

XIII

Women in Roman Society



Women have been mentioned in many of the selections in the previous chapters, but not as lawyers, magistrates, bankers, politicians, soldiers, teachers, administrators, or business-owners. The activities of women in Roman society were limited mainly to the domestic sphere. While male members of the society regularly spent their days outside the home working, conducting business, attending to legal and political matters, or interacting with associates and clients, women generally remained close to home, first their father's home, then their husband's, and perhaps finally their son's.¹ Their primary role was to bear children and manage a household.² Men in Roman society had both a public and private identity; a man was a baker or a banker or a carpenter, as well as a husband and a father. A woman, on the other hand, was dependent on her family connection for her identity; she was somebody's daughter, somebody's wife, or somebody's mother. Women were praised only for their performance in these roles, and conspicuous behavior in any other role brought notoriety rather than praise. In every aspect of their lives, moreover, women were expected to defer to men and to subordinate their own interests to those of the men in the family.³ They were treated like wards or dependents who needed constant supervision. If a woman's father died, she was entrusted to the care of a guardian.⁴ Even in her role as child bearer and child rearer, a woman's life was controlled by men. An infant could be exposed without the consent of the woman who had just given it birth.⁵ And a

¹ Quintilian's mother, for example, seems to have lived with him; see selection 17. Consider also the account of the ungrateful son in selection 23.

² This was the role of free and freed women. The identity and role of a slave woman was defined by the wishes of her owner (and she might have several owners in her lifetime).

³ Consider Plutarch's advice for a happy marriage in selection 58 and Cicero's complaints about his sister-in-law in selection 70.

⁴ On guardians, see selection 50. The function of the guardian was to protect any money or property the woman might have inherited. Few women in ancient Rome were financially independent; the vast majority were bound to the men in their lives because they had no money of their own, or no control over their money. Compare Cato's comment in selection 335: "Our ancestors were not willing to let women conduct any business, not even private business, without a guardian. They wanted them to remain under the control of their fathers, brothers, and husbands."

⁵ On exposure, see selections 36 and 37.

mother would lose her children if she were divorced. Men were the doers and achievers of the Roman world; women were the nourishers and sustainers, providing the men in their lives—their fathers, brothers, husbands, and sons—with encouragement and support.

CHILDHOOD

Little Women

Roman girls grew up very quickly; they received little, if any, formal education and were considered ready to assume the duties of a Roman *matrona* (matron) and to become a wife and even a mother as early as the age of twelve or thirteen. Even before marriage they were expected to act like little adults rather than like children. In this letter to his friend Marcellinus, Pliny expresses his grief at the untimely death of a girl, named Minicia, whom he thought had possessed all the qualities desirable in a thirteen-year-old Roman girl: maturity of judgment, matronly dignity, and modesty; she was serious and industrious, obedient and cheerful; she had little interest in toys or in play; and right to her death she bore her suffering courageously.⁶

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Pliny the Younger, *Letters* 5.16.1–7

I write this to you with a very heavy heart: the younger daughter of our friend Fundanus is dead. No young girl has ever been more charming than she, or more lovable, or, as I think, more worthy not just of a longer life, but even of immortality. She had not yet completed her thirteenth year, and yet she had the judgment of a mature woman and the dignity of a matron, but the sweetness of a little girl and the modesty of a young maiden. How lovingly she put her arms around her father's neck! How affectionately and respectfully she embraced us who were her father's friends! How she adored her nurses, her paedagogues, and her teachers, each for the special guidance that he or she had offered her! How diligently and how perceptively she used to read! How rarely and how demurely she played! With what composure, with what patience, indeed with what courage did she endure her final illness! She obeyed her doctors, she comforted her sister and father, and, even after the strength of her body failed her, she hung on by the strength of her mind. And this strength remained with her right to the very end; neither the length of her illness nor fear of death could weaken it. She has, therefore, because of her courageous attitude, left us even greater and graver reasons to feel loss and grief. O sad and quite untimely death! Indeed, I find the untimeliness of her death more cruel than the death itself. She had already been engaged to a fine young man, the day had now been set for the wedding, and we had just received our invitations. Now our joy has turned to sadness. I cannot express in words what great anguish I felt when I heard Fundanus himself making arrangements for the money he had intended to spend on his daughter's wedding clothes, pearls, and jewelry to be spent instead on funeral incense, ointments, and perfumes.

Single Women

As we have seen, young girls did not choose their own husbands, and they certainly had no choice about whether to marry or to remain single. An unmarried daughter

⁶Compare the grief expressed by Quintilian over the untimely death of his sons in selection 17. Quintilian laments that his sons' lives were cut short before they could excel as orators and scholars; Pliny laments that Minicia died before marriage.

was considered by her family an undesirable burden; it was her duty to marry the man chosen for her and to raise a family. In this passage from a poem by Catullus, we see that parents might even hate an unmarried daughter.

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Catullus, *Poems* 62.57–65

If, when she is ripe for marriage, she enters into wedlock, she is ever dearer to her husband and less hateful to her parents. . . . So do not reject such a husband, little girl. It is not right to reject the man to whom your father and mother gave you. You must obey them. Your virginity is not entirely yours. One-third of it belongs to your father, one-third to your mother, and only one-third to you yourself. Don't fight against your parents who have surrendered to your husband a dowry and their rights over you.

LIFE EXPECTANCY

A Brief Life

Some females died of exposure immediately after birth; some lived to be 80. Many women, however, were married at a young age, raised families, and died before reaching "middle age." A woman's life passed rapidly; she might well be a grandmother at 30. The woman mentioned in this epitaph from the Roman province of Pannonia was married at 11, gave birth to six children, lost five of them,⁷ and died at 27.

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CIL 3.3572

Here I lie, a matron named Veturia. My father was Veturius.⁸ My husband was Fortunatus. I lived for twenty-seven years, and I was married for sixteen years to the same man. After I gave birth to six children, only one of whom is still alive, I died.

Titus Julius Fortunatus, a soldier of Legion II Adiutrix, provided this memorial⁹ for his wife, who was incomparable and showed outstanding devotion¹⁰ to him.¹¹

Death in Childbirth

The duty of the Roman *matrona* was to bear legitimate heirs for her husband. Girls married in their early teens soon became pregnant; childbirth was frequently difficult and painful, and many women died. In this letter to his friend Velius Cerialis, Pliny comments on two such deaths.

