

MASTER'S THESIS

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The Literary Character of the Roman Emperor Commodus

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Introduction

In most literature, both ancient and modern, the Roman emperor Commodus (A.D. 180-192) is presented in simplistic and overwhelmingly negative terms. He is a madman, a megalomaniac, stupid and debauched, seemingly possessing no redeeming qualities. Commodus was once a real person who was likely more complex than how he is presented in most texts, but that person has been gone for nearly two thousand years. Today, he exists only as a literary character, with characteristics bestowed upon him by people other than himself. This literary character, who is the very antithesis of a good leader, dates back to the oldest surviving writings about him, from the early third century, and lives on in modern historiography. This thesis will explore how and why the character of Commodus was created, and what has led to its longevity. In so doing, it will also examine the role narrative structures have on our perception of history. To answer the questions surrounding the narrative of Commodus I will provide in-depth analyses of literature about him from three distinct points in time: first from the time of the Roman empire, then the 18th century, i.e. the beginning of modern history, and lastly from historiography written in modern times. I have also analysed physical source material from Commodus' time, such as statues, coins, and inscription. Lastly, I have read and presented a variety of texts concerning historiography, literary traditions, and literary narratives. Roman emperors are usually characterised as either good or evil, with only some nuance of those who were “mostly good” or “mostly evil”, and this dichotomy creates a coherent narrative which is easy to follow. Such a simple narrative can only exist, however, if nuance is removed from the equation, and it is its very simplicity that makes it alluring. Within this framework, Commodus serves as an example of a “bad” emperor, but he is far from the only one. Emperors such as Nero and Caligula are characterised in much the same way as him, and the research conducted in this thesis may well apply to them too. The importance of the discussion about Commodus comes largely from the expanse of this narrative tradition.

The main research question of the thesis is this: which factors have led to the negative narrative that affects both Roman and modern historiography surrounding Commodus? To answer that question, we must also answer others. What led to the creation of this narrative? What is it about the character of Commodus, in the context of narratives surrounding Roman emperors, that appeals to both historians and readers? Do other representations of Commodus exist, and why are those presentations pushed aside in favour of this literary narrative? To answer these questions I will look at the relationship between ancient sources and modern

historiography, as well as the relationship between different pieces of secondary literature, to see what effect these relationships have on how modern historians view and present Commodus in their writings. However, historiography is not the only discipline we need to take into consideration. Narratives also belong in the realm of literature, or fiction, and the relationship between historiography and literature will prove important in explaining the advent and survival of Commodus as a historical and literary character. This is equally important when considering the over-arching narrative of “good” and “bad” emperors.

The thesis will start with a short discussion on the literature I have used for the research, followed by a chapter on methodology and theoretical perspectives. Following that is a discussion on Roman historiography and biography with an overview of the characteristics of Roman historiography. After that I will provide descriptions of Commodus as presented in the ancient literary sources, and a discussion on what led to the creation of this character. We will then turn to the physical source material that has survived from his reign, focusing especially on coinage and statuary, as we can construct a different story of Commodus based on these sources than the one presented in the ancient literature. Afterwards, we will look at how Septimius Severus, Commodus’ successor, is presented in the works of Dio Cassius and Herodian, and in the *Historia Augusta*, as well as how the narratives of the two of them fit into the larger narrative of “good” and “bad” emperors. An overview of how Commodus is characterised in Edward Gibbon’s *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* follows. Gibbon should not be treated as a source on Commodus, nor as part of the modern debate, considering his work was published in the late 18th century, but given the importance his work has had over the years it may provide insight into traditions that still bear importance today. Following this is an overview of what is said about Commodus in modern works of history, discussing similarities and differences between the narratives, and pointing out the most important elements these texts contain. The thesis concludes with a discussion on narratology, comparing the qualities and importance of historical and fictional narratives.

The research conducted for the thesis has been done through reading and analysing a variety of texts available through Oria, JSTOR, the Nord University library, and the Norwegian system of University Libraries. I have read all available texts on Commodus written between 1980 and today. Since I am looking at the significance of the character of Commodus in modern times, I concluded this to be a good timeframe. I have similarly read about Septimius Severus, although less extensively than Commodus, as he plays a smaller role in the thesis. The existing literary sources on Commodus, i.e. Dio Cassius’ *Roman*

History, Herodian's *History of the Empire since the Death of Marcus*, and the *Historia Augusta* have been thoroughly read and analysed, as have modern texts examining different aspects of these sources. I, unfortunately, do not know ancient Greek, and have therefore read the texts translated into modern English. No matter how good a translation is, some nuance and details will be lost. I have therefore not put too much stock into the exact wording of the sources, instead focusing on the overall meaning of the passages. When necessary, I have consulted multiple translations.¹ Physical source material has also been thoroughly examined. I have looked at important pieces from Commodus' reign in their own right, as well as interpretations made by historians and literature regarding the role of physical sources. By examining all sources and secondary literature surrounding Commodus, as well as literary traditions surrounding emperors, I hope to understand both how and why the character of Commodus was born, and why it has survived until today.

Literature

The research I have conducted for this thesis is twofold. First, there is the ancient and modern literature regarding Roman history, mainly focused on Commodus. Second is the literature regarding historiography and narratology. In this thesis it will be natural to have a systematic overview of the historical literature later, in which the ancient sources and the modern historiography will be treated separately. This chapter will provide an overview of the literature regarding historiography and narratology.

Hayden White's *Metahistory* was published in 1973. It caused a revolution in how history is viewed and worked with, and his ideas of history as constructed narratives instead of discovered truths about the past is central to this thesis. White represents a shift in how historical research is conducted, and what we consider history. Before *Metahistory* was published, history was widely considered a discipline similar to the natural sciences, where one could, through rigorous study and research, find objectively correct answers. This view is no longer widely accepted. Instead, historians generally agree that history is, in some way, shape, or form, created by its authors. Alun Munslow, in *Deconstructing History*, took the notion of history as a construction further, and argued that history and fictional literature are

¹ For Dio Cassius, I have used the translation by Earnest Cary and Herbert B. Foster, as well as the proofread version on LacusCurtius, founded by William Thayer. For Herodian's *History of Rome* I have used Edward C. Echols' translation, and compared passages with C. R. Whittaker's translation, provided by the Loeb Classical Library. For the *Historia Augusta* I have used the translation by David Magie, and compared passages with the translation provided by LacusCurtius.

created in the same manner. The ideas presented by White and Munslow are vital to the perspectives on historiography argued for later in the thesis, and will be discussed further in the chapter *Methodology and Theoretical Perspectives*.

In addition to the works of White and Munslow, I have used several articles from the collaborative book *Tropes for the Past: Hayden White and the History/Literature Debate*, published in 2006, which addresses and expands upon the ideas set forth by White approximately three decades earlier. Korhonen, in his *General Introduction*, gives an overview of the role history and poetry had in antiquity, during which both of them were rhetorical arts with similar functions. He argues this similar start points to intrinsically shared characteristics between the two disciplines, which is complementary to the arguments made by White in *Metahistory*.² Stierle, in his article *Narrativization of the World*, argues that the world, as experienced by people, is made mainly of narratives. We understand and make sense of the world through narrativization in different modes and genres, and at scales ranging from conversations in small families to society as a whole.³ The last article, *Narratives of the Fake* by Burrell, makes a point of how narratives can be so persuasive as to surpass the real world in believability. By trying to make sense of the world we create stories that seem logical, even if they are at odds with “what really happened.”⁴ This is the power good storytelling has over us.

The three aforementioned books are all written with historians as the intended audience, and deal mainly with historiography, though several of them make arguments for the similarity between history and literature. To expand on the idea of history as literature, and the role of narrativity in historiography, I have included *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*. This book provides extensive discourse on the different definitions of narrative, and the way narrativity affects storytelling. In it, Abbott argues for narrative storytelling to be central to what it means to be human. Lastly, I have included Velarde’s *The Lion, the Witch, and the Bible*. Velarde looks into the functions narratives of “good versus evil” have in fictional stories, using C. S. Lewis’ *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* as an example. The thesis will similarly look into how the narrative of “good versus evil” affects historiography, and some of the points brought up by Velarde are as relevant for history as they are for fiction. In his view, books should contain evil characters to prepare the reader for the evils they might encounter in real life. On the flip side, by showcasing good characters,

² Korhonen, 2006, p. 9

³ Stierle, 2006, p. 73

⁴ Burrell, 2006, p. 105

literature can instil good values in its reader. Roman historiography, as will be discussed under *Roman Historiography and Biography*, had a similar function.

The view researchers and historians have on history has changed greatly since the publication of *Metahistory* in 1973, and since then several historians have theorised and expanded upon the idea of history as a literary, rather than scientific, discipline. Much of what authors such as Abbott and Velarde say in regard to fictional stories hold true for historiography as well, and should be considered when examining the literary and narrative qualities of history. This thesis is at its core a discussion about narratology in history, and should be considered as part of an ongoing discussion about the relationship between literature, narratology, and history.

Methodology and Theoretical Perspectives

In the introduction I outlined the kinds of texts I have read for the purpose of the thesis. The bulk of them consist of literature about Commodus, sources written during the third and fourth century A.D., Gibbon's *Decline and Fall*, and modern historiography written after 1980. Historians typically make a distinction between ancient and modern historiography, claiming the former to be a source and the latter to be secondary literature, but in the context of this thesis that distinction seems artificial. The purpose of the thesis is the examination of a created character, not a real person, and so all texts concerning said character have to be viewed as literature. In the context of this discussion, the obverse is also true. This thesis examines the development of narratives and historical texts, and so all literature should be viewed as sources on this development. This can, of course, be said about all historical characters, but a general discussion of this is outside the scope of this thesis. In the context of Commodus as a created character, there is little difference between the writings of Dio Cassius and the ones of David Potter, apart from the time in which they were written. Modern historians base their writings on these ancient texts, but as will be discussed further in *Commodus in the Literary Sources*, Herodian and the authors of the *Historia Augusta* also based their writings off of Dio Cassius. The use of references is therefore not enough to distinguish between a source and a piece of secondary literature. Throughout the thesis I will refer to sources and secondary literature as such, in order to avoid confusion as to what I am referring to, but the two should not be seen as wholly different from one another. When referring to sources and secondary literature at the same time, I will refer to it as literature.

According to Hayden White, history is created at multiple levels: that of chronicle, story, mode of emplotment, mode of argument, and mode of ideological implication. Chronicle refers to the outline of the historical event. It becomes a story when it is arranged into a discernible beginning, middle, and end, and for a chronicle to be transformed into a story the author needs to make choices as to what to include and how to arrange the information; they need to answer a lot of questions which “determine the narrative tactics the historian must use in the construction of his story.”⁵ The author also decides what kind of story they want to tell, and the structure of the story reflects that choice. Providing the meaning of the story by deciding on its structure is called explanation by emplotment. White believes there to be four structures a story can have, and all stories that exist fall into these four categories, i.e. tragedy, comedy, satire, and romance.⁶ Explanation by formal argument seeks to explain “what it all adds up to” through explicit and discursive argument. Through formal argument, the author creates an argument that rests on some law of causal relationship in which A leads to B. These kinds of generalisations showcase the “proto-scientific character” of historiography.⁷ The last level at which a historical story is created is the mode of ideological implication, in which the author has to reflect upon the ethical element of their work, and the relationship between the knowledge of past events and the understanding of the present.⁸ I will not analyse each text presented in this thesis in each of the terms provided by White, but the notion that history is created through these kinds of choices made by its author is significant for all the literature examined throughout the thesis. Ancient sources, *Decline and Fall*, and modern historiography will all be examined through the same lens, in which they are seen as constructions made by the decisions of their writers. In line with this, I have focused on the relationship between historical presentations of Commodus. Many modern historians’ presentation of Commodus rely on literary sources, or on secondary literature that in turn rely on the literary sources, and repeating the writings of others is a choice in and of itself.

Storytelling is an intrinsic part of human existence; the act of telling stories goes back further than history or literature, and some scholars consider narratives, alongside language itself, to be “*the* distinctive human trait.”⁹ Narratives exist in everything we say and write, from the simplest sentence to the most complex story. At its most basic level, a narrative is

⁵ White, 2015, p. 5-7

⁶ White, 2015, p. 7

⁷ White, 2015, p. 10-11

⁸ White, 2015 p. 21

⁹ Korhonen, 2006, p. 9; Abbott, 2002, p. 1

“the representation of an event or a series of events,” and any more detailed definition is up for debate.¹⁰ Using this definition, there is no difference between a historical and a fictional narrative; both are representations of events. Still, the two are often seen as intrinsically different, where the former tells of real events and the latter of something made up. The divide between them is, however, not so simple. History is seen as dealing with events that actually took place, whereas fiction is not, but in reality, both types of narratives inform the reader of the real world.¹¹ The events in fictional narratives may not have a perfect parallel in the real world, but the author will draw inspiration from reality and transform it into a narrative that deals with real-life issues. In Munslow’s words, the main difference between literature and history is referentiality, i.e. “the accuracy and veracity with which the narrative relates what actually happened in the past.” Literature does refer to the past, but is “not referential in the same manner” as historical texts.¹² He goes on to say

“It follows that, like literature, the past and written history are not the same thing. Not recognising this permits us to forget the difficulties involved in recreating the past – something that does not exist apart from a few traces and the historians’ narrative. Because we cannot directly encounter the past, whether as a political movement, economic process or an event, we employ a narrative fulfilling a two-fold function, as both a surrogate for the past and as a medium of exchange in our active engagement with it. History is thus a class of literature.”

Storytelling, regardless of its form, has to take a subject matter and transform it into “the conceivable more of a story.”¹³ In fiction, we expect things to make sense. There should be a plausible cause and effect for everything that happens, and if that expectation is not met, we consider the story to be bad. This is a quality usually ascribed to fiction, but it is also true for historical narratives. They are constructed in a way that makes the past make sense. In Abbott’s words, “*narrative is the principal way in which our species organizes its understanding of time.*”¹⁴ We create narratives not because they are perfect representations of the past, but because they make the past understandable to us. They are constructed representations of the past that exist because of our interactions with them. Their importance,

¹⁰ Abbott, 2002, p. 12

¹¹ Korhonen, 2006, p. 17

¹² Munslow, 1997, p.4

¹³ Stierle, 2006, p. 74

¹⁴ Abbott, 2002, p. 3

therefore, does not come from their accuracy in relation to the past, but from what we use them for in the present. These narratives should meet expectations we already have, such as the expectation of plausible cause and effect, and we often accept falsehoods simply because they align with our expectations.¹⁵

I have not written this thesis to uncover falsehoods or the “truth” about Commodus, inasmuch as such a truth can even exist. Commodus, the real person, existed in a past that is now inaccessible to us. History, regardless of how well-researched it is and which sources were used, will never be equivalent to the past.¹⁶ When we write history we are not writing down a strictly factual, unbiased play-by-play of the past. We are constructing a present version of the past, based on the limited sources available to us, and transforming this construction to text. History should be viewed as “the creation and eventual imposition by historians of a particular narrative form on the past.”¹⁷ It is this kind of creation and imposition that is the focus of this thesis. The past is behind us, but history, even the history of a Roman emperor who died in 192 A.D., is happening right now, in the sense that history is the stories we tell, and we tell those stories in the present. Therefore, source criticism of the type “is this statement based on real events” or “which source is more reliable” hold less relevance than it does in many other discussions. This type of source criticism will therefore not be discussed in its own right. It will, however, still be brought up at times, as it can be relevant to the discussion at hand why an author included inventions in his narrative. The purpose of this thesis is not to find out “what really happened,” but to look at different narratives of Commodus that can reasonably be construed from the source material, and why alternative narratives have been pushed aside in favour of the singular narrative presented by the literary sources. The reasons behind the inventions in the literary sources can shine a light on how and why a certain narrative was created, and must therefore be considered. It is pertinent to look at why the *Historia Augusta*, as an example, contain certain inventions about Commodus, not because I am trying to find out what is and is not true, but because these falsities, and the reasons behind their inclusion in the text, are part of the narrative about him.

Roman Historiography and Biography

The literary sources pertaining to Commodus are, like many sources from imperial Rome, biographical in nature. The *Historia Augusta* is the most obvious, being a collection of *vitae*,

¹⁵ Burrell, 2006, p. 105

¹⁶ Munslow, 1997, p. 4

¹⁷ Munslow, 1997, p. 2

or lives, of emperors and pretenders. Modern scholars often refer to the *vitae* as biographies. The same is not true of *Roman History* and *The History of the Empire*. Dio Cassius set out to write the entire history of Rome, not the biographies of the most notable individuals.¹⁸ When Herodian describes his literary work, he refers to it as “my history” and points to “the many important events” that happened in his lifetime, not to the important people who lived contemporaneously to him.¹⁹ Both works are, however, centred around the lives of great people. For the entirety of Herodian’s work, and for much of Dio’s, that meant the lives of emperors were front and centre, much like how a collection of biographies is organised.²⁰ The reason why their works follow this biographical structure, even if they might have intended to write classical historical works, is simple; biography was the more widely used genre, and these authors were a product of their time. Duff claimed that “In an age of increasing monopoly of power by the emperors, to write history increasingly meant to write biography, or at least to throw the spotlight on the emperor, on his actions and character.”²¹ This was said in relation to the earlier author Suetonius, but the statement would remain true for the authors of the third and fourth century as well. This is not to say the authors were in the wrong for writing biographies instead of histories; biography was a suitable genre during that time, as society and politics to a large extent revolved around individuals. Additionally, literary scholars would be drawn to biographies as that style of writing “furnished the opportunity to demonstrate rhetorical skills.”²² It is therefore only natural that the literary sources from this period come to us in the form of biography.

The medium in which a text is written does change the content and the ways in which said content is presented. Breisach claims that “in the biographer’s perspective, all of world history shrank to a series of great lives and the moral struggles in them,” as well as character being “the key for explanation.”²³ If the history of the world is nothing but the lives of a few important people, there is a lot of pressure on those people to act ‘well,’ even when there is little consensus on what ‘acting well’ entails. It is therefore natural to assume that if one of those people steps outside the boundary of proper conduct they will be seen as responsible for whatever hardship their people, country, or empire face, even when their conduct was not a determining factor. An emperor ruling during a time when the empire saw decline, either

¹⁸ Hidber, 2004, p. 187

¹⁹ Herodian 1.1.3

²⁰ Duff, 2003, p. 119

²¹ Duff, 2003, p. 104

²² Breisach, 2007, p. 70

²³ Breisach, 2007, p.71

financial, social, military or otherwise, could potentially be presented negatively in biographies because of how much power and influence he had in the author's eyes. Ancient biography was "concerned with the development of moral character," and so the biographies of 'bad emperors', such as Commodus, can be read as cautions to the audience, or as a guide of how not to behave.²⁴ Roman historiography is moral in character, and the goal was largely to educate the masses and teach them how to act morally.²⁵ When biography became the norm this function revolved around the lives and actions of the emperors. Nicolai states that ancient historiography served to create "politico-militaristic or ethical" paradigms and "put forward great personalities, positive or negative, as exempla, so as to fix the parameters of moral evaluation."²⁶ In the historiography from imperial Rome we see this in the creation of the pattern of 'good' and 'bad' emperors, and as will become evident, Commodus fell squarely into the second category.

Commodus in the Literary Sources

Commodus' first appearance in any text was approximately eighteen-hundred years ago, when he featured in Dio Cassius' *Roman History*, written early in the third century. Not long after, he is featured in Herodian's *History of the Empire after the Death of Marcus*, and in the fourth century A.D. he receives his own *vita* in the *Historia Augusta*. These are the three literary sources pertaining to Commodus that have survived until today. This chapter will present each source in turn, looking at how Commodus is characterised and presented in each one. The discussion as to why he is characterised in this manner will feature in *The Narrative of Commodus in the Literary Sources*. First, we must figure out who he is as a character in each text, starting at the beginning with *Roman History*.

