

# *In the Age of Gold*

Eric Lerner

## CHAPTER ONE

WHEN I RETURNED TO ROME, accompanying the body of my husband, I was greeted by the rumor that I had poisoned him to death.

It was said that I preyed on his fondness for figs. That during the night I painted the lowest hanging fruit on his favorite tree in the garden outside his bedroom at our estate at Nola with a lethal potion, and in the morning I led him to the tree. That I reached for an unadulterated fig from a higher branch and ate it myself to demonstrate not only its deliciousness, but to allay his suspicions, since, as the rumor noted, he greatly feared me. It was said that as he leaned against me for support, I urged him to try one, extolling the virtues of the fruit as a healthful remedy for the stomach ailment from which he suffered. He picked one and ate it, and then, it was said, I offered him another to ensure that by the time he staggered back into the house his death would be assured, and its cause would go undetected.

Like all cunning lies, this rumor has the tantalizing aroma of truth.

The question that begs to be asked is why I waited until he was seventy-six years old and in frail health, when I had numerous opportunities to effect his demise over the course of fifty-three years of marriage?

But my husband long ago observed that it is counterproductive to question the veracity of a rumor, since its mere repetition with your own lips increases its power exponentially.

Instead, he taught me that the only question that should be asked, you should ask yourself, in silence: *Who will profit from this rumor?*

WE LEFT ROME IN THE FIRST DAYS of August to escape the stifling summer heat of the city. At Asura, we took advantage of a favorable wind to sail on the evening tide for Capreae, but before we reached our destination, my husband took ill with the stomach ailment that plagued him intermittently for his whole life. During the four days we spent at our villa, he was unable to ingest solid food.

My husband's health was always a concern to those around him, and his demise was incorrectly predicted on several occasions, most enthusiastically by himself. I never chided him for his hypochondria, since he survived several acute bouts of fever that would have killed any other man if he possessed a wife less devoted to keeping him alive.

Unlike my late husband, I have always been a paragon of good health. I have not spent a day of my life in bed due to illness or even a female complaint. While my constitution is undoubtedly strong, what one is

constituted of can either be weakened or strengthened by one's activities. I have endured with good humor the jibes of my children and grandchildren and even visitors to my home regarding my prescriptions for what ails them.

As a young woman I became a devoted adherent of Asclepiades of Prousius, a rhetorician, not a physician, which earned him the enmity of the so-called professional practitioners who resented his critique of their barbaric and invasive methods. For the prevention of illness, Asclepiades prescribes a gentle regime of good diet, moderate exercise, and tonics derived from plants. I have taken advantage of my extensive travels to experiment with a wide range of roots and herbs whose salutary properties have proven remarkable. I also recommend the daily intake of at least one cup of the wine of Pucinum, whose grapes I have cultivated for many years at my estate at Prima Porta.

AFTER WE LEFT CAPREAE to attend a gymnastics exhibition at Napule, my husband's condition still had not improved. Rather than continue our journey south as we had originally planned, we headed for Nola, his family's ancestral estate, a place of tranquility where he could rest and recover before returning to Rome. We arrived there late in the day on August 14, and both of us immediately felt better.

We had been away from Nola for too long, and the first thing I did was inspect my gardens and orchard. My avid interest in horticulture is a natural complement to my expertise in the maintenance of human health. At Nola, I have a small grove of fig trees whose genus bears my name, *Liviana*, and its fruit is renowned for its sweetness. As you probably guessed, this is the fruit the pathetic rumor claims I used to poison my husband. What kind of simpleton believes he'd eat unripe fruit? Everyone knows that fig trees are harvested in the autumn.

EARLY THE NEXT MORNING I found him on the veranda of his bedroom, seated at a small table, wrapped in a shawl, and wearing a hat with a brim nearly as wide as an umbrella to shade his sensitive skin from the sun. He was gazing at the garden. Late summer perennials bloomed at the bottom of the small hill that slopes away from the house. While he never quite understood my fondness for cultivating plants, he appreciated the enjoyment I derived from the activity as well as its results.

I placed before him a cup of the remedy I'd freshly prepared from the root of the elecampase plant, whose bitter nature is tempered by grinding it, marinating it in vinegar and water, and then mixing it with fruit and honey. He wrinkled his face in dread as he solemnly lifted the cup to his lips,

closing his eyes as he drained it in one long draught. His expression changed from despair to pleasure, as if he were in some kind of sexual transport. Placing the empty cup on the table, he exhaled as if he had just reached a climax and pronounced, “My dear...I am...cured!”

