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Women of the Republic: Female Influences in the Social History of Ancient Rome

ABSTRACT: *This essay examines women's often hidden, yet nonetheless essential roles in the late Roman Republic from a social-history perspective. On the basis of interdisciplinary scholarship referencing ancient primary sources, it endeavors to present a more nuanced account of women's quality of life, as well as their social and legal standing in this highly patriarchal society. The author argues that, despite the male-dominated narratives that have come down to us from the late Republic and early Empire, women wielded considerable influence.*

KEYWORDS: *ancient history; late Roman Republic; citizenship; women; Vestal Virgins; Agrippina the Younger; pater familias; social history; gender history; scholarship*

Introduction

The late Roman Republic was an era marked by political turmoil and instability in the Senate, which ultimately spilled over into the nonpolitical spheres of life. Both ancient writers and modern scholars have primarily attributed the Republic's downfall and the Empire's subsequent rise to the actions of particular men, while disregarding any female influences during this dramatic transition. Despite the lack of female-authored primary sources, women were rather influential in the evolution of late Republican culture and aided in the formation of the Empire. Renowned authors of this period, such as Cicero, Caesar, and Livy, excluded the narrative of women as equals and, instead, relegated them to their roles as nurturers and submissive caretakers of the home. In addition, the Roman honorific naming system perpetuated a disparity between women and men, as men were given the liberty to have a family name or a chosen name to represent their character, while women were simply named after their father with no reference to personal agency or identity outside of their patriarchal lineage.

Definitions of Roman citizenship vary and are, at times, vague with regard to specific legal ramifications. Women were largely excluded from *civitas*, the Latin noun denoting "citizenship." However, as we shall see, civic participation and the related benefits were not confined to male members of the *civitas*. Generally speaking, *civitas* referred to a Roman man's civic participation in and his responsibilities to the Republic.[1] As a *civis* (i.e., "citizen"), a man had numerous obligations, including *tributum* and *stipendium*, namely, tax contributions to Rome's military economy (which relied on crowdfunding). Such taxes were based on land ownership and the related income; therefore, women were inherently exempt from them. Military service, if applicable, was required of men only.

[1] See, for example, Aude Chatelard and Anne Stevens, "Women as Legal Minors and Their Citizenship in Republican Rome," *Clio: Women, Gender, History* 43 (2016): 25–26. Unless otherwise specified, the terms "man" and "woman" in this essay refer to free individuals who had been born to Roman families.

Lastly, any direct civic involvement, including the attendance at and participation in various assemblies in the *forum* (i.e., Rome's central public space), was seen as a duty for men but not open to women.

I. Religious Roles

While the aforementioned obligations were key elements of *civitas*, women did have a few select duties in Roman society. Their largest area of influence pertained to the *iura sacrorum*, namely, Rome's official religious practices.[2] In this polytheistic religion with its clearly defined gender roles, women routinely served as priestesses and performed other independent roles. According to Cicero's mid-first-century BCE speech *Pro Balbo* (i.e., "For/in favor of Lucius Cornelius Balbus"), documented accounts of *civis Romana*—the female equivalent of a Roman citizen—included the religious rituals performed by a Greek priestess of the cult of Ceres (i.e., the Roman goddess of agriculture) who had to be made a Roman citizen to perform her rituals in the city of Rome.[3] As primary agents in religious rituals, women were considered highly honorable and expected to behave similarly to their male counterparts, engaging in an intense interest and compassion for all aspects of Roman life, even those traditionally outside of the female influence, such as politics and the military.

In both the Republic and the Empire, the Vestal Virgins[4] were rare examples of true female autonomy who acted outside the control of a *pater familias*, the Latin term used to denote the senior male figure and head of the Roman household. The female-centered state cult of Vesta (i.e., the Roman goddess of home and hearth) afforded a small group of women the rare opportunity to wield public influence as caretakers of the sacred fire. Serving Vesta was considered a highly prestigious duty.[5] While confined to a minority of women who hailed from the city's patrician families, the existence of the Vestal Virgins in Roman society showcases a highly respected and exclusively female space.

