

Arguments with Silence



Writing the History
of Roman Women

Amy [redacted] n

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*For Judith Hallett and Marilyn Skinner
comitibus*

Acknowledgments



This book takes a long look back over two decades that shaped several generations, and my debts of gratitude are many. My first thanks go to my parents, Samuel and Sylvia Richlin, who not only paid for my education with two lifetimes of alienated labor but gave me constant moral support, cheering me on. My father referred to my time on the job market as “going down by Heckerman’s,” a sympathetic echo of the neighborhood prostitute who, tormented by my father’s boyhood gang, used to yell at them, “Go vay, ya doidy bums! I’m going down by Heckerman’s to peddle mine hess.” I owe him lifelong thanks for his perspective, and the love and faith behind it. The essay that now forms chapter 10 was dedicated to “S. V. R.”: my father, who took “Vercingetorix” as his middle name, and went back to college at the age of seventy-six to major in Women’s Studies. He died while *Feminist Theory and the Classics* was in press, but, in *Arguments with Silence*, his spirit lives on; right next to my mom’s, who was the one who took me to the Met, and taught me to look at old things.

My teachers Jack Cundari, Sarah Smith, Jeffrey Henderson, Gordon Williams, and Jack Winkler started me out, and Elaine Fantham gave me her *imprimatur* at a time when I badly needed it, along with a lot of coaching, most of which I probably did not take in. James Tatum has been a constant friend and co-joker since my days at Dartmouth; Mary-Kay Gamel, with her usual magnanimity, welcomed me to beautiful Santa Cruz and into

the world of ancient theater. My students over the years have been a source of joy and inspiration, and I particularly want to thank Ellen Olmstead for the bibliography on women writers of the world, Melinda de Jesus for the diskettes (because), Monica Rios for handing me her paper and a Spanish dictionary, David Fredrick for standing (and sitting) by me in San Francisco, Cindy Benton and Trevor Fear for grace under pressure, Philip Purchase for making me read Franco Moretti, Mark Masterson for travels in late antiquity, Rhiannon Evans for travels in geography, Siobhán McElduff for help with translation theory, and most recently Emily Selove for bridging trashy texts in Arabic and Latin, and Ellen Snyder for pushing me onward in feminist theory.

For this new collection of old things, new thanks are due. Ellen Bauerle prompted me to seek out her editorial help by the paper she gave at the 2011 APA meeting, a statistical survey of women publishing in the field of ancient history; she has boosted me through every chore. Grace Gillies, fresh from her MA work on Domitia Lucilla, spent the summer of 2012 checking references with meticulous care, funded by a generous grant from the UCLA Faculty Senate. For advice on new bibliography, I am grateful to Fanny Dolansky, Rebecca Flemming, Elizabeth Greene, Lora Holland, Sharon James, C. W. Marshall, Holt Parker, Elizabeth Pollard, and the anonymous reviewers for the Press. At UCLA, special thanks go to Christopher Johanson and John Papadopoulos for help with images, and to Kathryn Morgan and Mario Telò for many consultations. Appropriately, Judith Hallett and Marilyn Skinner plowed through the whole manuscript and greatly improved both the bibliography and the introduction—Marilyn, especially, reminding me to keep optimism in the picture. My dear husband, Lon Grabowski, has kept the home fires burning even during the throes of the editing process.

The volume introduction attempts to paint a picture of the sociology of feminism in Classics in the 1980s—an incomplete one, I know, because it is written specifically from the perspective of my own experience in writing about Romans, and textual Romans, at that. Along the way, two people above all have helped me learn more about theory: Sandra Joshel and Nancy Sorkin Rabinowitz, to whom I owe an ongoing debt. This book, meanwhile, is dedicated to the two scholars who were, and still are, my companions in thinking about Roman women and about why it matters to teach and write about them: Judith Hallett and Marilyn Skinner, two great teachers, two great scholars, two great women.

Contents



Acknowledgments ix

Introduction: In Search of Roman Women 1

- 1 Approaches to the Sources on Adultery in Rome 36
- 2 Invective against Women in Roman Satire 62
- 3 Julia's Jokes, Galla Placidia, and the Roman Use of
Women as Political Icons 81
- 4 Sulpicia the Satirist 110
- 5 Reading Ovid's Rapes 130
- 6 Making Up a Woman: The Face of Roman Gender 166
- 7 Carrying Water in a Sieve: Class and the Body in
Roman Women's Religion 197
- 8 Pliny's Brassiere 241
- 9 Emotional Work: Lamenting the Roman Dead 267
- 10 The Ethnographer's Dilemma and the Dream of a
Lost Golden Age 289

