Being Female in Ancient Rome: Gender and Class Matters: Ann R. Raia

Introduction: Dr. Sebesta has demonstrated how the texts and images of our anthology and website convey the complexity of the premier role for Roman women of *materfamilias*. I propose to show you how other aspects of Roman women's lives can be easily incorporated into your Latin curriculum by using evidence provided in *WRW* and *Companion.*

Being female affected women differently according to their class, beyond their domestic role as mother of the household.
We will first consider women of the upper classes. They are featured in two *Companion* Worlds: The World of State http://www2.cnr.edu/home/araia/state.html , where you will find women of note and notoreity, including the empresses,
and the World of Class http://www2.cnr.edu/home/araia/class.html, where they are separated in text and image from their plebeian sisters: here is an example of a traditionally posed elite woman (Pudicitia) and another of a freedwoman (Myrsine).
Upper class women can also be found in the Worlds of Family http://www2.cnr.edu/home/araia/family.html, as the mother-aunt-daughter-wife of famous men and also in the World of Marriage http://www2.cnr.edu/home/araia/marriage.html where they are presented as wives fulfilling their culture's expectations of matronal virtue – or not.
We will then turn to the invisible lower classes, where the majority of Roman women are located. You will find much material about them in two Worlds: the World of Class (which we just visited) and the World of Work http://www2.cnr.edu/home/araia/work.html, which they alone occupy. Although they were beneath notice, lower-class women were to be seen everywhere in ancient Rome, working beside men) in non-gender related occupations (http://www.vroma.org/images/raia_images/sarcophagus_gaudenianicene.jpg and doing work traditionally associated with women, as midwives http://www.vroma.org/images/raia_images/sarcophagus_biob.jpg, as nurses http://www.vroma.org/images/raia_images/medeasarcoph_nurse.jpg, and, of course, as prostitutes http://www.vroma.org/images/mcmanus_images/pameretrix3.jpg.

1. Women of the Privileged Classes: Upper-class women experienced social class directly and indirectly. Directly in that it qualified them for certain privileges and entry into the few religious offices open to them. Indirectly because it afforded them status through males with whom they were closely associated by birth and marriage. In fact, an upper-class woman's identity was tied to her family's social class through her name, which was a feminized version of her *nomen gentilicium*, her *gens* or birth family name. As a result, the historical record is full of Claudias and Julias, while males of their families are recognizable by their threefold citizen names: Appius Claudius Caecus and Gaius Julius Caesar. Rather than distinguishing her as an individual, her name indicated that she was a female member of a noble family. Since women used only one name until the end of the Republican period, they were often differentiated by

their order of birth, e.g. **Claudia Quinta,** was the 5th daughter in her family. (http://www.vroma.org/images/raia_images/claudia_syntyche.jpg According to legend, she miraculously restored her sullied reputation as a *matrona* in 204 BCE by single-handedly dragging the barge carrying the statue of the Magna Mater out of the mud in Ostia up the Tiber River to the goddess's new temple in Rome. Sometimes, for purposes of reference, a woman's name was joined to the genitive form of her husband's family name, thus, **Clodia Metelli (**http://www2.cnr.edu/home/sas/araia/cicero_clodia.html), wife of Metellus, is the late-Republican *matrona* whom Cicero castigates in his oration *Pro Caelio* for unmatronly behavior. This essay is a good example of how feminist scholarship has taught us to read against the text in order to excavate the silent woman. In fact, by conservative tradition, elite women's names were not used in public at all. For example, in this passage from the *Consolatio ad Helviam* (http://www2.cnr.edu/home/araia/seneca_adHelviam.html), the younger Seneca writes about his maternal aunt, who lived in the first half of the 1st century CE; he praises her for her bravery and loyalty to her husband but never once mentions her name, which remains unknown today. In contrast, you can find many examples in *Companion* of noble *matronae* who are celebrated by name for their womanly virtues (http://www2.cnr.edu/home/araia/ValMaxCornelia.html), such as Cornelia, the well-educated daughter of Scipio Africanus, who lived from190-121, BCE. Noted for being a *univira*, a woman who married only once, she lived as a widow for almost 30 years, the dedicated mother of 12 children, most famously the murdered statesmen Tiberius and Gaius Gracchus (excerpts from perhaps apocryphal letters of advice to her son Gaius appear in *WRW*, pp. 76-77). (http://www2.cnr.edu/home/araia/lucan_marcia.html) Another virtuous noblewoman is Marcia (mid-1st century BCE), the submissive young wife of Cato the Younger who divorced him and married another man at his request; after the death of Hortentius she begged Cato to re-marry her so that her tombstone would read "*Catonis Marcia*." The lasting power of the legend of Lucretia, the prototype of chaste and industrious womanhood who committed suicide in the late 6th century after she was raped by a member of the royal family, is captured (http://www2.cnr.edu/home/araia/Lucretia_activity.html) by this multi-level activity designed by Ed DeHoratiis for his high school Latin 3 class; in it he provides the resources for students to explore and appreciate the persistence of texts and images created about her through the ages.

