2007

Review of Eve D'Ambra's, Roman Women

Rachel Meyers
Iowa State University, rlmeyers@iastate.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/language_pubs

Part of the Ancient History, Greek and Roman through Late Antiquity Commons, and the History of Gender Commons

The complete bibliographic information for this item can be found at http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/language_pubs/34. For information on how to cite this item, please visit http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/howtocite.html.
Review of Eve D'Ambrâ’s, Roman Women

Abstract
A compact and practical introductory volume to Roman women is a welcome addition to the study of women in Classical antiquity. Part of a new Cambridge Introduction to Roman Civilization series, Eve D'Ambrâ’s Roman Women aims to introduce the daily lives of Roman women to students with no previous knowledge of the topic. D'Ambrâ demonstrates how a range of sources, written and material, are valuable not just for reconstructing how women lived but also for examining the positions of and attitudes towards women in Roman society.

Disciplines
Ancient History, Greek and Roman through Late Antiquity | History of Gender

Comments
A compact and practical introductory volume to Roman women is a welcome addition to the study of women in Classical antiquity. Part of a new Cambridge Introduction to Roman Civilization series, Eve D'Ambra's *Roman Women* aims to introduce the daily lives of Roman women to students with no previous knowledge of the topic. D'Ambra demonstrates how a range of sources, written and material, are valuable not just for reconstructing how women lived but also for examining the positions of and attitudes towards women in Roman society.

This *Roman Women* should immediately be added to the small group of books most often incorporated into courses on women in ancient Greece and/or Rome. This kind of introductory overview focusing solely on Roman women is, in fact, needed. Most will be familiar with *Women in the Classical World*, which has become a standard course text, but, when teaching a course only on Rome, half of the book remains untouched. The same is true for Lefkowitz and Fant's sourcebook, though it is still the best collection of primary sources on women in Greece and Rome. Suzanne Dixon's *Reading Roman Women*, though it concentrates on Roman women, may be considered more specialized and theoretical by some students. Therefore D'Ambra's text effortlessly fills a gap in the study of ancient women.

The book is divided into four chapters of roughly equal length. In the first chapter, Gender and Status, D'Ambra sets up the format for each chapter: a long paragraph (or two) introduces the topic and the contents are divided under several sub-headings with images interspersed throughout the text. Chapter 1 may be considered an introduction to this slim volume, though it is not titled in such a way, for it contains some background about Roman history and a preview of the rest of the book. At the beginning of the chapter, D'Ambra states that "[t]his book is about how Roman women lived with an emphasis on the mundane and less-celebrated aspects of daily life" (3), and near the end of the chapter she gives a preview of the following chapters (40).

Under the first heading of Chapter 1, Sources, the evidence from written works, material culture, and the fine arts are addressed. D'Ambra delineates the hierarchy inherent to Roman culture and highlights a few instances of women transgressing the traditional boundaries--such as a matron portrayed with masculine characteristics in her portrait.
statue--in the section Gender and Power. The chapter concludes with a brief historical overview of the Republic and Empire highlighting key moments of women emerging from the sources.

The second chapter, Marriage and Family, is divided into twelve sub-topics allowing the reader to quickly reference a particular feature, such as moral reform, girls dying before their time, and matchmaking. The section on mistresses and love poetry inevitably discusses the poetry of Catullus and Propertius but also serves as a segue to mention dinner parties--all of which were certainly not as dramatic and decadent as our poetical sources (and Petronius' *Cena Trimalchionis*) would have us believe, as D'Ambra cautions. When D'Ambra approaches the topic Husbands and Wives," she provides some general remarks on marital relationships and then offers specific cases, such as the deep longing Pliny the Younger expresses in a letter (*Ep.* 7.5) to his wife Calpurnia and papyri from Egypt showing women overseeing the farms while their husbands worked in Alexandria (78-80).

In the third chapter, Women's Work, the topics include the domestic arts, childrearing, the arts of cultivation, the company of women, *matronae doctae*, and saleswomen. The matter of a Roman woman's personal grooming will be especially interesting to college students (part of the intended audience of the book), who spend plenty of time, effort, and money on their own appearances. D'Ambra provides archaeological and literary evidence of women's grooming practices, ranging from recipes for cosmetics and the implements for mixing and applying make-up to examples of elaborate jewelry and the use of wigs and hair pieces in creating towering coiffures. The painted mummy portraits from Egypt (several illustrated) offer vivid accounts of how elite women would have looked adorned with make-up and their finest clothing and jewelry.

