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Review article

Gender in ancient Rome: New directions and voices

R. Ancona & G. Tsouvala, eds., *New directions in the study of women in Greco-Roman antiquity*, New York: Oxford University Press 2021. xvi + 278 pp., 11 figs, 8 colour pls. ISBN 9780190937638
<https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190937638.001.0001>

B. Longfellow & M. Swetnam-Burland, eds., *Women's lives, women's voices. Roman material culture and female agency in the Bay of Naples*, Austin: University of Texas Press 2021. 408 pp., 76 figs, 16 colour pls. ISBN 9781477323588
<https://doi.org/10.7560/323588>

F. Rohr Vio, *Powerful matrons. New political actors in the Late Roman Republic*, Zaragoza: Prensas de la Universidad de Zaragoza 2022. 236 pp. ISBN 9788413404523

<https://doi.org/10.30549/opathrom-16-11>

Introduction

Almost 50 years ago, Sarah Pomeroy published her monumental *Goddesses, whores, wives, and slaves* (1975). The research field of gender in the ancient Mediterranean benefited immeasurably from this volume and has grown phenomenally since its publication. In her *Studying gender in Classical antiquity* (2013), Lin Foxhall has traced its movements and transformations from the study of women in the 1960s and 1970s, to studies of gender relations and sexualities in the 1980s and 1990s, through to intersectional and trans approaches from the 2000s onwards. There is, in general, a “widespread accept-

ance of the notion that gender operates in some way in almost every human social context, and that it is intimately entwined with the construction, representation and performance of power in many realms”.¹ While there has been a shift from an exclusive focus on gender to intersectional considerations of the various dimensions affecting people’s lives and identities, gender remains a useful category of historical analysis,² as gender hierarchies and inequalities persist in numerous forms. Studying gender in the past reminds us how far we have come, as well as how far there is still to go. Our review article examines contributions from three recent works that advance the study of gender in ancient Rome in particular: 1) Ronnie Ancona and Georgie Tsouvala’s *New directions in the study of women in Greco-Roman antiquity* (2021); 2) Brenda Longfellow and Molly Swetnam-Burland’s *Women’s lives, women’s voices. Roman material culture and female agency in the Bay of Naples* (2021); and 3) Francesca Rohr Vio’s *Powerful matrons. New political actors in the Late Roman Republic* (2022). We will argue that these works are indicative of both the vibrancy of this field and the need for future research.

Before turning to the three works, it is worth highlighting two theoretical concepts or approaches that inform much recent research on gender in the ancient Mediterranean, namely female agency and intersectionality. Undergirding many studies on women and power are questions relating to female autonomy and self-determination under patriarchy. The concept of female agency—a woman’s “power and capacity to act as she chooses”³—offers one way of thinking about the limitations and possibilities for women in these terms. All three examined works deal with female agency either explicitly⁴ or implicitly.⁵

¹ Foxhall 2013, 14.

² E.g., Scott 1986; 2010.

³ Bowden & Mummery 2009, 124.

⁴ Ancona & Tsouvala 2021; Longfellow & Swetnam-Burland 2021.

⁵ Rohr Vio 2022.

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A recurrent theme among various contributions is the agency of collectives of women—“collective agency”—or “the making and carrying out of strategic alliances” to “achieve strategic and contextual ends”:⁶ women working together to get things done. This is particularly evident in Rohr Vio’s work, which highlights numerous cases of élite Roman women collaborating to achieve political goals. Another commonality among the works is an awareness of the impact of varying statuses on women’s lives. Intersectional scholarship, particularly that of Kimberlé Crenshaw, has demonstrated that social inequalities, oppression, and privileges occur across multiple dimensions beyond gender, including ethnicity, class, age, sexuality, and ability.⁷ The identities and lives of women in the past were not monolithic: an élite citizen woman had a vastly different experience to an enslaved foreigner.⁸ All three examined works affirm the impact of different statuses on women’s lives, notably the gulf in agency between wealthy élite women and other members of ancient societies. Our assessment of the contributions will be informed by these concepts.

