



FRANCESCA ROHR VIO

POWERFUL MATRONS

**NEW POLITICAL ACTORS
IN THE LATE ROMAN REPUBLIC**

EDITORIAL UNIVERSIDAD DE SEVILLA
PRENSAS DE LA UNIVERSIDAD DE ZARAGOZA

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INTRODUCTION

“What business has a woman with a public meeting? If ancestral custom be observed, none”.¹ Valerius Maximus is the author of these words. Throughout his collection of historical *exempla*, which dates to the 1st century CE, he gathered a selection of virtuous and negative behaviours. He aimed to inspire his fellow citizens to follow the guidance of Tiberius’ Principate. The *mos maiorum* stated that political activity was an exclusively male prerogative: only men could hold magistracies and military offices, operating in the locations devoted to the city’s politics – the senate, the popular assemblies, the courts, the Forum; and they alone could practice the art of public speaking, the spoken word being an indispensable tool for political activities.

Women, on the other hand, were obliged to follow a traditional behavioural model that excluded them from any form of political activity. This code of conduct was particularly binding for matrons, the female expression of the ruling class, and it corresponded to a selection of virtues, well attested in funerary epigraphy,² but also in the portrayals of women attested by ancient historiography. Women were required to be pleasing in

1 Val. Max. 3.8.6: *Quid feminae cum contione? si patrius mos servetur, nihil*. All the translations in English, if not differently specified, are from Loeb Classical Library.

2 Between the second half of the 2nd and the 1st century BCE see esp. the inscriptions of Claudia (*CIL*, I 2 2211), Turia (*CIL*, VI 1527, 31670, 37053) and Murdia (*CIL*, VI 10230).

their appearance, which was believed to be a reflection of their inner beauty. They were expected to take on the double role of wives and mothers to secure a future generation of citizens; to be righteous and loyal to their husbands, thus assuring their children's paternity and, as a consequence, the certain identity of the children's ancestors. The Romans believed that political and military skills were transferred as a veritable biological inheritance from father to son, thereby legitimising an oligarchic structure that only entrusted power to a restricted group of families: in the future, their descendants would assume the duties and responsibilities which their fathers had taken on in the past, much to the benefit of the *res publica*. Matrons were dissuaded from seeking attention through any gesture or choice of clothing: they would thus refrain from attracting excessive attention or engaging in any kind of intimacy with strangers, the unhappy consequence of self-exposure.

Matrons were encouraged to take up spinning and weaving. Legend had it that women had been assigned these occupations after the abduction of the Sabine women, duties agreed upon by the Roman kidnappers and their victims' fathers, who wished to protect their daughters from hard labour in the future. However, standing at the loom was also a means of identifying the physical space deemed suitable for matrons, the inner, most sheltered, private rooms of the house. Women were encouraged by tradition to operate within the confines of their houses, demarcating both the physical boundary of their activities, but also their sphere of competence, i.e., the family and housekeeping. Conversely, the urban areas – the streets, the Forum, the court – reserved for public life were deemed suitable for men's actions, and were only ever the setting for women's activities during cult and funerary practices. Matrons were encouraged to use the spoken word exclusively in private contexts and only in a measured manner, to curb women's natural propensity to harmful chatter.³

The traditional range of behaviours appropriate to matrons had remained practically unaltered over the centuries. This was due to several factors. The Roman mentality recognized the positive value of tradition, and was suspicious of innovation. Moreover, this behavioural model exclusively concerned those who spent most of their existence within the *domus*, a place only marginally affected by the significant transformations taking place in Roman society.

