

**Women's Life
in Greece and Rome**

A Source Book in Translation

Third Edition

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To our mothers, Mena Rosenthal and Nancy Brown

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dinner, praises Vergil and excuses Dido's suicide:³⁷ matches and compares poets, weighing Vergil on one side of the scale and Homer on the other. Schoolmasters yield; professors are vanquished; everyone in the party is silenced. No one can speak, not a lawyer, not an auctioneer, not even another woman. Such an avalanche of words falls, that you'd say it's like pans and bells being beaten. Now no one needs trumpets or bronzes: this woman by herself can come help the Moon when she's suffering from an eclipse.³⁸ As a philosopher she sets definitions on moral behaviour. Since she wants to seem so learned and eloquent she ought to shorten her tunic up to her knees³⁹ and bring a pig to Sylvanus⁴⁰ and go to the penny bath with the philosophers. Don't let the woman who shares your marriage bed adhere to a set style of speaking or hurl in well-rounded sentences the enthymeme shorn of its premise. Don't let her know all the histories. Let there be something in books she does not understand. I hate the woman who is continually poring over and studying Palaemon's⁴¹ treatise, who never breaks the rules or principles of grammar, and who quotes verses I never heard of, ancient stuff that men ought not to worry about. Let her correct her girlfriend's verses – she ought to allow her husband to commit a solecism.

Pauper women endure the trials of childbirth and endure the burdens of nursing, when fortune demands it. But virtually no gilded bed is laid out for childbirth – so great is her skill, so easily can she produce drugs that make her sterile or induce her to kill human beings in her womb. You fool, enjoy it, and give her the potion to drink, whatever it's going to be, because, if she wants to get bloated and to trouble her womb with a live baby's kicking, you might end up being the father of an Ethiopian – soon a wrong-coloured heir will complete your accounts, a person whom it's bad luck to see first thing in the morning.

70. *Bereavement. Rome, late 1st cent. AD (Martial, Epigram 9.30. L)*

Antistius Rusticus died on the savage shores of Cappadocia. O land guilty of a doleful crime, Nigrina brought back her husband's bones in her arms and complained that the trip was too short; and as she gave the sacred urn to the tomb, which she was jealous of, she saw herself twice bereft of her stolen spouse.

71. *Cicero on Clodia. Rome, 56 BC (Cicero, Pro Caelio 13-16.⁴² L)*

Not a comic poet speaking in generalities but a deadly serious advocate in a court of law, Cicero directs his sarcasm and considerable wit against a specific woman. Speaking last in the defence of Marcus Caelius Rufus, a former protégé, Cicero deliberately blurred the formal charges under the law against riot and amused the jury, restive because it had been empanelled on a holiday, with his spicy portrait of the already notorious Clodia, arguing that she had sponsored the prosecution for personal

reasons. With what amounted to character assassination, he paid off an old grudge of his own against her brother Clodius (see below, p. 292).

(13) The accusations are two: the gold and the poison. And the same person is on the scene for both. The gold is supposed to have been taken from Clodia⁴³ and the poison to have been procured to use on her. Everything else is slander, not accusations, better suited to malicious gossip than a court of law. 'Adulterer, lecher, briber' are insults, not accusations. ... I see the author of these two charges, the source, I see a specific person, a mind. 'He needed gold; he took it from Clodia, without witnesses, and kept it for as long as he needed it.' That's the clear proof of an uncommon intimacy. 'Then he decided to kill her, stirred up those he could, got the poison, established the place, and brought it.' Again, this is clear proof of a deep hatred, conceived after having been cruelly jilted.

In this trial, gentlemen of the jury, we are concerned only with Clodia, a noble woman and a notorious one, but I will say no more than is necessary about her to rebut the accusations. However, you, Gnaeus Domitius,⁴⁴ smart as you are, understand perfectly that we are concerned only with this woman. If she does not affirm that she lent the gold to Marcus Caelius, if she does not accuse him of having procured the poison for her, our conduct is inappropriate. To use the name of Roman matron when the respect owed to respectable women does not allow it! If, however, this woman were removed from the case, the accusers no longer have a head nor any means to attack Caelius. And surely another thing entirely would be the vigour that I would use were it not for the animosity between me and this woman's husband – excuse me, brother, I always make that mistake. Now, however, I am obliged to proceed with circumspection; and I will not push beyond the limits that my obligations to my client and the case itself demand. And furthermore I never considered it wise to make an enemy of a woman, especially one who is generally considered everybody's friend.

