

HUMANITIES

Medicine, Make-up, & Male Perspectives

How far did the patriarchal influence extend in a Roman woman's life?

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For scholars of Roman antiquity, the possible fields of study are seemingly endless. Information pertaining to Roman life course is plentiful with literary and archaeological evidence. Emperors, soldiers, and even freed slaves – all of these narratives and more are accessible to the historian. Yet even a superficial glance at the available material brings with it the realization that female voices are grossly underrepresented. Adding to this issue, almost all extant literary sources are from male authors writing in a patriarchal society – one in which women were largely assigned their place by men. Evidently, male perspectives colour much of present-day reconstruction of a woman's life in ancient Rome. How far, then, did the male influence actually extend over a woman's life?

Two sectors that have often been singled out for their decidedly feminine appeal are cosmetics and proto-gynaecology. Female-driven beautification and female-oriented medicine - of which there was much overlap in antiquity - are assumed by the modern historian to have been relatively unaffected by male prejudice or bias as the intended beneficiaries were women. However, one must question the actual validity of this assumption. In this paper, I argue that Roman patriarchal values extended into virtually all areas of a woman's life, including that of cosmetics and gynaecological medicine. With an exclusive focus on Roman female citizens, I will validate this claim by examining relevant literary and archaeological sources from the first two centuries of our era, illustrating how they indicate the importance of male opinion even in almost exclusively female aspects of life. Finally, I will establish a meaningful connection between makeup and medicine in antiquity and demonstrate that although seemingly unrelated to the modern reader, the two areas were, in Ancient Rome, intricately interwoven in a woman's life.

The field of medicine can serve as a reflection of contemporary ideas and practices. The many connections to Plato, Aristotle, and Hippocrates in Roman medical writings are a testament to the Greek influence in aspects of Roman culture. Similarly, medical texts relating specifically to women reveal much about the dominant attitudes regarding the female gender. While there are references to female physicians and medical writers in extant documents, as well as epigraphic evidence of their existence, there are no surviving texts written by the women themselves.¹ Consequently, as all existing medical writings are from

male authors, the texts offer a first-hand glimpse at male opinion and shed light on the patriarchal influence in exclusively female features of life.

As a 'doctor' in ancient Rome, one could have been many things: male or female, astrologist or herbalist, surgeon or midwife, or any range of combinations.² The profession itself was unregulated, with a pervasiveness of superstition and magic in medical understanding. Additionally, many important and seemingly influential texts related to medicine were not written by practicing physicians per se. For example, in Pliny the Elder's *Natural History* (~AD 77-79) a common medical theory on the differences between male and female fetuses is presented:

A male fetus is always recognized by the good health and color of the pregnant woman, and movement in the womb from the fortieth day of pregnancy, whereas [with a female fetus] the load is burdensome, it is accompanied by some swelling, and movement only begins on the ninetieth day.

The idea that being male was superior to being female was widespread amongst medical writers. The renowned physician Galen (129-200 AD) writes that "just as mankind is the most perfect of all animals, so within mankind the man is more perfect than the woman [...] so too the woman is less perfect than the man in respect to the generative parts." The female reproductive system seems to have been where most medical writers focused their attention and, not surprisingly, their criticism. The concept of the 'wandering womb' was quite popular within the Greek-Roman medical tradition for centuries. The 'wandering womb' was a description of the female reproductive system in which the uterus was prone to wander throughout the body, causing a wide range of problems, such as "suffocation".⁴ The most common explanation offered for a wandering womb was the absence of a pregnancy; consequently, more sex with a woman's husband was recommended as a treatment option alongside fumigations, incantations, and amulets (see Figure 1).

In the *Timaeus*, Plato stresses the uterus' absolute need for pregnancy for the rest of the female body to function properly:

There being in [women] a living animal desirous of childbearing, whenever it is fruitless for a long time beyond its season, being distressed it carries on with difficulty and by wandering in every



Figure 1. Incantations written on hematite gemstones from Imperial Rome reveal common features, such as commands for the uterus to “stop!” moving, as well as the common depiction of the uterus as an upside-down jug. From Faraone, 2011.

direction throughout the body [...] and provokes all other kinds of diseases.

