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Contributions of Women during the Roman Era

^{¶1} During the Roman era a woman's most common and socially acceptable roles were that of *matrona* (or "housewife") and priestess. Women who were slaves and peasants and thus unable to achieve such status often became prostitutes. These are the limits in which women moved in Roman society. If a woman desired to take on a traditionally male position, she was "acting contrary to her culture's role for her and was subject to the severest criticism and punishment."¹ Although these traditional roles inhibited women's direct participation in society and politics, women still made significant contributions to Roman culture from within the confines of those roles. 

^{¶2} There were laws that rewarded and institutionalized the constraints placed on women, especially laws that made a woman subordinate to her husband and the household. For example, the father could emancipate sons from the restriction of *paterfamilias*, the absolute ownership of the family. However, the only women who could become legally emancipated from the 

1. Bonnie S. Anderson and Judith P. Zinsser, *A History of Their Own: Volume I* (New York: Harper & Row, 1989), 42.

paterfamilias were of the priestess class, the Vestal Virgins.² As a housewife, a woman's duties were strictly confined to having legitimate children and staying home to tend to the household. She also supervised the slaves and performed "traditional labor such as spinning and making wool."³ These duties became so expected from women that they were repeatedly referred to in Roman epitaphs with statements such as "She kept the house and worked in wool."⁴ Women of poorer classes, without dowries, not only had to take care of their children and manage the household, but also had to bring in an income. This was known as "double burden." A woman who felt this double burden might sell food, clothing, or trinkets; she might offer food and lodging, manage a brothel, or engage in prostitution.⁵

³ Prostitutes were socially condemned and had virtually no rights (they could not be Christian or marry freeborn Roman men). However, many women rose to power through this avenue and impacted Roman society.⁶ According to Anderson and Zinsser, "A clever woman in the right circumstances could turn her sexual connection with an important man into a secure and even



2. Sarah B. Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves: Women in Classical Antiquity* (New York: Schocken Books, 1995), 150.

3. Anderson, 40.

4. Ibid., 41.

5. Ibid.

6. Georges Duby, Michelle Perot and Pauline Schmitt Pantel, *A History of Women, I: From Ancient Goddesses to Christian Saints* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 332.

powerful future.”⁷ One woman who impacted Roman culture in this way was Theodora, who rose from a prostitute to Empress of the Roman Empire in the East. Through an adulterous relationship with an administrative official in Egypt, Theodora was able to meet men of the highest level of society, including the Roman Emperor, Justinian, whom she eventually married. In order to marry Theodora, Justinian had to amend the law that prohibited free men from marrying prostitutes. Justinian eventually described Theodora as “partner in my deliberations,” giving Theodora the power to strongly influence political policy.⁸

^{¶4} Rather than denying her past as a prostitute, Theodora became a role model for women who, otherwise, believed that they could not rise above their circumstances. Theodora used her position to help women who turned to prostitution. She began a convent for former prostitutes and bought girls who had been sold into prostitution, freed them and provided for their future. Theodora also passed legislation that gave women more property rights and cleaned up the brothels.⁹ Through her role as prostitute, Theodora was able to achieve a position that ultimately helped most women in Roman society.

^{¶5} The power gained through prostitution by women was seen as “undermin[ing] the hard-won status of the virginal daughter and the chaste wife.”¹⁰ To discourage this, the Roman government emphasized the value of religious cults that centered on chastity and familial bonds.



7. Anderson and Zinsser, 47.

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid.

10. Ibid., 45.

Women may have been influenced by the cults to be more chaste; however, participating in them became another way for women to move beyond their traditional roles and have influence on Roman law. Two of the most influential priestly classes were the priestesses of Ceres and the Vestal Virgins. The priestesses of Ceres were the only women, besides Vestals, allowed a high priestly prominence. Ceres was the goddess of marriage, and the cult was exclusively in the hands of women.¹¹ The priestesses of Ceres encouraged the creation of laws that promoted the protection and, eventually, the freedom of women.

¹⁶ Another powerful priestess class was that of the Vestal Virgins. Six Vestals “. . . enrolled between the ages of six and ten, were obliged to remain virgins” and stoke the sacred “flame that symbolized the continuity of both family and community.”¹² Even though the Vestals were extremely regulated, they had more freedoms than any other women in Rome. The Vestals were legally emancipated and were freed from the power of *paterfamilias*. Vestals were the only women allowed to drive through the city of Rome in a two-wheeled wagon, a distinction which was usually reserved for magistrates, high priests, and men of high office; they were also the only women who “retained places on the imperial podium.”¹³ Seeing the priestesses enjoy

11. Pomeroy, 215.

12. Ibid., 210.

13. Ibid., 214.

14. Ibid.

such liberties, aristocratic women wished to have the same elevated prestige and were eventually granted the “rights of Vestals,” which then led to their emancipation from the ownership of their fathers or husbands. Since upper-class women were now able to gain these privileges without the vow of chastity, there were fewer Vestal candidates to choose from, which in turn created new opportunities to daughters of lower-class families to enroll as priestesses.¹⁴ By exhibiting the freedoms allowed to them, the Vestal Virgins inspired Roman women to seek greater freedoms for themselves.

¹⁷ Women also gained freedoms and made contributions to society with their wealth. On occasion, economic and political situations allowed wealth to come into the hands of women, and after an eventual change in Roman law, daughters and wives were allowed an inheritance. Many women used their wealth to become public benefactors. They made contributions such as “constructing and endowing public buildings: meeting halls, temples, and baths.”¹⁵ Recognition of a woman’s creations and endowments was often carved in stone and publicly displayed so women would be remembered and “perhaps empower other women.”¹⁶

¹⁸ Wealth also allowed women to pursue an education. Educated women influenced art, literature, philosophy, and science. One such woman, Iaia of Cyzicus, was a celebrated painter in her time and had such great talent that the price of her paintings was twice that of her

15. Anderson and Zinsser, 60.

16. Ibid.

contemporaries. Although none of these women's art survived, "the tradition they established of women working the arts endured in later European centuries."¹⁷ This was also true of literature. Cornelia and Agrippina wrote letters and memoirs, and Sulpicia, a daughter of Cicero's friend, was a poet.¹⁸ The tradition of writing continued with these women and the women who followed them which "was one of the traditions inherited which most empowered European women in the centuries to come."¹⁹ Through wealth, women were able to move away from the duties of the housewife and directly impact Roman culture.

¹⁹ From these examples of women such as Theodora and the priestesses and from the influence of educated women and women benefactors, Roman women were able to expand their contributions to society and politics. Women no longer just made wool; they formed laws and moved about in society more freely. They became emancipated and inherited wealth and they impacted art, literature, and science. Although limited by a confining social structure, Roman women gradually expanded the perimeters of their influence, which changed the future for the subsequent generations of European women.



17. Ibid., 61.

18. Ferrer,

19. Anderson, 66.



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