⁷Cornelia, mother of Tiberius and Gaius Gracchus, bore twelve children, but only three lived to adulthood.

⁸On the naming of girls, see note 4 of genealogy chart 2.

⁹this memorial: funerary inscription.

¹⁰devotion: Latin *pietas*; see the introduction to selection 1 and the introduction to the section on ritual in Chapter XV.

¹¹For other examples of military families on the frontiers, see selections 313 to 316.

What a sad and bitter tragedy befell the two Helvidiae sisters! Both of them died in labor, both of them died while giving birth to daughters. I am overwhelmed with grief. And not unduly, for it seems to me so tragic that two very virtuous young women, in the prime of their youth, were snatched away from us even as they were giving life to a new generation. And I grieve over the unhappy lot of the infants, who immediately, even while being born, were deprived of their mothers.¹² And I weep for the sad fate of the husbands, who are both very fine men.¹³

PRAISEWORTHY BEHAVIOR

The Virtues of Women

The following passage, taken from a late first century B.C. eulogy to a woman named Murdia (a eulogy delivered by her son and preserved in Rome as an inscription on marble), gives expression to the belief that a much narrower range of virtues was expected of women than of men. Men could strive for excellence¹⁴ and compete for honor in many different areas of their lives; women were restricted to striving for excellence in those qualities that best served the interests of the family.

Praise for all good women is simple and similar because their qualities, which are natural, characteristic, and carefully sustained, do not require a variety of words. Let it suffice that they have all done things which are worthy of celebration. And since it is difficult for a woman to win praise in new areas of endeavor, because their lives are stimulated by less diversity of opportunities, we must inevitably cherish the traits which they have in common so that nothing may be lost from these just precepts and ruin the rest. And yet my mother, who was very dear to me, deserved greater praise than all the others because in modesty, moral integrity, chastity, obedience, wool-working,¹⁵ diligence, and loyalty she was equal and similar to other excellent women, nor did she yield to any woman in virtue, hard work, or wisdom.

¹²Many children did not know their natural mothers; see the introduction to the section on mothers in Chapter II. In selection 325, there is no mention of Minicia's mother, who is perhaps dead or separated from her children by divorce.

¹³For more information about this family, see selections 331 and 332, and genealogy chart 3.

¹⁴*excellence*: Latin *virtus*, from which we derive our English word "virtue."

¹⁵*wool-working*: see note 73 of this chapter and compare selection 59: "she spun wool." Wool-working was one of the traditional duties of a Roman matron and even upper-class matrons were praised for their skill and diligence in wool-work. Today women are expected to perform household tasks, but are usually not celebrated in their obituaries or other public tributes for activities such as ironing or cleaning. "Roman society, however, stressed the connection between women and housework even in the case of women unlikely to have performed any tasks of this kind." Judith Hallett, "Perspectives on Roman Women," p. 141, in *From Augustus to Nero: The First Dynasty of Imperial Rome*, edited by Ronald Mellor (East Lansing, Michigan, 1990).

An Outstanding Example of *Pietas*

Women earned praise when they directed all their actions toward the welfare and preservation of their families. A man was expected to devote himself to his own career or political advancement; a woman was expected to devote herself to the advancement of others. Therefore, courage, intelligence, and strength in a woman were commendable qualities, but only when coupled with selflessness and self-sacrifice. The following inscription, which dates to the end of the first century B.C. and was discovered in Rome, honors a Roman woman whose name was perhaps Turia. She exemplified the character and behavior expected of a Roman matron. She was strong, brave, modest, prudent, faithful, and self-sacrificing. In sum, she was an outstanding example of *pietas*: an unswerving sense of duty, devotion, and loyalty to one's family, friends, country, and gods. This eulogy was written by her husband.

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CIL 6.1527, 31670 (ILS 8393)

The day before our wedding you were suddenly left an orphan when both your parents were murdered. Although I had gone to Macedonia and your sister's husband, Gaius Cluvius, had gone to the province of Africa, the murder of your parents did not remain unavenged. You carried out this act of piety¹⁶ with such great diligence—asking questions, making inquiries, demanding punishment—that if we had been there, we could not have done better. You and that very pious woman, your sister, share the credit for success. . . .

Rare indeed are marriages of such long duration, which are ended by death, not divorce. We had the good fortune to spend forty-one years together with no unhappiness.¹⁷ I wish that our long marriage had come finally to an end by *my* death, since it would have been more just for me, who was older, to yield to fate.

Why should I mention your personal virtues—your modesty, obedience, affability, and good nature, your tireless attention to wool-working, your performance of religious duties without superstitious fear, your artless elegance and simplicity of dress? Why speak about your affection toward your relatives, your sense of duty¹⁸ toward your family (for you cared for my mother as well as you cared for your parents)? Why recall the countless other virtues which you have in common with all Roman matrons worthy of that name? The virtues I claim for you are your own special virtues; few people have possessed similar ones or been known to possess them. The history of the human race tells us how rare they are.

Together we diligently saved the whole inheritance which you received from your parents' estate. You handed it all over to me and did not worry yourself about increasing it.¹⁹ We shared the responsibilities so that I acted as the guardian of your fortune and you undertook to serve as protector of mine. . . .

You demonstrated your generosity not only toward your very many relatives but especially in your performance of family duties. . . . For you brought up in our home young female rela-

¹⁶ *piety*: Latin *pietas*. It was Turia's duty to her parents to avenge their murders. In the absence of their husbands, she and her sister took a very active role in the murder investigations, but their concern was family, not personal, honor, and their behavior was therefore laudable.

¹⁷ Statements such as these help to correct the impression that all Romans of the late republican period had loveless marriages and were frequently divorced. For a marriage of long duration in the imperial period, see selection 60.

¹⁸ *sense of duty*: Latin *pietas*.

¹⁹ It was the husband's duty and right to manage his wife's estate. It is clear, however, in the next paragraph that separate books were kept for the wife's money and the husband's money.

tives.²⁰ . . . And you provided dowries for them so that they could attain a position in life worthy of your family. These arrangements which were planned by you and your sister were supported by Gaius Cluvius and me with mutual agreement; moreover, since we admired your generosity, in order that you might not reduce the size of your inheritance, we put on the market family property and provided dowries by selling our estates. I have mentioned this not to congratulate myself but in order to make known that we were compelled by a sense of honor to carry out with our own money those arrangements made by you because of your dutifulness and generosity. . . .

