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978-1-107-14875-8 - Prostitutes and Matrons in the Roman World

Anise K. Strong

Excerpt

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Introduction

Two thousand years ago, an aristocratic Roman matron named Vistilia faced a trial for adultery. Vistilia was notorious for conducting multiple extramarital affairs, but her husband, Titidius Labeo, refused to divorce her. Eventually, the Emperor Tiberius himself accused her of adultery, a crime punishable by exile to a remote island. Vistilia responded to this charge by publicly registering herself as a common prostitute, since prostitutes were legally incapable of committing adultery. The Emperor then passed a new law forbidding women of the senatorial class to become prostitutes, forced Vistilia's husband to divorce her, and duly exiled her.¹

By itself, this story is a minor anecdote in the annals of Roman history. No wars were fought; no religions were founded; no nations were conquered. Nevertheless, Vistilia's tale encapsulates a fundamental contradiction between the version of Roman society that has been generally accepted over the past two millennia – an image constructed by elite male authors, emperors, and jurists – and the everyday social realities of Roman men and women. In her landmark 1975 text, Sarah Pomeroy divided ancient women into the categories of “Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves,” emphasizing in her title these prescriptive distinctions between different social and moral categories.² This book explores the fluidity and mutability of the roles of “whore” and “wife” in the Roman world, analyzing the tales of the women who both exemplified and defied them. It asks not only why most Roman elite males promulgated these stereotypes in a wide variety of literary and artistic genres, but also why and how other authors and women like Vistilia subverted these normative doctrines of good women and bad women. The categories and boundaries of Roman social hierarchies intertwined with the Roman sexual and gender

systems. In practice, however, both such structures were less stable and coherent than they may have appeared from the surface.

In the official decrees of Tiberius and his predecessor Augustus, the divisions between different types of women were clear and absolute. There were wives – loyal, brave, hard-working matrons devoted to a single man – and there were whores – greedy, selfish, promiscuous prostitutes focused on their own self-interests. When a wife acted like a whore, the emperor’s punishment was removal from Roman society itself. She no longer fitted into established moral categories and thus could not function within the elite Roman world. Tiberius’ own wife and Augustus’ daughter, Julia, faced disinheritance and exile, allegedly for sexual promiscuity although possibly also for rebellious and transgressive political activity.³

Vistilia, Tiberius’ victim, had a different view of social and moral categories. In order to evade punishment, Vistilia was willing to register herself publicly as a prostitute. She announced that she was a whore and was not ashamed. The Roman biographer Suetonius claims that many other women sought a similar loophole, suggesting that this was not a unique act of rebellion.⁴ Suetonius’ emphasis is on the degenerate choices of these elite matrons and youths and on the state-imposed sanctions, whereas the historian Tacitus focuses on the restoration of the normal social order in a single case.⁵ Suetonius may have exaggerated a general trend from reports of the single incident of Vistilia, but this may also be an accurate portrayal of a pattern of civil disobedience against Augustus’ restrictive adultery laws. Since Tacitus does not contradict Suetonius’ account, I suspect Vistilia was simply the most prominent example of a group of rebellious, pragmatic elite women seeking sexual autonomy.

Notably, Vistilia’s husband Titidius Labeo had neither publicly objected to her activities nor attempted to divorce her. Indeed, when reminded of the clause in the *lex Iulia de adulteriis* which forced him either to divorce an adulterous wife or himself be found guilty of *lenocinium* (pimping), Titidius Labeo asked for an extra two months to consider his decision. While he eventually submitted to the Emperor’s will, his reluctance suggests that Labeo tolerated a wife who did not fit the prescriptive norm of the ideal matron. For Titidius Labeo, his wife’s sexual behavior was not a matter of fundamental importance in their marriage. He may have been motivated by the financial reason of not wanting to lose her dowry; the six marriages of Vistilia’s sister (or possibly aunt) suggest that both women came from a prominent and wealthy family.⁶ Whatever his

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reasons, he was willing to be married to a wife who declared herself publicly to be a whore.

