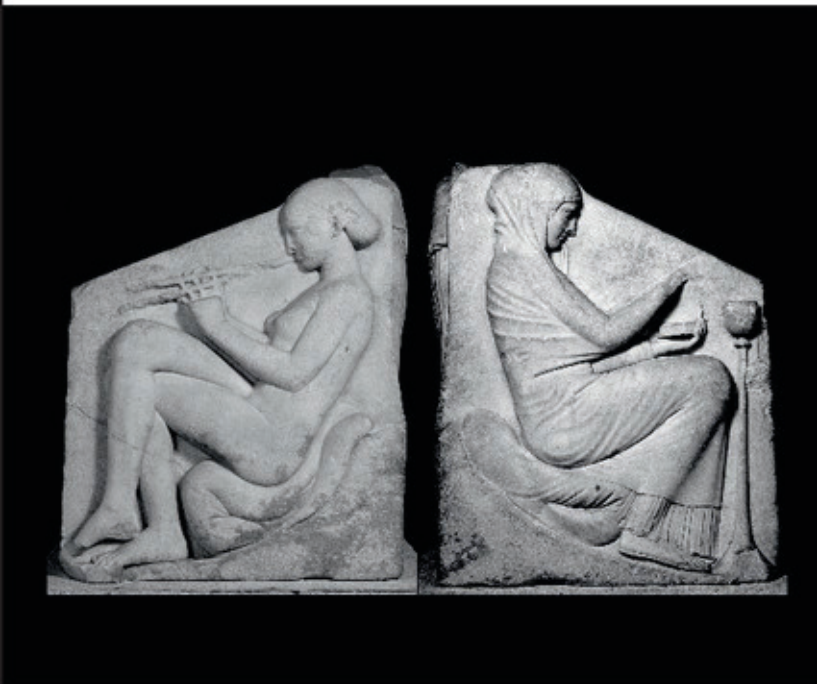
Prostitutes and Matrons in the Roman World

Anise K. Strong



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Prostitutes and Matrons in the Roman World is the first substantial account of elite Roman concubines and courtesans. Exploring the blurred line between proper matron and wicked prostitute, it illuminates the lives of sexually promiscuous women like Messalina and Clodia, as well as prostitutes with hearts of gold who saved Rome and their lovers in times of crisis. It also offers insights into the multiple functions of erotic imagery and the circumstances in which prostitutes could play prominent roles in Roman public and religious life. Tracing the evolution of social stereotypes and concepts of virtue and vice in ancient Rome, this volume reveals the range of life choices and sexual activity, beyond the traditional binary depiction of wives or prostitutes, that were available to Roman women.

Anise K. Strong, winner of the Women's Classical Caucus Award for best presentation in classical gender studies, received her B.A. from Yale and her M.Phil and Ph.D from Columbia University before beginning her professional career at Northwestern, Stanford, and Western Michigan Universities. She is also a consultant for various television series in their depictions of antiquity.

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In memory of my mother,
Helene Keyssar,
who taught me how to be a feminist,
and
Natalie Boymel Kampen,
who taught me how to look beyond the surface.

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Illustrations

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Introduction

Two thousand years ago, an aristocratic Roman matron named Vistilia faced a trial for adultery. Vistilia was notorious for conducting multiple extramarital affairs, but her husband, Titidius Labeo, refused to divorce her. Eventually, the Emperor Tiberius himself accused her of adultery, a crime punishable by exile to a remote island. Vistilia responded to this charge by publicly registering herself as a common prostitute, since prostitutes were legally incapable of committing adultery. The Emperor then passed a new law forbidding women of the senatorial class to become prostitutes, forced Vistilia's husband to divorce her, and duly exiled her.[1]

