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WOMEN'S DAILY LIFE IN THE ROMAN WEST

Emily Hemelrijk

Writing a chapter on 'women's daily life in ancient Rome' is a challenge, since it involves three questionable categories: 'women', 'daily life' and 'ancient Rome'. First, 'women' is such a vast category as to be almost unmanageable. Roughly half the population of the Roman world consisted of women, who were divided by class, juridical status, domicile, language, ethnic background, wealth, age and marital status as much as they were united by the privileges and constraints of their sex: their ability to give birth and breastfeed, and their exclusion from the army (at least from its fighting ranks) and from political and juridical office. Second, 'daily life' is a highly elusive notion. It encompasses the daily routine of individuals that is obvious to the person in question and considered uninteresting for others; therefore, it is usually unrecorded. A person's 'daily life' is in part occupied by the basic need for food, sleep and shelter, which are alike for all human beings. Yet, cultural values interfere, for instance, by allotting women a smaller share of the food when the amount is connected with social esteem (Hemelrijk 2015). It further consists of the daily occupations to earn a living, which were of prime importance for all but the leisured class. In the Roman world, work was certainly divided by gender, but perhaps less so than the ancient evidence suggests; gender norms tended to push women back into their domestic tasks much more than most women could actually afford to do.¹ Since women's work is dealt with elsewhere in this volume, I shall not discuss it here. Women's 'daily life' will therefore be defined here as their day-to-day activities apart from possible work to earn a living. Lastly, the term 'ancient Rome' can be used for the city of Rome in antiquity and for the Roman world at large. I shall here take an intermediate position and focus on the Roman Empire, particularly on its western part. Because of the lack of evidence for women in the rural areas, the main concern of this chapter will be women living in the numerous Roman cities of Italy and the western provinces in the first three centuries of the Empire.

Norms and daily practice

What did these urban women have in common to justify a communal discussion of their daily lives? With the exception of female slaves, most of them had Roman citizenship or received it at some stage between the foundation of their cities and AD 212, when it was granted to virtually all free inhabitants of the Empire. Thus, they were subject to Roman law, which allowed those who had no living *paterfamilias* and had borne three or more children

to control their own finances without male interference.² It also made them answerable to Roman gender norms which emphasized modesty, chastity and domesticity. These norms, advertising a retired way of life devoted to the home and family, were reflected in funerary inscriptions for women and were symbolized by their wool work. ‘She spun wool, was pious, modest, frugal and chaste; she stayed at home’ reads the epitaph of Amyone, the ‘excellent and very beautiful’ wife of Marcus (Rome, *CIL* 6, 11602). Similarly, a husband addressed his deceased wife, whom he married as ‘a virgin of 14’ and who died at 21: ‘to my sweetest wife, most loyal, chaste and faithful, who never wanted to go out in public without me, either to the baths or anywhere else’ (Ostia, *AE* 1987, 179). These traditional ideals are reflected in the standardized dress of female portrait statues covering the body with voluminous layers of cloth which emphasized their modesty (but also their wealth!) and impeded their freedom of movement. How, and to what degree, these norms affected women’s daily lives is another matter. As we shall see, juridical status, class and wealth competed with gender in shaping the lives of women.

Despite Roman values prescribing female domesticity, we may assume that, in daily practice, most women had little opportunity to stay at home. Depending on their wealth and status, they had to go out to earn a living, travelled to visit family and friends, helped their husbands in their trade or in tilling the fields. This does not mean that they did not observe the traditional norms, but, under the veil of domesticity, women could lead much more variegated lives. An epitaph in Roman Africa set up by a merchant for his wife ‘full of modesty’ may be taken as an example:

In Rome, Urbanilla was my companion and partner in business supported by her frugality. When all had been completed successfully and she returned with me to my fatherland, Carthage snatched away my pitiable companion. I have no hope of living without such a wife; she kept my house and helped me with her advice. Deprived of the light of life, the poor woman now rests enclosed in marble.

(*CIL* 8, 152; late second–early third century)

Clearly, Urbanilla’s life in business was not felt to be at odds with her female virtues. In epitaphs for women of the working classes, their industry is often praised together with their traditional female virtues. Postumia Matronilla, for example, was commemorated by her husband in Roman Africa as:

an incomparable wife, good mother and most dedicated grandmother, chaste, pious, hardworking, frugal, efficient, watchful, careful, true to one husband, a *matrona* full of industry and trustworthiness.

