the sense that it has a proper beginning (entrance on the political stage) and a proper ending (death scene), and some of the emperors' actions are actually focalized through her. As such, a closer examination of her

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[171] Kuhn-Chen 2002, 323; see also Joubert 1981, 301-9 and 310, where she argues that women acually also obey to their "sens de l'intérêt public, à la sagesse". According to Piper 1975, 26, "Herodian's favorites, of course, are the Syrian women".

[172] Marasco 1998, 2907: "un atteggiamento di rispetto verso la personalità delle donne che accostano ancora Erodiano alle caratteristiche della storiografia 'tragica' e ai suoi riflessi in epoca imperiale"; Sidebottom 1998, 2789, n. 75: "the crediting of dramatic roles to women, especially imperial princesses"; with Bekker-Nelsen 2014, 227, in general agreement ("it may well be that Herodian has modelled some of his characters on the female protagonists of classical Greek tragedy"). Nadolny 2016, 164 credits these 'aggrandized' roles in the *History* (compared to e.g. Dio's work) namely to Herodian's "Unterhaltungsabsichten" ('entertainment purposes') and to the fact that he was not bound by the codes of any particular social or political group – or so he presents himself.

[173] E.g. Kettenhofen 1979, 33-44; 144-50, or Birley (in *OCD*[3], s.v. "Julia Maesa", 778): "her political influence is exaggerated by Herodian".

[174] Recently, e.g. Bekker-Nelsen 2014, 241; Kemezis 2014 247-8, 263; Chrysanthou 2020, 633.

[175] Rowan 2012, 172-3, along with the role of Mamaea during Alexander's section. Sommer 2004, 103-4 also identified her importance by calling her the "Herrin der Lage".

[176] Nadolny 2016, 167-72.

role, her interactions with the emperors and other social groups, and her impact on the overall narrative is warranted.

Cue Maesa

Like Marcia, Julia Maesa can boast a particularly long appearance compared to other female characters in the *History* – and a good chunk of secondary characters in general. However, unlike Marcia whose (narrative) existence in Herodian's work remains subordinate to Commodus' fate, Maesa enjoys a certain narrative autonomy, which mirrors her actual power. In fact, as the story of Heliogabalus' and Alexander's reigns progresses, Maesa is finally revealed to be the true protagonist of these episodes[177]. This key role is already made clear through Maesa's introduction: "there was a woman called Maesa (Μαῖσα ἦν τις ὄνομα), a Phoenician from Emesa (which is the name of a city in that country). She was the sister of Julia, the wife of Severus and Antoninus' mother"[178]. In contrast to other secondary characters, Maesa's presentation in the *History* is rather autonomous and does not immediately link her to the current emperor, the previous, or the next. Strikingly, her first relation to a known character within the story is another female character, her sister Julia Domna. This sets the tone for the next two regimes, as emperorship is depicted as something to be transmitted by and through women[179].

The phrasing of Maesa's introduction in the *History* is also highly indicative of her significance for the story. Herodian applies the same formula (i.e. variations of ἦν τις ὄνομα) he would use to introduce important supporting characters, such as usurpers, conspirators, close allies[180]. As seen above, a very similar turn marks the entrance of Maximinus at the end of book 6 (cf. 6.8.1). Maesa's introduction also has a decisive effect on the narrative, since Herodian initiates the transition from Macrinus to Heliogabalus through her presentation, instead of that of the future emperor[181]. Unlike other secondary characters who would generally come up in ongoing rules (and stories), Maesa leads this narrative shift. As such,

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[177] See Cass. Dio 80(79).6.2 (approved of Gannys); 11.1 (barbaric chants with grandson and daughter); 14.2; 15.4 (opposed Hierocles' promotion as Caesar); 17.2 (attended Alexander's adoption in the senate house); 19.2 (guarding Alexander from Heliogabalus); 19.4. In the *Historia Augusta*, Maesa is called 'Varia' and is evoked in a handful of passages (10.1; 12.3 (though refers to 4.2, which is about Soaemis); 13.5; 14.3; 15.6; 33.1). On Maesa's authority, Whittaker 1969-70, n. 3 *ad* 5.5.5: "The dominant position of Maesa is noted by all sources", citing Cass. Dio 80(79).17.2; *SHA*, *Heliog.* 12.3; *BMCRE* 5, ccxxxiii-ccxxxiv ("she strikes the double denarius – unlike any of the other Augustae of the reign"); *AE* 1955, 260. Maesa is not mentioned in Oros. 7.18.4-5; Aurel. Vict. 23; Ps.-Vict. 23; Zosim. 1.11.

[178] 5.3.2: Μαῖσα ἦν τις ὄνομα, τὸ γένος Φοίνισσα, ἀπὸ Ἐμέσου καλουμένης οὕτω πόλεως ἐν Φοινίκῃ· ἀδελφὴ δὲ ἐγεγόνει Ἰουλίας τῆς Σεβήρου μὲν γυναικὸς Ἀντωνίνου δὲ μητρός.

[179] And this, despite stories of Caracallian paternity for Heliogabalus and Alexander; see Scott 2017, 421-3 who notes a similar pattern in Dio.

[180] Maternus (1.10.1), Cleander (1.12.3), Narcissus (1.17.1), Festus (4.8.4), Martialis (4.13.1), Magnus (7.1.5), Quartinus (7.1.9), Capelianus (7.9.1).

[181] Herodian might flag the final episode of a rule, i.e. what has led to the current emperor's death, with a formula conveying fatality: e.g. ἔδει… παύσασθαι (1.16.1, Commodus) or ἔδει… λαβεῖν (4.12.3, Caracalla). A similar phrase marks Macrinus' last scene (5.3.1: ἐχρῆν… καταλῦσαι) and sets up Maesa's entrance, just like how Macrinus was introduced at the start of Caracalla's final moments. See Sidebottom 1998, 2819; Hidber 2006, 182, n. 176.

Maesa's role is perhaps closer to the part of a new emperor, whose position and movements across the Empire dictate the geographical shifts within the story. Maesa thus redirects the ongoing story in Antioch, where Macrinus was staying, to her own location around Emesa[182]. Though the phrase used is different from Maesa's, Severus' entrance in the *History* (2.9.2: ἠγεῖτο δὲ…) has a similar effect on the narrative, which also shifts from Antioch, where Niger was just proclaimed emperor, to Pannonia, where a 'newcomer' (presented as such by Herodian) would take advantage of shaky new regimes to seize power himself.

Mastermind Maesa

Macrinus' downfall and Heliogabalus' accession (and eventual ruin) are, in Herodian's story, entirely due to Maesa's doing. As the sister of Julia Domna, Maesa had been living at court until Macrinus came to power and deported her back to Syria (5.3.2). The exiled Maesa longed to recover her earlier lifestyle and restore her family's glory. As Herodian writes, "she would rather have risked any danger (πάντα κίνδυνον) than live as an ordinary person, apparently rejected"[183]. Maesa concluded that the best course of action would be to put one of her grandsons in power and made the most of all of the resources at her disposal to this end. According to Herodian, her long years in Rome had brought her knowledge and experience of the inner workings of court life and imperial power (cf. 5.8.3), in addition to having made her "an extremely wealthy person" (5.3.2: πλείστων δὲ ἦν χρημάτων ἀνάπλεως)[184]. Maesa's great fortune had not been confiscated by Macrinus when he came to power and banished her from court (5.3.2: πάντα ἔχουσαν τὰ ἑαυτῆς), and would prove central to her enterprise.

Using their growing disgruntlement with Macrinus' government (cf. 5.2.5-6; 5.3.1; 5.4.2), Maesa offered all of her money to the troops posted around Emesa so that, in return, they would guarantee her and her family safe passage into their camp, at which point they would proclaim Bassianus emperor. To secure their support and loyalty, Maesa encouraged rumours that Caracalla was the 'true' father of both her grandsons, looking to consolidate their dynastic legitimacy and bank on the deep affection the army still had for Caracalla (5.2.5-6; 5.4.2)[185]. Maesa also exploited the allegiance she had already acquired from certain soldiers

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[182] On space and imperial movement in Herodian, see Pitcher 2012; Kemezis 2014, 239-40; Hellstrom 2015; Schettino 2017.

[183] 5.3.11: πάντα κίνδυνον ἀναρρῖψαι μᾶλλον ἢ ἰδιωτεύειν καὶ δοκεῖν ἀπερρῖφθαι; cf. 5.3.8; 5.5.1; 5.75.

[184] Cf. 5.3.11 and 5.4.1.

[185] Herodian is sceptical about the validity of Maesa's claim (5.3.10: εἴτε πλασαμένη εἴτε καὶ ἀληθεύουσα; see also 5.4.3 and 5.7.3). Though he shows the soldiers to be entirely convinced (e.g. 5.3.8; 5.4.1), even Macrinus' own troops (5.4.4), he adds that money greatly helped to persuade the soldiers in switching sides (5.4.2). Dio is also suspicious, see 79(78).31.3; 79(78).32.3 (noting a physical resemblance); 80(79).19.4 (conversely, Alexander is said to really have been Caracalla's son). The *Historia Augusta* is more ambiguous: *SHA*, *Carac.* 9.2 (*filium reliquit*); *Macr*. 9.4 (*dixit Bassianum filium esse Antonini*); 14.2 (*qui patre uenali genitus*); 15.2 (*patris uindicasse mortem*); *Heliog.* 2.1 (*uulgo conceptus putaretur*). Eutrop. 8.22 is somewhat doubtful of the filiation (*hic Antonini Caracallae filius putabatur*), but Vict., *Caes.* 23.1, Ps.-Vict. 23.1, and Fest. 21.3 all consider it as fact. It is not mentioned at all by Orosius, but Zosimus alludes to it indirectly, cf. 1.10.1 (Heliogabalus is said to have been related (συναπτόμενον) to the mother of Antoninus) and 1.11.1 (καὶ αὐτὸν ἐκ τῆς Σεβήρου γενεᾶς καταγόμενον, Alexander also comes from the family of Severus).

(cf. 5.3.9: πρόσφυγες οἰκεῖοί τε τῆς Μαίσης)[186], as well as the pre-existing fascination they had for Bassianus. As a priest of the local cult of Elagabal, Bassianus would *perform* his duties with dancing and music, and the spectacle, combined with his lavish costumes (5.3.6-7), his natural beauty (5.3.7; 5.3.8), and his ties with the imperial family (5.3.8), was a source of great admiration among the soldiers[187]. And so, from Maesa's initial, calculated nudge, the rumours of a lost son of Caracalla then spread like wildfire: "they passed the news on gradually to their fellow soldiers, and soon made it so publicized that it got round the whole army"[188]. According to Herodian, Maesa's plan went on "without the slightest trouble" (5.3.12: ῥᾷστα). When she arrived at the camp with her family, "immediately (εὐθέως) the whole garrison saluted him [i.e. Bassianus] as Antoninus" and covered him with the imperial purple[189].

A brief Elagabalian interlude

All throughout these proceedings, Herodian denies Bassianus, now officially Antoninus, any type of involvement in his own appointment. From Maesa's scheming to the soldiers' proposal, the new emperor remains relatively absent, both in action and in ambition, and is given neither voice nor choice. Bassianus' initial portrayal in the *History* relies heavily on superficial aspects, such as clothing and physical appearance. Even the description of his priestly duties is less about him *doing* something than about *being seen doing it*. From that perspective, it is worthwhile to mention that Herodian mainly expresses the troops' interest for Heliogabalus through vision-related words (ἐπέβλεπον, ὄψεις, ἐπιστρεφούσης, ἔβλεπον, θαυμάζοντας)[190]. The use of such a lexical field emphasizes the spectacular aspect of Bassianus' appearance (and that of his future reign). Herodian had also compared the boy to "statues" (εἰκόσιν) of Dionysos: interestingly, not the god himself, but stone portraits of him[191]. However symbolic or able to provoke emotions in viewers, these statues remain objects, to be moulded, moved, used, and looked upon by humans. Although he would soon become emperor,

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[186] The exact nature of this deed is unclear; see Whittaker 1969-70, n. 2 *ad* 5.3.9.

[187] Alexander, then Alexianus, was also 'dedicated' to the cult of Elagabal (5.3.4: ἱέρωντο δὲ αὐτοὶ θεῷ ἡλίῳ). Heliogabalus' introduction gives Herodian the opportunity to discuss at length this cult: the god's temple, his cult stone, the reach of his worship. This digression is one of the main passages cited by scholars to argue for the 'historical value' of some of the *History*'s information; see notably Bowersock 1975.

[188] 5.3.10: ὅπερ ἐκεῖνοι ἀκούσαντες, τοῖς συστρατιώταις κατ᾽ ὀλίγον ἀπαγγέλλοντες διαβόητον ἐποίησαν τὴν φήμην, ὡς ἐς πᾶν χωρῆσαι τὸ στρατιωτικόν; cf. also 5.3.11: "the story went that…" (ἐλέγετο). Maesa's power is depicted as a sort of 'soft power', using popular and unofficial channels to convince the troops rather than directly coercing them into carrying out her plan. For Herodian, who often plays on the discrepancies between the story he just presented, the characters' manipulation of the narrative, and internal receptions of these events, Maesa's underhanded strategy is portrayed as having led to the general perception that Elagabalus' proclamation had been a military initiative.

[189] 5.3.12: εὐθέως τε τὸν παῖδα πᾶν τὸ στρατόπεδον Ἀντωνῖνον προσηγόρευσαν. According to Cass. Dio 79(78).31.3, Bassianus had even been dressed in clothes that had belonged to Caracalla before being brought into the camp.

[190] 5.3.8: περιεργότερον ἐπέβλεπον οἵ τε ἄλλοι ἄνθρωποι καὶ μάλιστα οἱ στρατιῶται, εἰδότες γένους ὄντα βασιλικοῦ, καὶ τῆς ὥρας αὐτοῦ πάντων τὰς ὄψεις ἐς ἑαυτὴν ἐπιστρεφούσης. See Ward 2011, 134-5.

[191] Cf. 5.3.7: ἀπείκασεν ἄν τις τὸ μειράκιον Διονύσου καλαῖς εἰκόσιν. On (divine) statues and *simulacra*, see e.g. Stewart 2003, chapter 6.

Bassianus is only described as an object of contemplation and he is given no active part to play in Maesa's great production[192].

Also significant in Herodian's account is the way in which the news of Heliogabalus' nomination reached Macrinus and his troops in Antioch: "a son of Antoninus had been found (εὑρέθη) and the sister of Julia was distributing (δίδωσι) money"[193]. Although the boy had just been proclaimed emperor, Herodian maintains the contrast previously established between Maesa's agency and Heliogabalus' passivity[194]. Even though Maesa temporarily slips away in favour of Heliogabalus during the armed confrontation with Macrinus, the new emperor remains somewhat uninvolved[195]. When Macrinus' prefect arrived at the Emesan camp, Heliogabalus' soldiers "displayed the boy" (*τόν παῖδα ἐδείκνυσαν*) to the rival army, along with their newly acquired riches. Despite his recent proclamation and growing popularity, Heliogabalus continues to be portrayed as an object to be viewed. In Herodian's account, he would only gain access to full agency when Macrinus decided to challenge the new prince himself. Herodian records that, faced with Macrinus' imminent attack, "Antoninus brought (ἐξάγει) his force out of the camp"[196]. While the evolution in Heliogabalus' imperial activity seems in order, this 'promotion' arguably serves to emphasize Macrinus' cowardice and incompetence rather than the agency of the new ruler (cf. 5.4.5). Once the rest of Macrinus' troops passed to Heliogabalus' side and proclaimed him emperor, "he accepted the rule" (5.5.1: *τά τε τῆς ἀρχῆς ἐκεῖνος ὑπεδέξατο*). There is a notable progression between Heliogabalus' first proclamation and the second. Having defeated his adversary, Heliogabalus is now promoted from usurper to sole emperor, which is reflected in his active representation. Though Heliogabalus now seemed to be in full possession of the emperorship, Maesa's return on stage would prove detrimental to his position.

Maesa's true power?

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[192] Elagabalus captivates by his dancing, luxurious and exotic dress, and beauty enhanced by makeup. Cosmetic practices for men, thoroughly denigrated by Greeks and Romans, were usual for Persian and Mede rulers, who sought to enchant their subjects with the spectacle of their decorated beauty. See Bérenger 2020, 20-21, with additional references on this topic.

[193] 5.4.1: *ὅτι τε Ἀντωνίνου υἱὸς εὑρέθη καὶ ὅτι ἡ Ἰουλίας ἀδελφὴ χρήματα δίδωσι*.

[194] Note, however, how Heliogabalus then passes from object to subject of a passive verb (εὑρέθη), through what might be called a 'syntactic promotion', which is also seen for Commodus (1.5.2) and Gordian III (8.8.8) during their own inaugurations.

[195] Interestingly, Cass. Dio 79(78).38.4 ascribes a decisive action to Maesa and Soaemis during the battle against Macrinus, though he minimizes their initial involvement by arguing that Elagabalus had been brought into the camp "without the knowledge of either his mother or his grandmother" (79(78).31.4: *μήτε τῆς μητρὸς αὐτοῦ μήτε τῆς τήθης ἐπισταμένης*). The initiative is rather credited to a certain Euthychianus (79(78).31, though it should be noted that the passage is quite fragmentary – Scott 2018a *ad loc.* argues that this was a nickname for Gannys), or later possibly Gannys (80(79).6.1: *]ν δὲ δὴ τὸν τὴν ἐπανάστασιν κατασκευάσαντα*, despite the lacuna, the following lines explicitly concern Gannys: *τὸν τροφέα*, *τὸν προστάτην*).

[196] 5.4.5: *ὁ δὲ Ἀντωνῖνος… ἐξάγει τὴν αὐτοῦ δύναμιν*. And yet, Herodian also minimizes the impact of Heliogabalus' first imperial decision by making it the consequence of the soldiers' exuberance (θαρρησάντων). In fact, Heliogabalus only gets another action when Macrinus yields the emperorship and his army by fleeing mid-fight, cf. 5.4.10: *ἐπύθετο Ἀντωνῖνος; πέμψας; διδάσκει; καλεῖ; ὁ δὲ Ἀντωνῖνος πέμπει*, etc.

According to Herodian, the senate and people unhappily (δυσφόρως) received news of Macrinus' defeat and Heliogabalus' nomination, but "were forced to submit to the course decided by the army"[197]. This might serve to substantiate Maesa's political understanding, since she was able to ally herself with the most powerful component of the Empire at the time. She also recognized how to secure the soldiers' loyalty and gave them exactly what they wanted: money and an emperor of their 'own' choosing, through a descendant of Caracalla. Like Macrinus utilizing Martialis' grief against Caracalla to do his bidding, Maesa manipulated the entire army into fulfilling her will. Unlike Macrinus' targeted ploy, however, Maesa's plan is depicted as being more subtle, widespread, and long-term, and consequently, was perhaps more effective.

Moreover, although Heliogabalus is first shown to have taken action during the war against Macrinus and is made central to his second proclamation by the entire army, Herodian recounts that "the immediate business in the East was dealt with by his grandmother and his circle of advisers"[198]. The author cites Heliogabalus' young age and lack of experience and education as reasons for this regency[199]. In addition, Herodian notes that Heliogabalus' entourage quickly (5.5.1: οὐ πολλοῦ χρόνου) set out for the capital, "because Maesa was particularly (μάλιστα) anxious to get to the imperial palace she had been used to"[200]. But their journey was impeded by the weather. While they were all stuck in Nicomedia for the winter, the emperor "straight away he began to practise his ecstatic rites" (5.5.3: εὐθέως τε ἐξεβακχεύετο)[201]. These first lines of Heliogabalus' rule in the *History* are a compelling mix of his earlier passivity, his newly assumed power, and his religious fixation. While Maesa and his council took care of imperial affairs, the emperor is shown to eagerly return to his priestly duties to Elagabal[202].

According to Herodian, however, neither Maesa's authority nor Heliogabalus' obedience were absolute. Instead of devoting himself solely to his function and scorning everything else around, Heliogabalus attempted to infuse his cult into Roman society. Already from Nicomedia where he was spending the winter on his way to Rome, Heliogabalus had sent ahead a large portrait of himself, in which he stood in priestly costume next to his god. The painting was to be hung in the curia above the statue of Victory, so that the senators would "get used to seeing his dress and to test out their reactions to the sight"[203]. This was done in

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[197] 5.5.2: ὑπήκουον δὲ ἀνάγκῃ τοῦ στρατοῦ ταῦτα ᾑρημένου.

[198] 5.5.1: διοικηθέντων αὐτῷ κατὰ τὴν ἀνατολὴν τῶν ἐπειγόντων ὑπό τε τῆς μάμμης καὶ τῶν συνόντων φίλων.

[199] 5.5.1: αὐτὸς γὰρ ἦν νέος τε τὴν ἡλικίαν, πραγμάτων τε καὶ παιδείας ἄπειρος.

[200] 5.5.1: σπευδούσης μάλιστα τῆς Μαίσης ἐς τὰ συνήθη ἑαυτῇ βασίλεια Ῥώμης.

[201] Interestingly, Heliogabalus' priestly activities are now described in much less flattering terms (e.g. περιεργότερον ἐξωρχεῖτο, at 5.5.3). For the *SHA*, the new emperor quickly engaged in all sorts of depraved acts (*Heliog.* 5.1.1: *ergo cum hibernasset Nicomediae atque omnia sordide ageret inireturque a uiris et subigeret*). Dio merely records that 'Avitus' left Antioch, was heading for Rome, but had to spend the winter in Bithynia, and eventually carried on through to Italy (80(79)3.1-2, ap. Xiph.).

[202] Cf. 5.3.11-12. See Pitcher 2012, 279: "thus, Elagabalus, notably, is *not* described as visiting a temple and then setting up at the Palace on his accession to the purple. The point at which he might have been expected to do so is occupied by a description of him *building* a temple instead" (emphasis in the original).

[203] 5.5.6: ἐν ἔθει γενέσθαι τῆς τοῦ σχήματος ὄψεως τήν τε σύγκλητον καὶ τὸν δῆμον Ῥωμαίων, ἀπόντος τε αὐτοῦ πεῖραν δοθῆναι πῶς φέρουσι τὴν ὄψιν. Even Elagabalus' disdain for wool is used to denote his rejection of

response to Maesa's advice to swap his usual clothes for a more appropriate attire, that would be more suited to his new station. Maesa was "extremely worried" (5.5.5: πάνυ ἤσχαλλε) that Heliogabalus might now be too 'exotic' (5.5.5: μὴ ἀλλοδαπὸν ἢ παντάπασι βάρβαρον) for a Roman emperor, and this bode rather poorly for her newly recovered lifestyle. Powerless in the face of Heliogabalus' eccentricities, it seemed she could only watch from the side-lines as the emperor grew increasingly unpopular (5.5.5 and 5.7.1: ταῦτα ὁρῶσα)[204].

A do-over

As emphasized in Herodian's story, Alexander's accession came about in much the same way as Heliogabalus' and is directly linked with the latter's downfall. Once again, Julia Maesa took it upon herself to unmake the ruling emperor and push for a new one of her own making. For Herodian, her action continues to be motivated by her desire to maintain her imperial lifestyle: she was deeply concerned that "she would again be reduced to the status of an ordinary person" (5.7.1: πάλιν ἰδιωτεύῃ). Hoping to secure her position in the imperial household, Maesa is said to have manoeuvred Heliogabalus (5.7.1: πείθει αὐτόν) into appointing Alexander as Caesar and handing over the administration of the Empire to him[205]. Thus liberated from mere "worldly affairs" (τὰ ἀνθρώπεια), as she called them, Heliogabalus could devote himself completely to his religious duties[206]. Through Maesa's easy manipulation of her grandson (he is described at 5.7.1 as "thoughtless", κοῦφον, and "silly", ἄφρονα[207]), Herodian reasserts her dominant role.

