

UNROMAN ROMANS



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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

1: Dress, Posture, and Self-Presentation: Men

1.1: The Toga and Roman Masculinity

1.2: Criticizing the Toga and Roman Masculinity

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1.4: Oratory

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1.1: The Toga and Roman Masculinity

Learning Objectives

By learning about how male Romans were supposed to dress you will understand:

- How the toga, an uncomfortable and hot garment made out of pure wool, came to symbolize Roman power and ‘Romanness’ among men;
- How Romans of various social levels, but especially the elite, were supposed to dress;
- How many Romans, including elites such as Julius Caesar, undercut the rules;
- What it meant when a Roman woman wore a toga.



The Emperor Augustus as the Pontifex Maximus (Chief Priest) of Rome. His toga is draped over his head for ritual reasons. This statue is commonly referred to as the *Via Labicana Augustus*, to distinguish it from all the other Augustus statues out there.

THE TOGA AND HOW TO WEAR IT

The toga was very much the defining Roman garment – in fact, non-citizens and many exiles were not allowed to wear it. The poet Virgil called the Romans ‘the togaed race/*gens togata*’ (*Aeneid* 1.282), but despite that it was originally worn by both the Romans and the Etruscans.^[1] In the early days of Rome, both men and women wore the toga, men wearing it without anything underneath except a loincloth; even later when it was worn nearly exclusively by men it continued to be worn by girls until they were 12. In its original form, it was a very handy and useful garment, which could even be worn into battle if you tied it up. Later, as it started to use more cloth, the toga grew unwieldy and expensive, gradually declining in popularity. By the time of the Emperor Augustus’ reign, it was largely something reserved for formal occasions – a bit like black tie and formal gowns. In fact, Augustus had to enforce the wearing of the toga in reaction to this decline:

Augustus wanted also to revive the old style of dress, and once when he saw a crowd of men in dark cloaks in assembly, he cried out indignantly, “Look at them — ‘Romans, masters of the world and the togaed race’^[2], and he ordered the aediles never again to allow anyone to appear in the Forum^[3] or its neighbourhood except in the toga and without a cloak.

Suetonius, *Augustus* 40.5

As part of his public image as a ruler who would revitalize good old-fashioned Roman values, Augustus was very careful about his public appearance and the image of old time simplicity he presented to the world:

The simplicity of Augustus’ furniture and household goods may be seen from couches and tables still in existence, many of which are scarcely fine enough for a private citizen. They say that he always slept on a low and simply furnished bed. He wore common clothes for the house, made by his sister, wife, daughter or granddaughters,^[4] except on special occasions; his togas were neither close nor full, his purple stripe^[5] neither narrow nor broad, and his shoes somewhat high-soled, to make him look taller than he really was. But he always kept shoes and clothing to wear in public ready in his room for sudden and unexpected occasions.

Suetonius, *Augustus* 73.1



A YouTube element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here: <https://pressbooks.bccampus.ca/unromantest/?p=133>

As the above video, featuring Dr. Mary Harlow from the University of Leicester, shows, the toga was not an easy garment to wear.

WEARING THE TOGA ‘INAPPROPRIATELY’

In the Late Republic some Romans began to experiment with new materials, and, as older forms of social control lost their power, felt able to abandon the traditional all wool toga. Others, like Cicero, used this as a way to attack their enemies, as in the following speech from 63 BCE. Cicero was in the middle of dealing with a potential revolution by an aristocrat named Cataline and had managed to get him to leave the city; Cicero was now trying to get people to turn on Cataline’s supporters. One avenue of attack was to make them seem unRoman by attacking how they looked and the clothing they wore:

5 I wish he [Catiline] had taken with him those soldiers of his, whom I see hovering about the forum, standing about the senate-house, even coming into the senate, all oiled up, glittering in purple. If they remain here, remember that we should not so much fear the army out there as as these men who have deserted the army.

Cicero, *Second Speech Against Catiline* 5

Seneca the Younger complained about the custom of taking off the toga on the Saturnalia, a December holiday where gifts were given and the slave-master paradigm was traditionally flipped, letting slaves be served by their masters.

1 It is the month of December, and yet right now the city is in a fever. General merrymaking is permitted. Everything resounds with mighty preparations — as if the Saturnalia differed at all from the usual business day! Because this day is no different, I regard as correct the remark of the man who said: “Once December was a month; now it is a year.” 2 If I had you ^[6] with me, I should be glad to consult you and find out what you think should be done — whether we ought to make no change in our daily routine or whether, in order not to be out of sympathy with the ways of the public, we should dine in a more fun way and take off the toga. As

it is now, we Romans have changed our dress for the sake of pleasure and holiday making, though in former times that was only customary when the state was disturbed and had fallen on evil days.

Seneca the Younger, *Letters* 18.1-2

SLAVE MEN AND THEIR DRESS

There was no special attire for slaves. As they were thought to represent their masters they might be very finely dressed — better than most free Romans. But whatever happened they did not normally get to choose their own dress. Here is Cato the Elder on what slaves on a farm should wear:

Clothing allowance for laborers: A tunic 3½ feet long and a blanket every other year. When you give out the tunic or the blanket, first take back the old one and have patchwork made of it. A sturdy pair of wooden shoes should be issued every other year.

Cato the Elder, *On Agriculture* 59.1

LOOKING ROMAN, LOOKING GOOD

What you wore, how you walked, talked, and groomed yourself was important was of vital to fitting into ancient Roman society. Another dimension of this was how physically attractive you were. The Romans judged each other on the basis of appearance and not inner qualities: your physical appearance was thought of as a reflection of your inner person. If you were going to attack someone's character, you went after their appearance — if you could show that they were physically ugly, people would more easily believe they also had an ugly character. In the following, Cicero attacks the looks (and pretty much everything else) of Julius Caesar's father-in-law, Piso:

Do you not see now, do you not feel, you beast, what complaints men make of your audacity? No one complains that a Syrian, that a man whom nobody knows, or some freely freed slave, was elected consul. For that complexion, like that of slaves, and those hairy cheeks and discoloured teeth, did not deceive us: your eyes, your eyebrows, your brow, in short your whole appearance which is, as it were, a sort of silent language of the mind, led men into error, this it was which led those to whom this man was unknown into mistake and error, and blunders. There were only a handful of us who were knew your foul vices; few of us who knew the deficiency of your abilities, your stolid manner, and your embarrassed way of speaking. Your voice had never been heard in the Forum; no one had had any experience of your wisdom in counsel: you had not only never performed any, I will not say illustrious exploit, but any action at all that was known of either in war or at home. You crept into honours through men's blunders, by the recommendation of some old smoke-dried images, though there is nothing in you at all that resembles them — except your colour.

Cicero, *Against Piso* 1

THE TOGA AND ROMANNESS

The toga was considered a uniquely Roman garment. Because of this, those who did not have Roman citizenship were not allowed to wear the toga — this included those who were exiled from Rome and had lost their Roman citizenship, as you can see from the story below from the 1st century CE:

Have you heard that Valerius Licinianus is teaching rhetoric in Sicily? I do not think you can have done, for the news is very recent. He is of praetorian rank, and he used at one time to be considered one of our most eloquent orators in court, but now he has fallen so low that he is an exile instead of being a senator, and a mere teacher of rhetoric instead of being a prominent lawyer. Consequently in his opening remarks he exclaimed, sorrowfully and solemnly: "O Fortune, what jokes you make to amuse yourself! For you turn senators into professors, and professors into senators." There is so much gall and bitterness in that expression that it seems to me that he became a professor merely to have the opportunity of uttering it. Again, when he entered the hall wearing a Greek pallium — for those who have been banished with the fire-and-water formula are not allowed to wear the toga — he first pulled himself together and then, glancing at his dress, he said, "I shall speak my declamations in Latin."

Pliny the Younger, *Letters* 4.11.3

The orator Cicero often attacked his enemies on the basis of their unRoman dress. He was also, however, capable of defending it. The following comes from a defence speech he made on behalf of Rabirius Postumus, who was on trial in 54 BCE for extortion and other offences. Rabirius had lent a great deal of money to the ruler of Egypt, Ptolemy Auletes; when he went to Egypt, though, he got thrown in jail. Though he managed to escape and return to Rome, he was then charged for his actions in Egypt. Because Roman

courts did not prevent people from bringing up what we would consider unnecessary information, the prosecution brought up the fact that, as part of his attempts to get his money back (before the being thrown in prison part of the experience, naturally), Rabirius had dressed up in Egyptian clothing instead of the toga. Cicero, in his defence of Rabirius, said:

You may attack [Rabirius] as often as you want with wearing an Egyptian robe, and with having on him other ornaments which Roman citizens do not wear. For every time that you mention any one of these details, you are only repeating that same thing: that he lent money rashly to the king,^[7] and that he trusted his fortunes and his character to royal whims. 26 I admit that was foolish of him, but as things were as they were, either he had put on an Egyptian cloak at Alexandria, in order afterwards to be able to wear a toga at Rome; or, if he wore his toga in Egypt he must have discarded all hope of recovering his fortunes.^[8] We have often seen Roman citizens, youths of high birth, and even some senators — men born in the highest rank — wearing little caps for the sake of luxury and pleasure, not in their country residences or their suburban villas, but at Naples, a town everyone visits. 27 We have even seen the great commander Lucius Sulla in a *pallium*. And you can now see the statue of Lucius Scipio, who conducted the war in Asia and defeated Antiochus, standing in the Capitol, not only with a *pallium*, but also with Greek slippers. And yet these men not only were not liable to be tried for wearing them, but they were not even talked about; and, at all events, the excuse of necessity will be a more valid defence for Publius Rutilius Rufus; for when he had been caught at Mitylene by Mithridates, he avoided the cruelty with which the king treated all who wore the toga by changing his dress.^[9] Therefore, that Rutilius, who was a pattern to our citizens of courage, ancient dignity, and prudence, and a man of consular rank, put on slippers and a *pallium*. Nor did any one think of reproaching the man with having done so, but all attributed it to the needs of the time. And shall that garment bring an accusation upon Postumus, which afforded him a hope that he might at some time or other recover his fortune?

28 For when he came to Alexandria to Auletes, jurors, this one means of saving his money was proposed to Postumus by the king — namely, that he should undertake the management, and, as it were, the stewardship of the royal revenues. And he could not do that unless he became the steward. For he uses that title which had been given to the office by the king. The business seemed an odious one to Postumus, but he had actually no power of declining it. The name itself, too, annoying; but the business had that name or old among those people, it was not now newly imposed by the king. He detested also that dress, but without it he could neither have the title nor fill his office.

Cicero, In Defence of C. Rabirius Postumus 25-27.

Just in case you thought Cicero might have gone soft on clothing norms at some point, in the following, he attacks someone for wearing a black (mourning) toga to a funeral feast. Romans wore a dark toga, the *toga pulla*, to funerals, but not to the feast held after. In 59 BCE, however, Publius Vatinius attended the funeral feast of the father of Quintus Arrius in this toga to show his opposition to Arrius. Cicero, who hated him for many reasons too numerous to list, attacked him publicly for this:

[30] I want to know with what plot or plan you went in a black toga to the banquet given by Quintus Arrius, my very close friend? Who had you ever seen do such a thing before! Who had you ever heard of having done such a thing?! What precedent had you for such behaviour, or what custom can you use to defend it? You will say that you did not approve of those rites. Very well. Suppose that those rites were inexcusable. Do you not see that I am not questioning you at all with respect to the events of that year, nor of the circumstances in which you may appear to be concerned in common with any eminent men, but only about your own particular acts of wickedness? I admit that the rite was informal. Still, tell me, who ever went to a banquet in a mourning garment? For by such conduct the banquet itself is turned into a funeral feast, though the true intention of a banquet is to be a scene of enjoyment and praise.

Cicero, Against Vatinius 12.13

Cicero was writing in the Late Republic, but the continued rise in wealth in Rome and the expansion of the Roman Empire meant that more and more luxury materials were available to an elite that was growing richer and richer. The Emperor Tiberius legislated against the mixing of silk with wool in an attempt to keep men dressed traditionally and blamed all of this excess on the East.

On the next day of the Senate's meeting Quintus Haterius, an ex-consul, and Octavius Fronto, an ex-praetor, spoke against the luxury in the country. It was decided that vessels of solid gold should not be made for the serving of food, and that men should not disgrace themselves in silken clothing from the East.

Tacitus, *Annals* 2.33

While the standard of Roman fashion was clearly changing for men, by the Late Republic, that did not mean that attacking what a man wore stopped being valid in the eyes of the Romans. In the following chapter, we will explore those who attacked the 'manliness' of Roman men based on what they wore as well as those who were critical of the toga altogether.

Biography and Further Reading:

CONTENT WARNING

WHAT TO INCLUDE: A short list of the topics approached in the following section (eg. sexual assault, graphic violence, etc.), and a bit of a debrief that puts them in-context and acknowledges that we're approaching them from a contemporary standpoint.

EXAMPLE: (From James' section on Love and Affection) The topic of rape is brought up in the following discussion. Sadly, some formative Roman legends include acts of rape. It's hard to talk about their idea of love without including their perception of sexuality, and sadly their example of the ideal woman in regard to sexuality was a victim of rape.

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1. ([pb_glossary id="173"]Dionysius of Halicarnassus[/pb_glossary], [Roman Antiquities 3.61](#)). ↩
 2. This is the quotation from the Aeneid mentioned above. ↩
 3. The Forum was where not only government business was done, but was also a centre for banking and all sorts of shopping, which also included the purchase of slaves. As only Romans citizens could wear the toga this could represent an issue for those who were non-citizens as well as those who could not afford to buy a toga,, which was quite expensive, ↩
 4. He exiled his daughter, Julia, for adultery. He also exiled one of his granddaughters, also called Julia, for adultery. So one suspects that some of what he wore was not in fact woven by their hands. The Empress Livia also had considerable duties, so one wonders how much time she had left for weaving. ↩
 5. This refers to the broad purple stripe that only senators were allowed to wear. ↩
 6. This likely refers to Lucilius Junior, to whom Seneca the Younger's *Letters* were addressed, and who is otherwise widely unknown in the ancient world. ↩
 7. To the then ruler of Egypt, Ptolemy Auletes. ↩
 8. Losing all your money meant you also lost your position in the Senate, and probably, given that everyone was going to prosecute him when he got home, he could also look forward to spending what was left on trying to bribe the jury to let him off. ↩
 9. Mithridates the Great of Pontus fought a number of wars with the Romans. In 88 BCE he organized a massacre of Roman citizens and Italians (over 80,000 were killed) in a number of cities in Anatolia, from which Rutilius escaped by dressing up as a Greek. ↩

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1.2: Criticizing the Toga and Roman Masculinity

Learning Objectives

This chapter asks you to think about:

- How important it was to conform to certain standards of dress as a Roman male
- What criticism of dress and the prejudices about appearance reveals about Roman elite society

ROMAN MEN WEARING MAKEUP

Roman men were not supposed to wear makeup or dye their hair, but many did. The Romans valued youth and vigour and expected their politicians, who were often also their generals, to reflect that. The following excerpt from Plutarch records how the rumour that the consul Marius had not received his scars in battle was used as propaganda against him:

Marius was elected triumphantly, and at once proceeded to gather soldiers contrary to law and custom, enlisting slaves and poor people. Former commanders never accepted such people, but bestowed arms, like other favours, as a matter of distinction on persons who had the proper qualification: a man's property being thus a sort of security for his good behaviour. These were not the only occasions of ill-will against Marius; some haughty speeches, spoken with great arrogance and contempt, gave great offence to the nobles^[1]; as, for example, his saying that he had carried off the consulship as a spoil from the effeminacy of the wealthy and high-born citizens, and telling the people that he gloried in wounds he had himself received for them, as much as others did in the monuments of dead men, and the *imagines* of their ancestors.

Plutarch, *Life of Marius*

While the toga was a powerful social symbol in ancient Rome, how one wore (or refused to wear) the toga left men vulnerable to criticism. If how a person wore the toga was intrinsically linked to Roman conceptions of masculinity, then to attack what someone was wearing was to attack their *virtus* — 'manliness'. Cicero emasculated those who supported his political competitor Catiline by portraying them as people who had transgressed all sorts of Roman norms. Notice how Cicero escalates from using clothing and self-grooming as a basis of attack to stating that they are degrading the Roman Republic itself:

21 There is a last class, last not only in number but in the sort of men and in their way of life: Catiline's private bodyguard, personally selected; the friends of his embraces and of his heart, whom you see with carefully combed hair, glossy, beardless, or with well-trimmed beards, with tunics with sleeves or reaching to the ankles, and draped in veils, not with togas. All the effort of their lives, all the work of their sleepless nights is spent in suppers that last until dawn. 22 In these bands are all the gamblers, all the adulterers, all the unclean and shameless citizens. These boys, so witty and delicate, have learned not only to love and be loved, not only to sing and to dance, but also to brandish daggers and to administer poisons. Unless they are driven out, unless they die, even should Catiline die, I warn you that the school of Catiline would exist in the republic. But what do those wretches want? Are they going to take their wives with them to the camp? How can they do without them, especially in these nights? And how will they endure the Apennines, and these frosts, and this snow? Maybe they think that they will endure winter more easily because they have been in the habit of dancing naked at their feasts. Yes – we should really dread a war when Catiline is going to have a bodyguard of whores!

Cicero, *Second Speech Against Catiline* 21-22

In the following, the poet Juvenal attacks men who wear makeup and take care of their appearance in what he sees as feminine ways:

One draws out his eyebrows with some damp soot on the edge of a needle and lifts up his blinking eyes to be painted, another drinks out of an obscenely-shaped glass, and ties up his long locks in a gilded net; he is clothed in blue checks, or smooth-faced green; the attendant swears by Juno like his master. Another holds in his hand a mirror like that carried by the effeminate Otho...

...It was an even greater monstrous event when Gracchus,^[2] dressed in a tunic, fought as a gladiator, and fled, trident in hand,^[3] across the arena — Gracchus, a man of nobler birth than the Capitolini, or the Marcelli, or the descendants of Catulus or Paulus, or the Fabii: nobler than all the spectators in the podium; not excluding him who gave the show^[4] at which that net was flung.

Juvenal, *Satire 2*

ATTACKING ROME BY ATTACKING ROMAN FASHION

Though the toga was a signifier of Roman class and masculinity, Christian moralists undermined this by approaching the topic of dress and self-grooming to attack Roman pagans as corrupt and unmanly. For example, the Christian bishop, and later saint, Tertullian, attacked Roman men for spending too much time on their appearance:

I, a man and envious of women, am banishing them from their own domains. Are there, in our case too, some things which we should not do because of the sobriety we are to maintain on account of the fear we owe God? If it is true, (as it is) that a defect of nature has implanted the will to please in men for the sake of women, just as in women for the sake of men, and if our gender acknowledges that it uses deceptive trickeries of form peculiarly its own, such as cutting the beard too sharply or plucking it out here and there; shaving round about the mouth; arranging hair and disguising its greyness by dyes; removing all the hair on the body as it appears; fixing each hair in its place with some womanly pigment; smoothing all the rest of the body by the aid of some rough powder or other: then, also, taking every opportunity for consulting the mirror and gazing anxiously into it. While, when once the knowledge of God has put an end to all wish to please by means of sexual attraction, all these things are rejected as frivolous and hostile to modesty. For where God is, there modesty is, and there is sobriety as her assistant and ally. How, then, shall we practise modesty without her instrumental mean, that is, without sobriety? How, moreover, shall we bring sobriety to bear on the discharge of the functions of modesty, unless seriousness in appearance and in countenance, and in the general aspect of the entire man, mark our carriage?

Tertullian, *On the Dress of Women* 2.8.2

REFLECT

Do you find it significant that this passage on the dress of men is from Tertullian's *On the Dress of Women*?

As wearing the toga was a way for men to show their Romanness, it proved appealing wear for anyone who wanted to perform Romanness. Tertullian, because he clearly had little else to be getting on with, also wrote an entire speech praising Greek pallium, a cloak-like garment, that attacked the wearing of the toga by the men of Carthage. In the process he also has a lot to say about how men and women should dress:

4.2 A change of clothing only starts to be a fault if it is not custom that is changed, but nature. There is an important difference between the honour we owe to the past and to religion. Let custom faithfully follow the age, and nature God. 3 So Achilles^[5] caused a breach of nature by changing into a girl, he, the man who had been reared on the marrow of wild beasts (this, then, is how he got his name, since his lips had not tasted breast milk), a hero who was taught by a coarse, wood-dwelling, monstrous teacher in a stony school! One may willingly tolerate in the case of a little boy a mother's concern. But no doubt he was already covered with hair, no doubt he had already secretly proved himself a man to somebody when he still put up with a woman's flowing robe, doing his hair, applying make-up, consulting the mirror, caressing his neck, his ears made effeminate by piercing, as may still be seen in his bust at Sigeum.^[6] 4 Certainly, later he is a warrior, for necessity restored his gender! There had been sounds from the battlefield, and weapons were close by. 'Iron itself,' so it is said, 'attracts a man.' Anyway, if he had persisted in being a girl even after this incentive, he might as well have got married – how about that for a change?! 5 A monstrosity, then, he is, a double one: from a man he became a woman, and then from a woman a man, although neither the truth should have been denied, nor the lie confessed. Either form of change was bad: the former ran counter to nature, the latter was against his safety.

Reflection

Reflect on how Tertullian links a person's gender with the clothing that they are wearing. What do his ideas on the connection between clothing and gender say about how vital clothing was to social assimilation in ancient Rome? How have things changed or stayed the same in the last 2000 years?

Tertullian continues...

3 More degrading still were complete changes in a man's dress because of lust rather than some maternal fear. Nonetheless you adore that man who ought to make you feel ashamed, this 'club-arrow-hide-bearer',^[7] who exchanged the outfit mentioned in his name for a woman's attire. So much then was granted to the Lydian secret mistress, that Hercules prostituted himself in Omphale, and Omphale in Hercules... 4 But there is something too about the man who earlier had come close to Hercules, Cleomachus the

boxer.^[8] At Olympia he underwent an unbelievable change from his male condition by being cut inside and outside his skin. Well, he earns a crown amidst the *Fullers* of Novius (Roman dramatist) and he has rightly been mentioned by the mime-writer Lentulus in his *Catinenses*!^[9] Surely, just as he covered the traces of boxing-gloves with bracelets, so he replaced the coarse sportsman's wrap with some thin, loose-fitting garment. 5 About Physco or Sardanapallus we must keep silent: if they were not remarkable for their lusts, no-one would know them as kings....^[10]

8 Such clothing, therefore, that is not in agreement with nature and modesty deserves sharply fixed stares, pointing fingers, and critical nods. Really, if with Menandrian luxury a man can be trailing a refined dress behind him may he hear close by the words the comic author heard: 'What is this madman spoiling a splendid cloak?' But now that the eyebrow of censorial watchfulness has disappeared, how much ground for criticism does the lack of distinction provide? 4 [You can see] freedmen dressed liked equestrians, slaves scarred with floggings in the dress of the nobility, captives dressed as freeborn, and country folk as city dwellers, idiots as men of the forum, citizens as soldiers. The corpse-bearer, the pimp, and the trainer of gladiators: they dress like you. 9 Look at women too. There you may see what Severus Caecina^[11] stressed before the Senate: matrons appearing in public without stolas. 2 Under the decrees of the augur Lentulus, those who had disgraced themselves this way were punished as if for sexual misbehaviour, since the garment that was the witness and guard of dignity had been felt to be an impediment to practice fornication and so had sedulously been dropped by some women. 3 But now, committing lechery against themselves and making themselves more easily accessible, they have renounced the stola, the linen attire, the rustling bonnet, the hairy head-dress, yes, even the litters and portable chairs, in which they had been kept private and apart even in public. 4 But some put out their own lights, while others kindle lights that are not theirs...4.10 And when the manager of the public toilets fans her silken gown, and comforts with necklaces a neck that is less pure than the toilets, and uses bracelets — which, as parts of what was given to brave men, even matrons would indiscreetly have owned — to insert her hands that are guilty of every shameful deed, and fits on her maculate leg a white or reddish shoe, then why do you not look at these garments?

... 5.2 Now I will interrogate your conscience: how do you feel in a toga: dressed or oppressed? Is it like wearing clothes or enduring them? 2 If you deny this, I will follow you home, and I will see what you rush to do right after you get in the door. No other garment is taken off with such relief as the toga! 3 We say nothing about the shoes, that special torture of the toga, that most impure covering of the feet, and a false one too. For who would not be better off stiffening barefoot in heat or cold, than fettered in shoes? 4 Sure, a great support for walking has been taken care of by Venetian shoemaker-workshops in the form of effeminate boots! (5.3) 1 But there is nothing so convenient as the *pallium*, even if it is double, as that of Crates. On no occasion there is a waste of time in dressing, for all the effort it takes consists in loosely covering oneself.

Tertullian, *On the Pallium*

Fashion could also be used to attack Rome from within the nation itself. The poet Martial, in the late first century CE, attacked current standards of male beauty none of which he agreed with and none of which were "traditional". Martial appeared to be quite critical of the measures Roman men were taking to be good looking, and ends up being quite mean about it in the following poem:

Cotilius, you're a good looking guy; Cotilius, many people say this.

I hear it: but tell me — what is a good looking guy?

A good looking guy is: one who arranges his curls in order

Who always smells of balsam and cinnamon

Who sings Egyptian songs, who hums Spanish ones

Who moves his hairless arms to different beats

Who wastes his entire day alongside women's chairs

And who always is whispering something in someone's ear

Who reads and writes notes here there and everywhere

Who shields his *pallium* from neighbouring arms

Who knows who loves whom, who is going to parties,

Who knows in and out the ancient heritage of Hirpinus.

What are you saying! Is this this, *this*, really a guy?

Then, Cotilius, your guy is something deeply troubling.

Martial Epigrams 3.63

ROMAN MEN DRESSING LIKE ROMAN WOMEN

CONTENT WARNING

This following section includes a harsh condemnation of what could be perceived now as people having a gender expression that differs from “the norm”. In this section, the author Juvenal lashes out at men who did not conform to the idealized Roman man and Seneca The Younger tries to enforce a rigidity between who gets to be masculine and who gets to be feminine.

The satire author Juvenal, though being a great source for the ancient Roman world, does not make for an easy read. Here in *Satire* 2, he is writing on the topic of hypocrites: people who are moralists in public, but privately engage in immoral behaviour. In this rather nasty poem, however, we can see how tightly connected criticism of dress was connected with attacks on behaviour.

What will not other men do when you, Creticus,^[12] dress yourself in garments of gauze, and while the people are marvelling at your outfit, attack the Proculae and the Pollittae?^[13] Fabulla is an adulteress; condemn Carfinia of the same crime if you please; but even if found guilty, they would never wear such a toga as yours.^[14] “O but,” you say, “these July days are so hot and humid!” Then why not speak [in court] without clothes? Such madness would be less disgraceful. Yours is a nice outfit in which to propose or expound laws to our countrymen flushed with victory and with their wounds yet unhealed, and to those mountain peasant who had laid down their ploughs to listen to you!^[15] What would you not say if you saw a judge dressed like that!^[16] Would a toga of gauze be appropriate to a witness? That you, Creticus, you, the keen, unbending champion of human liberty, are clothed in a see-through outfit! This plague has come upon us by infection and it will spread further, just as in the fields the scab of one sheep, or the mange of one pig, destroys an entire herd, and just as one bunch of grapes takes on a sickly colour from the appearance of its neighbour.

Question Box:

Female prostitutes and adulterers were forced to wear the toga, a male garment, in public. If the toga represented morality and the elite among Roman men, why did it represent social shame when worn by women? May this have something to do with the maintenance of gender roles in ancient Roman society?

Juvenal continues...

Someday you will try something more shameful than this dress; no one reaches the depths of turpitude all at once. In due time you will be welcomed by those who in their homes put headbands on,^[17] drape themselves with necklaces, and propitiate the Bona Dea with the stomach of a pig and a huge bowl of wine, though by an evil usage the goddess warns off all women from the door; none but males may approach her altar.^[18] “Away with you! profane women” is the cry; “no booming horn, no she-minstrels here!”... One draws out his eyebrows with some damp soot on the edge of a needle and lifts up his blinking eyes to be painted, another drinks out of an obscenely-shaped glass, and ties up his long locks in a gilded net; he is clothed in blue checks, or smooth-faced green; the attendant swears by Juno like his master. Another holds in his hand a mirror like that carried by the effeminate Otho, a trophy of the Auruncan Actor, in which he gazed at his own image in full armour when he was just ready to give the order to advance — a thing notable and novel in the annals of our time, a mirror among the weapons of Civil War! It needed, in truth, a mighty general to kill Galba, and keep his own skin shaved; it needed a citizen of highest courage to copy the splendours of the royal palace on the field of Bebricum, and plaster his face with dough! Never did the quiver-carrying Semiramis have something like this in her Assyrian realm nor the despairing Cleopatra on board her ship at Actium. There is no decency of language here, no regard for table manners. You will hear all the foul talk and squeaking tones of Cybele; a grey-haired frenzied old man presides over the rites; he is a rare and notable master of the art of gluttony and should be hired to teach it. But why wait any longer when it is now time to lop off the extra flesh in Phrygian fashion?^[19]

Gracchus^[20] has presented to a cornet player — or perhaps it was a player on the straight horn — a dowry of four hundred thousand sesterces. The contract has been signed; the prayers have been pronounced; the banqueters are seated, the new made bride is reclining on the bosom of her husband. You elites of Rome! Is it a soothsayer that we need, or a censor? Would you be more

aghast, would you deem it a greater omen, if a woman gave birth to a calf, or an ox to a lamb?^[21] The man who is now arraying himself in the flounces and train and veil of a bride once carried the quivering shields of Mars by the sacred thongs and sweated under the sacred burden!^[22]

Father of our city, where did such wickedness among your Latin shepherds come from? How did such a lust possess your grandchildren, Gracivus?^[23] Behold! Here you have a man of high birth and wealth being handed over in marriage to a man, and yet neither shakes your helmet, nor strike the earth with your spear, nor yet protests to your Father? Away with you then; begone from that broad Campus Martius which you have forgotten! One says, “I have a ceremony to attend at dawn to-morrow, in the Quirinal valley.” “What is the occasion?” “No need to ask: a friend is taking a husband; quite a small affair.” Yes, and if we only live long enough, we shall see these things done openly: people will wish to see them reported among the news of the day.^[24] Meanwhile these want-to-be brides have one great trouble: they can bear no children with which to keep the affection of their husbands; has nature done well in granting to their desires no power over their bodies. They die infertile; the medicine-chest of the bloated Lyde is no help, neither is holding ut their hands to the blows of the swift-footed Luperici!^[25]

It was an even greater monstrous event when Gracchus, dressed in a tunic, fought as a gladiator, and fled, trident in hand, across the arena — Gracchus, a man of nobler birth than the Capitolini, or the Marcelli, or the descendants of Catulus or Paulus, or the Fabii: nobler than all the spectators in the podium; not excepting him who gave the show at which that net was flung. That there are such things as Manes, and the realms below the earth, and punt-poles, and Stygian pools black with frogs, and all those thousands crossing over in a single boat—these things not even boys believe, except such as have not yet had their penny bath. But just imagine them to be true—what would Curius^[26] and the two Scipios think? Or Fabricius and the spirit of Camillus? What would the legion that fought at the Cremera think, or the young manhood that fell at Cannae; what would all those gallant hearts feel when a shade of this sort came down to them from here? They would wish to be purified; if only sulphur and torches and damp laurel-branches were to be had. Such is the degradation to which we have come! Our arms indeed we have pushed beyond Juverna’s shores, to the new-conquered Orcades and the short-nighted Britons; but the things which we do in our victorious city will never be done by the men whom we have conquered. And yet they say that one Zalaces, an Armenian more effeminate than any of our youth, has yielded to the ardour of a Tribune! Just see what evil communications do! He came as a hostage: but here boys are turned into men. Give them a long stay in our city, and lovers will never fail them. They will throw away their trousers and their knives, their bridles and their whips, and carry back to Artaxata the manners of our Roman youth.

Juvenal, *Satire 2*

Exercise

Take a few moments to consider Juvenal’s quote that “someday [Creticus] will try something more shameful than this dress; no one reaches the depths of turpitude all at once.” How does Juvenal’s escalation from dressing in gauze into complete moral upheaval reflect possible fears about the stability (or lack thereof) of Roman societal standards?

Many of the details of this story were invented and exaggerated for various reasons; still, some men in reality clearly resisted clothing norms. For example, in a discussion of inheritance law, the *Digest* mentions in passing a senator who clearly liked to dress in women’s evening wear:

There is no difference between the expressions ‘garments for men’, and ‘clothing for men’, but the intention of the testator sometimes creates difficulty, if he himself was accustomed to make use of some garment which was also suitable for women. Therefore it should, by all means, be ascertained whether the garment bequeathed was the one which the testator had in his mind, and not that which was actually destined for the use of women or for men.

For Quintus Mucius says that he knew a certain Senator who was in the habit of wearing women’s clothing at the table and who, if he should bequeath a garment used by women, would not be considered to have had in his mind one which he himself was accustomed to make use of, as if it was one suitable for his sex.

Pomponius, On Quintus Mucius, Book IV. Digest 34.2.33

Romans moralists (of which there were quite a number) were particularly horrified at deviations from what they felt was the proper manly attire of a Roman male. Seneca the Younger attacked those who wore women’s dress, as well as tried to look younger than

their ages, either to preserve their sexual appeal for others or so they could take up sexual roles that the Romans only thought suitable for younger men and teenagers. It is relevant to note that Seneca the Younger's opinions are rightfully antiquated.

7 Surely you believe that men who put on women's clothing live contrary to nature? Do not men live contrary to nature who try to look fresh and boyish at an age unsuitable for such an attempt? What could be more cruel or more wretched? Cannot time and manhood ever carry such a person beyond an artificial boyhood?

Seneca the Younger, *Letters* 122.7

Looking like a Roman man — performing like one — in antiquity no doubt took time and energy, particularly for the upper class. However, even among the deepest critics of unmanly Romans, such as Cicero, it was difficult to maintain this strict form of masculinity.

Bibliography and Further Reading:

OLSON, KELLY. "Masculinity, Appearance, and Sexuality: Dandies in Roman Antiquity." *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 23, no. 2 (2014): 182-205.

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1. I.e. people whose families had already held the consulship and were old Roman families, compared to Marius who was none of these things. ↩
 2. Although the Gracchi were a very ancient Roman family, the name is used here to note any elite Roman claiming illustrious ancestry, rather than any specific person. ↩
 3. He fought as a retiarius, a type of gladiator who wore very little clothing and fought with a net and trident. ↩
 4. The emperor. ↩
 5. Achilles, one of the greatest Greek heroes, was predicted to have a short life if he took up a life of warfare. So his mother hid him away and had him reared by the centaur Chiron, who is the monstrous teacher referred to above; later she dressed him in a dress and hid him with a princess and her court. He could only be lured out when Odysseus turned up with weapons which he enthusiastically grabbed at. ↩
 6. A location in Ancient Greece ↩
 7. The hero Hercules who wore as his distinctive dress a lion skin, and carried a club. He spent a year serving the Eastern queen Omphale, who liked to make him wear her clothes while she dressed up in his. According to most versions of the story, Hercules does not seem to have minded this arrangement. ↩
 8. Cleomachus was infamous in antiquity. According to Strabo (14.1.41), he fell in love with a [pb_glossary id="630"]cinaedus[/pb_glossary] and then with a girl that had been raised for the sex trade; as a result, again according to [pb_glossary id="476"]Strabo[/pb_glossary], he started copying the mannerisms and clothing of a cinaedus. To fully realize the impact of this you have to understand that ancient boxing was brutal: there were no rounds and no weight classes and people basically just pounded each other anywhere (often with lead in wraps around their hands) until one keeled over. (Deaths occurred.) These were the manliest of manly men. ↩
 9. Both of these were Roman playwrights who had written comedies featuring him as a character (the comedies do not survive). ↩
 10. In the short missing section Tertullian rants on about philosophers wearing expensive, purple garments. ↩
 11. Aulus Caecina Severus, a Roman consul in 57 BC. ↩
 12. Most likely an invented name, meant to evoke a highly aristocratic family ↩
 13. Seemingly these were names that once cited brought female adultery to the Roman mind; they may also be the names of some actual women, who had presumably been involved in some infamous adultery cases. ↩
 14. Women convicted of adultery were not allowed to wear the stola, the garment of respectable women, but had to wear the toga, like prostitutes. ↩
 15. Juvenal is going back to some old standards here: hard peasant soldiers and farmers coming to the city after a long day at the farm had not been a thing in Rome for a long, long time before this was written – if they ever had been in the way that later Romans imagined. ↩
 16. Juvenal is going back to some old standards here: hard peasant soldiers and farmers coming to the city after a long day at the farm had not been a thing in Rome for a long, long time before this was written – if they ever had been in the way that later Romans imagined. ↩

17. Headbands were apparently one mark of a respectable matron, though we can't be sure of how often they were worn in reality. ↩
18. [6] Bona Dea was a goddess worshipped by women in all female gatherings and she was considered an important goddess for the well being of Rome ↩
19. Here he refers to the custom of the Galli, the priests of Cybele, of self-castration. ↩
20. Like Creticus, this is likely an invented name ↩
21. The Romans had great faith in omens sent by the gods, and Juvenal lists some 'historical' examples of omens the Romans had seen over the years. ↩
22. This is a reference to the dancing priests of Mars, the Salian Priesthood. It was a highly aristocratic and exclusive priesthood and its priests did the dance of Mars for the good of Rome in full armour through the streets the Rome. ↩
23. Another name for the god Mars ↩
24. This refers to daily report of significant public business and news in the city of Rome, posted publicly for all to read. ↩
25. This was another aristocratic priesthood. These ran nearly naked through the streets of Rome once a year whipping women as they ran past with leather whips. This was believed to bring fertility. ↩
26. Although the name of Gracchus above is made up, these are the names of historical great Roman heroes. ↩

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1.3: Behaving "Manly"

CONTROLLING ROMAN MASCULINITY

Roman social life was governed by societally enforced taboos — non-legal restrictions on behaviour. These taboos affected the elite of Rome, and men of the senatorial-class most visibly, as the senatorial-class were and remain the most observable group of people within Rome. Taboos, while also dictating Roman sexuality and dress, extended as far as to stipulate what emotions could be shown by men in public. These taboos created and perpetuated the idea that a Roman man (*vir*) had to exercise power over all aspects of his life; along with retaining power over their household and their clients,^[1] Roman men were expected to display power over their emotions in a way similar to modern-day toxic masculinity. Among other things, it was considered unacceptable for Roman men to be bombastically angry in public, kiss a spouse, or cry — anything that would show a man's weakening control over his emotions. Just as is done, to a lesser extent, with public displays of affection in certain cultures now, Roman society was able to prevent or minimize certain legal behaviours by stigmatizing them. In the midst of the Late Republic, however, the chaos arising from constant in-fighting in Rome allowed significant figures to deviate from these norms. With Scipio Africanus the Younger weeping after destroying the North African city of Carthage, Marius doing so upon being rescued from drowning, and Cicero being generally inconsolable during his exile and then later following the death of his daughter, Tullia, The Late Republic hosted many a man-tear.

Exercise

Set a timer for five minutes and do some research on toxic masculinity. Do you think it is fair to retroactively apply the label of "toxic masculinity" to ancient Rome? How far, if at all, do you think we have come in how society lets men display emotion publicly?

SCIPIO AFRICANUS THE YOUNGER

CONTENT WARNING

The following passage contains a non-graphic depiction of suicide and the murder of young children.

The Greek historian Appian within his work *The Punic Wars* depicts Scipio Africanus the Younger, crying after defeating the Carthaginians at the conclusion of The Third Punic War. The cruel and dramatic feminization of Scipio's peace-seeking opponent, the Carthaginian commander Hasdrubal the Boetharch is also of note within this passage.

Thereupon Hasdrubal secretly presented himself to Scipio, bearing an olive branch.^[2] Scipio commanded him to sit at his feet and there showed him to the deserters. When they saw him, they asked silence, and when it was granted, they heaped all manner of reproaches upon Hasdrubal, then set fire to the temple and were consumed in it. It is said that as the fire was lighted the wife of Hasdrubal, in full view of Scipio, arrayed in the best attire possible under such circumstances, and with her children by her side, said in Scipio's hearing, "For you, Roman, the gods have no cause of indignation, since you exercise the right of war."^[3] Upon this Hasdrubal, betrayer of his country and her temples, of me and his children, may the gods of Carthage take vengeance, and you be their instrument." Then turning to Hasdrubal, "Wretch," she exclaimed, "traitor, most effeminate of men, this fire will entomb me and my children. Will you, the leader of great Carthage, decorate a Roman triumph? Ah, what punishment will you not receive from him at whose feet you are now sitting." Having reproached him so, she killed her children, flung them into the fire, and plunged in after them. Such, they say, was the death of the wife of Hasdrubal, which would have been more becoming to himself.

Scipio, beholding this city, which had flourished seven-hundred years from its foundation and had ruled over so many lands, islands, and seas, rich with arms and fleets, elephants and money, equal to the mightiest monarchies but far surpassing them in bravery and high spirit (since without ships or arms, and in the face of famine, it had sustained continuous war for three years), now come to its end in total destruction — Scipio, beholding this spectacle, is said to have shed tears and publicly lamented the fortune of the enemy. After meditating by himself a long time and reflecting on the rise and fall of cities, nations, and empires, as well as of individuals, upon the fate of Troy, that once proud city, upon that of the Assyrians, the Medes, and the Persians, greatest of all, and later the splendid Macedonian empire, either voluntarily or otherwise the words of the poet escaped his lips: —

"The day shall come when sacred Troy shall be laid low, and Priam, and the people of Priam with goodly spear of ash."

(Homer, Iliad. 6.448-449)

Being asked by Polybius^[4] in familiar conversation (for Polybius had been his tutor) what he meant by using these words, he said that he did not hesitate frankly to name his own country, for whose fate he feared when he considered the changeability of human affairs. And Polybius wrote this down just as he heard it.

Carthage being destroyed, Scipio gave the soldiers a certain number of days for plunder, reserving the gold, silver, and temple gifts. He also gave prizes to all who had distinguished themselves for bravery, except those who had violated the shrine of Apollo. He sent a swift ship, embellished with spoils, to Rome to announce the victory. He also sent word to Sicily that whatever temple gifts they could identify as taken from them by the Carthaginians in former wars they might come and take away. Thus he endeared himself to the people as one who united clemency with power. He sold the rest of the spoils, and, in sacrificial cincture, burned the arms, engines, and useless ships as an offering to Mars and Minerva, according to the Roman custom.

Appian. *The Punic Wars*. 20.131-133

Question Box

Other than crying publicly, Scipio is presented as an upstanding Roman citizen within this passage. Do you think that the emphasis on Scipio's Roman deeds and the feminization of his enemy, Hasdrubal, could have been motivated by the author's worry that Scipio might be interpreted as unRoman for crying?

MARIUS

Gaius Marius is depicted within Greek biographer Plutarch's work *Parallel Lives* to be crying publicly upon being saved from drowning. Marius was elected multiple times to consul, a significant figure within the Roman state equal to that of a contemporary prime minister, on the grounds of his presentation as a 'traditional' Roman. In this passage, however, he is depicted in a way that contradicts that — crying, grovelling, and generally dependant on others.

But presently, when they were about twenty furlongs^[5] distant from Minturnae, an Italian city, they saw from afar a troop of horsemen riding towards them, and also, as it chanced, two merchant vessels sailing along. Accordingly, with all the speed and strength they had, they ran down to the sea, threw themselves into the water, and began to swim to the ships. Granius and his party reached one of the ships and crossed over to the opposite island, Aenaria by name Marius himself, who was heavy and unwieldy, two slaves with toil and difficulty held above water and put into the other ship, the horsemen being now at hand and calling out from the shore to the sailors either to bring the vessel to shore or to throw Marius overboard and sail where they pleased. But since Marius supplicated them with tears in his eyes, the masters of the vessel, after changing their minds often in a short time, nevertheless replied to the horsemen that they would not surrender Marius. The horsemen rode away in a rage, and the sailors, changing their plan again, put in towards the shore; and after casting anchor at the mouth of the Liris, where the river expands into a lake, they advised Marius to leave the vessel, take some food ashore with him, and recruit his strength after his hardships until a good wind for sailing should arise; this usually arose, they said, when the wind from the sea died away and a tolerably strong breeze blew from the marshes. Marius was persuaded to follow their advice; so the sailors carried him ashore, and he lay down in some grass, without the slightest thought of what was to come. Then the sailors at once boarded their vessel, hoisted anchor, and took to flight, feeling that it was neither honourable for them to surrender Marius nor safe to rescue him. Thus, forsaken of all men, he lay a long time speechless on the shore, but recovered himself at last and tried to walk along, the lack of any path making his progress laborious. He made his way through deep marshes and ditches full of mud and water, until he came to the hut of an old man who got his living from the water. At his feet Marius fell down and begged him to save and help a man who, in case he escaped his present perils, would recompense him beyond all his hopes. Then the man, who either knew Marius from of old or saw that in his face which won the regard due to superior rank, told him that if he merely wanted to rest, the cabin would suffice, but that if he wandering about trying to escape pursuers, he could be hidden in a place that was more quiet. Marius begged that this might be done, and the man took him to the marsh, bade him crouch down in a hollow place by the side of the river, and threw over him a mass of reeds and other material which was light enough to cover without injuring him.

Plutarch, *The Life of Marius*. 37.1-6

CICERO

Cicero was exiled in 58 BCE for putting a Roman citizen Catiline to death without a trial — an action which was retroactively made unlawful by the Tribune of the Plebs Publius Clodius Pulcher (93-53 BCE). This was a political position which gave a person

the power to write or veto laws against the interest of the people in ancient Rome. This letter was written by Cicero to his first wife Terentia, daughter Tullia, and son Cicero the Younger; being exiled resulted in him having to leave the city of Rome without his family, who could not come with him because his Roman citizenship was revoked, therefore making him unable to be legally be married to a Roman woman such as Terentia. Ironically, though Cicero refers to his wife within this letter as having a “broken spirit,” Terentia proved more competent than him in the face of this adversity.

Yes, I do write to you less often than I might, because, though I am always wretched, yet when I write to you or read a letter from you, I am in such floods of tears that I cannot endure it. Oh, that I had clung less to life!^[6] I should at least never have known real sorrow, or not much of it, in my life. Yet if fortune has reserved for me any hope of recovering at any time any position again, I was not utterly wrong to do so: if these miseries are to be permanent, I only wish, my dear, to see you as soon as possible and to die in your arms, since neither gods, whom you have worshipped with such pure devotion, nor men, whom I have ever served, have made us any return.

I have been thirteen days at Brundisium in the house of Marcus Laenius Flaccus, a very excellent man, who has despised the risk to his fortunes and civil existence in comparison to keeping me safe, nor has been induced by the penalty of a most iniquitous law to refuse me the rights and good offices of hospitality and friendship. May I some time have the opportunity of repaying him! Feel gratitude I always shall. I set out from Brundisium on the 29th of April, and intend going through Macedonia to Cyzicus. What a fall! What a disaster! What can I say? Should I ask you to come — a woman of weak health and broken spirit? Should I refrain from asking you? Am I to be without you, then? I think the best course is this: if there is any hope of my restoration, stay to promote it and push the thing on: but if, as I fear, it proves hopeless, pray come to me by any means in your power. Be sure of this, that if I have you I shall not think myself wholly lost.

But what is to become of my darling Tullia? You must see to that now: I can think of nothing. But certainly, however things turn out, we must do everything to promote that poor little girl's married happiness and reputation.^[7] Again, what is my boy Cicero to do? Let him, at any rate, be ever in my heart and in my arms. I can't write more. A fit of weeping hinders me. I don't know how you have got on; whether you are left in possession of anything, or have been, as I fear, entirely plundered.

Cicero then goes on to give some instructions on how to run the household, before continuing...

To return to your advice, that I should keep up my courage and not give up hope of recovering my position, I only wish that there were any good grounds for entertaining such a hope. As it is, when, alas! shall I get a letter from you? Who will bring it me? I would have waited for it at Brundisium, but the sailors would not allow it, being unwilling to lose a favourable wind. For the rest, put as dignified a face on the matter as you can, my dear Terentia. Our life is over: we have had our day. It is not any fault of ours that has ruined us, but our virtue. I have made no false step, except in not losing my life when I lost my honours.^[8] But since our children preferred my living, let us bear everything else, however intolerable. And yet I, who encourage you, cannot encourage myself.

[...] Take the greatest possible care of your health, and believe me that I am more affected by your distress than my own. My dear Terentia, most faithful and best of wives, and my darling little daughter, and that last hope of my race, Cicero, good-bye!

Cicero, *Letters to his Friends*. 14.4

Cicero's dejection upon his exile was also recorded by Greek author Plutarch in his biography of Cicero in *Parallel Lives*.

But although many people visited [Cicero] out of goodwill, and the Greek cities vied with one another in sending him deputations, still, he passed his time for the most part in dejection and great grief, looking off towards Italy like a disconsolate lover, while in his spirit he became very petty and mean by reason of his misfortune, and was more humbled than one would have expected in a man who had enjoyed so lofty a discipline as his. And yet he often asked his friends not to call him an orator,^[9] but a philosopher, because he had chosen philosophy as an occupation, but used oratory merely as an instrument for attaining the needful ends of a political career.

Plutarch. *The Life of Cicero*. 35.5-6

While Cicero's exile was eventually reversed, thanks in part to the work of his wife Terentia, tragedy struck again in 45 BCE when Cicero's daughter, Tullia, died. An excerpt from Roman Jurist Servius Sulpicius Rufus (106-43 BCE) depicts the most popularly held conception of how a Roman man should feel and express what he is feeling publicly. Sulpicius, having joined the side of Pompey over Caesar in The Great Roman Civil War, is established as an optimate, one of the upper-class ‘best men’ and therefore

an ambassador for Roman values. His largely apathetic reflections regarding the Tullia's death is recorded in a letter to Cicero. This letter makes clear how Cicero's public displays of emotion were looked on at the time. Astonishingly writing "Reflect that we have had snatched from us what ought to be no less dear to human beings than their children — country, honour, rank, every political distinction. What additional wound to your feelings could be inflicted by this particular loss?" Sulpicius attests the absurd values that were propagated by and among Roman men. Sulpicius writes:

When I received the news of your daughter Tullia's death, I was indeed as much grieved and distressed as I was bound to be, and looked upon it as a calamity in which I shared. For, if I had been at home, I should not have failed to be at your side, and should have made my sorrow plain to you face to face. That kind of consolation involves much distress and pain, because the relations and friends, whose part it is to offer it, are themselves overcome by an equal sorrow. They cannot attempt it without many tears, so that they seem to require consolation themselves rather than to be able to afford it to others. Still I have decided to set down briefly for your benefit such thoughts as have occurred to my mind, not because I suppose them to be unknown to you, but because your sorrow may perhaps hinder you from being so keenly alive to them.

Why is it that a private grief should agitate you so deeply? Think how fortune has dealt with us before now. Reflect that we have had snatched from us what ought to be no less dear to human beings than their children — country, honour, rank, every political distinction. What additional wound to your feelings could be inflicted by this particular loss? Or where is the heart that should not by this time have lost all sensibility and learn to regard everything else as of minor importance? Is it on her account, pray, that you sorrow? How many times have you recurred to the thought — and I have often been struck with the same idea — that in times like these there is far from being the worst fate to whom it has been granted to exchange life for a painless death? Now what was there at such a period that could greatly tempt her to live? What scope, what hope, what heart's solace? That she might spend her life with some young and distinguished husband? How impossible for a man of your rank to select from the present generation of young men a son-in-law, to whose honour you might think yourself safe in trusting your child! Was it that she might bear children to cheer her with the sight of their vigorous youth? Who might by their own character maintain the position handed down to them by their parent, might be expected to stand for the offices in their order, might exercise their freedom in supporting their friends? What single one of these prospects has not been taken away before it was given? But, it will be said, after all it is an evil to lose one's children. Yes, it is: only it is a worse one to endure and submit to the present state of things.

Discussion

Should we perceive Cicero's reaction to the death of his daughter as a weakness of character like the ancient Romans, or should we have empathy for him?

I wish to mention to you a circumstance which gave me no common consolation, on the chance of its also proving capable of diminishing your sorrow. On my voyage from Asia, as I was sailing from Aegina towards Megara, I began to survey the localities that were on every side of me. Behind me was Aegina, in front Megara, on my right Piraeus, on my left Corinth: towns which at one time were most flourishing, but now lay before my eyes in ruin and decay. I began to reflect to myself thus: "Hah! do we tiny men feel rebellious if one of us perishes or is killed — we whose life ought to be still shorter — when the corpses of so many towns lie in helpless ruin? Will you please, Servius, restrain yourself and recollect that you are born a mortal man?" Believe me, I was no little strengthened by that reflexion. Now take the trouble, if you agree with me, to put this thought before your eyes. Not long ago all those most illustrious men perished at one blow: the empire of the Roman people suffered that huge loss: all the provinces were shaken to their foundations. If you have become the poorer by the frail spirit of one poor girl, are you agitated thus violently? If she had not died now, she would yet have had to die a few years hence, for she was mortal born. You, too, withdraw soul and thought from such things, and rather remember those which become the part you have played in life: that she lived as long as life had anything to give her; that her life outlasted that of the Republic; that she lived to see you — her own father — praetor, consul, and augur;^[10] that she married young men of the highest rank; that she had enjoyed nearly, every possible blessing; that, when The Republic fell,^[11] she departed from life. What fault have you or she to find with fortune on this score?

Do not forget that you are Cicero, and a man accustomed to instruct and advise others; and do not imitate bad physicians, who in the diseases of others profess to understand the art of healing, but are unable to prescribe for themselves. Rather suggest to yourself and bring home to your own mind the very maxims which you are accustomed to impress upon others. There is no sorrow beyond the power of time at length to diminish and soften: it is a reflexion on you that you should wait for this period, and not rather anticipate that result by the aid of your wisdom. But if there is any consciousness still existing in the world below, such was her

love for you and her dutiful affection for all her family, that she certainly does not wish you to act as you are acting. Grant this to her, your lost one! Grant it to your friends and comrades who mourn with you in your sorrow! Grant it to your country, that if the need arises she may have the use of your services and advice.

The concept introduced by Sulpicius that Cicero has an obligation to his country to appear untouched by emotion might have been bolstered by the fact that Cicero himself was an optimatus, and therefore was held to higher standards of Romanness. Despite being a novus homo, the first in his family to serve the in within Roman government, Cicero attained the position of consul, an annually elected position equated to that of prime minister. Having men in power presenting themselves as apathetic, and therefore normative, was just one of the ways in which the stigmatization of emotion was perpetuated within Roman society.

Activity Box

Chat with a friend or classmate about a contemporary celebrity or otherwise public figure. Are they expected to present socially acceptable and normative behaviour? How are they targeted and judged by news outlets and tabloids when they deviate from the social standard?

Sulpicius finishes his address to Cicero with a warning of how his actions will be perceived by the public eye:

Finally — since we are reduced by fortune to the necessity of taking precautions on this point also — do not allow anyone to think that you are not mourning so much for your daughter as for the state of public affairs and the victory of others.^[12] I am ashamed to say any more to you on this subject, lest I should appear to distrust your wisdom. Therefore I will only make one suggestion before bringing my letter to an end. We have seen you on many occasions bear good fortune with a noble dignity which greatly enhanced your fame:^[13] now is the time for you to convince us that you are able to bear bad fortune equally well, and that it does not appear to you to be a heavier burden than you ought to think it. I would not have this be the only one of all the virtues that you do not possess.

As far as I am concerned, when I learn that your mind is more composed, I will write you an account of what is going on here, and of the condition of the province. Good-bye.

Cicero, *Letters to his Friends*. 4.5

An excerpt of Cicero writing Sulpicius back shows Cicero's reflection on his shame at not being able to bare his loss as a Roman man of upstanding character.

It is not only your words and (I had almost said) your partnership in my sorrow that consoles me, it is your character also. For I think it a disgrace that I should not bear my loss as you — a man of such wisdom — think it should be borne. But at times I am taken by surprise and scarcely offer any resistance to my grief, because those consolations fail me, which were not wanting in a similar misfortune to those others.

An excerpt from Cicero, *Letters to his Friends*. 4.6

Question Box

How were the emotions of Roman men controlled through social concepts of shame? The letter just discussed, Appian's *The Punic Wars* (20.131), and Cicero's *Letters to his Friends* (14.4) are good jumping-off points for this discussion.

As part of his role as a politician in Rome, Cicero was a renowned orator. In the following section, we will explore how oration as a performance was vital to forwarding the political lives of Roman men.

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1. Lawful subordinates, such as ex-slaves or Plebeians, if the subject were Patrician. ↩
 2. Giving olive branches was a gesture implying that Hasdrubal was seeking peace; in the context of this passage, peace seeking is interpreted as surrendering. ↩
 3. The Roman concept of bellum justum, “righteous war”, indicated that Romans were always in the right when they went to war, and therefore would not be subject to punishment by the gods. ↩
 4. Greek historian, 200-118 BCE. ↩
 5. A unit of measurement. There are about five furlongs in a kilometre. ↩
 6. The expected Roman way of coping with exile was to honourably commit suicide. Despite this being the standard, Roman men choosing suicide instead of shame was understandably not common. ↩
 7. This is a reference to Tullia’s dowry not yet having been paid to Gaius Calpurnius Piso Frugi, to whom she was betrothed to in 63 BCE while her father was consul. ↩
 8. Again a reference to the expectation that Cicero should have committed suicide instead of being shamed in exile. ↩
 9. Oration was public speaking, and was highly valued among the Roman aristocratic class as a skill in government. Philosophy was much less valued. ↩
 10. Succinctly put, a praetor, consul, and augur are: a Roman military leader, political leader, and religious leader, respectively. These were all reputable and hard earned positions within Roman government. ↩
 11. The Great Roman Civil War (49-45 BCE) was and continues to be considered the event marking the end of The Roman Republic. ↩
 12. Tullia dying and Cicero’s side (the optimates) losing against Julius Caesar (100-44 BCE) in The Great Roman Civil War both happened the same year (45 BCE). ↩
 13. Fame in this context meant reputation. ↩

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1.4: Oratory

MALE ORATORY AND DRESSING 'MANLY'

The toga was a complicated garment, and often limited the movement of those who wore it. The fact that it had a tendency to fall off with any sort of vigorous activity was a problem in ancient oratory (public speaking), which involved a lot of movement. In the following passage the educator and orator Quintilian advises the budding orator on how to wear it and what faults to avoid:

137 With regard to clothing, there is no special clothing unique to the orator, but people see his clothing more often than that of others. It should, therefore, be distinguished and manly, as, indeed, it ought to be with all men of status. But excessive care about the cut of the toga, the style of shoes, or arrangement of hair, is just as disgraceful as excessive carelessness. There are also details of clothing which are altered to some extent by successive changes in fashion. Our ancestors, for example, wore no folds [in the toga], and their successors wore them very short. 138 Consequently it follows that in view of the fact that their arms were, like those of the Greeks, covered by the garment, they must have employed a different form of gesture in the exordium from that which is now in use.^[1] However, I am speaking of our own day. The speaker who does not have the right to wear the purple stripe will wear his belt in such a way that the front edges of the tunic fall a little below his knees, while the edges in rear reach to the middle of his hams. For only women draw them lower and only centurions higher. 139 If we wear the purple stripe, it requires but little care to see that it falls becomingly; negligence in this respect sometimes excites criticism. Among those who wear the purple stripe, it is the fashion to let it hang somewhat lower than in garments that are retained by the belt.

The toga itself should, in my opinion, be round, and cut to fit, otherwise there are a number of ways in which it may be unshapely. Its front edge should by preference reach to the middle of the shin, while the back should be higher in proportion as the belt is higher behind than in front. 140 The fold is most becoming, if it fall to a point a little above the lower edge of the tunic, and should certainly never fall below it. The other fold which passes obliquely like a belt under the right shoulder and over the left, should neither be too tight nor too loose. The portion of the toga which is last to be arranged should fall rather low, since it will sit better thus and be kept in its place. A portion of the tunic also should be drawn back in order that it may not fall over the arm when we are speaking in court, and the fold should be thrown over the shoulder, while it will not be unbecoming if the edge be turned back. 141 On the other hand, we should not cover the shoulder and the whole of the throat, otherwise our dress will be unduly narrowed and will lose the impressive effect produced by breadth at the chest.

The left arm should only be raised so far as to form a right angle at the elbow, while the edge of the toga should fall in equal lengths on either side. 142 The hand should not be overloaded with rings, which should under no circumstances come close to the middle joint of the finger. The most becoming attitude for the hand is produced by raising the thumb and slightly curving the fingers, only it is occupied with holding notes. But we should not go out of our way to carry the latter, for it suggests an acknowledgment that we do not trust our memory, and is a hindrance to a number of gestures. 143 The ancients used to let the toga fall to the heels, as the Greeks are in the habit of doing with the cloak: Plotius and Nigidius both recommend this in the books which they wrote about gesture as practised in their own day. I am consequently all the more surprised at the view expressed by so learned a man as Pliny the Younger, especially since it occurs in a book which carries minute research almost to excess: for he asserts that Cicero was in the habit of wearing his toga in such a fashion to conceal his varicose veins, despite the fact that this fashion is to be seen in the statues of persons who lived after Cicero's day. 144 And only illness can excuse a short cloak, bandages used to protect the legs, mufflers and coverings for the ears.

Quintilian, *Institutes of Oratory* 11.137-144

Reflect

How does Quintilian connect wearing the toga properly to both elite status and Roman conceptions of 'manliness'. If the toga was so deeply ingrained in Roman identity, how did this mindset actively exclude certain populations from being truly 'Roman'?

Wearing a toga properly was serious business, as can be seen by this anecdote from the *Saturnalia*, a 4th-century work by Macrobius. This anecdote is about the first century BCE lawyer Quintus Hortensius, who was both notable both as a consul and an orator. His elegant and graceful oratory earned him the name Dionysia, the name of a famous female dancer, because of his exuberant style of delivery. The story starts with a discussion of how peacocks came to be eaten in Rome:

1 It is said that Quintus Hortensius was the first to have served [peacock] at a feast of the augural college: ^[2] decent men talked about it as an act of extreme luxury rather than an austere one. A large number of people followed him, and raised the price of peacock eggs so high that they easily sold for five denarii each, and the actual birds for 500. 2 Look: that peacock eggs sold at 5 denarii each back then and are not cheaper not is not only something that we should avoid admiring and criticize. 3. Hortensius was the same man who watered his plane trees with wine, and he was so enthusiastic about it that he asked Cicero to exchange places with him in a court case they were engaged in, ^[3] so that he could go earlier to plant trees on his estate in Tusculum and himself take care of irrigating them himself.

4. But perhaps even a Hortensius cannot shame an entire generation, a man so openly soft that he thought all decent appearance was in the arranging of his clothing. He dressed in the latest style, and to make sure he went out well dressed he looked at his appearance in a mirror, where, gazing intently at himself he draped the toga on his body so that a complex knot tied up the folds. He arranged them the folds with effort not by chance, and so that the fold of garment fell down in such a way as to flatter his upper body 5 Once when he had arranged his toga *very* carefully to look its best, he charged a fellow senator whom he had had to pass in narrow passage and who had destroyed its arrangement as a result, with an offence, as he said he considered it a crime that the folds from his shoulders should be disarranged.

Macrobius, *Saturnalia*

MALE ORATORY AND TALKING ROMAN

If we look back to Quintilian, the focus that he has not only on clothing but on how to speak and stand says a lot about how a Roman ‘man’ was meant to act in public.

Just our language must be correct, clear, ornate and appropriate, so should how we deliver that language. It will be correct, that is, free from fault, if our speech is fluent, clear, pleasant and urbane, or in other words, free from all traces of a rural or a foreign accent. 31 For there is good reason for the saying we so often hear, “He must be a barbarian or a Greek”, since we may detect a man’s nationality from the sound of his voice as easily as we test a coin by its ring. ^[4] If these qualities are there, we shall have those harmonious accents of which Ennius expresses his approval when he describes Cethegus as “sweet voiced,” and avoid the opposite effect, of which Cicero expresses his disapproval by saying, “They bark, not plead.” Delivery may be described as correct if the voice is sound, that is to say, exempt from any of the defects of which I have just spoken, and if it is not dull, coarse, exaggerated, hard, stiff, feeble, soft or effeminate, and if the breath is neither too short nor difficult to sustain or recover.

Quintilian, *Institutes of Oratory* 11. 30-3

Quintilian continues with his extensive advice on how to stand, move, and hold oneself in general:

122 Be careful not to puff out the chest or stomach, since such an attitude arches the back, and all bending backwards is unsightly. The sides must follow the gesture, as the motion of the entire body contributes to the impact. Cicero argues that the body is more expressive than even the hands. For in the *On the Orator* he says, “There must be no quick movements of the fingers, but the orator should control himself by the poise of his whole upper half and by a manly inclination of the side.” 123 Slapping the thigh, which Cleon ^[5] is said to have been the first to introduce at Athens, is in general use and is becoming as a mark of indignation, while it also stirs up the audience. Cicero regrets its absence in Calidius, ^[6] “There was no striking of the forehead,” he complains, “nor of the thigh.” With regard to the forehead I must humbly disagree with him: for it is a purely theatrical trick even to clap your hands or to beat your chest. 124 It is only on rare occasions, too, that it is becoming to touch the chest with the finger-tips of the hollowed hand, as when, for example, we address ourselves or speak words of exhortation, reproach or commiseration. But if we ever use this gesture, it is becoming to pull back the toga at the same time. As regards the feet, we need to be careful about our walk and the positions in which we stand. To stand with the right foot advanced or to shove forward the same foot and hand are alike unsightly. 125 At times we may rest our weight on the right foot, but without any corresponding inclination of the chest, while, in any case, the gesture is better suited to the comic actor than to the orator. It is also a mistake when resting on the left foot to lift the right or poise it on tiptoe. To straddle the feet is ugly if we are standing still, and almost indecent if we are actually moving. To go forward may be effective, provided that we move but a short distance and do so rarely and calmly. 126 It will also at times be found convenient to walk backwards and forward because of extravagant pauses caused by the audience’s applause. Cicero, however, says that this should be done only on rare occasions, and that we should not take more than a few steps. On the other hand, to run up and down, which, in the case of Manlius Sura, Domitius Afer called overdoing it, is total stupidity, and a rival professor once snarkily asked Verginius Flavus how many miles he had declaimed.

Quintilian, *Institutes of Oratory* Book 11.122-126.

FEMALE ORATORY

Oratory in Rome was very much a male area; elite men trained to be orators for all of their lives. In the Late Republic and onwards, oratory was essential to a successful public life. Elite Roman women, however, were not supposed to speak out in public like men, even if they were often well educated. Hortensia, the daughter of Hortensius, was, however, one of the great orators of the Late Republic. The following story is set in 42 BCE, when the Second Triumvirate had imposed a new tax on the 1,400 richest women in Rome to help pay for their costs in the Civil War.

The women resolved to plead with the women of the triumvirs. With the sister of Octavian and the mother of Antony they did not fail, but they were driven from the doors of Fulvia, the wife of Antony, whose rudeness they could barely endure. They then forced their way to the tribunal of the triumvirs in the forum, the people and the guards dividing to let them pass. There, through the mouth of Hortensia, whom they had selected to speak, they spoke as follows: “As is right women of our rank addressing a petition to you, we went to the ladies of your households; but having been treated as did not befit us at the hands of Fulvia, we have been driven by her to the forum. You have already deprived us of our fathers, our sons, our husbands, and our brothers, whom you accused of having wronged you; if you take away our property also, you reduce us to a condition unbecoming our birth, our manners, our gender. If we have done you wrong, as you say our husbands have, proscribe us as you do them. But if we women have not voted any of you public enemies, have not torn down your houses, destroyed your army, or led another one against you; if we have not hindered you in obtaining offices and honours, — why do we share the penalty when we did not share the guilt?

...34 1 While Hortensia spoke like this the triumvirs were angry that women should dare to hold a public meeting when the men were silent; that they should demand from magistrates the reasons for their acts, and themselves not so much as furnish money while the men were serving in the army. They ordered the lictors to drive them away from the tribunal, which they proceeded to do until cries were raised by the multitude outside, when the lictors desisted and the triumvirs said they would postpone till the next day the consideration of the matter. On the following day they reduced the number of the women, who were to present a valuation of their property, from 1400 to 400.

Appian, *The Civil War* 4.32 & 34

Altogether, there were many social, legal, and cultural restrictions that Roman men had to conform to. From their dress and posture to their emotions and speaking skills, the difficulty and nuance of conforming to the ideal Roman man left many to the wayside. The above passage, however, gives a glimpse of the social lives of women, which we will explore in the following section.

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1. Gesture was an important part of ancient oratory. The toga restricted the use of one arm, meaning that Romans used only one arm to gesture with. The Greeks, wearing a different garment, could use both. [↩](#)
 2. These were an elected group who served as augurs and provided advice to the Roman state on certain bird signs. Lest you think this was silly stuff: the Romans really, really were committed to this type of telling the future and looking to see if actions were approved by the gods. Getting elected to the college of augurs was a big deal, too. [↩](#)
 3. Roman trials often had a number of people speak for the defendant and the prosecution. In this case, Cicero and Hortensius were on the same team, but Cicero was slated to go earlier and Hortensius wanted to take his place so he could skip out of court early. [↩](#)
 4. This refers to the practice of testing whether coins were fake or not by checking to see if they rang true as they should. [↩](#)
 5. An Athenian orator and general, he died in 422 BCE. [↩](#)
 6. A Roman orator of the 1st century BCE [↩](#)
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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

2: Dress, Posture, and Self-Presentation: Women

[2.1: The Stola and Other 'Female' Garments](#)

[2.2: Cosmetics](#)

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2.1: The Stola and Other 'Female' Garments

INTRODUCTION TO THE STOLA



Drawing of a Roman *matrona* in a *stola*.

Just as it was for men in Roman antiquity, the dress, hair, and makeup of women attracted particular attention and criticism in Rome, which is not altogether unsimilar to the customs of today. Roman women were supposed to be presentable and to wear clothes that matched their status, whether as *matrona* or as a lower class citizen, freedwoman (former slave), or slave.

In early Rome both men and women wore togas but at some point, the toga became a [male-only garment](#). For most of ancient Roman history, respectable Roman women wore the *stola* — a long dress that reached down to the feet that was worn over a tunic. The stola was usually sleeveless and could be made out of a range of materials, though it had traditionally been made out of wool, like the toga. Roman women wore a cloak called the *palla* over it when they went out in public.



Statue of Livia Drusilla wearing a stola and palla

DRESSING RESPECTABLY

The Christian author Tertullian wrote an entire treatise on women's dress. It is very long and repetitive but the following gives you a taste of how he encouraged the judgement of women who did not dress 'respectably':

8 Clothing that is not in agreement with nature and modesty deserves glaring stares, pointing fingers, and critical nods. Really, if with Menandrian^[1] luxury a man can be trailing a refined dress behind him may he hear close by the words the comic author heard: "what is this madman spoiling a splendid cloak?" But now that the eyebrow of censorial watchfulness has disappeared, how much ground for criticism does the lack of distinction provide? 4 [You can see] freedmen dressed like equestrians, slaves scarred with floggings in the dress of the nobility, captives dressed as freeborn, and red-necks as city dwellers, idiots as men of the forum, citizens as soldiers. The corpse-bearer, the pimp, and the trainer of gladiators: they dress like you.

9 Look at women too. There you may see what Severus Caecina stressed before the Senate: matrons appearing in public without stolas. 2 Under the decrees of the augur Lentulus, those who had disgraced themselves this way were punished as if for sexual misbehaviour, since the garment that was the witness and guard of dignity had been felt to be an impediment to practice fornication and so had sedulously been dropped by some women. 3 But now, committing lechery against themselves and making themselves more easily accessible, they have renounced the stola, the linen attire, the rustling bonnet, the hairy head-dress, yes, even the litters and portable chairs, in which they had been kept private and apart even in public. 4 But some put out their own lights, while others kindle lights that are not theirs [...] 4.10 And when the manager of the public toilets fans her silken gown, and comforts with necklaces a neck that is less pure than the toilets, and uses bracelets — which, as parts of what was given to brave men, even matrons would indiscreetly have owned — to insert her hands that are guilty of every shameful deed, and fits on her maculate leg a white or reddish shoe, then why do you not look at these garments?

Tertullian, *On the Dress of Women* 3.8-4.10

DRESSING WRONG

Not every woman wanted to dress in a stola. The satirist Juvenal attacked women who dared take off women's traditional clothing and put on exercise gear and armour. These women even trained in Roman sports, which garnered them harsh criticism for not conforming to the expectations of their gender.

I don't even have to speak of the purple wraps and the wrestling-oils used by women. Who has not seen one of them striking a stump, piercing it through and through with a foil, lunging at it with a shield, and going through all the proper motions? — A respectable mother truly qualified to blow a trumpet at the Floralia! Unless, indeed, she is nursing some further ambition in her bosom, and is practising for the real arena. What modesty can you expect in a woman who wears a helmet, loathes her own gender, and enjoys feats of strength? Yet she would not choose to be a man, knowing the superior joys of womanhood. What a fine thing for a husband, at an auction of his wife's goods, to see her belt and armlets and plumes put up for sale, with a leg-guard that covers half a left leg; or if she fights another sort of battle, how charmed you will be to see your young wife disposing of her greaves! Yet these are the women who find the thinnest of thin robes too hot, whose delicate flesh is chafed by the finest of silk tissue. See how she pants as she goes through her prescribed exercises; how she bends under the weight of her helmet; how big and coarse are the bandages which enclose her haunches; and then laugh when she lays down her arms and shows herself to be a woman! Tell us, you grand-daughters of Lepidus, or of the blind Metellus, or of Fabius Gurgus, what gladiator's wife ever assumed accoutrements like these? When did the wife of Asylus ever gasp against a stump?

Juvenal *Satire* 6.245-67

REFLECT

How do Juvenal's ideas of women "dressing wrongly" match up to contemporary ideas of what women should and should not wear? How much, if at all, have the policing of women's clothing changed in the past 2000 years.

Citations and Further Reading:

Olson, K. (2006) 'Matrona and Whore: Clothing and Definition in Roman Antiquity'. In *Prostitutes and Courtesans in the Ancient World*, ed. by Faraone, C.A. & McClure, L. Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 186-204.

Olson, K. 2008. *Dress and the Roman woman : self-presentation and society*. Routledge.

Media Attributions

- woman in stola

1. Menander was a Greek Comedy writer who lived around 342/41 – 290 BCE. [↩](#)

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2.2: Cosmetics

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- The cultural expectations on Roman women to wear make up;
- The types of make up that Roman women used;
- Male pressure on women to use make up ‘appropriately’ and criticism of them for using it wrongly;
- The links between cosmetics and luxury and depravity in the eyes of critics.

ROMAN WOMEN WEARING MAKEUP

As is the case with nearly all subjects concerning women in antiquity, the extant sources available to the modern scholar describing the use of cosmetics in Rome are all written by men. Thus, the descriptions of these beautifying substances and their use by women (and sometimes men) are heavily affected by the authors’ views — which were often inherently negative and sexist — on women as a whole. Though comments about cosmetics are varied across the sources, ranging from recipes to purely hateful remarks, cosmetics and the women who wore them were generally viewed as deceitful and therefore harmful to men, and even to the moral fibre of the woman herself. In fact, cosmetics were frequently associated with courtesans and adulterous women, essentially equating wearing makeup to being sexually promiscuous and lacking proper commitment to one’s husband and children.

It is worth noting that one’s outwards appearance was highly valued in Roman society. An unpleasant physical exterior was seen as indicative of an unpleasant interior. Due to these high standards of beauty and grooming for both **men** and women, Roman citizens were encouraged to take care of their physical appearance. This, coupled with the fact that women in an unadorned and natural state were generally not considered beautiful by male authors, made it difficult for women not to attempt to improve their appearance through the use of makeup and related substances.

At the same time, Roman authors highly valued simplicity and modesty, especially under the rule of the Emperor Augustus, who placed significant emphasis on ‘traditional’ Republican values during his reign. As a result, a Roman woman seeking to conform to beauty standards would almost inevitably be attacked for vanity while at the same time one who used no substances to improve her appearance would be attacked for ugliness. Clearly, it was nearly impossible to be the ideal Roman woman, and nearly all women who used makeup were considered to be ‘unRoman’.

WHAT WERE COSMETICS MADE OF?

Despite the attacks and judgment received for wearing makeup, women continued to express themselves through adornment, a fact which is clear both from the continued mention of it in sources and from archaeological evidence. In a society where women would inevitably be attacked whether they wore makeup or not, yet simultaneously fixated on physical beauty, it is not difficult to understand why women continued to gravitate to cosmeceuticals and cosmetics.

Though by no means does Ovid, who wrote under the Emperor Augustus, provide us with a fair treatment of women and their use of makeup. His views are significantly different from his contemporaries’ in that he tended to encourage the use of cosmetics rather than deem them unsuitable for a Roman woman. The following is the first of five recipes from his *Medicamina Faciei Feminae*, a semi-didactic poem intended to be read by women. The word *medicamina* can be defined as meaning remedy, medicine, or cosmetic, highlighting the blurred boundaries between what constituted a cosmetic versus a cosmeceutical. Though beauty ideals shifted across time and obviously varied depending on personal preferences, a bright and unblemished complexion was one of the most valued components of what was considered to be a beautiful Roman woman. Hence why the first recipe in the poem is for a face-pack, which Ovid promises will lead to a brighter and more smooth complexion if made and applied correctly

Learn, when sleep has released your tender limbs, how your face could shine radiantly.

Strip the barley, which farmers from Libya have sent by ship, of its husks and coverings:

An equal measure of bitter vetch^[1] is soaked in ten eggs:^[2] but the stripped barley should amount to two librae.^[3]

Once drive by gusty breezes, have these crushed on a rough millstone by a slow female donkey.

Grind into this the first horns that fall from a long-lived stag — see that a sixth of a whole as goes in.

Next, having mixed this into the pounded meal, you must immediately sift every last granule through closely-meshed strainers;

Add twelve narcissus bulbs without the rind^[4] (which a vigorous right-hand should grind on clean marble) and let gum along with Tuscan seed^[5] weigh one-sixth of an as;^[6]

An to it let there go nine times as much honey.^[7]

Any woman who applies this treatment to her face will gleam more smoothly than her own mirror.”

Ovid's *Medicamina* 51-100

Pliny the Elder wrote the *Natural History*, a monumental work made up of 37 books, in the first century CE. Being the ancient counterpart to a modern-day encyclopedia, *Natural History* covers a wide variety of topics, from astronomy to zoology to geography. Pliny was essentially aiming to compile all his knowledge on the natural world (or what he considered to be the natural world) into one work. Though not all the information Pliny includes is completely accurate or factual, he even wrote about things like the Cynocephali (people with dog heads), scattered throughout his work are references to cosmetics that are very useful. Because of the purpose of his work and writing style, Pliny offers a more informational view of cosmetic use than his contemporaries and thus provides a lot of knowledge about which ingredients were used and the process of making them. However, this does not mean that some of his passing remarks about makeup are not tainted by the bias that pervaded male perceptions of female activities in the ancient world.

In most cases, when Pliny mentions an ingredient that can be used as a cosmetic, it is used to improve the appearance of the skin. As noted above, unblemished and bright skin was considered highly beautiful in Rome, and the many references in *Natural History* certainly underscore the aim to improve the appearance of one's skin. What follows are two excerpts from book 28, one discussing how the milk of a donkey served to maintain luminous skin and the other outlining how to use pig's fat for the same purpose:

It is generally believed that asses' milk effaces wrinkles in the face, renders the skin more delicate, and preserves its whiteness: and it is a well-known fact, that some women are in the habit of washing their face with it seven hundred times daily, strictly observing that number.^[8] Poppæa, the wife of the Emperor Nero, was the first to practise this; indeed, she had sitting-baths, prepared solely with asses' milk, for which purpose whole troops of she-asses used to attend her on her journeys. The grease of a sow that has never given birth, is the most useful of all cosmetics for the skin of females; but in all cases, hogs' lard is good for the cure of itch-scab, mixed with pitch^[9] and beef-suet^[10] in the proportion of one-third, the whole being made lukewarm for the purpose. Fresh hogs' lard, applied as a pessary,^[11] imparts nutriment to the infant in the womb, and prevents abortion. Mixed with white lead or litharge,^[12] it restores scars to their natural colour; and, in combination with sulphur, it rectifies malformed nails.^[13] It prevents the hair also from falling off; and, applied with a quarter of a nutgall, it heals ulcers upon the head in females.^[14] When well smoked, it strengthens the eyelashes.

Natural History 28

Apparently people also used salt to achieve glossier skin, here is a section from book 31 which reviews different types of salt and their benefits:

Of the various kinds of sea-salt, the most esteemed is that of Salamis, in Cyprus; and of the lake-salts, that of Tarentum,^[15] and the salt known as Tattæan salt, which comes from Phrygia:^[16] these last two are also good for the eyes. That of Cappadocia,^[17] which is imported in small cubes, imparts a fine colour, it is said, to the skin; but, for effacing wrinkles, that which we have already spoken of as the salt of Citium is the best:^[18] hence it is that, in combination with gith, it is used by females as a liniment for the abdomen after childbirth.

Natural History 31

The next few excerpts not only emphasize the ultimate goal to achieve shiny and smooth skin and the rather outlandish things people would apply on it in order to achieve this goal, but also serve to show how closely cosmetics were associated with remedies for various medical conditions. What Pliny would often do was discuss one ingredient, such as oyster shells and antimony (book 33), and then survey all the things that it could be used for, jumping back and forth between purely aesthetic uses and more scientific ones. The second source gives an in-depth description of the complex procedure used to make tablets of antimony.

Calcined oyster-shells, mixed with honey, cure affections of the uvula and of the tonsillary glands: they are similarly used for imposthumes of the parotid glands, inflamed tumours, and hardening of the breasts. Applied with water, these ashes are good for

ulcerations of the head, and impart a plumpness to the skin in females. They are sprinkled, too, upon burns, and are highly esteemed as a toothpaste. Applied with vinegar, they are good for the removal of prurigo and of pitted eruptions.^[19]

Natural History 32

Stimmi is possessed of certain astringent and refrigerative properties, its principal use, in medicine, being for the eyes.^[20] Hence it is that most persons call it “platyophthalmon,”^[21] it being extensively employed in the calliblepharie^[22] preparations of females, for the purpose of dilating the eyes ... The method of preparing it, is to burn it, enclosed in a coat of cow-dung, in a furnace; once that is done, it is quenched with woman’s milk, and pounded with rain-water in a mortar. While this is happening, the thick and turbid part is poured off from time to time into a copper vessel, and purified with nitre. The lees of it, which are rejected, are recognized by their being full of lead and falling to the bottom. The vessel into which the turbid part has been poured off, is then covered with a linen cloth and left untouched for a night; the portion that lies upon the surface being poured off the following day, or else removed with a sponge. The part that has fallen to the bottom of the vessel is regarded as the choicest part, and is left, covered with a linen cloth, to dry in the sun, but not to become parched. This done, it is again pounded in a mortar, and then divided into tablets. But the main thing of all is, to observe such a degree of nicety in heating it, as not to let it become lead. Some people, when preparing it on the fire, use grease instead of dung. Others, again, bruise it in water and then pass it through a triple strainer of linen cloth; after which, they reject the lees, and pour off the remainder of the liquid, collecting all that is deposited at the bottom, and using it as an ingredient in plasters and eye-salves.

Natural History 33

The last source by Pliny from book 34 discusses how to make tablets of white lead which women used to whiten their skin. The Romans were aware of the poisonous properties of lead yet, like many other cultures, did not refrain from using it in the name of beauty.

Psimithium, which is also known as ceruse, is another production of the lead-works.^[23] The most esteemed comes from Rhodes.^[24] It is made from very fine shavings of lead, placed over a vessel filled with the strongest vinegar; by which means the shavings become dissolved. That which falls into the vinegar is first dried, and then pounded and sifted, after which it is again mixed with vinegar, and is then divided into tablets and dried in the sun, during summer. It is also made in another way; the lead is thrown into jars filled with vinegar, which are kept closed for ten days; the sort of mould that forms upon the surface is then scraped off, and the lead is again put into the vinegar, until the whole of the metal is consumed. The part that has been scraped off is triturated and sifted, and then melted in shallow vessels, being stirred with ladles, until the substance becomes red, and assumes the appearance of sandarach.^[25] It is then washed with fresh water, until all the cloudy impurities have disappeared, after which it is dried as before, and divided into tablets. Its properties are the same as those of the substances above mentioned. It is, however, the mildest of all the preparations of lead; in addition to which, it is also used by females to whiten the complexion. It is, however, like scum of silver, a deadly poison.^[26]

Natural History 34

USING COSMETICS ‘PROPERLY’

A poem written by Ovid in 2 CE has a similarly instructional function, yet the three books were targeted to different audiences. The first two are intended to teach men the ways of love and romance, but the one of interest to this topic is the third book, which aims to teach women how to secure a man’s love. The entire poem is based on a very simplified understanding of gender relations and how women should behave, though this is to be expected from an ancient source. In his own words taken from the opening of the poem: “Woman is soft, and of a tender heart, apt to receive and to retain love’s dart; Man has a breast robust, and more secure, it wounds him not so deep, nor hits so sure.” In this poem, Ovid goes over various ways to improve one’s looks, touching on subjects like fashion and clothing, hairstyles, and personal hygiene.

As discussed above, Ovid was more open to the use of makeup by women, and in this work as well he specifies that women should take care to maintain their physical appearance in order to be presentable and acceptable to men in their society. The mildly sexist message of the poem is frustrating to read in a modern context, because Ovid essentially is saying women were only viable partners for men if they were physically attractive. He also reinforces the notion that women were completely unattractive once they showed signs of aging, and that youthful and clear skin was to be strived for: “Alas, how soon a clear complexion fades! How soon a

wrinkled skin plump flesh invades!” He begins by assuring his reader that natural beauty is a gift not bestowed to many, and that it should be cultivated and not neglected.

And, first, we speak of dress. The well-cared for vine

Produces plumpest grapes, and richest wine;

And plenteous crops of golden grain are found,

Alone, to grace uncultivated ground.

Beauty’s the gift of gods, women’s pride!

Yet to how many is that gift denied?

Art helps a face; a face, although divinely lovely,

May quickly fade because of necessary care.

In ancient days, if women slighted dress,

Then men were ruder too, and liked it less.

Ovid, *Ars Amatoria* 3.101-108



Cupid holds a mirror for Venus in a fresco from Ostia, Rome’s port. Image by Robert Decker.

Next, Ovid reminds us of the delicate line women walked between needing to maintain their appearance but not seeming *too* obsessed with how they look, by saying they should take care not to weigh themselves down with overly lavish clothing and accessories. He also explains a rule of beauty that is still relevant today: that what flatters one woman may not flatter another, and informs his reader that she should choose hairstyles that suit her features:

Let not the nymph with pendants load her ear,

Nor in embroidery, or brocade, appear;

Too rich a dress may sometimes suppress desire,

And cleanliness rouse love’s fire more,

The hair arranged, may gain or lose a grace,

And much become or misbecome the face.

What suits your features ask your mirror.

For no one rule is fixed for head attire,

A face too long should part and flat the hair.

Ovid, *Ars Amatoria* 3.129-137

Next the poem takes a misogynistic turn as Ovid begins to discuss how women should hide the fact that they used cosmetics to improve their appearance. Even though they had to use makeup to be deemed suitable enough to marry, it was basically disgusting to see the evidence of their ‘deceit’. Ovid advises readers to apply makeup while men think they are sleeping so as to avoid them

seeing the vile truth behind a woman's appearance. The contradictory nature of cosmetics reveals itself once again by Ovid insisting their application is an offensive sight yet also consistently referring to it as an art.

I need not warn you of too powerful smells,
Which sometimes health or kindly heat expels;
Nor from your tender legs to pluck with care
The casual growth of all unseemly hair.^[27]
Though not to nymphs of Caucasus^[28] I sing,
Nor such who taste remote the Mysian^[29] spring
Yet let me warn you that through no neglect
You let your teeth disclose the least defect.
You know the use of white to make you fair,
And how with red lost colour to repair;
Imperfect eyebrows you by art can mend,
And skin, when wanting, o'er a scar extend;
Nor need the fair one be asham'd, who tries
By art to add new lustre to her eyes.

A little book I've made, but with great care,
How to preserve the face, and how repair.
In that, the nymphs by time or chance annoy'd,
May see what pains to please 'em I've employ'd,
But still beware that from your lover's eye
You keep conceal'd the med'cines you apply:
Tho' art assists, yet must that art be hid,
Lest whom it would invite it should forbid.
Who would not take offence to see a face
All daub'd and dripping with the melted grease?
And tho' your unguents bear th' Athenian name,
The wool's unsav'ry scent is still the same.
Try not marrow^[30] of stags, nor your pomades,
Nor clean your furry teeth when men are by;
For many things, when done, afford delight,
Which yet, while doing, may offend the sight.

Ovid Continues...

While we think you sleep, repair your face,
Locked away from observers, in some secret place;
Add the last hand before you show yourselves ,
Why does your lover need to know of your need of art?
For many things when most concealed are best,
And few of strict enquiry bear the test.

Ovid, *Ars Amatoria* 3.193-218, 225-230

Livy was a Roman historian who wrote in the 1st century BCE and the next two sources are from his only surviving work, *From the Founding of Rome*. His comments are significantly more restrained, though they do make some generalizations about sex and gender. In both sources Livy argues that things like adornment, fashion, and makeup were the domains of women, whereas war and politics were the realms of men. Sources like these remind us that though men treated women who wore makeup extremely disrespectfully there was nonetheless an unspoken expectation that they *would* wear makeup in order to look nice.

Elegance, grooming, a fine appearance—these are the women’s insignia. These are their pride and joy. This is what your ancestors called ‘woman’s embellishment.

No offices, no priesthoods, no triumphs, no decorations, no gifts, no spoils of war can come to them; elegance of appearance, adornment, apparel —these are the woman’s medals; in these they rejoice and take delight; these our ancestors called the woman’s world.

Livy, *From the Founding of Rome* 34.7-8

NEGATIVE VIEWS OF FEMALE COSMETICS

For example, in this quote from book 11 of Pliny the Elder’s *Natural History*, some of the condescension with which some men regarded the use of makeup is apparent. Notice the contrast between what eyelashes are *supposed* to be for and what women do with them:

Men have eyelashes on the eyelids on either side; and women even make it their daily care to stain them; so ardent are they in the pursuit of beauty, that they must even colour their very eyes. It was with another view, however, that Nature had provided the hair of the eyelids — they were to have acted, so to say, as a kind of rampart for the protection of the sight, and as an advanced defence against the approach of insects or other objects which might accidentally come in their way.

Pliny the Elder, *Natural History* 11

As you can see from the above, two major sources for the use of cosmetics in ancient Rome are Pliny’s *Natural History* and Ovid’s *Medicamina*, which coincidentally also provide the two slightly more positive reviews of their use. Besides them, no other author made an effort to write a work about this topic, though fleeting remarks about makeup and beautification are still sprinkled throughout their works. Many of these comments are somewhat cruel jokes made at someone’s expense, ridiculing both men and women for allegedly using cosmetics in an attempt to improve their appearance. Some of the sources are more general remarks about standards of beauty or just comments that confirm that cosmetics were indeed widely used by women, and were sometimes considered to be a part of traditionally female pursuits.

Horace, a poet who also wrote under Augustus, represents the view of cosmetics as deceitful and not aligning with upstanding morals. In the first source he defines a ‘decent’ woman as one who does not attempt to look prettier, even though he and his contemporaries attacked women for being ‘ugly’:

Let her be fair, and straight, and so far decent as not to appear desirous of seeming fairer than nature has made her.

Horace, *Sat.* 1.2.123

This next source, also by Horace, shows that often in male eyes using makeup was synonymous with a woman being sexually depraved. Despite the hostility he and others write with, sources like these can still be somewhat useful to glean information about what ingredients women used in cosmetics. In this case, crocodile dung as blush. Though it is safe to assume Horace picked the most gross ingredient to mock this woman and that it was not actually widely used by women:

What a sweat and what a nasty smell comes from her withered limbs when, finding my penis limp, she presses on to satisfy her wild lust, her chalk makeup grows damp, and, along with the rosy colour produced from crocodiles’ dung, begins to run, and now in her animal heat she breaks the thongs of the bedstead and its canopy!

Horace, *Epode* 12

The next sources are from two satirical poets, Juvenal and Martial, who were both writing in the 1st century CE. Martial tended to write shorter epigrams often packed with insults towards specific people, yet both authors are significantly nastier than their contemporaries.

In the source by Juvenal he takes the negative reputation of cosmetics as evidence of moral corruption a step further by saying that a woman will wear greasy makeup in the presence her husband but take it all off for her lover. The source ends by him comparing a woman’s face to an actual ulcer.

But earlier in the process

She presents a sight as funny as it’s appalling,

Her features lost under a damp bread face-pack,
Or greasy with vanishing-cream that clings to her husband's
Lips when the poor man kisses her — though it's all
Wiped off for her lover. She takes no trouble about
The way she looks at home: those imported Indian^[31]
Scents and lotions she buys with a lover in mind.
First one layer, then the next: at last the contours emerge
Till she's almost recognizable. Now she freshens
Her complexion with asses' milk. (If her husband's posted
To the godforsaken North, a herd of she-asses
Will travel with them.) But all these medicaments
And various treatments — not least the damp bread-poultice —
Make you wonder what's underneath, a face or an ulcer.”
Juvenal, *Satire* 6.460-473

BODY MAKEUP AND PHYSICAL BEAUTY

The sources from Martial focus on how hideous women were considered to be in a natural state. He ridicules women for having bodies that are not in their physical prime, calling them out for having things such as stretch marks on their belly (things that would be expected after having borne children), like he does with a woman named Polla in the first source. The language he uses in the following sources can be quite offensive and his views are, on the whole, incredibly sexist. These sources demonstrate how men used women's physical appearance as a way to attack them, and how women perhaps used cosmetics as a way to avoid these insults. They also stress that pale and smooth skin was the ideal in Rome, as wrinkles and marks on the skin are consistently brought up by Martial in his abrasive remarks.

You try to hide your belly's wrinkles with bean-meal,^[32] Polla, but you smear your stomach, not my lips. Better that the blemish, perhaps a trifling one, be honestly shown. Trouble concealed is believed to be greater than it is.

Martial 3.42

This brief excerpt makes fun of a woman named Lycoris for going to Tibur (modern day Tivoli) with the hopes of whitening her skin and instead returning with even darker skin:

Hearing that the ivory of an ancient tusk turns to white in the suns of Tibur, dusky Lycoris went to Hercules' hills. How potent is the air of lofty Tibur! In a short time she returned black.

(Loeb) 7.13:

Here Martial degrades a woman named Saufeia for not wanting to bathe with him (personally, I wouldn't want to take a bath with Martial either), and sees this as evidence that she is hiding a revolting body from him. There truly is no way to win with Martial, he believes this means Saufeia is either incredibly ugly or is overly weak and insecure.

You want to be fucked, Saufeia, and you don't want to take a bath with me. I suspect there's something here very bad indeed. Either your breasts hang from your bosom like rags, or you're afraid of betraying your belly's furrows in the nude, or your split groin yawns with a bottomless cavern, or something protrudes from the mouth of your vagina. Oh, but there's nothing like that, I'm sure, you are most beautiful in the nude. If that's true, Saufeia, you have a worse blemish: you're a prude.

Martial 3.72

REFLECT

Martial uses angry language in the above section when he is denied something he believes that Saufeia owes him. How does Martial lashing out reflect contemporary ideas of men being owed sex?

This last source, which is especially vicious, demonstrates how ancient authors consistently equated cosmetics with deceit. Martial is comparing the odour of a woman, Thais, to various foul-smelling things to underscore how bad he thought she smelt. He then says she hides her true smell behind layers of cosmetics as one of her many tricks (though if she really smelt as bad as he says it seems it would be almost impossible to cover up).

Thais smells worse than the veteran crock of a stingy fuller,^[33] recently broken in the middle of the road, or a billy goat fresh from his armours, or a lion's mouth, or a hide from beyond Tiber torn from a dog, or chicken rotting in an aborted egg, or a jar polluted with putrid garum. In order to exchange this stench for a different odor, whenever she takes off her clothes to get into the bath, the crafty lady is green with depilatory or lurks under a lining of chalk and vinegar, or is coated with three or four layers of thick bean meal. A thousand tricks, and she thinks she's safe. But when all's done, Thais smells of Thais.