3 On the female model see Cenerini 2009b: 16-38 and 59-86; Lamberti 2014: 61-84.

Normative gender roles, therefore, conditioned the behaviour of matrons; but they also provided a means to evaluate women's conduct, determining their appreciation or condemnation. Sometimes they also worked as a pretext for strategically criticising women's actions, the ultimate targets of controversy but, more often, merely a smokescreen for enemies hoping to discredit or damage their fathers, husbands, brothers and children.⁴

Moreover, the same gender roles were responsible for excluding women from politics. The specific circumstances and reasons for this prohibition become clear in the speeches which Livy attributes to Lucius Valerius and Marcus Porcius Cato. The occasion for these speeches to be pronounced was the proposal to repeal the *Lex Oppia* in 195 BCE, supported by the former and opposed by the latter.⁵ It is impossible to verify the historicity of the words Livy attributes of the tribune of the plebs and the consul because of the mediation of the Augustan historian; but it is possible to reconstruct in generic terms the mentality which gave rise to those speeches, a mentality which made these words credible to readers only two centuries after the facts.⁶

The *Lex Oppia* was a sumptuary law passed in 215 BCE that restricted women's display of wealth: forced to renounce their jewellery and their luxurious gowns, women were compelled to mourn the financial and human losses that had struck Rome after its defeat at the hands of Hannibal. After the positive outcome of the war, the tribune Lucius Valerius had proposed a return to normality. There had been a lively debate on the issue, which had seen Valerius clash with the consul Cato. Meanwhile, the Roman women left their houses and poured in the streets to support the proposal that would allow them to flaunt their jewels and don their precious garments, the status symbols of their class. Although in disagreement over the specific topic of contention, both Valerius and Cato agreed that the domains of male and female action should remain distinct. Valerius argued that men were called to act outside their houses, taking on crucial roles in public, political and military life; women's duties, on the other hand, kept matrons within the domestic perimeter and pertained exclusively to the domains of housekeeping and family life. Cato stated that a woman, an irrational animal, was by nature unsuitable to take on any form of responsibility within the community: her

4 On the matrons' portrayal see Garlick – Dixon – Allen 1992.

5 See *infra*.

6 Valentini 2012: 8-21.

interference in public life would have resulted in the dissolution of the family sphere and the overturning of current political and social order, causing serious damage to the *res publica*.⁷

The portrayal of women outlined in this debate in the early 2nd century BCE seems to have persisted well into the next century, which is the chronological focus of this book. For instance, Cicero's opinion, attested by the Christian *rhetor* Lactantius between the 3rd and 4th century CE, appears to be identical to that of Cato and Valerius.⁸ In the *Epitome* of the *Divine Institutes*, Lactantius expounded the principles of Christian theology, contesting pagan beliefs, and reflecting on the misery of any city where women were responsible for public activities, a traditionally male duty.⁹

In arguing therefore that women were not to be involved in political life, Valerius Maximus was adopting a perspective widely shared both in the past and in the centuries to come. However, he identified a significant exception to this assumption; in fact, he went on to argue that: "But when domestic quiet is stirred by the waves of sedition, the authority of ancient usage is subverted and compulsion of violence has greater force than persuasion and precept of restraint".¹⁰ The historian was commenting on the unusual appearance of a matron, Hortensia, in the Forum, a public place and in full view of the magistrates of the *res publica*.¹¹ He dismissed any condemnation of this woman's initiative: he explained that the emergency situation of the civil wars had not only led some women to political action, but that this situation also justified their activism. Moreover, matrons had already been involved in community life in the past, and had served it well: thus, for instance, after the destruction of Veii in 396 BCE, the Roman matrons' jewellery (their status symbol) had secured the amount of gold required to forge the tripod promised to Apollo as a votive offering;¹² in 390 BCE they

7 Livy 34.1-8. Peppe 1984: 44-47; Mastrorosa 2006: 590-611. The difference in characteristics between the male and female gender is studied in Hallett – Skinner 1997; Milnor 2005: 158-185.

8 See Cic. *Rep.* 1.43.67: Cicero, paraphrasing Plato, argues that when slaves and women do not obey, it is anarchy.

9 Lactant. *Epit.* 33.38.5.

10 Val. Max. 3.8.6: *sed ubi domestica quies seditionum agitata fluctibus est, priscae consuetudinis auctoritas convellitur, plusque valet quod violentia cogit quam quod suadet et praecipit verecundia.*