To have this decision ratified, Heliogabalus is said, in the *History*, to have gone to the senate. It should first be noted that no such senatorial endorsement for Heliogabalus' accession appeared in Herodian's account[208]. From the story's perspective, Heliogabalus' power therefore remained on the cusp of legality and legitimacy, supported mainly by the army, whose loyalty was only gained through Maesa's wits, personal wealth, and connections. It is therefore telling that Herodian chooses the episode of Alexander's association to feature the senate in its traditional role for the first time during Heliogabalus' reign. If the author depicts Alexander's adoption by Heliogabalus with a good amount of mockery (5.7.4:

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traditional structures and his defiance of expectations, since he chose silk – luxurious, foreign, and associated with women's dress – over the typical material of the Roman toga, which he thought to be "cheap" (5.5.4: εὐτελοῦς): "only seric silk was good enough for him" (τοῖς δὲ Σηρῶν ὑφάσμασι μόνοις ἠρέσκετο). On Herodian's treatment of Elagabalus' clothing (in terms of colour, shape, material, embellishments, accessories, etc.) and its ideological implications, see recently Bérenger 2020. According to Gleason 2011, 75: "Herodian's story about Elagabalus conditioning the senate's visual expectations reflects his characteristic interest in visual phenomena and the psychology of visual perception."

[204] Thus Marasco 1998, 2847 notes: "La descrizione delle follie di Elagabalo procede comunque ancora di pari passo con la notazione degli effetti di esse sul consenso".

[205] Cf. 5.7.4; see also 5.8.3-4.

[206] 5.7.1-2: ὡς ἄρα χρὴ ἐκεῖνον μὲν τῇ ἱερωσύνῃ καὶ θρησκείᾳ σχολάζειν τοῦ θεοῦ, βακχείαις καὶ ὀργίοις τοῖς τε θείοις ἔργοις ἀνακείμενον, εἶναι δὲ ἕτερον τὸν τὰ ἀνθρώπεια διοικοῦντα, ἐκείνῳ δὲ παρέξοντα τῆς βασιλείας τὸ ἀνενόχλητόν τε καὶ ἀμέριμνον.

[207] Cf. 2.7.9, on Syrians more generally, with above, [199-201].

[208] Cf. 5.5.5-7. The portrait of Heliogabalus mentioned above appears to replace the customary inaugural speech (or letter) to the senate, hinting at the emperor's upcoming subversive measures.

γελοιότατα), his criticism is directed only at the current emperor, not his successor. By contrast, Alexander's nomination is given formal approval by the senate (5.7.4: ψηφισαμένων… ἃ ἐκελεύοντο), foreshadowing his upcoming restoration and traditional government in which he would prove himself to be the complete opposite of his cousin.

In the *History*, Maesa was assisted in this second attempt by one of her daughters, Julia Mamaea. If ultimately Alexander was proclaimed emperor by the military, it was through Maesa's planning that he became an obvious and viable choice to take his cousin's place. Prior to Heliogabalus' accession, Maesa is shown to have shaped his first grandson into a more desirable candidate than the ruling emperor, Macrinus. Making use of alleged imperial kinship, hefty sums, her personal network, and the boy's beauty (found 'exotic' by the Roman soldiers), she succeeded in winning the army's favour over Macrinus. Meant to appear as a much better alternative to his cousin in the exercise of power, Alexander undergoes a similar 'transformation' process.

First of all, just like Bassianus who had been renamed 'Antoninus' after his alleged father, Alexander's dynastic claim is also strengthened by the taking up of the name 'Alexander', who was "so admired and honoured" (5.7.3: ὡς πάνυ τε ἐνδόξου καὶ τιμηθέντος) by Caracalla. However, although Alexander benefitted from all the same familial assets that Heliogabalus had had at his disposition, his own transformation, as emphasized by Herodian, is taken in quite the opposite direction. Against Heliogabalus' orientalism, which Maesa first used to her advantage and then quickly perceived as a threat to her station, Alexander was instead provided early on with "both a Latin and a Greek education" (5.7.5: παιδείαν τε τὴν Ἑλλήνων καὶ Ῥωμαίων). Heliogabalus, too, had wanted to oversee the education of his heir, but wanted him to partake in the same sort of questionable interests as himself (5.7.4: ὀρχεῖσθαί τε καὶ χορεύειν). Deeming these activities unsuitable for a Roman sovereign, Mamaea, who acts in Herodian's account as a double of Maesa in the grooming of her son as the next emperor[209], instead arranged for Alexander lessons of "all the arts" (5.7.5: πάσης παιδείας), "the exercise of self-control" (τοῖς τε σώφροσιν… μαθήμασι), and manly sports (παλαίστραις τε καὶ τοῖς ἀνδρῶν

[209] Cf. 5.8.3. Mamaea's slightly more favourable later reputation should be linked to her alleged Christian faith (Oros. 7.18.7, *cuius mater Mamea Christiana Origenem presbyterum audire curauit*; cf. Aurel. Vict. 24.5, *matrisque cultu, quae nomine Mammaea erat, plus quam pius*; Eutrop. 8.23, *in Mamaeam, matrem suam, unice pius*. There is some allusion to her cupidity in Ps.-Vict. 24.5 (*huius mater Mamaea eo filium coegerat ut illa ipsa permodica, si mensae prandioque superessent, quamuis semes alteris conuiuio reponerentur*). In the *New History*, Zosimus has Mamaea nominate Ulpian and prevent a plot against him, cf. 1.11.2-3. Overcome by greediness, Alexander took to hoarding riches, which he placed under her control (at 1.12.2); Mamaea's own cupidity is not directly touched upon. Finally, her death puts her in a certain position of power, in accordance with literary tradition: according to Zosimus, she was killed as she was leaving the praetorium, accompanied by the prefects, to quell the commotion caused by Maximinus' arrival in Rome (1.13.2).] In the *Historia Augusta*, Mamaea is either mentioned in trivial passages, or lauded (cf. 2.1; 5.1; 5.4; 13.1-2; 14.1; 14.7 (sharing of power: *et cum puer ad imperium pervenisset, fecit cuncta cum matre, ut et illa uideretur pariter imperare, mulier sancta sed auara et auri atque argenti cupida*); 20.3; 25.10; 26.9 (cf. Eutrop. 8.23); 49.5; 51.4; 57.7 (*Mammeani*); 59.8 (insults of army: *a militibus tamen constat, cum iniuriose quasi in puerum eundem et matrem eius auaram et cupidam multa dixissent*); 60.2 (*egit omnia consilio matris, cum qua occisus est*); 63.5; 66.1 (*et optimae matris consiliis usus est*). Cassius Dio has a more or less neutral outlook on Mamaea, see 80(79).19.2 (Maesa and Mamaea were guarding Alexander); 20.1 (Soaemis and Mamaea were openly feuding against each other); 80.1.2 (Ulpian took refuge with Maesa and Mamaea).

γυμνασίοις)[210]. According to Herodian, although Mamaea was carrying out these plans secretely, Heliogabalus eventually found out and, as a result, executed or exiled all of Alexander's teachers (5.7.5-6). In spite of Heliogabalus' efforts, Alexander was ultimately perceived by the army as a more promising candidate than his cousin, on the basis of his sober habits and traditional demeanour.

Checkmate

The context of Alexander's accession is similar to the situation of four years prior, and is similarly constructed in Herodian's retelling. Just as Maesa had taken advantage of Macrinus' ever-growing disfavour, she would also exploit the increasingly widespread discontent with Heliogabalus' rule (cf. 5.7.1; 5.8.1). Drawn at first by Heliogabalus' 'exoticism', the soldiers were now disgusted by it, finding the emperor too soft and effeminate for their liking[211]. It may be that they had exhausted their goodwill towards him, but also that these features were appealing precisely in their exoticism. Once transferred to a stricter Roman context, in the imperial capital no less, and applied to the emperor, and not a Syrian civilian, these are shown to have become wholly unsuitable attributes in the people's eyes (cf. 5.8.1)[212]. Preferring Alexander's more traditional upbringing[213], the praetorians easily switched allegiances and assisted Mamaea in the safekeeping of Alexander, who had become the target of Heliogabalus' constant plotting. Like her mother had done before her, Mamaea is said to have made private distributions to the soldiers to secure their loyalty (5.8.3). According to Herodian, Heliogabalus' scheming against Alexander escalated when the emperor found out about Mamaea's tricks[214]. But it was Maesa, finally, who "frustrated and checked" (5.8.3: ἀπεῖργέ τε καὶ ἐκώλυεν) every one of Heliogabalus' ploys[215]. Maesa is said to have been quite used to court intrigues, due to her many years spent at the palace. Being "naturally foolish"

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[210] Zimmermann 1999a, chap. 3.6 calls this changeover the "Streit um die παιδεία"; see also Sidebottom 1998, esp. 2804-12, for an analysis of imperial character and success (or failure) in Herodian based on παιδεία, with Hidber 2006, 36-7, arguing against the centrality of the theme in this work.

[211] Cf. 5.5.6: οὐκ ἀνδράσιν ἀλλὰ θηλείαις; 5.8.1: ἢ κατὰ γυναῖκα σώφρονα, ἐσθῆσί… ἁπαλαῖς, ἀνάνδρως.

[212] See Kemezis 2014, 246-7, who talks about these changed perceptions as instances of "cultural misunderstanding", noting that they "manifested first in Nicomedia and finally in Rome". Kemezis argues that, for Herodian, when Elagabalus' looks become problematic for the population, it is more a matter of effeminacy more than religion or culture, despite earlier hints to the contrary. According to Kemezis, "Herodian has created the expectation that cultural geography will be the key factor in Elagabalus' fall, but he is ambivalent about actually following through in his narrative causality."

[213] Cf. 5.8.2, with above, [152]. The soldiers' consideration for Alexander's education may have more to do with the cultivation of manly (and military) virtues than of a good moral character and literary knowledge. In any case, Herodian echoes, through this stock comparison, the contrast he had established between Geta and Caracalla, at 4.3.2-3.

[214] Though to a lesser extent, Herodian's Mamaea is also used as a foil to Maesa. Although Mamaea attempted to provide 'proper' lessons to Alexander and make distributions to the army 'in secret' (5.7.5: λάθρᾳ; 5.8.3: λανθάνουσα), she kept being discovered by Heliogabalus (5.7.5; 5.8.3: πυνθανόμενος), who has been consistently described as naive and unsophisticated. This may be due, at least in part, to her relative inexperience, as Maesa is said to have gained her knowledge and understanding of 'soft politics' with time.

[215] Cf. 5.8.4: "she missed none of his machinations" (οὐδὲν οὖν αὐτὴν ἐλάνθανε τῶν ὑπὸ τοῦ Ἀντωνίνου βουλευομένων).

(5.8.3: φύσει… χαύνου), Heliogabalus was no match for her keen, experienced, "enterprising" eye (ἐντρεχής).

Once again, Maesa (though this time with Mamaea) only had to sow the seed of rebellion and watch as others eventually engaged in her play. Herodian shows how Maesa's scheming, in addition to offering a better alternative to the army in Alexander, pushed Heliogabalus to aggravate his own situation (5.8.4-6). Unsuccessful in his attempts against Alexander and deeply regretting his adoption, Heliogabalus intended to demote the Caesar and remove him from public life. As Herodian records, the soldiers, however, demanded to see Alexander and, until their terms were met, suspended their duties and shut themselves in the camp. Growing desperate, Heliogabalus even spread rumours of Alexander's imminent death, but his deception only served to exasperate the praetorians further. Finally yielding to the praetorians' demands, Heliogabalus accompanied Alexander to the camp, where the latter was welcomed with great enthusiasm and the former, ignored.

Alexander's accession, as it is retold by Herodian, is overemphasized to be in many ways similar to Heliogabalus' earlier proclamation in the Emesan camp. Principally, the upcoming emperor only plays a passive part in his own appointment. Alexander is repeatedly featured in the *History*'s last act of Heliogabalus' reign, but only as the subject of contention between the emperor and the praetorians. According to Herodian, the soldiers, infuriated by Heliogabalus' orders to punish most of their companions, turned against the emperor and murdered him, along with his mother, Soaemis, and the rest of his entourage[216]. Significantly, Herodian delays Alexander's proclamation until after his last mention of Heliogabalus, which describes in detail the prince's posthumous fate (5.8.10). This clear division from one reign to the next mirrors the ideal dynastic progression suggested in the rest of the *History* and indicates the start of a promising new government. Furthermore, the camp became once again the stage of a power transfer: following the murder of the tyrant, the new emperor was proclaimed by the army and later escorted back to the imperial palace.

In both these episodes, the upcoming emperor is depicted as a tool to be used by those who hold effective power: stemming from Maesa's scheming, and later with Mamaea's, both nominations are fulfilled by the army. This marked passivity of the emperors ties in with Herodian's constant criticism of rulers so young and inexperienced they easily fall prey to corruption or manipulation. But, unlike his clear-cut portrayal of Heliogabalus, Herodian uses Alexander an ambiguous example of such a ruler. On the one hand, Alexander was provided with a good education, through which he acquired and cultivated moral virtue, and this ensured his popularity with the army and the senate, especially as an alternative to Heliogabalus' unbridled tyranny. Yet on the other hand, Alexander was, from the outset, "very

[216] Cf. 5.8.5-10. Soaemis is also featured in few passages in the *Vita* (in which she is called Symiamira), cf. *SHA*, *Heliog.* 2.1; 4.1-4 (*senaculum muliebrum*); 13.5; 14.4; 15.6; 18.2 (death). Elsewhere, she is only alluded to when talking about Heliogabalus' parentage (Vict., *Caes.* 23.1-2) or death (Oros. 7.18.5; Eutrop. 8.22), and not at all in Ps.-Vict. 23; Fest. 21.3. While Cassius Dio presents Soaemis in an overall negative light, it often seems an extension of his criticism of Heliogabalus; cf. 80(79).6.2 (approved of Gannys; basically married to him); 11.1 (barbaric chants with son and mother); 14.2; 17.2 (present at Alexander's adoption in the senate house); 20.1; 20.2 (death).

much under the tutelage of his mother and grandmother" (5.8.10: *πάνυ ὑπὸ τῇ μητρὶ καὶ τῇ μάμμῃ παιδαγωγούμενον*); even as he grew older, Alexander is said to have remained under the thumb of his mother – Mamaea herself ended up lacking the merits of her own mother. And ultimately Alexander would succumb to a similar fate as that of his cousin.

Success and consecration

According to Herodian, Maesa and Mamaea assumed together an effective regency in Alexander's name at the start of his rule. Although Alexander was the one formally holding the emperorship (6.1.1: *τὸ σχῆμα καὶ τὸ ὄνομα τῆς βασιλείας*), in practice "the control of administration and imperial policy was in the hands of his womenfolk"[217]. Concretely, Maesa and Mamaea are said to have selected sixteen senators to form the imperial council, on the basis of the "greatest dignity in years and the most moderate way of life" (6.1.2: *ἡλικίᾳ σεμνοτάτους καὶ βίῳ σωφρονεστάτους*)[218]. Although Alexander would eventually be murdered by his troops who would side with Maximinus, it can reasonably be argued that Maesa's venture was ultimately successful: banished from court by Macrinus, Maesa managed to restore her family's standing for nearly twenty years and she herself died an empress.

Maesa's notable presence in the *History* might, to some extent, reflect her important official representation[219]. It should be noted that this is not always the case, and that the amount of space and the agency given to secondary (female) characters in Herodian's work are not always equivalent to their place in official imagery. For instance, both Domna and Mamaea are heavily featured in material sources, as well as in the rest of ancient historiography, but this importance is not matched by the parts they play in Herodian's story[220]. Maesa, however, enjoys a significant autonomy in the *History*, which even alters the now-expected relations between emperor and most secondary characters, especially in the case of women. It is also worth mentioning that, in Dio's account, Maesa has a similar authority over Heliogabalus, but a considerably lesser role in the overall story. With this in mind,

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[217] 6.1.1: *ἡ μέντοι διοίκησις τῶν πραγμάτων καὶ ἡ τῆς ἀρχῆς οἰκονομία ὑπὸ ταῖς γυναιξὶ διῳκεῖτο*. Cf. 6.7.4, where Alexander's advisers are not able to provide good counsel to emperor in the face of an imminent German attack; on this point, see Roberto 2017, 178-9.

[218] Cass. Dio, frag., *ap*. Zonar. 12.25, ascribes these actions to Mamaea only. Motta 2017, 67, comments, about Herodian's representation: "L'eccezionale consenso di tutte le componenti, popolo, soldati e soprattutto del senato… che distingue l'inaugurazione dell'impero di Severo Alessandro, é il segno tangibile della idealizzazione in atto della figura di questo imperatore". This idealization would fully take shape in the pro-senatorial *Historia Augusta*.

[219] Cf. Rowan 2011, 266. This is especially visible in Heliogabalus' coinage, where Maesa largely overshadows even Soaemis: respectively 39 vs. 18, among the 368 types minted, with similar proportions for inscriptions, cf. Hekster 2015, 154-7 and Rowan 2011, 265-7 and in literature (with Soaemis), Nadolny 2016, 149-55 (in Dio); 167-72 (in Herodian); 188-90 (in the *Historia Augusta*).

[220] On Domna: Levick 2007; Rowan 2011, 249-56; Mallan 2013a; Bertolazzi 2015; Hekster 2015, 143-55; Nadolny 2016, 164-6 (esp. 166: Domna is a prime example of Herodian's method, described as "eine Konzentration auf das seiner Meinung nach Relevante und Unterhaltende sowie eine auf einen Kernaspekt beschränkte Ausgestaltung der Person gelten kann"). On Mamaea: Kosmetatou 2002; Rowan 2011, 267-70; Hekster 2015, 155; and on 'Mamaean' as a title for Alexander, see Martinelli 1991; Vitiello 2015 202-5. Interestingly, 'son of Mamaea' can also be found in combination with 'grandson of Maesa' (e.g. *AE* 1912, 155).

Herodian's Maesa might actually be closer in importance to Dio's Domna, who has similar preoccupations. According to Dio, Domna was afraid that, after Caracalla's death, Macrinus might condemn her to an ordinary life (79(78).23.1: ἀλλ᾽ ὅτι αὐτὴ ἰδιωτεύουσα ἤχθετο), so she aspired to seize power herself [221].

In addition to Julia Domna, several other comparisons may be established between Herodian's Maesa and imperial female figures in ancient literature, such as Cleopatra, Livia, Agrippina, Faustina, Domna, etc.[222]. Usually these women are given great political ambitions, framed in sharp contrast with a weak ruling power that they would often take advantage of and even threaten. In Herodian's story, such intentions are also attributed to Lucilla, Commodus' sister, who could not bear to lose her imperial privileges to her new sister-in-law Crispina. Lucilla supposedly encouraged a certain Quadratus to conspire against her brother (1.8.4). Similarly, Mamaea banished her son's new wife (i.e. Sallustia Orbiana), whom she had even selected herself, because she was jealous of her title (6.1.9). In all of these cases, the female sovereign rarely experiences a favourable fate and the emperor whose power she had jeopardized eventually prevails. It is thus quite remarkable that Maesa, as Herodian emphatically shows, achieved her goals without suffering a gruesome end and, in fact, succeeds rather brilliantly.

There is one final parallel to be found in the *History* itself, and it is perhaps the most productive in the general interpretation of Maesa's character within Herodian's account. Consider first how the historian presents her death: "After a long period (ἐπὶ πολύ) of this type of government in the empire, Maesa, already an old woman (πρεσβῦτις ἤδη), died and received imperial honours and deification (ἐξεθειάσθη), according to Roman practice." [223] What immediately comes across are undeniable similarities with the story of Marcus' death, both factual and narrative: a long life (also 5.3.3 and 5.3.11), a successful tenure (οὕτω refers to the aristocratic rule of 'Alexander' just described at 6.1.1-3), and posthumous honours. Bearing in mind that the *History*'s chronology is generally vague and that the exact date of Maesa's death remains so far unknown, Herodian still seems to draw out Maesa and Mamaea's joint regency (ἐπὶ πολύ)[224]: this creates the impression that Maesa's death took place later than it might have actually been[225]. Moreover, Maesa is one of the few characters in the *History* whose apotheosis is explicitly mentioned. With the exception of one occurrence in a mythological

[221] Cf. Cass. Dio 79(78).23.3; 24.2. On Dio's representation of Domna, see esp. Bertolazzi 2015; Nadolny 2016, 142-8; Scott 2017, 419-26. It should be noted that the intertextual relations between Dio's Domna and Herodian's Maesa are more complicated that it would first seem, since the former was possibly shaped through an amalgam of Maesa's official representation and the other Juliae (so Scott 2017, 428).

[222] On (literary) representations of the Augustan noblewomen, see e.g. Syme 1985, chap. 13, which opens with the (in)famous line "Women have their uses for historians." More generally, on the title, status, and power of Roman empresses, see Levick 2007, 57-73, who approaches these questions with a focus on Julia Domna.

[223] 6.1.4: ἐπὶ πολὺ δ᾽ οὕτω τῆς ἀρχῆς διοικουμένης, ἡ μὲν Μαῖσα πρεσβῦτις ἤδη οὖσα ἀνεπαύσατο τοῦ βίου, ἔτυχέ τε βασιλικῶν τιμῶν, καὶ ὡς νομίζουσι Ῥωμαῖοι, ἐξεθειάσθη.

[224] Herodian had used a similar technique to 'date' Marcus' death, cf. 1.3.1, with above, [91-94].

[225] Maesa was probably born around 165-70 and died between 223 and 227; for a review of the evidence and hypotheses, see Whittaker 1969-70, n. 3 *ad* 6.1.4; Kettenhofen 1981; Kosmetatou 2002, 409, n. 33.

story, Maesa is in fact the only one who was not (formally) an emperor[226]. Just the mention of such a distinction would serve to place Maesa next to these other noteworthy figures, bestowing upon her additional honours. More broadly, her apotheosis is used by Herodian to confirm her superiority, while establishing her commendable resemblance to Marcus[227]. Finally, this parallel with Marcus also activates a series of comparisons with other examples of 'good deaths of good rulers', such as Augustus, that are underlaid in Herodian's idealized depiction of the death of Marcus[228]. This then allows the historian to confirm Maesa's status as 'lead actress', as she is revealed to be the true protagonist of Heliogabalus' rule and the early years of Alexander's[229].

4.4 Plots, plots, plots

4.4.1 A series of unfortunate plots and counterplots

Though plots (and especially plots against the emperor) are a recurring theme throughout Herodian's *History*, they are devised as the basis of Commodus' activity, both as character and as emperor. In this narrativization of Commodus' imperial life, plots are used to dictate the flow and sequence of episodes, where, broadly speaking, one plot leads to the next. Commodus' death can be seen, in Herodian's story, as a succession of recognition scenes, coming at the end of a long series of unsuccessful plots instigated by: Lucilla, Commodus' sister, and two noblemen, Quadratus and Quintianus, who encouraged the senate to conspire against the prince (1.8.3-7); Perennis, Commodus' praetorian prefect, who sought the emperorship for himself (1.8-1.9); Maternus, a deserter who led successful raids throughout Spain and Gaul and infiltrated Rome during the Saturnalia (1.10); Cleander, an imperial freedman, favoured by Commodus (1.12.3-1.13.6). These plots are all depicted as decisive moments which further push Commodus towards the final scene.

According to Herodian, the plot organized by Lucilla, Quadratus, and Quintianus was "the first and foremost reason why young Commodus hated the senate"[230]. It was also through this event that Perennis secured his personal power and his hold over Commodus, who was led to execute all the conspirators, including his own sister, as well as anyone even slightly suspected (1.8.8). Perennis also used this opportunity to get rid of the remaining people who still cared about Commodus' safety and well-being (1.9.1)[231]. As Herodian shows, Commodus,

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[226] Other apotheoses in Herodian's *History*: 1.5.6 (Marcus); 1.11.2 (Ganymede, in the aetiological story of the cult of Cybele in Rome); 4.2.1-4.3.1 (Severus); 8.6.3 (Gordian I and Gordian II).

[227] Ward 2011, 115 sees Maesa as "a figure who is similar to Marcus Aurelius in that she foresees the problems that Elagabalus will eventually encounter, problems that are evident if one reads him correctly."

[228] Maesa's death is not mentioned by Dio, though it is possible to find, instead, certain points of similarity between the historian's final judgements on Domna (79(78).24) and Marcus (71(72).33-35); cf. Mallan 2013a, 756-7; Scott 2017, 427-8. This would further support the idea of a strong parallel between the figures of Dio's Domna and Herodian's Maesa.

