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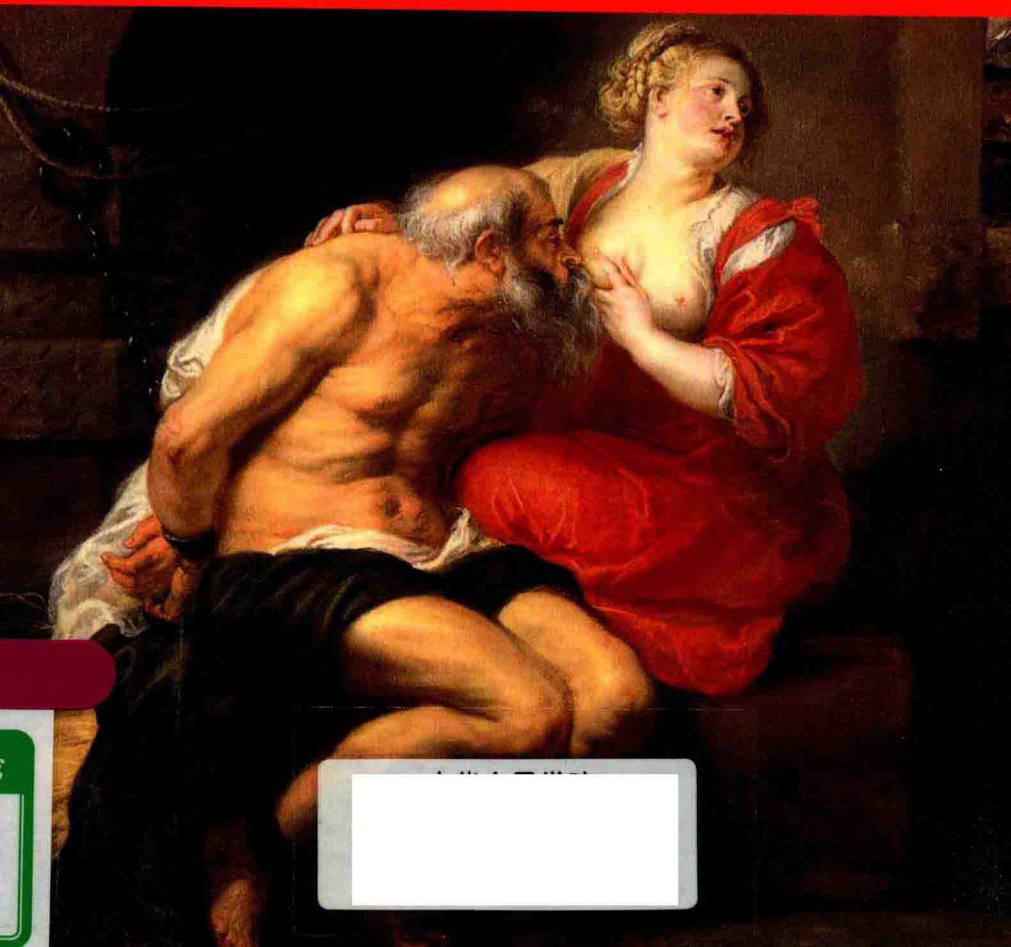
# Gender, Domesticity, and the Age of Augustus

## INVENTING PRIVATE LIFE

Kristina Milnor

*Oxford Studies in Classical Literature and Gender Theory*



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# OXFORD STUDIES IN CLASSICAL LITERATURE AND GENDER THEORY

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Oxford Studies in Classical Literature and Gender Theory publishes substantial scholarly works of feminist literary research, which offer a gender-sensitive perspective across the whole range of Greek and Roman literature, from Homer and Augustine. The series welcomes studies of any genre, whether verse or prose, whether approached thematically or by author. The Editors are particularly keen to encourage feminist readings of texts which have not in the past received much attention from a gender-sensitive perspective. It is expected that contributors to the series will express the theoretical principles that inform their approach, but the series does not impose a single line or monolithic viewpoint. Feminist criticism is understood minimally as presupposing that the mental and moral capacities of women and men are not significantly different, and as recognizing that the explicit or implicit denial of gender equality, including equality of attention, is always a form of 'epistemic violence'. Feminist criticism seeks to redress these imbalances by exposing their operation in patriarchal texts and by illuminating counter-tendencies that affirm women's identities in Classical literature.

