

# Crowded and emptied houses as status markers of aristocratic women in Rome: the literary commonplace of the *domus frequentata*<sup>1</sup>

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Since the 1990s, scholars of Antiquity have increasingly applied to Roman society the notion of ‘separate spheres’ for men and women, a concept borrowed from eighteenth- and nineteenth-century western Europe, where the private/public distinction largely mapped onto a female/male distinction<sup>2</sup>. From the ancient sources it appears that there certainly existed a discourse that assigned women’s role to the private sphere, that of the *domus*. Men’s place, by contrast, was in the public

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2 — On the variety of meanings of ‘public’ and ‘private’, see Weintraub, 1997, 1-42. The distinction between ‘public’ and ‘private’ has long served as a point of entry to study key issues of the ancient world, in particular in the field of archaeology and art history. See, for instance, Kampen, 1991; Wallace-Hadrill, 1994; Milnor, 2005; Winterling, 2005; Trümper, 2012.

domain, symbolized by the *forum*<sup>3</sup>. The historical reality behind this rhetoric was more complicated as the division between private and public spheres was often unclear, and the *domus* was conceived both as a private and a public space<sup>4</sup>. The interpretation of both ‘spheres’ was always liable to change. Women’s role in society was constantly subject of debate as over time their social, legal and economic position evolved and their visibility in public life expanded. The preoccupation of the ancient literary authors with the public prominence of aristocratic women, of whom the women of the imperial family are examples *par excellence*, resulted in their application of certain literary *topoi* that were before predominantly used in portrayals of men as a means to characterize women. Tacitus’ use of the words *dux*, *dominatio* or *imperium* in his descriptions of Julio-Claudian and other powerful women to illustrate their transgressive behaviour is a well-known example<sup>5</sup>. In this article, I will focus on a literary *topos* that has remained largely unnoticed in modern scholarship, namely that of the *domus frequentata* or the crowded house of Julio-Claudian women<sup>6</sup>. As will become clear, because of the increasing public visibility of the women of the imperial family, their residence, or, more specifically, the domestic space that was associated with these women, became a *locus* of public life<sup>7</sup>.

In a society that was dominated by men, the Roman house, or *domus*, was essential to the social status of the upper-class man. Not only was it a token of his wealth and a legitimization of his position within the elite, it was also a symbol of his *auctoritas*. This ideological argument appears implicitly as well as explicitly in the writings of numerous authors of both the Republican and imperial periods. Seneca the Younger coined the phrase *domus frequentata*, the crowded house, stating that: “Whenever men have been thrust forward by fortune, whenever they have become part and parcel of another’s influence, they have found abundant favour, their houses have been thronged (*domus frequentata est*), only so long as they themselves have kept their position; when they themselves have

3 — See, for instance, Livy’s account on the repeal of the *Lex Oppia*, in which he opposes *domus* and *forum* as well as private and public and connects these categories to women and men: Liv. 34.1.5 and 34.2.9-11.

4 — See Riggsby, 1997; Burckhardt, 2003; Cooper, 2007; Speksnijder, 2015.

5 — On this subject, see above all (with further references) Santoro L’Hoir, 1992.

6 — The Latin *frequentare* means ‘to visit frequently’ as well as ‘to fill with a great number’ or ‘to crowd’, see Lewis and Short, s.v. *frequento*. Here it is translated as ‘to crowd’, for the central idea that is being communicated by the ancient writers who use this concept is that of several people – though the size of the group is hard to determine – visiting the house of an aristocratic individual.

7 — Anne Leen mentions the *domus frequentata* of the Republican elite woman Clodia, but the focus of her study is on the house in general as a motif in Cicero’s *Pro Caelio*. See Leen, 2000-2001, p. 153.

left it, they have slipped at once from the memory of men”<sup>8</sup>. Though Seneca was the first to use this phrase, the idea that a house full of visitors marked the social position and influence of an elite man was not new. As a rhetorical device, it was foremost dealt with by Cicero, often to illustrate the competence or incompetence of himself and his peers<sup>9</sup>. In *De Officiis*, for instance, written in 44 B.C. and addressed to his son Marcus, Cicero explained that a politician should have a well appointed house: it should be large enough to accommodate all the visitors, but at the same time not so spacious as to look void<sup>10</sup>. Cicero stated that a house had the capacity to enhance a man’s dignity, but could not secure it. An owner still needed to bring honour to his house, not the house to its owner. As is well-known, Cicero often discussed the close relationship between himself and his houses. He saw his Tusculan *villa* and his house on the Palatine as manifestations of two different aspects of his identity and his status as a member of the elite<sup>11</sup>. The Tusculan *villa* reflected his literary and philosophical interests, while the Palatine house symbolized his career as a statesman<sup>12</sup>. One of the reasons why a house was so important for a politician was because it served as a meeting place<sup>13</sup>. In its various parts, an owner received morning visitors, held judicial arbitrations and meetings on public or semi-public matters<sup>14</sup>. In fact, the *auctoritas* of a man was often inferred from the number of visitors he received throughout the day.

Though women never formally obtained a position of influence in Roman society, their houses too became *loci* of public life. However, since the nature as well as the socio-political significance of the activities of imperial women in these crowded houses did not exactly parallel those of men, the literary representations of the female *domus frequentata* were not faithful copies of the literary representations of the male *domus frequentata*. In spite of this, the idea of the crowded house evoked the male-oriented public domain, which enabled ancient writers to maximize

8 — Sen. *Ep.* 21.6. Unless stated otherwise, translations are taken from the Loeb Classical Library editions.

9 — See above all Treggiari, 1999. Treggiari discusses the motif of the house in a variety of genres in Cicero’s oeuvre dating from 71 to 44-43 B.C., which shows that it was a popular commonplace in his work.

10 — Cic. *De Off.* 1.139. For a discussion on the date of composition and publication, see Dyck, 1996, pp. 8-10, 39-41. In his study of houses in Pompeii, Dickmann has studied how the architecture and decoration of public or semi-public rooms of Pompeian houses might have functioned as a means of self-display for its owners. See Dickmann, 1999.