Vistilia's gambit was fundamentally unsuccessful in preventing punishment for her unorthodox behavior. However, she believed that adopting a new sexual and social identity was not only possible but also a viable solution to her dilemma. For Vistilia, the worst possible outcome was not being publicly shamed as a whore but exile from her home city. Her story suggests that Roman women's views about the importance of this social division may have differed from the harsh, dichotomous categorizations of women by elite male authors like Tacitus and Cicero. For Vistilia, the value of sexual license outweighed the disadvantage of personal shame, if indeed there was any shame at all.

It is time to take a closer look at these categorical divisions that have become a cliché in the analysis of ancient women. Roman women could and did transition between these social and moral labels. In the same era that Tiberius forbade women of senatorial descent to become prostitutes, his predecessor Augustus forbade senatorial men to marry prostitutes and transform them into elite wives.⁷ While "matron" and "prostitute" may have been fixed official categories in the minds of the emperors and lawmakers, "wife" and "whore" became increasingly fluid moral categories used to praise or attack women who demonstrated appropriate female virtues or vices, most particularly the virtue of loyalty towards a male partner. Furthermore, elite male anxiety focused primarily on the dangers represented by women's economic independence rather than on their sexual behaviors.

We have relied on these labels of wife and whore for so long because so much of the written evidence seeks to inscribe them as factual absolutes. Not only legal texts, but the strongly moralizing histories and declamations of Roman literature also divide women into good and bad moral archetypes. These archetypes, furthermore, are not limited to elite texts. A tourist walking through the streets of Pompeii today might indeed conclude that there were only two types of women in the Roman world – the virtuous matrons immortalized on tombstones as faithful, fertile wool-workers and the cheap prostitutes whose names and prices were scratched into tavern and brothel walls.⁸ Both prostitute and "good wife" stories may also have formed part of the lost oral tradition, which would also have been accessible to a much larger audience. However, these non-elite records still primarily indicate how literate men chose to depict and memorialize women, rather than how most Roman women might have conceptualized their own identities.

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In this book, I trace the stories, images, and artifacts that illuminate the lives of women who defied traditional labels, in an attempt to understand how Roman women and men themselves negotiated between and around these categories. I discuss both the historical (if probably slandered) promiscuous whore-empress Messalina and Livy's semi-fictional "good little prostitute" Hispala Faecenia, as well as the women who fell into neither category, like the elite courtesans of the late Republic and the palace concubines of the Empire. By studying examples in different literary and artistic genres of two variants of the familiar labels – the "wicked wife" and the "good whore" – I explore the underlying social definitions of Roman female virtue and vice.

The following chapters will establish that the defining characteristic of a Roman "whore" was neither her type of work nor her sexual activity but her abandonment of ties to a male partner. Conversely, women of low social status could achieve "wife-like" labels if they demonstrated generous devotion to a male partner and support of the Roman state and the established social hierarchy. While the term *meretrix* or "whore" was originally used to describe a woman who exchanged sex for money, it became a moral label used to condemn any woman who led an overly public, economically autonomous, sexually active life unrestricted by ties to a single man. Meanwhile, my analysis of women who appear not to fall into any of these categories – concubines, courtesans, the elusive *amicae* of Roman elegy, and the women in Roman erotic paintings – suggests contemporaneous challenges to this normative dichotomy of socially segregated "good" and "bad" women.

Stories about prostitutes and about women who behaved like prostitutes, as well as moral exempla that praised matrons or women who behaved like matrons, appear prominently in a variety of genres of Roman literature. Such tales appeared in texts ranging from comedy to satirical poetry to hypothetical speeches used in rhetoric classes for elite young men. These anecdotes would have been familiar to a large audience, of one primarily composed of the prosperous and literate members of society.⁹ They also likely served as didactic tales for young Roman women themselves. The orator Cicero famously urged Clodia Metelli, who had allegedly been behaving like a whore, to imitate instead the example of her virtuous ancestors Claudia Quinta and the heroic Vestal Claudia.¹⁰

To some extent, the general Roman predilection for tales about both good and especially wicked women can be blamed on their basic entertainment value: sex sells, now and historically. Yet this discourse also

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betrays a more general concern about the threat to the social order posed by publicly prominent women who were not defined by a familial role and who potentially valued profit above the welfare of their male companions. This basic distrust extended beyond professional sex workers to other Roman women who exhibited familial disloyalty through their indiscriminate sexual availability. By establishing a moral category of “wicked women” that was rhetorically aligned with the disreputable social category of “prostitute,” elite men could rebuke or shun women who did not follow conventional social mores and uphold the patriarchal social system.