Notes 319

Bibliography 357

Index Locorum 395

General Index 405

Introduction

In Search of Roman Women



History-writing, in my book, is material—a history that thinks about events enacted by, experienced by, real people. Here are the tracks of two people like those I have in mind:

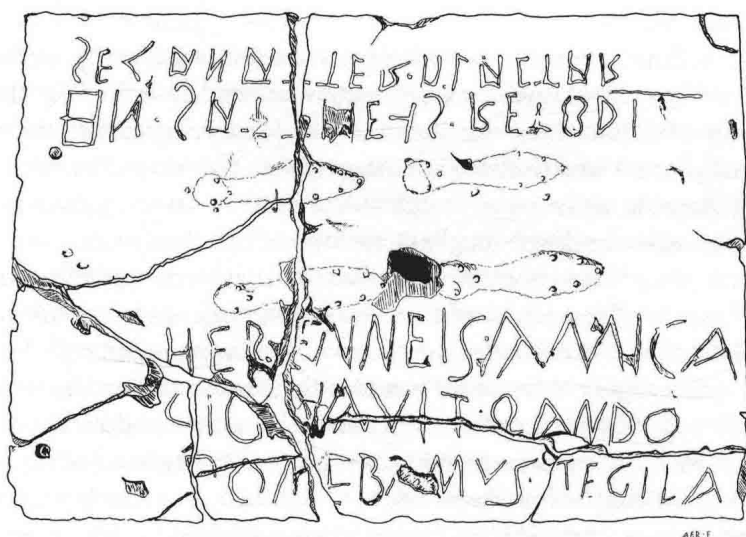


Fig. 1. Roof tile from Pietrabbondante, Italy, bearing the footprints and signatures of the two workers who made the tile. (Drawing Amy Richlin, after La Regina 1976: 285.)

Andrew Wallace-Hadrill describes this object in the context of the mix of cultures in Republican Italy (2008: 90):

In the great sanctuary complex of Pietrabbondante . . . up in the roof of the temple, where nobody could see, a roof tile betrayed a bilingual reality. . . . Two workers in the tile factory “signed” their work by imprinting [it] with their footprints, and by incising their names and slightly different messages from opposite edges of the tile, one in Oscan, the other in Latin:

hn. sattieis detfri

seguanatted. plavtad

(Detfri slave of Herennius Sattius/ signed with a footprint)

Herenneis Amica

signavit. quando

ponebamus. tegila

(Amica slave of Herennius/ signed when/ we were placing the tile)¹

These two slave women made a mark to show they were there, not only in words but in the flesh.

Finding Roman women is a challenge. In the ten essays here presented, I was following more elusive tracks through words mostly written by Roman men; from most ancient women we have only silence, hence the title *Arguments with Silence*, and the book's constant search for the women just out of hearing. Because my own early work was on Roman satire and invective, I picked up a trail running through the seamy, bodily side of women's experience: sex, procreation, body modification, medicine, cult practice, work, death. Because of the nature of these texts, the work made me think and write about the methodological problems of writing such history. The first nine chapters appear in the order in which they were published, 1981–2001, and trace a continuous arc of thought, a set of developing ideas, about Roman women and about how to write their history. As became evident when I came to consider the conditions under which these essays were produced, they also trace a history of ideas in a developing subfield of history-writing, “Women in Antiquity,” now discussed in the introductions to each chapter; the new connective tissue here then deals not only with the theory of his-

tory, but also with the sociology of knowledge. The chapters themselves, though, are not of historic interest only, dealing as they do with issues in women's history that are still under-studied and too rarely juxtaposed; literature and history are still uneasy companions, and there are still a hundred readers of love poetry for every reader of invective. Everything in this book still seems to me to need explaining, teaching, and discussion.

The essays here included were published in a variety of venues: classical journals (chapters 2 and 4); collections of essays in Classics aimed at a feminist or gender-studies readership (chapters 1, 5, 8, and 10); collections aimed at a readership in disciplines other than Classics (chapters 3, 6, and 7); a Festschrift (chapter 9). I wanted to put them all together in a single volume, calling them together from their far-flung stations for the use of present and future seekers of Roman women. Making the collection and updating the bibliography have made me reflect on how venue determines audience: not just how hard it is for feminist classicists to reach a general Women's Studies audience, a big preoccupation of ours in the 1990s, but how unlikely it was that, for example, an essay on Roman women's religion published in a collection titled *Women and Goddess Traditions* would find its way to classicists. Reading and writing are social actions.