11 — See Hales, 2000.

12 — Cic. *Dom.* 146; Cic. *Att.* 1.4.3; Cic. *Att.* 1.8.2; Cic. *Fam.* 7.23.2.

13 — Saller, 1994, pp. 91-93.

14 — See, for instance, Vitruvius 6.5; Sen. *De Clem.* 1.9; Plin. *Pan.* 49.1; Plin. *Pan.* 83.1; Cic. *Ad Q.F.* 1.1.25; Cic. *Verr.* 3.133; Cic. *Phil.* 1.2; Cic. *Lig.* 14. See also Treggiari, 1999, pp. 41-46.

the rhetorical potential of the literary *topos* of the female *domus frequentata*, as will become clear.

By the end of the Republican period, women themselves were recognized as influential or as intermediaries between clients and patrons, and for that reason their houses were often visited<sup>15</sup>. This practice continued during the reigns of the Julio-Claudian emperors. It appears that in the perception of their contemporaries as well as of the ancient writers who later portrayed them, the house became a status marker of its main female resident. Augustus' need to destroy the house of his granddaughter Julia the Younger or Caligula's destruction of the house in which his mother Agrippina the Elder was held during Tiberius' reign illustrate how closely a building could become associated with a woman's image, as I have discussed elsewhere<sup>16</sup>. From the literary sources, it appears that a female crowded house could be valued both positively and negatively. The question, however, is where the line was drawn. When did a woman's *domus frequentata* damage her reputation and when did she deserve praise for it? Two main concerns lay at the core of the perception of a female *domus frequentata*: of whom did the crowd consist in, and what activities took place in the crowded house?

### ***Republican precedents: the "generation of 63 B.C."***

The public prominence of the Julio-Claudian women, though closely associated with their role within the semi-new political infrastructure of the Principate, did not come into existence *ex nihilo*<sup>17</sup>. During the first century B.C., an important subgroup of elite women impacted on the politics of Republican Rome through the exchange of social gossip and political information, using informal networks of female and male friends and relatives. Corey Brennan termed this group of women "the generation of 63 B.C.", taking Cicero's consulship and the Catilinarian conspiracy as a point of reference<sup>18</sup>. The main (known) members were Cicero's wife Terentia, Pompey's wife Mucia, Brutus' mother Servilia, Antony's wife Fulvia, and Clodius Pulcher's sister Clodia, although their networks must have counted many more influential aristocratic women<sup>19</sup>.

15 — On the nature and character of female influence, see, for instance, Lefkowitz, 1983; Wikander, 1991; Hallett, 2004.

16 — Sen. *De Ira* 3.22.1; Suet. *Aug.* 72. Foubert, 2010.

17 — On historical precedents for the Julio-Claudian women, see Burckhardt, 2010.

18 — Corey Brennan, 2012.

19 — There is extensive scholarship on these women, see, for instance: Haley, 1985; Dixon, 1986; Dettenhofer, 1992; Hillard, 1992; Virlovet, 1994; Cluett, 1998; Shubert, 2002; Grebe, 2003; Treggiari, 2007. For scholarship on Clodia Metelli, see below.

The political landscape of the last decades of the Republic had forced many aristocratic men to leave Rome, both voluntarily, in the context of military or diplomatic campaigns, or forcedly because they were condemned to exile. Women were left behind and turned out to be crucial to manage the household, to control the finances, to serve as intermediaries between their absent husbands and their social peers in Rome; in short, to preserve a socio-political *status quo* while men were away<sup>20</sup>. As a result, these women were called upon in their homes. Yet, as they served as links between their male relatives and their clients and friends in Rome, at the same time they were easily exposed to criticism: everyone could write to their men abroad, truthfully and not, to report their activities as well as the people they received and talked to. The speeches of Cicero exemplify how references to crowded houses in general, and those of the “generation of 63 B.C.” in particular, could be used as a literary technique to criticize an opponent. A comparison between Cicero’s rhetorical strategy to portray Mark Antony and his characterisation of Chelidon, Verres’ mistress, and Clodia Metelli will illustrate this literary mechanism.

When responding to contemporary political crises, Cicero often stressed the link between men of the elite and their houses. In many instances, he uses the image of the house as a means of character assassination whereby an adversary’s decadent lifestyle corresponds with his or her dissolute house. In 44-43 B.C., in the *Philippicae*, Cicero uses this rhetorical trope to the fullest to characterise Mark Antony and denounces him as someone who indeed had brought dishonour to his house. He criticises Antony, for instance, for having acquired the house of Pompey and transformed it from a modest residence, appropriate for a well-established politician, to a decadent ruin, fitting Antony’s depraved character<sup>21</sup>:

*Domus erat aleatoribus referta, plena ebriorum [...]; Conchyliatis Cn. Pompei peristromatis servorum in cellis lectos stratos videres [...]. At idem aedis etiam et hortos. O audaciam immanem! Tu etiam ingredi illam domum ausus es, tu illud sanctissimum limen intrare, tu illarum aedium dis penatibus os impurissimum ostendere? Quam domum aliquamdiu nemo aspicere poterat, nemo sine lacrimis praeterire, hac te in domo tam diu deversari non pudet? In qua, quamvis nihil sapias, tamen nihil tibi potest esse iucundum* (Cic. *Phil.* 2.67-68).

The house was crammed with gamblers, full of drunkards [...]; In the garrets of slaves you would see beds covered with the purple tapestries of Cnaeus Pompeius [...]. But he also occupied the house and the gardens. What monstrous audacity! Did you so much as dare to put foot in that

20 — See, for instance, Diod. 40.5; Cic. *Fam.* 5.6.1-2; Cic. *Verr.* 2.2.24; Plut. *Sulla* 6.12. Cf. Plut. *Luc.* 6.