When my political enemies were hunting me down,²¹ you aided my escape by selling your jewelry; you gave me all the gold and pearls which you were wearing and added a small income from household funds. We deceived the guards of my enemies, and you made my time in hiding an "enriching" experience. . . .

Why should I now disclose memories locked deep in my heart, memories of secret and concealed plans? Yes, memories—how I was warned by swift messages to avoid present and imminent dangers and was therefore saved by your quick thinking; how you did not permit me to be swept away by my foolhardy boldness; how, by calm consideration, you arranged a safe place of refuge for me and enlisted as allies in your plans to save me your sister and her husband, Gaius Cluvius, even though the plans were dangerous to all of you. If I tried to touch on all your actions on my behalf, I could go on forever. For us let it suffice to say that you hid me safely.

Yet the most bitter experience of my life came later. . . . I was granted a pardon by Augustus,²² but his colleague Lepidus²³ opposed the pardon. When you threw yourself on the ground at his feet, not only did he not raise you up, but in fact he grabbed you and dragged you along as if you were a slave. You were covered with bruises, but with unflinching determination you reminded him of Augustus Caesar's edict of pardon. . . . Although you suffered insults and cruel injuries, you revealed them publicly in order to expose him as the author of my calamities.²⁴ . . .

When the world was finally at peace again and order had been restored in the government,²⁵ we enjoyed quiet and happy days. We longed for children, but spiteful fate begrudged them. If Fortune had allowed herself to care for us in this matter as she does others, we two would have enjoyed complete happiness. But advancing old age put an end to our hopes for children. . . . You were depressed about your infertility and grieved because I was without children. . . . You spoke of divorce and offered to give up your household to another woman, to a fertile woman. You said that you yourself would arrange for me a new wife, one worthy of our well-known love, and you assured me that you would treat the children of my new marriage as if they were your own. You would not demand the return of your inheritance;²⁶ it would remain, if I wished, in my control. You would not

²⁰On orphans, see selection 51. Turia considered it her duty to look after relatives who had been orphaned.

²¹When Octavian and Mark Antony formed an alliance in 43 B.C. (see note 82 of Chapter III), they began to hunt down systematically and to kill their political opponents. Turia's husband, Quintus Lucretius Vespillo, was one such opponent, but he managed to escape execution. Cicero, however, was executed by Antony (see selection 154).

²²*Augustus*: Octavian.

²³*Lepidus*: member of the political alliance with Octavian and Antony (the Second Triumvirate); see note 104 of Chapter VII.

²⁴Although Turia here appeared conspicuously in public and even dared to contradict a man, Lepidus, she did so on behalf of her husband and is therefore praised, not censured.

²⁵That is, when Augustus (Octavian) established the principate; see selection 267.

²⁶Roman husbands by law assumed control of their wives' money. Turia's husband managed for her the money she had inherited from her parents. In the case of divorce or death, the husband was required to return the wife's dowry to her father or, if he were dead, to her guardian; see selection 71. However, Roman funerary laws provided that "a husband can retain from his wife's dowry the amount which he spent on her funeral"; see selection 126. The vast majority of Romans were lower-class and not fortunate enough to have inheritances and large dowries to worry about. Consider selection 292; Ligustinus's wife brought to the marriage "nothing except her free birth and chastity."

detach or isolate yourself from me; you would simply carry out henceforth the duties and responsibilities of my sister or my mother-in-law.

I must confess that I was so angered by your suggestion that I lost my mind. I was so horrified that I could scarcely regain control of myself. How could you talk of a dissolution of our marriage before it was demanded by fate!²⁷ How could you even conceive in your mind of any reason why you should, while still alive, cease to be my wife, you who remained very faithfully with me when I was in exile, indeed almost in exile from life! How could the desire or need for having children be so great that I would break faith with you! . . .

I wish that our old age had allowed our marriage to last until I, who was the elder, had passed away; it would have been fairer for you to arrange a funeral for me. . . . But by fate's decree, you finished the race of life before I did, and you left me all alone, without children, grieving and longing for you. . . . But inspired by your example I will stand up to cruel fortune, which has not stolen everything from me since it allows the memory of you to grow brighter and stronger through praise. . . .

I conclude my oration with this: you have deserved all, and I can never repay you completely. I have always considered your wishes my commands. I will continue to do for you whatever I still can.

May the Manes²⁸ grant to you and protect your eternal peace, I pray.

Emotional Control

In this letter to his friend Nepos, Pliny describes the courage of Arria, the wife of Caecina Paetus. When her husband was ordered by the emperor Claudius in A.D. 42 to end his life,²⁹ he hesitated to do so. Arria picked up a sword, stabbed herself, handed the bloody sword to her husband, and said, "Paetus, it does not hurt." The incident related in this passage took place, of course, before Paetus's suicide. Arria's strength of mind is viewed as praiseworthy because it was directed toward the welfare of her husband.

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Pliny the Younger, *Letters* 3.16.3-6

Arria's husband, Caecina Paetus, was ill. So was her son, and neither was expected to recover. The son died, a boy of exceptional beauty, remarkable modesty, and dear to his parents for all sorts of reasons in addition to his being their son. Arria made arrangements for his funeral and attended the funeral without her husband's knowing. In fact, whenever she entered his room, she pretended that their son was alive and even feeling better. And whenever her husband asked how the boy was doing, she replied, "He has rested well and has his appetite back." Then, when the tears which she had held back for a long time overwhelmed her and gushed forth, she left the room and only then gave way to grief. After she had wept, she dried her eyes, regained her composure, and returned, as calm as if she had left her feeling of bereavement outside the room. Her best-known deed was, of course, heroic, when she unsheathed the sword, stabbed herself in the breast, pulled out the sword, and handed it to her husband, saying these immortal, almost divine words: "Paetus, it does not hurt." But still she had before her eyes, as she was acting and speaking thus, the hope of fame and immortality. How much more heroic was it to conceal her tears when she had little chance of gaining

²⁷ *fate*: death.

²⁸ *Manes*: see note 56 of Chapter III.