Dio Cassius

Dio Cassius was a senator and contemporary of Commodus; in fact, Commodus' reign was the first in which Dio served on the senate.²⁷ He came from a respectable senatorial family, being the son of the senator Cassius Apronianus, and he himself became a senator in 180 A.D.²⁸ Among historians today, Dio is widely discussed in regard to the accuracy and purpose

²⁴ Mellor, 1999, p. 132

²⁵ Melve, 2010, p. 33

²⁶ Nicolai, 2008, p. 92

²⁷ Schultz, 2019, p. 181

²⁸ The Editors of the Encyclopedia Britannica

of his work, and some historians are dismissive of him altogether. The criticisms for his accuracy stems from him often referring to hearsay or anonymous sources for claims he could not know with certainty.²⁹ His work has also been criticised for the political motivations behind it, as “the entire *Roman History* is centred on his vision of an idealised form of Roman monarchical government.” The manner in which Dio researched and wrote *Roman History* should also be noted. He started his research in 200 A.D., and it continued for ten years before he started writing the stories down.³⁰ Given the scope of his work, it is possible that he created certain historical trends in order to either create a coherent narrative or to support his own political ideology. It is also possible that facts were lost or misremembered because of how long it took him to gather his research. The work is nonetheless important to our understanding of Roman history, as he is the only Roman historian to have covered over a thousand years of Rome’s political history, and he is one of the foremost sources of information for the second and third century A.D.³¹

His account of Commodus is affected by his proximity to the emperor, and by the negative relationship between emperor and senate during that time.³² When reading *Roman History* it is not difficult to understand how Dio Cassius saw Commodus, or rather, how he wanted his readers to view him. The reasons given for why Commodus decided to end the Marcomannic war serve as a great example of this. After Marcus’ death Commodus took command of both the empire and the army, and was free to do as he pleased. If Dio is to be believed, what Commodus wanted was whatever required the least amount of effort and offered the greatest amount of comfort, as he “hated all exertion and craved the comfortable life of the city.”³³ After returning to Rome, Commodus neglected his governmental duties in favour of “chariot-racing and licentiousness.”³⁴ He would also hunt animals in the arena, an activity Dio considers to be beneath the emperor.³⁵ Even worse were the gladiatorial exploits of Commodus; the spectacle of the emperor fighting as a gladiator would be bad enough, but Dio also claims the matches in which Commodus participated were poor, as they were fought with wooded swords or sticks and resembling child’s play.³⁶ And it was not only when Commodus himself starred in the show that his wicked personality came through; Dio claims

²⁹ Hidber, 2004, p. 193

³⁰ Gowing, 2016, p. 117

³¹ Madsen & Lange, 2016, p. 1-2

³² Hekster, 2002, p. 5

³³ Dio Cassius 73.1.1

³⁴ Dio Cassius 73.9.1

³⁵ Dio Cassius 73.18.1-2

³⁶ Dio Cassius 73.19.2-5

Commodus once gathered all the men in Rome who had lost their feet, and, “after fastening about their knees some likenesses of serpents' bodies, and giving them sponges to throw instead of stones, had killed them with blows of a club, pretending that they were giants.”³⁷

While Commodus was busying himself with various games, others were ruling the empire in his stead. It was first Perennis, whom Dio was positively inclined towards. Dio considered his abilities and actions so good that when he was slain by the soldiers he commanded, he states Perennis “deserved a far different fate, both on his own account and in the interest of the entire Roman empire.”³⁸ The next *de facto* ruler is not spoken of as highly. Cleander was an imperial freedman who, according to Dio, abused the power he had obtained at every possible opportunity; in order to fill his own pockets he “bestowed and sold senatorships, military commands, procuratorships, and, in a word, everything.”³⁹ While Cleander remained in power Dio saw the senate, which he himself was part of, derail into chaos.

The actions of Cleander and his fellow freedmen were accompanied by those of Commodus. Dio tells us no one, least of all the men serving on the senate, were safe from the emperor wrath. Prominent men, such as the ex-consuls Salvius Julianus and Tarrutenius Paternus “and others with them” were killed without cause, and presumably without proper trial. The Quintilii brothers Condianus and Maximus were killed because of the virtues and talents they possessed, which led Commodus to believe they might be plotting a rebellion, or at the very least that they were “displeased with existing conditions.” The men listed are all described by Dio as honest and virtuous men, a clear juxtaposition to the evil madman responsible for their murders.⁴⁰ While he was killing good men, Commodus wanted to be seen as great. It was customary for emperors to receive new names as they earned them, for instance after military victories, but Commodus bestowed great names upon himself without proper cause. He took the names Amazonius and Exsuperatius “to indicate that in every respect he surpassed absolutely all mankind,” and in the same vein changed the name of Rome to Commodiana while the legions were called Commodian.⁴¹ These name changes make it clear that Commodus, who already had a feeble mind, had crossed over into insanity,

³⁷ Dio Cassius 73.20.3

³⁸ Dio Cassius 73.10.1

³⁹ Dio Cassius 73.12.3

⁴⁰ Dio Cassius 73.5.1,3

⁴¹ Dio Cassius 73.15.2,4

and the narrative ends shortly after, with the megalomaniac Commodus meeting his death at the hands of the people closest to him.⁴² A fitting death for man such as him.

In short, Dio's account of Commodus is negative throughout. Commodus features as a lazy person who wants to do nothing but relax, drink, and have sex. He shows no interest in doing the work that comes with the title of emperor, instead leaving lower-ranking men with the reigns to the empire. His deviancy becomes especially apparent towards the end of Dio's account, where he fights as a gladiator in the Colosseum, which no self-respecting aristocrat should do, least of all the emperor. At least, that is how it is presented by Dio. It is also stated that Commodus, in his great cruelty, killed a great number of people, many of them honourable senators. At the end of his reign, and the end of Dio's account, Commodus takes on several new and impressive-sounding names, which, according to Dio, is proof of Commodus' megalomania. The account states nothing positive about Commodus.

Herodian

Little can be said about who Herodian was with any degree of certainty. He is less well-documented than Dio Cassius, and it is unknown exactly which position he held, though he may have been a procurator.⁴³ His writings, seen purely as a work about history, is known as unreliable and unprecise, as he often omits important details such as names and places, and the value of his work comes partly from him covering a period of time for which parts of Dio's narrative have been lost. His style of writing, however, is lauded as "elegant and fluent."⁴⁴ Herodian uses Dio's *Roman History* as a source for certain events, but since he only writes about a time period during which he was alive, he also relies on his own experiences, the accounts of witnesses, and hearsay for information.⁴⁵

The characterisation of Commodus in Herodian's work is largely tied to him being young and inexperienced. Herodian states that "emperors who were advanced in years governed themselves and their subjects commendably, because of their greater practical experience, but the younger emperors lived recklessly and introduced many innovations."⁴⁶ Commodus, who was eighteen years old when he became sole emperor, is part of the second group. Like Dio Cassius, Herodian considers Commodus' reign to be negatively affected by the influence of ambitious and evil advisors, but where Dio ascribes the ease with which

⁴² Dio Cassius 73.22.4

⁴³ Matthews, 2008, p. 641

⁴⁴ Matthews, 2008, p. 641

⁴⁵ Hekster, 2002, p. 8

⁴⁶ Herodian 1.1.6

others took control of the empire to Commodus' stupidity, Herodian ascribes it to his youth. For a short while after Marcus Aurelius' death, Commodus listened to the advisors his father had left him, but after "yielding to his companions," likely a group of equally young men, "he no longer consulted his advisors on anything." This led to him quitting the war on the Danube.⁴⁷ In a contradictory statement, Herodian claims Commodus listened to the advisors appointed by Marcus for the first few years of his reign before succumbing to the influence of lesser men.⁴⁸

The most important advisor in Herodian's narrative is Perennis, who was praetorian prefect. He encouraged Commodus to "spend his time in drinking and debauchery" while he took on the responsibility of governing the empire.⁴⁹ In contradiction to Dio's positive review of the praetorian prefect, Herodian presents him as a sly man looking out for his own fortune; he even claims Perennis planned to kill Commodus in order to seize the throne for himself.⁵⁰ Cleander is only discussed in relation to the grain shortage that arose in 189 AD. He was a freed slave who had risen far above his station. According to Herodian he had "command of the bodyguard, the stewardship of the imperial bedroom, and the control of the imperial armies."⁵¹ His ambition and wantonness led him, like Perennis, to want the empire. His plan for securing his position at the top was to create a grain shortage by stocking the grain supply in storage and then, when the people, and more importantly the army, were out of food, he would make a generous distribution of grain to win their support.⁵² In Herodian's view Cleander got what he deserved when the people blamed him for the grain shortage, and the mob demanded his head. Commodus, ever the coward, gave it to them to save himself.⁵³

Ever since the plot in 182 A.D., in which the senate was implicated by the would-be assassin Quintianus, Commodus had considered the senate to be his enemy, and treated them as such. Those involved in the plot, along with everyone who were under suspicion, were executed.⁵⁴ But Cleander's betrayal in 190 A.D. made Commodus' reign take a turn for the worse. After returning from Laurentum to Rome, he "killed now without warning, listening to all accusations without question and paying no heed to those worthy of hearing."⁵⁵ In his

⁴⁷ Herodian 1.6.1, 8

⁴⁸ Herodian 1.8.1

⁴⁹ Herodian 1.8.1

⁵⁰ Herodian 1.9.1

⁵¹ Herodian 1.12.3

⁵² Herodian 1.12.3-4

⁵³ Herodian 1.13.3

⁵⁴ Herodian 1.8.7-8

⁵⁵ Herodian 1.13.7

growing paranoia he shunned from the palace people “who had even a smattering of learning,” claiming they were conspiring against him. Instead of spending his time with learned men, he enjoyed the company of charioteers and actors, and trained to fight animals.⁵⁶ Such activities were of course unbecoming the emperor. As was the way he now presented himself in public; he took the name Hercules and dressed as him, and named the months after his own various titles.⁵⁷ Nothing, of course, was as bad as when he decided to fight as a gladiator.

People from all over Italy rushed to Rome to see their emperor perform in the amphitheatre, and even though Herodian considers the slaying of beasts to be inappropriate behaviour for Commodus, he concedes the emperor was a talented marksman, and that he did win the approval of the mob for his courage and marksmanship.⁵⁸ But when he came into the arena naked to fight in gladiatorial combat “the people saw a disgraceful spectacle.”⁵⁹ His vision of himself as a gladiator would be his undoing; before the celebration of the Saturnalia, he intended to spend the night in the gladiatorial barracks and arrive at the festival wearing armour. Marcia, Laetus, and Eclectus, Commodus’ concubine, praetorian prefect, and chamberlain respectively, tried to talk him out of the decision, for which he decided to have them killed. Upon learning they were to die, they formed a final plot against Commodus, and before he could put his own plans into motion, he was dead.⁶⁰

Herodian’s account of Commodus is less brutally negative than Dio’s. It is greatly affected by Commodus’ youth and inexperience, which Herodian believed made him a weak leader. Although Herodian believes Commodus to have been a good, or at least decent emperor for a while, he quickly took a turn for the worse after the conspiracy in 182 A.D. He held council with bad influences because he was too young to know whom he should listen to, and was easily persuaded by them to give up his imperial duties in favour of other less becoming activities, such as drinking, racing, and sex. He became worse still after the betrayal by Cleander in 190 A.D., after which he became paranoid and killed wantonly. He also took on new names and titles, the most notable being Hercules, since he embodied the deity in other ways as well. Herodian presents Commodus’ exploits in the arena as two-fold. The slaying of various animals was mostly fine; it entertained the mob and Commodus showed off

⁵⁶ Herodian 1.13.8

⁵⁷ Herodian 1.14.8-9

⁵⁸ Herodian 1.15.1-2,7

⁵⁹ Herodian 1.15.7

⁶⁰ Herodian 1.16.3, 1.17.1-2,8,11

his excellent marksmanship, which in Herodian's view did no harm. Commodus fighting naked as a gladiator, however, is presented by Herodian as obscene and disgraceful.

The *Historia Augusta*

The *Historia Augusta* is a collection on biographies, or *vitae*, of emperors and pretenders from Hadrian (117-138 A.D.) to Carinus (283-285 A.D.) and Numerian (283-284 A.D.). It purports to have been written during the reigns of Diocletian (284-305 A.D.) and Constantine (306-337 A.D.).⁶¹ The authorship of the *Historia Augusta* is itself a topic worthy of its own book. Six people are listed as authors, but there is an ongoing debate about whether those names are correct or if all the *vitae* in the books were written by one person. As it stands, we know little about the authorship for certain, and like the names listed as authors, there is little credibility lent to the contents of the biographies by modern historians. It is a much-discussed piece of literature, and the general consensus is that little of its content can be believed. The text refers to several letters, speeches, and decrees as a means to lend believability to its content, but few of those documents were real.⁶² Several statements made throughout the biographies are considered by historians today to be nothing more than inventions made by the author or authors.⁶³ It remains an important historical source only because of the scarcity of sources from the time period it covers.

The biography of Commodus in the *Historia Augusta* reads less like a biography than a long list of any and every horrible thing Commodus did during his lifetime. As a child he received an excellent education, but learned nothing from it, instead excelling in activities “not becoming of an emperor,” such as singing, dancing, whistling, “and he could play the buffoon and gladiator to perfection.”⁶⁴ When he grew up his habits became even worse. His time was seemingly spent for the most part on drinking and having sex.⁶⁵ This last point is driven home by the claim that Commodus had three hundred concubines “gathered together for their beauty and chosen from both matrons and harlots,” and the same number of minions.⁶⁶ This behaviour was possible because other people took on the job of governing the empire. Perennis persuaded Commodus to “devote himself to pleasure” in order to acquire

⁶¹ Stover & Kestemont, 2016, p. 140

⁶² Breisach, 2007, p. 75

⁶³ Rohrbacher, 2013, p. 146

⁶⁴ *Historia Augusta*, p. 265

⁶⁵ *Historia Augusta*, p. 271

⁶⁶ *Historia Augusta*, p. 275-7

power and riches for himself.⁶⁷ He would charge people with fictitious crimes to seize their riches, and gave military commands to equestrians in place of senators. For this he was eventually declared an enemy of the state.⁶⁸ His replacement, Cleander, was no better. While he was in power freedmen entered the senate, and one year there was a total of twenty-five consuls. This was the result of prominent positions being sold for money, a practice which filled Cleander's pockets.⁶⁹ His end came at the hands of an angry mob, as he became Commodus' scapegoat after the public outcry over the unjust execution of Arrius Antoninus.⁷⁰

Unjust executions were a common feature during Commodus' reign. They were in part the result of the hatred the senate felt towards him, which led Commodus to be moved "by cruel passion for the destruction of that great order."⁷¹ The senators Paternus and Julianus were killed under the pretence that they conspired to the throne, and the entire house of the Quintilii were eradicated. Many other murders are listed, and later the author claims Commodus would have killed even more people, had not a boy thrown out the tablet on which Commodus had written the names of those he wanted dead.⁷² The murders, as well as Commodus' other crimes, are described as erratic, something the emperor would do on a whim or at the slightest provocation. One anecdote claims he fed a man to wild beasts for having read a book containing the life of Caligula, because he and Commodus shared the same birthday.⁷³ In short, "he slew whomsoever he wished to slay, plundered a great number, violated every law, and put all the booty into his own pocket."⁷⁴ Commodus' gladiatorial exploits are also mentioned as examples of his wickedness. It is first claimed he fought as a gladiator 735 times in total, but this is contradicted shortly after when it is stated Commodus "won enough gladiatorial crowns to bring the number up to a thousand."⁷⁵ Regardless of the actual number, the *Historia Augusta* makes it clear how important this activity was to Commodus, who "accepted the names usually given to gladiators with as much pleasure as if he had been granted triumphal decorations."⁷⁶

⁶⁷ *Historia Augusta*, p. 275

⁶⁸ *Historia Augusta*, p. 277-9

⁶⁹ *Historia Augusta*, p. 281

⁷⁰ *Historia Augusta*, p. 283

⁷¹ *Historia Augusta*, p. 271

⁷² *Historia Augusta*, p. 273-5, 287

⁷³ *Historia Augusta*, p. 289

⁷⁴ *Historia Augusta*, p. 277

⁷⁵ *Historia Augusta*, p. 293-5

⁷⁶ *Historia Augusta*, p. 293

In the *Historia Augusta*, as in the narratives of Dio Cassius and Herodian, Commodus dies at the hands of Marcia, Laetus, and Eclectus. Unlike the other narratives, the focus at the end is not on Commodus' comeuppance, but on the reaction the senators have when they hear the news of his death. A chant lasting several paragraphs was given, where the senators rejoice in their freedom from this man whom they saw as a tyrant, in which they call him foe, tyrant, and gladiator, and call for his body being dragged by the hook through the streets of Rome, the very worst indignity one could show to the body of the deceased.⁷⁷ The *Historia Augusta* is never subtle in its feelings towards Commodus, but nothing previously stated show the contempt the senators felt for Commodus as clearly as this final speech.

To summarise, the *vita* of Commodus in the *Historia Augusta* is little more than a list of every awful thing Commodus did and every horrible attribute he had. He was unvirtuous and participated in activities unbecoming of an aristocrat ever since he was child. Although he received an excellent education he remained stupid and careless, and after becoming emperor, the bad traits from his childhood were amplified. Like he had had no interest in learning as a child, he now had no interest in his duties as emperor, allowing instead horrid men like Perennis and Cleander to run the empire to the ground while he himself bathed multiple times a day, had sex with his many concubines, and partook in gladiatorial combat. Worse still are the execution the *Historia Augusta* claims Commodus enacted; men and women of all ranks were murdered for their estates, imagined slights, or perhaps for nothing at all. Out of the three accounts of Commodus, the *Historia Augusta* is the most simplistically negative.

The Narrative of Commodus in the Literary Sources

The story about Commodus, as detailed above, should be viewed as a construction made by the three ancient authors, and not as a retelling of an objective truth. Various factors were at play when the authors wrote their literary works, and this chapter will examine the factors that led to the creation of the literary narrative of Commodus, and how the literary character of Commodus fits with the common characteristics of Roman Historiography.

Evidenced by the earlier sections detailing how Commodus is presented in the three literary sources, they all tell a similar story of him. This is not necessarily indicative of truth, but rather a sign of the texts being biased and interdependent, meaning the later authors based at least parts of their texts on the previous ones.⁷⁸ The author of the *Historia Augusta*, and

⁷⁷ *Historia Augusta*, p. 307-313

⁷⁸ Hekster, 2002, p. 8

possibly Herodian, were dependant on Dio Cassius for information about Commodus, as there were few contemporary sources.⁷⁹ The authors were also trying to reach the same audience, that is to say “Greek-speaking members of the higher orders,” which would have affected how they created their respective narratives.⁸⁰ It is to be expected that narratives covering the same historical period are similar in the events and people included, and that their chronology is mostly the same, but there are also similarities between the narratives when it comes to characterisation and moral judgements, which might not have been the case had they been independent of each other.