(14) But I would nevertheless begin by asking her whether she wants me to adopt with her a severe, solemn, old-style tone, or whether she prefers something more easy-going and modern. If she prefers the austere style, then I shall have to summon up from the underworld one of those beards – no, not one of the fashionable jobs that she likes so much, but a really serious hairy beard out of the portraits and statues of days gone by – to reprimand her and to speak in my place. Then she can't blame me! Let us imagine, therefore, that there appears a member of her own family: let's conjure up the famous Caecus, the Blind (it will be easier on him, as he can't see her).⁴⁵ If he were to rise up right now, he would say something like this:

'Woman, what do you have in common with Caelius? With a youth, a stranger? Why were you so intimate with him as to lend him the gold, or so inimical as to fear poison from him? Did you not see your father as

consul? Weren't you told that your uncle, your grandfather, your great-grandfather, your great-great-grandfather, and his father were consuls too? And then, didn't you realise that till just now you were the wife of Quintus Metellus?⁴⁶ He, a man of ancient lineage and great energy, a man extraordinarily devoted to his country, had only to step outside his house to overshadow virtually all his fellow citizens in courage, glory, and reputation. Born of a noble house, married into one just as illustrious, how could you get mixed up with someone like Caelius? Is he a relative? a relative by marriage? a friend of your husband? Not at all. This was nothing but sheer, unbridled passion. If the images of your male ancestors don't move you, did not even Quinta Claudia, my illustrious descendant, push you to vie in domestic virtue with the women who brought glory to our house? Not even Claudia, the Vestal Virgin? She who, holding her father close, did not allow his enemy, the tribune of the people, to pull him down from his chariot during his triumph? Why did you let yourself be influenced by the vices of your brother rather than by the qualities of your father and forefathers? And yet these, ever since my day, have been kept going both in the males of the family and, especially, in the females. Did I break the peace with Pyrrhus so that you could make daily treaties with your filthy lovers? Did I built the aqueduct to provide water for your post-incest ablutions? Did I built the road so that you could parade with other women's husbands?

(15) But why, gentlemen of the jury, did I bring in such a difficult character as old Appius, who might at any moment turn his censorious austerity against Caelius? But I'll get to that later, and in such a way, gentlemen of the jury, that I am sure I will be able to justify the life of Marcus Caelius even to the severest judges. As for you, woman – that's right, it is I speaking now, for myself – if you intend to justify your actions, your declarations, your calumnies, your machinations, your accusations, then you're going to have to give an accounting, and a clear one, of this great intimacy. The accusers, for their part, speak only of orgies, love affairs, adultery, Baiae,⁴⁷ beach parties, banquets, revels, singing, concerts, boat rides; and at the same time they give us to understand that there is nothing they say without your approval. And you, gripped by some sudden madness – were willing to have all this mud dragged into the Forum in front of the jury. So you either have to deny the charges and prove that they are lies or admit that neither your accusation nor your testimony deserve to be believed.

But perhaps you prefer that I behave more like a man of the world. Here's what I'll do with you: I'll pull the gruff, practically rustic old man off the stage and replace him with someone more to your liking, say, your little brother. He's so refined in this sort of thing! and, too, he loves you with all his heart and because of some faintheartedness, I suppose, and fear of the dark, the little brat always slept in your bed. What would he say now: 'Why all this fuss, sister? Why this madness?'

Why, with shout and speech, inflate
A little thing into a great?⁴⁸

You saw a young man, a neighbour. He was tall and handsome, and you liked his face and eyes. You wanted to see him more often. You managed to frequent the same gardens. And now you, a fine lady, want to hold that young man tight with your wealth, given that he is still in the power of a stingy father. But you cannot. He kicks, he spits, he rejects you. He doesn't think your gifts are worth so much. And you turn to another! You have a garden on the Tiber and you were very careful to put it right where the young people go to bathe; there every day you can take all the opportunities you want. Why then pester this one, who doesn't want you?

(16) ... [Caelius'] case is all but won. Against what accusation can he not defend himself? I am not speaking against that woman, but let us suppose that there is another woman, different from her, who gives herself freely to everybody – I mean everybody – who always has a lover to show off; let us suppose that in her garden, in her house, in her villa at Baiae, she gives complete freedom to the pleasures of all; that she goes so far as to maintain young men and to compensate with her largesse for the stinginess of their fathers; let us suppose that this woman is a widow and lives freely; that she is a hussy and lives brazenly; that she is a wealthy woman and lives extravagantly; that she is a slave to her appetites and lives like a whore. Should I consider a man an adulterer if he takes a little liberty when he meets her?

with luxury and fancy trappings that the Oppian law was needed to restrain them, when, since the rites of Ceres had been suspended because all the women were in mourning, the senate ordered mourning limited to thirty days? To whom is it not clear that poverty and misfortune were the authors of that law of yours, since all private wealth had to be turned over to public use, and that it was to remain in effect only as long as the reason for its writing did? ...