Roman women experienced a twofold gender bias which kept them for the most part out of history:
First, males were considered the norm, the default, while women were seen as "the other" and therefore lesser. The fact of their difference became a basis for cultural discrimination: sexually, they were penetrated, not penetrating; biologically, they were reproductive rather than productive; physically, they were weak in body (*infirmitas*) and therefore judged to be weak in mind as well, an assumption that was written into law. Domestic rather than public, women were, unlike men, held to expectations and ideals of excellence focused on their body: fecundity

and chastity. Like children, they required male oversight, but it lasted all of their lives, from the *patriapotestas* of their father to, during the Republic, the *manus* of a husband, or, in their absence, even during the Empire, the *tutela* (legal guardianship) of an appointed male.

In her 1989 *Helios* article "Women as *Same* and *Other* in Classical Roman Elite," Dr. Hallett terms this bias *sex polarity* and testifies to its presence in Roman culture:

> ". . . the perception of women's Otherness is frequently voiced, especially in various statements from a broad array of Latin literary works which generalize about the female sex. Such remarks, categorizing women as a group who conduct themselves in ways different from and often unthinkable for males, include some of the best known assessments of the female sex by canonical Roman authors . . . ." 60-1

Second, by law women were excluded from holding political office, with the consequence that most women were never educated beyond early instruction, since advanced education was intended to produce orators and statesmen, not mothers.

Women of means who undertook independent political action or who used their learning in the public arena often received criticism. Notable exceptions are Veturia, Coriolanus's mother (*WRW*, pp. 116-117), about whom Dr. Sebesta spoke earlier, and Hortensia (http://www2.cnr.edu/home/araia/hortensia.html), the daughter of Hortensius, Cicero's rival in the courts. These women escaped censure because they acted not for their own gain but on behalf of their class. Quite other are the women whose example is recorded only to be avoided. One is Sempronia (*WRW, pp. 122-3*), portrayed by the historian Sallust as a wealthy, corrupted older woman who used her personal resources to support Catiline's conspiracy. Another (http://www2.cnr.edu/home/araia/ValMax_Amesia.html) is Maesia or Amesia – even her name is confused. She is one of two late Republican women whom Valerius Maximus remembers as having dared to argue cases in the lawcourts. It seems that Maesia defended herself successfully from an unnamed charge at a trial before the Roman praetor and thus earned herself the satiric nickname the *Androgyne*. (http://www2.cnr.edu/home/araia/ValMax_Afrania.html) Afrania was less fortunate, perhaps because her intervention involved political hostilities and she was defending not herself but those condemned by the warring generals in the declining years of the Republic; she was popularly called the *monstrum*.

Not all of the texts in *Companion* are about perfect women It is probable that the most infamous examples of female independent action are in Livy's history: the earliest is Tarpeia, (http://www2.cnr.edu/home/araia/Livy_Tarpeia.html), whose name is preserved in the Tarpeian rock, the site of execution for murderers and traitors. Livy presents conflicting explanations for