Martial 6.93

Makeup and the cultivation of physical beauty in ancient Rome seemed to be a lose-lose situation for women. Perhaps if our sources weren't exclusively created by male authors, the overwhelming mysogyny evident in our sources may not have been so ubiquitous. Regardless, it seems _____

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Media Attributions

- 800px-Ostia_antica-19

1. Bitter vetch is a plant in the legume family. It was likely used as a thickener in creams and also had emollient properties. ↩
2. Eggs were often included in ancient beauty recipes and are still an ingredient in many cosmetics because of their various benefits for the skin. Egg whites tighten the skin and improve circulation while egg yolks add moisture. ↩
3. A unit of measurement equivalent to 11.6 ounces. ↩
4. Narcissus bulbs were commonly used to treat various skin ailments. Other sources mention that when combined with honey they were also useful for treating burns, sores, and wounds. ↩
5. Most likely a type of wheat from which oil is extracted and used in cosmetics for its emollient qualities. ↩
6. A Roman coin. ↩
7. Honey has a large variety of benefits when used on the skin and is a popular ingredient in modern cosmetics and DIY skin treatments. Honey is naturally anti-bacterial, thus fights blemishes, it also brightens and smooths skin creating a more glowing complexion. ↩
8. This cannot be true. Pliny either made a mistake or was deluded enough to think women had the time and effort to wash their faces 700 times a day with donkey milk. ↩
9. A sticky, dark-coloured substance similar to resin. ↩
10. Suet is a type of fat that is hard and white. ↩
11. A pessary would be inserted vaginally. ↩
12. Lead monoxide. ↩
13. Notice that a primary aim was always to diminish the appearance of scars and other unbecoming marks on the skin. ↩
14. A nutgall, also known as just a gall, is an abnormal growth that forms in trees (usually oak trees). ↩
15. A city in southern Italy, modern Tarento. ↩
16. Phrygia was a kingdom in what is now Turkey. ↩
17. A region in Turkey. ↩
18. Citium (or Kition) was a city on the island of Cyprus. ↩

19. Prurigo is a skin ailment that causes intense itching. 'Pituitous' is an adjective now rarely used, but in this case refers to eruptions having to do with an excess of mucus or phlegm. ↩
20. 'Stimmi' here means antimony, which is a chemical element better known by its Arabic name, kohl. It has a metallic grey colour and was frequently used in both cosmetics and medicine in the ancient world. ↩
21. The Greek word 'Platyophthalmon' means 'eye-dilating'. As is common in many cultures, it seems women wanted to achieve bigger and wider looking eyes. As Pliny says, antimony had astringent properties and so perhaps was applied to the eyelids in order to make the skin contract and literally widen the eyes. ↩
22. The word 'calliblepharie' comes from the Latin word 'calliblepharum' which referred to cosmetics or dyes for the eyebrows. ↩
23. 'Psimithium' and 'ceruse' are two archaic terms for white lead. ↩
24. A Greek island. ↩
25. Sandarach is a resin that can be obtained from a certain kind of African tree. ↩
26. The ancients were fully aware of the poisonous properties of lead. ↩
27. The Romans were big on hair-removal. ↩
28. Caucasus is a mountainous area in Eurasia between the Caspian and the Black Seas. ↩
29. Mysia was an area in ancient Asia Minor ↩
30. Bone marrow was used in both cosmetic and medicinal mixtures. ↩
31. Juvenal emphasizes the use of expensive and imported cosmetics here to stress the woman's corrupted morals. ↩
32. A paste made of beans, used to treat wrinkles. ↩
33. Fullers cleaned clothing using human urine, thus making their work very smelly indeed. ↩

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

3: Entertainers

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3.1: Actors and stage performers

Actors and Stage Performers



Learning Objectives

This section tells you about

- the social and legal situations of most actors
- the types of actors in Rome
- elite perspectives on actors getting 'beyond their station' and acting in ways that they did not approve of

Like gladiators and charioteers – and all those who were perceived as selling their bodies – actors were *infamis* (except for those who acted in Atellan farce) and while they might acquire great fame and wealth, had a very low status in the Roman hierarchy. The Emperor Augustus took action against some actors who it was felt were getting above their status.

Augustus was so very strict about curbing the shocking behaviour of actors, that when he learned that Stephanio, an actor in the *fabula togata*,^[1] was waited on by a *matrona* with hair cut short to look like a boy, he had him whipped with rods through the three theatres and then banished him. Hylas, a pantomimic actor, was publicly lashed in the atrium of his own house, at the complaint of a praetor, and Pylades^[2] was expelled from the city and from Italy as well, because by pointing at a spectator who was hissing at him with his finger he turned all eyes upon him.

Suetonius, *Augustus* 14

Mime was one of the few areas of drama where women could appear on stage as something other than extras or background (most women's roles were played by men) and mime actresses had at least one association in Rome, the *Sociae Mimae*, as we know from an undated inscription from Rome (CIL 6.10109; the same volume has other inscriptions relating to various mime actresses). They also performed across the empire, as can be seen in the following extract from a 2nd century CE novel, the *Golden Ass*.^[3]

The fateful day finally came and I was led to the amphitheatre's outer wall by an enthusiastic and crowded procession. The entertainment began with actor's comic mimes, while I enjoyed myself by the gate browsing the rich and juicy grass growing at the entrance, and now and then refreshing my eyes with a glance at the show through the open gate. There were boys and girls in the prime of youth, exceptional for their fresh beauty, splendid costumes, and graceful movements, ready to perform the Pyrrhic^[4] dance. They moved in decorous unwavering order, now weaving in and out in a whirling circle, now linking hands in a slanting chain, now in wedges forming a hollow square, now separating into distinct troops. When the trumpet's final note unwove the knotted complexities of their intricate motion, the curtain was raised, the screens folded back, and the stage setting appeared.

There stood a mountain of wood, built with noble skill to resemble that illustrious Mount Ida that Homer sang of.^[5] It was planted with living trees and bushes, and from its summit a stream of water flowed from a fountain made by the designer's own hand. A handful of goats were cropping the grass and a youth, beautifully dressed in the manner of Paris, as Phrygian shepherd, an Asiatic robe flowing over his shoulders, a gold tiara on his brow, pretended to be tending the flock. Then a shining lad appeared, naked except for a cloak worn on his left shoulder, attracting all gazes with his blond hair, with little gold wings on either side projecting from his curls and a wand, proclaiming him as Mercury. He danced forward bearing in his right hand an apple covered in gold leaf, and offered it to the actor playing Paris. Then, relaying Jupiter's instructions for the action to follow, he nodded, swiftly and gracefully retraced his steps, and vanished. Next arrived a respectable looking girl dressed as the goddess Juno, a pure white diadem on her brow and a sceptre in her hand.^[6] Then on came another you'd have recognised as Minerva, a shining helm crowned with an olive wreath on her head, holding a shield and brandishing a spear as if off to battle.^[7] Then another girl made her entrance, a real beauty with an ambrosial complexion, playing Venus, as Venus looked before marriage. Her exquisite naked form was bare except for a piece of silken gauze with which she veiled her sweet charms. An inquisitive little breeze kept blowing this veil aside in wanton playfulness so that it lifted now to show her ripening bud, or now pressed madly against her, clinging tightly, smoothly delineating her voluptuous limbs. The goddess' very colouring offered interest to the eye, her body the white of heaven from which she came, her veil the cerulean blue of the sea from which she rose.

Each of the girls who played a goddess was accompanied by attendants; Juno by two lads from the acting troop, depicting Castor and Pollux, heads capped with helmets shaped like halves of the egg they came from, topped by stars to signify the Twins, their constellation. To the sound of an Ionian flute piping melodies, the goddess advanced with calm unpretentious steps, and with graceful gestures promised Paris rule over all Asia if he granted her the prize for beauty. The girl whose weapons denoted Minerva was guarded by two boys, depicting Terror and Fear, armour-bearers to the war-goddess, leaping forward with drawn swords. Behind them a piper played a battle tune in the Dorian^[8] mode, a deep droning intermingled with shrill screeches, stirring them to energetic dance. Minerva tossed her head, glared threateningly, and informed Paris in swift and abrupt gestures that should he grant her victory in the beauty contest then with her assistance he would be renowned for his bravery and his triumphs in war.

Then came Venus, to the audience's loud applause, taking her place gracefully at centre-stage, sweetly smiling and ringed by a host of happy little boys, so chubby and milky-white you'd have thought them real cupids flown down from heaven or in from the sea. With little wings and archery sets and all the rest they truly fitted the part, lighting their mistress' way with glowing torches as if they were off to a wedding feast. Next a crowd of beautiful girls streamed in, the most graceful of Graces, the loveliest of Hours, scattering garlands and loose flowers in tribute to their goddess, paying honour to the queen of all pleasure with the blossoms of spring.

Now flutes of many notes played Lydian tunes in sweet harmony, and as their soft melodies charmed the hearts of the audience, Venus began a gentle dance, with slow hesitant steps and sinuously swaying body and head, advancing with delicate movements to the sweet sound of the flutes. Letting fly passionate or sharp and menacing glances, she often seemed to be dancing by means of her eyelids alone. As soon as she reached the judge, Paris, she promised with transparent gestures, that if he preferred her above the other two goddesses she would grant him a bride of marvellous beauty, the very image of herself. At this the Phrygian youth, gladly handed her the golden apple, in token of yielding her the victory.

Apuleius, *The Golden Ass* Book 10, (Adapted translation from [A.S. Kline](#))

There were other female performers including dancers (the Romans were extremely fond of dance and it was a far more important theatrical genre to them than to many modern societies). The poet Martial wrote the following on an unnamed dancer from Cadiz:

She quivers so sexily, she makes her so charmingly available, that she would make a masturbator even out of Hippolytus.^[9]

Martial, *Epigrams* 14.203



He also wrote the following, possibly about the same dancer:

Telethusa, skilled in displaying attractive gestures to the sound of her Spanish castanets, and in dancing the beats of Cadiz; Telethusa, capable of exciting the decrepit Pelias, and of moving the husband of Hecuba at the tomb of Hector;^[10] Telethusa inflames and tortures her former master. He sold her a slave, he now buys her back a mistress.

Martial, *Epigrams* 14.204

This [link](#) takes you to an inscription for a female performer who died at 14; it gives you some idea of their training and skill. However, like all performers they were frequently slaves (as you can see from above) and had no choice in their performing, and were always vulnerable to assaults and abuse.

Mime: pantomime

Pantomime, however, was focused on star male performers. It was introduced to Rome by the Emperor Augustus' freedman Pylades in 22 BCE and became immediately popular:

Augustus allowed the praetors who wanted to do so to spend three times as much on the public festivals as the amount granted them from the treasury. Thus, even if some people were annoyed at the strictness of his other regulations,^[11] this action and his restoration of one Pylades, a mime, who had been exiled on account of sedition, ensured they remembered them no longer. This is why Pylades is said to have replied very cleverly, when the emperor rebuked him for having quarrelled with Bathyllus, a fellow-artist, and a favourite of Maecenas: "It is to your advantage, Caesar, that the people should devote their spare time to us."

Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 54.17

The popularity of mimes gave them the ability to also voice attacks on the emperor and go unscathed at times:

How grossly Tiberius was in the habit of abusing women even of high birth is very clearly shown by the death of a certain Mallonia. When she was brought to his bed and refused most vigorously to submit to his lust, he turned her over to the informers, and even when she was on trial he did not cease to call out and ask her "whether she was sorry"; so that finally she left the court and went home, where she stabbed herself, openly upbraiding the ugly old man for his obscenity. Hence a stigma put upon him at the next plays in an Atellan farce was received with great applause and became a saying, that "the old goat^[12] was licking the does."

Suetonius, *Tiberius* 45.4

Elite Romans were fans of mime, as much as the ordinary people. However, other Romans were deeply offended at mime and the effect that such performers had on their audience.

Can you find any woman that's worthy of you under our porticoes? Does any seat at the theatre hold one you could take from there and love with confidence? When sinuous Bathyllus^[13] dances his pantomime Leda,^[14] Tucia wets herself and Apula cries out as if

she were making love with sharp tedious cries. Thymele watches carefullt: naive Thymele learns something.

Juvena,l *Satire* 6^[15] (Translated by A. S. Kline)

However, such criticism was ignored by most, including wealthy Romans who owned mimes and hired them out for huge profits. Some of these also used them in their house for private entertainment – one such was Numidia Quadratilla, a very wealthy lady of the late 1st century CE:

Numidia Quadratilla has died, having almost reached the age of eighty. Up until her last illness she enjoyed uninterrupted good health, and was unusually strong and robust for a woman. She has left a very sensible will, having left two-thirds of her estate to her grandson, and the rest to her grand-daughter. The young lady I know very slightly, but the grandson is one of my closest friends. He is a remarkable young man, and his merit entitles him to the affection of a relation, even where his blood does not. Notwithstanding his remarkable attractiveness he escaped all malicious gossip both as a boy and a youth: he was a husband at twenty-four, and would have been a father if fate had not disappointed his hopes. He lived in close quarters with his luxury-loving grandmother, but was very scrupulous about his own behaviour, although he respected her. She kept a company of pantomimes and was an encourager of this class of people to a degree not appropriate for one of her gender and social status. But Quadratus was never at these entertainments whether she gave them in the theatre or in her own house; nor, indeed, did she require him to be present. I once heard her say, when she was recommending to me the supervision of her grandson's studies, that it was her custom, in order to pass away some of those unemployed hours with which female life abounds to amuse herself with playing at draughts or watching her pantomimes, but that whenever she engaged in either of those amusements she always sent away her grandson to his studies: she appeared to me to act in this way as much out of reverence for the youth as from affection. I was a good deal surprised, as I am sure you will be too, at what he told me the last time the priestly games were on.^[16] As we were coming out of the theatre together, where we had been entertained with a show of these pantomimes, "Do you know," said he, "to-day is the first time I ever saw my grandmother's freedman dance?" Such was the grandson's speech! While a set of men of a far different stamp, in order to do honour to Quadratilla (I am ashamed to call it honour), were running up and down the theatre, pretending to be struck with the utmost admiration and rapture at the performances of those pantomimes and then imitating in musical chant the expression and manner of their lady patroness. But now all the reward they have got, in return for their theatrical performances, is just a few small legacies, which they have the mortification to receive from an heir who was never so much as present at these shows.

Pliny the Younger, *Letters* 7.24

The popularity of mime and its star system did give immense power to the actors, and although you might be able to expel them for a while no emperor would risk cutting the Romans (who were prone to rioting) off from one of their most loved forms of entertainment. Attempts to curb their power and income often went badly as in the great mime riots of 14/15 and 23 CE, when Tiberius tried to cut their payments.

That year [14 CE] saw a new form of religious ritual with the addition of a new college of Priests of Augustus, which was patterned on the ancient Titian brotherhood founded by Titus Tatius^[17] to safeguard the Sabine rites. Twenty-one members were drawn by lot from the leading Roman houses and Tiberius, Drusus, Claudius, and Germanicus were added.^[18] The *LudiAugustales*, celebrated for the first time, were marred by a disturbance caused by the rivalry of the mime actors. Augustus had allowed these theatrical shows to please Maecenas, who was deeply in love with Bathyllus. He himself also had no personal dislike for amusements of this type,^[19] and considered it a graceful act to take part in the pleasures of the crowd. Tiberius had other tendencies, but as yet he lacked the courage to force into the ways of austerity a nation which had been indulged for so many years.^[20]

Tacitus, *Annales* 1.54

Another historian, a Greek, adds some more details, which lets us know that this was about pay:

Meanwhile the people rioted, because at the *Ludi Augustales* one of the actors would not enter the theatre for the regular pay and they did not stop rioting until the tribunes of the plebs convened the senate that very day and begged it to permit them to spend more than the legal amount.

Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 56.47.2

Then next year saw more riots on a larger scale; it appears Tiberius this time cut the fee for mimes (Suetonius, Tiberius 34.1), while his son Drusus (then around 30) was extremely friendly with them:

While Tiberius was carrying out these measures, Drusus performed the duties pertaining to the consulship equally with his colleague [Tiberius], just as any ordinary citizen might have done; and when he was left heir to someone's estate, he assisted in carrying out the body.^[21] Yet he was so given to violent anger that he hit a distinguished equestrian and for this exploit received the nickname of Castor. 10 And he was becoming so heavy a drinker, that one night, when he was forced to lend aid with the Praetorian Guard to some people whose property was on fire and they called for water, he gave the order: "Serve it to them hot." He was so friendly with the actors, that this class created a riot and could not be brought to order even by the laws that Tiberius had introduced for regulating them.

Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 57.14.9-10

These are the laws that are being referred to above:

The disorderliness of the stage, which had become apparent the year before, now broke out on a more serious scale. In addition to casualties among the people, several soldiers and a centurion were killed, and an officer of the Praetorian Guards wounded, in the attempt to repress the insults levelled at the magistracy and the dissension of the crowd. The riot was discussed in the Senate and it was suggested that the praetors should be given the authority to punish actors. Haterius Agrippa, a tribune of the plebs, vetoed this proposal and was attacked in a speech by Asinius Gallus. Tiberius said nothing, allowing the Senate to have this simulacrum of liberty. Still the veto held good, for the deified Augustus had once answered a question by saying that actors were immune from the whip,^[22] and it would be blasphemy for Tiberius to now do the opposite of what he had said. They passed a great number of laws to limit the expenditure on entertainments and to curb the extravagance of the fans. The most striking were: that no senator was to enter the houses of pantomime actors; that, if they came out into public, Roman equestrians were not to gather around them, nor were their performances to be followed except in the theatre; while the praetors were to be authorized to punish any disorder among the spectators with exile.

Tacitus, *Annales* 1.77

As you can see from the above, despite their low legal status it was clear that mimes were being treated like elite Romans in the Senate, who were also gathered around as they went to the Senate, and that Senators were going to their houses instead of – as was the norm – them coming to their houses and showing respect to them.

These laws did not work and in 23 CE (the same year Drusus died) the riots broke out once more:

Next, after various and generally ineffective complaints from the praetors, Tiberius at last brought up the question of the effrontery of the *histriones*.^[23] "They were frequently the instigators of sedition against the state and of depravity in private houses; the old Oscan farce, the trivial delight of the crowd, had come to such a pitch of indecency and power that it needed the authority of the Senate to check it." The *histriones* were then expelled from Italy.^[24]

Tacitus, *Annales* 4.14

It was not just the actors who were expelled, but the leaders of their factions, that is their fan clubs, which were very dedicated and willing to take to violence in support of their stars:

He took great pains to prevent disturbances by the people and punished those that occurred very, very severely. When a quarrel in the theatre ended in bloodshed, he banished the leaders of the factions, as well as the actors who were the cause of the trouble – and no entreaties of the people could ever induce him to recall them.

Suetonius, *Tiberius* 37.2

Bibliography and Further Reading:

The ancient author Lucian is one of the few ancient authors to write about the dance, and his work in it can be found [here](#).

Fernández, Zoa Alonso. 2015. "Docta saltatrix: Body Knowledge, Culture, and Corporeal Discourse in Female Roman Dance." *Phoenix*, 69: 304-333.

Slater, W. 1994. Pantomime Riots. *Classical Antiquity*, 13: 120-144.

Webb, Ruth. 2008. *Demons and Dancers: Performance in Late Antiquity*. Cambridge, UK.

1. A type of drama where the actors wore Roman, rather than Greek, dress. ↩

2. He was a freedman of Augustus and one of those who introduced pantomime to the Romans; he focused on tragic pantomime. He attacked the audience on other occasions: one when he was acting out the madness of Hercules the audience hissed at him for not dancing properly; he threw off his mask and screamed “idiots! I am acting the role of a madman!” His exile was in 18 BCE – he was back within a year. ↩
3. The speaker is the hero of the novel who has been turned into a donkey due to an unfortunate incident with magic. ↩
4. A type of war dance. ↩
5. The reference and the following are to mythical events that preceeded the Trojan War and which are now being staged as a dance. Paris, one of the sons of the King of Troy, was a shepherd on the mountain and was picked to adjudicate a competition between three goddesses: Juno, Minerva, and Venus. He picked Venus because she offered him Helen of Troy.. ↩
6. Because she symbolized power and queenship. ↩
7. Minerva was a Roman goddess often assimilated to the Greek war goddess, Athena. ↩
8. Dorian here is an allusion to the war like people of Sparta, an ancient Greek power that was now run as a bit of tourist destination for Romans and others. ↩
9. Hippolytus is a mythical Greek hero who had an almost fanatical commitment to chastity. ↩
10. Priam, the elderly king of Troy. ↩
11. Augustus pushed through a great deal of moral legislation as emperor. ↩
12. Tiberius had retired to the island of Capri,; the Latin for goat is caper, hence the double meaning. ↩
13. One of Augustan artists who introduced pantomime to Rome; he appears to have focused on comic pantomime and rather sexy version of myths. ↩
14. A pantomime based on the myth of Leda and the swan. ↩
15. This is a satire against women in which Juvenal basically accuses them of all the evils that a Roman could imagine. And that was quite a few. ↩
16. Games run and put on by members of the priestly colleges, rather than the magistrates. ↩
17. A legendary king of the Sabines, who eventually co-ruled that people and the Romans along with Romulus. ↩
18. All were members of the imperial family. ↩
19. Augustus seems to have been extremely fond of mime, in fact. ↩
20. Tacitus really hates Tiberius, so take such comments with a pinch of salt. ↩
21. null ↩
22. This is not consistent with the story about the mime Stefanio that opens this section. ↩
23. This can refer to a wide range of actors, though probably mime actors are intended here. ↩
24. Normally they would only be expelled from the city of Rome. ↩

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3.2: Charioteers

Learning Objectives

In this chapter you will learn about

- Chariot racing, the most popular (by far) sport in Rome and the status of its stars
- How chariot racing operated with a star system far more than gladiatorial combat
- Elite responses to and attacks on chariot racing and charioteers as worthless
-

FAME AND FANDOM

Chariot racing, unlike gladiatorial combat, was split into four factions, which were the same all over the empire: blue, green, red, and white.. Fans were incredibly devoted to their factions, which were run as private enterprises owned by those of equestrian status until quite late, only being taken over the emperors in the 300s CE. Most races involved all four factions racing against each other either in two or four horse chariots (there could be chariot teams that had up to 10 horses, but those were not used regularly). Sometimes the factions raced pairs of chariots or teamed up against each other, racing two against two. In addition to horses there were more exotic forms of chariot racing, with animals like elephants and camels. Once, when the charioteers refused to race until they were paid more money, one aedile threatened to race dogs; two crumbled but the Blues and Greens held out. Charioteers were the superstars of the ancient sporting world – far more so than gladiators – and some earned immense sums (see, for example, Diocles' inscription below), although they risked life and limb to do so. We are not sure when the factions started, but our first mention of them is from the 70s BCE when one of the supporters of the Reds threw himself in the funeral pyre of the charioteer Felix:

We find it stated in the *Annals*, that when Felix, a charioteer of the Reds, was placed on the funeral pile, one of his admirers threw himself upon the pile; a very stupid way to behave. In case, however, that this event might not be attributed to the great excellence of the dead man in his art, and so add to his glory, the other parties all declared that he had been overpowered by the strength of the perfumes.

Pliny the Elder, *Encyclopaedia* 7.54

Pliny's words show us how uncomfortable the Romans were with the importance given to men that they considered worthless and of low status, and how unwilling they were to give them even more importance.



Mosaic showing a charioteer from the white faction with one of his horses. 3rd century CE from the Villa dei Severi near Rome.

LIVE FAST, DIE YOUNG

Charioteers could gain wide celebrity and have long careers, moving from faction to faction over the course of their time racing. However, they started their careers as slaves and could be sold to another faction by their masters, rather than picking and choosing between offers like a modern athlete (we cannot be sure what happened once they obtained freedom). Given the incredibly

dangerous nature of chariot racing many of them could also die as slaves, never managing to buy their freedom. One short lived but extremely successful charioteer of the 1st century CE was Scorpis, about whom Martial wrote several poems; the two on his death show the extent of Scorpis' celebrity.

Poor Gaurus begged Praetor,^[1] a man he knew well from a long-standing friendship, for a hundred thousand sesterces, and told him that he only needed that sum to add to his three hundred thousand and qualify him to applaud the emperor as a full equestrian.^[2] Praetor replies, "You know, I shall have to give some money to Scorpis and Thallus;^[3] and would that I had only a hundred thousand sesterces to give them!" Ah! shame, shame on your ungrateful chests, filled to no good purpose! That which you refuse to an equestrian, Praetor, will you give to a horse?

Martial, *Epigrams* 5.67

Tragic Victory:^[4] shatter your Idumaeian palms. Favour, strike your bare chest with wild blows. Honour, change your clothing. Sad Glory, cast your crowned locks as a gift for the unjust funeral pyre. Alas for the shame of it! Scorpis, cheated and cut down in your youth and so quickly yoking the horses of death. Your wheels always hastened the race – but why was the finishing line of your life so close?

Martial, *Epigrams* 10.50

O Rome, I am Scorpis, the glory of your noisy circus, the object of your applause, your short-lived favourite. The envious Lachesis,^[5] when she cut me off in my twenty-seventh year, considered me, judging by the number of my victories, to be an old man.

Martial, *Epigrams* 10.53



The above mosaic shows a Roman charioteer taking a victory lap; notice the palm of victory he carries and the attendant riding on one of the horses for the lap.

SPECTATORS

Roman moralists worried about the influence of chariot racing on the people of Rome, as it was seen to take them away from important matters. Despite such warnings, many emperors were enthusiastic spectators of the races; some even went so far as to train as charioteers, building their own private racetracks in the city for the purpose; Gaius Julius Caesar Augustus Germanicus, better known as Caligula, built his own on the Vatican Hill, which stood roughly where St Peter's now stands.

Caligula also gave many games in the Circus which lasted from early morning until evening; at one time he'd introduce between the races a baiting of panthers and now the manoeuvres of the game called Troy;^[6] some, too, of special splendour, in which the Circus race floor was strewn with red and green,^[7] while the charioteers were all senators. He also started some games at random,

when a few people called for them from the neighbouring balconies,^[8] as he was inspecting the outfit of the Circus from the Gelotian house.^[9]

Suetonius, *Caligula* 18.3

The historian Cassius Dio fills out the picture of Caligula's enthusiasm for the games, which could turn dark for those he did not support:

This was the kind of emperor into whose hands the Romans then fell into. Hence the deeds of Tiberius,^[10] though they were felt to have been very harsh, were nevertheless as far superior to those of Gaius [Caligula] as the deeds of Augustus were to those of Tiberius. 2 For Tiberius always kept power in his own hands and used others as agents for carrying out his wishes; whereas Gaius was ruled by the charioteers and gladiators, and was the slave of the actors and others connected with the stage. Indeed, he always kept Apelles, the most famous of the tragic actors of that day, with him even in public.^[11] 3 So he by himself and they by themselves did without any restraints all that people like that naturally dare to do when given power. He organized and arranged everything relevant to their art in the most lavish manner at the slightest excuse, and he forced the praetors and the consuls to do the same, so that almost every day some performance of the kind was sure to be given. 4 At first he was but a spectator and listener at these and would take sides for or against various performers like one of the crowd; and one time, when he was vexed with those of opposing tastes, he did not go to the spectacle. But as time went on, he came to imitate, and to contend in many events, 5 driving chariots, fighting as a gladiator, giving exhibitions of pantomimic dancing, and acting in tragedy. So much for how he normally behaved. Once he sent an urgent summons at night to the leading men of the Senate, as if for some important discussion, and then danced before them.^[12]

Yet after doing all this he later killed the best and the most famous of these slaves by poisoning. He did the same also with the horses and charioteers of the rival factions; for he was strongly attached to the Greens, which from this colour was called also the Faction of the Leek. Even to-day the place where he used to practise driving the chariots is called the Gaianum after him.^[13] 7 He used to invite one of the horses, which he named Incitatus, to dinner, where he would offer him golden barley and drink his health in wine from golden goblets; he swore by the animal's life and fortune and even promised to appoint him consul, a promise that he would certainly have carried out if he had lived longer.

Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 59

Romans who wanted to present themselves as serious and committed to important matters, often prided themselves on being immune to such unRoman activities (though chariot racing was a very old sport in Rome). Pliny the Younger, who was not the most exciting of men, wrote, rather smugly, to his friend Calvisius about how superior he was to the regular, faction man members of the Circus Maximus' audience:

I have spent the past few days among my papers with the most pleasing serenity you could dream of. You will ask how that can be possible in the middle of Rome? Why, the *Ludi Circenses* were taking place, a form of entertainment which does not appeal to me at all. The games have no novelty, no variety, nothing, in short, anyone would want to see again. This makes me even more astonished that so many thousands of grown men should be repeatedly possessed with a childish passion to look at galloping horses and men standing upright in their chariots. If, indeed, they were attracted by the swiftness of the horses or the skill of the men, we could account for such passions. But it is actually a scrap of cloth they favour, a scrap of cloth that captivates them. And if during the running the racers were to exchange colours, their supporters would change sides, and instantly abandon the very drivers and horses whom they were just before recognizing from afar, and loudly cheering by name. And that is the level of favour, of weighty influence, that one cheap tunic has with not only the common crowd who are more worthless than the tunics they wear, but with certain important people! When I observe such men so insatiably fond of so silly, so low, so uninteresting, so common an entertainment, I congratulate myself that I am insensible to these pleasures and am glad to devote the leisure of this season, which others throw away upon the most idle employment, to literature. Farewell.

Pliny the Younger, *Letters* 9.6

FAME AND FORTUNE

Because charioteers could earn a considerable amount of money over their careers, as well as fame, they could afford to set up records of their lives and victories in the same way elites and other wealthy Romans did. This inscription, which commemorates the charioteer Scirtis and his wife, Carisia Nassis, a freedwoman, dates from 13-25 CE and shows the fondness for listing all victories

in exhaustive detail that the more detailed honorific inscriptions for charioteers have; however, the sum total of wins is not great and reflects that this was not a good period for spectacles, especially expensive ones like chariot racing.

Scirtis, freedman, charioteer for the Whites.

In the consulship of Lucius Munatius and Gaius Silius,^[14] in the four horse chariot 1 victory, 2nd 1 time, 3rd 1 ...

In the consulship of Sextus Pompeius and Sextus Appuleius, 1 victory, 2nd 1 time, 3rd 2 times

In the consulship of Drusus Caesar and Gaius Norbanus, 2 victories, was recalled once, 2nd 5 times, 3rd 3 times

In the consulship of Gaius Caelius and Lucius Pomponius, 2 victories, was recalled once, 2nd 8 times, 3rd 6 times

In the 3rd consulship of *Titus Caesar* and the 2nd of *Germanicus Caesar*, 2nd 7 times, 3rd 12 times

In the consulship of *Marcus Silanus* and *Lucius Norbanus*, was recalled once, 2nd 5 times, 3rd 5 times in the consulship of *Marcus Valerius* and *Marcus Marcus Aurelius*, 2nd 3 times, 3rd 4 times in the 4th consulship of *Titus Caesar* and the 2nd of *Drusus Caesar*, 2nd 2 times, 3rd 5 times

In the consulship of Decimus Haterius Agrippa and Sulpicius 2nd 3, 3rd 4

In the consulship of Gaius Asinius and Gaius Antistius Vetus, was recalled once, 2nd 1 time, 3rd 5 times

In the consulship of *Servilius Cornelius Cethegus* and *Lucius Visellenius* 2nd 1 time, 3rd 4 times

In the consulship of Cossus Cornelius Lentulus and Marcus Asinius 3rd 2 times

... Grand total: 7 victories in a four horse chariot, was recalled 4 times, second 39, third 60. He once raced during an official suspension of public business, and twice raced in a six horse chariot. CIL 6.10051

A vastly more successful charioteer was Diocles, who raced from the age of 18 and achieved immense success over the 24 years his career spanned. A monument erected in 146 CE details all of his victories at length:

Gaius Appuleius Diocles, charioteer for the Reds, born in Lusitania, Spain, aged 42 years, 7 months, 23 days. He first drove for the Whites during the consulship of Acilius Aviola and Corellius Pansa [122 CE]. He first won for the same faction during the consulship of Manlius Acilius Glabrio and Gaius Bellicius Torquatus [124 CE]. He first drove for the Greens during the second consulship of Torquatus Asprenatis and the first of Annius Libo [128 CE]. He first won for the Reds during the consulship of Laenatis Pontianus and Antonius Rufino [131 CE]. His wins: drove a four-horse chariot for 24 years. He started 4,257 races, won 1,462, he won the first race of the day 110 times.^[15] In races for single four horse chariots he won 1,064 times, and in this he took the largest purse 92 times; he won the 30,000 sesterces prize 32 times (3 of them in a 6 horse chariot), the 40,000 sesterces prize 28 times (twice in a 6 horse chariot), the 50,000 prize 28 times (one in a 6 horse chariot), the 60,000 sesterces prize three times. In races for pairs of four horse chariots he won 347 times; and won 15,000 4 times in a three horse chariot. In races for three chariots he won 51 times. He gained honours 1,000 times He was second 861 times, third 576, fourth with 1,000 sesterces once, and took no prize 1,351 times. He won jointly with a charioteer for the Blues ten times; with one from the White 91, and shared the 20,000 purse twice. His total winnings were 35,863,120 sesterces. He also won 1,000 sesterces in a two-horse chariot, jointly with a White charioteer once and with a Green twice. He won while leading from the gate 815 times, coming from behind 67, after being passed 36, in different ways 42, and at the finishing line 502. He won against the Greens 216 times, against the Blues 205, and against the Whites 81 times. Nine horses had 100 wins with him and one had 200. His notable achievements: In the year when he first won twice driving a four horse chariot, he won at the finishing line twice. The acta say that Avilius Teres was the first in his faction to win 1,011, and he won most often in one year for single chariots, but in that year Diocles won over 100 victories, winning 103 races, 83 of them for single chariots. Increasing his fame he passed Tallus of his faction, who was the first in the Reds to... But Diocles is the most distinguished of the charioteers, since in one year he won 134 races with another charioteer's lead horse, 118 races for single chariot, which puts him ahead of all the charioteers who compete in the games. It is noted by all, with well-deserved admiration, that in one year with unfamiliar lead horses, with Cotynes and Pompeianus as the inside pair, he won 99 times, winning the 60,000 purse once, the 50,000 four times, 40,000 once, and 30,000 twice. ...for the Greens winner 1025 times, Flavius Scorpis, winner 2048 times, and Pompeius Musclosus, winner 3550 times. Those three charioteers won 6,652 times and won the 50,000 purse 28 times, but Diocles, the greatest charioteer ever, won the 50,000 purse 29 times in 1,462 wins. CIL 6.10048

Such monuments testify to the desire of charioteers to post their life histories and successes in the way that the elite did, to appear Roman, even if their status was *infamis*.

Bibliography and further reading:

Bell, S., 2013. Roman Chariot Racing: Charioteers, Factions, Spectators. In: P. Christesen and D. G. Kyle, ed., *A Companion to Sport and Spectacle in Greek and Roman Antiquity*. Oxford: 491-502.

A nice introduction to the topic that doesn't presuppose that the reader already is familiar with ancient spectacles or chariot racing. Good place to start.

Cameron, Alan. 1976. *Circus factions: Blues and greens at Rome and Byzantium*. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press.

Deals mainly with a later period than this anthology, but an amazing read if you want to know how the devotion to the factions kept developing until it ruled many aspects of peoples' lives.

Humphrey, John H. 1986. *Roman circuses: Arenas for chariot racing*. Berkeley: Univ. of California Press.

Nelis-Clément, Jocelyne, and Jean-Michel Roddaz. 2008. *Le cirque romain et son image*. Bordeaux, France: Ausonius.

Even if you can't read French, the images are amazing.

Media Attributions

- Mosaic_white_charioteer_Massimo

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1. This is not the name of any particular Roman, but is a (high) ranking office in Rome, so stands in for any very wealthy Roman. ↩
 2. Equestrians had to have 400,000 sesterces in property to qualify for that rank. ↩
 3. Thallus is not mentioned elsewhere by Martial, although there is an inscription from 90 CE to a charioteer Thallus (ILS 3532). ↩
 4. Victory, Favour, Honour, and Glory were all Roman gods. Palms were often called Idumaeans, because although they could be found in Southern Italy, they were said to be from Idumaea, a region in Judea. ↩
 5. One of the three Fates and the one responsible for allotting people the years that they would live. ↩
 6. This, the *ludus Troiae*, was a complicated set of equestrian manoeuvres by aristocratic youths. It usually took place on the Campus Martius and sometimes resulted in major injuries. ↩
 7. To match the colours of the Reds and Greens respectively. ↩
 8. Of the houses surrounding the Circus Maximus. ↩
 9. Located on the Palatine Hill. It was originally a private house owned by a wealthy freedman of Augustus, called Gellus, but was incorporated into the imperial palace at some point. ↩
 10. The previous emperor, who was not well liked. ↩
 11. The modern cult of celebrity makes this seem innocuous, but in Rome actors were infamous, that is they were not at all respectable company for a senator, let alone an emperor. Not that that really stopped most people. ↩
 12. Whenever I try and visualize this words fail me. ↩
 13. Originally, an open racetrack it became a circus and was known as the Circus of Gaius or the Vatican Circus. ↩
 14. 13 CE; each consulship after that represents a year. ↩
 15. The Latin says he won from the *pompa*, that is right after the parade that opened the races. ↩

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3.3: Cytheris: The Life of a Female Mime

Learning Objectives

In this section you will learn about

- what we know of the most famous female mime actresses, Cytheris
- how she was seen as an erotic and alluring person and as someone who was acceptable to perform literature that was highly valued as Roman
- her power and position at the end of the Roman Republic and her lasting reputation

CYTHERIS THE MIME

Most actors were men, as they played both male and female roles in masks, as was traditional in Greece and Rome. The one exception was a form of unmasked mime where female actresses were allowed. Women, however, were acrobats, dancers and musicians and were essential parts of theatrical troops, though we tend to know less about their careers than we do of famous male mime actors, who held immense power over their fans. One exception is Volumnia Cytheris, an actress of the first century BCE, who was the freedwoman of Publius Volumnius Eutrapelus,^[1] a Roman aristocrat, and friend of Mark Antony. She was also the mistress of Brutus, the assassin of Caesar and Mark Antony. As such she was often held up as a symbol of excess, particularly in her relationship with Antony, where she was labelled as basically a whore who should not be respected. As such she was represented as not worthy of the respect accorded to a 'decent' Roman woman.

However, there is another side to the presentation of Cytheris and that is as a highly educated woman, who read widely and was a superb performer of Virgil's poetry, which she did in public to great applause, including apparently praise by Virgil himself.^[2] In a poem to her boyfriend, the aristocrat Gallus, the poet Virgil refers to her reading poetry with a range of complex poetic references (he uses the pseudonym Lycoris):Gallus

I will send you a few verses, my Gallus, like those Lycoris might read

Virgil, *Eclogues/Buccolics* 10.2-3

As said, she performed Virgil's poetry, and apparently performed it very well:

It is said that [Eclogue VI]^[3] was recited to such huge applause, that, when Cytheris (whom Virgil calls Lycoris in the final Eclogue), sang it in the theatre Cicero was blown away and asked whose the poem was.

Servius, *On Eclogue* 6.11

FREEDOM AND WEALTH

Even after Cytheris managed to obtain her freedom, she spent time with Volumnius, to whom she most likely owed acting services as a condition of gaining her freedom.^[4] She was also his mistress, though how consensual their relationship was given that she had been his slave is another matter. The rather stuffy orator Cicero once had dinner with the two of them, much to his rather embarrassed excitement – though he made sure to write in detail about it in a letter from Rome to a friend, Lucius Papirius Paetus.

I have just laid down to dinner at three o'clock,^[5] when I scribble a copy of this note to you in my notebook. You will ask, "Where are you?" With Volumnius Eutrapelus. One place above me is Atticus, one below Verrius, both friends of yours. Do you wonder that our slavery is so pleasant? Well, what am I to do? I ask your advice as the pupil of a philosopher. Am I to be miserable, to be tormented? What would I get by that? And when would be the end? "You should live among your books," you say. Well, do you suppose that I do anything else? Or could live, had I not lived with my books? But even to them there is, I don't say a surfeit, but a certain limit. When I have left them, though I care very little about my dinner—the one problem which you put before the philosopher Dion^[6]—still, what better to do with my time before taking myself off to bed I cannot discover.

Now listen to the rest. Below Eutrapelus lay Cytheris. At such a party as that, say you, was the famous Cicero,^[7] "To whom all looked with reverence, on whose face Greeks turned their eyes with wonder?" To tell you the truth, I had no idea that she would be there. But, after all, even the Socratic Aristippus himself did not blush when he was taunted with having Lais as his mistress: "Yes," he said, "Lais is my mistress, but not my master." It is better in Greek; you must Lais make a translation yourself, if you want one.

As for myself, the fact is that that sort of thing never had any attraction for me when I was a young man, much less now I am an old one. I like a dinner party. I talk freely there, whatever is the theme, as the phrase is, and change my moans into wide smiles and laughter. Did you behave better in jeering at a philosopher and saying, when he invited anyone to put any question he chose, that the question you asked the first thing in the morning was: “Where shall I dine?” The moron thought that you were going to inquire whether there was one heaven or an infinite number! What did you care about that? “Well, but, in heaven’s name—you will say to me—” was a dinner a great thing to you, and there of all places?”

Well then, my course of life is this. Every day I read or write something: then, not to be completely rude to my friends, I dine with them, not only without exceeding the law, but even within it, and that by a good deal.^[8] So you have no reason to be terrified at the idea of my arrival. You will receive a guest of moderate appetite, but filled with jokes.

Cicero, *Letters to his Friends* 9.26

SOCIAL NETWORKING

In the letter above Cicero refers to slavery, a commentary on the fact that as it was written Rome was under the rule of Julius Caesar. Cicero and Caesar were on opposing sides in politics and, later, in civil war. He went to join the Senatorial forces (eventually and reluctantly), which placed his wife and daughter, Terentia and Tullia,^[9] in great danger as they were stuck in Rome as Caesar marched on it. After Pompey’s defeat in Greece Cicero came back to Italy but had to wait in the port of Brundisium until he knew if Caesar was willing for him to return to his own properties. Cytheris, being the mistress of Antony, and thus very influential, was seen as someone who could protect them, and so they approached her for help. We only have Cicero’s response to their news about this, and it seems she did act, but not in a way Cicero thought was sufficient.

To Terentia at Rome from Brundisium, 4 January, 46 BCE

If you are well, I am well. I am well. Though as things are now, I have no reason to expect a letter from you or anything to tell you myself, yet somehow or another I do look for letters from you all, and do write to you when I have anyone to carry a letter.^[10] Volumnia^[11] ought to have been more attentive to you than she has been, and even what she has done she might have done with more diligently and cautiously.

Cicero, *Letters to his Family* 14.16

Because Cytheris was *infamis* she was not seen as worthy (at least by Cicero and other conservatives) as worthy of the public respect accorded someone’s wife. That did not mean that others did not place her in positions where other Romans came and paid their respects to her in a way that enraged some. Mark Antony was fond of many things, but especially drinking and mimes, in whose company he spent considerable time:

We are told, at any rate, that Antony once feasted at the wedding of Hippias the mime, drank all night, and then, early in the morning, when the people summoned him to the forum, came before them still stuffed with food and vomited into his toga, which one of his friends held out to help.^[12] Sergius the mime also was one of those who had the greatest influence with him, and Cytheris, a woman from the same school of acting, was also a great favourite – he took her with him in a litter on his visits to the cities and her litter was followed by as many attendants as that of his mother.

Plutarch, *Antony* 9.4

The reference to Cytheris tour in a litter is to a tour of Italy that Antony took in an official role (which meant that people had to come out and greet him on the roads and be extremely polite) in 49 BCE, after Julius Caesar had won the Civil War against the Senate. Antony took Cytheris along with him, as well as his mother, in an act that Cicero saw as a deliberate act of disrespect to the almost fallen Roman Republic and its values:

The Tribune of the Plebs was borne along in a chariot, lictors crowned with laurel preceded him; and in the middle of these, on an open litter, was carried an actress; whom honorable men, citizens of the different municipalities, coming out from their towns under compulsion to meet him, saluted not by the name by which she was well known on the stage, but by that of Volumnia. A carriage followed full of pimps; then a lot of debauched companions; and then his mother, utterly neglected,^[13] followed the mistress of her profligate son, as if she were her daughter-in-law. O the disastrous fecundity of that miserable woman! That man stamped every municipality, and prefecture and, in short, the whole of Italy with the marks of such wickedness as this.

Cicero, *Philippics* 2.58

Even worse, claimed Cicero, was that Antony brought her with him into military camp.

You came to Brundisium, to the bosom and embraces of your actress. What is the matter? Am I speaking falsely? How miserable is it not to be able to deny a fact which you are ashamed to confess! If you had no shame before the municipal towns, had you none even before your veteran army?^[14] For what soldier was there who did not see her at Brundisium? Who was there who did not know that she had come so many days' journey to congratulate you? who was there who did not grieve that he was so late in finding out how worthless a man he had been following? 62. And again you made a tour through Italy, with that same actress as your companion!

Cicero, *Philippics* 2.61-62.

Cicero also mentioned this event in a number of letters to his friend Atticus (Letters to Atticus 10.10.5 & 10.16.5), so it seems he did actually find it deeply shocking that Antony would abandon social mores to such a degree, especially as Antony was then the most powerful man in Italy and representing the power and authority of Julius Caesar.

Cytheris' life then shows the complex situation that figures like mimes found themselves in: although they were seen as disgraceful in that they sold their bodies for a living by putting them on show (and also in other ways) and held low legal status, they still were deeply connected to the fabric of elite life and took part in it in many ways. We should be wary of taking our sources as honest in how they depict these people as shameful figures to many Romans, who seemed to have no problems associating with and being devoted fans of. However, this does not mean that we should not realize how vulnerable many of these people were as slaves and freed; they frequently relied on powerful individuals to protect them, and they did not get to tell their own life stories – we have nothing at all from Cytheris to say what she felt about being at the apex of her profession or so famed and desired.

Bibliography and further reading:

There is not really as much as you would expect on Cytheris, and most of it treats her as an mainly a sex object to be traded around, with no focus on her own possible ambitions or aims, so be prepared to learn about everyone else except her.

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Keith, Allison. 2011. "[Lycoris Galli/Volumnia Cyteris: the life of a female courtesan in Rome.](#)" *European Network on Gender Studies in Antiquity* 1: 23-52

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1. Eutrapelus was a nickname; it means 'witty' in Greek; Greek names like these were used for those who were seen as having an special fondness and familiarity with Greek culture. ↩
 2. We cannot be sure that any of these anecdotes happened quite as reported or at all. However, by having Virgil praise her she became marked also as a docta puella, a learned girl, for the sort that many poets used as their muses and audiences. While this did not make her necessarily respected by many of the elite, it does give an idea of her standing. Especially as we do not hear this about other female actors. ↩
 3. These were pastoral poems; this particular one, however, prophesied a golden age after the unrest of the Late Republic thanks to the birth of a magical child, whose identity is still argued over. (But it isn't Jesus, even if the Christians went with that interpretation; more likely the child of Mark Antony and Octavia, Augustus/Octavian's sister. ↩
 4. Because slave actors could make a great deal of money from their work, it cost them a great deal to buy their freedom and their owners might require them to return to perform acting duties for them in return for allowing them to buy their freedom. The law set some restrictions on these claims, however, and forbid people from stopping their freedpeople from earning a living by burdening them with too many demands. It also forbid anyone from demanding a person continue offering sexual services as a condition of their freedom. In other words, if you freed a prostitute, you could not demand that they had to offer their services to you or clients on your behalf. How often these laws were honoured is another question entirely. ↩
 5. Roman adults reclined, rather than sat, to eat. ↩
 6. A Greek philosopher, follower of Plato, and tyrant of Syracuse (Sicily). Lived 408-354 BCE. ↩
 7. Cicero was an egomaniac, but he was also very famous as an orator, politician, and author. ↩
 8. [1] Every once in a while the Romans would pass sumptuary laws that restricted how much people could spend on feasts and dinners. ↩
 9. Tullia was also married at the time to a supporter of Caesar, Dollabella; Cicero did not approve of the marriage and was worried about how much protection he could or would provide as he was not in the city. ↩

10. There was no formal postal service in Rome for private individuals, so people generally sent letters with friends or others travelling towards specific places. ↵
11. Using this name, rather than Cytheris, was an act of respect. ↵
12. This happened and right while on the speaker's platform; it was not at all discrete. ↵
13. We have no idea what his mother thought about this at all. It is hard to imagine though that she was not there willingly, though. ↵
14. Antony was very popular with the army, who I suspect had no problems with him publicly going around with Cytheris in Brundisium. ↵

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3.4: Gladiators

GLADIATORS



A Victorian imagines Nero entering the arena

INTRODUCTION TO GLADIATORS

Learning Objectives

This chapter will teach you about

- the social and legal status of gladiators
- the presentation of gladiators from a range of (nearly all) elite source
- how gladiators could be seen both as unRoman *and* as symbolizing Roman values of courage and unflinching bravery

While not possessing the same popularity as charioteers or mime, gladiators were an essential part both of Roman spectacles and of how Romans articulated and celebrated their own identity and power (it takes a lot of power to have the ability to command two men to fight to the death as part of mass entertainment). Gladiators were complex symbols to the Romans, showing both degradation and honour at the same time: they might be slaves, freed, or disgraced citizens, but at the same time it took courage and bravery to look death in the face and accept it without flinching and that quality the Romans valued. Thus gladiators could be used as a mirror for Roman manhood, and as an example of how to behave, even as at the same time the Romans passed laws against elites and ‘respectable’ men and women fighting as gladiators.^[1]

Gladiators were not always part of the fabric of Roman life: the first fights we have record of took place in 264 BCE, when three pairs of gladiators fought at a funeral for the father of a former consul (see below). Originally held as part of *munera* (private games to mark the death of a relative), these fights quickly became widespread and grew in size, eventually becoming spectacles in their own right. Most gladiators were slaves, prisoners of war or condemned criminals, and like actors, prostitutes and all others who were considered to “sell their bodies” for entertainment, gladiators were *infamis* – if freed or free, they were Roman citizens, but stripped of most of their civic rights. But while gladiators were, in the words of Roman historian Lucius Annaeus Florus, as “the worst sort of men”,^[2] they could have a disproportionately large impact on Rome. Gladiator games and the fighters themselves

could be wildly popular, and multiple Roman writers critiqued their fellow citizens for loving the games too much – letting them incite unRoman-like passion. As said above, women – and women of high status – also fought as gladiators, further upsetting more traditional members of the Roman public.

Outside of the arena, a group of gladiators started the Third Servile War (also known as the War of Spartacus), a rebellion in the south of Italy from 73-71 BCE that took the proud, powerful Roman military nearly three years to put down. And perhaps most damning of all were the number of senators, equestrians ^[3] and other elites who wanted to fight as gladiators in the arena. Despite opposition from some quarters (there were multiple laws passed that attempted to restrict elites from “disgracing themselves” in arenas), the allure of gladiators evidently outshone the general concepts of Romanness for many. In fact, it is ironic to note that in some ways, gladiators were very Roman: the ideal Roman man had *virtus*, a Latin word that contained connotations of strength, courage and general manliness (*vir* is the Latin word for man). Gladiators held – or were at least expected to hold – those values, putting the Romans in an odd position of both disparaging certain people for being a lower social class, while at the same time admiring them for representing what it meant to be a great Roman.

While we are uncertain of their true beginnings, we do know that our first records of gladiators in Rome show that gladiatorial fights were given as part of *munera*, games vowed by private individuals, usually to mark the death of a close male relative. As private games, the expense was borne entirely by the person holding them: unlike chariot racing or theatre you could not access public funds (you also did not need to have a current position as an elected magistrate). In the text below Tertullian, a Christian author from the late 2nd/early 3rd century CE, explains the origins of *munera*, though given his vehement disgust of the practice (including the fact that he equated the exhibitions to the invocation of demons), the reliability of his history can be questioned.

We still have to examine the most famed and popular spectacle: it is called *munus* [singular form of *munera*] from being an *officium*, for *munus* and *officium* are synonyms^[4]. People in the past thought they were performing a duty to the dead with this form of spectacle after they moderated its nature with a more refined form of cruelty. Long ago, since they believed that the souls of the dead are appeased by human blood, they purchased captives or slaves of poor quality and sacrificed them at funerals. Afterwards, they preferred to disguise this unholy practice by making it something to enjoy. Thus, after they trained the people they had obtained these ways to wield the weapons they had as best they could (training them to learn how to die!), they then exposed them to death at the tombs on the day appointed for sacrifices in honour of the dead. And so it was that they consoled themselves with murder. That is the origin of the gladiatorial *munus*. But gradually their refinement developed along with their cruelty; these inhuman people could not rest satisfied or gain pleasure unless wild animals tore humans to pieces. What was then a sacrifice offered for the appeasement of the dead was no doubt considered a rite in honour of the dead. This sort of thing is, therefore, idolatry^[5], because idolatry, too, is a kind of rite in honour of the dead: both are services rendered to the dead.

Additionally, demons live in the images of the dead. And now consider the titles also: although this type of exhibition has moved from being an act to honor the dead to one which honours the living (for example, those who hold quaestorships, magistracies, *flamines*^[6], and *priesthoods*) still, since the guilt of idolatry taints the dignity of the title, whatever is carried out in the name of this dignity shares necessarily in the taint of its origin. We must also consider the paraphernalia which are considered as belonging to the ceremonies of the actual offices as also being idolatrous. For the purple robes, the *fasces*^[7], the *fillets*^[8], and crowns—finally, also, the announcements made in meetings and on advertisements and the final dinners^[9] given the evening before games—have the Devil’s pageantry and the invocation of demons. In conclusion, what shall I say about that horrible place which not even perjurers can bear? For the amphitheatre is consecrated to more numerous and more terrible names than the Capitol, although the Capitol is the temple of all demons^[10]. There as many unclean spirits live as there are seats. And to say a final word about the arts concerned, we know that Mars and Diana are the patrons of both types of *ludi*.

Tertullian, *On Spectacles* 12

The low status of gladiators was marked by the fact that laws were even put in place that would restrict the sales of slaves to both pimps and *lanistae*:

7 He stopped masters from killing their slaves, and ordered that any who deserved it should be sentenced by the courts. 8 He forbid anyone to sell a slave or a female slave to a pimp or *lanista* without giving a reason for it. 9 He ordered that those who had wasted their property, if legally responsible, should be flogged in the amphitheatre and then let go.

Historia Augusta, *Hadrian* 18

Being sold to a gladiator school or traveling *lanista* was considered a severe punishment, one serious enough for the Romans to place restrictions on where the enslaved could be sold – and the Romans placed great importance on not restricting masters' rights in this way, so this was a truly exceptional circumstance. Stories like the following showed, however, that slaves could still fall victim to their master's whim:

12 1 After starting this way Vitellius^[11] regulated the greater part of his rule wholly according to the advice and whims of the lowest actors and charioteers, and in particular of his freedman Asiaticus. When he was a youth Asiaticus had been willingly ravished by him but soon grew tired of him and ran away. When Vitellius came upon him selling posca^[12] at Puteoli,^[13] he had him put in chains but at once freed him again and again made him his favourite. Then annoyed once more by his excessive insolence and thievishness, and he sold him to a travelling lanista. When, however, he was once reserved for the end of a gladiatorial show, Vitellius suddenly snatched him away, and finally on getting his province, set him free. On the first day of his reign he presented him with the golden ring at a banquet, although in the morning, when there was a general demand that Asiaticus be given that honour, he had deprecated in the strongest terms such a stain on the equestrian order.

Suetonius, *Vitellius* 12

POPULAR ENTERTAINMENT

It is in the Mid-Republic that gladiatorial munera appear, and they were quickly embraced. The first we know of took place in 264 BCE at games Decimus Junius Brutus held for his father: three pairs of gladiators fought in the Thracian^[14] style.

To honor his father, Decimus Junius Brutus was the first one to organize a gladiatorial munus.

Livy, *Periochae* Book 16^[15]

The three first gladiator fights were Thracians matched in three pairs as an offering made by the sons of Junius at their father's grave.

Ausonius, *Griphus* 36-7

The numbers soon increased: in 216 BCE, 22 pairs of gladiators fought at the funeral of Marcus Aemilius Lepidus:

After the death of M. Aemilius Lepidus, who had been an augur^[16] and also consul twice, his three sons, Lucius, Marcus, and Quintus, celebrated funeral games in his honour for three days and exhibited twenty-two pairs of gladiators in the Forum.

Livy, *From the Founding of the City* 23.30.15

In the Late Republic the games grew increasingly spectacular. Politicians like Julius Caesar put on larger and larger *munera*, using all sorts of excuses, and Caesar was so excessive in how many gladiators he wanted to bring in that laws were passed to limit numbers.^[17]

When he was aedile Julius Caesar decorated not only the Comitium and the Forum^[18] with its adjacent basilicas, but the Capitoline Hill as well, and built temporary colonnades^[19] to display a part of his material. He provided *venationes*^[20] and stage-plays too, both with his colleague and independently. The result was that Caesar alone took all the credit even for what they spent in common, and his colleague Marcus Bibulus openly said that his was the fate of Pollux:^[21] “For,” said he, “just as the temple erected in the Forum to the twin brothers bears only Castor’s name, so the joint generosity of Caesar and myself is credited to Caesar alone.” Caesar also gave a gladiatorial show in addition to this, but with somewhat fewer pairs of fighters than he had planned; for the huge number he gathered from everywhere possible terrified his opponents so much that they passed a law limiting the number of gladiators which anyone was allowed to keep in Rome.

Suetonius, *Julius Caesar* 10

As a collective, gladiators were seen as powerful erotic symbols and as intensely desirable. In the city of Pompeii in the South of Italy we have these graffiti preserved for us by the eruption of Vesuvius in 79 CE.^[22] In the following someone wrote of a gladiator belonging to the Thracian type.^[23] and apparent power he had over hearts:

Celadus the Thracian, thrice victor and thrice crowned, the young girls’ heart-throb

CIL 4.4342

Crescens, a *retiarius*, or someone who fought with a net^[24] was also apparently able to get the girls:

Crescens the Netter of young girls by night

CIL 4.4353

Crescens, the master of girls

CIL 4.8916

No matter how famous they were, however, gladiators were still infamis. They were either slaves or free/freed men with limited rights, and were – at least in theory – on the same social level as criminals and members of other “shameful” professions. At the same time, Romans definitely had a soft spot for gladiators, which put them in a bit of an odd position, as Tertullian was only too happy to rage about.

Next taunts or mutual abuse without any warrant of hate, and applause, unsupported by affection....The perversity of it! They love whom they lower; they despise whom they approve; the art they glorify, the artist they disgrace.

Tertullian, *On Spectacles* 22

THE ARENA

Until the 1st century BCE, amphitheatres were built using wood. The first stone amphitheatre was not the Colosseum, but rather the Amphitheatre of Pompeii, built in 70 BCE. It could have seated up to 24,000 spectators, or around the entire population of the city. An inscription from the amphitheatre tells who first built it.

Gaius Quinctius Valgus, son of Gaius, and Marcus Porcius, son of Marcus, quinquennial [duumvirs](#)^[25], for the honour of the colony [of Pompeii], saw to the construction of the amphitheatre at their own expense and gave the area to the colonists in perpetuity.

CIL^[26] 10 852

The Colosseum, the most famous and iconic Roman amphitheatre, was built on the grounds of Nero's [Domus Aurea](#) (Golden House) by the Flavians, who succeeded the Julio-Claudians as emperors. It was begun by Vespasian, inaugurated under his son Titus, and finally finished under his other son Domitian. It was originally called the Flavian Amphitheatre; it ended up with the name “the Colosseum” because it stood by a colossal statue of Nero depicted as the sun god. The poet [Martial](#) wrote a book of poems on the opening of the Colosseum, which gives some idea of its impact on the Roman people. In his first poem he claims that the Colosseum has surpassed all the wonders of the ancient world.

Let not barbarian Memphis speak of the wonder of her pyramids, nor Assyrian toil boast of its Babylon; let us not praise the soft Ionians for Diana's temple^[27]; let the altar made of many horns keep hid its Delos;^[28] nor the Carians boost to the heavens the Mausoleum^[29] poised on empty air with excessive praise. All labour yields to Caesar's amphitheatre: Fame will speak of one work instead of all others.

Martial, *Book of Spectacles* 1



The inauguration of the Colosseum was marked with an incredibly lavish period of games, held under Emperor Titus in 80 CE. Titus ruled for only two years, and according to Roman historian Cassius Dio, he was unable to accomplish too much besides the wonderful spectacle that was the opening of the Colosseum.

During his reign Titus did little that was exceptional, apart from the incredible shows he gave for the dedication ceremonies of the hunting theater [the Colosseum] and the baths that are named after him. One contest pitted whooping cranes against each other; in another four elephants fought. Animals both tame and wild were slaughtered, to the number of 9,000. Women (though none of any standing) took part in the killing; many men fought in single combat, but many others fought in squads, on both foot and in boats, since Titus had this same theater quickly flooded ... Others also fought on boats in the basin in the Gardens of Gaius and Lucius [the Naumachia], which Augustus had excavated for just such battles.... Such spectacles lasted for one hundred days. Titus supplemented them with some more useful entertainment: he threw little wooden balls down on the audience of the amphitheater, each inscribed with a little picture of the prize that those who caught the balls could pick up from the appropriate officials: the prizes included food, clothing, vessels of silver and gold, horses, mules, cattle, and slaves. On the last day of his games, Titus was seen to weep. When they were over, he accomplished nothing great, dying the following year.

Cassius Dio, *History* 66.25

TRAINING GLADIATORS

When it comes to the gladiators themselves, we know incredibly little about how they were trained, as no source talks about it and we have no training manuals. This is likely due to the fact that while owning a gladiator school was socially acceptable for a well-off Roman, it was not deemed acceptable to participate in any of the day-to-day operations of that school. The following text talks a little about athletic training in general and mentions gladiators in passing.

In every act consider what precedes and what follows, and then proceed to the act. If you do not consider, you will at first begin with spirit, since you have not thought at all of the things which follow; but afterward, when some consequences have shown themselves, you will stop which is shameful. “I wish to win at the Olympics.” “And I too, by the gods: for it is a fine thing.” But consider here what precedes and what follows; and then, if it is for your good, undertake the action. You must behave according to rules, follow a strict diet, abstain from delicacies, force yourself to exercise at fixed times, in heat, in cold; you can not drink cold water or wine. In a word, you must surrender yourself to the trainer as you do to a physician. Next in the contest, you must be covered with sand, sometimes dislocate a hand, sprain an ankle, swallow a quantity of dust, be struck with a whip;^[30] and after undergoing all this, you will sometimes lose. After adding up all these things, if you have still an inclination, go to the athletic

practice. If you do not add them up, you are behaving like children who at one time you will play as wrestlers, then as gladiators, then blow a trumpet, then act a tragedy, when they have seen and admired such things. So you also do: you are at one time a wrestler, then a gladiator, then a philosopher, then a rhetorician; but with your whole soul you are nothing: like the ape, you imitate all that you see; and always one thing after another pleases you, but that which becomes familiar displeases you.

Epictetus, *Discourses* 3.15

When it came time to spread the word about an upcoming gladiator show, the Romans advertised in much the same ways that we do today. The image below is graffiti from Pompeii: an ad for a munus in the nearby town of Nola. The gladiator on the right with a small shield is a Thracian, standing opposite to a secutor; this was a common pairing for these gladiators.



Below is the text from this image. Note the wins and overall fight totals; proof that the loser of a gladiatorial battle – condemned criminals notwithstanding – could often live to see another fight.

At Nola there will be a munus of Marcus Cominius Heres for four days. Princeps of the Neronian ludus fought 13, 10 wins; Hilarius of the Neronian ludus fought 14, 12 victories, Creunus fought 7, 5 wins.

CIL 4.10237

WHO WERE THE GLADIATORS

This following inscription lists the members of a gladiatorial familia and was found in Venusia, a town in Southern Italy. Six of the twenty men listed were not slaves; they could have been freed slaves, or free men who chose to be gladiators (auctorati).

Oceanus, slave of Avilius, novice.

Sagittarius: Dorus, slave of Pisius, 6 wins, 4 crowns[23]

Veles: Mycter, slave of Ofilius, 2 wins

Hoplomachus: Phaeder, slave of Avilius, novice.

Thracians: Donatus, slave of Nerius, 12 wins, 8 crowns; Hilario, Arrius' slave, 7 wins, 5 crowns; Aquilia, slave of Pisius, 12 wins, 6 crowns; Quartio, slave of Munilius, 1 win; Gaius Perpenius, novice

Murmillones: Amicus, slave of Munilius, 1 win; Quintus Fabius, 5 wins, 3 crowns; Eleuther, slave of Munilius, 1 win; Gaius Memmius, 3 wins, 2 crowns; Anteros, slave of Munilius, 2 wins; Atlans, slave of Donius, 4 wins, 1 crown;

Essedarius: Inclutus, Arrius' slave, 5 wins, 2 crowns

Samnite: Strabo, slave of Donius, 3 wins, 2 crowns

Retiarius: Gaius Clodius, 2 wins

Scissor: Marius Caecilius, novice

Gallus: Quintus Granius, novice

THE HATERS

Not everyone in Rome was a fan of gladiator games. Seneca the Younger, a famous Roman intellectual from the time of the Emperor Nero, was a very outspoken critic of the spectacles. In particular, he despised the public executions of criminals and Christians, which were guaranteed to end in death for those forced into the arena.

I turned in to the games one mid-day hoping for a little wit and humour there. I was bitterly disappointed. It was really mere butchery. The morning's show was merciful compared to it. Then men were thrown to lions and to bears; but at midday to the audience. There was no escape for them. The slayer kept fighting until he could be slain. "Kill him! flog him! burn him alive" was the cry: "Why is he such a coward? Why won't he rush on the steel? Why does he fall so meekly? Why won't he die willingly?" Unhappy that I am, how have I deserved that I must look on such a scene as this? Do not, my Lucilius,^[31] attend the games, I pray you. Either you will be corrupted by the multitude, or, if you show disgust, be hated by them. So stay away.

The men have no defensive armour. They are exposed to blows at all points, and no one ever strikes in vain... There is no helmet or shield to deflect the weapon. What is the need of defensive armour, or of skill? All these mean delaying death... The spectators demand that the slayer shall face the man who is to slay him in his turn; and they always reserve the latest conqueror for another butchering. The outcome of every fight is death, and the means fire and sword. This sort of thing goes on while the arena is empty.

Seneca the Younger, *Epistles* 7

Seneca attacked the games for taking peoples' minds off more serious things.

And so they strive for something else to occupy them, and all the intervening time is irksome; exactly as they do when a gladiatorial exhibition is announced, or when they are waiting for the appointed time of some other show or amusement, they want to skip over the days that lie between.

Seneca the Younger, *On the Shortness of Life* 16.3

The historian Tacitus also disparaged the games (and other *infamis*-led endeavors), seeing them as lowbrow entertainment that distracted the Roman populace from more important pursuits.

And indeed there are characteristic and specific vices in this city, which I think are formed in the mother's womb: a love of actors and madness for gladiators and horses. How can someone totally occupied by and obsessed with these have time for the noble arts?

Tacitus, *Dialogue on Oratory* 29

Like many adults today, Tacitus believed that the minds of the youth were being corrupted by the popular forms of entertainment of the time. Here he is complaining about the obsession some held for chariot-races and gladiatorial fights:

How often will you find anyone who talks of anything else at home? And when you enter the lecture-halls, what else do you hear young men talk about?

Tacitus, *Dialogue on Oratory* 29



SPARTACUS AND THE THIRD SERVILE WAR

Despite traditionally occupying one of the lowest spots on the hierarchy that made up Roman society, gladiators were not powerless. Probably the most famous example of this is the Third Servile War, or the War of Spartacus: an armed revolt led by gladiators from 73-71 BCE. Here is an account of the beginning of the revolt:

The insurrection of the gladiators and the devastation of Italy, commonly called the war of Spartacus, began upon this occasion. One Lentulus Batiates trained a great many gladiators in Capua,^[32] most of them Gauls and Thracians, who, not for any fault by them committed, but simply through the cruelty of their master, were kept in confinement for the object of fighting one with another. Two hundred of these formed a plan to escape, but their plot being discovered, those of them who became aware of it in time to anticipate their master, being seventy-eight, got out of a cook's shop chopping knives and spits, and made their way through the city, and lighting by the way on several wagons that were carrying gladiators' arms to another city, they seized upon them and armed themselves. And seizing upon a defensible place, they chose three captains, of whom Spartacus was chief, a Thracian of one of the nomad tribes, and a man not only of high spirit and valiant, but in understanding, also, and in gentleness, superior to his condition, and more of a Grecian than the people of his country usually are.

Plutarch, *Life of Crassus* 8-11

After a fairly drawn-out conflict, during which Spartacus' force rapidly grew in size and defeated at least four small Roman armies in various battles, the rebellious forces were eventually put down by the Roman general Crassus. Here is Plutarch's telling of the end of the war:

Spartacus, after this discomfiture,^[33] retired to the mountains of Petelia, but Quintius, one of Crassus's officers, and Scrofula, the quaestor, pursued and overtook him. But when Spartacus rallied and faced them, they were utterly routed and fled, and had much ado to carry off their quaestor, who was wounded. This success, however, ruined Spartacus, because it encouraged the slaves, who now disdained any longer to avoid fighting, or to obey their officers, but as they were upon their march, they came to them with their swords in their hand, and compelled them to lead them back again through Lucania, against the Romans, the very thing which Crassus was eager for. For news was already brought that Pompey^[34] was at hand; and people began to talk openly that the honour of this war was reserved for him, who would come and at once oblige the enemy to fight and put an end to the war. Crassus, therefore, eager to fight a decisive battle, encamped very near the enemy, and began to make lines of circumvallation; but the slaves made a sally, and attacked the pioneers. As fresh supplies came in on either side, Spartacus, seeing there was no avoiding it, set all his army in array, and when his horse was brought him, he drew out his sword and killed him, saying, if he got the day, he should have a great many better horses of the enemies, and if he lost it, he should have no need of this. And so making directly towards Crassus himself, through the midst of arms and wounds, he missed him, but slew two centurions that fell upon him together. At last, being deserted by those that were about him, he himself stood his ground, and, surrounded by the enemy, bravely defending himself, was cut to pieces.

Plutarch, *Life of Crassus* 8-11

It's interesting to note that Spartacus' end is described as brave and heroic by Plutarch, given that Spartacus was a slave who rebelled against the Roman state. In a different account of the same war, gladiators are called as a "second class of men" and "men of the worst character":

We may, however, support the dishonour of a war with slaves, for though they are, by their circumstances, subjected to all kinds of treatment, they are yet, as it were, a second class of men, and may be admitted to the enjoyment of liberty with ourselves. But the war raised by the efforts of Spartacus I know not by what name to call, for the soldiers in it were slaves, and the commanders gladiators; the former being persons of the meanest condition, and the latter men of the worst character, and adding to the calamity of their profession by its contemptibleness.

Florus, *Epitome* 2.8.20

Despite those insults, Florus, like Plutarch, described the deaths of Spartacus, as well as the revolt's other notable leaders – Crixus and Oenomaus – as noble and brave.

Here, being shut up in a corner of Bruttium,^[35] and attempting to escape to Sicily, but having no ships, and having in vain tried, on the swift current of the strait, to sail on rafts made of hurdles and casks tied together with twigs, they at last sallied forth, and died a

death worthy of men. As was fitting for a gladiator captain, they fought without sparing themselves. Spartacus himself, fighting with the utmost bravery in the front of the battle, fell as became their general.

Florus, *Epitome* 2.8.20

The fact that it took Rome almost three years to put down a revolt led by gladiators would have challenged the perceived superiority of the Roman army and Roman-ness in general, and was evidently galling in the eyes of at least one elite Roman:

This war, so formidable to the Romans (although ridiculous and contemptible in the beginning, considered as the work of gladiators), had now lasted three years. When the election of new praetors came on, fear fell upon all, and nobody offered himself as a candidate until Licinius Crassus, a man distinguished among the Romans for birth and wealth, assumed the praetorship and marched against Spartacus with six new legions.

Appian, *The Civil Wars* 1.111.118

That same sentiment is echoed again later in his account:

When the Romans in the city heard of the siege, they thought it would be disgraceful if this war against gladiators should be prolonged. Believing also that the work still to be done against Spartacus was great and severe they ordered up the army of Pompey which had just arrived from Spain, as a reinforcement.

Appian, *The Civil Wars* 1.111.119

ELITES FIGHTING AS GLADIATORS

Despite all that (and the low social status of the profession), Roman elites were still attracted to the idea of gladiators, and sometimes entered the arena themselves. As part of the celebration of his return to Rome in 46 BCE, Julius Caesar sponsored gladiatorial games that saw two elites – including a former senator – fight as gladiators.

In the conflict of gladiators presented in the Forum, Furius Leptinus, a man of praetorian family, fought as a combatant, as did also Quintus Calpenus, formerly a senator, and a lawyer.

Suetonius, *Julius Caesar* 39.1

A current senator wanted to fight in full armour at the same games, but was denied permission.

In all the contests the captives and those condemned to death took part; yet some of the equestrians, and, not to mention others, the son of one who had been praetor fought in single combat. Indeed a senator named Fulvius Sepinus desired to contend in full armour, but was prevented; for Caesar deprecated that spectacle at any time, though he did permit the equestrians to contend.

Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 43.23

There was evidently some pushback from the powers-that-be against elites performing as gladiators, as it was banned in 38 BCE.

One person was chosen to be quaestor while still considered a boy, and did not obtain the standing of a teen until the next day; and another, who had been enrolled in the senate, desired to fight as a gladiator. Not only was he prevented, however, from doing this, but an act was also passed prohibiting any senator from fighting as a gladiator, any slave from serving as a lictor, and any burning of dead bodies from being carried on within two miles of the city.

Cassius Dio, 48 43

This did not work, and in 22 BCE another law was passed, forbidding elite men and women and even the sons and grandsons of senators from appearing on stage and fighting as gladiators.

And since knights and women of rank had given exhibitions on the stage even then, he forbade not only the sons of senators, who had even before this been excluded, but also their grandsons, so far, at least, as these belonged to the equestrian order, to do anything of the sort again.

Cassius Dio, 54 2

That did not work either, and soon after the “ban” was lifted, showing that nothing was going to stop those so inclined from performing in the arena. These contests of elites playing gladiators were also very popular.

Three senators, as before, transacted business with embassies, and the equestrians — a fact which may cause surprise — were allowed to fight as gladiators. The reason for this was that some were making light of the disfranchisement imposed as the penalty for such conduct. For inasmuch as there proved to be no use in forbidding it, and the guilty seemed to require a greater punishment, or else because it seemed possible that they might even be turned aside from this course, they were granted permission to take part in such contests. In this way they incurred death instead of disfranchisement; for they fought just as much as ever, especially since their contests were eagerly witnessed, so that even Augustus^[36] used to watch them in company with the praetors who superintended the contests.

Cassius Dio, 56 25

One reason why elites may have wanted to fight as gladiators is because gladiators represented a lot of the qualities that defined “Romanness” in the eyes of the Romans themselves. As Meghan MacDonald, a Roman historian, puts it: gladiators were — in some sense — among the most manly “Romans” there were:

Here, where men fought and died for the pleasure of the audience, Roman virtue – masculine virtue, courage and civic and social perfection – was enacted. It was performed with such exquisite vitality in fact that the Roman audience experienced a transcendent sublimity that reinforced the nature of their social world as they watched “non-persons” (forgive the modern term) represent Roman excellence. (MacDonald 2019)

Emperors as Gladiators

Emperors as gladiators should have been – if you read all the above – the most unRoman thing possible, and certainly emperors who played at being gladiator, like Caligula and Commodus, were roundly attacked by the sources.

Citations and Further Reading:

There has been a lot written on gladiators, as you might imagine. Because of the glamour some people attach to gladiators and their symbolic value for many people still (whether as a symbol of bravery or cruelty or something else), this is one area where we suggest being very careful using information on the internet, and to check out if the author has some very particular axe to grind about Roman or our society or is just overcome with enthusiasm for it all.

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Barton, Carlin. 1993. *The Sorrows of the ancient Romans: the gladiator and the monster*. Princeton.

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Brunet, Stephen. 2004. “Female and dwarf gladiators.” *Mouseion* 48: 145.

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Coleman, Kathleen. 2000. “*missio*” at Halicarnassus. *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 100 : 487.

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Dunkle, Roger, 2008. *Gladiators: Violence and spectacle in ancient Rome*. New York

Accessible and scholarly at the same time.

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Fagan, Garrett. 2011. *The Lure of the Arena: social psychology and the crowd at the Roman games*. Cambridge.

Highly recommended, and for its title quite accessible. If you are interested in the crowd at these events, an essential read. Also has an appendix with many inscriptions.

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A nice paper by an MA candidate at York; accessible and informative.

McCullough, Anna. 2008. "Female gladiators in imperial Rome: Literary context and historical fact." *The Classical World* 101 (2): 197-209.

Morcillo, Marta García. 2008. "Staging power and authority at roman auctions." *Ancient Society* 38 : 153-81.

Online

Many more sources on gladiators can be found in this related anthology of ancient sources on spectacles in Rome

"Female Gladiators." Encyclopaedia Romana.

http://penelope.uchicago.edu/~grout/encyclopaedia_romana/gladiators/amazones.html.

"Seneca (b.4 BC/1 CE-d. 65 CE): Epistles 7: The Gladiatorial Games." Internet Ancient History

Sourcebook. <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/ancient/seneca-letters7.asp>.

"Slavery in the Roman Republic." Internet Ancient History Sourcebook.

<https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/ancient/slavery-romrep1.asp>.

"Sources for the Three Slave Revolts." Internet Ancient History Sourcebook.

<https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/ancient/3slaverevolttexts.asp>.

"The Roman Gladiator." Encyclopaedia Romana.

http://penelope.uchicago.edu/~grout/encyclopaedia_romana/gladiators/gladiators.html.

(The Encyclopaedia Romana is a great resource. The "Notae" section has a series of essays on the history and culture of Rome, and provides a great deal of background information as well as useful primary sources. The writing is clear and easy to understand, and the website includes sections on gladiators in general, female gladiators specifically, and the Circus Maximus.)

Media Attributions

- Detail_of_The_Emperor_Commodus_Leaving_the_Arena_at_the_Head_of_the_Gladiators_by_American_muralist_Edwin_Howard_Blashfield_(1848-1936)_02
- Gladiadores_después_del_combate,_por_José_Moreno_Carbonero

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1. If you have to pass a range of laws against this activity, it suggests that many were in fact at least flirting with appearing as gladiators in some form. ↩
 2. This is in the context of the war with Spartacus; you can find his account of that war [here](#). ↩
 3. Roman knights; powerful members of Roman society, and representing its second rank. These often became senators, especially as all children of senators were ranked as equestrians until (or if) they entered the senate by winning certain political offices. ↩
 4. No, they're not. Both mean duty, but *munus* also means gift, especially a gift given to the dead. ↩
 5. Idolatry is described in the Bible as divine honour conferred onto any created object. This includes nature worship (worship of the sun, moon, trees, rivers, etc.) and hero worship (worship of heroes or deceased ancestors). ↩
 6. A type of priesthood. ↩
 7. Certain Roman magistrates (consuls, praetors, curule aediles, quaestors) were entitled to be accompanied by lictors (civil servants) who carried fasces, a bundle of rods with an axe sticking out. These symbolized their power to punish as part of their duties. ↩
 8. The bands of wool priests and priestesses wore on their heads when performing ceremonies. ↩
 9. The *cena libera*, a public feast given the night before *ludi* to gladiators and those who were due to be executed in the arena. ↩
 10. The Capitoline Hill held many temples for various deities and in particular the temple to Jupiter Optimus Maximus. ↩

11. Vitellius was a friend of Nero, and also emperor for 8 months in 69 CE before he was brutally deposed. ↵
12. [2] A drink loved by the lower classes and soldiers. ↵
13. A formerly Greek town in the south of Italy; it was a popular resort town for the wealthy. ↵
14. At this time Thracia was an independent neighbor of Rome. The Romans liked to have gladiators representing enemy outsiders fight gladiators armed like Roman soldiers. ↵
15. Livy's history is not extant for this period; what we have are summaries of the content called the Periochae. ↵
16. The augurs were priests whose role was to advise on bird omens; it was a prestigious college of priests (one of 4 in Rome) and membership was by nomination and election. ↵
17. Some of the limiting of numbers had a great deal to do with the risk of having large groups of trained fighters loyal to various individuals in the city of Rome. ↵
18. The Comitium and the Forum were (in simple terms), large open spaces in Rome that had similarly large social, political and (at least in the case of the former) religious significance. ↵
19. Long sequences of columns. ↵
20. Arena games that involved the hunting and killing of animals. ↵
21. Castor and Pollux were mythical brothers, of whom Castor was far more famous, having given up his chance at living as a god to share his immortality with his brother. ↵
22. New discoveries are made all the time at Pompeii, including [this fresco](#) of gladiators uncovered in 2018, so it always worth looking to see what new information has been added from that location. ↵
23. See the next section for this type of 'ethnic' gladiator type. ↵
24. These wore especially little, so you got to see quite a lot as they had no breastplate to obscure the view. ↵
25. The highest position in the Pompeii local government. ↵
26. Corpus Inscriptorum Latinorum, a record of Latin inscriptions, including graffiti. ↵
27. The Temple of Diana at Ephesus, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. ↵
28. This altar, made of the horns of sacrificed goats, was one of the attractions on the island of Delos, an island dedicated to the god Apollo. ↵
29. The Mausoleum of Halicarnassus (in Southwest Caria) was a massive tomb built for Mausolus by his wife Artemisia in the mid-4th century BCE; it was one of the Seven Wonders of the ancient world. ↵
30. The Mausoleum of Halicarnassus (in Southwest Caria) was a massive tomb built for Mausolus by his wife Artemisia in the mid-4th century BCE; it was one of the Seven Wonders of the ancient world. ↵
31. Lucilius was a procurator (magistrate in charge of financial affairs) in Sicily. We only know of him through letters addressed to him from Seneca. ↵
32. Capua was a town south of Rome. ↵
33. A decent chunk of Spartacus' army mutinied and abandoned him shortly before the final battles. The group of mutineers was quickly destroyed by Crassus. ↵
34. Crassus' main political rival. ↵
35. An ancient city in southern Italy, just to the north of Sicily. ↵
36. Emperor Augustus, the first emperor of the Roman Empire. ↵

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3.5: Ethnic Varieties of Gladiators

Learning Objectives

In this section you will learn about

- Types of gladiators that were named after enemies of the Romans
- How these types of gladiators changed over time to reflect how the Romans' conflicts and their enemies changed
- How this could make gladiators appear even more unRoman

'ETHNIC' GLADIATORS

One way that the Romans could mark gladiators as specifically unRoman is through the use of ethnic types of gladiators named after enemies of Rome, who fought with some Romanized^[1] version of their traditional weapons and fighting styles. In creating gladiators of this type to fight for them the Romans tried to mark out those in the ring as different than them, and as more deserving of the humiliation of fighting for others' entertainment.

Rome did not become an empire overnight: first they fought a number of wars with various peoples around them, some of them very similar in culture and language. One Italian tribe they fought was the Samnites, whom the Romans conquered early on in their expansionist phase.^[2]



Map of Italy in the 400s BCE, showing the territory of Rome and the Samnites. Image from Wikimedia Commons.

THE SAMNITE GLADIATORS

One such type was the Samnite, one of the oldest type of gladiators we hear of, but one that later died out. The Samnites was the name given to peoples of Samnium in southern Italy; the Romans conquered them in a long process and a sequence of three wars in the 4th and 3rd centuries BCE, which ended in 290 BCE. However, there were still tensions and the Samnites fought with other Italian allies of Rome in the Social War, the war between Rome and her allies that ended in 87 BCE, and were nearly wiped out in the process. After that their territory was devastated and depopulated and did not recover.

Here is Livy's account of the origin of the Samnite gladiator. It is noteworthy that the equipment of the Samnite gladiators derives from the Samnite military. This inscription is the earliest reference of Samnite gladiators: in 308 BCE after the Second Samnite War:

There were two divisions; one had their shields plated with gold, the other with silver. The shield was made straight and broad at the top to cover the chest and shoulders, then became narrower towards the bottom to allow of it being more easily moved about. To protect the front of the body they wore coats of chain armour; the left leg was covered with a greave, and their helmets were plumed to give them the appearance of being taller than they really were. The tunics of the men with gold plated shields were in variegated colours, those with the silver shields had tunics of white linen....They looked upon those things as a spoil for the enemy rather than a defence for the wearer, resplendent enough before a battle but soon stained and fouled by wounds and bloodshed.

....Now the Samnites took to flight, and soon the plain was filled with shining armour and heaps of bodies. At first the terrified Samnites found shelter in their camp, but they were not able even to hold that; it was captured, plundered, and burnt before nightfall.... Whilst the Romans made use of this armour to honour the gods, the Campanians, out of contempt and hatred towards the Samnites, made the gladiators who performed at their banquets wear it, and they then called them “Samnites.”

Livy, *History of Rome* 9.40.

The Samnite type of gladiator was extremely popular in the Late Republic, but disappears after that. However, notice that in the above Livy places the first gladiators outside Rome, among the Campanians. Campania is a region in the South of Italy that includes Naples, which was at that time a Greek city. The Romans, according to Livy, do the good thing and give the armour to the gods to thank them for their victory, but the UnRoman Campanians just use the armour for their pleasure. Romans were convinced that Campanians were addicted to pleasure and soft, so this allowed them to contrast that with their manly, reverent selves. This probably strikes some of you as ironic, given the popular depiction of Romans in any movie about gladiators.



Samnite Gladiator at the Musée de l'Arles. Image by Michael Wal.

They carried a short sword (*gladius*) and a rectangular shield called a *scutum*. A helmet with a crest and a feathered visor (*galea*), and left leg greaves (*ocrea*) offered them protection.

THE GALLIC GLADIATORS

The peoples of Gaul (a region that roughly covered modern France and Belgium) proved to be a formidable foe of Rome, as demonstrated when they sacked the city in 390 BCE. Here a later historian gives a short account.

At an early period the Gauls waged war against the Romans, took Rome itself, except the Capitoline Hill and burned it. Camillus,^[3] however, overcame and expelled them.

Appian, *Roman History* (From an Epitome) 7

They were feared by the Romans until conquered by Julius Caesar's military campaign there in the 50s BCE. The devastation that Caesar's campaign caused in Gaul and the number of people he killed and enslaved can barely be imagined. Here is one short reckoning of the deaths:

The latest and greatest war of the Romans against the Gauls was that waged under the command of Caesar, for, in the ten years that he held command there, he fought with more than 4,000,000 barbarians, taken all together. Of these 1,000,000 were captured and as many more slain in battle. He reduced to subjection 400 tribes and more than 800 towns, which had either revolted from their allegiance or were conquered for the first time.

Appian, *Roman History* (From an Epitome) 20a

As Gaul became deeply integrated into the empire and a wealthy province providing many members of the Roman elite and military the Gallic gladiator were renamed as the *murmillio* to reflect the changing attitudes towards the Gauls.

The second inscription says: “When the *retiarius* fights against the *murmillo*, he sings ‘I don’t hunt you, I hunt fish. Why are you running away from me, Gaul?’, since the type of armour *murmilliones* wear is Gallic, and the *murmilliones* used to be called Gauls before, and that is why they have images of cockerels and fish .”

Paulus ex Festo p.358L^[4]

THE THRACIAN GLADIATORS/*THRAEX*

The Romans encountered the Thracians, who lived in the southeastern Balkans – between Bulgaria, Greece and Turkey – in the Mithridatic Wars in the 1st to 2nd century BCE. To the Romans the Thracians were wild and savage, a perspective they shared (and probably absorbed from) the Greeks, on whose borders the Thracians lived.



The territory of ancient Thrace shown over modern boundaries of Greece, Bulgaria and Turkey. From Wikimedia Commons

The *Thraex* had a small rectangular shield (*parmula*), two leg greaves, a curved scimitar (*sica*), a feathered helmet carved with the relief of a griffin’s head, a right armguard (*manica*) and a loincloth.^[5] In combat, it was paired with the *hoplomachus*,^[6] *murmillo*, or another Thracian gladiator.



Tombstone for a Thracian gladiator from the graveyard of the gladiators in Ephesus, Turkey. 2nd century CE. Image by Carole Raddato, via Wikimedia Commons.

The first gladiators to appear at Rome were Thracians,^[7] and they were immensely popular until the end. This means that they entered the arena and appealed to Romans, long before and after they fought directly and seriously with them as a people.^[8] So something about this fighter was deeply appealing to the Romans.

The Romans, however, also absorbed Greek attitudes towards Thrace, which were not very positive: they considered them barbarians and fit only to be slaves, even if they were also a terrifying enemy at times. In the following passages, three authors writing in Greek, Ptolemy, Herodotus and Thucydides^[9] offer their opinions on the Thracian people. On one hand they are

perceived to be somewhat worthy of respect because they share values with the Greeks; whereas in the other, they are seen as the “Other” with low morals and are a warmongering people. Although all three were Greek, Ptolemy (see below) was most likely a Roman citizen, who lived in 2nd century CE Alexandria in Egypt, while Herodotus and Thucydides lived and wrote in the 5th century BCE.

Herodotus gives his opinions of them in a number of places:

The Thracians are the biggest nation in the world, next to the Indians. If they were under one ruler, or united, they would, in my judgment, be invincible and the strongest nation on earth. Since, however, there is no way or means to bring this about, they are weak. The Thracians have many names, each tribe according to its region, but they are very similar in all their customs, save the Getae, the Trausi, and those who dwell above the Crestonaeans.⁴ As for the Getae, who claim to be immortal, I have already given an account of their practices.¹ The Trausi, who in all else conform to the customs of other Thracians, do as I will show at the times of birth and death. When a child is born, the kinsmen sit around it and lament all the ills that it must endure from its birth onward, recounting all the sorrows of men. The dead, however, they bury with celebration and gladness, asserting that he is rid of so many ills and has achieved a state of complete blessedness.^[10] 5. Those who dwell above the Crestonaeans have yet different practices. Each man has many wives, and at his death there is both great rivalry among his wives and eager contention on their friends’ part to prove which wife was most loved by her husband. She to whom the honor is adjudged is praised by men and women alike and then killed over the tomb by her nearest of kin. After the killing she is buried with the husband. The rest of the wives are greatly displeased by this, believing themselves to be deeply dishonored.^[11] 6. Among the rest of the Thracians, it is the custom to sell their children for export^[12] and to take no care of their unmarried girls, allowing them to have intercourse with any man they wish. Their wives, however, they strictly guard, and buy them for a price from the parents. 2 To be tattooed is a sign of noble birth, while to bear no such marks is for the lower people. The lazy person is most honored, the farmer most scorned; he is held in highest honor who lives by war and robbery.

Herodotus, *Histories* 5.3-6.

All the qualities that Herodotus describes as Thracian would have been deeply unsettling to many Romans as well as the Greeks, including not getting a dowry with your wife and instead having to pay a bride price.

The following comes from a work on astrology and philosophy written in second century CE by Claudius Ptolemy, a Greek resident of Alexandria in Egypt, who had a Roman first name (and thus may have been a Roman citizen). In it he discusses the various star signs and how they relate to different ethnic groups:

The parts of this quarter which are close to the centre of the inhabited world, Thrace, Macedonia, Illyria, Hellas, Achaia,^[13] Crete...^[14] have in addition familiarity with the south-east triangle, Taurus, Virgo, and Capricorn, and its co-rulers Venus, Saturn, and Mercury.^[15] As a result the inhabitants of those countries are brought into conformity with these planets and both in body and soul are of a more mixed nature. They too have qualities of leadership and are noble and independent, because of Mars;^[16] they are liberty-loving and self-governing, democratic and framers of law, through Jupiter;^[17] lovers of music and of learning, fond of contests and clean livers, through Venus; social, friendly to strangers, justice-loving, fond of letters, and very effective in eloquence, through Mercury; and they are particularly addicted to the performance of mysteries, because of Venus’s occidental aspect. And again, part by part, those of this group who live in the Cyclades and on the shores of Asia Minor and Cyprus are more closely familiar to Taurus and Venus. For this reason they are, on the whole, luxurious, clean, and take care of their bodies. The inhabitants of Hellas, Achaia, and Crete, however, have a familiarity with Virgo and Mercury, and are therefore better at reasoning, and fond of learning, and they exercise the soul in preference to the body. The Macedonians, Thracians, and Illyrians have familiarity with Capricorn and Saturn, so that, though they are acquisitive, they are not so mild of nature, nor social in their institutions.^[18]

Ptolemy, *Tetrabiblos* 2.3.59-69

As a supposedly wild and savage nation, fond of tattooing their bodies (unlike the Romans and Greeks)^[19] and living a life of murder and robbery, you can see why they might have appeal to the Romans in the arena. To them, like the Greeks, they could be seen as wild people, who already lived a life of violence, now made to fight for their masters.

Thracians were so popular they appear in an ancient dream book, a book that explains the meaning of various dreams Romans might have. Notice that the Thracian not only represent wealth and cunning, but is aggressive (wants to be first and advances).

In Artemidorus' *Dream Book* where he explains different imagery in dreams, he notes what the different aspects of the Thracian gladiator mean should someone see one in their dreams.

I have often observed that this dream [of fighting gladiators] indicates that a man will marry a woman whose character matches the weapons that he dreams he is using or the type of opponent he is fighting...For example, if a man fights a Thracian he will marry a rich, cunning wife, fond of being first. She will be rich because the Thracian's body is covered all over by his armour; cunning because his sword is curved, and fond of being first because the Thracian advances when he fights.

Artemidorus, *Dream Book* 2.32

The Emperor Caligula was fond of appearing as a Thracian fighter. In his case, it is hard to know if he picked that type of fighter because its ethnic connotations (as wild and dangerous) appealed to him or for some other reason:

He also devoted himself with much enthusiasm to arts of other kinds and of great variety, appearing as a Thracian gladiator, as a charioteer, and even as a singer and dancer, fighting with real weapons^[20] and driving in circuses built in various places; so carried away by his interest in singing and dancing that even at the public performances he could not stop himself from singing with the tragic actor as he delivered his lines, or from openly imitating his gestures by way of praise or correction.

Suetonius, *Caligula* 54

Further Reading

Doberstein, William. *The Samnite Legacy: An Examination of the Samnitic Influences Upon the Roman State*. 2014. University of Lethbridge Research Repository. Retrieved from

https://opus.uleth.ca/bitstream/handle/10133/3499/Doberstein_William_MA_2014.pdf

An MA thesis that is quite accessible and also available online. (MA and PhD theses are usually available online now- so they are a valuable resource, especially if recent, because they will start by providing you with a summary of the subject at the time, along with references if you want to dig further. While these are not published works in the normal sense, they have had to be submitted, read, and passed by an academic committee from that field.)

A note from the student reviewer: "Content-wise, the first chapter of Doberstein's thesis paper proved the most useful in dealing with the origins of the Samnite gladiator. It is directed towards an audience that are native English-speakers. But for those with English as their second language, the sentences are short and easy to understand. The second chapter may be helpful in discerning where the words *pilum* and *scutum* came from, if one is interested. However, because this chapter also details the Samnitic origins of the manipule system, some knowledge may be needed for knowing the early history, workings of the Roman military, and its terminology. Thus, for students, ESL or not, this chapter may be hard to understand. The third chapter can be omitted."

Jankovic, Marko A. 2014. "Violent ethnicities: Gladiatorial spectacles and display of power", in *The Edges of the Roman World* Editors: Marko A. Jankovic, Vladimir D. Mihajlovic, Stasa Babic. Cambridge: 48-60

Any basic work on gladiators will discuss the types, particularly the Thracian (*Thraex*) gladiators, because they were so popular, but not discuss *why* these types might have appealed. This is an accessible article (it begins by explaining the history and function of the games and does not expect you to know the background) that goes into the history of and reasons why these types came into existence and were so popular.

Rebecca F. Kennedy, C. Sydnor Roy and Max L. Goldman. 2013. trans. *Race and Ethnicity*. Indianapolis.

A collection of ancient primary sources on race and ethnicity; if you want to read more about what the Greeks and Romans thought about the various ethnic groups these gladiators references, then this would be the place to go.

Useful websites for general information on the gladiator types mentioned above:

<http://www.tribunesandtriumphs.org/gladiators/samnites.htm>

<http://www.tribunesandtriumphs.org/gladiators/gallus.htm>

<http://www.tribunesandtriumphs.org/gladiators/thracian.htm>

<http://penelope.uchicago.edu/~grout/...rs/thraex.html>

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<http://mcadams.posc.mu.edu/txt/ah/livy/livy09.html>
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<https://www.livius.org/sources/content/appian/appian-gallic-war-4/>
- Livius.org. “Appian, The Mithridatic Wars 20.” Livius.org. Last 3 December 2018.
<https://www.livius.org/sources/content/appian/appian-the-mithridatic-wars/appian-the-mithridatic-wars-20#98>

Media Attributions

- 604px-Italy_400bC_en.svg
 - Musée_Arles_antique_801 © Michel Wal
 - [Thrace_modern_state_boundaries](#)
 - [Funerary_carved_relief_of_a_Roman_gladiator_found_at_Ephesus,_Ephesus_Museum,_Turkey_\(17089900370\)](#)
-
1. The Romans did not really go for accuracy in this, however; it was a very Roman centred vision of their foes. ↵
 2. While some of these gladiators were originally presumably prisoners of war from the Samnites or Thracians (to name two types), they were also drawn from prisoners from other cultures and peoples who were made to learn a new way of fighting. ↵
 3. Known as the “Second Founder of Rome”, Marcus Furius Camillus was a Roman military general and later on, a five-time dictator. He died in 365 BCE. ↵
 4. Because this is a tricky source to find sometimes here is the Latin: Retiario pugnanti adversus murmillonem, cantatur: “Non te peto, piscem peto. Quid me fugis, Galle?” quia murmillonicum genus armaturae Gallicum est, ipsique murmillones ante Galli appellabantur; in quorum galeis piscis effigies inerat. ↵
 5. Bear in mind the Romans were not going for historical or ethnographical accuracy in the way they kitted out these fighters; it was enough to gesture to some sort of vaguely similar fighting style, as the majority of Romans would not exactly be experts or demand accuracy. ↵
 6. Itself a variety of ethnic gladiator modelled vaguely on a Greek hoplite soldier. ↵
 7. See the previous section for details. ↵
 8. This page gives you some idea of what Roman Thrace was like so you can understand what the region was like while Romans were watching them fight in the arena. ↵
 9. The two authors were considered classics and were read by many educated Romans, sometimes as part of their education; the first wrote under the Roman empire on a very popular topic, astrology. ↵
 10. This sort of attitude about death was common also to many Greek nations. ↵
 11. I strongly suspect that if this happened, that this was not the case and no one actually wanted to be killed. ↵
 12. The Greeks, instead, practiced infanticide with children they did not want to raise. ↵
 13. Hellas refers to Northern Greece, and Achaia to the Peloponnesus where cities like Athens, Corinth, and Sparta were situated. ↵
 14. He goes on to reference other places like various Greek islands. ↵
 15. These last three are gods. ↵
 16. The god of war. ↵
 17. The main god of the pagan pantheon, he was thought to be closely connected to ruling and the qualities of rulership and law. ↵
 18. By this, Ptolemy is referring to the tribal nature of these societies, and their lack of urban living in a way that the Greeks and Romans thought was ‘civilized’. ↵
 19. Which is not to say that some Romans and some Greeks did not have tattoos; it just means that they had a heavy social stigma attached. ↵
 20. As opposed to wooden ones, so you didn't accidentally lop someone's head off because you had no idea what you were doing. ↵
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3.6: Female Gladiators and Spectators

Female Gladiators

INTRODUCTION TO FEMALE GLADIATORS

A relative rarity within the arena, the Romans never developed a standardized terminology to describe female gladiators. *Ludia*, despite popular misunderstanding, refers to a gladiator's wife, mistress, or woman who works or is enslaved at a training school for gladiators, not a female gladiator, and the term *gladiatrix* is of contemporary origin. Often fighting bare-breasted under *noms de guerre* against other women in the arena, there is not enough evidence to say how they may have ended up in gladiatorial schools, although many of them were likely sold as slaves. Their performances were genuine events, intended to provoke amazement through their portrayal of a male role and their resemblance to the Amazons, a legendary race of female warriors. Elite women were also interested in gladiatorial combat, however, and it was this breach of traditional social structure, rather than their gender, that warranted censure. The Romans differentiated between a *femina*, or high-class woman, and a *mulier*, or lower-class woman. From the Roman perspective, a respectable individual of any gender should not debase themselves by providing entertainment or spectacle for an audience. It was degrading for anyone of a senatorial or equestrian class to participate in the arena, while they seem to have had no issue with the participation of lower-class women. The earliest account of women in the arena dates to the reign of Nero [54-68 CE], under whom Dio recalls upper-class women driving chariots, hunting beasts, and fighting as gladiators in the arena. Domitian [81-96 CE] also included *mulieres* in his games [86 CE], to which he received no criticism that we have evidence of. Under Septimius Severus in the third century CE, women of any status were banned from facing each other in the arena, echoing an earlier edict by Tiberius [DATES] limiting the participation of senatorial and equestrian citizens in the arena more broadly.