Dio Cassius

Roman historiography was concerned with morality, and one of history’s primary functions was to educate the readers by giving them examples to follow and others to avoid.⁸¹ Dio creates a vivid and detailed image of who Commodus was; he was evil and licentious, he cared for no one but himself, and he had no respect for the people and traditions of the Roman empire. He gives his readers a perfect example of whom not to emulate. In this vein it is notable that Dio never states, at least not in the epitome which has survived, anything truly positive about Commodus. It is difficult to believe that in the entire twelve years of Commodus’ sole reign he did nothing that was not wicked. What seems more likely to have happened is that certain details were either omitted or changed by Dio to better fit his narrative. He likely wanted there to be no doubt that Commodus was both a terrible person and ruler, and adjusted the facts so as not to blur the story. But that raises the question as to why this presentation of Commodus was the one Dio wanted to offer to his readers. One explanation is that the characterisation is closely aligned with how Dio saw Commodus; he was mostly bad and whatever positive traits or actions that may have existed were omitted in order to achieve a clearer narrative, better suited for its moral and educational purpose. This might be partly true, but on its own it seems simplistic. A different explanation is that Dio had some personal reason behind his portrayal of Commodus. He was a senator during Commodus’ reign, and he and his peers would be personally affected by Commodus’ policies, which were anti-senatorial.⁸² He also wrote with the Roman elite in mind, and they may have reacted negatively to a positive, or even just a nuanced, portrayal of Commodus.⁸³ By writing

⁷⁹ Hidber, 2004, p. 190

⁸⁰ de Blois, 2003, p. 149

⁸¹ Adams, 2013, p. 13

⁸² Hekster, 2002, p. 4-5

⁸³ Adams, 2013, p. 32-3

to this narrow audience Dio would focus on the issues which were significant to them, and as they already had strong opinions on the subject matter, i.e. Commodus, the content of Dio's narrative was limited, and only the horrible things Commodus did were included.⁸⁴

Herodian

Herodian was in a somewhat different situation than Dio Cassius. Given much of Dio's bias came from being a senator, and that Herodian was not one, one might think his account would be less affected by the strained relationship between Commodus and the Senate, and thus less negative. To some extent this is true; Herodian's account is more positive than Dio's, but that is not a high bar to clear, and Herodian still presents us with a mostly negative image of Commodus. Though Herodian was not of as high rank as Dio Cassius was, their intended audience was the same, and so several of the reasons for why Dio presented Commodus the way he did are true of Herodian's narrative as well; he had to write a version of the events that would resonate with the upper strata of Roman society.⁸⁵ But Herodian placed especial emphasis on one factor which Dio barely touched on, namely Commodus' age. The transgressions of others, such as Perennis and Cleander, could have been curtailed if Commodus had been a stronger leader, and he could only have been a stronger leader if he had been older. Herodian saw some emperors, Marcus Aurelius among them, as "a proper counterweight to military misconduct and usurpation by bad characters at court."⁸⁶ Commodus, because of his age, was too easily influenced by these 'bad characters' to function as a counterweight. In Herodian's narrative, Commodus is less of a perpetrator than he is in Dio's. Instead, he simply allows others to do what they want, as long as he is not beholden to governing the empire himself, and as long as he retains the freedom to do what he wants.

The *Historia Augusta*:

While it is agreed that much of the *Historia Augusta* is fabrication, the reasons why a dishonest historical narrative would be written cannot find a shared consensus. It could have been political propaganda on behalf of emperor Julian or Constantius II, or it could be written on behalf of persecuted pagans asking for tolerance from Christians in the fifth century. Neither theory finds much support in the original text. Another theory is that the author

⁸⁴ Duff, 2003 p. 119

⁸⁵ de Blois, 2003, p. 149

⁸⁶ de Blois, 2003, p. 156

“favours the senate and the Roman aristocracy and despises the lower classes and the barbarians,” and wrote a narrative which justified this point of view.⁸⁷ Given the “strong pro-senatorial tendency” that exists throughout the *Historia Augusta*, the latter theory seems to have merit.⁸⁸ The author used both Dio Cassius and Herodian as sources, and found in them much material for an anti-Commodus narrative in which the senate was a victim of a gruesome tyrant. To this narrative, the author has added made-up details, such as the number of concubines and minions Commodus had, and the number of gladiatorial matches in which he fought. The additions make Commodus seem more unhinged than he does in either Dio’s or Herodian’s texts. The senators, who feature as Commodus’ adversaries, are presented as his opposites; they are virtuous and good. If this text were indeed written as pro-senatorial propaganda, it would have gotten its point across.

Commodus as a Characteristic of Roman Historiography

There is far from a wealth of literary sources from second century Rome; only three sources on Commodus have survived to present time, and not all survived in their entirety. But books being lost over time is not the only reason why our sources on Commodus are so rare. It is plausible that not much history was written, as writing was both a dangerous and difficult pursuit. Criticism of an emperor with absolute power could result in banishment or execution, and given Commodus was known for persecuting men of high social standing, seemingly without reason, only someone ready to welcome death would give him a reason to dislike them.⁸⁹ The risks of writing about the sitting emperor would vary depending on who occupied the throne at any given time, and it is fair to assume the danger would be significant during Commodus’ reign.⁹⁰ It is therefore not surprising the accounts of Commodus were all written after his death, under a different dynasty. Writers were also faced with the difficult task of finding out the truth, as reliable information was hard to acquire during the imperial period.⁹¹ Some facts were of course leaked, and writers had access to public declarations, but neither of these would be entirely trustworthy.⁹² The emperor and his inner circle not divulging their secrets to the public led to a “considerable scope for speculation and dramatic recreation”

⁸⁷ Rohrbacher, 2013, p. 147

⁸⁸ Hekster, 2002, p. 7

⁸⁹ Duff, 2003, p. 90

⁹⁰ Breisach, 2007, p. 66

⁹¹ Hidber, 2004, p. 189

⁹² Beard, 2019, p. 374

which we have seen in all three sources previously discussed.⁹³ While writers could verify some of what they wrote, Dio Cassius in particular, as Commodus' contemporary and a member of society's upper strata, there were other aspects of the emperor's life and person they could not know about. This led to a myriad of inventions, especially when it came to Commodus' personal life and his inner thoughts and motivations. Said inventions come to us in the form of cleverly used literary devices.

One such literary device is the use of speeches, an important part of narrative history. They were used to showcase "the reasons and rationale of the historical characters," that is to say why someone acted the way they did, and which "aims, goals, and expectations" they had in mind.⁹⁴ The speech Commodus gave to the soldiers after the death of Marcus in Herodian's narrative serves as a great example. In his speech, Commodus tries to win the support of the army by presenting himself as the one and only heir of Marcus Aurelius, and nobler than any emperor before him on account of him being the previous emperor's trueborn son.

*To follow him, Fortune has given the empire not to an adopted successor but to me. The prestige of those who reigned before me was increased by the empire, which they received as an additional honor, but I alone was born for you in the imperial palace. I never knew the touch of common cloth. The purple received me as I came forth into the world, and the sun shone down on me, man and emperor, at the same moment.*⁹⁵

Commodus must have given a speech to the soldiers on this occasion, but Herodian was not there to witness it, nor was the speech written down. He might have talked to someone who heard Commodus speak and asked for the general gist of what was said, but even then, it would be naïve to assume that the speech written by Herodian is particularly close to an accurate representation of the one given by Commodus. The extract above does not show how Commodus viewed himself, but rather how Herodian saw him, or perhaps how Herodian wished to characterise him. In this case, Herodian considered him a man who expected to be honoured because of his high birth, not because of any personal qualities; those are wholly absent from the speech, another sign the author of those words was not Commodus himself.

Perhaps the most well-known speech from any text concerning Commodus is the one at the end of his *vita* in the *Historia Augusta*, where the entire senate chants in unison that

⁹³ Bentley, 1997, p. 52

⁹⁴ Marincola, 2008, p. 295-6

⁹⁵ Herodian 1.5.5

Commodus' honours must be taken from him, and his corpse be dragged by a hook through the streets of Rome. A similar speech is not found in any other surviving text, and given the *Historia Augusta* was written long after Commodus' death, it is safe to say that this part was not written by an eyewitness; it is, like so much of the *Historia Augusta*, a fabrication. Nevertheless, it serves a useful purpose in showing the senate's opinion of Commodus. They called for a *damnatio memoriae*, which was granted by Commodus' successor Pertinax, and for further humiliation of the dead emperor's body. The scene shows a joyous senate, victorious over their foe of twelve years, and by writing this scene as a speech given by the victors, the author achieves a few important things. Firstly, he reminds the reader of the horrible actions of Commodus, the murders and gladiatorial fighting, and thus justifies the senate in their joy over his death. Secondly, through the style of rhythmic chanting this speech is written in, the reader is drawn into it. The style is engaging, and therefore becomes persuasive. The feeling of the senators is joy, their aim is revenge, and their revenge is justified.

Another literary device found in many biographies from antiquity is that of comparison. In order to make the qualities and actions of one person stand out, the author would place him next to his opposite. This played into the educational purpose of biographies, showing the readers in a succinct manner one person to emulate and one to disregard as a role model.⁹⁶ In Commodus' case, his opposite was Marcus Aurelius, who was wise where Commodus was stupid, pious where Commodus was heretical, and brave where Commodus was cowardly. He, along with Commodus' other Antonine predecessors, would have affected how Commodus was perceived both by his contemporaries and by later historians.⁹⁷ Herodian starts his narrative by calling Marcus Aurelius "the perfect emperor" and goes on to show the many ways in which Commodus did not live up to his father's legacy.⁹⁸ Commodus suffered at the hands of historians because of the persecution of senators which took place during his reign. Being friendly towards the senate would have the opposite effect, as shown in the biographies of Antoninus Pius and Marcus Aurelius. Marcus in fact gained favour with the senate by declaring no senators would be executed during his reign.⁹⁹ Even though Commodus would be described negatively for his treatment of senators regardless of his predecessors, his presentation in the literary sources stands out all the more because of the

⁹⁶ Adams, 2013, p. 13

⁹⁷ Adams, 2013, p. 43

⁹⁸ Herodian 1.2.1

⁹⁹ Adams, 2013, p. 104-5

comparison. The two are also presented differently in regard to the Marcomannic war. Commodus was an inept leader who surrendered to the enemy's demands so he could return to the comforts of Rome.¹⁰⁰ Marcus, on the other hand, was an excellent strategist who instinctively knew which adversary he should trust, and who seemingly always made the right decision.¹⁰¹ These differences in characterisation are indicative of how the two are presented throughout the literary sources.¹⁰²

Biographies in ancient Rome would frequently sort emperors into two groups: the 'good' and the 'bad'.¹⁰³ There were certain traits often afforded to 'bad' emperors, such as Commodus, in order to show their nature as being wicked or base. Overt sexuality was one such critique, and as seen previously Commodus is supposed to have had an excessive interest in sex.¹⁰⁴ Dio refers to his "licentiousness" and the *Historia Augusta* talks of his three hundred concubines and minions, adding homosexual relations to this narrative. There is no way of disproving Commodus' sexual nature as it is described in the sources, but since it is part of a literary tradition, it should not be taken at face value. Another such critique found in several narratives of 'bad' emperors is that of divine aspirations.¹⁰⁵ All sources discuss Commodus' association with the divinity Hercules, and Dio mentions Commodus donning the "garb of Mercury" when entering the arena.¹⁰⁶ It was common for emperors to be deified after their deaths, but aspiring to divinity while still alive was seen as unbecoming. Showing an emperor's divine aspiration created the image of one who thought too highly of themselves; someone who lacked virtues. This too is part of a literary tradition, but other pieces of evidence suggest Commodus' association with Hercules was not a fabrication made by the authors. That discussion will be further dealt with in the next chapter, regarding physical source material.

The literary sources provide a certain characterisation of Commodus, and for the most part they are in agreement; he was unintelligent, he delegated the hard work of ruling the empire to lesser men, he overindulged in bodily pleasures, and power made him mad. We will come back to these notions, created almost two thousand years ago, in the discussion on Commodus in modern historiography. This points to a long-lasting literary tradition created by a few people all belonging to the upper echelons of Roman society.

¹⁰⁰ Dio Cassius 73.1.1

¹⁰¹ Dio Cassius 72.12.1;13.1

¹⁰² Adams, 2013, 124

¹⁰³ Adams, 2013, p. 13

¹⁰⁴ Adams, 2013, p. 156-7

¹⁰⁵ Adams, 2013 p. 229

¹⁰⁶ Dio Cassius 72.17.3

Physical Source Material

We have now covered the literary sources on Commodus, of which only three separate texts have survived until now. The physical source material regarding the emperor, that is to say statues, coinage, and inscriptions, is both more plentiful and more varied, and provide information and interpretations not available in the literary sources. The literary sources, as has been discussed, provide a one-sided narrative, but interpretations of physical source material can present a wholly different narrative. This chapter is dedicated to various pieces of physical source material, and will look at what kind of story about Commodus we make create based on these sources. The research on physical sources is not conducted to attempt to find “the real Commodus,” but to look for traces of narratives the authors of the literary sources did not include in their works.

After his death, Commodus suffered a *damnatio memoriae* at the hands of the senate, in which some material was lost forever. Not all, however, and since his image was rehabilitated by Septimius Severus early in his reign, more portraits of Commodus have survived than most others whose image was destroyed post mortem.¹⁰⁷ This is lucky indeed, as there is much information to be gleaned from contemporary portraits and inscriptions. Where literary sources provide the point of view of a small elite, physical sources can allow us to see how the emperor wanted to be seen, and from that we can deduce what his relationship with the rest of the populace was like. A statue is never just a statue, and the portrait on a coin was not chosen at random. Although artwork of the emperor served to inform the population, most of whom would never see the emperor, of what he looked like, this was not its only function. Given the fact some statues featured traits the emperor did not possess himself, it may be that informing the population of his appearance was secondary to the more important function of imperial propaganda.¹⁰⁸ Some historians prefer the term ‘imperial messaging,’ though this seems to be the case mostly because of the negative associations we have with the word propaganda today.¹⁰⁹ Whether we call it messaging or propaganda, the artwork of antiquity, from grand statues to bronze coins, contained a message created by people in power, and interpreted, consciously or not, by the population at large. The purpose of these messages was to improve the reputation and solidify the power of the

¹⁰⁷ Kleiner, 1992 p. 273

¹⁰⁸ Hannestad, 1988 p. 9

¹⁰⁹ Hekster, 2019, p. 22

patron.¹¹⁰ Messages in visual form were particularly important because of the low literacy rate in the empire, and well-established symbolism would be more understandable than Latin or Greek to most of the population.¹¹¹

We do not know with certainty if all imperial portraits were commissioned by the emperor himself, but most inhabitants of the empire would assume the portraits came directly from him, and in the context of portraiture as propaganda the reception of the populace is more important than the detail of the art's true patron. Additionally, no portraiture would go against the wishes of emperor and still make it to the public's eye.¹¹² The messages from the imperial house came in the form of statuary and coinage, both with somewhat different functions and both equally important when assessing imperial propaganda from a specific reign. Also important to take into consideration are the portraits and inscriptions that did not come directly from the emperor or his inner circle. Provincial coinage did not always follow the imperial mints, and can thus provide insight into how the emperor was viewed by people outside of Rome, and whether his propaganda held steady in the corners of the empire.¹¹³ Inscriptions can function in much the same way, but are unique in that not all of them are created by people from the same social class. Only the richest people could afford statues, and the people controlling the mints are likely to have been of similar status to each other, but inscriptions come in many forms, and from different parts of the highly divided Roman society. Unfortunately there are few preserved inscriptions dedicated to Commodus, likely as a result of the *damnatio memoriae*. However, there are a few key inscriptions detailed later in this chapter.

Imperial Coinage

During the Roman empire there was likely nothing as abundant and as permanent a staple of every person's life as the coins they used on a daily basis. Coins, and therefore portraits of the emperor, were everywhere.¹¹⁴ An emperor wanting his message to reach the broadest amount of people possible was sure to utilise coins for what they were worth, both in ideological and monetary terms. Most people would never see the emperor in person, but coins bearing his face would reach even the most distant provinces. Because of this, they were arguably the

¹¹⁰ Hannestad, 1988 p. 9

¹¹¹ Ando, 2000, p. 194, 197

¹¹² Hekster, 2002, p. 89

¹¹³ Hekster, 2002, p. 168-9

¹¹⁴ Ando, 2000, p. 213-4

most useful tool in the ruler's arsenal for cementing both his position and legacy.¹¹⁵ It is difficult, if not impossible, to ascertain to exactly what extent people were aware of the messages coins contained. We do, however, know people were very much aware of the images on coins.¹¹⁶ Although we cannot assume the general population of the empire understood why coins had certain portraits at certain times does not mean the effects of the propaganda did not take hold. Propaganda is, after all, more effective when the recipients are not aware of its extent.

The messages on coinage during Commodus' sole reign can be divided into three interdependent categories; dynastic, divine, and allusions to the golden age Commodus sought to bring. The first category was relevant even before Commodus became sole emperor, as his image featured on coinage commissioned by Marcus Aurelius. Coins from the joint reign of Marcus and Commodus can be understood as Marcus proclaiming to the entire empire that his successor was chosen, and that Commodus would be yet another great emperor from this dynasty. In either 177 or 178 A.D. an aureus depicts Commodus and Castor, "who mythologically assisted at a time of great crisis." In the context of the plague and ceaseless wars of Marcus' reign, the meaning behind this depiction is clear; Commodus, who had recently become co-emperor with Marcus, would help with the troubles currently facing the empire. In the same vein, coins from 177 A.D. show Commodus in association with Salus, the goddess of welfare, health, and prosperity, and in 178 A.D. he featured on a coin with Mars, the god of war.¹¹⁷ Two important things happen in this coinage; firstly, the dynasty is being promoted, as "minting with the prospective heir on the obverse is clearly supporting a dynastic program."¹¹⁸ Secondly, Commodus is being shown with the qualities most needed in a leader given the current state of the empire. Both of these aspects would make the transition between Marcus as sole emperor to a joint principate, and later the transition from joint principate to Commodus' sole rule, easier. The endorsement of the previous emperor had after all long been the most important factor in who became emperor next.

Dynastic principles continued being on the forefront of coinage as Commodus came into his own power. Commodus has been accused by historians of breaking with traditions and of being something completely other when compared to Marcus Aurelius, but there is little evidence of this in his coinage. Fullerton describes Roman art "as a reflection of a

¹¹⁵ Hekster, 2019, p. 24

¹¹⁶ Hekster, 2019, p. 20

¹¹⁷ Adams, 2013, p. 119

¹¹⁸ Yarrow, 2012, p. 432

sequence of dynastic forces” which “must then change (or not change) in accordance with each ruler’s efforts to emphasize continuity or discontinuity with his predecessor(s).”¹¹⁹ If Commodus wished to distance himself from his father or other predecessors, or if his rule constituted something significantly different than that of the rest of his dynasty, this would have come to show in the coins produced during his reign. The Antonine dynasty “went to great lengths to represent themselves as a cohesive and exemplary Roman family,” and Commodus is no exception to this.¹²⁰ His right to rule lay in him being the biological son of Marcus Aurelius. This continuity was not only shown in Commodus’ appearance resembling that of his predecessors, Marcus especially, which will be discussed further in the statuary from his reign, but also in an interesting numismatic trend going back to the reign of Hadrian. Coinage under Commodus featured Crispina at a rate of one in seven, the same rate of which Vibia Sabina was featured on coinage during Hadrian’s reign. During the reigns of Antoninus Pius and Marcus Aurelius imperial women featured at a rate of two in seven, but there were twice as many relevant women during those reigns, i.e. Faustina I and Faustina II for Pius, and Faustina II and Lucilla for Marcus.¹²¹ The numbers are too exact and the trend remained for too long for a coincidence to be likely. It is more probable that women were used to showcase the dynasty. Even in a line of adoptive emperors the role of women would have been to be wives and bear children to carry on the family line.

For most of Commodus’ reign his coinage stressed continuity, but his association with Hercules and the promised Golden Age that that was displayed on coins towards the end of his reign were, at least to some extent, a break with tradition. None of his predecessors had taken on the role of a deity in quite the same way as he now did, but as Yarrow explains, the coinage from Commodus’ last year “must be contextualised via the earlier use of divine attributes and assimilations.”¹²² The use of divinities on coinage was far from a new invention by Commodus. The dynasty had tied members of the imperial family to deities on coinage either through showing a member of the imperial family on the obverse and a deity on the reverse, or with a family member with the attributes or in the guise of a deity.¹²³ By doing so they told the empire that the emperor, or an important member of his family, had certain attributes or qualities in common with this deity. It was an effective way of broadcasting to a vast number of people exactly who the emperor was. Neither was Commodus the first to

¹¹⁹ Fullerton, 2015, p. 212

¹²⁰ Yarrow, 2012, p. 430

¹²¹ Yarrow, 2012, p. 433

¹²² Yarrow, 2012, p. 440

¹²³ Yarrow, 2012, p. 438

utilise Hercules in imperial propaganda; he was featured on coinage during the reigns of Hadrian, Trajan, and Antoninus Pius, in different iterations. Hadrian's Hercules was a fighter, Trajan's was a traveller, and Pius' was "thoroughly Roman." Commodus utilising this multifaceted deity, who could be used to say so many different things depending on how he was presented, was not breaking with tradition. To quote Hekster, "once more the emperor was carefully following in the god's footsteps. Once more, those footsteps were carefully constructed to reflect the emperor's favourite style of government."¹²⁴ Commodus' Hercules could have intended to promote military interest.¹²⁵ This explanation is all the more likely because of his poor relationship with the senate; having disillusioned on powerful institution he needed the support of another.

