

ROMAN WOMEN

Edited and with a New Introduction by
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CORNELIA THE MATRON

Corrado Petrocelli

“Whenever we try to picture this woman clearly in our minds, to bring her from the realm of imagination to the real world, she vanishes. She remains a dim figure, and thus we must leave her, for only in that vagueness may we recognize her.” With these words, Henry Houssaye (*Aspasie, Cléopâtre, Théodore* [Paris, 1890]) described the difficulties encountered in reconstructing an accurate, detailed biography of Aspasia, the most celebrated woman of classical Greece. The sources, which view her with hostility, portray her as a woman indisputably endowed with intelligence, learning, wisdom, and even political acumen, qualities rarely found in women living in Athens in the fifth century B.C. Yet she left no record of her thoughts and feelings, not a word written by her own hand. She suddenly bursts upon the scene in Plutarch’s biography of Pericles when, in the midst of a discussion of the expedition against Samos, the author launches into a digression about Aspasia, underlining the remarkable intellectual abilities (*techné* and *dynamis*) with which she challenged the politicians and men of learning of her time. Nothing is known about the period prior to her relationship with Pericles (or Socrates), except that she was from Miletus and was the daughter of Axiochos. We do not know when she was born or how old she was when she arrived in Athens. An impenetrable silence also surrounds the end of her life, by which time Pericles (and shortly afterwards, Lysicles, the other politician with whom she was associated) had died.

“No Greek woman ever became famous except through men, or at least, through one man.” This observation, with which Nicole Loraux (*Grecia al femminile* [Rome and Bari, 1993], 125) dutifully opens her essay on Aspasia, applies not only to the Greek world of Athens in the fifth century B.C. but to the Roman world as well. Although it is true that “in presenting a list of women famous in their times, a modern historian of ancient Rome would not find the same difficulties” as those encountered when dealing with the Greek world (*ibid.*, xxviii), it is equally true that the Greeks and Romans displayed a similar perspective and that

the records of both cultures reveal a similar selection of information. Except for extremely rare cases, we have no direct testimony of women’s voices, no direct records of their thoughts. Barred from men’s duties (*virilia officia*) because of their indisputable, innate incapacity (*infirmitas, imbecillitas sexus, levitas animi, impotentia muliebris*), excluded from public life and from the rhythms of collective society, Roman women, like Greek women, were considered only in their relationship to men and in their capacity as mothers, wives, sisters, or daughters. The portrayals we have of women (mostly drawn by men) have often been inspired by stereotypes, and the examples of famous women passed down by legend or written record have systematically been reduced to models of canonical virtue or of flagrant transgression.

Plutarch, at the beginning of his treatise *Examples of Feminine Valor*, in which he attempts to show that virtue (*arete*) in a man and in a woman were substantially the same thing, mentions the Roman custom of *laudationes funebres*, eulogies delivered at the funerals of women as well as men. This contrasted with the Athenian custom of the *logos epitaphios* and the belief (which Thucydides ascribes to Pericles) that it was wise to say as little about women as possible, whether in praise or blame. Yet even when Roman women were commemorated by *laudationes funebres* (which were a late development, the first example dating from 102 B.C.: Quintus Lutatius Catulus’s elegy for his mother Popilia, mentioned by Cicero in *De oratore* 2.44), they were merely *the objects* of men’s judgment of their qualities. Significantly, the *laudationes funebres* had more to do with the prestige and career of the man giving the speech than with the woman being commemorated. There are no records of women delivering these commemorative speeches.

Even for someone like Cornelia, daughter of Scipio Africanus and mother of the Gracchi, a woman frequently mentioned in historical sources, it is difficult to reconstruct a biography if we wish to see her as a person rather than an idealized figure of legendary virtue. Like Aspasia, Cornelia enjoyed a fame that was unusual for the women of her time, among whom, we may reasonably conclude, she distinguished herself. This fame depended not only on her noble descent and virtuous behavior, but also and most importantly on her cultural and intellectual abilities. Aspasia, an animating force and a direct participant in Pericles’ circle, was often described as the incarnation of novelty and transgression. In contrast, Cornelia was idealized by posterity as the perfect matron, the embodiment of those values that traditionally characterized the family, the underlying structural unit of Roman society. Yet in order to

describe Cornelia's life, we must resort to conjecture and refer continually to the men in her life, digging through their biographies, full of references to their careers, in search of a few scanty bits of information about her.

An Important Marriage

The year of Cornelia's birth is unknown. Although much is known about her life from the time of her marriage to Tiberius Sempronius Gracchus until the death of her son Gaius, references to the other periods of her life are few. We have no information about her adolescence and early youth, which must have been rich in experiences, especially concerning her education and intellectual development. The only direct record we have (offered almost as an explanation for the tragedies in Cornelia's life) is furnished by Pliny, who tells us that Cornelia was an example of a very ill-omened condition for women: being born with genitals closed (*Nat. Hist.* 7.69; see also Solinus 1.67).

It is not surprising that Cornelia makes her official appearance on the stage of history just prior to her marriage. Marriage represented the culminating moment in a woman's social realization. Through the abandonment and symbolic consecration of the objects of childhood, marriage marked a bride's coming of age in the same way that the donning of the *toga virilis* symbolized the youth's break with the past and sanctioned his entrance into society, with full rights and privileges.

The marriage of an eminent politician like Tiberius Sempronius Gracchus to the daughter of Publius Cornelius Scipio, Africanus Major, the man who had defeated Hannibal, must have been a memorable event.

Livy dedicates special attention to it (38.57), while describing the final phase of Africanus's life, specifically in his account of Sempronius Gracchus's intercession on behalf of the Scipios. During an attempt by certain enemies to bring the Scipios to trial, Sempronius Gracchus had energetically intervened to help them, despite the deep hostility he felt for some of the more influential members of the *gens Cornelia*, a mutual antagonism to which many authors attest (see, for example: Livy 38.52.9 and 57.4; Cicero *De provinciis consularibus* 8.18; Valerius Maximus 4.1.8; Plutarch *Tiberius Gracchus* 1.3; and Gellius *Noctes Atticae* 12.8.1). His intercession must have been a great surprise to the senators who later during a solemn banquet at the Capitolium requested that Africanus Major "promise his daughter to Gracchus." Once the engagement rites had been concluded, Scipio returned home and informed his wife, Tertia

Aemilia. She at first resented not being consulted but then forgave her husband, for the bridegroom he had accepted was truly outstanding. Here Livy may be referring to the fact that mothers generally played a decisive role in their daughter's marriages or divorces. (In this context we might call to mind the *ius maternum* invoked by Amata against Latinus's decision in the *Aeneid* 7.402.) Livy's anecdote reflects a custom that gradually became more common: the consolidating of political alliances through marriage.

The reconciliation of these two families is recorded vividly by Valerius Maximus: those who had come to the sacred banquet as enemies, *odio dissidentes*, returned home as friends, *amicitia et adfinitate iuncti*: Scipio promised his daughter to Gracchus "right then and there" (4.2.3). And by Gellius: this all happened simply because they were sitting near each other quite by chance at a banquet at the Capitolium (12.8.4). (See also Seneca the Elder *Controversiae*, exc. 5.2.2; Dio Cassius fr. 65.1; *Latin Panegyrics* 7[6].13.4.) Another reference may be found in the rhetorical argument (about *genus argumentationis remotum*) used by Cicero to blame Scipio for the repercussions of the Gracchi's actions: "If Africanus had not married his daughter to Tiberius Gracchus, and if she had not given birth to the two Gracchi, such widespread rebellions would never have occurred" (*De inventione* 1.91).

The accuracy of records from this period, especially those regarding the "trial of the Scipios" (ca. 187-184 B.C.) has long been debated by scholars and was subject to controversy even in ancient times. More than once, Livy was forced to record discrepancies between his conflicting sources and to reveal his embarrassment at not knowing which version to follow (for example, the divergences regarding the death of Scipio, 38.56.1, for whom neither the date of death nor the place of burial is certain). One subject of conflict in the sources is whether Cornelia Minor (the older sister of Publius Cornelius Scipio Nasica Corculus) was given in marriage by Africanus himself (*haud dubie a patre collocata erat* Livy 38.57.2) or whether she married Gracchus after her father's death. Livy tends toward the former hypothesis, elaborating on it with copious detail, while treating the latter only sketchily. Plutarch, whose biographies of Tiberius and Gaius Gracchus are our main source of detailed information concerning Cornelia's life, claims, however, that the former version is untrue. According to Plutarch's account, it was Appius Claudius Pulcher who proposed during a banquet of augurs that Gracchus marry his daughter Claudia. The episode follows the same pattern of Livy's story about Scipio and Tertia Aemilia. Here too, the authoritative

princeps senatus returned home to announce the betrothal to his wife, Antistia, who expressed surprise at such unjustified haste but forgave him because he had chosen "Tiberius Gracchus for her daughter's husband" (Plutarch *Tiberius Gracchus* 4.3). Immediately after, Plutarch states that he is aware that others have told this same story about Scipio Africanus and Sempronius Gracchus, but that more people agreed with his version. More important, he records Polybius's statement that "after Africanus died, his relatives betrothed Tiberius to Cornelia, who had been left by her father neither married nor engaged" (ibid. 4). Given this second account of the engagement, and considering the authority of Polybius, who had close ties with the Scipio family, we will take Plutarch's version as true. Moreover, the tradition that Africanus Major and Gracchus were enemies (various authors agree on this point) is puzzling and may be based, according to some modern scholars (for example Fraccaro and Carcopino), on elements that are far from cogent. Even though Plutarch confirms this supposed animosity between the two men (*Tiberius Gracchus* 1.3) by stating that Sempronius Gracchus was Scipio's enemy and not his friend, it may be that the reports of this antagonism were simply based on the conflicts that later arose between Scipio Aemilianus and Tiberius Gracchus, or were derived from the anecdote regarding their reconciliation.