(*CIL* 8, 11294)

Instead of the cumbersome dress of Roman statues, such women wore a simple tunic, which allowed them to perform manual labour. Both in norms and in dress, therefore, we should not mistake ideals for reality and assume that, in daily practice, Roman women stayed at home spinning wool and wearing the *tunica*, *stola* and *palla* (mantle) that we find in the literary sources and in portrait statues.³

In sum, the relationship between norms and daily practice was a complicated one: Roman women at once observed, reproduced *and* manipulated the traditional norms (cf. Cohen 1991). We find a similar tension in the education of Roman women. In daily practice, a good education was appreciated for women of the upper classes and among families who aspired to high

status, since these women were expected to participate in the social and cultural life of their class. They received guests, accompanied their husbands to dinner parties and other social events, informed their husbands (when they were abroad) about the social and political developments in Rome, and administered their property. This required not only basic literacy and numeracy but also a good cultural education, which was so important for the upper classes. At the same time, prejudices against educated women, accusing them of sexual licentiousness, ostentation and meddlesomeness, forced these women to perform a balancing act, hiding their education behind the traditional female virtues. Plutarch's portrait of Pompey's fifth wife Cornelia shows the mixed feelings women's education provoked:

She was well versed in literature, in playing the lyre, and in geometry, and had been accustomed to listen to philosophical discourses with profit. In addition to this, she had a nature which was free from that unpleasant meddlesomeness which such accomplishments are apt to impart to young women.

(Plut. Pomp. 55)

Though appreciated for reasons of status and convenience, women's education should be unobtrusive; the traditional female virtues remained the ultimate standard of their lives (Hemelrijk 1999).

A life of leisure or daily toils?

What can we know, or infer, about women's daily lives? For instance, what does their exclusion from political, military and juridical office and their limited participation in trade and in the professional occupations imply for their daily routine? Were women fully occupied with domestic concerns and the care for their families, or did they perhaps lead a life of leisure? Obviously, there is no description of women's daily lives in our male-authored sources; in as far as they wrote about women at all, most ancient authors were more interested in what women were supposed to do, or what they feared they would do, than in what they actually did. In the following, I shall therefore try to piece together some of the patchy evidence for women's daily lives differentiating between them according to their social and juridical status.

An upper-class life: Ummidia Quadratilla

Let us start with Pliny's obituary of Ummidia Quadratilla, a senatorial woman in Casinum who died in the early second century AD at the age of almost 79. Sketching her life, Pliny writes that: 'as a woman with the many idle hours of her sex she used to relax her mind by playing draughts and watching her pantomimes' (Pliny, *Ep.* 7.24.5). Though mildly critical about the unconventional way she filled her empty hours, Pliny takes the leisure of her sex for granted. From his perspective, as a man of politics and juridical affairs, hers was a life of leisure indeed, but we should not mistake it for a life of idleness. Apart from having a busy social life, Ummidia Quadratilla raised her orphaned grandchildren in her house, supervised their education and properly provided for them in her will. Pliny calls her the leading lady (*princeps femina*) of the town, and her popularity is reflected by the excited response of the crowd when she visited the theatre where her troupe of pantomimes performed. He does not spend a word, however, on her main claim to fame. As is shown by inscriptions, she was an important civic benefactress, donating a temple and an amphitheatre to her hometown, and repairing the local

theatre, at the dedication of which she gave a banquet to the city-councillors, the people and the women of the town. Obviously, as a woman of wealth and high rank, she had a large staff of slaves and freedmen who performed all household chores as well as the manual labour on her estates. This left her with a lot of free time. Yet, she supervised her extensive household and administered her possessions herself, probably – as was common for a Roman woman of substance – with the help of a freedman steward. Judging by the great sums she spent on her city, her elegant lifestyle and the excellent provisions for her grandchildren, she must have been a keen businesswoman.⁴ Clearly, there was more to her life than playing draughts and watching pantomimes.

