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Introduction

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CHAPTER I

*What's in a Single? Roman Antiquity and a Comparative World Approach**

Christian Laes

1 A 'Marriage' between Philology and Social History

Raised in the rich and established tradition of Altertumswissenschaft, classicists and ancient historians are used to working with concepts and terms, the exact definition of which can be traced down by means of encyclopaedias, lexica and dictionaries. *Rem tene, verba sequentur*. Only after having searched for accurate definitions can one safely proceed with the research topic. In such a context, the very first thing to do in a volume on *The Single Life in the Roman and Later Roman World* would be to look for what is meant precisely when we use the word 'single', then to search for Greek and Latin terms matching this definition (and in a comparative perspective also words in other well attested languages of the ancient Mediterranean such as Hebrew, Aramaic and Arabic), and finally to carefully study the text fragments where such words show up. Though this task may appear both manageable and straightforward, things are not as simple as they appear at first sight.

First, the present-day concept. There is at least a certain ambiguity in the use of terms. Derived from the Old French *sengle*, which in its turn stems from the Latin *singuli*, the word 'single' refers to a person not married, or not having an exclusive relationship with someone.¹ Nowadays, most Germanic languages have taken over the English term, while words such as *alleinstehend* (German) or *alleenstaand* (Dutch) connote the condition of living alone or even loneliness. Indeed, the word 'single' has become increasingly popular as an untranslated term in many languages.

* I am most grateful to John Martens (University of St Thomas – Minnesota) for his careful reading and improving of my English text.

¹ It would make little sense to encumber this chapter with references to dictionaries for each language concerned. Suffice it to notice that I have made use of well-established dictionaries for each language concerned. For Arabic, Aramaic and Hebrew, I kindly acknowledge the help of Malika Dekkiche (University of Antwerp) and Hagith Sivan (University of Kansas).

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[More Information](#)

Romance languages etymologically either stress the aspect of not being married, as *célibataire* in French or *celibe* in Italian, or the aspect of loneliness, as in Spanish *soltero* and *solteiro* in Portuguese. In the Slavic tradition, Russian emphasises not being married, and distinguishes between men (*nezhenatuy*/неженатый “without wife”) and women (*nezamuzhnaja*/незамужняя “not connected to a husband”). Here the gendered aspect comes in. The very same tradition now exists in Greek, which has *agamos/άγαμος* for men and *anypantros/ανύπαντρος* for women. Arabic أَغْرَب (Eazbā) again stresses the aspect of not entering marriage (but also refers to being isolated or alone), as does Hebrew רָוֵק (ravak). Both have a masculine and a feminine form, as for instance *ravak* and *ravaka* in Hebrew. Moreover, in a globalising context which is strongly influenced by the internet, it seems that the word ‘single’ has become an almost international term to denote a free and unbound lifestyle, while negatively loaded words which mostly concerned unmarried women (cf. the ‘spinster’) are fading away as obsolete or depreciatory.²

Looking for terminology in present-day languages does not therefore provide us with the methodological clarity one would have hoped for. On the contrary, the different terms point to at least three different aspects of ‘the single life’, all of which can but need not merge within one another: the legal fact of not being married or not being in an exclusive relationship with another person; living alone and the possible economic or emotional consequences of this loneliness; and a happy-go-lucky lifestyle mostly associated with youth. Moreover, in different cultural traditions, the single life might be considered as a transitory period for those searching for a partner with whom to form an exclusive relationship, or it might evolve into a more permanent state, in which celibacy is considered as a vocation, be it personal or religious. As such, both contemporary Israeli and Arabic culture (with traditions firmly rooted in Antiquity) present a fascinating text case for the conflict between tradition and modernity, with familial pressures on single women to marry and to produce (grand)children, but more and more educated young women who delay marriage because of their studies or even refuse to be married to a husband with lower education.³

² As in Finnish, the loan word *sinkku* matches the term ‘single’. While *naimaton* is a neutral word to denote being not married, the female word *vanhapiika* is only used in a negative way, as a spinster. I thank Ville Vuolanto for this information, and I happily include one Finnish-Ugrian example to complete the list of language families in Europe.

