

The account of Zenobia of Palmyra in the *Historia Augusta* must be regarded with suspicion as a faithful representation of historical events (Syme 1). When considered as a narrative, however, this passage becomes a discourse on the correlation of power, gender, and ethnicity. This paper presents a reading of the *Life of Aurelian* (HA 22-34) and argues that the construction of the episode's plot as well as devices such as variable focalization and dramatic irony call attention to the nexus of power, gender, and cultural identity, but ultimately destabilize the assumption that power is Roman and masculine.

Invented letters, frequently employed in the *Historia Augusta* to lend authenticity (Jenkins 138), focalize the narrative through Aurelian and Zenobia, who present alternative models for the correlation of power and gender. A letter in which Aurelian complains that the difficulty of his campaign against Zenobia is undervalued in Rome because she is only a woman (26) introduces the view that women are not worthy adversaries due to inherent moral deficiencies but at the same time raises questions as to whether one who engages in such protestations in fact represents the Roman ideal of manhood. Zenobia's letter, a reply to another letter in which Aurelian demands her surrender, implies that Aurelian, by virtue of his chosen method of communication, has compromised his own *virtus* (27). Zenobia also seems to recast the relationship between power and gender Aurelian's first letter proposes, even though she was not its recipient. As if to counter Aurelian's assertion that fear drives women's actions in war, she reminds him of another woman who does not fit the profile he has developed: Cleopatra.

As the invented letters question the stability of the relationship between power and gender, the construction of the episode's plot as well as the embedded comments of the authorial narrator present a similarly dynamic interaction between power and cultural identity. The narrator's remark that Zenobia's letter to Aurelian was written in Syrian and translated into Greek (27) sets up the dramatic irony of Aurelian's execution of Longinus, Zenobia's Greek teacher. When Aurelian kills Longinus (after deeming it inappropriate to execute a woman), he attempts to silence Zenobia's voice by removing the individual he believes allowed her to engage the emperor in dialogue. As the narrator again points out, however, Zenobia composed her letter in Syrian, thus demonstrating her ability to exercise power in the context of her own ethnic identity.

The climax of the episode, Aurelian's display of Zenobia in his triumph, again juxtaposes Aurelian's attempts to compromise Zenobia's power with a subversion of those attempts. Aurelian insists upon enacting with Zenobia the outcome Cleopatra had denied Augustus. The way the narrator describes the scene, however, suggests an alternate reading of the spectacle. Zenobia is described wearing gems and golden chains. She is not, however, burdened by these items, but rather adorned (*ornata*, 34) and others bear their weight for her. These details suggest her enduring royal status and her ability to captivate the spectators. Whether in letters or spectacle, the Zenobia of the *Historia Augusta* mediates the transmission of her image and, thus, rewrites Aurelian's rules of power.