DEPICTIONS OF FEMALE GLADIATORS

The following is an image of a significant piece of archaeological evidence for the role of female gladiators, a 2nd century CE marble slab from Halicarnassus that was acquired by the British Museum in 1856. Its relief sculpture depicts two women wearing traditional gladiatorial attire, including loincloths, greaves, and arm protectors, facing off against each other as paired opponents with curved, oblong shields. Their breasts and heads are bare, although their upright helmets can be seen on either side of the podium near their feet. An inscription on the podium records their stage names, Amazon and Achillia, in Greek, while the inscription above their heads records the result of their match. Both women have been judged *stantes missae*, which means they have fought to a draw and have been granted temporary reprieve by the sponsor of the games. Following this judgement, they would have been dismissed and allowed to return to their barracks for further training and fighting.



Such a monument “marks an engagement that is worthy of commemoration both for the rarity of its outcome and for the fact that its protagonists are women” (Coleman 2000, 495). The removal and placement of their helmets, in conjunction with the inscription granting them *missio*, or reprieve, is also symbolic of the outcome of their fight and the women’s acceptance. It also indicates that their performance was in fact regarded as a legitimate gladiatorial event bound by traditional rules and regulations. There is no explicit indication that female gladiators were ever considered parodies or informal combatants. It is also important to note that women in the arena, regardless of status, are often associated with both private and state wealth. This relief was likely expensive to commission, and thus was indicative of the sponsor’s wealth.

FEMALE GLADIATORS OUTSIDE OF ROME

A partially preserved inscription from Ostia, the port of Rome, offers the only other definitive evidence for female gladiators outside of Rome. Dated to the mid to late second century CE, it commemorates the magistrate Hostilianus as the first person to provide a gladiatorial show incorporating women since the founding of Rome. The wording used, *ad ferrum dedit*, has been translated as “to provide women for the sword”, and thus it may potentially be understood that the women were in fact being sentenced to execution in the arena. The majority of academic sources, however, agree that it is more likely they participated in the games as gladiators.

Some scholars date the inscription to the mid second century, on account of the emperor Septimius Severus’ ban^[1] on the performance of aristocratic women towards the end of the century. According to Coleman (2000), however, the use of the term *mulieres* implies that the women involved were not of high status. Thus, the text may also be dated to a period after Septimius Severus’ ban, as the participation of lower-class women, as opposed to the more aristocratic *feminae*, would not have violated the restrictions.^[2] Additionally, this particular inscription is significant in that it indicates the infrequency with which women appeared in the arena. Based on the pride in Hostilianus’ claim to be the first provider of female gladiators, as late as the second century CE and in a relatively large and central city, it seems evident that female gladiatorial fights were in fact an uncommon, and likely expensive, phenomenon.

SPECTATORS

In this passage, the historian Tacitus [56-120 CE] discusses seating arrangements in the arena under the Emperor Nero [54-68 CE] in the year 63 CE. In the arena, spectators were divided into various tiers according to their gender and social status. The first tier was a place of honour reserved for the emperor, senators, and other important governmental and religious figures, including the Vestal Virgins. The second tier was reserved for the *equites*, members of the equestrian class who were in charge of administration and finance. They were followed by ordinary Roman citizens, called plebeians, and lastly by all other women, despite their status, and freed slaves.

Importantly, Tacitus also references elite women appearing in the arena. Here, “matron” is a popular translation of *femina*, the Latin for a woman of high class who was considered worthy of respect. Such women included the daughters and wives of free-born Roman citizens. The emphasis is not placed on the fact that Nero is hosting games featuring female gladiators, but on the participation of women, and men, of a senatorial, equestrian, or otherwise respectable social class, as it was considered degrading for citizens of such a rank to perform in the arena in any capacity.

To the Roman equestrians^[3] he assigned places in the circus^[4] in front of the seats of the people, for up to that time they used to enter in an indiscriminate mass, as the Roscian law^[5] extended only to fourteen rows in the theatre. The same year witnessed shows of gladiators as magnificent as those of the past. However, many prominent matrons^[6] and senators disgraced themselves by appearing in the amphitheatre.

Tacitus, *Annales* 15.32

Historian Cassius Dio [c. 150-235 CE] and poet Statius [45-96 AD] provide further evidence for female gladiators. Chronicling the Emperor Domitian’s [81-96 CE] elaborate festival in affiliation with the Saturnalia, one of the most popular celebrations in honour of the Roman god Saturn, they record him as having women fight alongside dwarfs in the Colosseum. While some sources claim that female gladiators fought directly against dwarves in these games, Brunet (2004) problematizes this understanding, proposing that while dwarfs and female gladiators may have performed during the same spectacles, there is no definitive evidence that they ever appeared together in the arena. Gladiatorial opponents were intended to be fairly matched, and female gladiators and dwarfs were likely quite disparate in terms of size, strength, and armour. An alternative reading of the passages may suggest that Domitian

in fact matched women with other women, and dwarfs with dwarfs. Brunet (2004) credits the popular pairing of female gladiators with dwarfs to an understanding of women as novelty spectacles.

Domitian would also frequently stage the games also at night, and sometimes he would pit dwarfs and women against each other.

Cassius Dio, *Epitome* Book 67

In the middle of this noise and the new luxuries there appear women trained to wield the sword wildly daring to fight like men. You would believe that the Amazons^[7] of Thermodon were fighting wildly by Tanais or savage Phasis.^[8] Now a bold unit of dwarfs appears, whose growth nature suddenly cut short, binding them in one movement into a knotted lump. They give and receive wounds and threaten death with tiny hands. Mars^[9], our father, and bloody *Virtus* laugh and cranes hover over the scattered loot marvel at the tiny fighters .

Statius, *Silvae* 1.6.52-64

PERCEPTIONS OF FEMALE GLADIATORS

Martial's poems regarding Emperor Domitian's inaugural games for the colosseum in 80 CE also provide evidence of female gladiators. He goes as far as to compare a female gladiator to Venus herself, a goddess associated with victory and imperial power.

It is not enough that warlike Mars serves you with his unconquerable weapons, Caesar: Venus^[10] herself also serves you.

Martial, *On Spectacles* 6

Legend used to sing of the lion killed in the great valley, a feat worthy of Hercules^[11] – let ancient belief be silent! For after your *munera*^[12] , Caesar, for we now admit that this has been done by a woman warrior.^[13]

Martial, *On Spectacles* 6b

Juvenal, in a heavily problematic and misogynistic satire on the evils of women, talks of high-born ladies running off and training with gladiators. It is largely directed towards those rich, high-status matrons whom he considers to have lost all sense of their dignity and responsibilities as women. According to his criticism, noblewomen betray not only their gender, but more seriously their social order. This is evident in his emphasis on matrons practicing for the arena. In his eyes, by training to be a gladiator and performing in the games, women not only bring shame to themselves and their family, but also to the senatorial and equestrian orders more publicly. Thus, Juvenal is illustrating the perceived threat that made female gladiators so problematic, that of an upset social rather than a simple violation of traditional gender roles. Additionally, his note that female gladiators were the same women who “find the thinnest of thin robes too hot for them; whose delicate flesh is chafed by the finest of silk cloth” emphasises their association with the elite as representations of indulgence, both personal, in the case of noblewomen, and public, in the case of sponsors who sought such expensive novelty acts.

Decorate your doors and doorposts with wreaths of laurel, so your noble son, Lentulus, may show in his tortoiseshell cradle the face of Euryalus^[14] or of a *murmillo*!^[15]

When Eppia, the senator's wife, ran off with a gladiator to Pharos and the Nile and the ill-famed city of Lagos , Canopus^[16] itself cried shame upon the monstrous morals of our town. Forgetting her home, husband, and sister, without thinking of her home, she shamelessly abandoned her weeping children; and—more marvellous still—deserted Paris^[17] and the games. Though born wealthy, though as a baby she slept in a gaudy cradle on the paternal down, she cared nothing about the sea, just as she had long cared nothing for her good name—a loss thought trivial among our soft, litter-riding matrons. And so she bravely endured the tossing and the roaring of the Tyrrhenian and Ionian Seas, and all the many seas she had to cross. For when danger comes in a right and honourable way, a woman's heart freezes with fear and dread and she cannot stand upon her trembling feet: but if she be doing a bold, bad thing, her courage fails not. For a husband to order his wife on board ship is cruelty: the bilge-water sickens her and the sky goes round and round. But if she is running away with a lover, she feels no qualms: then she vomits over her husband; now she messes around with the sailors, she roams about the deck, and loves hauling at hard ropes. And what were the youthful charms which captivated Eppia? What did she see in him to allow herself to be called a *ludia*?^[18] Her darling Sergius had already begun to shave^[19] ; a wounded arm gave promise of a discharge, and there were a range of deformities in his face: a scar caused by the helmet; a huge boil on his nose; and a nasty fluid always dribbling from his eye. But then he was a gladiator! It is this that transforms these fellows into Hyacinths!^[20] It was this that she preferred to children and to country, to sister and to husband. What these women love is the sword: had this same Sergius no longer been a gladiator, he would have been no better than a Veiento^[21] ...

Why do I need to talk of the woollen cloaks^[22] and the wrestling-oils used by women? Who has not seen one of them striking a stump, piercing it through and through with a blade, lunging at it with a shield, and going through all the proper motions?^[23]—a matron truly qualified to blow a trumpet at the Floralia!^[24] Unless, indeed, she is nursing some further ambition in her bosom, and is practising for the real arena. What modesty can you expect in a woman who wears a helmet, rejects her gender, and delights in feats of strength? Yet she would not choose to be a man, knowing the superior joys of womanhood. What a fine thing for a husband, at an auction of his wife's effects, to see her belt and armlets and plumes put up for sale^[25], with a greave that covers half the left leg^[26]; or if she fights another sort of battle, how charmed you will be to see your young wife disposing of her greaves ! Yet these are the women who find the thinnest of thin robes too hot for them; whose delicate flesh is chafed by the finest of silk cloth. See how she pants as she goes through her prescribed exercises; how she bends under the weight of her helmet; how big and coarse are the bandages which enclose her haunches; and then laugh when she lays down her arms and shows herself to be a woman!

Juvenal, *Satire* 6.82-133 (extracts; translation adapted from A.S. Kline)

Media Attributions

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1. 200 CE ↩
2. See Coleman (2000). ↩
3. Originally members of the cavalry selected from the senatorial class. They later became members of a distinct political, financial, and administrative equestrian class just below the senators in rank. ↩
4. A large and open-air building used for various public events, often including chariot racing and other performances. ↩
5. A law passed by tribune Lucius Roscius Otho in 67 BCE that reserved the first fourteen rows in theatres for the equestrians as the second noble class. These seats were directly behind the podium reserved for the emperor, Senators, Vestal Virgins, and priests. ↩
6. A matron was free-born and respectable woman who was usually married. ↩
7. The Amazons were a legendary race of female warriors who were thought to live by the River Thermondon. ↩
8. Tanais and Phasis are rivers in Scythia – the Tanais is the modern Don and Phasis is the river Bion. ↩
9. The Roman god of war. ↩
10. Roman goddess of love, beauty, and fertility. ↩
11. References the first labour of Hercules in Greek mythology, in which he kills the Nemean lion. ↩
12. Singular munus. A gift or service, often performed out of obligation for the benefit of a community or the Roman state on behalf of a high-status individual. See glossary for further information. ↩
13. A specific reference to female venatores. These individuals participated in staged hunts including a variety of wild animals. ↩
14. Presumably the name of a famous gladiator. ↩
15. A type of gladiator who fought with a rectangular, curved shield and straight sword. They also wore a distinctive, wide-brimmed helmet with a crest in the image of a fish. ↩
16. An ancient Egyptian town ↩
17. Paris is a traditional name for a mime. ↩
18. Ludia can refer to an actress, a female gladiator or a gladiator's wife. ↩
19. Men in ancient Rome were often considered most attractive when they were younger, before going through puberty. ↩
20. A mythical boy of great beauty, whom the god Apollo loved. ↩
21. Aulus Didius Fabricius Veiento. A Roman politician who was exiled in 62 CE for defaming priests and senators. Here it may be meant to be a reference to any highly aristocratic man, given that this was an ancient Roman family. ↩
22. This reference is to a type of coarse cloak worn by athletes. ↩
23. Gladiators were organised and trained according to their classification. Training focused largely on a wooden post called a palus, against which gladiators practiced by repetitively stabbing with their swords and striking with their shields in order to perfect their techniques. ↩
24. A recurring public festival instituted in 238 BCE in honour of Flora, the goddess of blooming plants and flowers. Celebrations included games and various mimic and theatrical performances, often involving naked actresses and prostitutes. ↩
25. Auctions were often used to humiliate or honour individuals through the public exhibition of their effects and patrimony. They were also sometimes employed as economic strategies. Caligula [37-41 CE] is recorded as having sold paraphernalia from the

circus and surviving gladiators. ↩

26. A type of leg armour that protects the shin, stretching from the ankle to just below the knee. ↩

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

4: Witches, Warlocks, and Magic

[4.1: Roman perceptions of magic](#)

[4.2: Witches](#)

[4.3: Warlocks and Wizards](#)

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4.1: Roman perceptions of magic

Learning objectives

This section will tell you about:

- How (some) Romans thought of magic and presented its history;
- How magic can be seen as beneficial if done by the 'right' person, and if done for 'good' reasons;
- How magic – especially that done by outsiders – can be seen as automatically harmful or destructive;
- The very blurred line that separates magic from other areas such as medicine or religion.

ROMAN PERCEPTIONS: MEDICINE AND GOOD MAGIC

Romans distinguished between good and bad magic: good magic helped your crops, kept you healthy and had other positive outcomes without harming others.

Cato the Elder, a new man or *novus homo*, who had made himself the epitome of Romanness to many Romans, wrote about agricultural magic in his 2nd century BCE *On Agriculture*, a farming manual for the well to do estate owner needing management advice. Sometimes Cato will discuss medical practices that are basically magic, as in the following remedies for oxen. In the first remedy the repeated number three hardly seems likely to be there for a medical reason, and the same is true of making the person giving the cure fast.

70.1 Remedy for oxen: If you have reason to fear sickness, give the oxen before they get sick the following remedy: 3 grains of salt, 3 laurel leaves, 3 leek leaves, 3 spikes of leek, 3 of garlic, 3 grains of p81 incense, 3 plants of Sabine herb, 3 leaves of rue, 3 stalks of bryony, 3 white beans, 3 live coals, and 3 pints of wine. You must gather, macerate, and administer all these while standing, and he who administers the remedy must be fasting. Administer to each ox for three days, and divide it in such a way that when you have administered three doses to each you will have used it all. See that the ox and the one who administers are both standing, and use a wooden vessel.

The following also, with its use of snake skin, seems to verge on the magical:

73.1 Give the cattle medicine every year when the grapes begin to change colour, to keep them well. When you see a snake skin, pick it up and put it away, so that you will not have to hunt for one when you need it. Macerate this skin, spelt, salt, and thyme with wine, and give it to all the cattle to drink. See that the cattle always have good, clear water to drink in summer-time; it is important for their health.

Even if Cato the Elder saw this as magic in some way, he would surely have put it into a different category than other forms. Previously he insisted that the slave manager of an estate should “not consult a fortune-teller, or prophet, or diviner, or astrologer” (5.5)^[1]

ROMAN PERCEPTIONS: XENOPHOBIA AND BAD MAGIC

One of our major sources for Roman perceptions of magic is Pliny the Elder, a Roman aristocrat, general, politician and advisor to the Emperor Vespasian. Although he wrote much, his only surviving work is the *Natural History*, completed in 77 CE, and which was comprised of 37 books that are topically organized. This work collected knowledge about the world amassed from his rich lifetime of experience and research from a huge range of sources. Pliny prefaces the entire work with a dedication to the emperor Titus,^[2] the most elite Roman in imperial Roman society, whom this information would be of great interest to. After the dedication and explanation of sources at the beginning, the topics follow as such: astronomy, geography, human biology, zoology, botany, medicinal remedies from plants, medicinal remedies from animals, metals, minerals, gemstones, and art. Book 30 is within the category of medicinal remedies derived from animals, and is focused on magic – it explains where it came from, who the practitioners were, and lists magical medicinal practices for physical afflictions. Chapter 2 describes the origins of magic, and in it, readers can attain a sense of Pliny's largely negative feelings toward magic as a practice in addition to its practitioners.

Pliny asserts that magic originated from Persia, known to the Romans as “the East”, where the contemporary and respectably old society thrived and likely held ancient knowledge, magic included. The Roman opinion of Persians was low due to their rivalry, and Pliny's commentary shows this disdain, claiming people as practitioners of magic was a Roman way of “othering” and

attacking people they disliked. Pliny then describes the spread of magic from Persia to the Greeks, whom the Romans also disliked, yet they associated the Greeks with medicine, a practice everyone needed. Notably, Pliny states magic and medicine developed alongside each other. So, he makes clear the foreign, deep un-Roman origins of magic, but in practice, the Romans themselves practiced magic as well, in the context of religious rituals and medicine. The *Natural History* is full of remedies that are magical in nature, particularly in the sections focused on medicine, but the Romans did not consider it as magic, as to them, magic was what other people did that was “bad”.

In tracing this “bad” practice, Pliny highlights the problematic and inefficient transmission method of the information he has collected in his research, which reveals not only his contempt for the sources, but also his skepticism regarding the reliability of the foreign sources over time. He describes the main Persian sources and then goes on to list a multitude of Greek sources including many writers, philosophers, and other people of great intellect. It is a surprise to Pliny that the traditions of magic have been passed on to so many people over time, and therefore he questions the reliability of the information, including Homer’s seeming lack of reference in his work to magic – however, Pliny suggests that Homer does reference sorcery. There is an apparent sense of difficulty for Pliny in finding information on magic, and the fact that he is concerned with “hearsay” attests to the hardships of gathering knowledge on topics that are taboo and un-Roman in Roman society.

During the Roman Empire, as they were throughout most of Rome’s history, Roman people were experimenting with and pushing Roman culture and customs. Elite Romans were curious people, and intellectuals in particular liked to travel and explore other cultures and mysterious, taboo subjects like magic. Pliny makes reference to people like Pythagoras and Plato seeking out knowledge about magic, and this corroborates the popularity of un-Roman activities that Romans were interested in. As this set of encyclopaedic volumes was dedicated to the emperor Titus, who is supposed to represent the ultimate Roman man, perhaps Pliny included these facts to inform him of this un-Roman Roman interest in magic.

There is no doubt that this art [magic] originated in Persia,^[3] under Zoroaster,^[4] this being a point upon which authors are generally agreed; but whether there was only one Zoroaster, or whether in later times there was a second person of that name, is a matter which still remains undecided. Eudoxus,^[5] who has endeavoured to show that of all branches of philosophy the magic art is the most illustrious and the most beneficial, informs us that this Zoroaster existed six thousand years before the death of Plato an assertion in which he is supported by Aristotle. Hermippus^[6] again, an author who has written with the greatest precision on everything connected with this art, and has commented upon the two millions of verses left by Zoroaster, besides completing indexes to his several works, has left a statement, that Agonaces was the name of the master from whom Zoroaster derived his doctrines, and that he lived five thousand years before the time of the Trojan War.^[7] The first thing, however, that must strike us with surprise, is the fact that this art, and the traditions connected with it, should have survived for so many ages, while all written commentaries perished in the meanwhile; and this, too, when there was no continuous succession of experts, no notable teachers, to ensure their transmission.

There are only a few, in fact, who know anything, even by report, about the only professors of this art whose names have come down to us, Apusorus^[8] and Zaratus of Media, Marmarus and Arabantiphocus of Babylonia, and Tarmoendas of Assyria, men who have left not the slightest records of their existence. But the most surprising thing of all is, that Homer should be totally silent upon this art in his account of the Trojan War, while in his story of the wanderings of Ulysses,^[9] so much of the work should be taken up with it, that we may justly conclude that the poem is based upon nothing else; if, indeed, we are willing to grant that his accounts of Proteus^[10] and of the songs of the Sirens are to be understood in this sense, and that the stories of Circe^[11] and of the summoning up of the shades below, bear reference solely to the practices of sorcerers. And then, too, to come to more recent times, no one has told us how the art of sorcery reached Telmessus, a city devoted to all the services of religion, or at what period it came over and reached the *matronae* of Thessaly; whose name^[12] has long passed, in our part of the world, as the appellation of those who practise an art, originally introduced among themselves even, from foreign lands.^[13] For in the days of the Trojan War, Thessaly was still contented with such remedies as she owed to the skill of Chiron,^[14] and her only lightnings were the lightnings hurled by Mars.^[15] Indeed, for my own part, I am surprised that the imputation of magical practices should have so strongly attached to the people once under the sway of Achilles,^[16] that Menander^[17] even, a man unrivalled for perception in literary knowledge, has entitled one of his Comedies “The Thessalian Matron,” and described there the devices practised by the females of that country in bringing down the moon from the heavens. I should have been inclined to think that Orpheus had been the first to introduce into a country so near his own, certain magical superstitions based upon the practice of medicine, were it not the fact that Thrace, set along the northern part of the Aegean Sea his native land, was at that time did not know at all the magic art.

The first person, so far as I can ascertain, who wrote upon magic, and whose works are still in existence, was Osthanes,^[18] who accompanied Xerxes, the Persian king, in his expedition against Greece. It was he who first spread, as it were, the seeds of this monstrous art, and tainted therewith all parts of the world through which the Persians passed. Authors who have made diligent inquiries into this subject, mention a second Zoroaster, a native of Proconnesus, as living a little before the time of Osthanes. That it was this same Osthanes that especially inspired the Greeks, not with just with fondness, but a passion, for the art of magic, is a fact beyond all doubt: though at the same time I would mention, that in the most ancient times, and indeed almost invariably, it was in this branch of science, that was sought the highest point of celebrity and of literary renown.^[19] At all events, Pythagoras,^[20] we find, Empedocles,^[21] Democritus,^[22] and Plato, crossed the seas, in order to attain a knowledge thereof, submitting, to speak the truth, more to the evils of exile^[23] than to the mere inconveniences of travel. Returning home, it was upon the praises of this art that they expatiated—it was this that they held as one of their grandest mysteries. It was Democritus, too, who first drew attention to Apollobeches^[24] of Coptos, to Dardanus,^[25] and to Phoenix: the works of Dardanus he sought in the tomb of that personage, and his own were composed in accordance with the doctrines there found. That these doctrines should have been received by any portion of mankind, and transmitted to us by the aid of memory, is to me surprising beyond anything I can conceive. All the particulars there found are so utterly incredible, so utterly revolting,^[26] that those even who admire Democritus in other respects, are strong in their denial that these works were really written by him. Their denial, however, is in vain; for it was he, beyond all doubt, who had the greatest share in fascinating men's minds with these attractive chimeras.^[27]

There is also a marvellous coincidence, in the fact that the two arts—medicine, I mean, and magic—were developed simultaneously: medicine by the writings of Hippocrates,^[28] and magic by the works of Democritus, about the period of the Peloponnesian War, which was waged in Greece in the year of the City of Rome 300.^[29]

There is another sect, also, of experts in the magic art, who derive their origin from Moses,^[30] Jannes,^[31] and Lotapea, Jews by birth, but many thousand years before Zoroaster: and as much more recent, again, is the branch of magic cultivated in Cyprus.^[32] In the time, too, of Alexander the Great, this profession received no small accession to its credit from the influence of a second Osthanes, who had the honour of accompanying that prince in his expeditions, and who, evidently, beyond all doubt, travelled over every part of the world.

Pliny the Elder, *Natural History* 30.2



The deity Set portrayed in the Greek Magical Papyri

If you are interested in reading more about the depiction of women as witches see [here](#).

To read our only defense speech written against a charge of magic by Apuleius go [here](#).

Citations and Further Reading:

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1. A later author, [pb_glossary id="1737"]Columella[/pb_glossary], expanded on this, writing " Soothsayers and witches, two sets of people who incite ignorant minds to spend through false superstition and then to shameful practices, he must not admit inside. (*On Farming* 8.5) ↩
 2. For the dedication and Pliny's introduction see the preface to the *Natural History*. ↩
 3. Persia: More specifically, Bactriana, or Bactria, a historical-cultural region situated in modern Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and northern Afghanistan. ↩
 4. Zoroaster: Also known as Zarathustra, a Persian prophet whose teachings inspired the religious movement, Zoroastrianism. His historical date remains embroiled in scholarly debate). ↩
 5. An ancient Greek mathematician and astronomer who lived from 390-340 BCE. ↩
 6. Hermippus: An Athenian comic writer who wrote during the 5th century BCE ↩
 7. Trojan War: A legendary war between the Mycenaean Greeks and the Trojans of the city of Troy, initiated by the Greeks. ↩
 8. This name and the following names have likely been all transmitted to us in corrupted forms due to time. ↩
 9. Ulysses: The Roman name for Odysseus, a legendary ancient Greek hero ↩
 10. A Greek sea god. ↩
 11. Circe: A Greek legendary divine figure portrayed as a having the powers of a witch or sorcerer. ↩
 12. Thessaly: Thessaly was a region of central Greece, and here Pliny the Elder is referring to the name of “Thessala”, which was used by the Romans to mean a witch, enchantress, or sorceress. ↩
 13. Pliny is referring to lands of Eastern origin (John Bostock, *The Natural History*, Book 30, Chapter 2). ↩
 14. Chiron: A wise centaur who fills the role of mentor for several legendary ancient Greek heroes, and is known for his medical knowledge. ↩
 15. Mars: The Roman version of the Greek god of war, among other things, Ares. ↩
 16. Achilles: Not the legendary hero, this is referring to a different person. ↩
 17. Menander: An ancient Greek comic playwright who lived from 342-292 BCE (Jeffrey Carson, “Menander”, *Encyclopedia of Ancient Greece*, 462). ↩
 18. Like Zoroaster, his date and attachment to one historical person is debated. ↩

19. Celebrity interest in taboo subject of magic indicates the elite interest in a sphere they are supposed to keep away from, but like most taboo topics in Roman society, magic seems to be a popular thing. ↵
20. An ancient Greek philosopher and mathematician who lived in the 6th century BCE. ↵
21. An ancient Greek philosopher who lived from 492-432 BCE. [26] Democritus: Another ancient Greek philosopher. ↵
22. Democritus: Another ancient Greek philosopher. ↵
23. Exile for elite people allowed for relatively easy access to learning about magic (John Bostock, The Natural History, Book 30, Chapter 2). ↵
24. Nothing is known about this particular writer ↵
25. We are not sure who is being referred to here. ↵
26. Pliny makes his opinion of the magic arts known, in line with “othering” magic as he has asserted that it comes from the East, and Easterners are not Roman and do things like magic that are an affront to Roman society. ↵
27. Chimeras, or are Greek mythological monsters with the body parts of different animals. ↵
28. Hippocrates: An illustrious ancient Greek physician who lived from 460-370 BCE. ↵
29. Romans dated everything from the founding of the city. This war, which took place between Athens and Sparta, and their respective allies, occurred from 431-404 BCE. ↵
30. Pliny here refers to the Jewish people who were often associated with magic by the Romans ↵
31. Jannes is a magician mentioned in the Hebrew Bible, in the book of Exodus. ↵
32. Cyprus: An island located in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea (Michael Given, “Cyprus”, Encyclopedia of Ancient Greece, 196). ↵

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4.2: Witches

WITCHES AND POLICING FEMALE BEHAVIOUR

Witches tend to be rather differently represented in our literature than wizards and warlock, and they are often represented as sad, withered, and delusional figures obsessed with getting their lovers back. According to some Romans there was no hideous thing they would not attempt. Witches and poisoners were often rolled into one category along with under types of undesirable and unRoman female behaviour. Witches were believed to do things like help poison husbands or slip them love potions that could drive them insane, or kill free born children to perform their rituals. Many women caught up in these trials may have been female healers and wise women (see Ripat 2016).

The following account by Livy of a mass poison trial of women that took place in 331 BCE after a number of important senators fell ill and died, shows how Rome could use such accusations against a large number of women at one time. The lack of detail about the names of the first women seized suggest that the story was perhaps not entirely based on truth, but even if not, the warning it sent out to women was clear:

The lead men in the state were being attacked by the same illness, and in almost every case with the same fatal results. A female slave went to Q. Fabius Maximus, one of the curule aediles, and promised to reveal the cause of the public mischief if the senate would protect her against any danger in which her discovery might involve her. Fabius at once brought the matter to the notice of the consuls and they referred it to the senate, who authorised immunity be given. She then disclosed that the state was suffering through the crimes of certain women; those poisons were concocted by Roman matronae, and if they would follow her at once she promised that they should catch the poisoners in the act. They followed their informant and actually found some women compounding poisonous drugs and some poisons already made up. These latter were brought into the Forum, and as many as twenty *matronae*, at whose houses they had been seized, were brought up by the magistrates' officers. Two of them, Cornelia and Sergia, both members of patrician houses, contended that the drugs were medicinal preparations. The female slave, when confronted with them, told them to drink some that they might prove she had given false evidence. They were allowed time to consult as to what they would do, and the bystanders were ordered to retire that they might take counsel with the other *matronae*. They all consented to drink the drugs, and after doing so fell victims to their own criminal designs. Their *disorder* were instantly arrested, and denounced a large number of *matronae* as being guilty of the same offence, out of whom a hundred and seventy were found guilty. Up to that time there had never been a charge of poison investigated in Rome. The whole incident was regarded as a portent, and thought to be an act of madness rather than deliberate wickedness.

Livy, *From the Founding of Rome* 8.18

There were a number of other incidents of this nature, including more mass trials. Because the word for poison and the word for a magic potion were the same (*veneficia*) it can be hard to separate them apart in our sources, and it is unclear that the Romans thought there was that much difference. (To be fair, some of the stuff that went in magic potions could be toxic, and it was not impossible that a love potion or an actual honest remedy might kill someone rather than have the desired effect.)

While our evidence points to most love spells being actually written by men, it was women in literature who were depicted using love potions, often because their other appeals had faded. Horace, who wrote during the reign of Augustus, imagined female witches killing well-born boys to make a love potion. The poem starts in the voice of the boy watching the witches setting up their spell, before moving to voice of one of the witches, and then back to the boys. Notice how disgustingly the witches are portrayed and how useless their magic is according to Horace:

“But by all the gods in heaven, who rule the earth and human race, what is this horrible sound? And what the hideous looks of all these hags, fixed solely on me? I beg you by your children (if you called up Lucina^[1] to be present at any real birth of yours), I [conjure] you by this empty honour of my purple stripe,^[2] by Jupiter, who must disapprove of this, why are you looking at me like a step-mother,^[3] or a wild beast struck with an arrow?” While the boy made these cries with a faltering voice, he stood with his marks of distinction taken from him,^[4] a tender frame, such as might soften the impious breasts of the cruel Thracians; Canidia, having interwoven her hair and uncombed head with little vipers, orders wild fig-trees torn up from graves, orders funeral cypresses and eggs smeared with the gore of a loathsome toad, and feathers of the nocturnal screech-owl [*strix*], and those herbs, which lolchos, and Spain, fruitful in poisons, transmits, and bones snatched from the mouth of a hungry bitch, to be burned in Colchian flames. But Sagana, tucked up for expedition, sprinkling the waters of Avernus^[5] all over the house, bristles up with her

rough hair like a sea-urchin, or a boar in the chase. Veia, deterred by no prodding of conscience, groaning with the toil, dug up the ground with the sharp spade; where the boy, fixed in, might long be tormented to death at the sight of food varied two or three times in a day: while he stood out with his face, just as much at bodies suspended by the chin [in swimming] project from the water, so his parched marrow and dried liver might be a charm for love; when once the pupils of his eyes had wasted away, fixed on the forbidden food.^[6]

Both lazy Naples and every neighboring town believed that Folia of Ariminum, of masculine lust, was there: she, who with her Thessalian incantations forces the charmed stars and the moon from heaven. Here the fell Canidia, gnawing her untrimmed thumb with her livid teeth, what said she? or what did she not say? “O you faithful witnesses to my proceedings, Night and Diana, who preside over silence, when the secret rites are celebrated: now, now be present, now turn your anger and power against the houses of our enemies, while the savage wild beasts lie hid in the woods, dissolved in sweet repose; let the dogs of Suburra (which may be matter of ridicule for every body) bark at the aged rake, bedaubed with ointment, such as my hands never made any more exquisite. What is the matter? Why do these songs not work as well as those of the barbarian Medea? She used these to make her escape, after she got revenge on [Jason’s] haughty mistress, the daughter of the mighty Creon; when the garment, a gift that was injected with venom, took off the new bride by its fiery power.”^[7] And yet no herb, nor root hidden in inaccessible places, ever escaped my notice – still he sleeps in the perfumed bed of every whore, forgetting me. Ah! ah! he walks free [from my power] by the charms of some more knowing witch. Varus, (oh you that will shortly have much to lament!) you shall come back to me by means of unusual spells; nor shall you return to yourself by all the power of Marsian enchantments, I will prepare a stronger potion: I will pour in a stronger potion for you, disdainful as you are; and the heaven shall subside below the sea, with the earth extended over it, sooner than you shall not burn with love for me, in the same manner as this pitch [burns] in the sooty flames.” At these words, the boy no longer, as before, tried to move the impious hags by pleading expressions; but, doubtful how he should break silence, uttered curses like Thyestes.^[8] “Potions have a great efficacy in confounding right and wrong, but are not able to invert the condition of human nature; I will follow you with curses; and execrating detestation is not to be expiated by any victim. Moreover, when doomed to death I shall have perished, I will attend you as a nocturnal fury; and, a ghost, I will attack your faces with my hooked talons (for such is the power of those divinities, the Manes), and, brooding upon your restless breasts, I will deprive you of rest through terror. The mob, from village to village, assaulting you on every side with stones, shall demolish you filthy hags. Finally, the wolves and Esquiline vultures shall scatter abroad your unburied limbs. Nor shall this spectacle escape the observation of my parents, who, alas! must survive me.”

Horace, *Epode V*



A fresco of Priapus from the Casa dei Vettii, Pompeii.

In another poem of Horace’s, the priapic god Priapus, who was often left in gardens to protect them (a bit like an extremely pornographic garden gnome) watches some witches perform their rituals:

Before this I was the trunk of a wild fig-tree, a useless log, when the carver, in doubt whether he should make a stool or a Priapus out of me, decided that I should be a god. And so I became a god, the greatest terror of thieves and birds: for my right hand restrains thieves, and a bloody looking pole stretches out from my frightful middle: but a reed fixed upon the crown of my head terrifies the mischievous birds, and hinders them from settling in these new gardens. Before this the fellow-slave bore dead corpses

thrown out of their narrow cells to this place, in order to be deposited in cheap coffins. This place stood a common grave for the miserable mob, for the clown Pantolabus, and Nomentanus the rake. Here a column assigned a thousand feet [of ground] in front, and three hundred toward the fields: that the burial-place should not descend to the heirs of the estate.^[9] Now people can live in the Esquiline Hill as it is now a healthy place, and walk upon an open terrace, where just recently the melancholy passengers beheld the ground frightful with white bones; though both the thieves and wild beasts accustomed to infest this place^[10] do not causes me so much care and trouble, as do [these hags], that turn people's minds by their incantations and drugs. These I can not by any means destroy nor stop, and continue to gather bones and noxious herbs as soon as the fleeting moon has shown her lovely face.

I myself saw Canidia, with her sable garment tucked up, walk with bare feet and disheveled hair, yelling together with the elder Sagana. Paleness had rendered both of them horrible to behold. They began to claw up the earth with their nails, and to tear a black ewe-lamb to pieces with their teeth. The blood was poured into a ditch, that they might charm out the shades of the dead, ghosts that were to give them answers. There was a woollen effigy too, another of wax: the woollen one larger, which was to inflict punishment on the little one. The waxen stood in a suppliant posture, as ready to perish in a servile manner. One of the hags invokes Hecate, and the other grim Tisiphone. Then might you see serpents and infernal bitches wander about; and the moon with blushes hiding behind the lofty monuments, that she might not be a witness to these doings. But if I lie, even a tittle, may my head be contaminated with the white filth of ravens; and may Julius and the effeminate Pediatous, and the knave Voranus, come to piss upon me, and befoul me. Why should I mention every particular? viz. in what manner, speaking alternately with Sagana, the ghosts uttered dismal and piercing shrieks; and how by stealth they laid in the earth a wolf's beard, with the teeth of a spotted snake; and how a great blaze flamed forth from the waxen image? And how I was shocked at the voices and actions of these two furies, a spectator however by no means incapable of revenge? For from my cleft body of fig-tree wood I uttered a loud noise with as great an explosion as a fart. But they ran into the city: and with great laughter and amusement you could have seen Canidia's false teeth and Sagana's towering wig of false hair falling off, and the herbs, as well as the enchanted bracelets from her arms.

Horace, *Satire* 1.8

Elderly Women and Magic

You will notice that the witches in Horace are described as disgusting, hideous – and old, too old to be getting up to love potions and like. The Romans might talk a lot about respecting the elderly and have all sorts of laws in place to force children to respect and take care of their parents, but many older people were destitute^[11] and, even if possessed of some money, considered fools and obstacles to be got rid of. Older women in particular came in for scathing attacks, and were often associated with magic of a terrifying sort, perhaps as a better way to make them even more 'other' and undeserving of respect.

We can see this in the stories about the *strix* (*striges* (plural)). These owl-like^[12] beings are depicted as old women that are vampiric and either disembowel and feed on infants or breastfeed them. The first case they do the opposite of what a *matrona* was supposed to do – have and raise children – and speak to Roman anxieties about old women as caregivers and medical authorities, who in the latter case might also be seen as challenges to professional doctors.^[13] The mythology behind them is very confused, but we hear of them in association with the nymph, who was also the goddess of the hinge, and as such was seen to also protect entrances and exits where hinges were found. She was invoked against the *strix*, as we hear in a passage from the poet Ovid, who tells us that after being raped by the god Janus (after whom January is named),

he gave her a thorn – a whitethorn– using which she could drive all terrible harm from doors.

[131] There are greedy birds, not those that cheated Phineus' mouth of its food,^[14] though from those they are descended. Their heads are big, their eyes goggle, they have beaks for snatching, their feathers blotched with grey, their claws fitted with hooks. They fly by night and attack children without nurses, and defile their bodies, snatched from their cradles. They are said to rend the flesh of babies with their beaks, and their throats are full of the blood which they have drunk. *Strix* is their name, but the reason for the name is that they are often screech horribly by night. And so whether they are born birds, or are made such by enchantment and are nothing but old women transformed into fowls by a Marsian^[15] spell, they came into the room of Proca.^[16] In the chambers Proca, a child five days old, was a fresh prey for the birds. They sucked the infant with their greedy tongues, and the poor child squalled and cried for help. Alarmed by the cry of her fosterling, the nurse ran to him and found his cheeks scored by their rigid claws. What was she to do? The colour of the child's face was like the colour of late leaves nipped by an early frost. She went to Cranaë [=Carna] and told what had befallen. Cranaë said, "Lay fear aside; the child will be safe." She went to the cradle; mother and father were weeping. "Restrain your tears," she said, "I myself will heal the child." At once she touched the doorposts three

times, one after the other, with arbutus leaves; three times with arbutus leaves she marked the threshold. She sprinkled the entrance with water (and the water was drugged), and she held the raw inwards of a piglet just two months old. And thus she spoke: "You birds of night, spare the child's inwards: a small victim falls for a small child. Take, I beg you, a heart for a heart, entrails for entrails. This life we give you for a better life." When she had thus sacrificed, she set the severed inwards in the open air, and forbade those present at the sacrifice to look back at them. A rod of Janus, taken from the white-thorn, was placed where a small window gave light to the chambers. After that, it is said that the birds did not violate the cradle, and the boy recovered his former colour.

Ovid, *Fasti* 6.130-168.

NIGHT-HAGS AND WEREWOLVES

There were other fears the Romans had, some of which involved witches and werewolves. The following description of 'night-hags' comes from 1st century CE Roman novel, the *Satyricon* by Petronius.^[17] The story of the witches comes after a story about a werewolf that we have included, because it is great. The speaker is a guest at the dinner party of an extremely and rather horrible rich freedman, called Trimalchio.

When I was still a slave, we lived in a narrow street; the house is Gavilla's now. There, as the gods would have it, I fell in love with Terentius, the inn-keeper's wife; you all knew Melissa from Tarentum, the prettiest of pretty girls! Not that I courted her just for sex or pleasure of that sort, but more because she was such a good sort. Nothing I asked did she ever refuse; if she made money, I got half of it; whatever I saved, I put in her purse, and she never cheated me. Well! her husband died when they were at a country house. So I moved heaven and earth to get to her; true friends, you know, are proved in adversity.

72 "It so happened my master had gone to Capua, to attend to various trifles of business. So seizing the opportunity, I persuade our lodger to accompany me as far as the fifth milestone. He was a soldier, as bold as Hell. We got under way about first cockcrow, with the moon shining as bright as day. We arrive at the tombs; my man lingers behind among the gravestones, while I sit down singing, and start counting the gravestones. Presently I looked back for my comrade; he had stripped off all his clothes and laid them down by the wayside. My heart was in my mouth; and there I stood feeling like a dead man. Then he pissed all round the clothes, and in an instant changed into a wolf. Don't imagine I'm joking; I would not tell a lie for the finest fortune ever man had. However, as I was telling you, directly he was turned into a wolf, he set up a howl, and away to the woods. At first I didn't know where I was, but presently I went forward to gather up his clothes; but lo and behold! they were turned into stone. If ever a man was about to die of terror, I was that man! Still I drew my sword and attacked every shadow on the road till I arrived at my sweetheart's house. I rushed in looking like a ghost, soul and body barely sticking together. The sweat was pouring down between my legs, my eyes were set, my wits gone almost past recovery. Melissa was astounded at my state, wondering why I was out so late. 'Had you come a little sooner,' she said, 'you might have given us a hand; a wolf broke into the farm and has slaughtered all the cattle, just as if a butcher had bled them. Still he didn't altogether have the laugh on us, though he did escape; for one of the laborers ran him through the neck with a pike.'

"After hearing this, I could not close an eye, but directly it was broad daylight, I started off for our good Gaius's house, like a travelling salesperson whose bag's been stolen; and coming to the spot where the clothes had been turned into stone, I found nothing whatever but a pool of blood. When eventually I got home, there lay my soldier in bed like a great ox, while a surgeon was treating his neck. I saw at once he was a werewolf and I could never afterwards eat bread with him, no! not if you'd killed me. Other people may think what they please; but as for me, if I'm telling you a lie, may your guardian spirits confound me!"

73 We were all struck dumb with amazement, till Trimalchio broke the silence, saying, "Far be it from me to doubt your story; if you'll believe me, my hair stood on end, for I know Niceros is not the man to repeat idle fables; he's perfectly trustworthy and anything but a babbler. Now! I'll tell you a horrible tale myself, as much out of the common as an ass on the tiles! "I was still but a long-haired lad (for I led a life of luxury from a boy) when our master's pet^[18] died,—a pearl, by heaven! a paragon of perfection at all points. Well! as his poor mother was mourning him, and several of us besides condoling with her, all of a sudden the witches set up their hullabaloo, for all the world like a hound in full cry after a hare. At that time we had a Cappadocian in the household, a tall fellow, and a high-spirited, and strong enough to lift a mad bull off its feet. This man bravely drawing his sword, dashed out in front of the house door, first winding his cloak carefully round his left arm, and lunging out, as it might be there—no harm to what I touch^[19]—ran a woman clean through. We heard a groan, but the actual witches (I'm very particular to tell the exact truth) we did not see. Coming in again, our champion threw himself down on a bed and his body was black and blue all over, just as if he had

been scourged with whips, for it seems an evil hand had touched him. We barred the door and turned back again to our lamentations, but when his mother threw her arms round her boy and touched his dead body, she found nothing but a wisp of straw. It had neither heart, nor entrails, nor anything else; for the witches had whipped away the lad and left a changeling of straw in his place. Now I ask you, can you help after this believing there are wise women, and hags that fly by night. But our tall bully, after what happened, never got back his color, in fact a few days afterward he died raving mad!”

74 We listened with wonder and credulity in equal proportions, and kissing the table, begged the Night-hags to stay indoors, while we were returning home.

Petronius, *Satyricon* 71-74

Older witches might do even more terrible things according to other writers, making themselves even more other and unRoman. The following story comes from another novel, this time in Greek, called the *Ethiopian Story* by Heliodorus (the novel dates from the 200s or 300s CE). The story is very complicated so we will not try to explain it. All you need to know is that two of the characters, the heroine (Chariclea) and an old priest (Calasiris), have come to the town of Bessa while searching for the hero.

For coming near to Bessa about sunset they beheld a great and recent slaughter of men, most of which were Persians, as might easily be known by their armour, and a few of those that lived in Bessa also. They could guess had been a battle, but they did not know who had fought each other. They ranged about the dead bodies, looking to see if any of their friends were killed — for hearts in fear, careful for what they love best, do often expect the worst — until at last they saw an old woman who lay upon the dead body of one of the locals and wailed wonderfully. They decided therefore, if they could, to inquire somewhat of her; and so, coming to her, attempted at first to comfort her and appease her great sorrow. Which done, they asked for whom she lamented and what battle had been there — Calasiris talking to her in the Egyptian tongue — and she told them all in few words: that she sorrowed for her son, and came of purpose to these dead bodies that some armed man might run on her and kill her; and in the meantime she would do such rites to her son as she was able with tears and lamentations.

[In a cut section the old woman tells them what happened in the battle, she ends with the following]

‘But,’ she, ‘strangers, where are you going?’ ‘To the village,’ said Calasiris. ‘It is not safe,’ said she, ‘to mingle with those of us that are left, seeing that you are not known and come at this unseasonable hour.’ ‘If you will agree to entertain us,’ said Calasiris, ‘we hope we shall be unharmed.’ ‘I cannot now,’ she answered, ‘for I must do certain night sacrifices. But if you can wait — and indeed there is no remedy; you must, whether you will or not — get you into some place away from these dead bodies to pass the night, and in the morning I promise I will entertain you and be your guarantor.

Thus she said. Calasiris told Chariclea all and took her with him and they went their way. And having gone a little past those bodies, they chanced upon a little hill. There he laid down with her quiver under his head, and Chariclea sat upon her back instead of a stool. The moon had just risen, lightening all things with her brightness, for she was now three days past full and Calasiris, being an old man and weary with his travels, fell fast asleep. But Chariclea, by reason of the cares that troubled her, slept not that night but beheld a wicked and abominable scene, such as the women of Egypt commonly perform. The old woman thinking she had now gotten a time when she would neither be seen nor troubled of any, first dug a trench, then made a fire on both sides of it, and in the middle laid her son’s body. Then taking an earthen pot from a three-footed stool which stood thereby she poured honey into the trench; out of another pot she poured milk, and from the third a libation of wine. Lastly she cast into the trench a lump of dough hardened in the fire, which was made like a man and crowned with a garland of laurel and fennel. This done, she took up a sword which lay among the dead men’s shields, and behaving herself as if she had been in a Bacchic frenzy, said many prayers to the moon in strange outlandish terms. Then she cut her arm and with a branch of laurel sprinkled the fire with her blood; and after doing many monstrous and strange things beside these, at length bowing down to her dead son’s body and saying somewhat in his ear, she awakened him, and by force of her witchcraft made him suddenly stand. Chariclea, who hitherto had been looking not without fear, trembled with horror and was utterly undone by that terrible sight, so that she awaked Calasiris and caused him also to behold the spectacle. They could not be seen in their dark corner, but they saw easily what she did by the light of the fire, and heard also what she said, for they were not very far off, and the old woman spoke very loud to the body. Her question was this: ‘Would his brother, her son who was yet alive, return safe or not?’ The body made no answer, but by nodding gave his mother a doubtful hope of success according to her wish, and then fell down upon its face again. But she turned it over on its back and did not stop asking that question, with more earnest entreaties, it seemed, speaking in his ear. Sometimes she leapt, sword in hand, to the trench, sometimes to the fire, and at length she made the body stand upright again and asked the same question, compelling him

to answer not by nods and becks but plainly by word of mouth. While this was doing, Chariclea begged Calasiris earnestly that they might go near and ask the old woman some tidings of Theagenes. But he would not go, saying that the sight was wicked although they were compelled to endure it. It was not becoming for priests either to take delight or be present when such things were doing. Their prescience came from lawful sacrifice and virtuous prayer; the knowledge of sorcerers from traffic with dead bodies in the ground, such as this chance had allowed them to see the Egyptian woman use.

While he spoke like this, the dead body cried out very terribly with a hollow voice, as if it had come out of a deep cave, saying: 'Mother, at the first I spared you, and allowed you to sin against nature and break the laws of destiny, attempting by incantations to make those things move which by nature are immovable. For even dead men, in so far as they may, have reverence towards their parents. But since you have destroyed this, and proceed in the wicked and shameful deeds which thou did at first begin, and are not content that a dead body stand up but will compel him to speak also, caring nothing for my burial and barring me from the company of the other spirits for the sake of thy own private need: hear now that which till now I did not tell you before — Neither shall thy son come safe home, nor thyself escape death by the sword. As thou have spent thy life in such wicked deeds as these, thou shalt soon meet the violent death that is appointed for all such. Thou have endured not only to do these secret and hidden mysteries alone, but in the sight of others also, betraying to them the fortunes of the dead. Of these one is a priest — and that is so much the better, for in his wisdom he know that such things should not be published abroad; and he is also well beloved of the gods; and he shall, if he make speed, reconcile his sons who are ready armed to fight a bloody battle hand to hand. But the other — which is much worse — is a maid, who has seen and heard all that thou hast done to me, a woman distressed by love who wanders all the world over almost, for her lover's sake; with whom after infinite labours and infinite dangers in the furthest part of the world she shall live in prosperity and kingly estate.

The body fell down when he had said thus. But the old woman perceiving that it was the strangers who looked upon her, armed as she was with a sword, rushed against them like a wild woman. About the dead bodies she ranged thinking they were there in hiding, and meaning, if she could find them to rid them of their lives, as being crafty folk who by their spying upon her had caused her to have ill success in her witchcraft. At length seeking negligently in her anger for them among the bodies, a spear that stood up struck her through the belly; and thus died she, fulfilling straightway by justice the saying which her son prophesied to her before.

Heliodorus, *The Ethiopian Story*

Bibliography/further reading:

Kaufman, David. 1932 "Poison and Poisoning among the Romans." *Classical Philology* 27: 156-172

This is old and he believes that the cases reflect increases in the crime of poison, so take some of his assumptions with a lot of salt. He does, however, lay out the cases and the events reported in our sources very well, so worth reading to get an overview of poison cases.

[Click here to read at Bill Thayer's site \(open access\)](#)

Paule, Maxwell "Canidia: A Literary Analysis of Horace's Witch." Electronic Thesis or Dissertation. Ohio State University, 2012.

Recommended by a student researcher who worked on this material (see their review below)

https://etd.ohiolink.edu/pg_10?258697508567::NO:10:P10_ETD_SUBID:76888

Maxwell Teitel Paule's dissertation *Canidia: A Literary Analysis of Horace's Witch* raises the issue of labelling ancient literary characters "witches", since these diverse characters have become grouped together under a generalized term "witch" that the ancient world had no concrete baseline, only the assumption of one, to compare them from.

This source proves extremely useful when sifting through the ancient world for these magical figures, which can often feel like looking for a needle in a haystack for someone who is not familiar with Rome's literary characters and writers. Various Roman (and other) witches are mentioned, along with helpful comparison charts, and the text also explores in depth the issue of categorizing by fitting popular witches into other categories like demons.

Ripat, Pauline. 2016. "Roman women, wise women, and witches" *Phoenix* 70: 104-128.

Media Attributions

- Pompeya_erótica6

1. A Roman goddess of childbirth ↵
2. null ↵
3. Romans, like Greeks, portrayed stepmothers, almost without exception, as evil and keen on killing their stepchildren so theirs would inherit more of the estate, or just to get the house empty. ↵
4. The bulla, which marked freeborn status in children. ↵
5. One of the rivers of the underworld. ↵
6. It was thought that the hunger he felt would transfer to his marrow, and thus be useful in love potions. ↵
7. Medea sent a poisoned cloak to the woman marrying her ex-husband; it ate at her when she put it on, and then the king when he tried to save her and so forth. ↵
8. A figure in Greek mythology who cursed a fair bit after his brother fed him his children for dinner. ↵
9. When you created a burial site you often put up an inscription saying who the site was for, who could be buried in it afterwards, and how big the plot was. This was to stop anyone else coming along later and trying to claim some of your space for their own plot, now that you were conveniently dead. ↵
10. Graveyards, especially those of the poor who would not be buried deep, were obviously a prime source of food for various wild and feral animals. And they were a great place to lurk to wait for targets if you were a criminal, as graveyards were just outside the city walls and not generally a place people wanted to hang out at night unless they were looking for trouble. ↵
11. Quite a lot of people's children never survived to take care of them. ↵
12. *Strix* is the Latin name for the screech-owl, Owls, especially owls in the day time or in houses, were ill omens to the Romans, who feared them quite a bit. ↵
13. According to the Romans medical authorities should be Greek. They could be women, but all 'professional' doctors took Greek names and supposedly adhered to Greek norms of treating people. ↵
14. The reference is to the Harpies who stole food from Phineus. ↵
15. The Marsians were an Italian people associated by the Romans with magic. ↵
16. He was later the king of Alba Longa, and the grandfather of Romulus and Remus. ↵
17. The novel only exists now in fragments. ↵
18. The Romans liked to keep small slave children around as pets. ↵
19. He touches the table to ward off any evil spirits listening. ↵

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4.3: Warlocks and Wizards

Learning Objectives

In this chapter you will learn about

- How the Romans portrayed wizard and warlocks as outsiders;
- How that portrayal differed in intensity from that of witches;
- The words and language the Romans use to describe wizards and other male magic users;
- The close connections between magic and other areas of Roman life.

MEN PERFORMING MAGIC

The Romans had a whole list of words for male magicians, of which one of the chief was *magus*,^[1] a word borrowed from Persian, via Greek (which used the term *magos*). The use of this word shows how the Romans visualized the wrong sort of magic as unRoman and as arising from outsiders from the East, as no good Roman would surely engage in such things.

Of course, there were other words for male magic users, some of which were masculine versions of the feminine forms such as *veneficus* and *sagus*. Older Latin terms included *hariolus* and *superstitiosus*; you might be able to guess what the last refers to because of its closeness to the English word superstition. A *Hariolus* is a fortune teller, soothseer, or prophet. Cato the Elder, who wrote in the second century BC said that a slave overseer of a villa should not consult a fortune-teller (*haruspices*), or prophet (*augures*), or diviner (*hariolum*), or astrologer (*Chaldaeam*). The sort of haruspices he is talking about are not to be confused with the officials employed by the Roman state to tell the future from entrails of specially selected and ritually slaughtered animals; these were travelling ones, and not respectable. The same goes for the augurs, who in the Roman state, interpreted bird signs. Only the last term, Chaldean/astrologer is a non-Roman loan word, used to refer to a range of astrologers whether they came from Chaldea, an ancient region along the Persian gulf. Despite the tendency to portray magic as unRoman, magic was mentioned in Rome's earliest law code, the Twelve Tables, which forbids enchanting away crops from others fields as well as mandating the death penalty 'if anyone sings or composes an incantation that can cause dishonor or disgrace to another.'

What we know of men accused of magic doing in the mid Republic isn't a lot, but the evidence suggests that people who were seen as less Roman than others might be accused of witchcraft. Pliny the Elder tells the following story about 'ancient history', most likely 191 BCE. Notice that the accused was a freedman, and judging from his name 'Chresimus', Greek.

C. Furius Chresimus, a freedman who was able to grow far larger harvests with only a very small piece of land than his neighbours could from the largest farms, became the object of very these neighbours' considerable jealousy, and was accordingly accused of enticing away the crops of others by the practice of sorcery.^[2] Upon this, a day was named by Spurius Calvinus, the curule aedile, for his appearance. Afraid of being condemned, the case was about to be voted on by the tribes, he had all his farm tools brought into the Forum, together with his farm slaves, strong, well-built, and well-dressed people, Piso says. The iron tools were of first-rate quality, the mattocks^[3] were sturdy and strong, the ploughshares heavy and substantial, and the oxen sleek and in prime condition. When all this had been done, he said, "Here, Romans are my magic tools; but it is impossible for me to show you, or to bring into the Forum, my midnight labour, my early risings, sweat, and exhaustion." At this, he was immediately acquitted by the unanimous voice of the people. Agriculture, in fact, depends upon the expenditure of labour and exertion; and hence it is that the ancients were in the habit of saying, that it is the eye of the master that does more towards fertilizing a field than anything else.

Natural History 5.7

LOVE POTIONS AND MAGICAL MURDER

Slaves, like women, were often thought to be prone to using love potions, which could in fact be dangerous. The great Roman general of the Late Republic, Licinius Lucullus, was said to have been driven mad by a freedman's love potion:

Cornelius Nepos says that Lucullus lost his mind not from old age, and not even from disease, but that he was disabled by drugs administered to him by one of his freedmen, Callisthenes; 2 that the drugs were given him by Callisthenes in order to win more of his love, in the belief that they had such a power, but they drove him mad and overwhelmed his reason, so that even while he was still alive, his brother managed his property.

Plutarch, *Life of Lucullus*

Despite stories like this, we do not find the flood of poetry attacking male magicians as disgusting and vile that we do about witches, which is not to say there is none. But if you look at the personal attacks on Apuleius in the next chapter, although they focus on his ethnic background, class, appearance (he has, according to his accusers ‘pimplike’ hair) and so on, they do not reach the heights of hysteria that we see in the descriptions of witches.

The historian Tacitus wrote an account of the death of Germanicus, the Emperor Tiberius’ heir, which is useful to read as an outsider account of how a member of the Roman elite might be portrayed when accused of killing a very popular man (according to Tacitus, who is *not* a neutral observer) by means of witchcraft.

This is a very famous historical event, but you only need to know these historical and literary basics

- a. Tacitus hates Tiberius, and portrays him as a devious criminal mastermind
- b. Suetonius is an enormous fan of Germanicus, and not one of Tiberius.
- c. Germanicus was the adopted son of Tiberius; he was the child of his brother, whom Tiberius seems to have loved. The adoption took place in 4 CE, long before Tiberius became emperor
- d. Germanicus liked to be at war, and at one point he had command of 8 legions, a huge part of the Roman army. He fought in Germany, received a triumph for his work in avenging a [great Roman defeat](#) there
- e. He was then transferred to the province of Syria where he and the governor, Gnaeus Piso, came instantly into conflict.
- f. Piso’s wife was called Plancia, and Germanicus’ wife Agrippina. His son was the later Emperor Caligula.

(If you want to read the account in its entirety you can find it [here](#) in an English translation we have adapted for this reader.)

Tacitus begins his account with a damning portrayal of Piso and his wife and their arrival to the city of Athens; pay attention to the different ways the different people involved in this event are described, and the treatment of provincial subjects.

55.1 Meanwhile Gnaeus Piso, racing to start his plans, first got Athens in an uproar by his furious arrival, then gave out to them in a virulent speech, which included an indirect attack on Germanicus for “compromising the dignity of the Roman name by his exaggerated civilities, not to the Athenians (whose repeated disasters had extinguished the breed) but to the present cosmopolitan rabble. For these were the men who had leagued themselves with Mithridates against Sulla, with Antony against the deified Augustus!”^[4] He criticized them using their own ancient history; their unlucky rebellions against Macedonia and their violence towards their own fellow citizens. Private resentment, also, embittered him against the town, as the authorities refused to give up at his request a certain Theophilus, whom the verdict of the Areopagus^[5] had declared guilty of forgery. After this, quick sailing by a short route through the Cyclades meant he caught up with Germanicus at Rhodes. He was aware of the invectives with which he had been attacked, but he behaved with such mildness that, when a rising storm swept Piso toward the rock-bound coast, and the destruction of his enemy could have been attributed to accident, he sent warships to help in extricating him from his predicament. Even so, Piso was not mollified and, after reluctantly submitting to the loss of a single day, he left Germanicus and completed the journey first. Then, the moment he reached Syria and the legions, he made himself called in the language of the rabble ‘Father of the Legion’ because he corrupted all around him by handouts and by bribery, by attention to the lowest private, by dismissing the veteran centurions and the stricter commanding officers, whom he replaced by dependents of his own or by men of the worst character; by permitting laziness in the camp, wild behaviour in the towns, and soldiers to wander in the country as madly as they wished, Nor could Plancia keep herself within the limits of female decorum: she attended cavalry exercises and infantry training; she sneered at Agrippina or Germanicus, and even some of the loyal troops were ready to yield her a disloyal obedience; for a whispered rumour was gaining ground that these doings were not unacceptable to the emperor. Germanicus knew all this, but his more immediate anxiety was to reach Armenia first.

Annals 2.55

Tacitus then goes into detail about Germanicus’ doings in Armenia and the character of the Armenian people, and how Germanicus mistakenly made a trip up the Nile in defiance of Tiberius’ wishes. We pick up the story with Germanicus’ return from Egypt; please be aware that we have cut a great deal that, while historically interesting and quite fun to read if you are into imperial shenanigans, is not relevant to the issue of magic and witchcraft.

69 1 On the way from Egypt, Germanicus learned that all orders issued by him to the legions or the cities had been rescinded or reversed. And so he made insulting references to Piso: nor were the retorts directed by him against him less bitter. Then Piso determined to leave Syria. Checked almost immediately by the ill-health of Germanicus, then hearing that he had rallied and that the vows made for his recovery were already being paid,^[6] he took his lictors and swept the streets clear of the victims at the altars, the apparatus of sacrifice, and the festive populace of Antioch. After this, he left for Seleucia, awaiting the outcome of the illness which had again attacked Germanicus. The cruel virulence of the disease was intensified by the patient's belief that Piso had given him poison; and it is a fact that explorations in the floor and walls brought to light the remains of human bodies, spells, curses, leaden tablets engraved with the name Germanicus, charred and blood-smeared ashes, and others of the implements of witchcraft by which it is believed the living soul can be handed over to the powers of the grave. At the same time, messengers from Piso were accused of keeping a too inquisitive watch upon the ravages of the disease.

70 1 Of all this Germanicus heard with at least as much anger as alarm:— “If his threshold was besieged, if he must surrender his breath under the eye of his enemies, what must the future hold in store for his unhappy wife — for his infant children? Poison was considered too slow; Piso was growing urgent — imperative — to be left alone with his province and his legions! But Germanicus had not fallen from himself so far, nor should the price of blood remain with the slayer!” He composed a letter renouncing his friendship: the general account adds that he ordered him to leave the province. Delaying no longer, Piso weighed anchor, and controlled his speed so that the return journey would be shorter, if Germanicus' death opened the door in Syria.

71 1 For a moment Germanicus revived and there was hope: then his spirit faded, and, with the end near, he addressed his friends at his bedside to this way:^[7]— “If I were dying by the course of nature, I should have a justified grievance against heaven itself for snatching me from parents, children, and country, by a premature end in the prime of life. Now, cut off as I am by the villainy of Piso and Plancina, I leave my last prayers in the keeping of your breasts: report to my father and brother the agonies that wracked me, the treason that encompassed me, before I finished the most pitiable of lives by the vilest of deaths. If any were ever stirred by the hopes I inspired, by kindred blood, — even by envy of me while I lived, — they must shed a tear to think that the once happy survivor of so many wars has fallen by female treachery. You will have your opportunity to complain before the senate and to invoke the law. The prime duty of friends is not to follow their dead with passive laments, but to remember his wishes and carry out his commands. Strangers themselves will weep for Germanicus: *you* will avenge him — if you loved me, and not my fortune. Show to the Roman people the granddaughter of their deified Augustus, who was also my wife; mention her six children: pity will side with the accusers, and, if the murderers allege some infamous warrant, no one will believe them— or no forgiveness!” His friends touched the dying hand and swore to give up their lives sooner than revenge.

An account of Germanicus' funeral and mourning for him follows, along with Agrippina's departure to Rome with the urn with her husband's ashes. Tacitus then does into various accounts of illegal goings on by Piso in Syria before moving back to Rome and the uproar there. Focus on how Tacitus portrays the common opinion and what it focuses on.

82 1 But at Rome, when the failure of Germanicus' health became current knowledge, and every circumstance was reported with the aggravations usual in news that has travelled far, all was grief and indignation. A storm of complaints burst out:— “So for this he had been relegated to the ends of earth; for this Piso had received a province; and this had been the drift of Augusta's colloquies with Plancina! It was the mere truth, as the elder men said of Drusus, that sons with democratic tempers were not pleasing to fathers on a throne; and both had been cut off for no other reason than because they designed to restore the age of freedom and take the Roman people into a partnership of equal rights.” The announcement of his death inflamed this popular gossip to such a degree that before any edict of the magistrates, before any resolution of the senate, civic life was suspended, the courts deserted, houses closed. It was a town of sighs and silences, with none of the studied advertisements of sorrow; and, while there was no abstention from the ordinary tokens of bereavement, the deeper mourning was carried at the heart. Accidentally, a party of merchants, who had left Syria while Germanicus was yet alive, brought a more cheerful account of his condition. It was instantly believed and instantly disseminated. No man met another without proclaiming his unauthenticated news; and by him it was passed to more, with additions suggested by their joy.

Various honours are awarded posthumously to Germanicus, but the story does not end; Agrippina returns to Rome, and Piso follows:

Book III

8 1 Meanwhile, Piso, sending his son in advance to the capital with a message designed to pacify the emperor, bent his way to Drusus; whom he hoped to find not so much angered at a brother's death as reconciled to himself by the suppression of a rival. To make a display of impartiality, Tiberius gave the young envoy a civil reception, and treated him with the liberality he was in the habit of showing to the cadets of noble families. To the father, Drusus' answer was that, "if the current allegations were true, his own resentment must rank foremost of all, but he preferred to believe they were false and unfounded, and that Germanicus' death involved no capital offence." The reply was given in public, all secrecy having been avoided; and no doubts were felt that the phrasing was dictated by Tiberius, when a youth, who had otherwise the simple and pliant character of his years, resorted for the nonce to the disingenuities of age.

9 1 After crossing the sea of Dalmatia, Piso left his vessels at Ancona, and, travelling through Picenum, then by the Flaminian Road, came up with a legion marching from Pannonia to Rome, to join later on the garrison in Africa: an incident which led to much gossip and discussion as to the manner in which he had kept showing himself to the soldiers on the march and by the wayside. From Narnia, either to avoid suspicion or because the plans of a frightened man are apt to be inconsistent, he sailed down the Nar, then down the Tiber, and added to the exasperation of the populace by bringing his vessel to shore at the mausoleum of the Caesars. It was a busy part of the day and of the river-side; yet he with a marching column of retainers, and Plancina with her escort of women, proceeded beaming on their way. There were other irritants also; among them, festal decorations upon his mansion looming above the forum; guests and a dinner; and, in that crowded quarter, full publicity for everything.

10 1 Next day, Fulcinus Trio applied to the consuls for authority to prosecute Piso. He was opposed by Vitellius, Veranius, and the other members of Germanicus' suite: Trio, they argued, had no standing in the case; nor were they themselves acting as accusers, but as deponents and witnesses to the facts, carrying out the instructions of the prince. Waiving the indictment on this head, Trio secured the right of arraigning Piso's previous career, and the emperor was asked to take over the trial. To this even the defendant made no demur, as he distrusted the prepossessions of the people and senate; while Tiberius, he knew, had the strength of mind to despise scandal, and was involved in his mother's accession to the plot. Besides, truth was more easily distinguished from accepted calumny by one judge; where there were more, odium and malevolence carried weight. The difficulties of the inquiry, and the rumours busy with his own character, were not lost upon Tiberius. Therefore with a few intimate friends for assessor, he heard the threats of the accusers, the prayers of the accused; and remitted the case in its integrity to the senate.

11 1 In the interval, Drusus returned from Illyricum. The Senate had voted him an ovation at his entry, in return for the submission of Maroboduus and his achievements of the preceding summer; but he postponed the honour and made his way into the capital privately. As his advocates the defendant now specified Lucius Arruntius, Publius Vinicius, Asinius Gallus, Marcellus Aeserninus and Sextus Pompeius. They declined on various pretexts, and Manius Lepidus, Lucius Piso, and Livineius Regulus came to his support. The whole nation was eagerly speculating upon the loyalty of Germanicus' friends, the criminal's grounds for confidence, the chances that Tiberius would be able to keep his sentiments effectively under lock and key. Never had the populace been more keenly on the alert: never had it shown more freedom of whispered criticism and suspicious silence towards the emperor.

12 1 On the day the senate met, the Caesar spoke with calculated moderation. "Piso," he said, "had been his father's lieutenant and friend; and he himself, at the instance of the senate, had assigned him to Germanicus as his coadjutor in the administration of the East. Whether, in that position, he had merely exasperated the youthful prince by perversity and contentiousness, and then betrayed pleasure at his death, or whether he had actually cut short his days by crime, was a question they must determine with open minds. For" (he proceeded) "if the case is one of a subordinate who, after ignoring the limits of his commission and the deference owed to his superior, has exulted over that superior's death and my own sorrow, I shall renounce his friendship, banish him from my house, and redress my grievances as a man without invoking my powers as a sovereign. But if murder comes to light — and it would call for vengeance, were the victim the meanest of mankind — then *you* see to it that proper requital is made to the children of Germanicus and to us, his parents. At the same time, consider the following points:— Did Piso's treatment of the armies make for disorder and sedition? Did he employ corrupt means to win the favour of the private soldiers? Did he levy war in order to repossess himself of the province? Or are these charges falsehoods, published with enlargements by the accusers; at whose zealous indiscretions I myself feel some justifiable anger? For what was the object in stripping the corpse naked and exposing it to the degrading contact of the vulgar gaze? Or in diffusing the report — and among foreigners — that he fell a victim to poison, if that is an issue still uncertain and in need of scrutiny? True, I lament my son, and shall lament him always. But far from hampering the defendant in adducing every circumstance which may tend to relieve his innocence or to convict Germanicus of injustice (if injustice there was), I beseech you that, even though the case is bound up with a personal sorrow of my own, you will not therefore

receive the assertion of guilt as a proof of guilt. If kinship or a sense of loyalty has made some of you his advocates, then let each, with all the eloquence and devotion he can command, aid him in his hour of danger. To the accusers I commend a similar industry, a similar constancy. The only extra-legal concession we shall be found to have made to Germanicus is this, that the inquiry into his death is being held not in the Forum but in the Curia, not before a bench of judges but the senate. Let the rest of the proceedings show the like restraint: let none regard the tears of Drusus, none my own sadness, nor yet any fictions invented to our discredit.”

13 1 It was then resolved to allow two days for the formulation of the charges: after an interval of six days, the case for the defence would occupy another three. Fulcinus opened with an old and futile tale of intrigue and cupidity during Piso’s administration of Spain. The allegations, if established, could do the defendant no harm, should he dispel the more recent charge: if they were rebutted, there was still no acquittal, if he was found guilty of the graver delinquencies. Servaeus, Veranius, and Vitellius followed — with equal fervour; and Vitellius with considerable eloquence. “Through his hatred of Germanicus and his zeal for anarchy,” so ran the indictment, “Piso had, by relaxing discipline and permitting the maltreatment of the provincials, corrupted the common soldiers so much that the vilest of them called him ‘Father of the Legions’. On the other hand, he had been ruthless to the best men, especially the companions and friends of Germanicus, and at last, with the help of poison and the black arts, had destroyed the prince himself. Then had come the blasphemous rites and sacrifices of Plancina and himself, an armed assault on the commonwealth, and — in order that he might be put on his trial — defeat upon a stricken field.”

14 1 On all counts but one the defence wavered. There was no denying that he had tampered with the army, that he had abandoned the provinces to the mercies of every villain, that he had even insulted the commander-in-chief. The single charge which he seemed to have dissipated was that of poisoning. It was, indeed, none too plausibly sustained by the accusers, who argued that, at a dinner given by Germanicus, Piso (who was seated above him) introduced the dose into his food. Certainly, it seemed folly to assume that he could have ventured the act among strange servants, under the eyes of so many bystanders, and in the presence of the victim himself: also, he offered his own slaves for torture, and insisted on its application to the attendants at the meal. For one reason or other, however, the judges were inexorable: the Caesar, because war had been levied on a province; the senate, because it could never quite believe that Germanicus had perished without foul play. . . . A demand for the correspondence was rejected as firmly by Tiberius as by Piso. At the same time, shouts were heard: it was the people at the senate-doors, crying that, if he escaped the decision of the Senate, they would take the law into their own hands. They had, in fact, dragged his images to the Gemonian Stairs, and were engaged in dismembering them, when they were rescued and replaced at the imperial command. He was therefore put in a litter and accompanied home by an officer of one of the praetorian cohorts; while rumour debated whether the escort was there for the preservation of his life or the enforcement of his death.

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Citations and Further Reading:

Dickie, Matthew. 2010. “Magic in Roman law” in Richard Gordon and Francisco Simon. *Magical Practise in the Roman West*. Leiden: 79-104

Rives, James. 2003. “Magic in Roman Law: the reconstruction of a crime.” *Classical Antiquity* 22: 313-339.

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1. This word may possibly be familiar to you from the story of the Three Wise Men or Magi in the Christian gospels. Magus was a Persian term for priest/wise man, and it later became associated by others with magic. ↩
 2. The Romans believed that you could enchant away crops from others' fields and have them appear in your own, however improbably that sounds. ↩
 3. A hand tool that resembles a pick-axe. ↩
 4. Athens was at this point a very reduced city from its classical greatness. Its population had plummeted and it had made a series of unfortunate choices about which Roman to back in various civil wars, so it had also been sacked a few times. However, it was still an important place to Romans, and somewhere the elite went to for education and culture, and even retired to. ↩
 5. One of the courts of Athens. ↩
 6. If someone got ill, you might promise a god that you would sacrifice an animal if they recovered. ↩
 7. There is no way that Tacitus knew what Germanicus said on his deathbed. And I also suspect that Germanicus was in no condition to speak like this by this stage. ↩
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4.4: Apuleius: A Wizard On Trial

In this section you will learn:

- About Apuleius, a second century CE polymath, whose defense speech on a charge of magic you will read below;
- His background, education, and marriage to a rich widow in a town in North Africa;
- The background to his trial for enchanting that rich widow in marriage;
- His local opponents in court, who included his young stepson and the previous husband's family;
- How his opponents tried to present him to the judge, a high Roman official, as unRoman;
- How Apuleius, in turn, argued that his opponents were unRoman and he was very Roman, just like the judge;
- Why Apuleius was successful, and his opponents were not;
- About Apuleius' novel, *The Golden Ass*, packed full of witches among other things'
- Why Apuleius is the **most interesting man in the ancient world**.



The Roman forum at Madauros (modern M'daourouch in Algeria). Image by Michel-georges Bernard, from Wikimedia Commons.

INTRODUCTION TO APULEIUS

The second century CE Roman author, Apuleius of Madauros, is a truly fascinating figure for many reasons. Madauros, as you will read in his defense speech, was a town on the borders of the Roman empire in Roman North Africa. It was located in modern Algeria, and while it had been a town long before the Romans arrived, they 'refounded' it as a colony for veteran soldiers, and with the addition of these soldiers the town became patterned after a Roman town,, complete with forum and theatre.



Roman theatre in Madauros. Image from Wikimedia Commons, by Dan Sloan

Apuleius was born to wealthy parents and his father was a leading figure in their town, as he discusses below. He travelled and studied widely, spending time in Athens and Rome as well as other locations. He spoke and wrote Latin and Greek, and translated a great deal of Greek literature – in fact he wrote an enormous amount, not all of which survives. He is also the author of our only

complete Latin novel, *The Golden Ass* (often called *Metamorphoses*), a story about a student who heads to Thessaly, a remote region in Greece in search of witches, finds them, and as a result spends most of the novel as a donkey.

THE APOLOGY

One of the ways that we know about Apuleius' life is through his *Apology*, his defence speech on a charge of enchanting a wealthy widow to marry him. The widow was called Pudentila, and the brother of her previous husband objected to this strenuously, as he had hoped she would marry back into his family and bring her money with her. Her seventeen year old son, and, for a while, her older son, who had been friends with Apuleius during their studies overseas.^[1] were also part of the prosecution. The trial was held in 158 CE before the governor of the province, Claudius Maximus, and his advisory council, and presumably as many people in the town ([Sabratha](#)) and its surroundings as could fit in the semi-open space where the trial was held. It, after all, promised everything: family intrigue, love, magic, fish, good-looking philosophers, extremely rich people's private letters being read out, and more.



The ancient Roman theatre in Sabratha. Image by Ahmed A Abdurahman

First before you read extracts from the defence speech, here is a fellow North African author, the fourth century Christian, Augustine, on Apuleius' remarkably successful life, even if he did not, as Augustine points out, ever make consul or any lower position in the city of Rome.

19. Apuleius (of whom I choose rather to speak, because, as our own countryman, he is better known to us Africans), though born in a place of some note, and a man of superior education and great eloquence, never succeeded, with all his magical arts, in reaching, I do not say the supreme power, but even any subordinate office as a magistrate in the Empire. Does it seem probable that he, as a philosopher, voluntarily despised these things, who, being the priest of a province, was so ambitious of greatness that he gave spectacles of gladiatorial combats, provided the dresses worn by those who fought with wild beasts in the circus, and, in order to get a statue of himself erected in the town of Oea, the birthplace of his wife, appealed to law against the opposition made by some of the citizens to the proposal, and then, to prevent this from being forgotten by posterity, published the speech delivered by him on that occasion? So far, therefore, as concerns worldly prosperity, that magician did his utmost in order to success; whence it is manifest that he failed not because he was not wishful, but because he was not able to do more. At the same time we admit that he defended himself with brilliant eloquence against some who imputed to him the crime of practising magical arts; which makes me wonder at those who praise him, who, in affirming that by these arts he achieved some miracles, attempt to bring evidence contradicting his own defense of himself from the charge. Let them, however, examine whether, indeed, they are bringing true testimony, and he was guilty of arguing what he knew to be false. Those who pursue magical arts only with a view to worldly prosperity or from an accursed curiosity, and those also who, though innocent of such arts, still praise them with a dangerous admiration, I would encourage to pay attention, if they are smart, and to observe how, without any such arts, David became a king from the position of a shepherd, of whom Scripture has faithfully recorded both the sinful and the meritorious actions, in order that we might know both how to avoid offending God, and how, when he has been offended, his anger may be appeased.

Augustine, *Letters* 138.19

The following are extracts from his defence speech, *The Apology*,^[footnote]An Apology in Latin or Greek was a defence speech, and not an apology in the modern sense. Apuleius does not seem terribly sorry for anything he has done in his life.^[/footnote] which must have been successful as he went on to a very successful career as a public intellectual in Carthage, as one can see from Augustine's knowledge of him and his work. The extracts show the avenues of attack that were employed against him, trying to paint him as barely Roman and devious. They also show that he was very effective in showing himself to be the true Roman, and his opponents as barely literate morons, who struggled to read Greek, unlike Apuleius and the Governor in charge of the court, Claudius Maximus.

To begin then, only a short while ago, at the commencement of the indictment, you heard them say, 'He, whom we accuse in your court, is a philosopher of the most elegant appearance and a master of eloquence not merely in Latin but also in Greek!' What a damning insinuation! Unless I am mistaken, those were the very words with which Tannonius Pudens, whom no one could accuse of being a master of eloquence, began the indictment. I wish that these serious attacks on my beauty and eloquence had been true. It would have been easy to answer in the words, with which Homer makes Paris reply to Hector which I may interpret thus: 'The most glorious gifts of the gods should not at all be despised; but the things which they are accustomed to give are withheld from many that would gladly possess them.'^[2] Such would have been my reply. I should have added that philosophers are not forbidden to possess a handsome face. Pythagoras,^[3] the first to take the name of 'philosopher', was the handsomest man of his day. Zeno also, the ancient philosopher of Velia, who was the first to discover that most ingenious device of refuting hypotheses by the method of self-inconsistency, that same Zeno was — so Plato asserts — by far the most striking in appearance of all the men of his generation. It is further recorded of many other philosophers that they were very good looking and added fresh charm to their personal beauty by their beauty of character. But such a defence is, as I have already said, far from me. Not only has nature given me but a commonplace appearance, but continued literary labour has swept away such charm as my body ever possessed, has reduced me to a lean habit of body, sucked away all the freshness of life, destroyed my complexion and impaired my vigour. As to my hair, which they with unblushing lies declare I have allowed to grow long to pimp myself out, you can judge its elegance and beauty. As you see, it is tangled, twisted and unkempt like a lump of cord, shaggy and irregular in length, so knotted and matted that the tangle is past the art of man to unravel. This is due not to mere carelessness in how I style my hair, but to the fact that I never so much as comb or part it. I think this is a sufficient refutation of the accusations concerning my hair which they hurl against me as though it were something worthy of the death penalty.

5. As to my eloquence — if only eloquence were mine — it would be small matter either for wonder or envy if I, who from my earliest years to the present moment have devoted myself with all my powers to the sole study of literature and for this spurned all other pleasures, had sought to win eloquence to be mine with toil such as few or none have ever expended, ceasing neither night nor day, to the neglect and impairment of my bodily health. But my opponents need fear nothing from my eloquence. If I have made any real advance therein, it is my aspirations rather than my attainments on which I must base my claim. certainly if the aphorism said to occur in the poems of Statius Caecilius be true, that innocence is eloquence itself, to that extent I may lay claim to eloquence and boast that I yield to none. For on that assumption what living man could be more eloquent than myself? I have never even harboured in my thoughts anything to which I should fear to give utterance. Nay, my eloquence is consummate, for I have ever held all sin in abomination; I have the highest oratory at my command, for I have uttered no word, I have done no deed, of which I need fear to discourse in public. I will begin therefore to discourse of those verses of mine, which they have produced as though they were something of which I ought to be ashamed. You must have noticed the laughter with which I showed my annoyance at the absurd and illiterate manner in which they recited them.

WEALTH (OR LACK THEREOF)

Apuleius spends some time discussing the poetry they read out, including a poem on tooth powder, and poems in praise of some attractive males slaves owned by a friend, among other things. He then turns to the prosecution's charge of poverty, which he says is a compliment for a philosopher, before pointing out that he was, in fact, born into a well-off and distinguished family.

23.. I acknowledge that my father left my brother and myself a little under 2,000,000 sesterces — a sum on which my lengthy travels, continual studies, and frequent generosity have made considerable inroads. For I have often assisted my friends and have shown substantial gratitude to many of my instructors, on more than one occasion going so far as to provide dowries for their daughters. Indeed, I should not have hesitated to expend every farthing of my inheritance, if so I might acquire what is far better by contempt for it. But as for you, Aemilianus, and ignorant boors of your type, in your case the fortune makes the man. You are like barren and diseased trees that produce no fruit, but are valued only for the timber that their trunks contain. But I beg you,

Aemilianus, in future to abstain from reviling any one for their poverty, since you yourself used, after waiting for some seasonable shower to soften the ground, to expend three days in ploughing single-handed, with the aid of one wretched ass, that miserable farm at Zarath, which was all your father left you. It is only recently that fortune has smiled on you in the shape of wholly undeserved inheritances which have fallen to you by the frequent deaths of relatives, deaths to which, far more than to your hideous face, you owe your nickname of Charon^[4]. As to my birthplace, you assert that my writings prove it to lie right on the borders of Numidia and Gaetulia, for I publicly described myself as half Numidian, half Gaetulian in a discourse delivered in the presence of that most distinguished senator Lollianus Avitus. I do not see that I have any more reason to be ashamed of that than had Cyrus the Elder for being of mixed descent, half Mede, half Persian. A man's birthplace is of no importance, it is his character that matters. We must consider not in what part of the world, but with what purpose he set out to live his life. Sellers of wine and cabbages are permitted to enhance the value of their wares by advertising the excellence of the soil whence they spring, as for instance with the wine of Thasos and the cabbages of Phlius. For those products of the soil are wonderfully improved in flavour by the fertility of the district which produces them, the moistness of the climate, the mildness of the winds, the warmth of the sun, and the richness of the soil. But in the case of man, the soul enters the tenement of the body from without. What, then, can such circumstances as these add to or take away from his virtues or his vices? Has there ever been a time or place in which a race has not produced a variety of intellects, although some races seem stupider and some wiser than others? The Scythians are the stupidest of men, and yet the wise Anacharsis was a Scyth. The Athenians are shrewd, and yet the Athenian Meletides was a fool.

I say this not because I am ashamed of my home, since even in the time of Syphax we were a township. When he was conquered we were transferred by the gift of the Roman people to the dominion of King Masinissa, and finally as the result of a settlement of veteran soldiers, our second founders, we have become a colony of the highest distinction. In this same colony my father attained to the post of duumvir and became the foremost citizen of the place, after filling all the municipal offices of honour. I myself, immediately after my first entry into the municipal senate, succeeded to my father's position in the community, and, as I hope, am in no ways a degenerate successor, but receive like honour and esteem for my maintenance of the dignity of my position. Why do I mention this? That you, Aemilianus, may be less angry with me in future and may more readily pardon me for having been negligent enough not to select your 'Attic' Zarath for my birthplace.

APULEIUS ON MAGIC

Apuleius defended himself vigorously on the charge of magic, but he was also willing to claim great things for it:

25. I will now deal with the actual charge of magic. You spared no violence in fanning the flame of hatred against me. But you have disappointed all men's expectations by your old wives' fables, and the fire kindled by your accusations has burned itself away. I ask you, Maximus, have you ever seen fire spring up among the stubble, crackling sharply, blazing wide and spreading fast, but soon exhausting its flimsy fuel, dying fast away, leaving not a wrack behind? So they have kindled their accusation with abuse and fanned it with words, but it lacks the fuel of facts and, your verdict once given, is destined to leave not a wrack of calumny behind. The whole of Aemilianus' calumnious accusation was centred in the charge of magic. I should therefore like to ask his most learned advocates how, precisely, they would define a magician.

If what I read in a large number of authors is true, namely, that magician is the Persian word for priest, what is there criminal in being a priest and having due knowledge, science, and skill in all ceremonial law, sacrificial duties, and the binding rules of religion, at least if magic consists in that which Plato sets forth in his description of the methods employed by the Persians in the education of their young princes? I remember the very words of that divine philosopher. Let me recall them to your memory, Maximus:

When the boy has reached the age of fourteen he is handed over to the care of men known as the Royal Masters. They are four in number, and are chosen as being the best of the elders of Persia, one the wisest, another the justest, a third the most temperate, a fourth the bravest. And one of these teaches the boy the magic of Zoroaster the son of Oromazes; and this magic is no other than the worship of the gods. He also teaches him the arts of kingship. 26. Do you hear, you who so rashly accuse the art of magic? It is an art acceptable to the immortal gods, full of all knowledge of worship and of prayer, full of piety and wisdom in things divine, full of honour and glory since the day when Zoroaster and Oromazes established it, high-priestess of the powers of heaven. Nay, it is one of the first elements of princely instruction, nor do they lightly admit any chance person to be a magician, any more than they would admit him to be a king. Plato — if I may quote him again — in another passage dealing with a certain Zalmoxis, a

Thracian and also a master of this art has written that magical charms are merely beautiful words. If that is so, why should I be forbidden to learn the fair words of Zalmoxis or the priestly lore of Zoroaster?

But if these accusers of mine, after the fashion of the common herd, define a magician as one who by communion of speech with the immortal gods has power to do all the marvels that he will, through a strange power of incantation, I really wonder that they are not afraid to attack one whom they acknowledge to be so powerful. For it is impossible to guard against such a mysterious and divine power. Against other dangers we may take adequate precautions. He who summons a murderer before the judge comes into court with an escort of friends; he who denounces a poisoner is unusually careful as to what he eats; he who accuses a thief sets a guard over his possessions. But for the man who exposes a magician, credited with such awful powers, to the danger of a capital sentence, how can escort or precaution or watchmen save him from unforeseen and inevitable disaster? Nothing can save him, and therefore the man who believes in the truth of such a charge as this is certainly the last person in the world who should bring such an accusation.

One of the accusation against Apuleius was that he had bought special fish to work magic with. He responded by pointing out that fish were decidedly unromantic.

27. I fear, however, Maximus, that you may regard the empty, ridiculous and childish fictions which my opponents have advanced in support of their case as serious charges merely because they have been put forward. 'Why,' says my accuser, 'have you sought out particular kinds of fish?' Why should not a philosopher be permitted to do for the satisfaction of his desire for knowledge what the gourmand is permitted to do for the satisfaction of his gluttony? 'What,' he asks, 'induced a free woman to marry you after thirteen years of widowhood?' As if it were not more remarkable that she should have remained a widow so long. 'Why, before she married you, did she express certain opinions in a letter?' As if anyone should give the reasons for another person's private opinions. 'But,' he goes on, 'although she was your senior in years, she did not despise your youth.' Surely this simply serves to show that there was no need of magic to induce a woman to marry a man, or a widow to wed a bachelor some years her junior. There are more charges equally frivolous. 'Apuleius,' he persists, 'keeps a mysterious object in his house which he worships with veneration.' As if it were not a worse offence to have nothing to worship at all. 'A boy fell to the ground in Apuleius' presence.' What if a young man or even an old man had fallen in my presence through a sudden stroke of disease or merely owing to the slipperiness of the ground? Do you really think to prove your charge of magic by such arguments as these: the fall of a wretched boy, my marriage to my wife, my purchases of fish?

28. I should run but small risk if I were to content myself with what I have already said and begin my peroration. But since as a result of the length at which my accusers spoke, the water-clock still allows me plenty of time, let us, if there is no objection, consider the charges in detail. I will deny none of them, be they true or false. I will assume their truth, that this great crowd, which has gathered from all directions to hear this case, may clearly understand not only that no true incrimination can be brought against philosophers, but that not even any false charge can be fabricated against them, which — such is their confidence in their innocence — they will not be prepared to admit and to defend, even though it be in their power to deny it.

I will therefore begin by refuting their arguments, and will prove that they have nothing to do with magic. Next I will show that even on the assumption of my being the most consummate magician, I have never given cause or occasion for conviction of any evil practice. I will also deal with the lies with which they have endeavoured to arouse hostility against me, with their misquotation and misinterpretation of my wife's letters, and with my marriage with Pudentilla, whom, as I will proceed to prove, I married for love and not for money. This marriage of ours caused frightful annoyance and distress to Aemilianus. Hence springs all the anger, frenzy, and raving madness that he has shown in the conduct of this accusation.

If I succeed in making all these points abundantly clear and obvious, I shall then appeal to you, Claudius Maximus, and to all here present to bear me out, that the boy Sicinius Pudens, my step-son, through whom and with whose consent his uncle now accuses me, was quite recently stolen from my charge after the death of Pontianus his brother, who was as much his superior in character as in years, and that he was fiercely embittered against myself and his mother through no fault of mine: that he abandoned his study of the liberal arts and cast off all restraint, and — thanks to the education afforded him by this villanous accusation — is more likely to resemble his uncle Aemilianus than his brother Pontianus.

29. I will now, as I promised, take Aemilianus' ravings one by one, beginning with that charge which you must have noticed was given the place of honour in the accuser's speech, as his most effective method of exciting suspicion against me as a sorcerer, the charge that I had sought to purchase certain kinds of fish from some fishermen. Which of these two points is of the slightest value

as affording suspicion of sorcery? That fishermen sought to procure me the fish? Would you have me entrust such a task to gold-embroiderers or carpenters, and, to avoid your calumnies, make them change their trades so that the carpenter would net me the fish, and the fisherman take his place and hew his timber? Or did you infer that the fish were wanted for evil purposes because I paid to get them? I presume, if I had wanted them for a dinner-party, I should have got them for nothing. Why do not you go farther and accuse me on many similar grounds? I have often bought wine and vegetables, fruit and bread. The principles laid down by you would involve the starvation of all purveyors of dainties. Who will ever venture to purchase food from them, if it be decided that all provisions for which money is given are wanted not for food but for sorcery?

But if there is nothing in all this that can give rise to suspicion, neither the payment of the fishermen to ply their usual trade, to wit, the capture of fish — I may point out that the prosecution never produced any of these fishermen, who are, as a matter of fact, wholly creatures of their imagination — nor the purchase of a common article of sale — the prosecution have never stated the amount paid, for fear that if they mentioned a small sum, it would be regarded as trivial, or if they mentioned a large sum it would fail to win belief, — if, I say, there is no cause for suspicion on any of these grounds, I would ask Aemilianus to tell me what, failing these, induced them to accuse me of magic.

30. 'You seek to purchase fish,' he says. I will not deny it. But, I ask you, is any one who does that a magician? No more, in my opinion, than if I should seek to purchase hares or boar's flesh or fatted capons. Or is there something mysterious in fish and fish alone, hidden from all save sorcerers only? If you know what it is, clearly you are a magician. If you do not know, you must confess that you are bringing an accusation of the nature of which you are entirely ignorant. To think that you should be so ignorant not only of all literature, but even of popular tales, that you cannot even invent charges that will have some show of plausibility! For of what use for the kindling of love is an unfeeling chilly creature like a fish, or indeed anything else drawn from the sea, unless indeed you propose to bring forward in support of your lie the legend that Venus was born from the sea?

I beg you to listen to me, Tannonius Pudens, that you may learn the extent of the ignorance which you have shown by accepting the possession of a fish as a proof of sorcery. If you had read your Vergil, you would certainly have known that very different things are sought for this purpose. He, as far as I recollect, mentions soft garlands and rich herbs and male incense and threads of diverse hues, and, in addition to these, brittle laurel, clay to be hardened, and wax to be melted in the fire. There are also the objects mentioned by him in a more serious poem.

Rank herbs are sought, with milky venom dark
by brazen sickles under moonlight mown;
sought also is that wondrous talisman,
torn from the forehead of the foal at birth
before its mother could snatch it.

But you who take such exception to fish attribute far different instruments to magicians, charms not to be torn from new-born foreheads, but to be cut from scaly backs; not to be plucked from the fields of earth, but to be drawn up from the deep fields of ocean; not to be mowed with sickles, but to be caught on hooks. Finally, when he is speaking of the black art, Vergil mentions poison, you produce an entree; he mentions herbs and young shoots, you talk of scales and bones; he crops the meadow, you search the waves.

I would also have quoted for your benefit similar passages from Theocritus with many others from Homer and Orpheus, from the comic and tragic poets and from the historians, had I not noticed ere now that you were unable to read Pudentilla's letter which was written in Greek. I will, therefore, do no more than cite one Latin poet. Those who have read Laevius will recognize the lines.

Love-charms the warlocks seek through all the world:
The 'lover's knot' they try, the magic wheel,
ribbons and nails and roots and herbs and shoots,
the two-tailed lizard that draws on to love,
and eke the charm that gods the whinnying mare.

31. You would have made out a far more plausible case by pretending that I made use of such things instead of fish, if only you had possessed the slightest erudition. For the belief in the use of these things is so widespread that you might have been believed. But of what use are fish save to be cooked and eaten at meals? In magic they seem to me to be absolutely useless. I will tell you why I think so.

Many hold Pythagoras to have been a pupil of Zoroaster, and, like him, to have been skilled in magic. And yet it is recorded that once near Metapontum, on the shores of Italy, his home, which his influence had converted into a second Greece, he noticed certain fishermen draw up their net. He offered to buy whatever it might contain, and after depositing the price ordered all the fish caught in meshes of the net to be released and thrown back into the sea. He would assuredly never have allowed them to slip from his possession had he known them to possess any valuable magical properties. For being a man of abnormal learning, and a great admirer of the men of old, he remembered that Homer, a poet of manifold or, rather I should say, absolute knowledge of all that may be known, spoke of the power of all the drugs that earth produces, but made no mention of the sea, when speaking of a certain witch, he wrote the line:

All drugs, that wide earth nourishes, she knew.

Similarly in another passage he says:

Earth the grain-giver
yields up to her its store of drugs, whereof
many be healing, mingled in the cup,
and many baneful.

But never in the works of Homer did Proteus anoint his face nor Ulysses his magic trench, nor Aeolus his windbags, nor Helen her mixing bowl, nor Circe her cup, nor Venus her girdle, with any charm drawn from the sea or its inhabitants. You alone within the memory of man have been found to sweep as it were by some convulsion of nature all the powers of herbs and roots and young shoots and small pebbles from their hilltops into the sea, and there confine them in the entrails of fish. And so whereas sorcerers at their rites used to call on Mercury the giver of oracles, Venus that lures the soul, the moon that knows the mystery of the night, and Trivia the mistress of the shades, you will transfer Neptune, with Salacia and Portumnus and all the company of Nereids from the cold tides of the sea to the burning tides of love.