Because most of these essays had been produced before Microsoft Word—some of them, indeed, before the adoption of computers—all the text had to be retyped. I took this as an opportunity to tinker, and so the essays are retooled, not just for wording and accuracy but with new bibliography and expanded primary sources, particularly Plautine comedy. The essays you hold in your hand now address both the time of writing and the time of rewriting, already receding into the past even as I type these words. Historians of women must confront the perishable nature of women's lives, and our own are no different. So I write this to commemorate the lives of Roman women, whom I never knew, as well as the lives of the women I have known who have thought about Roman women.

This introduction, along with the chapter introductions, is written in the personal voice, not everyone's cup of tea; I still remember strongly what a liberation it was to me to use this voice for the first time, writing "Hijacking the Palladion" (1990), sitting in my tower room in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, and throwing footnotes out the window. This practice was itself the subject of a volume of essays edited by Judith Hallett and Thomas Van Nortwick (1997), and of a three-year colloquium at the American Philological Association (APA) leading to a special issue of *Arethusa* in 2001; Nancy

Rabinowitz eloquently locates personal-voice writing in contemporary discourse and explains what it has to do with women and feminism.² I can only echo her conclusion that “the personal voice must be characterized as one committed to social change” (2001: 207). Moreover, I firmly believe, and try to teach my students, that the main thing in writing is to know why you do it; here I am putting my cards on the table.

So: why do I do it? I feel a sense of duty to the dead, to tell their stories as best I can; in telling women’s stories, I am working toward a society that remembers women. But I have companions in the telling, all with reasons of their own. This project, now spanning thirty years, exemplifies the kinds of questions asked by the wave of women who entered the academy in the 1970s, and founded a new study of the history of women. We wrote in order to change the stories our culture tells about its past—to make women visible in that past, and to make gender visible as a major element in all cultures. We wrote in order to become scholars; we wrote in order to be heard ourselves; we wrote for a living; we wrote, like all writers, because it called us. Those of us coming from graduate programs in Classics wrote in partnership—sometimes we called it “sisterhood”—with women in other fields in the humanities and social sciences. In 1981, the year the first chapter in this book was published, we were still in the early stages. In 2012, as I write, we might be facing the end of the project in Classics—or maybe not; we can usefully reflect now on what we learned, what we taught, and what remains to be done. Work is still in progress.

Methodology: The Woman in the Table

In her novel *The Dispossessed*, Ursula K. Le Guin juxtaposes two societies, one on a planet, one on that planet’s moon. On the moon live anarchists, committed to a completely egalitarian society; on the planet, a conventional hierarchical society holds sway. A physicist defects from the anarchy to the hierarchy; en route, on the spaceship, he is much surprised to find there are no women on the ship—his hosts feel that women do not belong there, that women could not handle running a freighter. Even so, the physicist begins to notice a sort of sensuous feel to the ship’s fittings (Le Guin 1974: 15):

And the design of the furniture in the officers’ lounge, the smooth plastic curves into which stubborn wood and steel had been forced, the

smoothness and delicacy of surfaces and textures: were these not also faintly, pervasively erotic? He knew himself well enough to be sure that a few days without [his wife], even under great stress, should not get him so worked up that he felt a woman in every table top. Not unless the woman were really there.

The “K.” in Le Guin’s name stands for “Kroeber,” and, as a writer of science fiction, she walks in the tracks of her father, the great anthropologist. Anthropologists, at least ideally, look at societies as whole systems, and in the twentieth century this began to seem like a good idea to historians as well. The study of history from below helped to enable the project of writing women into history, underscoring the fact that the history seen from the top had been so almost exclusively male, except for the odd queen. The problems with writing women’s history, or a gender-inclusive history, stemmed from the same truths that caused problems with writing the history of the poor, or slaves, or children: these groups either did not themselves write, or what writing they did was not kept. To find what is hard to find is still a challenge much to the liking of many history-writers. The women were really there. Maybe we could find them in the table. Or maybe, if we search the corners, the kitchens, the laundry, we could hear them speak in their own voices.

Such a search is grounded in what I have called an “optimistic epistemology”: the belief that past events are recognizable—that concepts travel, as Mieke Bal puts it (see chapter 10; Richlin 2013b). Suzanne Dixon deflatingly calls the idea that we could squeeze women out of that recalcitrant table “the Sleeping Beauty view of history” (2001: 5), but she continues to try; as the essays in this volume show, the project of hunting around for Roman women leads to some methodological tactics and principles. First, the whole project is filled with what historians call “lamppost problems,” based on the old joke about the man who was looking for his keys under the lamppost because it was too dark in the alley where he’d dropped them. Would you like to know, from women themselves, about ordinary women’s daily life, their relations to their families, their use of property? You can’t look in Athens or Rome—try Egypt, where whole dossiers of papyrus letters are extant. Do you want to know about slaves, from their own perspective? Look in the graveyard—the library will not really tell you; the same goes for women’s religious practice, especially their agency as leaders.

