

Teaching Unit: The “Transgressive” Roman Woman

Rationale:

A proper study of “the transgressive woman” in Latin literature demands the application of feminist methodologies. Like the culturally ideal Roman *matrona*, the “transgressive” woman is a literary construct imposed on historical women by a cultural ideology which separated the sexes socially into gendered spheres of activity. Consequently, upper-class Roman women who initiated public action that crossed gender boundaries were negatively portrayed by male authors of Latin texts, which focused on masculine subjects and activities. Effaced by social *mores* and the vagaries of manuscript survival, the conduct and motivations of such women were shaped by gossip and in literary genres such as satire, oratory, comedy, and memoirs/memorabilia, whose conventions and bias invited caricature and invective.

Objectives:

- To re-read ancient canonical Latin texts using the lenses of gender
- To comprehend the difference between cultural construct and individual woman
- To understand the meaning of “transgressive” in terms of cultural expectations of gender and to recast female public conduct as “transgendered”
- To acquire strategies for reconstructing the lives of historical Roman women

Description:

This unit applies feminist reading strategies to ancient texts about “transgressive” Roman women. It may be offered in Latin or in a course on ancient literature or history.

Depending on the level of the students and the nature of the course, the following introductory articles on Roman women and their literary sources may be recommended:

Treggiari, Susan. 1996. “Women in Roman Society.” In *I, Claudia*: 116-125.

Williams, Gordon. 1996. “Representations of Roman Women in Literature.” In *I, Claudia*: 126-138.

Students new to classical feminist scholarship will find these preliminary readings helpful:

McManus, Barbara. 1997. *Classics & Feminism: Gendering the Classics*: 18-19, 59-60, 69-70.

Keith, Alison. 2011. “[Lycoris Galli/Volumnia Cytheris: a Greek Courtesan in Rome](#),” 23-26.

Kampen, Natalie Boymel. 1996. “Gender Theory in Roman Art.” In *I, Claudia*: 14-17.

Projects:

One or more of the assignments below can be undertaken by a class as a whole, distributed to teams of students, or offered as an independent study option. In all cases for maximum effectiveness the activities should be shared, the readings discussed, and the negative rubric “transgressive” traced against the background of Roman conceptualizations of sex and gender.

I. Fulvia: While Cicero’s famous diatribes are targeted at Antony, Fulvia receives her share of abuse as his wife and for her conduct. As one of two powerful contemporary voices surviving against her (Octavian’s the other), Cicero’s assessment influenced succeeding generations of authors.

Read: in Latin or English translation, Cicero, *Philippics* 2 (44 BCE)

<https://feminaeromanae.org/Fulvia.html>; Valerius Maximus, *Facta et Dicta* 8.3.3

<http://feminaeromanae.org/hortensia.html>; Hallett (2015), 247-265; McManus, 93-96 (Transgendered Moments); Myers, 337-52.

Consider: What methods does Cicero employ to reduce Fulvia to a stereotype, myth, or category? Does Valerius Maximus treat Hortensia as a transgressive woman? How might an intersectional or transgendered reading offer a truer portrait of Fulvia?

II. Clodia Metelli: Cicero successfully defended Marcus Caelius Rufus, on trial for serious political crimes (including the attempted murder of Dio, an ambassador from Alexandria), by redirecting the prosecution against Clodia Metelli, whose conduct and character as an aristocrat and wife he portrays as thoroughly corrupt.

Read: selections from Cicero, *Pro Caelio* (56 BCE) in Latin https://feminaeromanae.org/cicero_clodia.html or the whole speech in English translation; Davis (2008), 67-85; Dixon, 16-25; Skinner, 9-18, 105-112.

Consider: What methods does Cicero employ to ridicule and discredit Clodia and thus deflect on her the real issues of the trial? How might application of the theory of intersectionality and reading for genre bias bring us closer to the historical Clodia?

III. Lesbia: Catullus' love affair with the woman whose name he secreted gave birth to a brilliant cycle of poems that celebrated and scorned a flamboyant literary construct identified as Clodia.

Read: Catullus, *Carmina* 36

<http://feminaeromanae.org/catullus36.html> in Latin or in English translation; Dixon, 32-44, 133-156; Richlin, 36-61; Skinner, 121-126, 132-136, 145-150.

Consider: What methods does Catullus employ to reduce Lesbia to a stereotype, myth, or category? How does the Roman construct of female sexuality substitute for the woman behind the *persona* of Lesbia?