why she opened the citadel to the Sabine army, wghhich Dr. McManus incorporates in this activity http://www2.cnr.edu/home/araia/Tarpeia_activity.html; in it she encourages students to analyze the text on site in Rome's forum in *VRoma.* The other example of evil is Tullia Minor (http://www2.cnr.edu/home/araia/Livy_Tullia.html), second daughter of King Servius and second wife of her sister's husband, Tarquinius Superbus, who is described as lawlessly seeking royal power through brutal family murders.
As attitudes toward women shifted from the Republic to the Empire, women became more prominent, with the Principate as the watershed. Augustan religious revivals included those of cults devoted to goddesses who supported cultural female virtues [e.g., *Venus Obsequens, Venus Verticordia, Concordia*]. Under Augustus's legislation, women earned privileges, such as freedom from *tutela,* through producing children. His laws offered class-appropriate rewards and punishments to encourage women to adopt the traditional twin goals of marriage and motherhood and to pursue matronal virtues that became personified as deities on coins of the Empire **:** ***fecunditas, pietas, concordia***. To that end, Augustus arranged to have his wife Livia http://www.vroma.org/images/mcmanus_images/livia_clothing2a.jpg acclaimed as a model of noble womanhood for her *pudicitia, castitas,* and *fides,* along with his sister Octavia http://www.vroma.org/images/raia_images/octavia3.jpgs. The senate voted both of them public honors usually reserved for high-ranking males: *sacrosanctitas* (inviolability, religious sanction) and public statues. In addition, he freed them from the requirement of *tutela mulierum*. In this worksheet for "Livia: Rome's First 'First Lady'" Dr. McManus invites students to evaluate the portrayal of Livia in Tacitus' unflattering text and compare it to public images of her in *VRoma*'s Porticus Liviae.

Augustus set the stage for imperial women to be celebrated as *Augustae* and quasi-divine exemplars by succeeding emperors. They were displayed wearing the attributes of goddesses: http://www.vroma.org/images/raia_images/crispina4.jpg in this public statue the late 2nd century CE Empress Crispina is portrayed as the goddess Ceres; on this gold coin Faustina II (c. 129-175 CE) http://www.vroma.org/images/mcmanus_images/venus_genetrix.jpg is portrayed as Venus Genetrix. Others were personified on coins as one of the abstract female virtues, like this silver denarius of Julia Domna http://www.vroma.org/images/mcmanus_images/pudicitia_domna.jpg, representing *pudicitia*. Imperial women were portrayed as nurturing mothers in public statues that promoted the production of male citizens, like this representation of Agrippina II (early 1st century CE) (http://www.vroma.org/images/mcmanus_images/woman_childstatue3.jpg) with her son Nero. They were shown draped modestly in the traditional dress of the *matrona* (http://www.vroma.org/images/raia_images/faustina_elder4.jpg), as in this statue of the Empress Faustina the Elder (c. 94-141 CE).

Representations like these and the addition of the religious cult of the *Augustae* encouraged popular imitation of the imperial women, at least in public appearance and conduct, by women of

all classes but especially by wealthy *matronae* who sought social advancement. The household of Trajan was notable for its frequent display of imperial women whose public comportment supported the emperor's social goals. Pliny the Younger praises (http://www2.cnr.edu/home/araia/Pliny_Plotina.html) two women of the Trajanic *domus* in his *Panegyricus*, for embodying virtues that mirror and complement the emperor's: Plotina, the wife of Trajan, and Trajan's sister Marciana (http://www2.cnr.edu/home/araia/pliny_Marciana.html). The busts of the women of the emperor's family are portrayed on this delicately carved cameo: with (http://www.vroma.org/images/mcmanus_images/trajan_imperialwomen_cameo.jpg) Plotina beside him, Trajan faces his sister Marciana and his neice Matidia in a show of familial harmony that he so strongly advocated.

2. Women of the Lower Classes: Now let us look at how you might include women of the lower classes in your Latin curriculum. Less visible in literary texts than the upper class women we viewed above, they are well represented in *Companion* through material and inscriptional evidence. Lower-class women were as diverse in their personal circumstances as in their occupations: they were variously free-born (*ingenuae*) and manumitted slaves (*libertinae*); they were native citizens and foreigners who had partial or no citizen rights; some were the working or begging poor, others were wealthy. Although it is not a *Companion* activity, I want to bring to your attention the role-playing game that (http://www.vroma.org/course_materials/index.html#MOOassignments) Dr. McManus designed for the *VRoma* site. It makes creative use of funerary inscriptions to help students learn about the diversity of lower-class Romans by assuming their names, occupations, and imagined personalities.