By itself, this story is a minor anecdote in the annals of Roman history. No wars were fought; no religions were founded; no nations were conquered. Nevertheless, Vistilia's tale encapsulates a fundamental contradiction between the version of Roman society that has been generally accepted over the past two millennia – an image constructed by elite male authors, emperors, and jurists – and the everyday social realities of Roman men and women. In her landmark 1975 text, Sarah Pomeroy divided ancient women into the categories of "Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves," emphasizing in her title these prescriptive distinctions between different social and moral categories.[2] This book explores the fluidity and mutability of the roles of "whore" and "wife" in the Roman world, analyzing the tales of the women who both exemplified and defied them. It asks not only why most Roman elite males promulgated these stereotypes in a wide variety of literary and artistic genres, but also why and how other authors and women like Vistilia subverted these normative doctrines of good women and bad women. The categories and boundaries of Roman social hierarchies intertwined with the Roman sexual and gender

systems. In practice, however, both such structures were less stable and coherent than they may have appeared from the surface.

In the official decrees of Tiberius and his predecessor Augustus, the divisions between different types of women were clear and absolute. There were wives – loyal, brave, hard-working matrons devoted to a single man – and there were whores – greedy, selfish, promiscuous prostitutes focused on their own self-interests. When a wife acted like a whore, the emperor's punishment was removal from Roman society itself. She no longer fitted into established moral categories and thus could not function within the elite Roman world. Tiberius' own wife and Augustus' daughter, Julia, faced disinheritance and exile, allegedly for sexual promiscuity although possibly also for rebellious and transgressive political activity.[3]

Vistilia, Tiberius' victim, had a different view of social and moral categories. In order to evade punishment, Vistilia was willing to register herself publicly as a prostitute. She announced that she was a whore and was not ashamed. The Roman biographer Suetonius claims that many other women sought a similar loophole, suggesting that this was not a unique act of rebellion.[4] Suetonius' emphasis is on the degenerate choices of these elite matrons and youths and on the state-imposed sanctions, whereas the historian Tacitus focuses on the restoration of the normal social order in a single case.[5] Suetonius may have exaggerated a general trend from reports of the single incident of Vistilia, but this may also be an accurate portrayal of a pattern of civil disobedience against Augustus' restrictive adultery laws. Since Tacitus does not contradict Suetonius' account, I suspect Vistilia was simply the most prominent example of a group of rebellious, pragmatic elite women seeking sexual autonomy.

Notably, Vistilia's husband Titidius Labeo had neither publicly objected to her activities nor attempted to divorce her. Indeed, when reminded of the clause in the *lex Iulia de adulteriis* which forced him either to divorce an adulterous wife or himself be found guilty of *lenocinium* (pimping), Titidius Labeo asked for an extra two months to consider his decision. While he eventually submitted to the Emperor's will, his reluctance suggests that Labeo tolerated a wife who did not fit the prescriptive norm of the ideal matron. For Titidius Labeo, his wife's sexual behavior was not a matter of fundamental importance in their marriage. He may have been motivated by the financial reason of not wanting to lose her dowry; the six marriages of Vistilia's sister (or possibly aunt) suggest that both women came from a prominent and wealthy family.[6] Whatever his

reasons, he was willing to be married to a wife who declared herself publicly to be a whore.

Vistilia's gambit was fundamentally unsuccessful in preventing punishment for her unorthodox behavior. However, she believed that adopting a new sexual and social identity was not only possible but also a viable solution to her dilemma. For Vistilia, the worst possible outcome was not being publicly shamed as a whore but exile from her home city. Her story suggests that Roman women's views about the importance of this social division may have differed from the harsh, dichotomous categorizations of women by elite male authors like Tacitus and Cicero. For Vistilia, the value of sexual license outweighed the disadvantage of personal shame, if indeed there was any shame at all.