Cornelia's marriage was strategically planned by a family council held by the Scipios in order to establish an alliance with the Sempronii (ties later reinforced by the marriage of Scipio Aemilianus and Sempronia, daughter of Cornelia and Sempronius Gracchus). When could this marriage have taken place? Africanus Major's death, which occurred in approximately 183 B.C., gives us a fixed point on which to base our calculations. This same date is also useful in helping us establish the year of Cornelia's birth, for at the latest, she could not have been born more than a few months after that date. Modern scholars vary in their attempts to reconstruct the chronology of her life. To calculate this chronology, we must continue to concern ourselves with the men of her family.

Only three of Cornelia's children reached adulthood: Sempronia, Tiberius, and Gaius. We will find it useful to focus on her two sons, for whom detailed records exist. From Plutarch we learn that Tiberius Gracchus was not yet thirty at the time of his assassination in 133, and that Gaius, his political heir, was nine years younger (*Gaius Gracchus* 1.2). Thus, Tiberius was born in 163 (or 162) and Gaius in 154 (or 153). Cornelia has been described by the sources as an unusually fertile example of motherhood, bearing twelve children. Pliny mentions her in his discus-

sion of procreation: "Some people generate only daughters or only sons, whereas frequently in others we find an alternating of sons and daughters, such as in the case of the mother of the Gracchi, for twelve times, and Agrippina, the mother of Germanicus, for nine times" (*plerumque et alternant, sicut Gracchorum mater duodeciens et Agrippina Germanici noviens* [*Nat. Hist.* 7.57]).

In using this source, Mommsen interpreted *alternant* in the strictest sense. Basing his calculation on Polybius's claim (31.27.1-5) that Scipio Aemilianus generously paid the second half of the dowries of Africanus's daughters after their mother's death in 162 B.C., Mommsen postulated that Cornelia was married in 165 B.C. As it was customary to name the eldest son after the father, Mommsen also deduced that Tiberius must have been the first in a series of twelve children (or at least, second, if the eldest child had been a daughter) in which sons and daughters alternated. Carcopino and others, however, have convincingly contested such a late dating for Cornelia's marriage. Aside from the different ways this passage from Polybius may be interpreted (moreover, it is full of lacunae), the only thing it definitely proves is that by the year 162 B.C. Cornelia was already married. Forcing her to produce twelve children in less than fifteen years, and with such a rigorous alternation of sons and daughters, appears excessive, despite the attempts of scholars such as A. Guarino (who refers to these concerns as cavalier) to explain this by means of twin, premature, or multiple births. If that were the case, Pliny would probably not have described such an extraordinary example of fertility with the term *plerumque et* (a large number), which calls to mind a more common phenomenon. The other example of fecund motherhood that Pliny mentions was Agrippina Major, who gave birth nine times, bearing first six sons and then three daughters, as Mommsen himself demonstrated in 1878 (*Hermes* 13: 241ff.). On the basis of this evidence (especially Pliny *Nat. Hist.* 10.178 and Aristotle *Historia animalium* 7.6.5585B: *metabállousin*), K. Moir interprets the words *plerumque et alternant* more loosely and suggests that Cornelia first had a series of daughters and then a series of sons. This would help clarify a problem that arises if we fix Cornelia's marriage date many years prior to 163, the year Tiberius was born, presumably her eldest son and named after his father. It has been suggested that Cornelia may have had other sons before Tiberius was born, all of whom had died in infancy and had been given their father's name. This conflicts with Plutarch's assertion that when Sempronius Gracchus died, he was survived by his wife Cornelia and their twelve children (*Tiberius Gracchus* 1.5). Tiberius and Gaius

Gracchus had at least one older sister, Sempronia, who married Scipio Aemilianus. When the young Tiberius at age sixteen accompanied Scipio Aemilianus on the African campaign, his sister was already married to Aemilianus. Plutarch (*Tiberius Gracchus* 8.7) reports that in order to encourage ambition in her children (particularly Tiberius) Cornelia complained that she was still known as Scipio's mother-in-law, rather than as the mother of the Gracchi. Scholars have dated Cornelia's marriage to a period ranging from 176 B.C. (proposed by Carcopino), to around 180 (Earl) or 181 (Moir). K. Moir has also shown how the same data may be combined to give different results and suggests 170 B.C. as an equally plausible alternative.

Two Serpents Appear

Such a late dating of Cornelia's marriage would make Sempronius Gracchus even older. Modern scholars vary in fixing the year of his birth, ranging from 220 to 208 B.C. A few important phases of his career are well documented, but it is not always easy to reconstruct the surrounding political context. He was tribune perhaps in 187, when he attempted to keep Lucius Scipio from going to prison (but some scholars date this episode to 184); aedile in 182; praetor in Spain after 180; consul in 177 and again in 163. He was a capable politician, flexible and conciliatory (as we know from his various diplomatic missions abroad and from the peace negotiations he conducted in Spain in 178), at times very rigid (as when he took repressive measures during the revolt in Sardinia), but also very generous in the financing of games, public works, and buildings. His legendary sternness as censor in 169 may have been the origin of a story claiming that when he went to bed at night the citizens put out their lights to avoid being accused of wastefulness or disorderly behavior.

By the time he married Cornelia he was a mature man, well embarked upon a successful career. The age difference between them must have been considerable. We learn this from an anecdote appearing in Cicero's *De divinatione* 2.62, which the author claims was first recorded in a letter written by Gaius Gracchus to Marcus Pomponius. The episode is described in *De divinatione* 1.36, and a rational explanation is given for the event in 2.62:

Tiberius Gracchus, son of Publius, was twice Consul, Censor, and Augur of great authority, a wise man and exemplary citizen. One day he summoned the soothsayers because he had found a pair of serpents in his

house. His son, Gaius Gracchus, has left us the written record of this event. The soothsayers replied that if he released the male serpent, his wife would die shortly afterward. If he released the female serpent, then he would die. As he was already near the end of his life, while his wife, the daughter of Publius Scipio Africanus, was still young, he decided that he should die. He let the female serpent go and died a few days later.

In the biographies of illustrious persons, serpents often appear as portents and omens, and this is true of the traditions regarding the Scipios and the Sempronii. When a snake appeared in Pomponia's bed, this omen signified that she was no longer barren. Shortly afterwards, she became pregnant, and later Africanus Major was born. (This anecdote is similar to the story of Olympias, the mother of Alexander, told by Gellius 6.1. Another, analogous story about Atia, Augustus's mother, is told by Suetonius in *Divus Augustus* 94.) Similar premonitory apparitions of serpents also occurred in the Sempronii, foreboding unwelcome events for Tiberius Gracchus, the consul and husband of Cornelia, who fell during a skirmish with the Carthaginian, Magon (Livy 25.16 and Valerius Maximus 1.6.8), and for Tiberius, Cornelia's tribune son, shortly before his tragic end (Plutarch *Tiberius Gracchus*).