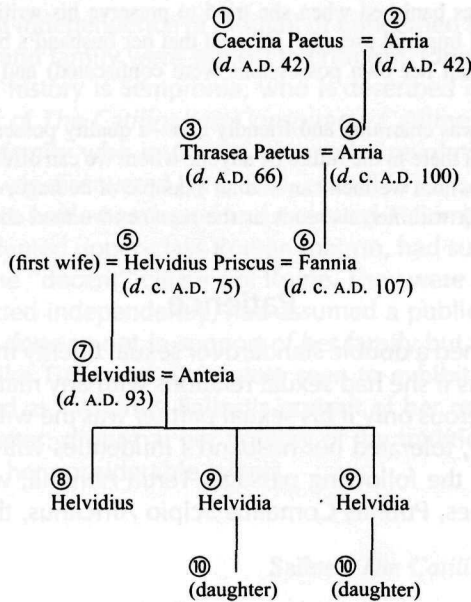
²⁹ Upper-class Romans who had incurred the wrath of an emperor were frequently invited to end their lives (commit suicide) and thus save their families the embarrassment of a public execution.

immortality, to hide her grief, with little chance of fame, and to continue acting like a mother after she had lost her son.

Loyalty

In this letter, Pliny tells his friend Priscus about the illness of Fannia. Fannia was the granddaughter of Caecina Paetus and Arria, who were mentioned in the previous

Genealogy Chart 3. Helvidii



- ① *Caecina Paetus*: involved in a plot to overthrow the emperor Claudius; tried, found guilty, and forced to commit suicide.
- ② *Arria (the elder)*: committed suicide with her husband ("Paetus, it does not hurt"); see selection 331.
- ③ *Thrasea Paetus*: involved in opposition to the emperor Nero; charged with treason, and forced to commit suicide.
- ④ *Arria (the younger)*: wanted to follow her mother's example and share her husband's fate. He persuaded her to remain alive for the sake of their daughter, Fannia.
- ⑤ *Helvidius Priscus*: exiled by Nero in A.D. 66; put to death in exile by the emperor Vespasian.
- ⑥ *Fannia*: accompanied her husband into exile; see selection 332.
- ⑦ *Helvidius (the elder)*: accused of treason against the emperor Domitian and executed in A.D. 93.
- ⑧ *Helvidius (the younger)*: brother of the two women who died in childbirth; see selection 328.
- ⑨ *Helvidia*: the two sisters who died in childbirth.
- ⑩ *daughters*: infant girls born to the two sisters who died.

passage. Her husband was Helvidius Priscus, a Stoic philosopher and writer³⁰ who was prominent in the opposition to the emperors and who was put to death by the emperor Vespasian around A.D. 75.³¹

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Pliny the Younger, *Letters* 7.19.1, 3, 4, 6

Fannia's illness worries me. . . . Her fever lingers, the cough grows worse, and she is extremely thin and weak. . . . I grieve that so great a woman is being snatched away from the sight of our citizens; I don't know whether we will see another like her. What purity she had! What integrity! What dignity! What loyalty! Twice she followed her husband into exile; the third time, after his death, she herself was banished when she tried to preserve his writings. . . . For when the Senate, through fear and imperial pressure, decreed that her husband's books be burned, she kept them safe (even though all her own possessions were confiscated) and took them with her into exile.³²

This same woman was charming and friendly and—a quality possessed by only a few—both loved and respected. Will there in the future be anyone whom we can offer to our wives as a model? Will there be anyone in whom we men can find an example of courage, whom we can all admire, even as we see and speak with her, as much as the heroines we read about in books?

Patience

The Romans maintained a double standard for sexual fidelity in marriage. A wife was considered adulterous if she had sexual relations with any man except her husband, but a man was adulterous only if his sexual partner was the wife of another man.³³ A good wife, moreover, tolerated her husband's infidelities without complaint.³⁴ The woman described in the following passage, Tertia Aemilia, was married to one of Rome's greatest heroes, Publius Cornelius Scipio Africanus, the conqueror of Hannibal.³⁵

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Valerius Maximus, *Memorable Deeds and Words* 6.7.1–3

Tertia Aemilia, wife of Scipio Africanus and mother of Cornelia, who in turn was mother of the Gracchi,³⁶ was a woman of such generosity and patience that, although she knew that one of her

³⁰On Stoicism and the Stoics of this period, see selections 466 to 473.

³¹Fannia and her husband were related to Arria, who was mentioned in the previous passage, and the two sisters of the Helvidian family who died in childbirth (selection 328); see genealogy chart 3. Many of the men in the family were exiled and even executed for their political beliefs. For other acquaintances of Pliny who were exiled or executed by emperors, see selection 55.

³²Fannia, like Pliny's wife, Calpurnia (selection 61), was intelligent and educated enough to appreciate the value of her husband's writings. Neither woman sought fame on her own as a writer.

³³See the selection on adultery in Chapter III.

³⁴Consider the behavior of Augustine's mother, described in selection 67.

³⁵*Publius Cornelius Scipio Africanus*: 236–184 B.C. For more information on his military career, see the introduction to selection 352. For an outline of his family connections, see genealogy chart 2.

³⁶*Cornelia*: see note 7 of this chapter.

little slave girls was attracting the sexual attention of her husband, she pretended not to notice.³⁷ For she considered it inappropriate for a woman to make charges against Africanus, the conqueror of the world, or for wifely impatience to make charges against a great man. In fact, her mind was so far removed from vindictive thoughts that, after the death of Africanus, she manumitted the slave girl and gave her in marriage to one of her freedmen.

UNACCEPTABLE BEHAVIOR

Scandalous Conduct

Women who exhibited independence of thought or concerned themselves with matters outside the home and family were subject to criticism. One of the most fascinating women in Roman history is Sempronia, who is described in the passage below from Sallust's account of *The Catilinarian Conspiracy*. Catiline was a young upper-class Roman of good family who in 63 B.C. planned a revolution to overthrow the state. The conspiracy was discovered by Cicero, consul in 63 B.C., and the conspirators were either killed in battle or arrested and executed.³⁸ Sempronia, an intelligent, well-educated, and talented upper-class Roman matron, had supported Catiline and thereby scandalized the "decent" citizens of Rome. They were scandalized because she had apparently acted independently, had assumed a public role in the political life of Rome, and had done so not in support of her family but for personal reasons. Thus, while women like Turia and Arria were seen to exhibit "strength of mind," Sempronia was viewed as "willful." Sallust's portrait of her reveals his ambivalent reactions to her character: disgust at her flouting of the traditional female role, but honest admiration for her considerable talents.