The use of deities to promote imperial interest, even the use of Hercules in particular, was nothing new. The deviation from tradition came in the extent of Commodus' association with him. An emperor showing himself with the attributes of multiple different deities can be interpreted as him wanting to emulate the different qualities of those deities, or wanting to be seen as already possessing them. Closely associating with one particular deity for a longer period of time, and more often than before, sends a different message. Hannestad identifies two bronze medallions from the end of Commodus' reign as "the ultimate Hercules identification," because of the portrait of him of the obverse, sporting Hercules' lion skin and with short hair and beard. Earlier portraiture of Commodus showed him with curls similar to Marcus, easily identifying him as part of the Antonine dynasty. The reverse of one of the medallions show Commodus ploughing, possibly intending to portray him as founding a city, and on the other he is armed with a quiver and club.¹²⁶ Around this time most coins referred to or featured Hercules. Such a favouring of a singular deity was new to the empire, and the message being sent forward had to clear to everyone. Commodus was not a mortal with certain qualities is common with Hercules; he was the god on earth, Hercules Romanus.¹²⁷

Before Hercules monopolised Roman coinage, a different idea was being put forward by Commodus, namely that of the golden age he would bring to his subjects. A medallion of the two-headed god Janus and Commodus may allude to Commodus looking toward the peaceful future his reign would bring. The use of cornucopias, which can only symbolise plenty and prosperity, add to this interpretation.¹²⁸ Legends on coins from 190 A.D. forward

¹²⁴ Hekster, 2005, p. 207-8

¹²⁵ Shotter, 1979, p. 53

¹²⁶ Hannestad, 1988, p. 245-7

¹²⁷ Hekster, 2002, p. 105, 109

¹²⁸ Hekster, 2002, p. 100, 107

proclaimed the “Golden Age of Commodus.”¹²⁹ He did not bring about any great military victories, like his father had, but he did give the empire the second-best thing: peace.

Coins are not only a useful source because of their portraits, but also because of their physical composition. The literary sources have accused Commodus of financial neglect, claiming the empire’s finances were significantly worsened during his reign. The physical evidence for this does not exist. It is true that there was some debasement of the denarius during Commodus’ reign, but that was nothing more than the continuation of a trend started while Antoninus Pius was emperor, and continued after Commodus’ death. During Pius’ reign the silver content of the denarius dropped from 93% to 84%, and a gradual decrease followed. The decrease ended in 195 A.D., with a silver content of a little over 50%. The weight of denarii, measured in how many coins can be minted per pound, was decreased twice during Commodus’ reign, first from 96 to 102, then to 114 per pound. This type of “monetary manipulation” increased from the time of Marcus Aurelius’ reign, and need not be a result of fiscal irresponsibility. It can be explained by a decrease in mining practices, meaning less precious metal was available, possibly as a result of the Antonine plague. State expenditures can also be a reason for debasement and decrease in weight.¹³⁰ Marcus’ reign was affected by plague and war, Commodus’ by plague and famine, all of which as costly for the state. The claim that Commodus ran the state’s finances to the ground in order to pay for lavish feasts and exotic animals is thus not corroborated by numismatic evidence.

Provincial Coinage

Not all coins came directly, or seemingly directly, from the emperor. Some were minted in the Roman provinces, and their portraits did not always follow the example set by imperial coinage.¹³¹ We do not know with certainty who controlled the provincial mints or how much direct influence the imperial administration had over which images were used on the coins, but the portraiture used on imperial and provincial coinage differ enough to assume the provinces had agency over the coins they minted. Provincial coinage thus serves as a source of information regarding the relationship between emperor and provinces; if provincial coinage follows an emperor’s visual programme it shows the programme to be effective and respected outside the borders of Rome. A trend during the Antonine period, and amplified during the reign of Commodus, was commemoration of local games on provincial coinage.

¹²⁹ Birley, 2000, p. 191

¹³⁰ Yarrow, 2012, p. 424-5

¹³¹ Hekster, 2002, p. 168-9

Although local games had long been important for status and revenue, they had not always been celebrated on coinage. Athletes, prizes, and prize crowns were featured on coins following the games, the latter for the first time during Commodus' reign.¹³² At the same time, provincial coinage increasingly "connect local festivities with imperial celebrations," and several cities used coinage to show a close bond between the city and the emperor.¹³³ One such city was Nicea, whose games are referred to on coinage as holy, and whose local festival was renamed Komodeia.¹³⁴

Games were an important part of Commodus self-representation. His love of them likely followed him his entire life, and him entering the arena himself would have been the culmination of a life-long partiality to them. Provinces focusing more on local games during his reign than they had previously, along with heightening the status of games to "holy" and naming them after the emperor himself, tells us two things. First, the provinces were well aware of Commodus' self-representation and visual programme, and second, they respected it enough to use it to create a stronger bond between themselves and the emperor. It is possible this was done more out of self-interest than anything else, as it was certainly in any province's best interest to cultivate a close bond with the emperor. It does, however, seem improbable they would do so through a means they found ridiculous or demeaning. It is more likely they were receptive to Commodus' love of games because it was something already familiar to and beloved by them. Games had long been used by emperors and aristocrats as a way to show gratitude to the people. The people now had the chance to use commemoration of games to show gratitude to the emperor.

Another aspect of Commodus' self-representation that may have been received differently in the provinces than by the Roman elite was that of his divinity. It was not overly common for local coinage to display the emperor with divine attributes, yet the provinces "seem freer to experiment with linking the imperial family to the divine" than the imperial mint.¹³⁵ Whether a mint produced coins featuring the emperor with divine attributes seem to depend on where the mint was located, thus affected by local beliefs and customs. Some eastern cities minted coins with Commodus sporting the attributes of Olympians early in his reign. This was before the imperial coinage presented systemic divine symbolism, while it was still focusing on dynastic representations. The divine attributes bestowed by the eastern

¹³² Yarrow, 2012, p. 444

¹³³ Hekster, 2002, p. 172-3

¹³⁴ Yarrow, 2012, p. 444-5

¹³⁵ Hekster, 2002, p. 168-9; Yarrow, 2012, p. 440

mints were therefore not a response to imperial propaganda, but born from their own culture, and indicating some groups in the eastern part of the empire “may have been receptive to some of the more prominent assertions of the emperor.”¹³⁶ Toward the end of his reign, coins from Ephesus, Cyzicus, and Iuliopolis feature Hercules and Commodus’ new name, Hercules Romanus. It does not necessarily mean the people supported Commodus’ association with Hercules, but it does show the image of him as Hercules was spread throughout the empire, and while perhaps not supported, it was accepted.¹³⁷

Analyses of coinage, both imperial and provincial, make it possible to construct a different story than the one presented in the literary sources. The literature presents Commodus inheriting the throne after Marcus as a mistake, whereas the narrative we can construct based on coinage from the Marcus’ reign and the joint rule indicates Marcus intentionally promoted Commodus as his heir. For most of Commodus’ sole reign continuity with the Antonine dynasty was heavily promoted on coinage. This is in direct opposition with the claims made in the literary sources of Commodus about Commodus being completely different from his Antonine predecessors. Even when his divine aspirations and association with Hercules took over the coinage, he did not fully break with traditions. Several of his predecessors had featured Hercules, as well as other deities, on their coinage to promote their policies and reigns. The literary sources say nothing about how Commodus was viewed by provincials in the empire, but provincial coinage can grant us some insight into this. Coins from several provinces featured games to a greater extent than before, and at times Commodus was celebrated alongside the games. Some provincial coins also feature Commodus in association with various deities, even before he was systemically promoted alongside Hercules on imperial coinage. The narrative put forth by these analyses is one of dynastic continuity and good relationships between the emperor and the army, and between the emperor and the people living in the provinces. Neither of those aspects are part of the literary narrative.

Statuary

Coinage and statuary both work to show the emperor, with his qualities and attributes, to the population of the empire. The two therefore have to work together to create a cohesive image, but that does not mean they have the exact same function. Coins were abundant and

¹³⁶ Hekster, 2002, p. 169-70

¹³⁷ Hekster, 2002, p. 170-172

everywhere, and statues of the emperor, though numerous and easy to find, could not compete in sheer numbers. On the other hand, coins could not inspire awe and respect in the same way statues could.¹³⁸ In fact, the statue of an emperor was in many ways akin to the emperor himself, and doing or saying something in front of a statue of the emperor was similar to saying or doing it before the emperor himself.¹³⁹ Given the importance of imperial statues, their construction and messaging would be carefully designed. Exact likeness to whomever it represented was not of great importance, although it had to be similar enough for people to recognise the person being portrayed. Muscle mass and hairstyle, as will become evident in Commodus' statuary, did not have to be accurate, and was often changed to accentuate a quality of the emperor. Large muscles, for example, showed youth and strength, and the Antonines used the curly coiffure to show their similarity to each other, despite no one but Marcus and Commodus being closely related.¹⁴⁰

Despite the multitude of coins bearing the likeness of both Commodus and a variety of deities, statues showing Commodus either with the attributes of or in the guise of gods is almost completely absent for most of his reign, and when his statues did feature deities, there was only Hercules who was featured multiple times.¹⁴¹ From 190 A.D. until his reign ended, a multitude of statues of Commodus as Hercules were erected, and in his last year he finally united with the god as Hercules Romanus.¹⁴² The most famous statue of Commodus is, unsurprisingly, one in which he has taken on the role of Hercules. The larger-than-life-size bust of Commodus as Hercules, currently in the Capitoline Museum in Rome, is better preserved than most statuary from the period, with only a few pieces of stone missing. The details in the statue are still there for us to examine. The statue, which portrays Commodus from the waist up, shows Commodus as naked save for the lion skin draped around his shoulders and head. In his right hand he holds a club, and in his left hand are the apples of Hesperides. The bust stands on two cornucopias above a globe featuring zodiacs, and next to the globe is a now headless amazon, who was most likely originally mirrored by a counterpart. Also lost to posterity are the two tritons who flanked Commodus, holding a *parapetasma*.¹⁴³ This one statue embodies the messages Commodus had put forward in his coinage during the last years of his reign; the cornucopias symbolise the golden age, and

¹³⁸ Ando, 2000, p. 211

¹³⁹ Kellum, 2015, p. 424

¹⁴⁰ Wood, 2015, p. 269

¹⁴¹ Hekster, 2002, p. 117

¹⁴² Hannestad, 1988, p. 246

¹⁴³ Kleiner, 1992, p. 277

being placed directly below the likeness of Commodus they seem to convey that only he could bring about this age. The kneeling amazons show Commodus has brought peace to the empire by defeating Rome's barbarian enemies, and the tritons show he ruled the sea as well. The zodiacs on the orb likely refer to the month of October, which, when Commodus renamed the months of the year after his own names and titles, received the name Hercules. The identification with Hercules is complete, as the statue alludes to the trials Hercules went through to achieve immortality, one of which was acquiring the apples of Hesperides. By emulating this particular deity Commodus, too, has become immortal. The statue tells one simple, yet powerful story. Commodus has brought peace and prosperity to the empire, and because of his deeds he has achieved godhood.¹⁴⁴ Another important aspect is the similarity to Marcus Aurelius. Commodus has the curly coiffure characteristic of the Antonines, and his gaze is calm and thoughtful, similar to how Marcus, the philosopher emperor, looked in his portraits.¹⁴⁵ Even when showing himself as the rightful ruler because of his now divine status, Commodus was sure to remind the people, who had loved and respected Marcus, that he was Marcus' son and rightful heir.

Whether the bust was created while Commodus was still alive is debated. Most historians write of the bust as if it were commissioned by Commodus himself, as part of his visual programme. Some of the imagery is similar to that of sarcophagi of the time, such as the *parapetasma* held by the tritons. Hercules was an excellent choice of deity to honour a deceased emperor, as it would show the emperor had passed from the mortal realm and, like Hercules, ascended to the gods. Because of this, Wood argues the statue was commissioned by Septimius Severus as part of his rehabilitation of Commodus. According to her, the bust "presents an eloquent, albeit thoroughly false, representation of a good ruler who has died young but whose noble deeds have won him immortality."¹⁴⁶ If this is the case, the statue can still be analysed as part of Commodus' visual programme. It would be the culmination of the messages he sent out while still alive, whether it was created before or after his death, as Severus would have relied on imagery from Commodus' reign to construct the statue. The details in the bust fit too well with the messaging from Commodus' coinage, and with his undeniable association with Hercules, for it not to have been based on previous portraits. The bust loudly proclaims Commodus was a god on earth, whether it came directly from Commodus, or was repeated by Severus.

¹⁴⁴ Kleiner, 1992, p. 277; Hekster, 2002, p. 122

¹⁴⁵ Hekster, 2002, p. 121

¹⁴⁶ Wood, 2015, p. 271

In order to better understand the importance of imperial statues we must take into account how they were received at the time of their construction. In Trimble's essay *Reception Theory* she identifies several different approaches to understanding how art was viewed and received in the Roman empire. The first approach, historical reception theory, concerns itself with visual conventions and expectations. The theory states portraiture had a lot of freedom when it came to presenting its subject matter, as certain physical traits did not need to resemble the person being portrayed, "but instead expressed collective social and symbolic values," whereas easily recognisable iconography and the ruling emperor's portrait features were important. The statue had to be recognisable as Commodus, i.e. having his face, but the body, clothing, and any other details could be utilised for symbolism and messaging. The bust of Commodus as Hercules is easily recognised as Commodus because of his face and hair, and as Hercules because of the club and lion skin. Commodus' posturing, his relaxed expression and restrained hands, show him as a member of the upper echelons of society, while his club and limited clothing shows him to be a warrior.¹⁴⁷ Commodus is represented as a complex character, an intersection between the restrained philosopher who fathered him and the great god through whom he has achieved peace for the empire and immortality for himself.

The second approach detailed by Trimble, reception aesthetics, focuses on the implied reader of a piece of art. She states, "any work is created in relation to an imagined reader but the reader also brings his or her own predispositions and decisions to this encounter."¹⁴⁸ When creating a piece of art, especially a propagandistic one, both the patron and the creator had to be aware not only of what message they wanted to signal, but how to signal it to specific people. The meaning behind a statue was not created by the sculptor alone, but in the meeting between the art and its viewer, so to understand the bust through reception aesthetics we have to know who the intended audience was, and "what the work demands of its audience."¹⁴⁹ The bust would have been viewed by a large number of people, and Roman society was too divided for that to be a homogenous audience. Instead, we can consider who Commodus regularly tried to appeal to: the general population. While the senatorial elite, who was less than fond of Commodus' association with Hercules, would respond negatively to a grand statue where Commodus proclaimed his godhood, the rest of Rome might not be as judgemental. The statue promises peace and prosperity, ideals most Romans were likely

¹⁴⁷ Trimble, 2015, p. 607

¹⁴⁸ Trimble, 2015, p. 610

¹⁴⁹ Trimble, 2015, p. 611

positively inclined to, especially since the previous reign had been characterised by plague and war. It shows the emperor as a calm, thoughtful, yet powerful leader, another lofty ideal most likely well received by the masses. He is also in the guise Hercules, a god beloved by the people for his many abilities. Today, these are messages we have to carefully analyse, but to the average Roman conclusions like these would form subconsciously.

The last approach relevant to the bust of Commodus as Hercules is social historical studies, which is centred on the patron, i.e. the person who commissioned the art. Through analysing the bust we learn how Commodus, if he indeed were the one to commission it, wanted to present himself.¹⁵⁰ The bust would be part of an ideological programme and feature symbolism important to the emperor, and considering the overlap in symbolism between the bust and coinage from Commodus' reign it is safe to say it is part a wider programme, designed, or at least approved, by Commodus.

This section has focused mainly on one statue of Commodus for the simple reason that it sums up every part of his visual programme. There are other statues of him in the guise of Hercules, and there are other statues that show similarities between him and the rest of the Antonines, but every trait shown in those statues also features in the Bust of Commodus as Hercules. Continuity between Commodus and his predecessors was an important aspect of Commodian statuary. This is especially evident in the deep-set eyes and curly coiffure sported by every Antonine. Commodus' deviation from his predecessors came in 190 A.D., when his association with Hercules became more important than his familial bonds in his visual programme. This association with a deity has been used in the literary sources as proof of Commodus' megalomania, but based on the analyses of statuary and reception theory we can construct a different narrative. In this version of events, the focus should be on how Commodus wanted to present himself to the public, and how the public received this presentation. The bust shows Commodus as having Marcus' pension for philosophy, combined with Commodus' strength and immortality, and because of the conscious messaging directed at the general, non-elite population, the people would see a kind and strong leader who would provide for them. The narrative here is one of a ruler who wanted to do right by his people, and in turn wanted the people's gratitude.

Inscriptions

¹⁵⁰ Trimble, 2015, p. 614

The inscriptions referencing Commodus have likely been affected greatly by the *damnatio memoriae*. Buildings commissioned by the emperor would bear his name, and the reason for the lack of building projects attributed to Commodus might be because his name was chiselled off the stone after his death.¹⁵¹ There are however two altars, neither of which are located in Rome, which give some insight into how Commodus' relationship with the provinces and the army was like. It is well known Commodus' did not travel outside of Rome after returning from the Danube in 180 A.D., meaning he had little contact with the army. Direct contact with the army was one of the ways emperors ensured their continued loyalty, and made sure a charismatic commander did not seize control of imperial troops. In lieu of visiting the army Commodus granted them certain special privileges. An altar in Dacia dedicated to Liber Pater shows one of these privileges was "the introduction of native gods into the official military cult."¹⁵² Commodus' reign was characterised by relative peace, so the army had little to do in terms of conquest and battle, and there was not much glory to achieve in those twelve years. This could have easily turned into discontent with the emperor, but Commodus seemingly found different ways of keeping the army on his side. Frequent donatives were certainly also part of it.¹⁵³

A different altar, dated 17 March 193 and dedicated by Aelius Tittianus, contain Commodus' many controversial titles, as well as the new names of the months. It shows the military were not only aware of, but also respected, his names and titles, as well as the names he had given the months of the year.¹⁵⁴ The date of the altar seems confusing, as it is unlikely these names and titles would be used after Commodus' death, especially the names of the months, but the altar was constructed outside of Rome. It is probable Tittianus did not know of Commodus' death at the time, and thought he was honouring the currently ruling emperor.¹⁵⁵ The altar then shows at least certain groups outside of Rome respected Commodus' self-representation, but not that the titles he bestowed upon himself during the last years of his reign were still in use after his death. The narrative presented in the literary sources barely mention the army and the provinces, instead focusing on the negative relationship Commodus had with the senate. Through these inscriptions we can create a narrative in which Commodus had a good relationship with both the army and provincials, and therefore was not as universally hated as the literary sources claim.

¹⁵¹ Hekster, 2002, p. 203

¹⁵² Traupman, 1956, p. 134

¹⁵³ Traupman, 1956, p. 129-30

¹⁵⁴ Hekster, 2002, p. 165-6

¹⁵⁵ Speidel, 1993, p. 112

The physical sources examined in this chapter should all be looked at through the lens of imperial propaganda. The coins minted during Commodus' reign, both while sharing the principate with Marcus and after Marcus' death, promote his claim to power. During the joint principate, and for much of Commodus' sole reign, dynastic principles were promoted heavily on coinage by focusing on similarities between Commodus and his predecessors. Commodus' qualities and virtues were advertised to assure the population of his ability to rule well. Throughout his life he featured on coinage alongside deities. This was common practice for emperors, as it was an easy way to promote the emperor's qualities in a way the general population would understand. Towards the end of his reign the message changed. Instead of featuring alongside a variety of deities, he favoured Hercules to a degree hitherto unheard of; most coins sporting Commodus' likeness alluded to Hercules in some way. A similar development happened in the statuary of the reign. For most of Commodus' reign deities did not feature on his statuary, but during the last years he featured in the guise of Hercules multiple times, most notably on the bust of Commodus as Hercules. His names and titles also reflect this change. Legends of coinage show him changing his praenomen from M. (Marcus) to L. (Lucius), distancing himself from his father.¹⁵⁶ The basis of Commodus' power had long been cemented in the fact that he was Marcus' biological son, but the narrative changed in the end. He was rightful emperor not just because of his earthly parentage, but because of divine right. In order to cement this divine right he promised to the people a golden age of peace and prosperity that only he could bring about. In a reign mostly void of war and conquest, he would give the empire something even grander.