What the ancients found most striking about the story of Sempronius Gracchus and Cornelia was her longevity, for she outlived all the men in her family, and showed great ability in managing her own affairs autonomously (Plutarch *Gaius Gracchus* 19). In a society in which average life expectancy was short, especially for females (consider not only the infant mortality rate but the number of women who died in childbirth), Cornelia with her numerous pregnancies was an even more remarkable exception. When a woman had survived her husband or sons, this was mentioned in funerary inscriptions as noteworthy. Given that history is full of women who demonstrated their devotion by sacrificing their own lives after the deaths of their husbands, Gracchus, in choosing to die in Cornelia's place, was extraordinarily generous. The episode is cited by Pliny as one of various *exempla pietatis* (7.122), and Plutarch (*Tiberius Gracchus* 1.2) tells us that Gracchus's decision was motivated by love for his wife. Valerius Maximus (4.6.1) contrasts this with the story of Admetus and praises it as a remarkable illustration of conjugal love (see also *De viris illustribus* 57). He concludes by saying that he is uncertain whether we must consider Cornelia lucky for having had such a husband or pity her for having lost him. Gracchus probably died in 154 B.C. (or not long afterward), the year of Gaius's birth, most likely their last child,

when Cornelia was not yet forty. Thus we may deduce that she was born around 190 B.C. or in the years just prior to that date. In fixing the year of her birth at such a late date (proposed by those scholars who also fix her marriage at a rather late date) the only point of reference we have is the year 183 B.C., the year her father died. Cornelia must have been born by that date, or it is possible she was born a few months afterward as Africanus's posthumous daughter, but there is no evidence to support this. It is much more likely that she was a small child when Africanus died (in Gellius's account—where, however, her father gives her in marriage—she is described as *virginem iam viro maturam*). Plutarch, drawing on Polybius's testimony, tells us that Cornelia had been left by her father *anèkdoton kai anèggyon*, neither married nor engaged (*Tiberius Gracchus* 4.4), hardly an appropriate description for a small child. A woman, nonetheless, could be considered *viripotens*, of marriageable age, even at the early age of twelve, and we have many records of very young brides marrying at fourteen or even earlier. The average marrying age for young girls, however, was between fifteen and twenty (here we should remember that the Augustan dispositions concerning marriage obliged women to marry between the ages of twenty and fifty). This would have been Cornelia's age if she married Gracchus between the years 176, as Carcopino believes, and 170 B.C., the late alternative proposed by Moir. This necessarily partial and approximative dating does not conflict with the main evidence we have. These sources fully agree that Cornelia lived a very long life and that when Plutarch described her in her villa at Misenum (where she retired after Gaius's tragic death in 121 B.C.), telling her guests the stories of her father and her children (*Gaius Gracchus* 19), she was quite an elderly woman. When her husband died, Cornelia rose to the occasion with the dignity required of her social position. The abilities she displayed in these circumstances suggest not only that she was a strong and spirited woman but that she was also mature enough in age to have gained much wisdom from her experiences.

In *De divinatione* 1.36, Cicero tells us that Gracchus chose to die instead of his young—the word Cicero uses is *adulescens*—wife. We would gain nothing here by discussing the heated debates of scholars who have attempted to define *adulescentia*, which may actually be interpreted rather flexibly, as the period extending from vigorous youth to the threshold of genuine *senectus*, old age. The point of the serpent episode was to emphasize the age difference between husband and wife, and the fact that Cornelia at the time of Gracchus's death (he already an old

man) was still young enough to remarry and have more children. Pliny underlines this and praises Gracchus's decision, not only because it showed how much he loved his wife, but also because it displayed his concern for the good of the state. Gracchus ordered that the male serpent be killed, since "Cornelia was still young and could still have children" (*Nat. Hist.* 7.122).

Plutarch may be saying the same thing in *Life of Tiberius Gracchus* (1.5) when he states that Gracchus made his decision because "he believed that he should be the one to die, as he was older, while Cornelia was still young." Elsewhere Plutarch specifies what he means by the expression "still young" (*eti neas ouses*). In *Life of Cato the Younger* 25, Plutarch tells us that Quintus Hortensius Hortalus, wishing to provide descendants for himself and to create closer ties with Cato, asked Cato to give him his daughter, Porcia, in marriage, even though she was already married to Bibulus and had two children. When this request was denied, Hortensius changed his mind and asked Cato to give him his wife, Marcia, instead, and this time Cato agreed. What interests us here is the expression used by Plutarch in this context, almost identical to the one he uses in reference to Cornelia but with one addition which for our purposes is quite illuminating. Hortensius did not hesitate to ask Cato for his wife who was "still young enough to give birth to more children" (*nean men ousan eti pros to tiktein*).

Here Are My Jewels

Cornelia was raised not only in the stimulating and broad-minded environment of the Scipio family, but also in an era that was quite unusual, both in itself and in its attitude toward women. In this era of profound change and deep contradiction, public recognition of women (who, significantly, seem very active in this period) alternated with repression of them. Earlier, during the terrible period of the Punic wars, women, as private individuals or as groups, had received public recognition for their meritorious deeds. For example, Busa, a wealthy woman from Apulia, was honored by the senate for the assistance she gave the troops who had sought refuge in Canosa after the defeat at Cannae (*Livy* 22.52.7; *Valerius Maximus* 4.8.2). *Livy* also tells us of a group of matrons who were officially summoned and brought together after the appearance of an omen. Twenty-five of them were then selected and entrusted with an offering to be made to Juno, after which followed sacrifices "in purity and chastity" (*Livy* 27.37). The high male death rate had led to greater

autonomy for women, especially in managing their patrimonies, which now frequently passed into their own control. The legislation of the time produced, aside from general provisions of a sumptuary nature, also a few restrictive measures. Later, in 169 B.C., the *lex Voconia* limited the wealth and property that matrons of the upper classes could inherit. Marriages became more unstable, while sterner attitudes prevailed in morals and behavior. Around 216/215 B.C., the cult of Venus Verticordia (she who turns her heart and soul toward Virtue) was introduced in order to encourage chastity and modesty in virgins and married women. Two vestals were accused of incest. One was buried alive, the other committed suicide (according to Livy 22.57, although the sources conflict on this point). The day after the Roman defeat at Cannae, the senate was forced to restrict the mourning period for a large number of matrons so that they could celebrate rites in honor of Ceres. Women were required to respect their religious duties, in which they performed an important role for the community, although at times this entailed setting aside their personal feelings. As Valerius Maximus (1.1.15) informs us, "as soon as the tears for their recently deceased loved ones had dried and the signs of mourning had been set aside, mothers and daughters, wives and sisters, were forced (*coactae*) to put on their white robes and make offerings of incense."

In 213 B.C. the aediles accused a number of matrons of adultery and immoral behavior and several of them were convicted and sent into exile. In this same period, Rome seems to have been invaded by a wave of superstition, accompanied by an army of soothsayers and practitioners of magic. Traditional religious ceremonies fell into disuse and new cults appeared, not only within the walls of private homes, but also in public places. Livy (25.1) reports that a scandal arose because women "in the forum and the Capitolium no longer perform sacrifices and invoke the gods according to the traditional ways (*patrio more*)." The praetor intervened by banning the celebration of strange or foreign rites in public or in sacred places and ordered the confiscation of all books containing divinatory formulas, prayers, or instructions on the art of performing sacrifices. The importation of a new cult from Phrygia, the cult of Cybele, did not occur until 204 B.C., when Cybele was officially admitted to Rome and was triumphantly welcomed by Scipio Nasica and by the matrons and vestals of the city. The authorities' vigilance regarding these matters continued even after the war had ended, when new religions and mystery cults spread throughout Rome and Italy. In Rome, religion was a civic institution essentially based on ritual practices and was closely con-

nected to politics. Women, who were excluded from politics, were also formally excluded from the sacred, collective events on which the life of the city depended. Yet they had their own religious function and space: as vestals and priestesses, in special cults where they had a specific role to perform, in rites exclusively for women (where for once they enjoyed a dominant role), and, as time passed, in the mystery cults offering personal salvation. The development of religious movements in which women could play a leading role led to the decline of women's cults. In the rites of Bacchus, women had the power to initiate men, mainly young men, thereby stealing them from both family and the city. The authorities came to view this power as subversive and cruelly suppressed the Bacchanals in 186 B.C. This was a return to darker times. Shortly afterward, the outbreak of an epidemic aroused suspicion against women in general, and many women were brought to trial for poisoning.

The case of the Bacchanals was not the only clamorous event in which women played a dominant role in the first half of the second century. In 195 B.C., they burst upon the political scene, invading the forum en masse and demonstrating before the houses of the tribunes, to show their support for the proposed repeal of the *lex Oppia*. This law had been passed twenty years earlier during the conflict with Carthage, a very crucial time in Roman history. The law limited drastically the amount of costly goods—sumptuous clothing, gold, jewelry, chariots—that a woman could own without these items being considered unnecessary, and unlawful, luxuries. Livy (34.1–8) gives an account (reflecting his own views and the temper of his own era) of the debate that took place on this question, in which the two sides were represented by Cato and by Lucius Valerius. In his speech Cato, an intransigent moralist (at the time consul), vigorously attacked these outspoken women, who, he believed, posed a serious threat to society. By violating the rules of modesty, *pudicitia*, escaping the control of their families, and assembling in public they constituted a dangerous female revolt that could have disastrous consequences. Moreover, giving in to their demands signified yielding to the greed (*avaritia*) and extravagance (*luxuria*) that had begun to spread through Roman society, destroying the roots of those wholesome practices and virtues (*mos maiorum*) on which Rome's fortune had been built. Valerius replied that there was nothing subversive about the women's demonstration. He emphasized that they could not aspire to the public, religious, political, or military honors reserved for men (*non magistratus nec sacerdotia nec triumphi nec insignia nec dona aut spolia bellica iis contingere possunt* 34.7.8) and that for them the only possible signs of distinction

were beautiful clothing and jewelry (*munditiae et ornatus et cultus, haec feminarum insignia sunt*, *ibid.* 9). The *lex Oppia* had been passed in wartime, a period of shortages and of peril. Now that peace and prosperity had been reestablished, it was time to repeal the law and allow women to enjoy the luxuries proper to their sex. Valerius won the debate: the law was repealed and the women were allowed to keep their jewels. (Later, during his term as censor in 184 B.C., Cato limited some forms of sumptuous display and opposed fashions that had come in with the Hellenizing tendency of the time.) It is easy to imagine that a woman like Cornelia's mother, Tertia Aemilia, wife of Africanus, might have participated in the women's protest, or at least shared their views, although we have no record confirming this. Polybius informs us that when Tertia Aemilia left her home to attend official ceremonies for matrons, she cut a magnificent figure: laden with jewels, traveling about the city in her ornately decorated *pilentum*, or carriage, accompanied by an army of servants.