He was a marvelous performer. Certainly soldiering wasn't his greatest gift. Only one of the many ironies of his life was the fact that this man who rose higher than any before him in our martial society posed a greater threat of injury to himself than to his enemies when he drew his sword. He often said he would have been content to have made a career of his first appointed office, directing public spectacles, but that was merely a clever line. The stage he required for his theatrical production was the entire world, and he needed to be not only the play's director, but its author, and, of course, its leading actor.

Once, a very long time ago, when we were still young, I crept quietly down the hallway before dawn to the door to his room and slipped it open a crack to observe him, as he rose with the sun, believing himself entirely alone. As he opened his eyes to the first rays of sunlight, his face assumed the unself-conscious self-consciousness of the actor working at his craft, conveying not true emotions, but skillful renditions.

Perhaps he knew I was watching him.

IN ROME, MY HUSBAND oversaw the administrative and military affairs of the empire from our house on the Palatine, keeping his freedman secretaries busy from dawn until late in the evening. Several of his secretaries accompanied him when he traveled, so there was no interruption in the flow of communication between him and the Senate, civic magistrates, military commanders, provincial governors, client monarchs, ambassadors, bankers, men of commerce, and even ordinary citizens who frequently presented their legal petitions directly to him.

That morning, while he was busy reviewing the contents of the newly arrived dispatch pouches, I consulted with the estate's chief arborist concerning an infestation of mites damaging the youngest of my fruit trees. I received several notes of various lengths from my husband, and I read them carefully, swatting away the tiny midges that came out with the morning sun as the messenger waited for me to reply. His last missive, however, requested my presence, so I left the problem of the mites to my arborist and trudged up the hill. I found him alone in his makeshift office looking disconsolate. He swept his hand across the pages of a document laid out before him on his worktable. I recognized it and wondered why he'd taken it on our journey.

“I am considering emendations.”

“Really.”

We’d spent an excruciating amount of time composing this account of the acts and deeds of his life that would take the place of the traditional funerary tablets placed beside the departed’s remains. Unlike those pithy memoriam, written in a loving and appreciative third-person voice, this was a tribute in the first person to himself. According to our architect’s estimate, it would stretch some thirty feet when inscribed on the bronze plates to be affixed to the exterior of his mausoleum, that hideous monstrosity he’d constructed when he was thirty years old. His exhaustive account included mind-numbing lists of the battles he won, the peoples and territories he pacified, the honors accorded him, the offices he held, and every single building, temple and park he constructed.

“*Emendations?* I can’t imagine what we left out?”

Ignoring my sarcasm he rose to his feet. Assuming his pose of public oratory he lifted the first page from the pile. My husband was not a tall man. In his youth, his rather diminutive stature and slender physique earned him derision as a pansy. Only in his latter years did he stop wearing sandals with extra soles bound to augment his height, because: *I no longer give a shit*. He began his recitation:

*In my nineteenth year, on my own initiative and at my own expense, I raised an army with which I restored liberty to the Republic, which had been oppressed by the tyranny of a faction. I drove the men who slaughtered my father into exile with a legal order, punishing their crime, and afterward, when they waged war on the Republic, I conquered them in two battles.*

He lowered the page and looked at me questioningly, as if I'd never heard the words before, when I practically knew them by heart.

“Does the omission of his name still bother you?” I asked.

“Perhaps I am experiencing an attack of filial piety,” he smiled wryly, “which serves no good purpose.”

We had discussed the issue extensively before arriving at the opaque introductory lines that don't refer by name to Julius Caesar, who did not become *his father* until after his death, when Caesar's posthumous adoption of his nephew elevated from obscurity the nineteen-year-old then known as Gaius Octavius.

Caesar's assassins, the so-called *Defenders of the Republic*, claimed that Caesar intended to make himself King of Rome, and thus it was not murder they had committed but the legal act of tyrannicide. When my husband avenged his father's death and acquired for himself more power than Caesar ever dreamt of, when he put an end to a hundred years of bloody

civil wars between the factions of the nobility, his survival depended on his ability to convince Rome that he was not, and never would be, their king.

*When I had extinguished the flames of civil war, after receiving by universal consent the absolute control of affairs, I handed over the Republic from my power to the will of the Senate and People of Rome. And for this merit of mine, by a Senate decree, I was given the title Augustus.*

But how would Augustus rule?