21 — On Antony’s confiscation of Pompey’s residence and gardens, see Hilbold, 2013.

house; you to pass over that most sacred threshold; you to show your most profligate face to the household Gods of that dwelling? A while past no man could look at, none pass the house without tears – are you not ashamed to be so long an inmate in such a house, where, though you have no sense, none the less nothing can give you pleasure?

Antony's crowded house consisted of the lowest ranks of Roman society, with slaves sleeping in beds covered with the most luxurious fabrics. Cicero's audience had but to imagine what Antony's bed looked like, as he would have surely surpassed the decadent lifestyle of his slaves<sup>22</sup>. Later in the same text, Cicero opposes in a similar manner M. Terrentius Varro Reatinus to Antony, comparing the house near Casinum that formerly belonged to the renowned scholar with the same house during its occupation by Antony:

*Quae in illa villa antea dicebantur, quae cogitabantur, quae litteris mandabantur! At vero te inquilino – non enim domino – personabant omnia vocibus ebriorum, natabant pavimenta vino, madebant parietes, ingenui pueri cum meritoriis, scorta inter matres familias versabantur* (Cic. *Phil.* 2.105).

What discussions formerly took place in that villa, what meditations! What thoughts were committed to writing [...]! But in your tenancy – for no owner where you – the whole place rang with the voices of drunken men; the pavements swam with wine; the walls were wet; boys of free birth were consorting with those let for hire; harlots with mothers of families.

Because of Antony's presence, the house, which Cicero remembered as a place of erudition, turned into an environment in which those who should be safeguarded by elite men against perverting elements, i.e. free-born boys and *matronae*, were corrupted by mere association with the other visitors of the house, i.e. drunkards and prostitutes.

Earlier, in his speeches against Verres, which he wrote in 70 B.C. and published after the accused had been successfully prosecuted, Cicero had used the concept of the crowded house to demonstrate the corruption that reigned during Verres' governorship in Sicily<sup>23</sup>. In the first as well as the fifth speech for the second hearing, both the house of Verres and that of his mistress Chelidon – Cicero calls her *meretrix* – are a focus of attention<sup>24</sup>. He condemns the influence of the governor's mistress and

22 — Ramsay, 2003, pp. 257-258.

23 — On Verres' trial and its speeches, see, for instance, Marshall, 1967; McDermott, 1977; Alexander, 1976; Frazel, 2004.

24 — Note that the second hearing never took place in the courtroom, since Verres withdrew into voluntary exile and was tried guilty in absence. Chelidon is mentioned in Cic. *Verr.* 2.1.104, 106, 120, 136-140; 2.2.39, 116; 2.3.78; 2.4.71; 2.5.34, 38. Most of these passages emphasize how

illustrates this by pointing out the difference between her house and those of the legal experts:

*Quam inanes domus eorum omnium qui de iure civili consuli solent, quam plena atque referta Chelidonis* (Cic. Verr. 2.1.120).

How empty were the houses of all the experts in civil law whom it is the practice to consult, how densely crowded was the house of Chelidon.

The formal places of power were replaced by informal ones. Several chapters later, Cicero continues his attack on Chelidon by elaborating on how she received visitors, as if it were an elite man's *salutatio*. He mentions three men by name – Gaius Mustius, Marcus Junius, and Publius Potitius – who solicited Chelidon's aid and exclaims by way of a rhetorical question: "To say nothing of other points, with what shame, with what indignation, do you think that such men as these went to the house of a prostitute?". Cicero makes it clear that these men were the most modest citizens, but that they were forced to enter the house of a lowlife like Chelidon out of sheer necessity. He describes what they witnessed in her *domus frequentata*:

*Veniunt, ut dico, ad Chelidonem. Domus erat plena; nova iura, nova decreta, nova iudicia petebantur [...]. Alii nummos numerabant, ab aliis tabellae obsignabantur. Domus erat non meretricio conventu sed praetoria turba referta* (Cic. Verr. 2.1.137).

They went, as I have said, to see Chelidon. Her house was full: decisions, judgments, methods of procedure – none ever heard of before – were being applied for [...]. Some were paying her cash, others were signing promissory notes: the house was filled, not with a courtesan's visitors, but with the crowd that attends a praetor's court.

Near the end of the speeches intended for the second hearing, Cicero makes it abundantly clear that not even the seriousness of Verres' political responsibilities could bring him to refuse Chelidon access to his house, on the contrary:

*Itaque non modo a domo tua Chelidonem in praetura excludere noluit, sed in Chelidonis domum praeturam totam detulisti* (Cic. Verr. 2.5.38).

Therefore, you were not only unwilling to drive Chelidon from your house during your praetorship, but you even transported your whole praetorship to Chelidon's house.

All three passages make it clear that the *praetorium* was not, as it should have been, at Verres' house, but at the house of his mistress. In

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she acted as an intermediary between Verres and his supposed clients and state that nothing occurred against her will. On Chelidon as *meretrix*, see McCoy, 2006.

much the same way as Mark Antony's presence corrupted the houses of Pompey and Varro, so did Verres' involvement with Chelidon impact on his own *domus* in the end: "Shall Verres take the memorials of Scipio of Africa to adorn his own house, a house full of lust and wickedness and foulness?"<sup>25</sup>.