11 See *infra*.

12 Livy 5.25.

had once again surrendered their jewels to pay for the ransom which led Brennus to relax his grip on Rome;¹³ and during the war against Hannibal, they had beseeched the gods with acts of great devotion.¹⁴ As an expression of the citizenry in their own right (despite their legal status being quite different from that of their men) women had successfully interfered in matters of public interest, acting collectively and thus as a recognised group. These were limited incidents, linked to times of particular emergency. The internal conflicts that ripped through Rome between the mid-2nd century BCE and the beginning of Augustus' Principate also saw the unprecedented intervention of a new protagonist on the political scene: matrons. The instability and conflict that characterized many areas of the empire and especially Rome, the seat of government, heavily impacted its institutional life: the senate, popular assemblies and the courts continued their political activity, but these were often hindered by frequent and significant absences. Many representatives of the Roman ruling class lost their lives on the battlefield or in the riots that bloodied Rome's streets; and many stayed away from the *urbs* for many years: some in the provinces as governors, others in command of armies engaged in internal political conflicts, others on the run after heading the losing party or because they were proscribed. These men were also absent from more informal political occasions: meetings in private residences, in the city itself or in their country villas, where agreements and alliances were struck and new political coalitions in the senate and the people's assemblies were defined.

The absence of numerous representatives of the ruling class was compensated in part by the interventions of women, as has often been the case during wartime in times far closer to ours. Despite being excluded from institutional offices, magistracies and military command, matrons still found different ways to interfere in the politics of the city. They operated from the privacy of their houses: firstly, because they were barred from the institutional settings of political life; secondly, because tradition condoned and therefore legitimized female initiatives within a domestic setting; and thirdly, because political initiatives were increasingly maturing in non-institutional contexts. But matrons also acted in public places, such as squares, streets, courts, military camps; in such public settings, they adopted different communicative solutions, sometimes taking over male behaviours; sometimes introducing in

13 Livy 5.34.

14 Livy 26.9.

these new contexts practices borrowed from funerary and cult rituals – public occasions recognised as falling within their sphere of competencies. The matrons' new condition was nevertheless disconnected from any desire for emancipation, which was entirely extraneous to Roman mentality. Instead, it arose from the contingent need to represent and replace those who until recently had managed the city's politics, and to safeguard the ruling power among the families on which the oligarchic system was based. For these reasons, the matrons of the Late Republic did not act in the hope of upturning female duties and changing social roles, but instead they acted as guardians of a power that passed – fleetingly and only out of necessity – through their hands.

However, their new role was foreign to female customs and was frequently delegitimized by traditional values, which had always guided women's conduct and condoned or condemned their actions. In some cases during the Late Republic, this situation led to matrons being judged harshly and criticised; on other occasions, their contemporaries and subsequent historiography found ways to justify these women's actions so as not to compromise the image of their men.

A wife praised by her husband in the so-called *Laudatio Turiae* is a concrete example of the new conduct of some matrons during the civil war.¹⁵ Her husband, perhaps Quintus Lucretius Vespillo, celebrated the woman with an articulated eulogy that survives in fragmentary form on an epigraphic support and dates to the end of the 1st century BCE. She is remembered for her traditional virtues: she worked in the house, she was moderate in her actions, she wove wool, and was devoted to her family and the gods. However, and much to her credit, Turia's political, judiciary and economic initiatives are also mentioned, initiatives which, according to traditional custom, fell within the remit of men's activities. The matron had ensured the criminal procedure of her parents' murderers; she had protected her father's will from her relatives' greed; administered her own property as well as that of her husband while he, a supporter of Pompey, was on the run; she had financially supported him in his run; and she had pleaded with the triumvir Lepidus for her husband, now proscribed, after Octavian had guaranteed his reinstatement. This document, therefore, attests how during this century women's interference in politics was

15 *CIL*, VI 1527, 31670, 37053. Flach 1991; Hemelrijk 2004: 185-197; Evans Grubbs 2006: 313-316; Keegan 2008: 1-7; Osgood 2014; Franco 2016: 137-163; Fontana 2020.

sometimes considered not only admissible but even worthy of appreciation. It also testifies how this gradual process of legitimization was accomplished: by citing the situation of emergency during the civil wars and by linking these initiatives to *pietas*, that is, devotion to one's family; it was one of the founding virtues of the female behavioural model and it had been exercised by Turia not only towards her parents but above all to her husband.