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Sallust, *The Catilinarian Conspiracy* 25

Sempronia had often in the past acted with a masculine daring and boldness. Yet Fortune had blessed her quite adequately, first with beauty and good birth, and then with a husband and children. She had studied Greek and Latin literature. She could play the lyre and dance, although with more skill than is necessary for an honest woman.³⁹ And she had many other talents which lead to moral dissipation. But there was nothing she valued less than honor and decency; it would be difficult to decide which she squandered more—her money or her reputation. She was so filled with burning lust that she more often made advances to men than they did to her. Even before meeting Catiline, she had often broken promises, dishonored credit agreements, been an accessory to murder, and plunged headlong into poverty because of her extravagance.⁴⁰ And yet her abilities were far from contemptible; she could

³⁷The slave girl was not necessarily a willing partner; on the sexual exploitation of slaves, see the introduction to selection 213.

³⁸One father executed his son for his involvement in this conspiracy; see the introduction to selection 15.

³⁹The Romans enjoyed watching dance performances but thought the dancers themselves were low-class and contemptible. Most dancers were slaves or foreigners. However, Sempronia's fault is not so much that she dances, but that she dances well; a woman's talents are not to be conspicuous.

⁴⁰Sallust's description of Sempronia's personal behavior may well have been colored by his distaste for her political involvement.

write poetry, be droll, converse modestly or tenderly or coarsely, as the situation demanded. In fact, she was a woman of great wit and great charm.

Women and Politics

In 215 B.C., after a stunning defeat by Hannibal at Cannae,⁴¹ the Romans passed a law (the Oppian Law), which curtailed women's purchases of luxury items, such as gold jewelry and expensive clothing. The Romans hoped this austerity measure would increase the money available for the war effort. A few years after the end of the war, in 195 B.C., two tribunes brought before the Concilium Plebis a proposal to repeal the Oppian Law. The proposal was discussed at great length and often bitterly. Since the Oppian Law had directly affected women, one would expect that women would have had strong opinions about its repeal. And they did! They poured out into the streets and into the Forum, where the assembly met, and, although they could not themselves vote, they tried to persuade their menfolk to vote for repeal. Ultimately, the proposal for repeal was passed by the assembly, but one of its reactionary opponents, Marcus Porcius Cato,⁴² expressed dismay and disgust at the behavior of the Roman women who had dared to express an opinion about a political matter and had lobbied for support. This passage is taken from one of his public speeches.

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Livy, *A History of Rome* 34.2.1, 2, 8–11, 14

If each of us men, fellow citizens, had undertaken to keep the right and the authority of the husband out of the hands of the women of the family, we would have less trouble with groups of women. But as it is now, at home our freedom is trampled on by feminine rages, and here in the Forum it is crushed and trod underfoot. Because we were unable to control each woman as an individual, we are now frightened by women in groups. . . .

Indeed, it was with some embarrassment that I came a few minutes ago to the Forum right through a crowd of women. If I had not held in respect the dignity and basic decency of each woman as an individual (it would mortify them to be seen receiving a scolding from a consul), I would have said: "What kind of behavior is this, running around in public and blocking streets and talking to other women's husbands? Could you not have asked your own husbands the same thing at home? Are you more persuasive in public than in private, with others' husbands than with your own? And yet it is not right, even in your own homes (if a sense of shame and decency were to keep you within your proper limits), for you to concern yourselves about which laws are passed or repealed here." That's what I would have said.

Our ancestors were not willing to let women conduct any business, not even private business, without a guardian. They wanted them to remain under the control of their fathers, brothers, and husbands. We, for heaven's sake, now allow them to take part in politics and to mingle with us in the Forum and to attend assemblies. . . . To be quite honest, they desire freedom, nay rather license in all matters. And if they win in this matter, what will they not attempt?

⁴¹*Hannibal*: Carthaginian general who ravaged much of Italy during the Second Punic War; see note 87 of Chapter VII.

Cannae: town in eastern Italy.

⁴²*Marcus Porcius Cato*: see selections 134, 176, and 207.

Women and Education

Roman women were expected to have enough education to appreciate their husbands' work, wit, writing, and opinions; they were not, however, expected to express opinions of their own. In public they were best seen—nodding in agreement or smiling appreciatively at their husbands' wit—but not heard. An intelligent and talented woman had to be careful not to appear more clever than the men around her.⁴³

Juvenal's Sixth Satire is a scathing attack on women. Many of his criticisms involve an exaggeration of the situation but nonetheless reveal what sort of behavior irritated Roman men. Apparently Roman men were embarrassed by, and thus disliked, women who were openly more learned than they.

336

Juvenal, *Satires* 6.434–456

Really annoying is the woman who, as soon as she takes her place on the dining couch,⁴⁴ praises Vergil,⁴⁵ excuses Dido's suicide,⁴⁶ compares and ranks in critical order the various poets, and weighs Vergil and Homer⁴⁷ on a pair of scales.⁴⁸ Grammar teachers⁴⁹ surrender, professors of rhetoric⁵⁰ are defeated, the entire group of guests is silent; neither a lawyer nor an auctioneer nor even another woman will get a word in. So loud and shrill are her words that you might think pots were being banged together and bells were being rung. . . .

Like a philosopher she defines ethics. If she wants to appear so learned and eloquent, she should shorten her tunic to midcalf!⁵¹ . . . Don't marry a woman who speaks like an orator—or knows every history book. There should be some things in books which she doesn't understand. I hate a woman who reads and rereads Palaemon's⁵² treatise on grammar, who always obeys all the laws and rules of correct speech, who quotes verses I've never even heard of, moldy old stuff that a man shouldn't worry about anyway. Let her correct the grammar of her stupid girlfriend! A husband should be allowed an occasional "I ain't."

⁴³ Sempronia, vehemently criticized by Sallust in selection 334, evidently did not conceal her talents.

⁴⁴ *dining couch*: the Romans reclined at dinner parties.

⁴⁵ *Vergil*: Rome's greatest epic poet; author of the epic poem *Aeneid* which recounts the journey from Troy to Italy of Aeneas, a Trojan prince who survived the Trojan war.

⁴⁶ An episode from the *Aeneid*. Dido, queen of Carthage, a city in North Africa, had fallen in love with Aeneas when he landed there. After a few months, however, Aeneas sailed away to continue his journey to Italy. The unhappy Dido committed suicide. Readers of the *Aeneid* have either blamed Aeneas for deserting a friend and causing her suicide or, like the woman at the dinner party, excused Aeneas for Dido's suicide because *pietas* demanded that he continue on to Italy. On Aeneas's *pietas*, see note 88 of Chapter XV.