It is time to take a closer look at these categorical divisions that have become a cliché in the analysis of ancient women. Roman women could and did transition between these social and moral labels. In the same era that Tiberius forbade women of senatorial descent to become prostitutes, his predecessor Augustus forbade senatorial men to marry prostitutes and transform them into elite wives.[7] While "matron" and "prostitute" may have been fixed official categories in the minds of the emperors and lawmakers, "wife" and "whore" became increasingly fluid moral categories used to praise or attack women who demonstrated appropriate female virtues or vices, most particularly the virtue of loyalty towards a male partner. Furthermore, elite male anxiety focused primarily on the dangers represented by women's economic independence rather than on their sexual behaviors.

We have relied on these labels of wife and whore for so long because so much of the written evidence seeks to inscribe them as factual absolutes. Not only legal texts, but the strongly moralizing histories and declamations of Roman literature also divide women into good and bad moral archetypes. These archetypes, furthermore, are not limited to elite texts. A tourist walking through the streets of Pompeii today might indeed conclude that there were only two types of women in the Roman world – the virtuous matrons immortalized on tombstones as faithful, fertile wool-workers and the cheap prostitutes whose names and prices were scratched into tavern and brothel walls.[8] Both prostitute and "good wife" stories may also have formed part of the lost oral tradition, which would also have been accessible to a much larger audience. However, these non-elite records still primarily indicate how literate men chose to depict and memorialize women, rather than how most Roman women might have conceptualized their own identities.

In this book, I trace the stories, images, and artifacts that illuminate the lives of women who defied traditional labels, in an attempt to understand how Roman women and men themselves negotiated between and around these categories. I discuss both the historical (if probably slandered) promiscuous whore-empress Messalina and Livy's semi-fictional "good little prostitute" Hispala Faecenia, as well as the women who fell into neither category, like the elite courtesans of the late Republic and the palace concubines of the Empire. By studying examples in different literary and artistic genres of two variants of the familiar labels – the "wicked wife" and the "good whore" – I explore the underlying social definitions of Roman female virtue and vice.

The following chapters will establish that the defining characteristic of a Roman "whore" was neither her type of work nor her sexual activity but her abandonment of ties to a male partner. Conversely, women of low social status could achieve "wife-like" labels if they demonstrated generous devotion to a male partner and support of the Roman state and the established social hierarchy. While the term *meretrix* or "whore" was originally used to describe a woman who exchanged sex for money, it became a moral label used to condemn any woman who led an overly public, economically autonomous, sexually active life unrestricted by ties to a single man. Meanwhile, my analysis of women who appear not to fall into any of these categories – concubines, courtesans, the elusive *amicae* of Roman elegy, and the women in Roman erotic paintings – suggests contemporaneous challenges to this normative dichotomy of socially segregated "good" and "bad" women.

Stories about prostitutes and about women who behaved like prostitutes, as well as moral exempla that praised matrons or women who behaved like matrons, appear prominently in a variety of genres of Roman literature. Such tales appeared in texts ranging from comedy to satirical poetry to hypothetical speeches used in rhetoric classes for elite young men. These anecdotes would have been familiar to a large audience, of one primarily composed of the prosperous and literate members of society.[9] They also likely served as didactic tales for young Roman women themselves. The orator Cicero famously urged Clodia Metelli, who had allegedly been behaving like a whore, to imitate instead the example of her virtuous ancestors Claudia Quinta and the heroic Vestal Claudia.[10]

To some extent, the general Roman predilection for tales about both good and especially wicked women can be blamed on their basic entertainment value: sex sells, now and historically. Yet this discourse also

betrays a more general concern about the threat to the social order posed by publicly prominent women who were not defined by a familial role and who potentially valued profit above the welfare of their male companions. This basic distrust extended beyond professional sex workers to other Roman women who exhibited familial disloyalty through their indiscriminate sexual availability. By establishing a moral category of "wicked women" that was rhetorically aligned with the disreputable social category of "prostitute," elite men could rebuke or shun women who did not follow conventional social mores and uphold the patriarchal social system.