For my father, who taught me to seek knowledge,
and my mother, who showed me what it was for

# *Preface*

THESE days, in Europe and America of the early twenty-first century, we tend to take the language of private morality as a natural, normal aspect of political discourse; we now expect our civic leaders to make repeated reference to the virtues of 'traditional' homes and families—even while they take action in their public and private lives which undermines the very values they espouse. It was this, in part, which led me to this project: I was struck by the eerie coincidence between the terms in which I had been taught to understand the moral restoration of Roman society under Augustus and those which I was reading in the newspaper every day. I had long believed one of the great credos of the feminist movement, that attention needs to be paid to the private sphere and the work, primarily done by women, which allows it to function. The attention which it was receiving from both right and left as 'family values', however, was not what I had had in mind. The family, I knew, was an institution, and thus had all of the merits and difficulties of other institutions. Yet as far as I could tell, the family being described by politicians—in its perfect selflessness, absolute acceptance, and unbreakable bonds of loyalty and love—did not describe the familial experience of anyone I knew, or anyone I had ever met. This in turn led me to wonder, not just what politics lay behind the invocation of domestic values as a civic concern in the modern day, but what lay behind it in the age of Augustus. As a historian, I had long been unsatisfied with the explanations which are traditionally offered for the loud trumpeting of traditional values in early imperial ideology; as a feminist, I distrusted the motives of Roman patriarchy in celebrating women's roles within the home; as a feminist historian, I wanted to know more about the conditions under which ancient Roman women were living and what changes, if any, had accompanied the shift from republican to imperial governance. And as a citizen of modern

western civil society, I saw in an investigation of the Augustan period the chance to question, from a historical distance, how and why a culture goes about constructing an idea of the family which is profoundly different from the reality of the family, and how and why that construct may be used to support actions which fly in the face of the genuinely productive values (selflessness, acceptance, loyalty, and love) which it is supposed to represent. It was from these different perspectives, and in furtherance of these different interests, that the following study of gender and private life was produced.

I also wrote this book in a deliberate attempt to engage several different conversations which are already happening within classical studies and in the academy generally: between literary scholars and historians, between philologists and archaeologists, between feminist scholars in other disciplines and those who study the ancient world. My hope was to suggest some different and potentially useful avenues of approach to these conversations, although I also hope that I have made it clear how much I owe to the scholars and scholarship that preceded me. It has always seemed to me, however, that the great power of 'marginal' studies—the study of social identities, texts, and materials which lie outside what has been constituted as the norm—is to challenge not just the content of that norm but its epistemology, that is, not just what we know to be canonical but how we know it. Studies of women and gender in the ancient world have made great strides over the past few decades and have come to be seen by many as a central part of the discipline of classics; this is a great blessing, but I think that it may also have caused us to forget how radical such studies can and perhaps should be. It is actually quite difficult to study the lives of ancient women, who on the one hand left behind so few real traces of themselves, and on the other were the subject of fantasy, speculation, and representation by the men around them. It behoves us, then, to be methodologically creative as we attempt to write ancient women's history—a creativity which, I would argue, may then cause us to look back at 'traditional' methodologies and histories to see them in a different light.