Jewels also play a role in Cornelia's story and in the famous anecdote concerning her (recorded by Valerius Maximus 4.4.1). One day after a matron from Campania had shown Cornelia her jewels, in reply she pointed to her two sons, just returned from school, and told the friend that these were her jewels (*haec ornamenta sunt mea*). There is no way to determine if the incident is historically true. In Plutarch's *Life of Phocion* (19), we find an almost identical story, in which Phocion's wife boasts to her friend that her most precious jewel is her husband. It would be useful to explore why this anecdote came to be associated with the legend of Cornelia. One hypothesis traces the origin of the story to Cornelia's presumed financial difficulties (Valerius Maximus refers to her as one of the famous *exempla de paupertate*). Seneca, the chief source of information about her financial problems, claimed (in *Ad Helviam matrem de consolatione* 12.6 and also in *Naturales quaestiones* 1.17.8) that Scipio's daughters received their dowries from public funds because their father had left them no money. This episode reported by Seneca actually involves another Cornelia and her father, Gnaeus Cornelius Scipio Calvus, as Valerius Maximus records (4.4.10), and occurred during the Iberian campaign. We cannot say for certain whether the decline of Africanus's family also entailed an economic crisis. Other sources agree that dowries for the two Cornelias, each fixed at fifty talents, were provided by Tertia Aemilia (for the first half of the amount) and Scipio Aemilianus (for the second half). If Africanus's son, Publius, was still

alive when the first payment was made, as some scholars, such as Bandelli, have suggested, the fact that his mother paid the dowry, drawing perhaps on her own patrimony, would strongly suggest that the Scipios were in economic trouble. Trying to trace Africanus's male descendants to see if they were alive at the time would be of no help here, as it is not certain how many sons he had (theories range from three to only one). It is very likely that Aemilia (coming from a family like the Aemilii Pauli) handled her own financial affairs. Polybius tells us that she lived in luxury and that most of her wealth had been acquired in the happy days of Africanus.

We have no real proof of Cornelia's economic difficulties (except, perhaps, the fact that her dowry was only fifty talents). She continued to live in high style even after her sons died, receiving guests at her villa and "exchanging gifts with kings" (Plutarch, *Gaius Gracchus* 19.2). This would suggest that her situation was secure. As for her sons, Plutarch tells us that Tiberius Gracchus offered to pay compensation to Octavius at a moment when his own finances were far from flourishing and describes Gaius (2.4) as a man of refined tastes and a spendthrift. It is likely that the story of Cornelia's famous reply came into being at a time when the criticism of luxury and of moral decline were favorite subjects for the moralistic writers of the day. This is borne out by the stern tone used by Valerius Maximus in his treatment of the saying *maxima ornamenta esse matronis liberos*—"For married women children [are] their most precious jewels." In the Roman imagination Cornelia was pictured as an old-fashioned woman devoted to her family. She was considered to be very different from the women of her time, from the other women of the Scipios, and even from her own mother. Here we should mention another story about jewels. Cornelia's mother, Tertia Aemilia, had an adopted grandson, Scipio Aemilianus, son of Lucius Aemilius Paulus and Papiria. He had been adopted by her son, Publius. Polybius recounts that when Tertia Aemilia died, about 162 B.C., immediately after the funeral, Scipio Aemilianus collected her splendid jewels and gave them to his natural mother, Papiria. His mother was now living apart from her husband and lacked means to maintain the high standard of living that her noble rank required. Papiria did not hesitate to wear the jewels, and all the matrons (as well as Polybius) commended her son's generosity (Polybius 31.26.6ff.). Cornelia never saw her mother's jewelry again. Her famous remark may conceal a trace of bitterness about the fortune she had lost.

Legimus epistulas Corneliae

Jewels were a status symbol for matrons and also a frequent topic for public debate. Roman tradition commemorated women who had helped save Rome by donating their gold to the public coffers in the times of Camillus or during the invasions of the Gauls. We have already mentioned the provisions made during and immediately following the Second Punic War. Now times had changed and women had their own patrimonies to defend. Women like Cornelia (or her mother, Aemilia) who competently handled their own affairs and those of their families (we have no record of Cornelia being helped or hindered by a *tutor*) were no longer exceptions to the norm. When the triumvirs levied an emergency tax in 42 B.C. on the patrimonies of fourteen hundred wealthy matrons, these women (*ordo matronarum*, Valerius Maximus 8.3.3) replied with a public protest. They gathered in the forum, where they were eloquently represented by Hortensia (the daughter of the great orator Quintus Hortensius Hortalus). Their spokeswoman declared that it was wrong of men to tax the patrimonies and the dowries that allowed matrons to enjoy a manner of life befitting their social station. She reminded the men that although women were barred from the military and from politics, in the times of the Punic wars they had helped save the city, acting on their own initiative, by donating their jewels when funds were needed. Hortensia's speech convinced the men. Valerius Maximus attests to this (8.3.3), as does Appian (*Bella Civilia* 4.32–34) who records her entire speech.

Quintilian praises Hortensia's speech and mentions it in connection with the education of children and the need for parents to pass on to their children a rich cultural heritage (1.1.6). Hortensia and Lelia (daughter of Gaius Lelius) were praised as examples of women who carried on the illustrious examples of their fathers, while Cornelia was remembered for her contribution to her sons' education and to their development as great orators. Evidence of her influence may be found in the letters Cornelia passed down to later generations. Cicero states that he had read those letters (*Brutus* 211), "*legimus epistulas Corneliae matris Gracchorum*," and that he understood why it was said that her sons "had been raised in eloquence rather than in their mother's womb" (*apparet filios non tam in gremio educatos quam in sermone matris*). The letters attributed to Cornelia are the earliest examples of private correspondence in Latin, with very few exceptions (we have record of a few individual letters from the legendary royal period and a few references to Cato's epistles) prior to Cicero's own letters.

Cicero's praise for the letters is remarkable, because they were written by a woman. His praise for her sons, however, is not surprising. Despite the hostile attitude toward them evinced in the sources, Tiberius and Gaius were universally known as eloquent men. Records exist which mention writings by Gaius Gracchus (for example the anecdote of Sempronius Gracchus and the snakes), including a *biblion* about his brother (mentioned by Plutarch in *Tiberius Gracchus* 8.9). The Gracchi's speeches were certainly recorded and read in later times (this is proved by numerous references to them in the sources). Cicero describes the oratorical skills of the two brothers in *Brutus* 104: "the speeches of Carbo and Gracchus in our possession (*Carbonis et Gracchi habemus orationes*), not yet splendid in style, expressed extremely intelligent and deeply pondered ideas." Pliny gives us the surprising news (it matters little whether it is true) that he had seen at the home of his friend Pomponius Secundus original manuscripts by Tiberius and Gaius Gracchus, nearly two hundred years old (*Nat. Hist.* 13.83: "*Tiberi Gaique Gracchorum manus apud Pomponium Secundum vatem civemque clarissimum vidi annos fere post ducentos*"). Thus it is plausible that a collection of Cornelia's letters was also preserved. Plutarch also refers to letters written by Cornelia to Gaius (*Gaius Gracchus* 13.2), but there is debate over this, given the obscure wording of the passage.

Cornelia's letters must surely have been a rich mine of information about the events of her era. Another similar testimony by a woman was the autobiography supposedly written by Nero's mother, Agrippina, in which she told the story of her family. Both Tacitus (*Annales* 4.53: "*id ego [. . .] repperi in commentariis Agrippinae filiae, quae Neronis principis mater vitam suam et casus suorum posteris memoravit*") and Pliny (*Nat. Hist.* 7.46, in discussing Nero's birth: "*scribit parens eius Agrippina*") refer to this autobiography, stating that they used it as a source. Their use of it indicates that it was in regular circulation at the time. No trace of Agrippina's autobiography has survived, and later historians remembered her only for her immoral behavior, which they described in detail. To the two much-discussed fragments of letters written by Cornelia, however, and to Plutarch's mention of *epistolia* we will return presently.