The story provided by analysis of physical source material is significantly different than the one provided by the literary sources. Through coins, statuary, and inscriptions we can glean an emperor who had a good relationship with most of the empire, and who worked hard to prove both his right and ability to rule. He presented himself as a reincarnation of Hercules not because of megalomania, but because this presentation was a tool he could use to effectively tell a compelling story to the inhabitants of the empire. This story, or perhaps this version of the story of Commodus, is rarely considered in modern literature. In order to understand why the narrative surrounding Commodus today is as negative as it is, we must consider other possible narratives and the reasons why those narratives are less prevalent.

Septimius Severus in the Literary Sources

¹⁵⁶ Hännestad, 1988, p. 245

Thus far we have looked at the narrative surrounding Commodus in the literary sources, and compared that to the narrative we can construct from analyses of physical source material. The literary narrative of Commodus should also be compared to an emperor who has been characterised by the ancient authors in different terms than him, so we can better understand how these narratives are created, and how the narrative of Commodus fits into the larger narrative of Roman emperors. Septimius Severus was Commodus' first successor to reign for more than a few months, and was the first member of the dynasty that took over after the Antonines. Additionally, he features in the same literary sources as Commodus, so a comparison between them will not have to account for the different priorities and writing styles other authors may have; we can instead see a direct comparison of how each of them were characterised by Dio Cassius, Herodian, and the author of the *Historia Augusta*.

Severus' good qualities, according to the literary sources, were plentiful. The sources agree he came to power not by appointment by the senate, but by the acclamation of the legions he controlled. This is a fitting start for a man characterised as an excellent military leader. The *Historia Augusta* states he was a competent general who "seldom departed from battle except as victor."¹⁵⁷ According to Herodian "no battles and no victories can be compared to those of Severus, and no army to the size of his army; there are no comparable uprisings among nations, or total number of campaigns, or length and speed of marches."¹⁵⁸ He also places emphasis on Severus' ability to make soldiers follow him, both through his charisma and actions.¹⁵⁹ After the news of Pertinax' death and Didius Julianus' rise to power reached Severus and his army, and the soldiers had proclaimed him emperor, the march back to Rome started. During the march Severus "shared personally in their hardships, sleeping in an ordinary army tent and eating and drinking whatever was available to all; on no occasion did he make use of imperial luxuries or comforts."¹⁶⁰ Here, Herodian shows Severus to possess a vital imperial virtue, namely that of modesty and frugality. This is also shown in the *Historia Augusta*, which claims he, because of his "frugal ways," received the name Pertinax after his predecessor, who was known for his frugality.¹⁶¹ The *Historia Augusta* also makes a point of showing Severus did not care for the fineries that often came with noble stations. He ate plain food together with his children, which tells the reader he valued family over riches,

¹⁵⁷ *Historia Augusta*, p. 413

¹⁵⁸ Herodian 3.7.7

¹⁵⁹ Herodian 3.6.1-8

¹⁶⁰ Herodian 2.11.2

¹⁶¹ *Historia Augusta*, p. 411

and wore plain clothes with little purple in them, meaning he did not feel the need to proclaim his high station in the way he dressed.¹⁶²

Severus is also shown to be a man of learning. He was born in Leptis Magna, but travelled to Rome for education when he was eighteen. According to the *Historia Augusta*, his interest in learning, particularly in regard to philosophy and oratory, followed him throughout his life.¹⁶³ Herodian characterises Severus as an intelligent person who constantly thinks ahead, and Dio says of his curious mind that Severus “was the kind of person to leave nothing, either human or divine, uninvestigated.”¹⁶⁴ His sharp mind served him well during his principate; Herodian claims his “shrewd judgement” was one of his most outstanding qualities, and the *Historia Augusta* notes he was quick to judge the guilty and advance the efficient, perhaps owing to his education in philosophy.¹⁶⁵

Despite the exemplary qualities laid out so far, Severus does not feature as a perfect emperor in the literary sources. Some of his actions are, in fact, presented as so damning that they at times overshadow his other abilities. After the defeat of Clodius Albinus in 197 A.D. Severus ordered Albinus’ head, exposed on a pole, sent back to Rome, which in Dio’s view “showed clearly that he possessed none of the qualities of a good ruler.”¹⁶⁶ According to Herodian, Severus showed his true colours earlier than that, by forcing the governors who were loyal to Pescennius Niger to betray him by capturing their children, and subsequently having both the governors and their children killed after his own objectives were achieved.¹⁶⁷ In the *Historia Augusta* Severus is said to have been grievously wounded after a fall from his horse. The senate, believing him to be dead, almost elected Clodius Celsinus as emperor. When Severus recovered from his injuries, he punished the senate by ordering the mutilation of the bodies of the senators who had died in the battle. The deification of Commodus was also punishment for this crime by the senate, if the *Historia Augusta* is to be believed.¹⁶⁸ Additionally, Severus is accused of “innumerable executions,” though the statement is not followed up by further details.¹⁶⁹ The effect of these particular stories is that Severus is shown to possess great cruelty, despite his knowledge of philosophy and other positive qualities.

¹⁶² *Historia Augusta*, p. 379, 419

¹⁶³ *Historia Augusta*, p. 371, 413

¹⁶⁴ Herodian 2.13.12; Dio, 76.13.2

¹⁶⁵ Herodian 2.14.2; *Historia Augusta*, p. 413

¹⁶⁶ Dio 76.7.3-4

¹⁶⁷ Herodian 3.5.6

¹⁶⁸ *Historia Augusta*, p. 397

¹⁶⁹ *Historia Augusta*, p. 411

There are also certain qualities ascribed to Severus by Herodian that should not be classified as either strictly good or bad. Severus was cunning. He would, according to Herodian, lie and break promises when doing so was beneficial for him, which shows both intelligence and cruelty.¹⁷⁰ In 193 A.D. Severus had to bring his army to Antioch to defeat Pescennius Niger, who had also been proclaimed emperor after the death of Pertinax. In order to keep Albinus from overtaking Rome while Severus was away, he devised a ploy in which he elevated Albinus to the rank of Caesar. He never intended for Albinus to remain in that position once the war was over, but Albinus believed him, and Severus was free to deal with Niger without worrying about his hold on power in Rome.¹⁷¹ These actions are, of course, deceitful, and an emperor should not strive to deceive his own people. However, Severus is also shown to possess incredible forethought and intellect in his ability to secure his own position this way. The story is not presented as wholly good, but neither does it receive the same type of damnation as the story of Niger's governors.

How an emperor is presented in literature is not only dependent on his personal qualities. His relationship with the senate also plays a significant role in how he is memorialised, as discussed previously in relation to Commodus. Unlike with Commodus, Severus' and the senate's relationship is more difficult to ascertain. After he had seized power in Rome, Severus made a promising decree to the senate. The exact content of the decree is uncertain, as each source tells a slightly different story. According to Dio Cassius, Severus proclaimed he would not put any senator to death, while in the *Historia Augusta* the proclamation is that no senator would be put to death before Severus had consulted the senate at large.¹⁷² Herodian's Severus stated, "no man would be put to death or have his property confiscated without a trial." Moreover, Severus promised to reintroduce senatorial rule in Rome.¹⁷³ Even though the wording of the promise differs somewhat from one text to the other, the meaning behind it is largely the same. Severus promised the senate more security and power than they had held during the reign of Commodus, and in so doing he proposed a rule more similar to those of Marcus Aurelius and Pertinax, both of whom were beloved by the senate. Severus may also have gained favour with the senate by avenging Pertinax, who had died at the orders of Didius Julianus. Claiming to model his reign after him might bring the senate to his side, as Pertinax had been a man of impeccable virtue.¹⁷⁴

¹⁷⁰ Herodian 2.9.13

¹⁷¹ Herodian 2.15.2-4

¹⁷² Dio 75.2.1; *Historia Augusta*, p. 387

¹⁷³ Herodian 2.14.3

¹⁷⁴ Dio Cassius 75.4.6

The promise not to put senators to death was, according to Dio, broken not long after it was made. Severus sentenced, among others, Julius Solon, who had been the one to frame the decree, to death.¹⁷⁵ The *Historia Augusta* corroborates this, stating he put both senators and commoners to death without trial. Severus distanced himself from the senate by shifting his focus to the army, and by bringing more troops into the city. In Dio's words he was "placing the hope and safety in the strength of the army rather than in the good will of his associates in the government."¹⁷⁶ This was an obvious slight to the institution he had recently promised more power. He had previously dismissed the existing praetorian guard, which had consisted of men only from Italy, Spain, Macedonia, and Noricum, and replaced it now with his selection of men from all legions. In Dio's view, men from the aforementioned places were "of more respectable appearance and of simpler habits," qualities the praetorian guard should inhabit, and the choice to replace them with miscellaneous legionaries was a disservice to the young Romans who were supposed to fill that role.¹⁷⁷ Severus' choice of "styling himself the son of Marcus and the brother of Commodus," as well as deifying the latter, was also unpopular among the senators, and Severus' defence of Commodus, that many senators lived lives worse than he had, was not well received.¹⁷⁸ The *Historia Augusta*, which previously claimed Severus deified Commodus as punishment to the senate, states he did it because of his reverence towards Marcus Aurelius.¹⁷⁹ This kind of continuity error is not uncommon in the *Historia Augusta*, and regardless of the reason for the honour given to Commodus, the senators were unhappy with Severus for giving it. Severus' relationship with the senate was clearly not perfect, but neither does it seem to be as hostile as the relationship between the senate and Commodus. The senate's view of Severus might be summed up succinctly in one statement from the *Historia Augusta*, in which it claims the senate saw Severus as too cruel, but also too useful to the state.¹⁸⁰ They did not like him, but getting rid of was not an option. This can, at least partly, explain why Severus is characterised more positively than Commodus, but still not in strictly positive terms, in the literary sources.

Severus is not presented as a strictly good or strictly bad emperor in the literary sources. He is shown to have possessed certain good qualities, such as intellect, passion for learning, courage, and military talent. He is, however, also shown to be cruel. He was not

¹⁷⁵ Dio Cassius 75.2.2

¹⁷⁶ Dio Cassius 75.2.3

¹⁷⁷ Dio Cassius 75.2.4-5

¹⁷⁸ Dio Cassius 76.7.4, 76.8.1-2

¹⁷⁹ *Historia Augusta*, p. 417

¹⁸⁰ *Historia Augusta*, p. 415

loved by the senate, like Marcus Aurelius and Pertinax, but neither was he hated like Commodus. It may seem as if he does not fit into the overarching narrative of good and evil emperors, as he is not categorised at either end of the spectrum, but that is not necessarily true. He is characterised as more good than evil, but when his bad traits are discussed, the authors make it abundantly clear that what Severus is saying, doing, or thinking in those instances is wrong. The texts thus retain their moralising function, and Severus can exist as a “mostly good” character whose intelligence and courage people should strive for, but whose cruelty people should avoid.

The Narratives of Commodus and Septimius Severus

Commodus and Severus are remembered in different terms, as two people wholly different from one another, but when looking at both literary sources and modern literature side by side, certain similarities make themselves known. Both removed privileges from the senate and promoted men from outside of the senatorial elite to positions of power and status. Admittedly, Severus promoted men of equestrian rank to legionary commands, while some of Commodus’ closest advisors were freedmen. The latter had less of a precedent, and was likely seen as worse by the elite. Both of them had praetorian prefect(s) who held more power than was acceptable. Commodus had two such prefects, Perennis and Cleander, and Severus had Plautianus. They both disposed of one each; Commodus handed Cleander to the mob who demanded his head for his perceived involvement in the grain crisis, and Severus ordered the death of Plautianus because he believed him to be plotting against him.¹⁸¹ Despite the differences, Severus is shown to be a far more capable leader, who was less reliant on the praetorian prefect, than Commodus was. Severus is also shown as active in both politics and military campaigns, while Commodus is not.

As far as personal qualities go, the greatest similarity is they are both shown to be cruel, but not in quite the same ways. Severus was cruel in his punishment of the supporters of his rival, while Commodus was cruel as a result of his ignorance and greed, and for his own amusement. One might argue they had a similar relationship to the army, as both of them gave significant donatives and granted privileges to the army. This is part of Severus’ narrative, both in ancient and modern times. However, the literary sources say little of Commodus’ relationship with the army, and as for the modern literature, only the monographies of Commodus mention his relationship with the army in any detail. We should

¹⁸¹ *Historia Augusta*, p. 403

therefore not claim the narrative of Commodus and Severus in relation to the army are similar, although their relationship to the army might have been more alike than the literary sources give reason to believe. A similar statement can be made in relation to their educations; both are said to have received good educations, but Severus focused on learning his entire life, while Commodus supposedly paid no heed to his tutors and gained nothing from his education. Their personal qualities, apart from cruelty, have little to no overlap. Shortly put, Severus was ambitious, intelligent, and cunning, while Commodus was stupid, drunken, and licentious. The only difference between the two that could be seen in Commodus' favour is that of family background. Commodus was the son of the great Marcus Aurelius, and related through adoption to the other excellent emperors of the Nerva-Antonine dynasty. No man at the time could claim a better family background. Severus, on the other hand, was the son of an equestrian. However, Commodus' background does little to help his narrative. Normally, a good family is emphasised to elevate a person. It is a simple narrative device that show the reader this is a good man. In Commodus' case, it is used to show that he was so awful not even the parentage of Marcus Aurelius was good enough to help him, another cleverly used literary device.

Emperors are typically categorised as either good or evil, and this categorisation comes from several traits bestowed upon each emperor. The character traits given to good or bad emperors work much like tropes do in modern literature. If an emperor is said to have had certain qualities, the reader would fill in the blank and assume him to be a good person. Some such qualities are “a good family background, an excellent education, interest in culture and philosophy, moderation, zeal, courage, and charity, but he also excelled in military prowess, competence in legal matters, and the selection of good assistants.”¹⁸² For the purposes of this comparison, this can function similar to a checklist. Severus is shown as possessing most of these traits; he received a good education and showed interest in philosophy throughout his life, he was moderate, zealous, and brave, and an excellent military leader. His family background is decent, but not exemplary, and his sense of charity and competence in legal matters are not discussed in any detail. It is only in the selection of good assistants Severus truly falls short; nothing good, and a lot of bad, is said of Plautianus in all three literary sources.

Of the traits listed by de Blois, Commodus is arguably shown to possess only one of them. The first quality is a good family background, which Commodus undeniably had, even

¹⁸² de Blois, 2003, p. 151-2

if the literary sources do not credit him with the qualities usually given the descendants of great men. Additionally, neither the literary sources nor modern literature disagree on the quality of the education Commodus received, which is second on de Blois' list. However, the overall narrative makes it clear that while Commodus was given the best education available, he did not actually learn anything. For all intents and purposes, Commodus did therefore not receive an excellent education, as far as the accepted narrative in ancient and modern literature is concerned. In all literature, apart from the few reactionary monographies discussed earlier, he is shown to have no interest in culture and philosophy, and no moderation, zeal, or courage. He is at times shown to be charitable, but this too comes with an asterisk of why it was bad, as he was, according to the ancient historians, only wasting money. The last three points on the list, i.e. military prowess, competence in legal matters, and the selection of good assistants, are all wholly absent from Commodus' characterisation. Out of ten points, only one is definitely fulfilled by Commodus. The literary narratives surrounding Severus and Commodus are clear; Severus is good, though not perfect, while Commodus is nothing short of the quintessential bad emperor.

Commodus and Septimius Severus are shown to have multiple traits in common, but the former is judged significantly more harshly by the ancient authors than the latter. This could be partially because Severus had more positive traits to make up for the negative, and thus received a more balanced treatment in the literature, but the narrative function of the two emperors should also be considered. Commodus was the last in line after several exemplary emperors, the last of which was Marcus Aurelius, who to this day is lauded for his philosophies. Commodus serves as an explanation for why this great dynasty had to end. Additionally, his immediate successor is Pertinax, who was supposedly an excellent ruler for the short time he held the principate, so Commodus' reign was in-between the reigns of two great men. Severus, on the other hand, succeeded Didius Julianus, whose reign started with him buying the throne in a bidding war, and was succeeded by Caracalla, who murdered his own brother in cold blood. In the ancient sources emperors were inevitably compared with their predecessors and successors, especially those closest to them in the imperial line-up. Commodus, compared to the excellent Marcus and Pertinax, had to be bad, and Severus, compared to the awful Julianus and Caracalla, had to be good. This is the narrative function each emperor had in the larger narrative. In addition to this, the narrative needed some emperors who were mostly good or mostly bad, such as Severus. If the narrative only featured characters such as Marcus and Commodus, who are on either end of the spectrum, the good might not seem as good, and the bad might not seem as bad. With some characters who are

good, but have some bad traits, the authors made the point that Marcus was not only good, but he was also excellent even when compared to someone like Severus, with whom he shared some qualities. The same goes for Commodus. He was not just bad; he was awful, not just in comparison with Marcus, but also in comparison with Severus.

The Narrative of Good and Evil Emperors

A narrative function that has survived from antiquity to today is that emperors seldom feature by themselves. From the literary sources of ancient Rome to Gibbon's *Decline and Fall* to a number of the modern books discussed previously, the emperors are presented one after the other in the same work of literature. Naturally enough, they are also mentioned in relation to each other, and comparisons between emperors are a frequent occurrence in both ancient and modern historiography. Verena Schultz's analysis of comparisons in Dio Cassius' work are true for the other literary sources of the time as well, and, as will become apparent, the literary device has survived until today. Ancient biography was concerned with characterising its subjects, and comparing said subject to a different emperor would highlight his traits. Domitian's base nature was shown through comparisons with Vespasian and Titus, while Tiberius was negatively compared to his adoptive son Germanicus.¹⁸³ For Commodus, this was usually done in relation to Marcus Aurelius. Commodus' overindulgence would be contrasted with Marcus' moderation, his low intelligence would seem worse next to Marcus' intellect, and he would be all the more of a coward for being successor to a man as brave as Marcus. These comparisons are part of the larger narrative of good and evil emperors; Marcus, who was moderate, intelligent, and brave, is good, and Commodus, because he was the antithesis of his father, had to be bad. Each of them is pushed further towards the edge of the spectrum of good and bad. This narrative of good and bad is important because history has power. Emperors cared about how they were remembered, a fact made obvious from the statues, buildings, and inscriptions they made sure to leave behind. Authors had the power to shape how each emperor was remembered, and could shape their narratives to make certain behaviours be remembered positively, while others would be remembered negatively.¹⁸⁴

Marcus Aurelius was, and still is, widely accepted as a great ruler, and is described in both ancient sources and modern literature as having most of the qualities on de Blois' checklist for good emperors. Narratives of him often start with a description of his adoptive

¹⁸³ Schultz, 2019, p. 201-4

¹⁸⁴ Schultz, 2019, p. 258-9

family background, emphasising how he was chosen by these great men because of his outstanding qualities. His education and interest in philosophy is perhaps what he is most known for, as his *Meditations* are still published and read to this day, and he is often referred to as “the philosopher emperor.” He is said to have been so preoccupied with his education as a child that it deteriorated his physical health, this being the only negative aspect anyone could fault him for.¹⁸⁵ Education is often used as a point of critique for both good and bad rulers. Dio, among others, used it to create a stark difference between Marcus, who valued learning above all else, and Commodus, who scorned it.¹⁸⁶

Marcus’ moderation came through in his carefulness with state expenditures and his respect for the senate in asking their permission before spending any sizable amount.¹⁸⁷ During the wars throughout his reign he had ample opportunity to show both his courage and military prowess. After several victories, the only reason he did not win the final war on the Danube was because he died before having time to finish it, and his selection of good assistants is obvious in the biographies of Commodus, where the latter is said to have disposed of the good counsellors left him by his father. Other historians propose quicker ways of determining who had been regarded as good or bad by ancient historians. Potter notes emperors who “advertised a close associate in their administration” were typically seen as good.¹⁸⁸ For the first eight years of Marcus’ reign he ruled alongside Lucius Verus as co-Augustus, and in 177 A.D. he promoted his son to Augustus, once again sharing the principate. As discussed in the chapter on physical sources, this was advertised on coinage for the empire to know. Another simple literary tool in Roman historiography is that the emperors who were murdered were demonised, while those who died a natural birth and left behind an heir were praised.¹⁸⁹ This may be because the murder of an emperor often led to a change in dynasty, as it did with Commodus. Authors hoping to curry favour with the new emperor might write negatively about his predecessor, so as to make the new ruler look better by comparison. Marcus, along with his Antonine predecessors, had died an old man with a successor already chosen. It did not matter if the heir was a biological or adopted son; what mattered was that the succession could proceed without difficulty. A good emperor need not be described with every single trait mentioned so far; there had to be some differences

¹⁸⁵ Dio Cassius 72.36.2

¹⁸⁶ Schultz, 2019, p. 183

¹⁸⁷ Dio Cassius 72.33.2

¹⁸⁸ Potter, 2009, p. 211

¹⁸⁹ Beard, 2019, p. 374

between them so they could be told apart. What was important was for the good qualities to heavily outweigh any potential negative traits.

