

The Literate Woman in the Roman World

by

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### Abstract

The object of this thesis is to explore the role of literacy in the lives of women in the Roman world during the central period of Roman history. A variety of evidence from ancient literary, visual, and documentary sources is brought together in order to examine how women acquired and applied the skills of reading and writing in domestic, cultural and legal contexts, the different forms and levels of literacy available to them, and the social attitudes expressed towards literate women.

Chapter One establishes a context for this study by reviewing recent scholarship on ancient literacy and women's studies. It begins by comparing different approaches to the subject of literacy: the problem of defining such a flexible concept, the need to examine not only applications of literacy but also related attitudes and customs, and the effect of the very limited dissemination of reading and writing skills in antiquity. Modern trends in the study of ancient women, relating to the recovery of details of women's lives and contributions within the private sphere of the family and Roman society in general, as well as the construction of gender roles, are also considered. Although it is probable that only a minority of women in ancient Rome were literate, the social factors associated with this phenomenon have rarely been analyzed in depth.

Chapter Two explores the evidence from literature. Although most of the extant literary and historical texts were male-authored and reflect the perspective of the most highly educated class of men, some information can be extracted concerning the educational opportunities for girls, and the cultural, professional and domestic activities which literate women might undertake. Also considered are the conventional and conflicting images of literate women which appear in a variety of literary genres, reflecting approbation or censure: the image of the literate and dutiful mother, wife or daughter who assumes the traditional values of the Roman woman is most admired, while educated women who step outside these roles are alternately praised in love poetry or mocked in satire for their intellectual pretensions or immoral conduct. The fact that women's education and literary culture were

based upon the same *doctrina* as that of men may have been a cause of anxiety to men who disliked the idea of women transgressing a traditionally male sphere of influence

Chapter Three focuses on artistic representations of women with the iconography of literacy: book-rolls, writing tablets, and other writing implements. These images were primarily designed as private portraits in houses or on funerary monuments. A brief history of the motif of the literate woman in the art of earlier periods precedes a discussion of representative images from the Roman world, which are collected together in a catalogue which follows the chapter. Women and girls can be portrayed alone or alongside men in “intellectual” scenes; however, artistic conventions might subtly dictate an unequal power relationship in the latter case, when women are most often presented in a subordinate role not quite equal to that of men, perhaps reflecting patriarchal norms. However, the fact that both men and women are depicted, either individually or as couples, as participating in literary culture in the idealized contexts of decorative and commemorative art indicates that intellectual abilities were admired as distinctive markers of education and status.

Chapter Four considers the direct testimony for women’s literacy which emerges from a study of documentary texts from Oxyrhynchus in Roman Egypt and Vindolanda in Roman Britain, two extreme and unassuming locations of papyrological finds. Although only a small percentage of women actually appended autograph evidence of their writing abilities to legal and personal documents, emphasizing that education was usually a privilege of the élite, the mass of texts in which women made use of writing through the ubiquitous intermediaries of scribes clearly implies that many more women recognized the use of written documents as integral and practical tools in their lives.

The conclusion is reached in Chapter Five that although only a minority of women are represented as literate in the ancient source material, for this select group literacy was a source of prestige and pride as well as a practical commodity. The acquisition of the skills of reading and writing was a potentially leveling technology which brought women into a sphere dominated, and jealously preserved, by men, but where women could advance their own social, cultural, and legal interests.

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## Abbreviations

Abbreviations of the names of ancient authors and texts follow those used in

- i) Simon Hornblower and Antony Spawforth, eds. *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, third edition. Oxford: 1996
- ii) E G Turner *Greek Papyri* Oxford 1980

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## Chapter One

### Literacy and Women in the Roman World

The Roman world has left behind many traces of its involvement with the written word, not only works of literature and history but also inscriptions, graffiti, and personal and legal documents drafted on papyrus, wooden tablets, and other materials. The Romans relied on literacy for administration, communication, commemoration, and culture, and a large part of our knowledge of ancient Rome has been passed down through the medium of writing. Yet ironically, literacy was not a widespread skill in antiquity: the majority of ancient texts which have survived to the present day were authored by elite men, the educated class of Roman society, a very small percentage of the total population. Is it possible to extricate from such sources an impression of the extent of Roman women's participation in the aspects of Roman life which involved literacy? The object of this thesis is to examine the reading and writing accomplishments of Roman women in order to explore how women acquired and profited from the skills of literacy in their daily lives, the quality of literacy and literary knowledge available to them, and how literate women were characterized in the ancient sources, with a view to broadening our knowledge of the private and public roles of women and ideals of female behaviour within the family and in the larger context of Roman society.

Although there is hardly any surviving evidence of compositions actually penned by Roman women and the act of reading by itself leaves no record, other extant ancient evidence might be usefully exploited to this end. Male-authored historical and literary texts and letters allude to women reading or writing; a number of funerary monuments and wall paintings depict women with book-rolls and other writing paraphernalia, and papyrus documents and letters involving women attest to the literacy of some women in Roman Egypt and Britain, which might have implications for women in other parts of the Roman world. This variety of evidence, from approximately the second century BC to the early third century AD, when collected and compared, can help to establish not only the uses of literacy among women but also the social and cultural contexts in which "literate" Roman women were to be found, as well as ancient attitudes towards the image of the literate woman (from both the male and the female perspective, at least as far as the latter may be discerned). The

status of the female readers and writers is an important consideration. Conclusions concerning the educational opportunities of all women in Roman society are scarcely possible, given the bias of the majority of the evidence towards the élite. This small group made up the governing class of Roman society, and was usually comprised of the most wealthy or most socially prominent members of the community, the senatorial, equestrian, and decurial orders. Specific information is often lacking for the lives of the female slave population, freedwomen, and the poorer class of free-born women, although they too undoubtedly came into some contact with reading and writing.

### Approaches to Literacy in the Ancient World

Recent scholarship on literacy in the ancient world has raised many questions about the uses of writing and the diffusion of literacy geographically, socially, and chronologically. What did it mean to be literate in the ancient world?<sup>1</sup> A pioneering (though controversial) approach to this problem was undertaken by Harris in his study *Ancient Literacy*, published in 1989. Harris' primary goal was to study how widespread literacy might have been among the Greeks and Romans. He proposed that classical antiquity never knew the kind of "mass literacy" which has been typically assumed by modern scholars, and that in fact most of the population in the ancient world was "always illiterate."<sup>2</sup> Using a comparative methodology, Harris argued that the vital conditions which contributed to mass literacy in early-modern Europe did not exist in the ancient world: a technology which provides a large production of reading materials, the availability of cheap writing materials, and "an extensive network of schools subsidized by the state."<sup>3</sup>

One of the questions raised by Harris is that of quantification. Although he admitted that statistical estimates of literacy must necessarily be generalized because the ancient evidence does not allow for precise statistical analysis,<sup>4</sup> he suggested some percentages nonetheless: for Roman Italy during the late Republic through the High Empire (the central period of Roman history), less than twenty to thirty percent for the male population, and less

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<sup>1</sup> Harris (1989), 3

<sup>2</sup> Harris (1989), 8, 13

<sup>3</sup> Harris (1989), 14-15

<sup>4</sup> Harris (1989), 7

than ten percent for the female population, with variations proposed between the city, where people were more likely to have contact with literacy, and the country.<sup>5</sup> In reaching these conclusions Harris used this definition of literacy: a literate person in antiquity “should possess a more active skill than reading, and possess it to a truly useful extent.”<sup>6</sup> This follows the 1958 definition of literacy by UNESCO, which proposed that an illiterate person “cannot with understanding both read and write a short simple statement on his everyday life.”<sup>7</sup> Harris recognized that in any society there are bound to be varying degrees of reading and writing abilities, and that antiquity would have known “semi-literate” people as well, “who can write slowly or not at all, and who can read without being able to read complex or very lengthy texts.”<sup>8</sup> He further proposed the disputable category of “craftsman’s literacy”, in which “the majority, or a near-majority, of skilled craftsmen are literate, while women and unskilled labourers and peasants mainly are not.”<sup>9</sup> An inherent difficulty in this definition, at least for the purposes of this thesis, is that these categories of literacy are not easy to apply to the Roman women about whom there is the most evidence for literate activity, which is to say the elite class. On the one hand, Harris assumed that elite Roman women were probably “virtually as literate” as elite men, since literary evidence clearly attests to educated women: he cites the example of Sempronia (to whom we will return below), described by the historian Sallust as “learned in both Greek and Latin literature” (*litteris Graecis et Latinis docta*).<sup>10</sup> But on the other hand, Harris presupposed that since elite girls were not expected to follow the same career paths in public service as boys, parents would not have been as motivated to educate their daughters to the same degree as their sons, and girls, who generally married in their early teens, were left “no better than semi-literate.”<sup>11</sup> There is thus some ambiguity as to the amount, use and quality of literacy required to be considered “literate”, is it a knowledge of literature in two languages, such as Sempronia possessed, or

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<sup>5</sup> Harris (1989), 259

<sup>6</sup> Harris (1989), 4

<sup>7</sup> Harris (1989), 3

<sup>8</sup> Harris (1989), 5

<sup>9</sup> Harris (1989), 8

<sup>10</sup> Harris (1989), 252. Sall. *Cat.* 25.2

<sup>11</sup> Harris (1989), 253

enough reading and writing skills to manage a household or engage in a business transaction<sup>12</sup> Harris judged women's literacy by the same standard as that of men, despite his admission that men and women were educated to play different societal roles requiring proficiency in reading and writing in different areas and at different levels, the vital point which the rather vague labels of "literate" and "semi-literate" do not address<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, Harris's study of the varied uses of writing in antiquity and his conclusions concerning the limited distribution of literacy skills provide a valuable perspective which any study of literacy in the ancient world must take into account

Harris' seminal work on literacy produced responses from a number of Roman scholars, one collection of essays in particular, entitled *Literacy in the Roman World* (1991), deals with specific points concerning Harris' methodology and conclusions While there is general agreement with Harris' quantitative estimates of low literacy overall in antiquity, some would argue that Harris does not pay enough attention to the multiple degrees of literacy in the Roman world One argument proposed that there was plenty to read at Rome which was not high literature a parietal inscription such as an election notice, for example, could communicate information to people with different levels of reading ability some might be able to spell out and recognize only a candidate's name, while others with more knowledge could study the details of the message<sup>14</sup> Other easily legible material included store signs, announcements for games, and more<sup>15</sup> Significant points are also raised concerning attitudes towards literacy In Roman Egypt, for example, there is considerable evidence that illiterate people recognized the importance of written documents and proceeded to make use of them, employing scribes to write on their behalf if they could not, they too are seen to "participate in literacy", though these people are difficult to integrate into a quantitative survey of literacy<sup>16</sup> Similarly, persons with some writing ability might still have hired professional scribes for writing documents of an important official or legal nature,

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<sup>12</sup> Activities in which women might find writing helpful Harris (1989), 252

<sup>13</sup> For example, Harris overlooks the possibility that women could continue to acquire or hone reading and writing skills after their marriage This point will be further discussed in Chapter Two

<sup>14</sup> Franklin (1991), 87

<sup>15</sup> Corbier (1991), 107

<sup>16</sup> Bowman (1991), 122-123

for which specialized language and form were crucial<sup>17</sup> While Harris views ancient literacy as a glass half-empty, emphasizing the low percentages of literate people in antiquity, other scholars view the situation as a glass half-full. It has been seen that even a figure of ten percent literacy among the male population over the whole Roman empire at any one time still translates into a sizable number of people – perhaps two million – who possessed an ability to read and write<sup>18</sup> Thus even Harris' low estimate of less than ten percent literacy among women in the Roman empire represents an equally large number, and further exploration into how these women made use of their literacy seems a viable topic for investigation.

Since the primary evidence from antiquity is not well-suited to quantitative analysis, a different approach to the data might be explored. Thomas proposes a helpful methodology in her book *Oral Tradition and Written Record in Classical Athens*, also published in 1989, which raises some important issues, not in response to Harris' book, but which temper some of his conclusions nonetheless. Thomas' book discusses the interaction of oral and written traditions as co-existing modes of communication in classical Greece. She argued that a study of the extent of literacy does not reveal nearly as much about ancient society as a close examination of diverse levels, uses, customs and perceptions of literacy against the background of widespread orality. When it comes to defining literacy, Thomas (like Harris in his introduction) recognized that "literacy is not a single uniform skill with only one significant level of competence",<sup>19</sup> but she was hesitant to define the term because "if we take one definition and then proceed to measure its extent ... we are still reducing an extremely complex and varied skill to a single characteristic, thereby almost defining away any variations"<sup>20</sup> She prefers to think in terms of "functional literacy", which "introduces the idea of different levels of literacy according to the needs of people's everyday activities"<sup>21</sup> She proposed that this conception of literacy allows one to see changing attitudes and customs

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<sup>17</sup> Horsfall (1991), 69-71

<sup>18</sup> Hopkins (1991), 134-5

<sup>19</sup> Thomas (1989), 16

<sup>20</sup> Thomas (1989), 19

<sup>21</sup> Thomas (1989), 19

related to literacy, in addition to changes in the uses of literacy<sup>22</sup> Her emphasis on “attitudes” towards literacy is a valuable tool for addressing the ancient evidence, which is often anecdotal and random.<sup>23</sup> In *Literacy and Orality in Ancient Greece* (1992), Thomas further refined this approach, suggesting that scholars look not only at who could read and write in antiquity, but the need or desire to read and write in different situations, for example, a person with very limited literacy skills might be designated a “slow writer” when he or she signs an official document in Roman Egypt, but is obviously still eager to write, in contrast to a more literate person within the same society who disdains the physical act of writing and employs an amanuensis to write out a private letter (though he or she might add a handwritten greeting at the close)<sup>24</sup> Thomas’ study, though it deals primarily with Greek literacy,<sup>25</sup> presents an essential method for approaching ancient material on literacy

An exemplary study of the relationship between women and literacy in ancient Greece was published by Cole in 1981 and also provides a useful methodology. Cole sifted through evidence not only from literary, historical, and philosophical texts but also from vase paintings, sculpture, and papyrus documents from Greece, Asia Minor, and Egypt, in order to recover images of women reading and writing from the seventh century BC to the fourth century AD. One of the strengths of Cole’s approach is her careful consideration of how the ancient evidence might or might not make a case for female literacy when viewed in the light of known facts about the social and domestic life of Greek women and Greek society in general. She observed, for example, that although several red-figure vases from the fourth and fifth centuries BC depict women with book-rolls in household contexts (nearly as many vases portray men and boys with book-rolls), such scenes might have become a popular motif based on an affiliation with the Muses, and these images may represent a fashionable and “idealized” view of ordinary women or real life activities,<sup>26</sup> given the fact that so little is known about educational opportunities for women during that period. Cole also emphasized the difficulty with arguments from silence: a lack of references to the illiteracy of women in

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<sup>22</sup> Thomas (1989), 24-6

<sup>23</sup> Thomas (1992), 5

<sup>24</sup> Thomas (1992), 151-2

<sup>25</sup> An excursus at the end of Thomas (1992) briefly addresses literacy at Rome

<sup>26</sup> Cole (1981), 223

the works of ancient Greek authors could signify that such a condition was either so uncommon or so common that it did not merit particular notice<sup>27</sup> In addition, Cole looks at the papyrological evidence of Egypt with a careful eye She notes that although there are many surviving letters to and from women, women did not need to be able to read or write personally, because of the presence of scribes everywhere, “the use of written communication must be distinguished from literacy”<sup>28</sup> However, she finds that the content of the letters – often relating to family matters, including family business -- can provide interesting information about the “social uses” of writing<sup>29</sup> Cole based her conclusions concerning the rate of literacy among Greek women only on the (somewhat fragmentary) extant evidence and was unwilling to generalize more widely, which may mean that her estimates are rather low, however, her method of assessing each piece of evidence without taking it too far out of context is a sensible practice

### New Approaches to the Study of Women

Studies of the position of women in antiquity have flourished in the past three decades The rise of feminism and the equal rights movement prompted scholars to re-examine the roles and contributions of women not only within the private sphere of the family<sup>30</sup> but also in the public eye<sup>31</sup> Questions were asked about how gender roles were constructed and sustained by ancient society, and how individuals from different social levels viewed these constructions<sup>32</sup> One of the first social histories of ancient Roman women was Balsdon’s *Roman Women: Their History and Habits* (1962) Perhaps more antiquarian than historical, this collection of accounts of the famous women of Roman history as well as

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<sup>27</sup> Cole (1981), 220

<sup>28</sup> Cole (1981), 235-6

<sup>29</sup> Cole (1981), 235-6

<sup>30</sup> For example on marriage, see Hopkins (1965), Shaw (1987), Treggiari (1991), Saller (1994), Rawson (1996) On women and the family, see Rawson (1986), Bradley (1991), Dixon (1992) On mothers, see Dixon (1988)

<sup>31</sup> On women in Roman law see Crook (1967), Gardner (1986) On women’s status in public, see Forbis (1990), Savunen (1995) On women’s economic status, see Van Bremen (1983), Dixon (1986), Forbis (1990), economic roles in other parts of the Roman empire, see Pomeroy (1981), Hobson (1984), Boatwright (1991)

<sup>32</sup> For this feminist approach, see for example Kampen (1981a), Cantarella (1987), Fischler (1994)

myriad details concerning the daily lives of more “ordinary” Roman women outlined the roles women played in marriage, child-rearing, and religion. Balsdon was also interested in women’s “private lives”, both their personal appearance (dress, coiffure, make-up) and domestic activities (household duties as well as leisure pastimes). With respect to literacy, he noted that Roman matrons might take up the pursuit of literature: “even in respectable households educated women liked to keep abreast of what was being written and published”, such as the poetry of Ovid. Balsdon called these matrons *doctae puellae* (which might be translated as “educated girls”), women “gifted with that literary talent which, Ovid declared, was the ambition of many but the achievement of few”<sup>33</sup> Earlier in the work (in the chapter entitled “Less Reputable Women”), Balsdon referred to the courtesans praised in the poetry of Ovid and Propertius as *doctae puellae* as well, “talented, cultured, lively conversationalists”, whose intellectual cultivation set them apart from “respectable married women”<sup>34</sup> Balsdon obviously noted, but was not truly conscious of, the ambiguity surrounding the image of the educated woman in Roman society, to which we will return below. He resolved the dichotomy by suggesting that “though Ovid might emphasize when he wrote his *Art of Love*, and repeat afterwards, that it was no book for long-gowned female respectability, respectable married women would have been very unfeminine indeed if they had not stolen copies of the book and studied with intense care the advice which Ovid gave to their attractive rivals”<sup>35</sup> The strength of Balsdon’s work lies in his assemblage of minutiae concerning aspects of women’s lives which had not previously been studied in depth. Although Balsdon was sensitive to the social constraints placed on women, such as their expected submission to the male authority of their husbands or fathers, and noted women’s efforts to gain emancipation, major work on the issues and tensions facing women in antiquity and recovery of the female perspective was still to come.

Pomeroy’s *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves*, published in 1975, reflected a new sensibility to the lives of ancient women. Pomeroy explored topics concerning Roman women’s relationship to the law (especially marriage and divorce), reproductive issues (including contraception and the exposure of infant children), possibilities for education,

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<sup>33</sup> Balsdon (1962), 273.

<sup>34</sup> Balsdon (1962), 228.

<sup>35</sup> Balsdon (1962), 228.

political influence, the status of slaves and freedwomen, and religion. On the topic of literate women, Pomeroy briefly cited evidence for the schooling of girls and for women exercising their intellectual talents in literary discussions and poetic composition.<sup>36</sup> These accomplishments were set against the larger context of the increased opportunities for women to develop beyond their traditional roles due to “enormous wealth” and “pragmatism permitting women to exercise leadership during the absence of men on military and political missions of long duration.”<sup>37</sup> In lieu of Balsdon’s often anecdotal treatment of similar subjects, Pomeroy’s approach attempts to ask questions about the social factors which constructed gender roles.<sup>38</sup> Pomeroy’s work has yet to be superseded as a general introduction<sup>39</sup> and set the tone for further explorations into the lives of women in antiquity.

The evidence from antiquity strongly suggests that women in the Roman empire were not as literate as men, however, this fact, once acknowledged, has rarely been analyzed by historians. While “at first it seemed most important to document the repression of women in the ancient world, and to find examples of women who had nevertheless entered the male preserves of education, finance, and politics”, gradually a scholarly perspective emerged which reviewed the lives of women without defining their condition based on their ability to “exercise power in the same way as men.”<sup>40</sup> This is a key consideration as men and women were often subject to clearly defined spheres of social and political influence, women’s being primarily private and men’s public. While Roman women enjoyed many freedoms and privileges, they were rarely completely independent and remained closely tied to their families, for this reason an understanding of their family environment, relationships, duties and expectations is essential. A woman’s family was very much involved in decisions

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<sup>36</sup> Pomeroy (1975), 170-6

<sup>37</sup> Pomeroy (1975), 149

<sup>38</sup> “Modern scholarship . . . has focused on restrictions peculiar to women: what they were excluded from being or doing by reason of their gender and consequently how social, legal, or economic limits might shift in time: how women in general or categories of women or individual women might change the limits or find them changed” Treggiari (1996), 116

<sup>39</sup> A companion volume authored by Pomeroy together with Fantham, Foley, Kampen, and Shapiro was published in 1994 as *Women in the Classical World: Image and Text*, a sourcebook supplementing Pomeroy’s earlier study with further discussion of evidence from literature and especially from art and archeology

<sup>40</sup> Clark (1989), 1-2. See also Joshel (1992), 10: “Feminist retellings of the past, of course, responded to the demands of an extensive women’s movement”

regarding her education, and it is in the private realm that many of her occasions for reading or writing took place. The status implied by literacy might have been just as important for the family as for the individual woman.

The case of Sempronia illustrates the different interpretations which can be connected to the image of the literate woman at Rome. In his account of the events of the conspiracy of Catilina (63 BC), the historian Sallust included a brief portrait of Sempronia as an example of the kind of women who were implicating themselves in Catilina's seditious activities<sup>41</sup> these women

had first sold their bodies to finance their luxuries, but later, when age set a limit to this activity – but not to their tastes – fell heavily into debt. Catiline believed he could use these women to win over the urban slaves, set fire to the city, and either enlist or kill their husbands.<sup>42</sup>

Sallust related one woman's involvement in particular

One of these women was Sempronia, whose masculine boldness had already led her to commit many crimes. This woman was favoured by fortune in birth and beauty as well as in her husband and children. She was well read in Greek and Latin literature, she played the lyre and danced with greater skill than propriety warrants, and she had a number of other accomplishments, all of the sort that promote dissipation. But to her nothing was more worthless than modesty and chastity. It is not easy to say which she threw away more wantonly, her money or her reputation. She was so oversexed that it was more often she who went after men than the other way around. She had often broken promises, disavowed her debts, and been an accessory to murder. Love of luxury combined with poverty had driven her headlong. And yet, she had real talents. She could write verse, make jokes, and converse with modesty, tenderness or wantonness. She was a woman of considerable wit and charm.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> The question of why Sallust inserted Sempronia's portrait into his narrative has been much debated (she is mentioned only once more, allowing a meeting of the conspirators to take place at her house (Sall. *Cat.* 40.5), and she is not named by Cicero at all in his account of the events). See Syme (1964), Cadoux (1980), Ramsey (1984), Paul (1985), McGushin (1987), Boyd (1987).

<sup>42</sup> Sall. *Cat.* 24.3-4. Transl. M. Fant: *mulieres etiam aliquot, quae primo ingentis sumptus stupro corporis toleraverant, post, ubi aetas tantummodo quaestui neque luxuriae modum fecerat, aes alienum grande conflaverant. Per eas se Catilina credebat posse servitia urbana sollicitare, urbem incendere, viros earum vel adiungere sibi vel interficere.*

<sup>43</sup> Sall. *Cat.* 25.1-5. Transl. M. Fant: *Sed in eis erat Sempronia, quae multa saepe virilis audaciae facinora commiserat. Haec mulier genere atque forma, praeterea viro liberis satis fortunata fuit, litteris Graecis et Latinis docta, psallere, saltare elegantius quam necesse est probae, multa alia, quae instrumenta luxuriae sunt. Sed ei cariora semper omnia quam decus atque pudicitia fuit, pecuniae an famae minus parceret haud facile discerneres, libido sic accensa ut saepius peteret viros quam peteretur. Sed ea saepe antehac fidem prodiderat, creditum abiuraverat, caedis conscia fuerat, luxuria atque inopia praeceps.*

Biographical information from other ancient sources helps to fill out the historical details of this portrait. The Sempronii were a venerable plebeian family (though it is not known which particular branch Sempronia belonged to), and Sempronia's husband is usually thought to be D. Brutus, consul of 77 BC, a man descended from consuls, an advocate, wealthy and cultured (he was described as "learned in both Greek and Latin literature"<sup>44</sup>).<sup>45</sup> Sempronia possessed many admirable qualities for an elite woman: respectable lineage, a husband culturally refined and distinguished in politics, children, an attractive appearance, a literary education, and great personal charm. Consequently the behaviour appropriate to a Roman matron might also have been expected from her. But in spite of her advantages, Sempronia (and presumably the other women who joined in the conspiracy) transgressed the virtues for which Roman women were traditionally praised (on tombstone epitaphs, for example).<sup>46</sup> She did not show proper restraint or *modestia* in her activities such as music and dancing,<sup>47</sup> she was lustful, lacking in *pudicitia* (sexual responsibility),<sup>48</sup> she dishonoured the reputation of her family and of her husband, showing no *obsequium* (sense of duty); she devoted herself to luxuries and mismanaged her financial affairs, unmindful of *frugalitas*. In other words, she scorned her responsibilities in the private sphere of home and family and became a public menace. This picture is reinforced by the suggestion that her interest in poetry (in addition to her wit, musical abilities and dancing) put her on a par with the libidinous Roman *demi-mondaines* found in the verses of Catullus and other love poets of Rome in the first century

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*abierat. Verum ingenium eius haud absurdum posse versus facere, iocum movere, sermone uti vel modesto, vel molli, vel procaci, prorsus multae facetiae multusque lepos inerat.*

<sup>44</sup> Cic. *Brut.* 175. . . *et Graecis doctus litteris et Latinis.*

<sup>45</sup> Cadoux (1980), 93-122.

<sup>46</sup> Paul (1985), 15 and n. 37. Paul cites as a point of comparison with Sempronia the epitaph of Murdia (among others), *CIL* 6 10230, ll. 27-30. The text reads: "My dearest mother deserved greater praise than all others, since in modesty, propriety, chastity, obedience, wool-working, industry, and loyalty she was on an equal level with other good women, nor did she take second place to any women in virtue, work, and wisdom in times of danger." Transl. M. Fant. *Eo maiorem laudem omnium carissima mihi mater meruit, quod / modestia probitate pudicitia obsequio lanificio diligentia fide par similisque ceteris probeis feminis fuit, neque ulli cessit uir / tutis laboris sapientiae periculorum praecipium aut certe.*

<sup>47</sup> "The *elegantius* clause and that about *instrumenta luxuriae* do not refer back as far as the literature." Cadoux (1980), 118.

<sup>48</sup> On female *pudicitia*, see Kaster (1997), 9-10.

BC<sup>49</sup> Even worse, she was behaving like a man, taking upon herself the power to influence political events<sup>50</sup>

Sempronia's literacy has double-edged implications. Some scholars have viewed her literary training as a commendable part of a respectable Roman woman's upbringing<sup>51</sup>. On the other hand, a keen interest in literature, notably poetry, has been seen by some scholars to imply a decline in female morals<sup>52</sup>. These antithetical images of literate women appear frequently in Roman literature, as authors seek to construct images which reflect the balance of power between the different worlds of men and women<sup>53</sup>. The example of Sempronia reveals that literacy can be an ambiguous quality in a Roman woman, and raises certain questions. What factors lent respectability to literacy, and what anxieties caused literate women to be censured in other quarters? Sallust does not deny that, despite her dissident actions and immoral character, Sempronia's "intellectual gifts" made her engaging company<sup>54</sup>. What is missing from Sallust's account, and indeed almost all literary accounts, is a female perspective. What kind of literature did Sempronia enjoy? Did she like to read privately in her spare time? On what occasions did she recite her poetry? For what other

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<sup>49</sup> Paul (1985), 15-16

<sup>50</sup> For the "discourse of invective" employed by Roman authors against powerful female figures, such as Cleopatra, see Wyke (1992) 98-140: the purported transgressions of these women "usually takes the form of sexual promiscuity and extravagance, but can include the appropriation of what is considered to be 'male' political authority and its prerogatives" (111)

<sup>51</sup> For example, Marrou (1956), 247 "We must not be surprised to find a Roman mother playing such a part", Balsdon (1962), 47 Sempronia had "evident breeding and culture", Pomeroy (1975), 171 "Intellectual and artistic achievements did not endanger a woman's reputation, instead, education and accomplishments were thought to enhance her", Cadoux (1980), 117 "Sallust's attribution to Sempronia of a knowledge of Greek and Latin literature was not intended as a reproach"

<sup>52</sup> For example, Paul (1985), 16 "The relevance of the portrait of Sempronia to the raffish world of Catullus' poems has often been pointed out, a world which combines easy sexual standards with literary, especially poetic, tastes", Boyd (1987), 198 "Sempronia likewise is a person of no mean origins, whose noble status and accomplishments would normally, before the perversion of *virtus*, have made her a Lucretia or a Cornelia ... Instead of a catalogue of the typical virtues of a Roman matron, we find a woman whose education and aggressiveness are characteristic either of a prostitute – or of an urbane man", Leary (1993), 91 Sempronia resembles "an amateur courtesan"

<sup>53</sup> See Fischler (1994), 116

<sup>54</sup> Cadoux (1980), 119 Fischler (1994), 119: "Sallust's Sempronia is the classic transgressor of the female role. She has all the right attributes which she uses in all the wrong ways ... Sempronia is all the more worrying because Sallust has endowed her with traits of the ideal which she then threatens to use subversively"

purposes did Roman women employ literacy? Despite the often hidden female viewpoint, modern scholars in social history have worked to reconstruct the position of Roman women not only within the family but as members of Roman society, and it is within this framework that a study of the literate woman aims to make a contribution

## Chapter Two

### The Literate Woman Represented in Literature

In one of his published letters, Pliny the Younger commented sadly on the death of Minicia Marcella, the younger daughter of his friend Fundanus. According to Pliny she was not quite fourteen when she died,<sup>1</sup> and was engaged to be married. Pliny praised her “girlish sweetness and womanly dignity”, and noted particularly her intellectual precocity: she loved her teachers (*praeceptiores*) and “devoted herself to reading both eagerly and intelligently” (*quam studiose, quam intelligenter lectitabat!*)<sup>2</sup> This brief letter prompts several questions about Roman women, education, and literacy: What sort of books might Marcella have been reading? What was she learning from her teachers? What sort of literary activities might she have engaged in after her marriage, if her life had not been cut short? And was Marcella representative of Roman girls in general? The object of this chapter is to review the educational opportunities available to Roman girls and the potential applications of their study of reading, writing, and literary culture as they are presented through the literature of Rome during the central period of Roman history. The ancient authors who provide most of our information are, as we have seen, élite men, which largely limits the information available from their works to the interests and attitudes of that small group of society, and moreover to its male members, and references to women’s literary activities are scattered and brief. Nevertheless, despite the limitations of the evidence, it is possible to form an impression of the accomplishments of literate women and the social attitudes towards these educated women.

#### Education

Education in the Roman world has been referred to by modern scholars as “cultural capital”,<sup>3</sup> because schooling was important for success and prestige in later life in a “social system where what mattered were wealth, distinction, and eloquence amid a population

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<sup>1</sup> Her tombstone inscription (*CIL* 6 16631) actually lists her age at death as twelve years and eleven months.

<sup>2</sup> Plin. *Ep.* 5 16 ... *matronalis gravitas erat tamen suavitas puellaris*.

<sup>3</sup> Gleason (1995), xxi.

vastly poor, anonymous, and illiterate”, *doctrina* or *παιδεία* could define an élite male’s identity in society.<sup>4</sup> A public career in oratory, either on the political stage or in the law courts, would depend on his eloquence and astuteness.<sup>5</sup> In private, he was often expected to participate in the literary culture of his class.<sup>6</sup> The orator Pliny, who was asked to help find a suitable teacher for the son of his friend Corellia Hispulla, wrote to her “[Your son] will grow up to be like [the good men of his family] all only if he has been educated from the start on the proper lines”.<sup>7</sup> The ancient authors offer only rare, incidental references to the education of Roman girls,<sup>8</sup> but the number of educated women attested to in Roman literature and history presupposes that they learned to read and write at some time in their youth.<sup>9</sup> The absence of any information about an education specifically slanted towards girls suggests that girls probably received the same fundamental schooling as boys, though the oratorical training which would prepare élite boys for public careers would not be offered to girls as it would be of little use, since women were barred from such professions. It has been observed that some extant school texts, containing vocabulary lists and short texts in both Greek and Latin (the *hermeneumata*), typically describe the daily life of a young boy, the activities in which he would partake and the behaviour which was expected of him as a future member of the élite, namely “the role of slave owner, father, and advocate”.<sup>10</sup> This subject matter does not automatically exclude girls from using these books, but girls would learn from these texts “reading, writing, and perhaps reciting as a mimicry of male behavior”.<sup>11</sup> The following discussion explores the levels of schooling available to Roman

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<sup>4</sup> Kaster (1988), 11-3. See also Bloomer (1997) on the “socializing” of boys into manhood through school exercises.

<sup>5</sup> See Gleason (1995) on the construction of male gender roles through education and oratory.

<sup>6</sup> See Rawson (1985) and Fantham (1996) on literary culture in Roman society.

<sup>7</sup> Plin. *Ep.* 3.3. Transl. B. Radice. *Quibus omnibus ita demum similis adolescet, si imbutus honestis artibus fuerit.*

<sup>8</sup> The education of girls in Greece and Asia Minor during the Hellenistic period is discussed by Pomeroy (1977), 51-68 and Cole (1981), 231-2. Inscriptions from Teos and Pergamum indicate, for example, that both boys and girls attended schools and were taught reading and writing.

<sup>9</sup> Harris (1989), 252.

<sup>10</sup> Bloomer (1997), 58.

<sup>11</sup> Bloomer (1997), 75. For bilingual school texts, see also Dionisotti (1982).

girls and boys and the material taught, with attention paid to social distinctions between pupils and the intended application of the skills learned.

The first step in a child's education was a mastery of the basic elements: learning to fashion letter shapes and to recognize letters, syllables, and words, followed by elementary reading and writing practice. Children usually began their schooling at age seven, though no firm age limits were set in place.<sup>12</sup> As no widely or rigidly organized school system existed in antiquity as in the modern era,<sup>13</sup> Roman families had to arrange for their children's schooling themselves and had several options. The basic elements could be taught at home, and indeed this may have been the norm.<sup>14</sup> A child's pedagogue could be given this task, pedagogues of slave or freed status in Roman households cared for and supervised both boys and girls as they were growing up, and this attention might have extended naturally to leading their charges through elementary reading and writing exercises.<sup>15</sup> The rhetorician Quintilian, who wrote a handbook on education, recommended that both parents be "as well-educated as possible",<sup>16</sup> and there is some record of parents involving themselves directly in the early education of their children. Cato the Elder taught his son to read at home (even though his household included a Greek slave trained as a teacher) and personally wrote out in large letters a history of Rome for his young pupil.<sup>17</sup> Augustus himself taught his grandsons to read and encouraged them to copy their handwriting after his own.<sup>18</sup> The historian Tacitus recounted that Cornelia, mother of the Gracchi, Aurelia, the mother of Julius Caesar, and Atia, the mother of Augustus, were closely involved with the education of their sons, but he did not mention their specific role.<sup>19</sup> In the most privileged households a professional teacher

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<sup>12</sup> Quintilian saw no reason why a precocious child should not start sooner (*Inst.* 1.1.15-19).

<sup>13</sup> Harris (1989), 16-17

<sup>14</sup> Booth (1979a), 3

<sup>15</sup> Bradley (1991), 47-8, 51-2, Booth (1979a), 3. Quintilian (*Inst.* 1.1.8) urged that a child's pedagogue be well-educated (*eruditi plene*), though there were many pedagogues who had learned only the basic elements themselves (*paulum aliquid ultra primas litteras progressi*). See also Quint. *Inst.* 1.2.10.

<sup>16</sup> Quint. *Inst.* 1.1.6. Transl. M. Fant

<sup>17</sup> Plut. *Cat. Mai.* 20.4-7

<sup>18</sup> Suet. *Aug.* 64

<sup>19</sup> Tac. *Dial.* 28. Mothers could have been involved in choosing a proper teacher, or may even have taught the elements themselves. Cornelia was thought to have passed on her eloquence (evident in

could be hired as a private tutor, this teacher might even be a *grammaticus*, who usually guided pupils through more advanced literary studies, but who could also assume the responsibility of teaching the elements if the pupil was expected to pass through this beginner's stage quickly prior to further education.<sup>20</sup> Minicia Marcella, the daughter of Pliny's friend Fundanus, was probably educated at home in this fashion, as Pliny recalled how she loved all her attendants: nurses, pedagogues, and teachers.<sup>21</sup> It is far from certain that all girls received a similar education at home, Fundanus had a reputation as an intellectual, and may have been particularly interested to see that his daughter received a good education.<sup>22</sup> Still, in households where a teacher, pedagogue or parent was available to coach the boys of the family, the girls might have the opportunity to learn the elements, if not more advanced studies, as well.

The elements might also be acquired at a school. Children from the upper ranks of society who did not learn their letters at home would begin at the school of the *grammaticus* (as will be discussed below).<sup>23</sup> Meanwhile, pupils from families of less wealth and status, including slave children, could be taught basic reading and writing at the *ludus litterarius*.<sup>24</sup> Horace's father, a freedman, did not want his son to attend the school of Flavius, a *magister ludi* who taught the sons of centurions, he wanted his son to learn "the same skills which any equestrian or senator would have his sons taught", and sent him to the school of Orbilius the *grammaticus*.<sup>25</sup> Some families may not have seen the need for any more than a functional education in reading and writing learned at home or at the *ludus litterarius*. A freedman businessman in Petronius' *Satyricon* boasts "I didn't learn no geometry or criticism and such

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her published letters) to her sons. Quint. *Inst.* 1.1.6, Cic. *Brut.* 58.211. Bonner (1977), 15 suggests that, as widows, these women may have accepted more responsibility for their children's education than was usual. For more on the Roman mother's interest in education, see Dixon (1988), 170-3.

<sup>20</sup> Booth (1981a), 377-378. the *grammaticus*, especially if he taught as a private tutor, was occasionally referred to as a *litterator*. Booth (1979), 4-10.

