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Women in Ancient Rome

Abstract

When we view the women of Rome, we see them closest to the roles of nature: daughter, wife and mother. While the nature of Roman culture allowed for a relatively generous amount of freedom for its women, a sense of fear and trepidation toward women of the time existed. Within the core of Latin, we can note that those phenomena that are tempestuous or uncontrollable phenomena are typed feminine nouns. Notably, both the volatile *natura* (nature) and *fortuna* (fortune; luck), over which the Romans had absolutely no control in their age are solidly gendered as “woman”. *Fortuna*, when embodied, is a terrible goddess, as like to vengefully smite as she is to gently smile. This may show us something of the conceptions of women, while evincing something of the role expected of women: the force and influence they wielded was unpredictable, and must still be respected.

Honors project mentor: William Stockton, Professor, History

In spite of continued efforts to the contrary, there is never any easy way to define gender. Throughout the span of time, an imprecise lexicon has sprung forth in an attempt to separate and name that which is “male,” and that which is “female”. Our classifications have lain within the *differences* between sexes; the biological and physical components of surface disparity are, at their cores, the easiest to reconcile. We may define what “man” is, against what “woman” is not and, at its root, our classification is based on the societal conceptions and the roles played by each gender. In opening *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir opines, “Woman? Very simple, say the fanciers of simple formulas: she is a womb, an ovary: she is a female – this word is sufficient to define her” (3). While de Beauvoir’s intended purpose is to disprove the naive simplicity of defining woman based solely on her reproductive capabilities, at the essence of the womanly nucleus is her ability to bring forth offspring, particularly with respect to the ancient world of Rome. While this notion might rankle the sensibility of the current-day feminist, through the lens of history, ours is not to judge.

Until relatively recently – indeed, the advent of that modern feminism – study of the role of women in antiquity was limited. At issue, of course, is that women in the ancient world had no voice of their own; overwhelmingly, we gain our primary knowledge of female life through the words of men. Further complicating matters in some instances, scholars question the veracity of these accounts as being revisionist at best and whole-cloth, at worst. Gillian Clark, in “Roman Women,” deconstructs Cato the Elder’s oration regarding property limits placed upon women concerning the *Lex Oppia*, and believes that Livy has fabricated all (if not at least parts) of this speech (207). In the same way that we must be both cautious in projecting our own experience into antiquity and generous in our understanding of the self-same female psyche, we must also apply those standards to the historians of the time. Their world is not ours, and the sense of

integrity applied in creating a record of their times is tainted by political and social pressures of their age.

Moreover, in our attempts to understand the women of Rome, we must understand the nature of how women were viewed. From a physiological standpoint, women medically are seen as “other”, to employ de Beauvoir’s terminology. The shadow of menstruation and child-bearing is long and dark; women’s bodies are seen and portrayed often as closer to the mystical and the magic. From this viewpoint, women have been cast in the iron molds of what will become the female archetypes through history. Of course, these characterizations are not Roman-specific and can be seen across the spectrum of the classical world. Roman women begin as virginal innocents who grow to be wives and mothers, or vengeful schemers. Within Rome, however, the modes of definition show something of an incongruity in Roman thought and gender role: while women are frail and fragile, they are also to be feared (Clark 207). This trepidation can be marked beyond just the female body and its capabilities, but can also be traced to the relative amount of liberty that the women of Rome enjoyed compared to their counterparts. However, the women of Rome in antiquity can be best defined by the traditional roles of their gender; at its basis, both legal and social identities are based upon a woman’s relationships as daughter, wife and mother.

Woman, in artwork, has long been portrayed as the guarantor of bounty and fertility. Images and iconography from prehistory, irrespective of geography or culture, use the feminine form to depict both the abundant harvest, as well as the paramount importance of providing heirs. Female goddesses are overwhelmingly voluptuous with their breasts rounded and swollen, and the allusion to the sustenance women provide is apparent. While Roman sculpture, as it evolves through time develops realism, the picture of the Roman female mirrors not only these

ideals of woman, but the view of female as inherently different from male. Indeed, in Roman antiquity, a woman's body is considered to be, in its very essence, essentially different from that of man. Understanding the Roman view of illness, medicine and treatment further helps to illustrate this point.

Roman medicine, though not as advanced as its Egyptian counterpart, not only distinguished gender-difference, but also made distinctions between "major" and "minor". In "The First Healers: Women and Medicine in Ancient History", Laura Common notes that Roman soldiers and anyone of means would have "...flocked to lavish temples of healing," citing the temple of Asclepius as "half Lourdes, half Mayo Clinic," while minor ailments and likely any "feminine" malady would be treated by folk healers, which Common notes, "was mainly a matter of herbs, plus prayer with patients invoking a special god for each disease" (5). The role that women played in the tending to injured or ill men is unclear, since inscriptions mention women as both *medicae* (doctors) and *maiai* (midwives). While a doctor might treat disease, midwives were tasked with women's health exclusively, and for more than simply gynecological and obstetrical issues. In making this distinction, we see an inkling of the gender-specificity of treatment and the segregation of women as "different".

