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"Roman Women: Problems and Possibilities"

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One attraction in the study of women in ancient history is the issue of historical methodology in source interpretation. Ancient history is studied through fragments: this is particularly pronounced when it comes to women. Few female voices survive from the ancient sources. Most of our sources, especially our literary sources, are elite Roman males focusing on political and military spheres dominated by men.

Yet we should not simply give up on our sources: our extant evidence is broad and does feature Roman women. The material and documentary evidence includes funerary inscriptions on tombstones erected for wives by their husbands, as well as by wives for their husbands. We also have papyri, primarily from Egypt: legal documents, literature, shopping lists, and personal letters. And we have statues whose bases are often inscribed. Attestations of female life appear in the ancient literary genres of history, biography, philosophy, drama, and prose fiction. This material yields important features of Roman society that defined women.

Rome was a patriarchal society based on the institution of the family. The terms used, *familia* and *domus*, refer to family property or to the people of the family: the immediate circle or the larger circle including slaves, property, and all relatives. The *paterfamilias* ruled the family with his *patria potestas*, a power legally absolute. He chose whom his children married and technically owned the property of his adult sons unless they were emancipated under a special ceremony. He could execute his children should he choose, a useful but never- or almost never-used threat. Children's status within a family resembled that of slaves, and Romans were aware of this. Justinian's (527 – 565 AD) *Inst*. i.ix gives us, "Children whom we have begotten in lawful wedlock are in our power … the power we have over our children is peculiar to Roman citizenship and is found in no other nation. The offspring of you and your wife are in your power, as well as that of your son and his wife, that is, your grandson and granddaughter, and so on. But the offspring of your daughter are not in your power, but in that of their own father."

The early life of women was structured by their socioeconomic background. Some level of education was enjoyed by aristocratic women: they were literate to some degree. In poorer families, resources were unavailable to support a daughter's education. The "right" to education did not exist in the Roman world. The legal age for girls to marry was age twelve, and boys fourteen. It was most common for girls to marry in their late teens, and to marry men around thirty years of age: this fact enables us to imagine the differences in power and deference between husband and wife. Often a dowry composed of land, clothing, and jewelry was involved, paid by the girl's father to support the new

household. Dowries were returned upon the dissolution of the marriage, and were tied to the woman herself.

Different forms of marriage existed for women. One form during the early Republic featured marriage with *manus*, "hand," meaning "marital submission." The woman was officially transferred from the power of her father to that of her husband. She was under his "hand," under his authority. In this kind of marriage only he could initiate a divorce. She could not; her father could not. By the late Republic and the Empire, most women married without *manus* and remained under their father's power, enjoying more agency. Either the woman or her father could initiate a divorce. When their fathers died, the woman became even more independent: she still needed a legal guardian to approve of her decisions regarding property, but Augustus required women with three or more children to have no legal guardian.

Literary and funerary evidence give the characteristics Romans valued in women.

Livy (59 BC – 17 AD) wrote a history of Rome, *Ab urbe condita*. In Book 1, Rome's foundation is described. Two sorts of Roman women are often portrayed: the good and the bad. Tullia exemplified the bad wife and bad daughter. Her father, King Servius Tullius, gave her in marriage to the brother of a certain Tarquin, and Tullia's sister to Tarquin himself. Chafing under Tarquin's brother's lack of ambition, she desired to kill him and kill Tarquin's wife in order to marry Tarquin, and goaded Tarquin to make a bid for the throne against her own father.

Livy 1.48 writes, "But Tarquin had sent men after him, who caught him as he fled and cut him down. Some believe that this was done at Tullia's prompting: it certainly fits in with the other terrible things she did … When she was heading back home … her driver started in horror and, reining in, pointed out to his mistress the body of the slain king. She is said to have committed an appalling and barbaric crime there …. maddened by the avenging spirits of her sister and former husband, Tullia, so the story goes, drove the wagon over Servius' body."

Opposite to Tullia was Lucretia, faithful wife and faithful daughter, whose story is very important for Roman history. She was married to Collatinus, an aristocrat who associated with men of the royal family. Collatinus and other aristocrats, inebriated, went to see what each others' wives were doing. These ladies were up late, carousing with other women, except Collatinus' wife Lucretia, who was spinning wool with her attendants. Tarquinius desired her. In a few days he returned to her and raped her by threatening to kill her and a slave, put them together in a bed, and tell everyone that he killed her because she was sleeping with a slave. After raping her he left. She bid her husband and father to avenge her dishonor.