<sup>21</sup> Plin. *Ep.* 5.16.3: *ut nutrices, ut paedagogos, ut praeceptores pro suo quemque officio diligebat!*

<sup>22</sup> Sherwin-White (1966), 347, n.3, Bonner (1977), 107. Plin. *Ep.* 5.16.8: *est quidem ille eruditus et sapiens, ut qui se ab ineunte aetate altioribus studiis artibusque dedit.*

<sup>23</sup> See Booth (1979a), 1-14. The school of the *grammaticus* appeared during the late Republic: see Marrou (1956), 251.

<sup>24</sup> Kaster (1988), 24, Booth (1979b), 11-19.

silly rubbish, but I can read the letters on a notice board and I can do my percentages in metal, weights, and money”<sup>26</sup> These schools were probably held in the street, in an alcove off the forum or in a rented room<sup>27</sup> The historian Livy’s claim that Verginia, the daughter of a centurion, was attending such a school in the Roman forum in the fifth century BC, is certainly an anachronism<sup>28</sup>

How did girls and boys learn to read and write? The major Roman authority on this process is again Quintilian, who outlined a common procedure in his treatise on education. His methods are generally borne out by evidence of school exercises written on papyrus which have been recovered from Roman Egypt<sup>29</sup> The first step was for children to learn the alphabet. Young children could be given toys in the shape of letters to play with to help them learn to recognize the forms.<sup>30</sup> When children had to learn to form the letters, two methods appear to have been in practice.<sup>31</sup> According to Seneca, a child’s fingers could be held around the writing tool and guided through the forms of the letters by the teacher, then the child could try on his or her own.<sup>32</sup> A wax tablet would be the most convenient writing surface, since mistakes could be easily erased.<sup>33</sup> Quintilian’s method<sup>34</sup> requires that letters be carved onto a board, the child could practice forming the letters by following along the

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<sup>25</sup> Hor. *Sat* 1.6.77-78. Transl. J. Shelton. . . *artis quas doceat quibus eques atque senator semet prognatos*. See Booth (1979a), 2.

<sup>26</sup> Petron. *Sat* 58.7. Transl. J.P. Sullivan. *Non didici geometrias critica et alogias menias, sed lapidarias litteras scio, partes centum dico ad aes, ad pondus ad nummam*. Horsfall (1989), 74-89 analyses the levels of education displayed by the freedmen guests throughout the *Cena Trimachionis*. See also Daniel (1980), 153-159.

<sup>27</sup> For school accommodations, see Bonner (1977), 115-25.

<sup>28</sup> Livy 3.44, Dion. Hal. 11.28. See Rawson (1985), 48. According to Plutarch (*Quaest. Rom.* 278 E) the first fee-paying school was that of a former slave named Carvilius in 234 BC. Marrou (1956), 250.

<sup>29</sup> Crihiore (1996), 143. A catalogue of school exercises is also provided by Debut (1986), 251-278, and analysed in depth with regard to the “evolving” handwriting of students by Crihiore (1996).

<sup>30</sup> Quint. *Inst.* 1.1.26. Jerome, writing in the fifth century, suggested that a little girl might learn her letters by playing with letters made out of boxwood or ivory and learning their order with the help of a song. Jer. *Ep.* 107.4.2.

<sup>31</sup> See especially Harvey (1978), 69-75.

<sup>32</sup> Sen. *Ep.* 94.51.

<sup>33</sup> Harvey (1978), 70.

<sup>34</sup> Quint. *Inst.* 1.1.27.

grooves – making fewer mistakes than if he were writing on a wax tablet – and allowing him to practice without a teacher’s manual guidance<sup>35</sup> At this point, recent scholarship has suggested that pupils worked to master the alphabet by printing out model sentences, even before the children knew how to read: the evidence from papyrus school documents shows sentences fashioned in very undeveloped handwriting, indeed the same caliber of handwriting which is seen in alphabetic practice, when the pupils carried out the next step, the writing of syllables, the papyri exercises show a dramatic improvement in penmanship<sup>36</sup> After practice with writing syllables, during which time the pupils began to learn to read, they progressed to words and then to sentences<sup>37</sup> These might be moral maxims or famous passages from literature<sup>38</sup> Numeracy was usually introduced with the basic elements of writing. Children began by counting on their fingers and using small pebbles as counters. They would be taught basic calculations such as addition and multiplication with songs, and to write out the characters for the numbers. When they were ready to write out whole words, they appear to have begun to write out their multiplication tables. It is not known at exactly what stage a child learned to use an abacus.<sup>39</sup>

The *grammaticus* undertook the pupil’s formal liberal arts education<sup>40</sup> His task was to introduce students to grammar and to literature. In the reading lesson, the *praelectio*, pupils were taught to read aloud accurately and expressively. The teacher demonstrated the proper technique of reading and interpreted the meaning of the passage, following which was the pupil’s turn<sup>41</sup> The teacher also incorporated the *enarratio*, or exposition, of the poets into the lesson. The teacher analyzed the form of the passage and made clear any mythological or literary allusions, and even offered up details of a sometimes “trivial or

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<sup>35</sup> Jerome recommends either method for teaching a little girl how to write (*Ep.* 107.4.3). Etruscan writing-tablets, with their frames inscribed with model alphabets to copy, have been found dating from the seventh century BC. Marrou (1956), 250.

<sup>36</sup> Criatore (1996), 143-5, 149.

<sup>37</sup> Quint *Inst.* 1.1.30-1.

<sup>38</sup> Bonner (1977), 214.

<sup>39</sup> Bonner (1977) 180-4.

<sup>40</sup> For the role and status of the *grammaticus* see Kaster (1988). For a thorough description of the curriculum, see Bonner (1977), 189-249.

<sup>41</sup> Bonner (1977), 225-6, Marrou (1956), 279.

pedantic” nature, such as “Homer’s birthplace” or “the name of Anchises’ nurse”<sup>42</sup> The pupil might also be asked to analyze a part of speech, scan a verse, or discuss a point of grammar or a stylistic device, a process referred to as the *partitio*<sup>43</sup> The study of Homer and Vergil usually signaled the beginning of this next level of education<sup>44</sup> Although the variety of texts studied might depend on the tastes of the individual *grammaticus*,<sup>45</sup> pupils usually studied tragedy in addition to epic, Euripides was the most commonly read author, to judge from the papyrus fragments, while Latin authors studied included Ennius, Pacuvius and Accius. Among Greek comic authors Menander was very popular, and in Latin Plautus, Caecilius, Terence and Afranius. Greek and Latin lyric poetry was also on the curriculum, with Pindar and Horace among the favourites,<sup>46</sup> but Quintilian suggested either banning erotic elegiac verse or at least reserving it for the more mature students<sup>47</sup> Prose authors were normally studied at the school of rhetoric<sup>48</sup> Several authors suggest incidentally that girls could attend the classes of the *grammaticus* along with boys. Martial refers to this practice in his epigrams, although he calls the teacher a *magister*, the material being taught is clearly literary, namely epic poetry and tragedy. Martial’s muse asks him, “Do you wish to exchange your slipper for tragic buskins or thunder hard-fought wars in equal measures, to be dictated by a pompous schoolmaster’s hoarse voice and hated by big girls and honest lads?”<sup>49</sup> A line from Ovid’s *Tristia* mentions that Menander was read by boys and girls, presumably at the school of the *grammaticus*<sup>50</sup> In Apuleius’ fictional story the *Metamorphoses*, the baker’s wife remarked casually that she attended school with another woman in her youth<sup>51</sup>

<sup>42</sup> Bonner (1977), 237-240, Marrou (1956), 279-81

<sup>43</sup> Marrou (1956) 279, Bonner (1977), 227

<sup>44</sup> Quint *Inst* 1.8.5, Booth (1979a), 2

<sup>45</sup> Bonner (1977), 218

<sup>46</sup> Bonner (1977), 214-7, Quint *Inst* 1.8.5-12

<sup>47</sup> Quint *Inst* 1.8.6

<sup>48</sup> Quint *Inst* 2.5.1

<sup>49</sup> Mart 8.3.13-16 Transl. D. R. Shackleton-Bailey *An iuvat ad tragicos soccum transferre cothurnos / aspera vel paribus bella tonare modis / praelegat ut tumidus rauca te voce magister / oderit et grandis virgo bonusque puer?* Bonner (1977), 135-6 demonstrates that Martial is referring to a *grammaticus* in these passages. See also Mart 9.68.1-2

<sup>50</sup> Ov *Tr* 2.369-370 *Fabula iucundi nulla est sine amore Menandri, / et solet hic pueris virginibus legi*

<sup>51</sup> Apul *Met* 9.17 *Areten meam condiscipulam memoras*

Quintilian assumed that Roman children would learn both Greek and Latin, and even thought that the two languages should be taught together from the start of a child's schooling.<sup>52</sup> Bilingualism was considered a mark of cultivation among educated Romans.<sup>53</sup> There is some evidence for Roman girls studying Greek: Pompey the Great's daughter showed off the Greek she had been learning to her father by reading a passage from Homer chosen at random by her teacher.<sup>54</sup> In later life, this knowledge of Greek would serve as a status marker for a woman, if not a practical skill. In a passage from his defense speech, the *Apologia*, Apuleius mentioned that his wife Pudentilla wrote letters to her family in Greek, the purpose behind this comment was to imply that her education was superior to that of the advocate for the prosecution, who could not read the language and was unversed in Greek literature. "I would also have quoted for your benefit similar passages from Theocritus with many others from Homer and Orpheus, from the comic and tragic poets and from the historians, had I not noticed ere now that you were unable to read Pudentilla's letter which was written in Greek."<sup>55</sup> Hence even a woman living away from Rome, in the provincial society of North Africa, had a bilingual education. The satirist Juvenal complained that fashionable Roman women were always showing off their knowledge of Greek.<sup>56</sup>

Boys usually studied with a *rhetor* in order to learn in depth the art of public speaking, which they would need to pursue careers as advocates, orators, and politicians. Tacitus stated that the traditional manner for a boy to gain these skills was to listen to experienced speakers in the law courts and at debates, but at present boys did classroom exercises with a *rhetor*. They learned the arts of composition and debate through exercises of *suasoriae* and *controversiae*, which taught one how to argue for or against a particular question.<sup>57</sup> Since women did not have careers as orators, there was no reason for them to

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<sup>52</sup> Quint *Inst* 1.1.12-14

<sup>53</sup> Fantham (1996), 24-27. For discussion of the "Hellenization of Rome", especially in regard to education and intellectual life see Rawson (1985), Gruen (1992), Zanker (1995)

<sup>54</sup> Plut *Quaest conv* 9.1.3. See Rawson (1985), 46

<sup>55</sup> Apul *Apol* 30. Transl. H. E. Butler *Memorassem tibi etiam Theocriti parva et alia Homeri et Orphei plurima, et ex comoediis et tragoediis Graecis et ex historicis multa repetissem, ni te dudum animaduertissem Graecam Pudentillae epistulam legere nequiusse*

<sup>56</sup> Juv. 6.185-193

<sup>57</sup> Tac *Dial* 34.1-5, 35.1.3-5. Marrou (1956), 286. For the curriculum studied under the rhetor, see Bonner (1977), 250-327

train with a *rhetor*. Remarkable women who gained a reputation for the eloquence of their speech, such as Laelia and Hortensia, are said to have learned their skill from their fathers, who were both famous orators.<sup>58</sup>

It is generally agreed that girls did not pursue their studies as far as boys because girls generally married at a young age.<sup>59</sup> But the literary sources reveal that some husbands were interested in intellectual pursuits and encouraged their wives to continue their education.<sup>60</sup> Sometimes the husband took on the role of the wife's teacher. Pliny was proud that his own wife Calpurnia took up the study of literature after their marriage because of his influence.<sup>61</sup> The biographer Suetonius wrote that Curtius Nicias, a *grammaticus* and an associate of Pompey the Great and of Gaius Memmius (a man of literary pursuits), once conveyed a lustful letter from Memmius to Pompey's wife, she revealed what he had done and Nicias was banished from the house.<sup>62</sup> However, it is not known if Nicias visited the house as a guest or as the teacher of Pompey's wife. Another episode related by Suetonius is that Quintus Caecilius Epirota, a freedman of Atticus, was engaged to teach Atticus' daughter while she was the wife of Marcus Agrippa, he was sent away, however, when his intentions towards her became suspicious.<sup>63</sup> Plutarch, in a treatise giving advice to married couples, suggested that a husband should act as a teacher towards his wife and guide her through certain studies, including philosophy and geometry, as this would make her less likely to become involved in disreputable pursuits such as dancing and magic.<sup>64</sup>

### Literary Culture

The letters of Pliny the Younger provide glimpses of the importance of literary culture among the élite members of Roman society of the first century AD. Pliny came from

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<sup>58</sup> Quint *Inst* 1.1.6, Cic *Brut* 58.211

<sup>59</sup> Pomeroy (1975) 170; Dixon (1988), 170; Hopkins (1965), 326 calculates that girls probably married at age around 15, perhaps younger in aristocratic families. Shaw (1987), 43 suggests that most girls probably married in their late teens. See also Saller (1994), 25-42.

<sup>60</sup> Veyne (1987), 20; Rawson (1985), 47.

<sup>61</sup> Plin. *Ep* 4.19.

<sup>62</sup> Suet. *Gram* 14. See Kaster (1992), 87-8; Rawson (1985), 46.

<sup>63</sup> Suet. *Gram* 16. See Kaster (1992), 93-5.

<sup>64</sup> Plut. *Mor* 145d; Cole (1981), 232.

the town of Comum but studied rhetoric in Rome, eventually pursuing a career in law as well as politics, rising from equestrian status to the rank of senator, and holding the consulship in AD 100 in addition to other distinguished posts. He followed a typical career pattern for a member of the upper class, and his published letters, which were probably based on actual letters sent to family and friends which Pliny subsequently polished and collected together,<sup>65</sup> are excursions into a variety of topics which illustrate the social climate of his era. Of particular interest to the present study are Pliny's impressions of the uses of and attitudes towards literacy and education.

Pliny alluded to writing as a leisure activity (*otium*), often a pleasant release from the business and responsibilities of professional duties (*negotium*)<sup>66</sup>. Among other genres he himself enjoyed writing poetry, and claimed that many distinguished men turned their pen to amusing, even risqué, verse (with such models as Catullus and Propertius), but emphasized that they did so without injury to their respectability, his long catalogue of authors and statesmen who did so shows how widely the custom of amateur writing had spread among the élite orders.<sup>67</sup> Pliny urged several of his friends to write and publish,<sup>68</sup> though, interestingly, he did not seem to expect women to do so, although he thought highly of educated women (one need only recall his praise for Minicia Marcella). When Pliny read the letters of the wife of his friend Pompeius Saturninus, he was so surprised at their quality that he wondered if her author husband had written them for her, if he had not, then Pliny credited Saturninus with having taught his wife well.<sup>69</sup> Although Pliny's own

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<sup>65</sup> See Sherwin-White (1966), 6, 11, 1-20 on the "characteristics" and "authenticity" of the letters.

<sup>66</sup> Zanker (1995), 198. Plin. *Ep.* 1.3.2-3, 1.9.7, 8.21.3. For the "economic implications" of leisure for authors, see White (1994) 5-15. Fantham (1996), 41-42 and Rawson (1985) discuss the role of leisure and literature during the late Republic. See also Zanker (1995), 198-214. Upper class women undoubtedly enjoyed leisure time also. Pliny's acquaintance Ummidia Quadrattilla, "with all a woman's idle hours to fill" (*ut feminam in illo otio sexus*), liked "playing draughts and watching her mimes" Plin. *Ep.* 7.24.5. Transl. B. Radice.

<sup>67</sup> Plin. *Ep.* 1.16.5, 4.14.5, 5.3.2, 6.21.3, 7.9.9-12, 9.22.1.

<sup>68</sup> Plin. *Ep.* 3.5.20.

<sup>69</sup> Plin. *Ep.* 1.16.6. Sherwin-White (1966), 85 n.1 infers that these are "literary letters", a popular genre of literature at the time (see *Ep.* 2.13.7, 9.28.5). For further discussion of the letter-writing genre, see Sherwin-White (1966), 1-10.

wife had a fondness for literature and set her husband's verses to music,<sup>70</sup> Pliny did not imply that she herself ever tried her hand at composing poetry

The respect which was accorded to a person with a literary education was partially dependent on that person's status. Pliny, for example, praised in glowing terms a man who was a professional teacher of rhetoric,<sup>71</sup> but wrote critically of a former advocate who had become a teacher of rhetoric, finding such a position beneath the dignity of a senator.<sup>72</sup> Scholars have noted that a teacher's occupation was not always respected and that *grammatici* are rarely said to be at literary functions.<sup>73</sup> An education in the liberal arts mattered socially in the highest circles, but slave and freed readers, scribes, and teachers, whatever their contribution to an élite person's acquisition and enjoyment of literature, did not always receive the respect for this knowledge that the upper classes afforded their peers. The point of view of the non-élite, upwardly mobile might have been different, of course. Literary cultivation was a way of emulating the behaviour of the group to which one wished to belong, or wished to be seen to belong.<sup>74</sup>

Literary works were frequently disseminated to audiences through readings as well as through the circulation of written texts. Among the cultured élite authors gave private recitations to circles of friends.<sup>75</sup> The goal of such events was ostensibly to introduce a new work to an audience of colleagues who could appreciate and offer suggestions to improve the work. The work was subsequently published in written form and could then be distributed.<sup>76</sup> Women could be present at these recitations.<sup>77</sup> After Pliny's friend Piso gave a successful reading of a work, Pliny made sure to congratulate his mother and brother who were in

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<sup>70</sup> Plin. *Ep.* 4.19

<sup>71</sup> Plin. *Ep.* 2.3.5. His social rank is not known. See Sherwin-White (1966), 147-8, n. 1.

<sup>72</sup> Plin. *Ep.* 4.11.1. See Sherwin-White (1966), 280-1, n. 1.

<sup>73</sup> See Booth (1981b), White (1993), 62-3.

<sup>74</sup> See Horsfall (1989), 74-89, for the mimicry of intellectual activities by Trimalchio and his freedmen guests in Petronius' *Satyricon*.

<sup>75</sup> Plin. *Ep.* 1.13.1, 4.27.1, 7.4.7.

<sup>76</sup> Plin. *Ep.* 5.3.7-11, 5.12.1-2. For the circulation of written texts to friends as gifts and to a wider public through copyists and bookdealers, see Starr (1987).

<sup>77</sup> When Vergil read the draft of three books of his *Aeneid* to Augustus, the emperor's sister Octavia is said to have attended and to have fainted at the verses about her son Marcellus in Book 4. Suet. *Vita Verg.* 32-33.

attendance<sup>78</sup> Pliny also mentioned that when he gave recitations of his own work, his wife Calpurnia enjoyed being in attendance, although she sat behind a curtain<sup>79</sup> The fact that both these women had close ties with the author may explain their presence at the recitations, it is not known if members of the audience regularly brought along their wives or female relatives. Calpurnia presumably sat apart from the group to preserve the proper impression of *modestia* in a young wife (or Pliny would at least like the recipient of his letter, Calpurnia's noble aunt, to be reassured on this point) The appearance of a respectable Roman matron at literary gatherings was thus not unheard of, but Pliny's comment about the curtain implies that it was not necessarily the norm. Literary works attained a greater audience than at these recitations both in Rome and abroad through a few booksellers, libraries, and public performances by the authors themselves.<sup>80</sup>

Dinner parties were another opportunity for recitations and literary discussion<sup>81</sup> In wealthy families in-house readers (*lectores*) were trained to read texts aloud. In Pliny's household, works of literature were frequently recited as light entertainment at dinner parties, or even when he and his wife were dining alone<sup>82</sup> The use of readers does not necessarily indicate illiteracy, as readers specially trained in their field were a convenience,<sup>83</sup> and in an age without eye-glasses provided a valuable service.<sup>84</sup> The fact that women participated in the scholarly discussions at dinner parties was ridiculed by the satirist Juvenal, who claimed that as soon as the dinner guests had arranged themselves to eat, some women would launch into a comparative analysis of Vergil and Homer, producing such a tirade that

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<sup>78</sup> Plin *Ep* 5.17.5. Sherwin-White (1966), 349 n.5

<sup>79</sup> Plin *Ep* 4.19.4

<sup>80</sup> See Rawson (1985), 39-45, Harris (1989), 222-9; White (1993), 59-63, Fantham (1996), 14-17, 36-7

<sup>81</sup> Cornelius Nepos noted that one difference between Greek and Roman customs was that Roman men allowed their wives to be present at dinner-parties. Nep. *Praef* 6-7. Wallace-Hadrill (1996), 110 wonders if only the *materfamilias* was accorded this honour

<sup>82</sup> Plin *Ep* 1.15.3, 9.36.4

<sup>83</sup> Pliny prized the skills of his reader Zosimus: his clean articulation, good acting, and facility in both prose and poetry (*Ep* 5.19.3). Pliny was very concerned when another favourite reader, Encolpius, developed a sore throat, which would affect his duties (*Ep* 8.1.1). The emperor Augustus would summon readers to lull him to sleep if he was restless. Suet. *Aug* 78.

<sup>84</sup> Harris (1989), 15

even professional *grammatici* and *rhetores* fell silent before them.<sup>85</sup> Not all dinner parties may have been as formal as those in Pliny's household. The love poet Ovid imagined dinner parties to be opportunities for women to flirt lasciviously.<sup>86</sup> Cicero once attended a dinner party at which Volumnia Cytheris, a courtesan and sometime lover of Antony and of the poet Cornelius Gallus, was seated near to him. She was the only woman in attendance, and Cicero wrote about the meeting with "mock horror" and perhaps secret glee.<sup>87</sup>

Pliny was a highly educated man who genuinely loved his books, and it is not surprising that his circle of acquaintances as revealed in his letters should have similar interests.<sup>88</sup> It is doubtful, however, that such a taste for literary culture was shared by all men or women of Pliny's class. Pliny complained about the sort of person with leisure time (*otiosissimus*) who either did not bother to attend the literary functions to which he was invited, or came but grumbled that he was wasting his time, or who did not appreciate readings at dinner parties.<sup>89</sup> It appears that people who were not truly interested in literary culture might still desire the social *cachet* which came with it. The Stoic philosopher Seneca complained that private libraries were becoming a fashionable status symbol, and he noted disapprovingly that certain wealthy people were collecting books not for reading, but for decorating their grand houses. Seneca wondered if such people knew *how* to read.<sup>90</sup>

The literary tastes of Roman women are first alluded to in the love poetry of the first century BC. Educated women, often affectionately referred to as "learned" or "accomplished"

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<sup>85</sup> Juv. *Sat.* 6.434-440. *Illa tamen grauior, quae cum discumbere coepit, / laudat Vergilium, pertiturae ignoscit Elissae, / committit uates et comparat, inde Maronem / atque alia parte in trutina suspendit Homerum / Cedunt grammatici, uincuntur rhetores, omnis / turba tacet, nec causicus nec praeco loquetur, / altera nec mulier.* See Courtney (1980), 318-9.

<sup>86</sup> Ov. *Ars Am.* 1.229 ff.

<sup>87</sup> Cic. *Fam.* 9.26. Treggiari (1991), 302 discusses this passage in the context of the demi-monde of courtesans at Rome.

<sup>88</sup> Pliny's friend Spurinna, for example, as part of his daily routine, had a book read to him on his morning walk, wrote Greek and Latin verse in the afternoon, listened to a book read again during his siesta, and enjoyed comedic performances at dinner and intellectual conversation with his friends afterwards. Plin. *Ep.* 3.13-4.

<sup>89</sup> Plin. *Ep.* 1.13.4, 9.17.3.

<sup>90</sup> Sen. *Tranq.* 9.4-9. For this "books for looks" phenomenon, see Marshall (1976), 256, Kenyon (1951), 82-3.

(*doctae puellae*) appeared in the love poetry of Catullus, Propertius, Tibullus, and Ovid. Catullus' society has been described as

a world that is witty, well read, ironically frank about its own ambitions and shortcomings. . . . A world whose affectionate intimacy with all the best writers, Greek and Roman, is so much a common possession that knowledge can be aired without self-consciousness or pedantry. A world that is no less proud of its humanity, its involvement in what is going on, than it is of its *doctrina*.<sup>91</sup>

These poets wrote about affairs with women to whom they gave pseudonyms based on Greek literature: Lesbia, Cynthia, Nemesis, Delia, Corinna.<sup>92</sup> Much scholarly debate has been devoted to whether these girlfriends were actual Roman women about whom genuine biographical details could be extracted from the text, or fictional creations of the poets; the question cannot be resolved with certainty.<sup>93</sup> What is pertinent to this study is the (perhaps idealized) image which the poets presented of the *doctae puellae* extolled for their literary tastes.<sup>94</sup> A *docta puella* had not only received a literary education, however, the term could also refer to the cultivation of other talents. Ovid claimed that he was attracted to the *docta puella* because she was "gifted in the uncommon arts" (*rare dotata per artes*), such as singing, playing an instrument, dancing and especially literature.<sup>95</sup> The poetic image of the literary woman may stem from Hellenistic poetry, some of which was authored by women,<sup>96</sup> including Anyte of Tegea, Nossis of Locri, Moero of Byzantium, Erinna, and Corinna. Possibly the Roman love poets, familiar with Greek literature, were inspired by these historical figures, though they chose archaic or classical nicknames for their girlfriends.

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<sup>91</sup> Quinn (1972), 223

<sup>92</sup> Pomeroy (1975), 172

<sup>93</sup> See, for example, Williams (1968), Lyne (1980), Wiseman (1984), Griffin (1985) 27-8

<sup>94</sup> "The *urbani* were getting used to the idea that a girl might provide a young man with the kind of intellectual companionship he had traditionally got only from men" Quinn (1972), 233. Not all the mistresses written about in love poetry were necessarily *doctae puellae*. Volumnia Cytheris, for example, is not said to have had a particular interest in literature, despite being the mistress of the poet Gallus. Tibullus complained that his mistress Nemesis was not moved by his poetry (2.4.13-5), nor was his other love, Delia (1.5.67-8). See Lilja (1965), 133.

<sup>95</sup> Ovid *Am.* 2.4.17-30. For the accomplishments of the *docta puella*, see Balsdon (1962) 56, 228, 273, Lilja (1965) 133-143, Leary (1993), 88-91, Laigneau (1994).

<sup>96</sup> For discussion of the female Hellenistic poets, see Pomeroy (1977), Barnard (1978), and Snyder (1989).

In the second book of the *Ars amatoria*, in which Ovid advised men on how to attract women, the poet suggested that physical looks alone were not all that mattered to women – they also appreciated an educated mind<sup>97</sup> with a knowledge of languages, namely Latin and Greek<sup>98</sup>. It has been observed that these charms would be quite useless to employ if the women whom the men sought to impress did not value such accomplishments<sup>99</sup>. Ovid provided a list of suggested reading for women in his third book of the *Ars amatoria*. This list includes “classics” from the Greek world, Callimachus, Philotas, Anacreon, Sappho, and Menander, as well as current Latin literature, including Propertius, Gallus, Tibullus, Varro, Vergil, and (of course) Ovid himself<sup>100</sup>. Of course all these poets wrote about love, and naturally such a reading list was designed by Ovid to turn girls’ thoughts towards love and seduction, the goal of the *Ars Amatoria*, hence the claim that young women were thought to prefer love elegy to epic<sup>101</sup>. Other poets hinted that their mistresses enjoyed reading poetry on their own, for pleasure. Catullus wrote that Lesbia considered Volusius to be the very worst poet she knew (though she really meant Catullus), wittily implying that she was familiar with a fair amount of poetry, but he also modelled *Carmen* 51 after the famous poem by Sappho, which an educated girl might recognize<sup>102</sup>. Propertius was pleased that Cynthia read his verses and praised them,<sup>103</sup> and sometimes even recited them. Ovid, once worried that Corinna was undertaking a hazardous journey, suggested she stay safe at home

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<sup>97</sup> *Ars am* 2 111-2 *Ut dominam teneas, nec te mirere relictum, / ingenii dotes corporis adde bonis*

<sup>98</sup> *Ars am* 2 121-2

<sup>99</sup> Lilja (1965), 141

<sup>100</sup> *Ars am* 3 329-46. A similar list is given in Ovid’s *Remedia amoris* (759-765), with the opposite intention: it is a list of books which a lovelorn suitor should not read to avoid feeling worse about his situation. Quinn (1972), 233 observes “No doubt, like all reading lists, Ovid’s set a standard to aim at rather than one the ordinary *candida puella* about town could be expected to take in her stride.” See Leary (1993), 91.

<sup>101</sup> Prop 1 9 11-14, 2 34 42-6. See Lilja (1965), 58, 136.

<sup>102</sup> Catull 36 9. See Laigneau (1994), 148-9, Quinn (1972), 98-9.

<sup>103</sup> Prop 2 24a 21 *me modo laudabus et carmina nostra legimus* Prop 2 26a 25-6 *nam mea cum recitat, dicit se odisse beatos / carmina tam sancte nulla puella colit*

and read instead<sup>104</sup> Occasionally these women wrote themselves Propertius claimed that Cynthia could write verse rivalling that of Hellenistic poets Corinna and Erinna<sup>105</sup>

If one was courting a *docta puella*, Ovid recommended giving books of verse as presents, an especially effective means of wooing for a poor man who could not afford any other presents but words<sup>106</sup> Although some women would prefer an expensive item to a poem, there were a handful of *doctae puellae* who genuinely appreciated such things:

Girls praise a poem, but go for expensive presents  
 Any illiterate oaf can catch their eye  
 Provided he's rich Today is truly the Golden  
 Age gold buys honours, gold  
 Procures love If Homer dropped by – with all the Muses,  
 But empty-handed – he'd be shown the door  
 There *are* a few cultured girls (not many, it's true), and others  
 Who'd like to be cultured, but aren't,  
 Flatter any of these with poems, a bravura declamation  
 Even of trash – this will suffice to win  
 Their approval Clever or stupid, they'll take a poem fashioned  
 In the small hours, for *them*, as a cute little gift<sup>107</sup>

Sometimes the poems succeeded Catullus mentioned that a girl's affections were secured by his friend Caecilius' poems, and he therefore facetiously honoured the girl with the epithet "more learned than Sappho", although the girl was probably persuaded not by the quality of the verse but by the charm of the writer, as one scholar has noted<sup>108</sup> Sometimes the poems did not succeed Corinna tore up and tossed away, apparently unread, a poem sent by Ovid

<sup>104</sup> Ov *Ars am* 2.11.31 *Tutius est fuisse torum, legisse libellos*. See Lilja (1965), 135

<sup>105</sup> Prop. 2.3.21-22 See Lilja (1965), 135

<sup>106</sup> Ov *Ars am* 2.165-6

<sup>107</sup> Ov *Ars am* 2.275-286 Transl. P. Green *Carmina laudantur, sed munera magna petuntur / Dummodo sit dives, barbarus ipse placet / Aurea sunt vere nunc saecula plurimos auro / Venit honos, auro conciliatur amor / Ipse licet venias Musis comitatus, Homere, / Si nihil attuleris, ibis, Homere, foras / Sunt tamen et doctae, rarissima turba, puellae, / Altera non doctae turba, sed esse volunt / Utraque laudetur per carmina carmina lector / Commendet dulci qualiacumque sono, / His ergo aut illis vigilatum carmen in ipsas / Forsitan exigui muneris instar erit*

<sup>108</sup> Catull. 35.13-7 Quinn (1972), 233 Nevertheless, Quinn underlines the importance of the *docta puella* tradition "the girl is no blue-stocking: *docta* means something more like "knowledgeable about literature"—she hadn't just read a lot, she had taste as well. Clearly the Roman love poets liked to think their mistresses could appreciate what they wrote about them."

as a birthday gift<sup>109</sup> In another poem Ovid declared that he could love a woman whether she considered his poetry to be better than that of Callimachus or if she thought his verses were terrible<sup>110</sup> The poems which the poets sent to their girl-friends were evidently part of the process of seduction, but this does not preclude that the poets wanted their verses to be appreciated as fine works of literature and imagined that they could succeed in impressing the girls and winning them over through their poetic artistry

But the verses of these poets were not really intended as private reading for the eyes of their supposed mistresses' only, they were meant to be published for a wider audience Propertius claimed his book of poetry about Cynthia was read all around the forum, and that girls sought out his published poems avidly and loved to read them<sup>111</sup> He even imagined a girl, sitting alone, reading his poems while waiting for her boyfriend<sup>112</sup> Boys as well as girls were a targeted readership<sup>113</sup>

The possible identities of the *doctae puellae* of these poems were suggested by Apuleius, who declared in a second century AD defense speech that poets often used pseudonyms to protect the names of real people, he offered as examples Catullus' Lesbia, who was really Clodia, and Propertius' Cynthia, who was really Hostia<sup>114</sup> Modern scholarship<sup>115</sup> concurs that this Clodia was one of the sisters of Publius Clodius Pulcher the tribune, and the probable widow of the Quintus Metellus Celer, consul of 60 BC, a woman from a very high-ranking family, and the same woman who was lambasted by Cicero in his defense speech *Pro Caelio* for conducting numerous love affairs and flaunting a luxurious lifestyle<sup>116</sup> The social status of Hostia is assumed by modern scholars to be similar to that of Clodia, clues in Propertius' poetry suggest she too was from an illustrious family, perhaps a

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<sup>109</sup> Ov *Am* 3 1 57-58.

<sup>110</sup> Ov *Am* 2 4 17-30 See Lilja (1965), 139

<sup>111</sup> Prop 2 24 1-2, 3 2 10 See Lilja (1965), 59, 138

<sup>112</sup> Prop 3 3 19-20

<sup>113</sup> Prop 3 9 45-6

<sup>114</sup> Apul *Apol* 10

<sup>115</sup> Williams (1968), 528 Quinn (1972) discusses at length the connections between the literary Lesbia and the "historical Clodia" "the identification is extremely plausible" (202)

<sup>116</sup> For a description of the charges leveled against Clodia by Cicero, see Wiseman (1985)

descendant of the epic poet Hostius<sup>117</sup> Ovid's Corinna is more mysterious, although Ovid himself implied that she might be fictitious, scholars have proposed that she was fashioned after Lesbia and Cynthia, and her status seems to be that of a married woman<sup>118</sup>

If the *doctae puellae* were indeed modeled after educated women of the upper classes, their engagement in free and even adulterous love affairs (as suggested in the poems) has prompted scholars to view these aristocratic women as "amateur courtesans"<sup>119</sup> Real-life Roman women such as the aristocratic widow Clodia and the freedwoman courtesan Volumnia Cytheris did appear to enjoy a certain sexual freedom and *demi-monde* lifestyle, attaching themselves to men with literary interests, and resisting the traditional bonds of marriage<sup>120</sup> Roman marital alliances were forged for a variety of reasons,<sup>121</sup> including wealth and political connections, romantic love was not a central issue Indeed, the ideal Roman *matrona* devoted herself to her family and husband to create an atmosphere of harmony, *concordia*<sup>122</sup> Adultery may have been a consequence of the desire to experience the romantic satisfaction which conventional marriages did not provide,<sup>123</sup> but it would be unwise to generalize about how widespread this practice may have been It is possible that the love poets were reconstructing in their poems behaviour which was not unheard of among *some* women in Roman society, exceptional behaviour is often the most remarked upon On the other hand, this literary picture of lascivious, educated *demi-mondaines* might in fact be

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<sup>117</sup> Williams (1968) 529-42, summarizes the scholarly debate concerning Cynthia's status Wyke (1987), 47-61 puts forward the view that she is a fictional character

<sup>118</sup> See Lilja (1965), 23, Williams (1968), 539-40, Lyne (1980), 240

<sup>119</sup> For discussion of the alternating *pudicitia* and unfaithfulness of the women in love elegy, see Lilja (1965), 145-186

<sup>120</sup> On the presence of both "professionals" and "amateurs" from all social categories in the *demi-monde*, see Griffin (1985), 27-8. On respectable *matronae* taking on the role of amateur courtesans, see Lyne (1980), 1-18

<sup>121</sup> See Treggiari (1991), 83-124 for a full discussion of factors affecting choice of marriage partners

<sup>122</sup> See Bradley (1991), 6-8 for the ideal of *concordia* in Roman marriage, see also Treggiari (1991), 229-249 for the marital virtues commemorated in funerary epitaphs

<sup>123</sup> Bradley (1984), 491-2, Rawson (1986), 27. For such men and women seeking solace in the *demi-monde*, see Lyne (1980), 18

nothing more than a poetic image<sup>124</sup> It has been suggested that in Roman literature in general “these colourful characters [such as adulteresses] are not real people but resonant metaphors for social and political disorders ... These fictions served as vehicles for the articulation of anxieties, personal and political”<sup>125</sup> Behaviour which was forbidden by Roman law and conventional morality may have found an outlet in the verses of the love poets Not all women reading the poetry of Catullus, Propertius or Ovid behaved in the manner outlined in these verses In fact, part of the *cachet* attached to Lesbia, Cynthia, Corinna and the *doctae puellae* of the *Ars amatoria* is their particular combination of education and sexual liberty Literature of this type might have been read for pure amusement by other women – the Romans were not necessarily prudish about exposure to erotic symbolism, as wall-paintings and garden ornaments found during excavations of private homes have shown<sup>126</sup> Ovid warned married women not to read his *Ars amatoria*, but this may have been a nominal concession to Augustus’ legislation concerning marriage and adultery among the upper classes<sup>127</sup> In one epigram (albeit written at a slightly later time) Martial asserted that respectable *matronae* would read his book avidly, as soon as they discovered that his poem was about male nudity,<sup>128</sup> another epigram teasingly suggests that even a woman like Lucretia – a traditional symbol of female virtue – would enjoy reading Martial’s books secretly<sup>129</sup>

There is scant evidence for women authors Prose writers included Agrippina the Younger, the mother of Nero, wrote memoirs concerning her family the work was read by both Pliny the Elder and by Tacitus<sup>130</sup> Cornelia, mother of the Gracchi, had her letters

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<sup>124</sup> “The world of elegy is part make-believe formulated from literature, and part make-believe in real-life ... Poets and their readers enjoy exploring both fantasies” Treggiari (1991), 306 See also Wyke (1987)

<sup>125</sup> Edwards (1993), 36

<sup>126</sup> Wiseman (1985) 14

<sup>127</sup> *Ov Ars am.* 1.31-2, see Lilja (1965), 41-2 Augustus’ laws were concerned with promoting marriage and child-bearing (especially among the élite) and repressing adultery See Treggiari (1991), 60-80, 277-298

<sup>128</sup> *Mart* 3.68

<sup>129</sup> *Mart* 11.16 See Wiseman (1985), 13

<sup>130</sup> *Plin HN* 7.8, *Tac Ann* 4.53

published the rhetorician Quintilian commented on her elevated (*doctissimus*) style<sup>131</sup> A select group of women from the Greek East also demonstrated their writing talents The historian Pamphile, writing in Epidauros in the first century AD, composed thirty-three books of history, a three-book epitome of Ctesias' history, a handful of other epitomes and books on other selected topics, including sex (the *περι ἀφροδισίων*), though some sources attributed her work to her husband, a highly educated man who included her in discussions with his circle of learned friends<sup>132</sup> Plutarch's wife was said to be an author herself and wrote a treatise on the art of self-adornment (*περι φιλοκοσμίας*), though there was speculation there too that he himself had written the work<sup>133</sup> None of this work has survived

More women are known to have written poetry Cornificia, the sister of the poet Quintus Cornificius, wrote epigrams in the first century AD<sup>134</sup> Martial mentioned that Theophila, the fiancée of Canius, wrote verse worthy of comparison with Sappho's<sup>135</sup> A woman named Melinno wrote a "Hymn to Rome"<sup>136</sup> Almost none of the poetry of these women survives, but brief poems relating religious experiences were preserved in inscriptions<sup>137</sup> Claudia Trophime, a priestess of Hera in Ephesus, composed two epigrams in Greek about the glory of the goddess Hestia Three other women inscribed poems on the Colossus of Memnon in Luxor in accordance with local religious custom it appears that at different moments during the first and second centuries AD, Caecilia Trebulla, Damo, and Julia Balbilla (a member of the entourage of Vibia Sabina during a tour of the East of the

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<sup>131</sup> Quint *Inst* 1 1 6. A supposed surviving letter from Cornelia to her son is preserved in a work by the author Cornelius Nepos (Frag 1 1-2), however, the authenticity of this missive has been doubted. Pomeroy (1975), 172 questions the letter's veracity, Snyder (1989), 124 argues that their subject matter and tone are appropriate to Cornelia

<sup>132</sup> *FHG* 3 520. See Bowie (1994), 439 and Lefkowitz (1992), 168. Two Greek women who wrote works on Homer were Demo, a female grammarian, and Agallis of Corcyra. see Lefkowitz (1992), 348 n. 24.