³ See El Feki 2013 for a lively and fascinating account which gained much media attention.

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Excerpt

[More Information](#)*What's in a Single?*

5

Imagine a social historian in a far away future studying the single life in the beginning of the twenty-first century. He/she should be very much aware that the context is of crucial importance to understand what is exactly meant in the textual evidence. Here, one may think of application forms in European countries nowadays where the candidate has to fill in whether he/she is single, married, divorced or widowed, and in which he/she is expected only to fill in one box. Apparently, being married at the moment of filling in the form acts as the sole criterion. Though it is obviously possible to be both single and divorced or widowed (even the three at the same time), the widower or the divorcée who is again married at the time of filling in the questionnaire is not expected to put this aspect of his past in the foreground. The possibility of being in an exclusive relationship without being married is not even mentioned in such a document. The latter is all the more remarkable, since recent demographic data show that the number of marriages per 1,000 inhabitants has decreased within the twenty-eight countries in the European Union in recent decades. In fact, the crude marriage rate declined from 7.9 marriages per 1,000 inhabitants in 1970 to 4.2 marriages per 1,000 inhabitants by 2011. Since divorce rates increase at the same time, never before have so many children in the European Union been born to unmarried mothers. Moreover, modern sociologists agree that in the cities of the United States and Western Europe solo living has expanded as never before, with globally 277 million people opting for this living arrangement.⁴

Given the difficulties when looking at present-day usage of the term, one can easily imagine the problems which show up when one envisages to tackle the subject from the ancient historian's point of view.

- 1) Throughout the monogamous Graeco-Roman tradition, marriages were not state-registered, nor connected with religious duty.⁵ At least from the male point of view, marriage was not necessarily subject to moral expectations of mutual exclusivity (while polygamy did not exist, polygyny thrived).⁶ The ideal of exclusivity only became strong in the period of the so-called Christianisation of marriage, though the *univira*, the widow who never remarried, was an ideal we find from

⁴ Statistics and explanations are to be found on the European Commission, Eurostats website: http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Marriage_and_divorce_statistics (Data extracted in June 2015). For solo living on a global scale and sociological explanations of the phenomenon, see Cribiore, in this volume, p. 259.

⁵ Standard reference works on Roman marriage include Tregiari 1991b; Fayer 1994 and 2005.

⁶ Scheidel 2009 and 2010; Laes 2015.

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Excerpt

[More Information](#)

the Roman Republic on.⁷ Marriages were easily entered into, and divorce was a simple matter from the juridic point of view. All this does not mean that marriage was an institution without consequences or obligations. Marital laws put considerable pressure on at least the aristocratic class to enter marriage and to remain in the marital state for the most part of their lives.⁸ Financial transactions like a dowry were part and parcel of it; both inheritance and citizens' rights largely depended on marriage. But at least, one might speculate on the consequences of the juridic 'easiness' of marriage and divorce for those who did not enter the marital state. Such a question eminently counts for the lower classes, which are very much underrepresented in the sources.⁹ As Roman marriage was largely *de facto*, based on mutual consent and social rules and restrictions ("If you lived together as man and wife, man and wife you were"¹⁰), would neighbours in the slums of Rome or in a small village in the countryside really have cared whether the man and woman living next door in a small one room apartment were legally married or rather considered themselves, for social reasons, to live in a form of concubinage (compare the absence of any indication of marital status in the Roman Egyptian census, as noted by Huebner, in this volume, p. 41)? Would they have viewed the couple living next door as 'different', depending on whether or not they had Roman citizenship? Both legal marriages and concubinate union could easily and almost instantaneously be dissolved. Also, local traditions might have been prevailing, making people hardly aware of or concerned about the Roman law on marriage. Surely the late antique sources reveal that people distinguished between legal marriage and concubinage, but such testimonies already belong to the Christian sphere and foretell the Christianisation of the institution of marriage.¹¹ To the question, "Roman marriage and divorce: how easy and how frequent was it?", one could rightly add, how easy and even frequent it was not to enter into the marital state at all?¹²

- 2) While loneliness is a basic experience of human life, it can be understood in different ways and it surely escapes an archetypal definition for different times and cultures. It has been suggested that

⁷ Cooper 2007. On the *univira*, see Evans Grubbs 1995: 335 and Humbert 1972: 347–48.