While not all physicians subscribed to this Hippocratic/Platonic model of an erratic, free-moving uterus, the general idea of a uterus capable of wreaking bodily havoc was sustained for centuries.⁴ Even Galen, who rejected the idea of a wandering uterus, maintained that the organ could prove fatal if not preoccupied with menstruation, sex, and eventual pregnancy.⁴ One can conclude that the patriarchal values of female worth being rooted in reproduction and sexual gratification offered to her husband were foundational to the concept of the wandering womb. Beyond that, however, another noteworthy aspect of the ‘wandering womb’ lies within its theurgic appeal. The womb was described as being more like an animal and less like a human organ, running wild throughout a woman’s body and bringing chaos wherever it went. Aretaeus of Cappadocia, a prominent physician of Galen’s time, writes that the womb is “entirely erratic. It delights, also, in fragrant smells and advances towards them. [...] On the whole, the womb is like an animal within an animal.” This description, and others like it, is reminiscent of the ancients describing demons inside a person. In fact, many of the techniques used to ‘treat’ the wandering womb were a form of exorcism in nature, and often involved the healer using acrid fumigations in an attempt to lure or expel the uterus back towards its natural place.⁴

The parallel between medical depictions of a woman’s uterus and those of errant demons or beasts was an important signifier of the patriarchal values pervasive in Ancient Rome. A woman who was not fulfilling the societal duties imposed on her - namely to produce heirs and to sleep with her husband, was an abnormality - a deviation away from that which was good and desirable. Thus, the association between an empty womb and an ill-boding spirit or beast would have made sense in the ancient world. Moreover, just as the dominant opinion of a woman’s role was well

known and pervasive in Roman antiquity, so too was the association of the female reproductive system with unpleasant matters. Take, for instance, the 10th century A.D. agricultural saga *Geoponica*; a passage detailing how to get rid of vineyard rodents casually explains that the same process works on curing a displaced womb.⁴

Finally, it is noteworthy that nowhere in recorded Roman history is there any mention of the male reproductive system willfully causing physiological problems in men.⁴ This discrepancy further demonstrates that viewing the female body as inferior was an extension of the patriarchal values and biases that dominated in Roman society.

While the idea of a reproducing, married woman was undoubtedly praised within Roman culture, there is indication of another very prominent aspect of the idealized female. Attractiveness was of critical importance in the construction of the ideal woman, so much so that the message was conveyed to Roman girls at a very young age. Virtually all dolls discovered from the Roman era were modeled after fully-grown women displaying features of sexual maturity such as rounded hips, full breasts, and even outlined genitalia (Figure 2).⁵

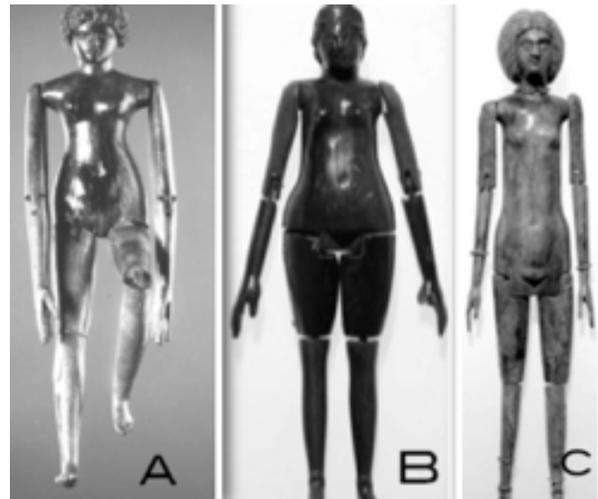


Figure 2. Ivory Roman dolls displaying jewelry, elaborate hairstyles, and the mature female form. A-from the tomb of Crepereia Tryphaena, along the Via Laurentina; B-from the tomb of an unknown girl along the Via Cassia road; C-from the tomb of the Vestal Virgin Cossinia, in Tivoli. From Dolansky, 2012.