Content and audience

Ancona and Tsouvala’s edited volume is a tribute to Pomeroy, and commemorates the fortieth anniversary of her *Goddesses, whores, wives, and slaves*. The twelve essays therein reveal the diversity of approaches within the research field; the contributors include, for example, historians, philologists, literary critics, archaeologists, art historians, and legal scholars, all of whom provide the reader with in-depth discussions of specific features of women’s lives across the Mediterranean. If the “new directions” featured in this volume consist of the re-examination of old evidence with a critical eye and a close attention to detail, the thirteen essays in the edited volume by Longfellow and Swetnam-Burland challenge previous interpretations of the material evidence from the Bay of Naples and add new voices to the chorus of ancient women. The contributors explore female agency by investigating how women from a range of social backgrounds engaged with their local communities, and they offer new approaches by adopting a principle of inclusion that counters the male biases in the sources. While this collection of essays discusses women of various ages and social statuses, enslaved and free, working and leisured, the volume by Rohr Vio focuses on the nature and frequency of (mostly) élite female interventions in politics in the Late Roman Republic, their consequences, and source evaluations thereof. This volume is a revision and English translation of

her earlier Italian volume, which Webb has reviewed previously.⁹ Throughout this new work, Rohr Vio demonstrates how women intervened in politics in domestic and urban spaces, and enumerates their various communication strategies. While some of her assumptions are traditional, her collection of numerous episodes of individual and collective female political activity will serve as a rich resource for future research on women and politics in the ancient Mediterranean.

The three works have disparate audiences. Two are more literary and historical,¹⁰ while the third is archaeological, with a particular focus on Pompeii and Herculaneum.¹¹ Rohr Vio’s work is invaluable as it opens up Italian scholarship to anglophone audiences. Such translations are necessary for bridging the gap between different scholarly traditions: we hope to see more of them. Longfellow and Swetnam-Burland and Rohr Vio’s works are accessible for a wide audience, avoid jargon, and offer translations of all ancient sources, and the former includes exceptional high-resolution photographs of relevant objects. Both works would be particularly suitable as teaching tools for undergraduates and beyond, and would even be accessible for non-specialist readers. Ancona and Tsouvala’s work is more specialized, although it does include helpful translations. Many contributions therein assume a significant degree of background knowledge and include substantial jargon, and would thus be more suitable for graduate students and scholars. All three works are relevant to scholars of gender in ancient Rome, and include either useful endnotes¹² or footnotes,¹³ expansive general bibliographies, and indices. For those looking for examples of how the research field is advancing: look no further!

Individual reviews

NEW DIRECTIONS IN THE STUDY OF WOMEN IN GRECO-ROMAN ANTIQUITY

One of Pomeroy’s greatest contributions to the research field has been her interdisciplinary approach. It is appropriate, then, that the volume dedicated to her involves multiple sources and methodologies and spans the whole Greco-Roman period. In the following, we focus on those essays addressing women in ancient Rome. The first group of essays are concerned with juridical aspects of women’s lives. Barbara Levick analyses M. Plautius Silvanus’ motivation for killing his

⁶ Bowden & Mummy 2009, 147.

⁷ Crenshaw 1989; Bowden & Mummy 2009, 138–139.

⁸ Richlin 2014, 11–12.

⁹ Rohr Vio 2019; Webb 2020.

¹⁰ Ancona & Tsouvala 2021; Rohr Vio 2022.

¹¹ Longfellow & Swetnam-Burland 2021.

¹² Longfellow & Swetnam-Burland 2021.

