

ROMAN GENDER RELATIONS

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Marriage The story of Roman gender relations begins and ends with marriage, which was the cornerstone of the structure of society. As in all ancient cultures, this marriage was about bringing two families, and two sets of assets, together, and very little about romance; though culture-history reminds us that some beautiful loves actually emerged from the Roman marriage. Meanwhile, in any case, the actual procedure of the Roman marriage was all about moving the nubile, and prospectively fertile, woman from her paternal home to that of her bridegroom. Protocols surrounded every act of this transition.

Two families agreed on the marriage, the bride to be's father having initiated the connection, and in 'elite level' cases often having settled the marriage details from the bride's birth on. A dowry was agreed on, a date set—in some auspicious month like June—and the proper gown and veil chosen for the bride. Out of the ensuing complex ceremony, which culminated in the wedding night, and which lived in the hope of reproduction, the Roman woman (if she was lucky enough to be fertile; especially if she was able to bring forth the three offspring traditionally hoped for) emerged more independent and powerful than had the Athenian married woman five centuries earlier. Marriage for the luckiest of brides was a portal to a fulfilling adulthood.

Women and society Depending on the historical moment of the Roman woman's marriage—by the Empire such women began to have free control over their dowries, and many more options for divorce—the Roman woman was poised to play an active role outside the house, not in politics or even at the ballot box, but as an active social presence. Under the Empire some women moved strongly into business, making themselves captains of industry. For example, female business entrepreneurs made themselves dominant CEO's in the trans-Mediterranean wine and oil trades.

Sexualities and gender relations Marriage and procreation were far from the only deployments of sexuality in Roman society. Men of standing were accustomed to shopping around sexually, both with prostitutes and with homosexual partners and entertainers of either sex, making out at will with slaves, 'delicate young boys,' and other guys—providing the relationship guaranteed the lover a dominant position, penetrating but not penetrated. The freeborn Roman citizen, male and proud, considered it a humiliation to be penetrated, although on rare occasions even a Roman Emperor (examples the Emperors Nero and Helagabalus) became a married bride, flaunting his deviance with reckless scorn for middle class values.

Readings

Saller, Richard, *Patriarchy, Property, and Death in the Roman Family*, Cambridge, 1994.

Williams, Craig, *Roman Homosexuality*, Oxford, 1999.

Discussion questions

The marriage arrangement described above—dowry, offspring, responsible eye to the future—obviously did not pertain to every married couple at every time in Roman history. What about the little guy or gal on the street? What kind of marriage rite would have been staged for the little guy?

Lesbian love, of the kind celebrated often in ancient Greece, was much less common or significant in Roman society. Why do suppose? Had it something to do with the social view of woman, in general, in ancient Rome?

Homosexual love in ancient Greek society tended to prioritize learning along with sex. The lover man was presumed to teach, instruct the beloved teen age boy he fancied. Why was this traditional expectation missing in Roman culture, where the lover and the young man he loved were only sexually bound together?