

## BOOK REVIEW

*Women in Ancient Rome*. By PAUL CHRYSAL. Stroud, Gloucestershire, England: Amberley Publishing, 2013. Pp. 224. Hardcover, \$33.30. ISBN 978-1-4456-0870-9.

In his Preface Chrystal states that his purpose is not only to “satisfy and inspire” the audiences of scholars and students of classical literature and civilization, but also “to provide an accessible yet rigorous survey of the subject [of Roman women] for the burgeoning lay market” (7). He acknowledges that most of our evidence comes from elite or educated “middle class” male Roman authors, rather than from women themselves; that we cannot fully establish how typical were the women that we have mention of; and that women’s social, legal, and familial positions did change over the centuries (10–11). In addition to elite women, he includes some information about women from the lower ranks of society, slave women, and women living in the provinces, shaping his discussion into eight chapters “Women in the *Familia*,” “Betrothal, Marriage, the Wedding,” “Women in the Public Eye,” “Educated Women, the *Puella Docta* & the Fine Arts,” “Sibyls and the Dark Arts,” “Women & Religion,” “Women’s Medicine & Women’s Health,” and “Sex & Sexuality.” He concludes with a short Epilogue and provides a list of Key Dates, Glossary of Greek & Latin Terms, Notes to the chapters, Bibliography, and Index.

To a certain extent Chrystal succeeds. For example, in “Women in the *Familia*,” as we read about Lucretia, we also read about a mother in Dalmatia mourning her son while still grieving about her lost daughters, reminding us that Roman parents faced a high mortality rate among the young. We meet the ideal *matrona* represented by Cornelia *mater Gracchorum* and Agricola’s mother Julia Procilla, as well as the lively, perhaps somewhat embarrassingly risqué grandmother Ummidia Quadratilla, the resolute Arria, Servilla’s active role (according to Cicero) in the family *consilium* called by Brutus at Antium, and women in the plays of Plautus and Terence. Chapter 3, “Women in the Public Eye,” looks mainly at elite women, whether celebrated or excoriated, such as the litigious Gaia Afrania and Attia Virola, who contested her disinheritance by her elderly father shortly after he married

a younger woman. Also included in this chapter is a brief mention of the *ordo matronum*, the electioneering slogans sponsored by women of Pompeii, women at dinner parties, games, and other entertainments. Yet at times his coverage is superficial—though he mentions the women of Akmoneia, who took the initiative in honoring the priestess Tatia daughter of Menokritos (63), he does not include Plancia Magna of Perge or Julia Rustica of Cartima, Spain, two women whose *beneficia publica* are well attested.

Some of his information, of course, applies to both sexes. The belief in and recourse to magic that he describes in “Sibyls & the Dark Arts” was not limited solely to women, nor was the use of poison, though women, according to a number of classical authors, were particularly prone to employ magic and poison. Chrystal’s discussion of *defixiones* and love charms, as well as the employment of magic by literary figures such as Dido and Tibullus’ witches will intrigue the general reader.

Chrystal acknowledges that “Women had a place in the cultivation of the household and family gods...though the paterfamilias was really in charge” (“Women and Religion” 105). Though Chrystal mentions the recent work on women and religion by Celia Schultz (*Women’s Religious Activity in the Roman Republic*, Chapel Hill, NC, 2006) he unfortunately does not include any of her examples and conclusions. As another example, he mentions in passing, but does not discuss, the research of Emily Hemilrijk on provincial *flaminicae* and women’s public roles in the west (“Public Roles for Women in the Cities of the Latin West,” in S. L. James, *Companion to Women in the Ancient World*, Chichester, 2012). Instead he gives only a detailed overview of state deities concerned with women, such as Fortuna Virginalis, Juno, Venus, Fortuna Virilis, and Bona Dea. The Vestals he examines at length, though information on them is easy to find in popular secondary literature, whereas women’s religious roles in the Republican period and in the imperial provinces has yet to find its way into such popular treatments as this book.

The chapter on “Women’s Medicine and Women’s Health” is more comprehensive and satisfying; it includes a general overview on medical writings especially those pertaining to women, medical training, and medical knowledge, both truly scientific (for the period) and popular beliefs that find their way into medical literature, thus providing a general background for examining what doctors thought about gynecological problems and conditions. Chrystal covers at some length health concerns and problems women faced, such as infertility, pregnancy, miscarriage (and abortion), neonates, breastfeeding, menstruation, teeth and diet, and

longevity. His chapter on “Sex & Sexuality” makes some interesting points that the general public may not think about, such as the fact that we do have evidence (e.g. inscriptional) not produced solely by elite men (though wall painters presumably accommodated the desires of elite men commissioning the paintings). Noting that literature discussing sex and sexuality (such as Martial’s epigrams) tends to focus on what sexual matters Romans scorned (e.g. male and female homosexuality), Chrystal devotes the preponderance of this chapter to such aspects of sexuality, as well as prostitution and Roman sex manuals.

Chrystal chose to illustrate the book with “less well-known images, using pictures taken from postcards, trade cards and from books published in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries” (7-8). Nonetheless, some images have been frequently reproduced from the originals, such as the funerary monument of Aurelius Hermas and Aurelia Philematium (British Museum; Chrystal calls her Aurelia Philematio) and the Pompeian wall painting often identified as “Sappho.” Less common images include: those taken from *The Comic History of Rome*; one of a “Roman” girl, one of a series of “dancing women of the world” cigarette card from 1899, whose costume is certainly not authentic; a “Roman” woman illustrating an ad for Pompeian Massage Cream (1910); and a print of Vestals sacrificing from *Aunt Charlotte’s Stories of Roman History for the Little Ones* (1884). These are interesting and should form the basis for a chapter on how Roman women have been seen in the past, but without such a context they are at best curiosities.

The strengths of the book are three: the variety of women Chrystal enumerates, a good number of whom are not commonly (or at all) included in other surveys of Roman women; the detailed context Chrystal gives at the beginning of several chapters before proceeding to give particular examples; and his engaging style of writing. While he gives an extensive discussion of women as portrayed by male authors, I would have liked more detailed discussion of women in the imperial period and a consideration to what extent women’s lives in the eastern and western provinces differed from one another and from women’s lives in Rome and Italy and a clearer distinction of how women’s lives changed from the late Republic into the early Empire.

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