Cornelia, with her learning and keen mind, was an exceptional woman. In early childhood she had been exposed to the fervid intellectual climate of her family, the broad-minded Scipios, who were receptive to Greek influences and who had a deep impact on the second century B.C. Among the Scipios, according to R. A. Bauman, women seem to

have been held in high esteem. Most certainly, Cornelia personally selected the tutors entrusted with her sons' moral and intellectual development. These men, Blossius of Cuma and Diophanes of Mytilene, not only played a crucial role in Tiberius's education, but also in his political career. In *Brutus* (104), Cicero stresses that Tiberius Gracchus owed his excellent education in early childhood and his knowledge of Greek letters mainly to his mother, for thanks to her *diligentia*, he was instructed by some of the most brilliant scholars of the time.

Moreover, the sources also tell us that Cornelia could hold her own in the company of famous people. Jerome (*Commentarii in Sophoniam prophetam*, Prologus 655 Adriaen = PL 25, 1337C), after mentioning famous Greek women intellectuals such as Aspasia, Sappho, and Themisto, says that Cornelia was so renowned for her knowledge of philosophy that Carneades found nothing unseemly about participating in philosophical disputes in her presence. Plutarch, in describing the last years of Cornelia's life after the death of her youngest son, Gaius, portrays her in her villa in Misenum, surrounded by guests, mostly Greeks and men of letters, whom she entertained with impeccable hospitality and pleasant conversation (*Gaius Gracchus* 19.2–3).

Women who excelled in intellectual pursuits, or who merely cultivated real interest in such pursuits, were extremely rare in Cornelia's day. She remains unique for her era. If we comb through the sources we may find traces of such women a century later. We have record of another Cornelia, the daughter of Metellus Scipio, first married to Crassus's son and later to Pompey. Plutarch praises her for her learning, which ranged from philosophy to geometry, and for her skill in playing the lyre (*Pompeius* 55, 66, and 74, 76, 78–80). Octavia, Augustus's sister and Marcus Antonius's wife, was also known as an erudite woman. She participated in readings of the *Aeneid*, and Athenodorus, son of Sandon, dedicated his works to her, as Plutarch tells us in *Life of Publicola*, 17.5. The appreciable talents of women in these circles appear to have been stifled by their personalities, which supposedly tended toward licentious conduct, as legend often claims. This is the case of Sempronia (later involved in the Catilinian conspiracy), a noble woman who had excelled in her studies of Greek, music, and dancing, and was famous for her poetry and witty conversation (Sallust *De coniuratione Catilinae* 25). Another poet was Cornificia (sister of the poet Quintus Cornificius), who must have distinguished herself with some skill, considering that centuries afterward her *insignia epigrammata* were still remembered. The *corpus Tibullianum* (3.13–18) contains a few elegies written by the young

poetess Sulpicia, daughter of Servius Sulpicius Rufus and pupil of Valerius Messalla. Martial (10.35) sang the praises of another poet by this same name, wife of his friend Calenus, comparing her to Sappho. Ovid affectionately celebrates young Perilla (*Tristia* 3.7), for her unusual learning and fertile poetic gift.

Caerellia played a complex role in Cicero's life (as we learn from his epistles), thanks to her age, position, and status, and also to her connections. She was an unusual woman, despite the malicious portrayal of her found in some sources (for example, Dio Cassius 46.18.6), and was so deeply interested in Cicero's philosophy that she once secretly obtained a copy of *De finibus* from Atticus's workshop before it was published. Philosophy had begun to interest women, occasionally for very specific reasons: in one of the memorable sayings attributed to Epictetus, the women of Rome were ridiculed for reading Plato's *Republic* and were described as being shocked by Plato's remark that "women must be common," being unable to grasp the philosophical meaning. Stoic philosophy had many women followers. Horace criticized a matron who had grown too old and unattractive to seduce men, and claimed that not even the volumes of the Stoics, which she kept wrapped in silk, would have been of any help to her ("*Quid? Quod libelli Stoici inter Sericos / iacere pulvillos amant . . .*," *Epodi* 8.15–16).

Later, Musonius Rufus recommended that the same education be given to young people of both sexes, who were to study philosophy (see especially *Diatribae* 3, "Let women philosophize," and 4, "Should the same education be given to sons and daughters?"). These were praiseworthy intentions. Seneca believed that intellectual activities could help women overcome the flaws in their characters and their natural inferiority: "Women are irrational creatures, and if lacking in culture or good manners, they are instinctive and prey to passion" (*De constantia sapientis* 14.1). Yet in Cornelia's time women were not allowed to translate these ideas into daily practice. In *To Helvia on Consolation*, Seneca encourages his mother to bury herself in her studies to find comfort for the pain of recent loss. Yet he is forced to admit that she had to limit those studies, owing to the disapproval of her old-fashioned husband (17.3–5).

The Education of Her Sons

We have explained why Cornelia was so remarkable for her times and also why the sources are so frugal in describing her intellectual interests and abilities. She is most often remembered for her role in her children's

education and her skill in running her household. Plutarch portrays her after her husband's death: "She took upon herself the burden of her children and the managing of her patrimony and proved to be so wise, so full of motherly love and so noble of character that it would seem that Tiberius had made no mistake when he chose to die in place of such a woman" (*Tiberius Gracchus* 1.6). Concerning her sons' education Plutarch says: "though they were without dispute in natural endowments and dispositions the first among the Romans of their time, yet they seemed to owe their virtues even more to their education than their birth" (Dryden translation of Plutarch's *Life of Tiberius Gracchus* 7). All the other testimonies evince this same tone, insisting mainly (as we have seen in Cicero and Quintilian) on her sons' indisputable oratorical skills: Tiberius with his softer style, Gaius, the more passionate speaker (*Tiberius Gracchus* 2.3). Such skills could have only come from the education they received from their mother, as their father had died before having a chance to contribute to their intellectual development. Furthermore (as Cicero tells us in *De Oratore* 1.38) Sempronius Gracchus, a serious and cautious man, was no great orator ("*homo prudens et gravis haudquam eloquens*"). The example of Cornelia shows that Roman women played an important role in society, not only as breeders of children, but as transmitters of cultural values, which was not true among the Greeks. By nursing their children at their own breasts and overseeing their education, Roman women performed a task useful not only to the family but to society, for they helped transmit the fathers' cultural heritage and were instrumental in the development of great men. When in Tacitus's *Dialogue on Oratory* (28.4–6) Messalla bitterly laments the corruption of morals and the laxity rampant in the education of children, he cites a triad of exemplary mothers who by wisely dispensing *disciplina ac severitas* influenced their sons' education and destiny. Cornelia comes first in this list, followed by Aurelia, Caesar's mother, and Atia, Augustus's mother:

Each of these three women of antiquity raised their sons, born of chaste motherhood, not in the chamber of a hired nurse, but at their own breasts and in their own laps. A mother's chief praise lay in governing her house and caring for her children. An elderly relative was chosen, a woman of esteemed reputation, and was entrusted with the care of all the children in the same family. In her presence children could not say anything foul or do anything dishonest. With a sacred reserve and modesty, she directed, with the mother's assistance, the children's studies and games. Thus did

Cornelia, mother of the Gracchi; Aurelia, mother of Caesar; and Atia, mother of Augustus, preside over the education of their sons and prepare them for their destiny as princes.

Plutarch tells us (*Tiberius Gracchus* 1.7) that Cornelia rejected an offer of marriage (and thus a kingdom) from King Ptolemy, probably Ptolemy VIII Euergetes II, named Physkon (certainly no handsome fellow, to judge from his nickname "big belly"—Polybius considered him one of the most repulsive of kings). This story, for which there is no independent evidence, reinforced Cornelia's public image as an ideal matron. The anecdote may be a propagandistic fabrication, intending to stress the good relations between Rome and Ptolemaic Egypt, or it may reflect Cornelia's social connections with foreign kings and celebrities. In moving in such high circles, Cornelia could rely on her prestigious status as a member of the Scipio family and on the influence and reputation of her husband, who had conducted many successful diplomatic missions abroad. It was primarily thanks to her choice to remain *univira*, faithful forever to one man, that Cornelia was elevated to mythic stature. It was believed that her decision not to remarry had been made entirely for her sons' benefit. Dionysius of Halicarnassus (8.48) records an illustrious precedent: Veturia, reproaching her son, Coriolanus, underlined the sacrifices she made for his education and claimed that after his father died, she had been for him mother, father, nurse, sister, and had chosen not to remarry or have other children for his sake.

Roman history is full of famous men influenced by their mothers (a genuine form of *materna auctoritas*), and when those mothers were widows, their influence was even stronger. Often the sons of widows were destined to become leaders of great upheavals or to turn against their own country. Thus runs the tradition for Coriolanus, Sertorius, Marcus Antonius (this is stressed in Plutarch's *Lives*; see Le Corsu, Salvioni).