The ideas in this book took their first, hesitant steps in my dissertation, completed at the University of Michigan in 1998. First thanks, therefore, must go to my long-suffering Ph.D. committee, who cajoled, comforted, and counselled me to completion of that version of the project: Sara Myers, David Potter, Susan Alcock, Ann Hanson, and Yopie Prins. I was also blessed at Michigan with some exceptionally fine student-colleagues, especially Molly Pasco-Pranger and John Muccigrosso, whose good influence I hope may still be felt even on this, much later and greatly changed, version of the study. In the intervening years, I have accrued even more debts: to James O'Hara for always sensible advice and insight; to my Columbia colleagues James Zetzel, Gareth Williams, and Alan Cameron, who have all given me the benefit of their vast knowledge of Latin literature; to audiences at New York University, the University of Southern California, and Wesleyan University, who listened with great patience and understanding to early attempts at articulating my ideas. Courtesy of a sabbatical leave from Barnard College, a grant from the American Council of Learned Societies, and the exceptional kindness of Simon Goldhill, I spent the spring and summer of 2002 in residence at King's College, Cambridge, where I completed most of the manuscript's first draft; I cannot sufficiently express my thanks to the students and staff of the classics faculty there, especially Simon Goldhill, Helen Morales, John Henderson, Mary Beard, the late Keith Hopkins, Paul Cartledge, Katie Fleming, Aude Doody, Miriam Leonard, and Richard Fletcher. Due to the vagaries of the publishing process, the final edition of the manuscript was produced while I was a Rome Prize fellow at the American Academy in Rome, researching an entirely different project; thanks are most certainly due to my fellow fellows in 2003–4, especially Elizabeth Marlowe, Mary Doyno, Emma Scioli, Catherine Chin, and Jonah Siegel, for their assistance and support during those last stages of revision. I would also like to express my warmest thanks to Alison Sharrock and David Konstan, editors of this series, and to Hilary O'Shea, Jenny Wagstaffe, and Enid Barker at Oxford University Press, for their advice and guidance through the publishing

process; the copyeditor Julian Ward and my indexer Marta Steele have also rendered valuable assistance in the production of this volume.

In addition, my life has been immeasurably enriched both personally and professionally by my colleagues at Barnard College in New York City: Natalie Kampen, Elizabeth Castelli, Nancy Worman, and most especially Helene Foley. I knew what feminism was before I met these women, but I had never before appreciated its full power: they have given me more than they will ever know, and more than I can ever repay. In a similar vein, I would also like to thank Mary Poovey for gifts too numerous to mention, except to say that both her keen intellect and her generous spirit were enormously influential on the later stages of this project. Eric Leach and Bryan Burns, each in his own way, were the *sine quibus non* of these pages. Finally, the critique of 'family values' which appears here should not be taken as evidence that my own familial experience has been a negative one. Far from it: it was my firsthand knowledge that families—and women in them—could be and do far more than they are credited with that gave me the will to write this book. For all they have been, are, and will continue to be, then, I would like to thank my mother, Catherine Milnor; my father, Andrew Milnor; my aunt, Lynn Gioiella; and my sister, brother-in-law, niece, and nephew, Erika, Steve, Phoebe, and Owen Hale.

K.L.M.

*Barnard College, New York*
*February 2005*

# *Abbreviations*

Most of the abbreviations used for the names of ancient authors and their works can be found in the abbreviations list of the *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 3rd edn. (1996), pp. xxix–liv. The following abbreviations for modern works and journals occur in the main text, footnotes, and References.

| | |
|---|---|
| *AJA* | *American Journal of Archaeology* |
| *AJP* | *American Journal of Philology* |
| *ANRW* | *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt*, ed. H. Temporini and W. Haase (Berlin and New York, 1972– ) |
| *CIL* | *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum* (Berlin, 1863– ) |
| *CJ* | *Classical Journal* |
| *CP* | *Classical Philology* |
| *CQ* | *Classical Quarterly* |
| *CW* | *Classical World* |
| *G&R* | *Greece and Rome* |
| *HSCP* | *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* |
| *ILS* | *Inscriptiones Latinae Selectae*, ed. H. Dessau, 3 vols. (Berlin, 1892–1916) |
| *JRA* | *Journal of Roman Archaeology* |
| *JRS* | *Journal of Roman Studies* |
| *LIMC* | *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae*, ed. H. C. Ackermann, J.-R. Gisler, *et al.* (Zurich, 1981– ) |
| *MD* | *Materiali e discussioni per l'analisi dei testi classici* |
| *OLD* | *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, ed. P. G. W. Glare (Oxford, 1982) |
| *PCPS* | *Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society* |
| *RIC*² | *Roman Imperial Coinage*, 2nd edn., ed. C. H. V. Sutherland and R. A. G. Carson (London, 1984– ) |
| *TAPA* | *Transactions of the American Philological Association* |
| *WS* | *Wiener Studien* |