*A civic crown was fixed over my door and a gold shield placed in the Senate house, and the inscription of that shield testified that the Senate and Roman People had given it to me for my virtue, clemency, justice, and my piety.*

*After that time, I took precedence over all in rank, but of power I possessed no more than those who were my colleagues in any magistracy.*

With only a civic crown on his door, he was merely *Princeps*, the First Man of Rome. He refused every offer of extraordinary powers. His power resided in his name:

*Augustus.*

How elegant, the way he reminds posterity that he had been adopted yet again, this time by the god Apollo, who bestowed upon him this mysterious sacred name, a unique honorific that eclipses the glory of the

ancient families whose impious lust for wealth and power brought chaos and destruction down upon Rome.

Augustus held closed the gates of war for over forty years. Forty uninterrupted years of peace and prosperity. We expressed all of this perfectly in the account of his life, so why change it now?

“You should take a long nap,” I suggested, “to allow the elecempase to calm your distressed intestines, which seem to be impairing your critical faculties.”

“I had a significant dream last night.”

I sighed, unable to hide my disinterest. “All your dreams are significant.”

“This dream was of particular significance. You would find it fascinating.” He waited patiently until my eyes met his, eyes that have been commented on so often by his biographer, his friends, and the poets, yet they all missed their most unique property—the way those curious blue orbs altered their shade to enhance his particular role in whatever play he cast himself at any given moment.

In scenes of friendship, in the company of the men who embraced him with an absolute loyalty and affection that he returned in kind, his eyes shone like the late afternoon sky warmed by the sun’s radiance. At other

times, though, they were only dimly illuminating, like the pale blue of dawn, and men found themselves squinting uncomfortably into his gaze until a sense of fatigue overcame them and they lost their will to resist him.

But at moments like this—I hesitate to say, *with me*, because I doubt moments like this occurred exclusively with me—the pupils seemed to grow in size, as if an eclipse were hiding the whites of the twin suns, and the blue of his eyes darkened like the sea off the island of Samos, beckoning me to step off a high cliff and plunge into the terrifyingly inviting waters.

“Aren’t you going to ask me what I dreamt, Livia?” he murmured seductively, as if holding a knotted cord of the softest calfskin, tempting me to express my desire for its touch across my flesh.

I couldn’t help myself. “Tell me your dream.”

“It was amazing!” He reached for my hand. “I was engaged in a game of dice.”

“How pleasant.”

While he was fond of wagering on anything from horses to whether one of his grandchildren had shit his diaper, rolling dice was a near addiction for him. “The stakes kept rising, higher and higher.” Eyes widening, he cupped his right hand, waving it in front of him, miming the shaking of the dice, while his half-pressed lips perfectly mimicked the sound of the clicking

bones. Then he cut off my laughter with a sudden sharp look, and his voice dropped to a whisper, the familiar device he employed to make you lean toward him, paying the closest attention to catch his every word. “And then, like the cold shiver you feel when a blade cuts your flesh, I realized: *This was my final roll of the dice!*”

I must not have conveyed sufficient comprehension, because he flashed his impatience at having to spell it out for me. “The game cannot go on forever, Livia. Sooner or later we all get one last roll.”

“I suppose that’s true.”

“Of course it’s true!” he snapped, then he bit his lip to maintain his imperturbability, a quality he was famous for, but which, like all fame we enjoy, inevitably taunts us.

“I hope you didn’t wager anything belonging specifically to me. In your dream, I mean.”

He gave me a thin smile. “I wagered everything, Livia. I bet...my entire legacy.”

So that was what this was all about. You see, my husband had not only been obsessed for nearly forty years by his impending demise, but also by his self-appointed task of ensuring that the world would continue to run according to his wishes even after his death. Now, as the end of his life

loomed inescapably before him, his project had become a lead ball chained to the iron collar welded around the neck of a defeated enemy who is forced to march in his conqueror's triumphal procession, staggering with the weight of his humiliation clutched in his hands.

"Livia, I was terrified, but I had no choice!" He shook his fist furiously in my face. "I had to fling the bones!" He opened his hand slowly. "The dice flew. I watched them land, rolling and rolling and rolling, until finally they came to rest."

"And?"

"Nothing."

"*Nothing?*"

"Utter darkness."

I was disappointed. "You woke up in the middle of the night?"