Augustus’ programmatic emphasis on political and social stability increased elite anxiety about women who appeared to threaten the fragile structure of Roman social hierarchies.¹¹ Such idealized and narrow categories of social status may never have accurately depicted the complex and shifting patterns of Roman society, where freedmen could rise to become imperial advisors and provincial centurions could become emperors. However, the ideal of a stable social pyramid remained essential among the elite aristocracy, who also wrote the vast majority of surviving texts.

Both Rebecca Flemming and T. A. McGinn, the most influential recent scholars of Roman prostitution, have argued that, unlike the Greek phenomenon of famous, wealthy *hetairai* or courtesans, Roman society had little place for glamorous, elegant prostitutes who slept with elite men and also influenced them politically and economically.¹² Yet if this hypothesis were true, it would be difficult to identify any possible remaining social status for the many elegant, witty, unmarried *amicae* or “girlfriends” in Augustan elegiac poetry and Imperial epigrams. Even if the women themselves in these poems are individually imaginary characters, the invention of an entire fictional category of women for poets to make socially acceptable love with seems rather implausible.¹³ Because these women fall in between the normative categories, evidence concerning them has previously been dismissed or ignored.

The first-century BCE Roman poet Ovid claims, for instance, that his racy poem the *Ars Amatoria* is intended for *meretrices* rather than adventurous wives. He cannot be alleging that his audience consists of impoverished illiterate streetwalkers.¹⁴ By examining historical and rhetorical accounts of influential concubines and courtesans, as well as their representation in poetry, we can further study Romans’ own deconstructions of social norms. The *amicae* stand as a challenge to the moral and social dichotomy of the wife–whore paradigm: are they good or wicked, or both?

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My focus on the concept of semantic labels as a means of defining Roman social roles is inspired by the Roman practice of identifying prostitutes by name-boards, or *tituli*, above their individual cells in brothels. These *tituli* may have announced prostitutes' prices and names to interested customers, defining them by their perceived sexual value and, by means of a "Do not Disturb" sign, symbolically establishing the periods when they belonged, however temporarily, to a specific man.¹⁵ For Roman authors, labeling and categorizing women as whores became a means of theoretically restraining their unconventional impulses. Even women who were defined by their lack of permanent male relationships could be controlled by the terms of the discourse about them. The possibility of gaining the negative label of *meretrix* may have served as a warning to respectable matrons of potential retribution for immoral behavior.

This concept of the "whore" is key to an examination of the fluidity of Roman moral categories for women, because Roman prostitutes played an inherently unstable and transgressive role in Roman society. The Roman whore was conceptualized as a particularly selfish individual, who cared more about her own gain than supporting and nurturing male family members or contributing to the larger community. Since the Roman era, this concept has served as a general trope in the discourse about the characters and morals of prostitutes in Western society.¹⁶ Literary and legal texts often characterize prostitutes as permanent social outcasts and exiles from the larger community.¹⁷ Timothy Gilfoyle presents prostitutes as "one of the ultimate subaltern subjects, outcasts from not only the dominant culture but often also from those subcultures labeled 'subordinate' – women, working classes, social minorities, radicals, or religious dissidents."¹⁸ Despite this socially marginal status as the paradigmatic Other, professional Roman prostitutes still regularly interacted with men and women from a wide variety of different social backgrounds. *Meretrices* were both theoretically ostracized outsiders and ubiquitous insiders, separated from other subordinate subcultures yet in constant contact with both the elite and lowly men of Roman society. Furthermore, they played both inherently subordinate roles as sexual objects and potentially dominant roles as economically independent agents who, in some cases, possessed sexual choice.

At the same time, we should not overstate the agency or glamorize the lifestyle of actual Roman sex workers. The vast majority of them were slaves under the control of a pimp or madam, having little if any control over their lives, customers, or profits. Their lives were probably both miserable and short. This book is concerned not so much with the lived

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reality of Roman prostitutes but with the discourse about the *meretrix* as a social, sexual, and moral category. Necessarily, this involves a greater focus on the relative minority of freedwomen freelance prostitutes, courtesans, and married women accused of prostitute-like behavior, even if the stories men told about such women were not representative of the lives of most actual Roman prostitutes.