[229] Ando 2012 quite tellingly includes the reigns of Heliogabalus and Alexander under the title "The dynasty of Julia Maesa", 1 (66-68) and 2 (68-75), though the narrative remains centered around the two emperors.

[230] 1.8.7: …*πρώτη καὶ μεγίστη αἰτία τῷ μειρακίῳ μίσους ἐγένετο πρὸς τὴν σύγκητον βουλήν*.

[231] On the narrative and thematic composition of the conspiracies of praetorian prefects (Perennis, Cleander, Plautianus, Macrinus) against their emperors in Herodian's work, see Scott 2017, with Alföldy 1971b, 438;

in the wake of Perennis' failed plot and execution, thought it best to appoint two praetorian prefects, instead of the one, hoping to discourage "anyone's ambitions for supreme power" (1.9.10: πρὸς τὴν βασιλείας ἐπιθυμίαν). Interestingly, Maternus' unsuccessful coup is not immediately followed, in the *History*, by any particular action on Commodus' part, beyond the resumption of the festivities. Instead, Herodian uses the plot's setting, the Hilaria celebrated in honour of Cybele (1.10.5), to expound on the myth of the goddess and her statue (1.11.1-5). Only after this long digression does Herodian record Commodus' reaction: the emperor is said to have increased his personal guard, generally retired from public, and even spent most of his time outside of the capital (1.11.5). After Cleander's attempted usurpation, Commodus returned to Rome, though with great wariness. This latest betrayal is used by Herodian to set in motion Commodus' slow downfall[232]. According to the historian, the emperor then quit his studies, surrendered himself completely to "continuous and unrestrained physical pleasures" (1.13.7: ἐπάλληλοι καὶ ἀκόλαστοι σώματος ἡδοναί, trans. mod.), gave in to his paranoia, and purged his court of every moderate individual (1.13.8). Granting instead his favour to mimes and actors, Commodus himself took part in chariot races and *uenationes*. All these plots against Commodus not only serve, within Herodian's story, to set the tempo of the emperor's rule, but also to explicate the long path to his downfall. Renounced by most of the population after a series of catastrophes, Commodus ultimately decided to renounce his Antonine heritage, presenting himself as a new Herakles and appearing in the amphitheatre as hunter, charioteer, and gladiator (from 1.14.7 to the end of book 1, which coincides with the emperor's death)[233].

Zimmermann 1999a, 122-4. The figure of the nefarious prefect is a familiar type since Sejanus (under Tiberius), with Tigellinus (under Nero) being another famous example, especially in their representations in Tacitus.

[232] Commodus' so-called 'madness' is cited a few times by Herodian, cf. 1.14.8 (μανίας καὶ παρανοίας); 1.15.8 (μανίας); 1.16.1 (μεμηνότα). Sidebottom 1998, 2806-7; Zimmermann 1999a, 125-44; Hidber 2006, 201-3 understand this major shift in Commodus' character through considerations of *paideia* (see above, [41; 92-93; 101; 228; 238-9, etc.] more generally on this theme in the *History*). Zimmermann 1999a, 135-9 also sees the structure of Commodus' final years in Herodian's story (1.14ff) as antithetical to that of the emperor's first years (1.5ff); both are marked by an *aduentus* and then build on Commodus' attributes, which are first treated as virtues, but eventually deteriorate into vices. Against this idea of a 'process' for the character, Ward 2011, 128-33 argues in favour of a 'delay' set up by the historian.

[233] Commodus would even order that he was to be called "Heracles, son of Zeus, instead of Commodus, son of Marcus" (1.14.8: ἀντὶ δὲ Κομόδου καὶ Μάρκου υἱοῦ Ἡρακλέα τε καὶ Διὸς υἱόν) and, later on, fashioned himself after a famous gladiator (1.15.8). He replaced the head of the Colossus with one in his likeness, swapping the expected inscription of "Germanicus" with "Victor of a Thousand Gladiators"; cf. Cass. Dio 73(72)22.3 and *SHA*, *Comm.* 15.8. The emperor would also rename the months of the year, with references to Heracles (cf. 1.14.9). See above, [193-6], on the costumes. Dio reports similar changes, but also writes that Commodus even renamed Rome "Commodiana" (Κομμοδιανὴν), as well as the legions (τὰ στρατόπεδα Κομμοδιανά) and the senate (γερουσίᾳ Κομμοδιανῇ): see Cass. Dio 73(72)15.2-6, with Gleason 2011, 48-50 commenting on "the numerous ways in which Commodus altered surface appearances." (quote at 48) On Commodus' Heracleian persona, official representations, and ideology, see e.g. Hekster 2002, 99-129 and Cadario 2017. By assuming both Heracleian and gladiatorial attributes, Commodus may have been creating a coherent public image for himself: a victory over death, perpetuated through gladiator games, could have served to validate the immortality he was aspiring to, so suggests Hekster 2001, 64-69.

As noted previously, Herodian depicts Commodus' corruption as a gradual process[234]. Interestingly, this degradation is also implied to not having been entirely his own fault, but is shown to have derived, partially, from a succession of betrayals by people close to him. Some of Commodus' more extreme actions against the senate, aristocracy, and people may be explained as (disproportionate) reactions to these manifestations of disloyalty. However, while these conspiracies actually unfold, it is striking to note how Commodus also tends to be kept in the background. Though inherently involved in these plots as its target, Commodus remains a markedly passive character, only carrying out the executions of the conspirators once the plot has been foiled by others.

For instance, the first scheme is said to have been uncovered through the stupidity of one of its instigators: according to Herodian, Quintianus made himself known too early, declaring his intentions instead of acting immediately against the emperor, who was then "forewarned" (1.8.6: προγνωσθέντι). Still, the investigations are said to have been taken over by Perennis, while Commodus was the one to order the executions[235]. Similarly, Perennis' plot is foiled by an unnamed philosopher, who ran out on the stage while Commodus was waiting for the start of a show during the Capitoline games (1.9.3-5)[236]. This warning prompted Commodus' friends to accuse Perennis as well[237]. Herodian records that the plot was thwarted by "some soldiers" (1.9.7: στρατιῶταί τινες), who presented Commodus with coins featuring Perennis' portrait. In this particular case, Commodus is shown as a more active character, having Perennis executed before the prefect even knew what was going on. Commodus also tricked Perennis' son into coming to Rome and had him killed on the way to the capital (1.9.8-10). According to Herodian, Maternus' plot was betrayed by some of his allies, out of jealousy (1.10.7). When Commodus was informed of Maternus' pillaging, the emperor only sent menacing letters to the governors of the targeted provinces and ordered them to organize a counteroffensive (1.10.3). But these confrontations never happened and Maternus instead turned to Italy. Once in Rome, during the Hilaria, Maternus was then "arrested and beheaded" (1.10.7: συλληφθεὶς τὴν κεφαλὴν ἀπετμήθη), and the other conspirators are said to have "received the punishments they deserved" (ἀξίας ὑπέσχον δίκας). For his part, Commodus is only shown to resume the festivities interrupted by Maternus' attempt, honouring and thanking Cybele for his escape. Finally, Cleander's plot was foiled by Fadilla (1.13.1-3).

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[234] See Marasco 1998, 2844-7. According to Herodian, Commodus was still welcomed warmly by the people upon his final return to Rome (1.13.7, similar to 1.7.2-3) and seemed, in Herodian, to only start losing considerable support in the wake of a series of bad omens and disasters (namely a large city fire thought to be divine punishment, 1.14.6: γνώμῃ θεῶν καὶ δυνάμει); Commodus retained however the approval of the lower classes up until the (attempted) realization of his gladiatorial aspirations (1.15.7). This coincides, in the *History*, with Commodus' gradual indifference to criticism and his lack of shame: compare, e.g., 1.6.3 and 1.6.7 with 1.13.8; 1.14.7; 1.15.1; 1.16.5 (though still some measure of embarrassment at 1.17.2).

[235] 1.8.8: γενομένης δ' ἐξετάσεως διὰ τοῦ Περεννίου ἀκριβεστέρας vs. ὁ Κόμοδος διεχρήσατο.

[236] Herodian even notes the "incredible manner" (1.9.2: παραδόξῳ τρόπῳ, trans. mod.) in which the plot was discovered.

[237] Commodus was "dumbfounded" by this information (1.9.5: ἀφασία), although everybody else is shown to have been unsurprised. Later Perennis is marked with the same ignorance (1.9.7-8), as well as his son (1.9.8-10); and to a lesser extent, Cleander who was unaware of the latest news, but had his doubts about Fadilla (1.13.4).

According to Herodian, she alone dared to speak out and warn the emperor, which then prompted others to come forward with similar charges (1.13.3). Again, Commodus is given the last part of the scene: the emperor summoned Cleander and had him executed upon his arrival. Here, although Commodus takes action, the plot's resolution is treated only summarily, especially when compared to the treatment given to the aftermath of Cleander's death (1.13.5-6). First led, as emphasized by Herodian, through his own inauguration by his father's advisers, Commodus is shown to rule in a similarly passive way, though now at the mercy of wicked individuals[238].

It is also worth noting, to follow up on this idea of passivity, that the conspiracies against Commodus are attributed, at least in Herodian's story, only to the personal grievances and ambition of these characters. Unsurprisingly, none of them express care or concern for the emperor. The first plot is explained through Lucilla's jealousy and resentment over Commodus' marriage to Crispina, which would grant the emperor's new wife the privileges Lucilla was keen to maintain as the previous 'first' Augusta (1.8.4-5: δυσφόρως τοῦτο φέρουσα; ὕβριν)[239]. Whatever his motivations, Quadratus is only said to have been convinced by "her continual, bitter complaints" (1.8.4: συνεχῶς ἀπωδύρετο)[240]. Perhaps significantly, Herodian makes no mention of the reasons behind the decision of certain senators to ally with Quadratus. Quintianus, charged with the execution, is described as "extremely rash" (1.8.5: προπετῆ δὲ καὶ θρασύν), which implies a lack of sound reasoning. From his first appearance in the *History*, Perennis is portrayed as a highly ambitious and greedy individual. Having grown wealthier with the seized assets of the purged aristocracy, Perennis was also able to secure his full dominance over Commodus. However, not yet satisfied with these victories, the prefect then set his sights on the emperorship itself (1.9.1). According to Herodian, Maternus was "of notorious daring" (1.10.1: πολλὰ δὲ καὶ δεινὰ τολμήσας) and was looking to enrich himself and his supporters. Further emboldened by his many successes across Gaul and Spain, Maternus angled for "a grander design" (1.10.3: μειζόνων πραγμάτων): having achieved so much already, he figured he would either reach this ultimate goal or die, but not "without some measure of fame and glory" (1.10.4: μὴ ἀσήμως μηδ' ἀδόξως, trans. mod.). Cleander's motivations are, in Herodian's *History*, similar to those of Perennis: "his greed and insolence

[238] From 1.6 onwards. A first critical issue to arise was whether Commodus should remain on the Danubian front to settle the war against the Germans or to return at once to Rome to indulge in an easy imperial lifestyle. In these dealings, Herodian makes a point to use words such as 'corrupt', 'put ideas', 'whet', or 'take advantage' to underline Commodus' youthful passivity. Compare with Severus' apology of Commodus at 2.10.3: "since we attributed most of the misfortunes not to him but to his sycophants and attendants, who encouraged him in his corrupt ways"; see Galimberti 2014, 70 (*ad* 1.6.1-2), 72 (*ad* 1.6.3).

[239] Based namely on numismatic evidence, Aymard 1955 discusses the date of the conspiracy, the fate of Crispina, and the 'true' motivations of Lucilla, who is argued to have felt threatened by the birth of a son for Commodus and Crispina.

[240] In Dio's version, Quadratus is said to have been a lover of Marcia, which Whittaker 1969-70, n. 4 *ad* 1.8.4 takes as an additional reason for Quadratus' hostility against the emperor. According to Lightman & Lightman 2008, s.v. Marcia (4), Marcia was convinced by Lucilla to take part in this conspiracy, though (somehow) escaped charges and became Commodus' favourite concubine.

led him to covet even (*καί*) the position of emperor"[241]. In all of these plots recorded by Herodian, Commodus is mostly perceived as collateral damage to the conspirators' greater ambitions for wealth and power. Strictly speaking, Commodus is depicted as an innocent party, falling victim to the wickedness of other people – most of whom he had (blindly?) trusted. To be sure, this lack of blame on Commodus does not produce a particularly positive image of the emperor, who often appears clueless or helpless in the face of these conflicts.

The final conspiracy

After a long description of Commodus' eccentricities (cf. 1.13.7-7; 1.14.7-9; 1.15.1-9), Herodian declares that "at last it became imperative to check (ἔδει… παύσασθαι) the madness of Commodus and to free the Roman empire from tyranny"[242]. On the occasion of the Saturnalia and the first day of the eponymous magistrates in office, Commodus decided that he would make his public appearance "not from the palace, as was usual (ὡς ἔθος), but from the gladiators' barracks, dressed in armour instead (*ἀντί*) of the purple-bordered toga of the emperors, and escorted in procession by the rest of the gladiators"[243]. When Commodus informed Marcia, who was his favourite concubine, of his plans, she attempted and failed to change his mind, concerned both for propriety and for his personal welfare (1.16.14)[244]. Similarly, Laetus, the praetorian prefect, and Eclectus, the chamberlain, tried in vain to appeal to him when he instructed them to make the necessary preparations for his overnight stay in the gladiators' barracks (1.16.5). Faced with this opposition, Commodus, "in a fury" (1.17.1: *ἀσχάλλων*), dismissed them and retired to his quarters under the pretence of his usual

[241] 1.12.3: *ὑπὸ δὲ πλούτου καὶ τρυφῆς ἀνεπείσθη καὶ πρὸς βασιλείας ἐπιθυμίαν*. Interestingly, Dio is much more favourable to Perennis, cf. Cass. Dio 73(72).9-10. Scott 2018a, 442-3, with Chrysanthou 202, 643-4, views this difference as the result of Herodian's commitment to the theme of the overly ambitious prefect.

[242] 1.16.1: *ἔδει δὲ ἄρα ποτὲ κἀκεῖνον παύσασθαι μεμηνότα καὶ τὴν Ῥωμαίων ἀρχήν*.

[243] 1.16.3: *οὐκ ἐκ τῆς βασιλείου, ὡς ἔθος, προελθεῖν οἰκίας, ἀλλ' ἐκ τοῦ τῶν μονομάχων καταγωγίου, ἀντὶ δὲ τῆς εὐπαρύφου καὶ βασιλικῆς πορφύρας ὅπλα τε αὐτὸς φέρων καὶ συμπροιόντων τῶν λοιπῶν μονομάχων*. Following Pitcher 2012, 277-9, who shows clearly that the imperial palace, in Herodian, symbolizes imperial authority, it would be possible to see Commodus' plan to appear from the gladiators' barracks instead of the palace as a final rejection of a traditional emperorship and his own heritage. See also Schettino 2017, 86-89 on Herodian's representation of the imperial palace. Cass. Dio 73(72).22.2 records that Commodus intended to invest the new consuls from the barracks; significantly, the trio's initial concern for Commodus does not appear in Dio's version. Other emperors before Commodus had appeared in public as gladiators: Caligula (Suet., *Calig.* 32.2; 54.1; 55.2; Cass. Dio 59.5.4-5; 8.3); possibly Nero (Philostr., *VA* 4.36) and Julianus (*SHA*, *Did. Iul.* 9.1); and even Hadrian to a certain extent (*SHA*, *Hadr.* 14.10: *gladiatoria quoque arma tractauit*). See Kyle 1998, 173, n. 83.

[244] Marcia is said, in Cass. Dio 73(72).4.6. to have been Quadratus' concubine and, in Cass. Dio 73(72).13.5, to have been the one to warn Commodus' of Cleander's conspiracy, instead of Fadilla as Herodian writes. Alföldy 1989, 112-14 argues that Herodian gave Marcia's role to Fadilla in order to delay her appearance until Commodus' final moments. Hekster 2002, 74, n. 193 sees, in both accounts, the possible invention of a messenger figure. According to Cass. Dio 73(72).4.7 (ap. Xiph.) and Hippol., *Refut.* 9.12.12 (φιλόθεος), Marcia had Christian sympathies; see Strong 2014, 248-54, for a recent overview of the evidence. See also Nadolny 2016, 161-2 on Marcia's role in Herodian ("dramatische, aber unglaubwürdige") or Chrysanthou 2020, 626, n. 18 (hers and Fadilla's roles are presented in "highly dramatic terms"); with Galimberti 2014, 161-2 (*ad* 1.16.3-4), on Marcia's (possible) identity and her overall representation in historiography, and Flexsenhar III 2016, who argues against the usual association of this Marcia with the Marcia Aurelia Ceionia Demetrias cited in *CIL* 10.5918 (= *ILS* 406).

afternoon nap. There the emperor made a list of all those he wanted executed the very night, recording it on a wax tablet:

> Heading the list was Marcia; then Laetus and Eclectus, followed by a great deal of many leading senators. Commodus' intention was to be rid of all the remaining, senior advisers of his father, since he felt embarrassed at having respectable witnesses to his degenerate behaviour[245].

According to Herodian, Commodus also planned to seize all of their assets, in order to make distributions to the soldiers and the gladiators.

Although the tablet does not appear in Dio's corresponding passage, scholars have instead linked this scene with Domitian's death in the *Roman History*, which features a similar recognition scene (Cass. Dio 67.15.3)[246]. As such, Herodian's version was deemed fabricated, even copied from Dio[247]. But, as Whittaker notes, it may well be that Commodus' and Domitian's deaths just "really were rather similar"[248]. There are certainly clear parallels between the two stories, of which the tablet, though arguably the most exciting, may not be as unusual as it has been made out to be[249]. For instance, Caligula too is said to have made lists of people he wanted to execute, even labelling them *gladius* or *pugio* to show how wanted them to die (Suet., *Cal.* 49.3). Herodian himself states, during Plautianus' short stint as would-be emperor, that written death warrants were "the practice of tyrants" (3.11.9: ἔθος… τυραννικόν), since it was said to add legitimacy to executions carried out without trial.

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[245] 1.17.2: ὧν πρώτη μὲν ἦν Μαρκία, εἵποντο δὲ Λαῖτός τε καὶ Ἔκλεκτος, ἐπὶ δὲ τούτοις πολὺ πλῆθος τῶν τῆς συγκλήτου πρωτευόντων. τοὺς μὲν γὰρ πρεσβυτέρους καὶ ἔτι λοιποὺς πατρῴους φίλους ἀποσκευάσασθαι πάντας ἤθελεν, αἰδούμενος ἔχειν αἰσχρῶν ἔργων σεμνοὺς ἐπόπτας· According to Cass. Dio 73(72).22.1-2, victims of Commodus' scheming were the incoming consulars, Erucius Clarus and Sosius Falco. In *SHA*, *Comm*. 15.1-2, it was the emperor's careless murder of his *cubicularii* that led Eclectus to plot against him; and in *SHA*, *Comm.* 16.8-17.1, Laetus and Marcia were "roused to action" (*incitati*) by Commodus' gifts of 725 *denarii* to each individual and of additional circus games.

[246] The scene is briefly recorded in *SHA*, *Comm.* 9.3 (who seemingly had access to Herodian's *History*), though not directly linked to the emperor's murder.

[247] According to Roos 1915, 192-5, this parallel shows how Herodian used Dio and another source, whose material is supposedly preserved in the *Historia Augusta*, to compose his narrative; see also Kolb 1972, 38-47; Martinelli 1988; Chrysanthou 2020, 627. Whittaker 1969-70, n. 4 *ad* 1.16.3 (with Sidebottom 1998, 2783, n. 83) summarizes the different views on this particular passage, namely an outright rejection of the episode (e.g. Hohl 1932, 191-200) or a winding reflection implicating Xiphilinus' knowledge and application of Herodian's story to his epitome of Dio (e.g. Càssola 1956-7, 195-8). See Molinier Arbo 2012 for a more recent analysis of the sources and the related scholarship; she argues that Marius Maximus, echoing contemporary Severan propaganda and Suetonian themes, would have been the one to set within the literary tradition of Commodus' death the narrative elements of the boy and the tablet. This is the tradition that would have been followed by both Herodian and the *SHA* (and possibly Dio). More generally on the parallels between (these stories of) Commodus and Domitian, see Zimmermann 1999a, 139-42.

[248] Whittaker 1969-70, n. 4 *ad* 1.16.3, citing Tertull., *Apol*. 35.9 (*unde qui faucibus eius exprimendis palaestricam exercent?*), links Narcissus to Domitian's murderers. Whittaker (with Syme 1938, 137; Galimberti 2014, 165-6 [*ad* 1.17.1-2]) wonders: "given a similarity in circumstances and an anti-Commodus interest in drawing the comparison, could not Dio himself have made Domitian's death as like C.'s as possible…?". This process would be similar to how Dio uses the contemporary representations of Julia Maesa in his portrayal of Julia Domna, cf. above, [224].

[249] Pagan 2004, 126-8, on such a plot device in conspiracy narratives. With above, [54-55], on the tablet used as proof by Eclectus and Laetus when they to Pertinax. See too Castelli 2008, 108-11 on the 'temporal micro-sequencing' of this particular episode, which helps produce a detailed and dramatic story.

Historicity notwithstanding, the tablet acts, in this story, as a fundamental element of the plot, as we will see below.

Already from the scene's setting and the essence of Commodus' plans, we get a sense not only of spectacle, but even of carnival, which is taken here, broadly, as ritualized forms of inversion. This pattern, inherent to the Saturnalia, is visible in Commodus' project, as well as in how Herodian constructs the whole episode[250]. Commodus' decision to get rid of the leading senators and appropriate their wealth is comparable to Perennis' earlier mass executions and confiscations in the aftermath of Lucilla's failed conspiracy. However, in the first case, Commodus had merely followed Perennis' lead, while in the second Commodus now acted all on his own. Similarly, the previous plots had been successfully thwarted due to Commodus' heeding of fortuitous or loyal warnings against his conspirators[251]. In this last moment, the emperor chose to ignore the pleas of a well-intended entourage, who only wanted to prevent him from bringing about his own demise. When the prince informed Marcia of his "extraordinary" (παράλογον) and "undignified" (ἀπρεπῆ) plans for the upcoming Saturnalia, she is said to have expressed at first true concern for Commodus. According to Herodian, she begged Commodus "not to bring disgrace on the Roman Empire and not to take the risk of entrusting himself to gladiators and desperadoes"[252]. Marcia's concerns for the Empire and for the emperor are shared by Eclectus and Laetus, once they too become aware of Commodus' intentions (1.16.5)[253]. All of their efforts to discourage the emperor from his unseemly plans are unsuccessful and prompt Commodus to plot against them. This is another important aspect of this final scene as it is told in the *History*: the future conspirators were still loyal to Commodus, even after his extreme transformation. Prior to this final turn of events, they did not mean him any harm, nor did they desire to assume power themselves (this will be confirmed by their later search for a new emperor). Their action against the emperor is framed, in this version, as a reaction to Commodus' initiative. Unlike his role in the previous plots, he is now depicted as the main guilty party.

Met with the emperor's stubbornness, Marcia is shown to leave his room, while Eclectus and Laetus were dismissed soon after. The story then turns back fully to Commodus. Leaning on this narrative shift and the departure of the three other characters, Herodian can build this next critical scene solely around Commodus, in a way making him the author of his own misfortune. Commodus first ignored, as Herodian records, the sound advice given to him

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[250] Rowan 2005, esp. 173-4, on this passage.

[251] Against Perennis and his sons, a man dressed as a (cynic) philosopher bursting out on stage (1.9.3-5) and some soldiers (1.9.7); against Maternus, jealous allies of the conspirator (1.10.7); against Cleander, Fadilla, one of Commodus' sisters (1.13.1-4). The philosopher and Fadilla in particular conform to the figure of the 'tragic warner', one of two types of the 'wise adviser', cf. Lattimore 1939: "the wise adviser appears to be something more than a mere borrowed figure, and is in the strictest sense a Herodotean character. At the same time, he certainly bears a marked resemblance to the foreboding characters of tragedy, and appears in situations which are, in a general sense at least, tragic" (quote at 24, n. 1).