Augustus' programmatic emphasis on political and social stability increased elite anxiety about women who appeared to threaten the fragile structure of Roman social hierarchies.[11] Such idealized and narrow categories of social status may never have accurately depicted the complex and shifting patterns of Roman society, where freedmen could rise to become imperial advisors and provincial centurions could become emperors. However, the ideal of a stable social pyramid remained essential among the elite aristocracy, who also wrote the vast majority of surviving texts.

Both Rebecca Flemming and T. A. McGinn, the most influential recent scholars of Roman prostitution, have argued that, unlike the Greek phenomenon of famous, wealthy *hetairai* or courtesans, Roman society had little place for glamorous, elegant prostitutes who slept with elite men and also influenced them politically and economically.[12] Yet if this hypothesis were true, it would be difficult to identify any possible remaining social status for the many elegant, witty, unmarried *amicae* or "girlfriends" in Augustan elegiac poetry and Imperial epigrams. Even if the women themselves in these poems are individually imaginary characters, the invention of an entire fictional category of women for poets to make socially acceptable love with seems rather implausible.[13] Because these women fall in between the normative categories, evidence concerning them has previously been dismissed or ignored.

The first-century BCE Roman poet Ovid claims, for instance, that his racy poem the *Ars Amatoria* is intended for *meretrices* rather than adventurous wives. He cannot be alleging that his audience consists of impoverished illiterate streetwalkers.[14] By examining historical and rhetorical accounts of influential concubines and courtesans, as well as their representation in poetry, we can further study Romans' own deconstructions of social norms. The *amicae* stand as a challenge to the moral and social dichotomy of the wife–whore paradigm: are they good or wicked, or both?

My focus on the concept of semantic labels as a means of defining Roman social roles is inspired by the Roman practice of identifying prostitutes by name-boards, or *tituli*, above their individual cells in brothels. These *tituli* may have announced prostitutes' prices and names to interested customers, defining them by their perceived sexual value and, by means of a "Do not Disturb" sign, symbolically establishing the periods when they belonged, however temporarily, to a specific man.[15] For Roman authors, labeling and categorizing women as whores became a means of theoretically restraining their unconventional impulses. Even women who were defined by their lack of permanent male relationships could be controlled by the terms of the discourse about them. The possibility of gaining the negative label of *meretrix* may have served as a warning to respectable matrons of potential retribution for immoral behavior.

This concept of the "whore" is key to an examination of the fluidity of Roman moral categories for women, because Roman prostitutes played an inherently unstable and transgressive role in Roman society. The Roman whore was conceptualized as a particularly selfish individual, who cared more about her own gain than supporting and nurturing male family members or contributing to the larger community. Since the Roman era, this concept has served as a general trope in the discourse about the characters and morals of prostitutes in Western society.[16] Literary and legal texts often characterize prostitutes as permanent social outcasts and exiles from the larger community.[17] Timothy Gilfoyle presents prostitutes as "one of the ultimate subaltern subjects, outcasts from not only the dominant culture but often also from those subcultures labeled 'subordinate' – women, working classes, social minorities, radicals, or religious dissidents."[18] Despite this socially marginal status as the paradigmatic Other, professional Roman prostitutes still regularly interacted with men and women from a wide variety of different social backgrounds. *Meretrices* were both theoretically ostracized outsiders and ubiqituous insiders, separated from other subordinate subcultures yet in constant contact with both the elite and lowly men of Roman society. Furthermore, they played both inherently subordinate roles as sexual objects and potentially dominant roles as economically independent agents who, in some cases, possessed sexual choice.

At the same time, we should not overstate the agency or glamorize the lifestyle of actual Roman sex workers. The vast majority of them were slaves under the control of a pimp or madam, having little if any control over their lives, customers, or profits. Their lives were probably both miserable and short. This book is concerned not so much with the lived

reality of Roman prostitutes but with the discourse about the *meretrix* as a social, sexual, and moral category. Necessarily, this involves a greater focus on the relative minority of freedwomen freelance prostitutes, courtesans, and married women accused of prostitute-like behavior, even if the stories men told about such women were not representative of the lives of most actual Roman prostitutes.