Livy writes (1.58): "'It is up to you,' she said, 'to punish the man as he deserves. As for me I absolved myself of wrong, but not of punishment. Let no unchaste woman hereafter continue to live because of the precedent of Lucretia.' She took a knife she was hiding in her garments and drove it into her breast. Doubling over, she collapsed in death."

Her husband and father, by chasing out the Tarquinii, overthrew the monarchy of Rome; thus beginning the Roman Republic. This contrast of women is not unique to Livy. The *Metamorphoses* of Apuleius (c. 123 – 180 CE), the only novel to survive in entirety from the Roman world, features as protagonist Lucius, a Greek aristocrat with a great appetite, who, transformed into a donkey, tries to become a human again, having many experiences along the way. Although fiction, this work is highly historically valuable: it portrays many women. Many fall into Tullia's category such as Pamphyle who hosts Lucius. She is a witch, a bad wife, and a dangerous woman. A poor working-class couple is another example: the man's wife is completely ungrateful and promiscuous, cheating on her husband and hiding the cuckold in an amphora. The best example of a good woman is Charite, an ideal wife and ideal daughter, a young aristocratic woman preparing to marry an aristocratic man. Everything goes well until bandits kidnap her for ransom. Her husband shows up *incognito*, defeats the bandits, and rescues her; she marries him in an official, ritual way, and is faithful and devoted. But a certain Thrasyllus, enamoured of her, conspires against her husband and kills him on a hunting expedition. Charite goes into mourning, almost madness. Thrasyllus then proposes marriage to Charite. Her husband visits as a ghost and tells her to marry again, but not marry Thrasyllus. She develops a plan and asserts love for Thrasyllus, saying only that they cannot marry yet as it is too early. He comes to her house unattended. Her maid gives him drugged wine. She blinds him in both eyes with a hairpin, thus avenging her own husband, then takes Thrasyllus' dagger, goes to her husband's tomb, and kills herself. Apuleius writes, "She then drove the sword below her right breast, and slid to the ground. As she writhed in her own blood, she stuttered some last incoherent words, and died like a man." (8.14). The pattern resembles Lucretia's.

Roman funerary inscriptions highlight women's roles as wives, daughters, and mothers. They are exciting since real people inscribed them. One from the second century BCE from a Claudia, a person of means but not an aristocrat, reads, "Friend, I have not much to say: stop and read it. This tomb, which is not fair, is for a fair woman. Her parents gave her the name Claudia. She loved her husband in her heart. She bore two sons, one of whom she left on earth, the other beneath it. She was pleasant to talk with, and she talked with grace. She kept the house and worked in wool. That is all. You may go." (Lefkowitz and Fant #134)

Do these images represent reality? It is important to identify the aims and biases of an author and to use those as a guideline and control for that source. If the details provided in a document or piece of writing advance the primary aim of the author, suspicion is warranted. If they do not advance the aims of the author, their reliability is strengthened. The presentations of these women came from male authors imagining women for purposes of moral instruction. Our historian Livy articulated this in his preface: "The special and salutary benefit of the study of history is to behold evidence of every sort of behavior set forth as on a splendid memorial: from it you may select for yourself and for your country what to emulate, from it what to avoid, whether basely begun or basely concluded." A 'splendid memorial': Livy wished to make good moral examples for his readers.

Tombstones often provide idealized portraits of women for other reasons, such as family honor, yet some, like Claudia's inscription, do not seem very idealized. Considering these aims, we cannot imagine most Roman women as highly unfaithful or highly faithful: both killing themselves out of devotion and killing their fathers or husbands are unlikely. These acts are presented for moral instruction. Yet these sources do have a certain historical value. They give us a male perspective, which remains valuable: how men thought about women. Men thought of women as wives, mothers, and daughters. Hearing female voices is more difficult. But we must allow that some and perhaps much of the ideas that are projected there may accurately represent some of the concerns and values of women too.

In some cases women's voices are more attainable. An example is Vibia Perpetua, a Christian in Carthage in 203. A document describes her arrest, imprisonment, and eventual martyrdom. The first part of the document is written in first person and explicitly says "what follows here she will tell herself the whole record of martyrdom in her own hand and in her own words." Besides describing many visions, she dwells on a few matters in particular: her identity as a daughter and relationship with her father. He wishes she would deny her faith and live; she refuses. She is also greatly preoccupied with her identity as a mother. How will she feed her nursing infant in prison? She agonizes over this; in the end she acts out of obligation and loyalty to Christ rather than to her father and child. The amount of energy she put into being a good daughter and good mother clearly shows that she agonized over these things and that they were important to her.

Studying women in antiquity is a tricky and delicate topic. Women provide excellent case studies for source criticism and this is essential for the practice of writing and analyzing history.