[252] 1.16.4: μήτε τὴν Ῥωμαίων ἀρχὴν καθυβρίσαι μηθ' ἑαυτὸν ἐπιδόντα μονομάχοις καὶ ἀπεγνωσμένοις ἀνθρώποις κινδυνεῦσαι.

[253] In the *Historia Augusta*, Eclectus first appears in the *Vita Veri* as one of Verus' "unscrupulous freedmen" (*SHA*, *Ver.* 9.5: *libertos improbos*). Supposedly, the man had also been a *cubicularius* of Quadratus, according to Cass. Dio 73(72).4.6, before passing into Commodus' service.

by well-meaning allies, and he then plotted to get rid of them. The sequencing, in keeping with Herodian's usual linear causation, strengthens this impression: the trio conspired against him *only after* Commodus made his own plans to have them executed[254]. Finally, Marcia, Eclectus, and Laetus' plotting is framed with just the right amount of planning and reacting. A long-planned murder predating Commodus' own scheme would have instead translated into disloyalty and unreliability. Too slow a response, once the trio became aware of the danger they were facing, would have been weak and foolish: as Herodian explains, "they agreed that they must strike first or be struck down, and that there was no time for delay or procrastination"[255].

Habits and recognition

In the *History*, Commodus' intentions were revealed to the concerned parties through an interplay between routine practices and chance events[256]. First, Commodus pretended to retire for his "usual" (1.17.1: εἰώθει) nap, but was instead deciding whom to eliminate that night. Afterwards, the emperor left the incriminating tablet unattended in his room, while he was engaging in "his usual bath and drinking session" (1.17.4: ἐπὶ τὰ συνήθη λουτρά τε καὶ κραιπάλας). Afterwards, Commodus' favourite, a so-called Philocommodus, rushed in and out of the imperial quarters, "as he normally did" (1.17.4: ὥσπερ εἰώθει), and picked up the tablet[257]. "By some extraordinary chance" (1.17.4: κατὰ δέ τινα δαίμονα), Philocommodus ran into Marcia, who took it from him thinking he might damage something important[258]. Marcia "recognized" (1.17.4: γνωρίσασα) Commodus' handwriting, which prompted her to have a closer look: she then "found out" (1.17.5: εὗρεν) that the emperor planned to execute a number of people and that her name was at the top of the list, along with Laetus and Eclectus[259]. Upon this realization, Marcia resolved to take action against Commodus before he could carry out his plans. She is said to have first shared her discovery with Eclectus, "who normally (ἔθος)

[254] In Cass. Dio 73(72).22.1, it is rather the other around: first Laetus and Eclectus began to plot against Commodus out of fear and disapproval, and then associated Marcia in their project. As noted above, the *Historia Augusta* splits the actions of Eclectus and of Laetus and Marcia into two different strands.

[255] 1.17.7: προσποιησάμενοι δὲ περὶ τῶν ἐκείνῳ διαφερόντων σκέπτεσθαι συντίθενται φθάσαι τι δράσαντες ἢ παθεῖν, οὐδὲ καιρὸν εἶναι μελλήσεως ἢ ἀναβολῆς. This is the usual reaction of secondary characters to the threat of imperial retribution; see recently, Scott 2018b.

[256] Recalling Lucian., *conscr. hist.* 50-51, Whittaker 1969-70 n. 2 *ad* 1.17.4 remarks that "the highly dramatic quality of the narrative is brought out by the use of the devices of chance, fate, recognition scenes and speeches." See also Castelli 2008, on the use of speeches and narrative speed in this passage.

[257] See Pitcher 2012, 279, n. 14: "the various palace rooms involved are brought in to emphasize the grisly mechanics of orchestrating the Emperor's demise".

[258] Gagé 1968 suggests that Herodian based his narrative on a bas-relief found in Ostia, which depicts a child drawing the *sortes* in front of Hercules. Following this, Gagé proposes that the *sortitio* scene, if taken as attempt from Marcia to legitimize her plot against Commodus, would validate "la logique totale de son héracléisme".

[259] Significantly, Marcia's reasoning is narrated in direct speech (1.17.5). Her final line, "that's the festival we are going to celebrate tonight!" (1.17.6: ποίαν μέλλομεν παννυχίζειν ἑορτήν), even echoes the setting of two of the previous, failed plots against Commodus: the first plot, organized by Lucilla, Quadratus, and Quintianus, was scheduled for the *ludi Capitolini*, while Maternus' conspiracy was to take place during the Saturnalia. On this festival, and others, in Herodian's work, see Rowan 2005, esp. 168-9.

visited her in his capacity as the official chamberlain" (he was also rumoured to be her lover)[260]. Newly informed of this threat, Eclectus then sent the sealed tablet to Laetus[261]. Both men, panicked, convened with Marcia and all three decided to act at once[262].

Their plan, as Herodian records, was to have Marcia poison the wine she "normally" (1.17.8: εἰώθει) mixed for Commodus, which he "normally" (ὡς συνήθη) drank after his regular baths or hunts[263]. Presented with the 'usual' cup, Commodus "tossed it off without a thought" (ἔπιεν ἀναισθήτως) and immediately fell into a coma. Taking advantage of Commodus' habitual overindulgence, Eclectus and Marcia convinced the household to retire since "this normally (εἰώθει) happened to Commodus on other occasions after he had been drinking heavily"[264]. Playing with the idea of 'regular irregularity', Herodian explains how Commodus had no set bed time and would get up "at any hour" (1.17.9: καταλαβούσῃ ὥρᾳ) to partake in various pleasures, like "frequent baths and meals" (1.17.9: πολλάκις γὰρ λουόμενος καὶ πολλάκις ἐσθίων). Once he ingested the wine prepared by Marcia, Commodus did not succumb to the poison, but was instead overcome with nausea and started vomiting violently. Herodian explains this turnaround through more of the emperor's habits: either Commodus' regular excesses worked in his favour and made him sick, or his usual paranoia had made him take an antidote some time before – this was, according to Herodian, a "common practice" (1.17.10: εἰώθασι) among the emperors[265].

Seeing their plan unravel, the trio feared the emperor would overcome the poison and punish them. According to Herodian, they enlisted, as a last resort, another individual to finish off Commodus by strangling him. This new character was "a certain young man called Narcissus, strong and vigorous" (1.17.11: νέον τινὰ ὄνομα Νάρκισσον, γενναῖόν τε καὶ ἀκμαστήν, trans. mod.). The term ἀκμαστήν is variously understood by modern translators[266], but is

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[260] 1.17.6: ἔθος δ' εἶχεν αὐτῇ προσιέναι ἅτε τοῦ θαλάμου φύλαξ.

[261] Whittaker 1969-70, n. 3 *ad* 1.17.6: "The necessity for summoning Laetus was in order to counteract the firm loyalty of the guards to Commodus. The advantage of the immediate action during the period of the festival was that the guards were not armed. […] Eclectus and Marcia seem to be chief instigators of the plot and the selection of Pertinax".

[262] These contrasting reactions are echoed in Zosim. 1.7.1, who notes that Marcia had "demonstrated the courage of a man" (φρόνημα ἀνδρεῖον ἀνελομένης, trans. Ridley 1982).

[263] Out of all of Commodus' vices, his gluttony and excessive drinking would, in Herodian's *History*, prove to be his end. Marcia's monologue at 1.17.5 foreshadows this, by focusing on this aspect twice, while also marking a stark contrast between the "fuddled drunkard" (μεθύων) and the "sober woman" (νηφούσης γυναικός). Interestingly, according to Cass. Dio 73(72).22.4, the poison was put in meat (ἐν κρέασι βοείοις), while Vict., *Caes.* 17.8 records a more general *cibum*.

[264] 1.17.9: εἰώθει δὲ καὶ ἐπὶ ἄλλων καιρῶν τοῦτο πάσχειν ὁ Κόμοδος ὑπὸ κραιπάλης.

[265] Bats 2002, 291, n. 66: "Les historiens font le choix de détailler ces réalités scabreuses: mort indécente et résistance quasi clinique qui se placent à la hauteur de l'*ubris* qu'a manifestée tout au long de son règne ce tyran." The same idea is found in Scheid 1984; Arand 2002; van Hooff 2003.

[266] ἀκμαστήν connects with ἀκμαῖος and ἀκμάζω ("to be in full bloom", "to be at one's prime") and is recorded for a club of gymnasts in Thyatira, Asia minor (*IGRom*. 4.1234: ἀκμασταί). It was thought by Sylburg 1590 to have been mistaken for γυμναστήν (as found in Cass. Dio 73(72).22.5) and noted as "dasselbe, νεανίσκος" by Pape 1880. Other translations are: "un giovane coraggioso e robusto" (ap. Càssola 1967); "a strong, young athlete" (ap. Whittaker 1969-70); "een jonge man nog" (ap. Brok 1973/Hunink 2017); "joven decidido y fuerte" (ap. Torres Esbarranch 1985); "un brave dans la force de l'âge" (ap. Roques 1990a); "eine jungen

generally taken to imply physical strength since Narcissus is recorded elsewhere to have been an athlete[267]. Herodian also notes that the conspirators convinced Narcissus to carry this task "in return for a large reward" (1.17.11: μεγάλα δώσειν ἔπαθλα). Here the author uses an expressive ἔπαθλα, which is normally used to designate to contest prizes. Following this idea, there is a certain irony in how Herodian frames the emperor's death, given the way that Commodus, having forsaken his imperial duties and devoted himself to sport, is shown to have brought the emperorship inside the arena. Though able and well-trained, the emperor would only partake in fake hunts and staged fights. Said to surpass all his instructors in marksmanship, Commodus would shoot the animals from a terrace built specifically for him so that he could 'hunt' from a safe distance (1.15.2-6)[268]. Similarly, in gladiatorial fights, the emperor would win by "merely wounding" (1.15.8: μέχρι τραυμάτων προεχώρει) his opponents[269]. According to Herodian, they would "let him win" (ὑπεικόντων), all too aware that they were still fighting the emperor (τὸν βασιλέα οὐ τὸν μονομάχον), whatever the character he was performing at that moment. In an inversion of the emperor's easy victories, Narcissus now took advantage of Commodus' weakened state and finished him off. In Commodus' last moments, the arena forcefully chased him back to the imperial palace.

Herodian then insists on how the conspirators dealt with the aftermath of Commodus' death. Once it was confirmed that the emperor was dead, the conspirators wrapped the corpse in cheap linen and sent it off with a couple of slaves (2.1.1). As Herodian shows, the body was snuck out undetected by the palace guards and then loaded onto a cart to be carried out of the city (2.1.2). Since the murder took place behind closed doors and they had successfully removed the damning evidence, the trio was able to bank on general ignorance and create their own narrative. According to Herodian, they decided to explain the emperor's death as a case of "sudden apoplexy" (2.1.3: ἀποπληξίας ἐπιπεσούσης)[270]. This, they felt, was a highly believable cause due to Commodus' known excesses[271]. As argued above, Commodus'

Mann von guter und kräftiger Statur" (ap. Müller 1996); "un giovane coraggioso e pieno di vigore" (ap. Galimberti 2014).

[267] Cf. Cass. Dio 73(72).22.5 and *SHA*, *Nig.* 1.5; alluded to in Ps.-Vict. 17.6; *SHA*, *Comm.* 17.2 and perhaps Tert., *Apol.* 35.9. Narcissus has been thought to be, namely by Whittaker 1969-70, n. 2 *ad loc.* and others after him, an imperial freedman (perhaps on the basis of similarly named *liberti* under Claudius and Nero). According to Cass. Dio 74(73).16.5 and *SHA*, *Seu.* 13.9, Narcissus was later executed by Severus, while *SHA*, *Nig.* 1.5 cites him as a supporter of Niger. Cf. Vict., *Caes*. 17.8-9 for slightly different version of Commodus' death, which was arranged by his satellites. See Galimberti 2014, 162-72 (*ad* 1.17.1-11), for a recent discussion on the different versions of Commodus' death; with Grosso 1964, 89, who gives a visual overview of the literary tradition(s) of Commodus' life, from the third century to the twelfth.

[268] A more extensive descriptions of these games and hunts can be found in Cass. Dio 73(72).18-20; there was a rumour according to which Commodus might shoot some onlookers "in imitation of Hercules and the Stymphalian birds" (73(72).20.2: ὥσπερ ὁ Ἡρακλῆς τὰς Στυμφαλίδας); see Cadario 2017, 51-52.

[269] According to Dio, Commodus would even try to mutilate his opponents, swinging freely at ears, hair, and noses (Cass. Dio 73(72).17.2).

[270] Significantly, Pertinax was given the true cause of Commodus' death, cf. 2.1.8.

[271] By declaring that Commodus "got the punishment he deserved" (2.1.9: δίκην δοὺς τὴν προσήκουσαν), they were also implying a certain intervention of fate, which would have struck down against the emperor's misdeeds. This idea of 'divine justice' is taken up again in Laetus' speech to the praetorians: "He [i.e Commodus] has got the fate that was in store for him" (2.2.6: τὸν μὲν οὖν κατέλαβε τέλος τὸ πεπρωμένον).

death scene in the *History* plays on the emperor's habits and accidents up to its very last moments, and this would enable his murderers to present a distorted, but credible version of the events to the general public.

This episode is, arguably, one of the most complex and detailed in the *History*, serving as a strong counterpoint for Marcus' similarly intricate death. If, in Herodian's story, Marcus' death is designed as the paradigmatic good death of the good emperor, Commodus' end shows a comprehensive example of a bad emperor's bad death. Marcus' portrayal had, from the very start, helped establish the model of the good emperor for the entire work. Much in the same manner, this representation of Commodus can also be incorporated within Herodian's general statement on good and bad emperorship found in the preface, as the embodiment of undisciplined young autocrats[272]. As Herodian emphatically shows, Commodus might have been blessed with every imaginable gift, "but all this talent he debased by corrupt living" (1.17.12: εἰ μὴ τὴν τούτων εὐμορίαν αἰσχροῖς ἐπιτηδεύμασι κατῄσχυνεν)[273]. Looking at the *History* as a whole, Commodus' end even comes to foreshadow the inevitable failure of most future rulers and contenders, both young and old, who would only rely on their position and wealth or forsake the common good in favour of pursing their private interests.

4.4.2 A tale of two brothers

As Herodian records, Caracalla and Geta's childhood rivalry did not end with their joint accession following Severus' death, but rather escalated. Back in Rome, the brothers are said to have had their own half of the imperial palace and their own bodyguard. They were in fact leading completely separate lives, save for the rare public function (4.1.5). According to Herodian, their feud even pushed them to contemplate an official division of the Empire: the west would go to Caracalla, the east to Geta (4.3.5-9)[274]. Shown to have been strongly opposed by their advisers and Julia Domna, their plan was quickly abandoned. Their hostility towards each other, however, would only grow and each attempted to get rid of the other through

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Castelli 2008, 112 also notes how the "degradaziane notturna del palazzo" provides an ideal setting for the emperor's death.

[272] Cf. 1.1.4-6, also in Marcus' final musings, at 1.3; with above, [92-94].

[273] This emphasis on Commodus' innate attributes may also resonate with the emperor's forceful rejection of his Antonine heritage, whether through names (e.g. 1.14.8), titles (e.g. 1.15.9), or friends (e.g. 1.17.2). Interestingly, this destruction of his father's memory is one of the only instances of true agency for Herodian's Commodus. On Herodian's final judgement of Commodus, see e.g. Zimmermann 1999a, 60-62; Galimberti 2014, 172-3 (*ad* 1.17.12); with Laporte & Hekster 2021. According to Widmer 1967, 17-18, Commodus' noble birth is confirmed to be, through Severus' later praise (2.10.3), a negative attribute in Herodian's view; in fact, so argues Widmer, Commodus' gradual corruption can only be taken as a formal invention of Herodian, since the man was inherently bad. Zimmermann 1999a, 148 sees the degradation of Commodus' character as an illustration of the emergence of tyranny, not as an apology or exculpation of the prince. Zimmermann also considers this break to emphasize the importance of education (*paideia*) in young rulers; with Hidber 2006, 201-48. On the basis of this passage, Marcus' choice of sons-in-law, and Herodian's description of Commodus' lineage, Kuhn-Chen 2002, 271-2 claims, perhaps dubiously, that, in addition to deeds, ancestry (and beauty) are also important attributes for Herodian, who would adhere, in this way, to aristocratic ideals of power and success.

[274] While the authenticity of this project is unanimously rejected by scholarship, the idea of an empire divided between brothers makes for a striking, and memorable, image. See Marasco 1998, 2871-3 on this passage; Marasco suggests that Herodian had in mind the 'famous precedent' of Marcus and Verus.

"every kind of intrigue" (4.4.2: πάντα τε εἴδη ἐπιβουλῆς). Following the *History*'s narrative sequence, it all came to an end when, exasperated, Caracalla resolved to either kill Geta or die trying[275].

Playing the victim

Discarding sneakier tricks, Caracalla is said to have turned instead to a "dangerous and desperate" plan (4.4.3: τὴν κινδυνώδη τε καὶ ἀπεγνωσμένην). Although the following text in the *History* presents a lacuna, a general idea of the proceedings can be drawn from Caracalla's own spin on the story he presented to the praetorians right after the fact[276]. According to Herodian, the murder took place in private chambers, and Julia Domna is possibly the only witness mentioned[277]. Dashing out of the room as soon as it was over, Caracalla already painted himself as the victim, claiming that he "had escaped a great danger and only just been saved" (4.4.4: μέγαν κίνδυνον ἐκπεφευγέναι μόλις τε σωθῆναι). In a strange inversion of the tyrant's hunt[278], Caracalla stages his 'pursuit' out of the palace and across the city.

The charade is emphasized by the accumulation of verbs denoting briskness, in relation to both movement and speech: "jump up" (4.4.3: προπηδᾷ), "run from" (φερόμενος), "rushing through" (4.4.4: φερομένῳ συνεξέδραμον), "shouted out" (ἐβόα), "ran out at full speed", "running quickly through" (4.4.5: φερόμενον τῆς πόλεως δρόμῳ), "bursting in" (εἰσέπεσεν), "threw himself on the ground" (προσκυνεῖται), "cried out" (4.4.6: ἐβόα)[279]. These very physical, 'theatrical' gestures, which are forcefully staging emotion, are reminiscent of how Julianus had hopped around from his house on the way to the praetorian camp in order to make a bid for the emperorship[280]. But while Julianus, in Herodian's story, was shaped *externally* as a comic character, Caracalla's dramatic actions can be seen as a deliberate production hatched by the main character himself[281]. This 'production' of Caracalla is also sensible through instances of (indirect) speech. According to Herodian, the emperor explained what had happened somewhat obliquely, hoping that the soldiers would come to their own conclusions – the full subtlety of Caracalla's speech might be lost due to the lacuna in Herodian's text. If Caracalla first referred to his brother in a roundabout way (4.4.6: πολεμίου καὶ ἐχθροῦ – τὸν

[275] 4.4.2: δρᾶσαί τι ἢ παθεῖν γενναῖον, διὰ ξίφους χωρήσας καὶ φόνου. Gleason 2011, 60-62 interprets the rivalry between the brothers, esp. in the account found in Dio's *Roman History*, as a case of 'doubles': "The more interchangeable the brothers, the greater the urgency of the annihilation" (quote at 60, n. 122).

[276] Interpolations in certain manuscripts appear to be based on Caracalla's retelling too; see their compilation in Whittaker 1960-70, n. 2 *ad loc.*

[277] On setting and witnesses, see above, [30, n. 54].

[278] On this point, see Scheid 1984. For de Blois 1998, 3417-18, Caracalla's portrayal is full of commonplaces tied to tyranny and the emperor has even been turned into "an uncivilized barbarian".

[279] In the *History*, the rushed confusion put on by Caracalla is also mirrored by the soldiers and population (4.4.4-5), in a crude interpretation of the idea that subjects tend to imitate their rulers (cf. 1.2.4).

[280] On Julianus, see above, [176, with n. 303]. Again, Huitink 2017, 183, from an enactivist account: "the focus on bodily actions [...] may do more than just contribute to spatial vividness and also tell us something about what readers may get out of 'seeing' this scene. [...] Since this understanding is perceptual-enactive, immediate and prereflective, it can be experienced as visually vivid."

[281] Opelt 1998, 2948 notes that Caracalla "begibt sich demonstrativ ins Lager und gibt in 'theatralischer' Form seine 'Rettung' bekannt".

ἀδελφὸν λέγων), his conclusion is unequivocal: between himself and his 'assailant', only "one of them was preserved by fortune as emperor" (4.4.6: κἂν ἕνα ἑαυτῶν βασιλέα τετηρῆσθαι ὑπὸ τῆς τύχης). This would imply that Caracalla's 'enemy' was also and already emperor, thus leaving no doubt as to whom he was hinting at[282].

However, despite all of Caracalla's 'dramatic' efforts to paint himself as the victim, Herodian suggests that the soldiers were not particularly convinced by the emperor's acting. Rather, their willingness to buy into Caracalla's story was helped substantially by the emperor's lavish promises (to wit, a gift of 2,500 Attic drachmae, an increase of their allowance by half, the license to plunder the temples and treasuries to gather these funds). According to Herodian, the soldiers were quite eager to receive "so large a sum" (4.4.8: τοσοῦτον χρημάτων πλῆθος), so they gladly accepted Caracalla's version, "even though they now knew the facts as a result of fugitives from within the palace broadcasting the story of the murder" (καὶ συνέντες τὸ πεπραγμένον ἤδη [τε] καὶ τοῦ φόνου διαβοήτου γενομένου ὑπὸ τῶν ἔνδοθεν φυγόντων).

Using Geta

Geta's death in the *History* is, significantly, less about him than about his murderer and, more specifically, his murderer. Although Geta officially shared the emperorship with Caracalla, the character never reaches the full agency other emperors gain with their accession. First treated in the story as Severus' one of two sons during his father's rule, Geta then becomes Caracalla's brother, or at least the *other* emperor, once they assume power. Geta's actions are generally part of a lot, alongside Caracalla, and his character is never fully turned inwards, by which I mean that his representation is mainly used as a characterizing tool for either Severus or Caracalla. This may explain, to an extent, the (slight) moral improvement Geta is given in the story when he is proclaimed emperor: namely, petty feuds with his brother and a strong disinterest in public affairs were a way for Herodian to show Severus' failure as a father and his inability to prepare his sons to be good successors. Narratively, it also set up Caracalla's final course of action.

Geta's portrayal as (co-)emperor in the *History* is more complicated. Now emperors, both brothers are shown to have continued to plot against the each other (e.g. 4.3.1; 4.4.2), pushing their childhood rivalry to the extreme, since their ambitions were not about winning contests anymore, but gaining sole emperorship. However, putting aside this ongoing fight with his brother, Geta is shaped into a fairly good ruler, defined by attributes reminiscent of Marcus or Pertinax. According to Herodian, Geta "showed some sign of goodness" (4.3.3: φαντασίαν γάρ τινα ἐπιεικείας ἐπεδείκνυτο), acted "with moderation and mildness" (μέτριόν τε καὶ πρᾶον), took up "more serious interests" (ἐπιτηδεύμασί τε σπουδαιοτέροις), proved to be "a person of honour and generosity" to those close to him (χρηστός τε ὢν καὶ φιλάνθρωπος), and could generally rely on "reputation and his good name" (φήμῃ καὶ δόξῃ ἀρίστῃ). Herodian uses

[282] This (attempt at) mystery is echoed in *SHA*, *Carac.*, 2.10 (*questus est de fratris insidiis inuolute et incondite*), though with the difference that Caracalla is addressing the senate.

Geta as a somewhat good example of a young emperor, similarly to Alexander. However, Geta's fate illustrates, much like Pertinax, that good qualities could not, in this world painted by the *History*, guarantee stability of rule anymore – quite the contrary. Moreover, if Geta proved to be good to his friends and the Roman population in general, he is said to have been equally malicious to Caracalla as his brother was to him. Up until Geta's murder, schemes, hostile behaviour, and extreme competition between the two are recorded by Herodian as shared actions[283]. Like Alexander who was weighed down by his mother's flaws and his own absolute obedience to her until his death, Geta also remains inextricably tied to his far less commendable brother.