Ummidia Quadratilla stands for a number of wealthy women in the cities of Italy and the western provinces who used their resources for the benefit of their cities as benefactresses, civic priestesses and patronesses or ‘mothers’ of cities and civic associations. Though all were women of substance, their social standing ranged from wealthy freedwomen to women of the senatorial elite and from women of indigenous background to descendants of ancient Roman stock. Their motives to spend their money, time and energy on their cities varied with their social background and personality, but the effect of their activities was to some extent similar: they were exposed to the public eye to a much higher degree than was common for women according to the traditional ideals. From the official promise of a donation to its eventual realisation, a benefactress was at the centre of public attention. During the period of construction, her name was attached to the building she donated and at its dedication, she added to the festivity and to the number of attendants by offering a banquet or a distribution of food or cash to all present. Priestesses presided at sacrifices, headed processions and supervised other cult activities, and patronesses favoured the cities and associations that co-opted them by bestowing benefactions or intervening on their behalf with the authorities.⁵ Public statues portray these women in full Roman dress with an inscription recording their civic merits and high standing. Thus, they present them not only as virtuous *matronae* but also as responsible, and respectable, Roman citizens. In sum, in the towns outside Rome, women of wealth could acquire great public esteem by munificence, civic priesthoods or patronal activities. Such activities must have occupied at least part of their spare time.

Women’s civic roles as sketched above permit the conclusion that, but for political office, the daily lives of male and female members of the upper classes were more alike than we tend to assume. Part of their routine activities was parallel. Women (and men) of the upper classes spent much time at their toilet, especially when going out, using specialized slaves to fashion their clothing and hairstyles (Figure 64.1).

Further, they attended to their financial affairs, checking the accounts of stewards and overseers. Last but not least, there were countless social events and obligations which involved banqueting, visiting the theatre and amphitheatre, meeting friends and acquaintances and receiving clients and dependents during the morning *salutatio*. The relative leisure that their exclusion from politics and jurisdiction allowed was at least partly filled by supervising their large households and caring for their families; the manual work was, of course, left to attendants.⁶ Finally, there was time to relax and perhaps play draughts, which was a favourite pastime for men as well (Balsdon 1969: 144–159). Gossipy sources tend to assume that the ample free time of wealthy women gave rise to illicit love affairs. Luxury and idleness would have corrupted their minds. For example, in his sixth satire Juvenal contrasts the self-indulgent and licentious women of his time with their sober and chaste predecessors in the good old days. And Lucian ridicules women’s zeal for philosophy and education, suggesting that it was only a pretence for their real interest: a secret love affair. Though love affairs did of course occur in the Roman world, these satirical sources, uncritically followed by some scholars in the past, misleadingly



Figure 64.1 Marble relief of a funerary monument from Noviomagus in Gallia Belgica (late 2nd – early 3rd c.) showing a Roman lady attended at her toilet by four female slaves. Rheinisches Landesmuseum Trier, photo Th. Zühmer.

present them as women's main pursuit.⁷ Their stories of women's sexual licence tell us more about male preoccupations than about women's daily life.

The working classes

In the classes below the elite, life was harder and more constrained. The daily lives of women of the artisan classes, and probably also those of the wives of farmers about whom we know next to nothing, must have been full of toil. Apart from a possible profession of their own, or as a co-working wife, these women had to look after their households and children with little or no slave assistance. Depending on whether they lived in the city or in the countryside, they had to draw water, grind grain, bake bread, cook, clean the house, spin, weave, wash and mend the clothing of the family, bear and rear the children, feed the animals and perform innumerable other household chores. No wonder that funerary inscriptions for women of these classes praise their frugality, industry and efficiency in addition to the conventional chastity, modesty and obedience to their husbands; these were important – even essential – qualities in a household of modest means. 'She was the first to rise and the last to go to bed, after she had put everything in order. Her wool-work was never out of her hands without good reason; no one

surpassed her in obedience', reads the tombstone of the freedwoman, Allia Potestas, in Rome. Though praised for her industry, domesticity and obedience, Allia Potestas seems to have led a highly unconventional life. Her extraordinary epitaph shows that she had lived harmoniously with two lovers and was praised for her physical qualities as well as for her matronal virtues (CIL 6, 37965, with Horsfall 1985).