Roman professional sex workers were defined by the fact that they plied their trade *palam*, or openly. Politically or economically prominent women who conducted their activities *palam*, regardless of their sexual behavior, were often accused of being *meretrices*.¹⁹ The frequent presence of a woman in public spaces already threatens her adherence to appropriate gender and sexual norms; if she is working outside, she is necessarily not wool-working or raising children inside the house.

At the same time, one of the key differences between Roman women of the Republic and early Empire and other ancient Mediterranean women was the emphasis on the public proclamation of their virtue, as will be discussed further in Chapter 1. A good Roman woman ought to be *nota*, well known, and publicly celebrated for her loyalty and chaste behavior, her *pudicitia*. However, a bad Roman woman was *famosa*, or notorious, and she was presumed to be behaving sexually like a whore.²⁰ This distinction outlined an uneasy and nebulous boundary between public women and what the medieval historian Ruth Mazzo Karras has termed “common women,” women equally available to all men.²¹ Unlike most other ancient Mediterranean societies, the good Roman woman had a public presence and was allowed to interact regularly with men outside her family. However, that made her relationship to the figure of the public prostitute all the more ambiguous and potentially confusing. The matron could be publicly visible but not sexually available, whereas the prostitute could be either visible on the street or invisible inside her brothel *cella* or home, and yet she was defined by her sexual accessibility. Since the physical location and even the appearance of a woman was not necessarily determinative of her moral status, as demonstrated further in Chapters 1 and 5, her potentially questionable status created social anxiety in the minds of elite men. The famous statue of Eumachia, patroness of the Pompeii fullers’ guild, exhibits some of this problematic issues of definition; the statue depicts a modestly dressed matron who is nonetheless prominently placed on the edge of the Pompeii Forum, in a building almost certainly dedicated to business meetings and transactions.²² She asserts her wealth and her public economic role in society at the same time. Numerous public statues and tomb monuments of early Imperial

Roman matrons immortalized realistic aging female heads on top of idealized young, nude, Venus-type bodies. This juxtaposition further demonstrates the complex relationship between female virtue and sexual attractiveness in the Roman world.²³ By attempting to define behavior rigidly and categorize all women as either wives or whores, male authors and jurists sought to conceal this tension, despite the evidence of social and moral intermixture that would have permeated Roman daily life.

Roman jurists and educators found the concept of the prostitute “convenient to think with,” as a means of categorizing and labeling socially acceptable behavior.²⁴ Prostitutes were convenient to think with not just for legal jurists, but also for poets, artists, and orators. The conceptual category of “bad women” or *meretrices* both reflected and helped construct the gender identity of “good” Roman women.²⁵ *Meretrices* served as the dangerous, exotic, foreign Other to the good matron, most vividly represented in Augustus’ propagandistic contrast of his sister Octavia and her rival Cleopatra VII of Egypt. These “bad women” were not only sexually promiscuous, but figures of chaos and disorder who disrupted the social system.

Elite male Roman discourse about *meretrices* centered on their queerness and subaltern status. I here borrow Gayle Rubin’s concept of queerness to analyze the rhetorical function of Roman *meretrices* as women who did not fit into the established patriarchal and sexual hierarchy.²⁶ The prostitute is often used as a symbol for the unchained, disloyal woman who might challenge the accepted social structure. This figure, especially in her guise of the formerly respectable “fallen woman,” becomes the symbol of societal disorder and instability.²⁷ Like Vistilia, she threatens the dominant narrative. However, the development of *meretrices* as this threatening, queer alternative to the normative Roman female stereotype largely served to reify and support the ideal role model of the loyal *bona matrona*: Vistilia still winds up exiled rather than pursuing her liaisons in peace and quiet.

Such elite identity judgments can only be evaluated as accurate models within their specific political and social contexts.²⁸ The complex Roman social pyramid of elites, freeborn citizens, freedmen, and slaves rested on a parallel and linked pyramid of female social hierarchy in which position depended largely on marital status and sexual relationships, as well as familial connections and wealth.²⁹ In such a system, the wealthiest freedwoman courtesan still ranked beneath a prosperous matron. However, her social status in relationship to a poor rural matron, like that of an Imperial freedman to a rural male farmer, was less clear. Such

ambiguity raised the question of whether social origins might be less important than economic status, an ongoing issue within the overall Roman social hierarchy.