⁸ Evans Grubbs, in this volume. ⁹ Kajanto 1970. ¹⁰ Crook 1967: 101.

¹¹ The example of Saint Augustine's concubine, the name of whom we never learn, immediately comes to mind. See August. *Conf.* 4.2.2 and Nathan, in this volume.

¹² Question raised by Treggiari 1991a, in a volume which contains other valuable contributions on the issue of remarriage (e.g. Bradley 1991b).

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Excerpt

[More Information](#)*What's in a Single?*

7

the lonely single is a product of the anonymity of life in modern big cities, while traditional societies were much more concerned about solidarity of life in a broader community.¹³ From an historical point of view, it is worth looking at whether people relate the feeling of loneliness with the fact of not being married or not having a partner, or rather with the financial difficulties of having to take care of themselves without the support of relatives or friends. The question eminently comes in when Christianity promotes asceticism. Did this asceticism imply abstinence from (exclusive) sexual relations, or did it encourage people to go and live on their own?

- 3) There is a large consensus that men in the Roman empire entered marriage somewhere in their mid-twenties.¹⁴ Surely in the higher classes, this leaves the possibility of a transitory period with a considerable amount of free time, the more so since political duties at that age were not enormously time-consuming and the necessity to work not pressing.¹⁵ Possibly, there was room for the celebrating of a specific lifestyle: being young, and not yet worried by the obligations of marriage. Such celebrations may show up in folkloristic or institutional evidence (for instance with youth organisations which included a large amount of bachelors),¹⁶ or in explicit literary testimonies in which people take pride in their unmarried lifestyle.¹⁷ However, the connection with youth should not be taken for granted.¹⁸ Older bachelors might mention their status, and even consider the unmarried state as a vocation or at least the best option for life. For them, it is interesting to see whether they were viewed as complying with the rules or rather behaving in an 'asocial' or 'inappropriate' way. At least in Late Antiquity, Libanius considered the unmarried life as his 'vocation' (cf. Cribiore, in this volume, p. 261). Even in the case of young unmarried men, some Roman poets have uttered the hopes of remaining in the bachelors' state: a godly and happy status indeed,

¹³ However, Morley 2006: 34 has pointed to the alienation and anonymity in the lives of the excluded poor without shelter in big cities in the Roman Empire.

¹⁴ Scheidel 2007 has aptly summarised the discussion. ¹⁵ Laes and Strubbe 2014: 164–83.

¹⁶ Laes and Strubbe 2014: 104–35, though admittedly little evidence on ancient associations of adolescent youth explicitly mentions the members as being unmarried.

¹⁷ Eyben 1977: 405–60 and 1993: 176–202 has extensively described Catullus and the elegiac poets like Tibullus, Propertius and Ovid as rebels, criticising the prevailing norms and provoking the respectable classes. These poets at least represented themselves as singles, opposing marriage. See Laes and Strubbe 2014: 136–49 summarising the discussion and criticising Eyben's theses.

¹⁸ Although marriage was often considered as the end of youth for young males. See Eyben 1977: 91–92 and Laes and Strubbe 2014: 209–10.

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Excerpt

[More Information](#)

as it was expressed in the proverbial *caelibes caelites*.¹⁹ In this context, those inclined to same-sex relations who preferred to remain unmarried for this very reason should also be mentioned (cf. Efthymiadis, in this volume, p. 316).

To these three different fields, the gendered aspect must be taken into consideration.