The main reason for women's participation in Roman politics is, therefore, to be connected to the emergency times brought about by internal political conflicts. It seems significant in this sense that certain legends acknowledged women's fundamental role in times of change and in the most decisive moments of Rome's history. Because of their legendary nature, these tales do not offer accurate historical reconstructions; however, they portray historical events in a simplified form and are a precious testimony of the mentality of the time in which they were conceived or reformulated. These legends were recast during the Late Republic and the Early Principate, at times when certain matrons were involved in city politics: these tales identify authoritative precedents in the past that would legitimise women's initiatives in the present, placing women at the centre of times of transition, even when it was violent. For instance, the Sabine women led by Hersilia were responsible for the conciliation between their fathers and brothers and the Roman kidnappers; Tanaquil had championed her husband Tarquinius Priscus' ascent to power and had guaranteed the succession of her son-in-law Servius Tullius; Tullia the Younger, daughter of Servius Tullius, had propitiated Lucius Tarquinius Superbus' accession to the throne; Lucretia had instigated her father and husband's revenge on Sextus Tarquinius, which eventually led to the fall of the monarchy and the inauguration of the republican government. All these women, remembered in reference to the Roman monarchy, collectively acquired roles independent from their men, albeit within the complex framework of values such as family, country and modesty – all codified by men. Even episodes of Early Rome began to feature more frequently in narratives during the Late Republican age, as these too offered legitimizing precedents: thus Veturia and Volumnia are remembered for persuading Coriolanus, the leader of the Volsci, to desist from the siege of Rome, resolving tensions on complex military environment in the same way Cloelia had with the Etruscans of Porsenna. The literary tradition also preserves the memory of later events, also unfolding in times of emergency similar to the 1st century BCE, such as women's initiatives after the war against Tarentum, and especially during the war against Hannibal.

If indeed an emergency situation was the primary and legitimising condition for female public action, then the circumstances which led some matrons to acquire new societal and political roles must be identified in the transformation of the female condition of the 2nd century BCE. This was a direct consequence of the changes that affected the entirety of Roman society as it rapidly amassed riches.¹⁶ Indeed, the positive consequences of Rome's expansion between the 4th and 2nd centuries BCE had led to women's improved wellbeing, freeing them from domestic duties now entrusted to slave labour. Conquests brought pedagogues to Rome, and they contributed to the cultural formation not only of men, but also of the women from the upper classes, and contributed to spreading a new mentality. The novel mindset was supported by the increased availability of books and libraries, acquired as spoils of war from the Hellenistic communities,¹⁷ and by the intensification in both quantity and quality of exchanges with foreign political systems, which saw women involved in politics and power as well as men.¹⁸ The juridical and financial status of women also gradually changed: they were now able to acquire substantial amounts of family assets through inheritance, and manage them independently;¹⁹ in time, they also emancipated themselves from their guardians, who had previously been their juridical managers and necessary intermediaries for their economic activities: women could now act with greater autonomy.²⁰ The opening of new markets, moreover, allowed them to enrich themselves through alternatives ways rather than land ownership only, allowing the monetization of wealth and its use in ways that would be impossible when dealing exclusively with real estate.²¹

Moreover, matrons were now present to the political operations promoted by their male relatives, often taking place in private settings, such as convivial occasions. Men attended these informal political occasions alongside their female family members, who could therefore observe and learn, acquiring skills they had previously barred from.²² These circumstances naturally

16 Clemente 1990: 235-266.

17 Hemelrijk 1999 ed. 2004: 21-22 and 88-91; van der Bergh 2000: 351-364; Keener 2007: 747-775.

18 Bielman Sánchez – Cogitore – Kolb 2016 ed. 2021; Bielman Sánchez 2019 (papers of Carney, Widmer, D'Agostini, Bielman Sánchez – Joliton, Ferriès).

19 Gardner 1986: 67-77 and 163-203; McClintock 2017: 1-50.

20 Gardner 1986: 14-29; Lamberti 2014: 61-84.

21 Berg 2016.

22 Badel 2006: 259-280.

determined a close connection between a matron's opportunities for political action and her family of origin (or acquired through marriage). The women who participated in the public life of the 1st century BCE did so under the guise of daughters, mothers, sisters and wives of the men they were related to, and only thanks to such family bonds.