<sup>133</sup> Plut *Mor* 145a. See Bowie (1994), 454-5, n. 17.

<sup>134</sup> Jer *Chron* 1 184 4. See Rawson (1985), 47.

<sup>135</sup> Mart 7 69. Martial also compares the poetry of Sulpicia to that of Sappho at 10 35 16.

<sup>136</sup> Stob 3 7. See Cantarella (1987), 141, Pomeroy (1977), 57.

<sup>137</sup> Another Roman woman may have written about a religious experience. Tertullian, a late second century author from North Africa, included in a religious work concerning Christian martyrs an account of the martyrdom of a young Carthaginian named Perpetua in 203 AD, which was supposedly based upon Perpetua's own diary of the events. See Salisbury (1997).

emperor Hadrian) all wrote a few lines of Greek verse celebrating the experience of having heard the voice of Memnon at the shrine. The first mentioned of these three women wrote in iambic trimeter, the latter two in elegiac couplets, which attests to a certain degree of literary instruction.<sup>138</sup>

The only female Roman poet for whom a small collection of work survives is Sulpicia, who wrote during the late first century BC. She came from a literary background: her father, Servius Sulpicius Rufus (consul in 51 BC) was known for his legal writings, and her brother may have been a member of the same poetry circle as she herself.<sup>139</sup> Her guardian and uncle, Marcus Valerius Messalla Corvinus, was the literary patron of several poets, including Ovid and Tibullus.<sup>140</sup> As her family encouraged literary activity, it is not surprising that Sulpicia too might have tried her hand at verse. Her work – six poems and perhaps another two which have been traditionally attributed to an anonymous author<sup>141</sup> – have been preserved in the *Corpus Tibullianum* along with the work of other amateur poets. The similarity of Sulpicia's writing style to that of other elegiac poets has been demonstrated by her use of the elegiac meter, a Greek pseudonym to conceal the name of the lover involved, and romantic vocabulary and themes, which include the joy of being in love, frustration at separation from her beloved, and jealousy.<sup>142</sup> Sulpicia's appropriation of this genre suggests that it was not necessarily uncommon for women to express their literary creativity in the same literary style as men.<sup>143</sup> The subject matter of her poetry, however, has been seen to reflect the expected feminine experience of a woman of the élite: in one poem, for example, she acknowledged and obeyed the authority of her male guardian, who was taking her on a trip and would not allow her to be in Rome with her "beau" Cerinthus (the exact nature of

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<sup>138</sup> For these four women, see Lefkowitz (1992), 9-10, also Bowie (1994), 439.

<sup>139</sup> Butrica (1993) 51-3, identifies the poet "Lygdamus" whose work survives in the Tibullan corpus as Sulpicia's brother.

<sup>140</sup> See Davies (1973), for the poetry circle of Messalla Corvinus, and White (1993) for the role of patronage in literary culture.

<sup>141</sup> Parker (1994), 39-62 argues that 3.9 and 3.11 are the work of Sulpicia, not the unknown *Auctor de Sulpicia*.

<sup>142</sup> Santirocco (1979) 236-8.

<sup>143</sup> See Richlin (1992b), 138. "this strongly asserted subjectivity tells us a lot. It tells us that, despite conditions of production that we have every reason to believe were highly daunting for a woman, female subjectivity and the desire and ability to present it were present in Roman culture."

the relationship is uncertain) for her birthday<sup>144</sup> Sulpicia's love poetry may also fall into a genre which adopts the passionate language of erotic elegy to add "romance" to poems celebrating married life or potential marriage partners (Ovid dedicated his second book of the *Amores* to girls who were engaged and to boys who were not knowledgeable about love)<sup>145</sup>

A similar technique may have been used by a later female Roman poet, also called Sulpicia, of whose work only a trace survives. She wrote in the late first century AD. Her contemporary Martial described her love poetry using language which recalls the traditional virtues for which *matronae* were praised<sup>146</sup> He claimed that she wrote verses accenting *fides*, or faithfulness, to one's married partner<sup>147</sup> and that she wrote of love celebrating *castitas* and *pudicitia*<sup>148</sup> Interestingly, her verses combined *sanctitas* (morality) with *nequitia* (wantonness),<sup>149</sup> suggesting that poetry about marital love could hold an element of spicy passion. In conclusion Martial suggested that Sappho herself could have become more learned (*doctior*) as well as chaste (*pudica*) if Sulpicia had been her teacher or classmate,<sup>150</sup> Sulpicia was *univira*, faithful to her one husband<sup>151</sup> In another poem Martial described her long and happy marriage to Calenus, as well as their passionate love<sup>152</sup> He employed the

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<sup>144</sup> Tib 3 14 See also Santirocco (1979), 239: "Sulpicia held up a mirror to the private world inhabited by women of her class. A birthday, a picnic, an uncle, a lover – to acknowledge in this way the insulated nature of her achievement is to recognize the impositions an androcentric society makes upon women."

<sup>145</sup> Treggiari (1991), 302 Ov *Am* 2 1 3-4

<sup>146</sup> See Treggiari (1991), 229-261 for further exploration of the following marital virtues, as they are celebrated in epitaphs

<sup>147</sup> Mart 10 35 1-4 *Omnes Sulpiciam legant puellae / uni quae cupiunt viro placere, / omnes Sulpiciam legant mariti / uni qui cupiunt placere nuptae* Richlin (1992), 129 notes the similarity of this passage to Catull 45 21-24, which also praises the "mutual love" of a couple. Lilja (1965), 21 observes that Prop 4 3 is a letter from a young wife to her soldier husband

<sup>148</sup> Mart 10 35 8 *Sed castos docet et pios amores*

<sup>149</sup> Mart 10 35 10-12 *Cuius carmina qui bene aestimavit, / nullam dixerit esse nequiores, / nullam dixerit esse sanctiores*

<sup>150</sup> Mart 10 35 15-17

<sup>151</sup> Mart 10 35 19-21 *...namque ea nec Tonantis uxor nec Bacchi nec Apollinis puella erepto sibi viveret Caleno*

<sup>152</sup> Mart 10 38 1-14

vocabulary of war and battles to describe their sexual relationship<sup>153</sup> It has been noted that the male love poets of the late Republic also used military imagery in their descriptions of love<sup>154</sup> The description of Sulpicia's poetry by Martial suggests that, as with the Sulpicia of Messalla's circle, women could claim the language and genre of male poets to express the female experience, such as love within the accepted traditional boundaries for female behaviour, including marriage<sup>155</sup>

No other mention is made of this Sulpicia in the classical period, but references to her work appear in later authors The fourth century poet Ausonius listed Sulpicia among other poets from classical antiquity whose poetry was risqué but whose lives were virtuous, including Juvenal, Martial, Pliny, Apuleius, Cicero, Plato, and even Vergil The fifth century poet Sidonius Apollinaris recorded Sulpicia among forty-six other poets from classical antiquity whose style he says "he will not try to imitate", including Tibullus, Propertius, Catullus, Ovid, Petronius, Martial, and Sappho, and the fifth century author Fulgentius recalls Sulpicia once among references to Ovid and Apuleius,<sup>156</sup> and once among references to women who do not like satire<sup>157</sup> It would appear that Sulpicia was the only female poet of renown after Sappho whose work circulated widely in later centuries One fragment of Sulpicia's work may have survived in a late fourth century AD commentary on Juvenal's satires by Probus<sup>158</sup> The scholiast remarks upon Juvenal's use of the rare word *cadurci* by citing a two-line verse in which Sulpicia used the same word,<sup>159</sup> which means "straps for the mattress"<sup>160</sup> or "bedding linen"<sup>161</sup> The entire verse runs *si me cadurci restitutis fasciis / nudam*

<sup>153</sup> "What combats, what mutual bouts were witnessed by the happy bed and the lamp drunk black with Nicerotian showers!" Mart 10.38.6-8 Transl. Shackleton-Bailey *O quae proelia, quas utrumque pugnas / felix lectulus et lucerna vidit / nimbis ebria Nicerotianis*

<sup>154</sup> See Lilja (1965), 64-9, Fantham (1996), 107-8.

<sup>155</sup> Parker (1992), 94. He notes a first century BC precedent for love poetry in a marital context Prop. 2.34.89-90: *haec etiam docti confessa est pagina Calvi, / cum caneret miserae funera Quintiliae*

<sup>156</sup> See Richlin (1992b) 135-7 and Hallett (1992), 104.

<sup>157</sup> Richlin (1992b) 137, Hallett (1992) 104.

<sup>158</sup> A 70-line satire, the *Sulpiciae Conquestio*, has been spuriously attributed to Sulpicia, scholars believe the work dates from the fourth century AD. Parker (1992) 91-2. Richlin (1992b) 133-4 discusses the similarities of the satire to what is known about Sulpicia's style.

<sup>159</sup> Probably inspiring Juvenal's use of the word. Richlin (1992b) 130 n. 8.

<sup>160</sup> Parker (1992) 93.

<sup>161</sup> Richlin (1992b) 130.

*Caleno concubantem proferat*<sup>162</sup> Although this verse is difficult to translate and its context is missing,<sup>163</sup> scholars have suggested that Sulpicia was writing with openness about sexuality in marriage.<sup>164</sup> It seems that it was possible for women to write love poetry which was admired without transgressing the traditional moral standards as in the case of the *demi-mondaines*.

The satirist Juvenal, writing in the early second century AD, had harsh criticism for educated women, both the literate *demi-mondaine* of the love poets<sup>165</sup> and the well-read Roman matron. An element of exaggeration is always expected in the vicious mockery of Roman satire, as satire's goal is to expose the faults of society. The sixth book of Juvenal's *Satires* targets the foibles of women, particularly those of high social rank, the *matronae*.<sup>166</sup> Their (purported) lurid behaviour, especially unbridled sexual desire, is laid bare and condemned. But *Satire 6* betrays concern not only about the sexuality of these upper class women, but also their intellectual capabilities. Juvenal disapproved of women who attempted to act like men, becoming gladiators or advocates,<sup>167</sup> and in one lengthy passage he complained of women who, attempting to impress others with their literary knowledge, made fools of themselves. These women dominated the conversation at dinner-parties with their literary criticism.

But more offensive is the one who on taking her place at dinner  
gushes in praise of Virgil, forgiving the doomed Elissa,  
compares and evaluates poets, holds the scales of judgment,  
placing Maro in one of the pans and Homer in the other  
Professional critics withdraw, rhetoricians are bested, the party  
falls silent, and neither lawyer nor crier ventures to speak,

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<sup>162</sup> Scholars generally believe the fragment is authentic. Parker (1992) 91-2

<sup>163</sup> Richlin (1992b), 131 offers several interpretations for the extant words

<sup>164</sup> Parker (1992), 93 "she makes a bold and provocative proclamation of female desire and sexual satisfaction" See also Richlin (1992b), 135 "This puts Sulpicia into the odd position of erotic writer *cum* strait-laced *matrona*, providing a hint perhaps of the divided mind a Roman would expect from a respectable woman who wrote erotic verse"

<sup>165</sup> Juvenal alluded to Catullus' Lesbia and Propertius' Cynthia as the very opposite of the chaste women of "the Golden Age" (Juv. 6.7-8). See Courtney (1980), 263

<sup>166</sup> Gérard (1976), 261

<sup>167</sup> Women taking up gladiatorial sports: 6.247-267. For women who generate court cases, compose their own briefs and tell their advocates how to do their job: 6.242-246. For women taking on these unconventional roles in the *Satires*, see Gérard (1976), 267, Winkler (1983), 165-9.

nor another woman, so great a torrent of words descends<sup>168</sup>

The satirist suggested that such a woman was really intruding into an activity which was the territory of men, if she wished to appear so well-educated, perhaps she should also dress like a man, engage in men's religious practices, and bathe at the men's baths

Philosophers tell us that one can have too much of a good thing  
Hence the woman who wants to appear too learned and fluent  
should wear a tunic that doesn't reach below the knee,  
slaughter a pig to Silvanus, and enter the baths for a quarter<sup>169</sup>

The diatribe finishes with a series of complaints about the sort of high knowledge these women acquired and flaunted: rhetoric, history, and grammar

Make sure the woman reclining beside you doesn't affect  
a rhetorical style, or brandish phrases before unleashing  
a clinching argument, let her not know the whole of history,  
or understand every word that she reads. For myself, I abhor  
the woman who is always consulting and thumbing Palaemon's *Grammar*,  
so precise in observing the laws and rules of speech,  
and, like a scholar, quoting lines I've never heard of.  
Are these things matters for men?<sup>170</sup>

Juvenal proposed that if a woman wished to show off her intellectual achievement, she should do so among her own kind: "Let her correct the speech / of an ignorant [girl] friend, but a husband's slips should pass without comment"<sup>171</sup> This "uncomfortable role reversal"<sup>172</sup>

<sup>168</sup> Juv. *Sat.* 434-440 Transl. N. Rudd *Illa tamen grauior, quae cum discumbere coepit, / laudat Vergilium, periturae ignoscit Elissae, / committit uates et comparat, inde Maronem / atque alia parte in trutina suspendit Homerum / Cedunt grammatici, uincuntur rhetores, omnis / turba tacet, nec causicus nec praeco loquetur, / altera nec mulier, uerborum tanta cadit us...* See Courtney (1980), 318-9

<sup>169</sup> Juv. *Sat.* 6.444-7 Transl. N. Rudd *Inponit finem sapiens et rebus honestis, / nam quae docta nimis cupit et facunda uideri, / crure tenus medio tunicas succingere debet, / caedere Siluano porcum, quadrante lauari.* Roman women typically dressed in long *stola*, while men wore a short *tunica*, Silvanus was considered to be a god of farmers, and it was the practice of only men to sacrifice to him, and the men's baths cost only a *quadrans*. Courtney (1980), 320-1

<sup>170</sup> Juv. *Sat.* 6.448-54 *Non habeat matrona, tibi quae iuncta recumbit, / dicendi genus aut curuum sermone rotato / torqueat enthymema, nec historias sciat omnes, / sed quaedam ex libris et non intellegat. Odi / hanc ego quae repetit uoluitque Palaemonis artem / seruata semper lege et ratione loquendi / ignotosque mihi tenet antiquaria uersus.* See Courtney (1980), 319-20

<sup>171</sup> Juv. 6.455-6 *nec curanda uiris opicae castigat amicae / uerba, soloecismum liceat fecisse marito*

<sup>172</sup> Richlin (1983), 204

is also evident in an epigram which the poet Martial addressed to Quintilian (the author of the treatise on education) that an ideal wife should not be *too* learned (*non doctissima*)<sup>173</sup> It is noteworthy that neither Juvenal nor Martial objected particularly to women who were *doctae*, but they did prescribe limits to the display that women should make of their accomplishment, namely that they should not participate in literary culture on the same level as men Both authors presupposed that the role of the husband was to be the intellectually dominant partner<sup>174</sup> When a woman took on this role, she might also presume to take on the running of the state, and “brazenly hurry / all over the town, facing the meetings of men, and engaging / uniformed generals in conversation in her husband’s presence, without any trace of embarrassment and with no milk in her breasts”<sup>175</sup> Despite the overtly caricatured portraits of Juvenal’s *Satires*, his anxiety undoubtedly had some basis in contemporary reality in order to be understood by his readers<sup>176</sup> The figure of the aristocratic “blue-stocking” was derided by satirists for appropriating public masculine behaviour, just as the *demi-mondaine* was condemned for assuming the sexual freedom which was allowed to men and not to women<sup>177</sup>

An educated woman was most admired when she displayed her intellectual accomplishments to bring distinction to her family as a dutiful wife, mother, or daughter Three historical portraits of elite women illustrate this view Cornelia, the daughter of Q Caecilius Metellus Pius Scipio, and the widow of P Licinius Crassus, became in 52 BC the fourth wife of Pompey the Great Plutarch, writing of the event, emphasized Cornelia’s *pudicitia*, or sexual integrity, for although she had been married once previously, she had at

<sup>173</sup> Mart. 2.90.9 See Marrou (1956), 274

<sup>174</sup> See Winkler (1983), 165, on Juv. 6.218-224, for the woman who takes on the powers of the *paterfamilias* in the home “The danger, from a male point of view, of the upheaval of the established social order and the deviation from previous values and conventions is summarized in the wife’s assumption of the man’s role and in her relegation of the husband to such a powerless state that verbal protestation is the only refuge left for him”

<sup>175</sup> Juv. 6.398-401 Transl. N. Rudd — *totam peruolet urbem / audax et coetus possit quae ferre uirorum / cumque paludatis ducibus praesente marito / ipsa loqui recta facie siccisque mamillis* See Courtney (1980), 313-4

<sup>176</sup> Gérard (1976), 274

<sup>177</sup> See Treggiari (1991), 299-319 for the “double standard” in Roman attitudes towards sexuality: “It is undeniable that the Romans, like the Greeks before them, demanded different standards of chastity from women and men” (315)

that time been a virgin bride. He also stressed her illustrious family background, her beauty, and her accomplishments: “she was well-versed in literature, in playing the lyre, and in geometry, and had been accustomed to listen to philosophical discourses with profit”<sup>178</sup> Her education was described in almost the same terms as the ideal education for an élite male advocated by Quintilian, which included not only the study of literature, but also music, astronomy, and philosophy<sup>179</sup> Plutarch noted particularly her passive learning of philosophy, she did not participate fully in the intellectual discussions, for “she had a nature which was free from that unpleasant officiousness which such accomplishments are apt to impart to young women”<sup>180</sup> Cornelia avoided the sexual excesses or intellectual pretension which might have secured her a reputation as a *demi-mondaine* or a blue-stocking. Her erudition instead was a credit to her father and family who had raised and educated her, as well as to her new husband. A similarly accomplished woman from the first century AD was Calpurnia, who, as seen earlier, became the third wife of Pliny the Younger. She was the grand-daughter of an *eques*, L. Calpurnius Fabatus, and Pliny noted in a letter to her aunt that Calpurnia “has proved herself worthy of her father, her grandfather, and you”<sup>181</sup> She demonstrated *frugalitas* in her management of the household, and *castitas* (“chastity”) in that she loved Pliny alone<sup>182</sup> She became interested in literature through Pliny’s influence, but was respectful of his intellectual predominance: she read his writings and even memorized them, she attended his readings, sitting discreetly behind a curtain, and even set his poetry to music<sup>183</sup> Pliny’s profile of her is that of an ideal Roman wife, who honoured her husband and added to his distinction<sup>184</sup> In contrast to these two women was Julia, the daughter of the

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<sup>178</sup> Plut *Pomp* 55.1 Transl. B. Perrin ἐνῆν δὲ τῇ κόρῃ πολλὰ φίλτρα δίχα τῶν ἀφ’ ὅπας καὶ γὰρ περὶ γράμματα καλῶς ἤσκητο καὶ περὶ λύραν καὶ γεωμετρίαν, καὶ λόγων φιλοσόφων εἰθιστο χρησίμως ἀκούειν

<sup>179</sup> Quint *Inst* 1.4.4

<sup>180</sup> Plut *Pomp* 55.1 Transl. B. Perrin καὶ προσῆν τούτοις ἦθος ἀηδίας καὶ περιεργίας καθαρὸν, ἃ δὴ νέαις προστρίβεται γυναιξὶ τὰ τοιαῦτα μαθήματα

<sup>181</sup> Plin *Ep* 4.19.1 Transl. B. Radice *cognoveris dignam patre dignam te dignam avo evadere*

<sup>182</sup> On these qualities in the ideal wife, see Shelton (1990), 167-8

<sup>183</sup> *Meos libellos habet lectuat ediscit etiam Eadem, si quando recito, in proximo discreta velo sedet, laudesque nostras avidissimis auribus excipit Versus quidem meos cantat etiam formatque cithara*

<sup>184</sup> Shelton (1990), 167-8 suggests that Calpurnia shows proper *pietas* by her “devotion to his interests”, which in this case happen to be literary, as did the wife of Statius (*Silv.* 3.5.33-36)

emperor Augustus. In the late first century BC, she was exiled from Rome, supposedly for her promiscuous behaviour.<sup>185</sup> An author of the fifth century AD, Macrobius, collected together some of Julia's (purported) witticisms along with other amusing anecdotes about famous personages in his *Saturnalia*. He introduced his subject in this way:

She abused the indulgence of fortune no less than that of her father. Of course her love of literature and considerable culture, a thing easy to come by in that household, and also her kindness and gentleness and utter freedom from vindictiveness had won her immense popularity, and people who knew about her faults were amazed that she combined them with qualities so much their opposite.<sup>186</sup>

Macrobius' words suggest that her education and interest in literature was encouraged by her family and enhanced its cultural reputation, but Julia transgressed the boundaries of proper behaviour through her sexual license and used her keen wit to joke about her sensual way of life. These "test cases" of actual Roman women confirm that the image of the literate woman could vary according to the traditional roles which she chose to pursue or to reject.<sup>187</sup>

### Letter-Writing

Although participation in literary culture was a glamorous application of literacy, the practical value of the skills of reading and writing must not be ignored. That letter-writing was a popular and often necessary use of literacy in antiquity is indisputable, given the huge number of private letters written on papyrus which have been unearthed from Roman Egypt. These letters and other documents are discussed in greater detail in Chapter Four. What do the ancient authors reveal about the letter-writing habits of Roman women?

The motif of the *billet-doux* emerges frequently in love poetry. Ovid facetiously offered advice on writing love letters in his didactic poem the *Ars amatoria*. He

However, it is not unthinkable that Calpurnia might have enjoyed Pliny's writings, such as his letters to her, which are discussed below.

<sup>185</sup> For Julia's history, as well as a commentary on the following passage from Macrobius, see Richlin (1992a).

<sup>186</sup> Macrobius *Sat* 2.5.1. Transl. H. Lloyd-Jones.

<sup>187</sup> See also Cantarella (1987), 133-4. "if some [women] dedicated themselves to arts and literature and proposed some other female image, these women made an individual choice that the social conscience did not accept. The "different" woman represented degeneration, corruption, danger. The model was always that of the *matrona*, the wife and mother who, in the fulfillment of her family duties, forgot herself." See too Shelton (1990), 177.

recommended wax tablets as the material of choice<sup>188</sup> These tablets were particularly suitable for illicit messages because they could be easily erased, if either a man or woman was writing love letters to more than one recipient, he or she had to be especially careful to smooth over any previous amorous message in the wax, lest the recipient read an earlier missive from someone else<sup>189</sup> Fir-wood tablets might also be used,<sup>190</sup> as could the ancient equivalent of “invisible ink”, a kind of milk which becomes visible only when coated with charcoal,<sup>191</sup> a piece of sharp, damp flax produces similar results<sup>192</sup> If the woman needs to mislead a rival (such as her husband) who might intercept the letters, a female slave could write the letter so as to disguise the handwriting, or the woman herself could learn to write in different hands<sup>193</sup> At banquets there is the opportunity to send amorous messages by a means even more transitory than wax, a pair of lovers seated together could communicate their passion by tracing letters in wine on the tabletop<sup>194</sup> Ovid himself claimed to have sent his poems as love letters on tablets to Corinna<sup>195</sup> For example, he asked her maid to encourage Corinna to pen a long response “Bid her write much in answer when she has read, I hate when a fine, fair page is widely blank. See she pack the lines together, and long detain my eyes with letters traced on the outermost page”<sup>196</sup> The love letter motif *par excellence* was employed by Ovid in his *Heroides*. In this fictional collection of letters in verse legendary heroines as Dido, Medea, Penelope, Ariadne, Hero, Cydippe and Helen (among others) write poignantly

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<sup>188</sup> Ov. *Ars am.* 1.437-438

<sup>189</sup> *Ars am.* 2.395-6, 3.495-6. In one of her poems Sulpicia expresses this fear: “Never would I choose to entrust my messages to tablets under seal, that none might read them before my lover” Tib. 3.13. Transl. J. P. Postgate. *Non ego signatis quicquam mandare tabellis / ne legat id nemo quam meus ante, velim.*

<sup>190</sup> *Ars am.* 3.469

<sup>191</sup> *Ars am.* 3.627-8. For “invisible ink”, see also Plin. *HN* 26.62. Ovid humorously suggests that a girl who did not want a letter to be intercepted could write directly on the her slave’s back, and send the slave as a messenger! *Ars am.* 3.625-6.

<sup>192</sup> *Ars am.* 3.629-30

<sup>193</sup> *Ars am.* 3.485, 3.493

<sup>194</sup> *Ars am.* 1.571-572, *Am.* 1.4.20. The same image recurs in Tib. 1.6.18-20. See Laigneau (1993), 140-1.

<sup>195</sup> *Am.* 1.11.15-28

<sup>196</sup> Transl. G. Showerman. *Nec mora, perlectis rescribat multa, iubeto, / odi, cum late splendida cera vacat / conprimat ordinibus versus, oculosque moretur / margine in extremo littera rasa meos*

about love to the men from whom they are separated, occasionally letters from the men themselves (Leander, Acontius, and Paris) are also included. The entertaining motif of the love letter occasionally surfaces in other genres, such as satire. Juvenal complained of rich women who send letters back and forth with their lovers without bothering to hide the fact from their husbands,<sup>197</sup> some mothers even advise their daughters on how to write *billets-doux*.<sup>198</sup> If a husband needs proof of a wife's infidelity, he should check the letters hidden in her desk-drawer.<sup>199</sup> In another genre, biography, Plutarch recounted that Julius Caesar, who had achieved a measure of fame as a womanizer, was once handed a small tablet (*γραμματιδίον*) while in the Senate house. When Cato the Younger hotly accused him of receiving letters from the Catilinarian conspirators, he was allowed to read the note, to his embarrassment it was a lascivious *billet-doux* from Cato's sister Servilia.<sup>200</sup>

The prevalence of the love letter motif in literature presupposes that men and women in Roman society did exchange letters, but the lack of preserved material evidence (such as has been found in Egypt) and the private and ephemeral nature of personal letters (both Pliny and Cicero's private letters were carefully selected and polished before their publication in antiquity) makes it difficult to ascertain the frequency and character of the missives by which couples, friends, and families communicated over distance. As an added complication to this study, although Cicero and Pliny both wrote many times to their wives and other female family members, no trace of the women's replies has been preserved. Ovid too wrote poems addressed to his wife from his exile, the *Tristia* and the *Epistulae ex Ponto*, while Seneca addressed his *Ad Helviam* to his mother Helvia. Plutarch also addressed a letter of consolation to his wife on the death of their daughter Timoxena.<sup>201</sup> Apuleius' wife Pudentilla wrote personal letters in Greek from North Africa, as we have seen.<sup>202</sup>

If we look more closely at Cicero's correspondence with his wife, the responsibilities which a *materfamilias* undertook in service of her family are revealed. During his exile in 58

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<sup>197</sup> Juv. 6.140-1

<sup>198</sup> Juv. 6.233-4, 14.29

<sup>199</sup> Juv. 6.277-8 *quae scripta et quot lecture tabellas / si tibi zelotypae retegantur scrinia moechae*

<sup>200</sup> Plut. *Brut.* 5. The same story is told at Plut. *Cat. Min.* 24.1. See Knox (1968), 431-2

<sup>201</sup> Plut. *Mor.* 608b

<sup>202</sup> Apul. *Apol.* 30

BC, Cicero expressed remorse and anxiety not only about his own situation but about its effect on his family, as well as the expectation that Terentia would not only look after their property and finances but also use what influence she had to effect his recall.<sup>203</sup> He alluded to the many letters which Terentia and even his daughter Tullia wrote to him, but as none of their replies have been preserved it is hard to reconstruct their content. Cicero did refer to Terentia's encouragement, her worry over his health, and her reports about the state of the family property.<sup>204</sup> During the civil wars Cicero wrote that he was greatly concerned about Terentia and Tullia's presence in Rome, which could be dangerous.<sup>205</sup> Before he and Terentia divorced in 47 or 46 BC, they had been apart for almost two years, but Cicero's letters during this period once again demonstrate concern for the health of his family and his confidence that Terentia will handle any domestic issues (such as the divorce of Tullia<sup>206</sup>) that may arise "provide for and take charge of any necessary business, as time and circumstances demand, and send me letters about everything as often as possible"<sup>207</sup> The tone of these letters is often cool and aloof,<sup>208</sup> due perhaps to the marital tensions which culminated in divorce, all the letters in any case reveal little sentiment of a romantic nature.<sup>209</sup> Yet throughout the period of their correspondence Cicero emphasized his dependence on Terentia for moral support and especially for the care of their children and the management of the family's household interests.<sup>210</sup>

Pliny the Younger's published correspondence also includes letters to several women friends, amiable missives about domestic matters: he wrote to his former mother-in-law Pompeia Celerina, thanking her for her hospitality, to a female relative named Calvina, to

<sup>203</sup> Cic *Fam* 14 4, 14 2, 14 1, 14 3

<sup>204</sup> Cic *Fam* 14 2, 14 2, 14 3

<sup>205</sup> Cic *Fam* 14 18, 14 14

<sup>206</sup> Cic *Fam* 14 13

<sup>207</sup> Cic *Fam* 14 16 *Quod opus erit, ut res tempusque postulat, provideas atque administres, et ad me de omnibus rebus quam saepissime litteras mittas*

<sup>208</sup> With regard to 14 6, for example, Shackleton-Bailey (1977), 500 asserts "the letter to Terentia is notably curt and uncordial. Cicero's relations with her seem to have deteriorated since he left Italy." See also Shelton (1990), 171 n. 23

<sup>209</sup> See Clark (1985), 33-57 for a thorough analysis of the expression of expectations and sentiments in these letters

generously assist her in paying a debt, and to a friend by the name of Corellia Hispulla, to recommend a suitable teacher for her son<sup>211</sup> The collection also includes two letters to the aunt of his wife, in which he praises her niece, in the first, he extols her domestic virtues, while the second letter is a cautious and reassuring report of Calpurnia's recovery after a miscarriage<sup>212</sup> Pliny's letters to his new young wife are sentimental, in contrast to those of Cicero and Terentia<sup>213</sup> The motif of the romantic *billet-doux* is translated into the fondness that can exist between a marriage couple During their separations, Pliny wrote that both he and Calpurnia took comfort in reading the letters of the other, which form a bond between them<sup>214</sup> Pliny's letters to these women, like those of Cicero to his wife, indicate that the female sphere of responsibility is that of the family, private matters rather than public

#### "Professional" Literacy

Women who were involved with the management of a household, estate, or business would certainly benefit from a basic knowledge of literacy and numeracy The ancient economy "provides a certain number of clerical jobs, and gives some incentive, though not an overwhelming one, to an artisan or shopkeeper to read and write"<sup>215</sup> Certain jobs for slaves necessitated a knowledge of reading and writing Funerary inscriptions from Rome sometimes commemorate slaves, listing their professions, and occasionally reveal that female

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<sup>210</sup> See Dixon (1986), 93-120 for Terentia's handling of her own and Cicero's finances during his absences

<sup>211</sup> Plin. *Ep.* 1.4, 2.4, 3.3

<sup>212</sup> Plin. *Ep.* 4.19, 8.11 The second letter contrasts noticeably with a letter on the same topic to Calpurnia's grandfather, in which concern for his wife's feelings and health are subordinated to the disappointment that no heir to the family name is imminent Shelton (1990), 171-2 suggests that Pliny has tailored each letter to address the principle concerns of the recipients his wife's aunt is expected to be anxious for the well-being of her niece, while her grandfather is considered to be more interested in her potential child-bearing abilities

<sup>213</sup> Shelton (1990), 164-5 cautions that since Pliny carefully prepared his letters for publication, he may have presented an "idealized" view of his marriage to the public

<sup>214</sup> Plin. *Ep.* 6.4, 6.7 See also 7.5 It has been suggested that Pliny's letters to Calpurnia are reminiscent of the Latin love poetry in their language and themes See Shelton (1990), 170

<sup>215</sup> Harris (1989), 18. Harris further notes that slavery may have freed some children from work and given them the chance to attend school who otherwise would not have had the opportunity For child labour in ancient Rome, see Bradley (1991), 103-124

slaves were trained for jobs requiring literacy<sup>216</sup> A few female pedagogues (*paedagogae*) had monuments set up for them by women, perhaps their former charges<sup>217</sup> Some female pedagogues might have had enough skill in reading and writing to begin the early training of their young wards<sup>218</sup> Women are also commemorated as readers (*lectrices* or *anagnostriae*) in private households<sup>219</sup> Women are recorded as “scribes” (*librariae*),<sup>220</sup> who would have performed clerical duties, while women who undertook the job of a “secretary” (*a manu* or *amanuensis*)<sup>221</sup> probably wrote letters and helped with other paperwork<sup>222</sup> Where the owner’s name is stated in an inscription, it appears that these female slaves were all employed by women, not men<sup>223</sup> This indicates not that their owners were illiterate, but rather that they could afford the luxury of a personal secretary to assist them with their daily business<sup>224</sup> It is rare for ancient authors to record the role of readers and secretaries, taking their services for granted, but at least one literary anecdote was recorded by Cassius Dio concerning Caenis, the amanuensis (*a manu*)<sup>225</sup> of Antonia, mother of the emperor Claudius, and who later as a freedwoman became the concubine of the emperor Vespasian Antonia asked Caenis to write out a letter (presumably on a wax tablet) about Sejanus, show it secretly to the emperor Tiberius, and then erase it at once so that no record of anything incriminating would be seen, Caenis declared that there was no need for her to write down anything in that case, as she had memorized the entire text<sup>226</sup> Were it not for the elevated and influential position to which Caenis rose later in her life, no detail of her career as a slave would probably have

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<sup>216</sup> See Treggiari (1976) for a discussion of the following inscriptional examples

<sup>217</sup> *CIL* 6 6331, 6 9754 A third inscription to a *paedagoga* (6 9758), does not record the commemorator Treggiari (1976), 90

<sup>218</sup> See Bradley (1991), 52 for the teaching roles of pedagogues

<sup>219</sup> *CIL* 6 8786, 6 33830, 6 33473, 6 34270, *AE* 1928, 73 Treggiari (1976), 78 notes that more women than men are listed as readers in the inscriptions from Rome, but the number is very small

<sup>220</sup> *CIL* 6 3979, 6 9301, 6 9525, 6 8882, 6 37802,

<sup>221</sup> *CIL* 6 9540, 6 9541, 6 9542

<sup>222</sup> Treggiari (1976), 78

<sup>223</sup> Treggiari (1976), 100 n 8

<sup>224</sup> Joshel (1992), 73 “a person of substance did not keep accounts, handle disbursements, or deal with the day-to-day management of property: accountants, secretaries, or agents took care of these matters”

<sup>225</sup> Suet *Vesp* 3

survived. Slaves could have received an education in reading and writing in order to fulfill these duties within the household, although there is some evidence for slaves attending schools.<sup>227</sup> Business professions might also have profited from a basic knowledge of writing and arithmetic.<sup>228</sup> Another field where literacy was recommended is medicine. Soranus, in his second century AD treatise on gynecology, suggested that the best midwives were women who, among other qualities, were literate,<sup>229</sup> for they were able to study theory and techniques from books. Many midwives probably learned their skills on the job, however, Soranus offered an idealized list of qualifications, covering all extremes of character and behaviour, good and bad: for example, a good midwife should also be discreet and remain sober at all times, and should not accept bribes for abortions, as money-hungry women might. Several women are recorded as midwives (*obstetrices*) in inscriptions, while a handful of women are listed as doctors (*medicae*).<sup>230</sup>

### Conclusion

The evidence from the literary sources indicates that women from the élite orders of Roman society were the most likely to be literate. The fact that most of the literature was written by élite male authors shows an obvious prejudice towards writing about their own group. Women from less privileged backgrounds also came into contact with reading and writing to some extent, most probably in commercial, legal, or epistolary contexts, or as part of special training as readers and scribes, though the literary evidence is particularly silent on these points. The sort of literacy which is normally alluded to by élite authors is more than a basic ability to read and write, it is principally involvement in literary culture (both Latin and Greek). At all social levels, the elements of reading and writing could be taught at home to girls as well as boys, if a member of the household possessed the necessary knowledge, or

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<sup>226</sup> Dio Cassius, *History of Rome* 65.14.1-5

<sup>227</sup> Treggiari (1976), 93. See Booth (1979b)

<sup>228</sup> For “working women” in antiquity, see Kampen (1981a) and Joshel (1992)

<sup>229</sup> Sor. *Gyn.* 1.3: ἐπιτήδειος δ'έστιν [πρὸς το γενέσθαι μαῖα] ἢ γραμμάτων ἐντός, ἀγχίνους, μνήμων, φιλόπονος. γραμμάτων μὲν ἐντός, ἵνα καὶ διὰ θεωρίας τὴν τέχνην ἰσχύση παραλαβεῖν

<sup>230</sup> *Obstetrices*: CIL 6.8949, 6.8948, 6.4458, 6.6325, 6.6647, 6.6832, 6.8192. *Medicae*: CIL 6.8711, 6.8926, 6.6851, 6.33812. See Treggiari (1976)

could be taught by a teacher privately hired or who ran a “school”, if families could afford to pay the required fees and felt that such an education would be of use to their child. For some families, a very rudimentary knowledge of reading and writing might be deemed enough, for further education concentrated on literary studies. Participation in literary culture was highly prized as a symbol of social acceptability and superiority for members of the *élite*: in the patriarchal and hierarchical social structure of ancient Rome, education played an integral role in the construction of their identity as leaders of their families and of Roman society. When wives, mothers, and daughters were educated as well, the reputation of the family was particularly enhanced, as they reflected the intellectual disposition of their fathers, husbands, and sons.