Roman professional sex workers were defined by the fact that they plied their trade *palam*, or openly. Politically or economically prominent women who conducted their activities *palam*, regardless of their sexual behavior, were often accused of being *meretrices*.[19] The frequent presence of a woman in public spaces already threatens her adherence to appropriate gender and sexual norms; if she is working outside, she is necessarily not wool-working or raising children inside the house.

At the same time, one of the key differences between Roman women of the Republic and early Empire and other ancient Mediterranean women was the emphasis on the public proclamation of their virtue, as will be discussed further in Chapter 1. A good Roman woman ought to be *nota*, well known, and publicly celebrated for her loyalty and chaste behavior, her *pudicitia*. However, a bad Roman woman was *famosa*, or notorious, and she was presumed to be behaving sexually like a whore.[20] This distinction outlined an uneasy and nebulous boundary between public women and what the medieval historian Ruth Mazzo Karras has termed "common women," women equally available to all men.[21] Unlike most other ancient Mediterranean societies, the good Roman woman had a public presence and was allowed to interact regularly with men outside her family. However, that made her relationship to the figure of the public prostitute all the more ambiguous and potentially confusing. The matron could be publicly visible but not sexually available, whereas the prostitute could be either visible on the street or invisible inside her brothel *cella* or home, and yet she was defined by her sexual accessibility. Since the physical location and even the appearance of a woman was not necessarily determinative of her moral status, as demonstrated further in Chapters 1 and 5, her potentially questionable status created social anxiety in the minds of elite men. The famous statue of Eumachia, patroness of the Pompeii fullers' guild, exhibits some of this problematic issues of definition; the statue depicts a modestly dressed matron who is nonetheless prominently placed on the edge of the Pompeii Forum, in a building almost certainly dedicated to business meetings and transactions.[22] She asserts her wealth and her public economic role in society at the same time. Numerous public statues and tomb monuments of early Imperial

Roman matrons immortalized realistic aging female heads on top of idealized young, nude, Venus-type bodies. This juxtaposition further demonstrates the complex relationship between female virtue and sexual attractiveness in the Roman world.[23] By attempting to define behavior rigidly and categorize all women as either wives or whores, male authors and jurists sought to conceal this tension, despite the evidence of social and moral intermixture that would have permeated Roman daily life.

Roman jurists and educators found the concept of the prostitute "convenient to think with," as a means of categorizing and labeling socially acceptable behavior.[24] Prostitutes were convenient to think with not just for legal jurists, but also for poets, artists, and orators. The conceptual category of "bad women" or *meretrices* both reflected and helped construct the gender identity of "good" Roman women.[25] *Meretrices* served as the dangerous, exotic, foreign Other to the good matron, most vividly represented in Augustus' propagandistic contrast of his sister Octavia and her rival Cleopatra VII of Egypt. These "bad women" were not only sexually promiscuous, but figures of chaos and disorder who disrupted the social system.

Elite male Roman discourse about *meretrices* centered on their queerness and subaltern status. I here borrow Gayle Rubin's concept of queerness to analyze the rhetorical function of Roman *meretrices* as women who did not fit into the established patriarchal and sexual hierarchy.[26] The prostitute is often used as a symbol for the unchained, disloyal woman who might challenge the accepted social structure. This figure, especially in her guise of the formerly respectable "fallen woman," becomes the symbol of societal disorder and instability.[27] Like Vistilia, she theatens the dominant narrative. However, the development of *meretrices* as this threatening, queer alternative to the normative Roman female stereotype largely served to reify and support the ideal role model of the loyal *bona matrona:* Vistilia still winds up exiled rather than pursuing her liaisons in peace and quiet.