Geta's fairly positive portrayal, perhaps his most individualized passage in the *History*, is immediately offset by a comparison with his brother: "Antoninus, by contrast, did everything violently and angrily" (4.3.4: ὁ δ' Ἀντωνῖνος ἐμβριθῶς τὰ πάντα καὶ θυμοειδῶς ἔπραττε, trans. mod.)[284]. In spite of this improved image and a substantial support within the aristocracy and the people, Geta is almost erased from his own death scene in the *History*. Mirroring his coming victory over his brother, Caracalla is made central to (Herodian's story of) the conclusion of their shared emperorship: "But finally Antoninus found it intolerable…" (4.4.2: τέλος δὲ μὴ φέρων ὁ Ἀντωνῖνος…)[285]. In fact, Geta's death, notwithstanding the textual lacuna in the work, is already directed towards Caracalla's characterization, since the episode only depicts *his* motivations and actions, and not Geta's. Though an effort is made to present both brothers as equal rulers at the very start of their joint rule, it remains that Geta has a very limited narrative presence in the *History* and, significantly, receives no posthumous assessment (or acknowledgement) from Herodian[286]. The aftermath of Geta's death is solely focused on Caracalla's re-staging of the confrontation, in which he casts his brother in the role of the attacker, both to the praetorians (4.4.2-8) and the senators (4.5.2-7)[287]. Afterwards, in a classic move of the (tyrannical) victor, Caracalla proceeded to execute all of his brother's friends and allies, and even mere acquaintances (4.6.1-2). Geta's final moments in the *History* reveal much more about Caracalla's character than about Geta's, since the circumstances of

[283] Starting from 3.15.6 (ὡς δὲ κατὰ τὸ αὐτὸ ἐγένοντο), when they are physically reunited, the brothers are generally given joint actions (through plural verbs and pronouns) until right after Severus' apotheosis, where their activity is singularized (4.3.1: ἑκάτερος…). Afterwards, the brothers' plan to split the Empire between themselves is structured around both plural and singular forms (4.3.3-9) and its failed aftermath reverts to shared deeds (4.4.1-2), until Caracalla's decisive action (4.4.3).

[284] See Sidebottom 1998, 2808-9. That is not to say that Geta's portrayal needs to be considered as entirely fabricated by Herodian. For instance, Dio also records the army's preference for Geta, whose physical resemblance to Severus apparently encouraged further loyalty (Cass. Dio 79(78).1.3). See e.g. Alföldy 1972, 19-51, for a comparison of Dio's and Herodian's stories of this rivalry; Alföldy concludes that Herodian's partiality for Geta is due to the historian's usual dramatic writing, meant to heighten the scene's *pathos*.

[285] Interestingly, the wording of this narrative marker echoes certain death notices of other emperors, though its meaning is vastly different: the deceased ruler is usually the grammatical subject, not the object of his murderer's action; on Herodian's death notices, see Laporte & Hekster 2021.

[286] In addition to being subjected to Herodian's streamlining techniques, Geta's quasi-absence in his own unravelling is perhaps to be connected with the *abolitio* he was subjected to by his brother, who became sole emperor for the following few years.

[287] See Kemmers 2011, who explains the brothers' extreme rivalry through power politics; also de Jong 2006, 146-52, for a discussion on the thoroughness of Geta's *abolitio*.

his death, his actions, or his motivations, even taking into consideration the lacuna, did not make the 'final cut'[288].

A fratricide?

Even though this story is quite unique within this specific work since it concerns two brothers, it generally unfolds like many of the *History*'s other power struggles. While both their parents tried to remind them of their fraternal bond[289], they apparently only saw the other as the enemy. When, as Herodian records, Caracalla resolved to kill Geta at any cost, there is no trace of concern for the morality of his act, or even its nature. Fratricide only becomes so through Caracalla's narrative distortions as he presents himself as the injured party of his brother's crime. As noted above, Caracalla first made an attempt at misdirection when he was explaining the situation to the praetorians: he escaped an 'assailant', an 'enemy'. In his speech to the senate, however, he is quick to switch gears and paints Geta, his brother, in the worst possible light[290]. Caracalla's opening statement is categorical about the nature of the recent events: "I am well aware of the *odium* which attaches immediately to the news of any family murder (οἰκείου φόνος)"[291]. But the actual fratricide, he argues, is not the crime, since it was enacted in self-defence. Or better yet, the true fratricide was attempted by Geta, but failed.

To justify his act further, Caracalla even cites famous examples of such acts: so too, he claimed, were Romulus, Nero, and Domitian right in taking action against their respective brothers (4.5.5-6)[292]. Although quoting these last two emperors of questionable reputation might seem counter-productive, what in fact seals Caracalla's dramatic fantasies is a reference to Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus, and this, according to Herodian, becomes his strongest argument:

> Marcus himself (αὐτός), while professing his philosophy and humaneness, did not tolerate the arrogance of Lucius, his son-in-law, and got rid of him by a plot. And so I too (ἐγὼ δέ) have defended myself against my enemy who was preparing to kill me and raised his sword against me[293].

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[288] According to Dio, Geta's murder left Caracalla "suffering from certain distressing visions" (78(77).15.3: ἐνόσει δὲ καὶ τῇ ψυχῇ πικροῖς τισὶ φαντάσμασι), in which he was pursued by his father and brother with swords raised.

[289] Albeit at different stages: Severus, at 3.13.3-5, just before embarking on his last campaign to Britain; Julia Domna, at 4.3.8-9, when the brothers announced their plan to divide the Empire.

[290] Acknowledging, perhaps, Geta's better reputation and character, Caracalla declares that his brother made himself into the enemy by his actions (cf. 4.5.7).

[291] 4.5.2: οὐκ ἀγνοῶ μὲν ὅτι πᾶς οἰκείου φόνος εὐθέως ἀκουσθεὶς μεμίσηται.

[292] If we consider Sylburg's emendation (σιγῶ Γερμανικὸν <τὸν Τιβερίου καὶ Βρεττανικὸν> τὸν Νέρωνος…), Germanicus is then given as brother of Tiberius, though it is unclear whether Herodian is referring to Tiberius' brother Drusus (cf. Suet., *Claud.* 1.4: *Germanici cognomen*), or to Tiberius' nephew, Germanicus. Similarly, Britannicus was Nero's stepbrother, but was in any case first called Germanicus (cf. Suet, *Claud.* 27.1: *primo Germanicum, mox Britannicum*).

[293] 4.5.6: Μάρκος αὐτός, φιλοσοφίαν καὶ ἐπιείκειαν προσποιούμενος, Λουκίου τὴν ὕβριν οὐκ ἤνεγκεν ὄντος γαμβροῦ, ἀλλ᾽ ἐξ ἐπιβουλῆς αὐτὸν ἀπεσείσατο. ἐγὼ δὲ δηλητηρίων παρεσκευασμένων ξίφους <τ᾽> ἐπῃωρημένου τὸν ἐχθρὸν ἠμυνάμην· τοῦτο γὰρ αὐτῷ τοὔνομα ἐδίδου τὰ ἔργα.

Caracalla not only re-shapes the actual story of Geta's death, making his brother play the part of the aggressor, but he even comes to place himself in the shadow of Marcus. The emperor, in doing so, sought total immunity and even attempted to assume, indirectly, Marcus' professed qualities of "philosophy and humanness" (4.5.6: φιλοσοφίαν καὶ ἐπιείκειαν, trans. mod.). To add even more weight to his account, Caracalla also claimed that the gods had intervened in the people's favour, saving (4.5.7: ἔσωσαν) all of them from this tragedy. This suggestion of a divine intervention, reminiscent of the dramatic device of the *deus ex machina*, fits quite well into Caracalla's theatrical production. According to Herodian, the emperor would even associate with Jupiter himself, alleging that his monarchy, and sole emperorship more generally, was in fact the god's own doing[294]. While Geta's death in the *History* is certainly an instance of narrative staging, it is more specifically a case of actorial (or internal) self-staging, that occurs *within* the story by the murderer himself[295]. And, as the wheel goes round, Caracalla would in turn soon be victim of an assassination plot, which would not only be similarly distorted by the perpetrator *post factum*, but also carefully orchestrated from the start.

Later productions

Though the re-framing of Geta's death would be Caracalla's masterpiece, the emperor is shown in various other productions afterwards. After establishing himself as sole emperor by murdering his brother, Caracalla spent the rest of his life in the provinces, since, according to Herodian, he "loathed the life in Rome and preferred to get away from the city" (an ironic nod to his father's regret)[296]. Caracalla then became a great traveller, visiting Germania, Thrace, Macedon, Asia Minor, and Mesopotamia (from 4.7.1)[297]. Significantly, Caracalla's victorious campaigns[298] are transformed, in Herodian's story, into these 'touristic' trips. During these trips, Herodian stresses the emperor's curiosity and interest in illustrious past figures, as he makes Caracalla follow in the footsteps of Alexander the Great and Achilles. In a sort of pilgrimage, Caracalla commemorated and honoured his models, and even re-enacted some famous episodes of their lives. According to Herodian, Caracalla would dress like Alexander in Macedonian garb (4.8.3); he created a Macedonian phalanx (4.8.2); he visited Ilium and especially the tomb of Achilles, where he organized a funeral for Festus, a favoured

[294] So Caracalla says: "Jupiter created imperial power for a sole ruler among mankind on the model of his own position among the gods." (4.5.7: βασιλείαν δὲ ὁ Ζεῦς, ὥσπερ αὐτὸς ἔχει θεῶν μόνος, οὕτω καὶ ἀνθρώπων ἑνὶ δίδωσι) Compare with Commodus' claim, at 1.5.5, that Fortune chose him to be the next emperor; cf. above, [43-45].

[295] Compare with Caracalla's role in Herodian's story of Plautianus' conspiracy (3.10.6-12.12): though that scene may be similarly theatrical, Caracalla is only one of its characters, along with Severus, Saturninus, and Plautianus, and is neither mastermind nor leading actor (as opposed to the part he plays in Dio's version, at 77(76).3-5); see e.g. Bingham & Imrie 2015.

[296] 4.7.1: πρὸς τὴν ἐν τῇ πόλει διατριβὴν ἀπεχθῶς ἔχων, ἀποδημῆσαι τῆς Ῥώμης ἠθέλησεν. Herodian attributes a similar hatred of urban life and the upper class to Maximinus, which also results in a marked avoidance of the capital; see Martin 2006, 101-2. Dio's portrayal of Caracalla is perhaps even more hostile, given the conflicts between the senate and the emperor; see e.g. Davenport 2012, esp. 808-14 and Scott 2015.

[297] See Hekster & Kaizer 2012; with see Marasco 1998, 2853-4.

[298] Cf. Cass. Dio 78(77).13.3-15.2.

freedman and personal secretary, who had recently died, such as Patroclus was said to have had (4.8.5). Caracalla also set up many pictures and statues of Sulla and Hannibal (4.8.5), but Herodian emphasizes most Caracalla's imitation of Alexander (4.8.1-2; 4.8.4; 4.8.6-7)[299]. Arguably, although Caracalla's imitations in the *History* have this 'sweeping' quality, extending to the people and space around him, these come across more as personal fancy than ideology[300]. Herodian also makes a point to show Caracalla as mostly uninterested in his imperial duties, preferring to devote himself to hunts and chariot races[301]. Caracalla's indifference is striking, since he had been so eager to get rid of his father and then of his brother in his efforts to become sole emperor. In a variation of Commodus' gradual retreat from public life after a series of attempts on his life, Caracalla, still in full control of his own narrative, would choose to retire from his functions in order to devote himself to more productions. Unlike the other emperors who had abandoned their duties in favour of leisure, Caracalla would not even keep the visible signs of emperorship, exchanging them for local or heroic costumes.

4.4.3 One-hit wonder: Macrinus' failed 'sequel'

As we have seen in the previous section, Caracalla, much like Commodus, is insistently portrayed in the *History* as a performer and this feature, already seen in the way Caracalla handled Geta's murder, will also be fundamental in his own demise. Herodian's usual 'death sentence' formula is placed after a seemingly ordinary statement about two individuals in Caracalla's close entourage: "Antoninus had two military prefects; one was a fairly old man called Adventus […] The other prefect was called Macrinus"[302]. Macrinus' presentation extends into a long description of his ongoing conflict with Caracalla, who would make fun of his "lack of military experience and bravery" (μὴ στρατιωτικὸν μηδὲ γενναῖον) and "extravagant life" (διαίτῃ ἐλευθερίῳ) (4.12.1-3). Although only one of two prefects, Macrinus' portrayal is more fleshed out, featuring interactions with the emperor and stressing their sources of

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[299] See also above, [194-5]. On Caracalla's *imitatio Alexandri*, see recently Molina Marín 2015; with Marasco 1998, 2853 who notes Herodian's 'sarcastic' emphasis on these 'grotesque' imitations) and Zeitlin 2001, 239 suggesting that Caracalla in fact "imitated Alexander imitating Achilles." Herodian also mentions an unfortunate 'imitation' of Eteocles and Polynices by Caracalla, imagined in jest by the Alexandrians (4.9.3); see below, [248, n. 327].

[300] Dio's version of Caracalla's *imitatio Alexandri* is shrouded in perhaps even greater fanaticism: the emperor "was so enthusiastic about Alexander that he used certain weapons and cups which he believed had once been his (78(77).7.1: περὶ δὲ τὸν Ἀλέξανδρον οὕτω τι ἐπτόητο ὥστε καὶ ὅπλοις τισὶ καὶ ποτηρίοις ὡς καὶ ἐκείνου γεγονόσι χρῆσθαι); he also posed as the reincarnation of Alexander; stripped of their privileges the Aristotelian philosophers in Alexandria; took elephants with him on journeys; promoted a man to the senate on the basis of his Macedonian origins, his name, and Alexandrian patronymic (78(77).7-8). Gleason 2011, 63 argues that Herodian's interpretation of Caracalla's masquerading is, due to the omnipresence of statues and other images, mainly visual, while Dio, as a senator, has a more verbal understanding of the matter (cf. above, [193, n. 58]). Another difference noted by Gleason is the historians' approaches to undermine Caracalla's imitation: for Herodian, "the visible incongruity of his heroic pretensions and un-heroic physique" (e.g. 4.8.5; 4.9.3), for Dio, "the incongruity of external pose and internal character."

[301] Cf. 4.7.2 (though Herodian says that Caracalla dispensed justice idly but somewhat efficiently; see Cass. Dio 78(77).17); 4.11.9; 4.12.7.

[302] 4.12.1: ἦσαν δὲ αὐτῷ ἐπάρχοντες τοῦ στρατοπέδου δύο, ὁ μὲν πρεσβύτης πάνυ… Ἄδουεντος ὄνομα αὐτῷ· ὁ δὲ ἕτερος Μακρῖνος μὲν ἐκαλεῖτο.

conflict: "Macrinus resented these accusations and was deeply offended"[303]. Tellingly, Herodian announces Caracalla's final episode right after Macrinus' presentation: "but it was obviously inevitable that Antoninus' life would come to an end"[304]. The close proximity, in the *History*, of that character's substantial introduction with Caracalla's final episode suggests an important implication of Macrinus in that event. Though some of Macrinus' traits may liken him to the imperial contenders defeated by Severus years before, his victory over Caracalla may be inferred by the textual sequence of Macrinus' arrival on stage which segues directly into the story of Caracalla's demise. (Not to mention, Herodian has emphatically shown that Caracalla did not possess the same kind of determination and efficiency as his father did, still more interested in games and shows than imperial duties.) Although Macrinus ultimately plotted against Caracalla as a means of survival, his resentment towards the emperor is shown by Herodian to have been rooted in old personal grievances. Quite unlike Commodus' three killers, Macrinus has no particular affection for his emperor, nor does he come to express concern for the common good. Macrinus, at least in Herodian's account, has only his own interests at heart, even sending another to his death for doing his dirty work.

Suspicious behaviours

Like Commodus' death scene, Caracalla's final moments in the *History* are built on a mix of customary practices and chance events[305]. Caracalla is depicted as a typical tyrant, highly suspicious and constantly fearing for his life. According to Herodian, Caracalla was "perpetually" (4.13.1: ἀεί) suspecting "everyone" (πάντας) of plotting against him. As a consequence, the emperor's vivid curiosity, also apparent in his many travels, unfurls into excessive superstition: as Herodian records, Caracalla "made full use (ἐνεφορεῖτο) of every (πάντων) oracle and summoned wise men and astrologers and sacrificial interpreters from every land (πανταχόθεν); no one (οὐδείς) who offered this kind of sorcery escaped him"[306]. And yet, even with all these resources at hand, Caracalla remained dissatisfied with the answers he received. The emperor came to believe that the reports he was given concerning possible conspiracies were falsified "out of flattery" (4.12.4: πρὸς κολακείαν).

As in Commodus' case, Herodian's story of Caracalla's demise features important written documents, that are also treated carelessly by the emperor. According to Herodian,

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[303] 4.12.2: ἅπερ οὐ φέρων ὁ Μακρῖνος πάνυ ἤσχαλλε; cf. 4.13.1. On the mention of this cause, unique to Herodian, see Scott 2012/13, 24-27, who suggests a possible influence from earlier conspiracy narratives, in which (stock) insults are an important component.

[304] 4.12.3: "but it was obviously inevitable that Antoninus' life would come to an end" (ἔδει γὰρ ἄρα τέλος λαβεῖν τὸν Ἀντωνίνου βίον). See Sidebottom 1998, 2819-20, on creating expectation through "anticipatory glimpses" for deaths of emperors, with Hidber 2007, 203-9, more generally on prolepses in Herodian. For Herodian, this personal conflict between Caracalla and Macrinus slots into the larger frame of the inevitability of fate, so 4.12: ἔδει γὰρ ἄρα τέλος λαβεῖν τὸν Ἀντωνίνου βίον. On fate in Herodian's work, see e.g. Widmer 1967, 58-60; Rubin 1980, 46-48; Joubert 1981, 328-35; Kuhn-Chen 2002, 308-13.

[305] See Scott 2012/13, for a comparison of Dio's and Herodian's accounts of Caracalla's murder.

[306] 4.12.3: χρηστηρίων τε πάντων ἐνεφορεῖτο, τούς τε πανταχόθεν μάγους τε καὶ ἀστρονόμους καὶ θύτας μετεπέμπετο· καὶ οὐδεὶς αὐτὸν ἐλάνθανε τῶν τὴν γοητείαν ταύτην ὑπισχνουμένων. Note the emphasis on Caracalla's excessive inquiries through the use of inclusive words and extensive listing of soothsaying variations.

the ever-leery Caracalla, still sceptical of his own findings, then wrote to a certain Maternianus, "whom he had put in charge of affairs in Rome at the time and whom he considered his most reliable (*πιστοτάτῳ*) friend and the only one (*μόνῳ*) to share in his secrets"[307]. As Herodian shows, Caracalla charged this man with renewed investigations, this time through necromancy. Maternianus, "either because the spirits had really made a prediction or because he was up to some kind of scheme", sent a letter to Caracalla which stated that Macrinus was plotting against him with the intention of seizing the emperorship for himself[308]. It is interesting to note how, in Herodian's story, Macrinus is not given any particular aspirations to the throne. Rather, the prefect's plot, in this version, is actually only formed in response to the danger he would be facing as a result of Maternianus' allegations. As we will see, Macrinus' survival instinct will lead him to act pre-emptively and with caution. In principle, the handling of Caracalla's succession would have required similar foresight from Macrinus, but the whole affair would turn out to be quite ill-prepared.

Though Macrinus would eventually devise a good plan to have Caracalla assassinated, Herodian's story makes clear that the prefect gained advanced knowledge of Maternianus' intentions mostly through a fortunate chain of events, which combined ordinary and extraordinary circumstances. According to Herodian,

> The message was sealed and given with other letters as usual (*κατὰ τὸ ἔθος*) to the couriers, though they did not realize (*οὐκ εἰδόσιν*) what they were carrying. They completed the journey with their normal speed (*τῷ συνήθει τάχει*) and came before Antoninus to present him with the whole package of letters, including the message attacking Macrinus, just as he was getting into his chariot and had picked up his charioteer's equipment. Antoninus' entire interest and attention was concentrated on the chariot race, so he told Macrinus to stand aside privately and deal with the dispatches; then, if there was anything urgent (*εἴ τι ἐπεῖγον εἴη*), to bring it to his attention but, if not (*εἰ δὲ μή*), to carry out his normal duties (*τὰ ἐξ ἔθους*) as prefect (as Macrinus frequently (*πολλάκις*) used to (*σύνηθες*) be told to do)[309].

Herodian's emphasis on familiar and unfamiliar elements echoes the strategy he had used in his account of Commodus' demise. Marcia had found about the emperor's plans through a

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[307] 4.12.4: *τότε πάσας ὑπ' αὐτοῦ τὰς ἐν Ῥώμῃ πράξεις ἐγκεχειρισμένῳ, πιστοτάτῳ εἶναι δοκοῦντι φίλων καὶ μόνῳ κοινωνῷ τῶν ἀπορρήτων*. Following Cass. Dio 79(78).4.2, Whittaker 1969-70, n. 3 *ad* 4.12.4 suggests that Maternianus was "probably not the regular *praefectus urbi* but acting in charge of the troops in Rome". See Buongiorno 2014, for a recent discussion on Maternianus' powers during the last year of Caracalla's rule.

[308] 4.12.5: *εἴτε ὄντως αὐτῷ δαιμόνων ταῦτα θεσπισάντων εἴτε ἄλλως συσκευαζόμενος*. See Cass. Dio 79(78).4.1-2, in which there was an African seer who had predicted, unprompted, that Macrinus and Diadumenianus would become emperors; as his prophecy had come to gain some notoriety, the soothsayer was sent to Rome, after which Maternianus informed Caracalla by letter.

[309] 4.12.6-7: *ταῦτα τὰ γράμματα ἀποσημηνάμενος μετὰ καὶ ἑτέρων ἐπιστολῶν κατὰ τὸ ἔθος δίδωσι τοῖς διακομίζουσιν, οὐκ εἰδόσιν ἃ φέρουσι. τῷ δὲ συνήθει τάχει τῆς ὁδοιπορίας ἐκεῖνοι χρησάμενοι ἐφίστανται τῷ Ἀντωνίνῳ, ἤδη τε σκευὴν ἡνιόχου ἀνειληφότι καὶ τοῦ ἅρματος ἐπιβαίνοντι προσκομίζουσι πάντα τὸν σύνδεσμον τῶν ἐπιστολῶν, ἐν αἷς ἦν καὶ τὰ κατὰ Μακρίνου γράμματα. ὁ δ' Ἀντωνῖνος τὴν ὁρμὴν ἤδη καὶ τὴν γνώμην περὶ τὴν ἱπποδρομίαν ἔχων, κελεύει τῷ Μακρίνῳ ἀποστάντι καὶ ἰδιάσαντι ἐντυχεῖν τοῖς γράμμασι, καὶ εἴ τι ἐπεῖγον εἴη, δηλῶσαι αὐτῷ, εἰ δὲ μή, τὰ ἐξ ἔθους αὐτὸν διοικῆσαι ὡς ἔπαρχον. πολλάκις δὲ τοῦτο κελεύειν ἦν σύνηθες αὐτῷ*. Herodian creates a marked contrast with his account of Macrinus' flight, in which his companions are making a hasty retreat as if Macrinus were still emperor and they were conducting urgent business.

chance encounter with Philocommodus who was going about his day, as usual, having picked up what he thought was a toy, but was actually the incriminating tablet. As shown in the *History*, Macrinus' discovery of the letter happens in similar circumstances: following the emperor's disinterest in imperial business and a general flippancy towards his duties, Macrinus "chanced upon" (4.12.7: περιτυχών, trans. mod.) the fatal report[310]. Understanding that this would be a perfect opportunity for Caracalla to get rid of him, hasty and excitable as he was, Macrinus got rid of the letter and "for the rest reported that they were routine (συνήθεις)"[311]. Given that Maternianus would likely send a second message when his first went unanswered, Macrinus decided to make use of this delay: according to Herodian, "he preferred to take some positive action of a daring nature rather than wait passively for the consequences" (4.13.1: δρᾶσαί τι μᾶλλον ἠθέλησεν ἢ ἀναμείνας παθεῖν. τολμᾷ δή τι τοιοῦτον)[312]. This initiative would be rewarded with (relative) success.