It is beyond our scope here to discuss the political turmoil that led Tiberius and Gaius to their tragic ends, or to analyze the judgments of ancient historians concerning the brothers Gracchus. We may legitimately ask, however, what influence Cornelia had on her sons' political careers. Here we must repeat that women were expected to keep their distance from politics and public life. Their participation in such matters could never be direct, although they often found themselves used as tools in the designs of others. Hallett has noted that Roman matrons tended to focus their ambition on their children rather than on their husbands, and the sources record many examples of women who did so

(according to Polybius, Pomponia, Africanus's mother, also took a very active interest in the careers of her sons, Lucius and Publius). This phenomenon became more pronounced as time passed. Seneca in his *To Helvia on Consolation* expresses gratitude to Helvia's sister (his aunt) for helping him obtain his quaestorship (19.2) and complains about those mothers who, excluded from public affairs because they are women, exploit their sons' influence and use them to satisfy their own ambitions (14.2 "*per illos ambitiosae sunt*"). Cornelia's influence on her sons' political views is open to debate (although there is a tendency to see her as generally agreeing with them). Plutarch records conflicting information on this point. Some evidence suggests that she tended toward more moderate views. For instance, in *Life of Gaius Gracchus* (4.2), Plutarch tells us that Gaius first proposed and then withdrew a law that would have directly affected Marcus Octavius (the proposed law prevented anyone who had been dismissed from public office from ever holding any other office again). Gaius later explained that he had withdrawn the law at his mother's request (a more hostile version of this story appears in Diodorus 34/35.25.2; see Botteri [1992], 85–86).

This may have been a strategic move on the part of young Gaius to gain political consensus and enhance his personal prestige, or perhaps it was the first sign of tension in his relationship with his mother, which grew more troubled as things came to a head. Traces of Cornelia's disapproval of Gaius's politics appear in two fragments preserved in the conclusion of *Lives* by Cornelius Nepos (fr. 59 Marshall; *Epistolographi Latini Minores* 124.3–4 Cugusi). The *inscriptio* describes these fragments as sections of Cornelia's letters, extracted from a book by Nepos, *On the Latin Historian*. The longer fragment (dating from 124 B.C., judging from its mention of Gaius's position as tribune, to which he was elected in that same year) is extremely interesting:

I would even say that, excluding those people who killed Tiberius Gracchus, no enemy has caused me such embarrassment and pain as you have. Why could you not have behaved as all my other children have done till now to ensure that in my old age I should have a minimum of distress, obeying me in all circumstances and considering it impious to do anything against my will, especially as I have not long to live? Not even this, not even the fact that I have not much time left, is enough to keep you from disobeying me and plotting to bring about the ruin of the republic. When will all this stop? When will our family stop committing such madness? When will it be possible to put an end to all this? When will we stop in-

flicting suffering and then having to suffer ourselves? When will we feel shame for bringing disorder and trouble to the state? However, if this cannot be, then at least wait until I am dead before presenting yourself to the tribunate. You may do as you please after I am no longer able to see and feel. When I am dead you must make the proper sacrifices and invoke our family god.

For years scholars have discussed the authenticity of these fragments (some scholars, such as Ed. Meyer or E. Malcovati, have modified their ideas on this), along with the question of how Cornelia's letters came to be preserved and circulated (Cicero knew of the letters and was a friend of Nepos). The fragments may have been taken from the same original text, but a few variations in tone and style have led some scholars to believe that they come from two different letters (in the first fragment some scholars have seen an obscure reference to Cornelia's intercession on behalf of Marcus Octavius). The stylistic and linguistic features, the use of archaic expressions, the familiar tone, have convinced many that this was a private letter (though others think it may have been a public communication), closely resembling other Latin prose of the era, and similar in style to the writings of Cato and Plautus (Horsfall). Cornelia did have the ability to write such elegant prose. Moreover, according to some scholars, the presence of a few repetitions and incongruities in the fragments demonstrates their authenticity (Cugusi), since a forger would no doubt have been careful to avoid any inconsistencies (we must also consider that Nepos himself may have done some editing). Yet there are other possible explanations for the incongruities. Let us suppose that the forger was not a student of rhetoric performing a neat exercise at his desk, but someone in later times, deliberately searching for effects that might make his forgery seem more authentic (anacoluthons, repetitions, redundancies appropriate to a woman feeling the pressure of events around her, in a state of agitation and worry about what will happen to her son). In that case those incongruities may merely reflect unsuccessful attempts at this. In fact, many different scholars have concluded that the letter was not really written by Cornelia, although they approach the question from different directions. Some express surprise that the anti-Gracchian party did not make use of the letter as propaganda against the Gracchi, which they surely would have done if it had been genuine. Others suggest that the letter was fabricated in order to discredit the Gracchi by showing them in conflict with their mother. Still others think the letter was intended to explain a sort of ideological gap between Cor-

nelia and her sons. Some skeptics have pointed out the striking contrast between these fragments and the traditional view of Cornelia as an uncritical mother who actively supported her sons' politics. Lastly, some scholars, for this very same reason, have attempted to soften the accusatory tone of the letter and have suggested that it merely reflects the chiding of a worried mother. These are the main arguments concerning the letter's authenticity.

It is difficult to answer to all the questions raised by such conflicting points of view. If Cornelia was not the author of these fragments (although a collection of her letters did once exist, and she was known to be capable of writing such prose) who could have written them? After analyzing the stylistic and linguistic features of the fragments some scholars have concluded that they were written shortly after the period to which they refer (and as S. Barnard has suggested) by Cornelia's daughter, Sempronia. It cannot be denied that they express strong disapproval of Gaius's political views. Though not so much in the first fragment, where we find further evidence of the well-documented Roman concept that *inimicitiae*, like family interests, must take second place to the good of the state. Right from the beginning, the second fragment has a tone which, far from being calm and reflective, is critical and provocative: as well as displaying an open aversion for Gaius's politics, their mother demonstrates disapproval of Tiberius, notably in the relentless series of rhetorical questions and in the expression: "*ecquando desinet familia nostra insanire?*" Phrases such as "*rem publicam profliges,*" and especially "*miscenda atque perturbanda re publica,*" voice the very criticisms uttered by the Gracchi's enemies (Instinsky) and seem excessive (and therefore suspect). It is no coincidence that in Cicero, for example, the Gracchi are more than once defined as *perturbatores rei publicae* and similar expressions are also found in Velleius and Tacitus. Cassius Dio, probably quoting exactly the Latin source used for accounts of the feats of the Gracchi, says (fr. 83.7) *phyrōn kai tarassōn*. Cornelia's rhetorical outburst against her son's political actions, her valiant defense of the state, and her insistence on her own authority as his mother sound all too familiar. In fact, they echo the words spoken by Coriolanus's mother while defending the supreme interests of the state against her own son in Livy, and especially in Dionysius of Halicarnassus.

The perfect harmony existing between Cornelia and her sons, as they are traditionally portrayed, may have been flawed, yet her deep love and respect for them may not necessarily have led her to endorse their political views. She may have supported Tiberius's views: after all, young Tibe-

rius's political ideas had been inspired by his teachers Blossius and Diophanes, whom she had personally chosen as his tutors. Sources tell us that her sons sometimes evoked her image in order to manipulate the public conscience. (See Plutarch *Tiberius Gracchus* 13.6 and Dio Cassius fr. 83.8).

After Tiberius's death, Cornelia withdrew to Misenum (Orosius 5.12.9), fleeing from the political turmoil of the times. Her previous prestige was not impaired, and even after the death of Gaius she continued her former way of life to the very end. There is no record of her being penalized as a consequence of her sons' misfortunes (by contrast, Licinia, Gaius's widow, was not allowed to dress in mourning and her dowry was confiscated; *Gaius Gracchus* 17.6). Plutarch portrays Cornelia as an elderly woman surrounded by guests, telling the stories of her sons' tragic lives as if they were heroes from an archaic era (no doubt her way of honoring their memory) and contrasts this with another, very pleasant (*hediste*) conversation in which she regaled her listeners with stories about her father, Africanus. Plutarch emphasizes that Cornelia's guests were astonished by the detachment and self-control she displayed in talking about her sons, for she never showed any signs of sorrow. Even when speaking of the holy places where they were slain (claiming that "their dead bodies were worthy of such sepulchers") she manifested her maternal *pietas* in the most dignified way. For Cornelia, who had always been *philōteknos*, loving her sons meant preserving their memory, and at that time, according to Plutarch (*Gaius Gracchus* 18.3), the people honored and made sacrifices to the memory of the brothers Gracchus, as if they were gods.