A bad emperor, similarly, would have a host of bad qualities. There might still be some positive traits, but they would typically be mentioned in passing or drowned out by horrid thoughts and actions. Commodus, for example, is said to have been beautiful, but this is not the focal point of any of the literary sources, not of any modern literature.¹⁹⁰ Instead, the authors create an archetypal character easily recognisable as bad, which means the bad emperors, among them Caligula, Nero, and Commodus, need to be characterised in similar fashion. They need to “have enough in common to be recognisable as the type of bad emperor, but they also have enough individual traits not to get mixed up.”¹⁹¹ Schultz explains three ways in which the image of an emperor can be, as she puts it, deconstructed. That is to say a negative image of an emperor is created “based on formerly positive or neutral interpretations of him.”¹⁹² She writes of deconstruction in the works of Dio Cassius, but devices for deconstruction feature equally often in Herodian’s work and the *Historia Augusta*.

The first form of deconstruction is transgression of Roman manliness, i.e. the emperor being presented as foreign and/or feminine.¹⁹³ This applies to Commodus in both instances; in the *Historia Augusta* he is accused of dressing in women’s clothing, and performing the rites of the eastern deity Mithra.¹⁹⁴ Homosexual tendencies may also belong to this transgression. Commodus supposedly had a multitude of male lovers, and is said to have kissed his chamberlain Saoterus in public.¹⁹⁵ The second form is the transgression of modesty in imperial representation, as Dio “regards modest behaviours as a virtue that leads to success.”¹⁹⁶ Commodus’ imperial representation was not modest. That, in and of itself, should not be seen as an invention of the ancient authors, as it is seen in coinage, statuary, and inscriptions from Commodus’ reign that he wanted to be seen as Hercules. The conclusions drawn by the ancient authors, that Commodus was a madman, a megalomaniac, and an overall bad ruler, on the other hand, are not corroborated by other pieces of evidence, and should be considered deconstructions. The third and final form of deconstruction is the opposition of nature, in which nature itself, in the form of weather, landscapes, and animals, becomes the emperor’s enemy; “they make his transgressive behaviour apparent, comment on

¹⁹⁰ Herodian 1.7.5

¹⁹¹ Schultz, 2019, p. 250

¹⁹² Schultz, 2019, p. 188

¹⁹³ Schultz, 2019 p. 188

¹⁹⁴ *Historia Augusta*, p. 289

¹⁹⁵ *Historia Augusta* p. 271

¹⁹⁶ Schultz, 2019, p. 190

it, or try to prevent it.”¹⁹⁷ No records of particularly bad weather from Commodus’ reign exist, and as he did not travel outside of Rome after returning in 180 A.D. landscapes do not play much of a role in his narratives. Animals, however, feature frequently, as he fought a variety of wild beasts in the arena. Commodus slaying animals for the entertainment of the crowds is unlikely to be an invention of the ancient authors, but they wrote of it in a way that fit into the larger narrative they were creating, that is, the narrative of Commodus as a megalomaniac unfit for the principate. The emperor should never have been in the middle of the arena, and with every animal mentioned in the ancient sources the authors make Commodus’ transgression of decency clearer. Nature might not be turning against Commodus of its own volition, but Commodus fights it, nonetheless.

Humour, too, plays a significant role when characterising an emperor as bad. A bad emperor would display either no sense of humour or a type of humour harmful to other people.¹⁹⁸ Several jokes of this type are recorded in the *Historia Augusta*: Commodus is said to have mixed human excrement into food to mock his guests, smearing mustard on two hunchbacks on a platter, and pushing the praetorian prefect Julianus into a swimming pool. Julianus was also supposedly made to dance naked in front of Commodus’ many concubines.¹⁹⁹ Commodus is presented as having a sense of humour, but it is based around embarrassing others, often prominent men of a higher social class, and the jokes are presented in a way that makes it clear no man of worth should ever find these things funny. Only a madman who delights in the mockery of others would find humour in them. Similarly, in the narratives of bad emperors, people would often find joy in the death of others. It was not only the emperor in question who would react this way. Rather, joy replacing grief was a quality prescribed to his reign. When the murder of Agrippina became known, people rejoiced, as they thought “this is the beginning of Nero’s end.”²⁰⁰ Cleander was handed over to the mob who demanded his head for having caused a famine. There is a sense of joyous righteousness expressed in the people who acquired Cleander’s body and “dragged it away and abused it and carried his head all about the city on a pole.”²⁰¹ They were clearly happy with the result of their exploits. Commodus himself, more so than anyone else, is shown to take great pleasure

¹⁹⁷ Schultz, 2019, p. 193

¹⁹⁸ Schultz, 2019, p. 194

¹⁹⁹ *Historia Augusta*, 11.3-4

²⁰⁰ Schultz, 2019, p. 245

²⁰¹ Dio 73.13.6

in the death of others. Murder is equated with “amusement and sports,” being interchangeable as far as pastimes go.²⁰²

On the opposite end, there are events covered in the literary sources that are presented as being serious, although they might have been intended as humorous.²⁰³ Nero’s marriages to Sporus and Pythagoras could have been intended as a parody of marriage, but is presented in the sources as a sure sign of Nero’s base character. Dio writes “I have seen that man (if man he is who has married Sporus and been given in marriage to Pythagoras.”²⁰⁴ Nero is not only shown to be an unfit emperor, but even his status as a man is being called into question. Caligula is characterised as a madman for promising to promote a horse named Incitatus to consul, “a promise that he would certainly have carried out if he had lived longer.”²⁰⁵ However, this promise, which, importantly, was never carried out, could easily be a taunt directed at the senators who were present. In claiming he would promote Incitatus to consul Caligula stated the present consuls, and perhaps the senate at large, were as qualified for their positions as a horse. The ancient authors, who were often part of the senatorial elite, would rather present the emperor as a madman than admit anyone would have so little respect for their great order.

Having little respect for the senate does seem to be another trait shared amongst the bad emperors. The dynamic between the senate and Commodus has been covered previously, and can be summarised as having started out well, souring over time as the senate attempted to assassinate Commodus and he engaged in behaviour they saw as unbecoming, up until he was murdered right before he was to attend the Saturnalia in the garb of a gladiator. The similarities to Caligula and Nero are striking; they, too, had good relationships with the senate at the beginning of their reigns, which quickly turned hostile. The circumstances of Caligula’s death, too, is not too different from that of Commodus. The plan to kill him came to be as a result of him announcing he would dance in a tragedy.²⁰⁶ The circumstances surrounding their deaths point to another trend binding the bad emperors together, namely the company they choose to keep. Nero’s affection for gladiators and actors is widely known, as is Caligula’s for charioteers and gladiators, while Commodus esteemed gladiators so highly he decided to become one, and took great pride in it.²⁰⁷ This inversion of social norms, where the highest

²⁰² Dio 73.14.1

²⁰³ Schultz, 2019, p. 196

²⁰⁴ Dio 63.22.4

²⁰⁵ Dio 59.14.7

²⁰⁶ Schultz, 2019, p. 250

²⁰⁷ Schultz, 2019, p. 219, 250

member of Roman society took in with the lowest rung, must have affronted the elite greatly, and this is reflected in how these emperors are treated in the literature.

The final aspect of bad emperors we will touch on is that of state expenditures. Expenses were not inherently bad; in some cases they were seen as strictly necessary, in other cases as the emperor giving back to the people, but sometimes they were used as evidence of an emperor abusing his power. Both Caligula and Nero fall into this last category, not just because they spent a lot of money, but because they did not, in Dio's opinion at least, spend it wisely. Caligula, for example, is supposed to have spent exuberant amounts on actors, horses and gladiators, all of which are hobbies he has been heavily criticised for. The methods used to acquire the money is also a factor in the judgement. Caligula would murder rich citizens to seize their wealth for himself, and Nero acquired funds through "exploitation, dispossession, and murders."²⁰⁸ These are the same criticisms Commodus faces in the literary sources, except the executions and dispossessions were usually carried out by his accomplices, rather than by Commodus himself. When Perennis was praetorian prefect, he killed wantonly to secure riches for himself, though it seems safe to assume some of the profit went to the emperor.²⁰⁹ Cleander famously sold high offices to the highest bidder, again for both his own and Commodus' enrichment.²¹⁰ But Commodus did not only secure wealth through his accomplices. He is, by himself, attributed to having raised the taxes of the aristocracy. On his birthday senators in Rome each had to give him two gold pieces, while senators in other cities had to provide five denarii each.²¹¹ Later in his reign he also earned well from his work as a gladiator, receiving a daily allowance of a million sesterces from the gladiatorial fund.²¹² To the modern reader there is a significant difference between wealth earned through murder and wealth earned through taxes, but to the ancient author both were deplorable, at least if it came at the expense of the aristocracy, and money derived from acting as a gladiator would naturally be tainted.²¹³

Roman historians were equipped with a suite of bad traits they could give an emperor they wanted to present as evil, which led to all the "bad" emperors being presented in similar terms. The same is true of "good" emperors. This helped the moralising function history had during Roman times, when historical characters existed to educate the population on how to

²⁰⁸ Schultz, 2019, p 217-8

²⁰⁹ *Historia Augusta* p. 275

²¹⁰ Dio 73.12.3

²¹¹ Dio 73.16.3

²¹² Dio 73.19.3

²¹³ Schultz, 2019, p. 219

conduct themselves, because it was easy to recognise who was bad and who was good. As a narrative function it has survived until today, and the story of the Roman empire is largely the story of a long line of either good or bad people, whom we should either deplore or laud. The following chapters will examine how this narrative features in Gibbon's *Decline and Fall* and in more recent scholarship.

Commodus' Decline and Fall

We have looked at the literary sources concerned with Commodus and how his character fits into the larger narrative of Roman emperors. The next chapter will detail how Commodus is treated and characterised in modern historiography, but before then we should look at an intermediary stage of history, and consider how the narrative holds up between antiquity and the present. Additionally, research about history builds on previous writings, and if we are to understand why Commodus is presented how he is today, it is beneficial to look at how he has been presented in earlier secondary literature. Of course academia has not always been as prolific as it is today, and Commodus has never been at the forefront of academic writing, so there are few texts in this category to examine. The one work we would be remiss not to look at is Edward Gibbon's *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. The work, consisting of six volumes, was published between 1776 and 1789, and while most historical works fall out of use after some time, *Decline and Fall* has remained in the public's interest for over two hundred years. There are several possible reasons for why *Decline and Fall* has not fallen into obscurity, many of which have to do with Gibbon's stylistic choices and ability to write an engaging narrative.²¹⁴ But for the sake of this discussion, the reasons for why people still read *Decline and Fall* are far less important than the simple fact that it is still being read, and still being treated as a historical work on the Roman empire, rather than a contemporary source on 18th century England.²¹⁵ Any text managing to stay relevant for this amount of time is bound to have a certain influence in its field, even if its authority has waned since the time of its release, and the content surrounding Commodus may shed light on the view historians today have of him.

Much like in the ancient literary sources and modern texts about Commodus, most of what is said about Commodus in *Decline and Fall* concerns his character, and the chapter contains a moral judgement of him. He is characterised as unintelligent and weak, rendering

²¹⁴ Craddock, 1988, p. 569-70

²¹⁵ Craddock, 1988, p. 569

him a particularly poor match for the principate. Although Commodus, according to Gibbon, was not cruel, he was stupid and weak-minded enough to be taken advantage of by his less than worthy company, making him “a slave of his attendants, who gradually corrupted his mind.”²¹⁶ These attendants would take on the responsibility of ruling the empire while Commodus gave in to his “sensual appetites.” In a statement taken directly from the *Historia Augusta* Gibbon claims Commodus had “three hundred women and as many boys, of every rank, and of every province” available to serve said appetites.²¹⁷ This notion brings out condemnation from historians today, and must have evoked even more scorn from both Gibbon and his readers in a time when deviation from sexual norms was far less socially acceptable than it is today. As he states only slightly further down the page, Commodus’ sexual habits, as he and the ancient authors believed them to be, “scorned every restraint of nature and modesty” and would not be easy to translate “into the decency of modern language.” As well as Commodus’ preoccupation with sex, his other interests were equally unsuitable for an emperor of Rome. He was from an early age fascinated with hunting, sports, and gladiatorial combat. The only saving grace was that he was, at the very least, a talented hunter. This served him well when he decided to showcase his skill in the arena, as his performance was enjoyed by part of the populace, though only the lower strata of society could enjoy what Gibbon characterises as a ridiculous and indecent spectacle.²¹⁸ And when Commodus enlisted and fought as a gladiator even “the meanest of the populace was affected by shame and indignation.”²¹⁹

While Commodus was busying himself with licentious pleasures and unsuitable exploits, the political and administrative state of the empire was being run to the ground by the likes of Perennis and Cleander. The former supposedly “aspired to the empire,” a position far above his stature, while the latter abused his position of power by selling the “rank of consul, of Praetorian, of senator” who anyone who could pay, regardless of their merits. Under the rule of men who should not have been given that level of power, upstanding senators and other people of rank were executed without a proper trial, and the government as a whole fell into disrepair. This was, as previously stated, not because Commodus was cruel, but because he was too inept to take charge over the empire that had wrongfully fallen into his lap.²²⁰ As “every sentiment of virtue and humanity was extinct in the mind of Commodus” he

²¹⁶ Gibbon, 1879, p. 102-3

²¹⁷ Gibbon, 1879, p. 111

²¹⁸ Gibbon, 1879, p. 111-3

²¹⁹ Gibbon, 1879, p. 114

²²⁰ Gibbon, 1879, p. 105-8

allowed himself to be taken advantage of by lesser men. This is how, in Gibbon's view, Commodus failed Rome.²²¹

There were contemporaries of Commodus who also felt he failed in his duties, as evidenced by the conspiracies that occurred against him. The first was instigated by his sister Lucilla, supposedly because she was jealous of the rank held by the empress Crispina. She formed the plot with a multitude of her lovers, who were "men of desperate fortunes and wild ambition," while leaving out her husband, who was "a senator of distinguished merit and unshaken loyalty."²²² The way Gibbon has formed the narrative, wickedness was a trait shared by the two siblings, whereas the only senator mentioned in the story was nothing less than a beacon of virtue. The conspiracy which led to Commodus' death nine years later serves as comeuppance for him having spent those nine years disgracing his station. As a result of him having "shed with impunity the noblest blood of Rome" the people closest to him grew scared of sharing the fate of so many others at the hands of the emperor, or of suffering similar consequences from "the sudden indignation of the people."²²³ With almost poetic resolve, Commodus' concubine, chamberlain, and Praetorian prefect decided to kill the emperor in order to save their own lives. First the concubine Marcia served him a glass of poisoned wine, but before the wine had time to kill him a youthful wrestler entered his chambers and finished his life.²²⁴ The first conspiracy happened before Commodus turned on the senate and gave his responsibilities over to lesser men, and the story does not contain a judgement of Commodus deserving to die. It does, however, show Commodus taking revenge on innocent people, as this was the event that led him to turn on the senate, despite, as Gibbon tells it, no senators were involved in the plot. The second plot shows us an evil tyrant getting exactly what he deserved: an unceremonious death. In *Decline and Fall* both plots are described in much the same terms as they are in the literary sources, both in how the events unfolded and in the motivations of the conspirators.

Gibbon stands out from other contemporary historians for his use of notes to show exactly which sources his work was based on, and this may well be one of the reasons why his work is still considered history.²²⁵ Nevertheless, his reliance on the ancient literary sources and lack of discussion surrounding them leaves his narrative an uncritical amalgamation of the ancient literary sources. As a piece of history itself, that is fine, but as a text on the Roman

²²¹ Gibbon, 1879, p. 111

²²² Gibbon, 1879, p. 104-5

²²³ Gibbon, 1879, p. 115

²²⁴ Gibbon, 1879, p. 116

²²⁵ Craddock, 1988, p. 570

empire it tells us little we cannot already read in the literary sources. What is important in regard to Commodus, is *Decline and Fall* being the oldest piece of secondary literature about him still being read. Had Gibbon created a different narrative about him in which he did more than repeat Commodus' misdeeds as they are displayed in the literary sources, the literary tradition surrounding Commodus may have shaped out differently. Not to say it would have been, or for that matter should have been, entirely positive, but it has long lacked the nuance a character such as Commodus deserves. Had it started out less one-sidedly negative there is a chance modern historians would have no choice but to examine Commodus, and the multitude of source material surrounding him, without the preconceived notion that he was nothing but horrible. This is not to say that Gibbon is single-handedly responsible for the negative image that exists of Commodus. After all, he based his narrative on the sources available to him. It is simply to point out that the narrative of Commodus as an unintelligent megalomaniac who should never have been given the chance to rule an empire has been prevalent for a long time, and largely owes its existence to historians taking the literary sources at face value. Similarly, no singular historian working today should be blamed for their negative presentation of Commodus; they too are basing their writings on the work of those who came before them, and in this, Gibbon's work has been highly influential.

Commodus in Modern Historiography

Roman historiography today, like the historiography of the third and fourth century, is greatly concerned with the many who at one point ruled the empire. It is difficult to think of Rome without thinking of its emperors. The discussions surrounding them have permeated into all types of academic writing; large overview works that cover the entire span of the empire, sometimes the Roman republic as well, monographies primarily dealing with only ruler, and articles discussing a particular facet of one emperor. These different forms of literature have different purposes, and by extension they have different strengths and weaknesses. Books covering several centuries of Roman history seek to give the reader a basic understanding of Rome's timeline, usually spending more time on a few important events while skipping over others entirely. Rome's vast and long-lasting history is hard to fit into one book, so cuts have to be made. The parts relating to the Roman empire tend to be structured around the reigns of the emperors, but that does not necessarily mean the author provides a thorough analysis of these historical characters. That sort of discussion is however the bread and butter for biographies and other books dealing mainly with one historical figure, which take on a much

shorter timespan in favour of more in-depth analyses. In order to fully understand modern historians' view on the emperor Commodus I have included both overview works and monographies in this analysis, as well as texts written for a broader audience along with those intended to be read by the especially interested. The selection of secondary literature discussed in this chapter is intended to provide an understanding of how Commodus is treated in modern literature, and how the different types of texts, along with the type of story the author wants to present, affects how Commodus is presented. The chapter covers twelve texts, including overview works, monographies, entertainment, introductory texts, and texts written for an already educated audience. In total, these texts cover the different views modern historians have of Commodus.