In Corey Brennan's work, the prostitute Chelidon is not taken into consideration as one of the members of the generation of 63 B.C., though Cicero's portrayal of Chelidon's network and her position of influence clearly resembles that of the elite women's. One of the key figures, so it seems, of the generation of 63 B.C. was Clodia, whom we know above all through Cicero's œuvre<sup>26</sup>. In his defence of M. Caelius Rufus in 56 B.C., Cicero tried to discredit Clodia, who figured as a key witness to two of the charges, and her testimony<sup>27</sup>. He made the residences of Caelius and Clodia on the Palatine central to his portrayal of the two. Caelius, so he states, moved from his father's house in order to be closer to the centre of power: "Since his father's house was far from the Forum, he rented an inexpensive house on the Palatine so he could more easily reach my (i.e. Cicero's) house and be visited by his own friends"<sup>28</sup>. Cicero presents the Palatine as a political space, where clients met with their patrons, and where it made sense for a politician on the rise, like Caelius, to reside. Unfortunately, this turned out to be the place where he got entangled, so Cicero continues, in the web of Clodia, a "Palatine Medea", i.e. an abandoned lover who sought revenge. Clodia's house serves as the stage for Cicero's portrayal of her, as it has been pointed out by Anne Leen: "With the exception of lone public appearances on the Via Appia, Clodia is consistently seen within the confines of her house, ..." <sup>29</sup>. The orator attacks the reputation of Clodia by explaining that her *domus frequentata* illustrated her depraved lifestyle:

*Si quae non nupta mulier domum suam patefecerit omnium cupiditati palamque sese in meretricia vita collocarit, virorum alienissimorum conviviiis uti instituerit, si hoc in urbe, si in hortis, si in Baiaurum illa celebritate faciat [...] cum hac si qui adulescens forte fuerit, utrum hic tibi, L. Herenni, adulter an amator? (Cic. Pro Cael. 49).*

If some unmarried woman throws open her house to the lust of all men and openly establishes herself in a whorish lifestyle; if she makes a habit of enjoying dinner parties with men who are complete strangers; if

25 — Cic. *Verr.* 2.4.83.

26 — For an overview of the sources in which Clodia figures, see Dyson Hejduk, 2008.

27 — Skinner, 2011.

28 — Cic. *Pro Cael.* 18. Translations of Cicero's *Pro Caelio* are taken from Dyson Hejduk, 2008.

29 — Leen, 2000-2001, p. 142. On p. 147, n. 20, Leen lists Cicero's references to Clodia's house, i.e. Cic. *Cael.* 34-36, 38, 49, 52, 55, 57, 59-60, 67.

she were to do this in the City, in the park, among those crowds in Baiae [...]; if, by chance, some young man should have been with this woman, would he appear in your eyes, Lucius Herennius, to be a predator or a lover [...]?

Clodia is presented as someone who invited crowds of layabouts, wherever she resided. Like Chelidon, she is called a *meretrix*, but Clodia's case is worse since she is a member of the elite behaving as if she were a prostitute<sup>30</sup>. Moreover, she did not seem to be ashamed of her behaviour, as she operated in the public eye: "not only does she not seek seclusion and shadows to conceal her scandalous behaviour, but she positively exults in the most shameful deeds among teeming crowds and in the clear light of day"<sup>31</sup>. The author presents Clodia's *domus* as a space in which traditional Roman expectations of domestic behaviour were violated<sup>32</sup>. In her household, nothing was as it should have been:

*Quis enim hoc non videt, iudices, aut quis ignorat, in eius modi domo in qua mater familias meretricio more vivat, in qua nihil geratur quod foras proferendum sit, in qua inusitatae libidines, luxuries, omnia denique inaudita vitia ac flagitia versentur, hic servos non esse servos* (Cic. *Cael.* 57).

For who does not see, gentlemen, or who is ignorant that in a house of that kind, in which the mistress lives the life of a courtesan, in which nothing is done which is fit to be published abroad, in which strange lusts, profligacy, in fact, all unheard-of vices and immoralities, are rife – who does not know that in such a house those slaves are slaves no longer?

On several occasions, Cicero refers to the stereotypical figure of the Roman *matrona* and denotes Clodia as a 'matrona gone bad'<sup>33</sup>. He explains that she belonged to a prestigious family and lists female ancestors such as Quinta Claudia and Claudia the vestal, whose exemplary behaviour was part of Rome's collective memory<sup>34</sup>. Cicero warns his audience that if he is wrong about Clodia, which of course in his opinion he is not, he considers himself having behaved disgracefully for using the name of a *materfamilias* in a manner contrary to the respect a *matrona*, especially one with a lineage such as hers, deserved<sup>35</sup>. Clodia's reputation, according to Cicero, was reflected in the reputation of her *domus*. The orator leaves no doubt as to the number of visitors she received, which for men would have been a sign of their influential social position. Yet, his

30 — For *meretrix*, see also Cic. *Pro Cael.* 38 and 57. On Clodia as *meretrix*, see McCoy, 2006.

31 — Cic. *Pro Caelio* 47.

32 — Leen, 2000-2001, p. 142.

33 — On the idea of the *matrona*, see, for instance Fischler, 1994; Cantarella, 2001<sup>2</sup>; Cenerini, 2009.

34 — Cic. *Pro Cael.* 34.

35 — Cic. *Pro Cael.* 32. On Cicero's portrayal of Clodia, see Geffcken, 1973, pp. 27-43.

comments on the nature of her *domus frequentata* serve as an illustration of her depraved lifestyle<sup>36</sup>.

### ***The domus frequentata of Julio-Claudian women***

In their literary representations of the crowded houses of elite women of the Republican period, ancient writers clearly distinguished a woman's *domus frequentata* from that of a man: though in some contexts women acted as intermediaries between their visitors and public figures, their houses were never formally recognized as places of power. In the descriptions of the houses of imperial women, this distinction is less clear. Some imperial women received visitors in a formal capacity, a particularity which Cassius Dio explicitly includes in his account, characterising the domestic space in which these visitors were received as an institutionalized public place. In most cases, however, the ancient writers seem to imply that an imperial woman's house that was filled with guests was to be considered a private affair. Yet, because of these women's status and their vicinity to the emperor and his entourage, such 'private' affairs ran the risk of having 'public' consequences. It is this ambiguity that enforced the female *domus frequentata* as rhetorical instrument.