Gaius was devoted to his mother and cites her as an example of fecundity and chastity. He reacted vehemently whenever anyone criticized her, as shown by some of his remarks about her that have become almost proverbial (see, for example, Plutarch *Gaius Gracchus* 4). Plutarch furnishes other information about their relationship (13.2) which gives a slightly different picture of Cornelia's attitude toward her son's politics. According to Plutarch, some sources claim that Cornelia assisted Gaius in the crisis of 121 B.C. by secretly hiring men outside Rome and sending them to the city disguised as reapers to participate in the protest. Proof of this was supposedly to be found in an obscure reference (*tauta* [. . .] *e(i)nigmēna gegrāphthai*) in one of Cornelia's letters to Gaius. This is yet another reference to her letters (even if the term used, *epistolia*, and its ambiguous contents suggest something very different from the letters that for Cicero and Quintilian were a model of style and rhetoric), this

time suggesting that she did support her sons' ideas. Plutarch seems to doubt this: he introduces this information generically ("they say") and hastens afterward to add a disclaimer: "Others, however, say that Cornelia firmly (*pany*) disapproved of what had been done."

This mention of Cornelia's alleged assistance to Gaius is the only explicit information in Plutarch's biography touching on her intervention in her sons' political activities—with the exception of her request that Gaius withdraw the law that would penalize Marcus Octavius. The story may be one of the few traces left of a slanderous attempt by the Gracchi's enemies to cast both mother and sons in a dubious light. As the myth of Cornelia took shape in the public imagination, those negative traces were swept away, and Africanus's daughter came to be esteemed universally as a symbol of maternal devotion. She had indeed performed her duties well, for the Gracchi's virtues were indisputably recognized even by their political opponents, and the credit for those talents and gifts was traced back to Cornelia. Their political ideas were considered by their adversaries as deviating from the great tradition of their forefathers (they were frequently compared unfavorably with their father, Sempronius Gracchus, and grandfather, Africanus, shining examples of loyalty to the state), but Cornelia could not be blamed for that. Women, after all, had no authority in the field of politics, the domain of men.

There may be a few oblique references in the sources to Cornelia's alleged involvement in her sons' political careers. Plutarch describes her impatiently spurring Tiberius on to greatness because she was tired of being known as "the daughter of Scipio rather than the mother of the Gracchi." This may be an allusion to her own responsibilities in encouraging her recently elected son to take prompt political action, motivated only by her personal ambitions. Perhaps these ambitions and her lavish life style helped create the proverbially haughty image of her, described by Juvenal (6.166) and later by Claudian (*Laus Serenae* 42–43).

In this chorus of praise, one voice can be heard singing out of tune, accusing Cornelia of a serious crime: the mysterious death of her son-in-law, Scipio Aemilianus.

Misunderstandings between Aemilianus and Tiberius increased as time passed. After Tiberius was killed, Scipio harshly criticized his brother-in-law's politics (Plutarch *Tiberius Gracchus* 21.7–8). In the following years Scipio used his influence to hinder the plans of Gaius and his circle (who supported the cause of the Italians). Then in 129, the night before he was to address an important assembly, Scipio was found dead in his chamber. Gaius and his followers, Fulvius Flaccus and Valer-

ius Carbo, were suspected of having murdered him, but were not brought to trial. Different rumors circulated about the condition in which Scipio's body had been found, along with conflicting theories concerning the cause of death (natural, murder, or suicide) that have intrigued both ancients and moderns. Plutarch tells us (*Tiberius Gracchus* 21.9) that he also wrote a biography of Scipio Aemilianus, which would doubtless help clarify the mystery of his death, but no trace of this text has survived. Appian gives an account of Scipio's death (*Bella Civilia* 1.20), and is unsure if it was by murder or suicide. If it was murder, he suggests that Cornelia and her daughter, Sempronia, may have been responsible:

The night he died Scipio had placed beside him a tablet on which he intended to write down his speech. He was later found dead, with no wounds. Some say that Cornelia, mother of Gracchus, had him killed because she did not want her son's law to be abolished. She was supposedly helped by her daughter Sempronia, who was married to Scipio, but who was not loved by him because she was ugly and barren. Nor did she love him. Others think he killed himself because he could not deliver what he had promised.

Appian is the only source to accuse Cornelia even though he does give her the benefit of the doubt by suggesting suicide as an equally plausible alternative. In hinting that Scipio was poisoned (for poison leaves no visible traces) and by depicting Sempronia as ugly and barren, Appian is repeating the traditionally misogynous view of women as potential conspirators and poisoners. No other sources blame Cornelia, and Plutarch does not mention this suspicion when he discusses the mystery of Aemilianus's death. Other sources accuse only Sempronia. Livy, in *Periocha* 59, tells us that Sempronia was suspected of poisoning her husband, and *Scholia Bobiensia* in *Pro Mil.* (118 Stangl) lay the blame on Gaius Gracchus and his sister. Orosius also accuses Sempronia (5.10.10: *uxoris suae . . . dolo necatum*) and does not even mention Cornelia. It is particularly significant that in these latter versions, Sempronia's motive was not rancor toward husband (stressed in Appian's version) but family loyalty to her brother. In *Periocha* 59 Livy says: "His wife, Sempronia, was accused of poisoning him, especially because she was the sister of the Gracchi, with whom Africanus had disagreed." Orosius in recording his version (which he attributes generically to "some"—*quidam . . . ferunt*) claims that through this crime, a family which "was already so ruinous to the state because of the impious sedition of its men, became even more heinous through the villainous actions of its women (*facinoribus*

mulierum),” but no mention is given here of Cornelia’s involvement. Such suspicions arose and spread most likely in environments hostile to the Gracchi, and later sources surely embellished the story with more details. According to Valerius Maximus, Sempronia continued to enjoy respect, if we are to believe his account (2.8.6) that she testified, in 101 B.C., in public proceedings involving a man (Equitius) who claimed to be Tiberius’s son. Sempronia (*Ti. et C. Gracchorum soror, uxor Scipionis Aemiliani*), ignoring the noisy incitements of the crowd, did not betray the nobility of her paternal heritage and scornfully refused to recognize the claimant. During these proceedings, Sempronia was called on as the only witness who could furnish any proof regarding this controversial question of identification. This suggests that she was the only member of Cornelia’s family still alive, keeper of its secrets and perhaps of its documents. By that date the mother of the Gracchi was no more, and this episode is the only evidence the sources give us concerning her demise.

Daughter of Africanus, Mother of the Gracchi

Sempronia had a curious destiny. Perhaps if Plutarch’s biography of Aemilianus had survived, we might have had a more complete picture of her, rather than Appian’s sketch of a harpy and murderess. Some sources ignore her completely and bring Cornelias’s descendants to an end after the deaths of Tiberius and Gaius. Seneca, in his *To Helvia on Consolation* says that destiny had reduced Cornelia’s twelve children to two (16.6), and in his *To Marcia on Consolation*, he specifies that Cornelia “had twelve children and an equal number of funerals. She waited patiently for the others, whom the city never noticed, living or dead. But Tiberius and Gaius, whose virtue may be denied but not their greatness, she lived to see murdered and buried” (16.3).

In both passages Seneca praises Cornelia for her dignity and strength of character in mourning her dead and bearing her losses. Plutarch tells us that Cornelia’s astonishing self-control when talking of her sons’ deaths caused some to believe that she was no longer in her right mind: “her age and the great burden of her afflictions had caused her to lose her reason. She no longer understood her own misfortunes” (*Gaius Gracchus* 19.4). There may have been mental instability in the Gracchi family (as Cornelia may be suggesting in the second letter fragment when she mentions the family’s tendency to “run mad”: “*ecquando desinet familia nostra insanire?*”). Diodorus (34/35.28a) describes Gaius as furious and psychologically disturbed.

Seneca’s mention of Cornelia in *To Helvia on Consolation* bears examining. In this same context, Seneca urges Helvia to immerse herself in her studies to distract herself from her sorrows, yet he makes no mention of Cornelia’s learning and intellectual abilities. By that time Cornelia had been idealized by the public imagination as a model of old-fashioned, womanly virtue, a piece of Roman history, a source of inspiration for posterity. Her name was linked to the mothers of great men and she was compared to figures of legend. While Seneca evoked her alongside Lucretia, Cloelia, Rutilia (mother of Cotta), and Tacitus compared her to the mothers of Caesar and Augustus, Martial ridiculed her in an obscene epigram (11.104), picturing her in the company of Julia (Pompey’s wife), Porcia (daughter of Cato and wife of Brutus), Lucretia, Andromache, and Penelope. Aelian praised her as the Roman Penelope, paragon of matronly virtue (*Varia Historia* 14.45). In the introduction to *Mulierum Virtutes* (*Moralia* 243d), Plutarch presents a gathering of women of former times who were celebrated for their virtues just as men were and compares Cornelia’s lofty and noble character (*megalôphron*) to that of Olympias, mother of Alexander. Among the Christian writers, Jerome (in *Adversus Iovinianum* 1.49 [320]), ranks her between Lucretia and Porcia as examples of women who were equal to men in virtue, while in *Epistula* (54 par.4) he defines her as chaste and fruitful, “*pudicitiae simul et fecunditatis exemplar*.” These were the same qualities for which Gaius had once praised her: defending her against an effeminate detractor, her son said: “How dare you compare Cornelia to yourself? Have you brought forth children as she has done? And yet all Rome knows that she has refrained from the company of men longer than you have” (Plutarch *Gaius Gracchus* 4.6). Juvenal refers to this proverbial image of Cornelia in his famous sixth satire when he claims that he prefers a simple woman from Venosa to such a proud and noble model of virtue (6.166 ff.)