# *Contents*

# Introduction

There is a paradox evident in the ideals and ideologies of gender which prevailed in early imperial Rome. On the one hand, Roman society (like many ancient societies) had long believed that women belonged to the domestic sphere, that their highest tasks lay within the household, and that their most praiseworthy roles were those of wife and mother. Yet it is also clear that, building on the social and political prominence which certain elite women had achieved during the final decades of the Roman Republic, early imperial culture opened up new spaces for femininity: women emerge into public discourse as builders and benefactors, patrons and property-owners, authors and important actors on the stage of history. In the Augustan period, we find women—far from being invisible and silent, locked behind the doors of their houses—who are able to take on real and important roles in the civic sphere, without compromising their perceived performance of 'traditional' domestic virtues. This book is about the creation and consequences of this paradox, about how and why the early Empire developed new ways of articulating 'correct' female behaviour, and what those new articulations had to do with the larger cultural transformations of the early Empire.

This study is by no means the first to identify the conflicts and contradictions which adhere to the position of elite Roman women during the first years of Julio-Claudian rule. The question has been approached from two different, and equally productive, angles: first, as an historical issue, pursued through a discussion of individual women whose names survive to us—Livia, Octavia, Plancina,

Julia—and whose activities can be reconstructed from a careful analysis of the textual and archaeological records.[1] These studies have given us important insight into the real, material possibilities which existed for certain women, particularly those of the imperial house, to create a place for themselves within Roman political culture. On the other side, literary scholars have focused on the issue as one of representation, and have therefore looked closely at the powerful images of women found in what might be called 'high' literary texts of the early imperial period: Roman elegy, epic, lyric, narrative history. This kind of scholarship has underscored the fact that it is not just women who were affected by the social and political changes of the period, but also 'women'; not just the actual people, but also the representational category. Thus, although Cynthia, Dido, or even 'Livia' in Ovid's exile poetry, should not be construed as actual historical personages who really did what they are described as doing, nevertheless the female figures found in early imperial texts must be understood as inseparable from the historical moment in which they were born.[2]

It will be seen that I am deeply indebted to both of these schools of scholarly thought. At the same time, however, I would argue that we have not gone far enough in considering how femininity functions as a cultural construct, which both creates and is created by a particular historical context. Joan Scott has long insisted that gender must be understood as no more or less than a category of knowledge, 'a way of organizing the world', which is manifested equally in the factual and imaginative products of a period: 'history and literature are...

[1] A recent, fine example of this kind of scholarship is Severy (2003); also noteworthy are Dixon (1983) and (2001*a*), esp. 89–112; Hallett (1984*a*), esp. 3–34 and (1989); Purcell (1986); Kampen (1991); the articles of Flory, esp. (1996); and Barrett (1996) and (2002).

[2] The representation of women in Augustan literature has been the subject of a vast quantity of scholarship, such that it is impossible to cite every example. Some noteworthy contributions, however, include: Richlin (1983), esp. 44–56 and 109–16; Hallett (1984*b*); Henderson (1989); Sharrock (1991); Joshel (1992*b*); Gold (1993); Keith (2000); and the essays collected in Wyke (2002).

forms of knowledge, whether we take them as disciplines or as bodies of cultural information.... [When] we take the disciplines as analysts and producers of cultural knowledge, we find that what is at stake is not simply a literary technique for reading but an epistemological theory that offers a method for analyzing the processes by which meanings are made, by which we make meanings.'[3] If we accept this theoretical position, it makes sense to seek the traces of gender ideologies not just in representations of men and women, historical or otherwise, but also in larger social structures, and it is similarly logical to think that changes in one would have causes and effects in the other. My argument here, then, is that, by looking at a set of representations which fall in between the spheres of strict social history and high literary culture, we may identify a particular strand of what we might call 'gendered Augustanism': a set of ideals and ideologies which on the one hand imagined themselves to be beyond the petty rise and fall of political systems, and on the other served as one of the fundamental building blocks of the new imperial state.