According to historian and Classical Studies scholar Celia E. Schultz, religious cults were among the key factors in maintaining stability and order in ancient Rome, as they were permeated by a sentiment of order that was meant to "encourage political stability," especially during the tumultuous years of the late Republic and the early Principate.[6] These groups' protected sacred activities aided in the advancement of women's rights, since women, while not enjoying the same religious and political rights as men, played an active role in these faith

[2] Chatelard and Stevens, "Women as Legal Minors," 28, 41.

[3] Cicero, *Pro Balbo*, referenced in Chatelard and Stevens, "Women as Legal Minors," 39.

[4] On these, see Robin Lorsch Wildfang, *Rome's Vestal Virgins: A Study of Rome's Vestal Priestesses in the Late Republic and Early Empire* (London: Routledge, 2006); Inge Kroppenberg, "Law, Religion, and Constitution of the Vestal Virgins," *Law & Literature* 22, no. 3 (2010): 418–439.

[5] Paul Chrystal, *Women in Ancient Rome* (London: Amberley Publishing, 2013), 138.

[6] Celia E. Schultz, *Women's Religious Activity in the Roman Republic* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 4.

communities and their cultic practices.[7] This suggests that women found unique personal and spiritual connections within Rome's religious spheres. Piety was greatly encouraged, and it appears that observing and engaging in religious practices offered comprehensive advantages to women.

II. Legal Status

Normative texts, such as laws, reflect a desired state of things, but not necessarily reality. Accordingly, in the late Roman Republic, the legally mandated code of conduct and the actual daily occurrences were not always congruent. The notion of *infirmitas sexus* (i.e., the alleged "weakness of the [female] sex") provided the basis for gendered inequality in ancient Rome and manifested itself in multiple forms of institutional and systemic misogyny.[8] Trends toward gender equality came gradually and often accidentally, as Rome's male senators were not particularly interested in female empowerment or liberation. Nonetheless, by the second and first centuries BCE, women of status and wealth could receive an education, thus becoming qualified, at least technically, to represent themselves in a court of law.[9] These women developed a greater sense of autonomy and freedom beyond the legal codes of their time.

To a certain extent, women benefited from the late Republic's political instability, as their male counterparts focused less on preserving the gendered status quo and more on the daily politics of the *forum*. For instance, the legal concept of *propter animi levitatem* (i.e., "because of the [alleged] lightness [or fickleness] of the [female] mind") mandated legal guardianship for all Roman women, regardless of their age or marital status.[10] However, in some cases—for example following the death of the *pater familias*—women were granted the liberty to inherit land *sui iuris* (i.e., "in their own right"). During the Second Punic War against Carthage (218–201 BCE), many Roman men were physically apart from their wives for long periods of time or lost their lives in battle. Either of these scenarios enabled a Roman woman to become her own guardian or be assigned a male guardian of lesser authority, such as a son or nephew not yet old enough to fulfill the requirements of military service. Thus, women—while facing tremendous legal disadvantages in a system designed to oppress their entire gender—occasionally managed to gain a sense of autonomy and self-determination.

There were, however, instances of accidental gender equality in Roman law. For example, the *civitas* of a Roman man was equally dependent on his maternal and paternal lineage. Consequently, women of high economic status wielded

[7] Schultz, *Women's Religious Activity*, 5.

[8] See, for example, Suzanne Dixon, "*Infirmitas Sexus*: Womanly Weakness in Roman Law," *Tijdschrift voor Rechtsgeschiedenis / Revue d'histoire du droit / The Legal History Review* 52, no. 4 (1984): 343–371.

[9] Chatelard and Stevens, "Women as Legal Minors," 30–31.

[10] Chatelard and Stevens, "Women as Legal Minors," 29.

considerable influence over their children, rendering them inherently more valued in society. Yet, while the status of women improved over time, obvious signs of inequality remained.[11] The intersection between gender and class in Roman legal codes is remarkable, but it is impossible to assess whether gender or class had a greater impact on women's lives due to a lack of detailed information pertaining to the lower social classes.