That difference, of course, can be directly tied to the mechanics of fertility and the mysteries of pregnancy. The female body secrets its important parts away, so to speak, and knowledge of the process ovulation and conception unknown. This leads to a dichotomy in itself. As Clark notes, contraception varied from "effective spermicides and pessaries... [to] faith in douches and wriggling, and entirely magical beliefs. The ovum was undiscovered and the relation between menstruation and fertile periods was misunderstood" (196). Without solid comprehension of those tucked away, inner processes, efficacy of birth control becomes a game

of chance simply because its timing is off. The idea then is that women, by virtue of their gender alone are closer in touch with the enigmatic workings of their bodies, as though they are keeping a secret of sorts. This sense of “inside knowledge” and “intuition”, in the Roman view, makes it likely that women treated women and men treated men, thus keeping the breadth of knowledge of the female’s role narrow and femininely “exclusive”.

This clear cut and decisive separation of women in a medical sense is not mirrored in any other aspect of Roman life, save politics, and there is little evidence to suggest that prudery or propriety is the basis of this segregation. Rather, Rome’s openness toward sex and sexuality seems to have benefited her women and provided a sense of freedom, too. While the average Roman wife was fourteen at the time of her marriage, owing to the reduced life expectancy in antiquity (Clark 200), sexual feelings and desires were believed to begin at puberty, “especially in girls who ate a lot and did not have to work; society made provision for such desires instead of trying to sublimate them” (Clark 201). While the ideal of the Roman woman as an overtly sexual creature seems openly liberated, it is important to note this freedom was meant to be exercised prudently and within the marriage bed. Without exception, philandering was the purview of the Roman male.

While Roman society acknowledged female sexual thoughts and desires, an abundance of evidence suggests that marriage, as an institution, was geared toward the comfort of the male in the union, though this is not to say the female was entirely disregarded. As Clark points out, the happy marriage was a goal in Roman culture, and divorce on the part of either party was not particularly hard to come by (202). However, the idea of marriage evolved as Empire succeeded Republic. This change, according to Paul Veyne in *A History of Private Life, Volume I*, came about as the view of the average Roman changed from independent citizen to part of something

larger than themselves, to wit: “The new moral code said, ‘Here are the duties of the married man.’ By contrast the old civic code had said, ‘Marriage is one of the duties of a citizen’” (37). This change reflects the civic morality of a *couple* (36), rather than that of the single male overseeing property. Tucked neatly into the *lex Cincia*, which enumerated the rules for official gift-giving between patron and client, there are also provisions dealing with the transfer of spousal property. A wife might transfer assets to her husband in order to help him meet or attain a census requirement. In Plutarch’s interpretation, this prohibition was intended to make couples see property and wealth as joint holdings (Gudeman 33). While we cannot extrapolate the idea that man and wife were equal partners, women, depending on their legal designations at the time of their marriage would have had a measure of freedom that heretofore may have not been recognized. In order to understand this liberty, we must first understand the nature of courtship and marriage in ancient Rome.

Marriage, at least among wealthy patricians, was a business arrangement. While the mother’s opinion of any match was irrelevant, the girl, herself, had the right of refusal, should her father’s choice be “immoral” (Clark 202). However, should the girl freely consent to her father’s choice, a dowry would then be owed to the intended. The dowry provided “seed money” for a male’s ambitions or living expenses, depending on social class. Surprisingly, in all but the slave classes, a dowry was demanded, although marriage laws were intended to keep divorce less attainable to poorer citizens (Clark 202). Explicitly spelled out and within the terms of payment, however, was the matter of *potestas*, or her father’s protection and obligations. As Clark points out:

Marriages were in the interest of the family rather than the individual, and Roman naming customs seem to reflect the underlying feeling. A [modern] girl has a

personal name (or names) and a family name; when she marries and she may take her husband's surname, since a woman belongs to her husband and not her father... A Roman woman, in a system apparently unique to Italy had only one name, the feminine form of her father's *gentilicium*; she shared it with her sisters and her cousins and her aunts on her father's side, and kept it unchanged throughout life no matter how many marriages she went through. (203)