In this section Apuleius attacks his accusers' ability in Greek, while touting his own. Knowledge of Greek as well as Latin was one essential element of being an elite Roman citizen, and, as you can see, that sometimes extended to women as well as men, as Pudentilla clearly could write Greek very well:

87. But I cannot bring myself to believe Aemilianus such a fool as to think that the letter of a mere boy,^[5] who is also one of my accusers, could seriously tell against me. There is also that forged letter by which they attempted to prove that I beguiled Pudentilla with flattery. I never wrote it and the forgery is not even plausible. What need did I have of flattery, if I put my trust in magic? And how did they secure possession of that letter which must, as is usual in such affairs, have been sent to Pudentilla by some confidential servant? Why, again, should I write in such faulty words, such barbarous language, I whom my accusers admit to be quite at home in Greek? And why should I seek to seduce her by flattery so absurd and coarse? They themselves admit that I write amatory verse with sufficient sprightliness and skill. The explanation is obvious to everyone; it is this: he who could not read the letter which Pudentilla wrote in Greek altogether too refined for his comprehension, found it easier to read this letter and set it off to greater advantage because it was his own.

One more point and I shall have said enough about the letters. Pudentilla, after writing jokingly and ironically those words 'Come then, while I am yet in my senses,' sent for her sons and her daughter-in-law and lived with them for about two months. I beg this most dutiful of sons to tell us whether he then noticed his mother's alleged madness to have changed for the worse either her words or her deeds. Let him deny that she showed the utmost shrewdness in her examination of the accounts of the bailiffs, grooms, and shepherds, that she earnestly warned his brother Pontianus to be on his guard against the designs of Rufinus, that she rebuked him severely for having freely published the letter she had sent him without having read it honestly as it was written! Let him deny that, after what I have just related to you, his mother married me in her country house, as had been agreed some time previously!

Apuleius then moves on to a somewhat surprising praise of magic, given the circumstances:

90. I have done with this. I come now to the very heart of the accusation, to the actual motive for the use of magic. I ask Rufinus and Aemilianus to answer me and tell me — even assuming that I am the greatest magician ever — what I had to gain by persuading Pudentilla to marry me by means of my love potions and my incantations. I am well aware that many persons, when accused of some crime or other, even if it has been shown that there was some real motive for the offense, have amply cleared themselves of guilt by this one line of defense, that the whole record of their lives renders the suspicion of such a crime incredible

and that even though there may have been strong temptation to sin, the mere fact of the existence of the temptation should not be counted against them. We have no right to assume that everything that might have been done actually has been done. Circumstances may alter; the one true guide is a man's character; the one sure indication that a charge should be rejected or believed is the fact that through all his life the accused has set his face towards vice or virtue as the case may be. I might with the utmost justice put in such a plea for myself, but I waive my right in your favour, and shall think that I have made out but a poor case for myself, if I merely clear myself of all your charges, if I merely show that there exists not the slightest ground for suspecting me of sorcery. Consider what confidence in my innocence and what contempt of you is implied by my conduct. If you can discover one trivial reason that might have led me to woo Pudentilla for the sake of some personal advantage, if you can prove that I have made the very slightest profit out of my marriage, I am ready to be any magician you please — the great Carmendas himself or Damigeron or Moses, or Jannes or Apollobex or Dardanus himself or any sorcerer of note from the time of Zoroaster and Ostanès till now.

91. See, Maximus, what a disturbance they have raised, merely because I have mentioned a few magicians by name. What am I to do with men so stupid and uncivilized? Shall I proceed to prove to you that I have come across these names and many more in the course of my study of distinguished authors in the public libraries? Or shall I argue that the knowledge of the names of sorcerers is one thing, participation in their art another, and that it is not tantamount to confessing a crime to have one's brain well stored with learning and a memory retentive of its erudition? Or shall I take what is far the best course and, relying on your learning, Maximus, and your perfect erudition, disdain to reply to the accusations of these stupid and uncultivated fellows? Yes, that is what I will do. I will not care one bit for what they may think. I will go on with the argument on which I had entered and will show that I had no motive for seducing Pudentilla into marriage by the use of love potions. My accusers have gone out of their way to make disparaging remarks both about her age and her appearance; they have denounced me for desiring such a wife from motives of greed and robbing her of her vast and magnificent dowry at the very beginning of our wedded life.

I do not intend to weary you Maximus, with a long reply on these points. There is no need for words from me, our deeds of settlement will speak more eloquently than I can do. From them you will see that both in my provision for the future and in my action at the time my conduct was precisely the opposite of that which they have attributed to me, inferring my rapacity from their own. You will see that Pudentilla's dowry was small, considering her wealth, and was made over to me as a trust, not as a gift,^[6] and moreover that the marriage only took place on this condition that if my wife should die without leaving me any children, the dowry should go to her sons Pontianus and Pudens, while if at her death she should leave me one son or daughter, half of the dowry was to go to the offspring of the second marriage, the remainder to the sons of the first.^[7]

92. This, as I say, I will prove from the actual deed of settlement. It may be that Aemilianus will still refuse to believe that the total sum recorded is only 30,000 sesterces, and that the reversion of this sum is given by the settlement to Pudentilla's sons. Take the deeds into your own hands, give them to Rufinus who incited you to this accusation. Let him read them, let him blush for his arrogant temper and his pretentious beggary. He is poor and ill-clad and borrowed 400,000 sesterces to dower his daughter, while Pudentilla, a woman of fortune, was content with 300,000, and her husband, who has often refused the hand of the richest heiresses, is also content with this trifling dowry, a mere nominal sum. He cares for nothing save his wife and counts harmony with his spouse and great love as his sole treasure, his only wealth.

Who that had the least experience of life, would dare to pass any censure if a widow of inconsiderable beauty and considerable age, being desirous of marriage, had by the offer of a large dowry and easy conditions invited a young man, who, whether as regards appearance, character or wealth, was no despicable match, to become her husband? A beautiful maiden, even though she is poor, is amply dowered. For she brings to her husband a fresh untainted spirit, the charm of her beauty, the unblemished glory of her prime. The very fact that she is a maiden is rightly and deservedly regarded by all husbands as the strongest recommendation. For whatever else you receive as your wife's dowry you can, when it pleases you and if you desire to feel yourself under no further obligation, repay in full just as you received it; you can count back the money, restore the slaves, leave the house, abandon the estates. Virginity only, once it has been given, can never be repaid; it is the one portion of the dowry that remains irrevocably with the husband.

A widow on the other hand, if divorced, leaves you as she came. She brings you nothing that she cannot ask back, she has been another's and is certainly far from tractable to your wishes; she looks suspiciously on her new home, while you regard her with suspicion because she has already been parted from one husband: if it was by death she lost her husband, the evil omen of her ill-starred union minimizes her attractions, while, if she left him by divorce, she possesses one of two faults: either she was so

intolerable that she was divorced by her husband, or so insolent as to divorce him. It is for reasons of this kind among others that widows offer a larger dowry to attract suitors for their hands. Pudentilla would have done the same had she not found a philosopher indifferent to her dowry.

93. Consider. If I had desired her from motives of avarice, what could have been more profitable to me in my attempt to make myself master in her house than the dissemination of strife between mother and sons, the alienation of her children from her affections, so that I might have unfettered and supreme control over her loneliness? Such would have been, would it not, the action of the brigand you pretend me to be.

But as a matter of fact I did all I could to promote, to restore and foster quiet and harmony and family affection, and not only abstained from sowing fresh feuds, but utterly extinguished those already in existence. I urged my wife — whose whole fortune according to my accusers I had by this time devoured — I urged her and finally persuaded her, when her sons demanded back the money of which I spoke above, to pay over the whole sum at once in the shape of farms, at a low valuation and at the price suggested by themselves, and further to surrender from her own private property certain exceedingly fertile lands, a large house richly decorated, a great quantity of wheat, barley, wine and oil, and other fruits of the earth, together with not less than four hundred slaves and a large number of valuable cattle. Finally I persuaded her to abandon all claims on the portion she had given them and to give them good hopes of one day coming into the rest of the property. All these concessions I extorted from Pudentilla with difficulty and against her will — I have her leave to tell the whole story as it happened — I wrung them from her by my urgent entreaty, though she was angry and reluctant. I reconciled the mother with her sons, and began my career as a step-father by enriching my step-sons with a large sum of money.

cursed Rufinus and praised my conduct. Pontianus together with his very inferior brother had come to visit us, before his mother had completed her donation. He fell at our feet and implored us to forgive and forget all his past offences; he wept, kissed our hands and expressed his penitence for listening to Rufinus and others like him. He also most humbly begged me to make his excuses to the most honourable Lollianus Avitus to whom I had recommended him not long before when he was beginning the study of oratory. He had discovered that I had written to Avitus a few days previously a full account of all that had happened. I granted him this request also and gave him a letter with which he set off to Carthage, where Lollianus Avitus, the term of his proconsulate having nearly expired, was awaiting your arrival, Maximus. After reading my letters he congratulated Pontianus with the exquisite courtesy which always characterizes him for having so soon rectified his error and entrusted him with a reply. Ah! what learning! what wit! what grace and charm was in that reply! Only a 'good man and an orator' could have written it.

We have no record of the outcome of the trial, but presumably Apuleius was voted innocent because he published the defense speech (not a thing he would have been likely to do if he had lost) and later went on to be a celebrated public intellectual in Carthage, one of the greatest cities of the Roman world. So, if his enemies had thought they could win by making him look unRoman and an outsider, they lost. However, Apuleius had enormous advantages that other accused did not: he was a master orator, well -connected, and wealthy,

REFLECT

Do you think Apuleius was using magic? If so, for what reasons? If not, why did he get prosecuted?

MAGIC IN THE GOLDEN ASS

Clearly Apuleius knew a lot about magic: it is not just obvious from his defense speech, but from his novel, *The Golden Ass*, which is packed with witches among other things. The choice of subject matter reflects the appeal of these topics to his audience, even if they were supposed to view of magic as deeply unRoman. Apuleius' novel is set in

Apuleius wrote a novel, *The Golden Ass*, in which the hero, Lucius, goes in search of magic to Thessaly – and finds it:

1 Now, what I propose in this Milesian tale^[8] is to string together for you a series of different stories and to charm your ears, kind reader, with amusing gossip – always assuming that you are not too proud to look at an Egyptian book written with the sharpness of a pen from the Nile; and to make you marvel at a story of men's shapes and fortunes changed into other forms and then restored all over again. So I'll begin. But who is this? In brief: Attic Hymettus, the Isthmus of Corinth, and Spartan Taenarus, fruitful lands immortalized in yet more fruitful books, these make up my ancient ancestry. It was there that I served my earliest apprenticeship to the language of Athens. Later, arriving in Rome a stranger to its culture, with no teacher to show me the way, by my own painful efforts I attacked and mastered the Latin language. That then is my excuse, if as an unpractised speaker of the foreign idiom of the

Roman courts I should stumble and give offence. In fact this linguistic metamorphosis suits the style of writing I have tackled here – the trick, you might call it, of changing literary horses at the gallop. It is a Grecian story that I am going to begin. Give me your ear, reader: you will enjoy yourself. 2 I was on my way to Thessaly – for on my mother’s side our family goes back there, being proud to number among our ancestors the distinguished philosopher Plutarch and his nephew Sextus – I was on my way, I say, to Thessaly on particular business.

Apuleius, The Golden Ass 1.1

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The Golden Ass, our only complete Roman novel, is packed with witches. The narrator, Lucius, is a wealthy college student travelling to Thessaly in search of magic and witches. After introducing himself, he narrates how he overheard a story about witchcraft. Notice in this who the witches are and how they overturn what the Romans would think of as acceptable hierarchies about gender and sexuality:

I caught up with two fellow travellers who happened to have gone on a short way ahead. As I began to eavesdrop, one was roaring with laughter and saying: ‘Stop lying like that – I’ve never heard anything so totally ridiculous.’ At that I, thirsting as always for novelty, struck in: ‘No, please,’ I said, ‘let me in on this – not that I’m nosy, it’s just that I’m the sort of person who likes to know everything, or at least as much as I can. And an agreeable and amusing story or two will lessen the steepness of this hill we’re climbing.’ ‘Yes,’ said the first speaker, ‘these lies are just as true as it would be to say that because of magic rivers can suddenly reverse their flow, the sea be becalmed, the winds cease to blow, the sun stand still, the moon be milked of her dew, the stars uprooted, the daylight banished, the night prolonged.’ Then I, emboldened, said: ‘You, sir, who began this story, please don’t be annoyed or too disgusted to tell us the rest’; and to the other man, ‘But what you are stupidly refusing to listen to and stubbornly making fun may very well be a true story. Really, I think you are being ignorant and perverse when you account as a lie anything you’ve never heard of or aren’t familiar with the sight of or just find too difficult for your understanding to grasp. If you look into these things a little more closely, you’ll find out that they aren’t only reliably attested but can easily happen. Look at me, yesterday evening: trying desperately to keep my end up at dinner, I rashly tried to cram down a piece of cheesecake that was too big, and the gooey stuff lodged in my throat and blocked my windpipe -I was very nearly a goner. Then again, when I was in Athens only the other day, in front of the Painted Stoa,^[5] I saw with these two eyes a juggler swallow a sharp cavalry sabre, point first; and then the same man, encouraged by a small donation, lowered a hunting spear right down into his inside, lethal point first. And then, lo and behold, above the blade of the lance, where the shaft of the inverted weapon entered the man’s throat and stood up over his head, there appeared a boy, pretty as a girl, who proceeded to wreath himself round it in a bonelessly sensuous dance. We were all lost in amazement; you’d have thought it was Aesculapius’ own rough-hewn staff, with his sacred serpent twining sinuously round it. But sir, please do go on with your story. I promise you I’ll believe it even if our friend here won’t, and at the first inn we come to I’ll stand you lunch – there’s your payment secured.’ ‘Very kind of you,’ he said, ‘but I’ll start my story again in any case, thanks all the same.

First however let me swear to you by this all-seeing divine Sun that what I’m going to tell you really happened; and if you get to the next town in Thessaly, you’ll be left in no doubt; all this was done in public and everyone there is still talking about it. But to let you know who I am, and where I come from: my name is Aristomenes, from Aegium. Let me tell you how I get a living: I travel all over Thessaly and Aetolia and Boeotia in honey and cheese and suchlike innkeeper’s staples. So, hearing that at Hypata – it’s the most important place in Thessaly – there was some new and particularly tasty cheese on offer at a very reasonable price, I hurried off there to put in a bid for the lot. But as tends to happen, I got off on the wrong foot and was disappointed in my hope of making a killing: a wholesaler called Lupus had bought it all the day before. So, worn out by my useless hurry, I went at sunset to the public baths; and who should I see there but my old friend Socrates. He was sitting on the ground, half wrapped in a tattered old coat, his face sickly yellow so that I hardly recognized him, miserably thin, looking just like one of those bits of Fortune’s flotsam one sees begging in the streets. Seeing him looking like this, though as I say I knew him extremely well, it was with some hesitation that I went up to him. “Socrates, my good friend,” I said, “what’s up? Why are you looking like this? What have they done to you? Back home you’ve been mourned and given up for dead, and your children have been given guardians by the court. Your wife has given

you a funeral, and now, disfigured by months of grieving and having wept herself nearly blind, she's being urged by her parents to cheer up the family misfortunes by getting happily married again.[6] And here are you, looking like a ghost and putting us all to shame." "Aristomenes," he said, "you just don't understand the deceitful twists and turns of Fortune, her surprise attacks, her reversals of direction," and as he spoke he covered his face, which had become red with shame, with his rags and patches, leaving himself naked from navel to groin. I couldn't bear the pitiful sight of his distress, and tried to pull him to his feet. But he, keeping his head covered, cried: "Leave me alone, leave me, and let Fortune go on enjoying the spectacle of this trophy that she's set up." However, I got him to come with me, and taking off one of my tunics I dressed or at least covered him up with it, and took him off to the baths. I got him oil and towels and with much effort scrubbed off the horrible filth he was encrusted with; and then when he had been thoroughly put to rights (by which time I was worn out myself and was hard put to it to hold him up), I took him back to my inn, put him to bed to recover, gave him a good dinner and a relaxing glass or two of wine, and chatted to him to calm him down. 'He was just beginning to talk freely, to crack the odd joke, even to get mildly flippant and answer back, when suddenly, heaving an excruciating sigh from the depths of his chest and passionately slapping his forehead, he broke out: "Gods, what miserable luck! It was only because I went in search of a bit of pleasure, to see a gladiatorial show I'd heard a lot about, that I got into this dreadful mess. As you know, I'd gone to Macedonia on business. I'd been hard at it there for nine months, and having made a decent profit I was on my way home. Not far from Larissa, where I was planning to see the show on my way through, I was waylaid in a wild and watery glen by a gang of bandits – absolute monsters – and robbed of everything I had, though in the end I escaped with my life. Reduced to this desperate state, I took shelter at an inn kept by a woman called Meroe, not at all bad-looking for her age. I told her everything, why I'd been away so long, my anxiety to get home, and the lamentable story of the robbery. She welcomed me more than kindly, treating me first to a good dinner, free gratis and for nothing, and then to a share of her bed – she really was on heat. And that's how I came to grief: that first night with her was the start of a long and degrading association. Even the rags which the robbers had generously left me to cover myself with, even those I made over to her, along with the pittance I earned as a porter while I was still fit enough for the work. And that's how this worthy wife, so called, and the malevolence of Fortune between them have reduced me to what you saw just now." "Well, damn it," I said, "you deserve anything you get and worse than that, for preferring the pleasure of fornicating with a leathery old hag to your home and children." But he put his finger to his lips and looked utterly horrified. "Shh, quiet," he said, looking round to see that we weren't overheard. "Don't talk like that about a woman with superhuman powers, or your rash tongue will get you into trouble." "Really?" I said. "What sort of woman is this mighty bar-queen?" "A witch," he answered, "with supernatural powers; she can bring down the sky, raise up the earth, solidify springs, dissolve mountains, raise the dead, send the gods down below, blot out the stars, and illuminate Hell itself." "Come on," I said, "spare me the histrionics and let's have it in plain language." "Well," he said, "do you want to hear one or two of her exploits? There are lots I could tell you about. It's not only our own people that she can make fall madly in love with her, but the Indians, the Ethiopians – both lots – even the Antipodeans; that's nothing, the merest ABC of her art. But let me tell you what she did in full view of a crowd of eyewitnesses.

9 "When one of her lovers was unfaithful to her, with a single word she turned him into a beaver, because when they're afraid of being caught beavers escape their pursuers by biting off their balls[7] – the idea being that something like that would happen to him. An innkeeper, who was a neighbour and therefore a trade rival, she changed into a frog; and now the poor old chap swims around in a barrel of his own wine and greets his old customers with a polite croak as he squats there in the lees. Another time she changed a lawyer who appeared against her in court into a ram, and it's as a ram that he now pleads his cases. Again, the wife of another of her lovers she condemned to perpetual pregnancy for being witty at her expense; she shut up the woman's womb and halted the growth of the foetus, so that it's now eight years (we've all done the sum) that this unfortunate creature has been swollen with her burden, as if it was an elephant that she was going to produce. 10 "This sort of thing kept happening, and a lot of people suffered at her hands, so that public indignation grew and spread; and a meeting was held at which it was decided that on the following day she should receive drastic punishment by stoning to death. However, she thwarted this move by the strength of her spells – just like the famous Medea when, having obtained a single day's grace from Creon, she used it to burn up the old king's palace, his daughter, and himself, with the crown of fire. Just so Meroe sacrificed into a trench to the powers of darkness (she told me all this the other day when she was drunk), and shut up the whole population in their houses by silent supernatural force. For two whole days they couldn't undo their bolts or get their doors open or even break through their walls, until in the end they came to an agreement among themselves and all called out, swearing by what they held most sacred, that they would not lay a finger on her and that if anybody had other ideas they would come to her assistance. So she was appeased and let them all off, except for the man who had convened the public meeting. Him she whisked off at dead of night, with his whole house – walls, foundations, the

ground it stood on – still shut up, a hundred miles away to another town which was situated on the top of a rocky and waterless mountain. And since the houses there were too closely packed to allow room for another one, she simply dumped it outside the town gates and decamped.”

11 “My dear Socrates,” I said, “what you tell me is as ghastly as it’s astonishing. You really have made me very uneasy – no, you’ve terrified me. It’s not just a pinprick of anxiety but a positive spearthrust that you’ve inflicted – the fear that the old woman may invoke some supernatural aid as she’s done before to eavesdrop on this conversation. So let’s get to bed straight away, and when we’ve slept off our fatigue let’s get as far as possible away from here before it’s light.” Before I had finished offering this advice, my friend, who had been tried to the limit by so many wearing experiences and more wine than he was used to, was fast asleep and snoring noisily. So I closed the door and shot the bolts firmly, and also wedged my bed hard up against the hinges and lay down on it. At first my fear kept me awake for a time, but then about midnight I dropped off. Hardly had I done so when suddenly (you wouldn’t think a whole gang of robbers could manage such an onslaught) the door was thrown open, or rather broken down and torn right off its hinges and sent crashing to the ground. My bed, which was only a cot, with a foot missing and riddled with worm, was overturned by this violent shock, and I was hurled out of it and rolled on to the floor with the bed upside down on top of me and hiding me. 12 ‘Then I discovered that some emotions naturally express themselves by their opposites. Just as one very often weeps tears of joy, so then, utterly terrified as I was, I couldn’t help laughing at the idea of myself as a tortoise. Grovelling there in the dirt I was able from under the protection of my resourceful bed to get a sideways view of what was happening. I saw two elderly women, one carrying a lighted lamp, the other a sponge and a naked sword. So arrayed, they stood on either side of Socrates, who was still sound asleep. The one with the sword spoke first: “There he is, sister Panthia, my beloved Endymion, my Ganymede, who by night and day has played fast and loose with my tender youth, who scorns my love, and not content with calumniating me is trying to escape me. I take it I’m supposed to play abandoned Calypso to his wily Ulysses, left to mourn in perpetual solitude?” And then she pointed and indicated me to Panthia: “But here we have our friend Aristomenes the Counsellor, who is the author of this escape plan and now lies on the ground under that bed within a hair’s-breadth of death, watching all this and thinking that the injuries he has done me will go unpunished. One day – what am I saying, now, this very moment – I’ll make him sorry for his past impudence and his present curiosity.”

13 ‘Hearing this I was in agony, drenched in an icy sweat and shaking all over, so that the bed too was convulsed by my shudders and heaved up and down on top of me. Then said the amiable Panthia: “Now, sister, shall we take this one first and tear him limb from limb like Maenads, or tie him down and castrate him?” But Meroe – for she it was, as I realized from what Socrates had told me – said: “No, let him survive to give a modest burial to the body of his poor friend,” and twisting Socrates’ head to one side she buried her sword up to the hilt in the left-hand side of his throat, catching the blood that spurted out in a leather bottle so neatly that not a drop was spilled. This I saw with my own eyes. Next dear Meroe, wanting I suppose to keep as closely as possible to the sacrificial forms, plunged her hand into the wound right down to his entrails, rummaged about, and pulled out my poor friend’s heart. At this he let out through the wound in his throat, which the violent stroke of the sword had totally severed, an inarticulate whistling sound, and gave up the ghost. Then Panthia, blocking the gaping wound with her sponge said, “Now, sponge,” she said, “you were born in the sea – take care not to cross a river.” With these words they left, but first they pulled the bed off me and squatted down and emptied their bladders over my face, leaving me soaked in their filthy piss. The moment they had gone the door reverted to normal: the hinges flew back into position, the bars returned to the doorposts, and the bolts shot back into the slot. As for me, I remained where I was, grovelling on the floor, fainting, naked, cold and drenched in piss, just like a new-born baby – or rather half dead, a posthumous survivor of myself, an absolutely certain candidate for crucifixion. “What’s going to happen to me,” I said to myself, “when he’s found in the morning with his throat cut? I can tell the truth, but who’ll believe me? I can hear them now. ‘Couldn’t you at least have called for help if you couldn’t cope with a woman – a big chap like you? A man murdered before your eyes, and not a peep out of you? And how is it that you weren’t likewise made away with by these female bandits? Why should their cruelty have spared a witness who could inform against them? So, you escaped Death; now go back to him!’” ‘While I was going over this in my mind again and again, the night wore on. The best plan then seemed to be to get clear surreptitiously before dawn and to take the road, though I had no very clear idea where to go. So I shouldered my luggage and tried to undo the bolts; but the upright and conscientious door, which earlier had unbarred itself so readily, now only opened with great difficulty and after many turnings of the key. Then, “Hey, porter,” I called, “where are you? Open the front door. I want to be off early.” The porter was lying on the ground behind the door and was still half asleep. “Have some sense,” he said. “Don’t you know the roads are stiff with robbers, and you want to start out at this time of night? You may have some crime on your conscience that makes you eager to die, but I’m not such a fathead as to want to take your place.” “It’s nearly light,” I said, “and anyway, what can robbers

take away from a traveller who's got nothing? Don't be stupid: you know that ten wrestlers can't strip a naked man." But he, drowsy and half asleep, turned over in bed and muttered: "Anyway, how do I know you haven't murdered your companion that you came in with last night and aren't trying to save yourself by doing a bunk?" "At that moment, I remember, I saw the earth opening and the depths of Hell, and Cerberus hungering for me; and I realized that it wasn't in pity that dear old Meroe had spared my life, but in a spirit of sadism, saving me for the cross.

So I went back to my room to mull over the form my suicide was to take. Since the only lethal weapon provided by Fortune was my bed, "Now, now, O bed," I cried, "my dearest bed, thou who hast endured with me so many sufferings, confidant and beholder of the night's happenings, the only witness to my innocence that I can call against my accusers, do you provide me as I hasten to the shades with the weapon that shall save me." With these words I set about undoing the cord with which it was strung and made one end of it fast to a beam which jutted out under the window; the other end I knotted firmly into a noose, and then climbing on the bed and mounting to my doom I put my head into the halter. But when I kicked the support away, so that the rope, tightened round my throat by my weight, should cut off the function of my breathing – at that moment the rotten old rope broke, and I fell from where I was standing on to Socrates, who lay nearby, and rolled with him on to the floor. 17 And precisely at that very same moment the porter burst abruptly in, shouting: "Where are you? You wanted to be off at dead of night, and now you're back in bed and snoring!" At this, aroused either by my fall or the porter's raucous bellowing, Socrates was on his feet first, remarking: "No wonder travellers hate all innkeepers! Look at this officious oaf, shoving in where he's not wanted – to see what he can steal, I expect – and waking me up with his noise when I was fast asleep and still tired out." 'I then got up too, happily revived by this unexpected stroke of luck. "There, O most faithful of porters," I said, "you see my companion and brother, the one that last night, when you were drunk, you accused me of murdering"; and as I spoke I embraced Socrates and kissed him. He was shocked by the smell of the foul fluid with which the witches had drenched me, and pushed me violently away, shouting "Get off me, you stink like the worst kind of urinal", and then proceeded to ask me facetiously why I smelled like that. Embarrassed and on the spur of the moment I cracked some stupid joke to divert his attention to another subject. Then, slapping him on the back, I said: "Come on, let's be off and enjoy an early start." So, shouldering my traps, I paid the bill, and we set out.

18 'When we had gone some way the sun rose; and now that it was fully light, I looked very closely at my friend's neck where I had seen the sword go in, and I said to myself: "You're crazy; you were dead drunk and had a horrible dream. There's Socrates whole, sound and unharmed. Where's the wound? Where's the sponge? And where's the fresh deep scar?" Aloud I said: "The doctors are quite right when they tell us that eating and drinking too much causes nightmares. Look at me; I had a drop too much yesterday evening, and I passed a night of such dreadful threatening dreams that I still can't believe I'm not spattered and defiled with human gore." He smiled and said: "It's not blood but piss you were drenched with. But to tell the truth, I too had a dream, that my throat was cut; I had a pain there, and I thought the heart was plucked out of me – and even now I feel faint, my knees are trembling and I can't walk properly. I think I need something to eat to put the life back in me." "Right," I answered, "I've got some breakfast all ready for you," and taking off my knapsack I quickly gave him some bread and cheese, adding, "let's sit down under that plane tree." 'This we did, and I too had a little something. He was eating greedily, but as I watched him, I saw that his face was becoming drawn and waxy pale, and his strength seemed to be ebbing away. Indeed he was so altered by this deathly change of complexion that I panicked, thinking of those Furies of last night; and the first piece of bread I'd taken, not a very big one, lodged right in my throat and refused either to go down or to come back up. What increased my alarm was that there was almost nobody about. Who was going to believe that one of a pair of companions had been done in without foul play on the part of the other? Meanwhile Socrates, having made short work of the food, became desperately thirsty, as well he might, having wolfed down the best part of a first-rate cheese. Not far from the plane tree there flowed a gentle stream, its current so slow that it looked like a placid pool, all silver and glass. "There," I said, "quench your thirst in that limpid spring." He got up, and finding a place that sloped down to the water, he knelt and leaned over eagerly to drink. He had hardly touched the surface with his lips when the wound in his throat gaped wide open to the bottom and the sponge shot out, followed by a little blood. His lifeless body nearly pitched headlong into the water, but I managed to get hold of one foot and drag him laboriously up the bank. There, after mourning him as best I could in the circumstances, I covered my unfortunate friend with the sandy soil to rest there for ever by the river. Then, panic-stricken and in fear of my life, I made my escape through remote and pathless wildernesses; and like a man with murder on his conscience I left country and home to embrace voluntary exile. And now I have remarried and live in Aetolia.'

20 That was Aristomenes' story. His companion, who from the start had remained stubbornly incredulous and would have no truck with what he told us, broke out: 'Of all the fairytales that were ever invented, of all the lies that were ever told, that takes the biscuit'; and turning to me, 'But you,' he said, 'to judge from your dress and appearance you're an educated man – do you go along

with this stuff?’ ‘Well,’ I said, ‘my opinion is that nothing is impossible and that we mortals get whatever the Fates have decided for us. You, I, everybody, we all meet with many amazing and unprecedented experiences, which aren’t believed when they’re told to somebody who lacks first-hand knowledge of them. But I do, I swear, believe our friend here, and I’m most grateful to him for amusing us with such a charming and delightful story. Here I’ve got to the end of this long and rugged road without effort and haven’t been bored. I believe my horse too thinks you’ve done him a favour, for without tiring him I see I’ve reached the city gates transported not on his back but, you might say, by my ears.’

Apuleius, *The Golden Ass* 1.5-21

Exercise

Compare the depiction of witches in this with how Apuleius represent wizards in his defense speech. What differences do you notice?

The following is another story about witches from Apuleius’ *The Golden Ass*. In it a young man tells the tale of how he had to watch a corpse one night to prevent witches stealing it. Notice how nothing is safe from witches, and how people even have to fear them in their homes on every occasion. The first speaker is Lucius, and the scene is a dinner party at a wealthy person’s house.

‘Very true,’ I said; ‘and I don’t think I’ve ever felt freer anywhere than I have here. But I really dread the dark and inescapable haunts of the magic arts. They say that even the dead aren’t safe in their graves, but that their remains are gathered from tombs and funeral pyres, and pieces are snipped from corpses in order to destroy the living; and that at the very moment of the funeral preparations old hags of sorceresses will swoop down to snatch a body before its own people can bury it.’ To this another guest added: ‘Round here even the living aren’t spared. Somebody we know had a similar experience which left him mutilated and totally disfigured.’ At this the whole company burst into helpless laughter, and everybody’s eyes turned to a man sitting in the corner. He was put out by this unwelcome attention and muttering indignantly got up to go. ‘No, do stay for a bit, my dear Thelyphron,’ said Byrrhena, ‘and like the good fellow you are tell us your story again, so that my son Lucius here can enjoy your agreeable and amusing tale.’ ‘You, dear madam,’ he answered, ‘are always kind and considerate, but some people’s rudeness is intolerable.’ He was evidently upset, but when Byrrhena persisted and pressed him, unwilling though he was, to tell his story as a personal favour to her, he eventually did as she asked. 21 So having piled the coverlets into a heap and reclining half upright on one elbow, Thelyphron stretched out his right hand like a man making a formal speech, with the third and fourth fingers bent, the other two extended, and the thumb raised slightly as if in warning, and began. ‘I had not yet come of age when I left Miletus to see the Olympic games. Then I wanted to visit this part of your famous province, and so after touring all over Thessaly I came in an evil hour to Larissa. My money was running low, and I was looking round the town in search of some remedy for my poverty, when I saw in the public square a tall old man. He was standing on a stone and loudly announcing that if anybody was willing to watch a corpse, he would negotiate a price. “What’s this?” I asked a passer-by. “Are corpses here in the habit of running away?” “No, no,” he said. “A mere boy and a stranger like you obviously can’t be expected to realize that this is Thessaly you’re in, where witches regularly nibble pieces off the faces of the dead to get supplies for their magic art.” 22 “But tell me, please,” I said, “about this business of watching over the dead.” “First of all,” he said, “you have to stay wide awake for the entire night; you mustn’t close your eyes for a second but must keep them firmly fixed on the body. You mustn’t let your attention wander or even steal a sidelong glance: these dreadful creatures, who can change themselves into anything, will take on the shape of any animal you like to name and creep up on you in stealth – it’s no trouble to them to outwit the eyes even of the Sun or Justice herself. They can take on the forms of birds or dogs or mice or even flies. Then they lull the watchers to sleep with their infernal enchantments. There’s no end to the tricks that these vile women contrive to work their wicked will. But the fee for this deadly job isn’t as a rule more than five or six gold pieces. Oh, I nearly forgot: if the body isn’t intact when it’s handed over in the morning, whatever’s been removed or mutilated has to be made good from the watcher’s own person.” 23 ‘Having taken this on board, I summoned up my courage and went up to the crier. “You can stop shouting,” I said. “Here’s a watcher all prepared. Name the price.” “You’ll get a thousand sesterces,” he said. “But look here, young fellow: this is the son of one of our chief citizens who’s died, and you must guard his body faithfully against the evil Harpies.” “Nonsense,” I said, “don’t give me that rubbish. You see before you a man of iron, who never sleeps, sharper-eyed than Lynceus or Argus, eyes all over him.” I had hardly finished speaking when he took me straight off. The house to which he brought me had its front door closed, and he ushered me in through a small back door, then into a shuttered room where he showed me in the gloom a weeping woman in deep mourning. Standing by her, “Here’s a man,” he said, “who has engaged himself to guard your husband and is confident he can do the job.” She parted the hair that hung down in front to reveal a

face that was beautiful even in grief. Looking at me, she said: "Please, I beg you, do your duty with all possible alertness." "You need not worry," I said, "just so long as the fee is satisfactory." 24 'Agreement reached, she rose and took me into another room. There was the body draped in snow-white linen, and when seven witnesses had been brought in she uncovered it herself. After weeping over it for some time she invoked the good faith of those present and proceeded to call off meticulously every feature of the body while one of the witnesses carefully wrote down a formal inventory. "Here you are," she said. "Nose all there, eyes intact, ears entire, lips undamaged, chin in good shape. I ask you, fellow citizens, to note and attest this." The tablets with the list were then sealed and she made to leave the room. But I said: "Please, madam, will you give orders for me to be supplied with everything I'll need?" "What might that be?" she asked. "A large lamp," I said, "and enough oil to last until dawn, and warm water with flagons of wine and a cup, and a plate of left-overs from dinner." She shook her head. "You talk like a fool," she said, "asking for suppers and left-overs in a house of mourning where there hasn't even been a fire lit for days and days. Do you think you're here to enjoy yourself? You would do better to remember where you are and look sad and tearful." With these words she turned to a maid. "Myrrhine," she said, "make haste and get a lamp and some oil, and then lock up the room and leave him to his watch." 25 'Left alone with the corpse for company I rubbed my eyes to arm them for their watch, and began to sing to encourage myself. Dusk came, and darkness fell, and time wore on until it was the dead of night. My fear was at its height when there suddenly glided in a weasel which stood in front of me and fixed me with a piercing stare. I was alarmed at seeing this tiny animal so bold. "Get out," I shouted, "you filthy beast, get back to your rat friends before I give you something to remember me by. Will you get out?" It turned and left the room, at which moment I was abruptly plunged into a bottomless abyss of sleep; the god of prophecy himself couldn't have told which of the two of us lying there was deader, so lifeless was I. Indeed I needed somebody to mount guard over me, since I might just as well have been elsewhere. 26 'The crowing of the crested company was singing truce to darkness when I at last woke up. With my heart in my mouth I rushed over to the body with the lamp, uncovered its face and checked off all the features: they were all there. Now the poor weeping widow, in great anxiety, came bursting in with yesterday's witnesses and fell on the body, covering it with kisses. Then after examining every detail by the light of the lamp she turned and called her steward Philodespotus. Having ordered him to pay over the fee immediately to their trusty watchman, which was done then and there, she added: "We are most grateful to you, young man; and what's more, for this faithful service we shall from now on count you as a particular friend." Delighted at this unexpected windfall and spellbound by the shining gold, which I was now jingling in my hand, "Madam," I said, "count me rather as one of your servants, and whenever you need my services, don't hesitate to command me." The words were scarcely out of my mouth when the whole household, cursing the evil omen, fell on me with every weapon they could lay their hands on. One punched me on the jaw, another thumped me across the shoulders, and a third jabbed me viciously in the ribs; they kicked me, they pulled out my hair, they tore my clothes. So, bloodied and ripped apart like another Pentheus or Orpheus, I was thrown out of the house. 27 'While I was getting my breath back in the street outside, I belatedly realized how thoughtless and ill-omened my words had been, and admitted to myself that I had got off more lightly than I deserved. At this point I saw that the final lamentations and last goodbyes had been uttered, and the corpse had now left the house. As was traditional for a member of an aristocratic family, it was being given a public funeral. The procession was passing through the city square when there appeared an old man in black, weeping and tearing his handsome white hair. Seizing the bier with both hands he cried loudly, his voice choked by sobs: "Citizens! I charge you, as you are true men and loyal subjects, to avenge a murdered fellow citizen and punish this wicked woman as she deserves for her horrible crime. She, and no one else, to please her lover and get her hands on the estate, has poisoned this unfortunate young man, my sister's son." These tearful complaints the old man loudly directed now to this individual and now to that. The crowd began to turn ugly, the probability of the thing leading them to believe his accusation. They called for fire, and started picking up stones and egging on the street-urchins to kill her. She burst into tears (which were obviously rehearsed), and by all that she held sacred called on the gods to witness that she denied this awful crime. 28 'Then the old man said: "Suppose we leave the proof of the truth to divine Providence. We have here in Zatchlas of Egypt a prophet of the first rank. He has already agreed with me a large fee to bring back the soul of the deceased from the Underworld for a short while and restore his body to life." So saying he led forward a young man dressed in a linen tunic and palm-leaf sandals with his head shaved bare. Repeatedly he kissed the man's hands and touched his knees in supplication. "Have pity, O Priest," he said, "have pity by the stars of heaven, by the infernal powers, by the natural elements, by the silences of night and the sanctuaries of Coptos, and by the risings of Nile and the secrets of Memphis and the sistrums of Pharos. Give him a brief enjoyment of the sun and let a little light into those eyes which are closed for ever. We do not seek to resist Fate or to deny Earth what is rightfully hers; we beg only for a short spell of life so that we may find consolation in vengeance." The prophet, propitiated, laid some sort of herb on the corpse's mouth and another on his breast. Then turning eastwards he silently invoked the majesty of the rising sun, arousing among the witnesses of this impressive performance excited expectations of a great miracle. 29 'I joined the crowd, and taking up a position on a tall stone

just behind the bier I watched the whole scene curiously. The corpse's chest began to fill, its pulse to beat, its breath to come; it sat up and the young man spoke. "Why, why," he said, "have you called me back for these few moments to life and its obligations, when I have already drunk the water of Lethe and embarked on the marshes of the Styx? Leave me, I beg you, leave me to my rest." To these words of the corpse the prophet returned a sharp answer: "Come now, tell the people everything and clear up the mystery of your death. Don't you know that my incantations can call up Furies and that your weary body can still be tortured?" The man on the bier answered and with a deep groan addressed the people: "I died by the wicked arts of my new wife; doomed to drink her poisoned cup I surrendered my marriage bed to an adulterer before it had grown cold." At this the exemplary widow put on a bold front and began to bandy words with her husband in a blasphemous attempt to rebut his accusations. The people were swayed this way and that, some calling for this abominable woman to be buried alive along with her husband's body, others holding that the corpse was lying and should not be believed. 30 'However, the young man's next words put an end to their doubts. With another deep groan he said: "I will give you the clearest proof that I speak nothing but the truth, and I will tell you something that nobody else could know or predict." Then he pointed at me. "There is the man," he said, "who guarded my body. He performed his duties with the utmost alertness, so that the hags who were waiting to plunder my corpse, though they changed themselves into all sorts of shapes to achieve their purpose, failed to outwit his vigilance. At last they wrapped a cloud of sleep round him, and while he was buried in deep oblivion they kept calling me by name, until my numbed limbs and chilled body made reluctant efforts to obey their magic summons. But at this point he heard his own name, which is the same as mine, and being in fact alive, though sleeping like the dead, got up without knowing what he was doing and like a lifeless ghost walked mechanically over to the door. Though it had been carefully bolted, there was a hole in it, and through that they cut off first his nose and then his ears; so he suffered the mutilation that was meant for me. Then, so as not to give the game away, they made shapes of his missing ears and nose in wax and fitted them exactly in place. And there he stands, poor devil, paid not for his work but for his disfigurement." Horrified at what I had heard, I started to feel my face. I took hold of my nose, and it came off; I tried my ears, and so did they. Everybody was pointing at me, turning round to look at me, and there was a roar of laughter. Bathed in a cold sweat I slunk away through the crowd, and since then I've not been able to face returning home to be mocked, looking like this. So I've grown my hair long to hide my missing ears, and my shameful nose I keep decently covered with this linen pad.'

Apuleius, *The Golden Ass* 2.20-30.

Citations and further reading:

The scholarship on Apuleius tends not to be that accessible. Reading an introduction to a translation is sometimes the easiest way to place him in his context; though be aware some of the older translations have some really problematic values.

This [website](#) from a seminar has the entire text of the apology and a lot of other useful information and might be the best place to start for someone interested in his defense speech. While it is for a graduate seminar it has a lot of information that is useful if you are interested in learning more about the speech and its setting.

Benjamin Todd Lee, Ellen Finkelpearl, Luca Graverini. 2014. *Apuleius in Africa*. Routledge.

A collection of essays focused on Apuleius as a writer from North Africa. Not intended for undergraduates or non-specialists, but still worth looking through.

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1. Everyone involved was a Roman citizen, and trial was held under Roman law. ↩
 2. This is a quote from an 7th century Greek epic by Homer, the Iliad. Paris was very, very goodlooking. ↩
 3. This is the Pythagoras of Pythagoras' Theorem. He was a 6th century CE philosopher from the island of Samos - apparently a very good looking one. ↩
 4. in Greek and Roman mythology he ferried souls across the River Styx into the Underworld ↩
 5. That is, his stepson, who was nominally bringing the case. ↩
 6. Roman law was extremely strict about dowries and wives giving their husbands gifts of their property and vice versa. Dowries, except under a few circumstances had to be returned in total, and if the husband took over managing his wife's property he had

to make up any losses that had occurred under his management, so he did not steal from her or manage his own property better than hers. Wives and husbands were also not allowed to give each other gifts, out of fear that their properties would become too intertwined, so returning a woman's property and dowry on divorce was something that Roman law took *very* seriously. ↩

7. For those interested in the law on Roman dowries, here is a link to an old, but still useful dictionary entry that tries to explain the [law](#). Those who know Latin, or who have taken a course on Roman law may find Saller 1984 and Gardner 1985 useful, but they are rather technical discussions and take some fortitude to read unless you really, really enjoy legal dates. ↩
8. Milesian tales seem to have been highly pornographic and loosely related stories. ↩

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

5: Immigrants and Foreigners in the City of Rome

5.1: Rome as a City of Immigrants

5.2: Greeks in Rome

5.3: Gauls and Germans in the City of Rome

5.4: Expulsions from the City of Rome

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5.1: Rome as a City of Immigrants

Learning Objectives

In this section you will learn about:

- Rome's founding narrative as a place of asylum for men and as a forcible abductor of women;
- The level of Rome's immigration and the complexity of the various ethnic groups in the empire's greatest city;
- Attacks on Roman citizens from outside the city as outsiders and untrustworthy.

FOUNDING ROME

CONTENT WARNING

The following section includes references to sexual assault. Rome as a society was founded on the conquest, plunder, and assault of the surrounding communities, as expressed in their creation lore. Women as rape victims tend to appear quite frequently in early stories, when they appear at all.

Rome was traditionally said to have started as an asylum for runaway slaves, exiles, and others who could not return to their home cities for various reasons, as its first and legendary king, Romulus, needed citizens fast. Unfortunately for him it turned out that most of those who turned up were men, and women were necessary for there to be a next generation of Romans, and so the narrative of free(ish) immigration soon turns into a tale of abduction and rape of neighbouring women:

The Roman state had now become so strong that it was a match for any of its neighbours in war, but its greatness threatened to last for only one generation, since because they had no women there was no hope of children and they had no right to intermarry with their neighbours. Acting on the advice of the Senate, Romulus sent envoys amongst the surrounding nations to ask for alliances and the right of intermarriage on behalf of his new community. These said that these cities, like everything else, sprung from the humblest beginnings, and those who were helped on by their own courage and the favour of heaven won for themselves great power and great renown. As to the origin of Rome, it was well known that while it had received divine assistance,^[1] it did not lack courage and self-reliance. There should, therefore, be no reluctance for men to mingle their blood with their fellow-men. Nowhere did the envoys meet with a favourable reception. Whilst their proposals were treated with disdain, there was at the same time a general feeling of alarm at the power so rapidly growing among them. Usually they were dismissed with the question, "whether they had opened an asylum for women, for nothing short of that would secure for them intermarriage on equal terms." The Roman youth could barely tolerate such insults, and it began to look like there would be war.

Livy, *From the Founding of the City* 1.9

Romulus solved that problem by abducting and raping the women from a neighbouring people, the Sabines, at a giant set of games he had organized. Rome eventually expanded its citizenship to include those people and other Latin tribes, and eventually all of Italy. It also gave citizenship to local elites in the provinces, to soldiers in its auxiliary forces after they had served a set number of years, to all slaves freed by Roman citizens, and some others on individual bases. However, many Romans loathed foreigners and resented any expansion of Roman citizenship, even if they themselves had benefitted from such an expansion. They even had problems with Roman citizens who were born 70 miles outside Rome, like Cicero, and those issues were increased when Roman emperors began to be born to Roman citizens overseas, much to some people's discomfort.

XENOPHOBIA

In the Late Republic accusations about people not really coming properly from Rome were part and parcel of political invective and abuse, as this story from an ancient biography of the orator and politician Cicero.

There was a certain Octavius, too, who was reputed to be of African descent; to this man, who said at a certain trial that he could not hear Cicero, the orator replied: "And yet your ear is pierced."

Plutarch, *Life of Cicero* 26.9

Cicero himself was attacked for being an outsider to Rome, as Plutarch also tells us right after the above story:

Again, in a dispute with Cicero, Metellus Nepos asked repeatedly “Who is your father?”^[2] “In your case,” said Cicero, “your mother has made the answer to this question rather difficult.”

Plutarch, *Life of Cicero* 26.9

Cicero came from the town of [Arpinum](#), which was 100 km south east of Rome — not exactly a vast distance; it had been give Roman citizenship in 188 BC, over 80 years before Cicero was born. But still when people faced him in court they had no problem labelling him an outsider, a non-Roman. During a particularly vicious law case, on which they were on opposing sides, Lucius Manlius Torquatus, accused Cicero of aiming at being a foreigner and king (another common accusation in Rome):

And if, jurors, it is fine for me and you to be considered foreigners by the rest of the patricians,^[3] still nothing ought to be said about this ‘stain’ by Torquatus. For on his mother’s side his is a citizen of a municipal town; a man of a most honourable and noble family, but still he comes from Asculum. Either let him, then, show that the Picentians alone are not foreigners, or else let him congratulate himself that I do not put my family before his. So do not in the future call me a foreigner, in case I get you a stronger response; and do not call me a king, in case you are laughed at.

Cicero, *In Defense of Sulla*^[4] 25

Like many modern racists some in Rome blamed foreigners, whether they came there willingly or not, for their own woes. In the following the poet Juvenal, a bigot of the first water, who hated all outsiders (he also, for good measure, hated women — in fact there was little that he did not hate) attacks various groups from the east that he believes are why he cannot make decent money as a satirist.

Since at Rome there is no place for honest pursuits, no profit to be got by honest work (I have less money to-day than yesterday, and to-morrow I will make even less) I plan to emigrate to the spot where Daedalus put off his wearied wings,^[5] while I still only have a few grey hairs and my old age is green and erect; while something still remains for Lachesis^[6] to spin, and I can bear myself on my own legs, without a stick needed for my right hand. Let us leave our native land. There let Arturius and Catulus live. Let those stay in it who turn black to white; for whom it is an easy matter to get contracts for building temples, clearing rivers, constructing harbours, cleaning the sewers, setting out funerals, and selling under the spear.^[7]

Romans! I cannot tolerate that the city has become Greek — and yet how small the amount here is even of the dregs of Greece! The Syrian river Orontes has long since flowed into the Tiber,^[8] and brought with it its language, morals, and the crooked harps with the flute-player and its national tambourines, and girls made to stand for hire at the Circus Maximus. Go there, anyone who wants a barbarian whore with an embroidered turban. That rustic of yours, Quirinus, takes his Greek ‘off to dinner’ cloak and wears Greek medals on his neck smeared with foreign oil. One has left behind steep Sicyon, another Amydon, a third Andros, another Samos, and yet another Tralles, or Alabanda, to swarm to the Esquiline,^[9] and the hill called from its osiers,^[10] destined to be the very vitals, and future lords of great houses. These have a quick wit, desperate impudence, a ready speech, and more rapidly fluent even than Isaeus.^[11] Tell me, what do you think he is? He has brought with him whatever character you wish—grammarian rhetorician, geometer, painter, trainer, fortune-teller, ropedancer, physician, wizard—he knows everything.

Tell a hungry little Greek go to heaven! He’ll go. In short, it was not a North African, a Sarmatian, or a Thracian that took wings, but one born in the heart of Athens. Shall I not shun these men’s purple togas? Shall this person take precedence to me in signing his name, and recline pillowed on a more honourable couch^[12] than I, though imported to Rome by the same wind that brought the plums and figs? Is it completely worth nothing that in my infancy I inhaled the air of the Aventine, and fed on Sabine berries? Why add that this nation, most deeply experienced in flattery, praises the conversation of a moron, the face of a hideously ugly friend, and compares some weak fellow’s crane-like neck to the brawny shoulders of Hercules holding Antaeus far from his mother Earth, and is in raptures at his squeaking voice, which sounds much like that of the cock as he leaps on the hen.

Besides, there is nothing that is held sacred by these people, or that is safe from their lust. Neither you wife, nor your virgin daughter, nor her suitor, still unable to shave, nor your son, untouched before this. If none of these are to be found, he assails his friend’s grandmother. They aim at learning the secrets of the house, and from that knowledge be feared. And since we have begun to talk of the Greeks, let’s move on to their schools of philosophy, and hear the foul crime of the more dignified cloak. It was a Stoic that killed Bareas—the informer, his personal friend—the old man, his own pupil—bred on that shore on which the pinion of the Gorgonean horse lighted. There is no room for any Roman here, where some Protogenes, Diphilus, or Erimanthus reigns supreme; who, with the common vice of his race, never shares a friend, but keeps him entirely to himself. In exact proportion to the sum of

money a man keeps in his chest, is the credit given to his oath. Though you were to swear by all the altars of the Samothracian^[13] and our own gods, the poor man is believed to despise the thunder-bolts and the gods, even with the sanction of the gods themselves. Why add that this same poor man furnishes material and grounds for ridicule to all, if his cloak is dirty and torn, if his toga is a little soiled, and one shoe gapes with its upper leather burst; or if more than one patch displays the coarse fresh darning thread, where a rent has been sewn up. Poverty, bitter though it be, has no sharper pang than this, that it makes men ridiculous. “Let him retire, if he has any shame left, and quit the cushions of the knights, that has not the income required by the law, and let these seats be taken by the sons of pimps, born in some brothel or other! Here let the son of the sleek crier applaud among the spruce youths of the gladiator, and the scions of the fencing-school.

Who was ever allowed at Rome to become a son-in-law if his estate was inferior, and not a match for the dowry of the young lady? What poor man’s name appears in any will? When is he summoned to a consultation even by an aedile? All Roman citizens that are poor ought long ago to have emigrated in a body. Difficult indeed is it for those to emerge from obscurity whose noble qualities are cramped by narrow means at home; but at Rome, for men like these, the attempt is still more hopeless; it is only at an exorbitant price they can get a wretched lodging, keep for their slaves, and a frugal meal. A man is ashamed here to dine off pottery ware, which, were he suddenly transported to the Marsi and a Sabine board, contented there with a coarse bowl of blue earthenware, he would no longer deem discreditable. Here, in Rome, the splendour of dress is carried beyond men’s means; here, something more than is enough, is taken occasionally from another’s chest. In this fault all participate. Here we all live with a poverty that apes our betters. Why should I detain you? Everything at Rome is coupled with high price. What have you to give, that you may occasionally pay your respects to Cossus?^[14] So Veiento^[15] may give you a passing glance, though without deigning to open his mouth? One shaves the beard, another deposits the hair of a favourite; the house is full of venal cakes.^[16]

I need to live in a place where there are no fires, no nightly alarms. Ucalegon^[17] is already shouting for water and removing his possessions: the third story in the house you live in is already in a blaze. Yet you are unconscious! For if the alarm begin from the bottom of the stairs, he will be the last to be burnt whom a single tile protects from the rain, where the tame pigeons lay their eggs.^[18] Codrus had a bed too small for his Procula, six little jugs the ornament of his sideboard, and a little can besides beneath it, and a Chiron reclining under the same marble, and a chest now grown old in the service contained his Greek books, and mice gnawed poems of divine inspiration. Codrus possessed nothing at all — who denies that? Yes all that little nothing that he had, he lost. But the climax that crowns his misery is the fact, that though he is stark naked and begging for a few scraps, no one will lend a hand to help him to bed and board. But, if the great mansion of Asturicus has fallen, the matrons appear in mourning clothes, the senators too, the praetor adjourns the courts. Then it is we groan for the accidents of the city; then we loathe the very name of fire. The fire is still raging, and already there runs up to him one who offers to present him with marble, and contribute towards the rebuilding. Another will present him with naked statues of Parian marble, another with a masterpiece of Euphranor or Polycletus.^[19] Some lady will contribute some ancient ornaments of gods taken in our Asiatic victories; another, books and cases and a bust of Minerva; another, a whole bushel of silver. Persicus, the most splendid of childless men, replaces all he has lost by things more numerous and more valuable, and could reasonably be suspected of having himself set his own house on fire.

Juvenal, *Satire 3*

REFLECT

Does Juvenal’s rant about foreigners resemble any modern attacks on foreigners or ‘outsiders’ in your own society? If so, why do you think that might be?

There are people from Chios, Galatia, Bithynia, and more who are unhappy with their fame and power among their peoples, and cry because do not wear the shoes of the patrician. But if they get them, they cry because they are not yet a praetor, and when they are praetors, they cry because they are not consul, and when consul they cry because they didn’t get the position earlier.

Plutarch, *On the Tranquility of Spirit* 10

Sources and Further Reading:

Due to Rome’s size and status as head of the empire, it was home to many different groups, some of which lived there for generations, so there is a lot of bibliography out there. Unfortunately much of it was written by people who thought that allowing the wrong sort of people (Easterners, Jewish people, Africans, Spaniards, etc.) into Rome led to its downfall and so you have to

wade through quite a bit of offensive comments to get at the information. We have not included such works here, but you will encounter them if you look further.

Haeussler, R. 2013. *Becoming Roman? Diverging Identities and Experience in Ancient Northwest Italy*.

Noy, David. 2000. *Foreigners at Rome: citizens and strangers*. London.

Tacoma, Laurens. 2016. *Moving Romans: Migration to Rome in the Principate*. Oxford

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1. Supposedly Romulus' father was the god Mars, who was in early Rome, an agricultural god. Their mother was a Vestal Virgin sexually assaulted by Mars. ↩
 2. Implying that his father was a slave; others claimed that his father was a fuller, a person who cleaned clothes. ↩
 3. Romans were divided between plebeians and patricians. Patricians had once been the most powerful group in Rome, controlling much of the elected positions, though that had changed considerably by Cicero's day. ↩
 4. The son of the Dictator (and famous) Sulla. ↩
 5. Cumae, near Naples. Daedalus was from Athens and his feat in creating wings to fly on is mentioned again below. ↩
 6. One the three Fates, who span the threads which were the individual fates of everyone. ↩
 7. The spear was a traditional sign of a slave sale in Rome. ↩
 8. The river that ran (and still runs) through Rome. ↩
 9. One of the seven hills of Rome. ↩
 10. The Viminal Hill, the least important of the seven hills. ↩
 11. A famous Greek orator. ↩
 12. Romans dined reclining on couches, and the closer yours was to your host's couch, the more honour was being done to you. ↩
 13. Samothrace had a temple complex to the 'Great Gods'. ↩
 14. Otherwise unknown, but presumably means to refer to a noble who is hard to get access to. ↩
 15. A senator and close advisor of the emperors Nero and Domitian among others. ↩
 16. A type of gingerbread, presumably given as a gift. ↩
 17. In myth a Trojan whose house was among the first to be set on fire by the Greeks when they left the Trojan Horse and began to set fire to Troy. His name began to be used as shorthand for any neighbour whose house was on fire. ↩
 18. The attic rooms: the top floor of a Roman apartment building was the cheapest to rent. ↩
 19. Two famous Greek sculptors, hence these would be priceless, like someone giving you Michelangelo's David and his Pieta. ↩

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5.2: Greeks in Rome

Learning Objectives

- To be able to define perceptions of Greek people in Rome;
- To be able to define to what extent were contemporary Greeks accepted and respected by the Romans;
- To learn about positions close to the Roman elite that Greeks might hold (and regret)

THE ROMAN EYE FOR THE GREEK GUY

What the Romans thought about the Greeks and the Greek 'East' is complicated. They had a great deal of respect for some ancient cultures, especially (but not limited to) Greece. They also based almost all of their literature on Greek models,^[1] and some elite Romans became enthusiastic followers of Greek philosophy. However, the Romans often thought far more highly of dead Greeks than they did actual living ones, and Greece was eventually made a Roman colony. Many Greeks came to Rome as slaves, often in great numbers in the Mid-Republic and the 100s BCE, when Rome was conquering Greece and Greek kingdoms in Asia Minor. Although many Greeks had Roman citizenship, there were relatively few Greeks in the Senate for a long time.

In the following speech from 62 BCE Cicero defends a Greek poet, Aulus Licinius Archias, who was tried on charges of claiming Roman citizenship falsely. He was being tried as a way to get at his powerful patrons (sponsors), because there was certainly no real evidence against him, and plenty of evidence, as Cicero points out, in favour of him being a citizen. Cicero and he were friends as well, and he was a man Cicero respected as an individual and intellectual; here, Cicero takes a very different tone about living Greeks that he does elsewhere, and also celebrates the value of Greeks and Greek literature for Rome:

...I will soon make you think that the man in front of you, Aulus Licinius,^[2] is someone not only, now that he is a citizen, does not deserve to be cut from the list of citizens, but is worthy, even if he were not now one, of being now made a citizen. When Archias first left childhood, out of all the studies of those arts by which young boys are gradually trained and refined, he devoted himself to the study of writing. This was first of all at Antioch, for he was born and was a noble there, previously an illustrious and wealthy city, and still full of learned men and of scholarship; there it was his fate to speedily show himself superior to all in ability and by how his talents were recognized. Afterwards, in other parts of Asia and over all Greece, his arrival was so talked of wherever he came, that the anxiety with which he was expected was even greater than the fame of his genius;—but the admiration which he received when he had arrived, exceeded even the anxiety with which he was expected! 5 Italy was at that time full of Greek science and of Greek systems, and these studies were at that time cultivated in Latium^[3] with greater zeal than they now are in the same places; here too at Rome, on account of the then tranquil state of the Republic, they were far from neglected. Therefore, the people of Tarento, Rhegium, and Naples^[4] presented him with their citizenship and with other gifts; and all men who were capable of judging talent thought him deserving of their friendship and hospitality. When, because of his great fame he became known to us *in absentia* he came to Rome, in the consulship of Marius and Catulus [102 BCE]. It was his fate to have those men as his first consuls, the former who could provide him with the most illustrious achievements to write about, the other could give him, not only exploits to celebrate, but his ears and judicious attention. Immediately the Luculli,^[5] though Archias was still a young man, received him in their house. But we should attribute not only his genius and his learning, but also his natural disposition and virtue, that the house which was the first to be opened to him in his youth, is also the one in which he lives most familiarly in his old age.

6 He at that time became a friend of Quintus Metellus, the great man who was the conqueror of Numidia, and his son Pius. He was eagerly listened to by Marcus Aemilius; he associated with Quintus Catulus (the father *and* the sons). He was highly respected by Lucius Crassus; and as for the Luculli, and Drusus, and the Octavii, and Cato, and the whole family of the Hortensii,^[6] he was on terms of the greatest possible intimacy with all of them, and was held by them in the greatest honour. For, not only did every one cultivate his acquaintance who wished to learn or to hear anything, but they pretended to want to do so. In the meantime, after a sufficiently long interval, having gone with Lucius Lucullus to Sicily, and afterwards departed from that province in the company of the same Lucullus, he came to Heraclea. And as that city was one which enjoyed all the rights of an allied city to their full extent, he became eager to become a citizen of that town. And, since they thought him worthy of such a favour for his own sake, when aided by the influence and authority of Lucullus, he easily obtained it from the Heracleans. 7 He was given their citizenship in accordance with the provisions of the law of Silvanus and Carbo: "If any men had been enrolled as citizens of the allied cities, and if, at the time that the law was passed, they had a residence in Italy, and if within sixty days they had made a return or themselves to the praetor." As he had now had a residence at Rome for many years, he registered himself as a citizen to the praetor,

Quintus Metellus, his most intimate friend. 8 If we have nothing else to speak about except the rights of citizenship and the law, I need say no more. The cause is over. For which of all these statements, O Gratus, can be invalidated? Will you deny that he was enrolled, at the time I speak of, as a citizen of Heraclea? There is a man present of the very highest authority, a most scrupulous and truthful man, Lucius Lucullus, who will tell you not that he thinks it, but that he knows it; not that he has heard of it, but that he saw it; not even that he was present when it was done, but that he actually did it himself...

9 "But he had no residence at Rome." What, a man who had moved all his property and fortunes to Rome many years before he became a citizen? "But he did not report for the census."^[7] Indeed he did, and in that return which alone has the authority of a public document with the college of praetors..In these documents, therefore, you will see no erasure affecting the name of Aulus Licinius. 10 And as this is the case, what reason have you for doubting his citizenship, especially as he was enrolled as a citizen of other cities also? In truth, as men in Greece were in the habit of giving rights of citizenship to many men of very ordinary qualifications, and endowed with no talents at all, or with very moderate ones, without any payment, it is likely, I suppose, that the Rhegians, and Locrians, and Neapolitans, and Tarentines^[8] should have been unwilling to give to this man, enjoying the highest possible reputation for genius, what they were in the habit of giving even to actors!...

Cicero continues on with his enthusiastic praise of Archias before pointing out that his poetry in praise of famous Romans was useful for Rome because Greek was known far wider than Latin:

23 For if any one thinks that people get less glory from Greek verses than from Latin ones, he is greatly mistaken, because Greek poetry is read among all nations, while Latin is confined to the limits of our territory, which are narrow enough. And so if the achievements which we have performed are limited only by the bounds of the whole world, we ought to desire that, wherever our energy and our arms have penetrated, our glory and our fame should likewise reach. Because, as this is always an ample reward for those people whose achievements are the subject of writings, so especially is it the greatest inducement to encounter labours and dangers to all men who fight for themselves for the sake of glory... 25 Therefore, I suppose, if Archias were not a Roman citizen according to the laws, he could not have contrived to get presented with citizenship by some general!...

26 What more need I say? Could he not have obtained citizenship from Quintus Metellus Pius, his own most intimate friend, who gave it to many men, either by his own request, or by the intervention of the Luculli? especially when Metellus was so anxious to have his own deeds celebrated in writing, that he gave his attention willingly to poets born even at Cordova, whose poetry had a very heavy and foreign flavour. For this should not be concerned, which cannot possibly be kept in the dark, but it might be avowed openly: we are all influenced by a desire of praise, and the best men are the most especially attracted by glory. Those very philosophers even in the books which they write about despising glory, put their own names on the title-page. In the very act of recording their contempt for renown and notoriety, they desire to have their own names known and talked of. 27 Decimus Brutus, that most excellent citizen and consummate general, adorned the approaches to his temples and monuments with the verses of Attius. And lately that great man Fulvius, who fought with the Aetolians, having Ennius for his companion, did not hesitate to devote the spoils of Mars to the Muses. Wherefore, in a city in which generals, almost in arms, have paid respect to the name of poets and to the temples of the Muses, these judges in the dress of peace ought not to act in a manner inconsistent with the honour of the Muses and the safety of poets...

But even people like Cicero, who were enthusiastic supporters of (some) Greek intellectuals and the role of Greek philosophy and literature in Roman life often did not think much of many actual Greeks he met and knew. The following is much more scathing of Greeks than his defense speech for Archias. In the following letter to his brother Quintus in 49 BCE, who was governor of the Province of Asia (roughly covering much of modern Turkey) he suggests distrusting Greeks and locals was the way to go. It is important to remember that Cicero himself had been a Roman governor in the province of Cilicia in 51 BCE, and this letter was probably intended for publication and the advice to reach far more than his brother, so this is what Romans felt comfortable saying openly about Greeks:

If, however, you have found in the province itself anyone, previously unknown to me, who has made his way into intimacy with you, take care how much confidence you place in him. There may, for sure, be many good provincials, but, though we may hope so, it is risky to be certain about it. For everyone's real character is covered by many layers of pretence and is concealed by a kind of veil: the face, eyes, and expression very often lie, and speech most often of all. And so how can you expect to find in that class any who, while enduring for the sake of money all from which we can scarcely tear ourselves away, will yet love you sincerely and not merely pretend to do so from interested motives? I think, indeed, it is a hard task to find such men, especially if we notice that the same persons care nothing for almost any man out of office, yet always with one consent show affection for the praetors.^[9] But

of this group, if by chance you have discovered any one to be fonder of you—for it may so happen—than of your position, you should be happy to add such a person to your list of friends: but if you fail to perceive that, there is no group of people you must be more on your guard against admitting to intimacy, just because they are acquainted with all the ways of making money, do everything for the sake of cash, and have no consideration for the reputation of a man with whom they are not destined to pass their lives. And even among the Greeks themselves you must wary about allowing them to be close friends, except in the case of the very few – if they can be found – who are worthy of ancient Greece. As things now stand, indeed, too many of them are untrustworthy, false, and schooled by long servitude in the arts of extravagant flattery. My advice is to entertain these men with courtesy, but only form close ties of hospitality or friendship with the best of them: excessive intimacies with them are not very trustworthy, for they do not dare oppose our desires, and they are not only jealous of the Romans but of fellow Greeks as well.

Cicero, *Letters to his Brother Quintus* 1.1

The following letter was obviously *not* intended for publication. Cicero had received what was clearly an outraged letter from his brother, who was furious that Cicero had recommended to him a man who had killed his mother, and had forgotten to mention that fact. In answering Cicero tries to defend himself by basically saying the Greeks are all pretty shifty, and using the ‘I am sorry you are upset’ non-apology strategy.

Now I will answer the letters delivered to me by L. Caesius, whom, as I see you wish it, I will help in every way I can. One of them is about Zeuxis of Blaundus, whom you say was warmly recommended to you by me though a most notorious matricide. In this matter, and on this subject generally, please listen to a short statement, in case you should by chance be surprised at my having become so conciliatory towards Greeks. Seeing, as I did, that the complaints of Greeks, because they have a genius for deceit, were allowed an excessive weight, whenever I was told of any of them making complaints about you, I appeased them by every means in my power. First, I pacified the Dionysopolitans, who were very bitter, whose leader, Hermippus, I got on side not just by how I talked, but by treating him as a friend. I did the same to Hephaestus of Apameia; the same to that most untrustworthy fellow, Megaristus of Antandrus; the same to Nicias of Smyrna; I also embraced with all the courtesy I possessed the most worthless men, even Nymphon of Colophon. And all this I did from no liking for these particular people, or the nation as a whole: I was heartily sick of their fickleness and obsequiousness, of feelings that are not affected by our kindness, but by our position.

But to return to Zeuxis. When he was telling me the same story as you mention in your letter about what M. Cascellius had said to him in conversation, I stopped him from farther talk, and admitted him to my society. I cannot, however, understand your virulence when you say that, having sewn up in the parricide’s-sack^[10] two Mysians at Smyrna, you desired to display a similar example of your severity in the upper part of your province, and that, therefore, you had wished to lure Zeuxis into your hands by every possible means. For if he had been brought into court, he ought perhaps not to have been allowed to escape: but there was no necessity for his being hunted out and lured by soft words to stand a trial, as you say in your letter—especially as he is one whom I learn daily, both from his fellow citizens and from many others, to be a man of higher character than you would expect from such an obscure town as his. But, you will say, it is only Greeks to whom I am indulgent. What! Did not I do everything to appease L. Caecilius? What a man! So irritable! So violent! In fact, who is there except Tuscenius, whose case no one can help, have I not softened?

Letters to his Brother Quintus 1.2

REFLECTION

Looking at the three documents above, what do you think that Cicero’s attitude towards Greeks was? How do you account for the different way he presents Greeks and talks about them?

GREEK CITIZENS, ROMAN CITIZENSHIP

Greeks, like other provincial people, became Roman citizens by a variety of means. Some might be given citizenship as an honour for serving the Romans or a Roman well. Others might become citizens when they were freed from slavery by a Roman master (Greek slaves were quite popular in Rome, especially to teach children of the elite Greeks), or if they had served an appropriate amount of time in the auxiliary forces for Rome. Others living in Greece might be the children of Roman citizens living overseas, as the Romans did not tie citizenship into birth in the city of Rome or even Italy. If you were the child of two free Roman citizens then you were a citizen, wherever you were born.

Despite the sneers of many Romans, Rome was where fortunes and reputations were made. Some Greeks might strike it out for Rome for potential monetary rewards tutoring Romans in philosophy. However, if the second century CE writer, Lucian's '*On the Dependent Philosopher*' is right, that could be a terrible job. He starts with describing how the philosopher is first lured in by being invited by a Roman to a fancy dinner where he will be treated like a king, and how things go downhill from there:

On the whole, your feelings are mixed, your spirit perturbed and stricken with awe. One moment you are envying your host his gold, his ivory, and all his magnificence; the next, you are pitying yourself as a miserable nonentity which calls its existence life. At intervals you think, 'how happy shall I be, sharing in this splendour, enjoying it as if it were my own!' For you dream of your future life as one continual feast...Presently toasts to health are drunk. The host calls for a large goblet, and drinks to 'the Professor,' or whatever your title is to be. You, in your innocence, do not know that you ought to say something in reply; you receive the cup in silence, and are thought rude. 17 In addition to this, your host's pledge has secured you the hatred of many of his old friends, with some of whom it was already a grievance that an acquaintance of a few hours' standing should sit above men who have been drinking the cup of slavery for years.^[11]

Tongues are busy about you at once. Listen to some of them. 'So! We are to give place to newcomers! It wanted only this. The gates of Rome are open to none but these Greeks. Now what is their claim to be placed over us? I suppose they think they are doing us a favour with their babble?' 'How he drank, to be sure!' says another. 'And did you see how he shovelled his food down, hand over hand? Mannerless starving pauper! He has never so much as dreamed of white bread before. It was the same with the capon and pheasant; much if he left us the bones to pick!' 'My dear sirs' (cries number three), 'I give him five days at the outside; after which you will see him at our end of the table, moaning with ourselves. He is a new pair of shoes just now, and is treated with all ceremony. Wait till he has been worn a few times, and the mud has done its work; he will be flung under the bed, poor wretch, like the rest of us, to be a receptacle for bugs.' Such are some among the many comments you excite; and, for all we know, mischief may be brewing at this moment...

... Such, my friend, is your first dinner, the best you will ever get. For my part, give me a dinner of herbs, with liberty to eat when I will and as much as I will. I shall spare you the recital of the nocturnal woes that follow your excess. The next morning, you have to come to terms as to the amount of your salary, and the times of payment. Appearing in answer to his summons, you find two or three friends with him. He bids you be seated, and begins to speak. 'You have now seen the sort of way in which we live—no ostentation, no fuss; everything quite plain and ordinary. Now you will consider everything here as your own. It would be a strange thing, indeed, were I to entrust you with the highest responsibility of all, the moral guidance of myself and my children'—if there are children to be taught—'and yet hesitate to place the rest at your disposal. Something, however, must be settled. I know your moderate, independent spirit. I quite realize that you come to us from no mercenary motive, that you are influenced only by the regard and uniform respect which will be assured to you in this house. Still, as I say, something must be settled. Now, my dear sir, tell me yourself, what you think right; remembering that there is something to be expected at the great festivals; for you will not find me remiss in that respect, though I say nothing definite at present; and these occasions, as you know, come pretty frequently in the course of the year. This consideration will no doubt influence you in settling the amount of your salary; and apart from that, it sits well on men of culture like yourself, to be above the thought of money.' Your hopes are blasted at the words, and your proud spirit is tamed. The dream of the millionaire and landed proprietor fades away, as you gradually catch his parsimonious drift. Yet you smirk appreciation of the promise. You are to 'consider everything as your own'; there, surely, is something solid? 'It is a draught (did you but know it)

That wets the lips, but leaves the palate dry.

After an interval of embarrassment, you leave the matter to his decision. He declines the responsibility, and calls for the intervention of one of the company: let him name a figure, at once worthy of your acceptance and not hard for him to pay, which has so many more urgent calls upon it. 'Sir,' says this officious old gentleman, who has been a toady from his youth, 'Sir, you are the luckiest man in Rome. Deny it if you can! You have gained a privilege which many a man has longed for, and is not like to obtain at Fortune's hands. You have been admitted to enjoy the company and share the hearth and home of the first citizen of our empire. Used aright, such a privilege will be more to you than the wealth of a Croesus or a Midas. Knowing as I do how many there are—persons of high standing—who would be glad to pay money down, merely for the honour and glory of the acquaintanceship, of being seen in his company, and ranking as his friends and intimates,—knowing this, I am at a loss for words in which to express my sense of your good fortune. You are not only to enjoy this happiness, but to be paid for enjoying it! Under the circumstances, I think we shall satisfy your most extravagant expectations, if we say'—and he names a sum which in itself is of the

smallest, quite apart from all reference to your brilliant hopes. However, there is nothing²¹ for it but to submit with a good grace. It is too late now for escape; you are in the toils. So you open your mouth for the bit, and are very manageable from the first. You give your rider no occasion to keep a tight rein, or to use the spur; and at last by imperceptible degrees you are quite broken in to him....

To save you I have cut some of the various horrible things you start to endure as a house-philosopher, most of which require you to realize your new job is going to be not just humiliating, but underpaid. Lucian continues...

...No, your employer has no need of your services in this direction. On the other hand, you have a long beard and a venerable countenance; the Greek cloak hangs admirably upon your shoulders, and you are known to be a professor of rhetoric, or literature, or philosophy; it will not be amiss, he thinks, to have such pursuits represented in the numerous retinue that proceeds him. It will give him an air of Grecian culture, of liberal curiosity in fact. Friend, friend! your stock-in-trade would seem to be not words of wisdom, but a cloak and a beard. If you would do your duty, therefore, be always well in evidence; begin your unfailing attendance from the early hours of the morning, and never quit his side. Now and again he places a hand upon your shoulder, and mutters some nonsense for the benefit of the passers-by, who are to understand that though he walk abroad the Muses are not forgotten, that in all his comings and goings he can find elegant employment for his ²⁶mind. Breathless and perspiring, you trot, a pitiable spectacle, at the litter's side; or if he walks—you know what Rome is—, up hill and down dale after him you tramp. While he is paying a call on a friend, you are left outside, where, for lack of a seat, you are fain to take out your book and read standing.

Night finds you hungry and thirsty. You snatch an apology for a bath; and it is midnight or near it before you get to dinner. You are no longer an honoured guest; no longer do you engage the attention of the company. You have retired to make room for some newer capture. Thrust into the most obscure corner, you sit watching the progress of dinner, gnawing in canine sort any bones that come down to you and regaling yourself with hungry zest on such tough mallow-leaves—the wrappers of daintier fare—as may escape the vigilance of those who sit above you. No slight is wanting. You have not so much as an egg to call your own; for there is no reason why you should expect to be treated in the same way as a stranger; that would be absurd. The birds that fall to your lot are not like other birds. Your neighbour gets some plump, luscious affair; you, a poor half-chicken, or lean pigeon, an insult, a positive outrage in poultry. As often as not, an extra guest appears unexpectedly, and the waiter solves the difficulty by removing your share (with the whispered consolation that you are 'one of the family'), and placing it before the new-comer.

More indignities about food and being served at table have been cut...

Many are your grievances; all is one huge grievance. ²⁷ And the climax is reached when you find yourself eclipsed by some minion, some dancing-master, some vile Alexandrian rapper of Ionic songs. How should you hope to compare with the minister of Love's pleasures, with the stealthy conveyer of sexy letters? You cower shamefaced in your corner, and bewail your hard lot, as well you may; cursing your luck that you have never a smattering of such graceful accomplishments yourself. I believe you wish that *you* could write love-songs, or sing other men's with a good grace; perceiving as you do what a thing it is to be in demand. No, you could find it in you to play the wizard's, the fortune-teller's part, and to talk of thrones and in millions of money. For these, too, you observe, make their way in the world, and are high in favour. Gladly would you enter on any one of these vocations, rather than be a useless castaway. Alas, even these are beyond you; you lack plausibility. It remains for you to give place to others; to endure neglect, and keep your complaints to yourself...

Lucian, *On the Dependent Philosopher* 16-27

Lucian continues with more insults dealt out to the unfortunate philosopher, including the horrors of a trip to the countryside and being saddled with looking after the dog, as well as the difficulty of getting one's promised pay after suffering all of this. This cold sholder from Romans is a common theme in the literature of the time:

6. Nothing can be more conscientious than the man [a friend he has just referred to], nothing more reasonable, nothing more unassuming; generous also, if I am any authority, and considering the slenderness of his resources as open-handed as his means permit. His characteristics, simplicity, self-control truthfulness, an honour plainly Roman, – and a warmth of affection, however, possibly not Roman, for there is nothing of which my whole life through I have seen less at Rome than a man unfeignedly φιλόστοργος. The reason why there is not even a word for this virtue in our language must, I imagine, be, that in reality no one at Rome has any warm affection.

Fronto to Lucius Verus 163 CE

1. All genres except satire, in fact. ↵
2. This was his legal, Roman name. ↵
3. The region around Rome, now called Lazio ↵
4. All originally Greek towns in the South of Italy. ↵
5. A very famous and distinguished Roman family. ↵
6. Cicero is name dropping the names of famous Romans and distinguished families like mad here. It is not important that you know all their names, but you should know this was the cream of Roman society that Archias counted as his friends. ↵
7. Whenever the census was taken all Romans had to turn up in Rome to register themselves and their property and children. This was supposed to occur every 5 years, but during the Late Republic political chaos often meant it was impossible to hold the census. ↵
8. All were Greek cities in the South of Italy. ↵
9. Praetors, like consuls, were of a rank to be able to be appointed governor. ↵
10. Those convicted in Rome of killing their fathers were sewn into a sack with some live animals, and then thrown into water. ↵
11. Where you were positioned at a Roman feast indicated your status. The most honoured guests got to lie on couches. ↵

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5.3: Gauls and Germans in the City of Rome

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Understand who the Gauls were and their history with the Romans;
- Understand how the Romans thought of and presented the Gauls;
- Learn how Gauls were first integrated as elite citizens and senators in Rome, and Roman;
- How Gallic religious and other practices were labelled as unRoman, even if the Romans also practiced similar rites;
- And, for a bonus, to understand the particular issues the Romans had with the Germans with a very brief overview.

WHO WERE THE GAULS?

When we talk about the Gauls we are talking about a number of different Celtic peoples whose territory stretched across much of mainland Europe. Some Gallic tribes would move in response to various pressures and that might lead them into contact and conflict with Rome even early on. In 390 BCE a Gallic people called the Senones attacked and sacked Rome, for example, After that the Romans fought a number of battles and wars with different tribes, until the most famous (and disastrous for the Gauls) set of Roman-Gallic wars, those of Julius Caesar from 58-50 BCE. That ended with millions of Gauls dead or enslaved and their major settlements destroyed.



Gaul in the 1st Century BCE, with various peoples' territories labelled. Image by Department of History, United States Military Academy.

WHO WERE THE GAULS (ACCORDING TO THE ROMANS)

Plutarch gives an account of Roman feelings about the Gauls which ends in a gruesome detail about human sacrifice of Gauls at Rome:^[1]

3 1 After the First Punic War ended in its twenty-second year [241 BCE], Rome was called upon to renew her struggles with the Gauls. The Insubrians, a Celtic people inhabiting the part of Italy which lies at the foot of the Alps, and strong even by themselves, called out their forces, and summoned to their aid the mercenary Gauls called Gaesatae. 2 It seemed an amazing piece of good fortune that the Gallic war did not break out while the Punic war was raging, but that the Gauls, like a third champion sitting by and awaiting his turn with the victor, remained strictly quiet while the other two nations^[2] were fighting, and then only stripped for combat when the victors were at liberty to receive their challenge. Nevertheless, the Romans were greatly alarmed by the proximity of their country to the enemy, with whom they could wage war so near their own boundaries and homes, as well as by the ancient renown of the Gauls, whom the Romans seems to have feared more than any other people. 3 For they had captured Rome once, and from that time on a Roman priest was legally exempt from military service only in case no Gallic war occurred again. Their alarm was also shown by their preparations for the war (neither before nor since that time, we are told, were there so many thousands of Romans in arms at once), and by abnormal sacrifices which they made to the gods. 4 For though the Romans have no barbarian or

unnatural practices,^[3] but feel towards their deities those mild and reverent sentiments which especially characterize Greek thought, at the time when this war burst upon them they were forced to obey certain oracular commands from the Sibylline Books, and to bury alive two Greeks, a man and a woman, and also two Gauls, in the place called the Forum Boarium, or cattle-market; and in memory of these victims, they still to this day, in the month of November, perform mysterious and secret ceremonies.

Plutarch, *Marcellus*

Pliny the Elder, writing in the 1st century CE, had this to report during his discussion of magic:

The Gallic provinces, too, were pervaded by the magic art, and that even down to a period within memory; for it was the Emperor Tiberius that destroyed their Druids, and all that tribe of magicians and physicians. But why make further mention of these prohibitions, with reference to an art which has now crossed the very Ocean even, and has penetrated to the void recesses of Nature? At the present day, struck with fascination, Britannia still cultivates this art, and that, with ceremonies so august, that she might almost seem to have been the first to communicate them to the people of Persia.^[4] To such a degree are nations throughout the whole world, totally different as they are and quite unknown to one another, in accord upon this one point!

As that is the case, then, we cannot too highly appreciate the obligation that is due to the Roman people, for having put an end to those monstrous rites, in accordance with which, to murder a man was to do an act of the greatest devoutness, and to eat his flesh was to secure the highest blessings of health.

Pliny the Elder, *Natural History* 30.4

It is important to note that, although Pliny the Elder displays revulsion here for Gallic human sacrifice, he also tells us in the previous book (Book 29.3) that it was only in 97 BCE that the Romans had banned it as a religious practice (Vestal Virgins and their lovers excluded).

Over a hundred years before Pliny wrote, Julius Caesar wrote eagerly of the human sacrifices of the druids, as part of convincing Romans back in Rome that it was a good idea to wipe them out. As this anthology focuses on Gauls in Rome and Gauls as Roman citizens rather than the sad history of the Gallic Wars, this is not the place to discuss that, but you might find this [blog](#) post an accessible introduction to the subject.

The Romans tended to lump all northern barbarian peoples in together, and much of what they said about Gauls could also be applied to Germans. This is how Tacitus describes the Germans:

As to the Germans themselves, I think it probable they are indigenous, and that very little foreign blood has been introduced either by invasions or by friendly dealings with neighboring peoples. For in former times those planning on moving there came on ships, not land, not by land, and the limitless ocean that lies beyond the coasts of Germany, which itself defies intruders, is seldom visited by ships from our part of the world.^[5] And without even talking about the dangers of that wild and unknown sea, who would have been likely to leave Asia Minor, North Africa, or Italy, to go to Germany with its forbidding landscapes and unpleasant climate – a country that is thankless to farm and dismal to behold for anyone who was not born and bred there?

Tacitus, *Germania* 2

The Romans suffered a number of defeats at the hands of the Germans, the most famous of which occurred in the [Tuetoberg Forest](#) in 9 CE; this defeated wiped out several legions, and ended Roman expansionist plans across the Rhine. (It is a battle well worth reading accounts of, especially as it took place over three days and shows you the complete collapse of a Roman army at a level of detail we rarely get.)

GAULS AS ROMAN ELITES

But despite Roman disdain for and endless wars with the Gauls they were quick to add them not just as citizens, but as senators with significant power and influence in Roman society after their conquest by Caesar and others. In this way Caesar got to hand out rewards to those Gauls who had supported him in his conquest, and also bribe any aristocrats still left alive and with power after his campaigns. As you might expect Roman senators did not approve of this, especially as Julius Caesar used Gauls to fight against the senatorial forces in the Civil War.

24 When however Lucius Domitius, candidate for the consulship, openly threatened to achieve as consul what he had been unable to do as praetor, and to take his armies from him, Caesar forced Pompey and Crassus to come to Luca, a city in his province, where he convinced them to stand for a second consulship to defeat Domitius, and he also succeeded through their influence in having his

term as governor of Gaul made five years longer. 2 Encouraged by this, he added to the legions which he had received from the state others at his own cost, one actually composed of men of Transalpine Gaul and bearing a Gallic name too (for it was called Alauda),^[6] which he trained in Roman tactics and equipped with Roman arms;^[7] and later on he gave every man of it citizenship.

Suetonius, *Julius Caesar* 24

With the same disregard of law and precedent he named magistrates for several years to come, bestowed the emblems of consular rank on ten ex-praetors, and admitted to the Senate men who had been given citizenship, and in some cases half-civilised Gauls.

Suetonius, *Julius Caesar* 76

80 2 On the admission of foreigners to the Senate, a placard was posted: “God bless the Republic! Let no one consent to point out the Curia to a newly made senator.” The following verses were sung everywhere:

Caesar led the Gauls in triumph, led them to the Senate

Then the Gauls took off their trousers, and put on the purple stripe.^[8]

Suetonius, *Julius Caesar* 80

When Claudius decided to promote some more Gauls to senatorial status the reaction was equally adverse:

In the consulship of Aulus Vitellius and Lucius Vipstanus [48 CE] the question of filling up the Senate was discussed, and the chief men of Gallia Comata, as it was called, who had long possessed the rights of allies and of Roman citizens, sought the privilege of obtaining public offices at Rome. There was much talk of every kind on the subject, and it was argued before the emperor with vehement opposition. “Italy,” it was asserted, “is not so feeble as to be unable to supply its own capital with a senate. Once our native-born citizens sufficed for peoples of our own family, and we are by no means dissatisfied with the Rome of the past. To this day we cite examples which under our old customs the Roman character showed courage and renown. Is it a small thing that Veneti and Insubres have already burst into the Senate-house, unless a mob of foreigners, a troop of captives, so to say, is now forced upon us? What distinctions will be left for the remnants of our noble houses, or for any impoverished senators from Latium? Every place will be crowded with these millionaires, whose ancestors of the second and third generations at the head of hostile tribes destroyed our armies with fire and sword, and actually besieged the divine Julius [Caesar] at Alesia. These are recent memories. What if there were to rise up the remembrance of those who fell in Rome’s citadel and at her altar by the hands of these same barbarians! Let them enjoy indeed the title of citizens, but let them not vulgarise the distinctions of the Senate and the honours of office.”

Tacitus, *Annals* Book 11

Sources and Further Reading:

Dench, E. 1995. *From Barbarians to New Men*. Oxford and New York.

Dietler, Michael. 1994. ““Our ancestors the Gauls”: archaeology, ethnic nationalism, and the manipulation of Celtic identity in modern Europe.” *American Anthropologist* 96: 584-605.

Ferris, Iain. 2000. *Enemies of Rome: Barbarians through Roman Eyes*. Stroud.

Williams, Jonathan H. C. 2001. *Beyond the Rubicon: Romans and Gauls in Republican Italy*. Oxford.

Media Attributions

- Gaul,_1st_century_BC

1. The Greeks also did not like the Celts, so you have to take some of the information about the Romans being forced to fight the Gauls with a pinch of salt. ↩
2. The Romans and the Carthaginians. ↩
3. Plutarch is ethnically Greek, although he was also a Roman citizen and spoke and read Latin. However, he writes from the cultural perspective of the Greeks, and so he means barbarian and unnatural from a Greek perspective. From many other perspectives Roman religious practices seem extremely unnatural, one such practice being burying alive Vestal Virgins who had been found guilty of betraying their vow to remain virgin, and another being to allow major military decisions to be decided by sacred chickens. ↩

4. To know more about how Pliny thought about Persians and magic, visit the section on magic and magicians. He was not a fan of either. ↩
5. IE the southern parts of Europe. ↩
6. The larks ↩
7. Auxiliary forces like the Gauls normally fought with their own weapons and using their own tactics. ↩
8. That showed they were members of the Roman Senate. ↩

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5.4: Expulsions from the City of Rome

Learning Objectives

In this section you will learn about:

- The expulsions of various ethnic, religious, and professional groups from Rome;
- The lack of legal protection for immigrants in Rome.

EXPELLING ETHNIC GROUPS FROM ROME

Many immigrants were not citizens and that left them with very little legal protection unless they held Latin status. One action the Romans could take against immigrants was to expel them from the city, and they did so on a number of occasions and with a range of different groups from the Latins to astrologers.

The Latin allies had never anything worse to submit to than (and it was a case of very rare occurrence) the being ordered by the consul to depart from the city. And they had the power then of returning to their own cities, to their own household gods; and in that general disaster no peculiar ignominy was attached by name to any single individual. But what is the case here? Is the consul to banish, by his edict, Roman citizens from their household gods?

Cicero, *In Defense of Sestius* 30

Livy talks of another expulsion of foreigners in 187 BCE:

In Gaul the praetor Marcus Furius, seeking in peace the appearance of war, had disarmed the Cenomani who had given no provocation: 2 as a result they complained about this before the senate at Rome, and were referred to the consul Aemilius, whom the senate had authorized to investigate and decide, and after engaging in great contention with the praetor won their case. 3 The praetor was ordered to restore their arms to the Cenomani and to leave the province. 4 Then ambassadors from the allies of the Latin confederacy, who had assembled from all Latium in great numbers from every side, were granted an audience by the senate. When they complained that a great number of their citizens had migrated to Rome and had been assessed there, 5. Quintus Terentius Culleo the praetor was instructed to search them out, and, on receiving from the allies proof that any person or the father of such person had been assessed among the allies in the censorship of Gaius Claudius and Marcus Livius or after that censorship, to compel such persons to return to the places where they had been registered. 6 As a consequence of this investigation twelve thousand of the Latins returned home, for even at that time a multitude of aliens was burdening the city.

Livy, *From the Founding of the City* 39.3-4

Another expulsion of Latins took place in 177 BCE, after citizens of their home towns complained as they were still expected to supply the same number of soldiers despite the fact that many of their citizens had moved to Rome, acted like Roman citizens, and were no longer available to be sent there (somewhat ironically)

Ambassadors from the confederate states of Latium, who, after having ineffectually applied to the former consuls and censors, were at last introduced to an audience, made a powerful impression on the senate. [6] The amount of their complaints was, that “their citizens, having been registered in the census at Rome, had most of them removed there; [7] and that if this practice were allowed, it would come to pass, in the course of a very few generations, that their deserted towns and country would be unable to supply any soldiers.” [8] The Samnites and the Pelignians also said that four thousand families had emigrated to Fregellae; and that neither of these places gave less soldiers on that account. [9] That there had been practised two species of fraud in individuals changing their citizenship: there was a law, which granted liberty to any of the allies or Latins, who should not leave his offspring at home, to be enrolled a citizen of Rome; yet, by an abuse of this law, some did injury to the allies, others to the Roman people. [10] For, at first, to evade leaving children at home, they made over their children as slaves to some Roman, under an agreement that they should be again set free, and thus become citizens by emancipation;^[1] and then those men, who had now no children to leave, became Roman citizens. [11] Afterwards, they neglected even these appearances of law; and, without any regard either to the law or family, passed indiscriminately into the Roman state by migration, and getting themselves included in the census. [12] To prevent this happening again in the future, the ambassadors requested the senate order the allies to return to their respective states, and to provide by a law that no one should make any man his property, or alienate such property for the purpose of a change of citizenship; and that if any person should by such means be made a citizen of Rome, he should not enjoy the rights of a citizen.” [9]

Then Caius Claudius, by direction of the senate, proposed a law and issued a proclamation, that “any of the allies and Latin confederates, who themselves, or whose ancestors, had been surveyed among the associated states of Latium in the censorship of Marcus Claudius and Titus Quintius, or at any time since, should all return, each to his respective state, before the calends of November.” [10] Dealing with those that did not obey, was entrusted to Lucius Mummius the praetor. To the law and the proclamation of the consul, was added a decree of the senate, that “the dictator, consul, *interrex*, censor, or praetor, who then should be in office, before whom any slave should be brought, to receive manumission, should cause the said slave who was about to be made free, to make oath, that the person giving him liberty did not do it for the purpose of his changing his citizenship;” they ordered that he, whoever would not swear this oath, should not be freed. [12] The cognizance and jurisdiction in this business was, for the future, assigned to Caius Claudius the consul.

Livy, *From the Founding of the City* 41.8-9

EXPULSION OF PROFESSIONAL GROUPS FROM ROME

It was not just various ethnic groups that could be expelled from Rome; professions could also be targeted. Cicero writes about an expulsion of philosophers in 126 BCE:

They, too, do wrong who would prevent foreigners from enjoying the advantages of their city and would exclude them from its borders, as was done by Pennus^[2] in the time of our fathers, and in recent times by Papius^[3]. It may not be right, of course, for one who is not a citizen to exercise the rights and privileges of citizenship; and the law on this point was secured by two of our wisest consuls, Crassus and Scaevola. Still, to prevent foreigners from enjoying the advantages of the city is altogether contrary to the laws of humanity. There are splendid examples in history where the apparent expediency of the state been ignored out of regard for moral goodness. Our own country has many examples to offer throughout her history, and especially in the Second Punic War, when news came of the disaster at Cannae, Rome displayed a loftier courage than ever she did in success and never showed a trace of cowardice, never a mention of making terms. The influence of moral right is so potent, at it eclipses the specious appearance of expediency.

Cicero, *On Moral Duties* 3.11

Cassius Dio reports Agrippa, a friend and eventually son-in-law of Augustus, expelling astrologers, among many other actions, in 33 BCE:

43 1 The next year Agrippa agreed to be made aedile, and without taking anything from the public treasury repaired all the public buildings and all the streets, cleaned out the sewers, and sailed through them underground into the Tiber. 2 And seeing that in the circus men made mistakes about the number of laps completed, he set up the dolphins and egg-shaped objects so that by their aid the number of times the course had been circled might be clearly shown. Furthermore he distributed olive-oil and salt to all, 3 and supplied the baths free of charge throughout the year for the use of both men and women; and in connection with the many festivals of all kinds which he gave — on such a scale, in fact, that the children of senators also performed the equestrian games called “Troy” — he hired the barbers, so that no one should be at any expense for their services. 4 Finally he rained upon the heads of the people in the theatre tickets that were good for money in one case, for cloth in another, and again for something else, and he also set out immense quantities of various wares for all comers and allowed the people to scramble for these things. 5 Besides doing this Agrippa drove the astrologers and charlatans from the city. During these same days a decree was passed that no one belonging to the senatorial class should be tried for piracy, and so those who were under any charge at the time were set free, and some were given a free hand to practice their villainy in the future.

Cassius Dio, 49.43.1-5

Augustus went even further and expelled slaves and gladiators in a time of famine:

Once indeed in a time of great scarcity when it was difficult to find a remedy, Augustus expelled from the city the slaves that were for sale, as well as the schools of gladiators, all foreigners with the exception of physicians and teachers, and a part of the household slaves; and when grain at last became more plentiful, he writes: “I was strongly inclined to do away forever with distributions of grain, because through dependence on them agriculture was neglected; but I did not carry out my purpose, feeling sure that they would one day be renewed through desire for popular favour.” But from that time on he regulated the practice with no less regard for the interests of the farmers and grain-dealers than for those of the populace.

Suetonius, *Augustus* 42.3

Tiberius expelled astrologers in 17 CE amid panic over a conspiracy to overthrow him involving a Roman aristocrat who was interested in astrology:

Decrees of the Senate were also passed to expel from Italy astrologers and magicians. One of their number, Lucius Pituanus, was hurled from the Rock. Another, Publius Marcius, was executed, according to ancient custom, by the consuls outside the Esquiline Gate, after the trumpets had been bidden to sound.

Tacitus, *Annales* 2.32

The legal scholar Ulpian provides more information about the law itself:

Also banned is the crafty and stubbornly persuasive fraud of the astrologers. It is not just in modern times that this has been banned: rather, it is an old prohibition. In short, there is a decree of the senate dating to the consulship of Pomponius and Rufus that prescribes exile and property confiscation for astrologers, Chaldaeans, soothsayers, and all who do similar things – or death if the person is a foreigner.

Collatio Legum Mosaicarum et Romanarum 15.2.1

REFLECT

In the above source, Ulpian makes clear a different punishment for astrologers who were Roman — expulsion — and astrologers who were foreigners — death. How is that difference in the magnitude of punishments between ethnic groups the same today? How is it different?

EXPELLING RELIGIOUS GROUPS FROM ROME

In 19 CE he expelled the Jews, along with worshippers of Isis:

85 1 Another debate dealt with the proscription of the Egyptian and Jewish rites, and a senatorial edict directed that four thousand descendants of enfranchised slaves, tainted with that superstition and suitable in point of age, were to be shipped to Sardinia and there employed in suppressing banditry: “if they succumbed to the pestilential climate, it was a cheap loss.” The rest had orders to leave Italy, unless they had renounced their impious ceremonial by a given date.