¹³ Ancona & Tsouvala 2021; Rohr Vio 2022.

wife Apronia in AD 24 (ch. 5). She uses the case as a springboard to discuss networks of elite women in the Early Imperial period, including the friendship between Urgulania, the grandmother of Plautius Silvanus, and Livia. By focusing on Urgulania's wealth, age, family ties, and personality, Levick illuminates how women outside the imperial family were part of, and contributed to, the political culture of the principate. Bruce W. Frier explores the understudied legal matter of under-age marriage, which, although legally impossible, was never criminalized (ch. 9). Frier demonstrates how the legislation progressed over time from tacitly legitimizing under-age marriage to mitigating its consequences for the young "wives" by assimilating their status to that of a fiancée. If the "husband" of an under-age "bride" should die before she reached the age of twelve, she would have the same right as a *sponsa* to recover the dowry. His chapter encourages us to decode Roman law and try to recover the "enormous quantity of unfamiliar and valuable perceptions and insights about contemporary social values and transactions" (p. 185) contained within. Like Frier, Marilyn Skinner is concerned with marriage legislation (ch. 10). Her discussion on the connection between (male) anxieties over wives' adultery and fears about their handling of family assets provides new insights into the rationale behind Augustus' marriage legislation and why extramarital sexual activities were criminalized. Female sexual misconduct has been the object of intense scholarly scrutiny, yet Skinner, by focusing on the financial penalties imposed after trial upon those convicted with adultery, sheds new light on both women's alleged immorality and their increasing wealth and autonomy.

The two final essays challenge core scholarly assumptions about the ways in which we approach ancient sources on women and female visibility in ancient Rome. Kristina Milnor returns to Dio's famous account of Augustan social legislation in 18 BC (Dio 54.16.2), and his claim regarding the paucity of women among the nobility and the permissive nature of the legislation for intermarriage among sub-senatorial people (ch. 11). She argues that the validity of Dio's assertion is perhaps less interesting than the fact that the Augustan social legislation generated historical facts, particularly about women, and that Dio could have been extrapolating from the legislation, perhaps even imagining some demographic data for context. For Milnor, this social legislation is particularly fertile ground for this fact-generation, given the dearth of historical data on women and the legislation's focus on women: the laws "do not just depend on the existence of certain knowledge about women and their lives" (p. 211), but they generate more knowledge, meanings, and facts. While previous analyses may have focused on the facticity of Dio's account, Milnor encourages us to focus instead on epistemological issues, on questioning "the fact of Dio's fact ... how it functions within an epistemological framework that wrote women's stories then and is still writing them now" and on

acknowledging the importance of "knowing and not knowing" for writing history (p. 212). Amy Richlin (ch. 12) offers a resounding challenge to the erasure of women from mainstream scholarship on Roman political culture, reminding us that women are deliberately omitted from past and present histories, "since historians are the ones who choose what they put in" (p. 213). The types of sources we use to challenge this erasure matter. Richlin contends that—unlike the later histories of Polybius and Livy—the comedies of Plautus (and others) offer a contemporaneous and bottom-up view of the Middle Republic, providing insight into the war-torn period from multiple perspectives—into the violent displacement of peoples, movement of refugees, enslavement, sexual violence, as well as contemporary political discourse. Given that such comedy "staged women and played to women" from non-élite to élite, it provides unrivalled insight into "what made women laugh ... and how that fits with their political culture" (p. 216; cf. Plaut. *Poen.* 28–35). Drawing on numerous Plautine and other examples, Richlin takes aim at Karl-Joachim Hölkeskamp's monolithic, all-male vision of Roman political culture and nomological knowledge, replacing his "man in the Roman street"¹⁴ with the many women in the streets of Rome (staged and historical). Notably, she indicates the frequency with which Livy situates women in public during the Second Punic War and other conflicts, either for religious activity or responses to warfare. With this and other evidence, she evinces the inclusion of women of various statuses in entertainment, legislation, religion, and public spaces in the Middle Republic. Richlin convincingly demonstrates that women were highly visible on the streets of Rome in the Middle Republic, and that our models of Republican political culture must be rewritten.