In short, a woman in Rome would always be identified by her own family affiliations. In some instances, however, and when we bear in mind that money, connections and alliances were the compelling reason behind matrimony, the legal issue of *potestas* (and of who is obligated to whom, and in what context,) becomes a factor as well. Roman women would be married in one of two ways: *cum manu*, in which a woman was adopted by her husband's family, or *sine manu*, which meant she remained a member of her own clan. As Clark explains, either option comes with its own advantages during marriage, but a woman married *sine manu* (sometimes, *filiaefamilias*,) stayed within the bounds of her father's authority (203). Another notable difference between these distinctions lies in a woman's ability to own property -- an option only available *sine manu*. Her father's *potestas* gave him the right to approve her financial transactions, and dissolve her marriage -- regardless of her feelings in the matter. *Sine manu* would have helped a woman in Rome tremendously once her father died; her legal status would change to *sui iuris* (literally, "of one's own laws"). This is the closest she could hope to get in attaining a measure of equality (Clark 204), and the ability to feely manage her own affairs. Irrespective of whether distinctions in *manu* practically worked to a woman's advantage, odds were in not in her favor. It would be wrong to assume that all but the most indulgent fathers negotiated *sine manu* into marital contracts for their daughter's benefit. Rather, far more likely

and easier to imagine, marrying one's daughter *sine manu* and the continued *pater postestas* allowed for a father to keep an eye on his family's interests and wealth.

As previously noted, the dissolution of a union was a viable – if luxurious -- choice for either party; however, should a man divorce his wife, the initial dowry payment was due back to her father; while a woman who compelled her husband to divorce would be, in essence, forfeiting her father's "investment" (Veyne 35). We can then view the dowry as something of an insurance instrument or a bet, and in this way, the poorer citizens of Rome are at a lesser advantage, as are those women married *sine*. Under the rule of Roman law, while a woman could compel her husband, she had no such rights with her father who, as *paterfamilias*, had the final say. In the same way that a father could dissolve his daughter's happy marriage, the other side of that coin shows us that he could force her to stay in an unhappy one should it benefit the family's – or, more likely *his* – interests.

Whereas wealth and connections were everything in the Roman world, another compelling reason for legal marriage was to produce heirs. While we can note that Cornelia, mother of the Gracchi, had twelve children, according to *A History of Private Life*, "The law accorded special privilege to mothers of three children, who were seen as having done their duty and this number seems to canonical" in early Rome (11). While much has been made of the father's role in the Roman family unit, a case for the influence and importance *materfamilia* can be made, as well.

As we have seen with respect to marriage, the family rises and falls by reason or whim of the Roman male. Interestingly, the power exerted by males outside of the home with respect to politics and war meant that, providentially, the feminine will ruled the household if by nothing more than presence. Ladies' arts of Rome, among them spinning, sewing and embroidery, were

home-based (Clark 199). The woman's presence in the home was immutable. Women, as householders, were primary influences on their young sons, but as Edward E. Best, Jr., notes in "Cicero, Livy and Educated Roman Woman", very little historical biography exists chronicling those young lives. Best writes:

Yet these were the formative years for the Rome's future consuls, generals and dictators and these were the years Rome's sons lived under the watchful and determining influence of their mothers and nurses. The manner and quality of such influence then must be considered important in the development of the minds and characters of Roman leaders... (199)

Hence, we can glean that part of the conscientious Roman mother's role was that of early education of her children. Best notes an inherent paradox in believing "women were uneducated and merely domesticated" yet still left in charge of their children's early education, particularly given the love of education and learning attributed to many of the great men of Rome.

Roman antiquity is rife with examples of maternal influence, but let us focus on the best example: Aurelia, mother of Gaius Julius Caesar. The relationship between the two is well noted as mutually affectionate, which Best claims is born of "[Aurelia's] zealous care and serious concern, a necessity when Julius was a boy, his father having died during Caesar's youth" (200). Best further speculates that Caesar's political aspirations can be traced to his mother's side of the family, as well. Aurelia's family, the clan of Marius, was on the popular side of politics and directly involved in overthrowing Sulla's conservative legislation (200). Thus, Sulla's worry of Marian tendencies in Caesar would seem well-founded. Throughout her life, Caesar's mother was both a presence and influence on her son. It was she who was alerted to the ignoble presence of Publius Clodius during *Bona Dea* ceremony, and she who urged her son to divorce

his wife in the wake of the scandal; further, Caesar reportedly boasted to Aurelia – not his wife – that he would return as *Pontifex Maximus* or not at all (200). While the assertion is not that Aurelia – nor any other Roman mother – was responsible for her son’s education *in toto*, clearly these women are neither as uneducated nor undereducated as we may imagine.