The emperor Commodus is a divisive historical figure whose character and reign historians today cannot agree on. Many write of him as having been a horrendous despot who should never have become emperor. This has led to some historians taking a reactionary stance, and in so doing they create a more moderate view of the controversial figure. The former way of looking at Commodus is more widespread, and can be found in both academic texts and in historical works meant for the general public. It has even made its way into popular culture with Ridley Scott's highly successful film *Gladiator* from 2000. The latter view is almost entirely contained in a few academic works. Additionally, the purposes and intended audiences of these texts differ. Toner's *The Day Commodus Killed a Rhino*, while it does contain good information about Commodus and the games held in the arena, is written to be entertaining enough for a layperson to enjoy. Ravnå's *Gresk og Romersk Politisk Historie* is an introductory book meant for university freshmen, and is therefore simplified and contains less discussion than most other secondary literature. Most of the literature referencing Commodus are books that deal with a wide timeframe, for example the entirety of the Roman empire, where Commodus' reign is just one part of it. Authors such as Iddeng, Potter, Dunstan, Birley, le Glay et al, and the editors of the encyclopaedia Britannica write texts that fall into this category. By the very nature of these texts there is little room to discuss each individual figure, and the parts about Commodus are often limited to only a few pages. In the works of Iddeng, Dunstan, le Glay et al, along with Potter's *Rome in the Ancient World* and the article on Commodus in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, his life and twelve-year sole reign is dealt with in less than three pages. Birley, in *The Cambridge Ancient History*, devotes somewhat more time to him with a total of five pages, and Potter in *The Roman Empire at Bay* spends almost ten pages on him. This is all to say that few pages are dedicated to Commodus in overview works, leaving little room for discussion about historiography or

contradictory viewpoints. This becomes particularly apparent in *Gresk og Romersk Politisk Historie*, where the history of the Roman republic and empire is told in approximately one hundred pages, and Commodus is given only a couple condescending sentences. On the opposite side there are the biographical and semi-biographical works by McHugh, Adams, and Hekster, which are entire books dedicated to Commodus. These works tend to go into more detail about multiple aspects of his life and reign, as well as more discussion regarding source material and other literature.

The differentiating views of Commodus are perhaps best understood when comparing how historians treat a few key aspects of Commodus' person and reign. There are three aspects that are brought up in most comprehensive texts about him. Firstly, his personal qualities or lack thereof, secondly, whether he should have become emperor, and lastly, the political life and administration of his reign. The rest of this chapter will examine in detail how each of these aspects are treated by modern historians.

Commodus' personal qualities

Commodus' personal qualities are discussed by each author mentioned above, though some of them spend more time on this than others. As will become apparent historians tend to portray this aspect in a negative light, with only Hekster and to some degree McHugh dissenting from the established norm.

Perhaps the most often discussed aspect of Commodus' personality is his insanity and megalomania, whether real or perceived. These character traits are usually discussed in relation to Commodus' association with the demi-god Hercules, to him fighting animals and gladiators in the amphitheatre, and to the renaming of various entities, particularly the city of Rome. The online encyclopaedia Britannica sums it up in a succinct manner, stating that "Commodus was lapsing into insanity. He gave Rome a new name, Colonia Commodiana (Colony of Commodus), and imagined that he was the god Hercules, entering the arena to fight as a gladiator or to kill lions with bow and arrow."²²⁶ But, as is the nature of online encyclopaedias, this is a simplified summary of more comprehensive works. Jerry Toner's *The Day Commodus Killed a Rhino* states that Commodus presenting himself as Hercules may not have been fully irrational, but that renaming the city of Rome, along with the months, his palace, the legions, and the senate after himself was surely a sign of megalomania.²²⁷

²²⁶ The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica

²²⁷ Toner, 2014, p. 28

Iddeng's *Romerrikets Historie* also claims Commodus became a victim of megalomania towards the end of his reign, for all the same reasons as previously mentioned, and David Potter states that Commodus "wanted people to see him as Hercules on Earth."²²⁸ Marcel le Glay et al writes about Commodus' "religious mania" which according to them he had shown symptoms of early in his reign, but which came to fruition towards the end.²²⁹

There are, however, some historians who see this aspect of Commodus' character in a different way. Most notable is Hekster, who, in his book *Commodus: An Emperor at the Crossroads*, presents a different explanation for the emperor's actions. Importantly, Hekster does not claim that Commodus did not present himself as Hercules, that he never fought in the amphitheatre, or that he did not rename the city of Rome, the senate, legions etc. Instead, he looks at what motives Commodus could have had for acting in this manner, besides simply being insane or megalomaniac. According to him, Commodus' association with Hercules was part of Commodus asserting his birthright. He was the first emperor to be "born to the purple," meaning he was born to a sitting emperor, and the basis for his imperial power lay in the empire being his birthright. Showing himself as the reincarnation of Hercules was one way of reminding the people of who he was and of what he was capable. As Hekster puts it, "Hercules, like Commodus, ruled the earth by divine (birth)right," and as Hercules had done before, Commodus would bring about a new Golden Age of peace and prosperity for his subjects.²³⁰ Hekster also sees the renaming of Rome as part of this narrative; the change to Commodiana could be meant as a rebirth of the empire under Commodus.²³¹ This narrative is similar to the one put forward by McHugh in *The Emperor Commodus: God and Gladiator*, in which he claims that Commodus may not have cared too much about how his association with Hercules would be received by the elite, because he prioritised the support of the army and the people.²³² This idea is, as has been discussed previously, corroborated by numismatic sources.

It is generally agreed upon that that the last Antonine was cruel. Several historians portray his cruelty as coming forth after the conspiracy of 182 A.D., which was instigated by his sister and included many senators. According to both le Glay et al and Dunstan the failed conspiracy created in Commodus both a sense of paranoia and a hatred towards the senate. This fear and animosity led to a so-called "reign of terror" in which members of the

²²⁸ Iddeng, 2018, p. 271; Potter, 2009, p. 240

²²⁹ le Glay et al, 2001, p. 295

²³⁰ Hekster, 2002, p. 106-7

²³¹ Hekster, 2002, p. 96

²³² McHugh, 2015, p. 161

aristocracy were executed. Le Glay et al specifies that it was Marcus Aurelius' old friends who were persecuted, whereas Dunstan only claims it was "senators and courtiers."²³³ Their sentiment is shared by Adams, who claims Commodus' fear of *nobiles* led to "a series of élite persecutions," made worse by the fact that the senate was not consulted. He adds that the senate's animosity towards the emperor grew.²³⁴ McHugh defines the parameters of this "reign of terror" in more specific terms. It was Commodus' reintroduction of the charge of *majestas* that allowed Commodus to persecute senators. *Majestas* was a capital offence which covered acts of treason against the state of Rome, and as the emperor was the embodiment of the Roman state it included acts of conspiracy against Commodus. Thus, all Commodus had to do to rid himself of someone he did not trust was to accuse and convict him of conspiracy. The man would then be executed or exiled, and his property would be confiscated by the state. McHugh also states that Commodus had the power to reduce the punishment or even pardon the accused, but that he "wished to promote this climate of fear to undermine his opponents."²³⁵

Said climate of fear was also propagated in less extreme ways than execution and exile. Toner, while recounting a passage from Dio Cassius almost verbatim, states Commodus would frequently insult senators "by making them perform degrading tasks" although he does not go into detail about what these tasks were.²³⁶ Birley, basing his statement on the *Historia Augusta*, writes of two incidents showing Commodus being cruel without going so far as killing someone; Iulius, who was sole prefect at the time, was once pushed into a swimming pool in front of his staff, and at another time was forced to stand naked in front of Commodus' many concubines.²³⁷ It was not only the elite who had to live in fear of the emperor, as shown by a man who was thrown to wild beasts for having read a biography of the first-century emperor Caligula, with whom Commodus shared a birthday.²³⁸ Commodus also gathered a group of men who had lost their feet, and clubbed them to death after having tied them up and given them sponges, which were supposed to look like stones, while he pretended they were the giants who had been killed by Hercules.²³⁹ Toner also states that Commodus "even brought down a gentle giraffe with his cruel spears."²⁴⁰ There were in other

²³³ le Glay, 2001, p. 295; Dunstan, 2010, p. 397

²³⁴ Adams, 2013, p. 150

²³⁵ McHugh, 2015, p. 79-80

²³⁶ Toner, 2014, p. 25

²³⁷ Birley, 2000, p. 190

²³⁸ Toner, 2014, p. 19

²³⁹ Toner, 2014, p. 17; Birley, 2000, p. 190

²⁴⁰ Toner, 2014, p. 2

words no one, aristocrat or commoner, human or animal, who were safe from Commodus' cruelty. These anecdotes of Commodus' cruelty are not necessarily based on the modern authors' convictions; they are all taken directly from the literary sources.

In addition to being cruel, Commodus may have been rather stupid. While some historians point out that he received an excellent education, as one would assume of the son of the most powerful man in the world, it is a contentious subject whether Commodus learned much from his tutors. le Glay et al simply states Commodus' education "had been meticulous," while McHugh claims he showed great interest in oratory and philosophy throughout his life, not only when he was forced to learn it.²⁴¹ As proof of Commodus being at least moderately intelligent he points to a passage from Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations*, in which he "gives thanks that his children were neither stupid nor deformed."²⁴² This passage is also referenced by Potter, but he adds that many people did not share the sentiment.²⁴³ This has not been evidence enough for most historians. According to Ravnå, at the time of Marcus Aurelius' death, when Commodus became sole princeps, he had seemingly learned nothing from his father.²⁴⁴ Potter is even more direct, stating "the basic problem with Commodus was that he was not very bright," and Toner claims Commodus was too stupid to realise that his opponents in the arena allowed him to win because he was emperor, instead believing "that he won his fights through talent alone."²⁴⁵ It seems McHugh is alone in believing Commodus to have been intelligent, and Commodus is still generally viewed as stupid.

The last characteristic of Commodus that has to be addressed is his debauchery, which is typically discussed in terms of sex, drinking, and the games in the amphitheatre. According to Dunstan, Commodus forwent his responsibilities as emperor in favour of "sexual pleasures and feats in the Colosseum," and Birley states by the time Cleander took over power, which is to say 182 A.D., Commodus was "devoting himself exclusively to the arena, showing remarkable proficiency as a gladiator."²⁴⁶ Similarly, Iddeng states Commodus lived privately in his palace, where he engaged in parties, luxury, and grand games, and "satisfied his appetite for sex and gladiator fights."²⁴⁷ This appetite for sex, which Potter describes as an addiction, is presumably how he ended up with the "conspicuous growth on his groin" Toner

²⁴¹ le Glay et al, 2001, p. 294; McHugh, 2015, p. 3

²⁴² McHugh, 2015, p. 2

²⁴³ Potter, 2004, p. 85

²⁴⁴ Ravnå, 2006, p. 160

²⁴⁵ Potter, 2009, p. 239; Toner, 2014, p. 18

²⁴⁶ Dunstan, 2010, p. 397; Birley, 2000, p. 198

²⁴⁷ Iddeng, 2018, p. 270

mentions in passing.²⁴⁸ Commodus is supposed to have had many concubines, and le Glay et al even claim that they, Commodus' favourite concubine Marcia in particular, played a significant role in the political scene of the last years of Commodus' reign.²⁴⁹ There is an obvious connection between Commodus' love of sex and parties and his lack of participation in governmental affairs, a common critique against the emperor which will be discussed further under *Politics and Administration under Commodus*.

Four characteristics of Commodus have been discussed thus far: insanity and megalomania, cruelty, stupidity, and debauchery. There is agreement in regard to two of these traits; neither Commodus' cruelty nor debauchery receive much discussion. The same cannot be said for his perceived stupidity, insanity, and megalomania. Historians generally refer to Commodus' identification with Hercules, his appearance as a gladiator, and him renaming various entities after himself as proof of the former, but Hekster and McHugh disagree. They look at Commodus' intentions and motives, and find an explanation for his actions in which the emperor acted rationally. McHugh also represents the main dissent in the question of Commodus' intelligence, where most historians think Commodus, despite having received a good education, was stupid. As far as his personal qualities goes, most modern historians agree that they were lacking.

Should Commodus have become emperor?

The discourse regarding Commodus' character, as detailed above, has likely influenced the much-discussed question of whether he should have become emperor at all. There are two parts to this question, the first being that Commodus came from a line of adopted emperors, starting with Nerva's adoption of Trajan, and ending with Antoninus Pius' adoption of Marcus Aurelius. Both Marcus Aurelius and Commodus have been criticised for ending this system of adoptive emperors; Adams and Ravnå argue Commodus' ascension to the throne broke with the traditions of the Nerva-Antonine dynasty. Iddeng and le Glay et al form the opposing side in claiming Commodus' ascension followed a greater and longer-lasting tradition, as well as adhering to the wishes of the Roman people, along with Potter who claims the system of adoptive emperors did not actually exist. The second part to the question is whether Commodus was experienced enough to be sole emperor. Adams, and to a lesser

²⁴⁸ Toner, 2014, p. 16; Potter, 2004, p. 86

²⁴⁹ le Glay et al, 2001, p. 296

degree Iddeng, argue that his experience was not sufficient. We will deal with the question of tradition first.

According to Adams, Marcus Aurelius deviated from his predecessors and decided that “birth was more important than experience or worth as a leader,” suggesting Commodus possessed neither quality.²⁵⁰ Ravnå seems to agree. He claims Marcus Aurelius failed in an old emperor’s most important task, namely finding a suitable successor, and states Marcus having a true born son was a problem.²⁵¹ Other historians disagree; Iddeng sees inheritance based on familial ties, rather than adoption, as the norm, and claims both the people and the army preferred such positions to follow bloodlines.²⁵² Le Glay et al holds the same view, and McHugh adds there can be no doubt about whether Marcus Aurelius intended for Commodus to succeed him, as some historians have claimed. Even Lucius Verus, Marcus Aurelius’ co-emperor until 169 A.D., wanted Marcus’ sons to be next in line, insisting Commodus and his brother be named Caesar.²⁵³ Potter advocates for there not being a system of adoption to begin with, claiming the adoption of Hadrian, Antoninus Pius, and Marcus Aurelius were done to ensure the throne remained in Trajan’s family.²⁵⁴ There is, in other words, little agreement about whether Commodus’ ascension to the principate broke or followed the established tradition.

There is also the discussion regarding Commodus’ experience as a leader. The biggest advocate for Commodus’ inexperience is Adams, who throughout *Gladiator, Hercules or a Tyrant* states Commodus lacked the necessary experience to be sole emperor. He attributes Commodus’ lack of experience of Roman politics largely to his youth, as he was only eighteen years old when his father died and he became sole emperor. According to Adams experience in several different areas was a prerequisite for good emperors, and this was not afforded Commodus “owing to circumstances beyond the control of both himself and his father.”²⁵⁵ One of these circumstances was that for most of the joint principate of Marcus Aurelius and Commodus, their time and energy was spent on the Germanic war, which meant Commodus’ time in Rome under the guidance of his father was reduced.²⁵⁶ He therefore did not learn to deal with complicated politics. Iddeng, though he spends less time discussing this aspect of Commodus’ life, shares the sentiment. He claims Commodus was naïve and

²⁵⁰ Adams, 2013, p. 114

²⁵¹ Ravnå, 2006, p. 160

²⁵² Iddeng, 2018, p. 269

²⁵³ le Glay et al, 2001, p. 397; McHugh, 2015, p. 4-5

²⁵⁴ Potter, 2004, p. 85

²⁵⁵ Adams, 2013, p. 135-6

²⁵⁶ Adams, 2013, p. 124

immature, and not fit for “such a comprehensive and all-encompassing task as being the ruler of a world empire.”²⁵⁷ Unlike the question surrounding Commodus being a “purple-born” princeps in a long line of adoptive emperors, which sees a lot of disagreement, there are no historians who go against the view that Commodus was inexperienced. There are, as we have seen, some who view his actions as being the result of cruelty rather than mere inexperience, but there are no one who outright claims Commodus experienced enough for the sole principate in 180 A.D.

The question of whether Commodus should have become emperor is not uniformly answered by modern historians. While it is undeniable that his immediate predecessors had been adopted into the role of emperor, as opposed to being the natural born heir, there is contention around whether this constitutes a true system, and whether that system should count for more than the dynastic tendencies that had existed in Roman society for much longer. As far as Commodus’ experience at the time of his father’s death goes, most historians do not go into detail about it, possibly owing to the texts about Commodus being, in many cases, only a few pages long. It is possible to extrapolate their views on his capabilities, which would be tied to experience, from how they deal with his policies and administration.

Politics and administration under Commodus

The replacement of Marcus Aurelius with Commodus brought about some changes in the political scene of the empire. Of this there is consensus among historians, but the extent of these changes is up for debate. Hekster, McHugh, and Adams argue there was at least some continuity in the imperial administration under Commodus, when compared to his immediate predecessors, whereas Dunstan, le Glay et al, Potter, and Toner see Commodus’ principate as something wholly other, and decidedly worse, than his father’s reign. This is mainly because of the strained relationship between Commodus and the senate and the advancement of non-senatorial men to positions of power. This critique is closely related to the idea of Commodus having little to no interest in governing the empire, and allowing his unqualified advisors to do it instead. Despite this, there is one policy unique for his reign that historians generally agree was positive. Hekster, McHugh, and Dunstan, who have expressed differentiating views on several occasions, all consider the policy of peace during Commodus’ reign to have been effective. Still, there are some more contentious aspects of politics and administration that need to be examined.

²⁵⁷ Iddeng, 2018, p. 270

Toner claims Commodus frequently gave prominent men offices below their station, whereas Adams states men who were traditionally suitable for high office were given those positions.²⁵⁸ Adams does however also state the senate was “politically ineffective” at this time, so even if members of the senatorial elite were given high political or administrative positions, those positions did not come with actual political power.²⁵⁹ Hekster holds a similar view, stating “consulships and urban prefectures were held by distinguished senators as much as before,” but that they were left out of Commodus’ circle of personal advisors.²⁶⁰ There are a few different explanations for these changes in government, with Adams claiming Commodus and the senate were at odds with each other because of ambition of similar calibre but with different goals.²⁶¹ Dunstan and le Glay offer a different explanation, claiming the tension between emperor and senate was a result of the conspiracy in 182 A.D., where the senate as a whole were implicated by the would-be assassin.²⁶² McHugh presents an interesting concept, but whether it is explanation or result of the strained relationship is difficult to say. According to him, Commodus’ predecessors had upheld a spiel of equality between emperor and senators, which Commodus rejected, “presenting the relationship for what it was: the emperor a benevolent autocrat whilst the rest of the petitioners mere subjects.”²⁶³ This, of course, was not well received by the senatorial class.

Whatever the reason for the animosity, historians agree that Commodus and the senate were not on good terms, and with senators losing much of their political power others would have to take over. There are three figures who have to be paid especial attention to: Saoterus, Perennis, and Cleander, who can be seen as having been Commodus’ right-hand men during different periods. According to McHugh, the freedman Saoterus’ influence grew at the beginning of Commodus’ reign, to the point where it was a threat to the power of the senatorial aristocracy.²⁶⁴ Birley agrees, claiming the influence Saoterus had over Commodus was likely a source of resentment for both the senate and the imperial family.²⁶⁵ McHugh also states that as Commodus’ trust in the senate vanished, a result of the conspiracy in 182 A.D., his trust was instead given to the people who owed their position solely to him, and those who

²⁵⁸ Toner, 2014, p. 25; Adams, 2013, p. 168

²⁵⁹ Adams, 2013, p. 103

²⁶⁰ Hekster, 2002, p. 59

²⁶¹ Adams, 2013, p. 108

²⁶² Dunstan, 2010, p. 397; le Glay et al, 2001, p. 295

²⁶³ McHugh, 2015, p. 35

²⁶⁴ McHugh, 2015, p. 69

²⁶⁵ Birley, 2000, p. 186

were entirely reliant on him, such as Saoterus and other freedmen.²⁶⁶ Dunstan claims Commodus not only promoted men who were not part of the senatorial elite, but even “neglected governmental duties and yielded to the influence and ambition of his nonsenatorial favorites,” mainly Perennis and Cleander, “who actually governed the Empire.”²⁶⁷ This is a popular critique of Commodus; le Glay states others governed on Commodus’ behalf, and Tones claims he left the dull matter of imperial administration to “a few trusted henchmen.”²⁶⁸ He is most likely referring to the aforementioned Saoterus, Perennis, and Cleander. Potter simply states Commodus “did his best not to govern.”²⁶⁹

The most important political group in the empire had now been surpassed by a few men hand-picked by the emperor, and they were, according to Iddeng, the only people who had access to the emperor. He sees the problem with this as being that they were doing the emperor’s job without having the qualities needed to perform it well, not to mention how insulting it must have been for the senatorial elite to see freedmen rise above them in the hierarchy.²⁷⁰ To add insult to injury, the freedmen who were promoted to high office found a way to abuse the political system for their own economic gain. McHugh claims they raised funds by selling various positions in both the government and the army, and Iddeng adds they also had rich aristocrats killed in order to take their fortune for themselves.²⁷¹ Neither of them claim Commodus was part of this, but he must have either been aware of and okay with their actions, or so out of touch with politics he did not know what was going on.