Clearly, the dolls were meant to foster the gender normative expectation of reproduction, yet scholars have pointed out another important meaning of the Roman-type doll. Many of the dolls had elaborate hairstyles, delicate facial features, and elegantly draped clothing. This indicates that the dolls were used to expose young Roman girls to the idea of childbearing, and to encourage her to “identify with an ideal, attractive wife.”⁵

Beyond childhood, men’s voices continued to

assert cultural pressure on women to be attractive. While both inward and outward beauty were desirable, the extreme preoccupation with which male authors discussed cosmetics points to the elevated importance of physical beauty, not unlike in our society today. Yet, this common and simple method of modifying one's features in an effort to become more 'attractive' was often vehemently attacked by the dominant male voice.

While some uses of cosmetics were more or less accepted by the ancient writers, others were attacked with great vitriol. Galen distinguished between two types of make-up, that which was meant to preserve one's natural features, *kosmetikon*, and that which unnaturally embellishes or hides, *kommotikon*.⁶ The majority of male criticism fell on *kommotikon*. The male voice quite frequently related the use of make-up to immoral traits such as promiscuity or deceit. Achilles Tatius (2.38) wrote that if a woman looks beautiful, it can only be because of her "fussy trickery" with cosmetics.⁵ In *ad Helviam*, Seneca the younger praised his mother for being modest, attentive to her family, and for not wearing cosmetics – perpetuating the idea that a cosmetic-wearing woman was a threat to the Roman family life.⁵ Pliny the Elder, in reference to mascara, complained that eyelashes "daily are dyed with cosmetic [...] such is [women's] claiming of beauty that they color even their eyes."

More important than beautiful eyes, however, was a beautiful complexion. Almost all the extant cosmetic recipes, often given by the very same authors attacking make-up, sought the improvement of facial skin. Fair skin was most desirable, as the lack of tanned skin suggested a woman did not have to spend time working outdoors, and was thus of elevated social standing.⁶ In addition to pallidity, a smooth complexion was also important – further indication that the ideal was unrealistic, especially for non-aristocratic women, considering the hygiene and living conditions in antiquity. Nonetheless, many recipes and descriptions of various facial creams, masks, and foundations were given. For example, in what remains of Ovid's *Medicamina Faciei Femineae*

(c. 1st century BC), he presented through didactic poetry a series of arguments as to why *kosmetikon* can be justified as part of female *cultus* in Rome, and further provided five different recipes for skin-care.⁷ He promised that by using his creams, a woman's face "will shine smoother than her own mirror." Interestingly, in spite of his extensive writings on physical beauty, Ovid ultimately concluded that a woman's inner heart is more important than her outward beauty.⁷ He was not alone amongst the ancients in this conclusion. The Stoic philosopher Epictetus (55-135 A.D.), in his handbook *Encheiridion*, deplored the pressure put on young Roman girls to be sexually attractive:

*So, seeing that the only thing they have got is to sleep with men, they begin to beautify themselves and put all their hopes in this. We ought to take pains, then, to make them understand that what they are really respected for is showing themselves well behaved and chaste.*⁵

The very fact that these writers felt the need to re-emphasize the importance of a woman's character in addition to beauty indicates how widespread the value of physical beauty had become.

Male writers exhibited many apparent contradictions in the patriarchal psyche towards the feminine, including the paradoxical obsession with cosmetics and remonstrance with their uses. Take, for instance, the rather cavalier male attitude toward women's hairstyles. Upper-class Roman women had notoriously intricate and varied coiffures, styled to such an extreme that completion often took hours (Figure 3). Clearly, the popular Roman style of female hairdressing was the equivalent of *kommotikon*, meaning the hair was manipulated and styled in such a way as to not even closely resemble a woman's natural hair. Unlike *kommotikon*, however, intricate hairstyles seem to have been widely accepted by male writers, apart from deriding the excessive time spent on hairdressing.⁶

What does this inconsistency – that they would



Figure 3. Various busts of women from the Roman Empire demonstrating the wide range of elaborate hairstyles available to women.⁶

quite openly tie cosmetics to threats against the well-being of the family unit and in essence the Roman social infrastructure, yet have relatively little to say about hairstyles – say about the male writers?⁵ Perhaps it is an indicator of the nonsensical intrusion of male opinion on exclusively female characteristics, or maybe it is simply a historical bias of texts that have survived versus texts that have not. Another possibility may be simply that the male writers were prone to exaggeration; artists of the same era did not paint Roman women with artificial-looking skin tones or exaggerated makeup, leaving one to wonder how much the male voice's diatribe on cosmetics was in reality simply an embellishment meant to reiterate the frivolousness of female adornment.⁷ Nevertheless, even if these reasons prove true, there is no denying the importance of physical beauty and attractiveness in a Roman woman's life.

