

3a) Are the realities of women's lives visible in the evidence we have from the ancient world?

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Women have been neglected and ignored throughout history. On their gravestones, we find their lives inscribed as their husbands' and sons' achievements, while the realities of their existences are obscured, romanticised and demonised elsewhere. In this essay I will look at ancient Greek and Roman portrayals of women and ask not only whether they are visible, but whether these accounts are accurate.

The Rape of Lucretia¹ is one of the most symbolic Roman stories of men's expectations and presentations of women, in which the realities of their lives are disregarded. In Livy's tale, a group of young, drunk, Roman men decide that to settle who has the "best" wife, they should simply inspect the women, like prize cattle. They find their wives partying (not unlike the husbands), but the lovely Lucretia is at her loom, the picture of virtue. Sextus Tarquinius, the son of the king, returns on another night and threatens Lucretia at knifepoint, demanding sex with her. When the threat of physical death is not enough to persuade her, Sextus threatens the death of her honour by leaving her dead body next to a dead slave, thus implying an affair. Lucretia submitted, related the story to her husband and father, and then, disgraced and robbed of her 'pudicitia,' (chastity or fidelity), killed herself. The realities of Lucretia's story, mythical as it is, are certainly not visible. There seems to be no account of her feelings towards the sexual violence, no sense of the complexities involved in her decision. The men who wrote and debated her story assumed she cared more about her reputation than her life. Livy presents the most prominent aspect of Lucretia's story as a political one - the end of kings at Rome, but perhaps its greatest significance is its Roman view of women. If death was a better choice than 'dishonour', did that represent the woman's desire to be chaste and save themselves for their husbands, or a question of male pride?

¹ SPQR pp121-5
Livy's History chapters 57-8

Furthermore, Martial² commented on how a woman could be a Lucretia by day as long as she was a whore by night – even the perfect Lucretia might read risqué poetry behind her husband’s back. This dichotomy of women as wives or whores still stands, one can be sexualised for her purity, her unattainable virtue, and her ability to be corrupted. Or she may be demonised for being sexually bold, too tempting. Women are often seen as, paradoxically, both pure and sexual, like Lucretia with her secret poetry, and there has always been an external fascination with women’s sex lives. Clodia³, sister of Clodius, wife of a senator and lover of the poet Catullus (among others), was both defamed and admired for her promiscuity and her manipulation. She was described by Cicero as ‘the Medea of the Palatine,’ a telling mixture of the imagery of a respectable, comfortable wife and a child-murdering, love-crazed witch. While there are probably elements of truth in her depiction, whether she would recognise herself in the fantasy and speculation which men adopted is another matter entirely. She is the elegant wife and the immoral temptress, the virgin and the whore. But women are their own people with a life outside their sexuality, and they are far more nuanced than this dichotomy imposed by men.

The misogyny of ancient Greek and Roman society led women to be shown as wicked temptresses and plotting villainesses. We only have to look at the speeches of Cicero to find women demonised for the benefit of male counterparts. The much-discussed figure of Sassia⁴, depicted as a heartless mother and murderer who would steal her own daughter’s husband out of sexual greed and delirium, is one example. The focus on her fault and her sexuality emphasises that Roman jurors both recognised that this is where men are more susceptible, while also insisting on attributing the blame on the woman for persuading, rather than the man for being persuaded. Women’s immorality – particularly if it related to the betrayal of the expectations of motherhood – was condemned more intensely and more widely than men were often condemned for similar (or more extensive) “crimes”

² SPQR p123

³ SPQR pp305-7

⁴ Cicero Pro Cluentio section 12

against society. Men were also uncomfortable with women's power, seen in the plentiful conspiracies about Emperor's wives, like Agrippina or Livia. Virgil's Dido is deprived of her power (and her life) by the lovesickness which Aeneas causes through his desertion, perhaps reflecting men's desire to still hold the real power and prove women's weakness. Furthermore, women were often brought into politics as disruptive factors to explain away men's decisions. When Mark Antony became a contender to rule during a period of great turbulence, a foreign queen, and an Eastern one at that, was the perfect scapegoat for his mistakes and a social weakness for his enemies to exploit. The Romans had a distaste for the perceived luxury and effeminacy – another example of underlying misogyny in their society – of Eastern territories, and an unattainable, powerful, distant and mysterious woman seemed the ideal focal point for hatred of Mark Antony himself. The image of Cleopatra was revived after her death in Octavian's triumph of 29 BCE⁵ which caught attention as much as she herself had, but no explicit mention was made of Mark Antony or indeed Octavian's other enemies. She was used as a vessel for his defeat, hatred of him and a distaste for things deemed 'other.'