A statue was raised to Cornelia’s honor. This was exceptional, considering that until the second century B.C., public recognition of women by means of statues was limited to the archaic period or connected with legendary events. Pliny discusses this statue in detail (*Nat. Hist.* 34.31): although Cato had opposed honoring women with statues in the provinces, one was erected in Rome to commemorate Cornelia, the “mother of the Gracchi and daughter of Africanus.” This statue portrayed the matron sitting, wearing strapless sandals. It was first placed in the public portico of Metellus (built by Metellus Macedonicus around 146 B.C.) and was later moved to the *Porticus Octaviae* (the lavish complex of struc-

tures still standing today). Plutarch associates it with a specific event: Gaius's withdrawal at his mother's request of the law that would have prevented Marcus Octavius from holding public office. Her intervention—recounted in *Life of Gaius Gracchus* 4.4—was met with great approval by the people “who honored Cornelia for her sons no less than for her father. Afterward (*hysteron*) they raised a bronze statue to her honor and inscribed it ‘Cornelia, mother of the Gracchi.’” There are different theories concerning the dating of the statue. Some scholars who believe that political motives underlay this official recognition of Cornelia date this event to around 100 B.C., or even later, at a time when the *populares* once again dominated the political scene (Coarelli). Plutarch's use of the word “*hysteron*,” however, does not exclude its having happened much earlier, even, according to some, while Cornelia was still living. Plutarch tells us of statues erected to commemorate the Gracchus brothers (*Gaius Gracchus* 18.3) and also mentions a statue of Tiberius Sempronius Gracchus, their father: the night before Gaius's death, the young man was said to have wept in silence while contemplating this statue (14.4). Cornelia's statue, first set in the *Porticus Metelli* and later more prominently displayed in the *Porticus Octaviae*, was probably intended to immortalize her image as a supreme symbol of fertility, chastity, *univirate*, and maternal love for the edification of posterity. And, in fact, records of the erection of statues in honor of women indicate that the females concerned (for example, Clelia, Tanaquilla, Gaia Taracia, Quinta Claudia) either had proved themselves particularly capable in the services they performed for the state or had embodied to perfection the canonical wifely virtues celebrated by tradition. This would have been perfectly in keeping with the moral climate of the Augustan period, when attempts were made to restore the wholesome values of long ago: family, marriage, procreation, and stern attitudes toward children and their education. Pliny must have seen Cornelia in this light, for he emphasizes her strapless sandals (*sine ammento*) and plain attire, inspired by the simplicity of the past. Could this statue also have been a warning to women, expressing rigorous opposition to luxury and lavish excess? Or is it another specific reference to her exceptional fecundity (Bettini 1988)? It is well known, in fact, that the ancients firmly believed that a woman giving birth should avoid contact with knots of any kind whatsoever. It was held that a knot represented an obstacle to the loosening and opening up of the pregnant body at the moment of giving birth. This explains the scrupulous care with which all forms of binding were avoided: fingers, arms and legs were not to be crossed, while belts and

boot fastenings and even hair had to be worn loose. Can it be inferred from this that sandals without laces (*ammenta*) were a symbol of ability to procreate?

We cannot say for certain how long the statue lasted. It may have been damaged in the fire of 80 B.C., or (as some scholars have tried to show) the statue itself, or a copy of it, may have still existed in the third century A.D. By the fourth century, the solemn image of a woman sitting (such as Aphrodite seated, by the sculptor Phidias) had become a model commonly used by sculptors to portray Roman women, including Helena, the mother of Constantine (Coarelli).

In 1878 in the area of the *Porticus Octaviae*, the base of a statue was found. It was wide enough to have been the pedestal for a bronze statue representing a seated figure. On the front two inscriptions appeared: *opus Tisicratis* (dating from the third century A.D.), and (dating from the Augustan era) *Cornelia Africani f. / Gracchorum*. This was probably the base of the statue described by Pliny.

This finding poses many problems. We will not discuss the ones related to the inscription *opus Tisicratis* (does this suggest that the artist's signature had been recovered in the Severian period, or is it a false attribution, or an indication that the base had been used for another statue?). The letter forms of the other inscription (*CIL* 6.31610) date from the Augustan period, but there are obvious signs that a previous inscription had been removed. The later inscription may be a faithful copy of the original one, or may have modified it (Coarelli, basing his theory on Plutarch's account, suggests that it originally read *Cornelia Gracchorum*). Could this previously have been the pedestal of another statue (Kajava's unlikely suggestion)? We cannot answer these questions. What interests us here is the curious formula: *Cornelia Africani f. / Gracchorum*. In inscriptions relating to women it was customary to put the husband's name immediately after the father's name. Here *Gracchorum* alone (referring not to her husband but to her sons) without the word *mater* is unusual (we have no other record of similar inscriptions) and has led some to believe that the statue of Cornelia was only one of a group of statues dedicated to illustrious mothers (Lewis).

This statue was a monument intended for the public, and it is extremely unlikely that its inscription would have been worded incorrectly or ambiguously. Cornelia was so famous that no one could have failed to recognize her, and the plural *Gracchorum* eliminates any ambiguity, as it can only refer to her sons (Kajava). This inscription faithfully reflects the formula traditionally used to refer to Cornelia in the sources.

Plutarch explains this by claiming that Cornelia owed her public prestige to being the daughter of Africanus and mother of the Gracchi. Pliny (who also claims that the statue represented "Cornelia daughter of Africanus and mother of the Gracchi"), mentions Cornelia as an example of exceptional fertility, along with Agrippina Major (*Nat. Hist.* 7.57) and refers to Cornelia only as "*Gracchorum mater*," while referring to Agrippina as "*Agrippina Germanici*," that is, wife of Germanicus (Agrippina Minor, mentioned in another context is cited as "the mother of Nero"). It was standard practice to use the husband's name to identify a married woman, for women could be identified only through their connections with men. This was the passport required for a woman's entry into history. Men, who were more visible, had to provide the point of reference for women. After her husband died and her sons were still boys, Cornelia was known as "Aemilianus's mother-in-law," as he was the most important male in the family at the time. In Cornelia's case, her sons' fame soon surpassed their father's (this is one reason why Sempronius Gracchus, a leading figure in his day, is less frequently mentioned by the sources). Once she had become a widow, she could be remembered only in connection with her prestigious paternal descent (in the inscription Scipio is in fact cited as "Africanus"), and in connection with her sons, major figures on the stage of history.

In connection with the omission of the word "mater," the expression *mater Corneliae Gracchorum*, in Valerius Maximus 6.7.1, refers to Tertia Aemilia. Inserting another *mater* or *parentis* before the word *Gracchorum* would have been stylistically unacceptable (Lewis). It would be appropriate, in any case, at this point to explode the longstanding and popular theory that the expression *Gracchorum mater* never once appears in the whole of Latin literature. Also, Jerome's statement (*Commentarii in Sophoniam prophetam, Prologus* 655 Adriaen = *PL* 25.1337c) leaves no doubts: "*Corneliam Gracchorum id est, vestram, tota Romanae urbis turba miratur.*"

At the beginning of 1779 a bust believed to represent Aspasia was unearthed during excavations of Civitavecchia, and near Tivoli a bust of Pericles also came to light (both were placed in the Vatican). An archaeologist, Ennio Quirino Visconti, suggested to the poet Monti that these events might serve as inspiration for a poem. Monti accepted the challenge and composed his famous ode *Prosopopea di Pericle*, celebrating Aspasia and her consort. This woman, praised for her intelligence and beauty, had at last been given a face (whether it really was a bust of Aspasia is of little importance).

When another noble matron named Cornelia died—wife of Aemilius Paulus Lepidus—she was not forgotten: in one of his most moving elegies (4.11), Propertius immortalized her image.

The last glimpse we have of the Gracchi's mother is of a woman still vital, burdened but not broken by old age and destiny, telling the story of the men in her life to a group of listeners. We do not know when she died. No poet was present that day to honor her memory or to describe her life with Gracchus, a life made of days and moments of which no record remains.

Nor was her statue celebrated by poets. Time and fate have dispersed the last testimony to her form and her face, never described in the sources. Only the pedestal of her statue has survived. Its inscription has passed down to us—as only stones can do—the essence of her entire existence:

Cornelia, Africani f. / Gracchorum