Such elite identity judgments can only be evaluated as accurate models within their specific political and social contexts.[28] The complex Roman social pyramid of elites, freeborn citizens, freedmen, and slaves rested on a parallel and linked pyramid of female social hierarchy in which position depended largely on marital status and sexual relationships, as well as familial connections and wealth.[29] In such a system, the wealthiest freedwoman courtesan still ranked beneath a prosperous matron. However, her social status in relationship to a poor rural matron, like that of an Imperial freedman to a rural male farmer, was less clear. Such

ambiguity raised the question of whether social origins might be less important than economic status, an ongoing issue within the overall Roman social hierarchy.

Arlene Saxonhouse uses the common gender paradigm of public and private, dividing men and women into separate spheres, in order to address the innately transgressive nature of ancient women in the public sphere.[30] However, her theory, while relatively applicable to the Greek and Near Eastern ancient worlds, does not consider how the public nature of Roman female virtue complicates such a paradigm for the Roman world. For the Romans, overall social stability depended on a more ambiguous understanding of the duties and place of women. The Romans sought to navigate between the ideal of a good Roman public wife – one whose public activities centered on her loyalty to family and her patriotism – and the negative caricature of the Roman common whore, whose public activities focused on gaining money through men's use of her body. A good Roman woman was necessarily public in her display of her virtues; a bad Roman woman was public in the sense of lacking any owner.

The originality and influence of the Roman label of *meretrix*

The Roman association between promiscuity and unorthodox female political and economic activity is the beginning of a long history of such labels in Western society. At the 1990 World Whores' Summit in San Francisco, the prostitutes' rights activist Gail Pheterson declared, "Whore-identified women are not considered citizens, and any woman can be called a whore at any time for somehow stepping over the line."[31] One of the questions interrogated closely in this book is precisely the ambiguity of Roman *meretrices* citizenship – what is their relationship to the larger social and political community?

This heritage does not primarily stem from any of the other major roots of Western culture. The Greeks, for instance, did not strongly associate indiscriminate promiscuity with their unorthodox, publicly active elite women, with the possible exception of the fifth-century BCE Elpinice, sister of Cimon.[32] Medea and Clytemnestra, whatever their flaws, are not represented as sexually promiscuous – Clytemnestra is an adulteress with one man, but she is certainly not openly available to all comers.

While Greek *hetairai* such as Pericles' mistress Aspasia certainly had political and social influence, the strict segregation between sexually promiscuous women and respectable citizen matrons largely eliminated the subversive threat of interaction and confusion between these types.[33]

When transgression does occur, as when Neaera and her daughter allegedly masqueraded as Athenian matrons, it is harshly criticized and largely concerns the issue of prostitutes misrepresenting themselves as respectable women, rather than vice versa.[34] The Hebrew and Near Eastern use of "whore" as a general moral label and its limitations for wider applicability, meanwhile, is further discussed in Appendix II.

Definitions and methods of identification

Precise terminology is key for comprehending Roman use of these negative and positive stereotypes. I shall briefly delineate my particular translation choices for the different Roman words for "prostitute" and "wife." The Romans themselves used a variety of methods to identify sex workers, both with regard to their names and in terms of visual symbols associated with their role in society.

As noted earlier, the Romans used the most common word for a professional prostitute, *meretrix* (lit. "female wage-earner"), to refer also to unorthodox elite women like the Republican matron Clodia Metelli and the Empress Messalina. This general label also described a variety of different types of unmarried, sexually active adult women, ranging from streetwalkers and brothel girls to elegant freelance courtesans and long-term concubines.[35] The linguistic connection between sex work and wages also highlights the anxiety about female economic autonomy that will be discussed further in later chapters.

Other terms, such as *scortum* (lit. "skin," a neuter term), *moecha"* (lit. "adulteress," from the Greek), and *lupa* (lit. "wolf-bitch") have both a stronger derogatory nuance and are usually used to refer to prostitutes of lower social and financial status.[36] Meanwhile, more generic terms like *puella* (lit. "girl") and *amica* (lit. "girlfriend"), both of which frequently occur in Latin elegy, are traditionally translated by the socially ambiguous word "girlfriend."