It is however important to note not only people of low rank were promoted under Commodus. According to Hekster, Commodus shared the first consulship of his sole reign with “the thoroughly acceptable patrician Antistius Burrus.”²⁷² McHugh points out that he also promoted several of his old tutors, and as they had originally been appointed by his well-respected father, Marcus Aurelius, they must have been respectable and highly educated people.²⁷³ He also states Commodus kept several of his father’s old advisors, which led to “a great deal of continuity between the father’s policies and the son’s,” and Adams points to

²⁶⁶ McHugh, 2015, p. 78, 90

²⁶⁷ Dunstan, 2010, p. 397

²⁶⁸ le Glay et al, 2001, p. 295; Toner, 2014, p. 22

²⁶⁹ Potter, 2009, p. 238

²⁷⁰ Iddeng, 2018, p. 271

²⁷¹ McHugh, 2015, p. 128; Iddeng, 2018, p. 271

²⁷² Hekster, 2002, p. 50

²⁷³ McHugh 2015, p.9

Commodus continuing the *alimenta* policy, a welfare program which was originally started by Nerva, as proof of continuity between reigns.²⁷⁴

The policy of peace is unique from both Commodus' closest predecessors and successors, and the decision to end the war with the Marcomanni and the Quadi is today generally considered to be a good one. Annexation of new territories along the Danube may have led to the empire being harder to defend, and the war was, according to Dunstan, perhaps financially unrealistic.²⁷⁵ Additionally, and perhaps more importantly, the peace terms worked. Both Hekster and McHugh state the border was stable for seventy years, until the reigns of Valerian and Gallienus, which McHugh calls "a remarkable achievement of both Marcus Aurelius and Commodus."²⁷⁶ While Commodus may not have had thoughts of a permanent policy at that point, the rest of his reign remained peaceful. As Adams points out, Commodus did not undertake any further campaigns after returning to Rome in 180 A.D., which he sees as a change in policy "rather than the complete neglect of provincial frontier affairs."²⁷⁷

It is difficult to ascertain how comprehensive the changes in Commodus' government were when compared to that of Marcus Aurelius. Some historians are of the opinion that there was continuity between the two, with some changes in the emperor's innermost circle but with traditionally suitable men still being promoted to most official positions. Others claim the imperial government saw radical changes with only a few men, unsuited for the positions they found themselves in, held almost all the political power. The latter view is also accompanied by the idea that Commodus removed himself from politics and let other govern in his stead. The only aspect of policies historians agree on is that the peace brought by Commodus' administration was effective and overall good for the empire.

Modern Historians on Commodus Concluded

The discourse regarding Commodus is divisive, and ranges from his being a horrible emperor and even worse person, to him being a complex character who is difficult to pinpoint as strictly bad. Texts about Commodus, whether a few pages in a larger work or entire biographies, contain clear moral judgements of his character. In most of the texts examined in this chapter this judgement is negative, though some are less extreme in their depiction than others, and a few strive for a more nuanced view of the last Antonine. Only Hekster and

²⁷⁴ McHugh 2015, p. 68; Adams, 2013, p. 48

²⁷⁵ McHugh 2015, p. 51; Dunstan, 2010, p. 397

²⁷⁶ Hekster, 2002, p. 47; McHugh 2015, p. 61

²⁷⁷ Adams, 2013, p. 278-9

McHugh fall squarely into the latter view, with their books written largely as a reaction to the existing, and overwhelmingly negative, narrative. Adams and Iddeng, while more negatively disposed toward Commodus than Hekster and McHugh, do at times point to the more positive sides of him; Iddeng defends Commodus' rise to sole principate, and Adams is the only author to mention Commodus continuing the *alimenta* policy. The remaining seven authors write about Commodus in almost exclusively negative terms, mirroring the sentiments from the literary sources.

Commodus is of course not the only emperor described in these terms. Nero, said to have played the fiddle while Rome burned, and Caligula, who supposedly promoted his horse to the senate, are treated as uniformly bad as Commodus is, and with as little nuance. They were all horrid, having no redeemable qualities to speak of. These are the people Commodus feature alongside with on lists of Rome's worst emperors, but neither is who he is most often compared to. That title goes to Marcus Aurelius. Many narratives, several of which are discussed in this chapter, feature a comparison between the father and son, not because they are similar, but because of how far the proverbial apple fell from the tree. Marcus was calm where Commodus was rash, upright and just where Commodus judged unfairly, brave where Commodus was cowardly. He was, in short, good where Commodus was bad, and it has baffled historians how a great man like Marcus Aurelius could father a delinquent like Commodus. These comparisons are easy to make; Commodus is overwhelmingly similar to Nero and Caligula, and overwhelmingly different from Marcus. A more interesting comparison is the one with Septimius Severus, who in modern historiography, like in ancient sources, feature as neither wholly good nor evil. This comparison will be carried out in the next chapter.

Out of the twelve books examined, only three of them are solely about Commodus. These are the books by Hekster, McHugh, and Adams, which are written with the purpose of understanding and educating the reader about Commodus specifically. Potter, le Glay et al, Birley, Dunstan, Iddeng, and Ravnå all wrote books that give an overview of Roman history, where Commodus only plays one of many parts. The Encyclopaedia Britannica functions similarly; the article about Commodus is short and contains little detail. Toner's book, although it has Commodus' name in the title, is mainly about the spectacles in the amphitheatre and Circus Maximus; only the first chapter is truly about Commodus. This is to say the texts that cover Commodus only briefly tend to be more negative towards him, whereas texts that examine his life and reign in more detail end up with a more nuanced view.

Septimius Severus in Modern Historiography

The course of events during Severus' life and reign are much the same in modern historiography as in the ancient sources, and will therefore not be discussed in any detail. The characterisation of Severus by modern historians is more pertinent to this thesis. His education and love of learning is mentioned in multiple pieces of modern literature. Birley, in his biography on Severus, states he received a good education in both Greek and Latin literature, and Dunstan claims Severus, throughout his life, spent a significant amount of time with poets and philosophers.²⁷⁸ His intelligence is also discussed in relation to how he handled Clodius Albinus, in the ploy in which he gave Clodius the position of Caesar to stop him from attempting a coup in Rome while Severus dealt with Pescennius Niger.²⁷⁹ His intelligence certainly helped him achieve the goals he set for himself, and Severus was a man of ambition, as any man vying for the principate had to be. According to Smith, there is no doubt Severus was involved in the conspiracy that ended Commodus' life.²⁸⁰ It is impossible to know this with any degree of certainty, and none of the literary sources make the same claim, but even if this particular statement is unfounded, we should not doubt Severus' ambition; he ascended to the principate against multiple adversaries, and won several military victories during his time as emperor. However, he is also shown to be a cruel leader, especially after his defeat of Albinus. Albinus is said to have been preferred by the senate over Severus, and the murders committed at Severus' orders seem to be proof of this. Twenty-nine senators who had supported Albinus were killed, and Severus supposedly "carried out this unrelenting persecution for ten years with untold cruelty."²⁸¹ In executing senators and seizing their property Severus created a much-needed influx to the empty treasury.²⁸² Although he had promised not to put any senator to death without due trial, it seems this was not a promise he intended to keep.²⁸³

This was not the only indignity the senate had to endure, as Severus' reign brought about multiple changes in both government and the leadership of the armies. Severus "rarely consulted the senate as a group", instead preferring the advice of African and eastern provincials, whom he had elected for himself.²⁸⁴ It had been the army, not the senate, who

²⁷⁸ Birley, 2000, p. 18

²⁷⁹ Dunstan, 2002, p. 399-400

²⁸⁰ Smith, 1972 p. 484-5

²⁸¹ Dunstan, 2002, p. 401

²⁸² Birley, 2000, p. 127

²⁸³ Birley, 2000, p. 104

²⁸⁴ Dunstan, 2002, p. 402

gave Severus imperial power, and this is reflected in his actions during his reign, as the army took on a more dominant role in the state. Officials from the equestrian order increasingly took on offices previously held by the senatorial elite.²⁸⁵ Equestrians, rather than senators, were now favoured for legionary commands, and when Severus went to Syria several of the legions accompanying him were given equestrian commanders instead of senatorial ones.²⁸⁶ Severus' relationship with the army was important, as armed might was the basis of his power. This importance is shown in the pay rise he granted them, which is widely discussed in modern historiography. The exact sum is not agreed upon, though Dunstan claims the rise to have been 200 denarii, meaning the army's pay went from 300 to 500 denarii each, thus "more than compensating for the rise in prices under Commodus."²⁸⁷ This wording seems to imply the pay rise was a necessity, and that Severus solved a problem created by his predecessor. A less favourable view is presented by Potter, who states Severus doubled the soldiers' salary "without improving the tax base of the government," effectively creating a financial problem in order to ensure his control over the army.²⁸⁸ Smith states the rise in soldiers' pay made up for inflation, but that they were still not paid as well as they had been during the first century A.D., and Birley simply states that by granting the first pay increase in over a century, as well as allowing the troops to marry, Severus secured the loyalty of the army for himself and his dynasty.²⁸⁹ The salary increase is, by most historians, seen as a positive move by Severus, and it might be another sign of his tactical mind. He knew in which institution his power lay, and expended resources to secure their loyalty, rather than focusing on the increasingly powerless senate.

Severus' military exploits for the most part follow the course of events as they are described in the literary sources, with most exploits meeting a favourable conclusion. There is however one interesting observation on the reason for Severus' early campaigns made by Birley. Severus had come to power as the result of over a year of civil war, and the soldiers who had fought against each other during that time were now part of the same army, united under the same emperor. The campaign against Mesopotamia gave the soldiers that chance to defeat a foreign enemy, rather than a Roman adversary, and allowed legions who had previously fought against each other to fight side by side.²⁹⁰ There are no mentions of internal

²⁸⁵ The Editors of the Encyclopedia Britannica

²⁸⁶ Dunstan, 2002, p. 403; Birley, 2000, p. 129

²⁸⁷ Dunstan, 2002, p.403

²⁸⁸ Potter, 2009, p. 244

²⁸⁹ Smith, 1972, p. 492

²⁹⁰ Birley, 2000, p. 115

strife in the army later in Severus' reign, so we can assume being previous adversaries did not taint the relationship between the soldiers long term. Whether this is a result of Severus' cunning is impossible to know, but his influence should not be discounted.

The role of Plautianus, because of its importance in the characterisation of Severus, should also be mentioned, although his role in modern historiography largely follows the one he has in the literary sources. He was sole prefect, and is shown to have held immense power, taking on much of the daily administration of the empire.²⁹¹ In 203 A.D. Severus became displeased with him for having set up multiple statues of himself, but after some commotion, the nature of which we cannot be certain of as the sources differ on what happened, their relationship was mended. Years later, Plautianus was the victim of a plot by Severus' son Antoninus, later known as Caracalla, in which Antoninus accused Plautianus of having ordered ten centurions to kill both emperors, so he could seize the throne for himself. The plot ended in Plautianus being summoned and killed on Severus' orders. Plautianus is presented as negatively in modern literature as he is in the ancient literary sources, and Severus is shown in a bad light for allowing someone else to achieve that level of power. In fact, Birley quotes Dio directly, stating of Severus and Plautianus "the latter occupied the position of emperor and he himself that of the prefect."²⁹² What is interesting is that Severus is otherwise not shown to be an incompetent leader. It is a discontinuity carried over from the ancient sources to modern literature; Severus is at the same time a servant to his own praetorian prefect and a capable political leader and general.

Severus is, throughout modern historiography, characterised as intelligent, having received a proper education, ambitious, cunning, and cruel. His relationship with the senate is presented by historians as strained. He continuously promoted equestrians to positions previously held by members of the senatorial elite, and after his victory over Albinus, several of the latter's senatorial supporters were executed. However, there are no mentions of plots formed against him by senators, which would likely have happened if he did not have their support. His relationship with the army was excellent. This was the basis for his power, and he made sure to reward them for promoting him to the principate, and to maintain their loyalty throughout his reign, both through a pay rise and extensive military campaigns. His most important praetorian prefect Plautianus is shown as having an indecent amount of

²⁹¹ Potter, 2009, p. 243

²⁹² Birley, 2000, p. 154, 162-3

power, and while this does reflect negatively on Severus, it is now shown as completely damning. Overall, Severus is discussed mostly in positive and moderate terms.

Good versus Evil: An Ever-Present Narrative

Roman history is largely a story of good vs. evil. In both ancient times and today, it focuses greatly on the lives of the emperors, and their morality is given as much attention as the events that unfolded around them. But Roman history is far from the only type of literature that deals with the relationship between morality and immorality. In fact, this persuasive narrative features in all types of storytelling, and across all genres. In *The Lord of the Rings*, the fellowship presents a group of good people who has to defeat the evil Sauron, and in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* the four Pevensie-children team up with the good inhabitants of Narnia to take down the White Witch. Fantasy, science fiction, detective novels, fairy tales, historical fiction, and so on, all feature some characters who are good, and other who are bad, and the narrator makes it clear to the reader who is who. To many, the most obvious example would be the Bible, in which the ultimate good, i.e. God, fights against the ultimate evil that is the devil. There are notable exceptions to this, stories of anti-heroes where the line between good and bad is blurred. Those stories do not disprove the common narrative of good versus evil; they are created specifically to diverge from the common narrative, and to play off of the reader's expectations.

There are several reasons why we read and write stories about good and evil. Although literature does not have the same explicit educative function now as it did in ancient Rome, stories are still used to instil good morals in their readers. Velarde, in his analysis of C. S. Lewis' *The Chronicles of Narnia*, states the books are filled with important moral lessons about virtue and vice, shown through the actions of good and bad characters. Fairy tales, such as *The Chronicles of Narnia*, often depict evil and violence, and in so doing they "are able to effectively communicate the power of light as well as the power of darkness." By showing violence and evil, an author can create fiction that resembles the real world, and in so doing prepares the reader for it.²⁹³ There is little difference in how fictional stories create moralising narratives than how historians do it, and it is often done with the same purpose in mind; to instil good values in the reader. I will also argue there is a secondary reason for the prevalence of this type of narrative. The world is, in reality, too complicated to understand fully, and we use stories, both historical and fully fictional, to make sense of it. To do that, the stories need

²⁹³ Velarde, 2005, p. 13-5

to be structured in a way that is easy to understand, and the dichotomy between good and evil makes sense to us. Some people are good, and some people are not. Bad things happen because of the actions of bad people, and good people act as a counterweight to evil. This is how most fictional stories are constructed, and the narrative of good and evil emperors follow the same literary conventions.

This thesis set out to try to understand which factors led to the narrative surrounding Commodus in both Roman and modern historiography. As should be evident by now, there are a lot of surrounding factors that have to be considered in order to answer the question of Commodus' character in modern historiography. We have looked at a variety of modern accounts of Commodus, ancient literary and physical sources, Commodus in Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, and the role literary devices and traditions play in creating a biographical narrative. I will refrain from repeating all the information as it was presented in the previous chapters, but certain findings will have to be reiterated so as to have them laid out in quick succession. We established the literary sources tell the story of Commodus in negative terms. In Roman times, history was typically written by members of the senatorial elite, and the intended audience would be members of the upper echelons of society, as the majority of the empire's inhabitants were illiterate. For most of his reign, Commodus was at odds with the senate, so when the time came for the story of his life and reign to be written, the authors had personal reasons to present him negatively. Additionally, ancient biography was concerned with moral character and served to educate the reader by providing examples to follow, and others to avoid. As we know, Commodus fell into the latter category. Since he was meant to stand out as a bad emperor, someone no one should ever attempt to emulate, any good qualities he may have had did not make it into the biographies. Instead, a clear and unclouded, and strikingly negative, narrative was provided. The narrative is stronger yet because of the sources being interdependent. Inventions and omissions in Dio's narrative likely continued into the narrative of Herodian and the *Historia Augusta*. Well over a millennia later, in 18th century England, we see the same story being told again, this time by Edward Gibbon. We have also established that modern historiography concerning Commodus, in this case referring to literature written after 1980, is overwhelmingly negative, which is the result of the narrative created by ancient authors being perpetuated. A few monographies serve as notable exceptions. They were written, at least in part, as a reactionary stance to the accepted narrative surrounding Commodus, i.e. the narrative of him as, in short terms, an evil and idiotic despot.

The story told through analyses of physical source material is different. Instead of being viewed through the lens of senatorial opinion, like the literary sources, it should be examined through the lens of imperial propaganda. Images on coins, which reached every part of the empire, show Commodus' claims to dynasty, divinity, and the Golden Age he intended to bring forth. Statuary constituted an important part of the emperor's visual programme, and mimicked certain important features of the imperial coinage; Commodus' association with Hercules is particularly prominent in both. Provincial coinage, which was not directly controlled by the imperial mint, show Commodus' self-representation may have been well-received in some provinces, especially in the eastern parts of the empire. Similarly, altars from outside of Rome provide evidence that Commodus likely had a good relationship with the army, despite the lack of military exploits during his reign. While the literary sources provide insight into the senatorial elite's view of Commodus, physical sources show how he wanted to appear to the people at large, not just the elite, and at times how the people responded to this representation. His association with Hercules, for which he has been branded a megalomaniac in both ancient and modern writings, appears more as a tool used to show himself to the people as an able ruler deserving of the principate in analyses of physical sources.

Why then, when other narratives of Commodus can be constructed, has the story of him as little more than stupid and cruel been the prevalent narrative for the last eighteen hundred years? It was first created partly because of the ancient authors' self-interests, born largely from Commodus' bad relationship with the senate. This is not a good enough explanation, as evidenced by the accounts of Septimius Severus; he too had a poor relationship with the senate, and his cruelty rivals that of Commodus', but he has been treated better by both ancient and modern authors than Commodus. This comes down to the part each of them has in the overarching narrative of Roman emperors. Ever since White published *Metahistory* we know the literary devices used by historians to create narratives affect our understanding of history, and the imperial narrative demands the emperors to fit into easily understandable categories of good and evil. Commodus, because of his place as the last emperor in a dynasty, and his place in-between Marcus Aurelius and Pertinax, had to be a bad emperor. Severus, the first in his dynasty and placed between Didius Julianus and Caracalla, had to be good. He did not have to be excellent, however. The narrative also demands some emperors to be mostly good, but still contain certain negative traits, to better exemplify the excellence of the truly good and the horror of the truly bad.

The simple persuasiveness of the clean, easy-to-understand narrative of good and evil emperors is also important. It is a format in storytelling we are familiar with from all types of fiction, and it should therefore not come as a surprise that the format has prominence in history as well. A story where one character is obviously good and another is obviously bad appeals to us as readers because we then know who we are supposed to agree with, without having to put too much effort in, and the story as a whole becomes easy to understand and digest. It is the type of story that makes sense.

The narrative remains prevalent today because history has the ability to perpetuate itself; this tendency becomes particularly obvious in overview works, books written for education, and books written partly for entertainment. The first two categories of historical work deal with a large part of history, sometimes more than a thousand years. This limits the amount of research the author can do on each individual topic, which in this case means each individual emperor. Reading and analysing each available literary source, in addition to relevant secondary literature, is too big of an undertaking. Additionally, the intent of overview works, as well as educational books, is often to provide the current consensus. If the current consensus is negative, that will be reflected in those works, which in turn will amplify that particular narrative as correct. Modern historians provide a negative narrative of Commodus because the original sources, for their own contemporary reasons, gave negative accounts of him. Modern historiography is for the most part based on the information provided in the literary sources or on other secondary literature which, if we go back far enough, is based on the literary sources. Historians should not be concerned with trying to find out the truth of the matter, or what “really happened.” Historical truth, much like the past itself, does not exist, and should therefore not be chased. This thesis did not set out to find the truth of Commodus, but rather to examine which narrative forces have created the story of him. History, whether it is contemporary literary sources or secondary literature written thousands of years after the fact, is created by people who are affected by their own motivations and by the literary traditions with which they are familiar. History cannot exist without narrative, and narratives follow conventions; the existence of good versus evil is a persuasive narrative convention that permeates all writing, including Roman historiography.

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