This strategy ties in with another issue: different kinds of sources tell different stories when asked the same question. As seen in chapter 1, the question “what happened to a man and woman caught in adultery?” has different answers in law, history, moral exempla, gossip, and satire; possibly, then, by asking as many different kinds of sources as possible we can arrive at a complex answer, closer to “what happened.” The process of running these questions I long ago compared (1990: 181) to the scene in *Forbidden Planet* where the invisible monster is ambushed by a circle of men armed with laser cannons: they fire at the monster from their points on the circle, and with them we see the monster outlined in 3-D. For this purpose, from early on it came to seem crucial to me to look low as well as high; it was an intellectual blessing, if at times a professional curse, to have begun with a low theme (sexuality) in a low genre (satire) and its even lower relations (the *Carmina Priapea*, epigram, graffiti). In Rome, the same writers wrote both epic poetry and obscene poetry; classicists put the epic poetry and not the obscene poetry into the curriculum, but in the original culture the top and bottom made each other. To see the whole monster you really need a sphere and not a circle. The chapters that follow are full of cultural junk, and I only wish we had more of it.

Thus chapter 2, on invective, deals with the most harshly misogynistic texts in Latin—disgusting texts, texts that speak disgust—contemplation of which caused me to argue that such texts (counter to then-common readings) do not tell you directly about women, but they do tell you what women had to put up with. In taking these texts to have had a direct effect on contemporary women, I began an argument against what is now known as “persona theory,” in which such texts are read as ineffectual through their very outrageousness (more on this below).

Chapter 3 in particular taught me another lesson about writing about Rome in particular that in turn should be useful elsewhere. The jokes about Julia, daughter of Augustus, preserved in Macrobius’s *Saturnalia*, bear witness to (at least) two times: the time of their original production and the time when Macrobius put them into his book. Roman writers going back to Plautus are always writing about something else in order to write about now—it was a strongly marked cultural trait, and should sensitize us to the complicated nature of any writer’s motivation (or, of any text’s context). If meaning is made at the point of reception, we have to realize that we are usually dealing with something already at least once received, and that we ourselves need, then, to write accordingly: doubly, triply. The jokes are about Julia, but also about something—somebody?—else, and it turned out

to be quite possible to find out what other women Macrobius might have had in mind. Similarly, as seen in the chapters on religion (7) and medicine (8), the same text can often be read in opposing ways: glass half empty, glass half full (see chapter 10). Rather than presenting possibilities as in a priamel, picking the best one (*egô de*), we might more usefully present each as equally valid, or each equally possible at different times (see Rabinowitz 1998 for an example of this technique applied to Greek drama). History-writers today cannot decide, based on the existing evidence, whether these jokes were really Julia's words or were made up about her; chapter 3 works out analyses based on both scenarios.

In writing "Julia's Jokes" and trying to establish an "historical context" for Julia and her jokes—two contexts, one in Augustan Rome and one in Rome around 400 CE—I ran into the *Forbidden Planet* problem again, since Roman narrative histories themselves are as constructed as the jokes are. The experience led me to the uncharacteristically pessimistic conclusion that Julia herself is unreachable to a history-writer. Others have arrived at a similar radical skepticism, notably Suzanne Dixon in *Reading Roman Women*, who comes to focus on how different genres go about their cultural work (2001: ix):

Each text is designed to project ideology (e.g. of proper womanly behaviour) rather than circumstantial information about any given woman, even when it purports to record a specific, historicised woman. My own wish to recover the history of women has survived . . . but my initial confidence that the real Roman woman could be conjured up from a close reading of legal sources has dwindled.

Yet this downturn in confidence is not final (2001: 15): "Behind our sober statements and academic language lurks the passionate wish to see through the veils of representations and read the women obscured by them, even if the one thing on which we all agree is that we cannot."

Kristina Milnor defines a similar project (2005: 40–41):

Ultimately, however, this is a study of representation rather than reality—although, in truth, I hope that the following pages will do something to challenge the conventional dichotomy between those two terms. . . . It is very difficult to write the 'real' history of women, slaves, working men, foreigners, and other marginalized groups, both because they often do not appear in ancient texts, and because, when they do appear, they are so clearly figments of an elite male author's imagination.

