Roman Women: Following the Clues

By Suzanne Dixon

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Women - were they any different in Roman times from how they are today? Sort truth from fiction to decide if things have changed since women were first depicted as loving or resentful wives, daughters, servants and workers.

Introduction

Where do we look for Roman women? The traditional answer has been - in Latin literature; that's to say in the histories, poems, biographies and political speeches composed by, and for, élite men.

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Few women, however, feature in this literature, and when they are included, it is often to make a point about modern morals or the importance of home life. These women are symbols, not 'real women'.

State inscriptions are another possible source of information but, like Roman history books, they seldom mention women. Roman tombstones and statue bases celebrate women, but in a formulaic way (as do our modern-day equivalents), so they do not usually bring individual women to life for us, and it seems that all Roman children were sweet, all wives were chaste, all marriages were argument-free.

And even when these ancient inscriptions do appeal to us, there is the possibility that we are over-influenced by a sentimental portrait, which leaves out all the complexities of living relationships.

Roman paintings and sculpture present yet another avenue to the past. Women's portraits in the Roman tradition are often quite realistic, but they, too, fall into certain patterns, and sometimes individual heads seem to have been imposed on standard bodies.

Archaeology offers a different perspective, and Pompeii in particular is famous for having preserved for centuries, under lava, the details of the everyday life of the town. Nearby Herculaneum also shows us houses and flats, workplaces, bars and shops that are seldom even hinted at in the rather rarefied literature of Roman times.

Virtuous women

We know of good women from literature, legend, coins and statues but, above all, from the many epitaphs that have survived from Roman Italy - such as the following, concerning 'Claudia'.

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'Stranger, my message is short. Stop and read it. This is the unlovely tomb of a lovely woman. Her parents gave her the name Claudia. She loved her husband with all her heart. She bore two children, one of whom she left on earth, the other beneath it. She had a pleasing way of talking and walking. She tended the house and worked wool. I have said my piece. Go your way.' *(Corpus of Latin Inscriptions, CIL 6.15346)*

Bereaved Romans often praised their mothers, wives and daughters on their tombstones, although their words were usually much briefer than this famous epitaph from Italy in the late second century BC. Often, however, they did echo the key feminine virtues mentioned in the epitaph, those of affection, good housewifery and chastity. Wool work was very much a symbol of a good woman.

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Every Roman schoolchild also learned the story of another good woman, Lucretia, who attracted the unwelcome attentions of a tyrant by her beauty and her domestic industry (working late at night at the loom). Her rape and subsequent suicide was said to be the origin of the Roman revolt against the Etruscan monarchy, and the foundation of the Roman Republic in 509 BC. The story is told by the historian Livy in his first book (late first century BC).

Augustus instigated the practice of holding up the women of the imperial family as inspiring models of virtuous womanhood in the first century AD. Later emperors carried it further and in the second century AD empresses such as Sabina (wife of the emperor Trajan) were depicted as embodying, for example, *pietas* (family feeling).

Faustina the younger, wife of Marcus Aurelius, often featured on coins symbolising various virtues, while Marcus's daughter-in-law, Lucilla, was particularly associated with modesty.

Letters and epitaphs tell of the particular grief of Roman parents if a girl died before marriage - and they seem truly to have delighted in their living daughters. The first and second century writer Pliny the Younger *(Letter 5.16)* paints a touching portrait of his friend's daughter, Minicia Marcella, who died at the age of 13.

**Working women of Roman Italy**

A fresco portrait of Terentius Neo and his wife © People did not always work for a wage in the ancient world. Most people worked on the land and in the home, while upper-class men and women supervised households and estates.

Although there were specialist cloth shops, all women were expected to be involved in cloth production: spinning, weaving and sewing. Slave and free women who worked for a living were concentrated in domestic and service
positions - as perhaps midwives, child-nurses, barmaids, seamstresses, or saleswomen. We do, however, have a few examples of women in higher-status positions such as that of a doctor, and one woman painter is known.

Women's domestic work was seen as a symbol of feminine virtue ...

How do we know about women's work? From men saying in print what women should be doing - poets (like Virgil), and philosophers (like Seneca), and husbands praising their dead wives on tombstones not only for being chaste (*casta*) but also for excelling at working wool (*lanifica*).

We can also learn about women's work from pictures on vases and walls (paintings), or from sculptural reliefs on funerary and public art. Septimia Stratonice was a successful shoemaker (*sutrix*) in the harbour town of Ostia. Her friend Macilius decorated her burial-place with a marble sculpture of her, on account of her 'favours' to him (CIL 14 supplement, 4698).

Graffiti such as the ones on the wall of a Pompeian workshop record the names of women workers and their wool allocations - names such as Amaryllis, Baptis, Damalis, Doris, Lalage and Maria - while other graffiti are from women workers' own monuments, usually those of nurses and midwives (see CIL 14.1507).

Women's domestic work was seen as a symbol of feminine virtue, while other jobs - those of barmaid, actress or prostitute - were disreputable. Outside work like sewing and laundering was respectable, but only had a low-status. Nurses were sometimes quite highly valued by their employers/owners, and might be commemorated on family tombs.

Reliability of sources

As you will have noticed by now, it is not a simple matter to just 'follow the clues' when looking for information about the far distant past. Even assembling a variety of ancient sources does not necessarily result in a truthful or complete picture.

Collecting evidence about Roman women's lives involves ranging over completely different kinds of information, and sifting each piece carefully, with due attention to the purpose of each source and the bias or ignorance of its author. A love poet, for example, wants to express his feelings about a real or imagined beloved, not to give you a rounded portrait of a real woman - while a son mourning his mother's death will mention only her virtues.

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Any writer's choice of words, image and medium will be governed by his budget, and by the conventions of his time and social group. All of these aims and limitations affect the portrait presented. Bear in mind that the great majority of these sources are not authored or commissioned by women, but by men who are striving to make a particular point.

When trying to work out what the lives of Roman women were really like, you should be at least as critical of ancient sources as you are of modern media coverage of celebrities. Every type of evidence has to be sifted and
looked at from different angles if we hope to catch the essence of Roman women, and end up with some kind of understanding of their everyday lives.

**Find out more**

**Books**

*Women's Life in Greece and Rome* edited by Mary Lefkowitz and Maureen Fant (Johns Hopkins, 1992)


*Reading Roman Women* by Suzanne Dixon (London, 2001)

*Status: Roman Working Women in Ostia* by Natalie Kampen (Berlin, 1981)

*I Claudia: Women in Ancient Rome* by Diana Kleiner and Susan Matheson (New Haven, 1996)

*I Claudia II: Women in Roman Art and Society* by Diana Kleiner and Susan Matheson (Austin, 2000)

**About the author**

Suzanne Dixon is from Australia and has held lecturing positions at both the Australian National University and the University of Queensland. Her published books include *The Roman Mother* (1988), *The Roman Family* (1992) and *Reading Roman Women* (2001). She has also written numerous scholarly articles on the classical world. Suzanne now lives on an island in Moreton Bay, off the South Queensland coast, and is a freelance writer.
The list below includes Roman women who were notable for their family connections, or their sons or husbands, or their own actions. In the earlier periods, women came to the attention of (later) historians either as poisoners of their husbands (a very few cases), or as wives, daughters, and mothers of great men such as Scipio Africanus. In later periods, women exercised or tried to exercise political power either through their husbands (as did Fulvia and Livia Drusilla) or political intrigues (as did