The evidence reveals that *élite* women were present at performances at which literary works were read out and discussed. The fact that a strong oral tradition allowed literature to be disseminated by recitations as well as in printed form meant that women, no matter what their level of literacy, and even social level, could have some knowledge of current and classic literary works, for public presentations could be given by actors or by the authors themselves. Private occasions for reading were available at home, and if a woman so wished she could undoubtedly pick up a text or have one read to her by a slave reader. Forays into literary composition, however, were what set the cultivated person apart from those who merely listened to or read works passively. It was fashionable for members of the *élite* to try their hand at poetry, prose, and even drama. Some were dilettantes writing for amusement, and some were the protégés of patrons, seeking their social and political influence and perhaps financial support. Pliny’s letters allude to a number of authors among his acquaintances whose works have not survived to the present day, or perhaps were not published more widely than a small coterie of friends. Possibly more women authors than we know of penned and presented their literary efforts in these private circles, in the style of the wife of Pompeius Saturninus or Sulpicia the ward of Messalla. Such a scenario would maintain the proper decorum and *modestia* for which Roman matrons were praised. A handful of female authors had their works circulated to a wider public, but Cornelia, mother the Gracchi, and Agrippina the Younger were famous “personalities” and their high profile and influence may have allowed them a measure of freedom to act in the public eye, an indulgence unavailable to more ordinary women. The author Sulpicia praised by Martial

must also have known a wide public as she is alluded to in successive lists of famous authors from antiquity, but she is noticeable as an exception to the rule, and Sappho is the only other female author mentioned with her. The Greek author Pamphile too was exceptional in her output. Only very seldom do we hear of women who wrote rhetorical prose, which was of most use to advocates and politicians, the speech of the “advocate” Hortensia, preserved in Appian,<sup>231</sup> was prepared for a one-time occasion, a protest against a new tax levied on women.

During the late Republic and early Principate, when Catullus, Propertius, and Ovid successively wrote their verse, the image of the literate woman who enjoyed poetry (especially erotic poetry) was not always respectable. The women alluded to in these poems, possibly women of the élite, were especially alluring in that they could merge physical attractiveness and sexual freedom with the intellectual cultivation to appreciate the education of the poets themselves: the poets dreamed of winning over these women through their poetic efforts for, like patrons, the women had the power to influence and inspire their art. This heady combination was understandably shocking because it suggested the possibility of women casting off their traditional roles in the family and acting, after a fashion, like men: the vocabulary of love elegy often presents the woman as dominant in these relationships, and the man as her willing slave or conquest,<sup>232</sup> an inversion of the usual standard. When in his *Pro Caelio* speech Cicero excoriated the lifestyle of the wealthy widow Clodia, probably the same Lesbia to whom Catullus addressed so many poems, she was accused of all manner of debauchery, while the behaviour of her lover Caelius, Cicero’s protégé, was excusable.<sup>233</sup> Traditional morality – and the law – required more chastity of women than of men. The legislation concerning marriage put forward by Augustus is indicative that among the upper classes a certain amount of extra-marital sexual freedom was taken by both men and women.<sup>234</sup> Women’s literacy was evidently not the source of the problem, but the image propagated by male authors of the literate woman reading and writing profligate poetry and

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<sup>231</sup> App. *BCiv* 4.32-34.

<sup>232</sup> Fantham (1996), 108, Williams (1996), 132. On the poets’ use of vocabulary associated with patronage, see White (1993), 87-90.

<sup>233</sup> See Treggiari (1991), 300.

<sup>234</sup> Treggiari (1991), 307.

sending adulterous love letters is symbolic of the tensions of the time.<sup>235</sup> At the same time, other literate women were engaged in less wanton pursuits while Cicero openly disapproved of Clodia, he corresponded with his wife and daughter regularly, and he was only annoyed that his friend Caerellia, who enjoyed philosophy, was having a copy made of his work *De Finibus* because she did not have the corrected and revised edition.<sup>236</sup>

The few extant fragments of and references to women authors suggest that they wrote in relatively mainstream genres. Sulpicia, from the circle of Messalla, wrote love poetry following the same metrical and thematic conventions as other love poets such as Catullus and Tibullus, but her verses are far from “immoral” in the sense that she does not suggest any contravention of female social norms, but expresses chaste but ardent love for “Cerinthus.” Similarly, the Sulpicia known to Martial was famous for her erotic verses about married love, these too do not really violate traditional standards, except that women did not usually express these feelings publicly. The disappointing absence of extant evidence for work of even the few female authors mentioned only by name in ancient sources makes it difficult to generalize about female writing styles and goals. It may be concluded that Roman women were not prolific and widely-circulated authors, though in the (usually) private, amateur domain we know of a handful of women who were tempted to put pen to paper, as it were, in order to set down certain thoughts about emotion, religion, as well as their own lives, writing in the same generic traditions as men. A certain incredulity concerning female talent is expressed by the fact that the husbands of female writers are sometimes thought to be the true authors of their works.

There is little indication of the reading preferences of Roman women. During their early education girls appear to have read the same school-texts as boys, as none of the sources account for a specifically feminine curriculum. Ovid offered a “reading list” for women which included Greek and Latin poets, Ovid advised men to avoid reading a similar list of love poets if they had just come from an unhappy love affair.<sup>237</sup> Although on the surface this may suggest that women and men read the same sort of poetry, Ovid’s text is a handbook for

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<sup>235</sup> “Although the Romans saw no essential connection between freedom and education, it was obvious that many cultivated women were also enjoying sexual liberty” Pomeroy (1977), 171.

<sup>236</sup> Cic *Att* 13 21a.

<sup>237</sup> Ov *Ars Am* 3 329-46, Ov *Rem Am* 759-765.

lovers and may be biased in that direction. Martial and Propertius imply that both women and men read their books. Pliny was pleased that his wife enjoyed reading his books and verses, but he did not mention any other of her favourite authors.

Although theoretically most women of the most privileged orders might have had the opportunity for schooling, most women whose literary interests are recorded are members, either by birth or by marriage, of families with a reputation for intellectual cultivation, which might suggest that these households in particular were the most disposed to provide an opportunity for women to be educated, or else were the most likely to remark upon their intellectual achievements.<sup>238</sup> Ancient authors tended to view women who stepped out of the private sphere to flaunt their education in public for pleasure as a sort of inverted ideal: on the one hand the love poets delighted in the company of intellectually stimulating and sensual women, on the other hand the satirists called women who enjoyed erotic poetry unchaste and despaired of proper Roman matrons who boasted that they were better educated than their husbands. Thus, although a number of literate women (although a very small percentage of all women in the Roman world) were admired and even encouraged in some quarters, there was underlying concern that their erudition – which was based on the same basic education as that of men – not become a threat to patriarchal control by asserting the same rights to power and prestige. The next chapter will consider how attitudes of admiration and restraint towards “literate” women were expressed in decorative and commemorative Roman art.

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<sup>238</sup> Rawson (1985), 46-7. They are thus unlike male authors: “literary figures do not on the whole inherit literary relationships or extend them from one member of a family to another. . . . Of the 121 poets of whose verse some trace remains . . . only seven are known to have had parents active in their own right as writers of either prose or verse” White (1993), 42.

### Chapter Three

#### Images of the Literate Woman in Art

A funerary relief in the British Museum shows a young girl seated on a chair, writing with a stylus on writing tablets held in her lap (catalogue no. 01).<sup>1</sup> On the right stands a lectern on which sits an open book-roll, while on the left a small dog places his paw beseechingly on the back of the girl's chair cushion. According to the Greek inscription on the monument, the girl's name was Avita (*Ἀβειῖτα*) and she was ten years and two months old when she died. Nothing else is known about Avita, and yet the choice of motifs on her monument – the writing tablets, the book-roll, the reading-desk, the girl's studious pose, and perhaps even the ignored pet – lead the viewer to believe that this young girl took a serious interest in her studies while she was alive. In contrast, the funerary inscription for Minicia Marcella, the deceased girl whose educational accomplishments Pliny so admired, has survived on her family's tomb near Rome, but the text reads only that she was the daughter of Fundanus, and lived twelve years, eleven months, and seven days. Neither the words of her epitaph nor the symbols on her funerary monument indicate anything about the intellectual precocity which Pliny described,<sup>2</sup> were it not for his surviving letter, nothing about Marcella's character or interests would be known today. Avita's funerary monument raises this question: was it common for girls and women to be commemorated for their intellectual achievements?

Identity can be constructed and affirmed through visual imagery, which “shows people idealized forms of themselves, forms by which to recognize the categories to which their society assigns them and by which to mark their hopes and desires. It also shows people how they differ from one another both as individuals and as members of categories.”<sup>3</sup> The aim of this chapter is to examine representations of Roman women holding the implements of literacy in order to consider the social significance of these images: how are they used as symbols of culture, power, and gender identity? An example of how the social roles of

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<sup>1</sup> References to the catalogue at the end of this chapter are shown as numbers in bracketed form, e.g. (cat. 01).

<sup>2</sup> *CIL* 6 16631. Her funerary inscription was surmounted by an eagle.

<sup>3</sup> Kampen (1996), 17.

Roman men and women could be differentiated in a visual sense can be seen in their dress for a man, the wearing of the toga symbolized his status as a citizen, the proper attire of a Roman matron was the *stola* (long dress) and the *palla* (veil or mantle).<sup>4</sup> When women wore the toga, it meant something quite different, for only female prostitutes wore that form of dress, the implication was that “being a woman and being politically active were, like wife and mistress, unassimilable categories.”<sup>5</sup> The images of “literate” women discussed in this chapter originate in the private sphere: the decoration in private homes in Pompeii, and the funerary monuments chosen to honour a family member. Yet these images became “public” as soon as other members of the family, as well as strangers, viewed the paintings which adorned the walls of the houses or passed by the monuments along the street or in the funerary precinct where they were erected,<sup>6</sup> and the book-roll and writing tablets convey messages to this public about a woman’s status and position within the family and society.

This study is based on a catalogue of art historical evidence which is included at the end of this chapter. Representations were chosen which featured girls and women (mortals, as opposed to Muses and gods) holding book-rolls (*volumina*, *rotuli*), writing tablets (*tabulae*) and pens (*styli*, *calami*). The scroll-box (*capsa*) makes an occasional appearance. Book-rolls can emerge in a variety of contexts, such as that of mythology or religion,<sup>7</sup> but our focus is on educational, cultural, or literary contexts (as far as they can be established). The evidence gathered for the catalogue does not aim to be a complete inventory of all examples in existence, but rather a representative sample. The evidence dates from approximately the first century BC to the mid-third century AD, with most examples falling into the later period.

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<sup>4</sup> Sebesta (1994), 48-9, Edwards (1993), 40

<sup>5</sup> Edwards (1993), 40

<sup>6</sup> Kampen (1991), 218-248 discusses the image of women on historical reliefs, where, she proposes, women represent the “private realm of family and reproduction.” Kleiner (1987) 545-556 shows that on the funerary altars of non-élite families a woman was most often commemorated for her family role as wife, daughter, and mother, and only occasionally for her profession or in the guise of a mythological divinity whom she might take after in some way, such as Venus or Diana.

<sup>7</sup> The rise of Christianity brought new meaning to the symbolism of the book. Christ and St. Peter teaching from book-rolls are motifs dating from the end of the second century AD, but increasing greatly in currency by the fourth century AD after Constantine’s adoption of Christianity, see Marrou (1964). By the fourth century many Christian sarcophagi show girls and women holding book-rolls (see, for example, Huskinson (1996) nos. 10.8, 10.14, 10.19). However, this time period is outside the scope of this study.

The geographical range of the catalogue is centered on Rome, but evidence from Italy, the Western provinces, and the Greek East helps to round out the picture.

Valuable studies on the image of the intellectual in Roman art have been undertaken but have focused primarily on the male figure, with only brief attention paid to the depiction of the female.<sup>8</sup> It has been thought that in funerary art, monuments which show men, women, and children with book-rolls and other implements of literacy can directly reflect the real-life interests of the deceased in education, literary activities, and philosophy, rather than eschatological themes.<sup>9</sup> Although the book-roll can take on different meanings depending on the context of the daily-life scenes (in commercial or business context it can represent an account book, or in a religious ceremony a text outlining the exact ritual to be followed),<sup>10</sup> the book-roll is usually the real-life “attribute” of poets, philosophers, teachers, and amateurs who aspire to these roles. This is especially made evident in scenes in which a “teacher” figure or the Muses, goddesses of artistic and intellectual inspiration, are present.<sup>11</sup> On funerary monuments the book-roll could even take on a symbolism beyond the realm of earthly intellectual culture. Pythagorean philosophy held that through development of the intellect and participation in the arts, a person might achieve the immortality of the gods and heroes, the Muses had the power to bring about this transfiguration or “heroization.”<sup>12</sup> One

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<sup>8</sup> Marrou (1964) provides in his essential work many examples of women with book-rolls and writing tablets and assumes that these women participated in reading and writing activities in the same way as men. Kampen (1981a) thoroughly studies artistic representations of working women in the city of Ostia, but literary paraphernalia are rarely seen. Harris (1989) briefly summarizes the archeological and art historical evidence (252, 263). Zanker (1995) presents a strong interpretation of the self-representation of men as intellectuals, but only touches on the similarities and differences in male and female imagery. A museum catalogue published by Yale University (1996) for a recent exhibition entitled *I, Claudia: Woman in Ancient Rome* contains a section entitled “Literacy among Roman Women”, and shows individual implements of reading and writing such as the stylus, waxed writing-tablets, and inkwell (nos. 97-100), as well as papyrus documents such as a marriage contract, loan agreement, and divorce agreement (nos. 93-95), but no images of women with reading and writing implements.

<sup>9</sup> Marrou (1964), 182-5. In particular Marrou refutes the theory that a book-roll on a grave marker represents the “Book of Destiny”, which, rolled up or held open to the last page, indicates that life too has come to an end. Marrou argues that too many “unrolled” or “open” book-rolls are seen in the hands of central figures, obviously the commemorated deceased, for the theory to hold true.

<sup>10</sup> See Marrou (1964), 190-1.

<sup>11</sup> Marrou (1964), 210-1.

<sup>12</sup> Marrou (1964), 231-257, for further discussion see Cumont (1942).

inscription explicitly links the meaning of the image of the book-roll with learning on a woman's monument from Sardis, dating from the first century BC. "the book-roll is for wisdom, that (wreath) which is on her head means public office, the one (alpha) that she is an only child, the work-basket is the symbol of orderly virtue, the flower for youth"<sup>13</sup> The book-roll does not represent literacy *per se*, but can connote refined or applied knowledge. The commemorator wished to celebrate this virtue in particular alongside those of community service and domestic duties, indicating that the deceased's family was pleased to publicize these qualities in a woman.

The history of the motif of the "literate" woman can be traced back to classical Greek art. A number of red-figure vases from 450 to 350 BC feature female figures with writing implements<sup>14</sup>. A large number of these figures can be recognized as Muses. Several, however, appear to be ordinary mortal women in typical domestic interiors, usually signified by the presence of a chair and pet bird<sup>15</sup>. In two of these scenes, a young man recites to a seated woman, perhaps preparing a school lesson at home. Three scenes show a woman reading to one or more companions, while on one vase a woman reads to herself. In four scenes musical instruments are present and the woman holding the book-roll may be either singing or reading aloud. The text of the book-rolls is usually interpreted as poetry, given the arrangement of dots and letters into a *stoichedon* pattern simulating the division of lines on the page<sup>16</sup>. Although the literary texts are unusually silent about the literacy of classical Greek women, these vases appear to portray reading as an enjoyable activity among the women of the household, presumably in the women's quarters, no women are actually seen in the act of composing poetry, although two vases show writing tablets and *styli* hanging on the walls<sup>17</sup>. One woman seen reading, however, is designated "Sappho" in an inscription by her

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<sup>13</sup> Lattimore (1962), 293. Transl. R. Lattimore: ἡ σοφί[α]{μι} μὲν βίβλιος, ὁ δ' αὖ περὶ κρατὶ φορηθεὶς / ἀρχα[ν]ή μανύει, μουνόγοναν δὲ τὸ ἔν, / εὐτάκτου δ' ἀρετᾶς τάλαρος μάννυμα, τὸ δ' ἄνθος / τὰν ἀ[κ]μάν. SEG 4, 634 5-8.

<sup>14</sup> Immerwahr (1964) and (1973), see also Pomeroy (1977), 51 and Cole (1981), 233-4.

<sup>15</sup> Cole (1981), 233. Immerwahr (1973), 147. The following examples are taken from Immerwahr (1964) and (1973), nos. 12, 12*bis*, 14, 16, 12*quat*, 15, 13, 17, 12*ter*, 16*bis*.

<sup>16</sup> Immerwahr (1964), 46.

<sup>17</sup> Cole (1981), 224.

head, and another woman holds a wreath above her head<sup>18</sup> It is possible that the other scenes of women reading are based on the image of Sappho (or the Muses) without the comparison explicitly stated<sup>19</sup> Women and girls are never seen in school-room scenes, though boys are depicted with their male teachers reading, reciting, and writing down lessons, and boys with book-rolls and writing tablets are also seen playing on their way to school or reading or playing music indoors<sup>20</sup> One vase does show a woman, writing-tablets in her hand, being pulled along by a female companion (perhaps a maid),<sup>21</sup> which has been explained as a girl being led to school However, an objection has been made that the figure is not a young girl and that no literary evidence corroborates the notion of girls' schooling outside the home<sup>22</sup>

Art historical evidence for the education of girls turns up in a small number of terra-cotta statuettes dating from the Hellenistic period One example portrays a little girl sitting by herself with an open book-roll on her lap, while another shows a girl and an older woman reading from a book-roll<sup>23</sup> Two other statuettes depict a little girl standing with writing tablets in hand Terra-cotta statuettes of men writing have also been found a seated scribe with stylus and writing-tablets, and boys receiving writing or reading lessons from male teachers<sup>24</sup> The teacher figures might represent a parent, a pedagogue, or a professional teacher During the Hellenistic period there is increased evidence for the schooling of girls<sup>25</sup> Other terra-cotta statuettes of "daily-life" scenes of children have also been found, including a little girl receiving a cooking lesson from an older female,<sup>26</sup> and possibly for some girls learning to read and write was one of those regular activities

Images of the intellectual on grave monuments became popular in the Greek East during the late second and first centuries BC A workshop in Byzantium, for example, produced a large number of monuments adapting the common scene of the funerary

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<sup>18</sup> Immerwahr (1964) no. 18

<sup>19</sup> Cole (1981), 223

<sup>20</sup> See Immerwahr (1964), nos. 1-11

<sup>21</sup> Beck (1975) no. X.3

<sup>22</sup> Cole (1981), 226

<sup>23</sup> Beck (1975), nos. X.15, Cole (1981), 226, Beck (1975) X.16, 1.17

<sup>24</sup> Beck (1975), nos. II.41, II.71, II.73, II.74, II.81, II.82, II.83

<sup>25</sup> See Pomeroy (1977)

<sup>26</sup> See Beck (1975), X.106

banquet, at which the deceased person could be seen reclining, into a “banquet of learning” The scene becomes a feast for the mind food is replaced by book-rolls and writing tools, where “cultivated gentlemen hold open book rolls instead of drinking vessels” on large and elaborate stelai.<sup>27</sup> One type of monument depicts a man reclining at a “banquet” of literary paraphernalia and holding a book-roll himself, and a woman sitting at his feet, her head covered by a *palla* (veil), the emblem of a respectable woman.<sup>28</sup> On another stele the woman is more than an observer (cat. 02) the seated woman holds writing tablets which one of her attendants passes to her. Another monument (cat. 03) from the same period shows a man reclining on a couch, holding a cup in one hand and a wreath in the other, but this time the woman, sitting on a lavishly decorated throne and dressed in a tunic and veiled with the *palla*, holds an open book-roll. On a shelf in the background is a box of book-rolls. It is rare to find scenes in which it is the woman, and not the man, who holds the book-roll, but the Greek inscription indicates that the monument was set up specifically for a woman, the male figure is probably not representative of a particular male member of her household, but a conventional decorative motif. That such monuments could be adapted to suit the particular tastes of the commemorator or commemorated is illustrated by an almost identical scene on another monument.<sup>29</sup> the reclining man is the same, but the seated female figure now holds a round fruit, and the book-rolls on the shelf above have disappeared, and carpenter’s tools have been carved onto the base the inscription is dedicated to a man. In Hellenistic art, the reader with the book-roll became a ubiquitous symbol of learning, even more so than in the Classical age, and as Roman imperialism spread into the Greek East, the Romans gradually embraced Hellenic culture as well.<sup>30</sup> For example, as early as the first century BC Roman aristocrats began to commission portrait statues of themselves in the guise of Greek poets, while still emphasizing their “Roman” status by keeping the shoes which announced their senatorial rank, in other words, they were adapting the intellectual images of Hellenism to show off their own cultural ambitions.<sup>31</sup> Book-rolls and other indicators of erudition became

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<sup>27</sup> Zanker (1995), 193 fig. 103

<sup>28</sup> For example, Marrou (1964), nos. 131, 132, 133.

<sup>29</sup> Koch (1988), no. 34.

<sup>30</sup> Zanker (1995), 190-211.

<sup>31</sup> Zanker (1995), 210-11.

important status symbols, expressing more than just literacy as we saw in the previous chapter, literary culture could emphasize wealth and leisure, and also the command of two cultures, one's own and that of a subject people. Roman women were not excluded from the use of this symbolism, but in some cases the symbolism was subtly adapted to stress the fact that men and women did not play equal roles in the power structure of Roman society.

### Wall Paintings

In ancient societies the place of women was traditionally viewed to be in the private sphere, the home. The houses preserved in the Roman city of Pompeii allow modern scholars to explore this environment. Recent scholarship on domestic space in Pompeii has shown that the Roman house was not a wholly private refuge for the family, but also a place where an elite male conducted his professional affairs, and "where the network of social contacts that provided the underpinning for all [the owner's] activities outside the house was generated and activated"<sup>32</sup>. There is no evidence that these Pompeian houses had separate "women's quarters", as in classical Athenian houses, segregated from those of the men.<sup>33</sup> The women of the household evidently played a conspicuous role in this "network of social contacts", and in the decoration of the houses this prestige could be manifested.<sup>34</sup> Although many Pompeian wall paintings depict mythological scenes featuring women, it has been suggested that a distinctively "Roman" stylistic interpretation of myths are visible: one portrayal of the sacrifice of Iphigenia, for example, shows a "naked" and "vulnerable" woman dragged to her fate, a painting in another house depicts a different episode from the life of Iphigenia and presents her as a proud Roman matron, fully clothed, crowned with laurels, and armed with a self-assured air.<sup>35</sup>

The same self-assertion is visible in a series of tondo portraits found in private houses which show the recurring motif of a woman holding writing implements. The portraits date from the early first century AD. An oft-reproduced example shows a young woman holding

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<sup>32</sup> Wallace-Hadrill (1994), 12.

<sup>33</sup> Fantham et al (1994), 339-40.

<sup>34</sup> Wall paintings in private houses "are designed not only to decorate, but to express the religion, culture, and taste of the owner" Strong (1976), 65.

<sup>35</sup> See Silberberg-Peirce (1993), 31, who compares the painting from the House of the Tragic Poet to the version in the Casa di L. Cecilio Giocondo.

writing-tablets in her left hand, while a stylus is held meditatively against her lips with her right hand (cat. 04). She wears a contemporary Claudian hair-style,<sup>36</sup> partly gathered back in a golden net, and gold earrings.<sup>37</sup> A woman depicted in the same pose, accompanied by her maid (cat. 05), is a variation on this theme.<sup>38</sup> A related portrait type shows a young couple, assumed to be husband and wife (cat. 06). This young woman also holds a stylus pressed to her lips and writing-tablets in one hand, while the man holds a rolled-up book-roll against his chin.<sup>39</sup> Men also appear in single portraits. The companion to the tondo of the solitary young woman, found on the same wall of the house, represents a young man holding a rolled-up book-roll against his chin, and wearing an ivy wreath, the attribute of a poet.<sup>40</sup>

Are these pictures meant to be portraits of the inhabitants of the house? Portrait paintings on walls are less common in Roman houses than sculpted portraits in the round, such as wax masks, busts, and *clipeatae imagines* (shield portraits).<sup>41</sup> Tondo portraits are a variation on the latter, and although the first images were of religious, political and literary personalities and were hung in public libraries and temples, eventually the style was appropriated by private individuals and displayed in the domestic sphere.<sup>42</sup> Scholars have concluded that the representations of these “literary” women are contemporary portraits,<sup>43</sup> though the features of the solitary young woman have been given a classicizing or idealizing treatment, similar to the features of women on portrait statues and busts of women from a

<sup>36</sup> Ling (1991), 158 suggests that her hairstyle might be slightly later, Neronian or early Flavian.

<sup>37</sup> Two similar portraits are listed, but not fully described, by Helbig (1868), no. 1423, from the Vicolo del Balcone Pensile, and no. 1424, from the House of M. Terentius Eudoxus (VI 13.6). A third portrait from the House of M. Gavius Rufus (VII 2.16) may be analogous. Schefold (1957), 171.

<sup>38</sup> A similar portrait is described by Helbig (1868), no. 1425, from Herculaneum.

<sup>39</sup> Scholars have debated whether this portrait represents a previous owner of the house, the magistrate P. Paquius Proculus and his wife, or the later owner, a baker, Terentius Neo and his wife. See Harris (1989), 263 n. 459. A similar portrait is listed by Schefold (1957), 202 to be found at the House of L. Cornelius Diadumenus (VII 12.26-7).

<sup>40</sup> Ling (1991), 158. For this portrait see Thompson (1979), fig. 10, Birt (1907), 115 fig. 64, Helbig (1868), no. 1420. A second portrait of a young man in a similar pose is described in Helbig (1868), no. 1420b.

<sup>41</sup> Ling (1991), 157.

<sup>42</sup> Zanker (1995), 214, Thompson (1979), 81.

<sup>43</sup> Zanker (1995), 214, Thompson (1979), 81, Maiuri (1953), 99.

slightly earlier date,<sup>44</sup> while the facial features of the “literary” couple show more evidence of the veristic strain of Roman portraiture.<sup>45</sup> It is impossible to confirm unequivocally that the portraits represent actual members of the households in which they were found, but clearly the motif itself was popular enough to be repeated in several houses.

Various interpretations have been suggested for the significance of the book-roll. Scholars have taken it as a marriage contract or legal brief attesting to the owner’s profession as a magistrate,<sup>46</sup> while the writing tablets of the women were seen as household accounts.<sup>47</sup> If the book-rolls and tablets represent literacy, it has been suggested that they connote more than simply functional reading and writing. Such well-dressed women might not be publicizing their ability to read and write – that would be expected of women of their stature – but rather their identities as members of the elite class, with the education and leisure to enjoy literature, the book-roll held by men might also attest to literary interests.<sup>48</sup> The book-rolls displayed by other male figures in tondi divulge the authors of the works contained in them on little tags, such as Homer and Plato,<sup>49</sup> displaying the fruits of a liberal arts education. “Still-life” paintings from other Pompeian houses prominently display writing materials.<sup>50</sup> Even if these portraits do not represent the actual intellectual activities of the inhabitants of the house, they may indicate their cultural aspirations. The couple portrait, for example was prominently placed in the *tablinum* of the house. For P. Paquius Proculus, the magistrate and former owner of the house, “this image would have presided over the *salutatio* or daily morning ritual of meeting political and business associates”, or, if the picture was painted during the occupancy of the baker, Terentius Neo, and his wife, “these

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<sup>44</sup> Ling (1991), 158.

<sup>45</sup> Maiuri (1953), 103 and Ling (1991), 159 comment on the realism of this particular portrait. The funerary portraits which have survived in the region of Fayum in Roman Egypt are painted in a very similar style, and are individualized enough to indicate that they were meant as actual portraits of the deceased. Ward-Perkins (1978), 122. For the Fayum portraits, see Doxiadis (1995).

<sup>46</sup> Thompson (1979) 79.

<sup>47</sup> Silberberg-Peirce (1993), 33.

<sup>48</sup> Zanker (1995) 213-214.

<sup>49</sup> Ling (1991), 159.

<sup>50</sup> These are “a conventional statement of a good education” Ling (1991), 158. See Helbig (1868) nos. 1719-1726 for scenes featuring various combinations of book-rolls, *calami*, inkpots, writing tablets and *styli*.

images would manifest their aspiration to a higher social class”<sup>51</sup> The houses in which all the portraits were found were either large or well-decorated, suggesting that the residences belonged to people of wealth.<sup>52</sup> It is noteworthy that these men and women are shown together in cultural “teams” this is evident in both the couple portrait (cat 06) and the twin portraits of the young woman (cat 04) and man displayed on the same wall. At first glance it seems that both men and women were admired for their learning, and this may indeed be the case. But their erudition is not denoted by exactly the same iconography. The woman is certainly seen in the act of composition, which is perhaps a charming allusion to Sappho.<sup>53</sup> Wax tablets were eminently suitable for composition because changes and corrections could easily be made. Wax tablets were usually used for school exercises, business ledgers, wills, and letters. Book-rolls, written on papyrus or parchment, could also be used in these contexts, as well as for the preservation of books of “high literature”,<sup>54</sup> such as Homer and Plato seen above. Possibly a relationship of power between the two genders is being subtly defined in these images: are a woman’s literary endeavours seen as ephemeral, and those of a man more enduring and illustrious?

On the other hand, another series of wall paintings show solitary female figures holding book-rolls (cat 07, 08, 09, 10). These do not appear to be portraits, but rather attractive decorative motifs. The female figures intently read open book-rolls in a variety of elegant poses – standing, sitting, leaning and walking – and are turned to show half-profiles both front and back, in contrast to most portraits, which are frontal.<sup>55</sup> In two cases (cat 08 and 09) the figures are artfully posed against a stylized architectural backdrop. One scholar has considered the figure in (cat 07) to be a Muse,<sup>56</sup> and indeed all the figures have somewhat idealized features. The manner in which the book-rolls are held is quite exaggerated: more of the page has been unrolled than is necessary, which allows the centre of the page to hang down in a deep and graceful curve, this makes for a charming pose but

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<sup>51</sup> Silberberg-Pearce (1993), 33. Maiuri (1953), 103 remarks “this affectation of literacy interests was a foible of the Pompeians of the humbler ranks of society when sitting for their portraits”

<sup>52</sup> Harris (1989), 263 n. 459

<sup>53</sup> Maiuri (1953), 103

<sup>54</sup> Johnston (1973), 318, Harris (1989), 194-5

<sup>55</sup> Birt (1907), 162

<sup>56</sup> Birt (1907), 164

would render actual reading difficult.<sup>57</sup> Solitary male readers appear in ornamental contexts as well.<sup>58</sup> These male figures are normally dressed only in the *pallium*, the traditional dress of philosophers, and are also seen sitting and standing amidst stylized architectural structures such as columns and arches. These idealized figures of both sexes show that reading was considered an elegant pastime and thus an agreeable decorative theme.

### Funerary Sculpture

Funerary monuments were set up by private individuals to perpetuate the memory of persons close to them. How the commemorator chose to do this through images and inscriptions reveals information not only concerning the life and ambitions of the deceased and the commemorator, but also the conventions which Roman society had adopted to express these values. Monuments were expensive to set up: materials such as marble and stone, and labour for the extensive sculpting, were costly. The most elaborately carved sarcophagi were probably purchased only by the wealthy, though plainer monuments were of course available and used by all levels of society.<sup>59</sup> We must therefore expect the evidence from the most ornate to be biased, once again, towards the more privileged of society.

Though a rich source of information about how Romans perceived their identities within Roman society, funerary monuments must be studied with caution. Identification is the first problem. Although inscriptions survive in great numbers by themselves, only a few pictorial monuments still have intact inscriptions, for those without, the deceased's name, age, sex, social status and family connections are difficult to ascertain. In the absence of other indicators, one must simply assume that the central figure, or the figure with facial features carved into a portrait, represent the deceased.<sup>60</sup> Another difficulty is related to the selection of the monument. The commemorator's choice of monument for the deceased depended on the designs available when the monument was required: a monument could be purchased in a hurry from a limited assortment,<sup>61</sup> if the commemorator did not wish to commission a

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<sup>57</sup> Birt (1907), 166

<sup>58</sup> See Birt (1907), nos. 96, 97, 101, 103 is a variation on a tondo painting.

<sup>59</sup> Toynbee (1971), 270.

<sup>60</sup> Marrou (1964), 185-7.

<sup>61</sup> Walker (1985), 43.

special image. In this case it is possible that a figure or iconography on a monument does not have particularly close association with the deceased at all. However, surely not all choices were arbitrary, and one must assume that the commemorator chose a design which reflected the interests or aspirations of the deceased (or how the commemorator wished to memorialize the deceased). Workshops produced certain types of designs for export and sale, and the designs would necessarily try to cater to the tastes and trends of the potential buyers. Therefore despite the absence of verifiable data about the deceased and the commemorator, some cultural information can be construed from the images on these monuments. A last problem is that of survival. Vast numbers of monuments and inscriptions have undoubtedly been lost over time. From the few surviving examples of “literate” women depicted on monuments, it is impossible to make far-reaching generalizations, much less generate statistical data, about the level of Roman women’s literacy or interest in literary culture. However, the individual vignettes which have survived reveal certain artistic conventions concerning the representation of women, which may be indicative of Roman attitudes towards the position of educated women not just within her grieving family, but in the larger context of society. “there can be no doubt at all . . . that all the decorated marble and stone sarcophagi . . . were meant to be admired and meditated on by passers-by, if ranged along roadsides, or by relatives and friends, if placed in tombs or in sepulchral precincts. Many bear inscriptions that were obviously intended to be read”<sup>62</sup>

For the most part the monuments under discussion in this chapter date from the second and third centuries AD, due to the accidents of survival and a change in commemorative habits under the Principate. From the late Republic until the time of Trajan, cremation was the usual burial practice among the Romans. During the early second century AD inhumation seems to have become the preferred fashion, and thus more stone sarcophagi appeared during this and later periods. The scenes sculpted in low relief on the faces and lids of the sarcophagi generally show episodes from mythology as well as real life (such as biographical narrations and battle scenes), or purely decorative motifs, though many different combinations were possible. A repertoire of stock motifs developed slowly, and designs were imitated from workshop to workshop. Sarcophagi were produced in great

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<sup>62</sup> Toynbee (1971), 275

numbers and exported throughout the empire, and details left unfinished by the sculptors, such as the portrait faces of the deceased and inscriptions, were filled in later. In some cases these details were never finished.<sup>63</sup> Portraits became increasingly popular during and after the reign of Hadrian and could appear in medallions in the centre of the monument or carved into the faces of mythological, biographical, or heroicized figures.<sup>64</sup>

It is axiomatic that funerary commemoration seeks to construct a positive, if not idealized, identity for the deceased person, with his or her virtues (actual or professed) rather than flaws accentuated.<sup>65</sup> Studies of the funerary inscriptions dedicated to women show that conventional virtues ascribed to women created a portrait in words “maintaining the highest standards expected by her social class”<sup>66</sup> as well as celebrating their commitment to their families.<sup>67</sup> Just as inscriptions follow certain formulas, the visual imagery used to create an identity for deceased women follows certain artistic conventions. Roman women are often depicted wearing the tunic and *palla*, the mantle which identifies a female citizen, they are sometimes veiled with the *palla*, as was traditional for a woman who ventured outdoors and wished to show proper *modestia*.<sup>68</sup> On many of the monuments considered in this chapter, Roman men are portrayed as “intellectuals”, identifiable by their uniform of tunic and *pallium* (mantle), or sometimes only the *pallium*. This contrasts with the toga which male Roman citizens wore for official public business, *negotium*.<sup>69</sup> Objects associated with men and women on funerary reliefs are frequently stock motifs: the distaff, for example, is a traditional symbol of domesticity and virtue. Similarly, as we have seen, the attribute of the book-roll need not denote literacy *per se* but rather “education” or “wisdom” in a more general sense. The depiction of the ability to read and write, as we have seen, is connected to other larger issues such as status.

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<sup>63</sup> Ramage-Ramage (1991), 188-193; Walker (1985), 18-26.

<sup>64</sup> Walker (1985), 36.

<sup>65</sup> Lattimore (1962), 299.

<sup>66</sup> Fischler (1994), 117.

<sup>67</sup> Lattimore (1962), 296-7 noted that “old-fashioned” virtues, such as wool-working, simplicity, obedience, and frugality are more common in women’s epitaphs. See also Treggiari (1991), 231-251. “Wives are praised for their lack of guile, for their dedication to their families, and for putting their husband first” (245). Education is only rarely alluded to.

<sup>68</sup> Sebesta (1994), 48-49.

Book-rolls and writing tablets are found on funerary monuments for children which portray scenes of the child's education. A reading or lesson scene is often one of several "biographical narration" scenes which represent the child's life. These scenes generally show the child's first bath, lessons, and *conclamatio* (gathering at the child's death-bed), although other scenes may be added. This "core" unit of scenes has been seen to symbolize the child's arrival into the world, his preparation for adulthood, and his departure from life.<sup>70</sup> These types of biographical sarcophagi commemorate only boys or men. However, on one sarcophagus for a married couple another type of biographical narration is seen, which appears to represent scenes from the life of the wife on left side and from the life of the husband on the right (cat. 11). There are five scenes in total: from left to right, a child's first bath; a lesson scene; a couple joined in marriage by the *dextrarum iunctio* (joining of hands); barbarians submitting to a victorious general; and a number of barbarian prisoners. The faces of the seated and veiled woman in the first bath scene, the man as the victorious general, and both figures in the marriage scene were left unfinished by the sculptor, and evidently portrait faces of the deceased were meant to be added.<sup>71</sup> In the lesson scene the pupil is a little girl, holding writing-tablets and a stylus. A woman veiled with the *palla* stands behind her, as do five Muses: one of the Muses leans forward to read over the little girl's shoulder. Is the veiled woman meant to represent the wife supervising the education of the couple's little girl? Or could it be the wife herself at a young age? The scenes at left definitely connote the domestic sphere of a typical Roman wife, and those at right the military sphere of a Roman male.<sup>72</sup> We have already seen from literary sources that elite girls were normally educated at home, and that the Roman mother could be responsible for overseeing the education of her children. The Roman woman commemorated by such a monument would be seen as playing the role of (or having received the upbringing of) a proper *matrona*, just as her husband would be admired for serving the empire as behooves all male citizens,<sup>73</sup> the imagery is symbolic of the

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<sup>69</sup> Zanker (1995), 274

<sup>70</sup> See Marrou (1964), Kampen (1981a) and (1981b), Amedick (1991) and Huskinson (1996)

<sup>71</sup> Marrou (1964), 42

<sup>72</sup> Marrou (1964), 42

<sup>73</sup> See Strong (1976), 205-6 for the "Roman virtues of *clementia*, *pietas*, and *concordia*" represented by such military scenes on the monuments of Roman men

most admired virtues in Roman society, even if it did not reflect the actual lives of this couple

Two other fragments are probably from similar monuments. The first (cat. 12) shows a little girl kneeling in front of a woman who sits relaxedly on the floor. The little girl reads to the woman from a book-roll which she holds open with both hands, while a Muse stands in the background holding up a scenic mask. The rest of the sarcophagus is lost, but it has been suggested that part of a figure broken off at the extreme right might correspond to a similar figure of a nurse seen at the extreme left of the bath scene on the monument discussed above (cat. 11).<sup>74</sup> In this case the fragment might be part of a similar husband-wife biographical narration as well. A second fragment (cat. 13), now lost, is reported to have shown a little girl being taught lessons by a woman, in the company of a Muse, which has a strong correlation to the previous two examples.