In a recent study, Fabian Goldbeck examined the earliest examples of formally organised female *salutationes*, a novelty which had its origins, so it appears, in the Julio-Claudian period<sup>37</sup>. As mentioned above, though ancient writers sometimes refer to Republican women who received visitors in their houses, it seems that these examples concern occasional visits of individuals and not an organised morning call. Cassius Dio informs us of two Julio-Claudian women who seemed to have held an actual *salutatio*, i.e. Livia and Agrippina the younger. As a token of her elevated status during Tiberius' reign, incomparable to that of the elite women of the Republic, so Dio states, Livia was allowed to receive senators and whomever wanted to greet her in her house. Its formal character is acknowledged by Dio's comment that this privilege was even entered in the public records<sup>38</sup>. He makes a similar remark when he discusses Agrippina the Younger's position during Claudius' reign, stating that "indeed, she had more power than Claudius himself and used to greet

36 — McCoy, 2006, pp. 181-183.

37 — Goldbeck, 2010, pp. 69-73.

38 — Dio 57.12.2. It remains difficult to assess to what extent Cassius Dio's writing was influenced by the practice of imperial women in his own time. With regard to the *salutationes* of imperial women, he seems to have consulted the *acta diurna* (on Cassius Dio's sources, see Edmonson, 1992, pp. 30-32). Tacitus mentions that Sallustius Crispus warned Livia that after the death of Agrippa Postumus it would be better to keep the meetings of her friends (*consilia amicorum*) a secret. Whether the author had a formal *salutatio* in mind is unclear. See Tac. *Ann.* 1.6.

in public all who desired it, a fact that was entered in the records”<sup>39</sup>. It is telling that the first example of a formally recognised *salutatio* by an imperial woman took place only during Tiberius’ reign. Various ancient sources, however, make it clear that the women of Augustus’ family were considered influential by their social peers, which makes it reasonable to expect that, similarly to what happened in the houses of the generation of 63 B.C., their houses were also visited by people asking for their help as intermediaries between them and the *princeps*<sup>40</sup>.

One of the earliest female relatives of Augustus whose crowded house is mentioned in the ancient sources is his sister Octavia. According to Plutarch in his *Life of Antony*, in 35 B.C. Octavia desired to sail to Athens to meet with Antony, in order to bring him supplies and soldiers for his military campaigns in the East. He, however, told her to remain in Athens while he continued campaigning and it appears, though Plutarch does not elaborate in detail on the outcome of the episode, that Octavia returned to Rome without seeing her husband. The public opinion, so Plutarch continues, pitied Octavia, a circumstance that Augustus tried to use in his favour:

Ὀκταουίαν δὲ Καίσαρ ὑβρίσθαι δοκοῦσαν, ὡς ἐπανήλθεν ἐξ Ἀθηνῶν, ἐκέλευσε καθ’ ἑαυτὴν οἰκεῖν. ἡ δὲ οὐκ ἔφη τὸν οἶκον ἀπολείπειν τοῦ ἀνδρός [...], καὶ γὰρ ᾤκει τὴν οἰκίαν, ὥσπερ αὐτοῦ παρόντος ἐκείνου, καὶ τῶν τέκνων οὐ μόνον τῶν ἐξ ἑαυτῆς, ἀλλὰ καὶ τῶν ἐκ Φουλβίας γεγονότων, καλῶς καὶ μεγαλοπρεπῶς ἐπεμελεῖτο: καὶ τοὺς πεμπομένους ἐπὶ ἀρχάς τινας ἢ πράγματα τῶν Ἀντωνίου φίλων ὑποδεχομένη συνέπραττεν ὧν παρὰ Καίσαρος δεηθεῖεν (Plut. *Ant.* 54.1-2).

As for Octavia, she was thought to have been treated with scorn, and when she came back from Athens Caesar ordered her to dwell in her own house. But she refused to leave the house of her husband [...]. For she dwelt in her husband’s house, just as if he were at home, and she cared for his children, not only those whom she herself, but also those whom Fulvia had borne him, in a noble and magnificent manner; she also

39 — Dio 60.33.1. On Agrippina the Younger, see also below. Dio mentions Julia Domna as a third imperial woman who organised public greetings, see Dio 78.18.3. Yet, only Livia’s greetings in 57.12.2 are located in the *oikos*. Dio labels the greetings of Agrippina and Julia Domna ‘public’ (*koinos, demosios*), which makes one wonder whether Dio understood them as morning calls or not. Besides Dio’s references to the greetings of imperial women, see also *HA, Alexander Severus* 25.10, where it is stated that Severus Alexander forbade women of ill repute to greet (*salutare*) his mother and wife. On the difficulties in interpretation of Latin and Greek vocabulary that refers to morning greetings, see Goldbeck, 2010, pp. 14-18. See also Friedländer, 1922<sup>10</sup>, pp. 91-92.

40 — Kunst rightly contextualizes the imperial women’s influential position in the context of the Roman patronage system with the emperor as a ‘superpatron’. The women’s influence, therefore, should be seen as a type of matronage. See Kunst, 2010.

received such friends of Antony as were sent to Rome in quest of office or on business, and helped them to obtain from Caesar what they wanted.

It appears from Plutarch's text that Octavia hosted Antony's friends and served as a link with her brother. Yet, the author's statement that her crowded house also included children, both hers and Fulvia's, contextualized Octavia in her role as *materfamilias*. Augustus' attempt to force Octavia out of Antony's residence, which she would not do until their divorce in 32 B.C., as well as Plutarch's remark that she acted as if her husband was at home, make it clear that Octavia's activities, though praiseworthy, were not considered normative behaviour. It could not have gone unnoticed to Plutarch's audience that in a normal situation, it would have been Antony, i.e. the house's formal owner, who would have received visitors. Plutarch uses this crowded house to sketch a world upside down.