⁴⁷ *Homer*: Greek epic poet who composed the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.

⁴⁸ A figurative expression; she tries to determine the "weightiness," or value, of each poet's work.

⁴⁹ *grammar teachers*: Latin *grammatici*; see selection 152.

⁵⁰ *professors of rhetoric*: Latin *rhetores*; see selection 153.

⁵¹ The tunic (Latin *tunica*), which reached about midcalf, was a man's garment; the woman's garment was a *stola* which extended to the feet. Juvenal is saying, let her wear men's clothing if she wants to act like a man.

⁵² *Palaemon*: see note 31 of Chapter VI.

Women and Luxuries

In the same satire from which the previous passage came, Juvenal, who lived around A.D. 100, blames women's immorality on Rome's affluence. In the "good old days," life was hard and women were pure, or so Juvenal thought.

337

Juvenal, *Satires* 6.286–295, 298–300

Do you wonder where these monsters come from? In the good old days, poverty made our Latin women chaste; small huts didn't provide opportunities for immoral behavior. Hard work, lack of sleep, hands rough and callused from working wool,⁵³ Hannibal⁵⁴ near the city, their husbands performing militia duty—these things just don't allow vices to develop. Now, however, we are suffering the ill effects of a long peace. Luxury, more destructive than war, threatens the city and takes revenge for the lands we have conquered.⁵⁵ No crime or lustful act is missing, now that traditional Roman poverty is dead. . . . Obscene wealth brought with it foreign customs,⁵⁶ and unmanly luxuries and ugly affluence weakened each generation.

Women and Theatrical Performances

In this letter to a man named Geminus, Pliny reports the death of Ummidia Quadratilla, a woman more fond of theatrical performances than he considered proper for an upper-class Roman matron. Both Pliny and Juvenal, the author of the two previous passages, lived at the end of the first century A.D. and expressed a conservative perspective on the appropriate behavior for women. We do not know how widely their opinions were shared by others. Perhaps the 80-year-old Ummidia reflects the values of an earlier, and less restrictive, generation. Pliny praises a woman's artistic interest only if it is directed toward the work of her husband. His own wife sang *his* poems and read *his* books (selection 61), and Fannia kept safe her husband's books (selection 332).

338

Pliny the Younger, *Letters* 7.24.1, 4, 5

Ummidia Quadratilla passed away a little before her eightieth birthday. She was in good health until the end, a woman with a figure more solid and plump than is usual even for a matron. . . . She owned a company of pantomime dancers⁵⁷ and enjoyed their performances with more enthusiasm

⁵³ On wool-working as a matron's duty, see note 15 of this chapter.

⁵⁴ *Hannibal*: see note 41 of this chapter.

⁵⁵ Lands conquered by Rome in war sent money to Rome for taxes and tribute. These lands also offered Roman capitalists new territory in which to expand their business ventures. However, as Rome became more affluent and prosperous, it also became, according to Juvenal, weaker and immoral, and thus conquered lands could indirectly cause the downfall of Rome.

⁵⁶ On Juvenal's prejudice against foreigners, see selection 235.

⁵⁷ *owned a company*: performers were usually slaves; therefore, this woman literally owned the performers. *pantomime*: a performance in which dancers depicted the actions of characters, usually mythological, in various situations; see selection 390. The woman in this letter loved pantomime but thought it would corrupt her grandson. Most Romans enjoyed the stage but despised the actors. On Roman ambivalence toward theatrical performance, see the introduction to selection 389.

than was proper for a woman of her social rank. However, her grandson Quadratus, who was brought up in her household, never saw their performances, either in the theater or at home, and she certainly never encouraged him to. She herself told me, when she was asking me to supervise his rhetorical training, that she, during the idle hours which women have,⁵⁸ used to relax by playing checkers or watching pantomimes; but when she was about to do either, she always told her grandson to go and study.

HYSTERIA

The word *hysteria* is derived from the Greek word *hystera*, "womb." Greco-Roman medical writers believed, as did the Egyptians before them, that hysteria was an illness caused by violent movements of the womb and that it was therefore peculiar to women. The illness had a clearly recognizable pattern of symptoms: suffocation, inability to speak, and sometimes convulsions. Men exhibiting similar symptoms were not considered hysterical, since they did not have a *hystera*, or "womb," and they were therefore assumed to have a different illness, such as epilepsy. The Greco-Roman theory of hysteria as an illness of physiological origin influenced doctors for the next 2,000 years. During these millennia hysteria continued to be considered a feminine ailment attributable to disturbances of the womb. Not until the time of Freud did doctors begin to recognize that the symptoms of hysteria were caused by emotional tensions arising from unconscious sources; these tensions are converted from emotional manifestations into a physical ailment, into the symptoms of hysteria. It is interesting that the symptoms of hysteria vary from culture to culture and are adapted to the ideas and mores current in each particular culture. "Hysteria has become an apparently infrequent illness. In this century behavior that includes 'kicking about' and 'waving the arms and legs' is met with distaste and lack of sympathy. . . . It has been suggested that, unlike the psychotic patient, the patient suffering from hysteria retains a sense of reality in the course of the seizure and is thus able to control his manifestations and to keep them within the limits permissible in his ambient setting. Unacceptable today would be the fainting ladies of the Victorian period . . . because they would altogether fail to evoke any sympathetic response in their social environment. . . . Hysteria has become subjectively unrewarding."⁵⁹

In the passages below, medical writers of the Roman world describe the origins, symptoms, and cures of hysteria. Their ideas seem curious, particularly since we now recognize that hysteria is caused, in both men and women, by anxiety and emotional tensions, and also since we seldom today see such examples of hysteria. However, we may well wonder why hysteria was so prevalent in the Roman world. What were the pressures, tensions, and anxieties that tormented so many Roman women and found a socially acceptable outlet only in the manifestation of hysterical symptoms?⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Upper-class women, attended by many slaves, might have "idle hours," but lower-class women would have precious few moments of leisure. Pliny's perspective was upper-class. However, even upper-class women were expected not to be idle. See note 15 of this chapter on wool-working and other household tasks.

⁵⁹ Ilza Veith, *Hysteria: The History of a Disease* (Chicago and London, 1965), p. 273. See also p. 209: "The symptoms, it seems, were conditioned by social expectancy, tastes, mores and religion, and were further shaped by the state of medicine in general."