Here too, the combination of routine proceedings and the emperor's general disinterest in his duties leads to a lucky discovery, which gave the targeted individual the upper hand. But, in Herodian's story, Caracalla is even shown to be twice ignorant. Although he was constantly on the lookout for potential conspiracies, Caracalla remained unaware of Maternianus' report. The emperor was also oblivious to the fact that Macrinus, however, had read the document and, as a consequence, was preparing to move against him[313]. It is also worth repeating that Herodian's only mention of Macrinus' imperial ambitions is expressed from Maternianus' perspective, and not via omniscient narration, nor from Macrinus' own point of view. It seems, then, that Macrinus' action against Caracalla, at least in Herodian's account, was born out of a mix of lucky coincidence and a strong sense of self-preservation, only slightly motivated by personal dislike and not based at all on a desire to seize power for himself[314].

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[310] Cass. Dio 79(78).4.2-3 depicts two parallel exchanges: Maternianus, from Rome, wrote a letter to Caracalla, but it was sent instead to Julia Domna, who took care of imperial correspondence in Antioch while her son was in foreign territory. At the same time, Ulpius Julianus, then censor who would later rise to praetorian prefect under the new emperor, wrote directly to Macrinus to warn him of Maternianus' letter. Note the emphasis on secrecy, but also Dio's practical explanation as to why Caracalla was made aware of the letters only after Macrinus and everybody else.

[311] 4.12.8: περὶ δὲ τῶν λοιπῶν ἀπαγγέλλει ὡς εἶεν συνήθεις.

[312] On the use and relation of δρᾶσαι and παθεῖν in Herodian's plot narratives, see Scott 2018b.

[313] Scott 2012/13, 16-17 suggests that the whole plot narrative took form after Macrinus' death, in an effort by Heliogabalus to further dissociate his predecessor from his own alleged father.

[314] See Scott 2012/13, 25; Chrysanthou 2020, 647-8. Both Herodian and Dio follow the same basic outline for this event, although Dio proposes a more elaborate version. In Cass. Dio 79(78).4-5, there are two sets of letters, the first sent to Julia Domna in Antioch who had been assigned to sort out Caracalla's correspondence (whence its delay in reaching the emperor), while the second was sent directly to Macrinus from Ulpius Julianus. Because Caracalla had already been warned of Macrinus' eventual treason by a certain Serapio and had suddenly removed the prefect's companions, Macrinus resolved to move into action. Dio later states that Macrinus had, "while Tarautas was still living, conceived in his mind, for the reason I have given, the hope of becoming emperor" (79(78).11.4: τοιοῦτος δή τις ὢν καὶ οὕτως αὐξηθεὶς ἔς τε τὸν νοῦν τὴν τῆς αὐταρχίας ἐλπίδα ζῶντος ἔτι τοῦ Ταραύτου, δι' ὅπερ εἶπον, ἐνεβάλετο). The *Historia Augusta* ascribes to Macrinus a similar eagerness to claim the throne, cf. *SHA*, *Carac*. 6.6: *qui post eum inuasit imperium*; *Macr*. 1.1: *nisi adspirassent ad imperium*; *Macr*. 5.1: *statim denique arripuit imperium*. The prophecy and Maternianus' letter are not mentioned in either *Vita*. Combined with Macrinus' impatient assumption of power, this

Staging a plot

Macrinus' scheme, as it appears in the *History*, is a reversal of the plot led against Commodus decades (and chapters) earlier. Whereas Marcia, Eclectus, and Laetus dealt with Commodus (mostly) on their own, they then selected another individual to become the next emperor. Macrinus' plot, however, implicated another party from its inception, and that individual would even be cast as the main actor in the whole affair[315]. According to Herodian, Macrinus turned to a certain centurion from the praetorian guard called Martialis, who was a former client of his, and tasked him with eliminating Caracalla (4.13.1-2)[316]. The prefect is shown to have cleverly taken advantage of Martialis' personal resentment of the emperor: not only had Caracalla recently had his brother murdered on groundless accusations, the emperor was also often insulting him "with cowardice and low birth and being a friend of Macrinus"[317]. Easily convinced by Macrinus, Martialis did not take immediate action against Caracalla, but followed the prefect's advice to wait for the opportune moment[318].

According to Herodian, the perfect occasion for Martialis would soon arise in the form of another of the emperor's 'touristic' trips, this time a visit to the temple of Selene, somewhere around Carrhae, in Mesopotamia[319]:

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editorial choice gives the impression that Macrinus actively pursed the emperorship through his betrayal of Caracalla.

[315] While the fatal blow was struck by the athlete Narcissus, the initial plan, which was almost successful, was for Marcia to add herself the poison to Commodus' wine and to serve it to the emperor (cf. 1.17.8-11). According to Herodian, Narcissus' involvement was unplanned and quickly arranged as the conspirators' last resort.

[316] Cass. Dio 79(78).5.2-3 associates two more men, the tribunes Nemesianus and Apollinaris, to Macrinus' plot. Herodian's reduced cast gives a more personal spin to the conspiracy, suggesting its limited objective and, consequently, Macrinus' lack of ambition; though see 4.14.2, where Herodian cites unnamed tribunes as supporters of Macrinus and possible accomplices. Timonen 2000, 179-80; 182 argues that both Macrinus and Martialis were in fact "opportunists" (at 180) and that Macrinus' action was above all "fear turned into action" (at 182).

[317] 4.13.1: ἄνανδρον αὐτὸν καὶ ἀγεννῆ καλῶν καὶ Μακρίνου φίλον. Note the resemblances with Macrinus and their similarly caused resentment for Caracalla, which are explained by Scott 2012/13, 28 as the transfer of "Macrinus' motives to Martialis in order to explain how the latter might have been inclined to kill the emperor." Cass. Dio 79(78).5.3 explains instead that Martialis' ire was prompted by a denied promotion to the rank of centurion. Chrysanthou 2020, 646 argues that "Herodian prefers motives that let us focus more on Caracalla's tyranny and flawed character, which eventually place on him responsibility for his failure." Looking at Caracalla's insults towards Macrinus and Martialis, as recorded by Herodian, one might be reminded of Caligula's very similar charges of effeminacy and cowardice against future murderer Cassius Chaerea, who had been a tribune under Germanicus (cf. Joseph., *AJ* 19.17-113; Suet., *Calig*. 56.2; Cass. Dio 59.29; cf. Osgood 2016, 221-3 on Caracalla's murder). See also Scott 2012/13, 24-27, for similar conspiracy narratives in comparison with Caracalla's murder. *SHA*, *Macr*. 4.7-8 explains that Macrinus planned it "with enough skill" (*tanta factione*), namely by bribing (*redempto*) the emperor's squire.

[318] This association with Martialis ends up creating a parallel between Macrinus and Caracalla, as it mirrors the emperor's earlier orders given to Maternianus: both prefect and emperor employ a close friend of inferior rank to carry out a task they were either unable or unwilling to do themselves. This may help to put Macrinus and Caracalla on a somewhat equal footing, pushing the prefect into a leading part and slowly laying the groundwork for his coming accession. In this version, Macrinus' caution, expressed through his easy manipulation and recruitment of Martialis, also suggests a certain competence, if not in general, at least over Caracalla.

[319] Cass. Dio 79(78).5.4 puts Caracalla on the road from Edessa to Carrhae, with no mention of a trip to the temple of the Moon. Similar information is found in summarized form in Eutr. 8.20; Oros. 7.18.2; Vict., *Caes*.

> The temple was some distance from the town, needing a proper journey to see it. But not to disorganize the whole army, Antoninus made the trip with a few cavalry, intending to make a sacrifice to the goddess and then return. In the middle of the journey he was forced by a stomach ache to tell the whole column to stop while he went off with a single attendant to relieve his trouble[320].

And so, Martialis pounced on Caracalla and killed him. Herodian emphasizes the covertness of Martialis' action: standing apart from the rest of the company, Martialis stabbed him "with the dagger he had hidden (ἔφερε λανθάνων) in his hands while the emperor's back was turned (ἀπεστραμμένον)"[321]. Herodian even spells out the emperor's total obliviousness through expressive α-privative words: "Caracalla was killed unexpectedly and unwittingly" (4.13.5: ἀπροσδοκήτως τε καὶ ἀφυλάκτως ὁ Ἀντωνῖνος ἀνῃρέθη, trans. mod.)[322]. Once again, Herodian explains the plot's success through a combination of a lucky coincidence (Caracalla's stomach ache) and a somewhat normal affair (his trips), while the emperor, going about his regular day, is caught entirely unaware.

Martialis easily served the purpose intended by Macrinus and is just as smoothly discarded afterwards. Based on the *History*'s account, the centurion suffered an unremarkable fate, neither celebrated by Caracalla's critics nor vilified by his troops[323]. Notably, not even Macrinus spared any thought for his 'old friend' once the plot was seen through. Said to have fled on horseback after striking down Caracalla, Martialis was quickly caught by the German cavalry. Favoured by the emperor and appointed as his bodyguard, the German riders had stayed closer to Caracalla and were able to run after Martialis as soon as he took off (4.13.6)[324]. Only then did the rest of Caracalla's entourage realize what had just happened and they all rushed to the emperor's side. Heading the lot was Macrinus, "pretending (προσεποιεῖτο) to weep and lament" at the sight of the murdered Caracalla[325]. According to Herodian, Macrinus'

21.5; Ps.-Vict. 21.6. *SHA*, *Carac*. 6.6 and 7.1 presents a composite version: the emperor was on his way to the temple, somewhere in between Edessa and Carrhae. On Caracalla's place of death, see e.g. Hekster & Kaizer 2012, 91-94 (with additional references and a discussion on Caracalla's reasons for the visit); Bekker-Nelsen 2014, 228, n. 31 (also reading this scene as an "overture to book five of the *History*, where misplaced veneration for an oriental deity will have disastrous consequences" for both emperor and empire).

320 4.13.3: ἀφειστήκει δὲ τῆς πόλεως ὁ νεὼς πολύ, ὡς ὁδοιπορίας χρῄζειν. σὺν ἱππεῦσιν οὖν ὀλίγοις, ἵνα δὴ μὴ πάντα τὸν στρατὸν σκύλῃ, τὴν ὁδοιπορίαν ἐποιεῖτο, ὡς ἂν θύσας τῇ θεῷ ἐπανέλθοι. κατὰ δὲ {τὴν} μέσην ὁδὸν ἐπειχθεὶς ὑπὸ τῆς γαστρός, ἀποστῆναί τε πάντας κελεύσας, ἀνεχώρει σὺν ἑνὶ ὑπηρέτῃ ἀποσκευασόμενος τὰ ἐνοχλοῦντα.

321 4.13.5: ἀπεστραμμένον παίει ξιφιδίῳ, ὃ μετὰ χεῖρας ἔφερε λανθάνων.

322 Interestingly, ἀφυλάκτως can also point to the idea of 'inevitability', especially in regards to τύχη (cf. *LSJ* A.II.2).

323 However, Cass. Dio 79(78).18.3 reports that the Romans wanted to honour Martialis "with encomiums and with statues", just like the tyrannicides Harmodios and Aristogeiton, who had killed Hipparchos many centuries earlier (e.g. Paus. 1.8.5). Cf. the decree of Demophantos (June? 410 BC), ap. Andoc., *Myst.* 97: "No sin shall he commit, no defilement shall he suffer who slays such an one or who conspires to slay him" (ὁ δὲ ἀποκτείνας τὸν ταῦτα ποιήσαντα καὶ ὁ συμβουλεύσας ὅσιος ἔστω καὶ εὐαγής).

324 Cass. Dio 79(78).5 remarks that Martialis would have gotten away successfully, if only he had thrown away the sword he had used to strike down Caracalla, but was instead recognized by Scythian guard.

325 4.13.7: ὀλοφύρεσθαί τε καὶ θρηνεῖν προσεποιεῖτο. Potter 1999, 87 suggests that Macrinus was at the time in Edessa and that "his presence in Herodian's story is again likely to be an artistic connivance, depicting the official line" suggested by Macrinus. Along similar lines, Wessels 2006, 4-6 talks about Nero's "aesthetic distance" from the great city fire of 64 and, following Tacitus, argues that the emperor cast himself in the

plan went off without a hitch: Martialis got rid of Caracalla, the Germans got rid of Martialis, and nobody suspected Macrinus at all, buying into the story that "Martialis had taken his revenge for a private grievance" (4.13.7: τὸν Μαρτιάλιον οἰκείαν ἔχθραν ἀμύνασθαι) – or at least nobody suspected the prefect "so far" (πω). Whereas Herodian's Caracalla had re-scripted Geta's murder as an act of self-defence against a hateful brother, Macrinus staged the scene from the start, casting Martialis as the 'tragic hero' and himself as the shocked spectator and dismayed associate[326]. To seal his performance, Macrinus would also see to the care of Caracalla's body, arranging the cremation and sending the urn to Julia in Antioch (4.13.8)[327].

As shown in the *History*, Caracalla's death affected greatly his troops: "the entire (πᾶς) army was bitterly angry (χαλεπῶς καὶ δυσφόρως) about the crime"[328]. Their grief, however, was particular: according to Herodian, Caracalla was missed "not as a ruler but as a comrade and associate (κοινωνὸν τοῦ βίου)"[329]. In this posthumous impression, the soldiers are said to have valued an *esprit de corps* with Caracalla, even over the man's leadership, whether imperial or military. Through their eyes, Caracalla appears as their perfect equal and does not seem to have held any particular position, never mind a commanding office. As such Caracalla is reduced to the status of an ordinary soldier – and this by those who held him in greatest esteem. But their affection, as it appears in the *History*, lacked depth: although the soldiers are said to have greatly suffered the loss of Caracalla, Macrinus was left alone to see to the care of the emperor's body, while everybody else had retreated to their tents (4.13.8). This indifference of the army may serve, within Herodian's story, to alienate Caracalla in a decisive manner: even those closest to him, so embittered by his death, ended up abandoning him[330].

This final image of Caracalla in the *History* is in stark contrast with Marcus' own exit who, in a similar passage, was honoured in a manifold capacity (father, emperor, general, ruler), that transcended the usual confines of imperial authority. By comparison, Herodian's Caracalla has reduced power throughout his rule, and even less so as the story progresses

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double role of actor and spectator, while shaping the ending of this 'play' by letting Christians take the fall for him.

[326] A similar strategy had been used by Severus to trick Albinus into openly declaring war against him, which allowed him to cast himself as the injured party and legitimize his own campaign, 3.5.3-8.

[327] Upon receiving the news, Julia Domna, coerced or not, took her own life. Cf Cass. Dio 79(78).23-24 for an expanded version, in which Domna's death takes place much later and only after her own attempts to gain sole emperorship; with Scott 2018a, 73-74; Chrysanthou 2020, 632 (this 'compression' would also serve to connect, thematically, Caracalla's death to Elagabalus' and Alexander's). Marasco 1996b, 192, n. 46 suggests that Herodian's whole story about Domna and her feuding sons takes after a tradition of modeling the brothers' rivalry on the myth of Oedipus and Jocasta (this might be referenced at 4.9.3, though the passage is not cited by Marasco).

[328] 4.13.7: ὅ τε στρατὸς πᾶς χαλεπῶς καὶ δυσφόρως ἤνεγκε τὸ πραχθέν· According to Herodian, the soldiers were also deeply confounded by the whole situation (e.g. 4.14.2). Conversely, Caracalla's death and Macrinus' inaugural promises to the Senate caused general relief and delight, cf. 5.2.1.

[329] 4.13.7: συστρατιώτην γὰρ καὶ κοινωνὸν τοῦ βίου, ἀλλ' οὐκ ἄρχοντα ᾤοντο ἀποβεβληκέναι; though see 4.14.2 and below. On the different meanings of ἄρχων, which is perhaps stripped here of (most of) its imperial connotation, see Roques 1990b, 38-39. Cf. 4.7.6-7 for examples of Caracalla's simple, military lifestyle and of his eagerness to share, and excel in, physical tasks; though Cass. Dio 78(77).18.3-4; 79(78).3.2 undercuts the authenticity of Caracalla's frugality.

[330] Cf. Cass. Dio 79(78).9.1: Caracalla's bones were smuggled into Rome to be placed in the Antonine mausoleum; also in *SHA*, *Carac*. 9.12.

towards his death. This 'demotion' is even visible in the story's format. It is also worth noting that Caracalla is mostly absent from his last episode. Although the emperor's request to Maternianus technically set off the events leading to his own death, focus is given to Macrinus, with a couple of guest appearances by Maternianus and Martialis. While the whole narrative is undeniably motivated by Caracalla, the emperor actually has few actions of his own and is mostly removed from the plot-counterplot sequence until he is struck down by Martialis[331].

Arranged deaths

Despite a constant flow of plots hatched by civilians against emperors in Herodian's *History*, only two were successful, resulting in the deaths of Commodus and Caracalla. What is striking is that these two emperors are also the only ones, during the period covered by Herodian, to have come to power through (direct) hereditary succession. In addition to their matching circumstances, these two conspiracies are also recorded in the *History* along highly similar lines: faced with mortal danger, the perpetrators choose to act first and catch their rival unaware. While, practically, this sort of covert operation would certainly serve to catch the emperor and his bodyguard unaware, it would also allow the murderers to manipulate, *post factum*, the narrative to their advantage, if they had not orchestrated everything from the very start. As we have seen in detail, the conspirators in these two parallel stories are made to prevail through an intricate play on expected practices and accidental happenings. In both cases, these machinations are finally seen through by the emperors' (bad) habits: their predictable activities, whether heavy drinking and a leisurely yet regular schedule, for Commodus, or extreme paranoia and continuous travelling for Caracalla, end up providing the conspirators with the perfect opportunities.

It is also worth noting that Herodian' accounts of both rules are filled with recurrent plot narratives, whether by or against the emperors. Targeted by multiple plots throughout his rule, Commodus only instigated one proper conspiracy himself, which led to a fatal counter-offensive[332]. In a way, Commodus would recast his friends and allies into his enemies, by arranging their executions when they disagreed with him but out of concern for him. By contrast, Caracalla plotted, sometimes successfully, against Plautianus, Severus, Geta, the Alexandrians, or the Parthian king Artabanus. Plagued with severe paranoia and constantly probing the stars on eventual threats on his life, Caracalla nevertheless fell victim to an unforeseen plot. Both emperors, such as they appear in Herodian's *History*, are undeniably linked, whether in political context, rule, or character. Their many points of intersection are

[331] The flatness of Herodian's notice (4.13.8) may be meant as a sort of literary *damnatio memoriae*, while rendering the aftermath of Caracalla's death so dull it becomes meaningless. Other emperors receive equally bland notices (e.g. Pertinax, at 2.5.9, or Heliogabalus, at 5.8.10), but this brevity is not in itself a mark of virtue or vice and should instead be read together with the essence of the rest of their rules; cf. Laporte & Hekster 2021. According to Cass. Dio 79(78).9.1-2 and *SHA*, *Carac.* 11.5-6, Macrinus proposed to consecrate the deceased Caracalla hoping to secure military support. Herodian makes no mention of this and Caracalla's death is apparently only met with senatorial rejoicing (5.2.1).

[332] In the *History*, the plot devised against Perennis' son is framed as a reaction to Perennis' own scheme, merely a stage in the general sequence of events initiated by the prefect.

emphasized by the historian through a strong resonance in narrative structure and patterns at their most critical moments[333].

Macrinus' accession

Although Macrinus' plot against Caracalla went on seamlessly, the aftermath of the emperor's death is painted as a moment of utter confusion. As noted above, in Herodian's *History* Macrinus conceived this plan purely in reaction to Maternianus' letter and the prefect's only goal was his own survival in the face of immediate danger. Strictly focused on himself, Herodian's Macrinus was merely concerned with getting rid of Caracalla as a personal enemy and seemed wholly indifferent to the fact that, as a result, he would also be eliminating the head of state. Longer-term consequences, like imperial succession, are shown to have played no part in Macrinus' scheming: the prefect did not express any desire of his own to assume power, nor did he have another individual in mind to take on the role. Uninterested himself in anything beyond his personal safety, Macrinus was faced with great apathy from the army whose command he had just inherited. Neither the actual doer nor an avowed plotter, Macrinus now struggled to cast himself as a promising successor, having failed to consider the aftermath of his assassination plot.

As Herodian tells it, Macrinus' plan may in fact have worked too well: 'emperorless', the soldiers were "at complete loss" (4.14.2: ἐν ἀφασίᾳ καὶ ἀπορίᾳ). In this version, Macrinus is himself missing from their deliberation about potential successors to Caracalla[334]. An exclusion in a similar context had worked to Pertinax's advantage, serving to dissociate him completely from Commodus' murder. By contrast, Macrinus' lack of participation in these successional affairs reflects rather poorly on his character and foreshadows a problematic rule. Once Caracalla's arc is wrapped up, the story immediately switches over to the army through the use of the customary death notice (4.13.8: τοιούτῳ μὲν δὴ τέλει ἐχρήσατο ὁ Ἀντωνῖνος…, followed by the aftermath starting at 4.14.1: τελευτήσαντος δὲ Ἀντωνίνου…). While this short military 'interregnum' follows somewhat the *History*'s usual flow, marking a clear transition from one rule to another, it also splits Macrinus' storyline too clearly in two. As we have already seen, Herodian tends to schematize causality, which is reflected by the way he usually brings up people just when they are about to have a direct impact on the (main) narrative. From their introduction, these characters are given 'top billing' up until they have fulfilled their (narrative) purpose and stop being relevant to the story. Accordingly, Marcia, Laetus, and Eclectus stay in the spotlight from the moment they decide to murder Commodus up to Pertinax's nomination, at which point they 'vanish' from the *History*[335]. Macrinus,

[333] This is also a theme in Dio's *Roman History*; Caracalla even summons Commodus' spirit, who talks to him (Cass. Dio 78(77).15.4).

[334] In Cass. Dio 79(78).11.4-5, Macrinus appears to be much more prepared for the aftermath of Caracalla's death: he is said to have waited three days until he openly made his bid, and in the meantime he was reaching out to soldiers posted in Mesopotamia pending the right time. Cf. *SHA*, *Macr*. 5.1: *statim denique arripuit imperium*.

[335] More accurately, Marcia 'exits the stage' just after the three settled upon Pertinax (2.1.3). According to Cass. Dio 74(73).8.2ff and *SHA*, *Pert*. 10.8ff, Laetus later revolted with the praetorians against Pertinax;

however, is given a discontinuous presence when converting from conspirator to new emperor. Whether deliberate or not, this temporary absence of Macrinus, instead of suggesting deference and modesty, only serves as a superficial surrendering power to the army and translates into short-sightedness and overall (political) cluelessness[336].

The understudy

All of this to say that the soldiers, after two or three days of puzzled consideration, settled upon Caracalla's other prefect, Adventus, to be the next emperor. Described by Herodian as a "fairly" (4.12.1: πάνυ) old man, Adventus had been a prominent soldier, "though in other fields he had no professional experience and was lost in politics"[337]. Despite these shortcomings and pressed by the threat of Artabanus' retribution, the soldiers picked Adventus "because he had military experience and was quite a good (οὐ φαῦλον) prefect"[338]. However, in a reversal of the 'ceremonial' *recusatio*, which was performed but not meant to succeed, Adventus effectively rejected the emperorship, claiming the usual excuse of old age (4.14.2: γῆρας προϊσχόμενος). Herodian does not mention that Adventus might have proposed Macrinus as the best alternative, as Glabrio had once promoted Pertinax in his stead, though we find this scene in Dio's work[339]. Although Adventus had been the soldiers' "first choice" (4.14.2: αἱροῦνται πρῶτον), they were eventually "persuaded" (4.14.2: πειθόντων) to nominate Macrinus by certain tribunes[340]. As such, Macrinus appears to have been a choice by default, neither inspiring his new subjects, nor even provoking anger: as Herodian shows, Macrinus becomes emperor simply because there is no one else, especially given the fact that this all happened on the outskirts of the Roman Empire and the pool of likely candidates must have been quite limited at that moment.

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elsewhere Eclectus is said to have been stabbed to death in the scuffle, cf. Cass. Dio 74(73).10.1; *SHA*, *Pert*. 11.11. Laetus and Marcia were eventually put to death by Didius Julianus (Cass. Dio 74(73).16.5: to avenge Commodus; *SHA*, *Did. Iul*. 6.2: in fear of their potential alliance with Severus).