While the power of the *pater familias* impacted both men and women, legal and social barriers prevented women in particular from gaining estate rights.[12] The concept of *pater familias* is frequently cited by modern social historians to explain ancient Rome's gendered inequalities, but the concept certainly transcends the traditional scope of social history; in fact, it was especially prominent in legal texts. As described by Pliny the Younger, Cicero, and Cato, the *pater familias* (i.e., "the father of the family") was the senior male figure and head of the Roman household, which extended beyond the nuclear biological family to include servants and slaves, and he was the owner of the family's estate, namely, its property, assets, and wealth. Thus, a *pater familias* had to have the capacity to own land, which required *civitas*, wealth, and independence from any guardian or other *pater familias*. Accordingly, the age of an estate holder could vary considerably, as it depended on familial circumstances. When an estate holder died without an adult male heir, a decision had to be made as to who would become the beneficiary and serve as the next estate holder. While the law was intended to uphold Rome's patriarchal society, in such a case the spouse or, for example, a minor was eligible to be appointed as estate holder *sui iuris*.

The role of the *pater familias* was intrinsically intertwined with the rights and responsibilities of *civitas*, and, as we have seen above, *civitas* was a highly masculinized concept in the Roman world.[13] However, it appears that male legal authors were intentionally vague with the language pertaining to the role of the *pater familias*, as neither women nor minors were entirely excluded from being estate holders *sui iuris*. Rather, it was the responsibility of an all-male jury to determine the outcome in each case. While this state of suspense was harmful to women, as there was no predetermined outcome due to their inferior legal status, it stands to reason that women were able to influence the outcome of their respective cases by means of persuasion.

III. Literary Works

While much less frequent, there are instances in which the idea or the term of *pater familias* appears in non-legal texts of the period. In the works of Cato, Pliny the

[11] See F. E. Adcock, "Women in Roman Life and Letters," *Greece and Rome* 14, no. 40 (January 1945): 1–11.

[12] Richard P. Saller, "'Familia, Domus', and the Roman Conception of the Family," *Phoenix* 38, no. 4 (Winter 1984): 336–355.

[13] See Helen E. Wieand, "The Position of Women in the Late Roman Republic: Part I," *Classical Journal* 12, no. 6 (March 1917): 378–392.

Younger, and Cicero, there is ample evidence of the term employed vaguely to denote an estate holder, yet with no reference to *patria potestas* (i.e., the title holder's dominion over his family). However, misogyny was a constant due to its firm anchoring in language, as evidenced by the abovementioned term *infirmitas sexus*.[14] This term, based on pre-Roman and Greek notions of the alleged "weakness" of the female sex, was another way to internalize sexism in the structures of government and public life. The social construct of *infirmitas sexus* ensured that women were considered perpetually inferior to men, regardless of what legal loopholes might be found, for example with regard to jury-approved estate holding. *Infirmitas sexus* ultimately meant that women, even if they were granted certain rights that were normally reserved for the *pater familias*, could never "be" anything like a *pater familias*, particularly since the ideal *civis* was a *diligens pater familias* (i.e., a reasonable and good head of the household), which was solely used in a masculine context. By implication, responsible estate holding was as unattainable for women as military service.

It is worthwhile here to note the politicized nature of the field of linguistics. The interpretation of words and expressions depends on the translator, who is, of course, expected to consider the cultural contexts in which words are being used. For, if not handled with discretion and sensitivity to bias, original meanings may be lost in translation. That said, modern philology seeks to distance itself from linguistic approaches that continue to uphold the patterns of patriarchy.

The *Love Poems* (*Amores*) of the Roman poet Ovid (43 BCE–c. 17 CE) are texts that exemplify the kind of misogyny described by Eve D'Ambra, a scholar of ancient Roman art.[15] Ovid's works reflect a time of great transformation in the late Roman Republic, and his writings on love and prosperity reflect the ideals of his time. In his *Love Poems (Amores)* and *Art of Love (Ars Amatoria)*, Ovid certainly implements groundbreaking poetic devices to separate his work from past Hellenistic poets, but translating his works—and thus his mindset—from 2000-year-old Latin into modern English poses immense challenges.[16] For example, while his writings communicate disturbing examples of "toxic masculinity,"[17] Ovid was a master of the literary technique of irony;[18] in other words: Ovid's writings affirm that misogyny was omnipresent in his world, but the question remains (and is perhaps impossible to answer) to what extent Ovid himself embraced or, alternatively, mocked misogyny in Roman society.

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[14] See Dixon, "*Infirmitas Sexus*," 343–371.

[15] Ovid, *The Love Poems*, trans. A. D. Melville (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990). See Eve D'Ambra, *Roman Women* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

[16] A. D. Meville, "Translator's Note," in Ovid, *Love Poems*, xxx–xxxiii.