According to 'middle-class' ideals, a good wife was sober and hardworking, and obedient to the wishes of her husband:

She wanted what I wanted and what I did not want she shunned. She had no secret that was unknown to me. She did not eschew hard work nor was she unaccustomed to wool working. She was parsimonious, but generous in her love for me, her husband. Without me she did not enjoy food nor the gifts of Bacchus.

(CIL 3, 7436; *Nova, Moesia Inferior*)

Many epitaphs present husband and wife as partners in life's daily struggle. The conjugal love and harmony ('without any quarrel') expressed on their tombs agree with the contemporary ideal of *Concordia* (Treggiari 1991: 229–261). Yet, since she was expected to put her husband first, the wife was held responsible for the success of the marriage. In sum, women of these classes were hard pressed by manifold obligations; unlike women of the elite, their daily lives knew little leisure. At the same time, the funerary inscriptions show pride in their achievements, their families and their domestic qualities. Modelled on those of the elite, most grave reliefs portray them not as the working (freed)women they were, but as the *matronae* of wealth and leisure they aspired to be (George 2005).

Slavery and poverty

The daily lives of the women of the freeborn poor, both urban and rural, usually go unrecorded. Compared to them, female slaves stood a better chance of leaving a record, particularly in the *columbaria* (collective tombs) of large households. Fewer female than male slaves were commemorated in these inscriptions. Though partly due to the underrepresentation of women in the epigraphic evidence, this suggests that not only in rural estates but also in upper-class urban households most of the menial work was performed by male slaves and freedmen. Female slaves were usually employed for various household chores, in childcare, for instance as wet-nurses (*nutrices*), and in the personal care of their mistress, for instance as hairdressers (*ornatrices*).⁸ Some of the more specialized tasks required training, which gave these women – once freed – a better start than women of the freeborn poor. The daily lives of female slaves were not only filled by work, but for the younger among them also involved childbearing – with the risk of being separated from their partner or children – and the misery of being sexually available for their masters. Yet, domestic slaves enjoyed a certain measure of protection and had a reasonable chance of being manumitted. Moreover, the large staffs of wealthy urban households formed a complex social world of their own composed of slaves, under-slaves (*vicarii*) and freed men and women, all of whom might be organized in *collegia* for sociability and for the sake of burial (Mouritsen 2013). In these domestic associations of large Roman households, we meet numerous female slaves and freedwomen not only as members, but also as office-holders: female *decuriones*, *curatores*, *quaestores*, a *sacerdos* and even a *quinquennalis* all fulfilled administrative and religious functions in these associations (Hemelrijk 2015: ch. 4). Being elected to such an office was an honour which was considered important enough to be recorded in their brief epitaphs; we may assume that it also gave them a more rewarding social life.

The drunken old woman

Poor freeborn women, especially those who had no male relatives to support them, had to fend for themselves. Without education or job training, they had little means to sustain themselves and, without surviving children, many older women must have been reduced to poverty. In late antiquity, the support of deserving widows was an important element of Christian charity, but this was a novel feature in the ancient world (Atkins and Osborne 2006: 2–3; Brown 2012: 39–45). In pagan society, benefactions were not intended as poor relief, but benefitted especially the wealthy and highly placed among the citizens. The miserable lot of poor elderly women, especially widows, is perhaps reflected in the literary and artistic topic of the *anus ebria*, the drunken old woman (Figure 64.2).

Numerous sculptures and terracotta flasks of a crouching old woman clinging to her enormous flask of wine and showing clear signs of drunkenness, illustrate the popularity of the theme from the Hellenistic period to the third century AD. Combining prejudices against old women, poverty and lack of self-control, the *anus ebria* was portrayed in the ancient sources with little empathy as a stock figure, both funny and disgusting. Though the clothes of the statues show that she had known better days, the overwhelming impression is one of abandon



Figure 64.2 Marble statue of the drunken old woman (second century AD; Roman copy of a Greek original). Munich Glyptothek inv.no. 437. (Photo: Christa Koppermann.)