Exploring how far a Roman woman was willing to go to conform to beauty standards leads one to the surprisingly close association between makeup and medicine. No known cosmetic product existed for cosmetic reasons alone; in fact, the majority of cosmetics were either medicinal, toxic, or both.⁷ Perhaps this is why so many of the male medical writers criticized cosmetics. One of the most popular ways to whiten the skin and achieve a fair, 'smooth' complexion was *cerussa*, a paste made from white lead and vinegar. To attain rosy cheeks, women would likely have applied red lead or red mercuric sulphide directly on to the skin, both of which were known poisons at the time.⁷ Ovid discusses this aspect of cosmetics in *Remedia amoris* when he noted "she is painting her cheeks with poisonous concoctions"⁷ These toxic compounds had the ironic double effect of both concealing a woman's so-called flaws while also greatly exacerbating them. The modern reader can interpret the 2nd century Roman poet Juvenal's declaration that a woman's face was a "wound", when she wore make-up in multiple ways: the patriarchal opinion considered a woman with obvious make-up as lesser and more unattractive; a woman was metaphorically wounded by the patriarchal values condemning cosmetic application; and finally, that certain poisonous cosmetics literally wounded a woman.^{6,9}

Although some cosmetics were poisonous, others were in fact medicinal in nature. *Oesypum*, a grease-like substance, could be used as a cosmetic or as a treatment for a fissured anus.⁷ Pliny the Elder in his *Natural History* relates how red ochre was used to form poultices or to aid in enemas in addition to coloring the cheeks.⁷ The close association between make-up and medicine extends into the archaeological record as well. Roman jars that have survived into modern day, either empty or sealed with surviving creams

and powders, could have served medical or cosmetic purposes – there is no certain way of knowing without the long-ago disintegrated labels.⁷

By commenting on and heavily criticizing women's usage of cosmetics, the dominant male voice in Rome was essentially exerting control over yet another aspect of the female life course. While certainly some of the cosmetics were a cause for concern, the male judgment was directed against the women who used the make-up, not towards the make-up itself. The word *medicamentum* most often translates to medicine, but can also refer to cosmetics or unnatural, even deceptive, enhancement.⁶ Similar to the complexity of the word itself, the use of cosmetics in Ancient Rome seems to have been at once encouraged by the male authors and subsequently ridiculed by them. Women seem to have been placed in an unfair dichotomy by the patriarchal society in which they lived: on the one hand, beauty was one of the most desired aspects in a woman, and yet on the other a woman who made too much effort to conform to those standards of beauty was derided viciously by the dominant male voice. It is evident that ideas about make-up in Ancient Rome were heavily influenced by men who authored both the social stigmas and recipes for cosmetic use – sometimes within the same work.

The patriarchy of ancient Rome manifested itself in different ways. From the *paterfamilias'* almost unlimited household power, *patria potestas*, to gender-biased laws like the Oppian Law which sought to punish women who displayed their wealth, it is undisputable that politically and socially women in Rome were not full equals.⁹ What is debated, however, is the extent to which the patriarchal influence reached primarily female aspects of life, such as proto-gynaecology and cosmetics. In this paper, I have demonstrated that the Roman patriarchy strongly shaped and influenced the ancient's understanding of the female reproductive system and their attitudes towards cosmetics. By seeking to shame a woman who did not fit the ideal of a sexually gratifying, childbearing, and naturally beautiful woman, the dominant male voice effectively sought control over the female body. In this way one can see the key connection to make-up and gynaecological medicine, beyond the shared authorship of texts or compounds: both were appropriated by the patriarchy to assert male-driven values in all areas of a woman's life. In conclusion, one can see that despite the female-oriented nature of cosmetics and proto-gynaecology, both were in fact driven by decidedly patriarchal ideas, such that a Roman woman's life was never truly free from male assessments of her worth.

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