Tacitus, *Annals* 85

Here is Suetonius describing the same events, along with some dubious claims about Tiberius getting rid of foreign rituals among the Romans.

36 1 He abolished foreign cults, especially the Egyptian and the Jewish rites, compelling all who were addicted to such superstitions to burn their religious vestments and all their paraphernalia. Those of the Jews who were of military age he assigned to provinces of less healthy climate, ostensibly to serve in the army; the others of that same race or of similar beliefs he banished from the city, on pain of slavery for life if they did not obey. He banished the astrologers as well, but pardoned those who begged for forgiveness and promised to give up their art.

Suetonius, *Tiberius* 36.1

Despite this, he was incredibly reliant on astrology as Suetonius also tells us:

69 1 Although somewhat neglectful of the gods and of religious matters, being addicted to astrology and firmly convinced that everything was in the hands of fate, he was nevertheless immoderately afraid of thunder. Whenever the sky was lowering, he always wore a laurel wreath, because it is said that that kind of leaf is not struck by lightning.

Suetonius, *Tiberius* 69.1

Sources and further reading:

Ripat, Pauline (2011). “Expelling Misconceptions: Astrologers at Rome.” *Classical Philology* 106: 115-154

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1. Any slave freed by a Roman citizen became automatically a Roman citizen. It seems unlikely that this was happening a lot. ↩
 2. M. Iunius Pennus, [pb_glossary id="620"]tribune of the plebs[/pb_glossary] 126 BCE. ↩
 3. C. Papius, tribune of the plebs 65 BCE, had a law passed that expelled all foreigners from Rome. ↩
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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

6: Sexuality and Gender

6.1: Same Sex Desire: Men

6.2: Pathicus

6.3: Same Sex Desire: Women

6.4: Intersex Individuals and Transitioning in Ancient Rome

6.5: Eunuchs

6.6: Case Study: Transgender Men in Lucian's Dialogue of the Courtesans

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6.1: Same Sex Desire: Men

SAME-SEX DESIRE: MEN

The Roman world is very different from the one which we inhabit and thus, we should try not to impose our understandings of sexuality or the terms we use onto the ancients as we try to understand sexuality in antiquity. For example, in Latin, there is no equivalent for the terms, 'homosexual,' 'bisexual,' or 'heterosexual.'

To a Roman, sexual activity took place between a 'penetrator' and a 'penetrated' and in an ideal situation, sexual roles and activity were supposed to reflect one's social status and gender. The 'active' role was to be played by someone with social and political power over the one who played the 'passive' role. For a Roman citizen man, there was no stigma attached with being sexually attracted to a man or to a woman. There was, however, stigma directed towards men who took pleasure in playing the passive role in sexual activities. Thus, a Roman citizen man who enjoyed playing the passive role faced stigma by Roman society. These men were referred to as *pathici* (singular *pathicus*). For more on the *pathicus*, see [the section on pathici](#).

CONTENT WARNING

The following passage includes references to activities where the consent for sexual interactions are dubious at best due to the nature of sex work and the age of the individuals involved. Pederasty, or the sexual relationship between an adult male and a younger male (who were underage by modern definition and also often enslaved), did take place in Rome.

Issues also arose when situations grew to be considered 'excessive' by Roman standards. What was upsetting about the situation in the passage below was not sexual desire between men but the excess.

For some of them had abandoned themselves to love affairs with boys and others to the society of escorts, and many to musical entertainments and banquets, and the extravagance they involve, having in the course of the war with Perseus^[1] been speedily infected by the Greek lack of boundaries^[2] in these respects. So great in fact was the lack of restraint among the young men in such matters, that many paid a talent for a male favourite and many three hundred drachmas for a jar of fish eggs. This aroused the indignation of Cato [the Elder], who said once in a public speech that it was the surest sign of deterioration in the republic when pretty boys fetch more than fields, and jars of fish eggs more than ploughmen.

Polybius, *Book 31*



A bearded man having anal sex with a beardless youth, side A of the so-called Warren Cup. Roman artwork, Circa, mid 1st century, CE.

THE CINAEDI

The *cinaedus* (plural *cinaedi*) described a man who was considered effeminate by Roman society. It was originally a Greek term (*kinaidos*)^[3] which described an effeminate dancer from lands further east. What differentiated a *cinaedus* from a ‘proper’ Roman was their hairstyle, way of dress, gait, and their love of dance at parties. Although the implication that a *cinaedus* enjoyed being a passive partner was part of the term, people who were described as *cinaedus* were not necessarily men who enjoyed anal penetration. Many descriptions of *cinaedi* include their passions with women.

What the Romans found uncomfortable with individuals they labeled as *cinaedi* was not their preference in sexual partners but their lack of self-control in their excessive sexual activity and their lack of interest in conforming with the Roman ideals of masculinity.

CONTENT WARNING

The passages below, while not originally meant to be homophobic, can feel as such to the modern reader. The misogyny, however, is as present then as it is now.

“Whenever a *cinaedus* is kept he taints the household. Folks let these people eat and drink with them, and merely have the vessels washed, not smashed to pieces as they should be when such lips have touched them. So even the lanista’s establishment is better

ordered than yours, for he separates the vile from the decent, and sequesters even from their fellow-retiarrii ^[4] the wearers of the ill-famed tunic ^[5] in the training-school, and even in prison, such creatures herd apart; but your wife condemns you to drink out of the same cup as these gentry, with whom the poorest pleb ^[6] would refuse to sip the finest wine. Women then consult about marriage and divorce, with their society do they relieve boredom or business, from them do they learn lascivious moves and whatever else the teacher knows. But beware! that teacher is not always what he seems: true, he darkens his eyes and dresses like a woman, but adultery is his design. Mistrust him the more for his show of effeminacy; he is a brave man in the sheets; there Triphallus ^[7] drops the mask of Thais ^{[8][9]}. Who are you fooling? Not me! Play this farce to those who cannot see through the mask. I bet you are every inch a man; do you admit it, or must we wring the truth out of the female slaves ^[10]?”

Juvenal, *Satire 6*

This nicely suits the disgusting *cinaedi*, Mamurra ^[11] and *pathicus* [Julius] Caesar. It's no wonder: they have similar stains —the one from the City ^[12], the other, Formian ^[13]—which stay deep-marked and can not be washed off. Diseased twins, both learned, both in one bed, equally voracious adulterers, allied rivals of girls. This nicely suits the disgusting *cinaedi*.

Catullus, *Poem 57*

I did not call you, Coracinus, a *cinaedus* ; I am not so rash nor bold, nor am I a person to utter lies willingly. If I did call you a *cinaedus* , Coracinus, may I find the bottle of Pontia and the goblet of Metilus ^[14] hostile to me; I swear to you by the Syrian swellings and Phrygian madness ^[15]. What have I said? It was light and silly: but you yourself will not deny this well known fact: , I said, Coracinus, that you go down on women ^[16].

Martial 4.43

Sources and Further Reading:

Ripat, P., Nikolic, M., & Gibbs, M. (2014). Themes in Roman society and culture: An introduction to ancient Rome. Don Mills, Ontario: Oxford University Press.

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1. This is referring to Third Macedonian War (171–168 BCE) between Rome and Macedon. Perseus was the king of Macedon at the time. [↩](#)
 2. A Roman stereotype. [↩](#)
 3. Interesting enough, there has been debate on whether or not this term actually reflected on reality. [↩](#)
 4. Two types of [gladiators](#). [↩](#)
 5. There is uncertainty, but as this sentence appears to rank the different statuses of gladiator, we can assume that the ones who wore the tunic in question are ranked lower than the former. [↩](#)
 6. In early Roman history, this term refers to anyone who was not of an aristocratic family line. Later, its definition expands to cover citizens who did not hold a certain amount of wealth. [↩](#)
 7. Another name of the deity Priapus, a god known for his large penis. [↩](#)
 8. Most likely refers to the mistress of Ptolemy I Soter (367 BCE–282 BCE), one of Alexander the Great's generals and founder of the Ptolemaic Dynasty in Egypt. [↩](#)
 9. The *cinaedus* is being compared to an actor in pantomime play [↩](#)
 10. Slaves were tortured for their testimonies in court as the Romans believed that those enslaved will only give the truth under torture [↩](#)
 11. Mamurra was *praefectus fabrum* under Julius Caesar in Spain 60-61 BCE; he became extremely wealthy which obviously sent Catullus over the edge as he wrote several poems like this about him; he may have been related to Vitruvius. [↩](#)
 12. i.e. Rome [↩](#)
 13. A city which lies between Rome and the coastal Naples [↩](#)
 14. Two types of poisons. [↩](#)
 15. He is referring to the religious rites of worshipers of the goddesses Isis and Cybele, respectively. [↩](#)
 16. Taking enjoyment in giving oral sex was looked down on by Roman society. [↩](#)

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6.2: Pathicus

DEFINING PATHICUS

Pathicus (Plural: *Pathici*)

There were several terms the Romans used to describe the behaviour of men who experienced same-sex desire in what they felt were inappropriate ways. These include: *mollis* (plural: *molles*, soft), *cinaedus* (plural: *cinaedi*, originally a term for a Greek dancer), *scortum* (plural: *scorta*, a general word for sex workers, but frequently used for males), *exsoletus* (plural: *exsoleti*, specifically for male sex workers, literally means “grown-up man”). When applying these terms to men, Roman authors implied or explicitly stated that these men were the passive partners in their relations with other men. Most often these terms were used contemptuously by the Romans, with few examples such as the Satyricon by Petronius Arbiter having empathetic portrayals of male same-sex desire.^[1]

Passive partners in male-male sexual relationships were called *pathici* (singular *pathicus*). The word is apparently derived from the Greek *pathikos*, a word which does not exist in any surviving ancient Greek texts, and *paskhein*, a greek verb which means “to submit” in sexual contexts.^[2] As a general, but not all-encompassing statement, Roman sexuality was concerned with a penetrator/passive binary. Passive partners in sexual relationships were viewed as lesser and weaker and were the object of much scorn in surviving literature. People who did not fit into this rigid view of sexuality faced both social and legal discrimination.

HEAD SCRATCHING QUESTIONS: WHO IS A PATHICUS

In the Late Republic in particular, Roman politicians would call each other *pathici* as an insult and as an attempt at discrediting each other. While these insults are hard to read as anything but, they do shed light on how the Roman elite felt about *pathici*. Even though these men were tolerated, they offended the Roman concept of manly excellence: *virtus*. To the male Roman majority, being anally penetrated meant being labelled as “other” or “unRoman”. Being designated a *pathicus* by the state had legal consequences, which will be discussed below. These men existed and may have represented a counterculture which deeply troubled the hegemony.

CONTENT WARNING

The following section includes descriptions of sexual violence.

Here, Seneca the Younger is describing how one can spot certain kinds of people by their body language. A man touching his finger to his head was thought by the Romans to be a sign that he is *pathicus*.

If you mark them carefully, all acts are always significant, and you can gauge character by even the slightest signs. The lecherous man is revealed by his walk, by a movement of the hand, sometimes by a single answer, by his touching his head with a finger, by the shifting of his eye.

Seneca the Younger, *Moral Letters*.52.12 Loeb Classical library

Here is Juvenal making a similar point. Note that Seneca was writing mid-1st century CE and Juvenal was writing late 1st century/early 2nd century CE. Men were not supposed to care too much about the way they looked; if a man had carefully constructed hair, he might only use a finger to scratch his head, thereby not ruining his hairdo. The Romans thought that men who cared for their looks too much must be *pathici*.

Fear not, you will never lack a pathicus friend as long as these seven hills^[3] stand and are safe; from every direction they will flock to those hills in carts and ships, scratching their head with one finger.

Juvenal, *Satire* 9.130-3

Plutarch echoes the same sentiment here. In 56 BCE, Publius Clodius went after the famous Roman general Pompey the Great for scratching his head with one finger.

And finally, when Pompey appeared at a public trial, Clodius, having at his beck and call a rabble of the lewdest and most arrogant thugs, stood in a conspicuous place and put to them such questions as these: “Who is a lustful general?” “Who is the man looking for a man?” “Who scratches his head with one finger?” And they, like a chorus trained in responsive song would answer each question by shouting out “Pompey” every time he shook his toga.

Plutarch, *Life of Pompey* 48.7

Pompey's enemy, Julius Caesar was also attacked for similar reasons, something Suetonius reports in his biography:

45.2 [Julius Caesar] took too-good care of his person, being not only carefully trimmed and shaved, but even having extra hair plucked out, as some have charged. while his baldness was a disfigurement which troubled him greatly, since he found that it was often the subject of his detractors' insults. Because of it he used to comb forward his thin locks from the crown of his head, and of all the honours voted him by the senate and people there was none which he received or made use of more gladly than the privilege of wearing a laurel wreath at all times. They say, too, that he was remarkable in his dress; that he wore a senator's tunic with fringed sleeves reaching to the wrist, ^[4] and always had a belt over it, though rather a loose one; and this, they say, was the occasion of Sulla's witticism, when he often warned the nobles to keep an eye on the badly-belted boy.

Suetonius, *Julius Caesar* 45.2

PATHICI IN ROMAN LAW

In his Satire Two, Juvenal mentions the *Lex Scantinia*, a Republican law of uncertain date, which outlined *stuprum* (the Latin word for sexual dishonour, which had legal consequences). The law itself was not preserved so we can only infer its contents through other written sources. Here, Juvenal is disgusted that effeminate (*mollis*) men associate together. This is perhaps evidence that men who experienced same-sex desire associated with each other in Rome, forming their own social circles. Since Juvenal was writing anonymously, some scholars believe that he was using fake names in the place of real people so that he would not be found out. These people likely would have been well-known in Rome; possibly the elites of the late first century CE.

But if it's a matter of waking up laws and statutes, it's the Scantinian law which should be summoned before all the rest. Look at men (*viri*) first, subject them to scrutiny. They behave worse, but they've got safety in numbers and in their phalanxes, with shield overlapping shield. The solidarity between effeminates (*molles*) is enormous. You won't find any example so revolting in our sex. Tedia doesn't tongue (*lambit*) Cluvia, nor Flora Catulla, but Hispo submits to young men and turns pale from both diseases.

Juvenal, *Satire* 2.44-47 Taylor (Pathici associate with each other)

Here is a part of the Praetorian Edict that outlines who could bring cases to court. The Romans wanted to limit the amount of court cases and prevented "dishonourable" people from bringing forth lawsuits. The law bars men "who submitted his own body to womanly things" (i.e. have been the receptive partner during anal intercourse) from bringing cases to court on behalf of others. However, these men could still bring cases to court for themselves. This portion of the law exempts men who have been sexually assaulted in battle or by bandits. We are not sure how a magistrate or judge would determine if a man was a *pathicus*; it most likely would have been left up to accusations from others or a judgement of a man's appearance and reputation.

Ulpian, Edict, book 6: The praetor issued this title for the sake of taking into account and protecting his position and for the sake of his own dignity, to prevent applications being made before him without restriction by all and sundry. 1. For this purpose he distinguished three classes. Some people he refused to make applications at all, others he permitted to do so only on their own behalf... 6 He also forbids a man who submitted his own body to womanly things make applications on behalf of others. However, anyone raped by the violence of robbers or the enemy ought not to be blacklisted, as Pomponius also says.

Justinian, *Digest* 3.1.1.1-6

Juvenal describes that a man named Gracchus^[5] is giving a dowry to a trumpeter who is marrying a man. Marriages between two members of the same sex would never have been officially recognized by the Roman state. However, the ceremony for these two men is implied to be the same as a Roman state approved marriage. The dowry was supposed to be given for the maintenance of the bride and here it is given to the trumpeter who supposedly plays a bride's role. Juvenal is outraged and fears that same-sex marriage will be more widespread. Juvenal's fear implies that men marrying each other was happening frequently and Gracchus' non-chalance demonstrates that at least some Roman elites approved and participated in these ceremonies. This may be further evidence of a subculture of Roman men who experience same-sex desire.

Gracchus gave a dowry of four hundred thousand *sesterces* to a trumpeter—or maybe he performed on a horn that was straight. The marriage contract has been witnessed, felicitations offered, a huge company invited to the feast, and the new

bride reclines in her husband's lap. O nobles! Is it a censor or a soothsayer that we need? Would you be more horrified, would you think it more monstrous still, if a woman gave birth to a calf or a cow to a lamb? He's wearing the bride's flounces, long dress, and veil—the man who carried the sacred objects swaying from the mystic thong and who sweated under the weight of the sacred shields. O father of Rome, where has it come from, this appalling outrage that afflicts the shepherds of Latium? Where has it come from, this itch that taints your descendants, Gradivus?^[6] Look: a man illustrious in family and fortune is handed over in marriage to another man—and you're not shaking your helmet, or striking the ground with your spear, or complaining to your father? Off with you, then—withdraw from the acres of the stern Campus^[7] which you don't care about. "Tomorrow at sunrise I have a ceremony to attend in the valley of Quirinus." "What's the occasion?" "Oh, just a friend of mine marrying a man, and he's invited a few guests." If we are allowed to live just a little longer, those marriages will take place, they'll take place openly, they'll even want to be reported in the news. Meanwhile, the fact that they can't give birth and use their babies to hang on to their husbands is a huge torment which these brides cannot escape. But it's better that nature grants their minds no power over their bodies: they die infertile, and swollen Lyde^[8] with her secret medicine box is no use to them, no more than holding out their palms to running Lupercus.^[9] Yet even this outrage is surpassed by Gracchus, wearing a tunic and with a trident in his hand, who as a gladiator traversed the arena as he ran away, a man of nobler birth than the Capitolini and Marcelli, than the descendants of Catulus and Paulus, than the Fabii, than all the spectators in the front row, even if you include the very man who staged that net-throwing show.^[10]

Juvenal 2.117-148 Loeb

CONTENT WARNING

The following section involves depictions of sexual assault involving a minor and domestic violence.

In this passage from the Satyricon^[11], Encolpius finds his 16 year-old slave, Giton, on the side of the road after having been raped. Portrayals of rape in Roman literature are highly problematic and the Satyricon is no exception. There is little understanding of or compassion for the physical and psychological pain incurred from sexual violence. Men who are raped in Roman stories are treated as a joke or shamed by authors. However, in the passage below, the character of Giton's sexual assault is treated seriously. Later in the Satyricon sexual assault is treated lightly and is highly sexualized.

I saw through a sort of murk Giton standing on the curb of the road in the dark, and hurried towards him.... I was asking my brother whether he had procured anything for us to eat, when the boy sat down at the head of the bed, and there upon proceeded to rub away the trickling tears with his thumb. My brother's looks made me uneasy, and I asked what had happened. The boy was unwilling to tell, but I added threats to entreaties, and at last he said, "That brother or friend of yours ran into our lodgings a little while ago and next wanted to rob me of my modesty. I shouted out, and he drew his sword and said, 'If you are a Lucretia, you have found your Tarquin.'"^[12]

Petronius Satyricon 9 Loeb Classical Library

Any man could be accused of being a *pathicus*. Here, Martial^[13] is writing about Charidemus, who is apparently acting too masculine (whatever Roman masculinity meant at the time, the concept was quite mutable). Roman men were expected to act masculine, but not too masculine. Men acting too masculine were thought by writers like Martial to be overcompensating for their desire to be a *pathicus*.

Do you think you cheat gossip, Charidemus, because your shanks are stiff with bristles and your chest with hair? Be advised by me, extirpate the hairs from your whole body, take your oath that you depilate your buttocks. "What for?" you say. You know that many folk say many things. Make them think you are sodomized, Charidemus.

Martial, *Epigrams* 6.56 Loeb

This Pompeian inscription insults passersby, calling *pathici* and people who have oral sex. Oral sex was highly stigmatized by Romans; they believed that any genital contact with the mouth caused it to be unclean and caused bad breath. The Romans believed that the person performing oral sex was the passive partner, further stigmatizing the act.

He who writes this is in love; he who reads it is fucked; he who listens is horny, he who passes by is a *pathicus*. May bears eat me, and may I who read this eat dick .

Sources and Further Reading:

Recommendations:

Roman Homosexuality by Craig A. Williams: This book is a great starting point for looking into same-sex desire in the Roman world. Williams covers a wide range of topics and the book is generally accessible to all. However, there are a few moments where even a seasoned Romanist will be confused and require further research/googling. The book goes into various terms for same-sex desire, as well as the socio-political contexts of such behaviours. It should be noted that this book only covers male same-sex desire and rarely discusses female desires. Williams uses lots of ancient sources to back up and explain his points and all could be used in future versions of this course reader.

I also highly recommended these two articles: *Two Pathic Subcultures in Ancient Rome* by Taylor and *Not Before Homosexuality: The Materiality of the Cinaedus and the Roman Law Against Love Between Men* by Richlin. Both are less accessible to newcomers but have a wealth of great sources and ideas about Roman same-sex desire.

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Geue, Tom. 2017. *Juvenal and the Poetics of Anonymity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Richlin, Amy. 1993. “Not before Homosexuality: The Materiality of the Cinaedus and the Roman Law Against Love between Men.” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 3 (4): 523-573.

salii 2005. 3 rev. ed. Oxford University Press.

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Williams, Craig A. 2010. *Roman Homosexuality*. 2nd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

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1. I say empathetic; however, the relationship is between a master, Encolpius, and his sixteen-year-old slave Giton, whose agency and ability to consent are murky at best. The reality for enslaved persons often meant having no control over what happens to their bodies. The relationship is highly problematic, but written with far less contempt than most other Roman authors would portray. ↩
 2. It is not surprising that the Romans thought this word was Greek in origin; many distrusted contemporary Greeks and there is much Roman literature devoted to the othering them. Roman elites would have also been exposed to a great deal of Athenian literature, some of which praised male same-sex relationships within certain social frameworks, such as institutionalized pederasty. ↩
 3. Ancient Rome had seven hills within the city's walls: the Aventine hill, the Caelian hill, the Capitoline hill, the Esquiline hill, the Palatine hill, the Quirinal hill, and the Viminal hill. ↩
 4. This was a tunic with a broad purple stripe on it. This was not an unusual thing to wear; what was unusual was the fringed sleeves which would have made his gestures very dramatic. ↩
 5. Possibly Sempronius Gracchus, a Salian priest. The Salian priests (the *Salii*) were priests for Mars, and took part in a ritual called *sodalitas*. ↩
 6. Another name for Mars, Roman god of war. ↩
 7. The Campus Martius ↩
 8. A Greek name, perhaps a reference to a woman who sells fertility medicines. As she is “swollen” i.e. pregnant, her medicines would be believed to work. ↩
 9. Reference to the Lupercalia, a Roman festival for fertility. ↩
 10. Juvenal goes on to disparage Gracchus for performing as a gladiator in the arena. ↩
 11. A Roman novel written by Petronius Arbiter during the reign of Nero. ↩
 12. This is reference to a foundational Roman story about a woman name Lucretia who is assaulted by a prince of Rome. She committed suicide afterwards, which supposedly caused an uprising against the Etruscan kings who ruled Rome and led to the formation of the Roman Republic. ↩
 13. Martial had a lot to say about “Romanness” despite coming from Spain. ↩
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6.3: Same Sex Desire: Women

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FEMALE SAME-SEX RELATIONSHIPS IN ANCIENT ROME: INTRODUCTION



Wall fragment with Two Women Roman 1-75 CE Plaster and pigment fresco Credit: Mary Harrsch

As Sandra Boehringer states in her essay on female homoeroticism, our modern terminology of sex and sexuality “assumes that certain sexual practices are associated with the ancient world.” For instance, the use of the term ‘lesbianism’ in reference to ancient Rome implies that “the ancient[s] designated female homosexuality in this way and [that] there were ‘lesbians’ in Greece and

Rome” (Boehringer 2013). The specificity of language, however, we now use in relation to sexuality wasn’t present in ancient Rome. Though, this does not mean behaviors we now define as ‘lesbian’ were not present then.

There is also the additional, odd standing, aspect of masculine-presenting women in Rome. There exists a scholarly belief that female same-sex relationships in Rome were defined by one woman being the more masculine partner and the other being the more feminine, as opposed to the age-based distinction present in male same-sex relationships. Frequently cited in this belief is the Roman author Phaedrus” [41-80 CE] story of the Greek god Prometheus and the creation of man:

Another person asked what system had produced tribads and soft men,^[1] and the old man explained: that same Prometheus, the creator of [our] common clay, which as soon as it offends fortune is broken, the natural parts^[2] which shame^[3] hides, when he had made them individually over an entire day, he was soon able to fit each one to its own body, when he was suddenly invited by Bacchus [Libero]^[4] to a feast. He came back home late and drunk, veins full of nectar and on unsteady feet. Then, half-asleep^[5] and with drunken confusion he fitted the virginal [part?]^[6] to the masculine type and added masculine members^[7] to women. So now desire is enjoyed with depraved^[8] joy.

Phaedrus, *Fables* 4.16

Phaedrus’s description has been used repeatedly to claim that the Romans’ conception of female same-sex desire only allowed for “physically masculine women pursuing feminine women” (Boehringer 2014). However, in a more modern view, it’s questionable that the act Phaedrus is describing is an act stemming from female same-sex desire. A gender studies scholar may bring up, for instance, the question of genitalia – does this make the women referred to in the passage transgender, as they possess the label of ‘woman’ but have ‘masculine’ sexual organs? Or might it refer to someone who was *intersex*^[9]?

Despite the real world examples displayed here, many scholars of the time did not reflect any understanding of such gender distinction in their works.

SEXUALITY AND SEX ROLES IN ANCIENT ROME

There was no prohibition involving female same-sex relationships (we are not quite sure of the laws restricting male same sex relationships). Societal stigma, however, was damaging towards those who were identified as same sex lovers especially of peers. For example, the shared duty of Roman women was to marry Roman men and produce legitimate offspring. As in the majority of ancient civilizations, infant mortality rates at Rome were high, and so conception was valued by the state as well as society at large. Exclusive same-sex relationships prevented this potential addition of population to the state.

As mentioned previously, the Romans defined sexuality via sexual roles: the dominant, or penetrator, role and the passive, or penetrated, role. The dominant would be male and generally older, while the passive would be female or a young male. This passivity became implied in all forms of female sexuality—making the ‘tribad’ an offense to the system at large for acting in a ‘male’ dominant role. A good summary of this thinking can be found in the Greek physician Soranus’s text on *pathic*, or passive, men:

[Tribads] are more eager to lie with women than with men: in fact they pursue women with almost masculine jealousy, and when they are freed of temporarily relieved of their passion...They rush, as if victims of continual intoxication, to new forms of lust, and sustained by this disgraceful mode of life, they rejoice in the abuse of their sexual powers.

Soranus, *On Pathic Men*^[10]

Another writer that reflects the normative thinking on the subject of female same-sex desire is the Roman philosopher Seneca the Younger [4 BC-65 CE]. Seneca writes on the matter in one of his epistles, claiming that women who have rejected their “womanly nature” (i.e. their passivity) have become, in bodily function, men, and are therefore “condemned to suffer” diseases attributed to men.

And they even match the men in their passions, although they were created to feel love passively (may the gods and goddesses confound them!). They devise the most impossible varieties of unchastity, and in the company of men they play the part of men. What wonder, then, that we can trip up the statement of the greatest and most skilled physician, when so many women are gouty and bald! Because of their vices, women have ceased to deserve the privileges of their sex; they have put off their womanly nature and are therefore condemned to suffer the diseases of men.

Seneca the Younger, *Epistles* XCV (LCL)^[11]

As Wayne Dynes posits in his work on same-sex desire in the ancient world, by the later republic of Rome, sexuality was already an “inextricable aspect of the Roman political and economic dominance of their part of the world.” In this way, gender performance, sexual performance, and social performance had become completely intertwined (Pintabone 2002).

FEMALE SAME-SEX DESIRE IN OVID'S *METAMORPHOSES*: THE TALE OF IPHIS AND IANTHE

This section focuses on one of the stories presented in Ovid's [43 BCE-17/18 CE] *Metamorphoses*, a 15-book mythical narrative containing over 250 myths in total. The story of Iphis and Ianthe, which can be found in Book IX, while somewhat well-known within scholarship, is not as omnipresent as some of the other myths Ovid retold in his volume.

Like many of the texts in the *Metamorphoses*, the tale of Iphis and Ianthe is, at its core, a story of transformation. Unlike some of the other stories, though, the transformation that takes place is extremely non-normative: the change from woman to man. The story deals with an “impossible love miraculously redeemed” (Ormand 2005, 79). For a modern reader, the text may bring up questions of gender, sexuality, and identity, as well as questions about how the story seeks to resolve or complicate these issues.

Diane T. Pintabone begins her essay on Ovid's Iphis and Ianthe by stating that the text has always “raised more questions than it has answered about ancient concepts” of female sexuality and female same-sex relationships (Pintabone 2002, 256). While Pintabone is correct in her perception, there are still things readers can glean from such a seemingly impenetrable text. Although, the tale refuses to make its main topic, a female same-sex relationship, at all “visible, intelligible, or nameable,” it demonstrates honor and a rare sympathetic lens towards female-female desire (Walker 2006, 206). As Walker states, “it is demonstrably the most extensive treatment of female same-sex desire in the extant literature of the period” (206). Even still, it's right to question Ovid's lack of stability as an ancient source^[12].

Debate around Ovid's intentions with the story has created a diverse range of interpretations, both within the scope of the text itself and with broader applications to understanding the Romans in general. However one may interpret it, the story clearly pertains to the questioning of sexuality by its main character, Iphis. Although both Ovid as narrator and Iphis as a character posit that gender and genitalia are the same, modern readers should keep in mind the inaccuracies of this statement

The tale begins with the birth of Iphis, born to a man, Ligdus, and his wife, Telethusa. Once Telethusa was close to giving birth, Ligdus warned her that she must produce a male child:

‘A girl is a heavier burden, and misfortune denies them strength. So, though I hate this, if... you give birth to a female infant, reluctantly, I order... that it be put to death.’ He spoke, and tears flooded their cheeks. (lines 669-670)

While this subject matter may be distressing to modern audiences, the Romans had a long history of infanticides. Ligdus' regrets in instructing his wife to commit such a heinous act shows that readers are not supposed to find Ligdus particularly unsympathetic. Instead, it is just the reality of bearing children for many in ancient Rome. Telethusa is distraught at putting her own child to death. She prays to the goddess Isis to help her hide her child if she produces a daughter.

When the pains grew, and her burden pushed its own way into the world, and a girl was born, the mother ordered it to be reared, deceitfully, as a boy, without the father realising. She had all that she needed, and no one but the nurse knew of the fraud. The father made good his vows, and gave it the name of the grandfather: he was Iphis. The mother was delighted with the name, since it was appropriate for either gender, and no one was cheated by it. From that moment, the deception, begun with a sacred lie, went undetected. The child was dressed as a boy, and its features would have been beautiful whether they were given to a girl or a boy. (lines 683-713)

Iphis' androgyny seems to be what Isis has gifted Telethusa. Not only is Iphis indistinguishable in gender by name, but also by looks. Again, the text here relates gender to one's sexual organs, which is incorrect. However, it does make comment on the performative nature of gender: that one can easily disguise themselves if they only call themselves by the correct gender and dress in the understood appropriate gendered style. It is in passages like these in which readers may see glimmers of a more progressive interpretation of the story. As the scholar Alison Sharrock puts it, Iphis demonstrates “the anxieties surrounding the acquisition of gendered identity,” especially in relation to masculinity (Sharrock 2002, 96).

Although some may interpret Iphis as truly gender-neutral in the modern sentiment^[13], Ovid places Iphis into a gendered relationship with Ianthe. This passage, particularly its final line, clearly establishes the basis for a female-female relationship, even if one of the characters is unaware of the other's biological gender.

Thirteen years passed by, meanwhile, and then, Iphis, your father betrothed you to golden-haired Ianthe, whose dowry was her beauty, the girl most praised amongst the women of Phaestos^[14], the daughter of Telestes of Dicte^[15]. The two were equal in age, and equal in looks... From this beginning, love had touched both their innocent hearts, and wounded them equally, but with unequal expectations. Ianthe anticipated her wedding day, and the promised marriage, believing he, whom she thought to be a man, would be *her* man. Iphis loved one whom she despaired of being able to have, and this itself increased her passion, a girl on fire for a girl. (lines 714-718)

A large piece of Iphis' story is told through a lament voiced by Iphis herself. Over the course of her musings, she refers to her "homosexual desire as unprecedented and monstrous, as a strange kind of desire from which the gods should have spared her" (Hallet 1992, 214). In part, one might interpret such a narrative display as Ovid showing "immense sympathy with Iphis' plight," as Hallet does, especially when contrasted with Iphis' own self-hatred and condemnation of female same-sex relationships (217). The full monologue is included in the following passage. Iphis speaks:

What way out is there left, for me, possessed by the pain of a strange and monstrous love, that no one ever knew before? If the gods wanted to spare me they should have spared me, but if they wanted to destroy me, they might at least have visited on me a natural, and normal, misfortune. Mares do not burn with love for mares, or heifers for heifers: the ram inflames the ewe: its hind follows the stag. So, birds mate, and among all animals, not one female is attacked by lust for a female. I wish I were not one! Yet that Crete might not fail to bear every monstrosity, Pasiphaë,^[16] Sol's^[17] daughter, loved a bull, though still that was a female and a male. My love, truth be told, is more extreme than that. She at least chased after the hope of fulfillment, though the bull had her because of her deceit, and in the likeness of a cow, and the one who was deceived was a male adulterer. Though all of the world's cleverness were concentrated here, though Daedalus^[18] were to return on waxen wings, what use would it be? Surely even his cunning arts could not make a boy out of a girl? Surely even he could not transform you, Ianthe?

Rather be firm-minded, Iphis, and pull yourself together, and, with wisdom, shake off this foolish, useless passion. Look at what you have been, from birth, if you don't want to cheat yourself, and seek out what is right for you, and love as a woman should! It is hope that creates love, and hope that nourishes it. Everything robs you of that. No guardian keeps you from her dear arms, no wary husband's care, no cruel father, nor does she deny your wooing herself. Yet you can never have her, or be happy, whatever is accomplished, whatever men or gods attempt.

See, the longed-for time has come, the wedding torch is at hand, and Ianthe will become mine – yet not be had by me. I will thirst in the midst of the waters. Juno^[19], goddess of brides, and Hymen^[20], why do you come to these marriage rites, where the bridegroom is absent, and both are brides?

Scholars may differ on the exact interpretation of Iphis' speech, however it is clear that Iphis's fixation on being "strange" and "monstrous" due to her desire for Ianthe is reflective of the Roman's societal fears around not only female desire, but female same-sex relationships. Something interesting to note is the lack of any 'tribad' language—Ovid defines Iphis' emotions as neither passive nor active. Instead, the only aspect holding Iphis' back from happily marrying Ianthe is her physical form. On first reading, this seems highly progressive. However, as Walker points out, "since the goddess Isis eventually transforms her body into a man's, the narrative in fact legitimizes Iphis's desire for Ianthe, but it does so by eradicating the possibility of naming that desire "lesbian" or "same-sexual" or even "tribadic"" (Walker 2006, 217).

The day before Iphis is set to be married, Telethusa and Iphis pray again to Isis.

Then Telethusa took the sacred ribbons from her own and her daughter Iphis's head, so that their hair streamed down, and clinging to the altar, cried: 'Isis^[21], you who protect Paraetionium, Pharos, the Mareotic fields, and Nile, divided in its seven streams^[22], I pray you, bring help, and relieve our fears!'

After leaving the altar, Iphis walks out of the temple transformed, acquiring signs of masculinity as she walks: “her step lengthens, color darkens, hair grows shorter, and so on” (Ormand 2005, 89). In addition, Ovid changes how he refers to Iphis via pronoun. Just as Iphis exits, the narrator still refers to the character using ‘she’ or ‘her’. However, as the passage continues and as Iphis is transformed, the narrator switches to using ‘he’ or ‘him’.

Iphis, her companion, followed, taking larger paces than before; with no whiteness left in her complexion; with additional strength, and sharper features, and shorter, less elegant hair; showing more vigour than women have. Take your gifts to the temple, Iphis: rejoice, with confidence, not fear! You, who were lately a girl, are now a boy!

They take their gifts to the temple, and add a votive tablet: the tablet has this brief line:

IPHIS PERFORMS AS A BOY, WHAT HE PROMISED, AS A GIRL.

The next day’s sun reveals the wide world in its rays, when Venus^[23], and Juno, joined with Hymen, come, to the marriage torches, and Iphis, the boy, gains possession of his Ianthe.

As Sharrock states, “more than any other non-dramatic ancient poetry, male-authored as it overwhelmingly is, Ovid’s work gives space to a female voice, in however problematic a manner, and to both male and female voices which reflect explicitly on their own gendered identity” (Sharrock 2002, 95). It is this space that allows for a conversation about gender, sexuality, and identity. Although this story can be interpreted in many different ways by its scholars and its readers, its heart lies in the love between two women. Iphis falls in love, and continues to be in love with Ianthe as a woman. Iphis’ transformation into a man occurs only so that Iphis and Ianthe’s love for one another can be understood as what the Roman understood as “natural,” as the love that occurs between a man and a woman.

Once we read these stories, as well as others from ancient Rome, it becomes clear that female same-sex relationships did exist. These women, fictional and real, may have been something not definable by the binaries at the time, but we can now recognize them— “unnatural” though they were at the time.

FEMALE SAME-SEX DESIRE IN THE WORKS OF MARTIAL

Prior to considering the subject of same-sex desire between women in his works, it is useful to have a general introduction to Martial. He wrote under the Emperor Domitian, writing 12 books of epigrams (short poems; Roman epigrams often had a focus on obscene themes). They offer one perspective on Roman life. They may be pornographic with crude language; his poetry is often rude and vulgar even by the low standards of Roman society, and his style is laced with racism, homophobia, sexism and much more. His writing may be offensive for us today, however, it was considered comical by the Romans, or at least to some of them.

Poem 90 from Book of Martial’s *Epigrams* introduces a woman, Bassa,^[24] along with a new type of absurdity for the Romans: same sex desire and sexual relationships amongst females. We would probably call Bassa a lesbian given that she provided sexual services to women; she is classified as manly (lines 2, 10) and her womanly qualities are denied.

Martial chose to assign Bassa the male suffix of “fuckster ” to present her as manly, using *futator*, instead of *futatrix*, the feminine form of the noun, which further dissociates Bassa from ‘womanly’ women. Bassa is contrasted with Lucretia, who is the Roman epitome of a chaste woman. For Martial to deny Bassa as a woman, is one sign that he rejects her identity as a Roman and categorizes her as ‘un-Roman’: she may try to look like a Roman heroine, but she fails.

Next, Martial introduces the Sphinx (line 11), as a possible route to understanding same sex relationships. For some Romans, a same sex relationship between woman was viewed as puzzling, as well as discomforting and disturbing. They had trouble comprehending the possibilities of the relationship, given that neither of those involved was a man, and could naturally take the male role. The Sphinx, in Greco-Roman mythology was known for posing near impossible riddles which confused and confounded her victims. Here, Martial is implying that the mere idea of a female only partnership is so ridiculous or even threatening to the Roman people, that only the Sphinx would be able to have an idea of how it worked.

In this particular epigram, Martial decides to include a mortal woman to contrast with a mythical woman. His choice to incorporate both persons is to convey his view on same sex relationships. We should not be under the assumption that every Roman shared this view, but enough must have for Martial to write this poem and think his audience would enjoy it.

Because, Bassa, I never saw
You with a man, and gossip

never said that that had a lover^[25]
and for each ritual^[26] crowds of your gender surround you,
so you couldn't be seen by any man who came along,

I thought you a Lucretia, I confess;
But – shame on it – you were a secret fucker^[27]
You dare two cunts unite
To play the man, monstrous Venus,
Only the Sphinx could interpret this riddle right:
that where there is no man, there is adultery.

Martial, Epigrams 1.9

The next poem shows just how problematic Roman views of women who desired other women were: in this the Martial attacks Philaenis, whose lust is such that not only does she desire women, but she also has a voracious appetite for boys as well.

The tribas Philaenis buggers boys
and, more savage than a husband's lust,
she pounds on eleven girls a day.
And with her dress tied up she plays with a handball,
and covers herself with sand, and with her arm
easily swings weights heavy enough for strongmen,
and covered with dust from the foul arena,
she is flogged by an oiled up coach,
and doesn't she dine or lie down for dinner^[28]
before she has vomited seven pints of unmixed wine,^[29]
and she only thinks it decent to return to drinking
when she has eaten sixteen steaks,
After all this, when she goes at it
she does not suck pricks. She thinks that far too unmanly –
but she regularly devours the groins of girls.
May the Gods give you back your sanity, Philaenis,
since you think it manly to go down on women.

Martial, *Epigrams* 7.67

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1. In Latin: molles mares (literally "soft/tender men") ↩
 2. Latin: naturae partes ↩
 3. Latin: pudor ("a sense of shame/modesty/decency") ↩
 4. The Roman deity of agriculture, wine, drunkenness, and fertility. His Greek equivalent is Dionysus ↩
 5. Latin: semisomno corede ↩
 6. There is some question about how to translate this word, which is generi in the original Latin. ↩
 7. Latin: membra ↩
 8. Latin: pravo ↩
 9. i.e. one who is born with genitalia that doesn't seemingly fit the standard definitions of male or female sex organs. See "What is Intersex?" Intersex Society of North America, last modified 2008. http://www.isna.org/faq/what_is_intersex ↩
 10. Translation by Vern L. Bullough, *Sexual Variance in Society and History*, Chicago: 1975, 143-144. ↩
 11. Translation by the Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press. ↩
 12. For more insight on questioning Ovid as a narrator, see P. Culham's "Decentering the Text: The Case of Ovid." ↩
 13. That is to say, a person who identifies as gender-neutral and outside of the male-female gender binary. ↩
 14. An ancient town on the island of Crete. ↩
 15. A mountain range on the island of Crete. ↩
 16. A mythological figure. After marriage to King Minos of Crete, Pasiphaë acted as the queen of Crete. She is said to have given birth to the half-man half-bull creature known as the Minotaur. ↩
 17. The Roman form of the Greek god of the sun, Helios. ↩
 18. A mythological figure, known as a craftsman and an artist. He is also remembered as the creator of the Labyrinth under the court of Crete. This particular line refers to the story of he and his son, Icarus. ↩
 19. The Roman form of the Greek goddess Hera. ↩
 20. The Greek god of marriage ceremonies. ↩
 21. An Egyptian goddess, known for maternal aid. ↩
 22. Egyptian locations and cities. ↩
 23. The Roman form of the Greek goddess Aphrodite. ↩
 24. Martial uses this name a number of times. We are not sure if it has a double meaning or not. ↩
 25. The Latin word used here, *moechus*, means a lover of a married woman, an adulterer ↩
 26. *officium*, strictly means 'duty', but it can mean that in a wide number of ways ↩
 27. *futator* ↩
 28. The Romans ate lying down on couches. Traditionally women sat in chairs while the men got the couches, but that was long over by Martial's day. ↩
 29. Romans mixed their wine with water; they thought only barbarians or alcoholics drank wine without any dilution. ↩

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6.4: Intersex Individuals and Transitioning in Ancient Rome

INTERSEX INDIVIDUALS

The Romans had a binary sense of gender: there were men and women, and anyone who felt in between those categories was likely to be killed as a child if they displayed signs of both sexes. For those intersex children who survived because they were hidden by their parents or caregivers, they might be classified as eunuchs as with Favorinus (for more on him see the [section on eunuchs](#)).

TRANSITIONING IN ANCIENT ROME

Just the possibility of transitioning ^[1] in ancient Rome may seem anachronistic. However, there are many stories referring to these types of changes—mainly from female to male. Some ancient historians even go so far as to state that such stories are explicitly nonfictional. The Roman author Pliny the Elder [23-79 CE] gives a few real-life examples in his *Natural History*. Some of his examples are pulled from the Annals of the Pontiffs, an ancient record by the priests of Rome, that no longer is extant.^[2] This text would have been seen as inherently factual, especially by Pliny.

Women transforming into men is not an idle story. We find in the Annals that in Publius Licinius Crassus and Gaius Cassius Longinus [171 BCE] a girl at Casinum^[3] was changed into a boy, as their parents watched, and at the order of the augurs was transported away to a desert island. Licinius Mucianus^[4] has recorded that he personally saw at Argos^[5] a man named Arescon who had been given the name of Arescusa and had actually married a husband, and then had grown a beard and developed masculine attributes and had married a wife; and that he had also seen a boy with the same record at Smyrna.^[6] I myself saw in Africa a person who had turned into a male on the day of marriage [in] Thysdritum...

Pliny the Elder, *Natural History* 7.4

Because of our evidence it is hard to know how the individuals we hear about felt about their gender or how the Romans would classify their change in gender. For example, in the story of Iphis (which can be found in the section on [same sex desire](#)), where a woman changes into a man after praying to a goddess and so they can marry a girl they were childhood sweethearts with, it is hard to say if we should consider this a transgender myth or just about the only way that the Romans could imagine a happy ending for two women in love with each other.

More sources on transgender men and women can be found in the section on [same sex desire](#).

1. the process of changing one's gender presentation and sex characteristics to conform with one's gender identity ↩
2. It is sometimes referred to as the Annales Maximi ↩
3. A city in Italy, now a monastery called Monte Casino. ↩
4. A general, statesman, and writer of the first century CE. ↩
5. A city in Greece. ↩
6. Another ancient Greek city. ↩

This page titled [6.4: Intersex Individuals and Transitioning in Ancient Rome](#) is shared under a [CC BY-NC-SA](#) license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by [Siobhán McElduff \(BCcampus\)](#).

- Understand that the category of ‘eunuch’ in Rome covered a wide variety of people and bodies and sexual identities, which do not match with ours;
- Learn the difference between Religious, Slave eunuchs and Non-religious eunuchs;
- Understand what the Romans meant when they talked about eunuchs;
- Learn that what perception we have of how the Romans reacted to those they called eunuchs heavily varies according to what sources we look at;
- Learn about the career of Favorinus.

Most of those who were castrated were altered to make them more desirable as slaves, and their consent was not sought. Some youths and adults, however, castrated themselves as part of their religious devotion: the most famous of these for the Romans was the Galli, the priests of the Eastern goddess Cybele. Early Christians also sometimes self-castrated as part of their commitment to chastity, until the practice was outlawed by the church, but sources about them and the Galli will be found in the section on religious groups.

The chance of the lot then gave him Africa, which he governed with great justice and high honour, save that in a riot at Hadrumentum he was pelted with turnips. It is certain that he came back none the richer, for his credit was so nearly gone that he mortgaged all his estates to his brother, and had to resort to trading in eunuchs^[1] to keep up his position; whence he was commonly known as “Mule driver.” He is also said to have been found guilty of squeezing two hundred thousand sesterces out of a young man for whom he obtained the purple stripe against his father’s wish, and to have been severely rebuked in consequence.

The Digest of Justinian, book 48, contains a number of laws in place on the castration of eunuchs, which was banned by Hadrian within the limits of the empire:

(2) The Divine Hadrian^[2] also stated the following in a Rescript: “It is forbidden by the Imperial Constitutions that eunuchs should be made, and they provide that persons who are convicted of this crime are liable to the penalty of the Cornelian Law, and that their property shall with good reason be confiscated by the Treasury. “But with reference to slaves who have made eunuchs, they should be punished capitally, and those who are liable to this public crime and do not appear, shall, even when absent, be sentenced under the Cornelian Law. It is clear that if persons who have suffered this injury demand justice, the Governor of the province should hear those who have lost their virility; for no one has a right to castrate a free person or a slave, either against his consent or with it, and no one can voluntarily offer himself to be castrated. If anyone should violate my Edict, the physician who performed the operation shall be punished with death, as well as anyone who willingly offered himself for emasculation.

Ulpianus, On the Duties of Proconsul, Book VII.

Those also who make persons impotent^[3] are, by a Constitution of the Divine Hadrian addressed to Ninius Hasta, placed in the same class with those who perform castration.

Paulus, On the Duties of a Proconsul, Book II.

He who delivers a slave to be castrated shall be punished by a fine of half his property, under a decree of the Senate enacted during the Consulate of Neratius Priscus and Annius Verus [97 CE].

Venuleius Saturninus, On the Duties of Proconsul, Book I.

IN LUCIAN'S 'THE EUNUCH'

The 2nd century CE Roman-Syrian author Lucian, who wrote in Greek and identified as Greek and Syrian, wrote a dialogue called *The Eunuch*. In it two men of Athens meet and one, Lucinus (note the Latin name despite the Greek setting and language) reports back on a contest to be the chair of a philosophical school, a position which brought with it an imperial salary: there were four imperially funded chairs of the the four major philosophical schools in Athens; this competition was for the head of the Academy, the school founded by Aristotle. The work is a satire on the pretensions of philosophers, and one of the ways that Lucian does that is by attacking their sexual identities.

Lucinus: ...^[4] Many competitors took part in the funeral games of the deceased, but two of them in particular were the most favoured to win, the aged Diodes (you know the man I mean, the dialectician) and Bagoas,^[5] the one who is rumoured to be a eunuch. The matter of doctrines had been thrashed out between them already, and each had displayed his familiarity with their tenets and his adherence to Aristotle and his teachings; by Zeus, neither of them had come out on top. The close of the trial, however, took a new turn; Diodes, discontinuing the advertisement of his own merits, passed over to Bagoas and made a great effort to throw his private life in his ace, and Bagoas met this attack by exploring the history of Diodes in the same way. But when they had had enough of hard words and snarking at each other, Diodes at length said in conclusion that it was not at all permissible for Bagoas to lay claim to philosophy and the rewards of merit in it, since he was a eunuch, and such people ought to be excluded, he thought, not simply from all that but even from temples and holy-water bowls and all the places of public gathering, and he declared it an ill-omened, ill-met sight if on first leaving home in the morning, one should set eyes on any such person. He had a great deal to say, too, on that point, observing that a eunuch was neither man nor woman but something composite, hybrid, and monstrous, alien to human nature.

Pamphilius: The charge you tell of, Lucinus, is novel, anyhow, and now I too, my friend, am moved to laughter, hearing of this incredible accusation. Well, what about the other man? Did he keep quiet? Or did he try to say something himself in reply to this?

Lucinus: At first, through shame and cowardice — for that sort of behaviour is natural to them — he remained silent for a long time and blushed and was plainly in a sweat, but finally in a weak, effeminate voice he said that Diodes was acting unjustly in trying to exclude a eunuch from philosophy, in which even women had a part; and he brought in Aspasia, Diotima, and Thargelia^[6] to support him; also a certain Academic eunuch hailing from among the Pelasgians, who shortly before our time achieved a high reputation among the Greeks.^[7] But if that person himself were alive and made similar claims, Diodes would (he said) have excluded him too, undismayed by his reputation among the regular folk; and he repeated a number of humorous remarks made to the man by Stoics and Cynics regarding his physical imperfection. That was what the judges dwelt upon, and the point debated after that was whether the seal of approval should be set upon a eunuch who was proposing himself for a career in philosophy and requesting that he be put in charge of the education of boys. One of them said that presence and a fine physical form should be among the attributes of a philosopher and that above all else he should have a long beard that would inspire confidence in those

who visited him and sought to become his pupils, one that would match the ten thousand drachmas which he was to receive from the Emperor, whereas a eunuch was worse than a castrated priest, for the latter had at least known manhood once, but the former had been marred from the very first and was an ambiguous sort of creature like a crow, which cannot be reckoned either with doves or with ravens.

The other argued that this was not a physical examination; that there should be an investigation of soul and mind and knowledge of doctrines. Then Aristotle was cited as a witness to support his case, since he tremendously admired the eunuch Hermias, the tyrant of Atarneus,^[8] to the point of celebrating sacrifices to him in the same way as to the gods. Moreover, Bagoas ventured to add an observation to the effect that a eunuch was a far more suitable teacher for the young, since he could not incur any blame as regards them and would not incur that charge against Socrates of leading the youngsters astray. And as he had been ridiculed especially for his not having a beard, he delivered this quit to good effect — he thought so, anyhow: “If it is by length of beard that philosophers are to be judged, a he-goat would with greater justice be preferred to all of them!” At this juncture a third person who was present — his name may remain in obscurity — said: “As a matter of fact, gentlemen, if this fellow, so smooth of chin, effeminate in voice, and otherwise similar to a eunuch, should strip, you would find him very masculine. Unless those who talk about him are lying, he was once taken in adultery, in the very act, as the table of the law says.^[9] At that time he secured his acquittal by resorting to the name of eunuch and finding sanctuary in it, since the judges on that occasion discredited the accusation from the very look of him. Now, however, he may recant, I suppose, for the sake of the money that he can almost touch.” Upon those remarks everyone began to laugh, as was natural, while Bagoas fell into greater confusion and was beside himself, turning all colours of the rainbow and dripping with cold sweat. On the one hand, he did not think it decent to plead guilty to the charge of adultery, yet, on the other, he thought that this accusation would not be without its usefulness for the case then in progress...

FAVORINUS AND FAMOUS EUNUCHS

Perhaps the most famous person classified as a eunuch in Roman antiquity was Favorinus. Born in Gaul, he was described by some as a ‘natural’ eunuch, while a writer called Philostratos called him a hermaphrodite. He was probably what we would call intersex, which the Romans (see above) struggled to understand. He was incredibly famous (and infamous) in the second century, and was friends with the Emperor Hadrian, until he was exiled by him in the 130s CE thanks to a (successful) accusation of adultery. The following is Philostratos’ account of him from his *Lives of the Sophists*:

Favorinus the philosopher, no less than Dio, was proclaimed a sophist by the charm and beauty of his eloquence. He came from Western Gaul, from the city of Arelatum which is situated on the river Rhone..

He was born double-sexed, a hermaphrodite, and this was plainly shown in his appearance; for even when he grew old he had no beard; it was evident too from his voice which sounded thin, shrill, and high-pitched, with the modulations that nature bestows on eunuchs also. Yet he was so ardent in love that he was actually charged with adultery by a man of consular rank. Though he quarrelled with the emperor Hadrian, he suffered no ill consequences. Hence he used to say in the ambiguous style of an oracle that there were in the story of his life three paradoxes: Though he was a Gaul he led the life of a greek;^[10] though a eunuch, he had been tried for adultery; and he had quarrelled with an emperor and was still alive.

But this must rather be set down to the credit of Hadrian, seeing that, though he was Emperor, he disagreed on terms of equality with one whom it was in his power to put to death. For a prince is really superior if he controls his anger “when he is angry with a lesser man” and, “mighty is the anger of Zeus-nurtured kings” if only it be kept in check by reason. Those who try to guide and improve the morals of princes would do well to add this saying to the sentiments expressed by the poets. He was appointed high priest, whereupon he appealed to the established usage of his birthplace, pleading that, according to the laws on such matters, he was exempt from public services because he was a philosopher. But when he saw that the Emperor intended to vote against him on the ground that he was not a philosopher, he forestalled him in the following way. “O Emperor,” he cried, “I have had a dream of which you ought to be informed. My teacher Dio appeared to me, and with respect to this suit admonished and reminded me that we come into the world not for ourselves alone, but also for the country of our birth. 2 Therefore, O Emperor, I obey my teacher, and I undertake this public service.” Now the Emperor had acted thus merely for his own diversion, for by turning his mind to philosophers and sophists he used to lighten the responsibilities of Empire. The Athenians however took the affair seriously, and, especially the Athenian magistrates themselves, hastened in a body to throw down the bronze statue of Favorinus as though he were the Emperor’s bitterest enemy. Yet on hearing of it Favorinus showed no resentment or anger at the insult, but observed this

:"Socrates himself would have been the gainer, if the Athenians had merely deprived him of a bronze statue, instead of making him drink hemlock."

He was very close with Herodes the Sophist who regarded him as his teacher and father, and wrote to him: "When shall I see you, and when shall I lick the honey from your lips?" Accordingly at his death he left Herodes all the books that he had collected, his house in Rome, and Autolecythus. ¹ This was an Indian, entirely black, a pet of Herodes and Favorinus, for as they drank their wine together he used to divert them by sprinkling his Indian dialect with Attic words and by speaking barbarous Greek with a tongue that stammered and faltered.

The quarrel that arose between Polemo and Favorinus began in Ionia, where the Ephesians favoured Favorinus, while Smyrna admired Polemo; and it became more bitter in Rome; for there consuls and sons of consuls by applauding either one or the other started between them a rivalry such as kindles the keenest envy and malice even in the hearts of wise men. However they may be forgiven for that rivalry, since human nature holds that the love of glory never grows old; but they are to be blamed for the speeches that they composed assailing one another; for personal abuse is brutal, and even if it be true, that does not acquit of disgrace even the man who speaks about such things. And so when people called Favorinus a sophist, the mere fact that he had quarrelled with a sophist was evidence enough; for that spirit of rivalry of which I spoke is always directed against one's competitors in the same craft.

Philostratus, *Lives of the Sophists* 8-28

One of his friends, the Roman author Aulus Gellius, gives a better sense of how respected Favorinus was in his own day:

The philosopher Favorinus thus addressed a young man who was very fond of old words and made a display in his ordinary, everyday conversation of many expressions that were quite too unfamiliar and archaic: Curius, said he, and Fabricius and Coruncanus, men of the olden days, and of a still earlier time than these those famous triplets, the Horatii, talked clearly and intelligibly with their fellows, using the language of their own day, not that of the Aurunci, the Sicani, or the Pelasgi, who are said to have been the earliest inhabitants of Italy. You, on the contrary, just as if you were talking to-day with Evander's mother, Evander, a Greek from Pallanteum in Arcadia, migrated to Italy and settled on the Palatine hill before the coming of Aeneas. Use words that have already been obsolete for many years, because you want no one to know and comprehend what you are saying. Why not accomplish your purpose more fully, foolish fellow, and say nothing at all? But you assert that you love the olden time, because it is honest, sterling, sober and temperate. Live by all means according to the manners of the past, but speak in the language of the present, and always remember and take to heart what Gaius Caesar, a man of surpassing talent and wisdom, wrote in the first book of his treatise *On Analogy*: "Avoid as you would a rock the strange and unfamiliar word"^[11]

Attic Nights 1.10

Philosophers like Favorinus were consulted on a wide range of matters, and in particular oratory. Gellius relates a time he went to him for advice in how to proceed in a case:

I therefore ordered a postponement and from the bench I proceeded to go to the philosopher Favorinus, with whom I then was spending a great deal of time with at Rome. I told him the whole story of the lawsuit and of the men as I had heard it, begging that with regard both to the matter about which I was then in doubt, as well as to others which I should have to consider in my position as judge, he should make me a man of greater wisdom in such affairs.

Then Favorinus, after commending my careful hesitation and my conscientiousness said: "The question which you are now considering may seem to be of a trifling and insignificant character. But if you wish me to instruct you as to the full duties of a judge, this is by no means the proper place or time for such a discussion involves many complex questions and requires long and anxious attention and consideration. To touch at once upon a few important questions for your benefit, the first query relating to the duty of a judge is this: if a judge chance to have knowledge of a matter which is brought to trial before him, and the matter is clearly known and demonstrated to him alone from some external circumstance or event, before it has begun to be argued or brought into court, but nevertheless the same thing is not proved in the course of the trial, ought he to decide in accordance with what he knew beforehand, or according to the evidence in the case? This question also," said he, "is often raised, whether it is fitting and proper for a judge, after a case has been heard, if there seems to be an opportunity for compromising the dispute, to postpone the duty of a judge for a time and take the part of a common friend and peace-maker, as it were. And I know that this further is a matter of doubt and inquiry, whether a judge, when hearing a suit, ought to mention and ask about the things which it is

for the interest of one of the parties to the suit to mention and inquire, even if the party in question neither mentions nor calls for them. For they say that this is in fact to play the part of an advocate, not of a judge.

Besides these questions, there is disagreement also on this point, whether it is consistent with the Practice and office of a judge by his occasional remarks so to explain and set forth the matter and the case which is being tried, that before the time of his decision, as the result of statements which at the time are made before him in a confused and doubtful form, he gives signs and indications of the motions and feelings by which he is affected on each occasion and at every time. For those judges who give the impression of being keen and quick think that the matter in dispute cannot be examined and understood, unless the judge by frequent questions and necessary interruptions makes his own opinion clear and grasps that of the litigants. But, on the other hand, those who have a reputation for calmness and dignity maintain that the judge ought not, before giving his decision and while the case is being pleaded by both parties, to indicate his opinion whenever he is influenced by some argument that is brought forward. For they say that the result will be, since one emotion of the mind after another must be excited by the variety of points and arguments, that such judges will seem to feel and speak differently about the same case and almost at the same time.

6 “But,” he said, “about these and other similar discussions as to the duty of a judge I shall attempt to give you my views later, when we have leisure, and I will repeat the precepts of Aelius Tubero on the subject, which I have read very recently. But so far as concerns the money which you said was claimed before your tribunal, I advise you, by Heaven! to follow the counsel of that shrewdest of men, Marcus Cato; for he, in the speech which he delivered For Lucius Turius against Gnaeus Gellius, 7 said that this custom had been handed down and observed by our forefathers, that if a question at issue between two men could not be proved either by documents or witnesses, then the question should be raised before the judge who was trying the case which of the two was the better man, and if they were either equally good or equally bad, that then the one upon whom the claim was made should be believed and the verdict should be given in his favour. But in this case about which you are in [p. 31] doubt the claimant is a person of the highest character and the one on whom the claim is made is the worst of men, and there are no witnesses to the transaction between the two. So then go and give credit to the claimant and condemn the one on whom the claim is made, since, as you say, the two are not equal and the claimant is the better man.

This was the advice which Favorinus gave me at that time, as befitted a philosopher. But I thought that I should show more importance and presumption than became my youth and humble merit, if I appeared to sit in judgment on and condemn a man from the characters of the disputants rather than from the evidence in the case; yet I could not make up my mind to acquit the defendant, and accordingly I took oath that the matter was not clear to me and in that way I was relieved from rendering a decision. The words of the speech of Marcus Cato which Favorinus mentioned are these: “And I have learnt this from the tradition of our ancestors: if anyone claim anything from another, and both are equally either good or bad, provided there are no witnesses to the transaction between the two, the one from whom the claim is made ought rather to be credited. Now, if Gellius had made a wager 8 with Turio on the issue, ‘ Provided Gellius were not a better man than Turio,’ no one, I think, would be so mad as to decide that Gellius is better than Turio; if Gellius is not better than Turio, the one from whom the claim is made ought preferably to be credited.”

Attic Nights 14.2

Bibliography/further reading:

Quite a lot of work on eunuchs in antiquity looks at them in Byzantine society, a much later period.

Gleeson, Maud. 2001. *Making Men: Sophists and Self-Presentation in Ancient Rome*. Princeton

Needs some background in Classics at least, but a really good study of Favorinus and what it meant for him to present himself this way.

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1. It is certain that he came back none the richer, for his credit was so nearly gone that he mortgaged all his estates to his brother, and had to resort to trading in eunuchs ↩
 2. Hadrian was very good friends with Favorinus, a famous orator and popular philosopher. ↩
 3. By medical means or witchcraft (the Romans fully believed in witchcraft). ↩
 4. I have cut the opening section where the two speakers meet up and cut to Lucius' description of the opening parts of the competition. ↩
 5. Both of these are invented figures, though the most famous historical Bagoas was a eunuch and favourite of Alexander the Great. ↩

6. Names of famous Greek women, all connected in various informal way (or possibly made up ways) to philosophy. ↩
7. The reference is to Favorinus, on whom see below. ↩
8. Aristotle's father-in-law, who, despite what is said above, was most likely not a eunuch. ↩
9. If a husband caught a man having sex with his wife he could kill him. However, he had to catch him in the very act, and not just alone with her and without any clothes, for example. The law was quite specific. ↩
10. Although modern Marseilles was a Greek town, Gauls rarely learned Greek and instead focused on exelling in Latin. ↩
11. This is Julius Caesar, the famous one. He wrote a book on grammar, which he dedicated to Cicero as part of the ongoing grammar wars of the Late Republic. (This is true. As well as being world conquerers, the Romans had fierce battles about gramatical points. ↩

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6.6: Case Study: Transgender Men in Lucian's Dialogue of the Courtesans

LUCIAN'S DIALOGUE OF THE COURTESANS

The *Dialogue of the Courtesans* is a collection of exchanges amongst courtesans and with their clients in Classical Athens^[1] written by the Roman author Lucian in the second century CE. It is a comic dialogue, a literary form which combines comedy and philosophy. Particularly, Dialogue 5 stands out as it is one of the few ancient sources which touches upon what some scholars have perceived as female same-sex desire. The issue which arises is that while looking at this dialogue with a modern understanding of gender identity, Megillus (or Megilla), the customer of one of the speakers, Leaena, reads more like a transgender man than a lesbian. For the purposes of this section, I will be using masculine pronouns when referring to Megillus outside of the original text^[2].

In general, the Romans saw gender as something completely reliant on genitalia and categorized transgender individuals based on their sexual preference –unless their genitalia miraculously changes and they become a ‘normal’ member of Roman society by marrying and having children (for more on miraculous genitalia transformations and sexuality, see [Transgender Men and Sexuality](#)). Megillus, although insisting on his masculinity, is seen as a woman by the courtesans and would have been understood by both the audience and the writer himself as a woman as well.

Another issue this dialogue has introduced is in academia. Scholars have been quick to assume that the ‘manly lesbian’ trope existed in ancient Rome from the emphasis of Megillus’ masculinity in this dialogue. However, scholars such as Boehringer (2014) have pointed out that the ‘manly lesbian’ trope may not have actually existed in the Roman Empire (p.161).

Whether Lucian caricatured Megillus for his gender or his sexuality is up for debate. What we can be sure of is that this dialogue allows for the modern reader to see the Romans’ understanding, or lack thereof, of gender as more than a binary system. It also serves as a warning about the accuracy of the sparse primary sources we have on LGBTQ2+ individuals living in the Roman world; how many of the few, surviving depictions of the LGBTQ2+ represent the actual community and not the stereotypes?

CONTENT WARNING

The following passage includes scenes where the consent for sexual interactions are dubious at best due to the nature of sex work. A character’s gender identity is also repeatedly questioned as Romans were not the most educated about such matters.

Lucian, Dialogues of the Courtesans V: Leæna and Clonarium^[3]

CLONARIUM: I have heard a strange thing said about you, Leaena^[4]: that Megilla, the wealthy Lesbian^[5] dame, treats you as a man would do; and that you lie in bed, doing I don’t know what. Ah! you blush? Tell me if it is true?

LEAENA: There is some truth in it, and I am ashamed of it. It is shocking.

CLONARIUM: By the Goddess^[6], what does it mean? What does the woman want of you? What do you do when you are together? If you love me you will tell me.

LEAENA: I love you more than anything; but that woman is strangely like a man.

CLONARIUM: If I understand you, she is one of those women^[7], of whom, there are so many in Lesbos^[8], who do not like men, but enjoy the society of women, as if they were men themselves.

LEAENA: That’s about it.

CLONARIUM: Tell me all, Leaena; how she approached you, how she seduced you, and all the rest.

LEAENA: As she and Demonsassa of Corinth^[9], who has the same tastes, were on a carouse^[10] together, they sent for me to entertain them^[11] with my cithara^[12] When I finished singing, it was late, and time to retire to bed; they were warm with wine, and detained me. “Come^[13], Leaena,” said Megilla; “it is time to sleep; you shall lie between us.”

CLONARIUM: And then? Were you to bed with them?

LEAENA: At first they kissed me like men; not simply putting their lips to mine, but kissing me open-mouthed. Then they embraced me and pressed my bosom; Demonassa became so excited that she even bit me, between her kisses. I did not

know what they purposed doing. At last, Megilla, waxing warmer^[14], took off her wig^[15], which was wonderfully well made and fitted her snugly, and appeared with her head bare and shaved like an athlete's, which alarmed me.

"Leaena, " she said, "did you ever see such a fine young man?"

"I see none, Megilla," I replied.

"Don't insult me by calling me that; I am Megillus^[16], and there is my wife" pointing to Demonassa^[17] At that, Clonarium, I began to laugh.

"What, O Megillus," I said, "you were a man all the time, without knowing it, like Achilles hidden among the maidens in his purple vestments^[18]? [15] a missing line here about the manly organs In that case, do you play husband with Demonassa?

"No, she said; "for I do not need to. If you choose, you shall see that my ways are much better."

"Then," said I, "you must be a hermaphrodite^[19], partaking of a dual nature;" for, Clonarium, I did not up to that time, comprehend the matter.

"No," she replied; "I am entirely a man."

"I have heard that a famous soothsayer of Thebes, Tiresias^[20], I think, whose story Ismenodora, the Boetia fluteplayer^[21], once told me, was changed from a woman to a man. Has anything of that sort happened to you?"

"No," she said; "I was born as other women, Leaena; but I have all the passions and desires of a man."

"Do you mean that the desire is enough for you?"

"Let me show you, Leaena, if you don't credit it, and you will see that I am not inferior to a man; that I possess something equal^[22] to his. But try, and be convinced."

I yielded, Clonarium, to her urgent entreaties; for she had given me a beautiful necklace and a linen gown of the finest fabric. She embraced me, just as if she had been a man, and kissed me, and the fulfillment of her desire made her pant; I saw that she vastly enjoyed herself.

CLONARIUM: But what did she do? How did she go about it? That^[23] is what you must tell me.

LEAENA: No, you are too inquisitive; that is quiet enough. No, by Venus, I will tell you no more.

Sources and Further Reading:

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1. 480–323 BCE ↩

2. There are also [scholars who understand Megillus as non-binary](#). ↩

3. Taken from <http://tinyurl.com/ub7ucb9> ↩

4. This name means 'Lioness', a common name for courtesans. ↩

5. There is a common association between the island of Lesbos and female same sex desire in antiquity because of Sappho, a famous lyric poet of the 6th century BCE who lived on the island of Lesbos. The words 'lesbian' and 'sapphic' are both etymologically tied to Sappho as she wrote poems depicting love between women. The sapphic nature of her poetry is

widespread from references in Archaic Greece (Anacreon Fragment 358) and in Imperial Rome (Horace's Odes, Ovid's Tristia, and this very dialogue). ↩

6. Lit. 'the child-rearing one', an epithet for several goddesses, including Aphrodite/Venus. ↩
7. The word, 'hetairestria' is used, which to Gilhuly (2006), is a clear reference to Aristophanes' speech of Eros in Plato's Symposium (191 c). Aristophanes speech is also considered one of the only surviving passages in classical literature to acknowledge female same-sex desire (p.275). ↩
8. Lit. "some like this in Lesbos" ↩
9. Corinth, amongst other things, is known in the ancient world for its courtesans and temple prostitution. ↩
10. a drinking party. It seems to be another layer Lucian adds in to exaggerate Megillos' abnormal behaviour (in the Roman sense) as it alludes to symposia (drinking parties prominent in classical Greece that only men could host). Likewise, Megillos' wife being present is also out of place in a classical symposium. ↩
11. Lit. "invited me." But, as an entertainer, Leaena was no doubt paid for her services. ↩
12. The cithara is a lyre-like stringed instrument. Courtesans were expected entertainment outside of sexual activity. They were also expected to provide dance and music. ↩
13. Come now!"; a colloquial expression commonly used in the classical period and an example of Lucian's attempt to Atticize (to make his writing more similar to that of Classical Athens) his prose. ↩
14. rising body temperature and probably sweating ↩
15. Wealthy Romans, both men and women, often wore wigs. ↩
16. The masculine form of Megilla. Megillos is a Spartan interlocutor in Plato's Laws, so choosing this name may be another example of Lucian's Atticizing prose. ↩
17. Note that same sex marriage did not exist in either Greece or Rome in this period. ↩
18. This is a reference to how, in order to avoid going to war, the Homeric hero Achilles was hidden on the island of Skyros disguised as a woman by his mother, the goddess Thetis. This story does not exist in the original Iliad but is in later sources. ↩
19. People who were intersex existed in the Greco-Roman world like they do today. Although social expectations called for infants with physical traits of being intersex to be killed, parents often hid their children to avoid doing so. ↩
20. A famous mythical character who played important roles in several stories such as the prophet in the tale of King Oedipus, who reveals to him the fact that Oedipus killed his own father. According to one myth, he was turned into a woman by the gods for seven years. He also figures in Lucian's other works, such as the Nekomantia. ↩
21. Ismenodora is also a courtesan. ↩
22. most likely referring to a phallus/dildo ↩
23. To the Romans, sexual intercourse requires the presence of a penetrator and a penetrated. What confused them about female same sex desire is the question of who penetrated. ↩

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

7: Sex Workers

[7.1: Sex Work and Sex Workers](#)

[7.2: Sex Work and The Law](#)

[7.3: Elites and Accusations of Sex Work](#)

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7.1: Sex Work and Sex Workers

CONTENT WARNING

Sexual Assault, Sexual Violence Involving Minors, Castration, Threats of Graphic Violence, Misogyny.

This entire section contains sexual violence. Many Roman authors casually mention sexual assault and try to minimize the severity of the act itself and the experiences of survivors.

THE SOCIAL STATUS OF SEX WORKERS

Sex workers were always vulnerable at all ranks of life. They were at risk from their clients and their owners or pimps (if they had them). The work was hard and often in terrible conditions. Not surprisingly, some, like the slave prostitute whose sale collar's inscription is below, tried to run away:

adultera meretrix tene me quia de Bulla R(e)g(ia):

adulteress-prostitute: detain me because I have run away from Bulla Regia

ILS 9455, Bulla Regia, North Africa, 4th century CE

Sex work was dangerous in antiquity, as now. As was being in any profession associated with sex work, such as acting. If your assaulter had any power you were unlikely to get any justice. In one defence speech, the orator Cicero just waved away his client's involvement in a gang rape of an actress as a thing of no importance because it was something everyone was allowed to do with actresses and actors:

Do you try to stain such a brilliant life as this with those imputations? You impute sex crimes to him which no one can recognize, not only by having ever heard any one's name mentioned, but even by having heard a suspicion breathed against him. You call him twice-married, in order to invent new words, and not only new accusations. You say that some one was taken by him into his province to gratify his lust; but that is not an accusation, but a random lie, risked because you expect no revenge. You say he raped an actress. And this is said to have happened at Atina, while he was quite young, by a sort of established licence of proceeding towards theatrical people, well known in all towns.

Cicero, *In Defence of Plancius* 30

It wasn't just older, more conservative men like Cicero who thought so little of women who made their money out of their bodies. In the following the poet Catullus attacks a woman who had made off with some of his writing tablets:

Come along all my hendecasyllables,^[1] as many as you are, from every part, all of you, as many as you are! A filthy whore thinks that I am a joke, and says she won't return to me your writing tablets, if you can stand it. Let's pursue her, and claim them back. "Who is she?" you ask. That one, whom you see strutting disgracefully, grinning with annoyance like a mime with a face like a Gallic dog. Surround her and demand them back. "Filthy whore, give back the writing tablets; give back, filthy whore, the writing tablets." You don't give two cents? You slime, you whorehouse, or if you could be anything even more loathsome! But you mustn't think that this is enough. For if nothing else we can extort a blush on your brazened bitch's face. We'll yell again in heightened voice, "Filthy whore, give back the writing tablets; give back, filthy whore, the writing tablets." But we do no good, she isn't moved. We must change our approach and our tune, if you can make further progress—"Pure and honest, give back my writing tablets."

Catullus, *Poem* 42

MALE PROSTITUTES

Many Romans were not so sympathetic. Seneca the Younger was so repelled by male prostitutes that he wonders if you should even take their money to save your life:

It seems to offer more opportunity for debate to consider what a captive ought to do, if a man of abominable vices offers him the price of his ransom? Shall I permit myself to be saved by a wretch? When safe, what repayment can I make to him? Am I to live with a disgraced person? Yet, am I not to live with the man who saved me? I will tell you my opinion. I would accept money, even from such a person, if it were to save my life; yet I would only accept it as a loan, not as a benefit. I would repay him the money, and if I were ever able to preserve him from danger I would do so. As for friendship, which can only exist between equals, I would

not condescend to be such a man's friend, nor would I regard him as my saviour, but merely as a money-lender, to whom I am only bound to repay what I borrowed from him.

Seneca the Younger, *On Benefits* 2.21

GENITAL MUTILATION

Many of those in sex work were children or teenagers. In the following, Petronius, of all people, has one of his characters attack underage sex work and the creation of eunuchs to keep male children hairless younger:

I shrink from speaking plain and betraying our destiny of ruin; boys whose childhood is hardly begun are kidnapped in the Persian way, and the powers the knife has shorn are forced to the service of lust, and in order that the passing of man's finest age may be hedged round with delay and hold back the hurrying years, Nature seeks for herself, and finds herself not. So all take their pleasure in harlotry, and the halting steps of a feeble body, and in flowing hair and numberless clothes of new names, everything that ensnares mankind

Petronius, *Satyricon* 122.1

Seneca the Younger, who lived at the same time as Petronius, and was, like him, close to the Emperor Nero, similarly attacks those who prevent their slaves from growing up so they can still use them as sexual objects and fit in within the Roman system of sexuality:

Another, who serves the wine, must dress like a woman and wrestle with his advancing years; he cannot get away from his boyhood and he is dragged back to it. Though he already has a soldier's figure, he is kept beardless by having his hair smoothed away or plucked out by the roots, and he must remain awake throughout the night, dividing his time between his master's drunkenness and his lust. In the chamber he must be a man, at the feast, a boy.

Seneca the Younger, *Letters to Lucilius* 47.7

BROTHELS

We only have one building from the Roman empire that we can identify as a purpose built brothel is in Pompeii, to the South of Rome.^[2] While there were most likely some other purpose built brothels, most of them were likely repurposed buildings or parts of various bars and entertainment sites. Sex work was also done in the streets and in some people's homes, just as now.



Exterior of lupanar (brothel) in Pompeii

Sex workers worked in many places; some from their own homes, others in the houses of clients, others (many others) in brothels. In the following fragment from the Roman novel the *Satyricon*, set in the south of Italy, one of the main characters, Ascyltos, finds the others after being separated and led into a rather disreputable part of town:

Wiping away the sweat with his hands, he replied, "If you only knew what I have gone through!" "What was it?" I demanded. "A most respectable looking person came up to me," he replied, "while I was wandering all over the town and could not find where I had left my inn, and very graciously offered to guide me. He led me through some very dark and crooked alleys, to this place, pulled out his penis, and commenced to beg me to comply with his appetite. A whore had already vacated her cell for an as,^[3] and

he had laid hands upon me, and, but for the fact that I was the stronger, I would have been compelled to take my medicine.” While Ascyrtos was telling me of his bad luck, who should come up again but this same very respectable looking person, in company with a woman not at all bad looking, and, looking at Ascyrtos, he requested him to enter the house, assuring him that there was nothing to fear, and, since he was unwilling to take the passive part, he should have the active. The woman, on her part, urged me very persistently to accompany her, so we followed the couple, at last, and were conducted between the rows of name-boards, where we saw, in cells, many persons of each sex amusing themselves in such a manner that it seemed to me that every one of them must have been drinking satyrion.^[4] On catching sight of us, they attempted to seduce us with pederastic lechery, and one jerk, with his clothes tied up, assaulted Ascyrtos, and, having thrown him down upon a couch, attempted to impale him from above. I assisted the sufferer immediately, however, and having joined forces, we defied the troublesome jerk. Ascyrtos ran out of the house and took to his heels, leaving me as the object of their sexual attacks, but the crowd, finding me the stronger in body and purpose, let me go unharmed.

Petronius, *Satyricon* 7

SEX AND EXCESS

Here is Tertullian discussing the dangers of spectacles and their association with sex workers:

In the same way we are commanded to steer clear of every kind of impurity. By this command, therefore, we are forbidden to attend the theatre, which is impurity’s own peculiar home, where nothing wins approval but what elsewhere finds approval. And so, the theatre’s greatest charm is above all produced by its filth—filth which the actor of the Atellan farces conveys by gestures; filth which the mime actor even exhibits by womanish dress, banishing all reverence for sex and sense of shame so that they blush more readily at home than on the stage; filth, finally, which the pantomime experiences in his own body from boyhood in order to become an artist.

Even the very prostitutes, the victims of public lust, are brought upon the stage, creatures feeling yet more wretched in the presence of women, the only members in the community who were unaware of their existence; now they are exhibited in public before the eyes of persons of every age and rank; their address, their price, their record are publicly announced, even to those who do not need the information, and (to say nothing of the rest) things which ought to remain hidden in the darkness of their dens so as not to contaminate the daylight. Let the senate blush, let all the orders blush, let even those very women who have committed murder on their own shame blush once a year when, by their own gestures, they betray their fear of the light of the day and the gaze of the people.

Now, if we must detest every kind of impurity, why should we be allowed to hear what we are not allowed to speak, when we know that vile jocularities and every idle word are judged by God? Why, in like manner, should we be permitted to see that which is sinful to do? Why should things which, spoken by the mouth, defile a man not be regarded as defiling a man when allowed access by the ears and eyes, since the ears and eyes are the servants of the spirit, and he whose servants are filthy cannot claim to be clean himself?

You have, therefore, the theatre prohibited in the prohibition of uncleanness. Again, if we reject the learning of the world’s literature as convicted of foolishness before God, we have a sufficiently clear rule also concerning those types of spectacles which, in profane literature, are classified as belonging to the comic or tragic stage. Now, if tragedies and comedies are bloody and wanton, impious and prodigal inventors of outrage and lust, the recounting of what is atrocious or base is no better; neither is what is objectionable in deed acceptable in word.

Tertullian, *On Spectacles* 17.3-4

One Roman festival associated with prostitutes was the Floralia, the springtime festival in honour of the goddess Flora. It was associated with mass excess on a lot of fronts. The Christian author Lactantius went so far as to invent an entire (and incorrect) origin story for it involving a prostitute:

Now how great must that immortality be considered which is attained even by whores! Flora, having obtained great wealth by this practice, made the people her heir, and left a fixed sum of money, the annual proceeds of which went to her public games to be celebrated on her Senate, which they called Floralia. And because this appeared disgraceful to the senate, in order that a kind of dignity might be given to a shameful matter, they resolved that an argument should be taken from the name itself. They pretended that she was the goddess who presides over flowers, and that she must be appeased, that the crops, together with the trees or vines,

might produce a good and abundant blossom. The poet [Ovid] followed up this idea in his *Fasti*, and related that there was a nymph, by no means obscure, who was called Chloris, and that, on her marriage with Zephyrus, she received from her husband as a wedding gift the control over all flowers. These things are spoken with propriety, but to believe them is unbecoming and shameful. And when the truth is in question, ought disguises of this kind to deceive us? Those games, therefore, are celebrated with all wantonness, as is suitable to the memory of a whore. For besides complete freedom of language, in which all filthiness is poured forth, women are also stripped of their garments at the demand of the people, and then perform the office of mimes, and are detained in the sight of the people with indecent gestures, just to satiate unchaste eyes.

Lactantius, *Divine Institutes* 1.20

Aulus Gellius tells us this anecdote of uncertain date about the courtesan Manilla and an attempt by a powerful Roman to break down her door:

14 A story told of Hostilius Mancinus, a curule aedile, and the *meretrix* Manilia; and the words of the decree of the tribunes to whom Manilia appealed.

1 As I was reading the ninth book of the Miscellany of Ateius Capito, *On Public Decisions*, one decree of the tribunes seemed to me full of old-time dignity. 2 For that reason I remember it, and it was rendered for this reason and to this purport. Aulus Hostilius Mancinus was a curule aedile. 3 He brought suit before the people against a *meretrix* called Manilia, because he said that he had been struck with a stone thrown from her apartment by night, and he exhibited the wound made by the stone. 4 Manilia appealed to the tribunes of the commons. 5 Before them she declared that Mancinus had come to her house dressed as a reveller; that it would not have been to her advantage to admit him, and that when he tried to break in by force, he had been driven off with stones. 6 The tribunes decided that the aedile had rightly been refused admission to a place to which it had not been seemly for him to go with a garland on his head;^[5] therefore they forbid the aedile to bring an action before the people.

Aulus Gellius, *Attic Nights* 4.14

CRITICISMS OF SEX WORK AND THOSE WHO PAY FOR IT

Here is Juvenal criticizing sex workers and men who pay for their services:

And besides, not to flatter ourselves, what value is there in a poor man's serving here in Rome, even if he takes the effort to hurry along in his toga before daylight, seeing that the praetor is ordering his lictor to go full speed lest his colleague should be the first to salute the childless ladies Albina and Modia, who have long ago been awake. Here in Rome the son of free-born parents has to give the wall to some rich man's slave; for that other will give as much as the whole pay of a legionary tribune to enjoy the chance favours of a Calvina or a Catiena, while you, when the face of some fancy dressed whore takes your fancy, scarce dare to help Chione step down from her lofty chair.

Juvenal, *Satire* 3.130-136

Early Christians also attacked sex workers for a multitude of reasons:

But as for us, we have been taught that to expose new-born children is an act of wicked men; and this we have been taught in case we should do any one an injury, and in case we should sin against God, first, because we see that almost all so exposed (not only the girls, but also the males) are brought up to prostitution. And as the ancients are said to have reared herds of oxen, or goats, or sheep, or horses, so now we see you rear children only for this shameful use; and for this pollution a multitude of females and hermaphrodites, and those who commit unmentionable iniquities, are found in every nation. And you receive the hire of these, and duty and taxes from them, whom you ought to exterminate from your realm. And any one who uses such persons, besides the godless and infamous and impure sex, may possibly be having sex with his own child, or relative, or brother. And there are some who prostitute even their own children and wives, and some are openly mutilated for the purpose of sodomy; and they refer these mysteries to the Mother of the Gods^[6], and along with each of those whom you esteem gods there is painted a serpent, a great symbol and mystery.

Justin Martyr, *Apology* 1.27

133 In dealing with brothel-keepers and their trade we must certainly betray no weakness as though something were to be said on both sides, but must sternly forbid them and insist that no one, be he poor or be he rich, shall pursue such a business, thus levying a fee, which all the world condemns as shameful, upon brutality and lust. Such men bring individuals together in union without love

and sex without affection, and all for the sake of filthy money. They must not take unfortunate women or children, captured in war or else purchased with money, and expose them for shameful ends in dirty booths which are flaunted before the eyes in every part of the city, at the doors of the houses of magistrates and in market-places, near government buildings and temples, 134 in the midst of all that is holiest. Neither barbarian women, I say, nor Greeks — of whom the latter were in former times almost free but now live in bondage utter and complete — shall they put in such shameful constraint, doing a much more evil and unclean business than breeders of horses and of asses carry on, not mating beasts with beasts where both are willing and feel no shame, but mating human beings that do feel shame and revulsion, with lecherous and dissolute men in an ineffectual and fruitless physical union that breeds destruction rather than life. Yes, and they respect no man nor god not Zeus, the god of family life, not Hera, the goddess of marriage, not the Fates, who bring fulfilment, not Artemis, protectress of the child-bed, not mother Rhea, not the Eileithyiae, who preside over human birth, not Aphrodite, whose name stands for the normal sex and union of male and female. 136 No, we must proclaim that neither magistrate nor lawgiver shall allow such merchandising or legalize it, whether our cities are to house a people of the highest virtue or to fall into a second, third, fourth, or any other class, so long as it is in the power of any one of them to prevent such things. 137 But if old customs and diseases that have become entrenched in the course of time fall to the care of our ruler, he shall by no means leave them without attention and correction, but, with an eye to what is practicable, he shall curb and correct them in some way or other. For evils are never wont to remain as they are; they are ever active and advancing to greater wantonness if they meet no compelling check.

138 It is our duty, therefore, to pay some attention to this and under no condition to bear this mistreatment of outcast and enslaved creatures with calmness and indifference, not only because all humanity has been held in honour and in equal honour by God, who begat it, having the same marks and tokens to show that it deserves honour, to wit, reason and the knowledge of evil and good, but also because of the following consideration, which we must always remember: that for flagrant wrong fostered by licence it is difficult to set a limit that it will no longer, through fear of the consequences, dare to transgress. Indeed, beginning with practices and habits that seem trivial and allowable, it acquires a strength and force that are uncontrollable, and no longer stops at anything.

139 Now at this point we must assuredly remember that this adultery committed with outcasts, so evident in our midst and becoming so brazen and unchecked, is to a very great extent paving the way to hidden and secret assaults upon the chastity of women and boys of good family, such crimes being only too boldly committed when modesty is openly trampled upon, and that it was not invented, as some think, to afford security and abstinence from these crimes.

Dio Chrysostom, *Orations* 7

SEX WORK AS POLITICAL SLANDER

Among the elite, it was not uncommon to be accused of prostituting oneself at some point. Few people seem to have gone so far as Cicero attacking Mark Antony in his Philippics (43 BCE). After Cicero issued a number of these Antony had him proscribed and his head and hands were cut off and displayed in Rome:

Shall we then examine your conduct from when you were a boy? Let's do that and begin at the beginning. Do you recollect that, while you were still clad in the *toga praetexta*,^[7] you became a bankrupt? That was the fault of your father, you will say. I admit that. In truth, such a defence is full of a son's love. But it is peculiarly suited to your own audacity, that you sat among the fourteen rows of the knights, though by the Roscian law there was a place appointed for bankrupts, even if any one had become such by the fault of fortune and not by his own. You assumed the *toga virilis*, which you soon made a woman's one:^[8] at first a public prostitute, with a regular price for your shame – and not a low one, at that. But very soon Curio^[9] stepped in, who carried you off from your public trade, and, as if he had bestowed a matron's robe upon you, settled you in a steady and durable wedlock. 45 No boy bought for the gratification of passion was ever so wholly in the power of his master as you were in Curio's. How often has his father turned you out of his house? How often has he placed guards to prevent you from entering? while you, with night for your accomplice, lust for your encourager, and wages for your compeller, were let down through the roof. That house could no longer endure your wickedness. Do you not know that I am speaking of matters with which I am extremely familiar? Remember that time when Curio, the father, lay weeping in his bed; his son throwing himself at my feet with tears recommended to me you; he entreated me to defend you against his own father, if he demanded six millions of sesterces of you; for that he had been bail for you to that amount.^[10] And he himself, burning with love, declared positively that because he was unable to bear the misery of being separated from you, he should go into exile. 46 At that time I soothed – or I should say removed – the misery of that most flourishing family! I persuaded the father to pay the son's debts; to release the young man, endowed as he was with great promise

of courage and ability, by the sacrifice of part of his family estate; and to use his privileges and authority as a father to prohibit him not only from all intimacy with, but from every opportunity of meeting you. When you recollected that all this was done by me, would you have dared to provoke me by abuse if you had not been trusting to those swords which we behold?

47. But let us say no more of your profligacy and debauchery. There are things which it is not possible for me to mention with honour; but you are all the more free for that, since you have not hesitated to be an actor in scenes which a modest enemy cannot bring himself to mention.^[11]

Cicero, *Philippic* 2. 44 -47

In the following invective against the historian Sallust attributed to Cicero, he accuses him also of prostituting himself. It is not by Cicero, however, and it should be noted that in the Invective against Cicero attributed to Sallust, he accuses Cicero of incest with his daughter. Invective had basically no boundaries in Rome.

5 13 I shall now return to you, Sallust, saying nothing of your father; for even if he never committed a sin in all his life, he could not have inflicted a greater injury upon his country than in begetting such a son. Nor shall I inquire into any sins of your boyhood, lest I may seem to criticize your father, who had full control of you at that time, but how you spent your youth. For if this be shown, it will readily be understood how vicious was the childhood which led up to a manhood so shameless and lawless. When the profit derived from your vile body could no longer suffice for your bottomless gullet, and when you were too old to endure what another's passion prompted, you were incited by an unbounded desire of trying upon others what you had not considered disgraceful to your own person. 14 Therefore, Fathers of the Senate, it is not easy to determine whether he acquired his property or squandered it with more dishonourable members.

Pseudo-Cicero, *Invective Against Sallust*

CONTENT WARNING

Misogyny.

The upperclass woman in this passage is accused of being a sex worker and is punished for it. High status women in ancient Rome were often accused by male Roman authors of being sex workers in an attempt to lower these women's status.

Just like the above, tales of elite women becoming prostitutes due their boundless appetite for sex have to be taken with an enormous grain of salt, as these stories all sound the same are all brought up for the same reasons, which is usually to point out how terribly unchaste women are now (whenever now was) compared to the mythical women of the past, and especially elite women, who were problematic because they could wield enormous power sometimes – that is especially true with [Empresses](#):

In the same year, the senate set limits to female depravity by stringent resolutions; and it was enacted that no woman should trade in her body, if her father, grandfather, or husband had been a Roman equestrian . For Vistilia, the daughter of a praetorian family, had advertised her venality on the aediles' list — the normal procedure among our ancestors, who imagined the unchaste to be sufficiently punished by the avowal of their infamy. Her husband, Titidius Labeo, was also required to explain why, in view of his wife's manifest guilt, he had not invoked the penalty of the law. As he pleaded that sixty days, not yet elapsed, were allowed for deliberation, it was thought enough to pass sentence on Vistilia, who was removed to the island of Seriphos.^[12]

Tacitus, *Annales* 2.85.1

Sources and Further Reading:

Media Attributions

- Exterior of lupanar (brothel) in Pompeii

-
1. A type of poetic metre. ↩
 2. This building is called the "*lupanar*" which means she-wolf's den. Female sex workers were called *lupa* (she-wolf). ↩
 3. A coin of small value ↩
 4. An ancient aphrodisiac. ↩
 5. The garland showed that he was there as a client, that is, rather than on business. The aediles seem to have been in charge of the management of prostitution as a business. ↩

6. Presumably referring to the Galli and Magna Mater, though there were other similar mother goddesses with self-castrated priests, as we have seen. ↩
7. While still legally a child. ↩
8. Prostitutes were supposed to wear the toga, as were adulteresses. As to whether that was something people did regularly, it is hard to know for sure. ↩
9. This family were friends of Cicero and among the Roman elite ↩
10. Antony had borrowed the money (which is a huge amount), Curio Junior had stood as guarantor of that loan, despite the fact that he had no legal right to sign any legal document in his own right, as he still had a *[pb_glossary id="511"]pater familias**[/pb_glossary]*, who was very much alive, and now on the hook for the amount. He could have fought it in court, as whoever lent that money should not have accepted him as a guarantor, but that would have been an extremely embarrassing case to end up arguing in public in Rome (law cases were argued in the open air, in the Forum, so were popular entertainment as well as legal events). ↩
11. I would note that Cicero has in fact mentioned all of these things in great detail and will go on to say a great many other things in this speech and the many, many others of this sort he wrote. ↩
12. Exile was a punishment often saved for upperclass criminals. See chapter on Exiles. ↩

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7.2: Sex Work and The Law

CONTENT WARNING

Gendered Violence Against Women, Misogyny.

This section contains gendered violence. The Romans generally viewed women as second to men and many systems of power in the Roman Republic and Empire were constructed to control woman's behaviour, among other things. A passage in this section deals with the murder of a sex worker.

Learning Objectives

In this chapter you will learn about:

- The legal status of sex work in Rome;
- Legal restrictions on sex workers;
- The taxation of sex work by the state.

LAWS ON SEX WORK

The Digest of Roman law is concerned only with female sex workers, and says the following about women who work in the sex trade:

Ulpian, On the Lex Julia et Papia, Book I.

We hold that a woman openly practices prostitution, not only where she does so in a house of ill-fame, but also if she is accustomed to do this in taverns, or in other places where she manifests no regard for her modesty.

(1) We understand the word “openly” to mean indiscriminately, that is to say, without choice, and not if she commits adultery or fornication, but where she sustains the role of a prostitute.

(2) Moreover, where a woman, having accepted money, has intercourse with only one or two persons, she is not considered to have openly prostituted herself.

(3) Octavenus, however, says very properly that where a woman publicly prostitutes herself without doing so for money, she should be classed as a harlot.

(4) The law brands with infamy not only a woman who practices prostitution, but also one who has formerly done so, even though she has ceased to act in this manner; for the disgrace is not removed even if the practice is subsequently discontinued.

(5) A woman is not to be excused who leads a vicious life under the pretext of poverty.

(6) The occupation of a pander is not less disgraceful than the practice of prostitution.

(7) We designate those women as procuresses who prostitute other women for money.

(8) We understand the term “procuress” to mean a woman who lives this kind of a life on account of another.

(9) Where one woman conducts a tavern, and keeps others in it who prostitute themselves, as many are accustomed to do under the pretext of employing women for the service of the house; it must be said that they are included in the class of procuresses.

(10) The Senate decreed that it was not proper for a Senator to marry or keep a woman who had been convicted of a criminal offence, the accusation for which could be made by any of the people; unless he was prohibited by law from bringing such an accusation in court.

Digest Book 23.43

Sex workers were not just female. The Tabula Heracleensis are the regulations of a town in Southern Italy that gained Roman citizenship in 89 BCE. These forbade men who sold their bodies for a variety of purposes from sitting with various town officials in public places:

25 No one shall become a decurion or a conscript in the senate of any municipality, colony, prefecture, market, or meeting place of Roman citizens, nor shall anyone who comes under the following categories be permitted to express his opinion or to cast his vote

in that body: anyone who is condemned for theft which he himself has committed or who compounds such theft; anyone who is condemned in an action for trusteeship, partnership, guardianship, mandate, infliction of injury or fraud; anyone who is condemned either by the Plaetorian Law or for something that he has done or does contrary to that law;" anyone who binds himself to fight as a gladiator; anyone who denies a debt on oath before the praetor or takes an oath that he is solvent; anyone who gives notice to sureties or creditors that he cannot pay his debt in full or who compounds with them to that effect; anyone for whom the sureties pay and settle the obligation; anyone whose possessions are seized and advertised for sale at public auction by the edict of the magistrate in charge of the administration of justice, excepting the cases of those whose property was so treated when they were wards, or of someone who was absent on public business, provided that he does not contrive fraudulently to be absent for such purpose; anyone who is condemned at Rome by public trial whereby it is unlawful for him to remain in Italy and who is not restored to his former status; anyone who is condemned by public trial in that municipality, colony, prefecture, market, or meeting place of which he is a citizen; anyone who is condemned of having lodged a false accusation or of having done something from collusion; anyone who is deprived of his rank in the military service because of disgrace; anyone whom a general dismisses from the army in disgrace; anyone who takes money or any other reward for bringing in the head of a Roman citizen; anyone who prostitutes his body for gain; anyone who trains gladiators or acts on the stage or keeps a brothel. If any of the aforesaid persons in contravention of this law takes his place or gives his vote among the decurions or the conscripts in the senate of the above-mentioned communities he shall be liable to a penalty of 50,000 sesterces to be paid to the State, and anyone so minded shall be entitled to sue for that sum.