In the Augustan vision of the new Roman Republic, the family (especially the emperor's own) and domestic life constituted the central space around which the rest of civic life might be built. It is, of course, a fundamentally paradoxical position, but one which was an inseparable part of the project on which the princeps had embarked: transforming what it meant to participate in the functioning of the Roman state, building a new definition of the *res publica*, making the social and political institutions of a Republic appear to support the idea of one-man rule. That the domestic world of women could be and should be a site of politics, I argue here, was an idea which developed in the course of this redefinition of public and private life, as the state became centred on a single man and a single family. Women as the focal point of the domestic sphere had an important role to play in the new vision of Roman society, as representatives of what the imperial regime had to offer—both an

[3] Scott (1999) 8–9.

imagined return to the unproblematic and virtuous past, and a fresh way of understanding what it meant to participate in Roman public life. The result was an overriding concern with feminine virtue and its locations, an extremely public discussion of the private sphere, a discourse which brought women out into public view even as it described how little they belonged there. It is this discourse, and its ironic consequences, which are described and discussed in the following chapters.

One of the fundamental premises on which this study rests, however, is that Augustus and the political system he created were not just historical facts, but also ideas, which came into being gradually, communally, and with some difficulty. The Augustan age, after all, marked just the beginning of a great cultural experiment, whose outcome was by no means certain and whose success depended on its ability to capture the minds, hearts, and imaginations of a significant portion of the Roman populace. It is no longer necessary to think of the early Empire as a time of totalitarian oppression, when Rome suffered under the imposition of a unitary and uncompromising ideology; rather, we now may understand it as a concept, whose power lay in its ability to set the terms which framed any discussion of politics, society, and culture. That concept, however, did not spring fully-formed onto the Roman political scene when Augustus assumed 'office' in 27 BCE, nor did it cease to be refined when he died forty-one years later. Although, as we will see, some aspects of what would become 'Augustan culture' were already in place by the late 20s BCE, others did not arrive until much later in the princeps' rule. In many ways, in fact, the reification of Augustus and Augustanism as symbols took on greater urgency after they were no longer (strictly speaking) living entities. The reason that the title of this study reads 'Gender, Domesticity, and'—rather than *in*—'the Age of Augustus' is that I wish to treat the last as an idea rather than a chronological moment, so that we may consider its creation as a process, and its historical role as a gradually imagined 'fact' which transformed how Roman politics and society would be understood.

## PUBLIC VALUES AND DOMESTIC POLITICS: *AENEID* 8

Although this book focuses on works which have by and large escaped the notice of literary critics, I would like to begin by looking at an illustrative moment in one of the 'highest' of high literary texts. In book 8 of Virgil's *Aeneid*, the poet offers an image which has been called one of the most memorable in the entire work.[4] The smith-god Vulcan has been persuaded by his wife, the goddess Venus, to construct a set of armour for her son Aeneas, armour which the hero will then wear through the final triumphant battle which brings both war and poem to an end. Vulcan, we are told, rises from his bed to set about his work in the small hours of the morning (8. 407–15):

inde ubi prima quies medio iam noctis abactae
curriculo expulerat somnum, cum femina primum,
cui tolerare colo vitam tenuique Minerva
impositum, cinerem et sopitos suscitat ignis
noctem addens operi, famulasque ad lumina longo
exercet penso, castum ut servare cubile
coniugis et possit parvos educere natos:
haud secus ignipotens nec tempore segnior illo
mollibus e stratis opera ad fabrilia surgit.

Then, when the first portion of rest has driven away sleep,
and the course of
night, pressed on, is halfway done, just at the time when
first a woman,
to whom the task has been given to support life with distaff and
simple handiwork, stirs up the ashes and sleeping fire,
adding night to her time of work, and she presses
her serving-women
by firelight to their long daily labour, in order that
she might be able to preserve

[4] R. D. Williams (1973) 255. The translation given below is my own, as are the translations of all other passages quoted, except where otherwise stated.