[336] Though there is a similar period of transition given to the senate during Severus' assumption of power (2.12), which also shifts the story's focus temporarily, the fact that Severus posed himself as a contender from the start and openly declared war upon Julianus (notwithstanding his covert entrance into Rome) arguably called for a more traditional changeover, especially since it was unfolding in the capital itself.

[337] 4.12.1: τὰ μὲν ἄλλα ἰδιώτης καὶ πολιτικῶν πραγμάτων ἀπείρως ἔχων.

[338] 4.14.2: ὡς στρατιωτικόν τε καὶ ἔπαρχον οὐ φαῦλον γενόμενον. Dio is more critical of Adventus, noting that Macrinus appointed him to several important positions "though he could neither see by reason of old age nor read for lack of education nor accomplish anything for want of experience" (Cass. Dio 79(78).14.1: μήθ' ὁρᾶν ὑπὸ γήρως μήτ' ἀναγιγνώσκειν ὑπ' ἀπαιδευσίας μήτε πράττειν τι ὑπ' ἀπειρίας δυνάμενον). In the *Historia Augusta*, Adventus is only evoked briefly and anonymously, cf. *SHA*, *Macr*. 4.7 and 5.3: *collega*. Although the name is almost too felicitous in this context, Adventus has generally been identified as M. Oclatinius Adventus: see an overview of (the evidence on) his career in Whittaker 1969-70, n. 1 *ad* 4.12.1, with additional references.

[339] According to Cass. Dio 79(78).14.2, Adventus answered so: "The sovereignty belongs to me, since I am older than Macrinus; but since I am extremely old, I yield it to him" (ἐμοὶ μὲν ἡ μοναρχία ἅτε καὶ πρεσβεύοντι τοῦ Μακρίνου προσήκει, ἐπεὶ δ' ὑπέργηρώς εἰμι, ἐκείνῳ αὐτῆς ἐξίσταμαι). Interestingly, this scene does not come up during Macrinus' actual assumption of power, at 79(78).12, but in a later discussion about how Macrinus promoted Adventus to the senate and appointed him as consul and urban prefect, despite his lack of qualifications and dubious character. *SHA*, *Macr.* 5.5 records that Macrinus was suspicious of Adventus' ambitions.

[340] *SHA*, *Diad*. 1.1 cites a *factio Macriana*.

Whereas Macrinus, according to Herodian, was the one pulling the strings during Caracalla's final episode, the future emperor is markedly absent from his own big moment. Significantly, Macrinus is denied a proper inauguration within the *History*. From the elliptic turn μετ' ἐκεῖνον δὲ τὸν Μακρῖνον πειθόντων αὐτοὺς χιλιάρχων (4.14.2), it seems we are meant to infer that, following the intervention of these tribunes, Macrinus' nomination was seen through and that he effectively assumed power thereafter. Most notably, Macrinus' accession is not processed through the usual proclamation scene seen elsewhere in the *History* and is not suggested by the wording, since αἱρέω, even if it were repeated, still does not denote, at least in Herodian's work, an official appointment[341]. Macrinus is also not given an inauguration speech: although the new emperor addressed the troops immediately after his nomination, this speech looks more like a pre-battle exhortation (παράκλησις), prompted by Artabanus' imminent attack (4.14.3-8)[342]. The reaction Macrinus' speech garnered from the soldiers was not an acclamation, but only a resigned taking up of arms (4.14.8: τὴν ἀνάγκην). In fact, while the army had assumed a prominent role in the interval between Caracalla's death and Macrinus' rule, the soldiers' involvement in Macrinus' selection turns out to be impersonal and quite disinterested. This attitude contrasts heavily with their affection for Caracalla. As Herodian summarizes, "Macrinus obtained the principate not so much through the love and loyalty of the soldiers as through necessity and the demands (ἀνάγκῃ καὶ χρείᾳ) of the immediate situation"[343]. Accordingly, Macrinus' coming to power appears as a lacklustre scene in the *History*, echoing the indifference the army felt for their new emperor.

While Macrinus' accession is not the only one, within the *History*, to occur during an ongoing military campaign, it alone is shaped, by the new emperor, around the urgency of a war[344]. In Herodian's account, Macrinus' nomination is bracketed by the threat of Artabanus' retaliation. This allows the historian to further stress the convenient aspect of Macrinus' emperorship, and not its intrinsic value or even its popularity. One might argue, however, that these were precisely extraordinary circumstances and called for immediate action against the

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[341] A similar phrasing may be found at 7.10.7: "they [i.e. the people] demanded that an emperor from Gordian's family should be chosen" (ἠξίουν γὰρ τοῦ Γορδιανοῦ γένους βασιλέα αἱρεθῆναι). But, again, the 'choice' had no legal power, nor did it have the legitimatizing weight of a military proclamation. On proclamation verbs in Herodian's work, see n. [133] above.

[342] On pre-battle exhortations in general, see e.g. Lendon 2017, 145-154; and as a narrative device, see Adema 2016 (with a focus on Caes., *Bell. Gall.*). Compare this piece in Herodian with Cass. Dio 79(78).12, who features a proper inauguration speech. It should be noted that this speech in Dio's account is very similar to the letter Macrinus addressed to the senate in the *History* (5.1).

[343] 4.14.3: παρέλαβε δὲ τὴν βασιλείαν ὁ Μακρῖνος οὐχ οὕτως εὐνοία καὶ πίστει τῶν στρατιωτῶν ὡς ἀνάγκῃ καὶ χρείᾳ τοῦ παρόντος καιροῦ. Note once again the use of καιρός. As Buongiorno 2017, 223 writes: "non come un potere monarchico lungi dall'essere ratificato, quanto piuttosto un comando contingente". Cf. *SHA*, *Macr*. 2.3-4 (*quemuis magis quam*…).

[344] Compare Macrinus' accession with those of Commodus (1.6.8-9: the passages following his accession mostly deal with the tensions in the prince's entourage and his own desire to return to Rome; although initially convinced by Pompeianus to remain on the Danube, Commodus ends up leaving the command to trusted generals, who successfully end the war against the Germans in his stead); Caracalla (3.15.6: the emphasis is on Caracalla's attempts to win the army's sole favour and the war against the Britons is settled quickly with a treaty); or Maximinus (there is a large gap between Alexander's avoidance of the war against the Germans, at 6.7.9-10, and Maximinus' crossing of the Rhine, at 7.1.5; the war is an opportunity for him, rather than a problem or a hindrance).

Parthians. Still, once Macrinus brokered peace with Artabanus, the story quickly brings him back to Antioch[345], though neither triumphant entrance nor proper inauguration is recorded. Instead, Herodian follows with the letter Macrinus sent in his stead to the senate, in which the new emperor condemns at length his predecessor and boasts his own achievements, namely the recently negotiated truce with Artabanus[346].

As previously noted, Macrinus is, in Herodian's work, shown to have been barely involved in his own nomination, even though he was the one to successfully orchestrate the whole plot against Caracalla. This letter sent to the senate, in lieu of the customary inauguration speech, was the occasion for Macrinus to try and re-script the narrative of his accession and paint himself in a better light. In Herodian's story, Macrinus literally rewrote himself into a more empowered role: upstanding citizen, victorious general, protector, promising new emperor. Yet, just like Caracalla's re-staging of Geta's death, this re-imagining of past events misses the mark. While the senate, informed of these recent developments, voted him all the fitting honours (5.2.1), Macrinus' self-presentation was not quite successful. According to Herodian, "it was not Macrinus' accession that pleased them all, so much as their universal exultation and celebration at the fall of Antoninus"[347]. As we have seen above, the soldiers were deeply affected by the death of Caracalla and gave the emperorship to Macrinus out of necessity and for want of a better candidate. The senators are shown to have been equally unenthused by the new ruler, while being absolutely ecstatic to be free from the previous one.

Noticeably, Herodian marks a strong contrast between Macrinus' agency as conspirator and as imperial contender, and between his corresponding success or failure. Thinking back on how clearly the historian divided plot, promotion, and inauguration in the sequence of the Commodus-Pertinax changeover, we might read an implicit criticism of Macrinus assuming both roles, instead of choosing one or the other[348]. Instead of playing in Macrinus' favour, transferring physical responsibility of the plot to Martialis may have actually served to deprive Macrinus of a full imperial capacity in the long run. And this discrepancy between Macrinus' two roles could also betray a need for order, especially in a

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[345] 4.15.9: "hurried back to Antioch" (ἐς τὴν Ἀντιόχειαν ἠπείγετο); 5.1.1: "on arrival at Antioch" (γενόμενος δὲ ἐν τῇ Ἀντιοχείᾳ).

[346] Aware of his 'shortcomings' in relation to birth and status, Macrinus frames his speech with a larger discussion on merit-based selections over hereditary successions. Herodian has apparently merged (or, ap. Whittaker 1969-70, n. 1 *ad* 5.2.1, "confused") two separate letters into one, cf. Cass. Dio 79(78).16.2 and 79(78).17.1 (a first letter which Macrinus knowingly but inappropriately signed off with self-appointed titles) vs. 79(78).27.3 (an update on the war against the Parthians). Or the letter may have been entirely fabricated by Herodian, according to Millar 1964, 163, n. 4, with Marasco 1996a, 187-95.

[347] 5.2.1: οὐχ οὕτως δὲ εὔφραινε πάντας ἡ Μακρίνου διαδοχή, ὡς ὑπερήδοντό τε καὶ πανδημεὶ ἑώρταζον ἐπὶ τῇ Ἀντωνίνου ἀπαλλαγῇ.

[348] See Cass. Dio 79(78).41.2-3, who clearly states that Macrinus should have promoted a better-suited candidate in the aftermath of Caracalla's death. Though Dio describes him elsewhere as a fairly competent man in some aspects, especially his legal practice and overall integrity (79(78).11.2; 40.3), (part of) the problem seemed to be that, as emperor, the equestrian Macrinus threatened the senate's very legitimacy: see e.g. Gleason 2011, 65-69, through the lens of identity theft and 'masquerade'. The *Historia Augusta* is decidedly more hostile towards Macrinus, e.g. *SHA*, *Macr.* 2.1 (*animi atque oris inuerecundi*); 4.1 (*ignobilem, sordidum, spurcum*); 5.9 (*improbum*); 12.1 (*superbus et sanguinarius*); 14.1 (*putidulum*).

world *post Marcum* which was marked by a conflation of fields and of functions. Macrinus certainly plays his first part perfectly, working behind the scenes to have Martialis do his bidding and take the fall for him. But once it was his turn to take centre stage as future emperor, it is as if Macrinus 'forgot his lines', leaving the army and his co-prefect Adventus to step in for him. Though Adventus might appear as Macrinus' understudy in this regard, it quickly becomes clear that it is in fact the other way around: Macrinus acts as a substitute for Adventus, who ultimately refuses to take up the part handed to him. Still, neither character can, in the end, boast a leading role, never mind a stellar performance.

4.5 Blast from the past: a senatorial re-enactment

The year 238 was a highly troubled period in Roman imperial history. The latest rebellion against Maximinus, the sitting emperor, had just been quelled by one of his close associates. Capelianus, then governor of Numidia, had launched an attack on Carthage and on the Gordians, who had been backed by the local aristocracy and by the senate. With the Gordians' defeat, the senators now needed to take immediate action since they had openly declared themselves hostile to Maximinus by endorsing the Gordians' proclamation. Their solution was to elect two candidates, Maximus and Balbinus, from within their own ranks. This, arguably, is the final major episode of Herodian's *History*. As we have seen in chapter 1, beginnings and endings are key parts of any story, and this principle is also applicable to the *History*. Gordian III's accession as sole emperor is the very last scene of the work, and as such has the narrative and ideological implications discussed above. Yet, given the space and detail allotted by Herodian, the election of Maximus and Balbinus needs to be examined with a similar consideration – if not greater. In terms of narrative content, this episode also constitutes an anomaly in the *History*, since the protagonists (the senators), setting (temple of Jupiter), and nomination process (senatorial election[349]) are all unique occurrences within its stories of imperial accessions, whether taken separately or in combination.

It is worth noting that, if we look at other ancient accounts (of which most are epitomes), this period is heavily truncated. When mentioned at all, Maximus and Balbinus' accession is usually glossed over and often treated as a mere usurpation, not as a legitimate emperorship such as we find here[350]. Herodian produces, by contrast, a highly detailed story,

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[349] I use the term 'election' in the strict sense of a 'formal voting process through which a group of people selects a person to hold an office'; it can, by extension, also signify the result of that process. Cf. above, [53, n. 75], for an extended discussion of these words in Greek.

[350] Oros. 9.19.3 (*nam Pupienus, interfector Maximini, et frater eius Balbinus, qui usurpauerant imperium, in Palatio mox interfecti sunt*); Ps.-Vict. 26.2 (*regnum inuadentes*; the author seems to consider Maximinus as the lawful emperor, while Maximus and Balbinus, as well as the two Gordians (26.1: *principatum arripientes*), are treated as usurpers). Aurelius Victor cites only the outcome of the senate meeting (Vict., *Caes*. 26.7: *Caesares constituit*), while the *Historia Augusta* features speeches by Maximus and Balbinus during the assembly, but not an actual deliberative process (*SHA*, *Gord*. 22.1: *delegerat*, *appellauit*; *Max*. *Balb.* 15.2: *his atques aliis adclamationibus imperatores facti sunt*). A rather negative perception of the emperors can be found in Eutrop. 9.2 (*duo superiores obscurissimo genere*), with a more or less neutral portrayal in Vict., *Caes*. 26.7 and Zosim. 1.14 (though this historian has them unsuccessfully plot against Gordian III, which led to their deaths, cf. 1.16.2). The *Historia Augusta* echoes Herodian's final verdict on the two

underlines the peculiar nature of the appointment, and expresses an overwhelmingly positive appraisal of the two 'senatorial' emperors. In light of its placement and unusual quality, this episode will prove to be key for the interpretation of the whole history.

Senators at work

Usurpations in the *History* tend to be shaped with care by Herodian, perhaps especially so when emperors judged to be good rulers come to power through an assassination. For instance, in the case of Commodus' murder, Herodian clearly separated plot, nomination, and accession, in addition to emphasizing Pertinax's lack of knowledge or involvement in the affair by featuring other individuals as lead characters. Similarly, Alexander's imperial appointment was credited to Maesa's cunning and the army's decisive action. At the time of their proclamations, both Commodus and Alexander were deliberately treated as the 'objects' of the decision of others. Though this deference might also be attributed to their (relative) young age, their *represented* passivity seems too deliberate to be reduced to this singular aspect. As argued above, the neat division of roles plays out to the advantage of the new emperors, who remain unspoiled by the violent nature of a coup. The strategy that Herodian employs to frame Maximus and Balbinus' joint accession is somewhat comparable to that, though the lines between narrative sequences and between roles are slightly less clear-cut than in previous episodes. For the most part, this shift can be attributed to Herodian's generally looser narrative of the years 235-8 and the very character of the selection process.

In the wake of the Gordians' defeat, the senators found themselves at a loss. Faced with Maximinus' inevitable retaliation for having sided with the Gordians, they concluded that the only way out was to "start a war" (7.10.2: πόλεμον ἄρασθαι, trans. mod.)[351]. According to Herodian, the senators called a meeting in Rome to discuss the matters at hand and decide on how to proceed. After deliberation, they agreed to "choose (προστησαμένους) and elect for themselves (ἑαυτῶν χειροτονηθέντας) emperors, whom they proposed should share (μερίσαι) the rule, to prevent the power reverting to a tyranny in the hands of one man (ἑνί)"[352]. Though in many ways similar to the initiative shown by the senators in the transition from Julianus to Severus, this superior level of agency on their part remains unparalleled in the *History*.

Even though Herodian usually includes the senators at some point during the inauguration episode of a new emperor, they tend to play a minor, even perfunctory, role. In a lot of these accession stories, the senate is simply called upon to ratify an imperial nomination already proclaimed by the army. Senatorial authority is presented in this work as being mostly symbolic, and becomes a device used to maintain, or perhaps criticize, the illusion of functional aristocratic institutions. Sometimes, in Herodian's story, the senate is even excluded from the process altogether. In this episode, however, the senators not only

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emperors, who met an end entirely unworthy of their lives and characters (*SHA*, *Max*. *Balb*. 15.2: *finem indignum uita et moribus suis*).

[351] Note how Maximus and Balbinus, in the *Historia Augusta*, are featured prominently from the start (*SHA*, *Max. Balb.* 1-2). By contrast, in Herodian's *History* neither emperor appears before their election, and this 'belated' entrance certainly accentuates the electoral aspect of their joint appointment.

[352] 7.9.2: προστησαμένους ἑαυτῶν χειροτονηθέντας βασιλέας, οὓς ἠθέλησαν μερίσαι τὴν ἀρχήν, ὡς μὴ παρ' ἑνὶ οὖσα ἡ ἐξουσία ἐς τυραννίδα πάλιν ἐξοκείλῃ.

took full control over the selection of the next rulers, but also picked them out from within their own ranks. While two individuals are eventually elected to be co-emperors, the senate as a whole appears as the true opposition to Maximinus' tyranny. In this way, Maximus and Balbinus act as the figureheads of a larger party and as avatars of the values it wanted to defend by waging a war against the 'barbarian' Maximinus. As such, their virtue, so lauded by Herodian throughout the account of their rule, is not entirely their own, but could instead be regarded as more of a collective attribute.

Finally, much fuss has been made among critics about Herodian's 'ignorance' of the *uigintiuiri consulares ex senatus consulto rei publicae curandae*, known mainly through inscriptions and the *Historia Augusta* [353]. Herodian admittedly leaves out this special commission, but does offer a comprehensive account of the whole process. While it is often found lacking, an allusion to the *uiginti uiri* in this passage has been acknowledged by most scholarship. As Whittaker further notes, "There is danger of overestimating the significance of the committee, which H. may have considered like that of Alexander […], but with added importance due to the emergency."[354] In any case, whether this choice is at its core more narrative or more political, this would generally comply with the author's strategy to limit the number of individualized secondary characters to produce a clearer story. It would also follow Herodian's tendency to focus on groups, such as the 'army', the 'population', or the 'senate', and how they might interact with the emperor in office, and with emperorship at large.

A vote

This imperial nomination is depicted, in the *History*, as the result of a long deliberative process:

> after a preliminary selection (ἐπιλεξάμενοι) of candidates from the men of seniority and distinction, a vote was taken on them (ἐδοκίμαζον κατὰ ψηφοφορίαν). Though many received votes (ψήφους), they were eliminated (διακριθεισῶν), and the majority of opinions (τοῦ πλείστου τῆς γνώμης) came down in favour (ἀνειπόντος) of Maximus and Balbinus, who were then appointed emperors[355].

The passage clearly marks the episode as an election, stemming from the decision of the many (τοῦ πλείστου τῆς γνώμης), rather than the selection of a few[356]. Noticeably, Herodian makes

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[353] E.g. *CIL* 14.3902 (= *ILS* 1186), with *SHA*, *Maximin.* 32.3 (the story is claimed to be drawn from Dexippus); *Gord*. 10.1-2; 14.3-4; 22.1; *Max. Balb.* 12.4 (though the delegation is placed after their proclamation, when Maximus is already in Aquileia); also Zosim. 1.14.2 (προχειρίζονται τῆς βουλῆς ἄνδρας εἴκοσι στρατηγίας ἐμπείρους) and alluded to in Vict., *Caes.* 26.7 (*at senatus… primo potestatum uices*). On the commission, see Whittaker 1969-70, n. 1 *ad* 7.10.3, with Théodoridès 1947 and Dietz 1980, 326-40.

[354] Whittaker 1969-70, n. 1 *ad* 7.10.3.

[355] 7.10.3: …ἐπιλεξάμενοι τῶν ἐν ἡλικίᾳ καὶ ἀξιώματι προυχόντων οὓς ἐδοκίμαζον κατὰ ψηφοφορίαν, ἐχόντων καὶ ἄλλων ψήφους, διακριθεισῶν τε καὶ τοῦ πλείστου τῆς γνώμης Μάξιμόν τε καὶ Βαλβῖνον ἀνειπόντος αὐτοκράτορας ἐποίησαν; cf. 7.10.5: "the men selected by the senate's vote" (τοῖς ὑπὸ τῆς συγκλήτου ἐψηφισμένοις).

[356] In 41, the senate met on the Capitol in the wake of Caligula's death, to decide on how to proceed (cf. Suet., *Calig*. 60.1; Cass. Dio 60.1: πολλαὶ καὶ ποικίλαι γνῶμαι ἐλέχθησαν). According to Suetonius, the senators took too long to deliberate, giving the army and population the opportunity to call for Claudius as their new emperor (Suet., *Claud.* 10.4; Cass. Dio 60.1). This resonates with the people's forceful request for the nomination of Gordian III in 238, though the act was in response to the recent election, not the senate's

liberal use of the technical terms ψηφοφορία and ψῆφος, with their (quasi-)synonyms χειροτονέω (7.10.2) and χειροτονία (7.10.5). This is not the only occurrence in the *History* of such expressions, but it should be noted that the concept applies almost exclusively to senatorial activity[357]. The use of voting-specific words in this context, with the implication of a majority-based appointment instead of a universal acclaim (that is, within the same group, not as an opposition of different bodies as seen elsewhere), clearly sets apart Maximus and Balbinus' nomination from other such episodes in the *History*.

Out of all of the eligible senators, Maximus and Balbinus were ultimately voted in by a majority of their colleagues[358]. Both emperors are first described by Herodian with qualities worthy of past good rulers, combining experience with moderation. Maximus was a military man and had also been *praefectus urbi*. According to Herodian, he was a fair (7.10.4: ἀνεπιστρόφως)[359], "intelligent" (φρενῶν), "shrewd man of sober habits" (ἀγχινοίας καὶ βίου σώφρονος). Balbinus was a patrician, had been consul twice and was a provincial governor (7.10.4). While he is said to have fulfilled his duties "without giving cause for complaint" (7.10.4: ἀμέμπτως), he is also noted to have been "simpler in character" (τὸ δ' ἦθος ἁπλούστερος) than his counterpart. Though they are portrayed as sharing certain fundamental attributes, they also contribute complementary assets. Most of all, Balbinus had the advantage of nobility (εὐπατρίδης)[360], while Maximus' military career (πολλαῖς στρατοπέδων ἀρχαῖς), valuable in itself,

dawdling. Some parallels can also be made with the senate's reaction to Domitian's death in 96 (cf. Suet., *Dom.* 23.1: *contra senatus adeo laetatus est, ut repleta certatim curia non temperaret*; Cass. Dio 68.1.1: Νέρουαν Κοκκήιον οἱ Ῥωμαῖοι ἀπέδειξαν αὐτοκράτορα). See the later 'election' of Tacitus by the senate, as a result of a meeting similar to that of 238 (*SHA*, *Tacit*. 3-7; 12; 13.4); on the difficulty of determining the extent of an electoral process in military proclamations, esp. for the so-called Illyrian emperors, see Frézouls 1998, 9-10.

[357] ψηφίζω: "vote of approval" to Julianus' proposal to proclaim Severus co-emperor (2.12.3); "voted" for the execution of Julianus (2.12.6); "voted" honours to Severus for his victories in Parthia (3.9.12); "voted" honours to Caracalla for his (pretended) victories in the east (4.11.9); "voted" imperial honours to Macrinus (5.2.1); "voted" for Heliogabalus' adoption of Alexander (5.7.4); no decision made without their "vote of approval" (6.1.2: σύμψηφοι). χειροτονέω: power "voted" to Severus (3.6.3, in a speech by the emperor); and exceptionally the measure is applied to the Illyrian army who "has voted" for Severus (2.6.8).

[358] Might one have expected speeches in this episode? For some scholars, these 'missing' speeches have been taken as proof of an unrevised work; though see e.g. Hidber 1999, 153 and Castelli 2008, 110-11, talking about the concentration or lack of speeches as different narrative strategies. It could be argued that the structure of this scene serves to emphasize the novelty of this nomination, by focusing on the electoral process. The lack of individualized speeches might also impress a sense of community within the senate; as a result, Maximus and Balbinus could be seen as an extension of the senatorial body, less as autocratic rulers. It is worth noting, in this sense, that the emperors took the title of *Patres senatus* (cf. *BMCRE* 6, 257, no. 81; 258, nos. 92-94; 259, no. 102). This title seems to have few occurrences within imperial history. The consul Vipstanus had proposed to vote this title to Claudius in 48, with the usual *Pater patriae*, but the emperor refused (Tac., *Annal*. 11.25); Commodus did accept the title in 186/7: *BMCRE* 4, 730, nos. 222-5; 811, no. 601.