"Nooooo!" he roared. "I was dead! When the dice stop rolling on your last toss, you are as dead as the miserable beast whose bones you threw! That's the point of my dream. I've wasted too many days of too many years wagering on the one outcome I'll never get to see. I'll never know if my last wishes will be obeyed because Lucretius is right, of course: *When we are dead we don't even know we are dead.* And I will certainly never know posterity's judgment of me. Isn't that tragic?"

“Then why do I detect irony in your voice?”

“Because I have come up with a solution to the problem. That’s why I called you here, tearing you away from your genuinely urgent task of exterminating the insects plaguing your fruit trees. Watch.”

He held up his hands, fingers splayed wide, like a street magician introducing his trick by showing the audience he has nothing to hide. With great exaggeration he piled the pages of his life’s account one atop the other into a neat sheaf which he proceeded to tear in half, tossing the scraps in the air and watching with great satisfaction as they landed all over the floor. I was not impressed. He had countless copies stashed in safe places in addition to the original deposited with his will in the trust of the Vestals.

“So,” he addressed me in his tone of formal instruction, “now you’re free to fashion something simpler for my funerary tablets, along the lines of: *He outlived all expectations, was married to the same woman for an unfathomable length of time, and loved dice.*”

I should have been amused because his performance was superb, but it was not designed to amuse, but rather to disturb me.

“As for the latest iteration of my Last Will and Testament, I am replacing it with simpler instructions. I want my entire estate—the gold, the silver, the deeds to my properties, etc.—piled at the foot of the enormous

statue of myself that stands in the magnificent Forum I so benevolently constructed for the people of Rome. When my funeral pyre is lit, the most distinguished senators will be invited to take up arms and fight it out for everything that was mine, including my authority.” His eyes widened and his lips twisted into a mad grin, a frightening portrayal of an utter lunatic. “I will restore the Ancient Republic of Rome at last, not the fantasy those simpering sons of the nobility have whined and schemed for all of my life. I will give them what they aren’t even old enough to remember, and when they have it, they’ll weep to the gods to bring back Augustus! If Vergilius were still alive, he’d compose the verses to describe the fires of war blazing once again, the smoke blotting out the sun, the people sacrificing on the altars to propitiate my departed spirit. It will be glorious! I won’t have to beg posterity to remember me well! This brilliant plan ensures it!”

Those fantastic words are as close to verbatim as my command of prose can capture. I realize my readers are familiar with the current style of writers who include in their accounts of past events lengthy dialogues they obviously never heard themselves, but fancifully composed, to bolster their biased judgments of great men. But unlike the so-called historians—carrion incapable of the kill, scavengers content to safely come upon the scene after danger has passed, picking bits of rotted flesh from the bones of nobler

beasts who fought gallantly for their lives—I took part in every battle, every conflict, every scene I am setting down for you in this memoir.

Amusing as his words were, however, my husband's dark mood that morning wearied me, and whatever was causing his distress, I could not stand it.

“Livia, where are you going?”

“Back to my orchard. Where I can be of some use.”

He did not attempt to stop me as I walked out of the room.

## CHAPTER TWO

ON THE MORNING OF THE DAY after the next, sitting before the mirror in my dressing room, I was still affected by our conversation, and it must have shortened my patience with my hairdresser. She was a last-minute substitute for my beloved Appella, who took ill and had to be left behind in the city. I was anxious to try on my sandal maker's recent attempt to alleviate the discomfort my exceptionally rounded arches—once such a fetching detail of my physiognomy—were causing at this advanced stage in my life, but the hairdresser's efforts were appalling, and I pulled all the pins free and told her to start over.

That was when my husband's cries from the other end of the hallway startled us. The tortured quality of his recitation of every simile for *excrement* roused me in alarm. I shook the hairdresser's fingers from my head as if fighting off a swarm of hornets and ran barefoot down the hall dressed only in my tunic.

I flung open the door to his bedroom without knocking. He stood beside his bed, held upright by the old freedman Philogenes and his son, with his arms around their necks. The boy clutched the hem of my husband's tunic to avoid the mudslide of shit oozing down his legs. A pool of piss

lapped against his bare feet on the tiled floor. His prick, as if deeply embarrassed by its own incontinence, was shriveled in shame, and his ball sack swung back and forth as his hips swayed precariously atop his strangely pliable legs.

Philogenes said they'd answered his summons immediately but were too late to help him to the toilet closet down the hall. Another young boy rushed in with a basin of fresh water and clean towels, and the three of them managed to keep him upright and lift his arms to remove his tunic. My husband stood there naked as they cleaned him, his eyes glazed, focusing on the intake and exhalation of every breath.