From the late Republican period onward, freedpeople were a growing segment of the Roman *plebs*. Their funerary monuments suggest that some had better lives than the free-born Roman, though they were legally in a lower category of citizenship. Being poor and powerless was stressful enough, but the stigma of being a *libertina* was daunting, even though legal restrictions on freedwomen died with them. Seeking acceptance, they adopted the appearance and mores of upper-class citizens, even if their names gave them away, e.g., on this late Republican family tombstone, **Sempronia Liberta Gai Eune**, clearly a freedwoman of Gaius Sempronius, is depicted as a traditional *uxor*; beside her is her freedman husband, Quintus Servilius Quinti Libertus Hilarus, who bears the *praenomen* and *nomen* of his *patronus*, and their son, Publius Servilius Quinti Filius Globulus, whose name and *bulla* declare him free-born, as does the capital metaphorically separating him from his parents.

Under Roman law, slaves were property, animate objects, completely subject body and soul to their master's will. Most Romans felt that having once been a slave, a person could never attain to the moral autonomy of thought and will that was the birthright of a free-born citizen. In

particular, the chastity of *libertinae* was in question. It was common for masters to mate their slaves or permit sexual unions among them for the purpose of breeding slave children; many masters claimed the sexual services of their slaves as well. Slaves had no parents or family; many came from far-distant places. In captivity they bonded with fellow-slaves, but could be separated from them and even from their children by sale, death or punishment. Thus, once freed, *libertinae* tended to marry within their acquaintance and to socialize within their class. Outside of marriage, upward social mobility was difficult for freedwomen: http://www.vroma.org/images/raia_images/tombstone_veciliahila2.jpg Vecilia Hila is portrayed on this early 1st century CE tombstone with her older free-born husband *Lucius Vibius L[uci] f[ilius] [tribu] Tro[mentina]* and their young son Lucius Vibius Felicio Felix. Hila is pictured in the draped *pudicitia* pose of the upper-class *matrona*, wearing the hairstyle of the Empress Livia and displaying the iron ring of citizen marriage. Some lower-class women, both free and freed, achieved status through inheritance or business ownership, e.g., (see WRW pp 134-5) Naevoleia Tyche http://www.vroma.org/images/raia_images/tomb_naevoleia.jpg. A socially and commercially successful citizen of Pompeii, she set up this large altar tomb for herself, her husband, and their freedpersons. Some wealthy freedwomen improved their social status with benefactions, often through religious office http://www2.cnr.edu/home/araia/Metilia_Acte.html, such as, Metilia Acte, a 2nd century CE priestess of the Magna Mater in Ostia.

Freedpeople were legally bound all of their lives to the owner who freed them, their *patronus/a*, to whom they owed *obsequium* (loyalty, respect) and *operae* (services). In some cases a master freed his female slave in order to marry her and beget legal heirs: http://www.vroma.org/images/raia_images/tomb_familyvibia.jpg Vibia Drosis arranged for these beautifully sculpted 1st century CE family portrait monuments to her former master and husband, Gaius Vibius Felix (on the left), her free-born son, Gaius Vibius Severus (on the right) and a cinerary urn for their freed slaves. (http://www2.cnr.edu/home/araia/dasumia_soteris.html) This entry, a testimony to the affection shared by spouses in such marriages, was submitted by one of Dr. Sebesta's students last fall. The freedman Lucius Dasumius Callistus dedicated this expensive, now fragmentary monument to the woman who was once his slave, Dasumia Soteris, whom he calls his *libertae optimae et conugi sanctissimae benemerenti.* In a lengthy inscription that makes no mention of children, he claims to have lived 35 years with her without a quarrel and concludes regretfully that she did not outlive him and that he did not die before her.

It is important to note that although lower-class women may have had more personal freedom than their elite sisters, they were also less protected by the power of a noble family. As women, they labored (not to pun) under a threefold handicap of gender, work, and class, compounded by the association of work with baseness and subservience. From the time of the kings, citizen class structure was founded on Roman preference for landed gentry who were free to serve as statesmen. Cicero gives classic expression to this attitude at the end of *De Officiis* I

(http://www.thelatinlibrary.com/cicero/off1.shtml#150), where he writes at the end of chapter 151: *nihil est agri cultura melius, nihil uberius, nihil dulcius, nihil homine libero dignius*. In chapter 150 he shares the scorn of the elite class for those who worked for a living, using the terms *illiberalis* and *sordidus* to describe the occupations considered improper for a gentleman: tax-gathering, usury, hired labor, vending, factory work, and all trades supplying food, pleasure and entertainment. To these would soon be added employment in the vast imperial bureaucracy that arose during the Principate, which was intentionally staffed by slaves and freedpeople whose loyalty could be enforced.