In contrast, a lesson scene on a boy's sarcophagus usually shows a boy, about to recite, holding a closed book-roll and standing before his seated male teacher (who also holds a book-roll), or reading to the teacher from an open book-roll, or reading while the teacher reads over the pupil's shoulder, sometimes with Muses presiding over the instruction.<sup>75</sup> The lesson scenes for the girls and the boys are similar in that both make use of the stock symbols of erudition, book-rolls and writing-tablets, as well as the presence of the Muses. One notable difference is that girls appear to be supervised by a female figure, perhaps a mother or female pedagogue, while the boys are taught by a male teacher, who might be a professional teacher, pedagogue, or even the boy's father. There is a record of a sarcophagus on which a little girl stood facing a male teacher who held an open book-roll (cat. 14), but as the monument has been lost it is difficult to tell if this is actually a lesson scene analogous to the preceding examples: the girl, for example, is not said to hold a book-roll.<sup>76</sup> The monument for Avita (cat. 01), described at the beginning of the chapter, appears to be

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<sup>74</sup> Amedick (1991), 65-66

<sup>75</sup> Reciting: Marrou (1964), no. 2, reading, nos. 3, 5, 6, 7, reading while teacher reads over shoulder, nos. 4, 12, Muses in background, nos. 4, 12

<sup>76</sup> A fresco painting from Rome (cat. 15) depicted a little girl reading from a book-roll to a seated male teacher, who follows the reading in a book-roll which he holds open in his lap, following the pattern outlined above for a typical lesson scene for boys. However, this fresco dates from the late Republic or early Principate, pre-dating the other monuments under discussion by at least one hundred years.

unique although it has been noted that some monuments for children depict a single scene – the lesson scene – to represent the short life of the child,<sup>77</sup> Avita sits writing by herself, without a teacher present. We may conclude that for a few girls as well as boys educational formation was symbolic of their childhood and worthy of commemoration.

The evidence from funerary inscriptions confirms that deceased children could be remembered for their intellectual achievements. In addition, personal information regarding the social rank of the commemorated can be discerned in the nomenclature of the individual and other biographical details. For the most part the little girls in the following list are not of high status: they may be slave, freed, or the daughters of freed slaves. Geminia Agathe, aged five, was “well-disposed to learning” (*ingenio docili*) in addition to other traits.<sup>78</sup> Flavia Dionysias, aged seven, was the *verna* (slave born in the master’s house) of Annia Isias, and would, according to her epitaph, have grown to be “the most learned of all girls.”<sup>79</sup> The epitaph for Magnilla, aged eight, gives no clues as to her status, although it relates that she was “beautiful and wondrous in good sense, learned beyond her years, sweet and deserving of praise.”<sup>80</sup> At least one little girl from the province of Gaul was remembered for her precocious intelligence. Scope, aged nine, had been taught “all the arts” by her mistress and would have grown up to be “very learned.”<sup>81</sup> Her single name suggests that she might have still been a slave when she died. Caecinia Bassa, aged ten and the daughter of Sextus, was described as “more clever than all her age-mates” in addition to being dutiful and virtuous.<sup>82</sup> Salvidiena Faustilla, aged fifteen, and daughter of a freedwoman, Hilara Salvidiena, was commemorated by her deeply grieving mother as “accomplished in all the arts.”<sup>83</sup> A little girl named Claudia was described only as *docta* by her mother Claudia Eutychia, whose name may indicate that she was a freedwoman.<sup>84</sup> At least two of the girls were trained professionals. Phoebe Vocontia, aged twelve, was commemorated by P. Fabius Faustus and Pompeia

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<sup>77</sup> See Marrou (1964), 199.

<sup>78</sup> CIL 6 19007

<sup>79</sup> CIL 6 18324 *Quod si longa tuae mansissent tempora vitae / doctior in terris nulla puella foret*

<sup>80</sup> CIL 6 21846 *Formosa et sensu mirabilis et super annos docta, decens, dulcis, grataque blanditius*

<sup>81</sup> CIL 9 3122 *Ego quae dominae cara puella fui quae me omnes artes docuit - doctissima cum essem*

<sup>82</sup> CIL 6 7898 *Pia filia, virgo pudica, excedens cunctas ingenio aequalis*

<sup>83</sup> CIL 6 25808 *Eruditae omnibus artibus*

Sabbatis, both of freed status, and was an *embolaria* (an actress who performed during theatre interludes), and her epitaph recorded that she was “accomplished in all the arts”<sup>85</sup> The monument of Eucharis Licinia, aged fourteen and of freed status, features a long and elaborate inscription set up by her (unnamed) parents. She too appears to have been a mime-actress on the stage, and her epitaph emphasizes her talents<sup>86</sup> She is stated twice to be “accomplished in all the arts”, with the further embellishment “as if by the hand of the Muses themselves”. Her epitaph further claims that had she lived longer, she would have “flourished in the arts” (*floreret artibus*)

Although these inscriptions have been noted previously for their connection to the education of girls,<sup>87</sup> little attention has been paid to the fact that these girls, for the most part, do not come from elite backgrounds. They appear to have received some education, but we would like to know more about the nature and purpose of this schooling. Were the girls trained for potential jobs requiring erudition, such as amanuensis or reader? At least two of the girls were stage performers, so we must not assume that training in the *artes* necessarily refers to reading and writing. Another possible scenario is that some of the girls were provided with an education by their parents so that they might improve their chances in society, either with the practical application of education in commercial business, or with the prestige that a liberal education could bestow. The adjective *docta* and its variants which occurs in so many of these epitaphs is reminiscent of the *doctae puellae* discussed in the previous chapter, women who were admired for their cultivation, although in this commemorative context the connotation is wholly positive. Possibly this language is being emulated by people of less privileged social levels to construct a more distinguished identity for themselves. The commemorators of these girls are particularly proud of their achievements: in six of the nine examples, the little girl’s intellectual accomplishment is her more praised character trait.

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<sup>84</sup> *CIL* 6 15415. No age for Claudia is given.

<sup>85</sup> *CIL* 6 10127. *Artis omnium erodita* [sic].

<sup>86</sup> *CIL* 6 10096. *Docta erodita* [sic] *omnes artes* . . . *docta erodita* [sic] *paene musarum manu, quae modo nobilium ludos decorauit choro / et graeca in scaena prima populo apparuit*. Wiseman (1985), 30-32 discusses her epitaph, explaining her profession.

<sup>87</sup> See Marrou (1964), 201-7, and Lattimore (1962), 295-97.

If we turn to the monuments which appear to commemorate adult women with the iconography of literacy, we can identify two groups: women who are honoured alone and women who appear on monuments beside men, and which were presumably made for married couples. Of the first group is a monument from Carthage, a series of stucco reliefs from a mausoleum (cat 16). A woman, in all likelihood the deceased, is shown in three different scenes. In the first, she is having her hair coiffed by an attendant. In the second, she is spinning wool (the head is missing, but the pose is similar to that of the woman in the other scenes). In the third, she holds a book-roll open with both hands,<sup>88</sup> her feet on a small footrest. Marks have been scratched onto the book-roll to suggest writing. This set of scenes might be a sort of “biographical narration” scene for an affluent and cultured woman, who had the leisure to spend time at her toilette and to engage in reading. A woman of such obvious wealth would hardly need to make her own clothes, the wool-working iconography may once again be only symbolic of her domestic virtue, as indeed the reading scene may be only symbolic of wisdom.

A related example (cat 17) from Rome shows a woman seated in profile, but with her upper body twisted slightly to face front, wearing the matron's *palla* as well as bracelets around her arms and a diadem on her head. A small dog with a collar sits on a cushion at her feet. She proudly holds up in her left hand an open book-roll, on which a Greek inscription, *πάσης μουσικῆς μετέχουσα*, proclaims that she possesses all the arts of the Muses. A Latin inscription above her head indicates that her name was Claudia Italia, that she died at age thirty and that her husband Claudius Hermias set up the monument for her.<sup>89</sup> The nomenclature of the couple indicates that they were of freed status. Her elaborate chair and her jewelry show off her wealth, and Italia (or her husband) appears to have been proud of her cultural accomplishments. Greek may have been used in the epitaph about her erudition to emphasize that she was educated not only in Latin but also in Greek, the language of literary culture as we have seen among the Roman élite.

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<sup>88</sup> This pose imitates that of a young man on a famous Attic stele from the fifth century BC: a seated young man, seen in profile facing right, reads from a book-roll held open on his lap, while a dog lies under his chair. See Reinach (1912), Vol. III 47, no. 2.

<sup>89</sup> A small figure of child is faintly sculpted beside her, holding a small ball, the words *Tyche delicata* are sketched above her head. She may be the deceased's daughter. Marrou (1964), 77.

An elaborate third century monument (cat. 18) uses the iconography of education in several different ways. The anterior face is divided into three panels separated by colonnades, and in the central panel stands a woman veiled with the *palla* and holding a rolled-up book-roll, together with the small figure of an Eros. In the left-hand panel a bearded man is seated in a chair, holding an open book-roll, lecturing two women (both wearing the *palla*), who stand facing him, each with a closed book-roll in hand. In the right-hand panel is an analogous scene, except that only one woman holds a closed book-roll. The portrait of the woman in the centre appears to be repeated on one of the female figures in the side panels. The lateral faces of the sarcophagus continue the theme of education (cat. 19). The left face shows a woman, her hair coiffed in a contemporary third century style, holding an open book-roll and a pen with a Muse on either side. The right face shows the same woman, holding a closed book-roll, again flanked by two Muses. It has been thought that this monument represented an intellectual family, with the father in the role of the teacher, while his wife and four daughters bring the number of muses up to nine<sup>90</sup>. This is possible but difficult to verify. The multiplicity of images related to education – the omnipresent book-rolls, the Muses, lesson scenes as well as a scene of solitary composition – makes it clear that education was a large part of the life of the woman commemorated in the central panel, perhaps more than a leisure time activity or symbol of wealth and prestige. It may be noteworthy that the woman never appears in the guise of the teacher herself.

A popular type of monument in the third century AD depicts a row of Muses along the long anterior face of a sarcophagus and with the figure of the deceased in the centre. One such monument shows a woman as that central figure (cat. 20) holding a closed book-roll. On the left stand five Muses, and on the right Minerva and the other four Muses. The Muses carry their various attributes and their hairstyles and feathered head-dresses differentiate them from the woman in the centre, who is dressed in the usual tunic and *palla* of a Roman matron. A second monument (cat. 21) is almost identical, except that this woman also has a *capsa* (box for holding book-rolls) at her feet. Men too were featured on duplicates of these monuments,<sup>91</sup> both sexes, therefore, identify themselves with the Muses

<sup>90</sup> Zanker (1995), 274. Marrou (1964), 87 also suggests that the male teacher is the deceased woman's husband, if not an idealized teacher figure.

<sup>91</sup> Wegner (1966), no. 168, and Marrou (1964), no. 155.

as the goddesses who inspire the arts. A third monument shows the deceased woman as the “tenth” Muse in a row (cat. 22). A variation on this type of monument (cat. 23) shows a woman seated in the centre of the frieze of Muses, five on left and four on the right. The woman is dressed in the matron’s tunic and *palla*, holds an open book-roll in one hand and extends her other arm in an orator’s gesture. Unfortunately, all ten heads are missing and their absence makes further identification of the woman based on portrait features or hairstyle impossible.<sup>92</sup> Once again this pose is also adopted by men: one example<sup>93</sup> shows a man in an almost identical scene, though his chair is on a small platform, and a tenth female figure – a mortal woman, with her face carved in portrait and her hair in a contemporary style, completes the scene at the far left. Perhaps she is the wife or a female relative of the man represented in the centre.

A few fragments of other monuments have survived, but almost no context can be reconstructed for them. A seated woman reads to a second, standing woman (cat. 24) on the left side of the fragment, while on the right side the scene is repeated with two men, one seated and reading to the other standing in front. Another woman, dressed in the tunic and *palla* of a matron and her face worked as a portrait, holds an open book-roll and looks off into the distance (cat. 25). In a second, similar fragment, the woman holds an open book-roll in one hand and extends her other arm in the gesture of an orator (cat. 26).

As in the case of the little girls, a few epitaphs celebrate the intellectual gifts of grown women. Euphrosyne, aged twenty, was described as “dutiful, learned in the nine Muses, and a philosopher”<sup>94</sup>. Euphrosyne Paragmia was celebrated as a *docta puella* among other good qualities by her freedman husband.<sup>95</sup> On an inscription accompanying an image of a funerary banquet, a man honours his betrothed Pedana with the adjective *docta*. On the sides of the monument were carved pictures of a lyre, laurels, and swans.<sup>96</sup> On another inscription, *docta* is more precisely described as musical ability. Pollia Saturnina, aged thirty,

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<sup>92</sup> Marrou (1964), 104 and Wegner (1966), 86, agree that the woman in the centre cannot be Mnemosyne, mother of the Muses, as there is no precedent for her appearance among the Muses.

<sup>93</sup> Marrou (1964) no. 21 = Wegner (1966) no. 167.

<sup>94</sup> *CIL* 6 33898 *Pia, docta novem musis, philosopha*

<sup>95</sup> *CIL* 6 9693 *Nobilis Euphrosyne, facilis, formosa, puella docta, opulenta, pia, casta, pudica, proba*

<sup>96</sup> *CIL* 6 17050

commemorated along with her two children, was described as “accomplished in song”<sup>97</sup> As we saw in the inscriptions for young girls, the adjective *docta* may have been employed on monuments for women of freed status as sign of education and upward mobility, on the other hand, it could indicate training in a certain art form, such as music

On monuments which feature “couples” and were probably designed to honour both a husband and wife (though of course one could predecease the other),<sup>98</sup> women appear in a wide variety of intellectual contexts. One type of monument is the *klina*,<sup>99</sup> which features statues of the deceased reclining atop their sarcophagus. Many *klinai* monuments exist showing individual boys or men holding book-rolls,<sup>100</sup> but individual women or girls with book-rolls are not seen. Statues of husbands and wives reclining together on *klinai* might show the husband holding a book-roll, but the wife never does. Instead, she might hold a garland or a musical instrument, if anything at all.<sup>101</sup> This artistic convention might presuppose that a book-roll is somehow a more appropriate attribute for the male figure.<sup>102</sup>

On a different type of monument this distinction is also underlined. A number of strigillated “mandorla” sarcophagi – on which the central panel of the anterior face is covered with S-shaped grooves and a narrow panel on either side is carved with figures – appear to have been made for couples: a female figure normally occupies the left-hand panel and a male figure the right-hand panel, both facing inwards. One series depicts a seated man in the right-hand panel holding a book-roll, while the woman seated at left holds a musical instrument.<sup>103</sup> On two “single-frieze” sarcophagi, the seated female musician on the extreme left is separated from the seated man with the book-roll at the extreme right by the figures of eight<sup>104</sup> or nine<sup>105</sup> Muses who fill in the space between. Once again the book-roll is a particularly “masculine” attribute. An exception to this rule, however, can be seen on a

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<sup>97</sup> CIL 6 10131 *Enituit docta sonare mele*.

<sup>98</sup> For monuments for couples, see Marrou (1964), 293-297 and Kleiner (1987), 545-556.

<sup>99</sup> For *klinai* monuments, see Toynbee, 268-70.

<sup>100</sup> Boys Marrou (1964) nos 134-6 Men nos 137-140.

<sup>101</sup> Garland Marrou (1964) nos 141-7, musical instrument, no 150, no attribute, nos 148-9.

<sup>102</sup> See Harris (1989), 259 n 441.

<sup>103</sup> Marrou (1964), nos 207-212.

<sup>104</sup> Marrou (1964), no 215.

<sup>105</sup> Marrou (1964), no 216.

monument from Spain (cat 27) In the extreme left compartment stands a woman, dressed in tunic and *palla*, holding a closed book-roll against her leg in her left hand, in the extreme right compartment, a man, dressed in the *pallium*, holds a book-roll across his chest in his right hand This monument approaches a type of equality of portrayal, yet the poses are not quite similar

On yet another type of “couple” monument the anterior face of the sarcophagus is divided into three panels In the centre panel half-open doors are shown, with a figure slipping through In the left-hand panel stands a woman, holding an open book-roll, her arm extended in an oratorical gesture, accompanied by a second woman and the bust of a woman on a pedestal In the right-hand panel stands a man, holding a closed book-roll, flanked by a man and the bust of a man on a pedestal (cat 28) This work is closely related to another in which the central panel is taken up by closed doors (cat 29) In the left panel a woman, coiffed in a contemporary style, is seated holding what may be writing-tablets, with a Muse standing on either side She raises her hand in a gesture answered by the man in the right-hand panel, who sits holding an open book-roll, also accompanied by Muses In both these examples writing implements are the attributes of both husband and wife, but again there is a subtle difference in their manner of presentation The first instance shows a distinct division of the sexes: the woman is surrounded by an entourage of women, and her husband, an entourage of men In the second instance, the woman is presented as the parallel of the man in every way but one: he holds a book-roll, and she holds writing tablets

Monuments frequently pair a seated male figure holding a book-roll with a standing woman who attends thoughtfully to his reading,<sup>106</sup> in some cases he makes an oratorical gesture towards her with his hand, seeming to include her in his discourse<sup>107</sup> Sometimes his audience is actually a Muse,<sup>108</sup> in others, a mortal woman assumes the pose of the Muse Polyhymnia: she listens to the reader while leaning one elbow horizontally on a column, while the other hand supports the chin<sup>109</sup> On one monument (cat 30), in the centre of a row of Muses an attentive mortal woman holds a book-roll in her hand as she turns slightly

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<sup>106</sup> Marrou (1964), nos 16, 17, 79, 80, 81, 86, 87

<sup>107</sup> Marrou (1964), nos 78, 85

<sup>108</sup> Marrou (1964), nos 82, 90

<sup>109</sup> Marrou (1964), nos 93-97, 99 “La femme s’associe à son travail par son attitude recueillie” (89)

towards a seated man, who holds a partially unrolled book-roll and makes an oratorical gesture, as though commenting on the text to her<sup>110</sup> Although she is portrayed with a symbol of literacy or literary culture as well, the seated man, reminiscent of the teacher figures in other scenes, appears to be the dominant intellectual figure through his pose and gesture. Another monument of this genre (cat. 31) survives together with its inscription, which allows us to understand more fully what this type of iconography wishes to represent. L. Pullius Peregrinus, a member of the equestrian class and a centurion, is the central male figure who is seated with an open book-roll<sup>111</sup> Although he is dressed in the tunic and *pallium* of a philosopher, his hair and beard are styled in a contemporary Roman style<sup>112</sup> A woman, veiled with the *palla* and coiffed in a contemporary style, holds a closed book-roll and stands beside him in the usual pose of the Muse “Polyhymnia.” Three bearded men, representing philosophers, are found on either side of the couple, and eight Muses peer over their shoulders from the background. This monument represents *par excellence* the intellectual ambitions of an amateur, who is surrounded by the symbols of philosophy and the arts as his entourage, and his dutiful wife beside him<sup>113</sup>

These monuments for couples, found mostly in Italy but occasionally in the provinces, clearly show that both husband and wife can be represented as engaging in the intellectual activities which the book-roll symbolizes. In almost every case, the female figure plays a subordinate role. This is suggested by pose as well as attribute. It has been suggested that in these situations the wife assumes the character of Muse for her husband, and her attentiveness to his interests represents the virtue of *concordia*. “this is especially clear on the sarcophagi which show husband and wife as teacher and Muse, seated or standing opposite one another, since here the pairing of the intellectual and Muse serves also as a metaphor for conjugal harmony”<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Marrou (1964), 52.

<sup>111</sup> For the accompanying inscription, see *CIL* 6.3558.

<sup>112</sup> Zanker (1995), 274.

<sup>113</sup> Marrou (1964), 103.

<sup>114</sup> Zanker (1995), 274-5, 328. See also 272.

## Conclusion

Book-rolls and writing tablets, conventional symbols of literacy and literary culture, can take on broader meanings in Roman culture: they are symbols of education, literary or philosophical inclinations, and social status. Decorative painting and funerary sculpture reveal that women as well as men could take advantage of this symbolism to enhance their identities as refined and distinct. Literacy, not widespread in the Roman world, was most accessible to the privileged orders, yet even those who did not know how to read or write would undoubtedly have come into contact with the written word. To the illiterate, the symbols of literacy would connote a certain power which they themselves did not possess. For the educated élite or the upwardly mobile, the symbols of literacy allude to more than reading and writing, an impression of literary culture was the desired effect. Through the symbolism of books, a person could assert his or her identity to both audiences: membership among the refined élite was affirmed, and differentiation from the uneducated was achieved.<sup>115</sup> Inscriptional evidence has shown that the symbols of literacy were adopted by persons of freed status who wished to create an identity of higher social standing.<sup>116</sup> The majority of the monuments in this chapter do not have inscriptional evidence which can assist in deducing the social level of the people who commissioned the work. Whoever they were, however, they wanted to recognize and advertise intellectual achievement.

Compared to men, women are portrayed relatively rarely with the iconography of erudition. When images of literate women do appear, however, basic literacy is taken for granted, but the power associated with literary culture is expressed in other ways. When men and women are depicted together, definite but differing degrees of stereotyping can often be detected in the artistic conventions, which imply that intellectual experience of Roman women was not considered the same as for Roman men.<sup>117</sup> For example, in the decorative portraits from Pompeii, different implements set “literate” men and women apart (in

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<sup>115</sup> See Kaster (1988), 15 for literary culture as a “separator”

<sup>116</sup> Zanker (1995), 252. “While for the élite education and intellectual prowess were an avenue to success in the competition for status and influence, for broad strata of the prosperous bourgeoisie these inevitably became tokens of social acceptability”

<sup>117</sup> Zanker (1995), 271. In artistic representation, “the operations of power can render certain things visible and mask others, can enforce and control in clear and sometimes brutal ways, yet power can also work with great subtlety” Kampen (1996), 14.

contrast to the solitary, Muse-like female figures who hold book-rolls as do idealized philosopher figures in ornamental painting) On funerary monuments, girls appear more frequently with a female teacher figure than a male; while boys never appear with a female teacher In addition, the poses assumed by the pupils are often different a male teacher is usually seated, and the pupils stand formally before him, placing him in a position of power The female “teachers” seen with girls either stand or sit on the floor, and do not hold book-rolls themselves On monuments which feature couples, the female figure is almost never shown as equal in pose, gesture, or attribute to her male companion On the occasional examples in which she approaches this equality it is noticeable that her entourage is also female (cat 24, 28), or her pose is slightly different (cat 27, 30, 31) More commonly a female figure is portrayed in a receptive, listening pose, rather than as the seated “dominant” intellectual This subtle language of imagery preserve the traditional and conventional image of female who is submissive to the authority of the male head of the household<sup>118</sup> The presence of women on these monuments nevertheless indicates that it was seen as important to include women taking part, even in a relatively passive sense, in the intellectual life of the family, the couple is remembered as having shared literacy culture together, in the style of Pliny and his wife Education, literature, and philosophy were not the domain solely of the men whether women are shown with book-rolls, musical instruments, or simply as attentive audiences, they help to project an image of “intellectual solidarity” together with their husbands As a couple they advertise their cultural achievements, a woman’s leisure could also a symbol of her husband’s affluence and social status<sup>119</sup> Women who are portrayed alone on monuments with the insignia of literary culture are atypical, and therefore form a select group Intellectual accomplishment, while respected, is not listed among the traditional virtues on epitaphs which by which conservative Roman society honoured their female dead A useful approach to the study of gender and art is “to keep the concepts of complicity and resistance in mind as we think about the way power can be exercised through visual imagery and through the act of commissioning, choosing, or even viewing a work of art”<sup>120</sup> Portrayed

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<sup>118</sup> Zanker (1995), 270

<sup>119</sup> Kampen (1981a), 131

<sup>120</sup> Kampen (1996), 14

alone or as part of an intellectual “couple”, the women depicted in these monuments draw the positive connotations of literacy and power upon themselves.

## Catalogue

- No 01  
 Category Funerary monument  
 Location London, British Museum  
 Provenance Greek East  
 Bibliography Marrou (1964), 151 no 193, Pfuhl (1977) Vol I 245, Vol II pl 959, Walker (1985), 45 pl 35, Wiedemann (1989), 169 pl 22  
 Description A young girl, dressed in a tunic, sits in a three-quarter pose, holding open writing tablets on her lap and writing with a *stylus*. On the right, a book-roll lies open on a reading-desk. To the left, a small dog with a collar places a paw on the back edge of the chair's cushion. The Greek inscription underneath reads  
 Ἀβεῖτα ζήσασα ἔτη ι'  
 μῆνας δύο  
 χαίρετε  
 [Pfuhl (1977), 245 ]  
 Date Second century AD
- No 02  
 Category Funerary monument  
 Location Istanbul  
 Provenance Byzantium  
 Bibliography Reinach (1912) Vol II 176, no 2, Marrou (1964), 121-2 no 130.  
 Description A funeral banquet scene, but with books instead of food: a man, perhaps the deceased, reclines on a couch and holds in his left hand an open book-roll. In front of the couch is a small tripod table on which are found what appear to be rolled-up book-rolls and an inkwell. A woman, perhaps the man's wife, veiled with the *palla*, sits at his feet and takes hold of an open writing tablet which is handed to her by one of the attendants. [Marrou (1964), 121-2 ]  
 Date Late first century BC
- No 03  
 Category Funerary monument  
 Location Malibu, J Paul Getty Museum  
 Provenance Byzantium  
 Bibliography Koch (1988), 92-4 no 33  
 Description A funeral banquet scene: on the right, a man reclines on a couch, dressed in the tunic and *pallium*, holding a cup in his left hand and a wreath in his right hand. On the left, a woman, dressed in a tunic and veiled with the *palla*, sits on a lavishly decorated throne with sphinxes, and holds the edge of her *palla* near her chin with her right hand, and in her left hand holds an open book-roll. Her feet are on a small footrest. In front of her is a small tripod on which are placed what appear to be fruit and loaves. On a shelf in the background is a box of book-rolls. A small figure of a girl holds a wool-basket

in her right hand, while the small figure of a boy stands on the right side of the scene. The inscription above reads, in Greek: *Λυσάνδρα Δάλειος χαῖρε* [Koch (1988), 92-4]

- Date First century AD
- No 04
- Category Wall painting
- Location Naples, National Museum
- Provenance Pompeii, VI 16 15 (Casa dell'Ara Massima)
- Bibliography Helbig (1868), 336 no 1422, Maiuri (1953), 99-103, Schefold (1957), 158, Zanker (1995), 213-214 fig 111
- Description A young woman, her hair coiffed in a contemporary style, wearing a gold hair-net and gold earrings, a green tunic and a red *palla*, holds a stylus pressed to her lips with her right hand and writing tablets in her left hand [Helbig (1968), 336]
- Date First century AD
- No 05
- Category Wall painting
- Location unknown
- Provenance Pompeii, VII 2 20 (House of Popidius Priscus/Casa dei Marmi)
- Bibliography Helbig (1868), 337 no 1426, Schefold (1957), 171-2
- Description A young woman, wearing a string of pearls in her hair, presses a stylus to her lips with her right hand and holds writing tablets in her left hand, over her shoulder is seen another woman, perhaps her maid. [Helbig (1968), 337]
- Date First century AD
- No 06
- Category Wall painting
- Location Naples, National Museum
- Provenance Pompeii, VII 2 6 (House of Terentius Neo)
- Bibliography Maiuri (1953), 103, Schefold (1957), 168, Ward-Perkins (1978), 122 pl 17
- Description A woman, her hair coiffed in the Claudian style, dressed in a red tunic and *palla*, holds a stylus to her lips and writing tablets in her other hand, while a bearded man holds a rolled-up book-roll against his chin. [Ward-Perkins (1978), 122]
- Date First century AD
- No 07
- Category Wall painting
- Location unknown
- Provenance Pompeii, IX.5 (in the "Room of the Muses")
- Bibliography Helbig (1868), 435 no 1868, Birt (1907), 163 no 98
- Description A female figure in a yellow tunic and purple *palla* stands reading from a large book-roll held open with both hands. [Helbig (1868), 434]
- Date unknown

- No 08  
 Category Wall painting  
 Location Naples, National Museum  
 Provenance Pompeii  
 Bibliography Birt (1907), 163 no 99  
 Description A female figure stands at a window-like wall opening and reads from a book-roll held open in both hands [Birt (1907), 163 ]  
 Date unknown
- No 09  
 Category Wall painting  
 Location Naples, National Museum  
 Provenance Pompeii  
 Bibliography Helbig (1868), 435 no 1866, Birt (1907), 164 no 100  
 Description A female figure in a green tunic and purple-red *palla* stands against an architectural column and reads from a book-roll held open with both hands [Helbig (1868), 435 ]  
 Date unknown
- No 10  
 Category Wall painting  
 Location Naples, National Museum  
 Provenance Pompeii  
 Bibliography Helbig (1868), 435 no 1867 Birt (1907), 165 no 102  
 Description A female figure, dressed in a short-sleeved white tunic, stands reading from a book-roll held open in both hands [Helbig (1868), 435 ]  
 Date unknown
- No 11  
 Category Funerary monument  
 Location Rome, National Museum  
 Provenance Rome, Via Tiburtina  
 Bibliography Marrou (1964), 39-41 no 13, Kampen (1981a) 40, 76, 148, no 26, fig 13, Kampen (1981b), 56 pl 10, 18, Amedick (1991), 65-66, 151 no 179, pl 62,7, 63 1 2  
 Description A series of biographical scenes beginning at left, an infant's first bath, a little girl in a lesson scene, a husband and wife joined by the *dextrarum unctio*, barbarians submitting to a victorious general, and a number of barbarian prisoners In the lesson scene, the little girl, dressed in a tunic and *palla*, her hair in a *Melonenfrisur* style, stands holding writing tablets on which she writes with a stylus Next to her stands a woman veiled with the *palla* Five female figures who appear to be Muses stand behind the girl, one of whom leans forward to read over the girl's shoulder [Marrou (1964), 39-41 ]  
 Date Late second century AD

- No. 12  
 Category Funerary monument (fragment)  
 Location Richmond (Virginia), County Museum  
 Provenance unknown  
 Bibliography Amedick (1991), 65-66, 142, no 125, pl 62,5  
 Description Part of a biographical scene a young girl, dressed in a tunic, her hair in the *Melonenfrisur* style, stands reading from an open book-roll to a woman seated on the floor to the right. To the left of the girl stands a Muse holding up a mask. [Amedick (1991), 142 ]  
 Date Late second century AD
- No. 13  
 Category Funerary monument (fragment)  
 Location unknown  
 Provenance Rome, Villa Borghese  
 Bibliography Marrou (1964), 33 no 8, Amedick (1991), 65-66, 159 no 233  
 Description Part of a biographical scene a little girl is being taught by a female figure, with a Muse looking on (another Muse may be missing) [Marrou (1964), 33, Amedick (1991), 159 ]  
 Date unknown
- No. 14  
 Category Funerary monument  
 Location unknown  
 Provenance unknown  
 Bibliography Marrou (1964), 37-8 no 11  
 Description The anterior face of a child's sarcophagus (Asiatic in origin) a male figure, bearded and dressed in a tunic and *pallium*, is seated and holds an object which is probably an open book-roll (the sculpture is slightly damaged) Opposite him stands a girl, dressed in a tunic and *palla* [Marrou (1964), 37-8]  
 Date Late second century AD
- No. 15  
 Category Wall painting  
 Location Rome, Terme Museum  
 Provenance Rome, Villa Doria-Pamphili  
 Bibliography Marrou (1964), 28 no 1  
 Description From a *colombarium* a young girl, dressed in a tunic and a *palla*, stands reading from an open book-roll. A male figure, bearded and dressed in tunic and *pallium*, is seated opposite her and holds an open book-roll. Marrou suggests that this is a teaching scene [Marrou (1964), 28 ]  
 Date First century BC or first century AD
- No. 16  
 Category Funerary monument

- Location Carthage, Lavigerie Museum  
 Provenance La Marsa, North Africa  
 Bibliography Reinach (1912) Vol II, 2, 4, Marrou (1964), 62 no. 52  
 Description A woman, seen in profile, is seated and reads from an open book-roll, on which some writing-like markings have been scratched [Marrou (1964), 62 ]  
 Date Early second century AD
- No 17  
 Category Funerary monument  
 Location Paris, Louvre Museum  
 Provenance Rome, Villa Albani  
 Bibliography Birt (1907), 129, Marrou (1964), 76 no 71, pl 3  
 Description A woman is seated on an elaborately decorated chair, her lower body seen in profile, her upper body turned to face forward, wearing a short-sleeved tunic, a *palla*, bracelets on her arms, and a diadem on her head. She looks straight ahead into the distance. A small dog sits at her feet. A smaller figure, perhaps a child, holds a small ball and reaches out towards the seated figure; above the child is faintly inscribed *Tyche delicata*. In one hand the main figure prominently holds up an open book-roll, on which is inscribed  
 ΠΑ  
 ΣΗΣ  
 ΜΟΥ  
 ΣΙΚΗΣ  
 ΜΕΤΕ  
 ΧΟΥΣΑ  
 Her epitaph is CIL 6 15482 (reconstructed here by Marrou)  
 D[is] M[anibus]  
 Cl[audia] Italiae Cl[audius] Hermias coniugi (sic) ben[e]  
 m[erenti] d[e] s[uo] f[aciendum] c[uravit]  
 Q[uae] v[ixit] a[nnis] t[riginta]  
 [Marrou (1964), 76-77 ]
- Date unknown
- No 18  
 Category Funerary monument  
 Location Vatican, Belvedere Museum  
 Provenance Rome  
 Bibliography Birt (1907), 63-65, Cumont (1942), pl XXX.3, Marrou (1964), 86-7 no 84, Wegner (1966), no 135, Zanker (1995), 274-5 pl 148  
 Description Anterior face in the centre panel a woman, dressed in a tunic and veiled with the *palla*, stands holding a rolled-up book-roll, with the small figure of an Eros in attendance. On the right panel a man, bearded and dressed in a tunic and *pallium*, is seated on a chair and holds an open book-roll, and appears to lecture two women standing opposite, dressed in tunic and *palla*, one of whom holds a rolled-up book-roll. On the left panel the same scene is repeated, except that each woman holds a rolled-up book-roll. Marrou considers that the portrait face of the woman in the centre panel is meant to

be the same as the “principal” listening figure in each side panel, the other female figure could be a friend or a daughter, the teacher could be her husband [Marrou (1964), 86-7]

- Date Early third century AD
- No 19
- Category Funerary monument
- Location Vatican, Vatican Museum
- Provenance Rome
- Bibliography Marrou (1964), 150 no 192, Cumont (1942), pl XXX.3
- Description Left lateral face of the previous sarcophagus: a woman, with a contemporary hairstyle, stands holding an open book-roll in her left hand and a reed pen in her right. To the left stands a Muse in the pose of Polyhymnia, and to the right a Muse carrying a staff (whom Marrou takes to be Thalia). On the right lateral face of the sarcophagus: a woman, again with a contemporary hairstyle, holds a rolled-up book-roll. To the left stands a Muse holding a celestial globe while a Muse on the right has a lyre and a *plectrum*. [Marrou (1964), 150]
- Date Early third century AD
- No 20
- Category Funerary monument
- Location Kansas City, Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art
- Provenance unknown
- Bibliography Lefkowitz (1992), pl. 6
- Description In the centre a woman, dressed in a tunic and *palla*, stands holding onto her *palla* with her right hand and clutching a rolled-up book-roll in her left. On the right stand five Muses, and on the left Minerva and the other four Muses. The Muses each carry their attribute, and their hairstyles and the feathers in their hair differentiate them from the woman in the centre.
- Date Mid-third century AD
- No 21
- Category Funerary monument
- Location Rome, Palazzo Rospigliosi
- Provenance Rome
- Bibliography Wegner (1966), 66-7 no. 170
- Description In the centre a woman, dressed in a tunic and holding onto her *palla* with her right hand, clutches a rolled-up book-roll in her left hand. At her feet are a bundle of book-rolls. On the right stand five Muses, and on the left Minerva and the other four Muses. The Muses each carry their attribute, and their hairstyles, headdresses, and clothes distinguish them from the woman in the centre, who has a contemporary hairstyle and portrait features. [Wegner (1966), 66-7]
- Date Mid-third century AD

- No 22  
 Category Funerary monument  
 Location Kansas City, William Rockhill Nelson Gallery of Art  
 Provenance unknown  
 Bibliography Wegner (1966), 19-20 no 34, pl 150a  
 Description Anterior face of a sarcophagus the nine Muses stand in a row, holding their individual attributes, but at the extreme left a woman, whose hairstyle and dress set her apart only slightly from the other female figures, stands holding an open book-roll in her left hand [Wegner (1966), 19-20 ]  
 Date unknown
- No 23  
 Category Funerary monument  
 Location Tebessa, Tebessa Museum  
 Provenance Tebessa, North Africa  
 Bibliography Reinach (1912) Vol II, 4 no 2-4, Marrou (1964), 103-4 no 103, Wegner (1966), 86 no 224 pl 126a  
 Description The anterior face of a sarcophagus in the centre a woman, dressed in a tunic and *palla*, is seated with her feet on a footstool, holding an open book-roll in her left hand while she makes an orator's gesture with her right hand A bundle of book-rolls are seen under her chair On the left stand four Muses, and on the right, the other five Muses All ten of the heads are missing On the left lateral side is pictured Minerva, and on the right, Apollo [Marrou (1964), 103-4 ]  
 Date Third century AD
- No 24  
 Category Funerary monument (fragment)  
 Location Rome  
 Provenance Rome  
 Bibliography Marrou (1964), 93-4 no 89  
 Description A seated woman reads from an open book-roll to a young girl standing before her The scene is repeated on the right, only with two men one seated, reading, and the other standing [Marrou (1964), 94-5 ]  
 Date unknown
- No 25  
 Category Funerary monument (fragment)  
 Location Rome  
 Provenance Rome  
 Bibliography Marrou (1964), 134 no 156  
 Description On a strigillated sarcophagus in the centre a woman (whose face may have been carved with portrait features), dressed in tunic and *palla*, stands holding an open book-roll in her left hand and looks off into the distance [Marrou (1964), 134 ]