Elsewhere, Plutarch also incorporated a positive evaluation of a woman's crowded house, which indicates his awareness of the literary force of the *topos*. In his *Life of Gaius Gracchus*, he admires Cornelia, mother of the Gracchi, for having borne her misfortunes in a noble spirit and for keeping her house open:

αὕτη δὲ περὶ τοὺς καλουμένους Μισσηνοὺς διέτριβεν, οὐδὲν μεταλλάξασα τῆς συνήθους διαίτης, ἦν δὲ πολύφιλος καὶ διὰ φιλοξενίαν εὐτράπεζος, αἰεὶ μὲν Ἑλλήνων καὶ φιλολόγων περὶ αὐτὴν ὄντων, ἀπάντων δὲ τῶν βασιλέων καὶ δεχομένων παρ' αὐτῆς δῶρα καὶ πεμπόντων (Plut. *C. Grach.* 19.1-2).

She resided on the promontory called Misenum, and made no change in her customary way of living. She had many friends, and kept a good table that she might show hospitality, for she always had Greeks and other literary men about her, and all the reigning kings interchanged gifts with her.

Octavia and Cornelia are praised for opening their houses to others. In Cornelia's case, already a widow in Plutarch's anecdote, her house is a centre of intellectual meetings. Octavia, at this point still married to Antony, welcomes his friends and gathers all of his children in the house she lives in. After her divorce from Antony, Octavia probably moved to the house of Augustus and Livia on the Palatine, taking her husband's children with her<sup>41</sup>. After Antony's death, she also allegedly took care of the children Antony had had with Cleopatra<sup>42</sup>. Though ancient writers do not explicitly characterize the Palatine residence as a *domus frequen-tata*, where Octavia would have been one of the women managing a

41 — Plut. *Ant.* 57.4-5.

42 — Plut. *Ant.* 87.1.

house filled with children, it is clear that Augustus presented his *domus* as a space where ideal matronal behaviour was on display<sup>43</sup>. It seems that he was also aware that Roman society would consider the women in his family influential intermediaries and that this could contradict the ideological message of domesticity he wanted to evoke<sup>44</sup>. Suetonius states that:

*Filiam et neptes ita instituit, ut etiam lanificio assuefaceret vetaretque loqui aut agere quicquam nisi propalam et quod in diurnos commentarios referretur; extraneorum quidem coetu adeo prohibuit, ut L. Vinicio, claro decoroque iuveni, scripserit quondam parum modeste fecisse eum, quod filiam suam Baias salutatum venisset* (Suet. *Aug.* 64.2).

In bringing up his daughter and his granddaughters he even had them taught spinning and weaving, and he forbade them to say or do anything except openly and such as might be recorded in the household diary. He was most strict in keeping them from meeting strangers, once writing to Lucius Vinicius, a young man of good position and character: “You have acted presumptuously in coming to Baiae to call on my daughter”.

Suetonius claims that Augustus reproached Lucius Vinicius because he did not behave discreetly or modestly (*modestus*) towards Julia the Elder. His mistake was that he had gone to Baiae, a pleasure-resort notorious for its decadent image though nonetheless popular with the Roman elite, and had visited Augustus’ daughter. Suetonius uses the word *salutare*, which might not necessarily refer to the formal morning greeting, as was customary for elite men, but evokes the idea nevertheless<sup>45</sup>. The author contextualizes Augustus’ reaction to this incident in the *princeps*’ general concern for the reputation of his female relatives, for by associating them with the traditional task of wool working and by monitoring how they conversed in public Suetonius’ Augustus presents them as women who displayed exemplary behaviour. It should not surprise us, therefore, that Augustus did not allow Livia to organise morning greetings in a similar fashion as elite men. This does not mean that she did not receive visitors who sought her help, for we know, for instance, that Ovid urged his wife to contact Livia as he thought that she could help him return from exile<sup>46</sup>. References to her position as an intermediary became more explicit once she shifted from being the wife of the *princeps* Augustus to being the mother of the emperor Tiberius<sup>47</sup>. The inclusion of her *salutatio* in

43 — On the Palatine *domus* as a symbolic space associated with ideal female behaviour, see Foubert, 2010.

44 — On this topic, see especially Milnor, 2005.

45 — On the terminology of formal greetings, and the meaning of *salutare*, see Goldbeck, 2010, pp. 14-18.

46 — *Ov. Pont.* 3.1.114-165. See also *Sen. De Clem.* 1.9; *Plut. Ant.* 1.13.6.

47 — *S.C. Pisone Patre* 113-120; *Vell.* 2.130.5; *Tac. Ann.* 4.57.3; *Dio* 58.2.3.

the *acta diurna* points to an ideological marking point: as the house of the mother of the reigning emperor, Livia's *domus* was now acknowledged as a formal *locus* of power<sup>48</sup>.

A passage in Tacitus' *Annals* indicates that Livia's house was not the only *domus* of an imperial woman that was visited during Tiberius' reign:

*Iunio Silano et Silio Nerva consulibus foedum anni principium incensit tracto in carcerem inlustri equite Romano Titio Sabino ob amicitiam Germanici: neque enim omiserat coniugem liberosque eius percolere, sectator domi, comes in publico, post tot clientes unus eoque apud bonos laudatus et gravis iniquis* (Tac. *Ann.* 4.68).

With Junius Silanus and with Silius Nerva as consuls, a foul beginning to the year was made with the dragging to prison of the illustrious Roman equestrian Titius Sabinus owing to his friendship with Germanicus. He had not omitted to be courteous to the man's spouse and children, acting as their attendant at home and companion in public – the only one remaining from so many previous clients, and for that reason praised among good men and a reproach for the prejudiced<sup>49</sup>.

Titius Sabinus is presented as one of Germanicus' clients, who still visited the house of his patron after his death to visit his wife, Agrippina the Elder. His close relationship with the widow caused his doom as he was betrayed by a group of senators and reported to Sejanus with the aim of being appointed by Tiberius as consuls. Though Tacitus aims at illustrating the corrupt and dark atmosphere of Tiberian Rome, where members of the elite were each other's enemies and the walls had ears, the anecdote makes it clear that Agrippina's *domus* was still a space to reckon with. On the one hand, the solitude of her house shows that Germanicus was believed to be the patron and that his death was the end of a line of communication with the emperor: as a consequence of his passing away, their house ceased to be crowded. On the other hand, the fact that at least one *equus* still visited her, and the risk that this seemingly entailed for the emperor and his entourage, indicate the political potential of an imperial woman's house: if more were to follow, Agrippina's crowded house would become a public statement of rivalry to the imperial throne.