Tabula Heracleensis 25

TAXING SEX

The Emperor Caligula was the first to impose a tax on prostitutes, a tax which was charged on sex workers across the empire, and which was collected by the army. The collection of the tax could be used as a means harass sex workers, with extra payments coerced on occasion.

He levied new and unheard of taxes, at first through the publicans and then, because their profit was so great, through the centurions and tribunes of the praetorian guard; and there was no class of commodities or men on which he did not impose some form of tariff. On all eatables sold in any part of the city he levied a fixed and definite charge; on lawsuits and legal processes begun anywhere, a fortieth part of the sum involved, providing a penalty in case anyone was found guilty of compromising or abandoning a suit; on the daily wages of porters, an eighth; on the earnings of prostitutes, as much as each received for one embrace; and a clause was added to this chapter of the law, providing that those who had ever been prostitutes or acted as panders should be liable to this public tax, and that even matrimony should not be exempt.

Suetonius, Life of Caligula 40.1

Occasionally, taxes raised by this could be directed towards specific public ends:

The Emperor Alexander Severus placed a tax on pimps and both male and female prostitutes, with the stipulation that the income thus raised go not into the public treasury but towards the cost of restoring the Theatre, the Circus, the Colosseum, and the Stadium.

Historia Augusta, Severus Alexander 24.3

However, once in a while some justice was done. A papyrus records the death of a prostitute and a judge's decision in the case about compensation for her mother in the 4-5th century CE. Hermoupolis, Egypt, 4th-5th cent. CE. It is remarkable for the fact that the magistrate has sympathy for these outsiders:

Case against a certain senator, Diodemus of Alexandria, who was in love with a public prostitute. He was dining with the prostitute at evening time. Diodemus killed the prostitute, and when Zephyrus learned about it, he ordered Diodemus to be put into prison ... The other senators ask that he be released, but Zephyrus insists that he must remain in prison.(7) Diodemus admits that he killed the prostitute. A certain Theodora, an old woman and a pauper, asks that Diodemus be compelled for her support to provide some small consolation for her daughter's life. For she said, 'this is why I gave my daughter to the pimp, so that I might have a means of support. Now that my daughter is dead I am deprived of my support, and on this account I ask that some small amount, appropriate for a woman, be given for my support.'

The prefect's decision:

You killed this woman, Diodemus, in a disgraceful way, a woman who gives a bad impression of human fortune, because she spent her life in an unholy manner and in the end sold [some letters missing]. And indeed I pity the poor creature, who when she was alive was laid out for those who wanted her, like a dead body. The poverty of her lot was so insistent that she sold her body and brought dishonour upon her name and reputation and took on a prostitute's life with its many hardships ... (8). I order that because you have destroyed the honour of the city council with the sword that you be banished as a murderer. Theodora, the poor old mother of the dead woman, who because of her own poverty deprived her daughter of her chastity, and so also caused her death, is to receive as her share one tenth of Diodemus' property; this is what required by law, with humanitarian considerations supporting the law's authority.

Berlin Papyrus 1024.6-8^[1]

Roman Law on Prostitution: The following laws come from the Digest of Justinian, an enormous compendium of Roman law compiled during the reign of the Emperor Justinian. As such they represent a body of law built up over many centuries, and incorporate a range of juridical opinions from a range of individuals.

Book 3 – on infamia

6) He also forbids a party to appear before him in behalf of others, who has suffered his body to be used like that of a woman. If, however, he has been violated by robbers or by enemies, he should not be branded with infamy, as Pomponius says.

Digest 3.1.6

PIMPING

Titulum 2 (2) ...He acts as a pimp who profits by the prostitution of slaves, but where anyone obtains such profit by means of free persons, he is also a pimp. Moreover, where he makes this his principal occupation, or as an addition to some other business; as, for instance, where he is an inn-keeper or a stable-keeper and has slaves of this kind for attendance on strangers, and, by means of their opportunities he obtains money in this manner; or if he is a bath-keeper, as is the custom in some provinces, and has slaves for the purpose of taking care of the clothes of customers, and these are guilty of such practices in the baths, he is liable to the punishment of a pimp. (3) Pomponius is of the opinion that a slave who uses for this purpose other slaves who are his private property^[2] is branded with infamy after he has obtained his freedom.

Ulpian, On the Edict, Book 6.2-3

The Emperor [Septimius] Severus stated in a Rescript that a woman was not branded with infamy who had been compelled to prostitute herself for money while in slavery.

INFAMY AND MARRIAGE

These following all come from Book 23 of the Digest, which is dedicated to discussing who could marry who legally under Roman law; as such it talks not just about prostitutes but actors and other entertainers, who also carried *infamia*, and as such could not marry high-status individuals.

It is understood that disgrace attaches to those women who live unchastely and earn money by prostitution, even if they do not do so openly.

If a woman should live in concubinage with someone besides her ex-master, I say that she does not possess the virtue of a matron.

41. Marcellus, Digest, Book XXVI.

In unions of the sexes, it should always be considered not only what is legal, but also what is decent.

(1) If the daughter, granddaughter, or great-granddaughter of a Senator should marry a freedman, or a man who practices the profession of an actor, or whose father or mother did so, the marriage will be void.

42. Modestinus, On the Rite of Marriage.

We hold that a woman openly practices prostitution, not only where she does so in a brothel, but also if she is accustomed to do this in taverns, or in other places where she manifests no regard for her modesty.

(1) We understand the word “openly” to mean indiscriminately, that is to say, without choice, and not if she commits adultery or fornication, but where she sustains the role of a prostitute. (2) Moreover, where a woman, having accepted money, has intercourse

with only one or two persons, she is not considered to have openly prostituted herself. (3) Octavenus, however, says very properly that where a woman publicly prostitutes herself without doing so for money, she should be classed as a whore. (4) The law brands with infamy not only a woman who practices prostitution, but also one who has formerly done so, even though she has ceased to act in this manner; for the disgrace is not removed even if the practice is subsequently discontinued. (5) A woman is not to be excused who leads a vicious life under the pretext of poverty. (6) The occupation of a pimp is not less disgraceful than the practice of prostitution. (7) We designate those women as procuresses who prostitute other women for money. (8) We understand the term “procuress” to mean a woman who lives this kind of a life on account of another. (9) Where one woman conducts a tavern, and keeps others in it who prostitute themselves, as many are accustomed to do under the pretext of employing women for the service of the house; it must be said that they are included in the class of procuresses.

43. *Ulpianus, On the Lex Julia et Papia, Book I.*

The section continues on discussing other women who could not marry senators.

The daughter of a Senator who has lived in prostitution, or has exercised the calling of an actress, or has been convicted of a criminal offence, can marry a freedman with impunity, for she who has been guilty of such depravity is no longer worthy of honor.

47. *Paulus, On the Lex Julia et Papia, Book II.*

Sources and Further Reading:

[The Social Effect of the Law on Prostitutes](#): a well sourced and accessible article on the introduction of the tax and its effects on sex workers.

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1. Source: (Berlin papyrus 1024.6-8, exc. G): Source” <http://www.stoa.org/diotima/antholog...legal155.shtml> ↩
 2. Although legally slaves were not allowed to own any property, being classified legally as property themselves, some slaves could and did gain considerable wealth with the consent of their masters. Owning other slaves was common for very high ranking slaves in large households and especially in the imperial household, and was a sign of their status within the slave hierarchy. ↩

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7.3: Elites and Accusations of Sex Work

Accusations of sex work against elites by other members of the elite were common in Roman invective. Why? Because it was an effective way to represent another Roman as fundamentally unworthy of the status of Roman citizen, and especially of the status of an elite member of that class, worthy of respect. The status of the person attacked did not matter or even their manliness in the case of men. For example, Mark Antony was a Roman general who was a close friend and ally of Julius Caesar, even ruling Italy for him when he was away. The orator Cicero, who hated Antony, accused him of working as a sex worker on the streets of Rome, selling himself to another member of the Roman elite.

Shall we then examine your conduct from when you were a boy? Let's do that and begin at the beginning. Do you recollect that, while you were still clad in the *toga praetexta*,^[1] you became a bankrupt? That was the fault of your father, you will say. I admit that. In truth, such a defence is full of a son's love. But it is peculiarly suited to your own audacity, that you sat among the fourteen rows of the knights, though by the Roscian law there was a place appointed for bankrupts, even if any one had become such by the fault of fortune and not by his own.^[2] You assumed the *toga virilis*,^[3] which you soon made a woman's one:^[4] at first a public prostitute, with a regular price for your shame – and not a low one, at that. But very soon Curio^[5] stepped in, who carried you off from your public trade, and, as if he had bestowed a matron's robe upon you, settled you in a steady and durable wedlock. 45 No boy bought for the gratification of passion was ever so wholly in the power of his master as you were in Curio's. How often did his father throw you out of his house? How often did he place guards to prevent you from entering? While you, with night for your accomplice, lust encouraging you, and wages pushing you on, were let down through the roof. That house could no longer endure your wickedness. Do you not know that I am speaking of matters with which I am extremely familiar? Remember that time when Curio, the father, lay weeping in his bed; his son throwing himself at my feet with tears recommended to me you; he entreated me to defend you against his own father, if he demanded six millions of sesterces of you; for that he had been bail for you to that amount.^[6] And he himself, burning with love, declared positively that because he was unable to bear the misery of being separated from you, he should go into exile. 46 At that time I soothed – or I should say removed – the misery of that most flourishing family! I persuaded the father to pay the son's debts; to release the young man, endowed as he was with great promise of courage and ability, by the sacrifice of part of his family estate; and to use his privileges and authority as a father to prohibit him not only from all intimacy with, but from every opportunity of meeting you. When you recollected that all this was done by me, would you have dared to provoke me by abuse if you had not been trusting to those swords which we behold? 47. But let us say no more of your profligacy and debauchery. There are things which it is not possible for me to mention with honour; but you are all the more free for that, since you have not hesitated to be an actor in scenes which a modest enemy cannot bring himself to mention.^[7]

Cicero, *Philippic* 2.44 -47

The Greek biographer Plutarch also relates the story, showing it still had currency over a century later:

2 1 His wife was Julia, of the house of the Caesars, and she could vie with the noblest and most discreet women of her time. By this mother her son Antony was reared, after the death of whose father she married Cornelius Lentulus, whom Cicero put to death for joining the conspiracy of Catiline. 2 This would seem to have been the origin and ground of the violent hatred which Antony felt towards Cicero. 2 At any rate, Antony says that not even the dead body of Lentulus was given up to them until his mother had begged it from the wife of Cicero. This, however, is admittedly false; for no one of those who were punished at that time by Cicero was deprived of burial. 3 Antony gave brilliant promise in his youth, they say, until his intimate friendship with Curio fell upon him like a pest. For Curio himself was unrestrained in his pleasures, and in order to make Antony more manageable, engaged him in drinking bouts, and with women, and in immoderate and extravagant expenditures. This involved Antony in a heavy debt and one that was excessive for his years — a debt of two hundred and fifty talents. 4 For this whole sum Curio went surety, but his father heard of it and banished Antony from his house. Then Antony allied himself for a short time with Clodius, the most audacious and low-lived populist of his time, in the violent courses which were convulsing the state; but he soon became sated with that miscreant's madness, and fearing the party which was forming against him, left Italy for Greece, where he spent some time in military exercises and the study of oratory. 5 He adopted what was called the Asiatic style of oratory, which was at the height of its popularity in those days and bore a strong resemblance to his own life, which was swashbuckling and boastful, full of empty exultation and distorted ambition.

Plutarch, *Life of Antony* 2

Empresses

Roman empresses were always problematic for the Romans, as they had no public political role for elite women, even if they often exerted considerable political power and had great wealth. Empresses were often represented as especially unRoman and the opposite of good Roman *matronae*, especially in their overt and unsatisfiable lust.



A rare statue of Messalina with Britannicus; most of her statues were destroyed after she was executed. c. 45 CE.

The Empress Messalina, who was married to Claudius, and mother of his two children, Octavia and Britannicus was found guilty of a charge of adultery and executed in 48 CE. Later poets really got going when describing other supposed sexual escapades of hers in brothels in Rome:

Then look at those who rival the gods, and hear what [the Emperor] Claudius endured. As soon as his wife [Messalina] saw that her husband was asleep, this august whore was shameless enough to prefer a common mat to the imperial couch. Throwing a cloak over her head, and attended by a single slave, she went out; then, having concealed her jet black locks under a blonde wig, she took her place in a brothel reeking with long-used blanks. Entering an empty room reserved for herself, she there took her stand, under the feigned name of Lycisca, her nipples bare and covered in gold leaf, and exposed to view the womb that bore you, O nobly-born Britannicus!^[8] Here she graciously received all comers, asking from each his fee; and when at length the keeper dismissed the rest, she remained to the very last before closing her cell, and with passion still raging hot within her went sorrowfully away. Then exhausted but unsatisfied, with soiled cheeks, and begrimed with the smoke of lamps, she took back to the imperial pillow all the smells of the brothel.

Juvenal, *Satire 6*

Bibliography and further reading:

Media Attributions

- Messalinaandbritannicus

1. That was while still a child under Roman law. ↩
2. This law forbid bankrupts and their children from sitting in certain places in the arena. ↩
3. the white toga of manhood assumed by boys of ancient Rome at age 15 ↩
4. Female sex workers were supposed to wear the toga, as were adulteresses. As to whether that was something people did regularly, it is hard to know for sure. ↩
5. This family were friends of Cicero and among the Roman elite. ↩
6. Antony had borrowed the money (which is a huge amount), Curio Junior had stood as guarantor of that loan, despite the fact that he had no legal right to sign any legal document in his own right, as he still had a *pater familias*, who was very much alive, and now on the hook for the amount. He could have fought it in court, as whoever lent that money should not have accepted him as a guarantor, but that would have been an extremely embarrassing case to end up arguing in public in Rome (law cases were argued in the open air, in the Forum, so were popular entertainment as well as legal events). ↩
7. I would note that Cicero has in fact mentioned all of these things in great detail and will go on to say a great many other things in this speech and the many, many others of this sort he wrote. ↩
8. Tiberius Claudius Caesar Britannicus, usually called Britannicus, was the son of Roman emperor Claudius and his third wife Valeria Messalina. ↩

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

8: Exile and Exiles

8.1: Exile

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8.1: Exile

FROM ROMAN TO UNROMAN

There were a number of ways you could become unRoman in a rather rapid manner. One was to be captured and enslaved; when that happened Roman law considered you dead, and only brought you back to life from a legal perspective once you were freed, which must have made things very interesting all round if you managed to get free at some point. We're not looking at those cases, however, but at those of exiles and Romans, like Sertorius, who decided to toss aside their Romanness.

EXILE

Exiles, both enforced and self-willed, form an interesting subset of Romans. Romans who were legally exiled^[1] lost all their civic rights and ceased for all intents and purposes to be Roman in the eyes of the state.

Men who are on trial for their lives at Rome, while sentence is in process of being voted,—if even only one of the tribes whose votes are needed to ratify the sentence has not voted,—have the privilege at Rome of openly departing and condemning themselves to a voluntary exile. Such men are safe at Naples or Praeneste or at Tibur, and at other towns with which this arrangement has been duly ratified on oath.

Polybius, Histories 6.14

For as to banishment, it is very easy to be understood what sort of thing that is. For banishment is not a punishment, but is a refuge and harbour of safety from punishment. For those who are desirous to avoid some punishment or some calamity, turn to banishment alone,—that is to say, they change their residence and their situation, and, therefore, there will not be found in any law of ours, as there is in the laws of other states, any mention of any crime being punished with banishment. But as men wished to avoid imprisonment, execution, or disgrace (ignominia), which are penalties, appointed by the laws, they flee to banishment as to an altar, though, if they chose to remain in the city and to submit to the rigour of the law, they would not lose their rights of citizenship sooner than they lost their lives; but because they do not so choose, their rights of citizenship are not taken from them, but are abandoned and laid aside by them. For as, according to our law, no one can be a citizen of two cities, the rights of citizenship here are lost when he who has fled is received into banishment,—that is to say, into another city.

Cicero, In Defense of Caecina

There seems to have been forms of exile that didn't involve actual movement from Rome, but many exiles were forbidden to come within hundreds of miles of the city under penalty of death for them and any who aided them. Some were even exiled to specific (usually horrible) places as a special twist of the knife. A manly, traditional Roman was supposed to take this sort of thing in his stride and endure it with stoic grimness, or to kill himself if he could not manage that. Cicero was not such a man, and he had a total breakdown when his enemy Clodius managed to have him exiled in 57 BCE, as the following letter to his wife Terentia, his daughter Tullia/"Tulliola", and son written as he was about to leave Italy shows:

TO TERENTIA, TULLIOLA, AND YOUNG CICERO (AT ROME)
BRUNDISIUM, 29 APRIL

Yes, I do write to you less often than I could because, though I am always wretched, yet when I write to you or read a letter from you, I am in such floods of tears that I cannot endure it. Oh, that I had clung less to life! I should at least never have known real sorrow, or not much of it, in my life. Yet if fortune has reserved for me any hope of recovering at any time any position again, I was not utterly wrong to do so: if these miseries are to be permanent, I only wish, my dear, to see you as soon as possible and to die in your arms, since neither gods, whom you have worshipped with such pure devotion, nor men, whom I have ever served, have made us any return... What a fall! What a disaster! What can I say? Should I ask you to come—a woman of weak health and broken spirit? Should I not ask you? Am I to be without you, then? I think the best course is this: if there is any hope of my restoration, stay to promote it and push the thing on: but if, as I fear, it proves hopeless, pray come to me by any means in your power.^[2] Be sure of this, that if I have you I shall not think myself wholly lost. But what is to become of my darling Tullia? You must see to that now: I can think of nothing. But certainly, however things turn out, we must do everything to promote that poor little girl's married happiness and reputation. Again, what is my boy Cicero to do? Let him, at any rate, be ever in my bosom and in my arms. I can't write more. A fit of weeping hinders me. I don't know how you have got on; whether you are left in possession of anything, or have been, as I fear, entirely plundered. Piso,^[3] as you say, I hope will always be our friend. As to the manumission of the slaves you

need not be uneasy. To begin with, the promise made to yours was that you would treat them according as each severally deserved. So far Orpheus has behaved well, besides him no one very especially so. With the rest of the slaves the arrangement is that, if my property is forfeited,^[4] they should become my freedmen, supposing them to be able to maintain at law that status. But if my property remained in my ownership, they were to continue slaves, with the exception of a very few. But these are trifles. To return to your advice, that I should keep up my courage and not give up hope of recovering my position, I only wish that there were any good grounds for entertaining such a hope. As it is, when, alas ! shall I get a letter from you? Who will bring it me? I would have waited for it at Brundisium, but the sailors would not allow it, being unwilling to lose a favourable wind. For the rest, put as dignified a face on the matter as you can, my dear Terentia. Our life is over: we have had our day: it is not any fault of ours that has ruined us, but our virtue. I have made no false step, except in not losing my life when I lost my honours. But since our children preferred my living, let us bear every-thing else, however intolerable. And yet I, who encourage you, cannot encourage myself. I have sent that faithful fellow Clodius Philhetaerus home, because he was hampered with weakness of the eyes. Sallustius seems likely to outdo everybody in his attentions. Pescennius is exceedingly kind to me; and I have hopes that he will always be attentive to you. Sica had said that he would accompany me; but he has left Brundisium. Take the greatest possible care of your health, and believe me that I am more affected by your distress than my own. My dear Terentia, most faithful and best of wives, and my darling little daughter, and that last hope of my race, Cicero, good-bye!

29 April, from Brundisium.

Cicero, Letters to his Family 14.4

For good measure, he also wrote to his brother Quintus to weep at him too:

TO HIS BROTHER QUINTUS (AT ROME), from THESSALONICA, AUGUST

I beg you, my dear brother, if you and all my family have been ruined by my single misfortune, not to attribute it to dishonesty and bad conduct on my part, rather than to shortsightedness and the wretched state I was in. I have committed no fault except in trusting those whom I believed to be bound by the most sacred obligation not to deceive me, or whom I thought to be even interested in not doing so. All my most intimate, nearest and dearest friends were either alarmed for themselves or jealous of me: the result was that all I lacked was good faith on the part of my friends and caution on my own. But if your own blameless character and the compassion of the world prove sufficient to preserve you at this juncture from molestation, you can, of course, observe whether any hope of restoration is left for me. For Pomponius, Sestius, and my son-in-law Piso have caused me as yet to stay at Thessalonica, forbidding me, on account of certain impending movements, to increase my distance. But in truth I am awaiting the result more on account of their letters than from any firm hope of my own. For what can I hope with an enemy possessed of the most formidable power, with my detractors masters of the state, with friends unfaithful, with numbers of people jealous?... [And so on and on]

Letters to his Brother 1.4

Reflection

Reflect on your understanding on the norms and expectations of Roman masculinity. What parts of Cicero's letters can be seen as examples and evidence of his unRoman way of coping with his exile?

It was not just men who were exiled. Augustus exiled his daughter and granddaughter, both called Julia, due to a range of offenses, all of which challenged his moral agenda:

65 1 But at the height of [Augustus'] happiness and his confidence in his family and its training, Fortune proved fickle. He found the two Julias, his daughter and granddaughter, guilty of every form of vice, and banished them. He lost Gaius and Lucius within the span of eighteen months, for the former died in Lycia and the latter at Massilia. He then publicly adopted his third grandson Agrippa and at the same time his stepson Tiberius by a bill passed in the assembly of the curiae; but he soon disowned Agrippa because of his low tastes and violent temper, and sent him off to Surrentum. 2 He endured the death of his family with far more resignation than their misconduct. For he was not greatly broken by the fate of Gaius and Lucius, but he informed the senate of his daughter's fall through a letter read in his absence by a quaestor, and out of shame would meet no one for a long time, and even thought of putting her to death. At all events, when one of her confidantes, a freedwoman called Phoebe, hanged herself at about that same time, he said: "I would rather have been Phoebe's father." 3 After Julia was banished, he denied her the use of wine and every form of luxury, and would not allow any man, bond or free, to come near her without his permission, and then not without

being informed of his stature, complexion, and even of any marks or scars upon his body. It was not until five years later that he moved her from the island to the mainland and treated her with somewhat less rigour. But he could not by any means be prevailed on to recall her, and when the Roman people several times interceded for her and urgently pressed their suit, he in open assembly called upon the gods to curse them with like daughters and like wives. 4 He would not allow the child born to his granddaughter Julia after her sentence to be recognized or reared. As Agrippa grew no more manageable, but on the contrary became madder from day to day, he transferred him to an island and set a guard of soldiers over him besides. He also provided by a decree of the senate that he should be confined there for all time, and at every mention of him and of the Julias he would sigh deeply and even cry out: “I wish never had married and I wish had died without offspring” and he never alluded to them except as his three boils and his three ulcers.

Suetonius, *Life of Augustus* 65

SELF EXILE

Cornelia, the mother of the Gracchi brothers—two famous Roman tribunes of the plebs in the late 2nd century BCE — decided to exile herself from Rome after her sons were lynched by opposing factions in the Senate. In doing so, she shows how self-exile — making oneself unRoman to some degree — could be effective.

Cornelia is said to have endured these and all her misfortunes nobly and unselfishly, and to have said about the shrines where they were buried that their bodies had received worthy tombs. She herself spent her days in the area called Misenum and did not change her usual way of life. She had many friends and entertained her friends, and there were always Greeks and learned men in her company, and all the kings exchanged gifts with her. She particularly enjoyed discussing with visitors and friends the life and habits of her father Scipio Africanus, and she was most admirable because she did not grieve for her sons and talked to her audience without weeping about their sufferings and their accomplishments, as if she were telling stories to them about the ancient heroes of Rome. Some thought that she had lost her mind because she was old and had suffered so greatly, and that she had become insensible because of her misfortunes, but these people were themselves insensible of how much nobility and good birth and education can help people in times of sorrow, and that for all the attempts of virtue to prevent it, she may be overcome by fortune, but in her defeat she cannot be deprived of the power of rational endurance.

Plutarch, *Life of Gaius Gracchus* 19.1-3

In contrast to Cornelia, we have the Roman general and ex-consul Lucullus (118-c. 57 BCE). Lucullus — who had had a spectacular political and military career, only to be gradually pushed aside by new rising competitors such as Pompey — went off to the countryside of southern Italy in an act of “self-exile.” There, he became very interested in raising fish and living a lavishly enjoyable lifestyle in, rather than fighting for Roman values and acting as a Roman elite male was supposed to. He spent little time in Rome, and preferred his many villas near Naples, then a favourite spot for the Roman elite to spend their summers.

38 1 After his divorce from Clodia, who was an immoral and base woman, he married Servilia, a sister of Cato,^[5] but this, too, was an unfortunate marriage. For it lacked none of the evils which Clodia had brought in her train except one, namely, the scandal about her brothers. In all other respects Servilia was equally vile and abandoned, and yet Lucullus forced himself to tolerate her, out of regard for Cato. At last, however, he divorced her. 2 The Senate had conceived wondrous hopes that in him it would find an opposer of the tyranny of Pompey and a champion of the aristocracy, with all the advantage of great glory and influence, but he quit and abandoned public affairs, either because he saw that they were already beyond proper control and diseased, or, as some say, because he had his fill of glory, and felt that the unfortunate result of his many struggles and toils entitled him to fall back upon a life of ease and luxury. 3 Some commend him for making such a change, and thereby escaping the unhappy lot of Marius,^[6] who, after his Cimbrian victories and the large and wonderful successes which were so famous, was unwilling to relax his efforts and enjoy the honours won, but with an insatiable desire for glory and power, old man that he was, fought with young men in the conduct of the state, and so drove headlong into terrible deeds, and sufferings still more terrible still. Cicero, say these, would have had a better old age if he had retreated from public life after the affair of Catiline, and Scipio, too, if he had taken a pause after adding Numantia to Carthage; 4 for a political cycle, too, has a sort of natural termination, and political no less than athletic contests are absurd, after the full vigour of life has departed. Crassus and Pompey, on the other hand, ridiculed Lucullus for giving himself up to pleasure and extravagance, as if a luxurious life were not even more unsuitable to men of his years than political and military activities.

39 1 And it is true that in the life of Lucullus, as in an ancient comedy, one reads in the first part of political measures and military commands, and in the latter part of drinking bouts, and banquets, and what might pass for mad parties, and torch-races, and all manner of frivolity. 2 For I must count as frivolity his costly buildings, his walkways and baths, and still more his paintings and statues (not to speak of his devotion to these arts), which he collected at enormous expense, pouring out into such channels the vast and splendid wealth which he accumulated from his campaigns.^[7] Even now, when luxury has increased so much, the gardens of Lucullus are counted among the most costly of the imperial gardens. 3 **As for his works on the sea-shore and in the vicinity of Naples where he suspended hills over vast tunnels, girdled his residences with zones of sea and with streams for the breeding of fish, and built dwellings in the sea, — when Tubero the Stoic saw them, he called him Xerxes in a toga.** 4 **He had also country villas near Tusculum, with observatories, and extensive open banqueting halls and porticos. Pompey once visited these, and chided Lucullus because he had arranged his country residence in the best possible way for summer, but had made it uninhabitable in winter. Whereupon Lucullus burst out laughing and said: “Do you suppose, then, that I have less sense than cranes and storks, and do not change residences according to the seasons?”** 5 A praetor was once making ambitious plans for a public spectacle, and asked him for some purple cloaks for the adornment of a chorus.^[8] Lucullus replied that he would investigate, and if he had any, would give them to him. The next day he asked the praetor how many he wanted, and on his replying that a hundred would be enough, told him take twice that number. The poet Flaccus alluded to this when he said that he did not regard a house as wealthy in which the treasures that were overlooked and unobserved were not more than those which met the eye.

40 1 The daily meals of Lucullus were such as the newly rich have. Not only with his dyed coverlets, beakers set with precious stones, and choruses and dramatic recitations, but also with his arrays of all sorts of meats and daintily prepared dishes, did he make himself the envy of the vulgar. 2 A saying of Pompey’s, when he was ill, was certainly very popular. His physicians had prescribed a thrush for him to eat, and his servants said that a thrush could not be found anywhere in the summer season except where Lucullus kept them fattening.

...

40 3 While this matter was much talked of in the city, as was natural, Cicero and Pompey came up to him as he was idling in the forum. Cicero was one of his most intimate friends, and although the matter of the command of the army had led to some coolness between him and Pompey, still they were accustomed to frequent and friendly meetings and conversation with one another. 4 Accordingly, Cicero saluted him, and asked how he was disposed towards receiving a petition. “Most excellently well,” said Lucullus, and invited them to make their petition. “We desire,” said Cicero, “to dine with you to-day just as you would have dined by yourself.” Lucullus demurred to this, and begged the privilege of selecting a later day, but they refused to allow it, nor would they suffer him to confer with his servants, that he might not order any thing more provided than what was provided for himself. 5 Thus much, however, and no more, they did allow him at his request, namely, to tell one of his slaves in their presence that he would dine that day in the Apollo. Now this was the name of one of his costly apartments, and he thus outwitted the men without their knowing it. For each of his dining-rooms, as it seems, had a fixed allowance for the dinner served there, as well as its own special apparatus and equipment, so that his slaves, on hearing where he wished to dine, knew just how much the dinner was to cost, and what were to be its decorations and arrangements. Now the usual cost of a dinner in the Apollo was fifty thousand drachmas, and that was the sum laid out on the present occasion. 6 Pompey was amazed at the speed with which the banquet was prepared, notwithstanding it had cost so much. In these ways, then, Lucullus threw his money around, as though it were in very truth a barbarian prisoner-of-war.

Plutarch, *Life of Lucullus*

Others chose to make themselves unRoman in more dramatic ways, and in ones that caused far, far more problems for the Roman state. One such person was Quintus Sertorius (c. 127-73 BCE), who in the first century BCE decided to embrace a role as a Spanish ruler after ending up on the losing side of a civil war in Rome between the generals Gaius Marius and Lucius Cornelius Sulla in the 80s BCE:

2 1 Quintus Sertorius belonged to a family of some prominence in Nursia, a Sabine city. Having lost his father, he was reared properly by his mother, of whom he appears to have been excessively fond. His mother’s name, we are told, was Rhea. As a result of his training he was sufficiently knowledgeable about legal procedure, and acquired some influence also at Rome from his eloquence, although he was only a youth; but his brilliant successes in war turned his ambition towards that.... 3 1 To begin with, he served under Caepio when the Cimbri and Teutones invaded Gaul, and after the Romans had been defeated and fled, though he

lost his horse and had been wounded in the body he swam across the Rhone, shield and breastplate and all, against a strongly opposing current, so sturdy was his body and so hardened against hardships by training. 2 Then, when the same enemies were coming up with many thousands of men and dreadful threats, so that for a Roman even to hold his post at such a time and obey his general was a great feat, while Marius was in command Sertorius undertook to spy out the enemy. So, putting on Celtic dress and acquiring basic expressions in that language for any necessary conversation, he mingled with the barbarians, and after he saw and heard what was important, he came back to Marius. 3 At the time, then, he received a prize for courage; and since, during the rest of the campaign, he performed many deeds which showed both judgement and daring, he was promoted by his general to positions of honour and trust. After the war with the Cimbri and Teutones, he was sent out as military tribune by Didius the praetor to Spain, and spent the winter in Castulo, a city of the Celtiberians. 4 Here the soldiers shook off all discipline in the midst of plenty, and were drunk most of the time, so that the barbarians despised them. One night they sent for aid from their neighbours, the Oritanians, attacked the Romans in their quarters and began to kill them. But Sertorius slipped out with a few others, and assembled the soldiers who were making their escape, and surrounded the city. He found the gate by which the barbarians had stolen in, but did not repeat their mistake; instead, he set a guard there, and then, taking possession of all quarters of the city, slew all the men who were of age to bear arms. 5 Then, when the slaughter was ended, he ordered all his soldiers to lay aside their own armour and clothing, to array themselves in those of the Barbarians, and then to follow him to the city from which the men came who had fallen upon them in the night. Having thus deceived the Barbarians by means of the armour which they saw, he found the gate of the city open, and caught a multitude of men who supposed they were coming forth to meet a successful party of friends and fellow citizens. Therefore most of the inhabitants were slaughtered by the Romans at the gate; the rest surrendered and were sold into slavery.

Plutarch, Life of Sertorius?

After many amazing military feats, Sertorius eventually returns to Rome to run for the tribuneship but loses thanks to opposition from Sulla; civil war breaks out in Rome and he eventually – being on the losing side – escapes back to Spain:

4 He found [Spain's] peoples strong in numbers and in fighting men, and since the rapacity and insolence of the Roman officials sent thither from time to time had made them hostile to the empire in all its aspects, he tried to win them over, the chiefs by his personal intercourse with them, the masses by a remission of taxes. His greatest popularity, however, was won by ridding them of the necessity for furnishing quarters for soldiers; for he compelled his soldiers to build their winter-quarters in the suburbs of the cities, and he himself was first to pitch his tent there. 5 However, he did not rely wholly on the goodwill of the Barbarians, but he armed all the Roman settlers of the country who were of military age, and by undertaking the construction of all sorts of engines of war and the building of triremes, kept the cities well in hand, being mild in the affairs of peace, but showing himself formidable by the preparations which he made against his enemies.

7 1 When he learned that Sulla was master of Rome, and that the party of Marius and Carbo was on the way to ruin, he expected that an army with a commander would come at once to fight with him.^[9] He therefore sent Julius Salinator with six thousand men-at-arms to bar the passage of the Pyrenees. And not long afterwards Caius Annius was sent out by Sulla, and seeing that Julius could not be assailed, he knew not what to do, and sat idly down at the base of the mountains. 2 But a certain Calpurnius, surnamed Lanarius, treacherously killed Julius, whose soldiers abandoned the heights of the Pyrenees; whereupon Annius crossed over and advanced with a large force, routing all opposition. Sertorius, not being able to cope with him, took refuge with three thousand men in New Carthage; there he embarked his forces, crossed the sea, and landed in the country of the Maurusii, in Africa. 3 But while his soldiers were getting water and were off their guard, the barbarians fell upon them, and after losing many men, Sertorius sailed back again to Spain. From this shore too he was repulsed, but after being joined by some Cilician pirate vessels he attacked the island of Pityussa, overpowered the guard which Annius had set there, and effected a landing. After a short time, however, Annius came with numerous ships and five thousand men-at-arms, and with him Sertorius attempted to fight a decisive naval battle, although the vessels which he had were light and built for speed rather than for fighting. 4 But the sea ran high with a strong west wind, and the greater part of the vessels of Sertorius, owing to their lightness, were driven aslant upon the rocky shore, while he himself, with a few ships, excluded from the open sea by the storm, and from the land by the enemy, was tossed about for ten days in a battle with adverse waves and fierce surges, and with difficulty held his own.

8 1 But the wind subsided and he was borne along to certain scattered and waterless islands, where he spent the night; then, setting out from there, and passing through the strait of Cadiz, he kept the outer coast of Spain on the right and landed a little above the mouths of the river Baetis, which empties into the Atlantic sea and has given its name to the adjacent parts of Spain. 2 Here he fell

in with some sailors who had recently come back from the Atlantic Islands. These are two in number, separated by a very narrow strait; they are ten thousand furlongs distant from Africa, and are called the Islands of the Blest. They enjoy moderate rains at long intervals, and winds which for the most part are soft and precipitate dews, so that the islands not only have a rich soil which is excellent for plowing and planting, but also produce a natural fruit that is plentiful and wholesome enough to feed, without toil or trouble, a leisured folk. 3 Moreover, a healthy air blows over the islands owing to the climate and the moderate changes in the seasons. For the north and east winds which blow out from our part of the world plunge into fathomless space, and, owing to the distance, dissipate themselves and lose their power before they reach the islands; while the south and west winds that envelope the islands sometimes bring in their train soft and intermittent showers, but for the most part cool them with moist breezes and gently nourish the soil. Therefore a firm belief has made its way, even to the Barbarians, that here is the Elysian Field and the abode of the blessed, of which Homer sang.

9 1 When Sertorius heard this tale, he was seized with an amazing desire to dwell in the islands and live in quiet, freed from tyranny and wars that would never end. The Cilicians, however, who did not want peace or leisure, but wealth and spoils, when they were aware of his desire, sailed away to Africa, to restore Ascalis the son of Iphtha to the throne of Maurusia. 2 Nevertheless Sertorius did not despair, but resolved to go to the aid of those who were fighting against Ascalis, in order that his followers might get some fresh ground for hope and occasion for new enterprise, and so might remain together in spite of their difficulties. The Maurusians were glad to have him come, and he set himself to work, defeated Ascalis in battle, and laid siege to him. 3 Moreover, when Sulla sent out Paccianus with an army to give aid to Ascalis, Sertorius joined battle with Paccianus and slew him, won over his soldiers after their defeat, and forced to a surrender the city of Tingis, into which Ascalis and his brethren had fled for refuge. In this city the Libyans say that [the mythical giant] Antaeus is buried; and Sertorius had his tomb dug open, the great size of which made him disbelieve the barbarians. But when he came upon the body and found it to be sixty cubits long, as they tell us, he was dumbfounded, and after performing a sacrifice filled up the tomb again, and joined in magnifying its traditions and honours. 4 Now, the people of Tingis have a myth that after the death of Antaeus, his wife, Tinga, consorted with Heracles, and that Sophax was the fruit of this union, who became king of the country and named a city which he founded after his mother; also that Sophax had a son, Diodorus, to whom many of the Libyan peoples became subject, since he had a Greek army composed of the Olbians and Mycenaeans who were settled in those parts by Heracles. 5 But this tale must be ascribed to a desire to gratify Juba, of all kings the most devoted to historical enquiry; for his ancestors are said to have been descendants of Sophax and Diodorus. So, Sertorius, having made himself master of the whole country, did no wrong to those who were his suppliants and put their trust in him, but restored to them both property and cities and government, receiving only what was right and fair in free gifts from them.

10 1 As he was deliberating whither to turn his efforts next, the Lusitanians sent ambassadors and invited him to be their leader. They were altogether lacking in a commander of great reputation and experience as they faced the terror of the Roman arms, and they entrusted themselves to him, and to him alone, when they learned about his character from those who had been with him. 2 And it is said that Sertorius was no easy victim either of pleasure or of fear, but that he was naturally brave in the face of danger, and bore prosperity with moderation; in straightforward fighting he was as bold as any commander of his time, while in all military activities demanding stealth and the power to seize an advantage in securing strong positions or in crossing rivers, where speed, deceit, and, if necessary, falsehood are required, he was an expert of the highest ability. 3 Moreover, while he was generous in rewarding deeds of courage, he used moderation in punishing transgressions. And yet, in the last part of his life, the savage and vindictive treatment which he bestowed upon his hostages would seem to show that his mildness was not natural to him, but was worn as a garment, from calculation, as necessity required...

11 1 However, at the time of which I speak he set out from Africa on the invitation of the Lusitanians. He proceeded to organize these at once, acting as their general with full powers, and he brought the neighbouring parts of Spain into subjection. Most of the people joined him of their own accord, owing chiefly to his mildness and efficiency; but sometimes he also betook himself to cunning devices of his own for deceiving and charming them. The chief one of these, certainly, was the device of the doe, which was as follows. 2 Spanus, a plebeian who lived in the country, came upon a doe which had newly yeaned and was trying to escape the hunters. The mother he could not overtake, but the fawn — and he was struck with its unusual colour, for it was entirely white — he pursued and caught. And since, as it chanced, Sertorius had taken up his quarters in that region, and gladly received everything in the way of game or produce that was brought him as a gift, and made kindly returns to those who did him such favours, Spanus brought the fawn and gave it to him. 3 Sertorius accepted it, and at the moment felt only the ordinary pleasure in a gift; but in time, after he had made the animal so tame and gentle that it obeyed his call, accompanied him on his walks, and did not mind the crowds and all the uproar of camp life, he gradually tried to give the doe a religious importance by declaring that she was

a gift of Diana, and solemnly alleged that she revealed many hidden things to him, knowing that the Barbarians were naturally an easy prey to superstition. 4 He also added such devices as these. Whenever he had secret intelligence that the enemy had made an incursion into the territory which he commanded, or were trying to bring a city to revolt from him, he would pretend that the doe had conversed with him in his dreams, bidding him hold his forces in readiness. Again, when he got tidings of some victory won by his generals, he would hide the messenger, and bring forth the doe wearing garlands for the receipt of glad tidings, exhorting his men to be of good cheer and to sacrifice to the gods, assured that they were to learn of some good fortune.

12 1 By these devices he made the people tractable, and so found them more serviceable for all his plans; they believed that they were led, not by the mortal wisdom of a foreigner, but by a god. At the same time events also brought witness to this belief by reason of the extraordinary growth of the power of Sertorius. 2 For with the twenty-six hundred men whom he called Romans, and a motley band of seven hundred Libyans who crossed over into Lusitania with him, to whom he added four thousand Lusitanian targeteers and seven hundred horsemen, he waged war with four Roman generals, under whom were a hundred and twenty thousand footmen, six thousand horsemen, two thousand bowmen and slingers, and an untold number of cities, while he himself had at first only twenty all told. 3 But nevertheless, from so weak and slender a beginning, he not only subdued great nations and took many cities, but was also victorious over the generals sent against him: Cotta he defeated in a sea-fight in the straits near Mellaria; Fufidius, the governor of Baetica, he routed on the banks of the Baetis with the slaughter of two thousand Roman soldiers; Lucius Domitius, who was pro-consul of the other Spain, was defeated at the hands of his quaestor; 4 Thoranius, another of the commanders sent out by Metellus with an army, he slew; and on Metellus himself, the greatest Roman of the time and held in highest repute, he inflicted many defeats and reduced him to so great straits that Lucius Manlius came from Gallia Narbonensis to help him, and Pompey the Great was hurriedly dispatched from Rome with an army. 5 For Metellus was at his wits' end. He was carrying on war with a man of daring who evaded every kind of open fighting, and who made all manner of shifts and changes, owing to the light equipment and agility of his Iberian soldiers; whereas he himself had been trained in regular contests of heavy-armed troops, and was wont to command a ponderous and immobile phalanx, which, for repelling and overpowering an enemy at close quarters, was most excellently trained, but for climbing mountains, for dealing with the incessant pursuits and flights of men as light as the winds, and for enduring hunger and a life without fire or tent, as their enemies did, it was worthless.

13 1 Besides this, Metellus was now getting on in years, and was somewhat inclined also, by this time, to an easy and luxurious mode of life after his many and great contests; whereas his opponent, Sertorius, was full of mature vigour, and had a body which was wonderfully constituted for strength, speed, and plain living. 2 For in excessive drinking he would not indulge even in his hours of ease, and he was wont to endure great toils, long marches, and continuous wakefulness, content with meagre and indifferent food; moreover, since he was also wandering about or hunting when he had leisure for it, he obtained an acquaintance with every way of escape for a fugitive, or of surrounding an enemy under pursuit, in places both accessible and inaccessible. The result was, therefore, that Metellus, by being kept from fighting, suffered all the harm which visits men who are defeated; while Sertorius, by flying, had the advantages of men who pursue. 3 For he would cut off his opponent's supply of water and prevent his foraging; if the Romans advanced, he would get out of their way, and if they settled down in camp, he would harass them; if they besieged a place, he would come up and put them under siege in their turn by depriving them of supplies. At last the Roman soldiers were in despair, and when Sertorius challenged Metellus to single combat, they cried aloud and bade him fight, general with general, and Roman with Roman, and when he declined, they mocked at him. 4 But Metellus laughed at all this, and he was right; for a general, as Theophrastus says, should die the death of a general, not that of a common targeteer. Then, seeing that the Langobritae were giving no slight assistance to Sertorius, and that their city could easily be taken for lack of water (since they had but one well in the city, and the streams in the suburbs and along the walls would be in the power of any besieger), Metellus came out against the city, intending to complete the siege in two days, since there was no water there. On this account, too, he had given orders to his soldiers to take along provisions of only five days. 5 But Sertorius quickly came to the rescue and ordered two thousand skins to be filled with water, offering for each skin a considerable sum of money. Many Iberians and many Maurusians volunteered for the work, and after selecting men who were both sturdy and swift of foot, he sent them by a route through the mountains, with orders that when they had delivered the skins to the people in the city, they should secretly convey away the unserviceable mass of the population, in order that the water might suffice for the actual defenders of the city. When Metellus learned that this had been done, he was annoyed, since his soldiers had already consumed their provisions, and sent out Aquinus, at the head of six thousand men, to forage. But Sertorius learned of this and set an ambush of three thousand men in the road by which Aquinus was to return. These sallied forth from a shady ravine and attacked Aquinus in the rear, while Sertorius himself

assailed him in front, routed him, slew some of his men, and took some of them prisoners. Aquinus, after losing both his armour and his horse, got back to Metellus, who then retired disgracefully, much flouted by the Iberians.

14 1 Because of these successes Sertorius was admired and loved by the barbarians, especially because by introducing Roman arms and formations and signals he did away with their frenzied and furious displays of courage, and converted their forces into an army instead of a huge band of bandits. 2 In addition, he used gold and silver without stint for the decoration of their helmets and the ornamentation of their shields, and by teaching them to wear flowered cloaks and tunics, and furnishing them with the means to do this, and sharing their love of beautiful array, he won the hearts of all. But most of all were they captivated by what he did with their boys. He collected together those of the highest birth from various peoples at Osca, a large city, and gave them teachers of Greek and Roman learning; thus in reality he made hostages of them, while ostensibly he was educating them, with the assurance that when they became men he would give them a share in administration and authority. 3 So the fathers were wonderfully pleased to see their sons, in purple-bordered togas, very decorously going to their schools, and Sertorius paying their fees for them, holding frequent examinations, distributing prizes to the deserving, and presenting them with the golden necklaces which the Romans call bulla. 4 It was the custom among the Iberians for those who were stationed about their leader to die with him if he fell, and the Barbarians in those parts call this a “consecration.” Now, the other commanders had few such shield-bearers and companions, but Sertorius was attended by many thousands of men who had thus consecrated themselves to death. 5 And we are told that when his army had been defeated at a certain city and the enemy were pressing upon them, the Iberians, careless of themselves, rescued Sertorius, and taking him on their shoulders one after another, carried him to the walls, and only when their leader was in safety, did they betake themselves to flight, each man for himself.

All things come to an end, and Sertorius eventually endures a number of defeats. If you are interested in the full story, the rest can be found in the entire account by Plutarch. The above gives you some idea of how Romans could go rogue and become unRoman through exile, and also the ways that they fantasized about what we might call the ‘Roman saviour complex’ whereby they, and only they, could make a foreign people into a proper fighting force against their Roman opponents – and how all people really, really wanted to become Roman if they could.

Bibliography and Further Reading:

– ** ask Siobhan

1. Exile was a legal punishment, in the Republic the result of losing a court case. Some people just skipped out of town before they lost their case. Other people just left town for other reasons. ↩
2. According to Roman law only a Roman could be married to a Roman. Thus at this point Terentia and Cicero were no longer man and wife in the eyes of Roman law, as Cicero was no longer a Roman citizen. She was entitled – and should legally have – to take back her dowry and abandon him to his fate. He was not entitled in any moral or social sense to ask her run risks of this nature for him. ↩
3. A Roman Senator ↩
4. To the state, which obtained the property of exiles. ↩
5. Cato the Younger (95-46 BCE), who considered himself a champion of traditional Roman values like his great-grandfather Cato the Elder. He wore an old fashioned skimpy toga, shouted a lot about morality, and was unbribable. He had two sisters called Servilia; the older was the mother of Brutus and the mistress of Julius Caesar (who may have been Brutus’ father); the younger married Lucullus and apparently cheated on him a number of times. ↩
6. Gaius Marius (157-86 BCE), the general and seven-time [pb_glossary id="36"]consul[/pb_glossary], was from the same town as Cicero, and like him was a new man. Unlike him he was a military man, and not at all fond of the fancier trimmings ↩
7. Roman generals did very well out of campaigns against wealthy nations in the Republic, being able to scoop off huge amounts of wealth from the plunder as long as they were willing to face a court case or two on their way back (luckily, they would have enough money to bribe the jury in that, thanks to all the plunder). ↩
8. Purple was the most expensive dye possible in Rome, so the cost for 100 cloaks would be huge. ↩
9. As Sertorius had been a supporter of Marius. ↩

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

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9.1: Judaism

CONTENT WARNING

This entire chapter contains instances of racial discrimination.

JUDAISM IN ROME

Of all the immigrant groups in Rome, the Jewish people seem to have had the most cohesive and long lasting group identity in Rome. Many Jews came to Rome initially as slaves under Pompey the Great, who had conquered Judea. Others immigrated for the economic or other opportunities Rome presented. Under the emperors Vespasian and Titus, who defeated the Jewish Rebellion in what is called the Second Jewish War, many more came as slaves, some of who were used to build Roman construction projects such as the Colosseum.

The following are a series of texts that show *some* aspect of Jewish relations with Rome. They focus on the city of Rome and the Jewish population's relationships with the emperors. Many Romans were interested in Judaism, and some even converted. The readings show, however, that many Romans loathed Judaism as something they felt was inherently unRoman, thanks to Jewish monotheism and religious customs—including circumcision. In addition, the monotheistic nature of Judaism conflicted with Roman emperor worship. Many were happy to attack the religion whenever the opportunity showed, and thus, the Jews were always under constant threat.

In the following passage, the Jewish author Philo addresses the Emperor Caligula, reminding him of how Augustus had treated his people:

155 How then did he [Augustus] look upon the great division of Rome which is on the other side of the river Tiber, which he was well aware was occupied and inhabited by the Jews? And they were mostly Roman citizens, having been emancipated; for, having been brought as captives into Italy, they were manumitted by those who had bought them for slaves, without ever having been compelled to alter any of their hereditary or national observances. 156 Therefore, he knew that they had synagogues, and that they were in the habit of visiting them, and most especially on the sacred sabbath days, when they publicly cultivate their national philosophy. He knew also that they were in the habit of contributing sacred sums of money from their first fruits and sending them to Jerusalem by the hands of those who were to conduct the sacrifices. 157 But he never removed them from Rome, nor did he ever deprive them of their rights as Roman citizens, because he had a regard for Judaea, nor did he ever meditate any new steps of innovation or rigour with respect to their synagogues, nor did he forbid their assembling for the interpretation of the law, nor did he make any opposition to their offerings of first fruits; but he behaved with such piety towards our countrymen, and with respect to all our customs, that he, I may almost say, with all his house, adorned our temple with many costly and magnificent offerings, commanding that continued sacrifices of whole burnt offerings should be offered up for ever and ever every day from his own revenues, as a first fruit of his own to the most high God, which sacrifices are performed to this very day, and will be performed for ever, as a proof and specimen of a truly imperial disposition. 158 Moreover, in the monthly divisions of the country, when the whole people receives money or corn in turn, he never allowed the Jews to fall short in their reception of this favour, but even if it happened that this distribution fell on the day of their sacred sabbath, on which day it is not lawful for them to receive any thing, or to give any thing, or in short to perform any of the ordinary duties of life, he charged the dispenser of these gifts, and gave him the most careful and special injunctions to make the distribution to the Jews on the day following, that they might not lose the effects of his common kindness.

Philo, *Embassy to Gaius* 155-8

We are told in an account by Suetonius that Emperor Claudius expelled the Jews from Rome:

Since the Jews constantly made disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus [Christ] he expelled them from Rome.

Life of Claudius 25.4

As there were also disturbances involving Jews in Alexandria, Claudius issued a number of edicts about the Jews to reaffirm their rights, including this one:

Tiberius Claudius Caesar Augustus Germanicus, pontifex maximus, holding the tribunician power, proclaims: . . . Therefore it is right that also the Jews, who are in all the world under us, shall maintain their ancestral customs without hindrance and to them I

now also command to use this my kindness rather reasonably and not to despise the religious rites of the other nations, but to observe their own laws.

However, according to Cassius Dio, Claudius did not expel the Jews, because there were simply too many:

As for the Jews, who had again increased so greatly that by reason of their multitude it would have been hard without starting a riot to bar them from the city, he did not drive them out, but ordered them, while continuing their traditional mode of life, not to hold meetings.

Cassius Dio 60.6

CAPTURING JERUSALEM

When discussing the capture and destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE by the (later) Emperor Claudius, the historian Tacitus makes a digression into an anti-Semitic history of the Jews:

2 1 However, as I am about to describe the last days of a famous city, it seems proper for me to give some account of its origin. It is said that the Jews were originally exiles from the island of Crete who settled in the farthest parts of Libya at the time when Saturn had been deposed and expelled by Jove. An argument in favour of this is derived from the name: there is a famous mountain in Crete called Ida, and hence the inhabitants were called the Idaei, which was later lengthened into the barbarous form Iudaei. Some hold that in the reign of Isis the superfluous population of Egypt, under the leadership of Hierosolymus and Iuda, discharged itself on the neighbouring lands; many others think that they were an Egyptian stock, which in the reign of Cepheus was forced to migrate by fear and hatred. Still others report that they were Assyrian refugees, a landless people, who first got control of a part of Egypt, then later they had their own cities and lived in the Hebrew territory and the nearer parts of Syria. Still others say that the Jews are of illustrious origin, being the Solymi, a people celebrated in Homer's poems, who founded a city and gave it the name Hierosolyma, formed from their own.

3 1 Most authors agree that once during a plague in Egypt which caused bodily disfigurement, King Bocchoris approached the oracle of Ammon^[1] and asked for a remedy, whereupon he was told to purge his kingdom and to transport this race into other lands, since it was hateful to the [Roman] gods. So the Hebrews were searched out and gathered together; then, being abandoned in the desert, while all others lay idle and weeping, one only of the exiles, Moses by name, warned them not to hope for help from gods or men, for they were deserted by both, but to trust to themselves, regarding as a guide sent from heaven the one whose assistance should first give them escape from their present distress. They agreed, and then set out on their journey in utter ignorance, but trusting to chance. Nothing caused them so much distress as scarcity of water, and in fact they had already fallen exhausted over the plain nigh unto death, when a herd of wild asses moved from their pasturage to a rock that was shaded by a grove of trees. Moses followed them, and, conjecturing the truth from the grassy ground, discovered abundant streams of water. This relieved them, and they then marched six days continuously, and on the seventh seized a country, expelling the former inhabitants; there they founded a city and dedicated a temple.

4 1 To establish his influence over this people for all time, Moses introduced new religious practices, quite opposed to those of all other religions. The Jews regard as profane all that we hold sacred; on the other hand, they permit all that we abhor. They dedicated, in a shrine, a statue of that creature whose guidance enabled them to put an end to their wandering and thirst, sacrificing a ram, apparently in derision of Ammon. They likewise offer the ox, because the Egyptians worship Apis.^[2] They abstain from pork, in recollection of a plague, for the scab to which this animal is subject once afflicted them. By frequent fasts even now they bear witness to the long hunger with which they were once distressed, and the unleavened Jewish bread is still employed in memory of the haste with which they seized the grain. They say that they first chose to rest on the seventh day because that day ended their toils; but after a time they were led by the charms of indolence to give over the seventh year as well to inactivity. Others say that this is done in honour of Saturn, whether it be that the primitive elements of their religion were given by the Idaeans, who, according to tradition, were expelled with Saturn and became the founders of the Jewish race, or is due to the fact that, of the seven planets that rule the fortunes of mankind, Saturn moves in the highest orbit and has the greatest potency; and that many of the heavenly bodies traverse their paths and courses in multiples of seven.

5 1 Whatever their origin, these rites are maintained by their antiquity: the other customs of the Jews are base and abominable, and owe their persistence to their depravity. For the worst rascals among other peoples, renouncing their ancestral religions, always kept sending tribute and contributions to Jerusalem, thereby increasing the wealth of the Jews; again, the Jews are extremely loyal

toward one another, and always ready to show compassion, but toward every other people they feel only hate and enmity. They sit apart at meals, and they sleep apart, and although as a race, they are prone to lust, they abstain from intercourse with foreign women; yet among themselves nothing is unlawful. They adopted circumcision to distinguish themselves from other peoples by this difference. Those who are converted to their ways follow the same practice, and the earliest lesson they receive is to despise the gods, to disown their country, and to regard their parents, children, and brothers as of little account. However, they take thought to increase their numbers; for they regard it as a crime to kill any late-born child,¹⁶ and they believe that the souls of those who are killed in battle or by the executioner are immortal: hence comes their passion for begetting children, and their scorn of death. They bury the body rather than burn it, thus following the Egyptians' custom; they likewise bestow the same care on the dead, and hold the same belief about the world below; but their ideas of heavenly things are quite the opposite. The Egyptians worship many animals and monstrous images; the Jews conceive of one god only, and that with the mind alone: they regard as impious those who make from perishable materials representations of gods in man's image; that supreme and eternal being is to them incapable of representation and without end. Therefore they set up no statues in their cities, still less in their temples; this flattery is not paid their kings, nor this honour given to the Caesars. But since their priests used to chant to the accompaniment of pipes and cymbals and to wear garlands of ivy, and because a golden vine was found in their temple, some have thought that they were devotees of Father Liber, the conqueror of the East, in spite of the incongruity of their customs.^[3] For Liber established festive rites of a joyous nature, while the ways of the Jews are preposterous and mean.

Tacitus, *Histories* Book 5

ATTACKING THE JEWISH FAITH

Juvenal attacked the Jews in his Fourteenth Satire for their worship of a god of whom they did not make images, of their practice of not eating pork, and other such things:

Some who have had a father who reveres the Sabbath, worship nothing but the clouds, and the divinity of the heavens, and see no difference between eating pork, from which their father abstained, and that of man; and in time they take to circumcision. Having been accustomed to flout the laws of Rome, they learn and practise and revere the Jewish law, and all that Moses committed to his secret book, forbidding to point out the way to any not worshipping the same rites, and conducting none but the circumcised to the desired fountain. For all which the father was to blame, who gave up every seventh day to idleness, keeping it apart from all the concerns of life.

Juvenal *Satires* 14.96-106

The following poem from the around the same period shows another Roman's antisemitism, as he imagines a Roman woman having a relationship with her Jewish slave:

CONTENT WARNING

Misogyny

The following passage contains graphic imagery and misogynistic slurs.

Your slave stands by your side with his privates carefully bound with a black leather pouch, whenever you bathe your entire body in warm water. But my slave, Laecania, not to mention myself, does not keep his appendages, like a Jew, undercover. We, both young and old, take our bath naked with you. Has your slave alone got a real prick?

Do you hang back in the women's quarters, matron, and do you, cunt,^[4] wash secretly in your own private water?

Martial Book 7.35

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1. Ammon was a Libyan deity whose oracle was situated about 500 kilometres west of Memphis, the capital of Egypt for most of the Old Kingdom period. The ancient Egyptians associated Ammon with their own major deity, Amun. ↩
 2. Apis was a sacred bull worshipped by the ancient Egyptians. He was the son of Hathor, a major goddess in the ancient Egyptian pantheon. ↩
 3. Liber Pater--"the Free Father"-- was a god of wine-making, wine, fertility, and freedom. Due to their similar associations and role in Roman religion, Liber was in certain cults assimilated with the Greco-Roman god Bacchus. ↩
 4. The word used is *cunnus*, which either means female genitalia or a whore ↩
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9.2: Magna Mater and the Galli

THE MAGNA MATER AND THE GALLI

The Galli were priests of the great goddess Cybele, a goddess with an important cult centre in the region of Phrygia,^[1] but who was worshipped around the East.^[2] The Romans referred to Cybele as the Magna Mater, or, the Great Mother. They invited her to Rome in an attempt to gain her favour during the Second Punic War; she came from Pessinus, in Anatolia in 204 BCE (in modern Turkey), and her arrival resulted in a bond of friendship between the Romans and Pessinus (it did not hurt that, after she arrived, the Romans went on to conclusively win the war.) The chief of the Galli was called Attis, and the priests wore saffron robes and clashed metal cymbals together as they walked the streets. They also performed self-castration as a show of devotion to the goddess. Romans were not allowed to become priests of Cybele, with the exception of the chief priest.

In 103 BCE, a priest from the shrine in Pessinus addressed the Roman Senate, either to have restoration of some harms committed at his shrine, or to predict a Roman victory. The Senate supported him; and, when a plebeian tribune who had violently opposed his right to address the Senate died of a fever (or, in the alternative scenario, when the prophesied Roman victory came), Magna Mater's power was assured in Rome. Some Greeks, however, like Dionysius of Halicarnassus, argued that the Romans tried to keep a boundary between themselves and this cult:

3 And — the thing which I myself have marvelled at most — despite the influx into Rome of innumerable nations which are under every necessity of worshipping their ancestral gods according to the customs of their respective countries, the city has never officially adopted any of those foreign practices, as has been the experience of many cities in the past. But, even though she has, in pursuance of oracles, introduced certain rites from abroad, she celebrates them in accordance with her own traditions, after banishing all fabulous clap-trap. The rites of the Idaean goddess [Cybele] are a case in point; 4 for the praetors perform sacrifices and famous games in her honour every year according to the Roman customs, but the priest and priestess of the goddess are Phrygians, and it is they who carry her image in procession through the city, begging alms in her name according to their custom, and wearing figures upon their breasts and striking their tambourines while their followers play tunes upon their flutes in honour of the Mother of the Gods. 5 But by a law and decree of the senate no native Roman walks in procession through the city arrayed in a multi-coloured robe, begging for money or escorted by flute-players, or worships the god with the Phrygian ceremonies. That is how cautious are they about admitting any foreign religious customs and how great their aversion is to all pompous display that is wanting in decorum.

Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Roman Antiquities* 29.3-5

In the following passage, you will see how Livy described the coming of the Magna Mater and her priests to Rome. As detailed below, it was a great state occasion, and also involved a famous case of a woman proving her chastity publicly:

In addition they deliberated on the reception of the Idaean Mother [Cybele/Magna Mater], in regard to whom not only had Marcus Valerius, one of the ambassadors, arriving in advance, reported that she would be in Italy very soon, but also there was recent news that she was already at Tarracina. 6 It was no unimportant decision that occupied the senate — the question who was the best man in the state. 7 At any rate every man would have preferred a real victory in that contest to any high commands or magistracies, whether conferred by vote of the senators or of the people. 8 Publius Scipio, son of the Gnaeus who had fallen in Spain, was the young man not yet of an age to be quaestor, whom they judged to be the best of good men among all the citizens. 9 If writers who lived nearest in time to men who remembered those days had handed down by what virtues the senate was led to make that judgment, I should indeed gladly hand it on to posterity. But I shall not interject my own opinions, reached by conjecture in a matter buried by the lapse of time. 10 Publius Cornelius was ordered to go to Ostia with all the matrons to meet the goddess, and himself to receive her from the ship, and carrying her to land to turn her over to the matrons to carry. 11 After the ship had reached the mouth of the river Tiber, in compliance with the order he sailed out into open water on a ship, received the goddess from her priests and carried her to land. 12. The foremost matrons in the state, among whom the name of one in particular, that of Claudia Quinta, is conspicuous, received her. Claudia's repute, previously not unquestioned, as tradition reports it, has made her purity the more celebrated among posterity by a service so devout. 13. The matrons passed the goddess from hand to hand in an unbroken succession to each other, while the entire city poured out to meet her. Censers had been placed before the doors along the route of the bearers, and kindling their incense, people prayed that gracious and benignant she might enter the city of Rome. It was to the Temple of Victory, which is on the Palatine, that they carried the goddess on the day before the Ides of April, and that was a holy

day. 14. The people thronged to the Palatine bearing gifts for the goddess, and there was a banquet of the gods, and games also, called the Megalesia.

Livy, *From the Founding of the City* 29.145.14

The poet Lucretius describes the procession of the Magna Mater in Rome:

Seated in a chariot in the realms of air
To drive her team of lions, teaching thus
That the great earth hangs poised and cannot lie
Resting on other earth. To her chariot
They've yoked wild beasts, since offspring
However savage, must be tamed and guided
By care of parents. They have crowned
With turret-crown the peak of her head,
Since, fortified in her divine, lofty strongholds,
She is who sustains the cities; now, adorned
With that same token, today is carried forth,
With solemn awe through many a mighty land,
The image of that mother, the divine.
Her the wide nations, after antique rituals
Name the Idaean Mother,^[3] giving her
Escort of Phrygians, since first, they say,
From out those regions it was that grain began
Through all the world. To her do they assign
The Galli, the emasculate, since thus
They wish to show that men who violate
The majesty of the mother and have proved
Ungrateful to parents are to be adjudged
Unfit to give unto the shores of light
A living progeny. The Galli come:
And hollow cymbals, tight-skinned tambourines
Resound around to bangings of their hands;
The fierce horns threaten with a raucous bray;
The tubed pipe excites their maddened minds
In Phrygian measures; they bear before them knives,
Wild emblems of their frenzy, which have power
The rabble's ungrateful heads and impious hearts
To panic with terror of the goddess' might.
And so, when through the mighty cities borne,

She blesses man with silent salutation,
They strew the highway of her passage
With coin of brass and silver, gifting her
With alms and generosity, and shower her and shade
With flowers of roses falling like the snow
Upon the Mother and her companion-bands.
Here is an armed troop, which by Greeks
Are called the Phrygian Curetes.^[4] Since
among themselves they use to play
In games of arms and leap in measure round
With bloody mirth and by their nodding shake
The terrorizing crests upon their heads,
This is the armed troop that represents
The arm'd Dictaeon Curetes, who, in Crete,
As runs the story, whilom did out-drown
That infant cry of Zeus, what time their band,
Young boys, in a swift dance around the boy,
To measured step beat with the brass on brass,
That Saturn might not get him for his jaws,^[5]
And give its mother an eternal wound
Along her heart. And it is on this account
That armed they escort the mighty Mother,
Or else because they signify by this
That she, the goddess, teaches men to be
Eager with armed valour to defend
Their motherland, and ready to stand forth,
The guard and glory of their parents' years.

Lucretius, On the Nature of Things Cybele

Catullus in Poem 63 imagined Attis, the original castrated priest of Cybele/Magna Mater, in a rather dramatic fashion. As seen in this telling, the mutilating act results in a fluid ambiguity in the identification of Attis' gender:^[6]

Over the vast main borne by swift-sailing ship, Attis, as with hasty hurried foot he reached the Phrygian wood and gained the tree-girt gloomy sanctuary of the Goddess, there roused by rabid rage and mind astray, with sharp-edged flint downwards dashed his burden of virility. Then as he felt his limbs were left without their manhood, and the fresh-spilt blood staining the soil, with bloodless hand she hastily took a tambour light to hold, your tambourine, Cybele, your initiate rite, and with feeble fingers beating the hollowed bullock's back, she rose up quivering thus to chant to her companions.

"Haste you together, she-priests, to Cybele's dense woods, together haste, you vagrant herd of the dame Dindymene,^[7] you who inclining towards strange places as exiles, following in my footsteps, led by me, comrades, you who have faced the ravening sea and truculent ocean, and have castrated your bodies in your utmost hate of Venus,^[8] make glad our mistress speedily with your minds' mad wanderings. Let dull delay depart from your thoughts, together haste you, follow to the Phrygian home of Cybele, to

the Phrygian woods of the Goddess, where sounds the cymbal's voice, where the tambourine resounds, where the Phrygian flutist pipes deep notes on the curved reed, where the ivy-clad Maenads furiously toss their heads, where they enact their sacred orgies with shrill-sounding ululations, where that wandering band of the Goddess flits about: there we should run with hurried mystic dance."

When Attis, spurious woman, had thus chanted to her group, the chorus straightway shrieks with trembling tongues, the rapid tambourine booms, the concave cymbals clang, and the troop swiftly rushes with rapid feet to green Ida. Then raging wildly, breathless, wandering, with brain distraught, hurries Attis with her tambourine, their leader through dense woods, like an untamed heifer shunning the burden of the yoke: and the swift Gallae press behind their speedy-footed leader. So when the home of Cybele they reach, wearied out with excess of toil and lack of food they fall in slumber. Sluggish sleep shrouds their eyes drooping with faintness, and raging fury leaves their minds to quiet ease.

But when the sun with radiant eyes from face of gold glanced over the white heavens, the firm soil, and the savage sea, and drove away the glooms of night with his brisk and clamorous team, then sleep fast-flying quickly sped away from wakening Attis, and goddess Pasithea received Somnus in her panting bosom.^[9] Then when from quiet rest torn, her delirium over, Attis at once recalled to mind her deed, and with lucid thought saw what she had lost, and where she stood, with heaving heart she backwards traced her steps to the landing-place. There, gazing over the vast main with tear-filled eyes, with saddened voice in tristful soliloquy thus did she lament her land:

"Mother-land, my creatress, mother-land, my begetter, which full sadly I'm forsaking, as runaway slaves do from their masters, to the woods of Ida I have rushed on foot, to stay amid snow and icy dens of beasts, and to wander through their hidden lurking-places full of fury. Where, or in what part, mother-land, may I imagine that you are? My very eyeball craves to fix its glance towards you, while for a brief space my mind is freed from wild ravings. And must I wander over these woods far from my home? From country, goods, friends, and parents, must I be parted? Leave the forum, the palaestra, the race-course, and gymnasium? Wretched, wretched soul, it is yours to grieve for ever and ever. For what shape is there, whose kind I have not worn? I (now a woman), I a man, a stripling, and a lad; I was the gymnasium's flower, I was the pride of the oiled wrestlers: my gates, my friendly threshold, were crowded, my home was decked with floral garlands, when I used to leave my couch at sunrise. Now will I live a priest of gods and slave to Cybele? I a Maenad, I a part of me, I a sterile trunk! Must I range over the snow-clad spots of verdurous Ida, and wear out my life beneath lofty Phrygian peaks, where stay the sylvan-seeking stag and woodland-wandering boar? Now, now, I grieve the deed I've done; now, now, do I repent!"

As the swift sound left those rosy lips, borne by new messenger to gods' twinned ears, Cybele, unloosing her lions from their joined yoke, and goading, the left-hand foe of the herd, thus speaks: "Come," she says, "to work, you fierce one, cause a madness urge him on, let a fury prick him onwards till he returns through our woods, he who over-rashly seeks to fly from my empire. On! thrash your flanks with your tail, endure your strokes; make the whole place re-echo with roar of your bellowings; wildly toss your tawny mane about your nervous neck." Thus angry Cybele spoke and loosed the yoke with her hand. The monster, self-exciting, to rapid wrath spurs his heart, he rushes, he roars, he bursts through the brush with heedless feet. But when he gained the humid verge of the foam-flecked shore, and spied the womanish Attis near the opal sea, he made a bound: the witless wretch fled into the wild wood: there throughout the space of her whole life a bondsmaid did she stay. Great Goddess, Goddess Cybele, Goddess Dame of Dindymus, far from my home may all your anger be, O mistress: urge others to such actions, to madness others hound.

Catullus, *Poem 63*

The Christian author Prudentius described the Taurobolion, the sacrifice of a bull for the Magna Mater. It should be said that this description is part of anti-pagan poem, so it is surely somewhat embellished:

Content Warning

In the following passage, the author uses explicit and descriptive imagery that can be considered gory and disturbing.

The high priestess who is to be consecrated is brought down under ground in a pit dug deep, marvellously adorned with a fillet, binding her festive temples with chaplets, her hair combed back under a golden crown, and wearing a silken toga caught up with Gabine girding. Over this they make a wooden floor with wide spaces, woven of planks with an open mesh; they then divide or bore the area and repeatedly pierce the wood with a pointed tool that it may appear full of small holes. Here a huge bull, fierce and shaggy in appearance, is led, bound with flowery garlands about its flanks, and with its horns sheathed—its forehead sparkles with

gold, and the flash of metal plates colors its hair. Here, as is ordained, they pierce its breast with a sacred spear; the gaping wound emits a wave of hot blood, and the smoking river flows into the woven structure beneath it and surges wide. Then by the many paths of the thousand openings in the lattice the falling shower rains down a foul dew, which the priestess buried within catches, putting her head under all the drops. She throws back her face, she puts her cheeks in the way of the blood, she puts under it her ears and lips, she interposes her nostrils, she washes her very eyes with the fluid, nor does she even spare her throat but moistens her tongue, until she actually drinks the dark gore. Afterwards, the corpse, stiffening now that the blood has gone forth, is hauled off the lattice, and the priestess, horrible in appearance, comes forth, and shows her wet head, her hair heavy with blood, and her garments sodden with it. This woman, all hail and worship at a distance, because the ox's blood has washed her, and she is born again for eternity.

Prudentius, *Peristephanon*

On the whole, we are often left with Roman perceptions of Eastern religions – with the exception of Judaism and Christianity, and those are not very helpful for understanding the appeal and impact of the various mother goddesses. Hence, included are the following by the Roman-Syrian author Lucian. It describes the religious cult for the 'Syrian Goddess' at the temple of Hierapolis Bambyce in Syria, where **she too [Cybele?]** was served by eunuch priests. In Lucian's retelling of the cult **of the Galli's [same cult? it is referenced as Galli below]** foundation story, the Assyrian queen Stratonice dreamt that she must build a temple at Hierapolis to the goddess, and so, the king sent her there with a young man named Combabus to ensure that it was done. Just in case of any trouble with the queen, Combabus castrated himself and left his genitals sealed in a box with the king. When the queen fell in love with Combabus and tried to seduce him, he revealed his condition; but this didn't prevent her from wanting him around all the time. After they got back home, she turned on Combabus and accused him of attacking her. Combabus was arrested, tried, and sentenced to death. Then – and only then for some reason – did he ask for the sealed box to prove his innocence, where upon the king relented and rewarded Combabus.

Combabus had stood up to this point in silence, but as he was being led to his fate, he spoke out, and demanded the restoration of his pledge, affirming that he was to be killed not for rebellious conduct against his king, nor for any violation of the king's married life, but solely because of the king's eagerness to possess what he had deposited at the royal court at his departure. The king then summoned his treasurer and bade him bring forth what he had committed to his custody. On its production, Combabus removed the seal and displayed the contents of the vessel, and showed how he himself had suffered thereby; adding, "This is just what I feared, O King, when you sent me on that errand: I left with a heavy heart, and I did my duty, constrained by sheer necessity. I obeyed my lord and master to mine own undoing. Such as I am, I stand accused of a crime which none but a man in every sense could have committed. The king cried out in amazement at these words, embraced Combabus and said with tears, "What great ruin, Combabus, have you brought upon yourself? What monstrous deed of ill have you, alone of men, wrought to your sorrow? I cannot praise you, rash spirit, for enduring to suffer this outrage; would that you had never borne it; would that I had never seen its proofs! I needed not this your defence. But since the deity has willed it thus, I will grant you, first and foremost, as your revenge, the death of the informers: and next there shall follow a mighty gift, a store of silver and countless gold, and raiment of Assyria, and steeds from the royal stud. You shalt enter freely to us unannounced and none shall withstand you: none shall keep you from my sight, even were I by my wife's side." Thus he spoke, and thus he acted; the informers were led off straightway to their execution; Combabus was laden with gifts, and the king's attachment to him was increased. No one of the Assyrians was deemed equal in wisdom and in fortune to Combabus.

26. On his request that he might complete what was unfinished in the construction of the temple—for he had left it unfinished—he was despatched anew; and he completed the temple, and there he lived. To mark his awareness of the bravery and good deeds of his architect, the king granted him a bronze statue of himself to stand in the temple of his construction. And even to the present day this bronze statue is seen standing in the temple, the work of Hermocles of Rhodes. Its form is that of a woman, but the garments are those of a man. It is said, too, that his most intimate friends, as a proof of their sympathy, castrated themselves like him, and chose the same manner of life. Others there are who bring gods into the story and affirm that Combabus was beloved by Hera; and that it was she who inspired many with the idea of castrating themselves, so that her lover should not be the only one to lament the loss of his virility. 27. Meantime the custom once adopted is still in practice, and many persons every year castrate themselves and lose their virile powers there, either out of sympathy with Combabus, or to find favour with Hera. They certainly castrate themselves, and then cease to wear man's clothing; they put on women's dress and perform women's tasks. I have heard the origin of this ascribed to Combabus as well, for the following event occurred to him. A certain foreign woman who had joined a sacred assembly,

beholding a human form of extreme beauty and dressed in man's attire, became violently enamoured of him: after discovering that he was a eunuch she killed herself. Combabus accordingly in despair at his incapacity for love, put on women's clothing, that no woman in future might be deceived in the same way. This is the reason of the female attire of the Galli. Enough of Combabus and his story: in the course of my story I shall make mention the Galli, and of their castration, and of the methods employed to effect it, and of the burial rites wherewith they are buried, and the reasons why they have no ingress to the temple; but before this I am inclined to speak of the site of the temple and of its size: and so I will even speak.

Lucian, *On the Syrian Goddess* 51

Bibliography and Further Reading:

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1. In classical antiquity, Phrygia was a kingdom in western-central Anatolia (modern day Turkey) [↩](#)
 2. To learn more about the Galli, [please see the previous section on Eunuchs.](#)[↩](#)
 3. Cybele is sometimes given the epithet *Idaea*--called *Mater Idaea* (Idaeian Mother)--in reference to her association with Mount Ida, which is located in Anatolia [↩](#)
 4. The Curetes, or Korybantes, were armed dancers who worshipped Cybele with drumming and dancing. [↩](#)
 5. While Zeus was hiding in a cave in his youth--Rhea having replaced his body with a stone to save him from being swallowed by his father, Kronos (Greek counterpart to Saturn)--the Kouretes danced and drummed so that Kronos would not be able to hear Zeus' cries (Pseudo-Apollodorus, *Bibliotheca* 1.1.5-7) [↩](#)
 6. In Phrygian and Greek mythology, Attis was both son and consort to his mother, Cybele. His self-castration sets an example for the Galli priests to follow. [↩](#)
 7. Dindymene is one of the names given to Cybele [↩](#)
 8. Venus is the Roman goddess of love and beauty; her Greek counterpart is Aphrodite. [↩](#)
 9. Pasithea, a Grace/goddess of relaxation, was married to Hypnos (the Greek counterpart of the Roman god of sleep, Somnus) [↩](#)

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9.3: Vestal Virgins

THE VESTAL VIRGINS: WHO WERE THEY, AND WHY WERE THEY IMPORTANT?

The Vestal Virgins were a specially selected group of six women. Highly revered in Rome, they were the priestesses of one of its most important cults from ancient times until its abolishment in 394 CE: the cult of the goddess Vesta. Unlike most Roman deities, the goddess Vesta was not anthropomorphic (of humanistic appearance and quality); rather, she was represented as a burning flame in the temple of Vesta (see images 2 and 3). This flame represented the sanctity of Rome and its Empire. It was the Vestals' job to never let the sacred flame die out, as the Romans believed that it would endanger Rome. The dying of the flame was also associated with the unchastity of a Vestal, as they were required to remain virgins from the time they were chosen (between the ages of six to ten years) to the end of their 30 years of service to Vesta. If Vesta's flame were to burn out, the Vestals could face serious punishment, the worst resulting in the sentencing by the Pontifical college to be buried alive within the city walls.

The Vestal Virgins were important figures in Roman society, and they held a unique position unlike any other Roman women. A regular Roman woman's life would be categorized into two stages: being a marriageable virgin, and then being a *matrona* (who is either married or widowed). Because of their required chastity, however, the Vestal Virgins did not hold the expectation of raising children and taking care of a family like regular women. In fact, they had to remain chaste during the most fertile period of their lives: between the ages of ten to forty. Although there are many reasons explaining the requirement of chastity—including ritual purity—it is clear that by not having to devote energy to a family and to the specific cults that an individual family would worship, the Vestals could devote all their religious energy to the state cult. This in-between role as a *matrona* for Vesta's cult while also remaining a virgin is reflected in their clothing; they would wear the *matrona's stola*, yet wear their hair in *sex crines* (six braids in a cone shape at the top of the head) in the style of a virgin bride (see the image below).

Vestals were also unique in that they had many rights not held by other women. To be inducted into the cult, the Vestals went through the rite of *captio* which freed them from the control of their *pater familias*. This legal status set them apart from other Romans, both male and female, as they did not have to go through the process of emancipation by *capitis deminutio* to obtain this status. Again, this separation from her family meant that a Vestal could fully devote herself to the religious rituals of Rome, instead of to the rituals of a single family. In addition, this legal status also gave a Vestal special rights. Because she did not need a male guardian's consent, a Vestal was free to buy and sell property, free slaves, write her own will, inherit property, and gain a substantial income from renting lands and buildings. As well, Vestals were the only Roman women allowed to testify orally in open court. This gave them a certain power that no other Roman woman had. This power can also be seen in their ability to sit in the front of the Roman arena with senators, as well as to be chaperoned by lictors.

We can therefore see that Vestal Virgins had a very important and unique role in Roman society. Their duties and legal status were unlike that of any other Roman women, and from it they could gain and hold significant power.

The following quotes can shed some more light on the lives of Vestals:

1. Rite of Captio

This first quote is by Aulus Gellius (1250-180 CE), describing the rite of *captio*. In this rite, a young girl is transferred from her father to the College of Pontiffs, thereby inducting her into the cult of Vesta. We can see that she is not only literally, but also symbolically taken from her father, as the rite removes her father's *potestas* over her. This rite is what ultimately allows a Vestal the right to write her own will, and in addition as we know, the right to the legal and financial status similar to a male citizen. The reason why the Vestal women were separated from their families was so that they would not be tied to an individual family's cultic life, but could instead devote themselves to the cultic life of all of Rome.

Moreover, a Vestal Virgin, as soon as she has been taken and led into the atrium of Vesta and handed over to the Pontifices, immediately at that moment she leaves her father's *potestas* without emancipation and without the diminution of her rights and obtains the right of making a will.

Aulus Gellius, Attic Nights 1.12.9

2. Appearance

In the following passage from Sextus Pompeius Festus (late 2nd Century CE), we can see the description of a Vestal's hair style. As discussed earlier, her physical appearance symbolized her liminal state as a woman in Roman society. Her association with marriageable virgins is visibly seen in this passage, which describes how bride and Vestal are adorned with the same hairstyle of *sex crines*, in which six braids are at the top of her head in a cone shape. We can therefore see that this hair style is associated with virginity as well as sacristy, as it is an ancient style (see image 1).

Brides are adorned with six braids, because this was the most ancient style for them. Which indeed the Vestal Virgins also use, whose chastity for their own **men -/- brides ***** from others.

Festus., p. 454L



Portrait sculpture of a chief Vestal Virgin from the 2nd Century AD. Note the *sex crines* hairstyle of six braids around her head and her stole, the clothing of a matron.

3. Testimony

This passage by Plutarch (46-120 AD) describes how Vestals were able to testify orally in the open court. This is something a regular Roman woman would not have been able to do, as although women were allowed to appear in the court they would have to remain mute; their evidence would be written down earlier on and then read out loud in court by a man. As Vestals were not under any male tutelage, they had the ability to speak out in court and serve as witnesses. Other ancient authors, such as Aulus Gellius (125-180AD) (7.7.2) and Tacitus (56-120 AD) (*Ann.* 2.34), also make mentions of this ability.

Now Tarquinia was a sacred virgin, one of the Vestals, and received great honours for her act, among which was this, that of all women her testimony alone be accepted.

Plutarch, *Publicola*, 8.4

4. Property

The following passage by Plutarch describes how, in 75 CE, the Vestal Virgin Licinia fell under the suspicion of having an affair with Marcus Crassus (115-53 BCE) because he was spending a lot of time with her trying to purchase the property she owned. Such charges were very serious, as the consequence for a Vestal being un-chaste was death. She would be buried alive, and her seducer would be flogged to death in public. Crassus and Licinia were able to refute such charges by proving the meetings were centred around the purchase of Licinia's property. Women in Rome were not able to own property as long as their *pater familias*—or, if they did not have one, a male tutor—were alive, as the men would control business affairs. However, as Vestals were free from male tutelage upon being inducted into the priestess-hood, they were free to do so.

And yet when he [Crassus] was further on in years, he was accused of criminal intimacy with Licinia, one of the vestal virgins, and Licinia was formally prosecuted by a certain Plotius. Now Licinia was the owner of a pleasant villa in the suburbs [of Rome] which Crassus wished to get at a low price, and it was for this reason that he was forever hovering about the woman and paying his court to her, until he fell under the abominable suspicion. And in a way it was his avarice that absolved him from the charge of corrupting the Vestal, and he was acquitted by the judges. But he did not let Licinia go until he had acquired her property.

Plutarch, *Crassus*, 1.2

5. Live burial

This passage from a letter written by Pliny the Younger (62 -113 CE) describes how the Emperor Domitian (51-96 CE; reigned tk) wanted to bury alive the chief Vestal Virgin Cornelia in a fit of rage and severity. Here, we can see the importance of Vestals remaining chaste, and the consequences that arose when found guilty. There is mention of the Pontiffs, the highest ranking priests of Rome, who would have been responsible for her prosecution instead of the regular court. Because the spilling of a Vestal's blood was forbidden, her sentencing involved being buried alive. This was done within the city walls, a place where other Romans were not allowed to be buried; however, as her underground chamber would have been provided with symbolic quantities of bread, milk, water, and oil for sustenance, her burial ritual was not viewed as a literal killing. Evidence suggests that Vestal would be accused of unchastity more often during times of political turmoil, suggesting that they were often viewed as scapegoats in relation to Rome's stability.

For when he [Domitian] desired to bury alive Cornelia the Senior Vestal. . . . He condemned her for incest absent and, unheard. . . . The Pontifices were immediately dispatched to see to her death and burial. She raising her hands now to Vesta, now to the other gods, cried out many things, but this especially: 'Caesar thinks that I am impure, I who have performed so many rites, by which he conquered and triumphed!'. . . She repeated this until she was led away to punishment, whether she was innocent or not, I do not know, but she certainly acted innocent. For even when she was sent down into the underground chamber, and her stola caught as she descended, she turned and collected herself, and when the executioner would have given her a hand, she declined it and drew back, as though she put away from her with horror the idea of having her chaste and pure body defiled by his loathsome touch. Thus she preserved her sanctity to the last and displayed all the tokens of a chaste woman..."

Pliny, *Epistles*, 4.11

Image 2. A 3D Computer generated image of the Temple of Vesta by the model maker, Lasha Tskhondia. Note the sacred flame in the centre that represented the goddess Vesta.

Taken from https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Temple_of_Vesta_3D.jpg.

Image 3. Reconstruction drawing of the temple of Vesta. Once again note the smoke coming from the sacred fire of Vesta which would be in the centre of the temple. Note as well its central location in the Roman forum. Taken from https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Trattato_generale_di_archeologia257.png

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Image 1. Portrait sculpture of a chief Vestal Virgin from the 2nd Century AD. Note the *sex crines* hairstyle of six braids around her head and her stole, the clothing of a matron. Image taken from <https://de.Wikipedia.org/wiki/Datei:VestalisMaxima.jpg>

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9.4: Roman Cults

Learning Objectives

In this chapter, you will learn about ancient Roman cults, as well as some details of the specific ones that existed in Rome, including:

- The cult of Isis;
- The cult of Bacchus;
- Pythagoreanism

ROMAN CULTS

Roman religion comprised of many different gods, traditions and cults. As you have seen previously (e.g. in the section on the Magna Mater), Romans were fairly receptive to foreign religions and cults, and largely allowed assimilated provinces to continue their practices and worship as they chose. However, cults and their influence were also feared by those in power. The mystery religions and cults eventually began to decline due to the rising popularity and eventual elevation of Christianity to the official state religion in Rome by emperor Constantine in 380 CE.

Below, you will learn about some of the cults that co-existed and functioned alongside traditional Roman religious practices.

ISIS AND HER WORSHIP

Isis was a very important Egyptian goddess who has long held an attraction for many Romans. Isis had an elaborate mythology, which included reviving her husband Osiris after he had been cut into bits by his brother Set. She is also a mother goddess with a mystery cult. When the Romans encountered her, many embraced her enthusiastically, much to the disgust of some other Romans.

Tertullian reports how the Senate in 59 BCE decided to destroy the worship of Isis in Rome, in a most likely not very accurate report:

Many times have the censors destroyed (a god) without consulting the people. Bacchus, with all his ritual, was certainly by the consuls, on the senate's authority, cast not only out of the city, but out of all Italy; while Varro informs us that Serapis also, Isis, Harpocrates, and Anubis, were excluded from the Capitol, and that their altars which the senate had thrown down were only restored by popular violence. The consul Gabinius, however, on the first day of the ensuing January, although he gave a tardy consent to some sacrifices, in deference to the crowd which assembled, because he had failed to decide about Serapis and Isis, yet held the judgment of the senate to be more potent than the clamour of the multitude, and forbade the altars to be built.

Tertullian, *To the Nations* 1.10.17

BACCHUS

If you are wondering what the comment about Bacchus in the previous section is referring to, it is the so-called Bacchanalian conspiracy.

The cult of Bacchus was introduced to Rome around 200 BCE, and the mystery cult attracted both men and women participants alike. The cult held secret meetings known as the Bacchanalia, festivals dedicated in honour of Bacchus (the Greco-Roman god of wine, religious ecstasy, insanity, and festivity, among other things); as with all mystery cults—wherein the initiates are bound by secrecy—very little is known about the cult and their rituals. According to Livy, the Bacchanalia would have been the perfect place to hatch a plot and/or commit a crime, as any noise made in the realizing of these plots would be drowned out by the noise made by ceremonial drums and cymbals.

In one of the earliest cases of the Romans coming down hard on a religion, the state violently suppressed the worship of Bacchus in Italy 186 BCE:

8. The following year diverted Spurius Postumius Albinus and Quintus Marcius Philippus from the care of armies, wars, and provinces, to the punishing of an intestine conspiracy. The praetors cast lots for their provinces, Titus Maenius obtained the city jurisdiction; Marcus Licinius Lucullus, that between citizens and foreigners; Caius Aurelius Scaurus, Sardinia; Publius Cornelius Sulla, Sicily; Lucius Quintius Crispinus, Hither Spain; Caius Calpurnius Piso, Farther Spain. The making of inquisition concerning

clandestine meetings was decreed to both the consuls. A Greek of low rank came, first, into Etruria, not with one of the many trades which his nation, of all others the most skillful in the cultivation of the mind and body, has introduced among us, but a low operator in sacrifices, and a fortune-teller; nor was he one who, by open religious rites, and by publicly professing his calling and teaching, imbued the minds of his followers with terror, but a priest of secret and nocturnal rites. These mysterious rites were, at first, imparted to a few, but afterwards communicated to great numbers, both men and women. To their religious performances were added the pleasures of wine and feasting, to allure a greater number of proselytes. When wine, lascivious discourse, night, and the intercourse of the sexes had extinguished every sentiment of modesty, then debaucheries of every kind began to be practiced, as every person found at hand that sort of enjoyment to which he was disposed by the passion predominant in his nature. Nor were they confined to one species of vice—the promiscuous intercourse of free-born men and women; but from this store-house of villainy proceeded false witnesses, counterfeit seals, false evidences, and pretended discoveries. From the same place, too, proceeded poison and secret murders, so that in some cases, not even the bodies could be found for burial. Many of their audacious deeds were brought about by treachery, but most of them by force; it served to conceal the violence, that, on account of the loud shouting, and the noise of drums and cymbals, none of the cries uttered by the persons suffering violence or murder could be heard abroad.

9. The infection of this mischief, like that from the contagion of disease, spread from Etruria to Rome; where, the size of the city affording greater room for such evils, and more means of concealment, cloaked it at first; but information of it was at length brought to the consul, Postumius, principally in the following manner: Publius Aebutius, whose father had held equestrian rank in the army, was left an orphan, and his guardians dying, he was educated under the eye of his mother Duronia, and his stepfather Titus Sempronius Rutilus. Duronia was entirely devoted to her husband; and Sempronius, having managed the guardianship in such a manner that he could not give an account of the property, wished that his ward should be either made away with, or bound to compliance with his will by some strong tie. The Bacchanalian rites were the only way to effect the ruin of the youth. His mother told him, that, “during his sickness, she had made a vow for him, that if he should recover, she would initiate him among the Bacchanalians; that being, through the kindness of the gods, bound by this vow, she wished now to fulfill it; that it was necessary he should preserve chastity for ten days, and on the tenth, after he should have eaten and washed himself, she would conduct him into the place of worship....”

Livy, *History of Rome*

In the following section are details on how the Romans became aware of the cult of Bacchus and its ‘dangers’, coming back to the story when Hispala, a prostitute with a heart of gold, tells all:

...Hispala then gave a full account of the origin of the mysteries. At first,” she said, “those rites were performed by women. No man used to be admitted. They had three stated days in the year on which people were initiated among the Bacchanalians, in the daytime. The matrons used to be appointed priestesses, in rotation. Paculla Minia, a Campanian, when priestess, made an alteration in every particular, as if by the direction of the gods. For she first introduced men, who were her own sons, Minucius and Herrenius, both surnamed Cerrinius; changed the time of celebration, from day to night; and, instead of three days in the year, appointed five days of initiation, in each month. From the time that the rites were thus made common, and men were intermixed with women, and the licentious freedom of the night was added, there was nothing wicked, nothing sinful, that had not been practiced among them. There were more frequent pollution of men with each other than with women. If any were less patient in submitting to dishonor, or more averse to the commission of vice, they were sacrificed as victims. To think nothing unlawful was the grand maxim of their religion. The men, as if bereft of reason, uttered predictions, with frantic contortions of their bodies; the women, in the habit of Bacchantes, with their hair disheveled, and carrying blazing torches, ran down to the Tiber; where, dipping their torches in the water, they drew them up again with the flame unextinguished, being composed of native sulphur and charcoal. They said that those men were carried off by the gods, whom the machines laid hold of and dragged from their view into secret caves. These were those who refused to take the oath of the society, or to associate in their crimes, or to submit to defilement. This number was exceedingly great now, almost a second state in themselves, and among them were many men and women of noble families. During the last two years it had been a rule, that no person above the age of twenty should be initiated; for they sought for people of such age as made them more liable to suffer deception and personal abuse.

14. When she had completed her information, she again fell at the consul’s knees, and repeated the same entreaties, that he might send her out of the country. The consul requested his mother-in-law to clear some part of the house, into which Hispala might remove; accordingly, an apartment was assigned her in the upper part of it, of which the stairs, opening into the street, were stopped

up, and the entrance made from the inner court. All Fecenia's effects were immediately removed there and her slaves sent for. Aebutius, also, was ordered to remove to the house of one of the consul's clients. When both the informers were by these means in his power, Postumius represented the affair to the senate, laying before them the whole circumstance, in due order; the information given to him at first, and the discoveries gained by his inquiries afterwards. Great dismay seized on the senators; not only on the public account, lest such conspiracies and nightly meetings might be productive of secret treachery and mischief, but, likewise, on account of their own particular families, lest some of their relations might be involved in this infamous affair. The senate voted, however, that thanks should be given to the consul because he had investigated the matter with singular diligence, and without exciting any alarm. They then committed to the consuls the holding of an inquiry, out of the common course, concerning the Bacchanals and their nocturnal orgies. They ordered them to take care that the informers, Aebutius and Fecenia, might suffer no injury on that account; and to invite other informers in the matter, by offering rewards. They ordered that the officials in those rites, whether men or women, should be sought for, not only at Rome, but also throughout all the market towns and places of assembly, and be delivered over to the power of the consuls; and also that proclamation should be made in the city of Rome, and published through all Italy, that "no persons initiated in the Bacchanalian rites should presume to come together or assemble on account of those rites, or to perform any such kind of worship; and above all, that search should be made for those who had assembled or conspired for personal abuse, or for any other flagitious practices. The senate passed these decrees.

The consuls directed the curule aediles to make strict inquiry after all the priests of those mysteries, and to keep such as they could apprehend in custody until their trial; they at the same time charged the plebeian aediles to take care that no religious ceremonies should be performed in private. To the capital triumvirs the task was assigned to post watches in proper places of the city, and to use vigilance in preventing any meetings by night. In order likewise to guard against fires, five assistants were joined to the triumvirs, so that each might have the charge of the buildings in his own separate district, on this side the Tiber. 15. After despatching these officers to their different jobs, the consuls mounted the rostrum; and, having summoned an assembly of the people, one of the consuls, when he had finished the solemn form of prayer which the magistrates are accustomed to pronounce before they address the people, proceeded thus: "Romans, to no former assembly was this solemn supplication to the gods more suitable or even more necessary: as it serves to remind you, that these are the deities whom your forefathers pointed out as the objects of your worship, veneration, and prayers: and not those which infatuated men's minds with corrupt and foreign modes of religion, and drove them, as if goaded by the furies, to every lust and every vice. I am at a loss to know what I should conceal, or how far I ought to speak out; for I dread lest, if I leave you ignorant of any particular, I should give room for carelessness, or if I disclose the whole, that I should too much awaken your fears. That the Bacchanalian rites have subsisted for some time past in every country in Italy, and are at present performed in many parts of this city also, I am sure you must have been informed, not only by report, but by the nightly noises and horrid yells that resound through the whole city; but still you are ignorant of the nature of that business. Part of you think it is some kind of worship of the gods; others, some excusable sport and amusement, and that, whatever it may be, it concerns but a few. As regards the number, if I tell you that they are many thousands, that you would be immediately terrified to excess is a necessary consequence; unless I further acquaint you who and what sort of persons they are. First, then, a great part of them are women, and this was the source of the evil; the rest are males, but nearly resembling women; actors and pathics in the vilest lewdness; night revelers, driven frantic by wine, noises of instruments, and clamors. The conspiracy, as yet, has no strength; but it has abundant means of acquiring strength, for they are becoming more numerous every day. Your ancestors would not allow that you should ever assemble casually, without some good reason; that is, either when the standard was erected on the Janiculum, and the army led out on occasion of elections; or when the tribunes proclaimed a meeting of the plebeians, or some of the magistrates summoned you to it. And they judged it necessary, that whatever a multitude was, there should be a lawful governor of that multitude present. Of what kind do you suppose are the meetings of these people? In the first place, held in the night, and in the next, composed promiscuously of men and women. If you knew at what ages the males are initiated, you would feel not only pity but also shame for them. Romans, can you think youths initiated, under such oaths as theirs, are fit to be made soldiers? That arms should be intrusted with wretches brought out of that temple of obscenity? Shall these, contaminated with their own foul debaucheries and those of others, be champions for the chastity of your wives and children?