IV. Julia Augusti: the very image of the "new woman," Augustus' daughter flouted convention and rebelled against her father's laws on morality to take control of her body and her life.

Read: Macrobius, *Saturnalia* 2.5.2-5, 7, 9 in Latin

<http://feminaeromanae.org/MacrobiusJulia.html> or in English translation; Fantham, 1-16, 81-89; Hallett (2012), 372-384; Richlin, 36-61, 81-102.

Consider: What real-life roles does Julia fill (daughter, wife, mother, aristocrat, member of the Augustan household) and how does Macrobius portray her in them? Compare Julia's conduct to that of her aunt Octavia, celebrated by Augustus with his wife Livia as exemplars of the traditional *matrona*.

V. Gallery of "Transgressive" Roman Women:

The *Worlds of Roman Women* (Raia, Lushnig, Sebesta, Focus 2005) and *Online Companion to the Worlds of Roman Women* (Raia, Sebesta) <https://feminaeromanae.org/> offer a number of annotated Latin texts about Roman women censured for abilities and conduct tolerated in males but unacceptable when displayed in women: learning, ambition, power, and sexuality. These portrayals by various ancient authors are introduced by essays that focus on the woman as subject. They can be interrogated individually by applying principles of feminist analysis, by comparing them to each other, or by setting them against narratives of Roman paragons of maternal virtue such as Lucretia, Cornelia, mother of the Gracchi, and Octavia, sister to Augustus.

Sallust, **Sempronia**, *WRW*, pp. 122-123
 Juvenal, **The Intellectual Woman**, *WRW*, pp. 34-35
 Livy, **Tarpeia** https://feminaeromanae.org/Livy_Tarpeia.html
 Livy, **Tullia** (Tarquin's wife) https://feminaeromanae.org/Livy_Tullia.html
 Valerius Maximus, **Amesia** https://feminaeromanae.org/ValMax_Amesia.html
 Valerius Maximus, **Afrania** https://feminaeromanae.org/ValMax_Afrania.html
 Tacitus, **Vistilia** https://feminaeromanae.org/Tacitus_Vistilia.html
 Tacitus, **Messalina** https://feminaeromanae.org/Tacitus_messalina.html
 Tacitus, **Livia** https://feminaeromanae.org/Tacitus_Livia_death.html

Bibliography

Introduction to Roman Women:

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Williams, Gordon. 1996. "Representations of Roman Women in Literature." In *I, Claudia: Women in Ancient Rome*, edited by Diana E.E. Kleiner and Susan B. Matheson. New Haven: Yale University Art Gallery: 126-138.
Hallett, Judith. 2012. "Women in Augustan Rome." In *A Companion to Women in the Ancient World*, edited by Sharon L. James and Sheila Dillon. Malden, Ma., Oxford, Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell. pp. 372-384.

Feminist Strategies for Uncovering the Lives of Roman Women:

Davis, Kathy. 2008. "Intersectionality as Buzzword: A Sociology of Science Perspective on What Makes a Feminist Theory Successful." In *Feminist Theory* 9.1: 67-85.
Dixon, Suzanne. 2001. "The Allure of 'La dolce Vita' in Ancient Rome." In *Reading Roman Women: sources, genres and real life*. London: Duckworth: 133-156.
Fantham, Elaine. 2006. *Julia Augusti: The Emperor's Daughter*. London and New York: Routledge.
Hallett, Judith. 2015. "Fulvia: The Representation of an Elite Roman Woman Warrior." In *Women & War in Antiquity*, edited by Jacqueline Fabre-Serris, Alison Keith. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press: 247-265.
Joshel, S.R. 2002. "The Body Female and the Body Politic: Livy's Lucretia and Verginia." In *Sexuality and Gender in the Classical World*, edited by Laura K. McClure. Oxford, UK, Malden, MA: Blackwell: 163-187.
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McManus, Barbara. 1997. *Classics & Feminism: Gendering the Classics*. New York: Twayne Publishers.
Myers, Nancy. 2003. "[Cicero's \(S\)Trumpet: Roman Women and the Second Philippic](#)." In *Rhetoric Review* 22.4:337-52.
Richlin, Amy. 2014. "Approaches to the Sources on Adultery in Rome" and "Julia's Jokes, Galla Placidia, and the Roman Use of Women as Political Icons." In *Arguments with Silence: Writing the History of Roman Women*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan: 36-61, 81-102.
Skinner, Marilyn B. 2011. *Clodia Metelli: The Tribune's Sister*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.