I tried to make sense of what I was staring at. I didn't recognize the chicken legs encased in scaly skin that had replaced his slim, down-covered limbs, or the sunken sack of his chest, filled with bones pushing out against the rough cloth that had somehow grown over the taut smooth skin once cool to my touch. And where his flat stomach used to lie, a distended globe was now rolling around over his vanished waist like a grotesque Cyclops head with a single, rheumy eye leering at me.

"Gaius!" I screamed, startling everyone in the room except him.

His eyes suddenly cleared, revealing the cold pale light of dawn.

"Go!" he bellowed, lifting one arm off Philogenes' shoulder and pointing his

finger at me, his tongue scraping his dry mouth for the moisture to let the words slip through his lips: “F...fix...your...hair!”

My hair indeed fell wildly to my shoulders, and in his humiliation, his naked aged body fouled by shit and piss, he insisted on maintaining his dignity by upbraiding me for my unkempt state. I nodded, indicating that my husband’s criticism was perfectly reasonable, then I bolted from the room.

I could not fix my hair. I could not apply a thin shell of powder and rouge to my face and accent my eyes with color to make myself presentable. I didn’t chastise my attendants. It wasn’t their fault the oval mirror rimmed with gold hanging on the wall before me had become a void in which my image no longer appeared.

He was dying.

Grief would come later, but the blow had landed like Neptune’s fist, a sudden, swelling wave rising unexpectedly in a storm, curling over the ship’s deck, smashing the vessel’s timbers and snatching me up in the God of the Seas’ hostile embrace. My chest heaved out to suck in as much air as I could gather before I was dragged beneath the surface into a cold dark uncertain world.

WHEN I RETURNED, composed, dressed and made-up, the physician Hirtius who traveled with us was directing Philogenes and his son to settle my husband into his bed, placing two pillows beneath his head. He nodded gravely as I moved to the bedside and lifted my husband's hand that lay limply across his chest to check his pulse. His eyes did not open as I pressed my fingers against his wrist.

“Weak. Thready.” The physician noted apologetically.

I nodded as I felt the uncertain throb of blood. I gently pulled the blanket down to place my ear against his tunic. His chest rose as if commanded by a stern galley-master, ribs swelling as the oars pulled hard, but collapsing quickly, the rowers exhausted by their effort. I detected a faint gurgling in his lungs. His heart was failing. I'd read descriptions in the texts, but as with most accounts, like those of battle and love, the approximation pales beside the reality.

“Madame.” The physician's imploring tone annoyed me. I reluctantly lifted my head from my husband's chest.

“His heart is failing,” I pronounced. “There is no treatment.”

The man almost fell at my feet in gratitude for lifting the onus of failure from him. I detest obsequiousness.

“Livia.” My husband’s eyes fluttered open. He’d heard everything. I took his hand again, and he squeezed my fingers as I beheld him through a blur of tears. I couldn’t hear his faint words, so I leaned closer, feeling the faint breeze of his breath against my cheek. “Livia...take care...”

“Shhhh.”

“Take care!” He was agitated.

“I will be all right.”

“Take care of...the...witnesses.”

*The witnesses.*

Of course. Not wanting the account of his death to pass into history unscripted by himself, and not trusting anyone who might simply by chance be present at his demise to relate it afterward, we’d drawn up lists of reliable witnesses who could be called upon at every place we visited these days.

“I’ll summon the witnesses. Don’t worry.”

He smiled and squeezed my hand, then closed his eyes, breathing more peacefully. Was that all he had to say to me? How could he lie there with his eyes closed, oblivious to my tears and my love and my impending loss, obsessed, as always, with what the world would think of him now and for eternity?

I wanted to kill him and not with some ridiculous poisoned fig. I wanted to put my fingers around his shriveled neck and strangle him!

*WHAT IN THE WORLD is upsetting you, Livia?*

For fifty-three years he found it incomprehensible that I had any concerns of my own, besides him, but for that, I must admit, since the purpose of this memoir, insofar as is possible, is to present an entirely honest portrait of myself, he did not bear sole responsibility. From the very beginning, through the long middle, right up until the end, and even now, as I write these words years later, I found his concerns so compelling it was impossible for me to resist being drawn into his strangling embrace, even as I knew that in the deepest sense he was oblivious to my existence. But somehow this made me oblivious as well, and aren't we all in one way or another seduced by oblivion? Only he could draw me out of myself with a spell cast by the radiance of his mind, closing the distance between us, a distance that never actually closed, but was always so tantalizingly near to closing.