- Date Early third century AD
- No 26
- Category Funerary monument (fragment)
- Location Rome
- Provenance Rome
- Bibliography Marrou (1964), 134 no 157
- Description A woman, veiled with her *palla*, stands holding an open book-roll in her left hand as she makes an orator's gesture with her right hand and looks off into the distance [Marrou (1964), 134 ]
- Date Early third century AD
- No 27
- Category Funerary monument
- Location Tarragona
- Provenance Tarraco, Spain
- Bibliography Marrou (1964), 77-8 no 72, Poulsen (1971), 65-7 pl LXIX.
- Description Anterior face of a sarcophagus in the left-most panel a woman, wearing a tunic and *palla* and a contemporary hairstyle, stands holding a rolled-up book-roll in her left hand. In the right-most panel stands a man, wearing the *pallium*, and holding up a rolled-up book-roll in his right hand. In the centre panel a man, bearded and wearing a tunic and *pallium*, sits poring over an open book-roll. A small figure holding a rolled-up book-roll stands in front of him, while another male figure and a male bust stand behind him. Marrou believes that the deceased couple, with portrait features, are represented in the outer panels, while an "ideal" teacher figure is featured in the centre panel, representing "education and culture" (The second and fourth panels are strigillated) [Marrou (1964), 77-8 ]
- Date Late third century AD
- No 28
- Category Funerary monument
- Location Capua, Campano Museum
- Provenance Capua, Italy
- Bibliography Marrou (1964), 131-2 no 154, Poulsen (1971), 66, pl LXXI, fig 112
- Description Anterior face of a sarcophagus in the centre panel are seen "the doors of Hades" and a shadowy figure emerging. In the left panel, a woman, dressed in tunic and *palla*, holds an open book-roll in her left hand and makes an orator's gesture with her right hand, while the bust of a woman stands on one side of her and a woman veiled with the *palla* on the other. In the right panel stands a man, bearded and wearing the *pallium*, holding a rolled-up book-roll in his left hand, flanked by another man also wearing the *pallium* and a male bust on a pedestal. [Marrou (1964), 131-3 ]
- Date Early third century AD

- No 29  
 Category Funerary monument  
 Location Vatican, Belvedere Museum  
 Provenance Rome  
 Bibliography Reinach (1912), Vol III 410 no 1, Marrou (1964), 107-8 no 108, Cumont (1942), pl XXX.2  
 Description Anterior face of a sarcophagus in the centre panel are seen closed doors. In the right panel, a man sits holding an open book-roll and makes an orator's gesture towards the woman seated opposite in the left-hand panel, who is holding what may be writing-tablets, Marrou suspects that a restoration has inadvertently replaced writing-tablets where a simple orator's gesture of the hand was originally called for. Each figure is flanked by two Muses. [Marrou (1964), 107-8 ]  
 Date unknown
- No 30  
 Category Funerary monument  
 Location Rome  
 Provenance Rome  
 Bibliography Reinach (1912), Vol III 257, no 1, Marrou (1964), 51-2 no 20  
 Description Anterior face of a sarcophagus in the centre of the frieze, a man sits holding a partially open book-roll in his left hand. Next to him stands a woman, dressed in a tunic and *palla*, holding a rolled-up book-roll. The couple have turned slightly towards each other, and each figure appears to have been carved with portrait features. Eight Muses stand about the couple. [Marrou (1964), 51-2 ]  
 Date unknown
- No 31  
 Category Funerary monument  
 Location Rome, Torlonia Museum  
 Provenance Rome  
 Bibliography Reinach (1912), Vol III 347 no 1, Marrou (1964), 102-3 no 102, Wegner (1966), 53-5 no 133, Zanker (1995), 272-3 fig 147  
 Description On the anterior face of a sarcophagus in the centre a seated man, dressed in tunic and *pallium*, holds an open book-roll. A woman, dressed in tunic and veiled with the *palla*, wearing a contemporary hairstyle, holds in her left hand, near her chin, a rolled-up book-roll and leans her left elbow on a small column, looking attentively at the seated man. On either side of the couple are two standing male figures and one seated at each extremity, all bearded and dressed in the *pallium* of philosophers, also holding book-rolls. The heads of eight Muses peer out from the background over the shoulders of the philosophers. [Marrou (1964), 102-3 ]  
 Date Mid-third century AD

## Chapter Four

### Traces of Literate Women in Documentary Papyri

A fragment of papyrus unearthed at the site of the ancient city of Oxyrhynchus contributes a surprisingly direct testimony of how a woman living in Roman Egypt viewed the fact that she was literate. In AD 263 Aurelia Thaisous sent a petition to the prefect of the Roman province of Egypt to request that she be allowed to manage her legal business without a male guardian.<sup>1</sup> Roman law required that an adult woman have an appointed guardian (called the *tutor* in Latin, *κύριος* in Greek) to give his formal consent to legal transactions, particularly those involving a division of her property.<sup>2</sup> Legislation enacted during the reign of Augustus, however, released a free-born woman who had three or more children (or a freedwoman with four or more children) from *tutela*.<sup>3</sup> In her application Aurelia Thaisous invoked this “right of three children” (*ius trium liberorum*), and informed the prefect that not only was she a mother, but that she also possessed the extra advantage of “being a writer who can write with especial ease.”<sup>4</sup> She asserted that the freedom to manage one’s affairs independently<sup>5</sup> was particularly befitting for women who “knew letters” (*ταῖς γρά[μ]ματα ἐπισταμέναις*)

By describing herself as a woman who “knows letters” (*γράμματα ἐπισταμένη*), Aurelia Thaisous included herself in a select group of women who reveal their facility for writing in just a few of the thousands of papyrus documents which have been excavated from the sandy deserts of Egypt. Fragments of papyrus texts frequently feature women who used written documents to buy, sell, and lease property, petition government officials for the

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<sup>1</sup> *P Oxy* 1467

<sup>2</sup> Property termed *res mancipi* falls into this category: slaves, land, buildings, farm animals such as oxen, horses and mules, etc., in short, “the land itself and the power of man and animal needed to work it, which were the bases of production in the peasant economy.” Gardner (1985), 18. A woman did not need a guardian to purchase such property. She could dispose of her other personal property as she liked. For other categories of property and obligation affected by this regulation, and the responsibilities of the *tutor* in general, see Gardner (1986) 14-22, also Crook (1967), 113-115 and Taubenschlag (1944), 128-133.

<sup>3</sup> The *lex Iulia* (18 BC) and *lex Popia Poppaea* (AD 9). Gardner (1985), 20.

<sup>4</sup> ἐνγράμματος δὲ καὶ ἐς τὰ μάλιστα γράφειν εὐκόπως δυναμένη

<sup>5</sup> ἑαυτῶν κυριεύειν καὶ χωρ[ις] κυρίου χρηματίζειν

redress of injuries or the grant of special privileges, compose wills and marriage contracts, register for taxes, and send personal and business letters. Ironically, although written documents were recognized as essential tools for communication and record-keeping, illiteracy was not unusual among both the men and the women of Roman Egypt. The pride that women who “knew letters” such as Aurelia Thaisous might take in their achievement is bolstered by the fact that in the majority of such documents women (along with a large number of men) are excused from actually signing documents, giving the reason that they “do not know letters.”<sup>6</sup> These high illiteracy rates of men and women in Greco-Roman Egypt have been affirmed by scholars.<sup>7</sup> However, various questions surrounding the women who are described as “knowing letters” remain to be explored. Was there a social or legal advantage for a woman to be known as literate? What social status and cultural milieu did these literate women come from, and what educational opportunities might they have had? Can personal letters sent to and from women transmit information about women’s literacy and writing habits? Papyrus documents are especially helpful for constructing a social history of women because they contribute a “close-up view” of the activities of women which required writing in everyday life, unfiltered through the perspective of male authors,<sup>8</sup> who only seldom take note of such matters except incidentally. The aim of this chapter is to examine the contextual clues in documentary papyri, legal texts first followed by private letters, to attempt to characterize the role which writing played in the lives of literate women as well as the social and economic factors which separated women who claimed to “know letters” from those who did not.

In order to establish a social context for the women under consideration, a specific site and time limit have been chosen. Papyrological documents, which can include, in addition to texts on papyrus, ostraca (potsherds), wooden tablets, linen, and parchment, have

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<sup>6</sup> The different terms by which illiterate persons were designated are collected in Calderini (1950), 17-21.

<sup>7</sup> In a survey of literacy in the published papyri, Calderini (1950), 22-23 counted 1365 illiterate men compared to 373 illiterate women, the discrepancy is not due to a higher number of educated women but to their less frequent use of notarial documents. In contrast, she counted eight “literate” women (from a total of 400 literate persons) in the second century AD and thirteen (from a total of 273 literate persons) in the third century. Calderini (1950), 37. Unfortunately she did not publish her catalogue. See Cole (1981), 237, Pomeroy (1981), 312-4.

<sup>8</sup> Lewis (1983), 8.

been found at archeological sites all over the empire, but the largest source by far is Egypt.<sup>9</sup> The chronological parameters for this study are the first three centuries AD. Egypt was annexed as a Roman province in 30 BC and always remained under the princeps' special supervision. Octavian's representative in Egypt was a prefect from the equestrian order, and in fact no person of senatorial rank could enter the province without the princeps' authorization.<sup>10</sup> As elsewhere in the Roman empire, local administration was not significantly altered by the coming of the Romans. Rome increased taxation, assigned positions of high authority to Roman citizens, but left local governments more or less intact in the hands of the Greeks and Egyptians, each nome was still administered by a *strategos*, who was however without military power.<sup>11</sup> The emphasis of this chapter will be the evidence collected and published as the *Oxyrhynchus Papyri*.<sup>12</sup> As the capital city (*metropolis*) of the Oxyrhynchite nome, one of the thirty-one administrative districts into which Egypt was divided, Oxyrhynchus was a centre for official record-keeping as well as a city of culture. Moreover the site is a particularly useful focal point for this study, given that it has produced an enormous trove of papyrus fragments dating from approximately the second century BC to the seventh century AD.<sup>13</sup> They include a large range of literary texts as well as tax receipts, administrative documents, legal contracts, school texts, personal letters and accounts. In contrast Alexandria, a cosmopolitan centre of culture and education, has not yielded a comparable amount of material: the damp conditions of this coastal city were not as well suited to the preservation of papyrus as the drier inland areas.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, relatively little papyrus evidence is available from the autonomous "Greek cities" of Naukratis, Ptolemais, and Antinoopolis. Oxyrhynchus was a city with three public baths, two small harbours on a

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<sup>9</sup> Turner (1968), 6-7. Literary papyri are collected in R. Pack, *Index of Greek and Latin Literary Texts from Greco-Roman Egypt*, second edition (1965). A new up-to-date edition is currently being prepared by P. Mertens. Another useful collection of papyri is the *Duke Data Bank of Documentary Papyri*, produced on CD-ROM by the Packard Humanities Institute, which includes all papyri published between 1932 and the present time.

<sup>10</sup> Pestman (1990), 25.

<sup>11</sup> Lewis (1983), 16.

<sup>12</sup> Volumes 1-63. It should be noted that papyri whose provenance is also Oxyrhynchus appear in other papyrus collections as well.

<sup>13</sup> Turner (1968), 45.

<sup>14</sup> Bagnall (1995), 10.

distributory canal to the Nile, and a theatre with a seating capacity of about 11,000, used for public gatherings, cultural performances, religious events, and gymnastic contests by the ephebes,<sup>15</sup> in addition, it had a bank, a shrine to Sarapis and twenty other temples<sup>16</sup> The literary fragments which have been found show that there was definitely a market for books, one papyrus fragment left behind by an Oxyrhynchus book-dealer is a list of books to be supplied to him numerous copies of works by Plato, Xenophon, Homer, Menander, Euripides, and Aristophanes<sup>17</sup> A private letter from the second century AD has survived which the sender asks the recipient at Oxyrhynchus to copy and send copies of certain chapters of Hypsicrates' *Characters in Comedy* for him, and to check with a local bookseller named Demetrius for another book<sup>18</sup> The literary fragments from Oxyrhynchus show Homer to have been the most widely read author, followed by works in all other genres: tragedy, comedy, poetry, and historical and philosophical prose, Latin literature, though not found in abundance, is represented first and foremost by Vergil, followed by Cicero, Juvenal, Livy, Lucan, Sallust, and Terence<sup>19</sup>

The people most likely to take advantage of the cultural facilities of Oxyrhynchus were the "metropolit" class, the Greek upper class, usually well-to-do property owners, who often took up prestigious administrative offices in the community. It has been observed that "for the mass of Egyptians under Roman rule the touchstone [for social distinction] was Hellenism",<sup>20</sup> and the metropolit class enjoyed opportunities to stage cultural events, such as dramatic festivals, athletic contests, and architecture as in the fashionable Greek cities.<sup>21</sup> The upper crust of the metropolitites was composed of the so-called "gymnasial" class, for which in 4/5 AD Augustus drew up lists of eligible citizens<sup>22</sup> Membership seems to have been hereditary – in order to maintain that status for their children, these metropolitites could only

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<sup>15</sup> Bowman (1989), 144-145, see also Préaux (1920), 782 for the cultural life at Oxyrhynchus

<sup>16</sup> Lewis (1983), 38

<sup>17</sup> Lewis (1983), 61

<sup>18</sup> *P Oxy* 2192 Bowman (1989), 161

<sup>19</sup> Bowman (1989), 162-3

<sup>20</sup> Lewis (1983), 32

<sup>21</sup> Lewis (1983), 39, 61

<sup>22</sup> Pestman (1990), 163

marry among themselves<sup>23</sup> Most metropolite boys attended school – very few illiterates are found among men of that rank – but for daughters education appears to have been optional<sup>24</sup>

This study is also limited to Greek and Latin documents, although papyri in many different ancient languages have also been found in Egypt. Greek was introduced as the language of administration by Ptolemy I with the establishment of Ptolemaic rule following the death of Alexander the Great in 323 BC. The incorporation of Egypt into the Roman empire in 30 BC did not have great linguistic impact, although Latin was the language used by the military and Roman citizens and high officials, information passed between Roman authorities and the people of Egypt continued to be in Greek.<sup>25</sup> Greek was also a language of culture as well: as we have seen, during the period of Roman rule Greek literary documents continually outnumbered Latin literary documents. When a man or woman was designated as illiterate (“not knowing letters”) in the papyri, the expression meant more than not knowing how to write, “to know letters” meant “the ability to write in Greek.”<sup>26</sup> In a city which valued Hellenism, knowledge of Greek could be a valuable status marker. The Greeks of the Ptolemaic era made no real attempt to “Hellenize” the native Egyptians in general, particularly those living in the countryside, the lack of autograph Greek signatures on census returns, legal documents such as wills, and Greek/Egyptian transcripts of judicial hearings, make it clear that Greek was not commonly adopted by the population of Egypt, nor was Latin.<sup>27</sup>

The study of papyrology has certain limitations. Because papyrus finds are scattered geographically as well as chronologically, the available evidence can make no pretensions to being a complete inventory nor a random sample, such as would be useful for statistical purposes, there is no reliable way of assessing how many literate women there may have been

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<sup>23</sup> Lewis (1983), 40

<sup>24</sup> Lewis (1983), 62

<sup>25</sup> Youtie (1971a), 162

<sup>26</sup> Youtie (1971a), 162-163, and especially Youtie (1975b) 101-108, demonstrates that the phrase “does not know letters” applies exclusively in legal documents to a person who is not capable of writing in Greek. Whether or not the person is able to write in Egyptian (Demotic or Coptic) is irrelevant. The use of Demotic fades somewhat in the first century AD, and Coptic became increasingly widespread after the third century AD.

<sup>27</sup> Youtie (1975a), 203-205

at all places in Egypt at a given time<sup>28</sup> From the evidence of literate women which has survived, it is difficult to extract information about the level of education or skill in writing which these women possessed. An endorsement on a legal document, for example, does not yield much data about the range of ability of the writer. Was the signature all that could be managed, or the merest glimpse of the writer's accomplishments?

One papyrologist has noted that in Egypt "hardly anyone would escape some involvement with the comprehensive network of private and governmental documentation ... But many people would have only a second-hand acquaintance with the world of writing, depending on others to write things for them where necessary"<sup>29</sup> Professional scribes were available to meet this need. They were trained not only in the art of writing but in the special terminology and form necessary for legal and official documents<sup>30</sup> Such scribes could be easily hired "in the street", as the documents themselves state.<sup>31</sup> Professional scribes might also be part of a wealthy household,<sup>32</sup> a wealthy woman from Oxyrhynchus submitted a document related to her extensive land holdings endorsed by a private secretary, or *γραμματεύς*, who appears to have been in charge of her paperwork.<sup>33</sup> This is not inevitably an indication of illiteracy on the part of the woman in question. The wealthy, who are the most likely to have had access to education, are also the most inclined to have slaves or assistants handle the day-to-day functions of paper shuffling and keeping records<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Youtie (1975a), 164-5

<sup>29</sup> Bagnall (1995), 15

<sup>30</sup> Criboire (1996) 28

<sup>31</sup> See *P Oxy* 490 and 492. *P Oxy* 1473 mentions that the parties involved in the marriage agreement are responsible for sharing the scribes' charges, even though both parties are obviously literate

<sup>32</sup> Lewis (1983), 135

<sup>33</sup> *P Oxy* 3047

<sup>34</sup> Bagnall (1995), 25 "Male members of the propertied classes could, with a few exceptions, read and write fairly easily; indeed, some were active in literary pursuits. But their means and their volume of activity both permitted and required them to delegate most of the actual writing to others. One might almost say that there was a direct correlation between the social standing that guaranteed literacy and the means to avoid writing."

## Legal Documents

The pervasive presence of professional scribes urges a close examination of the ancient documents for clues to identifying literate women. Signature evidence on legal documents is one way of recognizing women who have been educated in writing Greek. The editors of papyrus collections usually indicate which parts of a document are written in the hand of the scribe who wrote out the body of the text, and where the hand of the parties involved in the legal or official action endorsed the document at the bottom. A signature was not usually enough, in the first century AD notarial contracts required that the parties involved in the transaction append an autograph statement to the end of the document, a subscription or *υπογραφή*<sup>35</sup>. The object of this subscription was to summarize in a sentence the substance of the document in order to prove that the party signing understood and approved the terms and conditions. For example, at the end of a document concerning a land lease the lessor wrote “I, Aurelia Antiochia also called Dionysia, rented [according to the terms set out], and paid four talents for the property as was set out”<sup>36</sup>. Alternately, a person might elect to write the bare minimum, for example, *Ἀὐρηλία Ἀμμωνάριον ἐπιδέδωκα*, “I, Aurelia Ammonarion, have presented [this]”<sup>37</sup>. Although at first glance the simpler endorsements might seem to reflect limited facility in reading and writing, because a subscription could be painstakingly copied from a model,<sup>38</sup> in many cases a simple formulaic endorsement was all that was required.<sup>39</sup>

It is, however, all too rare to find women who sign documents in their own hand, though similarly a large number of illiterate men do not sign on their own behalf either. It is

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<sup>35</sup> Pestman (1990), 43

<sup>36</sup> *P Oxy 102* Ἀὐρηλία Ἀντιοχία ἢ καὶ Διονυσία ἐμίσθωσα [ὡς πρόκ(εται)] καὶ ἔσχον τὰ τοῦ ἀργυρίου τέλα[ν]τα τέσσαρα ὡς πρόκειται

<sup>37</sup> *P Oxy 720*

<sup>38</sup> This seems to be the case of Petaus, the “town clerk” of Ptolemais Hormou, who considered himself literate because he was able to sign his name along with the short subscription *ἐπιδέδωκα*. Papyri have been found on which he laboriously practiced this brief endorsement, and scholars have concluded from his orthographical mistakes in practicing that he probably could not read with understanding what he was copying. For Petaus, see Youtie (1971a), 171, and (1971b), 240.

<sup>39</sup> A small collection of surviving legal documents from Pompeii, in the form of receipts on wax tablets produced by the financial agent L. Caecilius Iucundus in the mid-first century AD, has yielded disappointing results in terms of evidence for women’s signature endorsements. “Of the five

common to find a *υπογραφεύς* coming to the rescue, “someone who can scan the agreements and write an acknowledgment . . . that fits [the illiterate party’s] intentions”<sup>40</sup> In the case of an illiterate woman, typically the chosen *υπογραφεύς* would write out the necessary subscription in her name, followed by his own name and the statement that he had written the endorsement because she “does not know letters” In the surviving documents which actually state the relationship between the woman and her *υπογραφεύς*, it appears that a woman tended to select her *κύριος* to sign, if she had one and he were literate If the woman’s *κύριος* were illiterate, or if she were acting without a *κύριος* by virtue of the *ius trium liberorum*, she might choose a family member or an acquaintance to be her *υπογραφεύς*<sup>41</sup> Strangers were rarely called upon to be *υπογραφεις*, because the position involved a certain amount of trust<sup>42</sup>

As noted at the beginning of this chapter, according to Roman law a woman with Roman citizenship required a *κύριος* to give his consent to certain legal actions involving the transmission of her property<sup>43</sup> This law was initiated to protect women with limited experience in legal and business matters from making mistakes when alienating their property<sup>44</sup> A woman’s *κύριος* was usually her father, brother, son, or another paternal agnate Roman legislation decreed in AD 175/180 forbade marriage between a woman and her guardian (unless the woman’s father had arranged the match), presumably to avoid wrongful management of her property, in which her paternal family had an interest and which it would not like to see squandered A peculiarity of Roman Egypt is that a large number of women are found who were married to their *κύριοι*<sup>45</sup> A magistrate could appoint

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female creditors [mentioned in the 153 examples], not one woman wrote for herself”, although sizable sums of money were involved see Harris (1989), 262-3

<sup>40</sup> Youtie (1975a), 208.

<sup>41</sup> Youtie (1975a), 212-214. Illiterate men similarly accepted the assistance of relatives, friends, colleagues, nearby residents, or even professional scribes. Youtie (1975a), 213-217.

<sup>42</sup> Youtie (1975a), 220.

<sup>43</sup> The tradition of a guardian for women existed in Egypt under Ptolemaic rule as well, though during this time women also had recourse to native Egyptian law, which did not require a guardian see Pomeroy (1984), 172. On rare occasions even under Greek law women acted without a *κύριος*. See also Pomeroy (1984), 119-120, esp. n. 85.

<sup>44</sup> Gardner (1985), 21, Youtie (1971a), 165.

<sup>45</sup> Gardner (1985), 16-7.

a guardian for a woman who did not have one,<sup>46</sup> either because her guardian had died and another had not been designated for her in his will, or because the guardian was absent and unable to give his consent, or happened to be on the other side of a legal transaction with the woman in question<sup>47</sup> There is evidence that under the High Empire the *tutela* was considered an empty formality The second century AD jurist Gaius wrote

There seems, on the other hand, to have been no very worthwhile reason why women who have reached the age of maturity should be in guardianship, for the argument which is commonly believed, that because they are scatterbrained they are frequently subject to deception and that it was proper for them to be under guardian's authority, seems to be specious rather than true For women of full age deal with their own affairs themselves, and while in certain instances the guardian interposes his authorization for form's sake, he is often compelled by the praetor to give authorization, even against his wishes<sup>48</sup>

At any rate the *κύριος* was to approve, and not undertake, transactions dealing with a woman's property, thereby technically allowing her a certain measure of freedom<sup>49</sup> As the paragraph from Gaius shows, in certain cases a guardian could be compelled to approve a woman's transaction

Literacy was not required of a guardian Numerous documents from Roman Egypt show that both the *κύριος* and the woman whose interests he was overseeing required a *ὑπογραφεύς* to write a subscription on their behalf Similarly, a woman who applied for the *ius trium liberorum* did not have to prove that she was literate,<sup>50</sup> and she could employ a *ὑπογραφεύς* when she required a subscription Even if she were literate, she might add to the document the name of a man who was assisting her with the transaction, a *συνεστώς*,

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<sup>46</sup> In the provinces by the *leges Juliae et Titiae* (first century AD), in Rome, by the *lex Atilia* (210 BC) Gaius *Inst* 185

<sup>47</sup> Gardner (1985), 17

<sup>48</sup> Gaius *Inst* 190-1 *Feminas uero perfectae aetatis in tutela esse fere nulla pretiosa ratio suasisse uidetur nam quae uolgo creditur, quia leuitate animi plerumque decipiuntur et aequum erat eas tutorum auctoritate regi, magis speciosa uidetur quam uera, mulieres enim, quae perfectae aetatis sunt, ipsae sibi negotia tractant, et in quibusdam causis dicis gratia tutor interponit auctoritatem suam, saepe etiam inuitus actor fieri a praetore cogitur*

<sup>49</sup> Gardner (1985), 21

<sup>50</sup> Pomeroy (1981), 316 Sijpesteijn (1965), 181-187 found that of eighty-three women who claimed the *ius liberorum* in the papyri from Egypt, only twenty-six texts state whether or not a woman was illiterate, and of these women twenty were found to be illiterate and only six literate

συμπαρών or παρών, who no doubt acted as an advisor, in essence, performing a duty similar to the κύριος<sup>51</sup>

An unpracticed handwriting might be a symptom of a shaky grasp of literacy in general. On occasion a signatory is described as βραδέως γράφων, a “slow writer”, a term which came to designate a person who possessed enough literacy skills to write at least a short subscription, or part of one, albeit usually in a somewhat clumsy handwriting. Three different types of “slow writers” have been identified, though no female “slow writers” (to date) figure in the collected Oxyrhynchus papyri.<sup>52</sup> First, a hesitant writer might have had a ὑπογραφεύς write most of the subscription, along with an expression such as ἔγραψα καὶ ὑπὲρ ... τὰ πλῆστα (“I wrote the most part on behalf of ...”), to which he or she might have added a few words.<sup>53</sup> Alternately, the phrase ἔγραψα τὸ σῶμα was used to convey the same message.<sup>54</sup> The third type are expressly described as “slow writers” in the text of the document.<sup>55</sup> Sometimes the “slow writer” actually wrote nothing at all, relying on a ὑπογραφεύς for the entire subscription.<sup>56</sup> It is clear that βραδέως γράφοντες had received some schooling in writing, although they were not sufficiently well-trained to feel

<sup>51</sup> Sijpesteijn (1965), 176, notes examples of four literate women from third-century Hermoupolis who had men as co-signatories: Aurelia Demetria in *P Lug Bat* II 6, Aurelia Charina in *P Lug Bat* II 6, Aurelia Artemidora in *P Lips* 3 = *M Chrest* 172, and Aurelia Isidora of *P Strassb* 29.

<sup>52</sup> Calderini (1950), 34-35 found only five examples of women “slow writers”, all in the first and second centuries AD. They are Ptolemais (*M Chrest* 220), Menekleia (*BGU* 891), Didyme Matrona (*P Giss* 29), Soteiria (*M Chrest* 257), and Oualeria Diodora (*P Mich* VI 428).

<sup>53</sup> Youtie (1971b), 242-243 cites two examples of women whose subscriptions include this formula: Menekleia in *BGU* III 891, dated AD 144 and Aurelia Hesychion in *BGU* IV 1049, dated AD 342. The editors of the papyri described the handwriting of Menekleia as awkward, shaky and unligatured, though her son (her κύριος) wrote more fluidly. Hesychion’s handwriting, on the other hand, does not have the awkwardness of a beginner’s school hand, and although her letters are unligatured they are written evenly and resemble the writing style of the period. Her husband writes in the same style of hand, only more fluidly; he may have written out the entire contract, very legibly if not elegantly. Hesychion, in comparison with Menekleia, has clearly received more education in writing, evidently even among “slow writers” there could be a good deal of variation in ability.

<sup>54</sup> Youtie (1971b), 245.

<sup>55</sup> Youtie (1971b), 250 discusses Valeria Diodora, a woman involved in the sale of a house at Karanis (*P Mich* VI 428). As a “slow writer” she needed her husband to write out her subscription for her, to which she appended a few words of her own, the editors describe her hand thus: “each letter was laboriously formed, and the writer was unable to maintain a straight line, ... the alphabet is largely majuscule”.

<sup>56</sup> Didyme, also called Matrona, was designated a “slow writer” yet had another person write her entire subscription (*P Giss* 29). Youtie (1971b), 255.

comfortable writing without some explanatory caveat<sup>57</sup> A lack of practice or exposure to writing material might have caused their skills to regress “Slow writers are not school children, still in process of learning to write Slow writers are grown men, sometimes women, who are using their meager attainments to carry out the business transactions which provide their livelihood Some progress is expected of children still at school The slow writer will not improve, he will always be a slow writer”<sup>58</sup>

Why did “slow writers” insist on demonstrating their writing ability, no matter how limited? The female “slow writers” evidently viewed themselves as more literate than illiterate because even when they did not write anything at all in a subscription, they preferred the designation “slow writer” to “not knowing letters” It has been proposed that “it is not likely that the driving force for very many was cultural pride or vanity, since illiteracy carried no stigma in the conditions of middle-class life in Greco-Roman Egypt”<sup>59</sup> Yet the law eventually frowned on scarcely literate persons who presented themselves as fully literate The sixth century law codification of Justinian demanded that both the person who was illiterate (*ἀγράμματος*) and the person who could write just a little (*ὀλιγράμματος*) have five witnesses present at the signing of a document, one of whom had to be literate enough to write a subscription for the illiterate or barely literate person<sup>60</sup> This law was evidently designed to protect the illiterate person from misrepresentation<sup>61</sup> Although there may have been no social stigma attached to being known as an illiterate person, there may have been enhanced status associated with a literate person.

Illiterate persons did run the risk of being exploited In one recorded case a woman claimed that another person had falsely written a subscription for her on a loan document When pressed for return of the loan, she claimed that the subscription wrongly described her as illiterate, she proved this by showing the magistrates that she could write (though the parties attempting to collect the loan in turn claimed that she had fraudulently claimed to be

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<sup>57</sup> Youtie (1971b), 252

<sup>58</sup> Youtie (1971b), 251

<sup>59</sup> Youtie (1971b), 261

<sup>60</sup> Youtie (1971b), 253

<sup>61</sup> The validity of the contract thus was also protected: “Justinian regarded this practice [of a barely literate person signing without witnesses] as a grave abuse because it endangered the status of contracts as reliable evidence of the transactions embodied in them” Youtie (1971b), 254

illiterate) In another case, an illiterate woman claimed that the terms and conditions of an agreement did not match her intentions, but the actual scribe of the document could not be located to verify this A third case involves an illiterate woman who had inherited all her husband's properties The city was pressing her to give them money owed for a civic office, but the woman had done nothing about it because, her father wrote, she did not have a "trustworthy *υπογραφεύς*" to help her with the matter (as the mother of three children she appears exempt from guardianship) <sup>62</sup>

Although paleographical analysis of handwriting can be useful in determining how comfortably a person handled a pen, which might be indicative of how much he or she needed to write or what level of schooling he or she might have reached,<sup>63</sup> the editors of the papyri do not always provide a description of the hand of the signatory or photographic plates<sup>64</sup> In any event, poor penmanship should not necessarily be seen as a sign of near illiteracy The convenient recourse to trained scribes would have given people less practice in writing, just as in the twentieth century people rely increasingly on electronic "scribes" in the form of typewriters and computers, not only for legal and business documents but for private correspondence as well

Very few documents in the published *Oxyrhynchus Papyri* provide evidence for women signing documents in their own hand Although women are parties in hundreds of recorded transactions, many of these documents have survived only in fragments Due to rough preservation conditions, in many cases the edges of a document are most damaged, unfortunately for the purposes of this study, the bottom edge, which would record the autograph signatures of the parties involved, is often lost, and it is impossible to know if a woman endorsed the document herself Even documents which appear to finish with a woman's personal subscription can be misleading A woman from Oxyrhynchus named Taorseus sent a request dated to AD 86<sup>65</sup> to a board of officials to ask that her fourteen-year-

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<sup>62</sup> For these examples, see Youtie (1975a), 206-8

<sup>63</sup> Cribiore (1996) provides a scale by which to judge the handwriting of students as they progress through the various stages of education

<sup>64</sup> Youtie (1971b), 248

<sup>65</sup> *P Oxy* 1028

old son be registered to pay the reduced poll-tax.<sup>66</sup> Her subscription, *Ταορσος ἐπιδεδω(κα)* (“I, Taorseus ... presented this”) is the last legible line of text on the damaged document. As the application states at the beginning that Taorseus was making her request with her *κύριος* Thompsemis, his subscription would follow hers, according to the established custom seen on similar documents. If he were literate and had acted as her *ὑπογραφεύς* in addition, he would have written Taorseus’ subscription in her name, then written the usual short statement that he had done so because she did not “know letters”. The editors note that Taorseus’ subscription was written in “rude uncials”, and moreover, her name may be spelled wrong, when compared to the spelling of the same name on other documents.<sup>67</sup> It therefore appears that the signatory, either Taorseus or her *κύριος*, was unpracticed both in writing and in Greek. Similarly it is impossible to know if the signatory of *P Oxy* 912, dated AD 235, was also the woman involved in the transaction. Aurelia Besous, a citizen of Oxyrhynchus, appears to have signed a lease to rent out her cellar and another room for a year, with a short subscription. Since she was acting with her *κύριος* Aurelius Theon, we do not know if he wrote the subscription on her behalf, as the portion of the document with his subscription is also lost.

The handful of documents which do contain signature evidence can be examined for clues to the factors which might lead to the literacy of these women. As Aurelia Thaisous specifically stated that women who could write were the most qualified for the *ius trium liberorum*, we will begin our discussion with the women claiming this right. As might be expected, the petition of Aurelia Thaisous which was introduced at the beginning of this chapter ended with Aurelia’s personal subscription: *Αὐρηλία Θαισοῦς ἢ καὶ Λολλιανὴ διεπεμψάμην πρὸς ἐπίδοσιν*, “I, Aurelia Thaisous, also called Lolliane, sent this ...”. By chance another document featuring Thaisous was also found at the site of Oxyrhynchus, dating four years after her application for the *ius liberorum*. In *P Oxy* 1475 Thaisous recorded a deed of purchase with the official property-registers. The document does not end with a signature.<sup>68</sup> However, this later document provides a bit more information about

<sup>66</sup> Roman citizens and citizens of the Greek cities did not have to pay the poll-tax, but male members of the metropolite class could apply to pay a reduced tax. Lewis (1983), 41.

<sup>67</sup> *P Oxy* 1028, notes.

<sup>68</sup> As does *P Oxy* 1200, a similar example.

Thaisous She was the daughter of Sarapion, also called Agathodaemon, an ex-agoranomos of Oxyrhynchus. The agoranomos was one of six prestigious civic offices which a wealthy metropolite might undertake and finance from his personal funds for a year. These offices were administrative and did not have any real power, but they were sought for the status they bestowed, the agoranomos was a “market regulator”, but not much else is known about his duties.<sup>69</sup> Thaisous evidently came from an affluent family, and appears to have had a large amount of money in her own right. In the deed of purchase Thaisous (acting without a *κύριος* as she had requested previously) purchased eleven arourae of grain-producing farmland near the village of Paimis near Oxyrhynchus. The property was adjacent to a canal, with irrigation equipment, in addition to two houses in the village and all their fixtures, yards, and orchard. As Egypt was an integral supplier of wheat for the whole Roman empire, one would expect such land to be expensive, and indeed, Thaisous paid in one lump sum of 1 talent 3,700 drachmae.<sup>70</sup> The deed of purchase is made up of several documents rolled into one. If Thaisous had to deal with such bureaucratic paper-shuffling herself, literacy would have been a useful skill, however, she may also have had a clerk oversee the paperwork for her. Thaisous’ earlier request that she be granted special consideration because of her literacy has perplexed scholars. It has been suggested that Thaisous was merely inflating the importance which writing could have for women,<sup>71</sup> or was “nervous of officialdom and ignorant of the precise requirements of the law, anxiously including what she feels might buttress her claim”,<sup>72</sup> or simply wished to appear more credible to manage her business independently, in view of the prevalent suspicion against the competence of women.<sup>73</sup> We will reconsider these interpretations after a review of further evidence. However, the status of Thaisous and her metropolite family in the community make it likely that literacy might have been desirable not only for cultural prestige but for practical application in business.

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<sup>69</sup> Lewis (1983), 47-8

<sup>70</sup> Pomeroy (1981), 305. “The importance of land ownership in a country like Egypt that is based on an agricultural economy cannot be overestimated”

<sup>71</sup> Youtie (1971a), 167. “In spite of the enthusiasm that Thaisous displays for the advantages bestowed on women by literate accomplishments, she is perhaps guilty of exaggeration” In Youtie (1975a), 221, note 62, he reconsiders this judgement, however “Literacy would confer great practical advantages on a woman in that position.”

<sup>72</sup> Gardner (1985), 21

<sup>73</sup> Sijpesteijn (1965), 176, following S. Solazzi.

Another woman who acted without a *κύριος* by virtue of the Roman *ius liberorum* is Trunnia. She submitted a document dated to AD 175<sup>74</sup> to an official to certify that her son L. Trunnius Lucilianus, her daughter Trunnia Marcella and three slaves had undergone an examination and her children's status as Roman citizens was verified. Trunnia appears to have signed the document herself *Τρο[υvνία] ἐπιδέδωκα* ("I, Trunnia ..., presented this"),<sup>75</sup> and the fact that she produced all the necessary records such as a previous *ἐπίκρισις* declaration, census return and other documents may show a familiarity with written paperwork.

The papyrus evidence also reveals four women with the *ius liberorum*, all from Hermoupolis, each of whom was described as literate in Greek (*εἰδυνία γράμματα*). Hermoupolis, like Oxyrhynchus, was the metropolis of a nome and as such was an administrative as well as cultural centre. Two documents from AD 250 concern two sisters, each involved in a different land sale. Aurelia Demetria, also called Tinoutis, and Aurelia Charina, also called Artemidora.<sup>76</sup> Each sister also listed her husband as an assistant in the sale: the husband of Demetria was her *συμπάρων*, and Charina's husband was also present as a *συμπάρων*. Their father went by the Romanized name Maximus, and his official appointments in Hermoupolis included gymnasiarch, archiereus, and city councilor.<sup>77</sup> The office of gymnasiarch (who managed and supplied the city's gymnasium) was the most prestigious office a metropolite could hold, though the office of archiereus (who performed ceremonies related to the cult of the Emperor) was also distinguished, these offices, along with membership in the council (*βουλή*) required a substantial outlay of money.<sup>78</sup> Their father undoubtedly was wealthy enough to pay for schooling for his daughters, and,

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<sup>74</sup> *P Oxy* 1451

<sup>75</sup> The editors of the papyrus note that "*Τρο[υvνία]*" is written thicker than the preceding and following lines ... l. 34 [the line following her signature] is distinctly not by the first hand [that of the scribe], and presumably contains the signature of one of the three witnesses mentioned in l. 5, not a writer on behalf of Trunnia, who is unlikely to be illiterate" *P Oxy* 1451, notes to ll. 33-4.