Dixon's "wish," Milnor's "hope," infuse the pages of this book as well; I can see the ideology ticking away, but ultimately hope to find, hope I have found, something about real women.

By the mid-1980s, feminists in other academic disciplines had moved toward work on writing by women, ransacking libraries and archives. What were we to do without any comparable body of texts? And what about the authors on the reading list—were we just to abandon them? Phyllis Culham's iconoclastic argument at the 1985 Women's Classical Caucus panel at the APA meeting insisted that no real women could be derived from the pages of Ovid, and that real women were our proper business. Culham spoke as an historian with a robustly optimistic epistemology, but most classicists are trained in literary criticism and not in history-writing. Her argument resonated with the material-culture scholars—some archaeologists, some art historians, some papyrologists; unlike text people, they can hold in their hands an object that once belonged to a Roman woman.³ Some objects, indeed, say in large letters that they were paid for by a Roman woman; as Suzanne Dixon points out, "Naevoleia Tyche went to some trouble to ensure that we knew her name" (Dixon 2001: x, cf. ix, 97).

Chapter 4 deals with a Roman woman writer, Sulpicia the satirist, who is almost unknown, because all that remains of her work is a two-line fragment. She thus stands as a handy reminder of why it is important to read women writers: (1) they were there, and their first-person voice can tell what no one else can tell for them—in the case of this Sulpicia and her foremother Sulpicia the elegist, they tell not only their desire, but their desire for men, a great rarity in premodern literature; (2) their fragmentary state is a fact about them, and repays thought and inquiry. To have a woman satirist is a bonus, taking us back to questions raised by Julia's jokes and to questions about women and comedy in general, as in chapter 2. Moreover, chapters 2, 3, and 4 all incorporate testimonia from late antiquity; a great deal of work remains to be done on the persistence of the satirical and invective traditions in Christian ideas. Here Sulpicia also stands as a reminder that women talked back.

Whereas historians tend to accept that a large marble tomb, for example, was paid for by the person indicated by an inscription on that tomb, most scholars would not take a literary text at face value. Trends within the academy at large from the 1980s to the present have encouraged readers to abandon the idea of determinable meanings and authorial intent, along with any confidence that we can arrive at any knowledge of a reality outside

the text, or see anything other than the text itself, or a set of texts in relation to each other, or analyze an alien text with our own system of ideas. This last poses a big problem for classicists, who cannot interview the audience after Ovid gives a reading. But it seems to me that the insistence on the radical difference of the past can border on a sort of exoticizing; the word “before” in a title now makes me think, “Cue tom-toms” (cf. Bennett 2006: 43 on the myth of the premodern as necessarily the opposite of all things modern). History-writers work to become conscious of the limits of their understanding, and write accordingly; the nature of the whole project demands, as Walter Benjamin says, a recognition of the past by the present as one of its own concerns. To continue with the “Theses on the Philosophy of History”: “Only that historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is firmly convinced that *even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he wins” (1968: 255).

The slipperiness of authorial intent inspires persona theory. In the United States, this approach owes a great deal to William S. Anderson’s urgings, going back to the 1960s, that classicists should give up reading so naively and take a tip from our colleagues in the English Department (e.g., Anderson 1964). We should be conscious of how writers address each other in their writing, how self-conscious they are, how almost parodic. I wrote chapter 5 originally, in part, in indignant reaction to the thesis put forth by several of Anderson’s former graduate students, who argue that the nasty jokes about rape in the *Ars amatoria* belong to a ridiculed character, not to Ovid himself, who in reality is showing this character up for the fool he is. Similar arguments have been made about Juvenal, and continue today. In reply, I would say that content is not erased by quotation marks. In “Reading Ovid’s Rapes,” looking at the *Ars amatoria*, *Fasti*, and *Metamorphoses*, I compared Ovid’s style to “a bow on a slaughterhouse,” and it is very interesting that the same kinds of cuing, like wrapping paper, are used on violent sexual fantasies like Ovid’s and on crude jokes and invective (Juvenal, Martial, the *Priapea*). That is, each writer presents each reader with a beautiful style (the incomparable Juvenal), or an elegant package (the miniature perfection of an epigram), or a cool persona (Lucilius, Catullus, Persius). Theorists of humor write about the “cue” that tells you “it’s just a joke,” thereby disarming any anger, indeed preempting it; it seems that rhetoric, that style itself, can have the same function as “Three men walked into a bar . . .” The literary system works like a team of con men, with tragedy yelling “Help!” while comedy picks your pocket; people who love literature tend to divide