IN THE DRAMATIC LIGHT of a forest of candles burning in their elegant copper holders, illuminating the household's ancestral statues arrayed around his

deathbed, I was joined in the early evening by the witnesses—his oldest family friends whose fathers were present at the death of his father in that same room nearly seventy years before. As his breathing grew more labored, and the physician signaled that the end was near, I went to his bedside and whispered, “It is time.” He was still conscious. His lips moved, but no sound emerged. How had he convinced me he would be able to utter the words he’d carefully composed for posterity? I had to improvise.

I put my ear to his lips, positioning my body so no one could see that he wasn’t speaking, and I feigned a somber expression, as if deeply moved by what he was saying to me. Then I straightened up and turned to the witnesses to repeat the words he’d supposedly whispered to me.

*“In this comedy called life, have I played my part well?”*

For a moment, they stared at me with looks of incomprehension. Then they got it—the traditional question posed by the leading actor to his audience when the play ends. They spontaneously broke into applause. I lowered my head as if taking a bow for him.

“Livia!”

His cry startled us all. His eyes flew open, and he spoke clearly now, his very last words, impromptu, “Livia, remember our marriage.”

*REMEMBER OUR MARRIAGE?*

How? Fondly? With thoughts of him warming me in his cold absence until the end of my days? It was not a final endearment he bestowed upon me but a warning, a caution, a command, which I have considered carefully since his death, weighing whether or not to continue with this project of my memoirs in the face of his injunction to keep quiet and remember the terms we agreed upon so long ago.

I must admit—already a second admission in my scrupulously honest account—that he kept his part of the bargain. What I am chafing against is the fact that he defined the bargain entirely in the first place.

*Don't do it, Livia. Don't betray us.*

Like the warning poor Eurydice was given as she left the underworld.

*Don't look back.*

AFTER ACTIUM—which was not a great battle, regardless of the colossal monument he erected to himself afterward on the site, since a battle can be great only if there was at least some doubt as to the outcome, and there was none at Actium—after he caused the suicide of his former brother-in-law Marcus Antonius, which he claimed Antonius bungled, after he put Cleopatra to death, inventing a particularly imaginative version of *her*

suicide, and after he buried them both in Alexandria far from Rome, Gaius Caesar's ability to rule as no man had ever ruled before him depended not only on his ability to convince his countrymen that he was not a Dictator or a King, but more importantly that he was not Marcus Antonius.

Only a decade before Actium, Marcus Antonius was unquestionably the First Man of Rome in the eyes of the people as well as the nobility, the brilliant general who vanquished Caesar's murderers at the Battle of Philippi while the lowborn despot *Octavianus*—that was the derisive name his enemies called Gaius Caesar then, denying his claim of Julian nobility he'd inherited from his Divine Father—cowered for his life in a swamp as the fighting raged. But ten years later, when Marcus Antonius led his fleet out of the harbor of Alexandria to meet the navy of Gaius Caesar in the bay of Actium, he'd been transformed by our army of scribes and graphic artists, our legions of agents whispering lies and inciting hostile demonstrations in the streets, and by the grave speeches of statesmen and generals loyal to our cause—thanks to the bribes and promises we made them—into the most demonic, subversive, depraved threat ever faced by the Republic of Rome.

*Marcus Antonius has betrayed his country! He abandoned his chaste, noble Roman wife! He is besotted by lust for the Foreign Witch Queen Cleopatra who seeks to enslave Rome under her Despotism!*

The charges were scrawled on the walls of the city, and luridly illustrated in the hand-painted pamphlets delivered to the homes of prominent men, depicting Antonius on his knees being fucked in the ass by Cleopatra on the steps of the Capitoline, from whence, she purportedly boasted, she would *dispense justice*. The image incited the ancient terror—even greater than the anathema of being subjected to the rule of a king—of Rome being ruled by a *Woman!*

Illegally seizing Marcus Antonius's Last Will and Testament from the sacred trust of the Vestals—that is, if it really was his authentic Will—we revealed that the traitor had secretly married the Egyptian Sorceress and made their foreign bastard his heirs, and even worse, that he intended to put his Witch Queen on an Italian throne to *fuck all of Rome in the ass!*

Thank the gods *Gaius Caesar Augustus* saved us, his stirring victory over Marcus Antonius inaugurating a Golden Age!