In her discussion of two well-known sculpted reliefs of saleswomen from Ostia, D'Ambra makes the astute observation that, although the tables of wares are depicted with significant detail, they are not realistic in their portrayal of the real work these women would have done--the dirty work of obtaining and preparing the goods for sale. In these sculpted panels the saleswomen present themselves and their wares to potential customers, which is "the part of the job that made the women appear disreputable and degraded to elite men, who saw them as aggressive, shameless, and surely willing to sell their bodies as easily as they would hand over a head of garlic" (140). These women, although successful in their trade, are marked out as different from noble matrons.

The first part of Chapter 4 on "Public Life" provides brief sketches of certain prominent women in Roman history (matriarchs, wives of politicians, and imperial women) in order to examine the clichés of women ("the schemer, the poisoner, and the ungovernable matron who craves power" [142]) in the ancient and modern sources. For the Republican period, Cornelia and Fulvia are considered. For the Imperial period, Livia, the Agrippinas, Boudicca, Julia Titi, Sabina, and Faustina the Younger are singled out for consideration. Although the sections on Livia and the Agrippinas include the usual anecdotes and modern scholars' views, the inclusion of Boudicca offers an unexpected--though appreciated--glimpse of the foreign warrior queen and foe of Rome.

The second part of Chapter 4 turns to the religious sphere. Religious practices and duties
were one aspect of the public sphere in which women could circulate without incurring public scorn or accusations of trying to overstep traditional gender barriers. The Vestal Virgins are accorded ample description. However, in addition to the more common goddesses and cults, D'Ambra includes lesser known practices and monuments. She illustrates the funerary relief of Licinia Flavilla, a priestess, and her husband Sextus Adgennius Macrinus, a military tribune and local official from Nîmes in southern France (171). The wife serves as a public priestess, a duty shared by numerous other women across the empire and duly commemorated on her grave. Mention of the goddess Venus also brings forth a description of the cults of Venus Obsequens and Venus Verticordia, two aspects of the goddess not usually cited in other general studies of women and religion (172-176).

After the fourth chapter there is a glossary with both Latin and English terms (181-184). The next section lists twenty-seven Roman authors with their dates, their genre, and the titles of their more important works (185-188). The select bibliography focuses on English-language articles and books. No work after 2004, except a 2006 article by D'Ambra herself, is included, probably due to the publication schedule of this volume. The very thorough Index stretches for twenty-one pages and even provides sub-headings for a number of entries to make a quick look-up easy for the reader.

Just like many of the women discussed in it, the book itself is visually appealing, with glossy pages, legible font and spacing, and ninety-nine illustrations. The images, more than half of them in color, include informative captions providing not only standard information (museum/collection, date) but also the relevance of each particular object or monument to women and to the chapter itself. Although several of the images will have been seen in other texts on Roman women, many of them will be new even to the initiated. D'Ambra's prose is refined and witty yet completely coherent. Although no traditional footnotes are used, numerous parenthetical comments throughout the text serve as cross-references to other sections or in providing further explanations of terms or characteristics of Roman culture to the reader who may be new student of Roman history. The text is nearly free of errors.

Throughout the book, D'Ambra mixes well-known historical figures and anecdotes with the unfamiliar. Although the book includes some images and historical accounts available in other general studies of Roman women, it stretches beyond the usual to feature more nuanced written and visual examples. This mixing of the familiar and the lesser-known is one of the greatest benefits of D'Ambra's book. She creates a solid introduction to the study of Roman women without relying solely on material that can be found elsewhere. She allows the student new to Roman women the opportunity to confront a balanced mix of people, events, and objects. While the book is intended to serve as an introduction, it provides detailed and concise information with avenues for more in-depth studies and will make an excellent textbook for any college course on women in Rome.

Notes:

1. See also Augusto Fraschetti (ed.), *Roman Women* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 2001). This is a collection of essays focusing on nine different women as
exemplars of certain types (e.g., "Cornelia the Matron," "Livia the Politician," and "Perpetua the Martyr"). For a review, see BMCR 2001.10.13.


5. I point out only a small inaccuracy in the dating for Faustina the Younger, who was granted the title *Augusta* at the end of 147 (not 146 as D'Ambra states [165]), a day after giving birth to her first child. There has previously been confusion regarding important dates in the life of Faustina, but these have been clarified by Klaus Fittschen, *Prinzenbildnisse Antoninischer Zeit* (Phililpp von Zabern, 1999).