WOMEN'S LIVES, WOMEN'S VOICES. ROMAN MATERIAL CULTURE AND FEMALE AGENCY IN THE BAY OF NAPLES

In the introduction to *Women's lives, women's voices*, the editors note how the lack of obvious gender differentiation in the archaeological material—funerary monuments built by women cannot be visually distinguished from those built by men, nor can the handwriting of a woman be identified in a graffito—has meant that scholars have treated Pompeii as a city primarily inhabited by men. Objects like mirrors, cosmetics, or weaving implements have been associated with the female realm, while more "gender-neutral" material objects tend to be seen as male. This volume, drawing on the unique Campanian material, focuses attention on female agency and social engagement, and sets out a new direction of research on women's lives by bringing a wide range of source materials

¹⁴ Hölkeskamp 2014, 67.

and theoretical frameworks into dialogue. The thirteen essays are structured around three themes: public and commercial identities, women on display, and representing women. In the first chapter, Lauren Petersen demonstrates how scholarship on even the most well-documented context in Pompeii, such as the Temple of Isis, favours discussion of men over women, despite evidence that clearly indicates women were both patrons and devotees of the cult (ch. 1). Petersen argues that this omission is part of a larger pattern of silence in the scholarship on Pompeii. Activities such as the *salutatio* are predominantly described from the perspective of elite men, and this male-centric view ignores the evidence for how women were present in the atrium in different capacities and engaged in different activities before and after the *salutatio*. The challenge posed in Petersen's chapter, to make Pompeian women integral to the city's history, is taken up in the rest of the volume.

The following chapters by Molly Swetnam-Burland and Lauren Caldwell combine archaeological material from Pompeii with written records from the Roman world and look at female labour, including financial operations (chs. 2 and 3). Caldwell argues that spinning and weaving provided economic and social advantages to free and enslaved women, which offers a fresh perspective on activities that are commonly seen as markers of virtuous femininity for elite women rather than commercial enterprises. The final two essays in the first section are written by Barbara Kellum and Eve D'Ambra and focus on female patronage and how women could construct public personae by sponsoring major monuments in the city of Pompeii (chs. 4 and 5). The second section explores how women self-identified and were identified by others. Brenda Longfellow investigates funerary and honorific portrait statues and how they might provide information not only on how women were perceived but also how they projected their own images (ch. 6). Elaine K. Gazda thereafter re-examines the frieze in the Villa of the Mysteries and argues that the distinct facial features of the depicted women suggest that they were household members, perhaps involved in a Dionysiac *thiasos* (ch. 7). Thereafter Erika Zimmermann Damer casts light on women of the lower social strata by looking at graffiti (ch. 8). Her essay enables us to identify and name the many women who left their mark, and commemorated their own lives, on the walls of Pompeii. Lastly, Sarah Levin-Richardson demonstrates how female sex workers were visible in numerous ways in the city, from the purpose-built brothel to the forum, and highlights the many roles that they performed, including emotional labour and the "promotion of the masculinity of their clients" (ch. 9).

The final section focuses on what idealized representations of women might indicate about their lived experience. Jennifer Trimble explores how women in different social and commercial positions might view the same painting in the House of the Chaste Lovers (ch. 10), while Luciana Jacobelli turns

to the House of the Triclinium and argues that it might have been owned by a courtesan who, in an autonomous manner, offered companionship and sex (ch. 11). Jessica Powers' essay focuses on a single marble relief sculpture from a tavern depicting a woman and a man having sex (ch. 12). She suggests that it was reused from an earlier context and displayed at the tavern to enhance the customers' experience, offering an occasion for both women and men to reflect on their own life and circumstances, and to explore fantasies. In the final chapter, Margaret L. Laird examines a different kind of female depiction, namely graffiti drawings produced by non-professional artists (ch. 13). Many of these drawings do not conform to the female image portrayed in media such as paintings and sculpture, reminding us that the markers that we consider characteristic of Roman womanhood might have had limited appeal to the person on the street.