From the second half of the 2nd century BCE, therefore, and pursuant to the changes engendered by Rome's expansion and the crisis of the *res publica*, Roman society underwent a double transformation.²³ Political dynamics changed drastically: some matrons entered the scene, albeit never in a formalised manner – they did not take on institutional or military offices. But the role of women in society also changed: what would be defined in modern terms as new opportunities for action opened up. This book investigates the details of female conduct between the 2nd and the 1st century BCE: it explores matrons' autonomy in decision-making and its independence from the directives set down by the men of the family, the multiple types of female intervention in Rome's public life, and the ways in which these women promoted such initiatives, either by borrowing from male political practices, or by "exporting" into novel contexts the practices traditionally attributed to women, but which had until recently been confined to the female sphere of action (such as ritual practice and funerary ceremonies).

Sources very rarely remember matrons' political dynamism during this historical period. The surviving evidence is prevalently historiographic in nature; however, it reserves only sporadic and discontinuous attention to female initiatives: it allocates space to matrons only when their actions had significant repercussions upon their men they had relationships with, who were the primary focus of ancient historians.²⁴ Therefore, it is only by juxtaposing all attested numerous episodes bearing similarities in the types of female political interventions, that we can interpret each female initiative not as an exception, but as evidence of the emergence of a new kind of female behaviour, which had become common practice in this historical period. Because history is reconstructed through evidence, the basis for this research will be the ancient sources, and the study of each of the episodes examined in

23 On the new particularly favourable conditions that from the 2nd century BCE permitted the involvement of matrons in politics see Bauman 1992.

24 On the problems relating to the description of women in ancient sources see Garlick – Dixon – Allen 1992; Späth – Wagner-Hasel 2000; Dixon 2001; Gourevitch – Raepsaet-Charlier 2001.

the next chapters will begin with the analysis of the most authoritative literary source. The careful contextualization of each event is key to the interpretation of the historical facts. The resulting narrative coincides with the portrait clearly outlined by Tacitus: "... and autocratic orders as from the women, who, once in curb by the Oppian and other laws, had now cast their chains and ruled supreme in the home, the courts, and by now the army itself".²⁵

* *

This book originates from my study "Le custodi del potere. Donne e politica alla fine della repubblica romana", published in 2019 in Italian by Salerno Editrice (Rome). Its publication for the Editorial Universidad de Sevilla and Prensas de la Universidad de Zaragoza in English has represented an opportunity for me to revise the text, whose contents have since been expanded and its structure redesigned. The new edition is also accompanied by an integrated and updated bibliography and a new chapter discussing the legitimacy of women's political initiatives in the 1st century BCE, which is key to understanding the processes outlined in these pages.

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This book is dedicated to the memory of my father Giovanni and to the women of my life, my mother Daniela and my daughter Maddalena.

25 Tac. Ann. 3.33: *...impotentibus mulierum iussis quae, Oppiis quondam aliisque legibus constrictae, nunc vinclis exsolutis, domos, fora, iam et exercitus regerent*. On the dating of the Aulus Caecina Severus' speech at 21 CE see *infra*.

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The *mos maiorum* stated that only men could hold magistracies and military office, operating in the spaces dedicated to the city's politics — the senate, the popular assemblies, the courts, the Forum. Women, on the other hand, were obliged to conform to traditional behavioural models which excluded them from any form of political activity. Nevertheless, in the first century BCE, the emergency situation of the civil wars led some women to undertake political initiatives. This opportunity arose from the Roman matrons' contingent need to represent and replace the men who until recently had managed the city's politics, and to safeguard the ruling power among the families on which the oligarchic system was founded. Their contemporaries and subsequent historiographers often found ways to justify these women's actions in order not to compromise their families' reputations. To that end, certain legends, recast during the Late Republic and the Early Principate, identify authoritative precedents that would legitimise women's initiatives in the present. This book studies the protagonists, the methods, the aims, the consequences, and the judgement of matrons' political acts. The purpose of this study is twofold: on the one hand, it seeks to shed light upon a defining moment in the history of women; on the other hand, it aims to reconstruct a crucial aspect of the political history of ancient Rome.