Roman historians provide anecdotal evidence that women, on the whole, were exposed to both formal and indirect education. Best asserts that Livy’s story of Marcus and Virginia proves that even plebian girls were educated to a certain level. It is not a far step in logic then to realize that if lower-class females were taught, higher-class girls would have been, as well. Hortensia, the daughter of respected orator Q. Hortensius, argued the cause of wives upon whom triumvirs in 42 B.C. had imposed a burdensome tax. While women were forbidden to address the bar, Hortensia’s speech was preserved for its significance (202). Additionally, we can note that Catullus’s Clodia is beloved by both the poet, as well as Cicero, for her intellect, as well as her beauty. However advantageous a woman’s education is to the impressionable mind of her son, we must also remember it would be pretense to believe in educational equality for the sexes in Rome during any period.

Instead, the woman seemingly must be educated enough to be an effective teacher for her children, yet not so educated that she injures the pride of the males in her household. While much can be made of learned of women in Rome, it is a hollow victory at best. In the same way that Hortensia’s speech was preserved for the ages, one must wonder if, in the face of Roman machismo and masculine posturing, the words claim additional interest simply because they fell from feminine lips. Best is quick to point out that the historian, Valerius Maximus claimed, “it was a good speech and not because it was made by a woman.” We may choose to take this at

face value or not, for the caveat unwittingly reinforces the speaker's sex and the novelty inherent therein.

As we see then, women are often educated with parameters befitting at least the station of householder and mother to which they found themselves. General, working knowledge for daily life including the math necessary for household sums would have been necessary, as well as the ability to be somewhat conversant in the philosophical issues of the day. Gender roles are probably never more clearly defined than in Rome; yet, conversely, women of the time enjoyed a fair amount of freedoms because of their position within their households.

While the right of *postestas* offers women a measure of legal protection and a modicum of independence, Roman women are granted certain rights simply by virtue of having produced children. As Clark notes, Augustan laws permitted inheritance between spouses only if, "they had a living heir, or had lost one after puberty, two after the age of three or three after naming" (196). Infant mortality being what it was in antiquity, the provisions made for deceased children show us, from a legal viewpoint, what constituted both motherhood and a marriage as well. The "canonical number" of three is reinforced, and tacitly implies the contention that woman is validated based on her roles of mother and wife. It bears repeating, though: the dissolution of the latter revoked the former in Roman law, as mothers had no claim to their issue once the union was dissolved. Historically, it we see that this was inviolate, even among the most prominent of Romans.

Clark cites Scribonia, who did not see her daughter for thirty-seven years after Octavian divorced her on the days of the girl's birth, and points out that Livia's children "by her first marriage did not come and live with her until their father's death and his appointment of Augustus as guardian" (205). While a woman's right to inherit from her husband was based on

children, her rights *to* her children were dependent upon her spouse. Without prejudice, we must again note the dichotomies inherent in the roles of marriage, family and the personhood of women in Ancient Rome. From a modern vantage point, we may see this as particularly troubling; mothers denied their children are viewed as tragic. However, while even Clark concedes that a woman more than likely would have missed her children (205), they were in no position to act or affect changes. The patriarchal nature of Roman society would not allow for sweeping changes, particularly in a society where a woman's public voice was an incongruity, rather than a rule.

In retrospect, when we view the women of Rome, we see them closest to the roles of nature: daughter, wife and mother. While the nature of Roman culture allowed for a relatively generous amount of freedom for its women, a sense of fear and trepidation toward women of the time existed. Within the core of Latin, we can note that those phenomena that are tempestuous or uncontrollable phenomena are typed feminine nouns. Notably, both the volatile *natura* (nature) and *fortuna* (fortune; luck), over which the Romans had absolutely no control in their age are solidly gendered as "woman". *Fortuna*, when embodied, is a terrible goddess, as like to vengefully smite as she is to gently smile. This may show us something of the conceptions of women, while evincing something of the role expected of women: the force and influence they wielded was unpredictable, and must still be respected.

So too, the process of pregnancy and childbirth can be seen as unpredictable to the ancient mind. In the absence of firm understanding of the mechanics and mathematics of conception, magic must be substituted and while man's body stays relatively and consistently the same during his lifetime, this is not the case for the female whose expected role is to bring forth sons and daughters to aid the nation. From daughter to wife to mother, the Roman woman's

body – her very physical being – changed in the ways unique to her gender. In a culture where medicine and treatment included entreaties to a god “for good measure”, the stages of womanhood would have seemed closer to nature and fearsome. Nature and woman are both wild, but they can be *managed*, which is evident within the laws of the time.

Ours is not to say either that Roman women felt constrained within what we see as constrained and narrow social roles. Entirely possible – and more than likely probable – more than a few found true happiness in living their lives as good, solid, Roman citizens. This position is easier to accept when we realize that, as often as women are termed “other,” until very recently in the span of history, she herself shared the same perception. In this way then the women of Rome in antiquity can be best defined by the traditional roles of their gender; at its basis, both legal and social identities are based upon a woman’s relationships as daughter, wife and mother, and we may see them as such, and without allowing our own idea and ideals to cloud our view.

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