Though ancient writers state that the public visibility of the female relatives of Caligula, both the living and the dead, increased during his reign, none of their houses is described as a place where people came to

48 — Unfortunately, whether Livia had a separate residential building within the Augustan complex, as is often believed based on the presence of the so-called Casa di Livia, is under the present archaeological circumstances still impossible to determine. It is therefore not possible to use archaeological evidence to shed light on Livia's *domus* as a *locus* of power. On this identification, see Foubert, 2010, pp. 66-67 (with further references).

49 — Translations from Tacitus' *Annals* are taken from Woodman, 2004.

ask for help. His grandmother Antonia the Younger was appointed priestess of Augustus and received the title of Augusta<sup>50</sup>. His sisters – Livilla, Drusilla, and Agrippina the Younger – were included in the vows for the emperor's well-being and in senatorial oaths. Drusilla in particular was singled out by Caligula, who, according to Suetonius, appointed her as his heir during an illness<sup>51</sup>. The sources are less explicit about the social position and visibility of Caligula's wives, though Suetonius states that Milonia Caesonia joined him among the soldiers<sup>52</sup>. Despite the role these women were given in Caligula's imperial propaganda, none of the ancient authors mention that they were influential enough to act as an intermediary between the emperor and the Roman elite<sup>53</sup>. Not even the conspiracy, of which Livilla and Agrippina were accused of in 39 and for which Caligula exiled them, is contextualized in the *domus* of Caligula's sisters<sup>54</sup>. A similar image appears at the beginning of Claudius' reign: ancient writers describe Valeria Messalina's position as influential, but they do not describe her as a host who received visitors in her residential quarters of the imperial palace so that she could lobby for them, upon request, as an intermediary<sup>55</sup>. Instead of creating a *locus* of public life of her own in the palace, Messalina is described as intruding in the space where Claudius operated as she attended, for instance, the trial *intra cubiculum* of the former consul Valerius Asiaticus<sup>56</sup>. Yet, in one instance, Cassius Dio seems to caricature the setting of a *salutatio*:

Μεσσαλίνα δὲ ἐν τούτῳ αὐτὴ τε ἡσέλγαινε καὶ τὰς ἄλλας γυναῖκας ἀκολασταίνειν ὁμοίως ἠνάγκαζε, καὶ πολλὰς γε καὶ ἐν αὐτῷ τῷ παλατίῳ, τῶν ἀνδρῶν παρόντων καὶ ὄρωντων, μοιχεύεσθαι ἐποίει. καὶ ἐκείνους μὲν καὶ ἐφίλει καὶ ἡγάπα, τιμαῖς τε καὶ ἀρχαῖς ἤγαλλε, τοὺς δ' ἄλλους τοὺς μὴ συγκαθιέντας σφᾶς ἐς τοῦτο καὶ ἐμίσει καὶ πάντα τρόπον ἀπώλλυε.

In the meantime Messalina was not only exhibiting her own licentiousness but was also compelling the other women to show themselves equally unchaste. She made many of them commit adultery in the very palace itself while their husbands were present and looked on. Such men she loved and cherished and rewarded them with honours and offices; but others, who would not offer their wives for such business, she hated and brought to destruction in every possible way.

50 — Suet. *Claud.* 11.2.

51 — Suet. *Cal.* 15, 24; Dio 59.3.3-4, 59.7.4, 59.9.2.

52 — Suet. *Cal.* 25.

53 — It should be noted that Tacitus' account of Caligula's reign did not survive. On the public image of Caligula's sisters, see Wood, 1995.

54 — Suet. *Cal.* 24, 29, 39; Dio 59.22.8, 59.23.8.

55 — On Messalina see, above all, Saunders, 1994; Joshel, 1997; Mastellone, 2004.

56 — Tac. *Ann.* 11.1-3; Dio 60.29.4-6<sup>a</sup>.

Dio presents Messalina as a hostess to members of the elite and illustrates how some of them were rewarded with honours and offices. However, this was not procured through the procedure of an organised morning call. The author describes how Messalina turned the Palatine complex into a brothel<sup>57</sup>. She allegedly invited men and women of the higher classes to the imperial palace and forced the women to commit adultery while the men were watching. Men who refused to offer their wives for her vicious plans were brought to destruction; those who agreed were rewarded. Dio's passage on the brothel of Messalina followed a description of Messalina's influential position at court, which she used to sell military commands and governorships to the highest bidder, among other things. The association between Messalina's *domus frequentata* and a brothel is clear<sup>58</sup>.

The only other Julio-Claudian woman who held a public position similar to that of Livia during the reign of Tiberius was her great granddaughter Agrippina the Younger during Claudius' and Nero's reigns<sup>59</sup>. As mentioned above, Cassius Dio states that during the reign of Claudius the *salutatio* of Agrippina the Younger was included in the public records<sup>60</sup>. Both Dio and Tacitus illustrate the influential position of Agrippina as the emperor's wife, emphasizing how she joined him during public events and how she impacted on Claudius' policy by manipulating his entourage<sup>61</sup>. At the start of Nero's reign, her position was maintained and her residence is described as a public *locus* of power. She is stated to have held meetings with her friends and invited tribunes and centurions to her private quarters in the imperial palace<sup>62</sup>. The description of Agrippina's *salutatio* in Tacitus' *Annals* illustrates the close relationship between the extent of a woman's influence and the idea of her having a flourishing house. Shortly after the beginning of Nero's reign, the influence of Agrippina on her son started to weaken and Nero struggled to become independent of his mother. Tacitus describes how the emperor gradually removed her privileges. The author states:

*Ac ne coetu salutantium frequentaretur, separat domum matremque transfert in eam, quae Antoniae fuerat, quotiens ipse illuc ventitaret, saeptus turba centurionum et post breve osculum digrediens. Nihil rerum mortalium tam instabile ac fluxum est quam fama potentiae non sua vi nixae. Statim*

57 — Cf. Dio 60.31.1.

