Elizabeth McCauley
CAAS Presentation
October 11, 2008

Assessing the Online Companion to *The Worlds of Roman Women*

At 23 years old, fresh out of college, still getting used to rising before the sun, wearing a dress shirt and heels, and battling the morning commute, I have recently stepped into the position as the head of the Latin Department at a highly competitive private, all-female, college preparatory high school. True, there is only one Latin teacher at Merion… so, by default, the department is I. And though I agree with John Donne that "no man is an island", at 2:45 on a Friday afternoon, when I struggle to convey the importance of the sequence of tenses to a rowdy group of sophomore girls whose minds are more focused on the importance of finding the perfect outfit for the mixer that evening, I start to wonder if this is really true.

What I've come to realize in my short time at Merion is that, as the only teacher in the department, it can be a lonely Classical world. As a result, reliance upon technology to, not only connect me with other Latin teachers, but also provide supplementary material for my students is imperative. The online *Companion to the Worlds of Roman Women* has been a useful tool in helping guide me pedagogically, as well as providing my students with a fresh voice and a different perspective.

I was first introduced to the *Companion* website while taking a class in Lyric Poetry as an Undergraduate at Saint Joseph's University. Despite being a "millennial" learner, I embarrassingly admit that technology has never been my forte. I was drawn to the *Companion* website, however, by its user-friendly nature—it really is impossible to get lost on the website,

as it has a "site map", a veritable GPS tracking device of the Roman world. I was also drawn to the site's focus on the role of women in antiquity. Having taken a course in Sexuality and Gender in the Ancient World in my Freshman year at St. Joe's, I had been introduced to the importance of gender in the study of Greek and Roman society. And so the sight had a bit of familiarity.

This summer, I had the opportunity to do my own text commentary for the site on Horace's *Carmina 1.5*, the "Pyrrha Ode". We had studied the ode in Lyric Poetry and I had noticed that it wasn't a part of the *Companion* website, and so proposed the project to my professor, Dr. Maria Marsilio, as my final project for the course. The process of drafting, submitting, and revising the commentary has been very gratifying. I would consider my background in Republican rhetoric and epic poetry stronger than that in lyric poetry, and so this selection posed a challenge to me.

A poem which I really enjoyed translating, discussing, and analyzing in class, when I sat down to draft my commentary, I found myself bewildered as to how exactly I was supposed to fit all of my thoughts and insights on the *Pyrrha Ode* into one brief introductory paragraph. What I realized however, after looking to other texts for guidance, was that the commentary was merely supposed to be a starting point for textual analysis and student discussion. And so, after much time and work, I began to refine my thoughts. Dr. Raia had suggested that the *Ode* would fit well in the world of flirtation, and so I used that to direct my focus, coming up with the commentary and textual annotation which is now on the site. One of the best parts of

contributing to the *Companion* website is that the virtual component allows for continuous revision in hopes of producing the best possible analysis. And I look forward to that process.

As a high school teacher, I have found the *Companion* website to be very useful. The site takes texts in their original form and makes them accessible to students of all levels, through textual commentary and annotation. I have been able to use it with my first year students who are just beginning to learn about the culture, history, and customs of antiquity, all the way through to my fourth year students who have a much more extensive, working knowledge of the language.

Next semester I plan to use the *Companion* website for a major semester project for the fourth year class. I will give the girls an opportunity to look over the site and choose a piece which they find interesting. After having me approve it, they will work on designing and presenting a lesson plan for that particular piece. This will give the students an opportunity to extensively search the site and its contents, strengthen their public speaking skills, and learn how to teach original text with some assistance.

Another major benefit of the site is that the textual annotations provide useful guides for students who are just learning to fluently read authentic Latin text. It does not give them a translation which they can merely memorize and repeat, a habit often formed by students at that level. Rather, it forces them to analyze the text, piecing together vocabulary and grammar into a smooth, working translation. It enables them to actually *understand* how the language fits together.