We can see the erasure of women's lives even in their gravestones. A grave of a married couple relates the husband's trade and his agency in their marriage, while his wife is described as "chaste, modest and not gossiped about."⁶ Likewise, Thucydides records Archedike's tomb at Lampsacus⁷ as saying: "This earth covers Archedike the daughter of Hippias, a man who was great among the Hellenes of his day. Her father, her husband, her brothers, and her sons were tyrants, yet her mind was not lifted up to vanity." Not only is space made for her male relatives on her own grave, but it seems that how she appears to society is more important than who she was in herself, and her sexuality is of interest even after her death. One Claudia's grave⁸ bears, in place of anecdotes or

⁵ SPQR p348

⁶ SPQR p312

⁷ Thucydides, Book 6.59

⁸ SPQR 304

praise, references to her male relatives: “she loved her husband with her heart. She bore two sons.” It even goes as far as to detail that “one [son] she leaves on earth, the other under the earth.” Even in death, her sons warrant more of her memorial than her personally. The lines “She was graceful... and elegant... She kept the home. She made wool.” show an emphasis on how one appeared to the world and how well one played the woman’s role in the household, rather than how she felt, how she thought. The final line “That’s what there is to say.” drives in the stake of injustice; all she was to her relatives was dignified, domestic, reproductive. Perhaps these were the realities of women’s lives. Perhaps women were confined to certain expectations and restricted ambitions to such an extent that there really was no more to say. But women surely had hidden thoughts and feelings, small impacts on others, tiny fragments of a sense of self beyond the home.

When we compare these graves to the triumphant tombs of men like Scipio Barbatus⁹ with their military victories, their political achievements, their supremacy, it seems that notable parts of life differed greatly for the sexes. The tomb of the wife of a Syrian man, Barates¹⁰, has more identity but its accuracy is uncertain. Her tomb has a Palmyran architectural style, its inscription is in Latin and credits her as being of the ‘Catuvellaunian tribe.’ It displays Aramaic, and is built on English soil near a Roman fort. The multiculturalism expressed here is almost overwhelming, but as well as showing Rome’s expansion, the cultural element enhances the question of whether her identity is expressed as she saw it. ‘Queenie,’ as she is known from her Latin ‘Regina,’ was quite possibly Barates’ own ex-slave, so how Syrian she felt is questionable, yet that identity is integrated into her memorial as an important aspect of her life. However, perhaps this is to look at the issue through the wrong lens; perhaps her tomb is supposed to commemorate her husband through her, making his identity and his presence as important as her own. In either case, the realities of her life, like those of other women mentioned here, are certainly not visible as we would expect today.

⁹ SPQR p133

¹⁰ SPQR p510

We have lamentably few accounts of ancient life from the perspective of women. In ancient literature some men write the stories of heroes and wars in epics, some, like Ovid, write saucy poetry, some write tragedy. Here, when women are expressed, it is through men's eyes, often with no grasp of the realities of their lives, mythical as they may be. Sophocles' Antigone¹¹ is pious and loyal to her family, and would rather die than leave her brother unburied. Whilst a hero boldly acting of her own accord, she is doing it for her brother, perpetuating the idea of women as family protectors with no ambition for themselves. Sophocles' Jocasta¹² hangs herself upon hearing a terrible truth, his Antigone gives up her life, the story of Iphigenia involves her consenting to die to save others; there is a theme of suicide as the woman's way out, often influenced by men or used as a tool for the gain of others. Women's intelligence, like that of *Iphigeneia in Tauris* or *Helen*¹³, is only displayed when it can be used for the good of men. Women's spite is often directed at men through other women, seen in the punishments Hera inflicts on Zeus' conquests like Io, Echo or Callisto, and how Aphrodite exploits Phaedra in *Hippolytus*. This literary world eradicates female solidarity, an idea which is unpalatable and, one would hope, inaccurate.