MORE THAN THE CREATIVE ACCOUNTS of his life fashioned by his hired biographer Nicolaus of Damascus, more than the idealized statues produced in our workshops and worshiped in every provincial town in the empire—never in Rome, of course, that would have been blasphemy—even more than the records of the Imperial Archives we edited to serve our ends, the

everlasting image of my late second husband that posterity will revere was created by a poem.

The *Aeneid* of Vergilius, though marvelous entertainment and a profound work of artistic imagination, was foremost a vital instrument of our national policy, a tool more powerful than a thousand public speeches and a hundred authorized biographies, because only poetry can create mass amnesia. Like the fires set to clear the fields for planting, the tale of Aeneas, Founder of Rome, obliterated the memories of the survivors of my late second husband's terrifying vengeance and plowed the furrows for the seeds of his Golden Age:

*Here is the man so often promised you,  
Augustus Caesar, a god's son, and bringer  
Of a new age of gold to Saturn's old realm  
Of Latium.*

*He will take our rule past India,  
Past Garamantia, past the solar pathway  
That marks the year, where Atlas hefts the sky  
And turns the high vault set with burning stars...  
The Caspian realm, the land around Macotis  
Already quake at prophecies—he's coming!*

While Rome would never tolerate the tyranny of a *man*, all of us endure as a fact of our human lives the tyranny of the immortal gods. That is piety. Therefore, if my husband's rule was not a manifestation of his personal ambition, but rather the will of the gods as prophesized, then we should rejoice: *He's coming!*

Fortunately we managed to pry the manuscript from Vergilius's clutches before he burnt it. The poor man suffered from a dismal deficiency of appreciation for his own magnificent verse.

But who, exactly, was this man who would fulfill the prophecy?

Not the man Antonius had denigrated in their escalating war of words leading up to Actium, sneeringly characterizing his brother-in-law as *a petty hypocrite* for his moralizing about Antonius's Egyptian mistress, whom he never had the slightest intention of marrying, as we knew perfectly well despite our propaganda. Antonius pointedly reminded Rome: *The Son of the Divine Julius Caesar raped a nobleman's wife, then coerced the nobleman into handing her over to him in marriage.*

He called us the Whore and the Whoremonger, which is why, once Antonius was dead, we obliterated every word he'd ever written, every speech, and every letter, so Vergilius had a clean slate on which to fashion his tale of a hero, who, even though he lived in an age so distant it cannot be

marked in years or centuries, bears a striking resemblance to the man he prophesizes will found the Golden Age.

Through the magic of poetry, the ancient hero Aeneas is simultaneously our hero, *Caesar Augustus*, a hero who, unlike the disgraced, defeated traitor Marcus Antonius, would never abandon his duty, never betray the will of the gods out of *lust for a woman!*

Vergilius dramatizes our hero's estimable virtues with heartrending pathos in the *Aeneid's* fourth book, *The Tale of Dido*.

Aeneas and his band of Trojans fled their wasted homeland following the sack of their glorious city by the treacherous Greeks—who in this truer account of that ancient war are stripped of the specious nobility Homer imputes to his countrymen—charged by the gods to found a new Troy on Latium's shore. When their ships are blown off course, Carthage's Queen Dido offers them refuge. After a sumptuous evening banquet, Aeneas recounts to her his heroic travails, and even though Queen Dido has recently lost her beloved husband, King Sychaeus, and vowed to honor his memory by remaining an unmarried widow, she falls deeply in love with Aeneas. While Aeneas has no wife, he has made a pact with the gods more sacred than that of marriage: He will found a new Troy on Latium's shore.

It is here that the story—my husband’s and mine—becomes tantalizingly confused with the tale of Dido and Aeneas as they embark on their torrid love affair. The next day, as Dido and Aeneas are out riding on an innocent hunting party, the sky suddenly erupts in a howling storm:

*Streams rushed from the hillsides,*

*The Trojan Lord and Dido found the same cave.*

*Primeval Earth and Juno, giver of brides,*

*Signaled, and in collusion lightning flashed*

*At the union.*

*On the mountaintops nymphs howled.*

*From this day came catastrophe and death...*

*No thought of public scandal or of hiding*

*Her passion troubled Dido any longer.*

*She called it marriage, to conceal her shame.*

But Jove, learning that Aeneas has forsaken his pact with the gods for sensual indulgence, sends his messenger Mercury to remind Aeneas of his duty and bring the wayward hero to his senses. Aeneas is chastened:

*His hair stood up, and words stuck in his throat.*

*He burned to run—however sweet this land was.*

He calls his men together and orders them to rig the ships, keeping their departure a secret from Dido. It doesn't work. Dido confronts him:

*You traitor, did you think you could hide*

*Such a great crime, that you could sneak away?*

But in the face of her tearful entreaties, Aeneas manifests the virtues of a true hero:

*He kept his eyes down, at Jove's orders,*

*Struggling to force his feelings from his heart.*

Aeneas remains steadfast, deaf to her pleas and threats:

*His fate and Jove were barriers to his ears.*

*In his noble heart he suffered,*

*But tears did nothing. His resolve endured.*

As Aeneas's ships sail out of the harbor, the heartbroken Dido plunges her sword into her chest.

And what is Aeneas's response to this wonderful, generous Queen's death that he caused?

*Aeneas resolutely voyaged far out*

*Through bills driven black by the north wind.*

Unlike Marcus Antonius, whose irresolute manhood was sapped by a woman, and who sacrificed his country for his lust.

IT WOULD HAVE BEEN MUCH EASIER if, after Actium, he'd simply left me, as Aeneas left Dido—*resolutely*—leaving sordid passion and scandal behind, to fulfill the prophecy of the gods, but instead of divorcing me, he transformed me, as he transformed himself.

He became an austere, pious, virtuous, self-sacrificing old Roman, working diligently on behalf of the people from his modest house, appearing among his fellow citizens not borne in a luxurious litter, but on foot, clad in a worn tunic with ratty sandals on his feet.

And his wife Livia? She is the embodiment of the ancient, chaste matrona, the keeper of the household flame, spinning homespun cloth for her husband's modest garments. Not Cleopatra, not Dido, but, *the Mother of the Country*.

Behold my public likenesses! Atop the smooth, idealized planes of my marble face is that ridiculous severe knot of hair I had my hairdresser compose as a joke to demonstrate the absurdity of this masquerade, but my husband thought it was perfect and insisted I wear it everywhere, and sure enough, every fashionable woman in the city soon slavishly imitated me. He thought it hilarious. And I was supposed to finally pass from this world as

amused as he was by the comedy he'd created and the role he concocted for me.

UNLIKE THE JEWS, a people my late husband held in the highest regard, despite the erratic character of our client King Herod—I am still the principal patron of the largest synagogue in the city—we Romans take no comfort in a belief that the gods will even bother to recall our earthly existence once we are gone, much less pass judgment upon us, no matter how pious our lives. Instead, a Roman seeks the acclaim of his fellow men for his actions, acclaim that adds luster to his name, a name that will shine forever in the minds of posterity.

We believe honor and glory are the ultimate prizes free men compete for in their lifetime, and this belief is inculcated in every male adolescent as part of his formal education. My own sons, grandsons, great-grandsons, and nephews too numerous to enumerate all honed their rhetorical skills under the watchful eyes of their tutors by reciting the famous speeches of Rome's greatest men, including my Claudian ancestors—an immortal glory far greater than the harsh and capricious favor Yaweh begrudges his Jews—imagining how future generations would repeat their words, recount their deeds, and remember their names forever.

Glory, however, does not adhere to the name of a woman, because we don't even have a name to attach it to! We are known simply as the daughters of our fathers, and if we have sisters, we use nicknames to distinguish one *Antonia* or *Julia* or *Cornelia* from another. More to the point, the activities that bring honor to a man are forbidden to a woman. We bear children, not arms. We cannot vote, much less hold public office. We can't even enter the Senate house lest we pollute it. We bear sons for our husbands, our masters. For a woman, *ambitious* is as derogatory an adjective as *effeminate* is for a man. Men honorably pursue their ambitions on the battlefield—they even claim assassinating their rivals is an honorable act—but women, it is said, fulfill their devious ambitions through treachery. Much has been made of my so-called ambitions and what I purportedly did to fulfill them. It is the fetid well from which every vicious slur upon my reputation has been drawn.

Long before I purportedly killed my husband, I purportedly poisoned his nephew Marcellus, his heir at the time. When he banished his daughter Julia, never to see her again, it was whispered that I forced him to do it. When he made his daughter's sons his new heirs, and they died in their youth, I was blamed, of course, supposedly seeking to promote the interests

of my own son. And I have no doubt that every terrible event that has transpired since the death of Augustus will be falsely ascribed to me.

Hence, this memoir.