[17] Melissa Marturano, "Ovid, Feminist Pedagogy, Toxic Manhood, and the Secondary School Classroom," *The Classical Outlook* 95, no. 4 (2020): 147–151.

[18] Ioannis Ziogas, "Stripping the Roman Ladies: Ovid's Rites and Readers," *The Classical Quarterly*, n.s., 64, no. 2 (2014): 735–744.

While seemingly insignificant, such a distinction is important, as these small and often disregarded caveats can fundamentally alter the perception of the experience of Roman women as well as the general discourse around the female identity of the time. With each new interpretation or exploration of the few female-centered documents dating back to the Roman Republic, historians and sociologists can better piece together the lived experience of the scores of women whose stories have been silenced for too long.

IV. Historiography

An ongoing issue in social history is the relative underrepresentation of diverse researchers, which sustains an internal bias and an echo chamber of previously accepted ideas. Granted, works such as Richard P. Saller's 1999 article "*Pater Familias*, *Mater Familias*, and the Gendered Semantics of the Roman Household" remain highly valuable to facilitate our understanding of the origins of widely used Latin expressions pertaining to issues of gender,[19] but his—much like most other past contributions to the field—is the work of a male scholar. With regard to the history of women in ancient Rome, the Classics are still largely a male-dominated field, with authors such as Eve D'Ambra (focusing on art) and Celia E. Schultz (focusing on religion) being notable exceptions. D'Ambra's 2007 monograph *Roman Women* highlights themes of female identity, ensuring that vital points such as classism and private-versus-public spheres of influence are addressed.[20] While striving to remain fair in her assessments, D'Ambra openly admits her bias in favor of the plebeians and her anti-classism, thus inviting her readers to distinguish fact from personal opinion.

As a case study of the ancient world, the Roman Republic is especially worthwhile to examine due to the unusual abundance of preserved works. The Romans' astounding recordkeeping may be attributed to the prioritization of literacy and the proliferation of copyists (both ancient and medieval), which allows modern historians and archaeologists, for example, to identify trends in the development of religion. Indeed, in addition to investigating the Roman family through legal documentation, religion as a tool for female autonomy has been on scholars' radar for some time. As early as 1945, Classical historian F. E. Adcock addressed the limited spheres of female influence in his article "Women in Roman Life and Letters."[21] Adcock qualifies his initial statement that—according to a speech written by Tacitus (c. 56/58–c. 120 CE) for Valerius Messalinus—Roman women enjoyed domestic life by acknowledging the formal right of women to be involved in the Roman state's religious activities.[22] Schultz's 2006 monograph

[19] Richard P. Saller, "*Pater Familias*, *Mater Familias*, and the Gendered Semantics of the Roman Household," *Classical Philology* 94, no. 2 (1999): 182–197.

[20] D'Ambra, *Roman Women*.

[21] Adcock, "Women in Roman Life and Letters," 1–11.

[22] Tacitus, *Annales*, referenced in Adcock, "Women in Roman Life and Letters," 1.

Women's Religious Activity in the Roman Republic offers a key example of a "female first" history—a work written about women by a woman with both academic merit and empathy.[23] Schultz demonstrates that Roman women, while still affected by class and wealth, generally took part in public life more than one might expect in ancient civilizations; this was largely due to their ability to participate in national religious holidays and events. The divided gender roles in the Roman *cultus deorum* (i.e., the divine service) benefitted women: since it was deemed immodest for men to lead in women's spaces, independent female leadership was required in these particular spaces.

An important caveat when studying Roman women's rights and identities is the notion of class structure and the stark divide between patricians and plebeians. While freeborn Roman women were, in principle, deemed citizens (*cives*), albeit without most of the rights and responsibilities associated with men's *civitas* (e.g., voting and military service), women of higher status were afforded privileges not traditionally granted to lower-class women. In a 1970 article "Cicero, Livy and Educated Roman Women," Classicist Edward E. Best references a story told by Livy (c. 59 BCE–c. 17 CE) about a plebeian woman named Virginia that appears to suggest that plebeian women were literate and could calculate basic mathematics.[24] Since patricians outranked plebeians in Rome's societal hierarchy, Livy's story would imply that patrician women would have at least the same—if not an even greater—level of education, especially due to their access to formal tutoring or mentorship.