Ovid's *Ars Amatoria* encourages having 'two girls on the go',¹⁴ and male Greek authors often advocated marrying women off in order to placate them, and to force men to settle down. Here women are once again reduced to tools for the good of men, which is even reflected in the language. Instead of saying 'I will marry,' as men did, women had to say, 'I will be married'. This passive form of the verb is all too telling of her new role as a passive wife and is one of few indications of the realities of women's lives in the ancient world. One male tragedian who generally takes a greater interest in the female characters of his plays is Euripides. His *Trojan Women*

¹¹ Haward p28

¹² Haward p32

¹³ Haward p29

¹⁴ *Ars Amatoria*, *Remedia Amoris* Part VII

recognises that women are the ones to suffer when tragedy occurs, and foregrounds them even in the title. His characters lament their losses, their new lives and trauma. Medea's speech¹⁵ on the place of women is immensely powerful, and covers in 21 lines the concept of marriage, agency, sexuality, loneliness, luck, social expectations, death, childbirth and forced dependence on husbands. Here, Euripides captures the emotion and opinions I have been searching for throughout this essay, and the empathy he displays is a cut above his fellow ancient writers.

This representation of the realities of women's lives is invaluable, but it is often best to look to members of a certain group in order to learn about their true reality. One of the very few female authors who wrote about or from the perspective of women as a woman herself was Sappho.¹⁶ Though much of her work is lost, what remains is an incredibly valuable source when studying female needs and feelings. She speaks of love, loneliness, grief and death, presenting an authentically emotional side of women not seen elsewhere in the external accounts of men. Sappho's speakers are sentimental, sensual, sensitive; they speak of love lost, love matches, the absence of love, love for deities, love for oneself or lack thereof. Here we see a side of women seldom expresses by men, a side with feelings, longings and opinions of their own. And yet many of Sappho's poems are still somewhat passive, accepting rather than active. Perhaps other ancient literature is not inaccurate about the realities of women's ability to alter their own lives, but inaccurate about their inner thoughts and feelings instead.

Women's lives can be examined further in the small details, off-hand remarks, and anecdotal evidence of the ancient world. Cicero's puzzling second marriage to a girl at least 45 years his junior was controversial even then, and his attitude no better than his actions. He is supposed to have remarked¹⁷, on the day of their wedding, "Don't worry, she'll be a grown-up woman tomorrow."

¹⁵ Euripides Medea lines 230-51

¹⁶ Penguin Classics, Come Close pp1-55

¹⁷ SPQR p312-3

There is a subtle assumption in his words, that what makes a woman is marriage or loss of virginity. This gives men incredible power, an ability to launch someone into a new stage of life, a new perspective, a whole new way of living. Womanhood is so much more than this, it is personal and powerful and a chance to mature and grow in one's own way. However, giving men power over womanhood erases the nuance and the beauty of being a woman, while the realities of women's lives are completely ignored, and a romanticised patriarchy instated in their place. Cicero's brother Quintus was rather unhappily married for 25 years before he and his wife, Pomponia, divorced. Quintus is supposed to have stated that "nothing is better than not having to share a bed,"¹⁸ a sentiment most likely shared by Cicero's young bride and possibly by Pomponia, but the women's opinions were unwanted and remain unknown. The contrast between how many of even the arbitrary thoughts of men we can find and how few of women's thoughts remain is stark, suggesting that the realities of women's lives were certainly not as visible as men's, if they were visible at all.

The realities of women's lives in the ancient world are visible in terms of their constraints and expectations, from literature to anecdotes to graves. What is not visible is their thoughts, feelings, lamentations, hopes, dreams, ambitions. Women were confined to domesticity, villainised and sexualised, speculated about and idolised. Most accounts we have are unsentimental and unempathetic, but those which sail closer to the truth are invaluable and give an insight into what this essay has been searching for. Nonetheless, no amount of supposition or guesswork can revive what we have lost: the intricacies and realities of the lives of women in the ancient world in their most integral, private, reflective state.

¹⁸ SPQR p311

Bibliography:

Anne Haward *Penelope to Poppaea* pp 28-32

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