<sup>76</sup> *P Lug Bat* II 6. See Sijpesteijn (1965), 182.

<sup>77</sup> Pomeroy (1981), 315.

<sup>78</sup> Lewis (1983), 46-51.

moreover appears to have been a man interested in Greek culture, as his connection with the gymnasium reveals.<sup>79</sup>

According to the *lex Julia de maritandis ordinibus* (18 BC) there were several privileges available for both men and women who had children, for example, seniority in official positions, such as that of consul, was given to married men with the most children.<sup>80</sup> Women, as seen earlier, were exempted from the *tutela*. There is a suggestion, however, that prestigious women might be awarded the right to act without guardianship without the requisite three children of the *ius trium liberorum*.<sup>81</sup> There is no intimation, however, that literacy was grounds for such an exception. The prestige associated with the *ius trium liberorum* is perhaps alluded to in the documents in which women claimed this right in actions for which a tutor's consent would not have been required anyway,<sup>82</sup> perhaps the women were pleased to "show off" this grant of independence, whether it was required for the purpose at hand or not. The *Constitutio Antoniniana*, which in one sweep granted citizenship to almost all the free inhabitants of the empire, allowed more Greek and Egyptian women in Roman Egypt to claim the *ius trium liberorum*, which previously had excluded all but Roman citizens.<sup>83</sup> At this time the Roman name *Aurelia* became ubiquitous. Along with

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<sup>79</sup>Two other literate women from Hermoupolis claiming the *ius trium liberorum* were Aurelia Artemidora daughter of Poludeuces, who was accompanied by Aurelius Koprios Cornela and Aurelius Epimachus, her husband, who was involved in the sale of a house (*P Lips* 3 = *M Chrest* 172, dated 256 AD). Also Aurelia Isidora daughter of Hemius also called Olympus, who was accompanied by Hemius also called Olympus, her father, and was involved in an issue concerning an inheritance (*P Strass* 29, dated 289 AD). See Sijpesteijn (1965), 182.

<sup>80</sup>Treggiari (1991), 66

<sup>81</sup>Gardner (1985), 20 observes that the second century AD historian Cassius Dio wrote "There are a number of exceptional cases in which the law confers the privileges belonging to parents of three children upon men and women to whom the gods have not granted that number. This status was originally accorded through the authority of the Senate, but now through that of the emperor, those who enjoy it are exempt from the penalties imposed for childlessness and are entitled to all but a few of the rewards given to those who bear large families" (55.2). Transl. Ian Scott Kilvert

<sup>82</sup>Sijpesteijn (1965), 179, n. 4, found twenty-five cases from his total survey of eighty-three women acting with the *ius liberorum* of women who included the claim of *ius liberorum* where it was not legally required.

<sup>83</sup>Sijpesteijn (1965) 177-178, notes that prior to AD 212 he could find only ten women with the *ius liberorum*, all of whom appeared to be full Roman citizens (women with two Roman names) or Romanized Greeks. After AD 212, a breakdown by nationality showed three women with fully Romanized names acting with the *ius trium liberorum*, fifty-five women with Greek names and five women with Egyptian names.

their new names, these women perhaps enjoyed the status which the Roman honour of the *ius trium liberorum* bestowed upon them<sup>84</sup> There are many instances in the papyri from Oxyrhynchus in which women had the freedom to act independently according to the *ius liberorum*, but were unable to sign their own subscriptions

On occasion women appear to have acted without a *κύριος* without specifically stating that they were claiming the Roman *ius trium liberorum*, perhaps because they were not performing transactions which would require the consent of the *κύριος*, such as an alienation of property. In a document dated either AD 141/2 or 164/5,<sup>85</sup> a woman named Claudia Diogenis wrote an authorization to the *σιτολογοί* (grain collectors) of Mermertha to transfer 100 artabas of wheat to a person named Melanion. She endorsed the document *Κλαυδία Διογενίς σεσημείωμαι*, “I, Claudia Diogenis, signed this” This is a fairly large amount of wheat,<sup>86</sup> and is some indicator of Claudia Diogenis’ wealth. Another woman who acted without making reference to the *ius trium liberorum* or a *κύριος* is Aurelia Antiochia, who in a document dated 306 AD<sup>87</sup> leased out to another party nine arourae of land for the cultivation of flax<sup>88</sup> near the village of Sestoplelo at a rent of 1 talent 3,500 drachmae for each aroura, a considerable sum of money. The contract states that she received four talents of the rent up front. Antiochia wrote an unusually long subscription to the contract<sup>89</sup> In addition to her evident wealth, a hint to her background is suggested by the fact that her father was given as Antiochus also called Dionysios, who had held an official position in Alexandria,<sup>90</sup> once again, wealth and social status might have prompted Antiochia’s family to grant her an education. One more example is that of a woman named Aurelia Ptolemais who apparently leased out a property of five arourae at a rent of 3,000 drachmae per aroura

<sup>84</sup> Sijpesteijn (1965), 188

<sup>85</sup> *P Oxy* 3337

<sup>86</sup> A usual planting for a large landowner was between 21 and 134 artabas, while a village farmer might have a planting of between 1 and 12. Lewis (1983), 44

<sup>87</sup> *P Oxy* 102

<sup>88</sup> Flax was a cash crop grown to produce linseed oil and linen. Lewis (1983), 127

<sup>89</sup> *Αὐρηλία Ἀντιοχία ἢ καὶ Διονυσία ἐμίσθασα [ὡς πρόκειται] καὶ ἔσκον τὰ τοῦ ἀργυρίου τάλα[ν]τα τέσσαρα ὡς πρόκειται.* “I, Aurelia Antiochia also called Dionysia, rented [according to the terms set out], and paid four talents for the property as was set out”

<sup>90</sup> *Ἀντιόχου τοῦ καὶ Διονυσίου ἄρξαντος τῆς λαμ(προτάτης) πόλεως τῶν Ἀλεξανδρέων* *P Oxy* 102, ll 3-4

in a document fragment dated to approximately 287 AD.<sup>91</sup> She signed the lease herself, “I, Aurelia Ptolemais, have the amount as negotiated”<sup>92</sup> One commentator has determined that the land was probably used to cultivate flax, which explains the high rent.<sup>93</sup> That Ptolemais came from a wealthy family may be illustrated in another surviving document, a will in which a woman by the same name and her sister inherited from their father, an *exergetes* and *prytanis* of Oxyrhynchus, a vineyard and other farm property, and in addition the sister received a further legacy because, it seems, the father had already bestowed Aurelia Ptolemais with a dowry of four talents and a female slave.<sup>94</sup> Of particular interest is the fact that the lease of Ptolemais was found along with three other partial documents, two fragments from Homer’s *Iliad* and a history of Sikyon, which leads one to speculate that they might have belonged to and were perhaps read by her.<sup>95</sup>

Since the determining factor for the *ius liberorum* was of course children and not literacy, it is not surprising to find papyrus documents in which women who were literate were required by law to act with the consent of a *κύριος*, whether the *κύριος* was literate or not. This is seen in the case of Aurelia Claudia, who in AD 215 sent an application to the nomarch requesting the examination (*ἀνάκρισις*) of a slave whom she wished to acquire,<sup>96</sup> a common procedure found in other papyrus documents.<sup>97</sup> Aurelia Claudia was not, as her Roman name suggests, a Roman immigrant, but probably a woman of Greco-Egyptian origin, as she stated that her father was Sarapion from Oxyrhynchus. Her husband and *κύριος*, Marcus Aurelius Ammonius was from an Alexandrian deme. Although Aurelia Claudia wrote her own subscription, *Αὐρηλία Κλαυδία ἐπιδέδωκα*, it is interesting that her husband was described as *μὴ εἰδότης γράμματα* and required a *ὑπογραφεύς*, in this case another man from Alexandria. Presumably his wife could not sign on his behalf because

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<sup>91</sup> *P Oxy* 1690.

<sup>92</sup> *Αὐρελία Πτολεμαῖς καὶ ὡς χρηματίζω] ἔσχον τούτου τὸ ἴσον*. Her handwriting was described as “a slightly uneven but fairly rapid cursive” Bagnall (1992), 140.

<sup>93</sup> Bagnall (1992), 138.

<sup>94</sup> *P Oxy* 907, commented by Bagnall (1992), 138-9.

<sup>95</sup> Bagnall (1992), 137-141. The other texts are *P Oxy* 1365, 1386, and 1392.

<sup>96</sup> *P Oxy* 1463.

<sup>97</sup> The *ἀνάκρισις* has been variously interpreted as a “permit for the sale” or “certificate containing an official description of the slave” *P Oxy* 1463, introduction.

he was acting as her *κύριος*. However, there is no evidence in the papyri that a woman ever executed the functions of a *υπογραφεύς* for another person. It is difficult to glean any details about Claudia's background from this document. The seller of the slave was a woman named Artemeis who "did not know letters". She was acting independently by virtue of the Roman *ius liberorum*, but she needed her brother-in-law to act as her *υπογραφεύς*. This document nicely sums up a few ways in which women's literacy and illiteracy worked within the law: a woman who was literate required the consent of a *κύριος* unless she claimed the *ius liberorum*, while a woman who had claimed the *ius liberorum* still needed a *υπογραφεύς* to write her subscription for her as she was illiterate.

Another example is seen in a petition dated AD 200,<sup>98</sup> sent by a woman named Apollonarium, also called Aristandra, to the authorities to request that the obligation of cultivating the sizable property – over 165 arourae – of crown land which she had been leasing be removed from her, as she was no longer in a financial position to be able to afford to pay the taxes on it. Apollonarium cited the legal precedents for women being released from this duty. As the document is a copy of the original – written entirely in one hand – there is no opportunity to view Apollonarium's actual handwriting in any of the three subscriptions which are included in the copies of earlier petitions and letters which are cited in this document. She had a *κύριος* appointed for her, who appended his signature at the bottom of the document, but made no mention that he was writing on her behalf as a *υπογραφεύς*. As Apollonarium described herself as "a woman without a husband or helper" in seeking the prefect's assistance, her *κύριος* was perhaps appointed for these transactions only, as she could not legally act without one.

Two papyri state explicitly that the women involved were literate. A document dated AD 201<sup>99</sup> was sent to the strategos by a man named Horion with regard to his re-marriage to a woman named Apollonarium. Copies of earlier documents related to the case are cited within this particular petition, including a copy of the approved request for the appointment of a *κύριος* made by Apollonarium to the deputy-strategos, so that she could legally sign the re-marriage contract, which stipulates that she pay back her husband for money borrowed from him, the very large sum of 2 talents, 3000 drachmae, and that he was allowed the

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<sup>98</sup> *P Oxy* 899. Transl. B. Grenfell and A. Hunt.

income from her vine-yard properties until the debt was paid off<sup>100</sup> She was apparently not in a position to claim the *ius trium liberorum*. Horion could not act as *κύριος* as she was making the contract with him. In her application for a guardian she asked that, as she “knew letters” (*ἐπισταμένη γράμματα*) and was making another marriage contract, a man named Eudaemon son of Agenor be appointed her *κύριος* “for this transaction only” (*πρὸς μόνην [ταύτην] τὴν οἰκονομίαν*), and she signed the request the customary way: Ἀπο[λλω]ν[ι]αρίου Χαϊρήμονος ἐπιδέδωκα. The reply from the deputy-strategos repeated these same terms: “As you “know letters” you may make use of Eudaemon as your guardian for this transaction only”<sup>101</sup> The phrase *ἐπισταμένη γράμματα* may be significant, as both the request and the official consent include this information. Further proof for Apollonariou’s writing ability is seen at the end of Horion’s petition, where he attested that all three parties involved, Horion, Apollonariou, and her *κύριος* Eudaemon, had written their autograph signatures.

A related example is that of Tabesammon, who in AD 211 wished to borrow the large sum of 6,000 drachmae and planned to put her vineyard up as collateral<sup>102</sup> She needed a *κύριος* for this transaction, and sent an application to the exergetes in office requesting that Amoitias be appointed her *κύριος*. Like Apollonariou, Tabesammon stressed that she could write (*ἐπισταμένη γράμματα*) and signed the request herself, Ταβ[η]σάμμων Ἀμμωνίου ἐπιδέδωκα. Her intended *κύριος* Amoitias also wrote in his own hand. Like Apollonariou, she was the owner of a vineyard, though the extent of her holdings is unclear, however, the sum of money she wished to borrow was fairly substantial (one talent). Unlike the other women she went by her Egyptian name, though her mother had a Greek name (Diophantis) and was a citizen (*ἀστὴς*) of one of the Greek cities, and her father had both a Greek name and a Latin name (Ammonius also called Cassius).

Another request for a *κύριος* from a literate woman is dated to AD 247<sup>103</sup> This petition to the prefect, however, is written in Latin. Interestingly, it specifically mentions the

<sup>99</sup> P Oxy 1473

<sup>100</sup> The extent of this agricultural property is not stated, but she evidently expected the revenue from the property to be able to pay off her large debt to Horion.

<sup>101</sup> *ἐπισταμένη γράμματα κυρίῳ χρῆσασθαι τῷ Εὐδαίμονι πρὸς μόνην [ταύτην] τὴν οἰκονομίαν*

<sup>102</sup> P Oxy 56

<sup>103</sup> P Oxy 720

*lex Iulia et Titia*, which allowed provincial governors to appoint guardians for women <sup>104</sup> The applicant, Aurelia Ammonarion, signed the document herself, [Α]υρηλία Αμμωνάριον [ἐπιδέδωκα] but both she and her proposed κύριος signed in Greek, as did the scribe who wrote in the date. The prefect's office, however, wrote a Latin authorization for the request <sup>105</sup> Ammonarion, unlike the previously mentioned Tabesammon, did not indicate the particular occasion which requires a κύριος. Nor did she state that she was literate, although she gave evidence of the fact by signing for herself.

### Education in Roman Egypt

In order to appreciate how women in Roman Egypt employed the skill of writing, it is important to consider how they were educated. Educational opportunities in Egypt are strongly attested to by a volume of school exercises on papyri, ostraca (pottery sherds), and tablets (wax and whitened wood) <sup>106</sup> These records trace the progression of pupils learning to form the letters of the alphabet, then syllables, words, and sentences, and reading selections predominantly from Homer (but also tragic and comic playwrights and prose authors), and studying grammatical constructs. This follows the method of teaching set out by Quintilian (discussed in Chapter Two). Occasionally the exercises are bilingual: glossaries provide Greek equivalents for Latin texts. In most cases Greek would be learned as a second language after Egyptian (spoken rather than written). Texts for teaching the Latin language are also found in Egypt, but the proficiency of the handwriting in many cases suggests that Latin might have been learned as a second or third language <sup>107</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> Gai. *Inst* I 185

<sup>105</sup> Another bilingual request for a guardian was found dated to AD 245 (*P Oxy* 1466). It was addressed to the same prefect, Valerius Firmus by a woman named Aurelia Arsinoe. As in *P Oxy* 720, the text of the petition is in Latin and also refers to the *lex Iulia et Titia*. Following this Latin text is a Greek translation, and dates and subscriptions in Greek. In this case, however, a ὑπογραφεύς wrote on behalf of Aurelia Arsinoe.

<sup>106</sup> A catalogue of school exercises was published by Debut (1986). A catalogue of writing exercises only was assembled and thoroughly analysed by Crihiore (1996).

<sup>107</sup> Crihiore (1996), 30

Students were encouraged to practice writing words and sentences right after they mastered the alphabet, even before they learned to read,<sup>108</sup> literary sources refer to this process and a paleographical examination of students' handwriting reveals beginners' sentences written in a hand that can barely form letters.<sup>109</sup> Learning to write one's name was one of the first and most important exercises taught, for this skill would always be useful for writing subscriptions on documents, no matter how much or how little education one received, a number of exercises show a student's name written in "letters quivering with uncertainty", followed by practice of the letters of the alphabet, or simply the name practiced over and over.<sup>110</sup> This may be the highest accomplishment reached by some "slow writers", who "preferred to sign documents and letters in their clumsy, belaboured characters rather than be considered among illiterates"<sup>111</sup>

Although the evidence for girls learning to read is slight, there are many references to mothers from Oxyrhynchus who paid close attention to their children's education, as seen in letters which they may have written themselves.<sup>112</sup> One papyrus fragment shows a list of expenses drawn up by a mother, which include food, toys, wax and a stylus for her children.<sup>113</sup> In a private letter, a mother wrote that her child was taking to his studies with eagerness.<sup>114</sup> One mother wrote to her son, very disappointed to learn that his *καθηγητής* (teacher) would be moving away.<sup>115</sup> She had had confidence in the teacher's ability to look after her son properly. When she had inquired what her son was reading, the teacher had replied *τὸ ζῆτα*, "the sixth", which may refer to the sixth book of Homer's *Odyssey* or *Iliad*.<sup>116</sup> However, she trusted the judgment of her son and his pedagogue to find another good teacher. Her keen interest in what her son was studying, her casual reference to Homer

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<sup>108</sup> "In addition to the very poor quality of the handwriting, the meaningless jumble these students often produced in copying blindly from models is further proof that this kind of writing was introduced very early" Crihiore (1996), 137

<sup>109</sup> Crihiore (1996), 144-145

<sup>110</sup> Crihiore (1996), 146-7 listing examples

<sup>111</sup> Crihiore (1996), 10

<sup>112</sup> See Crihiore (1996), 15, who lists the following examples

<sup>113</sup> *P Oxy* 736

<sup>114</sup> *PSI* 1 94

<sup>115</sup> *P Oxy* 930

in the letter, and her determination that her son find a qualified instructor suggest that she herself had been exposed to some education.<sup>117</sup>

There seems to be some evidence that women in Roman Egypt were teachers.<sup>118</sup> A mummy portrait found in the Arsinoite nome and dating from the first century AD was inscribed with name *Ερμιόνη γραμματικη*, Hermione the teacher.<sup>119</sup> A register from a *graphaeion* (a records office, but also a place where a scribe could be hired) from Tebtunis in the first century AD shows that a woman listed as *Σαραπιάς δέσκαλος*, Sarapias the teacher, gave payment for some writing she had done, a letter from Karanis dating from the first century AD from a woman to her probable husband mentions that the children are seeing a *δεσκάλην* (female teacher), a letter from the Fayum and dating from the second or third century AD contains a mother's message to her children, and includes greetings from several acquaintances, including *Αθηναίς ἡ δέσκαλος*, and a third century letter similarly extends greetings to *τὴν δέσκαλον*.<sup>120</sup>

The best evidence for a little girl's schooling comes not from Oxyrhynchus but from Hermoupolis in the second century AD. From a handful of letters written by her parents and other members of the household, we can gather clues about the education of Heraïdous. Her father Apollonios was the *strategos*, the governor of the nome, which indicates that her family was very highly placed. The tone and content of her mother's letters have been described as stylish and refined, so it is probable that her mother was educated as well.<sup>121</sup> In addition, Heraïdous seems to have been a great favourite with the family, usually referred to in

<sup>116</sup> Preaux (1920), 781 n. 3

<sup>117</sup> Préaux (1920), 782-3

<sup>118</sup> An unpublished paper entitled "Women Teachers in Roman Egypt" was given by Raffaella Cribiore at the American Philological Association conference in Washington, DC in December 1993.

<sup>119</sup> Cribiore (1996), 22. Turner (1968) 77 suggests that she is a "literary lady".

<sup>120</sup> See Cribiore (1996), 165 for a list of these examples. *P Mich* 2 123, *P Mich* 8 464, *BGU* 1 332, *P Oxy* 2595.

<sup>121</sup> "À parcourir les lettres d'Aline à son mari, on acquiert vite la certitude qu'elles émanent d'un milieu cultivé, la femme du stratège est douée d'une sensibilité très fine qu'elle sait détailler sans gaucherie et sans exagération, il y a dans ses lettres, même les plus inquiètes, une mesure qui est, à n'en pas douter, l'indice de beaucoup de distinction." Préaux (1929), 774.

affectionate diminutives<sup>122</sup> Heraïdous is probably not a typical Greco-Egyptian girl, except perhaps in the highest echelons of society

One letter, probably addressed to Apollonios from his brother Hermaios (the beginning of the text is lost), sends greetings to the strategos from little Heraïdous, Apollonios' mother, and Hermaios himself. He asked that some studying material (*ἐπιτήδεια τῆ σχολῆ*) and a book for Heraïdous to read (*βιβλίον εἰς ἀναγιγνώσκειν*) be provided. Heraïdous was evidently past the beginning stages of learning her letters and was ready to begin the study of reading, or perhaps she was even ready for the study of literature.<sup>123</sup> Heraïdous was equally proficient at writing. A letter from Heraïdous' mother to a slave mentions the fact that the young girl wrote to her father (and sometimes neglected to greet her mother)<sup>124</sup>

Another short letter reveals some information about Heraïdous' teacher.<sup>125</sup> A member of the family's household (the papyrus again is damaged at the beginning and end) asked that any pigeons and fowl which the family does not want or need be sent to Heraïdous' *καθηγητής* (teacher).<sup>126</sup> The sender also asked that similar food be sent to the teacher of the sender's daughter, so that he will be considerate to her.<sup>127</sup> It appears that food was sometimes part of a teacher's remuneration; another papyrus reveals that the *καθηγητής* of a little girl was paid with wine and grapes.<sup>128</sup> If at Hermoupolis young girls are known to have received such an education, then it is likely that the literate women from Oxyrhynchus had a similar upbringing.

The few clues to the social status of the women who signed their own documents seem to indicate that, as might be expected, these women were most likely to have come from families of enough wealth and leisure to have sufficient means for and interest in the

<sup>122</sup> Mondini (1917), 47

<sup>123</sup> *P Giss* 85 Préaux (1920), 774-7

<sup>124</sup> *P Giss* 78 Ἡ μικρά μου Ἡραϊδοῦς γράφουσα τῷ πατρὶ ἐμέ οὐκ ἀσπάζεται καὶ διὰ τὴ οὐκ οἶδα Préaux (1920), 776

<sup>125</sup> *P Giss* 80 Préaux (1920), 779

<sup>126</sup> Τὰ [περιστερίδι [α καὶ ὀρνυθάρια ἃ οὐκ ἦθα ἐσθεῖν, πέμψον] . . . [ ] τῷ καθηγητῇ Ἡραϊδοῦτος

<sup>127</sup> Ὅσα ποτὲ οὐκ ἔφαγον παρὰ σοῦ ἀφ' [οσ]έστια [ ] [ ]ας, πέμψον τῷ καθηγητῇ τῆς θυγατρὸς μου, ἵνα φιλοπονήσῃ εἰς αὐτήν

education of a daughter. But not all female Roman citizens or members of the Greco-Egyptian metropolite or privileged gymnasial class necessarily had this opportunity.<sup>129</sup> For example, Lucia Veturia, the daughter of a Roman army veteran father and a Greco-Egyptian mother, did not sign her name on a document repaying a loan, her father wrote for her (though her brother wrote for himself).<sup>130</sup> Similarly, Beris, also called Demetria, and her husband, who wished to register their son as part owner of a house, included in the application all the necessary information to prove that their son was entitled to be a member of the gymnasial class and pay the reduced poll-tax, for this to be possible both mother and father had to be members of the “élite within the élite”, the gymnasial class. Even so, Beris was illiterate and could not sign her own name.<sup>131</sup>

Women were proud that they could write. The extant papyrus documents cite only a handful of examples of women who showed that they could do so, sometimes identifying themselves by the phrase *γράμματα ἐπισταμένη* or *εἰδυία*. The possibility must not be discounted that the phrases *γράμματα ἐπισταμένη* and *εἰδυία* (*εἰδυίη*) *γράμματα* are local expressions, not legal terms.<sup>132</sup> The former expression has been found only at Oxyrhynchus so far, the latter only at Hermoupolis. These women who “knew letters” do not appear to be acting in any capacity that strictly requires literacy. Notwithstanding the fact that the ability to write Greek would be an asset in any legal or financial transactions, perhaps the epithet “knowing letters” was indeed a point of pride for these women which they wished to advertise. In a plea to the prefect for redress against relatives who were attempting to swindle her out of an inheritance, one woman wrote, “you know very well, lord prefect, that the female tribe is by nature easily despised because of the weakness of our nature.”<sup>133</sup> It is conceivable that in a society in which knowledge of the written word gave one power over one’s personal affairs, women would prize their skill, even if this knowledge did not carry

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<sup>128</sup> *P Oslo* 3 156. See Criboire (1996), 167.

<sup>129</sup> Pomeroy (1981), 315, 309.

<sup>130</sup> *P Oxy* 3798.

<sup>131</sup> *P Oxy* 2858.

<sup>132</sup> Hanson (1991), 170 suggests that the term “slow writer” might have been a local custom, not an official term.

<sup>133</sup> *P Oxy* 2713 ἄμεινον δ’ἐπίστασε, ἡγεμῶν δέσποτα, ὅτι τὸ γυναικεῖον γένος] εὐκαταφρόνητον πέφυκεν διὰ τὸ περὶ ἡμᾶς τῆς φύσεως ἀσθενές.

legal weight. One scholar has suggested that “[women’s] illiteracy was not burdensome, since unless a woman enjoyed the *ius in liberorum* . . . she was always accompanied by a *kyrios* (guardian), most often a male relative. If he were literate, he would sign on her behalf, if both were illiterate, others would sign for them”<sup>134</sup> Yet in the petition for the *ius liberorum* which Aurelia Thaisous sent to the prefect, she specifically stated that she desired the opportunity to conduct her legal and business transactions “unimpeded”, *ἀνεμποδίστως*. At least this one woman chafed at the necessity of obtaining the consent of the *κύριος*, despite the fact that laws were in place to assure that if the guardian did not approve his consent could be compelled by law. It is all the more striking that the women who mentioned that they “knew letters” as these women do appear to be from exactly the high-ranking social class in which one would expect educated women would be found, and other women who apparently “knew letters” wrote subscriptions without drawing attention to the fact. It may be necessary to concede that the *γράμματα ἐπισταμένα* and *εἰδνία γράμματα* are terms of some special significance in the *metropoleis* where they are found, the circumstance for which there is no more information at the present time. Bowman has observed that “the patterns of personal and social identification in a literate society emerge from the ways in which people responded to the need to designate themselves in official documents, most commonly in reference to status groups of various kinds”,<sup>135</sup> and has identified various bureaucratic, ethnic, religious, or vocational titles which are joined to a person’s name. Perhaps the *ἐπισταμένως γράμματα* wish to announce their education and distance themselves from the “slow writers” and omnipresent “illiterates”.

### Personal Letters

Legal and financial contracts and official petitions represent only one aspect of the documentary papyri from Roman Egypt. Although a woman could endorse a document with a subscription, the actual composition of the text was done by a scribe or advocate skilled in the standard legal terminology required. The exciting number of private letters which have been preserved in the Egyptian desert provide an opportunity for the social historian to discover the voices of individual women as they send letters to articulate their concerns, hail

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<sup>134</sup> Pomeroy (1981), 313

family and friends and conduct business, a view of women's life "from below", as opposed to the lives of queens and famous historical figures<sup>136</sup> As we saw in Chapter Two, the private correspondence of Cicero and Pliny included letters to women, with no replies preserved. The papyrus letters from Egypt were for a long time the only extant personal letters actually written by women in the Roman world. However, the discovery in the 1970s of a cache of letters and other documents on wooden tablets from the second century Roman fort at Vindolanda in northern Britain provided a small documentary archive which can be compared to the material from the other end of the Roman world.

There are several limitations which must be considered when assessing the evidence of the private letters. First, it is almost impossible to know if the women who sent letters physically wrote out the letters for themselves. In many cases a professional scribe, secretary, literate family member or acquaintance could be called upon to pen a letter without the fact being expressed.<sup>137</sup> Unlike a legal document where a short endorsement in a person's own hand (if this were possible) was essential for the contract to be valid, there was no pressing need for a personal letter to be written in the hand of its author. It was an epistolary courtesy, though not an obligation, for a sender to write out in his or her own hand personal greetings (but not a signature) to the recipient, if the letter had been written by an amanuensis. This custom is seen in roughly contemporaneous letters from both Roman Britain at one extreme edge of the empire and Roman Egypt on the other, so it is safe to say that the practice was at least familiar, if not widely used by all correspondents. As noted previously, to have a secretary take dictation could be a sign of wealth and leisure. Quintilian, in his treatise on education, lamented the trend whereby personal penmanship was neglected:

the art of writing well and quickly is not unimportant for our purpose, though it is generally disregarded by persons of quality. Writing is of the utmost importance in the study which we have under consideration and by its means alone can true and deeply rooted proficiency be obtained. But a sluggish pen delays our thoughts, while an unformed and illiterate hand cannot be deciphered, a circumstance which necessitates another wearisome task, namely the dictation of what we have written to a copyist. We shall therefore at all times and in all places, and above all when we are

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<sup>135</sup> Bowman (1989), 137-8.

<sup>136</sup> Mondini (1917), 29.

<sup>137</sup> Cole (1981), 235.

writing private letters to our friends, find a gratification in the thought that we have not neglected even this accomplishment<sup>138</sup>

The preceding pages have shown that in legal documents, where some writing was required, there are few occurrences of women actually taking *calamus* in hand to write their own endorsements, which in most cases amounted to little more than their own names. If the majority of women shied away from this task, then there is some doubt as to whether the majority of women who sent letters actually wrote out these more extended texts themselves. Women were implored to “write back” to their correspondents, but it is dangerous to extract a literal meaning from such expressions. A person might “write” to another through dictation and not mention the fact, the recipient, probably aware of the writing capabilities of the sender, would not require this information. In one extant letter,<sup>139</sup> Callias, who held an administrative post under the royal scribe, employed the expression “I write to you . . .” (*γράφω σοι*)” in the body of his letter. The closing greetings, however, are written in a different hand, obviously Callias dictated the main part of the letter, then signed the closing.<sup>140</sup> In these letters the act of sending a letter and the act of physically writing the letter are referred to by the same word. In another letter, an apparently wealthy couple named Apollonius and Sarapias addressed a charming note to Dionysia, giving their regrets that they could not come to the wedding of her son (or step-son) Sarapion, to whom they seemed very attached. They were, however, sending 4,000 narcissus flowers and 1,000 roses for the occasion, and brushed off any suggestion that they be repaid for this generosity. The closing greetings, “We pray for your health, lady”,<sup>141</sup> were written in a different hand from the body of the text, which leads the editors to believe that an amanuensis wrote the dictated text, and

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<sup>138</sup> Quint *Inst* 1.1.28-9 *Non est aliena res, quae fere ab honestis negligi solet, cura bene ac velociter scribendi. Nam cum sit in studiis praecipuum, quoque solo verus ille profectus et altis radicibus nixus paretur, scribere ipsum, tardior stilus cogitationem moratur, rudis et confusus intellectu caret, unde sequitur alter dictandi, quae transferenda sunt, labor. Quare cum semper et ubique tum praecipue in epistolis secretis et familiaribus delectabit ne hoc quidem neglectum reliquisse.* Transl. H. Butler

<sup>139</sup> *P Oxy* 3810

<sup>140</sup> According to the editors, the hand of the main part of the letter is “a very good official cursive”, while the second hand is a “smaller and more rapid” cursive. *P Oxy* 3810, introduction.

<sup>141</sup> *P Oxy* 3313. Transl. J. Rea. *ἐρῶσθαί σε εὐχόμεθα κυρία*

one of the couple penned the concluding words to add a personal touch.<sup>142</sup> In contrast, the abruptness in style and tone of some letters strongly suggests that they were dictated to scribes by persons of little culture or literacy. A brief letter from Helene to her brother Petechon deals with several unrelated topics in quick succession, and includes a postscript message from her father.<sup>143</sup> The editors note that the letter was written in one hand, despite the fact that both Helene and her father speak in the first person singular in their respective messages. It is impossible to know if Helene, her father, or a barely competent amanuensis wrote the letter.<sup>144</sup>

In the absence of evidence for a second hand which exposes the presence of a scribe, it is often necessary to look for other contextual clues which might hint at the literacy of the sender. In a letter from a woman named Thermuthion to Isidorus, the sender wrote: "If you learn that the governor is coming out this way, (well and good), but if not, write to me quickly. Buy me the things which I wrote to you about before."<sup>145</sup> While these phrases may or may not indicate that the sender could both read and write personally, the next lines might strengthen the case for her literacy. Thermouthion instructed Isidorus: "Write a petition about the matter you know of, and shoot it off(?), and let the subscription of the petition be brought to me."<sup>146</sup> Was Thermuthion intending to write the subscription herself? The editors of the papyri note that "the hand of the letter, though not careful or elegant, is dashing and practiced. The lady's colloquial language is equally dashing, covering at least four topics briefly in 10 lines."<sup>147</sup> She might well have penned the letter herself, but any conclusion is necessarily speculative. The letters sent to and from women are full of such tantalizing phrases. One letter from a woman named Arsinoe to her "sister" Sarapias reads, "Since Achilles was going downstream I decided that I must greet you in writing. As for the

<sup>142</sup> *P Oxy* 3313, introduction, notes.

<sup>143</sup> *P Oxy* 1067. The editors note that the letter is "very ungrammatical" as well. A similar letter is *P Oxy* 295.

<sup>144</sup> Cole (1981), 235.

<sup>145</sup> *P Oxy* 3855. Transl. M. G. Sirivianou: *ἐὰν μάθης ὅτι ὁ ἡγεμὼν ἐξέρχεται δεῦρο, ἐὰν δὲ μὴ, γράψον μοι ἐν τάχει περὶ ὧν ἔγραψά σοι ἄλλοτε, ἀγόρασόν μοι.*

<sup>146</sup> *γράψον βιβλίδιον περὶ οὗ οἶδες καὶ χάλασον καὶ ἐνεχθήτω μοι ἢ [[απ]] ὑπογραφή τοῦ βιβλιδίου.*

<sup>147</sup> *P Oxy* 3855, introduction.

thing that you wrote me was finished, you will do me a favour if you give it to my brother

... If you want anything sent to you, write to me and I will send it to you immediately ”<sup>148</sup>

These letters reveal few details about the lives of the correspondents which would assist in unearthing their social status or level of education. To build on the signature evidence discussed above, we might assume that some women from the wealthy metropolite families, the *γράμματα ἐπισταμένας*, were probably capable of writing their own letters if they wished. Although paleographical analysis might seem to be of help in determining whether or not a professional scribe wrote a letter, there is no telling whether or not an unpracticed hand reflects the sender’s own ability, that of a more literate relative or friend pressed into service, or even a barely proficient scribe.<sup>149</sup>

A related problem is the fact that there is no way of knowing if women who received letters could read them for themselves. Once again, a literate person could easily be found to make known the message. Letters in which a second hand, that of the author, wrote personal greetings were presumably meant to be read and appreciated by the intended recipient. Once again women of the higher social classes who had received some education might have been expected to be able to read their own letters. But what of other women? A letter from Serenus to his mother Tapsais includes a request that the recipient “read this part of the letter to [Harpocratiaena], so that it does not appear that I have been neglectful”<sup>150</sup>. Can we assume that Tapsais was literate but Harpocratiaena was not,<sup>151</sup> or might a third party have read the letter to both women? In another letter Dionysius wrote to his sister, to whom he had just sent a mirror, writing tablets (*δελτάρια*), and a tunic: “Since the strategos has given me orders about this matter, let Ariston read you the document that was sent to him”<sup>152</sup>. Was

<sup>148</sup> *P Oxy 2680* Transl. J Rea. Ἀχιλλᾶτος καταπλέοντος ἀναγκαῖον ἔγνων διὰ γραπτῶν σε ἀσπᾶσασθαι περὶ οὗ μοι ἔγραψας ὅτι ἐτελέσθη, καλῶς ποιήσεις δοῦσα αὐτὸ Ἀχιλλᾶτι τῷ ἀδελφῷ μου ἵνα μοι αὐτὸ ἐνέγκῃ – ἐάν τι θέλ[η]ς πεμφθῆναί σοι, γράψον μοι καὶ εὐθέως σοι πέμψω

<sup>149</sup> Roger Bagnall presented a paper on the topic of women’s handwriting in papyrus letters at a conference on women in antiquity at Princeton in 1996, but the paper has not been published at this time

<sup>150</sup> *P Oxy 3996* Transl. H.G. Ioannidou καὶ ἀναγνωσθήτω αὐτῇ τοῦτο τὸ μέρος τῆς ἐπιστολῆς, ἵνα μὴ δόξῃ με ἡμεληκέναι

<sup>151</sup> *P Oxy 3996*, introduction.

<sup>152</sup> *P Oxy 2787* Transl. A.H.S. El-Mosallamy ἐπεὶ ὁ στρατηγός μοι περὶ τούτου ἐπέθετο Ἀρίστων σοι ἀναγνώτω τὸ πεμφθέν αὐτῷ πιττάκιον

Dionysius inferring that his sister could not read the document, or that it would be more politic to allow Ariston to read his document to her? The writing tablets might have been intended for the sister, but there is no way of knowing.

An inherent limitation in analyzing the content of other people's mail is that correspondents allude to events and persons obviously well-known to themselves, but whose significance is lost on the modern reader. Unlike the archives left by Cicero or Pliny, it is rare to find several letters to and from the same correspondents, which would allow the modern reader to build up a context for the information presented. In addition, unlike legal documents, private letters do not usually provide information which can identify the civic rank of the correspondents' families, which is useful for determining their social status in the community. Furthermore, it would be unwise to generalize about the situations of the inhabitants of the Roman empire from the personal experiences related by the correspondents of Oxyrhynchus, a society in which elements from early Egyptian, Ptolemaic, and Roman law and culture are combined. The letters from Vindolanda similarly reflect the point of view of persons in a military context. However, general trends might be drawn from an examination of the content of both sets of evidence.

A few topics of discussion reappear again and again in the private letters which are dispatched by women. It has been noted that these letters tend to relate to domestic matters, such as articles of clothing and food, and occasionally money;<sup>153</sup> however, it is worthwhile to delve more deeply into the nature of these missives. Letters are usually addressed to a "brother" or a "sister", but this term is used not only for actual siblings, but also as an affectionate epithet for a spouse or friend. In the context of Egypt, however, full brothers and sisters often married, especially among the propertied class of the metropolitans, who could only preserve their status (and land) for their children by marrying within their own ranks, however, even among the lower classes marriages of this type were common.<sup>154</sup> Endogamous marriages were prohibited for Roman citizens. However, in most of the letters from Vindolanda the sender referred to the recipient as either "brother" or "sister", and so these terms are evidently also epistolary courtesies, and are perhaps used as such in Egypt as well.

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<sup>153</sup> Cole (1981), 235-6.