Arlene Saxonhouse uses the common gender paradigm of public and private, dividing men and women into separate spheres, in order to address the innately transgressive nature of ancient women in the public sphere.³⁰ However, her theory, while relatively applicable to the Greek and Near Eastern ancient worlds, does not consider how the public nature of Roman female virtue complicates such a paradigm for the Roman world. For the Romans, overall social stability depended on a more ambiguous understanding of the duties and place of women. The Romans sought to navigate between the ideal of a good Roman public wife – one whose public activities centered on her loyalty to family and her patriotism – and the negative caricature of the Roman common whore, whose public activities focused on gaining money through men’s use of her body. A good Roman woman was necessarily public in her display of her virtues; a bad Roman woman was public in the sense of lacking any owner.

The originality and influence of the Roman label of *meretrix*

The Roman association between promiscuity and unorthodox female political and economic activity is the beginning of a long history of such labels in Western society. At the 1990 World Whores’ Summit in San Francisco, the prostitutes’ rights activist Gail Pheterson declared, “Whore-identified women are not considered citizens, and any woman can be called a whore at any time for somehow stepping over the line.”³¹ One of the questions interrogated closely in this book is precisely the ambiguity of Roman *meretrices* citizenship – what is their relationship to the larger social and political community?

This heritage does not primarily stem from any of the other major roots of Western culture. The Greeks, for instance, did not strongly associate indiscriminate promiscuity with their unorthodox, publicly active elite women, with the possible exception of the fifth-century BCE Elpinice, sister of Cimon.³² Medea and Clytemnestra, whatever their flaws, are not represented as sexually promiscuous – Clytemnestra is an adulteress with one man, but she is certainly not openly available to all comers.

While Greek *hetairai* such as Pericles’ mistress Aspasia certainly had political and social influence, the strict segregation between sexually promiscuous women and respectable citizen matrons largely eliminated the subversive threat of interaction and confusion between these types.³³

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When transgression does occur, as when Neaera and her daughter allegedly masqueraded as Athenian matrons, it is harshly criticized and largely concerns the issue of prostitutes misrepresenting themselves as respectable women, rather than vice versa.³⁴ The Hebrew and Near Eastern use of “whore” as a general moral label and its limitations for wider applicability, meanwhile, is further discussed in Appendix II.

Definitions and methods of identification

Precise terminology is key for comprehending Roman use of these negative and positive stereotypes. I shall briefly delineate my particular translation choices for the different Roman words for “prostitute” and “wife.” The Romans themselves used a variety of methods to identify sex workers, both with regard to their names and in terms of visual symbols associated with their role in society.

As noted earlier, the Romans used the most common word for a professional prostitute, *meretrix* (lit. “female wage-earner”), to refer also to unorthodox elite women like the Republican matron Clodia Metelli and the Empress Messalina. This general label also described a variety of different types of unmarried, sexually active adult women, ranging from streetwalkers and brothel girls to elegant freelance courtesans and long-term concubines.³⁵ The linguistic connection between sex work and wages also highlights the anxiety about female economic autonomy that will be discussed further in later chapters.

Other terms, such as *scortum* (lit. “skin,” a neuter term), *moecha* (lit. “adulteress,” from the Greek), and *lupa* (lit. “wolf-bitch”) have both a stronger derogatory nuance and are usually used to refer to prostitutes of lower social and financial status.³⁶ Meanwhile, more generic terms like *puella* (lit. “girl”) and *amica* (lit. “girlfriend”), both of which frequently occur in Latin elegy, are traditionally translated by the socially ambiguous word “girlfriend.”

Another problem lies in the issue of English translation. All English words that refer to promiscuous women have specific negative connotations to a modern ear: whore, slut, nymphomaniac, hooker, harlot, etc.³⁷ I use *meretrix* or “whore” to refer to the broad category of women identified in Roman sources by that label, precisely because I am trying to capture the sense of condemnation and insult attached to all women labeled as a *meretrix*, regardless of their profession. While “whore” is certainly not a formal or polite word, it serves as the best translation for