58 — Besides Dio, Juvenal also wrote about Messalina's sexual activities, which resembled those of a prostitute (Juv. *Sat.* 6.115-134). The satirist, however, does not place her within the context of the imperial palace, but claims that she went to the city where she hired a room to prostitute herself.

59 — Most exhaustive, see Eck, 1992; Barrett, 1996; Ginsburg, 2006.

60 — Dio 60.33.1.

61 — E.g. Tac. *Ann.* 12.3-4, 12.22, 12.25-27, 12.37; Dio 61.32-35.

62 — Tac. *Ann.* 13.18.

*relictum Agrippinae limen: nemo solari, nemo adire praeter paucas feminas, amore an odio incertas* (Tac. *Ann.* 13.18-19).

And, to prevent her being mobbed by a throng of well-wishers, he made his house separate and transferred his mother to that which had been Antonia's, surrounding himself, whenever he paid a personal visit there, with a crowd of centurions and withdrawing after only a brief kiss. Nothing in mortal affairs is so unstable and fleeting as the fame of a power that relies on a strength not its own. Immediately, Agrippina's threshold was deserted: no one consoled her, no one approached her, except a few ladies, whether from love or hate being uncertain.

The empty house of Agrippina did not only show that she had lost her influential position at the imperial court, but also that her previous social status was not legitimate. Apparently, she only received visitors because of her presence at Nero's side<sup>63</sup>. The same sentiment is expressed in Tacitus' description of Agrippina's final hours. After Nero's failed first attempt to kill her, she had retreated to her villa in Bauli. One by one her attendants fled and when finally the last waiting-maid got ready to leave, Tacitus' Agrippina said: "Are you too deserting me?"<sup>64</sup>. Her house had emptied.

### *Conclusion*

In Republican and imperial Rome, the house was seen as a *locus* of public life and a symbol of the status of its male residents. The influential position of elite women turned the houses that they owned, or the residential space with which they were associated the most, into appealing elements of literary discourse. The *topos* of the *domus frequentata*, though foremost used in portrayals of elite men, became increasingly applied to the characterization of women. Yet, to a Roman reader or listener it must have been clear that a woman's crowded house did not exactly mirror that of a man, as it had no formal base. The *domus'* ambiguous character, due to the blurred lines between the public and the private sphere, made the crowded house a forceful and versatile tool of literary character portrayal nonetheless. Central to all the anecdotes discussed in this contribution is the idea that a woman who gathers people around her might, at some

63 — On the impact of being close to the emperor on a person's status and social position, see Paterson, 2007. One could tentatively consider Poppaea Sabina's involvement in Judaism and her role in acquiring Nero's ear on behalf of Flavius Josephus (Jos. *Vita* 16) and again on behalf of an embassy of ten men from Judaea (Jos. *Ant. Jud.* 193-195) as a parallel. Two members of this delegation, moreover, are stated to have remained as hostages with Poppaea, though it is unclear whether they resided in her private quarters, one of her properties outside of Rome or elsewhere. Even though it is not explicitly stated whether these men actually met the empress, nor, if so, where this meeting took place, Poppaea is clearly presented as an intermediary between them and the emperor. I thank the anonymous referee for pointing this out.

64 — Tac. *Ann.* 14.8.

point, become a political force to be reckoned with. The details in these passages differ, as an ancient writer could mould the *topos* of the *domus frequentata* to evoke the message he wanted to communicate.

The differences between Cicero's portrayal of Chelidon and Clodia Metelli, and Plutarch's portrayal of Cornelia and Octavia illustrate this literary mechanism. The nature of a woman's crowded house – i.e. the reputation of her visitors and the activities that took place within the house – contributed to a positive or negative evaluation of her *domus frequentata*. It mattered whether a woman's house was filled with drunks, lovers and other lowlifes, or whether she hosted intellectuals or her husbands' clients, or took care of a group of children. From the literary representation of imperial women during Augustus' reign, it appears that Augustus himself was well aware that activities taking place within the house were often evaluated along the lines of the ideal of female conduct. At least, it was perceived as such by the ancient writers. Ultimately, the *domus Augusti* on the Palatine deserved praise because it was a stage of maternal display with Octavia and Livia as two of its most important representatives.

From the reign of Tiberius onwards, imperial women were increasingly acknowledged in state documents as *public* figures. It was no secret that they could serve as intermediaries between the emperor and the Roman elite. The fact that the *salutatio* of Livia and Agrippina the Younger appears to have been included in the *acta diurna* signals this development. Yet, Julio-Claudian women were never formally recognized as *political* figures, since their position always depended on their male relatives. This meant that their crowded houses usually ceased to be crowded once the formal base of their power had disappeared, as in the case of Tacitus' representation of the house of Germanicus and Agrippina the Elder. Likewise, the deserted house could be seen as illustrative of a woman's downfall, as in the example illustrated by Tacitus of Agrippina Minor's solitude during her daily *salutatio*.

Modern scholarship has often characterized the Julio-Claudian period as a period of trial and error. The portrayals of Julio-Claudian women illustrate this most clearly: whereas state-regulated media, such as imperial coins or senatorial decrees, show that these women were given a visible role in public life and were consequently considered as influential members of society, they were never recognized as formal players in the struggle for power. Describing their residence and its visitors enabled ancient writers to point this out. A modern audience should be aware that an ancient description of a female *domus frequentata* might very well have been a historical reality, but might at the same time also have served as a deliberately fashioned commonplace; a supposedly small, domestic, space in

which writers could situate wider issues of imperial authority, imbalance in gender, and power relations.

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