POWERFUL MATRONS. NEW POLITICAL ACTORS IN THE LATE ROMAN REPUBLIC

Rohr Vio's volume is an invaluable addition to the scholarship on women and power in ancient Rome, and one of the first in English to offer a synoptic overview of female interventions in politics in the Republic since Richard Bauman's *Women and politics in ancient Rome* (1994). She assembles numerous examples of women, individually and collectively, intervening in politics in the Late Republic, and demonstrates the frequency of these interventions in the *domus*, streets, Forum, and beyond. Rohr Vio argues that some women (read: mostly elite) were political actors and that they "should be acknowledged as exerting a concrete influence in Roman politics, despite no mention of female emancipation in a modern sense being preserved in the literary sources" (p. 212). She moves beyond the classic examples of Cornelia, Servilia, Fulvia, Hortensia, Terentia, and Octavia to encompass women such as Afrania, Eppuleia, and Tanusia. Her introduction situates female interventions within the *fluctus seditionum* of the Late Republic, following Valerius Maximus's dictum (Val. Max. 3.8.6). The first six chapters investigate female interventions in domestic and urban contexts, encompassing marital strategies and family alliances (ch. 1); the education and mentorship of children (ch. 2); the exploitation of women's and others' deaths, particularly funerals and suicides (ch. 3); interventions on behalf of relatives, including absent husbands and children (ch. 4); participation in the initiatives of their husbands, sons, brothers, and lovers (ch. 5); and mediation between various parties, from relatives to those outside their family (ch. 6). The seventh chapter adduces legendary precedents for female political interventions in the Late Republic, including, for example, Hersilia and the Sabine women, Tanaquil, Lucretia, Veturia, and Volumnia, as well as some "historical" precedents from the Middle Republic, notably the collective actions of women

during various conflicts, for example, during the Second Punic War (ch. 7). Throughout these chapters, Rohr Vio delineates the various communication strategies—gestural, visual, and oral—deployed by women in domestic and public contexts, and argues these were adopted from traditional domestic, funerary, and religious practices. She underscores the dynamics of male evaluations of these interventions in surviving sources, from criticisms to encomia, and indicates that these evaluations are typically directed at the male relations of these women as opposed to the women themselves. Such evaluations often reflect attempts by authors to delegitimize or praise the former. When directed at women, these evaluations build on pervasive female stereotypes. Her concluding chapter clearly articulates the numerous ways in which women were significant political actors during the Late Republic, and how their political activity helps us better comprehend the complexities of this period.

But were the political *matronae* of the Late Republic only “guardians of a power that passed—fleetingly and only out of necessity—through their hands” (p. 14), as Rohr Vio claims? The multiple legendary and historical precedents Rohr Vio adduces in her seventh chapter offer alternative visions. Far from being an evanescence of the 1st century BC, female political practices and power were integrated in the numerous transformations of Republican Rome.¹⁵ Five major assumptions lie at the core of Rohr Vio’s volume, which inform her approach to the ancient sources and her overarching analyses: 1) political activity was an exclusively male prerogative in the Republic; 2) “politics” constituted magisterial and military careers, activities within the Senate, assemblies, the courts, and the Forum, and public speeches; 3) women were expected to follow a traditional behaviour model, enshrined in inscriptions like the *laudationes Murdiae* and *Turiae*; 4) women were encouraged by tradition to operate in domestic spaces and men in public spaces (streets, Forum, court); and 5) the main reason for women’s participation in Roman politics was due to the “emergency times brought about by internal political conflicts” (p. 15). These assumptions produce significant conceptual issues, many of which Webb has addressed earlier.¹⁶ Essentially, a more expansive and inclusive view of politics as women’s proactive engagement in the *res publica*,¹⁷ of the numerous possible behavioural models for women in the Republic,¹⁸ of the complexities of gendered spatial usage and the blurriness of public, private, and sacred spaces,¹⁹ and of

the clear precedents for women as political actors in earlier periods would have produced different insights into the continuities and transformations of female political activity in the Republic. Assumptions aside, Rohr Vio’s volume persuasively attests to the agency and power of elite women in the Late Republic.