⁶⁰ Consider, for example, the repressed behavior of Arria in selection 331. Or consider the strain on a woman who was forced to expose her child (selections 36 and 37).

Symptoms

339

Aretaeus, *Medical Writings* 2.11.1-3; 6.10.1-4

In women, in the hollow of the body below the ribcage, lies the womb. It is very much like an independent animal within the body for it moves around of its own accord . . . and is quite erratic. Furthermore, it likes fragrant smells and moves toward them, but it dislikes foul odors and moves away from them. . . . When it suddenly moves upward⁶¹ and remains there for a long time and presses on the intestines, the woman chokes, in the manner of an epileptic, but without any spasms. For the liver, diaphragm, lungs, and heart are suddenly confined in a narrow space. And therefore the woman seems unable to breathe or speak. In addition, the carotid arteries, acting in sympathy with the heart, compress, and therefore heaviness of the head, loss of sense perception, and deep sleep occur. . . . Disorders caused by the uterus are remedied by foul smells,⁶² and also by pleasant fragrances applied to the vagina. . . .

The uterus follows after sweet-smelling things as if it experiences pleasure from them, and flees from stinking and foul-smelling things as if it experiences pain from them. If any bad-smelling thing irritates it from above, it flees downward, even beyond the genital organs. But if a fetid odor is applied below, it is forced upward, away from the odor. . . . If the uterus wanders upward, it very quickly causes the woman to suffocate and choke by cutting off her breathing. She cannot even struggle in pain or shout and call for help. In many cases, inability to breathe strikes immediately, in others inability to speak. . . . Old urine⁶³ rouses the senses of someone in a death-like state and drives the uterus downward. Sweet fragrances must be applied with pessaries to the area of the uterus.

Causes and Cures

340

Soranus,⁶⁴ *Gynecology* 3.26, 3.28.2, 3.29.5

The term *hysterical suffocation* derives from both the affected organ and one symptom, suffocation.⁶⁵ It denotes cessation of breathing, together with inability to speak and a loss of sense perception, caused by some condition of the uterus. In the majority of cases, the illness is preceded by repeated miscarriage, premature childbirth, long widowhood, retention of menses, menopause, or inflation of the womb.⁶⁶ Among women suffering the disease, these symptoms occur: swooning, loss of speech, labored breathing, seizure of the senses, clenching or grinding of the teeth, convulsive contraction of the extremities (though sometimes only weakness and collapse), swelling of the abdomen, retraction of the uterus, dilation of the chest area, bulging of the veins which criss-cross the face, chilling of the body, perspiration, and a failed or failing pulse. In general, the women recover quickly from the seizure, and usually they remember what happened. . . .

⁶¹That is, toward a fragrant smell.

⁶²The uterus "flees from" foul smells. Therefore, a foul-smelling object near the hysterical woman's nose or throat will cause the uterus to flee downward, back to its position in the lower body. A pleasant-smelling object near the vagina will attract the uterus and draw it down to its desired position.

⁶³That is, applied to the nose.

⁶⁴Earlier passages from this same author discussed fertility, contraception, and abortion; see selections 27, 32 and 34.

⁶⁵*hysterical suffocation*: Greek *hysterike pnix* from *hystera*, "womb," and *pnix*, "suffocation."

⁶⁶Although Soranus recognized that hysteria occurred most often in women who were unable to have children, he did not understand that its cause might be the psychological stress of being childless in a society which believed that a woman's main function was to bear children. In contrast with other ancient medical writers, however, Soranus did not believe that virginity was physically harmful.

One should make the patient lie down in a room which is moderately warm and bright, and rouse her as gently as possible from her seizure by moving her jaw, placing warm compresses over the whole middle part of her body, slowly straightening out each cramped limb, restraining the spasm of each extremity, and warming each chilled part by the laying on of bare hands. Then one should wash the face with a sponge soaked in warm water, for sponging the face in some way revives the patient. . . .

I strongly disagree with all those men who immediately irritate the inflamed areas and cause drowsiness or torpor by effluvia of foul-smelling substances. For the uterus does not issue forth like a wild animal from its lair, attracted by pleasant fragrances, nor does it flee from fetid smells.⁶⁷ It is, rather, displaced or contracted because of constrictions caused by inflammation.

WORKING WOMEN

Since the literary works that we use as source material for Roman civilization were written by upper-class men, we have much more information about men than about women, and more information about upper-class women than about lower-class women.⁶⁸ Yet there were obviously thousands and thousands of women in the Roman world who were working wives and mothers, women who were slaves or freedwomen or free women of the lower class. We know virtually nothing about their daily existence or how they coped with the often conflicting demands of work, children, and marriage.⁶⁹ They did not themselves write, and no one else wrote about them. Only their tombstones provide evidence that they once existed, and their epitaphs—a few from Rome are given here—tell us only the nature of their employment, not their feelings about it.⁷⁰ Note how young these women were at death.

A Dressmaker

341

CIL 6.9980 (ILS 7428)

To Italia, dressmaker of Cocceia Phyllis. She lived twenty years. Acastus, her fellow slave, paid for this tombstone because she was poor.

⁶⁷Soranus thus disagrees with Aretaeus, the author of the previous passage, a Greek medical writer who lived in the second century A.D.

⁶⁸An upper-class Roman *matrona*—Arria, Fannia, Calpurnia, and Tullia are all examples—certainly did not work outside the home. And within the home, they had many slaves to cook, clean, and look after the children. Compare Pliny's description of Ummidia Quadratilla in selection 338: "during the idle hours which women have."

⁶⁹Roman women did not have careers; they worked because they were forced to if they were slaves, or because their families would otherwise starve. Women without husbands were often destitute; see selection 42 on the woman forced to give away her daughter.

⁷⁰On midwives, see selection 118. On prostitutes, see note 113 of Chapter V, and also selection 372. Women were reduced to prostitution because of poverty or slavery.

A Hairdresser

342

CIL 6.9732 (ILS 7420a)

Psamate, Furia's hairdresser, lived nineteen years. Mithrodates, the baker of Flaccus Thorius, put up this tombstone.

A Fishmonger

343

CIL 6.9801 (ILS 7500)

Aurelia Nais, a freedwoman of Gaius, sold fish in the warehouses of Galba. Gaius Aurelius Phileros, a freedman of Gaius, and Lucius Valerius Secundus, a freedman of Lucius, paid for this.