While sources of money and status changed in the late Republic from property ownership and mercantile trading to other enterprises, the bias against those who engaged in work considered "ignoble" continued into the Empire. Doubtless many women of the lower classes ended up working in jobs considered sordid, as providers of food and drink (e.g. the *caupona* of Salvius in Pompeii) or entertainment (musicians, **dancers**, acrobats, actresses) or personal services. For example, Livy tells of a *libertina* (http://www2.cnr.edu/home/araia/Livy_Hispala.html) by the name of Hispala Faecenia, who turned to prostitution because she could find no way to earn a living after manumission, having been an *ancilla* as a slave. He describes her as a *scortum nobile* because her bravery and generosity led to the exposure in 186 BCE of the Bacchanalian Conspiracy.

It is clear that not all lower-class women were without recourse, however: some entered their family's business; some were apprenticed at a young age for training in a workshop; some married (http://www.vroma.org/images/mcmanus_images/fullonica4.jpg) a vendor, farmer, or shop owner. This sign advertises a Fuller's workshop in Pompeii where men and women worked together to produce and clean garments. Students can learn from inscriptions on cinerary urn covers in *columbaria* of large estates about the variety of duties slavewomen performed, finding identity in death through their occupations: there were midwives, herbalists, and nurses; there were those who worked in clothing manufacture (spinning, weaving, dying, sewing, cleaning), jewelers, personal caregivers (such as hairdressers, maids, companions), kitchen hands and even doorkeepers. Freed slavewomen could open businesses with the support of their *patronus/a* or could find work with their former owner or his clients.

Funerary monuments reveal some interesting occupations and relationships: this cinerary urn memorializes Sellia Epyre, a freedwoman with a shop on the Sacred Way who made and sold gold-decorated luxury clothing (*aurivestrix*). Septimia Stratonice, a shoemaker (*sutrix*) (http://www2.cnr.edu/home/araia/septimia_stratonice.html) in the harbor town of Ostia, was given burial and shared space on his son's tombstone by a grateful *patronus*. Aurelia Nais http://www2.cnr.edu/home/araia/Aurelia_Nais.html, a fishmonger (*piscatrix*) who worked near the warehouses beside the Tiber River, received this opulent altar from two freedmen, one of them her former master. Antonia Caenis is remembered on this late 1st century CE altar

(http://www2.cnr.edu/home/araia/caenis.html) by her freedman and his children. Once the slave and secretary to http://www.vroma.org/images/mcmanus_images/antonia_augusta.jpg Antonia Augusta, the younger daughter of Marc Antony and Augustus's sister Octavia, Caenis was freed and became the beloved and powerful mistress of Vespasian.

Companion's Funerary Inscription Project has motivated Latin students to engage with the texts, images and cultural context of funerary monuments and to learn about at least one lower-class Roman woman. Faculty in 3 colleges (two of us untrained in epigraphy) have successfully used this independent activity with our Latin classes. As a result, 8 model student projects are now published on this instruction page and two others have been added to site passages, such as the Dasumia Soteris funerary monument and inscription you saw above. Please note that many monuments http://www2.cnr.edu/home/araia/Raia_inscriptions2.html#mon are still undocumented on *Companion*, in case you are interested in this project for yourself or your students.

Dr. Sebesta and I would now like to open the floor to you for discussion. We have shown you only a small portion of the *Companion* site and explained how it can be easily used to bring Roman women to light. We welcome your comments or questions. Even more, we welcome your interest in becoming s *Companion* collaborators. To that end we would like to introduce you to Dr. Maria Marsilio, Professor of Classics at St. Joseph's University, *Companion* author, editor, and mentor *par excellence*. This spring, at the request of her advanced Latin class, she mentored their preparation of Catullus 3 for *Companion*, which they termed "the "coolest" project they've ever done." To insure that they took the project seriously, she assigned it as their final exam in the course. We look forward to adding this class project to *Companion.* Meanwhile, you may want to discuss it with Maria over lunch. We know she will be happy to tell you how her collaboration with *Companion* has assisted her in reaching her goal of "inspiring students to great achievements."

Thank you.

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