A sense of urgency pervades several letters from women. Short and terse, these letters transmit a necessary message and no more, in the fashion of telegrams<sup>155</sup> One letter from a woman to her brother reads “Zois to her brother Ischyriion, greeting No one has brought me a letter about the bread, but if you send a letter by Coluthus, an artaba will come to you immediately If you wish to depart for Alexandria, Apollos son on Theon is going tomorrow Good-bye”<sup>156</sup> Another letter reads “Sinthonis to her brother Tereus, greeting Please come to me until matters are arranged, but if not, do not go to the house of Satyrus, for we hear that he is going to get into trouble Sarapion greets you Good-bye”<sup>157</sup> Whether or not these female authors could read or write, they made use of the available technology to quickly communicate information to alleviate the distress of a distant family member.

A number of letters were written to accompany parcels of goods, and in the manner of a packing-slip enumerated the items which were included in the shipment, the recipient was often asked to send confirmation that all the items arrived<sup>158</sup> Some letters have a particularly business-like tone a letter from Apollonia to Philetus details the amount of wool which she was sending, as well as the precise cost<sup>159</sup> owed to her A letter from a woman named Thais to Tigrius reports on some agricultural business which must be attended to<sup>160</sup> Eunoea asked that an acquaintance redeem some of her pawned property, and included a list

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<sup>154</sup> See Lewis (1983), 43-4

<sup>155</sup> Bowman (1989), 161 notes that “many of [the letters] are inelegant, far from literary compositions, linguistically vulgar and syntactically imprecise The content is frequently brief, banal, and practical”

<sup>156</sup> *P Oxy* 1291 Transl B Grenfell and A Hunt Ζοῖς Ἰσχυρίωνι τῷ ἀδελφῷ χαιρεῖν οὐδεῖς μοι ἤνεγκεν ἐπιστολήν περὶ ἄρτων, ἀλλ’ εὐθέως, ἢ ἔπεμψας διὰ Κολλούθου ἐπιστολήν, εἰδὸν ἀρτάβη σοι γίνεται ἐὰν δὲ θέρης εἰς Ἀλεξάνδρεα ἢ ἀπελθεῖν, Ἀπολλῶς Θέωνος ὑπάγει αὔριον ἔρρα(σο)

<sup>157</sup> *P Oxy* 1215 Transl A. Hunt This missive is described by the editors as “an illiterate letter written in a rather large, uncultivated hand” Σινθονίς Τηρης τῷ ἀδελφῷ χαίριν καλῶς πυήσις ἐλθὼν πρὸς αἰμαὶ ἄχρι τὰ πράγματα κατασταλῆ, αἰὰν δ’ ἄρα μή, μή ἀπέλθης εἰς τὸ Σατύρου, αἰπεὶ γὰρ ἀκούομεν ὅτι κακὰ μέλλι πράσῃσιν ἢ ἀσπάζεται σοι Σαραπίων αἰροσθέ σοι

<sup>158</sup> Mondini (1917), 30-31 has noted that women appear to take on the responsibility for clothes, they acquire wool and linen, make tunics, send them, and men ask for them, cf *P Oxy* 937, 1300, 1294

<sup>159</sup> *P Oxy* 2593

<sup>160</sup> *P Oxy* 832

of the items.<sup>161</sup> Irene sent a letter to Taonnophris and Philo with money to pay a workman and also a supply of foodstuffs, which she listed.<sup>162</sup> This kind of letter could be an opportunity to exchange news and greetings in a friendly, “chatty” style, as in one example in which Apia sent her mother a warm letter itemizing the tunics which she was sending, and included greetings for many people.<sup>163</sup> Another letter mixes business with pleasure.<sup>164</sup> Arsinoe writing to Sarapias asked for instructions about collecting the rents from Sarapias’ tenant farmer and also urged her to enjoy the jar of pickles which she had sent with the letter.<sup>165</sup>

Indeed, some letters are simply friendly exchanges of family news and greetings, as opposed to urgent or business-related letters. One letter reads

Sarapias to Ischyriion her brother, greetings I was overjoyed when your letter was brought, because you are coming to us for the festival. A lot of supplies for the month which we had intended to send we held back in expectation of your visit. Your mother made you a cotton tunic. We were looking for someone reliable who could deliver it. Your mother and Sinthoonis and your father greet you. Greet Eraphroditus and Demetrius and Heracleides. We had been in no little anxiety because for a long time no letter or yours was delivered. Farewell.<sup>166</sup>

On occasion a letter can contain stronger sentiments. One fragment of a letter, reminiscent of love elegy, reads, “Didyme to Apollonius her brother and son, greetings. You must know that I do not view the sun, because you are out of my view; for I have no sun but you.”<sup>167</sup>

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<sup>161</sup> *P Oxy* 114

<sup>162</sup> *P Oxy* 116

<sup>163</sup> *P Oxy* 1679

<sup>164</sup> *P Oxy* 2680

<sup>165</sup> Cole (1981), 254

<sup>166</sup> *P Oxy* 3991 Transl H G Ioannidou *Σαραπιᾶς Ἰσχυρίωνι τῷ ἀδελφῷ χαίρει(ιν) λείαν ἐχάρην κομισθέντων σου τῶν γραμμάτων ὡς πρὸς τὴν ἑορτὴν ἐρχομένου σου πρὸς ἡμᾶς πολλὰ δέ σοι ἐπιμήνι, ἃ ἐμέλλομεν πέμπειν, ἐπέσχομεν προσδοκῶντες τ[ουτο] ἢ παρουσίαν τὸν χιτῶνά σοι τὸν ἐρίο[ξ]υλον ἢ μήτηρ σου κ[α]τεσκεύασε ἐζητ[ο]ῦμεν [[σοι]] τὸν δυνάμενον κομίσει ἀσφαλῆ[ν] ἢ ἀσπάζεται ἢ μήτηρ σου καὶ Σινθοῶνις καὶ ὁ πατήρ σου ἄσπασαι Ἐπαφρόδειτον καὶ Δημήτριον καὶ Ἡρακλείδην ἐν ἀγωνίᾳ γηγόνειμεν οὐ μεικρᾶ, πολλῶ χρόνῳ μὴ κομισθέντων σου γραμμάτων ἔρρωσο*

<sup>167</sup> *P Oxy* 3059 Transl P Parsons *Διδύμη Ἀπολλωνίῳ τῷ ἀδελφῷ καὶ ἡλίῳ χαίρειν γείνωσκέ με μὴ βλέπουσαν τὸν ἥλιον διὰ τὸ μὴ βλέπεσθαι σε ὑπ’ ἐμοῦ οὐ γὰρ ἔχω ἄλλον ἥλιον εἰ μὴ σέ*

More formal letters of a social nature were also sent by women: letters of condolence<sup>168</sup> as well as invitations to weddings.<sup>169</sup>

It has been observed that women tend to receive more letters than they send (a trend seen in the Oxyrhynchus papyri), and this probably reflects a higher illiteracy rate among women.<sup>170</sup> However, it is also an indicator of the fact that women traveled less than men and performed the valuable function of overseeing the smooth functioning of matters at home while their husbands or male family members were away. Husbands came to depend on their wives in this fashion.<sup>171</sup> A large number of the letters sent by men to women are instructions for carrying out certain tasks, such as securing items for the sender or arranging financial affairs, or to take receipt of items which accompany the letter.<sup>172</sup> These letters too might include a few personal messages, but rarely in the “chatty” tone of the women senders, although brief greetings are frequently included.

But men too can send affable letters to family and friends. An unusually amicable letter was sent from Flavius Herculanus to a woman named Aplonarian, perhaps his manumitted slave.<sup>173</sup> He addressed her in very warm terms, was sorry that she and her husband could not attend his son’s birthday party, greeted her parents, and sent his son’s greetings as well as those of his wife.<sup>174</sup> In another example, a brother wrote a warm letter to his sister and her husband, asking for news of her family, and announcing his impending visit.<sup>175</sup> Another man wrote to his sister (perhaps wife) to ask that she look after herself while he was away, likely on military service, and assures her that he would look after himself.<sup>176</sup> A mysterious allusion to a family matter is found in a letter from Sarapammon to his sister Thaeis: “... I intended to come back, but put it off until I learn whether Isas is in love or

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<sup>168</sup> *P Oxy* 115. Irene sends a brief letter of consolation to Taonnophris and Philo on the death of an acquaintance.

<sup>169</sup> *P Oxy* 2678 and *P Oxy* 111.

<sup>170</sup> Cole (1981), 235.

<sup>171</sup> Mondini (1917), 35.

<sup>172</sup> Letters of this type include *P Oxy* 293, 530, 937, 1069, 1293, 1488, 1489, 1670, 1677, 2787, 3506, 3990, 3996.

<sup>173</sup> *P Oxy* 1676, introduction. The address on the letter refers to him as *patronus*.

<sup>174</sup> *P Oxy* 1676.

<sup>175</sup> *P Oxy* 1216.

not, and whether there is any need for me to come back”<sup>177</sup> It is thus not only women writers take an interest in family matters

For some families regular correspondence appears to have been expected. More than once there is anxiety because no letter has been forthcoming<sup>178</sup> Several letters contain reproaches that the recipient has not been writing back as regularly as the sender would like<sup>179</sup> Agathus wrote to Aphrodite, “Send me word at once that you have received it, in order that you may not give people the trouble of writing to you, so that you may not become wearisome to them”<sup>180</sup> A man asked his sister to investigate what his wife was doing with his possessions, the wife’s silence made him nervous: “And the fact that she doesn’t write to me – from that I have a presentiment of trouble about her”<sup>181</sup> He even rebuked his sister for not sending news sooner “Even if I had not written to you, you ought of your own accord to have written to me, as I am your brother”<sup>182</sup> In another example, Aurelius Demareus wrote to his sister Aurelia Arsinoe: “I think it superfluous to write to you about our business and affairs concerning which I have written to you often before in many letters ... Although I have often written to you, you have not written at all nor remembered me in regard to the safety of our house, as I often by notes and letters ... enjoined you to do”<sup>183</sup> One sender admitted that he was an infrequent writer as well. Sarapas saluted his

<sup>176</sup> *P Oxy* 1154, introduction

<sup>177</sup> *P Oxy* 1488 Transl. B. Grenfell and A. Hunt. *ὑπερεθέμην ἔστ’ ἂν μάθω πότερον ἐρᾷ Ἰσαῖς ἢ οὐ, καὶ εἰ χρεῖα ἐστὶ τοῦ με ἀνελθεῖν*

<sup>178</sup> *P Oxy* 3991

<sup>179</sup> Men as well as women are chided for not writing. The entire letter of *P Oxy* 2980 is a amiable reproach from one male friend to another for failing to keep up his side of their correspondence.

<sup>180</sup> *P Oxy* 1677 Transl. B. Grenfell and A. Hunt. *Ταχέως δήλωσόν ἡμεῖν διὰ δάσεως ‘ἀπέσχεσ’, ἵνα μὴ βαρήσεισ ἀνθρώποις*

<sup>181</sup> *P Oxy* 3994 Transl. H.G. Ioannidou. *καὶ τῷ μὴ γράφειν μοι αὐτήν, ἐκ τούτου προλαμβάνω ἄλλω ‘ς’ περὶ αὐτῆς*

<sup>182</sup> *P Oxy* 3994 Transl. H.G. Ioannidou. *ἀσπάζου Θαισοῦν τὴν ἀδελφὴν καὶ εἶπέ αὐτῇ, ἐάν τινο[ς] χρήση ἐνθάδε, γράψα[ι] μοι*

<sup>183</sup> *P Oxy* 1070 Transl. A. Hunt. *τὸ μὲν οὖν γράφειν σοι περὶ τῶν πραγμάτων ἡμῶν ἢ καὶ τῶν ἔργων ὅπερ καὶ φθάνω πολλάκις σοι γράψας διὰ ἐπιστολῶν πολλῶν .. πολλάκις ἐμου γράψαντος ὑμεῖν οὐδὲ ὅλως ἐγράψατε οὐδὲ ἐμνήσθητέ μου περὶ τῆς ἀσφαλείας τῆς οἰκίας ἡμῶν, ὡς καὶ πολλάκις διὰ γραμμάτων καὶ ἐπιστολῶν... ἐνετιλάμην*

sister Diogenis, “You know from close experience my good-will even though I do not write to you, but you have never thought proper to send me greetings in a letter”<sup>184</sup>

The lack of a reliable postal service may be responsible for some of these reproaches. A large number of letters allude to the fact that they were being sent through acquaintances who were passing by the area where the intended recipient lived, it was often necessary to wait until a messenger of this kind became available.<sup>185</sup> This is corroborated by the fact that most addresses contain only the name of sender and recipient, the messenger probably knew where to deliver the missive. On occasion a more detailed address was provided.<sup>186</sup> A trustworthy courier was also essential.<sup>187</sup> Letters sometimes allude to the difficulties of delivering mail. Flavius Herculanus wrote to Aplonarion, “I rejoiced greatly at receiving your letter, which was given to me by the cutler, I have not, however, received the one which you say you sent me by Plato the dancer’s son”<sup>188</sup> However, the fact that some recipients apparently hesitated to reply makes us wonder if there were not some other difficulties involved. Naturally, there is the explanation that the recipient may not have had time to pen a reply. If a recipient could not read or write, he or she would need recourse to a literate acquaintance or a professional scribe, such a resource might not have been convenient, or perhaps the letter-writer was reluctant to make such a request. The general feeling, however, is that exchanges of letters was a common practice.

The only archive of Roman letters comparable to the papyri of Egypt comes from the other side of the empire: a fort in Roman Britain by the name of Vindolanda.<sup>189</sup> In recent years hundreds of fragments of documents, written on wooden tablets<sup>190</sup> have been

<sup>184</sup> *P Oxy* 1216 Transl. A. Hunt. *σὺ οἶδάς μου τὴν προαίρεσιν κἄν μὴ σοι γράφω, σὺ δαὶ οὐκ ἤξιωσάς μαι ἀσπασασθε δι’ ἐπιστολῆς*

<sup>185</sup> *P Oxy* 1070, 1291, 2151, 2680

<sup>186</sup> *P Oxy* 1678

<sup>187</sup> *P Oxy* 3991, 2680

<sup>188</sup> *P Oxy* 1676 Transl. B. Grenfell and A. Hunt. *ἐχάρην μεγάλας κομισάμενός σου ἐπιστολὴν, δόντος μοι αὐτὴν τοῦ μαχαιρᾶ ἣν δὲ γράφεις διὰ Πλάτωνος τοῦ τοῦ ὄρχηστοῦ πεπομφέναι μοι οὐκ ἔκομισάμην*

<sup>189</sup> A general introduction to the writing-tablets of Vindolanda is Bowman (1994a); a more scholarly work with a focus on archeology and paleography is Bowman (1994b)

<sup>190</sup> In addition to the type of wooden writing-tablet which is “hollowed out in the centre and filled with wax”, the Vindolanda tablets also include thin leaves which were written on in ink, “clearly the counterpart of papyrus in those areas of the empire where papyrus will have been difficult and

unearthed from the mud which preserved them in an airless environment. The thin wooden tablets are similar to papyrus in Egypt in that they were a convenient and affordable writing material.<sup>191</sup> The letters from Vindolanda show that even where a written tradition did not previously exist (unlike the Greek East) communication through letters was efficient and expected.<sup>192</sup> As in the case of the papyri at Oxyrhynchus, most of the Vindolanda texts had been destined for the rubbish heap in antiquity, the rescue of these administrative documents and private letters has allowed historians to learn first-hand of the interests and concerns of the inhabitants of the fort. Most of the tablets date from the late first century and early second century AD. The majority of the private letters are connected to the prefect of the Ninth Cohort of Batavians, Flavius Cerialis, while the rest of the letters are associated with various officers. Of particular interest to this study are the few letters of the wife of Cerialis, Sulpicia Lepidina. The historian Tacitus had written about the fact that wives increasingly accompanied their husbands on military service in the provinces,<sup>193</sup> a fact demonstrated by Lepidina, who corresponded with Claudia Severa, the wife of an officer by the name of Aelius Brocchus stationed near Vindolanda, and another woman probably named Paterna. All of them appear to be of the equestrian order.<sup>194</sup>

Only four letters have survived in partial form, but they are indicative nonetheless of certain aspects of life for these women who, far from Rome and its comforts and diversions, managed to construct a small social network. One letter from Severa to Lepidina is a friendly invitation to Severa's birthday party.<sup>195</sup> Severa took the trouble to write a long personal greeting in the closure: "I shall expect you, sister. Farewell, sister, my dearest soul, as I hope to prosper, and hail!"<sup>196</sup> In another letter, Severa wrote that her husband Aelius Brocchus had

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expensive to obtain" Bowman (1994a), 15. The wood used was normally grown in the area Bowman (1994a), 16.

<sup>191</sup> Bowman (1994a), 84.

<sup>192</sup> Bowman (1994a), 83.

<sup>193</sup> Tac *Ann* 3.33.

<sup>194</sup> Bowman (1994a), 57.

<sup>195</sup> Bowman (1994b), no. 291.

<sup>196</sup> Transl. Bowman *Sperabo te soror / vale soror anima / mea ita valeam / karissima et haue*

readily assented to her request to visit Lepidina<sup>197</sup> Other references to letters make it clear that the two women corresponded and attempted to see each other frequently Once again Severa included warm, but differently worded, wishes in her personal closure “Farewell my sister, my dearest and most longed-for soul”<sup>198</sup> A third letter from Severa was also found,<sup>199</sup> of which only the address and Severa’s closing greetings survive Lepidina also received a letter from another female correspondent, Paterna, who promised to visit and bring medicines for fever and another undisclosed ailment<sup>200</sup> Cerialis himself received at least one letter from a woman, perhaps named Valatta, who asked for his help in some unknown matter through the intercession of Lepidina<sup>201</sup> Letters from one officer to another often include in their closures warm greetings to or from women in the household<sup>202</sup> By means of letters a social fabric was constructed by these women, created not only of mutual friendship but of mutual assistance These letters are valuable testimony of how obviously literate women used writing in their daily lives on the frontier, and undoubtedly in other parts of the empire other military wives followed this example<sup>203</sup>

The evidence from both Roman Egypt and Vindolanda reveals that a number of women in the first three centuries AD depended on the medium of letter-writing to communicate with family and friends The awareness of the advantage of writing and the actual ability to write are of course not the same thing,<sup>204</sup> but it is clear that women who did write, such as Claudia Severa, were acquainted with the established epistolary conventions, and, moreover, felt free to elaborate on them, as Severa did in her closures such habits could

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<sup>197</sup> Bowman (1994b), no. 292 Interestingly, a different scribal hand was employed to write each letter As in Roman Egypt, the habit of using an amanuensis is also strong at Vindolanda Bowman (1994a), 88

<sup>198</sup> *[val]e m soror karissimaet anima ma desideratissima* Transl. Bowman. “Most striking of all is the elaborate and elegant expression of Claudia Severa to Lepidina . . . Severa appears to be fond of fulsome closures of this kind” Bowman (1994a), 93

<sup>199</sup> Bowman (1994b), no. 293

<sup>200</sup> Bowman (1994b), no. 294

<sup>201</sup> Bowman (1994b), no. 257

<sup>202</sup> Bowman (1994b), nos. 244, 247, 274, 310, 353

<sup>203</sup> Bowman (1994a), 83

<sup>204</sup> Cole (1981), 235

only be developed through practice,<sup>205</sup> and letter-writing was undoubtedly a more widespread phenomenon than was thought before the discovery of the Vindolanda tablets. Nonetheless, although it is probable that women of the upper levels of society might readily have written their own letters, the women from a lower economic and social rank were not cut off from using written communication. It is clear from the content of the letters that women received that, as guardians of the hearth, they were expected to take care of business at home while their male counterparts traveled. The letters which women sent reflected their role as the linchpin of the family's social network.

### Conclusion

A letter from Pliny the Younger to an acquaintance tells a story about the legacy-hunter Regulus:

The noble lady Aurelia had dressed in her best for the ceremony of signing her will. When Regulus arrived to witness her signature, he asked her to leave these clothes to him. Aurelia thought he was joking, but he pressed the point in all seriousness, and to cut a long story short, he forced her to open her will and leave him what she was wearing; he watched her writing and looked to see if she had done so.<sup>206</sup>

Pliny's incidental reference to Aurelia's signing of the will is a rare insight into the use of literacy by women in a non-literary context. The extant evidence only seldom allows the modern historian, in the manner of Regulus, to look over the shoulder of a woman in the act of independently writing a document of legal or economic importance, though we know from many ancient sources that women could possess great wealth and influence. The empire depended on the diffusion of writing, and as inhabitants of the empire women, literate or not, had to be involved with written records of administrative, legal and business transactions. A view of letter-writing which is far different from the romantic and frivolous letters described by Ovid is also visible in the documentary papyri. Letters served a real social function in the private sphere of the family, not only to send greetings to relatives and

<sup>205</sup> Bowman (1994a), 84, 88, 97.

<sup>206</sup> Plin. *Ep.* 2.20. Transl. B. Radice: *Aurelia ornata femina signatura testamentum sumpserat pulcherrimas tunicas. Regulus cum venisset ad signandum, "Rogo" inquit "has mihi leges" Aurelia ludere hominem putabat, ille serio instabat, ne multa, coegit mulierem aperire tabulas ac sibi tunicas quas erat induta legare, observavit scribentem, inspexit an scripsisset.* On Regulus's actions as well as the activity of will-signing, see Sherwin-White (1966), 202-5.

invitations to weddings and birthday parties, but also to advise on financial matters related to the family property and to exchange goods such as clothes and food. These sorts of mundane activities are rarely glimpsed in the literary sources. The documentary papyri present a unique opportunity to witness the strong expectation that women participate in the composition and circulation of written documents. Both the city of Oxyrhynchus in Egypt and the fort of Vindolanda in Britain were remote geographic locations in a huge empire, and only random chance has preserved these documents for posterity. The inhabitants in each area, far from Rome, were influenced by unique circumstances. At Oxyrhynchus, women of Egyptian and Greek origin eventually took on the mantle of Roman citizenship and laid claim to Roman legal rights, such as the *ius trium liberorum*, or simply found themselves having to manage their legal and business affairs within the parameters of Roman law. The gymnasial class among the metropolitans was itself a Roman social innovation.<sup>207</sup> Nevertheless a strong tradition of written records had been set in place by the earlier rulers of Egypt. At Vindolanda, the officer's wives writing letters doubtless were raised and educated in some other part of the empire, yet they were able to take advantage of the communication systems established by the Roman military to exchange correspondence. However, the fact that neither place was particularly noteworthy in antiquity may mean that the probability is very high that the writing and reading practices disclosed in the papyri may have been typical in other parts of the Roman world. The documentary texts allow us to see in a special way the manner in which women used the medium of literacy in various ways in their daily lives.

As a large number of men as well as women were presumably illiterate in Roman Egypt, a scribal system had been established to help them use written documents. Compromises were made in legal documents so that a *ὑπογραφεύς* could represent the signatory. Thus illiteracy did not matter legally, although the illiterate person ran the risk of exploitation. It is difficult to chart change over time, the majority of the evidence for women signing in their own hand in the collected Oxyrhynchus papyri comes from the third century, especially the first half. However, at all times in the first three centuries AD women who are said to be illiterate are more numerous than the literate women. This may reflect the fact that more women were engaged in legal and business affairs in the third century, but as

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<sup>207</sup> Bowman (1996), 696

the data sample is not random, we must consider the fact that it may be that more papyri from the third century have been uncovered so far.

Did illiteracy matter socially? Although in a society such as that of Greco-Roman Egypt an illiterate person “was able to function in a broad variety of occupations, to be recognized as a respectable member of his class, to attain financial success, to hold public office, to associate on equal terms with his literate neighbours”,<sup>208</sup> it is difficult to really know how illiteracy was viewed from a social, and not practical, point of view, and that point of view depends on one’s position in society. It has been observed that “Greek became the primary language of Egypt for administrative and official purposes and spread among the upper levels of the population, for knowledge of Greek was one of the keys to social and economic betterment”<sup>209</sup>. A “slow writer” considered himself or herself educationally superior to an illiterate person. But a “slow writer’s” abilities were nowhere near the level of literacy of the people who used to own the Greek literary texts which appear so abundantly in Oxyrhynchus. Culture and education were important to certain citizens, all the more so in the shadow of Alexandria, the intellectual capital of the world at that time. Metropolitans were proud to display their Hellenist traditions, literacy implied leisure, cultivation, and wealth. The literate women encountered in this chapter shared in this lifestyle. But even within this society, in which women could be granted the *ius liberorum*, managed large properties, and participated in written correspondence, there were still barriers in place which prevented more women from becoming literate. It is not surprising that *γράμματα ἐπιστοαμένας* rated this achievement highly.

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<sup>208</sup> Youtie (1975a), 201.

<sup>209</sup> Criatore (1996), 3.

## Chapter Five

### Conclusions

Modern scholarship on literacy in antiquity has emphasized that expertise in reading and writing was the possession of only a minority of the population of the Roman world. It is impossible to calculate any quantitative measurement of how many women might have been literate, or the levels of literacy they might have reached, given that the extant data does not lend itself to statistical analysis. Even the estimated number of literate women, however, tends to be low, although the ancient evidence clearly shows that a modest number of women knew how to read and write, sometimes with great proficiency. However, this information has rarely been considered in light of the projected high rate of illiteracy in Roman society. Questions are accordingly prompted about why these few women were literate and what role literacy played in their lives. The object of this thesis has been to examine representative images of women who were associated with different forms and levels of literacy, as they appear in the extant literary, documentary, and visual ancient sources for Roman history. It also explores what access women had to reading and writing activities, and how they applied the skills of literacy in domestic, social, cultural, and legal contexts, and the attitudes implied towards literate women in Roman society.

Literacy itself is a problematical term and a flexible concept, for literacy can take many forms depending on the needs of the practitioner. In some circumstances all that was required was a signature on a document, and a person who could complete this task was literate in the narrowest sense of the word;<sup>1</sup> however, except in the case of “slow writers” it is impossible to determine how much more writing the signatory could accomplish, not to mention reading. Possibly the women in Roman Egypt who wished to be known as “knowing letters” wanted to stress that they were capable of more writing if required, presumably because this talent was unusual and perhaps enviable. At the opposite extreme of signature literacy is literary composition, requiring a good knowledge of grammar, writing techniques, and vocabulary. For the élite, basic reading and writing abilities were not usually

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<sup>1</sup> Youtie (1971b), 260.

questioned. Among women in the ancient world there may have been a range of levels of literacy between these two points which the sources do not reflect.

Most of the surviving literary evidence relates above all to the situation of women in the city of Rome, but select evidence from other parts of the Empire, such as the documentary archives from Roman Egypt and Britain, assists in creating a picture of women and literacy in other areas of the Roman world. The period under discussion ranged from the second century BC to the early third century AD. No category of evidence (literary, artistic, or documentary) has provided a consistent stream of information for every century, so change over time is often hard to discern, and renders many conclusions tentative. Most of the surviving evidence, moreover, centers on the lives of the élite. However, it would be a mistake to assume that only this social group enjoyed the advantages of literacy. Certainly a high level of literacy might be expected from privileged families whose members (if they were male) would typically have careers in politics, law, or the military, and with the wealth to finance the education of their children, engage in business, and devote leisure time to literary activities. However, other free-born and freed people could profit from literacy and numeracy in their businesses and professions, not to mention cultural activities, and many of the duties of slaves required literacy. Unfortunately, the opinion that these groups took of the advantages of literacy is seldom visible in the ancient literary sources.

Ancient authors present conflicting conventional images of the literate woman, revealing both admiration and suspicion. A literate woman could be a definite asset to her family: a daughter who was educated reflected the intellectual refinement of her parents, a wife who shared in her husband's literary interests showed his cultural influence on her life, and a mother who ensured that her children were well-educated was performing a valuable duty not just for her family but for the future of Rome. Due to the strict patriarchal division of gender roles, an élite woman would not be expected to engage in the same public career as a man, but in the private sphere her literary interests and practical uses of literacy were respected and approved of when women performed them in the service of the family, complementing male activities and following the traditional domestic and social roles of a woman at different stages of her life.

In contrast, love poetry sometimes presents an image of the literate woman who exercised her ability to read and write for purposes outside the traditional standards of female

behaviour. The love poets wrote that they delighted in the company of women who, in addition to owning the advantages of great beauty and sexual freedom, were well-read and had an intellectual understanding of their poetry, sometimes wrote verse themselves, and enjoyed the game of writing *billets-doux* to their lovers, even deceiving their husbands to do so. Such portraits may have mirrored the relative emancipation of some real-life Roman women who rebelled against the social norms of the day. The *doctae puellae* of the love poets may also have represented more “mundane” educated Roman women who, within the traditional boundaries prescribed for female behaviour, enjoyed reading and even writing about erotic love. However, it is the free-spirited, literate *demi-mondaines* at Rome who are mocked in other genres such as satire and legal speeches, and although one must account for the exaggerations of authors who may have jeered at this sort of conduct among women for vicious comic effect, some truthfulness in the description must be present. Another object of censure was the literate woman who attempted to show intellectual superiority to men. Male authors were dismayed by these slights to the *dignitas* of men and expressed anxiety about women who ventured beyond their position in society and tried to be “like men”.

A recent book has suggested that part of the construction of social identity for Roman men of the élite was based upon education (*doctrina, παιδεία*) this “cultural capital”, secured by the “time, money, and effort” involved in acquiring and honing eloquence in oratory, for example, would “pay off” later in life with success in public life, both in proving one’s rightful place among one’s peers and in garnering the respect of others.<sup>2</sup> In youth “school exercises were not what separated the men from the boys, but what made boys into men.”<sup>3</sup> Like them, the literate women that we know of through the ancient authors (admirers and detractors alike) did not simply possess the ability to read and write, but were usually well-educated not only in Latin literature but also in Greek literature, for such women, the ability to read and write was not in itself a surprising or remarkable skill. This high level of literacy reveals the cultural norm of the élite. For élite women, the central period of Roman history was a period of relative cultural enlightenment, in that education for women was available though not deemed essential. In many ways, their *doctrina* resembled that of men. It appears that some girls (if their families wished it) received the

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<sup>2</sup> Gleason (1995), xxi

same basic education as boys, though they would not receive the rhetorical training that would prepare boys for an oratorical career. A few women are known to have been present at literary gatherings (not only those of the audacious love poets such as Catullus but also the salons of “respectable” authors such as Pliny), though perhaps more as members of the audience than as public participants. Men and women do not appear to have read different literary canons, and most of the literature was male-authored, though there is some evidence that women composed literary works along the same genres as men and which were read by both sexes. It is evident that some women prized their intellectual accomplishments and enjoyed displaying them in the same arena as men, and this may have been the cause of the discomfiture for the male satirists, as these women were participating in the *doctrina* which traditionally assisted in shaping male identity. The women’s point of view of this state of affairs, however, is sadly lacking. To judge from the few fragments of love and religious poetry and the titles of other works which have survived, it appears that women enjoyed expressing themselves through the written word.

Visual imagery also fashions identity, and a large number of men and a handful of women are associated with the iconography of literacy in Roman art. Surviving decorative wall paintings from Pompeian houses show portraits of men and women with the paraphernalia of literacy, supporting the view that the prestige of literary activity was not reserved only for men, but could be reflected by the female members of the household. In the second and third centuries AD a number of funerary monuments also appeared showing women holding book-rolls and writing tablets, proud and unmistakable symbols of culture and education. Artistic conventions tended to depict men and women with writing equipment in subtly distinct ways: on sarcophagi girls were more often portrayed with female teachers than male; on sarcophagi for couples women were generally portrayed as a subordinate, receptive audience for male intellectuals in their poses, gestures, and attributes. This may be due to the fact that the “symbols” of literacy – book-rolls and writing-tablets – do not by themselves have gender connotations, but they are symbols of culture, education and power, which is traditionally the male sphere of influence. The fact that men and

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<sup>3</sup> Gleason (1995), xxii

women commissioned artwork and monuments celebrating women's participation in culture, however, shows an awareness that these women's achievements were recognized and valued

While the literary and art historical evidence has shown that literary culture enjoyed a certain *cachet* among the privileged groups of society, the documentary evidence from Egypt and Britain contributes information about the functional applications of literacy by women in the Roman world. References to "practical" uses of literacy, such as for household management, letter-writing, or legal endorsements are found only incidentally in high literature. Legal documents required signatures and subscriptions, and though the papyrus evidence from Roman Egypt shows that a large number of women were illiterate in Greek and were thus unable to write even their own name, a handful of women, presumably from affluent and socially prominent families, easily endorsed documents in Greek. Moreover, some of them appear to have been conscious of the social prestige and power of literacy as they specifically designated themselves as "literate", even though from a legal point of view illiteracy carried no stigma. The evidence from private letters from Egypt and Britain shows that women from different social levels took advantage of written correspondence to communicate with distant friends and relatives, whether they dictated letters to a scribe or wrote out greetings in their own hand. The subject matter of the letters indicates that the social and economic concerns of the family were a regular responsibility for many women and written correspondence facilitated the management of these affairs. The evidence of this correspondence from two extreme ends of the Roman world has significant implications for other regions: it is possible that more Roman women routinely made use of literacy in daily life matters than was previously thought, though insufficient documentary evidence has not survived or yet been unearthed.

Literacy in ancient Rome had a potential socially leveling effect on men and women in several ways. The required manual skills of writing and reading could be mastered with ease if the opportunity for schooling and practice were available. Girls could be educated in the same manner as boys and enjoy the same literary culture to an extent. The visual symbolism as well as the functional applications of literacy, such as signing documents and writing letters, worked in the same way for both sexes. A woman could share in the prestige that literacy afforded, for to be seen as literate confirmed that she was powerful and distinct from the enormous percentage of women (and men) who were not literate.

But although the company of literate women was enjoyable to men in the private sphere, intellectual women were in general less admired in the public sphere. Women, for example, were barred by law from acting as advocates in the law courts, for it was thought that the modesty of a proper Roman matron would thus be compromised.<sup>4</sup> Three women are famous for having disregarded this prohibition.<sup>5</sup> In 77 BC Maesia Sentia defended her own case skillfully, but earned a nickname for her masculine behaviour – “she pursued every aspect of her defense diligently and boldly and was acquitted, almost unanimously, in a single hearing. Because she bore a man’s spirit under the appearance of a woman, they called her Androgyne.”<sup>6</sup> In 42 BC Hortensia faced the triumvirs to protest a heavy tax exacted from wealthy women after the civil wars, she “pleaded the case before the triumvirs, both firmly and successfully. For by bringing back her father’s eloquence, she brought about the remission of the greater part of the tax. Quintus Hortensius lived again in the female line and breathed through his daughter’s words.”<sup>7</sup> Although on both these occasions the men were persuaded by the eloquence of the women, they recognized their achievement as an assumption of the public male role. Much more objectionable was Gaia Afrania, “a woman disposed to bring suits, [who] always represented herself before the praetor – not because she had no advocates, but because her impudence was abundant. . . . She became the best-known example of female litigiousness. As a result, to charge a woman with low morals, it is enough to call her ‘Gaia Afrania.’”<sup>8</sup> These women demonstrated that it was possible for women to invade a traditionally male territory, the law courts, but these cases were anomalies. In the cases of Maesia Sentia and Hortensia, such behaviour was barely acceptable because these were one-time occurrences, in contrast Gaia Afrania pursued this activity regularly, and was rebuked. In politics, anecdotes about the lives of the emperors indicate that their wives and mothers enjoyed participating in the rule of the empire. Julia Domna, the mother of

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<sup>4</sup> Ulp. *Dig.* 50.17.2. See also Gardner (1985), 262-3, Williams (1996), 126.

<sup>5</sup> On these three female advocates, see also Simon (1990), 79-81. For a satirist’s view of women advocates, see Juv. 6.242-5, 2.51-2.

<sup>6</sup> Val. Max. 8.3. Transl. M. Fant. See also Lefkowitz (1992), 151 n. 31.

<sup>7</sup> Val. Max. 8.3. Transl. M. Fant. Quintilian admired this speech and reported that many people read it, and not only because its author was female (*Inst.* 1.1.6), thus implying that it was as good as a man’s. A purported copy of the speech is preserved by Appian (*B. Civ.* 4.32-4).

<sup>8</sup> Val. Max. 8.3. Transl. M. Fant.

Caracalla, was said to have given her son good political advice and herself looked after the imperial petitions and correspondence in both Latin and Greek, in addition to participating in a philosophical circle with prominent scholars.<sup>9</sup> However, after Caracalla's death she was suspected of conspiring to rule the empire by herself.<sup>10</sup> Livia, the widow of Augustus and mother of Tiberius, is also said to have offered solid advice to her son, which he needed but did not like to publicly acknowledge, and "often warned Livia to remember that she was a woman and must not interfere in affairs of state"<sup>11</sup> Inscriptional evidence from other parts of the Roman world indicates that women could play powerful roles in the public life in smaller centres in the areas of religion, civic euergetism, and business, as attested to in various inscriptions set up to honour the public benefactions of Roman women.<sup>12</sup> It has been found that these wealthy and civic-minded women were commemorated, not principally for their domestic virtues as is usually seen on private funerary monuments, but for the qualities of public generosity for which men are also honoured, such as "*munificentia, liberalitas, beneficia, and merita*"<sup>13</sup> These women openly publicized their contributions to the community. Although no women were allowed to run for public office, election graffiti (*programmata*) from all over Pompeii show that both women and men advertised their support for various political figures.<sup>14</sup> Wealth, community service, and family status could allow a woman to become capable and powerful in ways similar to men. The underlying suspicion of the ancient authors that women were exceeding the traditional roles of mothers and wives – respected, but subordinate – were justified in some respects, and may shed light on the negative imagery sometimes associated with women's literacy.<sup>15</sup> Although literacy was

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<sup>9</sup> Cass Dio 79.18. For Julia Domna's philosophical circle, see Bowerstock (1969), 101-9

<sup>10</sup> Cass Dio 79.23

<sup>11</sup> Suet. *Tib* 50.2-3. Transl. R. Graves: *sed et frequenter admonuit, maioribus nec feminae convenientibus negotiis abstineret*

<sup>12</sup> Will (1979), 36. See MacMullen (1980), Forbis (1990), Boatwright (1991).

<sup>13</sup> Forbis (1990), 493-507

<sup>14</sup> For the Pompeian *programmata* and literacy, see Harris (1981), Franklin (1991), and women, Will (1979), Bernstein (1988)

<sup>15</sup> "Dominant groups within societies tend to develop their own sets of images and beliefs. These images, or social constructs, are always derived from relationships between those who hold power within a clearly-defined area of society and those who do not. They help to describe and justify power relationships" Fischler (1994), 116.

not widely dispersed among all female inhabitants of the Roman world, the few women who were educated in reading and writing possessed an advantage which added to the quality of their lives. Investigating women's literacy opens new dimensions for understanding the lives of women in Roman society.

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Author

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Darca Joyce Tkach  
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