Farm Women

Selection 292 provides an account of the military career of Spurius Ligustinus, a republican era soldier, who served in overseas campaigns almost continually for 30 years. When he marched off to war, he left behind a wife, many children, and a farm. It would be interesting to learn how his wife was able to manage the farm and raise eight children while her husband was absent.

In selection 206, where Columella offered advice about the choice and treatment of slaves for farm work, he recommended that "the foreman should be given a female companion both to keep him in bounds and also to assist him in certain matters."⁷¹ The following passage describes the duties of this female companion (and incidentally instructs us further about the many operations involved in maintaining a farm). Although slaves could not form legal marriages,⁷² the relationship between the foreman and his female companion was probably parallel to that of a husband and wife.

344

Columella, *On Agriculture* 12.3.5, 6, 8 and 9

The forewoman must not only store and guard the items which have been brought into the house and delivered to her; she should also inspect and examine them from time to time so that the furniture and clothing which have been stored do not disintegrate because of mold, and the fruits and vegetables and other necessities do not go rotten because of her neglect and slothfulness. On rainy days, or when a woman cannot do field work out of doors because of the cold or frost, she should return to wool-working.⁷³ Therefore wool should be prepared and carded in advance so that she can more easily undertake and complete the required allotment of wool-working. For it will be beneficial if clothing is made at home for her and the stewards and the other valued slaves so the financial accounts of the *paterfamilias* are less strained.⁷⁴ She ought to stay in one place as little as possible,

⁷¹ Varro makes a similar proposal in selection 208 and adds that the female companion will bear the foreman's children. (Since the foreman and his female companions are both slaves, the children will become the property of the slave-owner.)

⁷² See the introduction to selection 226.

⁷³ *wool-working*: The wool cut from the sheep needed to be cleaned of extraneous matter and untangled by carding. The wool fibers were then ready to be spun into threads that could be used to weave cloth.

⁷⁴ *paterfamilias*: the owner of the farm and the slaves. On the use of the word *familia* to mean "crew of slaves," see note 27 of Chapter VIII.

for her job is not a sedentary one. At one moment she will have to go to the loom and teach the weavers whatever she knows better than them or, if she knows less, learn from someone who understands more. At another moment, she will have to check on those slaves who are preparing the food for the *familia*. Then she will also have to see that the kitchen, cowsheds, and even the stables are cleaned. And she will also have to open up the sick-rooms occasionally, even if they are empty of patients, and keep them free of dirt, so that, when circumstance demands, a well-ordered and healthy environment is provided for the sick. She will, in addition, have to be in attendance when the stewards of the pantry and cellar are weighing something, and also be present when the shepherds are milking in the stables, or bringing the lambs or calves to nurse. But she will also certainly need to be present when the sheep are sheared, and to examine the wool carefully, and compare the number of fleeces with the number of sheep.⁷⁵ Then she must turn her attention to the slaves in the house and insist that they air out the furniture and clean and polish the metal items and free them from rust, and take to the craftsmen for repair other items which require mending.

Comfort Women

345

Varro, *On Agriculture* 2.10.6

With respect to breeding opportunities for the shepherds who remain continually on the farm, the solution is easy because they have a female slave companion at the villa, and the lust of shepherds does not require anything more than this. However for those shepherds who are in mountain pastures and forest areas and who take shelter from the rain in improvised huts rather than in the villa, many farm-owners think that it is expedient to supply them with women who can follow the flocks and prepare meals for the shepherds and make them more vigilant.

COSMETICS

For the Skin He Loves to Touch

Ovid, the poet who advised men on where and how to meet women,⁷⁶ also advised women about cosmetics that would help to attract men.

346

Ovid, *A Book about Facial Cosmetics* 51–60, 63–68

Now we will learn how we can appear bright and radiant even in the morning when sleep first deserts our tender limbs. First strip away the husks and the chaff from some barley, preferably the variety sent from Libya by boat. Clean two pounds of this barley. Moisten an equal amount of vetch with ten eggs. When the barley has dried in blowing breezes, crush it with a rough millstone turned by a lazy donkey.⁷⁷ Grind up along with the barley the horns of a lively young stag. . . . Add twelve narcissus bulbs stripped of their outer layers and pulverized on pure marble. . . . Then add nine times as much honey. If you pamper your face with such a mixture, your skin will be smoother and more radiant than your own mirror.

⁷⁵Roman slave-owners assumed that unsupervised slaves would steal and cheat them; see selections 189 and 203.

⁷⁶See selections 73 and 382.

⁷⁷For the situation of a donkey in a mill, see selection 210.

The Dangers of Hair Dyes

Roman men and women used various mixtures to dye their hair. Henna, for example, was quite popular. One of Ovid's girlfriends, however, had an unfortunate experience with one dye. Besides the information about hair dyes, this passage offers insights into how some Roman women treated their slaves.

347

Ovid, *Love Affairs* 1.14.1–18, 27, 28, 43–46

Didn't I tell you to stop messing around with the color of your hair? Now you have no hair left to dye! If you had left it alone, who had thicker hair than you? And when you let it down, it used to hang to your waist. It was very fine—so fine that you hesitated to curl it with curling irons—like the silk fibers the Chinese produce, or the threads which the spider spins with her slender legs when she weaves a delicate web under a deserted beam. But it was neither raven black nor golden blond; it was a mixture of the two, the color of cedar wood when the bark has been stripped away. And it was easy to manage, naturally curly, and didn't cause you any trouble. You didn't have to worry about hair pins or combs being caught in tangles and hurting you when they were pulled out. Your hairdresser was never bruised or scratched.⁷⁸ I used to watch her combing and arranging your hair, and you never had to grab a hair pin and stab her in the arm. . . .

I used to cry out to you, "It's a crime, a real crime, to burn such naturally lovely hair with dyes. You cruel woman, have pity on your head." . . .

Now your hair has fallen out, and you alone are responsible. You yourself mixed the poison and put it on your head. Now Germany will send you her captured locks of hair,⁷⁹ and a conquered race will save you from the embarrassment of baldness.

⁷⁸Obviously some women would physically abuse their hairdressers (who were usually slaves) when combing out the tangles in their hair caused them pain. On the treatment of slaves, see Chapter VIII. Of course, most women could not afford a personal hairdresser.

⁷⁹She will buy a wig. Wigs made from the hair of Germans captured in battle were very popular because the hair was naturally blond.