

Imperial Whore, Seductress, Villain Messalina in Heavy Metal Music

Christina Hotalen, Independent Scholar

As one of the more notorious women from the early imperial period, Valeria Messalina, wife of Emperor Claudius, largely dominates the historical record as the embodiment of female vices. Messalina's proximity to imperial power and influence over the emperor made her a subject of criticism by prominent senators and authors. In primary sources, the empress is mostly characterized by her scandalous and ill-reputed behavior, ranging from being deceitful to engaging in illicit activities like adultery and prostitution. Clearly, these authors were motivated by their own agendas in portraying Messalina as anything but virtuous. This representation of the empress within primary sources has lingered within the historical record and found its way into the musical genre of heavy metal where she is both admired and scorned. In this presentation, I examine the reception of Messalina in heavy metal music through lyrics and the primary sources from which metal artists take inspiration from when writing music. Although we do not have an accurate representation of the empress from primary sources, I explore the ways in which Messalina's image has persisted in music, how ancient sources inform and inspire songs about the empress, and what makes her a compelling figure within the genre of heavy metal.