The elevated education of Roman women is evident in the lives of several influential individuals who played a role in the downfall of the Republic. As Plutarch (c. 46–c. 125 CE) relates, Pompey the Great's wife Cornelia was a highly educated patrician woman: "She was widely read, she played the lyre, was good at mathematics, and [she was] capable of making a useful contribution to philosophical discussion."[25] Married in times of considerable political strife and social unrest, Cornelia's life was one of great tragedy: for example, she was forced to witness her husband's murder in Egypt in 48 BCE. Despite this, she proved loyal to her nation. Cornelia's life may reflect how Roman women were taught to endure tragedy and adversity as a fundamental part of life. While the vast majority of women were not of her status, the importance of enduring tragedy and oppression, as well as creating a life of beauty and meaning, is a theme that connects all Roman women, regardless of status or class.

By modern standards of gender equality, Roman women were oppressed. However, Rome was—in a few select cases pertaining to wealthy women—also a

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[23] Schultz, *Women's Religious Activity*.

[24] Edward E. Best, "Cicero, Livy and Educated Roman Women," *Classical Journal* 65, no. 5 (1970): 202.

[25] Plutarch, "The Life of Pompey," quoted in Best, "Cicero, Livy and Educated Roman Women," 200–201.

forerunner for female equality. Agrippina the Younger (15–59 CE) is an example for the understated power wealthy women could wield in Rome during the early Empire. Born shortly after the death of Augustus, Agrippina helped lay the foundation for the future of the Empire, and it is difficult to imagine the Julio-Claudian dynasty without her contributions.[26] She also serves as a reminder of the reality of many Roman women, as she was faced with a great deal of scrutiny for assuming a dominant role in the process of appointing her son, Nero, as emperor instead of remaining a passive *matrona* (i.e., a freeborn, married woman of impeccable reputation). While it did not serve her legacy that she was accused of poisoning her husband Claudius (after the latter had adopted her son Nero), her political maneuvering certainly forced men to reconcile themselves to the idea of an independent, educated, and powerful woman that was capable of transforming Rome.

The concept of the female identity of Rome "herself" is a central theme in a 2017 article, "Roma(na) Matrona," by Classicist E. V. Mulhern. Mulhern analyzes the epic poem *Bellum Civile* by Lucan (39–65 CE), which explores the relationships between Pompey, Cato, Caesar, and their respective wives.[27] Mulhern argues "that Lucan's logic is circular: because the poet identifies *Roma* [i.e., Rome, both the political entity and its divine manifestation] and the *res publica* [i.e., the Republic] with the Roman *matrona*, a man who rejects either one is not truly Roman; conversely, a good Roman man loves a virtuous Roman woman because she embodies Roman virtues and, by extension, *Roma* herself."[28] The analogy is designed to assess the morality of each politician's actions in the context of the fall of the Republic as well as highlight Lucan's understanding of the divine female as an example of Rome as a political entity. Lucan's work criticizes Caesar's lack of marriage to a respectable woman of Roman lineage; the Egyptian queen Cleopatra is not a suitable wife, but her role in Caesar's life explains his ultimate failure as well as the Republic's demise. The connection that Lucan makes between women and the health of the Republic is an excellent illustration of how Roman men were expected to protect and defend what was considered "theirs" by their own cultural and gender norms, namely, women and Rome herself.

Conclusion

This essay has discussed a variety of themes pertaining to the lives of women in the late Roman Republic, showcasing both their agency and their resilience. Reexamining the lives of the Roman Republic's many forgotten women does not come without its challenges. While striving to establish an accurate account, social historians also have to dismantle the traditional bias and prejudice that permeates

[26] Anthony Barrett, *Agrippina: Sex, Power, and Politics in the Early Empire* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 190.

[27] E. V. Mulhern, "Roma(na) Matrona," *The Classical Journal* 112, no. 4 (2017): 432–459.

[28] Mulhern, "Roma(na) Matrona," 433.

older works. The field of Classics has been defined by male and female contributions for less than a century—barely twenty percent of the duration of the Roman Republic. Despite their contributions, women have been neglected in the academic discourse of the most influential civilizations. Great strides have been made, with more women than ever before writing about their ancient predecessors, but the need for an even more diverse academic research space remains.

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