and destitution.⁹ Ugly, emaciated and alone, the *anus ebria* was the opposite of the dignified elderly *matrona* of the wealthier classes, whose familial authority grew with her age and the number of her children (Dixon 1990). Respectable *matronae* were not supposed to drink, or only modestly and in the company of their husbands. Yet, proverbs, comedy and satirical sources portray elderly destitute women as having the bottle as their only friend, ridiculing her as a ‘wine-soak’ or a ‘much-drinking old hag drinking unmixed wine’.¹⁰ The relation between a stereotype and reality is rarely clear-cut. Yet, for the type to become as popular as it was – not only in the Hellenistic world but also in the Roman Empire (as numerous copies in various materials demonstrate) – the *anus ebria* must have been a recognizable figure in contemporary society. As an example of the misery and loneliness of the unprotected, the stock figure of the *anus ebria* may have served as a warning for all respectable *matronae* not to transgress the restrictions of their sex.

Conclusion

Despite the freedom of movement of Roman women, their financial capacity under Roman law and their regular contribution to the family income, daily life in the Roman world was segregated not only by class but also to some extent by gender. Men and women of the various classes led partly separate lives, meeting at social and religious events, banquets and even in the baths, but also having their own social gatherings and, probably, separate seating in the theatre and amphitheatre.¹¹ Being primarily responsible for their homes and families, women had respected familial roles, but in public life they were of secondary importance despite the prominence of a small group among them. This was expressed, for instance, by their exclusion from most distributions of food or cash in Roman towns – if mentioned at all, they were last and received least – and has greatly contributed to their underrepresentation in our evidence. Their position in public life has only in exceptional circumstances led to protest, a protest which confirmed the traditional norms (Hemelrijk 1987). In their daily lives, most Roman women seem to have identified with the moral codes of their class and gender and with the values of Roman society at large.

Notes

- 1 For working women, and the tension between the need to work and the ideal of domesticity of the Roman *matrona*, see e.g. Kampen 1981, Flemming 2013, Groen-Vallinga 2013, Holleran 2013.
- 2 Gardner 1990 and 1995; on Roman marriage and the *ius liberorum*, Treggiari 1991: 60–80.
- 3 For the ideals and reality of Roman female dress, see, among others, Scholz 1992, Davies 2002, Edmondson 2008: 22–26 and Olson 2008.
- 4 Sick 1999; for her benefactions, see *CIL* 10, 5183 = *ILS* 5628 = EAOR 4, 46 and *AE* 1946, 174 = *AE* 1992, 244 with Hemelrijk 2013.
- 5 Hemelrijk 2005, 2006, 2007, 2008 and 2015 with references.
- 6 Treggiari 1991 and 2007. On slaves within the Roman household, see Edmondson 2011.
- 7 *Juv. Sat.* 6; *Luc. de mercede conductis* 36, followed by Carcopino 1939: 112–124. Hemelrijk 1999: 37, 84–92 on ancient criticism of women’s education.
- 8 Edmondson 2011. See Mouritsen 2013: 49–53 and Treggiari 1975a and b on the gender imbalance among the staff of large Roman households.
- 9 Salomonson 1980; Zanker 1989; Cokayne 2003: 145–149; Parkin 2003: 86–87, 224–226, 247. For a thorough discussion of the varying responses to the *anus ebria*, see Masségliia 2012.
- 10 Plaut. *Curculio* 76–77: *anus . . . multibiba atque merobiba* and 79: *vinossissima*; see further Hor. *Od.* 4.13.4 and, for more examples, Cokayne 2003: 145–146 and Parkin 2003: 350 notes 121–125. For the prohibition to drink: Aulus Gellius, *Noctes Atticae* 10.23.1–2; Plutarchus, *Quaestiones Romanae* 6;

- Plutarchus, *Lyurgus et Numa* 3.5; Dionysius of Halicarnassus 2.25.6; Valerius Maximus 2.1.5 and 6.3.9; Cicero, *De Re Publica* 4.6.6; Plinius, *Historia Naturalis* 14.89–90 with Hemelrijk 2009.
- 11 For mixed or separate bathing for women, see Ward 1992 and Fagan 2002: 24–29; on dinner parties and seating arrangements in the theatre and amphitheatre, Hemelrijk 1999: 10–11, 42–47, Rawson 1987 and Edmondson 1996.

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