16. "But the mischief were less, if they were only made feminine by their practices; of that the disgrace would chiefly affect themselves; if they kept their hands from outrage, and their thoughts from fraud. But never was there in the state an evil of so great a magnitude, or one that extended to so many persons or so many acts of wickedness. Whatever deeds of villainy have, during late years, been committed through lust; whatever, through fraud; whatever, through violence; they have all, be assured, proceeded from that association alone. They have not yet perpetrated all the crimes for which they combined. The impious assembly at present

confines itself to outrages on private citizens; because it has not yet acquired force sufficient to crush the commonwealth; but the evil increases and spreads daily; it is already too great for the private ranks of life to contain it, and aims its views at the body of the state. Unless you take timely precautions, Romans, their nightly assembly may become as large as this, held in open day, and legally summoned by a consul. Now they one by one dread you collected together in the assembly; presently, when you shall have separated and retired to your several dwellings, in town and country, they will again come together, and will hold a consultation on the means of their own safety, and, at the same time, of your destruction. Thus united, they will cause terror to every one of you. Each of you, therefore, ought to pray that his kindred may have behaved with wisdom and prudence; and if lust, if madness, has dragged any of them into that abyss, to consider such a person as the relation of those with whom he has conspired for every disgraceful and reckless act, and not as one of your own. I am not secure, lest some, even of yourselves, may have erred through mistake; for nothing is more deceptive in appearance than false religion. When the authority of the gods is held out as a pretext to cover vice, fear enters our minds, lest, in punishing the crimes of men, we may violate some divine right connected therewith. Numberless decisions of the pontiffs, decrees of the senate, and even answers of the haruspices free you from religious scruples of this character. How often in the ages of our fathers was it given in charge to the magistrates, to prohibit the performance of any foreign religious rites; to banish strolling sacrificers and soothsayers from the forum, the circus, and the city; to search for, and burn, books of divination; and to abolish every mode of sacrificing that was not conformable to the Roman practice! For they, completely versed in every divine and human law, maintained that nothing tended so strongly to the subversion of religion as sacrifice, when we offered it not after the institutions of our forefathers, but after foreign customs. Thus much I thought necessary to mention to you beforehand, that no vain scruple might disturb your minds when you should see us demolishing the places resorted to by the Bacchanalians, and dispersing their impious assemblies. We shall do all these things with the favor and approbation of the gods; who, because they were indignant that their divinity was dishonored by those people's lusts and crimes, have drawn forth their proceedings from hidden darkness into the open light; and who have directed them to be exposed, not that they may escape with impunity, but in order that they may be punished and suppressed. The senate have committed to me and my colleague an inquisition extraordinary concerning that affair. What is requisite to be done by ourselves, in person, we will do with energy. The charge of posting watches through the city, during the night, we have committed to the inferior magistrates; and, for your parts, it is incumbent on you to execute vigorously whatever duties are assigned you, and in the several places where each will be placed, to perform whatever orders you shall receive, and to use your best endeavors that no danger or unrest may arise from the treachery of the party involved in the guilt.

17. They then ordered the decrees of the senate to be read, and published a reward for any discoverer who should bring any of the guilty before them, or give information against any of the absent, adding, that if any person accused should fly, they would limit a certain day upon which, if he did not answer when summoned, he would be condemned in his absence; and if any one should be charged who was out of Italy, they would allow him a longer time, if he should wish to come and make his defense. They then issued an edict, that "no person whatever should presume to buy or sell anything for the purpose of leaving the country; or to receive or conceal, or by any means aid the fugitives." On the assembly being dismissed, great terror spread throughout the city; nor was it confined merely within the walls, or to the Roman territory, for everywhere throughout the whole of Italy alarm began to be felt, when the letters from the guest-friends were received, concerning the decree of the senate, and what passed in the assembly, and the edict of the consuls. During the night, which succeeded the day in which the affair was made public, great numbers, attempting to fly, were seized, and brought back by the triumvirs, who had posted guards at all gates; and informations were lodged against many, some of whom, both men and women, put themselves to death. Above seven thousand men and women are said to have taken the oath of the association. But it appeared that the heads of the conspiracy were the two Catinii, Marcus and Caius, Roman plebeians; Lucius Opiturnius, a Faliscan; and Minius Cerrinius, a Campanian: that from these proceeded all their criminal practices, and that these were the chief priests and founders of the sect. Care was taken that they should be apprehended as soon as possible. They were brought before the consuls, and, confessing their guilt, caused no delay to the ends of justice.

18. But so great were the numbers that fled from the city, that because the lawsuits and property of many persons were going to ruin, the praetors, Titus Maenius and Marcus Licinius, were obliged, under the direction of the senate, to adjourn their courts for thirty days, until the inquiries should be finished by the consuls. The same deserted state of the law-courts, since the persons, against whom charges were brought, did not appear to answer, nor could be found in Rome, necessitated the consuls to make a circuit of the country towns, and there to make their inquisitions and hold the trials. Those who, as it appeared, had been only initiated, and had made after the priest, and in the most solemn form, the prescribed imprecations, in which the accursed conspiracy for the perpetration of every crime and lust was contained, but who had not themselves committed, or compelled others to commit,

any of those acts to which they were bound by the oath—all such they left in prison. But those who had forcibly committed personal defilements or murders, or were stained with the guilt of false evidence, counterfeit seals, forged wills, or other frauds, all these they punished with death. A greater number were executed than thrown into prison; indeed, the multitude of men and women who suffered in both ways, was very considerable. The consuls delivered the women, who were condemned, to their relations, or to those under whose guardianship they were, that they might inflict the punishment in private; if there did not appear any proper person of the kind to execute the sentence, the punishment was inflicted in public. A charge was then given to demolish all the places where the Bacchanalians had held their meetings; first in Rome, and then throughout all Italy; excepting those wherein should be found some ancient altar or consecrated statue. With regard to the future, the senate passed a decree, “that no Bacchanalian rites should be celebrated in Rome or in Italy;” and ordering that, “in case any person should believe some such kind of worship incumbent upon him, and necessary; and that he could not, without offence to religion, and incurring guilt, omit it, he should represent this to the city praetor, and the praetor should lay the business before the senate. If permission were granted by the senate, when not less than one hundred members were present, then he might perform those rites, provided that no more than five persons should be present at the sacrifice, and that they should have no common stock of money, nor any president of the ceremonies, nor priest.”

Livy, *History of Rome*

The senate then passed the following decree:

Quintus Marcius, the son of Lucius, and Spurius Postumius, consulted the senate on the Nones of October [i.e., the 7th], at the temple of the Bellonae. Marcus Claudius, son of Marcus, Lucius Valerius, son of Publius, and Quintus Minucius, son of Gaius, were the committee for drawing up the report. Regarding the Bacchanalia, it was resolved to give the following directions to those who are in alliance with us: No one of them is to possess a place where the festivals of Bacchus are celebrated; if there are any who claim that it is necessary for them to have such a place, they are to come to Rome to the praetor urbanus, and the senate is to decide on those matters, when their claims have been heard, provided that not less than one hundred senators are present when the affair is discussed. No man is to be a Bacchantian, neither a Roman citizen, nor one of the Latin name, nor any of our allies unless they come to the praetor urbanus, and he in accordance with the opinion of the senate expressed when not less than one hundred senators are present at the discussion, shall have given leave. Carried.

No man is to be a priest; no one, either man or woman, is to be an officer (to manage the temporal affairs of the organization); nor is anyone of them to have charge of a common treasury; no one shall appoint either man or woman to be master or to act as master; henceforth they shall not form conspiracies among themselves, stir up any disorder, make mutual promises or agreements, or interchange pledges; no one shall observe the sacred rites either in public or private or outside the city, unless he comes to the praetor urbanus, and he, in accordance with the opinion of the senate, expressed when no less than one hundred senators are present at the discussion, shall have given leave. Carried.

No one in a company of more than five persons altogether, men and women, shall observe the sacred rites, nor in that company shall there be present more than two men or three women, unless in accordance with the opinion of the praetor urbanus and the senate as written above. See that you declare it in the assembly for not less than three market days; that you may know the opinion of the senate that this was their judgment: if there are any who have acted contrary to what was written above, they have decided that a proceeding for a capital offense should be instituted against them; the senate has justly decreed that you should inscribe this on a brazen tablet, and that you should order it to be placed where it can be easiest read; see to it that the revelries of Bacchus, if there be any, except in case there be concerned in the matter something sacred, as was written above, be disbanded within ten days after this letter shall be delivered to you. In the Teuranian field.

PYTHAGOREANS AND OTHER PHILOSOPHICAL GROUPS

The Pythagoreans originated and developed in southern Italy beginning in the 6th century BCE. This philosophical brotherhood seems to have flourished as a surviving branch of—or at least has been significantly influenced by—the earlier mystery cults of the Bacchae or Orphism. Pythagorean beliefs were based on the metaphysical teachings of Pythagoras and his followers, and can be seen as akin to the many ongoing mystery religions in the ancient Greco-Roman world. Their teachings were influential on later schools of thought, such as Platonism, Neo-Platonism, and Cynicism.

We have many references to the Pythagoreans in Rome from Cicero. In the following section of Cicero’s *Tusculan Disputations*, he marks the beginnings of Pythagoras’ fame, and his influence on the early Roman Republic.

But while I am on this subject, and considering the study of philosophy, I meet with many reasons to imagine that those studies were brought to us from abroad, and not merely imported, but preserved and improved; for they had Pythagoras, a man of consummate wisdom and nobleness of character, in a manner, before their eyes, who was in Italy at the time that Lucius Brutus, the illustrious founder of your nobility, delivered his country from tyranny. As the doctrine of Pythagoras spread itself on all sides, it seems probable to me that it reached this city; and this is not only probable of itself, but it does really appear to have been the case from many remains of it. For who can imagine that, when it flourished so much in that part of Italy which was called Magna Græcia, and in some of the largest and most powerful cities, in which, first the name of Pythagoras, and then that of those men who were afterward his followers, was in so high esteem; who can imagine, I say, that our people could shut their ears to what was said by such learned men? Besides, it is even my opinion that it was the great esteem in which the Pythagoreans were held, that gave rise to that opinion among those who came after him, that King Numa was a Pythagorean. For, being acquainted with the doctrine and principles of Pythagoras, and having heard from their ancestors that this king was a very wise and just man, and not being able to distinguish accurately between times and periods that were so remote, they inferred, from his being so eminent for his wisdom, that he had been a pupil of Pythagoras.^[1]

Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations* 4

Cicero also attacks Vatinius (a Roman consul in the year 47/48 BCE) for calling himself a Pythagorean, and for Vatinius' defending of his "savage and barbarian" actions as based on Pythagorean deed:

6. [14] And since the beginnings of all great things are derived from the gods, I wish you to answer me,—you, who call yourself a Pythagorean, and to put around the name of a most learned man as a screen to bide your own savage and barbarian habits,—what depravity of intellect possessed you, what excessive frenzy seized on you, and made you, when you had begun your unheard-of and impious sacrifices, accustomed as you are to seek to evoke the spirits of the shades below, and to appease the Dî Manes with the entrails of murdered boys, despise the auspices under which this city was founded, by which the whole of this republic and empire is kept together, and, at the very beginning of your tribuneship, give notice to the senate that the responses of the augurs and the arrogance of that college should be no obstacle to your proceedings

Cicero, *Against Vatinius* 6

[Siobhan: This is a stub and will be added to]

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Isis and her Worship:

This [page](#) from the Center for Hellenic Studies at Harvard has a number of Greek as well as Roman sources on Isis worship.

Bacchus:

Livy, *History of Rome* Book 39

Pythagoreans and Other Philosophical Groups:

Huffman, Carl. 2019. "Pythagoreanism." *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2019 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.). Accessed August 2020. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/...ythagoreanism/>

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1. Here, Cicero notes Roman admiration for the teachings of Pythagoras. ↵

9.5: Christianity

THE CHRISTIANS, IN THE EYES OF THE ROMANS

Celsus was a second century CE philosopher who wrote a diatribe against the Christians. That work does not survive intact, but we have substantial portions of the text from a work called *Against Celsus*, written by the Christian bishop Origen of Alexandria in 248 CE. Origen's account gives you a sense for the various ways that the Romans attacked Christianity, even if one may doubt his honesty:

BOOK 128 ...[Celsus] accuses [Jesus] of having “invented his birth from a virgin,” and insults Him with being “born in a certain Jewish village, of a poor woman of the country, who gained her subsistence by spinning, and who was turned out of doors by her husband, a carpenter by trade, because she was convicted of adultery; that after being driven away by her husband, and wandering about for a time, she disgracefully gave birth to Jesus, an illegitimate child, who having hired himself out as a servant in Egypt because of his poverty, and having there acquired some miraculous powers, on which the Egyptians greatly pride themselves, returned to his own country, highly delighted with himself, and by means of these proclaimed himself a God.”...

BOOK 3 44 After these points Celsus quotes some objections against the doctrine of Jesus, made by a very few individuals who are considered Christians, not of the more intelligent, as he supposes, but of the more ignorant class, and asserts that “the following are the rules laid down by them. Let no one come to us who has been instructed, or who is wise or prudent (for we think such qualifications evil by us); but if there be any ignorant, or unintelligent, or uninstructed, or foolish person, let them come with confidence. By which words, acknowledging that such individuals are worthy of their God, they manifestly show that they desire and are able to gain over only the silly, and the mean, and the stupid, with women and children.”...

Chap. 55 But as Celsus delights to pile up lies about us, and, in addition to those which he has already uttered, has added others, let us examine these also, and see whether it be the Christians or Celsus who have reason to be ashamed of what is said. He asserts, “We see, indeed, in private houses workers in wool and leather, and fullers, and the most unlearned and peasant people, not daring to utter a word in the presence of their elders and wiser masters; but when they get hold of the children privately, and certain women as ignorant as themselves, they pour forth wonderful statements, to the effect that they ought not to give heed to their father and to their teachers, but should obey them [that is the Christians]; that the former are foolish and stupid, and neither know nor can do anything that is really good, being obsessed with empty trifles; that they alone know how men ought to live, and that, if the children obey them, they will both be happy themselves, and will make their home happy also. And while speaking like this if they see a teacher approaching, or one of the more intelligent class, or even the father himself, the more timid among them become afraid. However, the more forward push the children to throw off the yoke, whispering that in the presence of father and teachers they neither will nor can explain to them any good thing, seeing they turn away with aversion from the silliness and stupidity of such persons, because they are completely corrupt, and so wicked, and would punish them. [They add] that if they wish to avail themselves of their aid, they must leave their father and their instructors, and go with the women and their playmates to the women's quarters, or to the leather shop, or to the fuller's shop, that they may become perfect, and by words like these they seduce them.”

Chap. 59 This statement also is untrue, that it is “only foolish and low class individuals, and persons devoid of perception, slaves, women, and children, of whom the teachers of the divine word wish to make converts.”... After this it is unnecessary for us to wish to offer a reply to such statements of Celsus as the following: “For why is it an evil to have been educated, and to have studied the best opinions, and to have both the reality and appearance of wisdom? What barrier does this offer to the knowledge of God? Why should it not rather be an assistance, and a means by which one might be better able to arrive at the truth?”

BOOK 6 78 Celsus next makes certain observations of the following nature: “Again, if God, like Jupiter in the comedy, should, on awaking from a long slumber, desire to rescue the human race from evil, why did He send this Spirit of which you speak into one corner [of the earth]? He ought to have breathed it alike into many bodies, and have sent them out into all the world. Now the comic poet, to cause laughter in the theatre, wrote that Jupiter, after awakening, despatched Mercury to the Athenians and Spartans; but do not you think that you have made the Son of God more ridiculous in sending Him to the Jews?”...

BOOK 8 28 We shall now proceed to the next statement of Celsus, and examine it with care: “If in obedience to the traditions of their fathers they abstain from such victims, they must also abstain from all animal food, in accordance with the opinions of Pythagoras, who thus showed his respect for the soul and its bodily organs. But if, as they say, they abstain that they may not eat

along with demons, I admire their wisdom, in having at length discovered, that whenever they eat they eat with demons, although they only refuse to do so when they are looking upon a slain victim; for when they eat bread, or drink wine, or taste fruits, do they not receive these things, as well as the water they drink and the air they breathe, from certain demons, to whom have been assigned these different provinces of nature?"...

55 Celsus goes on to say: "They must make their choice between two alternatives. If they refuse to render proper honour to the gods and to respect their priests, let them not come to manhood, or marry wives, or have children, or indeed take any share in the affairs of life; but let them depart hence with all speed, and leave no posterity behind them, that such a race may become extinct from the face of the earth. Or, on the other hand, if they will take wives and bring up children, and taste of the fruits of the earth, and partake of all the blessings of life, and bear its appointed sorrows (for nature herself has given sorrows to all men; for sorrows must exist, and earth is the only place for them), then must they discharge the duties of life until they are released from its bonds, and render due honour to those beings who control the affairs of this life, if they would not show themselves ungrateful to them. For it would be unjust in them, after receiving the good things which they dispense, to pay them no tribute in return."...

Origen, *Against Celsus*

One reason why the Romans were so uncomfortable with Christianity was that Early Christianity had a truly radical message in comparison to traditional Roman values: for example, you do not necessarily have to obey your family, your parents, or society, even as a young woman. *The Acts of Thecla and Paul* tell the story of Thecla, a young aristocratic woman, who encounters Saint Paul in the city of Iconium and then goes on a rather radical life transformation. The following passages pick up after the opening section of *the Acts*, which recounts how Saint Paul arrived in the city:

...And while Paul was thus speaking in the midst of the church in the house of Onesiphorus, a certain virgin Thecla, the daughter of Theocleia, betrothed to a man named Thamyris, sitting at the window close by, listened night and day to the discourse of virginity and prayer, and did not look away from the window, but paid earnest heed to the faith, rejoicing exceedingly. And when she still saw many women going in beside Paul, she also had an eager desire to be deemed worthy to stand in the presence of Paul, and to hear the word of Christ; for never had she seen his figure, but heard his word only.

And as she did not stand away from the window, her mother sent for Thamyris; and he comes gladly, as if already receiving her in marriage. And Theocleia said: I have a strange story to tell you, Thamyris; for assuredly for three days and three nights Thecla does not rise from the window, neither to eat nor to drink; but looking earnestly as if upon some pleasant sight, she is so devoted to a foreigner teaching deceitful and artful discourses, that I wonder how a virgin of such modesty is so painfully put about. Thamyris, this man will overturn the city of the Iconians, and your Thecla too besides; for all the women and the young men go in beside him, being taught to fear God and to live in chastity. Moreover also my daughter, tied to the window like a spider, lays hold of what is said by Paul with a strange eagerness and awful emotion; for the virgin looks eagerly at what is said by him, and has been captivated. But go near and speak to her, for she has been betrothed to you. And Thamyris going near, and kissing her, but at the same time also being afraid of her overpowering emotion, said: Thecla, my betrothed, why do you sit thus? And what sort of feeling holds you overpowered? Turn round to your Thamyris, and be ashamed. Moreover also her mother said the same things: Why do you sit thus looking down, my child, and answering nothing, but like a mad woman? And they wept fearfully, Thamyris indeed for the loss of a wife, and Theocleia of a child, and the maidservants of a mistress: there was accordingly much confusion in the house of mourning. And while these things were thus going on, Thecla did not turn round, but kept attending earnestly to the word of Paul.

And Thamyris starting up, went forth into the street, and kept watching those going in to him and coming out. And he saw two men bitterly contending with each other; and he said: Men, tell me who this is among you, leading astray the souls of young men, and deceiving virgins, so that they do not marry, but remain as they are. I promise, therefore, to give you money enough if you tell me about him; for I am the first man of the city. And Demas and Ermogenes^[1] said to him: Who this is, indeed, we do not know; but he deprives young men of wives, and maidens of husbands, saying, There is for you a resurrection in no other way, unless you remain chaste, and pollute not the flesh, but keep it chaste. And Thamyris said to them: Come into my house, and rest yourselves. And they went to a sumptuous dinner, and much wine, and great wealth, and a splendid table; and Thamyris made them drink, from his love to Thecla, and his wish to get her as his wife. And Thamyris said during the dinner: You men, what is his teaching, tell me, that I also may know; for I am no little distressed about Thecla, because she thus loves the stranger, and I am prevented from marrying.

Demas and Ermogenes said: Bring him before the governor Castellos on the charge of persuading the multitudes to embrace the new teaching of the Christians, and he will speedily destroy him, and you shall have Thecla as your wife. And we shall teach you that the resurrection of which this man speaks has taken place, because it has already taken place in the children which we have; and we rose again when we came to the knowledge of the true God.

And Thamyris, hearing these things, being filled with anger and rage, rising up early, went to the house of Onesiphorus with archons and public officers, and a great crowd with batons, saying: You have corrupted the city of the Iconians, and her that was betrothed to me, so that she will not have me; let us go to the governor Castellos. And all the multitude said: Away with the magician; for he has corrupted all our wives, and the multitudes have been persuaded to change their opinions.

And Thamyris, standing before the tribunal, said with a great shout: O proconsul, this man, who he is we know not, who makes virgins averse to marriage; let him say before you on what account he teaches these things. And Demas and Ermogenes said to Thamyris: Say that he is a Christian, and thus you will do away with him. But the proconsul stayed his intention, and called Paul, saying: Who are you, and what do you teach? For they bring no small charges against you. And Paul lifted up his voice, saying: Since I am this day examined as to what I teach, listen, O proconsul: A living God, a God of retributions, a jealous God, a God in need of nothing, consulting for the salvation of men, has sent me that I may reclaim them from corruption and uncleanness, and from all pleasure, and from death, that they may not sin. Wherefore God sent His own Son, whom I preach, and in whom I teach men to rest their hope, who alone has had compassion upon a world led astray, that they may be no longer under judgment, O proconsul, but may have faith, and the fear of God, and the knowledge of holiness, and the love of truth. If, therefore, I teach what has been revealed to me by God, wherein do I do wrong? And the proconsul having heard, ordered Paul to be bound, and sent to prison, until, said he, I, being at leisure, shall hear him more attentively.

And Thecla by night having taken off her bracelets, gave them to the gatekeeper; and the door having been opened to her, she went into the prison; and having given the jailor a silver mirror, she went in beside Paul, and, sitting at his feet, she heard the great things of God. And Paul was afraid of nothing, but ordered his life in the confidence of God. And her faith also was increased, and she kissed his bonds. And when Thecla was sought for by her friends, and Thamyris, as if she had been lost, was running up and down the streets, one of the gatekeeper's fellow-slaves informed him that she had gone out by night. And having gone out, they examined the gatekeeper; and he said to them: She has gone to the foreigner into the prison. And having gone, they found her, as it were, enchained by affection. And having gone forth thence, they drew the multitudes together, and informed the governor of the circumstance. And he ordered Paul to be brought to the tribunal; but Thecla was wallowing on the ground in the place where he sat and taught her in the prison; and he ordered her too to be brought to the tribunal. And she came, exulting with joy. And the crowd, when Paul had been brought, vehemently cried out: He is a magician! Away with him! But the proconsul gladly heard Paul upon the holy works of Christ. And having called a council, he summoned Thecla, and said to her: Why do you not obey Thamyris, according to the law of the Iconians? But she stood looking earnestly at Paul. And when she gave no answer, her mother cried out, saying: Burn the wicked wretch; burn in the midst of the theatre her that will not marry, in order that all the women that have been taught by this man may be afraid.

And the governor was greatly moved; and having scourged Paul, he cast him out of the city, and condemned Thecla to be burned. And immediately the governor went away to the theatre, and all the crowd went forth to the spectacle of Thecla. But as a lamb in the wilderness looks round for the shepherd, so she kept searching for Paul. And having looked upon the crowd, she saw the Lord sitting in the likeness of Paul, and said: As I am unable to endure my lot, Paul has come to see me. And she gazed upon him with great earnestness, and he went up into heaven. But the maid-servants and virgins brought the kindling, in order that Thecla might be burned. And when she came in naked, the governor wept, and wondered at the power that was in her. And the public executioners arranged the wood for her to go up on the pile. And she, having made the sign of the cross, went up on the kindling; and they lighted it. And though a great fire was blazing, it did not touch her; for God, having compassion upon her, made an underground rumbling, and a cloud overshadowed them from above, full of water and hail; and all that was in the cavity of it was poured out, so that many were in danger of death. And the fire was put out, and Thecla saved.

And Paul was fasting with Onesiphorus and his wife, and his children, in a new tomb, as they were going from Iconium to Daphne. And when many days were past, the fasting children said to Paul: We are hungry, and we cannot buy loaves; for Onesiphorus had left the things of the world, and followed Paul, with all his house. And Paul, having taken off his cloak, said: Go, my child, buy more loaves, and bring them. And when the child was buying, he saw Thecla their neighbour, and was astonished, and said: Thecla, whither are you going? And she said: I have been saved from the fire, and am following Paul. And the boy said: Come, I shall take

you to him; for he is distressed about you, and is praying six days. And she stood beside the tomb where Paul was with bended knees, and praying, and saying: O Saviour Christ, let not the fire touch Thecla, but stand by her, for she is Yours. And she, standing behind him, cried out: O Father, who hast made the heaven and the earth, the Father of Your holy Son, I bless You that You have saved me that I may see Paul. And Paul, rising up, saw her, and said: O God, that know the heart, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, I bless You that You, having heard me, have done quickly what I wished.

And they had five loaves, and herbs, and water; and they rejoiced in the holy works of Christ. And Thecla said to Paul: I shall cut my hair, and follow you wherever you may go. And he said: It is a shameless age, and you are beautiful. I am afraid lest another temptation come upon you worse than the first, and that you withstand it not, but be cowardly. And Thecla said: Only give me the seal in Christ, and temptation shall not touch me. And Paul said: Thecla, wait with patience, and you shall receive the water.

And Paul sent away Onesiphorus and all his house to Iconium; and thus, having taken Thecla, he went into Antioch. And as they were going in, a certain Syriarch, Alexander by name, seeing Thecla, became enamoured of her, and tried to gain over Paul by gifts and presents. But Paul said: I know not the woman whom you speak of, nor is she mine. But he, being of great power, himself embraced her in the street. But she would not endure it, but looked about for Paul. And she cried out bitterly, saying: Do not force the stranger; do not force the servant of God. I am one of the chief persons of the Iconians; and because I would not have Thamyris, I have been cast out of the city. And taking hold of Alexander, she tore his cloak, and pulled off his crown, and made him a laughing-stock. And he, at the same time loving her, and at the same time ashamed of what had happened, led her before the governor; and when she had confessed that she had done these things, he condemned her to the wild beasts. And the women were struck with astonishment, and cried out beside the tribunal: Evil judgment! Impious judgment! And she asked the governor, that, said she, I may remain pure until I shall fight with the wild beasts. And a certain Tryphæna, whose daughter was dead, took her into keeping, and had her for a consolation.

And when the beasts were exhibited, they bound her to a fierce lioness; and Tryphæna accompanied her. But the lioness, with Thecla sitting upon her, licked her feet; and all the multitude was astonished. And the charge on her inscription was: Sacrilegious. And the women cried out from above: An impious sentence has been passed in this city! And after the exhibition, Tryphæna again receives her. For her daughter Falconilla had died, and said to her in a dream: Mother, you shall have this stranger Thecla in my place, in order that she may pray concerning me, and that I may be transferred to the place of the just.

And when, after the exhibition, Tryphæna received her, at the same time indeed she grieved that she had to fight with the wild beasts on the day following; and at the same time, loving her as much as her daughter Falconilla, she said: My second child Thecla, come and pray for my child, that she may live for ever; for this I saw in my sleep. And she, nothing hesitating, lifted up her voice, and said: God most high, grant to this woman according to her wish, that her daughter Falconilla may live forever. And when Thecla had thus spoken, Tryphæna lamented, considering so much beauty thrown to the wild beasts.

And when it was dawn, Alexander came to take her, for it was he that gave the hunt, saying: The governor is sitting, and the crowd is in uproar against us. Allow me to take away her that is to fight with the wild beasts. And Tryphæna cried aloud, so that he even fled, saying: A second mourning for my Falconilla has come upon my house and there is no one to help; neither child, for she is dead, nor kinsman, for I am a widow. God of Thecla, help her!

And immediately the governor sends an order that Thecla should be brought. And Tryphæna, taking her by the hand, said: My daughter Falconilla, indeed, I took away to the tomb; and you, Thecla, I am taking to the wild-beast fight. And Thecla wept bitterly, saying: O Lord, the God in whom I believe, to whom I have fled for refuge, who delivered me from the fire, grant a recompense to Tryphæna, who has had compassion on Your servant, and because she has kept me pure. Then a tumult arose, and a cry of the people, and the women sitting together, the one saying: Away with the sacrilegious person! The others saying: Let the city be raised against this wickedness. Take off all of us, O proconsul! Cruel sight! evil sentence!

And Thecla, having been taken out of the hand of Tryphæna, was stripped, and received a girdle, and was thrown into the arena, and lions and bears and a fierce lioness were let loose upon her; and the lioness having run up to her feet, lay down; and the multitude of the women cried aloud. And a bear ran upon her; but the lioness, meeting the bear, tore her to pieces. And again a lion that had been trained against men, which belonged to Alexander, ran upon her; and she, the lioness, encountering the lion, was killed along with him. And the women made great lamentation, since also the lioness, her protector, was dead.

Then they send in many wild beasts, she standing and stretching forth her hands, and praying. And when she had finished her prayer, she turned and saw a ditch full of water, and said: Now it is time to wash myself. And she threw herself in, saying: In the

name of Jesus Christ I am baptized on my last day. And the women seeing, and the multitude, wept, saying: Do not throw yourself into the water; so that also the governor shed tears, because the seals were going to devour such beauty. She then threw herself in in the name of Jesus Christ; but the seals having seen the glare of the fire of lightning, floated about dead. And there was round her, as she was naked, a cloud of fire; so that neither could the wild beasts touch her, nor could she be seen naked.

And the women, when other wild beasts were being thrown in, wailed. And some threw sweet-smelling herbs, others nard, others cassia, others amomum, so that there was abundance of perfumes. And all the wild beasts that had been thrown in, as if they had been withheld by sleep, did not touch her; so that Alexander said to the governor: I have bulls exceedingly terrible; let us bind to them her that is to fight with the beasts. And the governor, looking gloomy, turned, and said: Do what you will. And they bound her by the feet between them, and put red-hot irons under the privy parts of the bulls, so that they, being rendered more furious, might kill her. They rushed about, therefore; but the burning flame consumed the ropes, and she was as if she had not been bound. But Tryphæna fainted standing beside the arena, so that the crowd said: Queen Tryphæna is dead. And the governor put a stop to the games, and the city was in dismay. And Alexander entreated the governor, saying: Have mercy both on me and the city, and release this woman. For if Cæsar hear of these things, he will speedily destroy the city also along with us, because his kinswoman Queen Tryphæna has died beside the Abaci .

And the governor summoned Thecla out of the midst of the wild beasts, and said to her: Who are you? And what is there about you, that not one of the wild beasts touches you? And she said: I indeed am a servant of the living God; and as to what there is about me, I have believed in the Son of God, in whom He is well pleased; wherefore not one of the beasts has touched me. For He alone is the end of salvation, and the basis of immortal life; for He is a refuge to the tempest-tossed, a solace to the afflicted, a shelter to the despairing; and, once for all, whoever shall not believe in Him, shall not live forever.

And the governor having heard this, ordered her garments to be brought, and to be put on. And Thecla said: He that clothed me naked among the wild beasts, will in the day of judgment clothe you with salvation. And taking the garments, she put them on. The governor therefore immediately issued an edict, saying: I release to you the God-fearing Thecla, the servant of God. And the women shouted aloud, and with one mouth returned thanks to God, saying: There is one God, the God of Thecla; so that the foundations of the theatre were shaken by their voice. And Tryphæna having received the good news, went to meet the holy Thecla, and said: Now I believe that the dead are raised: now I believe that my child lives. Come within, and I shall assign to you all that is mine. She therefore went in along with her, and rested eight days, having instructed her in the word of God, so that most even of the maid-servants believed. And there was great joy in the house.

And Thecla kept seeking Paul; and it was told her that he was in Myra of Lycia. And taking young men and maidens, she girded herself; and having sewed the tunic so as to make a man's cloak, she came to Myra, and found Paul speaking the word of God. And Paul was astonished at seeing her, and the crowd with her, thinking that some new trial was coming upon her. And when she saw him, she said: I have received the baptism, Paul; for He that wrought along with you for the Gospel has wrought in me also for baptism. And Paul, taking her, led her to the house of Hermæus, and hears everything from her, so that those that heard greatly wondered, and were comforted, and prayed over Tryphæna. And she rose up, and said: I am going to Iconium. And Paul said: Go, and teach the word of God. And Tryphæna sent her much clothing and gold, so that she left to Paul many things for the service of the poor.

And she went to Iconium. And she goes into the house of Onesiphorus, and fell upon the pavement where Paul used to sit and teach her, and wept, saying: God of myself and of this house, where you made the light to shine upon me, O Christ Jesus, the Son of the living God, my help in the fire, my help among the wild beasts, You are glorified forever. Amen. And she found Thamyris dead, but her mother alive. And having sent for her mother, she said: Theocleia, my mother, can you believe that the Lord lives in the heavens? For whether you desire wealth, God gives it to you through me; or your child, I am standing beside you. And having thus testified, she departed to Seleucia, and dwelt in a cave seventy-two years, living upon herbs and water. And she enlightened many by the word of God.

And certain men of the city, being Greeks by religion, and physicians by profession, sent to her insolent young men to destroy her. For they said: She is a virgin, and serves Artemis, and from this she has virtue in healing. And by the providence of God she entered into the rock alive, and went under ground. And she departed to Rome to see Paul, and found that he had fallen asleep. And after staying there no long time, she rested in a glorious sleep; and she is buried about two or three stadia from the tomb of her master Paul.

She was cast, then, into the fire when seventeen years old, and among the wild beasts when eighteen. And she was an ascetic in the cave, as has been said, seventy-two years, so that all the years of her life were ninety. And having accomplished many cures, she rests in the place of the saints, having fallen asleep on the twenty-fourth of the month of September in Christ Jesus our Lord, to whom be glory and strength for ever and ever. Amen.

Instead of the last two sections, the **ms.(q. for Siobhan – what does this stand for? manuscript?)** which Dr. Grabe used has the following:

And a cloud of light guided her. And having come into Seleucia, she went forth outside of the city one stadium. And she was afraid of them also, for they worshipped idols. And it guided her to the mountain called Calamon or Rhodeon; and having there found a cave, she went into it. And she was there many years, and underwent many and grievous trials by the devil, and bore them nobly, being assisted by Christ. And some of the well-born women, having learned about the virgin Thecla, went to her, and learned the oracles of God. And many of them bade adieu to the world, and lived an ascetic life with her. And a good report was spread everywhere concerning her, and cures were done by her. All the city, therefore, and country round, having known this, brought their sick to the mountain; and before they came near the door they were speedily released from whatever disease they were afflicted by; and the unclean spirits went out shrieking, and all received their own in health, glorifying God, who had given such grace to the virgin Thecla. The physicians, therefore, of the city of the Seleucians were thought nothing of, having lost their trade, and no one any longer had regard to them; and being filled with envy and hatred, they plotted against the servant of Christ, what they should do to her. The devil then suggests to them a wicked device; and one day, being assembled, and having taken counsel, they consult with each other, saying: This virgin is a priestess of the great goddess Artemis; and if she ask anything of her, she hears her as being a virgin, and all the gods love her. Come, then, let us take men of disorderly lives, and make them drunk with much wine, and let us give them much gold, and say to them, If you can corrupt and defile her, we shall give you even more money. The physicians therefore said to themselves, that if they should be able to defile her, neither the gods nor Artemis would listen to her in the case of the sick. They therefore did so. And the wicked men, having gone to the mountain, and rushed upon the cave like lions, knocked at the door. And the holy martyr Thecla opened, emboldened by the God in whom she believed; for she knew of their plot beforehand. And she says to them: What do you want, my children? And they said: Is there one here called Thecla? And she said: What do you want with her? They say to her: We want to sleep with her. The blessed Thecla says to them: I am a humble old woman, but the servant of my Lord Jesus Christ; and even though you want to do something to me out of place, you cannot. They say to her: It is impossible for us not to do to you what we want. And having said this, they laid fast hold of her, and wished to insult her. And she says to them with mildness: Wait, my children, that you may see the glory of the Lord. And being laid hold of by them, she looked up into heaven, and said: God, terrible and incomparable, and glorious to Your adversaries, who delivered me out of the fire, who did not give me up to Thamyris, who did not give me up to Alexander, who delivered me from the wild beasts, who saved me in the abyss, who hast everywhere worked with me, and glorified Your name in me, now also deliver me from these lawless men, and let me not insult my virginity, which through Your name I have preserved till now, because I love You, and desire You, and adore You, the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost forever. Amen. And there came a voice out of the heaven, saying: Fear not, Thecla, my true servant, for I am with you. Look and see where an opening has been made before you, for there shall be for you an everlasting house, and there you shall obtain shelter. And the blessed Thecla regarding it, saw the rock opened as far as to allow a man to enter, and did according to what had been said to her: and nobly fleeing from the lawless ones entered into the rock; and the rock was straightway shut together, so that not even a joining appeared. And they, beholding the extraordinary wonder, became as it were distracted; and they were not able to detain the servant of God, but only caught hold of her veil, and were able to tear off a certain part; and that by the permission of God for the faith of those seeing the venerable place, and for a blessing in the generations afterwards to those that believe in our Lord Jesus Christ out of a pure heart.

Thus, then, suffered the first martyr of God, and apostle, and virgin, Thecla, who came from Iconium at eighteen years old; and with the journeying, and the going round, and the retirement in the mountain, she lived other seventy-two years. And when the Lord took her, she was ninety years old. And thus is her consummation. And her holy commemoration is on the twenty-fourth of the month of September, to the glory of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, now and ever, and to ages of ages. Amen.

THE ROMANS, ACCORDING TO THE CHRISTIANS

Christians probably did not help themselves in the eyes of Romans in their attacking of Roman cultural institutions like the gladiatorial games. In the passage below, the Christian author Tertullian (c. 160-c . 240 CE) fumes about the origins of the

gladiatorial games in an extract from his work *On Spectacles*. Tertullian came from Carthage and was vehement in his disgust at what he called idolatry; how reliable he is, given his agenda, is a moot point.

We still have to examine the most famed and popular spectacle: it is called *munus* from being an *officium*, for *munus* and *officium* are synonyms.^[2] People in the past thought they were performing a duty to the dead with this form of spectacle after they moderated its nature with a more refined form of cruelty. Long ago, since they believed that the souls of the dead are appeased by human blood, they purchased captives or slaves of poor quality and sacrificed them at funerals. Afterwards, they preferred to disguise this unholy practice by making it something to enjoy. Thus, after they trained the people they had obtained these ways to wield the weapons they had as best they could (training them to learn how to die!), they then exposed them to death at the tombs on the day appointed for sacrifices in honor of the dead. And so it was that they consoled themselves with murder. *That* is the origin of the gladiatorial *munus*. But gradually their refinement developed along with their cruelty; these inhuman people could not rest satisfied or gain pleasure unless wild animals tore humans to pieces. What was then a sacrifice offered for the appeasement of the dead was no doubt considered a rite in honor of the dead. This sort of thing is, therefore, idolatry, because idolatry, too, is a kind of rite in honor of the dead: both are services rendered to the dead.

Additionally, demons live in the images of the dead. And now consider the titles also: although this type of exhibition has moved from being an act to honor the dead to one which honours the living (for example, those who hold quaestorships, magistracies, flaminates, and priesthoods) still, since the guilt of idolatry taints the dignity of the title, whatever is carried out in the name of this dignity shares necessarily in the taint of its origin. We must also consider the paraphernalia which are considered as belonging to the ceremonies of the actual offices as also being idolatrous. For the purple robes, the fasces,^[3] the fillets, and crowns—finally, also, the announcements made in meetings and on advertisements^[4] and the final dinners^[5] given the evening before games—have the Devil’s pageantry and the invocation of demons. In conclusion, what shall I say about that horrible place which not even perjurers can bear? For the amphitheatre is consecrated to more numerous and more terrible names than the Capitol, although the Capitol is the temple of all demons.^[6] There as many unclean spirits live as there are seats. And to say a final word about the arts concerned, we know that Mars and Diana are the patrons of both types of *ludi*.

Tertullian, *On Spectacles* 12

Tertullian, in fine pagan-loathing form, also attacks [it](#)^{[q for Siobhan: does “it” refer to the games? Circus?] for [this](#):}

The Circus is primarily consecrated to the Sun. His temple stands in the middle of it, and his image shines forth from the pediment of the temple. For they did not think it proper to worship beneath a roof a god whom they see above them in the open sky. Those who argue that the first circus show was given by Circe in honor of the Sun, her father, as they will have it, conclude also that its name is derived from her. Plainly, the sorceress undoubtedly transacted the business in behalf of those whose priestess she was, namely, the demons and evil spirits. How many evidences of idol worship do you recognize accordingly in the decoration of the place? Every ornament of the circus is a temple by itself. The eggs are regarded as sacred to Castor and Pollux by people who do not feel ashamed to believe the story of their origin from the egg made fertile by the swan, Jupiter.^[7] The dolphins spout water in honor of Neptune; the columns bear aloft images of Seia, so called from “sementatio” (‘sowing’); of Messia, so called as deity of “messis” (‘reaping’); and of Tutulina, so called as ‘tutelary spirit’ of the crops.^[8]

In front of these are seen three altars for the triple gods: the Great, the Potent, the Prevailing. They think these deities are Samothracean.^[9] The huge obelisk, as Hermateles says, is set up in honor of the Sun.^[10] Its inscription which, like its origin, is Egyptian, contains a superstition. The gathering of the demons would be dull without their Great Mother, so she presides there over the ditch.

Consus,^[11] as we have mentioned, keeps in hiding underground at the Murcian Goals. The latter are also the work of an idol. For Murcia, as they will have it, is a goddess of love to whom they have dedicated a temple in that part (of the valley).^[12] Take note, Christian, how many unclean deities have taken possession of the circus. You should have nothing to do with a place which so many diabolic spirits have made their own.

Tertullian, *On Spectacles* 8

Bibliography and Further Reading:

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1. Companions of Paul, who have been pretending to be his friend. ←
 2. No, they’re not. Both words mean duty, but *munus* also means gift - especially a gift given to the dead. ←

3. Certain Roman magistrates (consuls, praetors, curule aediles, quaestors) were entitled to be accompanied by attendants and bodyguards called lictors who carried fasces, a bundle of rods with an axe sticking out. These fasces symbolized the lictor's power to punish as part of their duties. ↩
4. We actually have some advertisements for these shows from the remains of Pompeii; [see the section on advertising and marketing gladiators.](#)↩
5. The *cena libera*, a public feast given the night before *[pb_glossary id="583"]ludi[/pb_glossary]* to gladiators and those who were due to be executed in the arena. ↩
6. The Capitoline Hill held many temples for various deities, and in particular, the temple to Jupiter Optimus Maximus (Jupiter, the best and greatest). ↩
7. Jupiter raped Leda in the form of a swan, and she laid eggs from which Helen and Pollux were born. Castor was fathered by Leda's husband, Tyndareus. ↩
8. These three goddesses are rather obscure, but were native Italic goddesses associated with grain production and protection. ↩
9. Samothrace is a Greek island in the norther Aegean Sea. During the ancient Roman period, the island became a religious centre that pilgrims visited from all over the Roman world. ↩
10. This obelisk was set up by Augustus. ↩
11. His altar was buried in the Circus Maximus and uncovered during his feast day. ↩
12. A native goddess, she was identified with Venus, the goddess of love. ↩

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

10: Criminals and Gangs

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10.1: Pirates

PIRATES IN THE MEDITERRANEAN

Pirates were a perennial problem in the Mediterranean, especially in territory where they could hide in hidden harbours and dart out to capture passing ships (which was quite a lot of coastline along the coast of what is now Greece, Turkey, and Syria.) Ancient ships were vulnerable to them because they stayed close to land as much as possible, due to the fact that they weren't very good at staying afloat. The geographer Strabo describes the lands of the pirates in the following passage:

After the Sindic territory and Gorgipia, on the sea, there is the coast of the Achaei and the Zygi and the Heniochi, which for the most part is harbourless and mountainous, being a part of the Caucasus. These peoples live by robberies at sea. Their boats are slender, narrow, and light, holding only about twenty-five people, though in rare cases they can hold thirty in all; the Greeks call them *camarae*. They say that the Phthiotic Achaei in Jason's^[1] crew settled in this Achaea, but the Spartans in Heniochia, the leaders of the latter being Rhecas and Amphistratus, the "*heniochi*" of the Dioscuri, and that in all probability the Heniochi were named after these. At any rate, by equipping fleets of *camarae* and sailing sometimes against merchant vessels and sometimes against a country or even a city, they hold the mastery of the sea. And they are sometimes assisted even by those who hold the Bosphorus, the latter supplying them with mooring places, with market place, and with means of disposing of their booty. And since, when they return to their own land, they have no anchorage, they put the *camarae* on their shoulders and carry them to the forests where they live and where they farm poor land. And they bring the *camarae* down to the shore again when the time for sailing comes. And they do the same thing in the countries of others, for they are well acquainted with wooded places, they first hide their *camarae* in these and then themselves wander on foot night and day to kidnap people. But they readily offer to release their captives for ransom, informing their relatives after they have put out to sea. Now in those places which are ruled by local chieftains the rulers go to the aid of those who are wronged, often attacking and bringing back the *camarae*, men and all. But the territory that is subject to the Romans provides only little help, because of the negligence of the governors^[2] who are sent there.

Strabo, *Geography* 11.2.12

Any period of political instability, such as when the Romans destroyed many of the Hellenistic powers that had ruled various along the coast of the Eastern Mediterranean since the conquests of Hellenistic Greece in the 200-100s BCE was likely to see a surge in piracy. Eventually the pirates became miniature states almost in their own right – and even managed to take advantage of chaos in the 80-30s BCE in Rome.

24 1 The power of the pirates had its seat in Cilicia at first, and at the outset it was daring and elusive, but it took on confidence and boldness during the Mithridatic war,^[3] because it lent itself to the king's service. 2 Then, while the Romans were embroiled in civil wars at the gates of Rome, the sea was left unguarded, and gradually drew and enticed them on until they no longer attacked sailors only, but also devastated islands and maritime cities. And presently men whose wealth gave them power, and those whose lineage was illustrious, and those who laid claim to superior intelligence, began to embark on piratical craft and share their enterprises, feeling that the occupation brought them a certain reputation and distinction. 3 There were also fortified stopping points and signal-stations for pirates in many places, and fleets put in here which were not merely fitted out for their work with sturdy crews, skilful pilots, and light and speedy ships; but even more annoyingly than the fear which they inspired was the odious extravagance of their equipment, with their gilded sails, and purple awnings, and silvered oars, as if they enjoyed their iniquity and prided themselves upon it. 4 Their flutes and stringed instruments and drinking bouts along every coast, their seizures of persons in high command, and their ransoming of captured cities, were a disgrace to the Roman supremacy. For, you see, the ships of the pirates numbered more than a thousand, and the cities captured by them four hundred. 5 Besides, they attacked and plundered places of refuge and sanctuaries before untouchable, such as those of Claros, Didyma, and Samothrace; the temple of Chthonian Earth at Hermione; that of Asclepius in Epidaurus; those of Poseidon at the Isthmus, at Taenarum, and at Calauria; those of Apollo at Actium and Leucas; and those of Hera at Samos, at Argos, and at Lacinium. They also offered strange sacrifices of their own at Olympus, and celebrated there certain secret rites, among which those of Mithras continue to the present time, having been first established by them.^[4]

6 But they piled the most insults upon the Romans, even going up from the sea along their roads and plundering there, and sacking the neighbouring villas. Once, too, they seized two praetors, Sextilius and Bellinus, in their purple-edged robes, and carried them away, together with their attendants and lictors. They also captured a daughter of Antonius, a man who had celebrated a triumph, as

she was going into the country, and exacted a large ransom for her. But their crowning insolence was this. 7 Whenever a captive cried out that he was a Roman and gave his name, they would pretend to be frightened out of their senses, and would strike their thighs, and fall down before him entreating him to pardon them; and he would be convinced of their sincerity, seeing them so humbly suppliant. Then some would put Roman boots on his feet, and others would throw a toga round him, in order, they said, that there might be no mistake about him again. 8 And after thus mocking the man for a long time and getting their fill of amusement from him, at last they would let down a ladder in mid ocean and bid him disembark and go on his way rejoicing; and if he did not wish to go, they would push him overboard themselves and drown him.

Plutarch, *Life of Pompey*

As a result, Pompey the Great was set in charge of putting down the pirates across the Mediterranean in the 67-66 BCE. He had basically no restrictions on his power during that period, and managed to crush them – or at least give the illusion of that – in a very short period:

3 Pompey divided the waters and the adjacent coasts of the Mediterranean Sea into thirteen districts, and assigned to each a certain number of ships with a commander, and with his forces thus scattered in all quarters he encompassed whole fleets of piratical ships that fell in his way, and straightway hunted them down and brought them into port; others succeeded in dispersing and escaping, and sought their hive, as it were, hurrying from all quarters into Cilicia. Against these Pompey intended to proceed in person with his sixty best ships. 4 He did not, however, sail against them until he had entirely cleared of their pirates the Tyrrhenian Sea, the Libyan Sea, and the sea about Sardinia, Corsica, and Sicily, in forty days all told. This was owing to his own tireless energy and the zeal of his lieutenants.

27 1 But the consul Piso at Rome, out of rage and envy, was interfering with Pompey's equipment and discharging his crews; Pompey therefore sent his fleet round to Brundisium, while he himself went up by way of Tuscany to Rome. On learning of this, the citizens all streamed out into the road, just as if they had not escorted him forth only a few days before. 2 What caused their joy was the un hoped for rapidity of the change, the market being now filled to overflowing with provisions. As a consequence Piso came near being deprived of his consulship, and Gabinius had the requisite law already written out. But Pompey prevented this, as well as other hostile acts, and after arranging everything else in a reasonable manner and getting what he wanted, went down to Brundisium and set sail. 3 But though his immediate business was urgent and he sailed past other cities in his haste, still, he could not pass Athens by, but went up into the city, sacrificed to the gods, and addressed the people. Just as he was leaving the city, he read two inscriptions, each of a single verse, addressed to him, one inside the gate:—

“As you know you are mortal, in so far you are a god;”

and the other outside:—

“We awaited, we saluted, we have seen, and now conduct you forth.”

4 Some of the pirate bands that were still rowing at large begged for mercy, and since he treated them humanely, and after seizing their ships and persons did them no further harm, the rest became hopeful of mercy too, and made their escape from the other commanders, betook themselves to Pompey with their wives and children, and surrendered to him. All these he spared, and it was chiefly by their aid that he tracked down, seized, and punished those who were still lurking in concealment because conscious of unpardonable crimes.

28 1 But the most numerous and powerful had bestowed their families and treasures and useless folk in forts and strong citadels near the Taurus mountains, while they themselves manned their ships and awaited Pompey's attack near the promontory of Coracesium in Cilicia; here they were defeated in a battle and then besieged. At last, however, they sent suppliant messages and surrendered themselves, together with the cities and islands of which they were in control; these they had fortified, making them hard to get at and difficult to take by storm. 2 The war was therefore brought to an end and all piracy driven from the sea in less than three months, and besides many other ships, Pompey received in surrender ninety which had brazen beaks. The men themselves, who were more than twenty thousand in number, he did not once think of putting to death; and yet to let them go and suffer them to disperse or band together again, poor, warlike, and numerous as they were, he thought was not well. 3 Reflecting, therefore, that by nature man neither is nor becomes a wild or an unsocial creature, but is transformed by the unnatural practice of

vice, whereas he may be softened by new customs and a change of place and life; also that even wild beasts put off their fierce and savage ways when they partake of a gentler mode of life, he determined to transfer the men from the sea to land, and let them have a taste of gentle life by being accustomed to dwell in cities and to till the ground. 4 Some of them, therefore, were received and incorporated into the small and half-deserted cities of Cilicia, which acquired additional territory; and after restoring the city of Soli, which had lately been devastated by Tigranes, the king of Armenia, Pompey settled many there. To most of them, however, he gave as residence Dyme in Achaea, which was then bereft of men and had much good land.

29 1 Well, then, his critics found fault with these measures, and even his best friends were not pleased with his treatment of Metellus in Crete. Metellus, a kinsman of the Metellus who was a colleague of Pompey in Spain, had been sent as general to Crete before Pompey was chosen to his command; for Crete was a kind of second source for pirates, next to Cilicia. Metellus hemmed in many of them and was killing and destroying them. 2 But those who still survived and were besieged sent suppliant messages to Pompey and invited him into the island, alleging that it was a part of his government, and that all parts of it were within the limit to be measured from the sea. Pompey accepted the invitation and wrote to Metellus putting a stop to his war. He also wrote the cities not to pay any attention to Metellus, and sent them one of his own officers as general, namely, Lucius Octavius, 3 who entered the strongholds of the besieged pirates and fought on their side, thus making Pompey not only odious and oppressive, but actually ridiculous, since he lent his name to godless miscreants, and threw around them the mantle of his reputation to serve like a charm against evil, through envy and jealousy of Metellus. 4 For not even Achilles played the part of a man, men said, but that of a youth wholly crazed and frantic in his quest of glory, when he made a sign to the rest which prevented them from striking Hector, “Lest some one else win honour by the blow, and he come only second”; 5 whereas Pompey actually fought in behalf of the common enemy and saved their lives, that he might rob of his triumph a general who had toiled hard to win it. Metellus, however, would not give in, but captured the pirates and punished them, and then sent Octavius away after insulting and abusing him before the army.

Suetonius, *Life of Pompey* 24-29

OUTSMARTING PIRATES

Julius Caesar was captured by pirates in 75 BCE. As was usual when they captured those they could get more money for in ransom than as slaves, they allowed him to send out people to try and raise the money for him.

2.1 First, when the pirates demanded a ransom of twenty talents, Caesar burst out laughing. They did not know, he said, who it was that they had captured, and he volunteered to pay fifty. 2 Then, when he had sent his followers to the various cities in order to raise the money and was left with one friend and two slaves among these Cilicians, nearly the most bloodthirsty people in the world, he treated them so highhandedly that, whenever he wanted to sleep, he would send to them and tell them to stop talking. 3 For thirty-eight days, with the greatest nonchalance, he joined in all their games and exercises, just as if he was their leader instead of their prisoner. 4 He also wrote poems and speeches which he read aloud to them, and if they failed to admire his work, he would call them to their faces illiterate savages, and would often laughingly threaten to have them all hanged. They were much taken with this and attributed his freedom of speech to a kind of simplicity in his character or boyish playfulness. 5 However, the ransom arrived from Miletus and, as soon as he had paid it and been set free, he immediately manned some ships and set sail from the harbour of Miletus against the pirates. He found them still there, lying at anchor off the island, and he captured nearly all of them. 6 He took their property as spoils of war and put the men themselves into the prison at Pergamon. He then went in person to [Marcus] Junius, the governor of Asia, thinking it proper that he, as praetor in charge of the province, should see to the punishment of the prisoners. 7 Junius, however, cast longing eyes at the money, which came to a considerable sum, and kept saying that he needed time to look into the case. Caesar paid no further attention to him. He went to Pergamon, took the pirates out of prison and crucified the lot of them, just as he had often told them he would do when he was on the island and they imagined that he was joking.

Plutarch, *Julius Caesar* 2.1-7

Pirates could be well organized and surprisingly bold in seeking out targets. In the *Life of Apollonius of Tyana*, a philosopher and all round wise man and miracle worker, Philostratus tells of one encounter he had where he outwitted pirates who wanted to make a deal for a ship he was piloting:

3.24 But Apollonius replied: “Since you tempt me to talk about piloting ships, I would have you hear what I consider to have been my soundest exploit at that time. Pirates at one time infested the Phoenician Sea^[5] and were hanging about the cities to pick up information about the cargoes which different people had. The agents of the pirates spied out accordingly a rich cargo which I had

on board my ship, and having taken me aside in conversation, asked me what was my share in the freight; and I told them that it was a thousand drachmas, for there were four people in command of the ship. “And,” said they, “have you a house?” “A wretched hut,” I replied, “on the Island of Pharos, where once upon a time Proteus used to live.” “Would you like then,” they went on, “to acquire a landed estate instead of the sea, and a decent house instead of your hut, and ten times as much for the cargo as you are going to get now? And to get rid of a thousand misfortunes which beset pilots owing to the roughness of the sea?” I replied that I would gladly do so, but that I did not aspire to become a pirate just at a time when I had made myself more expert than I ever had been, and had won crowns for my skill in my profession. However they persevered and promised to give me a purse of ten thousand drachmas, if I would be their man and do what they wanted. Accordingly I egged them on to talk by promising not to fail them, but to assist them in every way.

Then they admitted that they were agents of the pirates, and begged me not to deprive them of a chance of capturing the ship, and instead of sailing away to the city whenever I departed from there, they arranged that I should cast anchor under the promontory, under the lee of which the pirate ships were riding; and they were willing to swear that they would not only not kill myself, but spare the life of any for whom I interceded. I for my part did not consider it safe to reprehend them, for I was afraid that if they were driven to despair, they would attack my ship on the high seas and then we would all be lost somewhere at sea; accordingly I promised to assist their enterprise, but I insisted upon their taking oath to keep their promise truly. They accordingly took an oath, for our interview took place in a temple, and then I said: “You take yourselves to the ships of the pirates at once, for we will sail away by night.” And they found me all the more plausible from the way I bargained about the money, for I stipulated that it must all be paid me in current cash, though not before they had captured the ship. They therefore went off, but I put straight out to sea after doubling the promontory.”

“This then,” said Iarchas, “Apollonius, you consider the behaviour of a just man? “Why yes,” said Apollonius, “and of a humane one too! For I consider it was a rare combination of virtues for one who was a mere sailor to refuse to sacrifice men’s lives, or to betray the interests of merchants, so rising superior to all bribes of money.”

Philostratus, *Life of Apollonius* 3.2

Sources and Further Reading:

[6] Image source and original inscription from: <http://laststatues.classics.ox.ac.uk/database/detail-base.php?record=LSA-2454>

1. Jason was a mythical Greek hero and sailor. He is best known for marrying and deserting Medea. ↩
2. Roman governors in the Republic tended to treat their provinces as places that would fund their lives once they returned to Rome. ↩
3. The Romans fought three wars with King Mithradates of Pontus in the first century BCE, winning them all, but at quite great cost. ↩
4. Mithras was an Eastern God who became very popular in the Roman army. ↩
5. The sea close to Lebanon and Judea. ↩

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10.2: Bandits

BANDITS IN THE ROMAN WORLD

Bandits were everywhere in the Roman world; to travel anywhere – even a short distance from a major city, including Rome – was dangerous and involved serious risk of encountering bandits and other less organized groups or individuals keen on taking your money and possibly your life. There was basically no police force in the Roman Empire beyond the army, although there were local organizations dedicated (to varying degrees) to keeping the peace. Hence people tended to travel in groups because of the risk:

This is the way also with the more cautious among travellers. A man has heard that the road which he is taking is infested with bandits; he does not venture to set forth alone, but he waits for a company, either that of an ambassador, or of a quaestor, or of a proconsul, and when he has attached himself to them he travels along the road in safety.

Epictetus, *Discourses* 4.1.91, c. 100 CE

Bandits could attack anywhere and anyone, even within 70 km of Rome, as here. In the following letter from the first century CE Pliny the Younger speaks of an equestrian who had vanished along the road, despite presumably having good security and travelling with a group:

To Hispanus.

You say that Robustus, a Roman equestrian of distinction, travelled as far as Ocrinum^[1] in the company of my friend Atilius Scaurus, and from that point nothing has been heard of him, and you ask for Scaurus to come, and, if possible, put us on the track of the missing man and help in the search. He certainly shall, but I am afraid that he will do little good, for I suspect that Robustus has met something like the same fate which befell Metilius Crispus, a fellow-townsmen of mine several years ago. I had obtained a military position for him, and on his departure had presented him with 40,000 sesterces towards the purchase of his arms and gear, but I never afterwards heard from him, nor did I ever get news of his death. Whether he was waylaid by his slaves, or whether they died with him, no one knows, for certainly neither he nor any of his slaves have ever been seen since. I pray to the gods that we may not find that Robustus has met a similar fate ! However, let us hasten Scaurus's arrival. That is the least I can do in answer to your entreaties, and the very proper entreaties of the excellent young man who is showing such remarkable filial love and wisdom in trying to find his father. I hope he may be as successful in finding him as he was in discovering in whose company he was travelling. Farewell.

Pliny the Younger, *Letters* 6.25

In periods and places of unrest bandits sprang up to take advantage of the situation, as during the collapse of the Republic in the first century BCE:

32 1 This seemed to be the end of the civil wars. Octavian [Augustus] was now twenty-eight. Cities joined in placing him among their protecting gods.^[2] At this time Italy and Rome itself were openly infested with bands of bandits, whose doings were more like open plunder than secret theft. Sabinus was chosen by Octavian to correct this disorder. He executed many of the captured bandits, and within one year brought about a condition of absolute security. At that time, they say, originated the custom and system of cohorts of night watchmen still in force. Octavian excited astonishment by putting an end to this evil with such unexampled rapidity.

Appian, *Civil War* 5.132

ATTEMPTS TO CONTROL BANDITS

The Digest of Roman Law dedicates considerable space to bandits, even defining them as a type of enemy of the state, in a sign of how seriously the Romans took this:

Enemies (*hostes*) are those who have declared war on us or on whom we have declared war; all the rest are bandits (*latrones*) or plunderers (*praedones*).

Digest 50.16.11, *De verborum significatione/on the meaning of [legal] terms*

It also lists the responsibilities of the governor in dealing with them:

It is proper for every good and worthy Governor to take care that the province over which he presides is peaceable and quiet. This he will accomplish without difficulty if he exerts himself to expel bad men, and diligently seek for them, as he must apprehend all sacrilegious persons, robbers, kidnappers, and thieves, and punish each one in proportion to his crime; he should also restrain those who harbour them, as without their assistance a robber cannot long remain hidden.

Ulpian, *On the Office of Proconsul*, Book VII.

The Digest shows that bandits were tried *extra ordinem* by governors:

Moreover, it is provided by the imperial mandates relating to sacrilege that the Governors of provinces shall search for all sacrilegious persons, robbers, and kidnappers, and punish them according to the gravity of their offences; and it is provided by the Imperial Constitutions that sacrilege shall be punished arbitrarily, by a penalty proportioned to the crime.

Digest 48.13.4.2

When he moved against bandits, Augustus moved against other groups that might form power challenges to his authority:

32 1 Many evil practices that caused public insecurity had survived as a result of the lawless habits of the civil wars, or had even arisen in time of peace. Gangs of bandits openly went about with swords by their sides, ostensibly to protect themselves, and travellers in the country, freemen and slaves alike, were seized and kept in confinement in the slave prisons of the land owners; numerous organizations, too, were formed for the commission of crimes of every kind, assuming the title of some new guild. Therefore to put a stop to banditry, he stationed guards of soldiers wherever it seemed advisable, inspected the slave prisons, and disbanded all guilds, except such as were of long standing and formed for legitimate purposes.

Suetonius, *Augustus* 32

Some rebels might be classified as bandits so as to be more easily dismissed. Tacfarinas was a deserter from the Roman auxiliaries, who belonged to a nomadic Berber tribe from what is now modern Algeria. This tribe had rebelled in 5/6 CE, and then rebelled a second time in 17 CE under Tacfarinas, who managed to almost wipe out part of a Roman legion in 18 CE.

52 In the course of the same year, war broke out in Africa, where the enemy was commanded by Tacfarinas. By nationality a Numidian, who had served as an auxiliary in the Roman camp and then deserted, he began by recruiting gangs of vagrants, accustomed to robbery, for the purposes of plunder and of theft: then he organized them into a body in the military style by companies and troops; finally, he was recognized as the head, not of a chaotic horde, but of the Musulamian tribe...

73 1 For Tacfarinas, in spite of many defeats, having first recruited his forces in the heart of Africa, had become so insolent he sent an embassy to [the Emperor] Tiberius, demanding nothing less than a territorial settlement for himself and his army, and threatening in the alternative a war from which there was no extrication. By all accounts, no insult to himself and the nation ever stung the emperor more than this spectacle of a deserter and bandit aping the procedure of an unfriendly power. "Even Spartacus, after the annihilation of so many consular armies, when his fires were blazing through an Italy unavenged while the state reeled in the gigantic conflicts with Sertorius and Mithridates, — even Spartacus was not allowed to surrender upon terms. And now, at the glorious zenith of the Roman nation, was this bandit Tacfarinas to be bought off by a peace and a gift of lands?" He handed over the affair to Blaesus; who, while inducing the other rebels to believe they might sheathe the sword with impunity, was to capture the leader by any means whatsoever. Large numbers came in under the amnesty. Then, the arts of Tacfarinas were met by a mode of warfare akin to his own.

Tacitus, *Annals* Book 3.73

LOOT

Bandits were often hated because they were violent and preyed on settled communities and rural dwellers, both those who had considerable wealth and those had basically nothing:

Another time we saw the skeleton of a bandit lying on rising ground by the roadside who had been killed by some traveller who fought off his attack. None of the locals would bury him, but in their hatred of him were glad enough to see his body consumed by the birds which, in a couple of days, ate his flesh, leaving the skeleton as if for medical demonstration.

Galen, *On Anatomical Procedures* 1.2

However bandits also could rely on the support of locals, from whom they might be recruited. They ensured this support by means of gifts of part of their proceeds. In this extract from a novel, the hero Lucius, who has been turned into a donkey and also captured by bandits while in donkey form is being used to carry bandit loot, sees just how that works:

Around midday, under a scorching sun, we stopped in a village at a house owned by some elderly friends and acquaintances of the robbers. Even a donkey could realize they were friends as soon as they greeted each other, talked and embraced. They took some of the things from my back as presents for the old men, and in hushed whispers seemed to be telling them they were proceeds of robbery. Then they took off the rest of the baggage, and left us to graze and wander freely in a field beside the house.

Apuleius, *The Golden Ass* 4.1

Because bandits usually needed some local support to operate the state was keen on also going after those who supported and helped them:

1. Marcianus, *Public Prosecutions*, Book II.

The harbourers of criminals constitute one of the worst classes of offenders, for without them no criminal could long remain concealed. The law directs that they shall be punished as robbers. They should be placed in the same class, because when they can seize robbers they permit them to go, after having received money or a part of the stolen goods.

2. Paulus, *On the Punishment of Civilians*.

Persons by whom a thief, who is either their connection by affinity or their blood relative, is concealed, should neither be discharged, nor severely punished, for their crime is not as serious as that of those who conceal robbers who are in no way connected with them.

Digest 47.16.1

WHO WOULD BECOME A BANDIT?

Bandits came from many backgrounds, but many were runaway slaves, who had little alternative but to join or form new communities with other marginalized individuals, or end up being dragged back to slavery individually.

And so the Romans noticing that the country was deserted, occupied the mountains and most of the plains and then gave them over to horse herders, cowherds, and shepherds, and by these herdsmen Sicily was many times put in great danger, because, although at first they only turned to banditry in a sporadic way, later they both assembled in great numbers and plundered the settlements, as, for example, when Eunus and his men took possession of Enna. Recently, in my own time, a certain Selurus, called the “son of Aetna,” was sent up to Rome because he had put himself at the head of an army and for a long time had overrun the regions round about Aetna with frequent raids. I saw him torn to pieces by wild beasts at an appointed combat of gladiators in the Forum^[3]; for he was placed on a high scaffold, as though on Aetna, and the scaffold was made suddenly to break up and collapse, and he himself was carried down with it into cages of wild-beasts — fragile cages that had been prepared beneath the scaffold for that purpose.

Strabo, *Geography* 6.2.6

This is how Livy described how one person became a bandit in the 140s and 130s BCE:

In Hispania, Viriathus (who first changed from a shepherd into a hunter, then into a bandit, and soon into the leader of an army) occupied all of Lusitania^[4], routed the army of the praetor Marcus Vetilius and captured him, after which praetor Gaius Plautius fought without any luck. This enemy inspired so much fear that a consul and his army were needed.

Livy, *Periochae* 52

PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS OF BANDITS

In the following story (much of which seems very unlikely) set in 187 CE a bandit plots against the Emperor Commodus. It might be of dubious historical value, but it does reflect the belief that bandits could strike even at the heart of the Roman state if they only became well-organized enough:

1 But before long another plot was organized against Commodus. It involved a former soldier named Maternus, who had committed many terrible crimes. He deserted from the army, persuading others to flee with him, and soon collected a huge mob of desperadoes. At first they attacked and plundered villages and farms, but when Maternus had amassed a sizable sum of money, he

gathered an even larger band of cutthroats by offering the prospect of generous booty and a fair share of the loot. As a result, his men no longer appeared to be bandits but rather enemy troops.

2 They now attacked the largest cities and released all the prisoners, no matter what the reasons for their imprisonment. By promising these men their freedom, he persuaded them to join his band in gratitude for favours received. The bandits roamed over all Gaul and Spain, attacking the largest cities; a few of these they burned, but the rest they abandoned after sacking them. 3 When he was informed of these developments, Commodus, in a towering rage, sent threatening letters to the governors of the provinces involved, charging them with negligence and ordering them to raise an army to oppose the bandits. When the brigands learned that an army was being raised against them, they left the regions which they had been ravaging and slipped unnoticed, a few at a time, into Italy, by a quick but difficult route. And now Maternus was plotting for the empire, for larger stakes indeed. Since everything he had attempted had succeeded beyond his fondest hopes, he concluded that if he were to undertake something really important it was bound to succeed; having committed himself to a hazard from which it was impossible to withdraw, he would, at least, not die obscure and unknown.

4 But when he reflected that he did not have an army sufficiently powerful to resist Commodus on equal terms and in open opposition (for it was thought that the majority of the Roman people were still well disposed toward Commodus, and he also had the support of the Praetorian Guard), Maternus hoped to balance this inequality of forces by guile and cunning. This is the way he undertook to accomplish it. 5 Every year, on a set day at the beginning of spring, the Romans celebrate a festival in honor of the *Magna Mater* [Cybele]. All the valuable trappings of each deity, the imperial treasures, and marvellous objects of all kinds, both natural and man-made, are carried in procession before this goddess. Free license for every kind of revelry is granted, and each man puts on whatever disguise he wishes. No office is so important or so untouchable that anyone is refused permission to put on its distinctive uniform, and concealing his true identity join in the fun; consequently, it is not easy to distinguish the true from the false.

6 This seemed to Maternus an ideal time to launch his plot undetected. By putting on the uniform of a praetorian soldier and dressing his allies in the same way, he hoped to mingle with the true praetorians and, after watching part of the parade, to attack Commodus and kill him while no one was on guard. 7 But the plan was betrayed when some of those who had accompanied him into the city revealed the plot, as they were pushed by jealousy to disclose it, since they preferred to be ruled by the emperor rather than by a bandit chief. Before he arrived at the scene of the festivities, Maternus was seized and beheaded, and his companions suffered the punishment they deserved. After sacrificing to the goddess and making thank offerings, Commodus completed the festivities and did honour to the goddess, rejoicing at his escape. The people continued to celebrate their emperor's safety after the festival came to an end.

Herodian, *History of the Empire* 1.10.1-7

There were many stories that told of bandit's daring deeds in a way that suggests the widespread appeal of their lives and freedom, even if most people were afraid of them. One Claudius gave Septimius Severus some issues, even after he had declared himself an enemy to bandits and worked hard to be seen as putting them down.

4 While Severus was priding himself on this achievement, as if he surpassed all mankind in both understanding and bravery, a most incredible thing happened. A certain robber named Claudius, who was overrunning Judaea and Syria and was being very vigorously pursued in consequence, came to him one day with some horsemen, like some military tribune, and saluted and kissed him; and he was neither discovered at the time nor caught later.

Cassius Dio, *Epitome of Roman History* 75.2.4

It wasn't just Claudius that Septimius Severus had issues with, though. Bulla, another even more famous bandit leader, also gave him considerable trouble:

At this period one Bulla, an Italian, got together a bandit force of about six hundred men, and for two years continued to plunder Italy under the very noses of the emperors and of a multitude of soldiers. 2 For though he was pursued by many men, and though Severus eagerly followed his trail, he was never really seen when seen, never found when found, never caught when caught, thanks to his great bribes and cleverness. For he learned of everybody that was setting out from Rome and everybody that was putting into port at Brundisium, and knew both who and how many there were, and what and how much they had with them. 3 In the case of most persons he would take a part of what they had and let them go at once, but he detained artisans for a time and made use of

their skill, then dismissed them with a present. Once, when two of his men had been captured and were about to be given to wild beasts, he paid a visit to the keeper of the prison, pretending that he was the governor of his native district and needed some men of such and such a description, and in this way he secured and saved the men. 4 And he approached the centurion who was trying to exterminate the band and accused himself, pretending to be someone else, and promised, if the centurion would accompany him, to deliver the robber to him. So on the pretext that he was leading him to Felix (this was another name by which he was called), he led him into a deep valley dense with thickets, and easily seized him. 5 Later, he assumed the dress of a magistrate, ascended the tribunal, and having summoned the centurion, caused part of his head to be shaved, and then said: "Carry this message to your masters: 'Feed your slaves, so that they may not turn to robbery.' Bulla had with him, in fact, a very large number of imperial freedmen, some of whom had been poorly paid, while others had received absolutely no pay at all. 6 Severus, informed of these various occurrences, was angry at the thought that though he was winning the wars in Britain through others, yet he himself had proved no match for a robber in Italy; and finally he sent a tribune from his body-guard with many horsemen, after threatening him with terrible punishment if he should fail to bring back the robber alive. So this tribune, having learned that the brigand was intimate with another man's wife, persuaded her through her husband to assist them on promise of immunity. 7 As a result, the bandit was arrested while asleep in a cave. Papinian, the prefect, asked him, "Why did you become a robber?" And he replied: "Why are you a prefect?" Later, after due proclamation, he was given to wild beasts, and his band was broken up — to such an extent did the strength of the whole six hundred lie in him.

Cassius Dio, *Epitome of Roman History* 57.10

This passage is about two bandits that, according to the Gospels, crucified alongside Jesus, just a way to show how common they are in the background of much ancient literature:

And one of the bandits that were hanging cursed him, saying, "Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us. But the other answered, and rebuking him said, "'Do you not even fear God, seeing you also were condemned to this? And we indeed deserved it, for we receive the due reward of our actions: but this man has done nothing wrong.'" And he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." And Jesus said unto him, "Truly I say unto you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

Gospel of Luke 29.33-44

Here is a likely untrue excerpt about the origins of the Emperor Maximinus Thrax, who was supposedly a bandit. The story is meant to disparage him as a bandit and but also praise him for his sense of justice:

In his early youth he was a shepherd, a young man with an impressive and noble appearance; later he went on raids with bandits and protected locals from attacks. He then entered the Roman army and served his *stipendia* in the cavalry. He was conspicuous for his large body size, outshone all other soldiers in bravery, was handsome in his manliness, wild in manners, harsh, arrogant, contemptuous, but nevertheless a man of justice.

Scriptores Historia Augusta, Life of Maximinus 2.1

Sources and Further Reading:

Shaw, Brent D. "Bandits in the Roman Empire." *Past & Present*, no. 105 (1984): 3-52.

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1. A town 70 km north of Rome. ↩
 2. Cities had protecting gods and goddesses who were called upon in times of need; many after Augustus' victory at Actium added him to that number in what was probably a wise decision. ↩
 3. Although we associate gladiatorial games and executions with the Colosseum, before that was built these events were held in a variety of locations, including the Forum. ↩
 4. A Roman province, roughly covering modern Portugal. ↩
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10.3: The Gangs of Rome

GANGS IN ROME

Rome should have, theoretically, been safer than it was given that weapons were prohibited within the *pomerium*. In reality it had all the problems of any major city and more, as it lacked both a police force and any form of public lighting. It was dangerous to go through the streets at night and many only went out in groups or with protection. The late 60s and 50s BCE were particularly violent in the city, resulting in a number of deaths, riots, postponed elections, and various fire related disasters, such as when the *Curia* was set on fire by mourners at the funeral of Clodius, a politician and a wielder of urban gangs. For those who want to read more this [blog](#) post by Dr. Linda Ellis gives a great sense of urban violence in Rome; what follows here are sources from the 60s and 50s BCE about the situation in Rome.

62 BCE

27 1 When the people were about to vote on the law^[1] in favour of Metellus^[2] there were armed strangers and gladiators and slaves drawn up in the forum, and that part of the people which longed for Pompey in their hope of a change was present in large numbers, and there was strong support also from Caesar, who was at that time praetor. 2 In the case of Cato [the Younger], however, the foremost citizens shared in his displeasure and sense of wrong more than they did in his struggle to resist, and great dejection and fear reigned in his household, so that some of his friends took no food and watched all night with one another in futile discussions on his behalf, while his wife and sisters wailed and wept. 3 He himself, however, talked without fear and with confidence with all and comforted them, and after taking supper as usual and passing the night, was roused from a deep sleep by one of his fellow tribunes, Minucius Thermus; and they went down into the forum, with only a few people accompanying them, but many meeting them and exhorting them to be on their guard. 4 Accordingly, when Cato paused in the forum and saw the temple of Castor and Pollux surrounded by armed men and its steps guarded by gladiators, and Metellus himself sitting at the top with Caesar, he turned to his friends and said: "What a bold man, and what a coward, to levy such an army against a single unarmed and defenceless person!" At the same time he walked straight on with Thermus. 5 Those who were occupying the steps made way for them, but would allow no one else to pass, but Cato with difficulty drew Munatius along by the hand and brought him up; and walking straight onwards he threw himself just as he was into a seat between Metellus and Caesar, thus cutting off their communication. 6 Caesar and Metellus were disconcerted, but the better citizens, seeing and admiring the countenance, lofty bearing, and courage of Cato, came nearer, and with shouts urged one another to stay and band themselves together and not betray their liberty and the man who was striving to defend it.

28 1 And now the clerk produced the law, but Cato would not allow him to read it; and when Metellus took it and began to read it, Cato snatched the document away from him. Then Metellus, who knew the law by heart, began to recite it, but Thermus clapped a hand upon his mouth and shut off his speech. 2 At last, seeing that the men were making a struggle which he could not resist, and that the people were giving way and turning towards the better course, Metellus ordered men-at-arms, who were standing at a distance, to come running up with terrifying shouts. This was done, and all the people dispersed, leaving Cato standing his ground alone and pelted with sticks and stones from above. Here Murena,^[3] who he had denounced and prosecuted, came to his relief, 3 and holding his toga before him, crying to those who were pelting him to stop, and finally persuading Cato himself and folding him in his arms, he led him away into the temple of Castor and Pollux.

When, however, Metellus saw the space about the tribunal empty and his opponents in flight through the forum, being completely persuaded that he had won the day, he ordered his armed men to go away again, and coming forward himself in orderly fashion attempted to have the law enacted. 4 But his opponents, quickly recovering from their rout, advanced again upon him with loud and confident shouts, so that his partisans were overwhelmed with confusion and terror. They supposed that their enemies had provided themselves with arms from some place or other in order to assail them, and not a man stood his ground, but all fled away from the tribunal. 5 So, then, when these had dispersed, and when Cato had come forward with commendation and encouragement for the people, the majority of them stood prepared to put down Metellus by any and every means, and the senate in full session announced anew that it would assist Cato and fight to the end against the law, convinced that it would introduce sedition and civil war into Rome.

29 1 Metellus himself was still unyielding and bold, but since he saw that his followers were completely terrified before Cato and thought him utterly invincible, he suddenly rushed off into the forum, assembled the people, and made a long and invidious speech

against Cato; then, crying out that he was fleeing from Cato's tyranny and the conspiracy against Pompey, for which the city would speedily repent in that it was dishonouring so great a man, he set out at once for Asia, intending to lay these accusations before Pompey. 2 Accordingly, Cato was in high repute for having relieved the tribunate of a great burden, and for having in a manner overthrown the power of Pompey in the person of Metellus. But he won still more esteem by not allowing the senate to carry out its purpose of degrading Metellus and deposing him from his office, which course Cato opposed, and brought the senate over to his views. For the multitude considered it a token of humanity and moderation not to trample on his enemy or insult him after prevailing completely over him, and prudent men thought it right and advantageous not to irritate Pompey.

Plutarch, *Life of Cato*

59 BCE

I have received several letters from you, which showed me with what eagerness and anxiety you desired to know the news. We are bound hard and fast on every side, and are no longer making any difficulty as to being slaves, but fearing death and exile as though greater evils, though they are in fact much smaller ones. Well, this is the position-one unanimously groaned over, but not relieved by a word from anyone. The object, I surmise, of the men in power is to leave nothing for anyone to lavish. The only man who opens his mouth and openly disapproves is the young Curio. He is loudly cheered, and greeted in the forum in the most complimentary manner, and many other tokens of goodwill are bestowed on him by the loyalists; while Fufius is pursued with shouts, jeers, and hisses. From such circumstances it is not hope but indignation that is increased, for you see the citizens allowed to express their sentiments, but debarred from carrying them out with any vigour. And to omit details, the upshot is that there is now no hope, I don't say of private persons, but even of the magistrates being ever free again. Nevertheless, in spite of this policy of repression, conversation, at least in society and at dinner tables, is freer than it was. Indignation is beginning to get the better of fear, though that does not prevent a universal feeling of despair. For this Campanian law^[4] contains a clause imposing an oath to be taken by candidates in public meeting that they will not suggest any tenure of public land other than that provided in the Julian laws. All the others take the oath without hesitation: Laterensis is considered to have shown extraordinary virtue in retiring from his canvass for the tribuneship to avoid the oath. But I don't care to write any more about politics. I am dissatisfied with myself, and cannot write without the greatest pain. I hold my own position with some dignity, considering the general repression, but considering my achievements in the past, with less courage than I should like. I am invited by Caesar in a very gentlemanly manner to accept a legation, to act as his *legatus*, and even an "open votive legation" is offered me. But the latter does not give sufficient security, since it depends too much on the scrupulousness of Pulchellus^[5] and removes me just when my brother is returning; the former offers better security and does not prevent my returning when I please. I am retaining the latter, but do not think I shall use it. However, nobody knows about it. I don't like running away; I am itching to fight. There is great warmth of feeling for me. But I don't say anything positive: you will please not to mention it. I am, in fact, very anxious about the manumission of Statius and some other things, but I have become hardened by this time. I could wish, or rather ardently desire, that you were here: then I should not want advice or consolation. But anyhow, be ready to fly here as soon as I call for you.

Cicero, *Letters to Atticus* 2.18

6 Bibulus,^[6] however, would not yield, but having gained the support of three tribunes, hindered the enactment of the law.^[7] Finally, when he had no other excuse for delay left, he proclaimed a sacred period for all the remaining days of the year alike, during which the people could not legally even meet in their assembly. 2 Caesar paid but slight attention to him and appointed a fixed day for the passage of the law. And when the populace had already occupied the Forum by night, Bibulus came up with the following he had got together and succeeded in forcing his way through to the temple of Castor, from which Caesar was delivering his speech. The men fell back before him, partly out of respect 3 and partly because they thought he would not actually oppose them. But when he appeared above and attempted to speak in opposition to Caesar he was thrust down the steps, his fasces were broken to pieces, and the tribunes as well as others received blows and wounds.

4 Thus the law was passed. Bibulus was for the moment satisfied to escape with his life, but on the next day tried in the senate to annul the act; nevertheless, he accomplished nothing, since all were under the spell of the multitude's enthusiasm and would do nothing. 5 Accordingly he retired to his home and did not appear in public again at all up to the last day of the year. Instead, he remained in his house, and whenever Caesar proposed any innovation, he sent formal notice to him through his attendants that it was a sacred period and that by the laws he could rightfully take no action during it. 6 Publius Vatinius, a tribune, undertook to place Bibulus in prison for this, but was prevented from doing so by the opposition of his colleagues. Bibulus, however, held aloof

from all business of state in the manner related, and the tribunes belonging to his party likewise no longer performed any public duty. 7 Now Metellus Celer and Cato, and through him one Marcus Favonius, who imitated him in everything, for a time did not take the oath of obedience to the law (a custom which began, as I have stated, on an earlier occasion, and was then continued in the case of other preposterous measures) and stoutly refused to approve it, Metellus, for instance, referring to Numidicus as an example. 2 When, however, the day came on which they were to incur the established penalties, they took the oath, perhaps because it is but human nature for many persons to utter promises and threats more easily than they actually carry them out, or else because they were going to be punished to no purpose, without helping the state at all by their obstinacy.

Cassius Dio, 38.6-7

58 BCE

When in the Aurelian tribunal you^[8] were openly enrolling not only freemen but slaves also, got together out of all the streets in the city, were you not at that time preparing for violence? When by your edicts, you ordered all the shops to be shut, were you aiming not at the violence of the mob, but at a modest and prudent gathering of honourable men? When you were having arms collected and carried to the temple of Castor, had you no other object beyond using violence to prevent others from being able to achieve anything? But when you tore up and removed the steps of the temple of Castor, did you then, in order to be able to act in a moderate manner, repel audacious men from the approaches and ascents leading to the temple? When you ordered those persons who, in an assembly of virtuous men, had spoken in defence of, my safety, to come forward, and had driven away their companions and seconders by blows and arms and stones; then, no doubt, you showed that violence was excessively disagreeable to you.

[55] Oh, but this frantic violence of a demented tribune of the people could easily be crushed and put down by the virtue and superior numbers of the good citizens. What? When Syria was given to Gabinius, Macedonia to Piso,^[9] boundless authority and vast sums of money to both of them, to induce them to place everything in your power, to assist you, to supply you with followers, and troops, and their own prepared centurions, and money, and bands of slaves; to all you with their infamous assemblies, to deride the authority of the senate, to threaten the Roman knights with death and proscription, to terrify me with threats, to threaten me with contests and murder, to fill my house with their friends, which had heretofore been full of virtuous men; through fear of proscription; to deprive me of the crowds of good men who used to associate with me, to strip me of their protection; to forbid the senate, that most illustrious body, not only to fight for me, but even to implore men, and to entreat them in my behalf, and, changing their garments, to lament my danger,—was not even this violence?

Cicero, *On his House* 54-55

34 In the presence and sight of these same consuls,^[10] a levy of slaves was held before the tribunal of Aurelian, under pretence of filling up the *collegia*, when men were enrolled according to their streets, divided into groups of ten, and stirred up to violence, battle, slaughter, and plunder. It was while these same men were consuls, that arms were openly carried into the temple of Castor, and the steps of the temple were pulled up; armed men occupied the forum and the assemblies of the people; slaughters and stonings of people took place; there was no senate, no magistrates were left; one man using arms and piratical violence seized on all the power of all the magistrates not by any power of his own, but having bribed the two consuls to desert the republic by the treaty respecting the provinces, he insulted every one, domineered over every one, made promises to some held down many by terror and fear and gained over more by hope and promises.

Cicero, *In Defence of Sestius* 34

18 It was not yet openly known that the republic had fallen, when you thought fit to arrange its interment. At one and the same moment my house was plundered and set on fire, my property from my house on the Palatine Hill was taken to the house of the consul who was my neighbour, the goods from my Tusculan villa were also taken to the house of my neighbour there, the other consul; when, while the same mob of workers were voting, the same gladiator proposing and passing laws, the forum unoccupied, not only by virtuous men but even by free citizens, and entirely empty, the Roman people utterly ignorant of what was going on, the senate beaten down and crushed, there being two wicked and impious consuls, the treasury, the prisoners, the legions, allies and military commands, were given away as they pleased.

Cicero, *To the Senate On his Return*

57 BCE

I am very well aware that you long to know what is going on here, and also to know it from me, not because things done before the eyes of the whole world are better realized when narrated by my band than when reported to you by the pens or lips of others, but because it is from my letters that you get what you want—a knowledge of my feelings in regard to the occurrences, and what at such a juncture is the state of my mind, or, in a word, the conditions in which I am living. On the 3rd of November the workmen were driven from the site of my house by armed ruffians: the porticus Catuli, which was being rebuilt on a contract given out by the consuls, in accordance with a decree of the senate, and had nearly reached the roof, was battered down: the house of my brother Quintus was first smashed with volleys of stones thrown from my site, and then set on fire by order of Clodius, firebrands having been thrown into it in the sight of the whole town, amidst loud exclamations of indignation and sorrow, I will not say of the loyalists—for I rather think there are none—but of simply every human being. That madman runs riot: thinks after this mad prank of nothing short of murdering his opponents: canvasses the city street by street: makes open offers of freedom to slaves. For the fact is that up to this time, while trying to avoid prosecution, he had a case, difficult indeed to support, and obviously bad, but still a case: he might have denied the facts, he might have shifted the blame on others, he might even have pleaded that some part of his proceedings had been legal. But after such wrecking of buildings, incendiaries, and wholesale robberies as these, being abandoned by his supporters, he hardly retains on his side Decimus the marshal, or Gellius; takes slaves into his confidence; sees that, even if he openly assassinates everyone he wishes to, he will not have a worse case before a court of law than he has at present. Accordingly, on the eleventh of November, as I was going down the Sacred Way, he followed me with his gang. There were shouts, stone-throwing, brandishing of clubs and swords, and all this without a moment's warning. I and my party stepped aside into Tettius Damio's vestibule: those accompanying me easily prevented his roughs from getting in. He might have been killed himself. But I am now on a system of cure by regimen: I am tired of surgery. The fellow, seeing that what everybody called for was not his prosecution but his instant execution, has since made all your Catilines seem models of respectability. For on the 12th of November he tried to storm and set fire to Milo's house, I mean the one on Germalus: and so openly was this done, that at eleven o'clock in the morning he brought men there armed with shields and with their swords drawn, and others with lighted torches. He had himself occupied the house of P. Sulla as his headquarters from which to Conduct the assault upon Milo's. Thereupon Q. Flaccus led out some gallant fellows from Milo's other house (the Anniana) : killed the most notorious bravoes of all Clodius's gang: wanted to kill Clodius himself; but my gentleman took refuge in the inner part of Sulla's house. The next thing was a meeting of the senate on the 14th. Clodius stayed at home: Marcellinus was splendid : all were keen. Metellus talked the business out by an obstructive speech, aided by Appius, and also, by Hercules! by your friend on whose firmness you wrote me such a wonderfully true letter! Sestius was fuming. Afterwards the fellow vows vengeance on the city if his election is stopped. Marcellinus's resolution having been exposed for public perusal (he had read it from a written copy, and it embraced our entire case—the prosecution was to include his violent proceedings on the site of my house, his arson, his assault on me personally, and was to take place before the elections), he put up a notice that he intended to watch the sky during all comitial days. Public speeches of Metellus disorderly, of Appius hot-headed, of Publius stark mad. The upshot, however, was that, had not Milo served his notice of bad omens in the campus, the elections would have been held. On the 19th of November Milo arrived on the campus before midnight with a large company. Clodius, though he had picked gangs of runaway slaves, did not venture into the campus. Milo stopped there till midday, to everybody's great delight and his own infinite credit: the movement of the three brethren ended in their own disgrace; their violence was crushed, their madness made ridiculous. However, Metellus demands that the obstructive notice should be served on him next day in the forum: "there was no need to come to the campus before daybreak: he would be in the Comitium at the first hour of the day." Accordingly, on the 20th Milo came to the forum before sunrise. Metellus at the first sign of dawn was stealthily hurrying to the campus, I had almost said by by-lanes: Milo catches our friend up "between the groves"^[11] and serves his notice. The latter returned greeted with loud and insulting remarks by Q. Flaccus. The 21st was a market day. For two days no public meeting. I am writing this letter on the 23rd at three o'clock in the morning. Milo is already in possession of the campus. The candidate Marcellus is snoring so loud that I can hear him next door. I am told that Clodius' vestibule is completely deserted: there are a few ragged fellows there and a canvas lantern. His party complains that I am the adviser of the whole business: they little know the Courage and wisdom of that hero! His gallantry is astonishing. Some recent instances of his superhuman excellence I pass over; but the upshot is this: I don't think the election will take place. I think Publius will be brought to trial by Milo—unless he is killed first. If he once puts himself in his way in a riot, I can see that he will be killed by Milo himself. The latter has no scruple about doing it; he avows his intention; he isn't at all afraid of what happened to me, for he will never listen to the advice of a jealous and faithless friend, nor trust a feeble aristocrat. In spirit, at any rate, I am as vigorous as in my zenith, or even more so; in regard to money I am crippled. However, the

liberality of my brother I have, in spite of his protests, repaid (as the state of my finances compelled) by the aid of my friends, that I might not be drained quite dry myself. What line of policy to adopt in regard to my position as a whole, I cannot decide in your absence: wherefore make haste to town.

Cicero, *Letters to Atticus* 4.3

56 BCE

24 And if we wish to recollect those things which have been handed down to us traditionally about each of the gods, we have heard that the Magna Mater^[12] whose games were thus violated and polluted, and turned almost to a massacre to the destruction of the city, does roam over the fields and through the groves with a certain degree of noise and roaring. 25 Oh immortal gods! How could you speak more plainly to us if you were living among and associating with us? You show us and plainly tell us that those games were profaned. What can be mentioned more deformed, polluted, altered and perverted, than for the whole body of slaves, as if they had been liberated by the permission of the magistrates, to be turned loose into one theatre, and set as guards over another, so that one body of spectators might be exposed to the power of slaves, and that the other might consist entirely of slaves? If during the games a swarm of bees had come on the stage, we should think it necessary to send for the soothsayers out of Etruria; and shall we all see on a sudden such vast swarms of slaves let loose upon the Roman people, blocked up and shut in, and not be moved by that? And perhaps, in the case of a swarm of bees, the soothsayers would warn us from the written books of the Etruscans to guard against the slaves.

[26] That then which we should guard against, if indicated by some disjointed prodigy admitting of different interpretations, shall we not be afraid of when it is its own prodigy, and when the danger is in that very thing from which danger is dreaded? Is this how your father celebrated the Megalesia? Did your uncle celebrate them in such a manner as this? And then he mentions his family, when he would rather celebrate the games after the fashion of Athenio or Spartacus, than like Gaius or Appius Claudius. When these great men were celebrating games, they ordered all the slaves to depart from the theatre. But you turned slaves into one, and turned free men out of the other. Therefore they, who formerly used to be separated from free men by the voice of the herald, now, at your games, separated free men from themselves not by their voice, but by force.

Cicero, *On the Responses of the Haruspices*

53-52 BCE

The following is from an ancient commentary (1st century CE) on Cicero's *In Defence of Milo*:

Titus Annius Milo [Papianus], Publius Plautius Hypsaesus, and Quintus Metellus Scipio sought the consulship [in 53, for 52] not only by bribing openly but using gangs of armed men. There was the greatest possible personal hostility between Milo and Clodius, both because Milo was very close to Cicero and he had used his weight as tribune of the plebs in bringing Cicero back from exile; and because Publius Clodius was exceedingly hostile to Cicero once he had been brought back and was on that account very zealously supporting the candidacies of Hypsaesus and Scipio. Milo and Clodius also often engaged in violence with each other with their gangs in Rome. The chutzpah was equally outrageous on both sides, but Milo generally took the side of the *optimates*. Besides that, in the same year Milo decided to stand for the consulship, and Clodius for the Praetorship (which he knew perfectly well would be less influential, if Milo were consul).^[13] In addition, when the electoral assemblies for consul went on for a long time, and were not able to produce a winner due to the very same riotous activities of the candidates, and for that reason in the month of January there were no consuls and no praetors at all, while the assemblies were being dragged out just exactly as before—though Milo wanted the election to be completed as quickly as possible and was expecting that they would be thanks to the efforts of the aristocracy, because he was standing in the way of Clodius, and also in the way of the *populus*^[14] on account of the 'gifts' which had been showered on them and the staggeringly huge costs of the theatrical spectacles and gladiatorial fight (on which Cicero remarks he had poured out three inheritances).

Asconius, *On Cicero's Pro Milone*

Sources and Further Reading:

Plutarch, *Life of Pompey* 54; Cicero, *On his House* 110 (in *In Defence of the Republic*)

1. To recall Pompey to deal with Catiline. ↩

2. Metellus Nepos' sister, Mucia, was married to Pompey and was tribune for 62. Pompey divorced Mucia on his return from Asia. ↵
3. Murena had been defended by Cicero and acquitted. ↵
4. An agrarian law proposed by Caesar, dividing public land in Campania ↵
5. Clodius Pulcher. The diminutive form is not polite. ↵
6. Caesar's co-consul. ↵
7. Again, Caesar's agrarian law, distributing public land around Campania. ↵
8. The you is Clodius; the Aurelian tribunal was a structure in the Forum. ↵
9. The consuls of 58 BCE, who Clodius bribed by getting them the provinces they wanted even though they had already been allotted other provinces. ↵
10. Piso and Gabinius. ↵
11. The road down which led alongside the Temple of Capitoline Jupiter towards the Campus Martius. ↵
12. The Megalesia, which Clodius was overseeing as an aedile when he allowed all of these events to happen. ↵
13. This was Cicero's argument; whether it was true or not is hard to say, given how much power Clodius seems to have had even as a tribune. ↵
14. The people of Rome ↵

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

11: unRoman Families and Relationships

[11.1: Love and Affection](#)

[11.2: Case study: Fannia and "Good Roman Women"](#)

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11.1: Love and Affection

CONTENT WARNINGS

The topic of rape is brought up in the following discussion. Sadly, some formative Roman legends include acts of rape. It's hard to talk about their idea of love without including their perception of sexuality, and sadly their example of the ideal woman in regard to sexuality was a victim of rape

Learning Objectives

By learning about the Romans' perception of love and how to display affection, you will understand:

- How upper-class men and women were expected to act in regards to affection and love;
- The situations in which these expectations were not followed and whether or not people would be punished for that;
- The Roman notion of *Vir* and *Virtus* and their relevance in the way Roman men could express tenderness.