To a woman, the fact of not being married before a certain age might have marked her as a *femme manquée*. Surely, demographic factors such as female infanticide may have caused a shortage of women, so that never entering marriage became a less likely possibility for females, surely in the so-called Mediterranean marriage pattern to which Roman society belonged. Such a demographic pattern could also imply that young men might have encountered obstacles in winning a bride on the marriage market.²⁰ But also later events in life such as divorce, the husband's death or the necessity of taking care of relatives may have caused women to stay unmarried for long periods of their life. In such cases, motherhood could seriously have altered the way they lived or the way their being unmarried was viewed.

Secondly, loneliness, vulnerability and poverty due to the impossibility of economically taking care of oneself could be matters which were aggravated by being a woman. In the rare autobiographical testimonies we possess, it is worth looking at how 'single' women exploited the argument of belonging to the 'weaker sex' in order to obtain what they requested in petitions.²¹

Thirdly, the celebration of being unmarried as a lifestyle might be strongly altered by the fact of belonging to the male or the female sex. English clearly distinguishes between spinsters and bachelors, the former more negatively connotated than the latter. The Graeco-Roman world was characterised by a late teenage marriage pattern for girls: the time between coming of age and entering marriage was anyway short for them (and perhaps even shorter for girls of the elites, who sometimes married at an even younger age). In the non-Christian tradition, testimonies on the joy and happiness of unmarried life for women are virtually absent, though based on cross-cultural anthropological evidence we might suspect the possibility of a youthful subculture with women.²² It is only in the Christian sources that female virginity, chastity and the renunciation of

¹⁹ Cf. infra note 49. ²⁰ Bagnall and Frier 2006: 121; Scheidel 2013.

²¹ See Cromwell, in this volume. ²² Laes and Strubbe 2014: 210–14.

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Excerpt

[More Information](#)*What's in a Single?*

9

sex and marriage are emphatically represented in a way which was utterly unknown before.²³

2 The Ancients Had Some Words for It

Coping with all these different meanings and connotations requires a thorough insight into many aspects of the sociocultural history of the Roman Empire. But, to come back to the first paragraph, such investigation can be well served by ‘traditional’ philological research, starting from Latin or Greek terminology.

It might be tempting to look for ancient equivalents for “Mrs.” and “Miss”, as well as “Ms.” (generally used for ‘older’ singles), but the rare explicit testimonies on such issues rather point to biological signs of girls becoming marriageable with the coming of age than to the actual fact of being (un)married. According to Epictetus, women are considered “ladies” (*kyriaiai/κύριαι*) by men when they reach age fourteen: “Therefore, when they see that there is nothing else for them besides sharing a bed with men, they start to adorn themselves and in this they place all their hopes.” Democritus addressed a young girl with the words “Greetings, girl” (*chaire kore/χαῖρε κόρη*), while the next day (i.e. after the night of defloration) he used the sentence “Greetings, lady” (*chaire gynai/χαῖρε γυναι*).²⁴ *Matrona* explicitly denotes a married lady, with or without children.²⁵ Latin *puerilla* seems to have been primarily used for girls before the age of marriage and subsequent sexual initiation, as were the terms *virgo* or *parthenos/παρθένος*.²⁶ In the early Christian usage, these words denoted both male and female virgins, while there also was a specific Christian term for males, namely *virgineus*. At first sight, one would expect these men to be unmarried, though the institution of ‘celibate’ married partners living together as brother and sister proves that this did not always need to be the case.²⁷

The words which come closest to ‘single’ in the sense of not married are *anandros/ἀνανδρος*, *agamos/ἄγαμος* and *eitheos/ἢἴθεος* for Greek, *caeles*

²³ Cooper 1996; Harper 2013 and Vuolanto 2015 are outstanding examples of scholarship on asceticism. The scholarly literature is obviously vast.

²⁴ Epict. *ench.* 40; Diog. Laert. *vita et doctr. philos.* 9.42.4–10. See Caldwell 2015: 15.

²⁵ Gell. 18.6.8–9; Isid. *orig. (etym.)* 9.7.13.