[359] Herodian discredits in advance (7.10.4: ἀνεπιστρόφως… ἄρξας) the popular objections to Maximus' nomination on the basis of his harsh treatment of the lower classes during his tenure as urban prefect, cf. 7.10.6.

[360] Though both emperors are later said to be "of patrician status" (8.8.1: εὐπατρίδαις), it is likely that Balbinus came from a long line of patricians, while Maximus achieved this during his own lifetime; see Whittaker 1969-70, n. 1 *ad* 8.8.1.

might also have been perceived as a compromise to the army, an acceptable alternative to the soldierly Maximinus[361].

On divine grounds

According to Herodian, these proceedings took place in the temple of Jupiter Capitolinus, rather than in the senate house[362]. This atypical choice (7.10.2: οὐκ ἐς τὸ σύνηθες συνέδριον) was meant to ensure secrecy, since the senators were plotting to overthrow the sitting emperor. In addition to its unusual, undisclosed location, the meeting is even said to have been "a closed session in the inner sanctuary" (7.10.3: συγκλείσαντες οὖν αὐτοὺς ἐν τῷ σηκῷ μόνους). Although there might have been some historical precedent for such a gathering[363], the location is also highly symbolic within the story's frame. Immediately, one might note that the contrast between Maximinus and his anti-urban sentiment and the senators with their traditional, 'Republican' values is reflected in the main places they invest: the emperor's 'relocation' to the frontier, as well as his foreign provenance, is set against one of the most emblematic sites of Roman civilization.

To that effect, it is telling that Herodian's explicative note on Jupiter Capitolinus, as "the god whom the Romans worship on their citadel" (7.9.2: ὃν σέβουσι Ῥωμαῖοι ἐν ἀκροπόλει), appears only towards the end of book 7. This late placement is noteworthy, especially since Jupiter (whether the god himself, his temple(s), or the games given in his name) comes up quite frequently throughout the course of the *History*. Herodian already cites Jupiter Capitolinus and the temple a few times in the first book, where we find much information on other temples, myths, and festivals. For instance, at the time of his first entrance in Rome as sole emperor, Commodus is said to have gone up "to the temple of Jupiter and to the other temples" (1.7.6: ἐς τε τοῦ Διὸς τὸ τέμενος καὶ τοὺς ἄλλους νεώς). Likewise, when Perennis had attempted to overthrow Commodus during the Capitoline Games (1.9.2: ἱερὸν ἀγῶνα τελοῦσι Ῥωμαῖοι Διὶ Καπετωλίῳ), Herodian simply explained what the celebrations entailed. In both cases, Jupiter is only cited as eponym and the historian seems to consider the god's name as sufficient information for his readers[364]. With this in mind, Herodian's delayed explanation on Jupiter Capitolinus can be taken to infuse positive value to the senators' initiative. The

[361] See Mullens 1948, 69-70.

[362] By contrast, the meeting is held in the temple of Concord in *SHA*, *Max. Balb*. 1.1 (though also on the Capitol in *Gord.* 22.8). This relocation, according to Chastagnol 1987, 918-19, deliberately diverges from Herodian, here taken as the *SHA*'s main source, and corresponds to the biographer's use of a Ciceronian filter (*Phil.* 2.19; 5.20). Other senate meetings for imperial appointments said to be held in the temple of Concord can be found in *SHA*: *Pert*. 4.9; *Alex.* 6.6.2; *Prob*. 11.5; and perhaps implicitly in *Gord*. 12-13 (*senatus consultum tacitum*). The temple of Concord was frequently used, after its restoration in 121 BC, by the senate, cf. Platner & Ashby 2015, s.v. "Concordia, Aedes, Templum". See also Whittaker 1969-70, n. 2 *ad* 7.10.2 and n. 3 *ad* 7.10.3 for an overview of the discussions on the date and place of the senate's meeting. On the programmatic representation of concord on the emperors' coinage, see Brenot 2014.

[363] Cf. Suet., *Calig*. 60.1; Cass. Dio 60.1. On the symbolic significance of this temple, see Simonelli 1990, esp. 74-77.

[364] Cf. 4.8.1: Caracalla filled all temples with statues and paintings of himself fashioned as Alexander and 8.8.3: the murder of Maximus and Balbinus took place during the Capitoline games. Note the recurrence of Jupiter's figure in ring composition between the accession and death of the co-emperors.

historian even imagines that this secret session was "witnessed as it were by Jupiter as their fellow councillor and guardian of their acts"[365]. Through this aggrandizing image, the election also gains legitimacy, and this divine 'presence'[366] acts much in the same manner that dreams and omens could be used by other emperors to validate their claim to the emperorship. This might also allow Herodian to approve, at least indirectly, of their project.

A counter-proposal

As shown in the *History*, the senators' decision did not satisfy the rest of the people. Somehow made aware of the secret meeting (either through allies of Gordian or just regular gossip, so Herodian presumes), the mob gathered in front of the temple, shouting and brandishing makeshift arms (7.10.5). According to Herodian, "they particularly disapproved of Maximus", on the basis of his harsh treatment of the lower classes during his term as urban prefect[367]. They were also insistent on having the emperorship stay within Gordian's family (cf. 7.10.6)[368]. These demands and actions, such as Herodian records, betray fickleness and a certain lack of foresight, which conforms to the way the people, and especially the 'mob', is usually portrayed in this work. They show, furthermore, that senatorial concerns were not quite in tune with the rest of the population[369]. Even though the senators' success would ultimately benefit most of Roman society, their motives were in essence self-serving: as Herodian shows, the senators wanted above all to secure their own survival in the face of a vengeful emperor. While this was an immediate goal, they might also have had in mind public safety and, in the longer term, contemplated restoring their past authority.

Confronted by a large, armed, and unhappy mob, the newly proclaimed Maximus and Balbinus decided to enrol all young equestrians and the veterans present in order to attempt a forceful exit from the temple (7.10.7). According to Herodian, this special guard, however, was no match for the angry crowd. The affair was eventually resolved, though Herodian's retelling is somewhat vague: "at someone's suggestion, they in turn tricked (ἐσοφίσαντο) the people"[370]. The 'trick', it seemed, consisted in convincing the people to appoint the young Gordian, named so after his grandfather, as Caesar. Thus pacified, the people would finally allow the emperors to pass through and make their way to the imperial palace. With the mob's

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[365] 7.10.3: ὥσπερ ὑπὸ μάρτυρι τῷ Διὶ καὶ συνέδρῳ ἐπισκόπῳ τε τῶν πραττομένων.

[366] A sort of a *deus ex machina*? See further below on reading the scene through this tragic filter.

[367] 7.10.6: καὶ μάλιστα τὸν Μάξιμον παραιτούμενοι. Seemingly contradictory, this divergence of opinions (Maximus was also said to have fulfilled this role impartially just before) may be an accurate representation of contrasting concerns for different social groups; cf. [n. 369] on the people's portrayal.

[368] See above, [74-75], on the name of Gordian.

[369] Although there was some initial resistance towards Maximus, the co-emperors are later said to be well liked and respected by the people (8.8.1). Popular opinion may certainly have changed with Maximinus' defeat, but it should also be noted that Herodian will sometimes distinguish a more general 'population' from 'plebs' or 'common people'. Since Herodian might use δῆμος for both, these differences tend to be found in context or behaviour rather than in designation; see Widmer 1967, 53-56; Roques 1990b, 49-50; 52; Marasco 1998, 2862-3; Zimmerman 1999b, 138-42; de Blois 2003, 152-3; Motta 2017, esp. 68-74 for the year 238; Andrews 2019, 146.

[370] 7.10.7: ἔστε δὴ ὑποβαλόντος τινὸς αὐτοὶ τὸν δῆμον ἐσοφίσαντο; see Whittaker 1969-70, n. 2 *ad loc.* on the unclear nature of the trickery.

easy acceptance of Gordian III, Herodian illustrates the full impact of popular levity: their opposition was dismantled by what ultimately amounted to a gimmick, and their 'champion' was a mere child assigned to a mostly symbolic, if higher, office[371]. More broadly, this chaotic atmosphere used to frame Maximus and Balbinus' shared accession foreshadows both their short tenure and the dour circumstances of their deaths[372].

Staging the past

As emphasized by Herodian, Maximus and Balbinus' joint nomination is a highly curious episode. This new regime emerged from a rare senatorial initiative (and unique within the *History*), which in the story is reflected by the senators' marked agency and a vivid description of the electoral process. Maximus and Balbinus would also form a bicephalous imperial administration, cast in the uncanny image of Republican collegiality. There were, admittedly, many advantages to a dual emperorship, namely an (informal) system of checks and balances between two rulers invested with equal powers. In addition, this merit-based, elected co-leadership could also be envisioned as a reasonable means to avoid the perils of hereditary succession that had plagued the previous decades and, accordingly, most of the *History*. Herodian's many concerns about the extravagances of monarchy connect with the recurring idea that emperorship, after Marcus, had become too vast for one person to assume alone. There is a constant tension in the work between imperial activity on the periphery and in the centre, between war and politics, between mildness of character and military success. Though the idea of splitting the emperorship appears in several occasions within the *History*, it is either temporary, meant as a nefarious ploy (by or against the emperor), or inconclusive[373]. One notable example is Caracalla and Geta's alleged proposal to divide the Empire between the two of them, though they seem less interested in a joint government than in an alliance of independent kingdoms (4.3.4-9). With this in mind, the realization of this senatorial dyarchy is unusual, to say the least.

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[371] Cf. above, [72-74] on Gordian's caesarship.

[372] According to Herodian, this first popular revolt was quickly echoed by a second, instigated by a couple of senators, who quickly went from unexpectedly murdering two soldiers at the senate house to incited the people to a civil war against the army and Maximinus' allies (7.11). One of the senators, coming from Carthage, might have been linked with Gordian I and seems to be part of the Gordian (III) faction, cf. Whittaker 1969-70, n. 1 *ad* 7.11.3. In *SHA*, *Maximin.* 20.6, the revolt is placed after Maximus' departure, while *SHA*, *Gord.* 22.7-8 has it after the death of the dyarchs and Gordian III's proclamation as Augustus. In *SHA*, *Max. Balb*. 9, the revolt also takes place after Maximus had left Rome, and the people are only placated after seeing Gordian installed as Caesar, while a similar episode is also recounted in *Max. Balb.* 10. There seems to be some merging and splitting into several different seditions the two incidents found in Herodian's account, i.e. the popular rebellion against the election of Maximus and Balbinus and the insurrection led by Gallicanus and Maecenas.

[373] Thus: Severus' fake offer of shared power to Albinus (2.15.3); Severus' temporary (or so it was intended) division of tasks between Geta and Caracalla during the British campaign (3.14.9); the brothers' project to divide the Empire in two (4.3.5-9); Caracalla's alleged plan to unite Parthians and Romans under a single nation (4.10.2-4); Maesa's suggestion that Elagabalus elevate his cousin to co-ruler (5.7.1-4). Notably, there is no mention of Lucius Verus as Marcus' co-emperor. On the idea of "dual emperorship" in Herodian's work, see recently Davenport & Mallan 2019, 16-17; with Marasco 1998, 2871-4 and Zimmermann 1999a, 278-9.

Maximus and Balbinus are depicted as concurrent incarnations of the same power: neatly splitting imperial tasks between the two of them, the former went off to war against Maximinus, while the latter remained in Rome to manage domestic politics and administration (7.12.1-2)[374]. However unfamiliar Herodian makes it seem, this 'new' model of government was in fact implemented first through the joint accession of Marcus and Verus (161-9) and afterwards by Caracalla and Geta[375] – the former case, however, is omitted by the historian, while the latter is ever so brief and not at all the harmonious affair Severus had wished. This power structure was also drawing from older institutions, when the Empire was, in the words of Maximus, "not the private property of a single man (οὐ… ἑνὸς ἀνδρός) but by tradition (ἄνωθεν) the common possession (κοινόν) of the Roman people"[376]. This was a project of revitalization. As suggested in the *History*, the senators intended to return the Empire to a period of peace and stability, which would not merely predate Maximinus, but perhaps reached even further back, to distant, Republican times. In theory, this might have seemed like a fairly sensible plan. In this particular context, though, it was bound to fail: it would soon be revealed as an "*utopie politique*"[377], built from a romantic vision of an era long past[378].

The quixotic aspect of the senators' political programme is mirrored or, better yet, magnified in Herodian's narrative choices: an unusual shift in protagonists, an atypical location, a unique plot and sequence, all shrouded in a sense of performed fantasy[379]. Furthering this impression of a dramatic scene are the (Aristotelian) principles of unity: a single action (the election), a single location (the temple of Jupiter), a (likely) single time (a day). In this 'production', the united senate could even act as a tragic chorus. It might also be possible to perceive the faint outline of a *deus ex machina*, as if (cf. 7.10.3: ὥσπερ) one could visualize, atop his temple, some sort of manifestation of Jupiter[380]. That is not to say that this is (depicted as) an actual apparition of the god, let alone (as) a direct intervention in a political crisis, or even in the story. (This muted aspect is in any case consistent with a generally low influence of the supernatural in Herodian's work.) Rather, what it does is to infuse the election

[374] Cf. Maximus' speech to the Aquileians, at 8.7.6: δύο μὲν γὰρ ὄντων βασιλέων εὐμαρέστερον καὶ τὰ ἐν τῇ Ῥώμῃ διοικήσεται καὶ εἴ τι ἐπὶ τῆς ἀλλοδαπῆς ἐπείγοι, πρὸς τὴν χρείαν ἀεὶ τοῦ πρὸς τὰ καλοῦντα ῥᾳδίως παρόντος. See Davenport & Mallan 2019, 10-18 for an extended analysis of this speech.

[375] At least officially. A number of earlier projects of joint successions never saw the light of day: Lucius Caesar and Gaius Caesar as Augustus' heirs; Caligula and Tiberius Gemellus for Tiberius; Nero and Britannicus for Claudius. Emperors would also designate their successors as Caesars or co-*Augusti*.

[376] 8.7.5: οὐ γὰρ ἑνὸς ἀνδρὸς ἴδιον κτῆμα ἡ ἀρχή, ἀλλὰ κοινὸν τοῦ Ῥωμαίων δήμου ἄνωθεν.

[377] Sotinel 2005, 9. This inefficiency is clearly illustrated by the fact the emperors would not actually triumph over Maximinus themselves. As Davenport & Mallan 2019, 11-12 note, "History happens without Pupienus."

[378] Hilali 2007, 61-63; with e.g. Buongiorno 2017, 227. More generally, Marasco 1998, 2862 argues that, for Herodian, the predominance of senatorial authority is not viable since it would inevitably lead to "la rottura della *concordia ordinum*", essential to any stable government.

[379] The idealized nomination of Maximus and Balbinus must be connected to Herodian's description of Aquileia (characterized by Sotinel 2005, 9 as the "quintessence de la romanité"), which acts as a physical and ideological battlement against Maximinus' advance. On this representation of Aquileians, and of its citizens, see further below.

[380] Mundt 2012, 178-81 reads in a similar way Herodian's story of the destruction of the Temple of Peace (1.14.2-6).

scene with an atmospheric presence and some measure of gravity, while tapping into a familiar, high impact theatrical device. This brief, yet vivid image of Jupiter 'hovering' above the senate's session suggests that the scene operates on a wider level and, accordingly, contributes to its overall theatrical mood.

In Herodian's staging, customary responses of wonder or astonishment to that popular device give way to a generalized feeling of confusion in the face of a highly unexpected turn of events. According to Herodian, this resolution garnered neither applause nor relief from a non-senatorial audience and what was intended as a decisive action against a common enemy instead met immediate popular backlash; the new emperors were unable to even leave the temple of Jupiter. As Herodian shows, the 'spectators' took control of the whole proceedings by forcefully prolonging this inauguration and demanding that it take the form they wanted. This audience was not only changing the narrative proposed by the senators, but also giving shape to the emperorship. This concession made by the senators for the nomination of Gordian III as Caesar might have appeared quite trivial at the time. Herodian's framing of it as a trick would even suggest that this altercation was in fact to the senators' advantage, since they won popular approval with minimal sacrifice on their part. Yet these senatorial emperors would soon be viciously murdered, while Gordian III would eventually go on to rule some five and a half years – the longest since Alexander.

As shown in the *History*, the years 235-8 were a period of political unrest in Roman imperial history. Although the senators agreed among themselves on the individuals to appoint as emperors, both the army and the people were left deeply unhappy with their decision. As a result, Maximus and Balbinus were inducted in the midst of popular revolts, which Herodian even calls at some point a "civil war" (7.11.6: ἐμφύλιον πόλεμον). The precarity of this 'new' system, and that of the authority from which it emerged, is confirmed by how readily the senators ceded to Gordian's caesarship. Even if this co-nomination of Gordian is presented as a sort of ruse by Herodian, it remains that the senate allowed what they considered a mere popular disturbance to materialize onto the political stage. From this moment on, it seemed inevitable that the new emperors would live on borrowed time, given the way the senators were so easily swayed by popular discontent – it stands to reason that they would be no match for the army.

This senatorial charade is framed in much unexpectedness and made to play out on a stage meant for an entirely different piece. Compared to other examples in this chapter, it might be argued that the staging in this episode has shifted from characters made into actors or producers back to the author-narrator producing a show for an audience, or from intradiegetic to extradiegetic. In fact, within Herodian's retelling of the election, two separate plays on two distinct story levels are running parallel to one another. Suppose that the closed session of the senate in the temple of Jupiter kept the people out, just as much as it excluded the senators from the rest of society. While they were staging their Republican fantasy behind closed doors, the senators are shown to have been completely unaware – and unconcerned – with the events unfolding right outside. They were in turn caught by surprise by the armed opposition waiting for them on the other side of the doors. Reaching what they thought was

the end of the 'show', the senators were wholly unprepared for what was really only the next 'act' of a much larger story. As suggested by the strong dramatic aspects of this episode in the *History*, the senators' ideal of a collegial emperorship, elected by and within the senatorial body, was ignorant, even dismissive, of the current power dynamics and vastly aggrandized through the combination of nostalgia and present despair.

In this final chapter, we have seen how Herodian's story is permeated with dramatic overtones, be it in character types and plots, or in terms of a more general attention to the spectacular. The use of theatrical and staging devices is embedded within Herodian's larger writing project designed to produce a vivid, dynamic, and overall 'pleasant' record of recent (and for many readers, familiar) events, which are deemed unique in Roman imperial history. Just as theatre continued to be an important feature of Graeco-Roman society well into Herodian's time, so too is the *History* imbued with a strong theatrical awareness, often transforming readers into spectators by placing the story 'before their eyes'. As Ward concludes,

> the primary purpose of the instances of viewing within the text are aimed at helping external readers understand what is really happening in the text while at the same time creating a dynamic that demands those same readers stay alert and attentive. Not every reader will be up to the challenge Herodian sets out, only the learned. At the same time, Herodian eventually brings things into focus and to a consensus so that even less learned readers will eventually understand what has been unfolding.[381]

Moreover, while Herodian's characters can themselves become spectators within these same stories, they can also be actors, playwrights, impresarios, or stage directors. Characters in the *History* might be subjected to 'typecasting', a technique that connects with Herodian's strategy of narrative schematization. The Thracian Maximinus, cast as the 'barbarian emperor', fits so aptly the part's requirements that he integrates the stock figure, serving as its archetype still nowadays. As Herodian shows, the Syrian princess Julia Maesa transcends even the prized part of the 'Empress', assimilating the lead as the true ruler in lieu of the actual emperors and this, until her natural death. By performing their parts so efficiently, both 'actors' come to influence the world around them either through projects of 'regalization' or, to the contrary, of tribalization. By seeking to restore her own family's status, Maesa would also re-establish a 'proper' aristocratic monarchy. Despite her initial failure with Elagabalus, she eventually succeeded in this plan through Alexander's long and moderate rule. Once Alexander became emperor, Maesa assumed, together with her daughter Mamaea, a joint regency, which was supported by a council of handpicked senators. As Herodian emphatically shows, Maesa died just as Marcus did years before, and these contextual and narrative similarities with Marcus' death serve to exalt her own achievements. Maximinus, for his part, overturned this 'restored' order, by razing to the ground (notions of) traditional Graeco-Roman structures. Rejecting values tied to urbanity and civic society just as much he

[381] Ward 2011, 184-5.

was rejected by them[382], Herodian's Maximinus attempted to create a new stage for the rest of Roman history to unfold, but his plans did not materialize.

As noted above, the very subject of Herodian's *History*, this 'Machtwechselgeschichte', is deeply conducive to dramatic writing, since it is, at its core, a story full of high-profile plots and murders. In Herodian's account, Commodus ultimately meets his death through a fairly standard scheme of plot and counterplot, which crowned a long string of conspiracies and a series of productions in which he starred as hunter, gladiator, racer, god and, all things considered, emperor. Drawing on a familiar tragic plot, Geta's murder at the hands of Caracalla is presented as the inevitable result of an ever-growing and irreconcilable tension between the brothers. As Herodian shows, both Commodus' and Geta's deaths are distorted by the culprits afterwards, the former into a more appropriate version for public consumption, the latter as part of a wider project of self-representation aimed at consolidating legitimacy for himself. Both 'spins' are certainly self-serving, and both are attempts to avoid retribution[383]. However, while Commodus, in Herodian's account, was merely said to have succumbed to his own vices, Caracalla's new story goes even further by casting the victim as wrongdoer and himself as the injured party[384]. Caracalla's 'alternative truth' about Geta's murder, along with his many other 'acting gigs' depicted throughout book 4, must be linked with the later story of the conspiracy that would lead to his own death. Caracalla's praetorian prefect and personal enemy, Macrinus, is turned into both impresario and stage director, overseeing the creation and production of this 'drama'. Quite unlike Commodus' murderers and Caracalla, Herodian's Macrinus would not need to fabricate a different story *post-factum*: the prefect could only let his 'script' play out to its natural end, while assuming himself the cameo of the aggrieved colleague during the final act.

The last major scene of Herodian's *History* is both fantasy and anomaly, showing just how much the whole work is underlined with a dramatic understanding of (hi)storytelling, where drama becomes a mode of composition. Staging a re-enactment of a past 'play', Herodian devotes substantial space to Maximus and Balbinus' joint nomination. Particular attention is given to the entire electoral process, which is depicted as a *huis clos*, not only physically (the session takes place behind closed doors, among senators only), but also ideologically (the election is conceived and conducted outside of the actual political situation, *in uacuo*). In this episode, the past is looked on from a disconnected perspective, which

[382] So Christol 1999, 135: "Rome est à la fois présente et absente de son destin: elle est l'exclue qui exclut son contempteur."

[383] Cf. Bartsch 1994, 11: "theatricality serves particularly well when the dominant member is felt to have a stake in controlling the appearance, and so the public meaning, of the interaction." According to Bartsch (at 22), Tacitus defines Nero's power "by his ability to decide what truth in the public realm will be; in a very real sense, his audience is compelled to follow a script over which the emperor has total control." A similar phenomenon can be seen within these episodes of Herodian's *History* in which the emperors are shaping or reshaping certain narratives in an effort to make them more suitable for public consumption.

[384] Bekker-Nelsen 2014, 237-43 sees four main arguments in Herodian's set speeches connected to imperial murders: self-preservation, violations of the norms of *philia*, blaming the victim, and ex post legitimization. Kemezis 2014, 252-60 reads most speeches through blatant miscommunication or a misinterpretation of situation on the speakers' part; with Sidebottom 1998, 2816-19, particularly on the ironic features of these speeches.

ignores or refuses to accept important changes in a world *post Marcum*. Herodian's dramatic staging, and eventual upstaging, of the narrative can only emphasize just how out of phase the senators' initiative was with the rest of the period and its other actors – even taking place among the people and touching current politics, it remained inherently fictitious and on the margins of reality.