LOVE, AFFECTION, AND TENDERNESS IN ROMAN CULTURE

This section is focused on love, tenderness and affection in the Roman world. Here we define love and tenderness in Roman society as small acts of affection, kindness, flirtation, and 'sweetness,' such as bringing a gift to one's loved one, a description of what a good parent one was, embracing the one you love, writing a poem about how wonderful your partner is etc. Although there are many examples of moments such as these, it doesn't mean that the general Roman regard for such actions was positive. The overall conception of acts of affection was negative; for a man to display it was to demonstrate weakness and 'softness' and for a woman to display it was to be licentious (sadly slut-shaming has existed for millennia). Both women and men, but especially women, were supposed to uphold *pudicitia*, a complex virtue that can be translated basically to restraint or chastity. A woman with a high degree of *pudicitia* was called a *univira* or 'one-man woman.' An *univira* aimed to always appear modest and— this is very important— would limit her social interactions with men who were not her relatives. Livy (59 BCE-17 CE) presented the legendary figure of Lucretia as the epitome of *pudicitia*, a woman who committed suicide after her rape in order to preserve firstly her husband's dignity, and then hers. Men, on the other hand were measured by the quality of their *virtus*. It is an untranslatable word, but it includes the notions of courage, excellence as a soldier, qualities of 'hardness' (think Don Draper— super masculine, but not in-your-face masculine like they have to prove it to you) and sexual prowess. So on one hand the Romans were expected to display their chastity and fidelity—no sleeping around—but on the other, men were judged by their sexual prowess. One cannot talk about love without talking about marriage. For the man to spend too much time lounging about his house was to bring dishonour to himself. The woman would be looked down upon if she seemed to be the reason a man was not leaving his household. Essentially, to display affection and tenderness in any way was to defy almost all social convention.

The men on whom I will be focusing—Sulla, Pompey the Great and Catullus—do all of these things, and some people—although, almost all of our sources are from elite men— are frustrated by it. What we might find surprising in regards to Pompey and Sulla is that Romans found themselves at an impasse when judging the two military leaders because, as both were incredibly successful commanders, they were basically the biggest *vir*^[1] (men) in Rome, but by allowing themselves to be overcome by their affection, they were displaying 'soft' qualities—things that the Romans found deeply troubling in Roman men.

Despite people's derision for these actions however, they could not slander Pompey nor Sulla in relation to their military capability. The poet Catullus, on the other hand, was no politician nor military man. He wrote directly from his heart, showing us that the Romans felt emotion, love and heartbreak just as we do, even though they weren't supposed to express that. As Daisy Dunn explains, Rome's first lyric poet shocked many in his day as he continues to shock many today...

Catullus' poems seem so surprising and immediate. While some are learned and erudite, some are mischievous, goatish and direct...one of the reasons Catullus' poems are still so readable... is that they show that the people of this world were not always so very different from us.

Daisy Dunn, *Catullus' Bedspread, The life of Rome's Most Erotic Poet* (pg.4)

Catullus, Pompey, and Sulla were all similar in one way—They upset the expectations and the conservative sensibilities of the upper-class. They knew what they were doing and they did it anyway. They allowed themselves to directly access their own passion, and allowed it to affect their actions, despite the derision this earned them from members of the Roman upper class.

POMPEY



(106-48 BCE)

Pompey is a very interesting case in the topic of love and tenderness; he seems to have been quite an emotional man in general, and got married and divorced several times for political reasons. By Sulla's command, Pompey divorced his first wife in order to marry Sulla's daughter, Aemilia Scaura (100– 82 BCE). He was upset by the divorce, but as was the Roman convention for the upper-class, he solidified his alliance with Sulla through the marriage in the year 82 BCE. An exceptional case, however, is the marriage he had with Julius Caesar's daughter, Julia (76-54 BCE). Although this marriage was the typical, politically-inspired one—arranged to signify the bond between Julius and Pompey in the *Triumvirate*, the alliance made by Crassus, Pompey, and Julius Caesar in 60 BCE which lasted until 53 BCE— Pompey and Julia seemed to genuinely fall deeply in love with each other. Their marriage occurred in 59 BCE. Pompey even offered the man to whom Julia was currently betrothed, his own daughter in order to marry Julia himself.

However, by his subsequent acts he made it clear that he had now wholly given himself up to do Julius Caesar's bidding. For to everybody's surprise he married Julia, the daughter of Caesar, although she was betrothed to Caepio and was going to be married to him within a few days; and to appease the wrath of Caepio, Pompey promised him his own daughter in marriage, although she was already engaged to Faustus the son of [the Dictator] Sulla. Caesar himself married Calpurnia, the daughter of Piso^[2]

Plutarch, Life of Pompey 47:5-6

Quite soon, Pompey became incredibly taken with his wife.

However, Pompey himself also soon gave way weakly to his passion for his young wife, devoted himself for the most part to her, spent his time with her in villas and gardens, and neglected what was going on in the forum, so that even Clodius, who was then a tribune of the people, despised him and engaged in the most daring measures.

Plutarch, Life of Pompey: 48:5

As we can see from this source, the Roman regard for such affection is quite negative; men who display it are seen as 'soft' and weak.

Furthermore, the political marriage of Pompey and Julia observably becomes more than just 'political' as Pompey is speaking with his friends on how to quell some contention the senate held towards him.

To Culleo, however, who urged him to divorce Julia and exchange the friendship of Caesar for that of the senate, he would not listen, but he yielded to the arguments of those who thought he ought to bring Cicero back.

Plutarch, *Life of Pompey*: 49:3

The upper-class of Rome thinks Pompey is growing weak because he's spending too much time with his wife, touring around Italy and enjoying themselves. Plutarch is considering the reasons why this young woman was so in love with such an older man, and guesses that it was probably because Pompey was faithful to her and was quite a charming individual. He then records that, although the general public despised his alliance with Caesar, and Julia by extension, they eventually removed her from blame. The event that effectuated this realization was when there was a skirmish at an election one day, Pompey got (someone else's) blood on his toga. He changed clothes and had his servants bring his bloodied toga home. Julia was horrified when she saw this and fainted, thinking her husband had died. After this, people realized how deep the love that she and Pompey shared was, and they developed a significant respect for her (54 BCE).

All this won him admiration and affection; but on the other hand he incurred a corresponding displeasure, because he handed over his provinces and his armies to legates who were his friends, while he himself spent his time with his wife among the pleasure-places of Italy, going from one to another, either because he loved her, or because she loved him so that he could not bear to leave her; for this reason too is given. Indeed, the fondness of the young woman for her husband was notorious, although the mature age of Pompey did not invite such devotion. The reason for it, however, seems to have lain in the chaste restraint of her husband, who knew only his wedded wife, and in the dignity of his manners, which were not severe, but full of grace, and especially attractive to women, as even Flora the courtesan may be allowed to testify.

It once happened that at an election of aediles people came to blows, and many were killed in the vicinity of Pompey and he was covered with their blood, so that he changed his garments. His servants carried these garments to his house with much confusion and haste, and his young wife, who chanced to be with child, at sight of the blood-stained toga, fainted away and with difficulty regained her senses, and in consequence of the shock and her sufferings, miscarried. Thus it came to pass that even those who found most fault with Pompey's friendship for Caesar could not blame him for the love he bore his wife. However, she conceived again and gave birth to a female child, but died from the pains of travail, and the child survived her only a few days. Pompey made preparations to bury her body at his Alban villa, but the people took it by force and carried it down to the Campus Martius^[3] for burial, more out of pity for the young woman than as a favour to Pompey and Caesar.

Plutarch, *Life of Pompey*, 53:1-5

SULLA



(138-78 BCE)

Sulla was ambitious, always seeking to improve his lot in life, to achieve what he wanted to achieve with little to no regard for the traditional Roman hierarchical order. This was tolerated because he was seen as a significant *vir*. His flirtations with women (as we shall see later) and displaying affection publicly was within his character and likely occurred often because, as we see here, he was not a shy man. In Rome, wasting the money you inherited was looked down upon just as much as rising up in the system from nothing. The latter certainly was the case for Sulla, as a nobleman points out below.

When he was a youth, he lived in lodgings, at a low price, and this was afterwards thrust in his teeth when men thought him unduly prosperous. For instance, we are told that when he was putting on boastful airs after his campaign in Libya, a certain nobleman said to him: “How canst thou be an honest man, when thy father left thee nothing, and yet thou art so rich?”

Plutarch, *Life of Sulla*, 1:1-2

He’s so ambitious that he even named his own children “successful.”

He named the male child Faustus, and the female Fausta; for the Romans call what is auspicious and joyful, “faustum.”

Plutarch, *Life of Sulla*, 34:3

Sulla is able to get away with his ‘frivolities’ with women because he is a *vir*. Here Sulla enacts his Proscriptions (around 82 BCE): an act he made which would help him eliminate his political enemies without himself having to bear the culpability of murder. He essentially puts bounties on the heads of his enemies. Sulla is able to get away with the most horrendous of deeds, so one can imagine that he was able to get away with acts of affection, despite them being looked down upon by the upper class, without repercussion. Furthermore, his proscriptions essentially eliminated all of the powerful people who opposed him, and aligned the rest with him out of fear. This may also be why he felt no need to adhere to the traditional system.

Sulla at once proscribed eighty persons, without communicating with any magistrate; and in spite of the general indignation, after a single day’s interval, he proscribed two hundred and twenty others, and then on the third day, as many more. Referring to these measures in a public harangue, he said that he was proscribing as many as he could remember, and those who now escaped his memory, he would proscribe at a future time. He also proscribed anyone who harboured and saved a proscribed person, making death the punishment for such humanity, without exception of brother, son, or parents, but offering any one who slew a proscribed person two talents as a reward for this murderous deed, even though a slave should slay his master, or a son his father. And what

seemed the greatest injustice of all, he took away the civil rights from the sons and grandsons of those who had been proscribed, and confiscated the property of all.

Plutarch, Life of Sulla, 31:1-4

The following is an interesting connection between Pompey and Sulla—this is very fascinating if we keep in mind Pompey’s later political marriage with Julius Caesar’s daughter.

[W]hen Sulla had made himself master of Italy and had been proclaimed dictator, he sought to reward the rest of his officers and generals by making them rich and advancing them to office and gratifying without reserve or stint their several requests; but since he admired Pompey for his high qualities and thought him a great help in his administration of affairs, he was anxious to attach him to himself by some sort of a marriage alliance. His wife Metella shared his wishes, and together they persuaded Pompey to divorce Antistia^[4] and marry Aemilia^[5], the step-daughter of Sulla, whom Metella had borne to Scaurus, and who was living with a husband already and was with child by him at this time.

This marriage was therefore characteristic of a tyranny, and befitted the needs of Sulla rather than the nature and habits of Pompey, Aemilia being given to him in marriage when she was with child by another man, and Antistia being driven away from him in dishonour, and in piteous plight too, since she had lately been deprived of her father because of her husband (for Antistius had been killed in the senate-house because he was thought to be a partisan of Sulla for Pompey’s sake), and her mother, on beholding these indignities, had taken her own life. This calamity was added to the tragedy of that second marriage, and it was not the only one, indeed, since Aemilia had scarcely entered Pompey’s house before she succumbed to the pains of childbirth.

Plutarch, Life of Pompey, 9:1-2

Perhaps Sulla was sort of a father figure for Pompey, thus Pompey’s inclination to ignore upper-class tradition was amplified by Sulla’s influence on him. Here Sulla gives Pompey political advice, seeming to sort of scold him for making a foolish decision (78 BCE).

And so, when Sulla saw Pompey going away from the polls delighted with his victory, he called him to him, and said: “What a fine victory this is of thine, young man, to elect Lepidus in preference to Catulus^[6], the most unstable instead of the best of men! Now, surely, it is high time for thee to be watchful, after strengthening thine adversary against thyself.” And in saying this, Sulla was something of a prophet; for Lepidus speedily waxed insolent and went to war with Pompey and his party.

Plutarch, Life of Sulla, 34:5

The following is an important passage for the topic of Love in ancient Rome. It shows us just how far one is able to transgress convention without completely disregarding it. Sulla is having a religious celebration, but his wife, Metella^[7] (115-80 BCE) is dying while he does it. Because Sulla was an Augur^[8], he had to send her a bill of divorce so her sickness wouldn’t ‘pollute’ his home. He seemed to have felt quite bad about this because after his wife died, he broke his own law which limited the price of funerals by having an incredibly elaborate funeral for her. He also threw many banquets in her honour after her death in which he drank great quantities to drown his sorrows (80 BCE).

On consecrating the tenth of all his substance to Hercules, Sulla feasted the people sumptuously, and his provision for them was so much beyond what was needed that great quantities of meats were daily cast into the river, and wine was drunk that was forty years old and upwards. In the midst of the feasting, which lasted many days, Metella lay sick and dying. And since the priests forbade Sulla to go near her, or to have his house polluted by her funeral, he sent her a bill of divorce, and ordered her to be carried to another house while she was still living. In doing this, he observed the strict letter of the law, out of superstition^[9]; but the law limiting the expense of the funeral, which law he had himself introduced, he transgressed, and spared no outlays. 3 He transgressed also his own ordinances limiting the cost of banquets, when he tried to assuage his sorrow by drinking parties and convivial banquets, where extravagance and ribaldry prevailed.

Plutarch, Life of Sulla, 35

SULLA'S AUGURY COINS



After Metella died, it seems love found its way to Sulla once again, as he flirted with a woman at a gladiatorial game (this was before the reign of Augustus, so men and women were permitted to sit together...perhaps this story is part of the reason why Augustus segregated seating—the upper-class hated what happened between Sulla and this new woman—Valeria).

Valeria (108-78 BCE)^[10] flicks some dust off of Sulla's toga and the two spend the rest of the day sharing playful glances. These acts of flirtation continued for a while and finally led to marriage some time later. Plutarch seems to look down on it because he believes that Sulla was carried away by his attraction and the flirtation that occurred between him and Valeria like a young boy, not a dignified Vir. Perhaps the reasons Sulla acted in such a divergent way from the norm for the upper-class were partly due to the death of his previous wife and partly due to the power he had at this point in life. In the Roman social ladder, there really wasn't any higher place that Sulla could climb. Maybe he felt he didn't really have to follow any rules he didn't like anymore (80 BCE).^[11]

A few months afterwards there was a gladiatorial spectacle, and since the places for men and women in the theatre were not yet separated, but still promiscuous, it chanced that there was sitting near Sulla a woman of great beauty and splendid birth; 4 she was a daughter of Messala, a sister of Hortensius the orator, and her name was Valeria, and so it happened that she had recently been divorced from her husband. As she passed along behind Sulla, she rested her hand upon him, plucked off a bit of nap from his mantle, and then proceeded to her own place. When Sulla looked at her in astonishment, she said: "It's nothing of importance, Dictator, but I too wish to partake a little in thy felicity." 5 Sulla was not displeased at hearing this, nay, it was at once clear that his fancy was tickled, for he secretly sent and asked her name, and inquired about her family and history. Then followed mutual glances, continual turnings of the face to gaze, interchanges of smiles, and at last a formal compact of marriage. All this was perhaps blameless on her part, but Sulla, even though she was ever so chaste and reputable, did not marry her from any chaste and worthy motive; he was led away, like a young man, by looks and languishing airs^[12], through which the most disgraceful and shameless passions are naturally excited.^[13]

Plutarch, *Life of Sulla*, 35

Perhaps the poet and author, Ovid got inspiration for part of his book *The Art of Love* from Valeria. Only here, he switched the genders so it is a man flirting with a woman. It was written a little over half a century after Valeria picked-up Sulla at a gladiatorial game. Ovid gives advice to men who are looking to meet women. He suggests going to the horse races, as there really isn't a better place to meet single ladies in Rome. At the end he laments over the chance many must have had to meet beautiful foreigners when Augustus held a mock naval battle in Rome. He says that this must have been so popular all over the world that many must have come to see it, therefore many had a chance to find love with exciting people from distant lands.

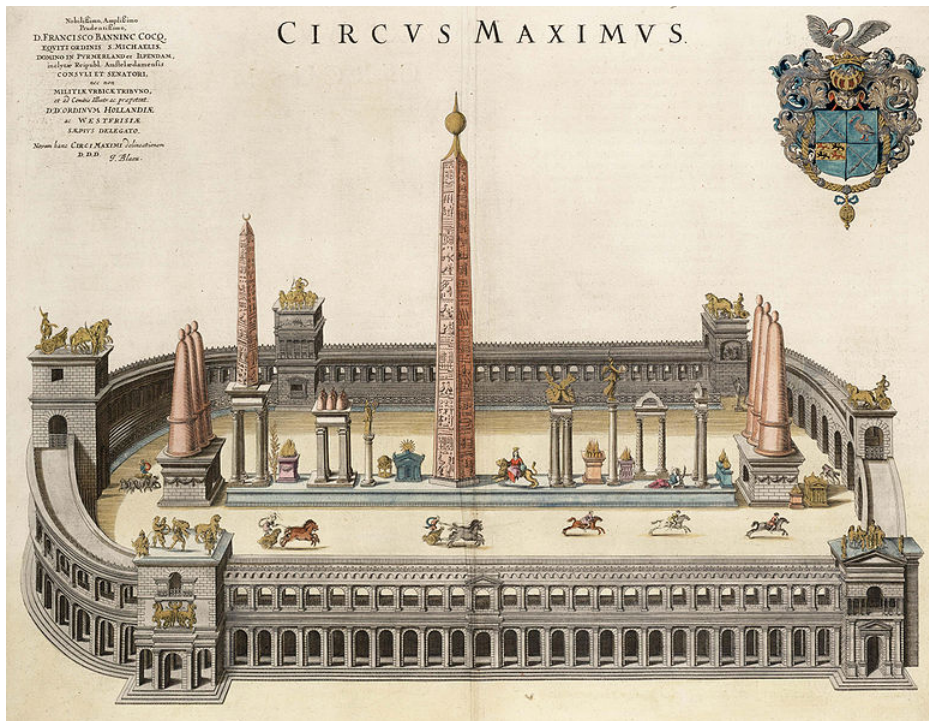
CONTENT WARNING

The passage becomes misogynistic as he belittles women, calling them "light minds."

Or at the Races, or the Circus^[14] Don't forget the races, those noble stallions: the Circus holds room for a vast obliging crowd. No need here for fingers to give secret messages, nor a nod of the head to tell you she accepts: You can sit by your lady: nothing's forbidden, press your thigh to hers, as you can do, all the time: and it's good the rows force you close, even if you don't like it, since the girl is touched through the rules of the place. Now find your reason for friendly conversation, and first of all engage in casual talk. Make earnest enquiry whose those horses are: and rush to back her favourite, whatever it is. When the crowded

procession of ivory gods goes by, you clap fervently for Lady Venus: **if by chance a speck of dust falls in the girl's lap, as it may, let it be flicked away by your fingers: and if there's nothing, flick away the nothing:** let anything be a reason for you to serve her. If her skirt is trailing too near the ground, lift it, and raise it carefully from the dusty earth: Straightaway, the prize for service, if she allows it, is that your eyes catch a glimpse of her legs. Don't forget to look at who's sitting behind you, that he doesn't press her sweet back with his knee. Small things please light minds: it's very helpful to puff up her cushion with a dextrous touch. And it's good to raise a breeze with a light fan, and set a hollow stool beneath her tender feet. And the Circus brings assistance to new love, and the scattered sand of the gladiator's ring. Venus' boy often fights in that sand, and who see wounds, themselves receive a wound. While talking, touching hands, checking the programme, and asking, having bet, which one will win, wounded he groans, and feels the winged dart, and himself becomes a part of the show he sees. When, lately, Caesar, in mock naval battle, exhibited the Greek and Persian fleets, surely young men and girls came from either coast, and all the peoples of the world were in the City? Who did not find one he might love in that crowd? Ah, how many were tortured by an alien love!

Ovid, *The Art of Love*, I;5



Further to the idea of the mentor relationship between Pompey and Sulla. After his death, many wished to bury Sulla without the honours granted to Roman viri (plural of vir). Pompey intervenes however, and ensures that Sulla's body is treated with respect and given an honour burial with all the respective rights for a vir (78 BCE).

Many now joined themselves eagerly to Lepidus, purposing to deprive Sulla's body of the usual burial honours; but Pompey, although offended at Sulla (for he alone, of all his friends, was not mentioned in his will), diverted some from their purpose by his kindly influence and entreaties, and others by his threats, and then conveyed the body to Rome, and secured for it an honourable as well as a safe interment. And it is said that the women contributed such a vast quantity of spices for it, that, apart from what was carried on two hundred and ten litters, a large image of Sulla himself, and another image of a lictor, was moulded out of costly frankincense and cinnamon. The day was cloudy in the morning, and the expectation was that it would rain, but at last, at the ninth hour, the corpse was placed upon the funeral pyre. Then a strong wind smote the pyre, and roused a mighty flame, and there was just time to collect the bones for burial, while the pyre was smouldering and the fire was going out, when a heavy rain began to fall, which continued till night. Therefore his good fortune would seem to have lasted to the very end, and taken part in his funeral rites. At any rate, his monument stands in the Campus Martius, and the inscription on it, they say, is one which he wrote for it himself, and the substance of it is, that **no friend ever surpassed him in kindness, and no enemy in mischief.**

Plutarch, *Life of Sulla*, 38:1-4

MORE ON POMPEY

The following passage furthers the notion that an exceptionally *virilis vir* (manly man) may be tolerated more in regards affectionate displays because of his proven masculinity. Here is a very exciting passage where Pompey defends himself against three oncoming armies at once, all enclosing upon him from different directions (82 BCE).

There came up against [Pompey], accordingly, three hostile generals at once, Carinas, Cloelius, and Brutus not all in front of him, nor from any one direction, but encompassing him round with three armies, in order to annihilate him. Pompey, however, was not alarmed, but collected all his forces into one body and hastened to attack one of the hostile armies, that of Brutus, putting his cavalry, among whom he himself rode, in the vanguard. And when from the enemy's side also the Celtic horsemen rode out against him, he promptly closed with the foremost and sturdiest of them, smote him with his spear, and brought him down. Then the rest turned and fled and threw their infantry also into confusion, so that there was a general rout. After this the opposing generals fell out with one another and retired, as each best could, and the cities came over to Pompey's side, arguing that fear had scattered his enemies. Next, Scipio the consul came up against him, but before the lines of battle were within reach of each other's javelins, Scipio's soldiers saluted Pompey's and came over to their side, and Scipio took to flight. Finally, when Carbo himself sent many troops of cavalry against him by the river Arsis, he met their onset vigorously, routed them, and in his pursuit forced them all upon difficult ground impracticable for horse; there, seeing no hope of escape, they surrendered themselves to him, with their armour and horses.

Plutarch, *Life of Pompey*, 7-8;1-3

This was thought to be such a hopeless battle for Pompey that Sulla himself tried to bring his own army to assist him. Imagine Sulla's surprise upon seeing Pompey was victorious. Sulla treats Pompey with the same respect that is expected to be directed to Sulla himself as Imperator and continues to hold Pompey in highest esteem. Now imagine what the rest of Rome would think about Pompey's great achievements. This would have enabled him to get away with certain things most would not; things such as tenderness and affection (82 BCE).

Sulla had not yet learned of these results, but at the first tidings and reports about Pompey had feared for his safety, thus engaged with so many and such able generals of the enemy, and was hastening to his assistance. But when Pompey learned that he was near, he ordered his officers to have the forces fully armed and in complete array, that they might present a very fine and brilliant appearance to the imperator^[15]; for he expected great honours from him, and he received even greater. For when Sulla saw him advancing with an admirable army of young and vigorous soldiers elated and in high spirits because of their successes, he alighted from off his horse, and after being saluted, as was his due, with the title of Imperator, he saluted Pompey in return as Imperator. And yet no one could have expected that a young man, and one who was not yet a senator, would receive from Sulla this title, to win which Sulla was at war with such men as Scipio and Marius. And the rest of his behaviour to Pompey was consonant with his first tokens of friendliness; he would rise to his feet when Pompey approached, and uncover his head before him, things which he was rarely seen to do for any one else, although there were many about him who were of high rank.

Plutarch, *Life of Pompey*, 8

Pompey is quite an emotional man; I imagine his reputation would be quite low if he wasn't such an accomplished general: In the following passage, Pompey is ordered to send his army home, but to remain where he is with a small force until the next general arrives. His soldiers are infuriated by these orders and Pompey is unable to calm them down. He becomes so overwhelmed by emotion because of this that he starts weeping and eventually threatens to kill himself if they don't listen. This is an example of a successful *vir* acting basically the opposite of how a successful *vir* should act (81 BCE).

On his return to Utica, a letter from Sulla was brought to him, in which he was commanded to send home the rest of his army, but to remain there himself with one legion, awaiting the arrival of the general who was to succeed him. Pompey himself gave no sign of the deep distress which these orders caused him, but his soldiers made their indignation manifest. When Pompey asked them to go home before him, they began to revile Sulla, declared they would not forsake their general, and insisted that he should not trust the tyrant. At first, then, Pompey tried what words could do to appease and mollify them; but when he was unable to persuade them, he came down from his tribunal and withdrew to his tent in tears. Then his soldiers seized him and set him again upon his tribunal, and a great part of the day was consumed in this way, they urging him to remain and keep his command, and he begging them to obey and not to raise a sedition. At last, when their clamours and entreaties increased, he swore with an oath that he would kill himself if they used force with him, and even then they would hardly stop.

Plutarch, *Life of Pompey*, 13

Pompey seems to have been humble and gentle for the most part; Pompey is reluctant to receive the name “The Great.” (80 BCE)

But when [Sulla] learned the truth, and perceived that everybody was sallying forth to welcome Pompey and accompany him home with marks of goodwill, he was eager to outdo them. So he went out and met him, and after giving him the warmest welcome, saluted him in a loud voice as “Magnus,” or The Great, and ordered those who were by to give him this surname. Others, however, say that this title was first given him in Africa by the whole army, but received authority and weight when thus confirmed by Sulla. Pompey himself, however, was last of all to use it, and it was only after a long time, when he was sent as pro-consul to Spain against Sertorius, that he began to subscribe himself in his letters and ordinances “Pompeius Magnus”; for the name had become familiar and was no longer invidious.

Plutarch, *Life of Pompey*, 13:4-5

Pompey was not someone to adhere to social traditions. He was a very bold man who was definitely willing to push the boundaries, especially in times of general instability in regards to the social order and political system. He is more interested in pursuing exactly what he wants, rather than conforming to the conventional social order (80 BCE).

Pompey, however, was not cowed, but bade Sulla reflect that more worshipped the rising than the setting sun, intimating that his own power was on the increase, while that of Sulla was on the wane and fading away. Sulla did not hear the words distinctly, but seeing, from their looks and gestures, that those who did hear them were amazed, he asked what it was that had been said. When he learned what it was, he was astounded at the boldness of Pompey, and cried out twice in succession: “Let him triumph!” Further, when many showed displeasure and indignation at his project, Pompey, we are told, was all the more desirous of annoying them, and tried to ride into the city on a chariot drawn by four elephants; for he had brought many from Africa which he had captured from its kings. But the gate of the city was too narrow, and he therefore gave up the attempt and changed over to his horses. Moreover, when his soldiers, who had not got as much as they expected, were inclined to raise a tumult and impede the triumph, he said he did not care at all, but would rather give up his triumph than truckle to them. Then Servilius, a man of distinction, and one who had been most opposed to Pompey’s triumph, said he now saw that Pompey was really great, and worthy of the honour. And it is clear that he might also have been easily made a senator at that time, had he wished it; but he was not eager for this, as they say, since he was in the chase for reputation of a surprising sort. And indeed it would have been nothing wonderful for Pompey to be a senator before he was of age for it; but it was a dazzling honour for him to celebrate a triumph before he was a senator. And this contributed not a little to win him the favour of the multitude; for the people were delighted to have him still classed among the equestrians^[16] after a triumph.

Plutarch, *Life of Pompey*, 14:3-6

Here we can observe elements of Pompey’s loyalty. As the passage above said that Pompey was always faithful to his wife, we can infer that loyalty was a large part of his character as he is incredibly loyal to Sulla, even after he was slighted in his will (78 BCE).

Sulla showed most clearly that he was not well-disposed to Pompey by the will which he wrote. For whereas he bequeathed gifts to other friends, and made some of them guardians of his son, he omitted all mention of Pompey. And yet Pompey bore this with great composure, and loyally, insomuch that when Lepidus and various others tried to prevent the body of Sulla from being buried in the Campus Martius, or even from receiving public burial honours, he came to the rescue, and gave to the interment alike and security.

Plutarch, *Life of Pompey*, 15:2-3

Pompey’s brashness transcends the natural order of societal propriety. Pompey doesn’t subjugate himself to those who should technically have power over him and people love him for it. This is a great example of certain actions being excusable or even overlooked due to the *virtus* of the person.

It is customary for a Roman knight, when he has served for the time fixed by law, to lead his horse into the forum before the two men who are called censors, and after enumerating all the generals and imperators under whom he has served, and rendering an account of his service in the field, to receive his discharge. Honours and penalties are also awarded, according to the career of each.

At this time, then, the censors Gellius and Lentulus were sitting in state, and the knights were passing in review before them, when Pompey was seen coming down the descent into the forum, but leading his horse with his own hand. When he was near and could be plainly seen, he ordered his lictors to make way for him, and led his horse up to the tribunal. 6 The people were astonished and

kept perfect silence, and the magistrates were awed and delighted at the sight. Then the senior censor put the question: “Pompeius Magnus, I ask thee whether thou hast performed all the military services required by law?” Then Pompey said with a loud voice: “I have performed them all, and all under myself as imperator.” On hearing this, the people gave a loud shout, and it was no longer possible to check their cries of joy, but the censors rose up and accompanied Pompey to his home, thus gratifying the citizens, who followed with applause.

Plutarch, *Life of Pompey*, 22:4-6

Plutarch on Cato the Elder’s regard for public displays of affection: This is what the Roman’s ideal Roman would think about affection (around 170 BCE.)

Cato expelled another senator who was thought to have good prospects for the consulship, namely, Manilius, because he embraced his wife in open day before the eyes of his daughter. For his own part, he said, he never embraced his wife unless it thundered loudly; and it was a pleasantry of his to remark that he was a happy man when it thundered.

Plutarch, *Life of Cato the Elder*, 17:7

Plutarch comments on the same occasion in his *Moralia*. This demonstrates how it was very much against convention for Pompey to display such emotion and affection on several different occasions and for Sulla to openly flirt with a woman at a public spectacle.

Cato expelled from the Senate a man who kissed his own wife in the presence of his daughter. This perhaps was a little severe. But if it is a disgrace (as it is) for man and wife to caress and kiss and embrace in the presence of others, is it not more of a disgrace to air their recriminations and disagreements before others, and, granting that his intimacies and pleasures with his wife should be carried on in secret, to indulge in admonition, fault-finding, and plain speaking in the open and without reserve?

Plutarch, *Moralia*, 139 E 13: 1-3.

Key Question

Why do you think that these men were able to express affection towards their loved ones despite the fact that it was looked down upon by the upper-class Roman society?

- To what extent does *virtus* affect their decisions and the public’s reception of them?
- How exceptional do you think these men truly were in their affection? Are these really the only men from the late republic to act in such a way, or could it be possible that there were others who were not recorded or weren’t noteworthy enough to inscribe in the Roman’s histories?

CATULLUS



The following contains some of the poetry of Catullus. Although he came from a wealthy family, he lived no traditional upper-class life, and basically devoted his work to subverting the notion of “Vir.” His poetry was received with mixed reviews among his contemporaries. The Late Republic was a very tumultuous time for one to live, and as history has shown time and time again, art criticizing the system flourishes in times of unrest. Catullus criticized Julius Caesar and Sulla themselves in his poetry, made proclamations of his love and lust, and introduced an entire new style of verse that shattered the preexisting notion of what poetry should be.

Daisy Dunn writes:

He feverishly combined elegantly phrased sentiment with colloquialisms and obscenity, unnerving the more serious Romans who believed that a jibe at one man’s sexual inadequacy was what high-spirited youths scribbled on walls and brandished in tense moments, not what educated writers preserved in fine papyrus scrolls. His work would therefore prove unsettling for some of the older generation, as well as important public figures such as Cicero... who had rather conservative tastes.

Daisy Dunn, *Catullus Bedspread, The Life of Rome’s Most Erotic Poet* (pg. 6)

The first poem we will explore is one of Catullus’ most famous. It is directed towards his lover, *Lesbia*^[17] (this is the literary pseudonym given to whom scholars speculate to be *Clodia*)^[18] (95-44?BCE). He encourages her to ignore the slander and prying eyes of others and to instead relish each other and to allow their passion to enrich their lives, rather than concerning themselves with the angry opinions of “evil peasants.”

Lesbia, come, let us live and love, and be
deaf to the vile jabber of the ugly old fools,
the sun may come up each day but when our
star is out...our night, it shall last forever and
give me a thousand kisses and a hundred more
a thousand more again, and another hundred,
another thousand, and again a hundred more,
as we kiss these passionate thousands let

us lose track; in our oblivion, we will avoid
the watchful eyes of stupid, evil peasants
hungry to figure out
how many kisses we have kissed.

Catullus, Poem 5

Here Catullus mocks his friend *Calvus*^[19] (82- 47 BCE), saying he was ruined by the bad poetry his friend sent to him, saying the only way it makes sense for Calvus to have sent the poetry was that the Dictator Sulla commanded it.

Calvus, if I did not love you as my own
two eyes, I'd hate you as we hate Vatinius.
Do you not recall
the present you sent me? What is it I did—
what did I say, what wrong did I do—
that you so wish to destroy me?
May the gods bring punishment on your client
who sent you that collection of poetic inanity.
If this fine, new book
arrived by way of Sulla, as I would suspect,
it would not be upsetting, no.
I'd be pleased: for it would mean
you were paid for your work.
What a foul thing you've done.
Was your intention, then, to unhinge your Catullus
at the very start of Saturnalia, best of days? No matter.
Come morning, I'll raid the shelves
of the booksellers. I'll gather
the worst of Caesii, Aquini, Suffenus—
all that's utterly stupid and worthless
and I'll get payback.
In the meanwhile, poets, be gone,
get as far away from me as possible.
On gangrenous feet return to the place
you came from. You are blemishes
on our age, you most stupid of poets
Catullus, Poem 14

Some of the poetry that upset the upper-class:

CONTENT WARNING

The following poem engages in threats of sexual assault.

Aurelius and Furius: little cocksuckers
I'll fuck you up the ass
and stuff your mouths!
You who think
since my poems are delicate I'm less than chaste.
It's well known that a poet who is devoted need not
be upstanding in his verses.
It's clear that my lines are charming, witty.
Then what of it if they're a tad soft
a bit shameless at times
so long as my readers get turned on?
Mind you I'm not talking about healthy boys, but hairy
old geezers who can't get it up
by standard methods.
Yet you still think because
I've spoken of a good many kisses
I'm somehow less than a man?
Yeah, I'll fuck you up the ass
and stuff it in your mouths.

Catullus, Poem 16

The following is a love poem. Catullus describes how his love for Lesbia has turned into more of a twisted obsession in which he reviles and reveres her simultaneously. He cannot be happy for her even if she becomes incredibly successful, nor can he stop loving her even if she commits a terrible deed.

At this point [my] mind is so broken down by your doing
my Lesbia,
that it destroys itself by its own devotion
so that it can no longer wish you well
even if you should become the best
nor can it stop loving you
no matter what you should do.

Catullus, Poem 75

Further the point of Catullus being overwhelmed by his passion for Lesbia; so much so that his emotions conflict like two colliding waves crashing into each other. Here is *Odi et Amo*, I hate and I love^[22].

I hate and I love.
Why I do this, perhaps you ask
I know not,
But I feel it happening
And I am tortured.

LOVING HUSBANDS, LOVING FATHERS

The following funerary inscription is significant because, although many scholars argue that “well-deserving spouse” was a stock phrase used on funerary inscriptions throughout the Roman world, the name of the child these two had together is larger than the Man’s name and his occupation on the tombstone. This should not be overlooked, as it implies that this child was the most important thing in his life, as well as his wife’s. The fact that their child died at the age of two is deeply tragic. This inscription goes to show that, despite the fact that infant mortality was high in the ancient world, the people who experienced it were not numb to it in the slightest. Rather, they were loving parents who were devastated by the death of their child.

I have roughly translated an inscription below:

To the spirits of the dead, Quintus Julius Martialis, served as a soldier for 21 years, and lived to 46. He was a patron and well-deserving spouse to Julia Sopatra. And Fortunata, his daughter lived to 2.

Robert Knapp quotes two examples in *Invisible Romans* of funerary inscriptions showcasing a tender love of husbands for their deceased wives. ^[20] It is quite beautiful as it expresses how important these people were to their loved ones, and how the ancient Romans experienced love just as we do, perhaps with the exception of the sexist Roman value of women not quarrelling with the men... However, don’t we all hope to meet someone who can be “my everlasting solace[?]”

This is the gravestone Gaius Aonius Vitalis set up for Atilia Maximina, she of purest spirit, an incomparable wife, who lived with me without any quarrels for 18 years, 2 months, and 9 days, having lived 46 years, leading a life of honor and good name, my everlasting solace. Farewell. (CIL 5.3496)

Pompullius Antiochus, her husband, set up this gravestone to Caecilia Festiva, his dearest, sweet wife, hard-working and well-deserving, who lived with me 21 years without a contrary word. (CIL 9.3215)

Plutarch wrote about Cato the Elder, praising him for being a loving father and a loving spouse. Within this praise, Plutarch also finds time to celebrate Cato’s wife for not using a wetnurse. The fact that Plutarch points these instances out indicates that neither Cato’s kindness towards his family nor his wife feeding their child were normative behaviour at the time.

Therefore I think I ought to give suitable examples of [Cato’s] conduct in these relations. He married a wife who was of better family than she was rich, thinking that, although the rich and high-born may be alike given to pride, still, women of great families have such a horror of what is disgraceful that they are more obedient to their husbands in all that is honourable. 2 He used to say that the man who struck his wife or child, laid violent hands on the holiest of holy things. Also that he thought it more praiseworthy to be a good husband than a good senator, and that there was nothing else to admire in Socrates of old except that he was always kind and gentle in his intercourse with a shrewish wife and stupid sons. After the birth of his son, no business could be so urgent, unless it was public affairs, that it prevented him from being present when his wife bathed and swaddled the babe. 3 For the mother nursed it herself, and often breast fed also to the infants of her slaves, that so they might come to cherish a brotherly affection for her son.

Plutarch, *Life of Cato the Elder*

Sources and Further Reading:

Bibliographic Recommendation: Catullus’ bedspread by Daisy Dunn. Dr. Dunn is a gifted writer and effortlessly bridges the gap that exists in translated poetry. She provides fantastic translations of Catullus works, as well as occasionally explaining why the original latin is so effective. She takes you through Catullus’ short life and provide insight into his mind and heart. It is a refreshing change of pace to read something by a scholar that doesn’t feel like it was written by one! It flows nicely and is actually informative as well as being a page-turner (a rare thing for the scholarly literature of the classicists). We definitely recommend checking this out if you found Catullus’ section interesting.

Clst 260 Spectacle Reader

Livius: <https://www.livius.org/category/roman-republic/>

Plutarch’s Histories: http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Plutarch/Lives/Pompey*.html#9.2

Plutarch, *Life of Sulla*

Plutarch, *Life of Pompey*

Ovid, *Ars Amatoria*: http://www.yorku.ca/pswarney/Texts/aa-kline.htm#_Toc521049265

Dunn, D. (2016). *Catullus' bedspread: the Life of Rome's Most Erotic Poet*. New York: HarperCollins.

Knapp, Robert (2011), *Invisible Romans*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt2jbpmg>.

Catullus Poetry: I mainly used wiki commons as I think the translation was the best, but I also used the following:

<http://intranslation.brooklynrail.org/latin/eleven-poems-of-catullus>

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/gaius-valerius-catullus>

https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Translation:Catullus_75

<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.02.0003%3Apoem%3D85>

Media Attributions

- 411px-Pompey_the_Great
- Sulla_Glyptothek_Munich_309

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1. Viri is the plural of Vir, Latin for “man.” But it means something more like manly man. ↩
 2. Piso was consul in the year 58 BCE. He was Julius Caesar’s father-in-law and a political adversary of Cicero. Piso tried to act as mediator between Julius and Pompey in their civil war, but left the city in protest when Julius marched on Rome. He did however insist on a public funeral for the dictator after Julius Caesar was assassinated. He also tried to act as a neutral party between Octavian and Mark Anthony during their civil war. He was an epicurean and actively worked for peace during both civil wars. ↩
 3. The Campus Martius (Latin for the “Field of Mars”, Italian Campo Marzio) was a publicly owned area of ancient Rome extending about 2 square kilometres (↩
 4. Antistia was the daughter of Publius Antistius. She was the first wife of Pompey from 87-82 BCE. This occurred after he was indicted on charges of embezzlement of plunder. Antistia's father was the judge of Pompey's trial. He made a deal with Pompey wherein Pompey would marry Antistia in exchange for being acquitted. ↩
 5. Sulla’s step-daughter. Aemilia was daughter of Caecilia Metella Dalmatica. She would be married to Pompey until she died during childbirth. ↩
 6. This Catulus—not be confused with our friend, Catullus the poet— was named Quintus Lutatius Catulus (120–61/60 BCE). He was sometimes called “Capitolinus” for his defence of the capital in 77 BCE. He was a politician, not a poet. ↩
 7. Metella was the fourth wife of Sulla, and he seemed to have loved her quite a bit as Plutarch wrote that it was thought that when Sulla took Athens, he punished the people severely because they had written slander about Metella on their walls. Their marriage was looked down upon by the upper-class as many didn’t respect Sulla and considered the marriage ‘beneath her.’ ↩
 8. [10] Sulla was an augur, a type of Roman priest that observed and interpreted messages from the gods. We know this in part from his coinage which feature the instruments of the augur like the lituus, the curved wand (see Fig.1). Death was considered to be polluting, so individuals with a religious function like augurs or other priests had to avoid contact with dead bodies, funerals, etc. So Sulla divorced his wife at the request of the other augurs to avoid being connected to her and thus polluted by her when she dies. ↩
 9. This is translated in the text as ‘superstition’ but that’s a poor translation of the word ‘superstitio’ in Latin which means something more like religious obligation/observance. Non-priests certainly would not have to divorce a sick wife—in fact there are laws against abandoning a sick slave, so presumably abandoning a sick wife would have been even worse. ↩
 10. There are no accurate dates for Valeria. Historians estimate she was born between 168-108 BCE, as there are no real accurate descriptions given about Valeria (thanks a lot patriarchy) ↩
 11. this is my favourite passage in the reader because it’s so adorable ↩
 12. This basically means that Sulla thought she was beautiful and that’s why he married her. ↩
 13. This Translation comes from a webpage that reproduces The Parallel Lives by Plutarch, published in Vol. IV of the Loeb Classical Library edition, 1916. What I find interesting about this is that this translation is over a century old, and gives us some

insight into the way the english language worked at the time. ↵

14. Here Ovid is referring to the Circus Maximus, the largest horse-track in Rome, it may have been built as early as the 6th Century BCE. It could hold around 150,000 spectators. ↵

15. Latin for Commander or General ↵

16. The Equestrian was an upper-class of Romans but it was still technically below the senatorial class. ↵

17. His nickname for *Clodia: Lesbia*, is a reference to the island of *Lesbos*, on which the famous poet Sappho lived! Kutzko, David. 2006. "Lesbia in Catullus 35." *Classical Philology* 101 (4): 405-410. ↵

18. Clodia was the daughter of a famous Roman Patrician and was in an unhappy marriage with Quintus Caecilius Metellus Celer. She was famous for her ability to drink and her proclivity for gambling. She is speculated to have had many affairs with different men, including Catullus. ↵

19. Calvus was an orator and poet of ancient Rome. Son of Licinius Macer, he was Catullus' Friend, and they shared a similar style and subject matter of poetry. ↵

20. KNAPP, ROBERT. *Invisible Romans*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2011.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt2jbpmg> . ↵

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11.2: Case study: Fannia and "Good Roman Women"

ELITE WOMEN IN ROME



This is a photo of a carved marble sculpture held at the Musée du Louvre in Paris, France ([link here](#)). The emotive sculpture depicts the famous suicide of Fannia's grandmother Arria Major in 42 CE (centre). It was carved in 1685 by French sculptor Pierre Lepautre, many years after the event depicted took place, showing how Arria's actions kept her family in the public's memory for centuries.

See [introductions below](#) for more details on Arria's suicide and how it ties directly with Pliny the Younger's letter about Fannia.

FANNIA: THE GOOD WOMAN

Ancient Roman society was one that revolved around appearance, both literal and figurative. The rich and the poor alike were expected to adhere to strict societal guidelines. Elite and 'respectable' Roman citizen women, for example, legally held no political power and were under the lifelong guardianship of either their *pater familias* (male head of family) or, in his absence, their *tutor* (alternative guardian). Upon reaching adolescence, these women were expected to marry, have children and run a household (this would include instructing a household of slaves if they were wealthy), all while wearing a *stola* (long woollen dress). I emphasize that these women were *expected* to behave in this manner because, unsurprisingly, some women did not wish to marry, have children, run a household or wear a heavy woollen dress. When considering Roman ideals, we must always keep in mind that women were people with agency (capacity/desire to act independently) and therefore did not always adhere to these guidelines.

Clodia Fannia (late 1st- early 2nd century CE) is an ideal case study for Roman elite women because, as we shall see in the following letter, she is viewed as someone who has exceeded the expectations of a respectable matron (married woman). However, Fannia did not live by many of the guidelines listed above, making her a curious role model. She was a three-time-exiled political rebel who did not bear any children of her own. By analyzing Pliny the Younger's acclamations, we gain additional perspective into what constituted a 'good' Roman woman and how Fannia achieved this status despite her nonconforming behaviour.

It is worth noting that Fannia's elite lineage gave her an advantage at birth. We know more about elite women like Fannia than we do poor women because many of our written sources were composed by the elites themselves (Pliny included). Any value attributed to her would have been difficult to earn were she underprivileged. The slaves, for example, owned by elites like Fannia, would certainly not have experienced similar praise in their lifetime, regardless of their behaviour.

FANNIA AS THE ROMAN ROLE MODEL

Pliny the Younger was a Roman lawyer, senator, author and the nephew of the renowned naturalist Pliny the Elder. Throughout his life, Pliny (the Younger) published a number of books containing his private correspondence in an effort to advertise his connection

with various socially and politically prominent individuals. The 2nd century letter 7.19 (Book 7, Letter 19), outlined in the following pages, is an excellent example of Pliny's strategy in action as he writes in earnest to his friend Priscus about his concern and admiration for the ill matron Clodia Fannia.

Author's Note:

I have divided the following translated letter into its four paragraphs, prefacing each with a brief introductory statement in italics and placed footnotes throughout to provide additional context to the letter's content. If you wish to read the English translation without pause, see [the following source](#). For the original Latin text, see [passage 19 here](#).

The letter begins with Pliny's concern for Fannia's health; specifying she fell ill while nursing her relative Junia. These opening words have been carefully chosen; Pliny is not simply stating the circumstances surrounding Fannia's illness but is paying a deliberate compliment to her character. He is essentially saying that Fannia, selflessly disregarding the risks to her own health, took in sick Junia of her own will (before the priests asked her) and cared for her as a relative and respectable Roman matron should. The emphasis on Junia's role as a Vestal Virgin (priestess of the Roman hearth-goddess Vesta) further enhances Fannia's character. Vestal Virgins were cherished public priestesses who, being appointed at an early age, lost all familial connection and made a thirty-year vow of chastity (abstinence from sex) to the goddess Vesta. By outlining Fannia's care and relation to a Vestal Virgin in the opening of his letter, Pliny has already reinforced her irrefutable Roman-ness.

From Pliny to Priscus.

I am most concerned about Fannia's health. She contracted this illness while she was taking care of Junia, a Vestal Virgin, first on her own initiative (as Junia was a relative) and subsequently by order of the priests. For virgins, while obliged by serious illness to leave the atrium of Vesta,^[1] are given into the care of some matron. Fannia was diligently performing this duty when she fell ill. She has constant fever and a cough that is getting worse; she is emaciated and generally in decline. Only her spirit is vigorous,^[2] worthy of her husband Helvidius and father Thræsea.^[3] But everything else is going down, and I am not merely afraid but deeply saddened. It pains me that so great a woman will be snatched from the eyes of her people, and who knows when her like will be seen again.

Pliny exalts Fannia's character using four Latin terms often attributed to Roman men (*castitas*, *sanctitas*, *dignitas*, *Constantia*) and praises her lifelong commitment to Helvidius, her late husband. Fannia followed Helvidius into exile twice for his association with the Stoic opposition, a collection of elites who disapproved of the emperor. Years after his execution, she was questioned in trial for endorsing a posthumous biography of his life, which she boldly admitted to and after which, against the Senate's orders, defiantly snuck (the biography) into her third exile.

What chastity, what sanctity, what dignity, what constancy! Twice she followed her husband into exile, and the third time she herself was exiled on his account.^[4] For when Senecio,^[5] on trial for writing the life of Helvidius, said in his own defence that Fannia had asked him to write it, Mettius Carus^[6] asked threateningly whether she had. "I did ask him," she replied; and to whether she had given him her husband's diaries – "I did give them." And to whether her mother knew about this, "She does not." In other words, she did not utter a single word to reduce the danger to herself. She even took into her exile its very cause – those books which the senate had through the compulsion and fear of the times ordered suppressed^[7] – for she had managed to save them when her goods were confiscated.

Women, even the elite, were not often named as role models for men in 2nd century Rome, as Roman virtues were primarily associated with elite men. However, we see here Pliny doing just that. He continues by saying he worries Fannia will be the last of her house (lineage) as no person could ever live up to her reputation.

How pleasant she is, how kind, how respectable and amiable at once – two qualities rarely found in the same person.^[8] Indeed, she will be a woman whom later we can show our wives, from whose fortitude men too can draw an example,^[9] whom now while we can still see and hear her we admire as much as those women whom we read about. To me her very house seems to totter on the brink of collapse, shaken at its foundations, even though she leaves descendants.^[10] How great must be their virtues^[11] and their accomplishments for her not to die the last of her line.

Fannia was not the first model-Roman woman in her family; she came from a long line of respected matrons, celebrated for their political collusion (plotting). Here, Pliny makes reference to her mother, Arria the Younger, and (indirectly) her grandmother; for as we shall see, no one can mention Arria the Younger without also calling to mind her namesake, Arria Major ([see Pliny 3.16 here](#)).

Arria Major (died 42 CE) was, like both her daughter and granddaughter, a political rebel. When her husband Aulus Caecina Paetus (dates unknown) was condemned for treason against emperor Claudius in 42 CE, he decided suicide would be a more noble death than execution. However, when the moment came, Paetus could not bring himself to the task so Arria, being the braver of the two, allegedly seized the dagger and plunged it into her own chest saying, “It does not hurt, Paetus,” and Paetus soon followed. The Romans saw Arria’s suicide as a noble act of courage and opposition to autocratic rule, and she soon became a legendary model for Roman men and women alike (see sculpture above).

It is with this history in mind that Pliny publicly references Fannia’s lineage and late mother, Arria the Younger, with whom he claims to have been friends. He mentions both women’s exile, adding that he supported them unconditionally during and after their troubles (presumably as a lawyer). He closes his letter by stressing the value of their friendship and connection, saying that he shall forever be indebted to them. This statement puts the two women, particularly Fannia, in a position of power and superiority that was rare for a living woman of the period.

My anguish is even greater because I feel I am reliving the death of her mother, that I can find no higher praise – great mother of a great woman, who, as she is given back to us in her daughter, so will be taken from us yet again, and I must suffer the old wound reopened as well as the new one. I honoured and loved both – I do not know which the more, nor did they want me to decide. My services were theirs in good times and bad; I comforted them in exile and avenged them when they returned. But that was not enough to repay my debt to them, and I am all the more eager that she be saved, so that I will have time to do so.^[12] There are my worries as I write you; if some god turns them into, I won’t complain about my present fears.

Farewell.

Pliny the Younger, *Letters* 7.19

REFLECT

Romanness: Reality or fiction? How does Pliny’s letter about Clodia Fannia compare with what we have learned about expectations for elite Roman women in the 1st and 2nd century CE? Were these societal guidelines truly necessary for earning respect as a woman in Rome?

Let’s review how Fannia fit into the social guidelines of elite women in Rome:

Women were expected to have children from a young age.

- Ø Fannia did not have any children of her own but, being her husband’s second wife, had a stepson.

Women had no legal power and did not have political sway.

- Ø Fannia was an active political rebel and member of the Stoic opposition.

Romans believed (or at least wrote that they believed) women should care for the domestic aspects of daily life.

- Ø Fannia was exiled three times, with her possessions seized on the third.

Roman rank and lineage was traditionally passed through the paternal (father’s) line.

- Ø Fannia’s grandmother Arria Major’s willingness to die for her Roman values gained her legendary respect. Her name was passed down to her daughter Arria the Younger, and her political reputation to her granddaughter Fannia.

Sought-after qualities like *virtutibus* (manliness) and *dignitas* (dignity) were restricted to Roman men of high rank.

- Ø Pliny uses both these terms (and more) in his description of Fannia.

Only Roman men could be model citizens for other men.

- Ø “Indeed, she [Fannia] will be a woman whom later we can show our wives, from whose fortitude men too can draw an example.” (Pliny the Younger, *Letters* 19)

Most of my information was collected from *Women in the letters of Pliny the Younger: A study in authorial self-representation* (Carlson, 2003). This book was an invaluable resource for close analysis of not only Pliny’s letter-writing but also of the context in which his letters were written and the genealogy (family history) of the people of whom he was writing.

Media Attributions

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1. The atrium was the central-court (often with an open roof) of a traditional Roman house. It was the responsibility of a Roman priest or priestess to maintain and guard the temple (or 'house') of their god. Therefore, in this case, Pliny is saying Vestal Virgins were permitted, when ill, to leave the house of Vesta and stay with a relative. ↩
2. Romans (typically men) were believed to have a level of endurance and pride indifferent to illness or injury. Pliny is bestowing these 'masculine' qualities on Fannia, saying her body may be failing but her spirit remains "vigorous". ↩
3. Helvidius Priscus (1st century CE), Fannia's late husband, and Clodius Thrasea Paetus (1st century CE), Fannia's late father, were two well-connected Roman men known for their active participation in the Stoic opposition (group of elites politically opposed to generations of emperors' autocratic rule). Fannia was, herself, a Stoic political rebel; a fact Pliny implies made her equal to the great men of her family. This 'name-dropping' is, in a sense, Pliny's attempt to align himself with Fannia's famous family of Roman Stoics. ↩
4. Although exile was not typically celebrated by Romans, Pliny wished to align himself with the elite members of the Stoic opposition as, at this point, the oppressive emperor Domitian had been assassinated. ↩
5. Herennius Senecio (2nd century CE) was a fellow Stoic oppositionist who, at the request of Fannia, wrote a biography of her late husband Helvidius. He was charged and executed for the act under order of emperor Domitian. ↩
6. Mettius Carus (dates unknown) was the prosecutor who charged Senecio and had him executed for Domitian. ↩
7. Pliny's "fear of the times" refers to the period under rule of emperors Vespasian and Domitian. Helvidius was connected to the Stoic opposition (opposition to Vespasian's rule) and was consequently executed in 75 CE. Under the following emperor, Domitian, the Senate would not have wanted the posthumous biography of Helvidius, an outspoken opposer of the empire, to be distributed so they exiled Fannia in 93 CE. ↩
8. These qualities are meant to emphasize Fannia's femininity and are juxtaposed with her equally prominent masculine traits. ↩
9. As mentioned in the introduction, women were rarely held up as role models for men, so this acknowledgement places extra emphasis on Pliny's respect for Fannia. He believed her the pinnacle of Roman ideals and a model for both men and women. ↩
10. Fannia did not have her own children but was survived by the child of her stepson, her descendant in this case. This absence of children makes her an unconventional role model for Roman women. ↩
11. The original Latin word used for this was *virtutibus*, a word that literally means 'manliness', further emphasizing Pliny's belief that Fannia held what were traditionally seen as positive masculine qualities. ↩
12. We do not know what illness Fannia suffered from but we do know she unfortunately did not survive. ↩

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11.3: Adultery

PERCEPTIONS OF ADULTRY

In ancient Rome, adherence to a strict moral code was often socially critical yet widespread deviation from such was common. With the power of the *pater familias*^[1] (father of the household) and his *patria potestas* (power of a father)^[2], as well as the honour codes of *pudicitia* (“modesty / sexual virtue” – code of conduct based on social shaming) for women, the issue of paternity of a child caused an intersection of many of the core moral values of ancient Rome. During the time of Augustus, around 18 BCE, the first Roman Emperor decided that Roman morals at the time were in a state of decay, and that the conduct of women especially needed to be reined in. The ‘*Lex Julia de Adulteriis*’, or the Julian Laws On Adultery, were instituted along with closely related Augustan marriage legislation in an attempt to revive the (supposedly) strong social morals and customs from an earlier period. These laws harkened back to a supposed ‘golden age’ of Roman morality^[3]. Emperor Augustus wanted to encourage proper marriages between elite Romans with the main goal of producing more elite Roman children. When there is widespread adultery and divorce in the upper class, marriages often do not produce enough legitimate children to sustain an elite class^[4]. Before the Julian Laws, adultery of a woman was considered to be a private matter to be dealt with by the *pater familias* within the home. The *Lex Julia* brought these cases to court, and even though very intense powers were given to the father, such as the legal right to kill his daughter and her lover in specific situations, it is difficult to say how often these extreme cases occurred as few records exist. However, it is likely that the larger goal was not for these powers to be used, but to shame people into not straying from their marriages knowing that their scandal would become a public matter, and the family’s honour and the woman’s *pudicitia*^[5] would be damaged.

CONTENT WARNING

The following section contains references to domestic violence and violence against women. A lot of the sources on the topic of adultery are appalling. The Romans were not known for being wonderfully tolerant people. In Classics, it is common to see horrifying subject matter discussed as ‘satire’ or just how things were, but just because it was in abundance does not make the extreme violence and bigotry of the Romans acceptable – in our age or theirs.

THE LEX JULIA AND HONOUR KILLINGS

With the institution of the *Lex Julia*, the *pater familias*’s *patria potestas* was reduced (although it may not appear so) and transferred to the courts. However, under the new laws, the father was allowed to kill his daughter and her lover under very specific circumstances, whereas the court punished adulterers primarily by relegation to various remote island combined with some loss of property^[6]. The complete *Lex Julia* no longer remains, but sections as well as case law reference the *Lex* were recorded in the *Justinian Digest*, a very large 6th century compilation of different parts of Roman law. These are excerpts of the digest that refer specifically to a section of the *Lex Julia* that primarily focuses on who her family can kill the female adulterer and under what circumstances. The husband was not permitted to kill his wife because it was feared that husbands would murder their wives, claim adultery, and try to take her dowry. It was thought that a father would make a sounder decision, because he would be influenced by his love for his daughter, and would therefore only kill her if it was absolutely necessary.

CONCERNING ADULTERY.

- (1) In the second chapter of the *Lex Julia* concerning adultery, either an adoptive or a natural father is permitted to kill an adulterer caught in the act with his daughter in his own house or in that of his son-in-law, no matter what his rank may be^[7].
- (2) If a son under paternal control, who is the father,^[8] should surprise his daughter in the act of adultery, while it is inferred from the terms of the law that he cannot kill her, still, he ought to be permitted to do so.
- (3) Again, it is provided in the fifth chapter of the *Lex Julia* that it is permitted to detain witnesses for twenty hours, in order to convict an adulterer taken in the act.
- (4) A husband cannot kill anyone taken in adultery except persons who are infamous (*infamia*)^[9], and those who sell their bodies for gain^[10], as well as slaves, and the freedmen^[11] of his wife, and those of his parents and children; his wife, however, is excepted, and he is forbidden to kill her.

(5) It has been decided that a husband who kills his wife when caught with an adulterer, should be punished more leniently, for the reason that he committed the act through impatience caused by just suffering.^[12]

(6) After having killed the adulterer, the husband should at once divorce his wife, and publicly declare within the next three days with what adulterer, and in what place, he found his wife.

(7) An angry husband who surprises his wife in adultery can only kill the adulterer, when he finds him in his (the husband's) own house.

(8) It has been decided that a husband who does not at once divorce his wife whom he has taken in adultery, can be prosecuted as a pimp^[13].

Justinian Digest Title XXVI. 1-8

Cont. Excerpts of Roman Case Law from the Justinian Digest Referring to the Julian Laws

The Justinian Digest was a collection of legal material compiled at a much later date (around 530 CE). There are excerpts from the original Lex, such as the passages above, but also passages that refer to official rulings that provide clarification to the existing laws. These were usually given on a case by case basis that would then have been made public to provide guidance to others with similar cases. This was the Romans' version of case law.

What the Lex says – 'shall have caught the adulterer in his daughter' – does not appear to be useless; for the intention was that this power should be available to the father if he should catch his daughter actually engaged in the crime of adultery. Labeo also approves this interpretation. and Pomponius^[14] has written that a person caught in the actual act of love is killed. This is also what Solon and Dracon^[15] say: 'in the act'.

Digest, 48.5.24(23)

The reason why the father and not the husband is allowed to kill the woman and any adulterer is that, for the most part, the fatherly pious commitment gives consideration to the children. Thus, the rage and attack of a husband readily jumping to a decision should be restrained.

Digest, 48.5.23(22).4

This is a piece of legal advice from Emperor Severus Alexander (r. 222-235 CE) clarifying sentencing in such a 'crime of passion' where a husband killed his wife's partner who was not of a lower status than he, which is technically illegal in the Lex. The Emperor is of the opinion that because the husband was the injured party in the crime of adultery, he should not be sentenced to the full extent of a homicide charge. One could be sentenced to the death penalty, fined, or exiled for homicide, and sentencing varied greatly based on status of the offender.

If Gracchus, whom Numerius killed when he caught him in adultery at night, was of such a status under the Lex Julia he could be killed with impunity, what was done lawfully merits no punishment. But if he killed outside the limits of the Lex, he is guilty of homicide. Yet because night and just feeling mitigate his act, he can be given a lighter sentence.

Severus Alexander, CJ 9.9.4

Despite the Romans allowing the father and not the husband of the woman to legally kill her and her partner, they did not go so far as to make it legally acceptable for the father to kill the lover and not his daughter — to be within the law, he had to kill both of them, at the same time, and without much delay.

It makes no difference whether the father kills his daughter surprised in adultery first, or not, provided he kills both guilty parties; for if he kills only one of them, "he will be liable under the Cornelian Law". If, however, one of them should be killed, and the other wounded, he is not released under the terms of the law; but the Divine Marcus and Commodus stated in a Rescript^[16] that he ought to be granted impunity, for the reason that, although the adulterer was killed, and the woman survived, after having received serious wounds inflicted upon her by her father, she was saved rather by accident, than intentionally; because the law requires the same indignation and the same severity to be displayed toward all those who are taken in adultery.

Digest, 48.5.32 Concerning The Julian Laws for Punishment of Adultery

In the following passage, it is deemed acceptable for her to be killed soon after instead of immediately if she fled and was recaptured, as her flight would have been due to fate, and not the father's own decision.

Where the law says, “He may kill his daughter at once;” this must be understood to mean that having to-day killed the adulterer he can not reserve his daughter to be killed subsequently; for he should kill both of them with one blow and one attack and be inflamed by the same resentment against both. But if, without any connivance on his part, his daughter should take to flight, while he is killing the adulterer, and she should be caught and put to death some hours afterwards by her father, who pursued her, he will be considered to have killed her immediately.

Digest, 48.5.23

It is worth noting that only men were allowed to bring forth accusations of adultery, a further example of how deeply the patriarchal structure infiltrated Ancient Rome. This would not have been a contentious issue at the time.

The Emperors Severus and Antoninus to Cassia.

The Lex Julia declares that wives have no right to bring criminal accusations for adultery against their husbands, even though they may desire to complain of the violation of the marriage vow, for while the law grants this privilege to men it does not concede it to women.

Digest, Title IX Concerning the Julian Laws on Adultery

LEGITIMATE AND ILLEGITIMATE CHILDREN

Using the *Lex Julia* as a demonstration of how the law viewed paternity rights and adultery in ancient Rome as well as the severity of the treatment of adultery, we can gain insight into how serious the problem of an illegitimate child might have been. An illegitimate child in the elite class would counter all of the core Roman social values such as *pudicitia*, the *pater familias* and *pater potestas*, as well as the sanctity of marriage and honour of the family. Because there were few accurate ways to prove or disprove the paternity of a child at this time, and because adultery was fairly common, at least according to our sources, some women tried to pass off illegitimate children as legitimate and raise them as if they were their husband’s. Scandalous stories such as these would have been seen as very ‘Unroman’ and dishonourable for the woman and the family as a whole.

Juvenal, who is known for being incredibly bigoted towards essentially all groups of people, writes of a fictional (though, according to him, representative) wealthy wife who had an affair with a gladiator. Gladiators were considered sex symbols in Rome, and often did sex work on the side, and wealthy women could (and often did) pay for sex just as wealthy men could. In this anecdote, she later became pregnant and later tried to pass off the child as the legitimate son of her husband, despite some unconvincing resemblances. It is important to note that figures who are known for their hateful writing like Juvenal, along with Cicero and Martial, were incredibly influential public figures, but it is impossible to know if Roman society as a whole would have shared their opinions.

If you marry a wife, it will be that the lyrist Echion or Glaphyrus, or the flute player Ambrosius^[17], may become a father. Then up with a long dais in the narrow street! Adorn your doors and doorposts with wreaths of laurel, that your highborn son, O Lentulus^[18], may exhibit, in his tortoiseshell cradle, the distinctive features of Euryalus or of a Murmillo^[19].

Juvenal, Satires 6, The Ways of Women/Against Women

The *Historia Augusta* is a collection of biographies primarily centered around the Roman Emperors and their heirs in the period of 117-284 CE. It is important to note that the authorship and reliability of the *Historia Augusta* is widely disputed,^[20] and this is one of the only sources we have that entertains the possibility of Commodus not being Marcus Aurelius’ legitimate son.

One of the reasons why this theory might have been created is that Commodus, most famously known as being the only Emperor to fight as a gladiator in the arena — was considered to be ‘mad’ at the time because of this. Many of the Emperors were known for pushing the envelope of what was considered acceptable behaviour in Roman society, such as Nero and Elagabalus, but for a sitting Emperor to participate in a profession worthy of *Infamia* status in an incredibly public and undisputed way was almost unheard of. Commodus’ father, Marcus Aurelius, had a generally solid and reputable reign. Thus, Commodus’s near obsessive devotion to fighting in the arena and all things gladiatorial stood in stark contrast. In terms of governing style, he certainly did not appear to be his father’s son, so even with Romans flinging around (mostly) unfounded accusations of adultery and sexual deviancy about anyone, especially those power, this theory detailed in *Historia Augusta* would not have seemed completely unrealistic.

Some say, and it seems plausible, that Commodus Antoninus, his son and successor, was not his child, but the product of an affair; they embroider this assertion, moreover, with a story current among the people. On a certain occasion, it was said, Faustina, the

daughter of Pius and wife of Marcus [Aurelius], saw some gladiators pass by and burned with love for one of them. Later, when she had been sick for a long time, she confessed the passion to her husband. And when Marcus reported this to the Chaldeans,^[21] it was their advice that Faustina should bathe in his blood and thus sleep with her husband. When this was done, the passion was ended, but their son Commodus was born a gladiator, not really a prince; for afterwards as emperor he fought almost a thousand gladiatorial bouts before the people, as shall be related in his life. This story is considered plausible, as a matter of fact, because the son of so virtuous an emperor had habits worse than any lanista^[22], any actor, any arena roadie, anything brought into existence from the dregs of all dishonour and crime. Many writers, however, state that Commodus was really the child of adultery, since it is generally known that Faustina, while at Caieta, used to choose out lovers from among the sailors and gladiators. When Marcus Aurelius was told about this so he might divorce, if not kill her, he is reported to have said “If we send our wife away, we must also return her dowry”. And what was her dowry? The Empire, which, after he had been adopted at the wish of Hadrian, he had inherited from his father-in law Pius.^[23]

Historia Augusta, Life of Marcus Aurelius 19.1-9

Juvenal’s Satire 9 is written in the style of a conversation between Juvenal, and a bisexual sex worker named Naevolus . Naevolus, who has served one patron for a long time, having intercourse with his *pathicus*^[24] (passive homosexual) patron as well as his patron’s wife, has fathered children for his patron when he could not do that himself, which supposedly saved his patron’s marriage and reputation. Naevolus is bitter and feels his patron has not adequately rewarded him for his services. Because Roman law discriminated against men and women who did not have children and do their social duty of producing new Roman citizens, it was of utmost importance for men and women to produce multiple children not only to make sure they had a surviving heir (as the childhood death rate was around 50%) but also to avoid nasty gossip that could damage their reputation as well as legal penalties that came along with being childless.

“And though you ignore and pass by my other services, what price do you put on this, that were I not your true and devoted client, your wife would still be a maid? You know how often, and in what ways, you have asked that service of me, and what promises you made to me. . . . There’s many a household in which a union that was unstable, ready to break up, and all but dissolved, has been saved by the intervention of a lover^[25]. Which way can you turn? Which service do you put first, which last? Is it to be no merit, you thankless and deceitful man, none at all, that I have presented you with a little son or daughter? For you rear the children, and love to spread abroad in the newspaper the proofs of your virility. Hang up garlands over your door! You are now a father; I have given you something to contradict the gossip. You have now parental right; through me you can be entered as an heir^[26], and receive a legacy entire, with a nice little extra into the bargain; to all which perquisites many more will be added if I make up your family to the full number of three.^[27]”

Juvenal 9, The Sorrows of Reprobate

Finally, here is a convoluted poem from Cicero’s *De Natura Deorum* (Nature of the Gods) about an elite woman attempting to pass off her illegitimate child as legitimate in a grab for power. He quotes the intensely dramatic Greek story *Atreus of Atticus* where Atreus, the king of Mycenae, is trying to figure out how to take revenge on his brother, Thyestes, for sleeping with his wife Aerope, and thereby challenging his rule and ousting Atreus from Mycenae. The story of these brothers is full of court intrigue and attempts to seize the throne, impregnation of the wrong people to produce sons to use in elaborate plots of vengeance, and a whole lot of murder.

Medea was criminal, but also she was perfectly rational. Again, does not the hero plotting the direful banquet for his brother turn the design this way and that in his thoughts?

More must I moil and bigger bale must brew,

Whereby to quell and crush his cruel heart.

Nor must we pass over Thyestes himself, who

Was not content to tempt my wife to sin —

an offence of which Atreus speaks correctly and with perfect truth —

the which I deem the height of peril

In matters of high state, if royal mothers

Shall be debauched, the royal blood corrupted,
The lineage mixed.

But how craftily this very crime is plotted by his brother, employing adultery as a means to gain the throne:

Thereto withal (says Atreus) the heavenly sire did send me

A warning sign, to confirm my reign —

A lamb, conspicuous among the flock

With fleece of gold, Thyestes once did dare

To steal from out my palace, and in this deed

My consort did suborn as his accomplice.

Cicero, *De Natura Deorum* III, 68

CASE STUDY: CLODIA AND HOW NOT TO BEHAVE AS A MATRONA

In the following speech by Cicero from 56 BCE, Cicero is defending Caelius in court. This famous defense speech includes references to Clodia, a widowed *matrona* (high class lady), carrying out a relationship with Caelius. Caelius was 32 or 33 at the height of this affair, and Clodia was possibly in her early 40s.

The accusers talk to us about lusts, and loves, and adulteries, and Baiae, and doings on the sea-shore, and banquets, and revels, and songs, and music parties, and water parties; and intimate also that they do not mention all these things without your consent.... You saw a young man become your neighbour; his fair complexion, his height and his appearance and eyes made an impression on you, you wished to see him oftener; you were sometimes seen in the same gardens with him; being a woman of high rank you are unable with all your riches to detain him, the son of a thrifty and parsimonious father: he kicks, he rejects you, he does not think your presents worth so much as you require of him. Try some one else. You have gardens on the Tiber, and you carefully made them in that particular spot to which all the youth of the city comes to bathe. From that spot you may every day pick out people to suit you. Why do you annoy this one man who scorns you?"

Cicero, *In Defense of Marcus Caelius Rufus*

"Woman [*mulier*], what have you to do with Caelius? What have you to do with a very young man [*homine adulescentulo*]? What have you to do with one who does not belong to you? Why have you been so intimate with him as to lend him gold, or so much an enemy of his as to fear his poison? Had you never seen that your father, had you never heard that your uncle, your grand-father, your great-grandfather, your great-great-grand-father, were all consuls?"

Cicero, *In Defense of Marcus Caelius Rufus*, 55 BCE

A great range of sources from the legal to the poetic and the rather obscure at the end. Good introduction and very clear about the legal set up and how it evolved to involve the state more and more. Good use of footnotes to help students through this material

I would like to be credited specifically for this section under the name Sophie Roth.

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Images:

Roman married couple

<https://wellcomecollection.org/works/tbn4py5f>

Commodus

https://en.Wikipedia.org/wiki/Commodus#/media/File:Commodus_Musei_Capitolini_MC1120.jpg

roman couple sarcophagus top

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/256163>

-
1. Oldest male head of a Roman household that all other members, male or female, were subordinate to. ↵
 2. Literally "power of a father". Included, even if only in theory, the legal right to kill his children in serious situations, usually honor based. The son/daughter was not freed from this when they became adults. ↵
 3. One can argue that this never really existed, as the Romans were always breaking their own codes of conduct – but everything looks better in hindsight, especially after the chaos of the late republic. ↵
 4. Life expectancy was also very low in ancient Rome, and infant mortality rate was often around 50%. ↵
 5. A daughter's pudicitia was very important to the family and her pater familias specifically because reputable daughters (i.e.: virgins, if it was a first marriage) were integral in elite families being able to make alliances with other elite families through marriage. ↵
 6. However, freedmen or slaves, who did not own property, would get harsher treatment. ↵
 7. Whereas a husband of the woman found committing adultery could only kill the adulterer if he was of a lower status. ↵
 8. This is referring a grown man who has his own daughter (the woman who has been found committing adultery) but is not yet the pater familias, or free of his own father's patria potestas. This is arguing that although legally he cannot kill her because he does not have the powers of patria potestas of his family, the author believes he should be able to. It is unclear if this situation ever appeared in the courts – life expectancy in Rome was not very high, so it would have been rare for a man to have his own adult children as well as a living father to subordinate him. ↵

9. A lowered legal standing that revokes rights of Roman citizenship that was usually caused by engaging in disreputable professions, committing a crime, or becoming an adulterer. ↩
10. Referring to prostitutes or potentially other careers worthy of infamia status such as charioteers, actors, or gladiators. ↩
11. Former slaves who have been freed or bought their freedom. ↩
12. It is important to note that laws like this still exist – especially in similar cases where anger or ‘personal injury’ (such as an adulterous spouse) is termed ‘provocation; and can be seen as a mitigating factor for murder/violence. ↩
13. If a husband does not divorce his wife immediately after she is found being adulterous it was assumed that he was pimping her out. The Lex Julia did not take into consideration cases of polyamory or a husband simply not caring that his wife had other partners; this was thought to be the only explanation. ↩
14. References to famous Roman legal commentators. ↩
15. Two of the first prolific Athenian lawmakers that held a somewhat mythical status – akin to how we would think of a figure like King Arthur. ↩
16. Referring to an official announcement that Emperors Marcus Aurelius and his son and successor Commodus made in relation to this case. ↩
17. Echion, Glaphyrus, and Ambrosius are generally presumed to be famous musical figures at the time, would be similar to someone today saying, ‘he is such an Elton John’. ↩
18. Would have been a typical elite name, presumably not targeting one Lentulus in particular. ↩
19. Euryalus and Murmillos are both well known types of gladiators. ↩
20. Some consider it more ‘historical fiction’ with around 2/3 of it being fictional. <http://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/...89661-0046.xml> ↩
21. Chaldea was a territory in Mesopotamia at the time. The Romans believed that the ‘East’ was where a lot of magic came from, and its possible that Marcus consulted the Chaldeans for magical advice that could help the problems in his marriage. ↩
22. Someone who purchased, managed, and trained gladiators. ↩
23. Faustina and Marcus Aurelius were biologically cousins. However, Marcus Aurelius had been formally adopted by Faustina’s father Pius, who was Emperor before Marcus Aurelius. Pius adopted Marcus Aurelius as his own biological sons had died young, and he needed an heir. ↩
24. The Romans were pretty tolerant when it came to what they considered the ‘active’ partner in a homosexual situation, however the ‘passive’ partner would not have enjoyed the same tolerance. ↩
25. Having children was integral to being a good Roman citizen, so a marriage that did not produce children would often be greatly strained by this tension and would often lead to divorce. A way to avoid gossip and speculation from others was to have a slave or prostitute step in, especially if the problem was with the man’s fertility, and father the child for them. ↩
26. Now that that the man has his ‘own’ children, he can be named in other people’s will and given inheritance. ↩
27. In an attempt to increase the population of upper-class Roman Citizens, fathers with 3 children (who survived to adulthood and had their own children) gained extra privileges such as exemption from mandatory public service. ↩

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CHAPTER OVERVIEW

12: Emperors and Empresses of Rome

[12.1: Emperors Defining "Romanness"](#)

[12.2: unRoman Emperors and Empresses](#)

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12.1: Emperors Defining "Romanness"

ROMAN EMPERORS DEFINING 'ROMANNESS'



A panel from c. 200 CE shows Septimius Severus, his wife Julia Domna, and his sons Caracalla and Geta (erased). Image from Wikimedia commons by Jbribeiro1.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

The learning objectives in this section are:

- To understand how Augustus and the emperors that followed created a standard of Romanness;
- Identify issues around Roman citizenship and the emperor's role in defining it;
- To understand that many later Roman emperors came from outside Rome and Italy.

AUGUSTUS AND THE 'TRADITIONAL' ROMAN

The Emperor Augustus was the first emperor of Rome, and reigned from 27 BCE until his death in 14 CE. Establishing himself as the *Princeps Civitatis*, the "First Citizen" — or rather, first among citizens — Augustus notably did not want it to appear as if he was bringing back the Roman monarch, but instead put effort into constructing something new. Augustus' rule marked the beginning of the Roman Empire, identified by the enthusiastic acquisition of the land that surrounded the Mediterranean Sea, that lasted in the west until 476 CE and was survived by the Byzantine Empire.

Among Augustus' efforts to create a Rome that did not repeat the mistakes that lead to the end of the Roman Republic was a 'return' to more strict, 'traditional' way of life. One way he did this was by mandating that the [toga](#), a traditional Roman garment, be worn in the assembly.

Augustus wanted also to revive the old style of dress, and once when he saw a crowd of men in dark cloaks in assembly, he cried out indignantly, "Look at them — 'Romans, masters of the world and the togaed race'^[1], and he ordered the aediles never again to allow anyone to appear in the Forum^[2] or its neighbourhood except in the toga and without a cloak.

Suetonius, *Augustus* 40.5

EMPERORS DEFINING ROMAN CITIZENSHIP AND ROMANNESS

Emperors had great sway over who was considered Roman and who was not. Expansion of Roman citizenship was always controversial; it was even more controversial when new citizens tried to integrate fully into the power structure of Rome. In 48 CE the Emperor Claudius gave the following speech to the Senate when they were trying to oppose new citizens taking places in the Senate and public offices in Rome:

In the consulship of Aulus Vitellius and Lucius Vipstanus the question of filling up the Senate was discussed, and the chief men of Gallia Comata,^[3] as it was called, who had long possessed the rights of allies and of Roman citizens, sought the privilege of obtaining public offices at Rome. There was much talk of every kind on the subject, and it was argued before the emperor with

vehement opposition. “Italy,” it was asserted, “is not so feeble as to be unable to supply its own capital with a senate. Once our native-born citizens were enough for peoples of our own kin, and we are by no means dissatisfied with the Rome of the past. To this day we cite examples of how under our old customs the Roman character exhibited courage and fame. Is it a small thing that Veneti and Insubres^[4] have already burst into the Senate, unless a mob of foreigners, a troop of captives (so to speak) is now forced upon us? What distinctions will be left for the remnants of our noble houses, or for any impoverished senators from Latium? Every place will be crowded with these millionaires, whose ancestors of the second and third generations at the head of hostile tribes destroyed our armies with fire and sword, and actually besieged the divine Julius [Caesar] at Alesia.^[5] These are recent memories. What if there those who fell in Rome’s citadel and at her altar by the hands of these same barbarians were to rise up the remembrance of this! Let them enjoy indeed the title of citizens, but let them not drag down with them the distinctions of the Senate and the honours of office.”

These and like arguments failed to impress the emperor. He at once rose himself to answer them, and thus attacked the assembled Senate. “My ancestors, the most ancient of whom was made at once a citizen and a noble of Rome, encourage me to govern by the same policy of transferring to this city all conspicuous merit, wherever found. And indeed I know, as facts, that the Julii came from Alba, the Coruncanii from Camerium, the Porcii from Tusculum, and not to inquire too minutely into the past, that new members have been brought into the Senate from Etruria and Lucania and the whole of Italy, that Italy itself was at last extended to the Alps, to the end that not only single persons but entire countries and tribes might be united under our name. We had unshaken peace at home; we prospered in all our foreign relations, in the days when Italy beyond the Po was admitted to share our citizenship, and when, enrolling in our ranks the strongest of the provincials, under colour of settling our legions throughout the world, we recruited our exhausted empire. Are we sorry that the Balbi came to us from Spain, and other men as illustrious from Narbon Gaul? Their descendants are still among us, and do not yield to us in patriotism.

What was the ruin of Sparta and Athens, but this, that mighty as they were in war, they rejected as aliens those whom they had conquered? Our founder Romulus, on the other hand, was so wise that he fought as enemies and then hailed as fellow-citizens several nations on the very same day. Strangers have reigned over us. That freedmen’s sons should be entrusted with public offices is not, as many wrongly think, a sudden innovation, but was a common practice in the old Republic. But, it will be said, we have fought with the Senones. I suppose then that the Volsci and Aequi never stood armed against us. Our city was taken by the Gauls. Well, we also gave hostages to the Etruscans, and passed under the yoke of the Samnites. On the whole, if you review all our wars, never has one been finished in a shorter time than that with the Gauls. Thenceforth they have preserved an unbroken and loyal peace. United as they now are with us by manners, education, and intermarriage, let them bring us their gold and their wealth rather than enjoy it in isolation. Everything, Senators, which we now hold to be of the highest antiquity, was once new. Plebeian magistrates came after patrician; Latin magistrates after plebeian; magistrates of other Italian peoples after Latin. This practice too will establish itself, and what we are this day justifying by precedents, will be itself a precedent.”

The emperor’s speech was followed by a decree of the Senate, and the Aedui were the first to obtain the right of becoming senators at Rome. This compliment was paid to their ancient alliance, and to the fact that they alone of the Gauls cling to the name of brothers of the Roman people.

Tacitus, *Annals* 11

The emperor Claudius, while being generous with citizenship in the above source, was not always as understanding. There were no language or other requirements to become a Roman citizen. However, it was expected that elite Roman citizens be able to speak Latin well, as they often held important positions and needed to be able to argue things in Latin, which was the only language of the Roman courts, army, and the Senate.^[6]

When emperors encountered those who did not speak Latin they often acted by making them unRoman formally — by taking away their citizenship. When the Emperor Claudius decided to take the position of censor, he took away the citizenship of high rank he encountered who did not know Latin. This involved putting a literal mark of censure against that person’s name in the citizenship rolls, marking them as unfit for their status; presumably this was done by others and not Claudius, as it would be a monumental task. His job was to review the lists of those found to be unfit to hold their positions (you could also be moved down the ranks from senator to equestrian or below and there were higher moral standards required of the elite than regular citizens).

16 1 [Claudius] also assumed the censorship, which had long been discontinued,^[7] ever since the term of Plancus and Paulus [22 BCE], but in this office too he was all over the place, and both his theory and his practice were inconsistent. In his review of the

equestrians he left off a young man of evil character, whose father said that he was perfectly satisfied with him, without any public censure, saying “He has a censor of his own.” Another who was notorious for corruption and adultery he merely warned to be more restrained in his excesses, or at any rate more discrete, adding, “For why should I know what mistress you keep?” When he had removed the mark of censure affixed to one man’s name, yielding to the entreaties of the latter’s friends, he said: “But let the erasure be seen.”^[8] 2 He not only struck from the list of jurors a man of high birth, a leading citizen of the province of Greece, because he did not know Latin, and even deprived him of the rights of citizenship; and he would not allow anyone to provide an account of his life except in his own words as well as he could and without the help of a lawyer.^[9]

The focus on the Greeks is not accidental here; because Greek was known by the Roman elites, who also wrote sometimes in Greek themselves, many educated Greeks did not learn Latin, considering it an inferior language.

When it suited them, Romans might celebrate the many non-Romans in Rome as a mark of Rome’s power. The Roman Empire was marked by a vast conquering of lands, both making Rome more diverse but also, as seen in the poem below, revealing xenophobic ideas about foreigners in Rome. These fears, and subsequent praise of the emperor for unifying such different people, is expressed by the poet Martial in this poem addressed to the Emperor Domitian:

What people is so distant from us, what people is so barbarian, O Caesar, that no spectator from it is present in your city! The cultivator of Rhodope [in Thrace] is here from Haemus, sacred to Orpheus. The Scythian who drinks the blood of his horses is here; he, too, who drinks the waters of the Nile close by their source and he also whose shore is washed by the most distant ocean. The Arabian has rushed here; the Sabaeans^[10] also, and here the Cilicians have anointed themselves with their own native perfume. Here come the Sicambrians with their hair all twisted into a knot, and here the frizzled Ethiopians. Yet though their speech is all so different, they all speak together hailing you, O Emperor, as the true father of your country.

Martial, *Epigrams* 9.3

NON-ITALIAN EMPERORS

The first imperial dynasty at Rome was the Julio-Claudians, but this dynasty died out with the Emperor Nero, and after that Roman emperors were drawn from citizens who were born outside the city and then even outside Italy. These emperors were Roman citizens by birth, and sometimes that caused less than positive reactions from the elite or even the public in general. However, all of this is complicated by the fact that many scholars writing on the emperors tended to see some emperors, like Septimius Severus, who were not white or from ‘better’ families as inherently problematic, unRoman, and as somehow responsible for the fall of the empire.

Accusations of unRoman origins were part and parcel of attacking emperors. Here is Suetonius on what was said about the emperor Vespasian's grandfather:

I ought to add that some have bandied about the report, that Petro’s father came from the region beyond the Po and was a contractor for the day-labourers who come regularly every year from Umbria to the Sabine district, to till the fields; but that he settled in the town of Reate and there married. Personally I have found no evidence whatever of this, in spite of rather careful investigation.

Suetonius, *Vespasian* 1

Trajan, who ruled from 98-117 CE, came from Spain (near Seville) although, like Vespasian, his family were of Italian origin and were Roman citizens. This doesn’t stop the writer Cassius Dio from being surprised that Vespasian was selected to become emperor over other more ‘Roman’ choices.

4 And so Trajan became Caesar and later emperor, although there were relatives of [the Emperor] Nerva alive. But Nerva did not place family relationships above the safety of Rome, nor was he less inclined to adopt Trajan because Trajan was Spanish instead of Italian or one of the Italian Greeks in, although no foreigner had previously held imperial power; for he believed in looking at a man’s ability rather than at his nationality. Soon after this act Nerva passed away, having ruled one year, four months and nine days; his life prior to that time had comprised sixty-five years, ten months and ten days.

Cassius Dio 68.4.1-2

The emperor whose non Italian birth place is mentioned most often by later scholars is Septimius Severus. Pictured with his family at the beginning of this chapter, Septimius Severus was a Roman citizen of Italian and North African origin who took over power in

193 CE after the assassination of Commodus. The following story (which may be entirely made up) hints at the personal consequences for having to present oneself as entirely Roman, even at this high level:

7 Septimius' sister from Leptis once came to see him, and, since she could barely speak Latin, she made the emperor very, very embarrassed. And so, after giving the purple stripe on the toga to her son and many presents to the woman herself, he sent her home again — as well as her son, who died a short time afterwards.

SHA, *Life of Septimius Severus*. 15.7

Rome had a very complex relationship with North Africa, which eventually became a hugely wealthy part of the Roman Empire. Even though it was successful and eventually produced an Emperor, this unease remained. North Africa in the early Roman period was populated by a mix of indigenous peoples and Greek and Punic settlers.

I will compare myself with Anacharsis, not in wisdom, but because we are both barbarians. He was Scythian from nomadic Scythians, and I am a Libyan from nomadic Libyans.

Fronto to Domilla Lucilla

Sources and Further Reading:

Media Attributions

- [Portrait_of_family_of_Septimius_Severus_-_Altes_Museum_-_Berlin_-_Germany_2017](#)

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1. This is the quotation from the Aeneid mentioned above. ↩
 2. The Forum was where not only government business was done, but was also a centre for banking and all sorts of shopping, which also included the purchase of slaves. As only Romans citizens could wear the toga this could represent an issue for those who were non-citizens as well as those who could not afford to buy a toga,, which was quite expensive, ↩
 3. 'Long haired Gaul', called so because the inhabitants had traditionally long hair. This was the region of Gaul that covered modern France and Belgium. ↩
 4. Tribes from the North of Italy ↩
 5. Alesia was an important town for the Gauls; Julius besieged it in 52 BCE, resulting in huge deaths, including of women and children. During the conquest of Gaul, Julius Caesar may have killed as many as one million Gauls. ↩
 6. People broke this last rule all time, including Romans whose first language was Latin. However, to speak it you were supposed to get special permission; otherwise they used an interpreter, even though nearly all elite Romans were also fluent in Greek as well as Latin. ↩
 7. The Romans had been counting people; they just hadn't been reviewing them for moral reasons and so forth. ↩
 8. I.e. the legal record would show that the erasure had once been made, even if it had been revoked. ↩
 9. As such cases had to be argued in Latin, this would be a good way to check to see if someone could speak Latin fluently. ↩
 10. An Arabian people, often associated with the Biblical kingdom of Sheba. ↩
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12.2: unRoman Emperors and Empresses

EMPERORS AND EMPRESSES AS OUTSIDERS



C. 40s CE; identification has been challenged.

The concept that if an Emperor did something, it was indicative of such behaviour being acceptable in Rome was simply not true. The Emperors and — to a much lesser extent — empresses of Rome were often not held to the standards of other elite Romans... nor, in fact, the standards of people in general. That does not make an exploration of their unRoman behaviour any less interesting, though!

The Emperor Claudius married Messalina as his second wife. In the following, concerns about Messalina's perceived prostitution mirrors anxieties about the weakness of Claudius' household.

Do the concerns of a private household and the doings of Eppia disturb you? Then look at those who rival the gods, and hear what [the Emperor] Claudius endured. As soon as his wife [Messalina] perceived that her husband was asleep, this august whore was shameless enough to prefer a common mat to the imperial couch. Assuming a night-cowl, and attended by a single slave, she went out; then, having concealed her raven locks under a blonde wig, she took her place in a brothel reeking with long-used blanks. Entering an empty cell reserved for herself, she there took her stand, under the feigned name of Lycisca, her nipples bare and gilded, and exposed to view the womb that bore you, O nobly-born Britannicus! Here she graciously received all comers, asking from each his fee; and when at length the keeper dismissed the rest, she remained to the very last before closing her cell, and with passion still raging hot within her went sorrowfully away. Then exhausted but unsatisfied, with soiled cheeks, and begrimed with the smoke of lamps, she took back to the imperial pillow all the smells of the slums.

Juvenal, Satire 6

Roman Emperors did not have to follow convention, and rebelling against it was — if they desired — a way to show their power and unique status as the most powerful men in the Roman Empire.

52.1 In his clothing, his shoes, and the rest of his clothing [the Emperor] Caligula did not follow the tradition of his country and his fellow-citizens — not always even that of his gender or, in fact, that of an ordinary human being. He often appeared in public in embroidered cloaks covered with precious stones, with a long-sleeved tunic and bracelets; sometimes he wore silk and a woman's robe; sometimes slippers or actors boots, again in boots, such as the emperor's body-guard wear, and at times in the low shoes which women wear. He also frequently showed himself with a golden beard, holding in his hand a thunderbolt, a trident, or a caduceus — emblems of the gods — and even in the dress of Venus. He frequently wore the dress of a triumphing general, even before his campaign, and sometimes the breastplate of Alexander the Great, which he had taken from his sarcophagus.

Suetonius, *Caligula* 52.1

The Emperor Nero was also accused of dressing in ways that broke with Roman norms, including growing his hair long and artificially curling it.

Nero was utterly shameless in the care of his person and in his dress, always having his hair arranged in tiers of curls, and during his trip to Greece letting it grow long and hang down behind; he often appeared in public in a dining-robe with a handkerchief bound about his neck, unbelted and not wearing shoes.

Suetonius, *Nero* 51.1

EMPERORS AS TRENDSETTERS

The Emperor Commodus was famously known as being the only Emperor to fight as a gladiator in the arena — was considered to be ‘mad’ at the time because of this. Many of the Emperors were known for pushing the envelope of what was considered acceptable behaviour in Roman society, such as Nero and Elagabalus, but for a sitting Emperor to participate in a profession worthy of *Infamia* status in an incredibly public and undisputed way was almost unheard of. Commodus loved gladiators, which was very improper by “traditional” Roman values. He enthusiastically participated as one, and wanted to inaugurate the year 193 CE dressed as a gladiator. He was assassinated before he could do this, but not before appearing as one countless times before the public.

In public he nowhere drove chariots except sometimes on a moonless night, for, though he was eager to play the charioteer in public, too, he was ashamed to be seen doing so; but in private he was constantly doing it, adopting the Green uniform.^[1] As for wild beasts, however, he slew many both in private and in public. Moreover, he used to contend as a gladiator; in doing this at home he managed to kill a man now and then, and in making close passes with others, as if trying to clip off a bit of their hair, he sliced off the noses of some, the ears of others, and sundry features of still others; but in public he refrained from using steel and shedding human blood. Before entering the amphitheatre he would put on a long-sleeved tunic of silk, white interwoven with gold, and thus arrayed he would receive our greetings; but when he was about to go inside, he put on a robe of pure purple with gold spangles, donning also after the Greek fashion a chlamys^[2] of the same colour, and a crown made of gems from India and of gold, and he carried a herald’s staff like that of Mercury. As for the lion-skin and club, in the street they were carried before him, and in the amphitheatres they were placed on a gilded chair, whether he was present or not. He himself would enter the arena in the garb of Mercury, and casting aside all his other garments, would begin his exhibition wearing only a tunic and barefoot.

Cassius Dio, *Epitome* 73.17

The lack of restrictions at the imperial level trickled down to the upper class, who followed suit in their own unRoman behaviours. Cassius Dio and Tacitus both mention elite men and women appearing as gladiators (which was customarily prohibited as the position was *infamis*) under Nero in 63 CE.

There was another exhibition that was at once most disgraceful and most shocking, when men and women not only of the equestrian but even of the senatorial order appeared as performers in the orchestra, in the Circus [Maximus],^[3] and in the hunting-theatre, like those who are held in lowest esteem. Some of them played the flute and danced in pantomimes or acted in tragedies and comedies or sang to the lyre; they drove horses, killed wild beasts and fought as gladiators, some willingly and some sore against their will.

Cassius Dio, *Roman History* 61.17.3

To the Roman equestrians he assigned places in the circus in front of the seats of the people, for up to that time they used to enter in an indiscriminate mass, as the Roscian law extended only to fourteen rows in the theatre.^[4] The same year witnessed shows of gladiators as magnificent as those of the past. However, many prominent matrons^[5] and senators disgraced themselves by appearing in the amphitheatre.

Tacitus, *Annales* 15.32

While women fighting as gladiators took place under the watch of many Emperors, it wasn’t seen as ordinary by some Romans. Here is the historian Suetonius writing about games held by Domitian, where he felt the need to point out that women were involved:

He constantly gave grand costly entertainments, both in the amphitheatre and in the Circus, where in addition to the usual races between two-horse and four-horse chariots, he also exhibited two battles, one between forces of infantry and the other by horsemen; and he even gave a naval battle in the amphitheatre. Besides he gave hunts of wild beasts, gladiatorial shows at night by the light of torches, and not only combats between men but between women as well.

Suetonius, *Life of Domitian* 4.1

Along with the wealthy women who participated as gladiators for fun, there were also professional female gladiators. Emperor Titus’ games at the inauguration of the Colosseum included staged hunts with trained female hunters.

There was a battle between cranes and also between four elephants; nine thousand animals both domestic and wild were killed and women (not those of any prominence, however) took part in dispatching them.

Cassius Dio, *Epitome* 66

SEX AND COMPANIONSHIP

Elagabalus was a member of the Severan Dynasty and ruled from 218-222. He was only fourteen when he came to the throne and he ruled about as well as one would expect a fourteen year old to do; in other words, he rather resembled Joffrey from Game of Thrones. He surrounded himself with a range of people the average Roman would not have thought fit company for an emperor, most of whom his successor, Alexander Severus, got rid of:

All the dwarfs belonging to Elagabalus, both male and female, fools, catamites ^[6] who had good voices, all kinds of dinner entertainers, and actors of pantomimes he made public property; those, however, who were not of any use were assigned, each to a different town, for support, in order that no one town might be burdened by a new kind of beggar. The eunuchs, whom Elagabalus had had in his base councils and had promoted, he presented to his friends, adding a statement to the effect that if they did not return to honest ways, it should be lawful to put them to death without authority from the courts. Women of ill repute, of whom he arrested an enormous number, he ordered to become public prostitutes, and he deported all catamites, those with whom that scourge had carried on a most pernicious intimacy, being drowned by shipwreck.

Historia Augusta, *Alexander Severus* 34.2

The Emperor Caligula went so far as to threaten to drown one specific group of sex workers, the *spintriae*, whom you could hire to entertain yourself or guests, and whose speciality was having group sex with each other before entertaining others:

He banished from the city the sexual perverts called *spintriae*, barely persuaded not to sink them in the sea.

Suetonius, *Caligula* 16

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- Empress Messalina with Britannicus © By Unknown - Ricardo André Frantz (User:Tetraktys), 2005, CC BY-SA 3.0,

1. Roman chariot-racers were divided into four main teams, all represented by a colour: Green, Red, Blue and White. ↩
2. A short cloak. ↩
3. The biggest stadium in Rome; it held chariot races. It literally meant "The Biggest Circle" ↩
4. Lucius Roscius Otto was a Roman tribune. Roscian Law reserved 14 rows in Roman theatres for equestrians, behind the 4 rows already reserved for senators. ↩
5. Powerful women. ↩
6. The receiving sexual partner of Roman homosexual relationships, often a prepubescent boy, but can also be also an insult when directed towards adult men. ↩

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