²⁶ Watson 1983; Laes 2007: 36 for the epigraphical usage of the terms. Also for males, the distinction between *puer* and *adulescens/iuvenis* was not related with the fact of being married. On *παρθένος*, see also Huebner, in this volume, pp. 41–42.

²⁷ Alwis 2011 (celibate marriage); Laes 2013 (male virgins); Vuolanto 2015: 260 for many entries on chaste marriage.

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Excerpt

[More Information](#)

for Latin. Surprisingly, these terms largely fit the different meanings and connotations as they appear in the modern languages.²⁸

2.1 Not Being Married

Greek *agamia/άγαμία* primarily refers to the unmarried (and childless) state of a man, as when Plutarch states that one should encourage his brother to marry and consequently honour his sister-in-law when she gets children.²⁹ Though there is a specific gendered term *anandros/άνανδρος* to describe unmarried women, *agamos/άγαμος* may also refer to females.³⁰ The Greek *eitheos/ήθεος* seems very much age-specific, since it refers to unmarried male youth. Rare instances of references to unmarried girls occur.³¹ The LSJ lexicon suggests that *agamos/άγαμος* also connotes widowers, though it is hard to find an unambiguous example of this usage. Part of the problem is that Ancient Greek did not have a proper term to denote widowers. The gendered *anandros/άνανδρος* or “husbandless” is used for both virgins and widows, though for widows the specific term *chera/χήρα* was much more common.³²

In the Latin tradition, several definitions by grammarians and authors with an interest in etymological matters, as well as statements in literary works, confirm that *caelebs* primarily refers to not being married.³³ If Livia had not existed, the emperor Augustus would have opted for the single life (*caelebs vita*) – since there was simply no other woman to whom he might have been a husband.³⁴ The use of the term *caelebs* predominantly applies

²⁸ Also for sociocultural historians, Burger 1946–1952 is an essential starting point for further research. The first attestation of *monachos* appears in a petition from Karanis in the year 324 (*P.Col. VII.171.15*), where a *diakon* and a *monachos* are mentioned. See Huebner, in this volume.

²⁹ Plut. *de frat. am.* 491e (άγαμιν δ' ἀδελφοῦ καὶ ἀπταδίαν). The combination of unmarried and childlessness already appears in Hom. *Il.* 3.40. See also Xen. *symp.* 9.7. Obviously, the usage of the word may also imply absence of sexual experience leading to procreation.

³⁰ See e.g. A. *Supp.* 143; Soph. *OT* 1502; Eur. *Or.* 205.

³¹ Plat. *leg.* 877e stresses the meaning “unmarried” (ήθεον δὲ ή καὶ γεγαμηκότα ἀπαιδα τελευτῆσαι). Clearly referring to young unmarried males: Hdt. 3.48; Plut. *Thes.* 15 and 17. Young females: AP 9.241 (Antip.); Eup. 332; Olymp. Phil., *In Platonis Alcibiadem commentarii* 223, line 15 (κόρη ήθεος).

³² 1 Cor. 7:8 mentions τοῖς ὀγάμοις καὶ τοῖς χήροις and continues by saying that it is better for them to stay unmarried like Paul himself (καλὸν αὐτοῖς ἔχει μείνωσιν ὡς κάγώ). The passage rather seems to refer to all unmarried, as it is understood in the Vulgata Latina (*non nuptiis*) though the combination with τοῖς χήροις might point to widowers too.

³³ See e.g. Isid. *orig.* 10.34 (*caelebs conubii expers*); Ovid. *met.* 10.245 (*sine coniuge caelebs vivebat*) on Pygmalion; Sen. *epist.* 94.9 (*hoc viro, hoc feminae, hoc marito, hoc caelibи convenit*); Quin. *inst.* 5.10.26 (*maritus an caelebs*); Gell. 5.11.2 (*deberetne uxorem ducere an vitam vivere caelibem*).

³⁴ Ov. *trist.* 2.163: *quae si non esset, caelebs te vita deceret, / nullaque, cui posses esse maritus, erat.*