'Shall it be our wives alone to whom the fruits of peace and tranquillity of the state do not come? ... Shall we forbid only women to wear purple? When you, a man, may use purple on your clothes, will you not allow the mother of your family to have a purple cloak, and will your horse be more beautifully saddled than your wife is garbed? ...

[Cato] has said that, if none of them had anything, there would be no rivalry among individual women. By Hercules! All are unhappy and indignant when they see the finery denied them permitted to the wives of the Latin allies, when they see them adorned with gold and purple, when those other women ride through the city and they follow on foot, as though the power belonged to the other women's cities, not to their own. This could wound the spirits of men; what do you think it could do the spirits of women, whom even little things disturb? They cannot partake of magistracies, priesthoods, triumphs, badges of office, gifts, or spoils of war; elegance, finery and beautiful clothes are women's badges, in these they find joy and take pride, this our forebears called the women's world. When they are in mourning, what, other than purple and gold, do they take off? What do they put on again when they have completed the period of mourning? What do they add for public prayer and thanksgiving other than still greater ornament? Of course, if you repeal the Oppian law, you will not have the power to prohibit that which the law now forbids; daughters, wives, even some men's sisters will be less under your authority – never, while her men are well, is a woman's slavery cast off; and even they hate the freedom created by widowhood and orphanage. They prefer their adornment to be subject to your judgment, not the law's; and you ought to hold them in marital power and guardianship, not slavery; you should prefer to be called fathers and husbands to masters. The consul just now used odious terms when he said "womanish rebellion" and "secession". For there is danger – he would have us believe – that they will seize the Sacred Hill as once the angry plebeians did, or the Aventine. It is for the weaker sex to submit to whatever you advise. The more power you possess, all the more moderately should you exercise your authority.'

When these speeches for and against the law had been made, a considerably larger crowd of women poured forth in public the next day; as a single body they besieged the doors of the Brutuses, who were vetoing their colleagues' motion, and they did not stop until the tribunes took back their veto. After that there was no doubt but that all the tribes

would repeal the law. Twenty years after it was passed, the law was repealed.

174. *Sempronia, a revolutionary. Rome, 1st cent. BC (Sallust, Conspiracy of Catiline 24.3-25. L)*

The historian Sallust regarded the conspiracy led by Catiline in 62 BC as a result of moral decline; in his account, Catiline's supporter Sempronia egregiously lacks the qualities for which virtuous Roman matrons are celebrated, but possesses others.

(24.3) At that time Catiline is said to have attracted many people of every sort, including some women. These had first sold their bodies to finance their luxuries, but later, when age set a limit to this activity – but not to their tastes – fell heavily into debt. Catiline believed he could use these women to win over the urban slaves, set fire to the city, and either enlist or kill their husbands.

(25) One of these women was Sempronia, whose masculine boldness had already led her to commit many crimes. This woman was favoured by fortune in birth and beauty as well as in her husband and children. She was well read in Greek and Latin literature; she played the lyre and danced with greater skill than propriety warrants; and she had a number of other accomplishments, all of the sort that promote dissipation. But to her nothing was more worthless than modesty and chastity. It is not easy to say which she threw away more wantonly, her money or her reputation. She was so oversexed that it was more often she who went after men than the other way around. She had often broken promises, disavowed her debts, and been an accessory to murder. Love of luxury combined with poverty had driven her headlong. And yet, she had real talents. She could write verse, make jokes, and converse with modesty, tenderness or wantonness. She was a woman of considerable wit and charm.

175. *A portrait of Cleopatra. Egypt, 1st cent. BC (Plutarch, Life of Mark Antony 25.5-28.1, 29. 2nd cent. AD. G)*

'For Rome, who had never condescended to fear any nation or people, did in her time fear two human beings; one was Hannibal, and the other was a woman.²⁰ In Roman literature during her lifetime and just after her death²¹ (e.g. Vergil's characterisation of Dido in the *Aeneid*; Horace, *Odes* 1.37), Cleopatra represented the dangerous appeal of decadence and corruption. A highly educated Greek, with the wealth of Egypt at her disposal, she was mistress first of Julius Caesar and then of Mark Antony. In Plutarch's account traditional anecdotes are related with considerable sympathy and admiration.

[Caesar and Pompey knew Cleopatra when she was] still a girl, and