Summary

All three volumes advance gender studies in the ancient Mediterranean in new directions, and are witnesses to the vibrancy of the research field. Contributors demonstrate a willingness to return to old data with new approaches and questions, and to challenge long-standing assumptions about the lives of women in ancient Rome. Of especial note are the contributors’ sensitivity to the range and variability of female identities and experiences in the past, and the value of interdisciplinarity for shedding new light on ancient evidence. Sources previously dismissed as too literary or consigned to the margins of scholarship on women—e.g., drama, graffiti, and household objects—prove to be a particularly rich source for bottom-up approaches to ancient Rome, and for encountering women from the enslaved to the elite. Material evidence has a particularly rich potential, which often remains untapped. For “archaeology offers the opportunity to engage directly with artifacts that were manufactured and used by women” and, if we can find women within male-authored literature, we should be capable “of identifying them in items they used on a daily basis.”²⁰ Through a radical openness to the material and textual traces left behind by women, we can begin to challenge the omissions and silences in our histories.

Future directions

In her epilogue to *Women’s lives, women’s voices*, Allison Emmerson reflects on how “issues such as race, ethnicity, and ability remain almost completely unexplored in the Bay of Naples and are pursued only rarely for Roman Italy as a whole ... Surely future projects will show that the silence of other groups likewise results from the questions we ask and the narratives we uphold.”²¹ We can only agree, for our view is that inter-sectional perspectives, collaborative efforts, and interdisciplinary conversations are essential for future growth in our field. Translations of international scholarship also offer a particularly helpful bridge between disparate scholarly communities

¹⁵ Cf. Webb 2022.

¹⁶ Webb 2020.

¹⁷ Webb 2022.

¹⁸ E.g., Plaut. *Amph.* 839–842; *Aul.* 167–169, 478–535; *Mil.* 679–700; *Mostell.* 280–289; Polyb. 10.4–5; 31.26–28; Nepos fr. 59M; Cato, fr. 158 *ORF*³; C. Sempronius Gracchus, fr. 48 *ORF*³.

¹⁹ Cf. Russell 2016.

²⁰ Emmerson 2021, 275.

²¹ Emmerson 2021, 280.

and traditions. To pursue these various goals, we need to forge new networks and venture out of our disciplinary silos.

Our own research trajectories offer some additional insight. Our doctoral dissertations focused primarily on elite women and political culture, namely the political position of Livia *femina princeps*²² and elite female status competition in Republican Rome.²³ Over the last few years, theories of female agency and intersectionality have encouraged us to look beyond the elite and outside traditional sources. Brännstedt's research now focuses on the nature of female resistance in the Roman law courts, and Webb's on the dynamics of female visibility in urban spaces in the Republic. We both consider the ways in which experiences differed for women of varying statuses and in various contexts, namely how legal and social status could radically impact women's lives, and how spatiality and temporality shaped the limits of the possible. To find our women in the courts and in the streets, we turn to all manner of ancient textual and material evidence and to comparative evidence from later periods. By combining archaeological, historical, literary, and philological approaches, we believe it is possible to challenge scholarly assumptions and shed new light on old material. Such intersectional and interdisciplinary approaches, we suggest, characterize the examined volumes and could usefully enhance future research.

Long ago, Pomeroy challenged scholars to grapple with the silences in our sources and scholarship.²⁴ By engaging with a variety of contemporary voices and being open to the variability of gendered voices in the past, we gain a better understanding of the complexities of marginalization and empowerment, and augment and nuance our narratives of the past. By way of example, if we avoid essentializing and dichotomizing gendered experiences, we can glimpse the diversity of genders in the past and connect with broader discussions on trans and non-binary lives in our own communities. There is much work to be done.

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²² Brännstedt 2016.

²³ Webb 2019.

²⁴ Cf. Richlin 2014, 11–12.

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