Where culture is concerned, the *Companion* website provides ample information on Roman women. So often, save the occasional study of Sappho, Lesbia, and Dido, the ancient woman gets overlooked at the intermediate level. And yet, understanding the woman of antiquity—her role, her life, her world—greatly shapes one's understanding of the society itself. Yet, the high school curriculum is wrought with the study of Caesar, Cicero, Vergil, and the like. In a perfect world I would have class periods, unbound by bells, in which I could present primary source material focused on the study of women in antiquity. Unfortunately, however, the reality remains that four all-too-fast years confine the Secondary education Latin course of study, and there simply isn't time to cover everything. As a result, the *Companion* website presents the unique opportunity for students to be introduced to Roman women through selected primary source material, thus acquiring knowledge of these women without sacrificing the study of the language itself.

Aside from the extensive source of original material that the site provides, I have also found the images on the site to be very beneficial. The first time my students were introduced to *Companion*, I presented a broad lecture just to familiarize them with the various roles of Roman women. Throughout, I was able to pull in a variety of images, explaining the implications of the time during which each piece was done. The girls enjoyed seeing the representations of women, not only through various time periods, but also through different artistic media. Hopefully, continued use of the site will increase their appreciation for the art and archeology of the time.

While technology has opened up educational doors and is a great tool for teachers, like anything, when misused it has grave consequences. As a teacher, one of my greatest fears, when it comes to technology, is that my students will unknowingly be led into a world of misinformation. As I told them on the first day of class: Wikipedia… *probably* not the best source. The companion website, however, is a wonderful, reliable source for students at the secondary level.   Not only does it extensively cover topics related to Roman women, but it also provides a wealth of links to bona fide websites, covering everything from grammar aids to cultural resources.

But enough from me. I would like to share with you some of the feedback from the students themselves:

Katie Rymal said, "I would definitely use this site when researching a project or paper because the links to reliable websites are a valuable resource."

From Ali Brocato: "The website does a great job of incorporating graphics, citing text, and thoroughly explaining the roles of women in each section be it Childhood, Learning, Marriage, Family, Body, State, Class, Work, Flirtation, or Religion… There is so much laid out here that one can find exactly what one is looking for in the world of Roman Women with ease."

Lili Dodderidge – "It was very convenient to be able to click on an unfamiliar word and discover its definition and contextual meaning."

Clare Coffey commented, "It was very gratifying to see the little-mentioned Roman women highlighted and celebrated."

In regards to the convenience of the site, Kimmy Keating said, "Everything was accessible and any questions that might have arisen could have been answered by the very same website."

And finally, from Angela Monaco – "I also thought that the explanations of each underlined name in the texts were great because they helped clarify the person about whom I was reading. It gets so confusing when you don't know who the subject of your reading is. Just for kicks, I clicked on the bibliography, and it was huge! I think this is awesome because it opens up a whole new world of sources useful for projects, assignments, or research."

After having explored *Companion*, a few students commented on the contributions from undergraduates and expressed interest in continuing the study of Classics beyond high school. They felt that they saw, in themselves, the potential to contribute to the website or others like it, as well. I can't think of anything more gratifying, as a teacher, than to find a student's interested sparked so much by an education tool like *Companion*. What better way to celebrate the women of Antiquity?

I admit that I am but a "baby" in the Classical world. My experience with the *Online Companion to the Worlds of Roman Women*, however, has peaked my interest in the field of research and submission, and I know that this commentary is merely a jumping off point for me. It is a jumping off point for my students, as well, who have been introduced to a world much more vast than that which is bound between the covers of a text book. Just as the oral traditions of some of the greatest works of literature had to be written down in order for us to study, enjoy, and profit from them, so too must we change with an ever-changing world. And so, in the morning, as I don my dress shirt and heals, and pack my books into my bag, I throw in

my laptop too. Because in doing so, I carry with me the *Worlds of Roman Women* with just the

touch of a button.