Another problem lies in the issue of English translation. All English words that refer to promiscuous women have specific negative connotations to a modern ear: whore, slut, nymphomaniac, hooker, harlot, etc.[37] I use *meretrix* or "whore" to refer to the broad category of women identified in Roman sources by that label, precisely because I am trying to capture the sense of condemnation and insult attached to all women labeled as a *meretrix*, regardless of their profession. While "whore" is certainly not a formal or polite word, it serves as the best translation for

the derogatory general label. I prefer this term to "slut" because "whore" conveys a sense of agency on the part of the woman; she is someone who whores herself out, whether sexually or in other ways. "Slut" has more passive connotations; a slut is a woman or man who allows herself to be used.

The English term "prostitute," on the other hand, will be reserved for women who exchanged sexual favors for money or gifts, whether in temporary transactions or longer relationships. I will use *scortum* to refer to cheap streetwalkers as well as women who worked in brothels or other indoor spaces. While Roman texts sometimes used *scortum* and *meretrix* interchangeably, *scortum* has a much stronger association with prostitutes of low status and will thus be reserved for that subgroup, whereas *meretrix* is a more general term.[38]

Women who fall into more ambiguous categories, such as the elegiac *amicae* or emperors' concubines, will be referred to as "courtesans" in short-term relationships and "mistresses" in more stable, long-term relationships. I will discuss in Chapter 3 how courtesans and concubines fell in between the gaps of the "wife" and "whore" labels.[39] These women were certainly subject to the same type of potential criticism and invective as other women who did not have the protection of a permanent marital bond. However, their material lives were probably more comfortable than those of brothel women or streetwalkers. I do not treat soldiers' unofficial wives or other women who functioned as common-law spouses for all intents and purposes, due to my focus on moral categories.[40] Women who ceased to work actively in the sex trade and became wives were still subject to some degree of prostitute-like associations, although they also fell under the same legal restrictions as any other Roman wife.[41]

For the more elite, freelance prostitutes who lived in their own apartments or under the protection of a patron, I have also chosen to use the term courtesan. This word accurately conveys the requirements of elegance and sophistication that distinguished the upper strata of Roman prostitutes. While the very existence of courtesans in the Roman world has been disputed, this book will establish the historical evidence for their prominence in Roman society during certain periods.[42]

The given names of Roman prostitutes also indicate their identity as *meretrices* rather than as respectable *matronae*. Prostitutes form an exception to the general Roman convention that labeled Roman women, even in their very names, as belonging to a particular man: e.g. Cornelia,

whose name indicated that she was the daughter of Cornelius Scipio.[43] In Rome, where a name indicated familial and consequently social status, prostitutes chose – or were assigned by their masters – names unrelated to any familial origins. Fortunata (Lucky), Iucunda (Pleasant), and Veneria (associated with Venus) are common examples. While these women may also have had legal names indicating the *gens* of their former owner, such official titles do not tend to appear in graffiti or literary sources.[44] Roman prostitute names often evoke memories of earlier famous Greek *hetairai*, like Thais of Athens, Ptolemy I's mistress, or Lais of Corinth, suggesting an informal allusion or even an attempt to establish a professional genealogy in lieu of a familial one. They may also be similar to slave names, which were also often descriptive rather than familial in nature.

It was highly useful for a prostitute to have a use-name that conveyed her profession, since it made advertisement simpler. Names that described positive physical or mental qualities, invoked Venus, goddess of love and beauty, or recalled legends of women famed for their sexual expertise were common throughout the Empire. We have no clear records as to how these names were chosen, although in many cases the *leno* or *lena* who trained the prostitute may have simply picked an evocative word.

This book concentrates primarily on textual, archaeological, and visual evidence from the second century BCE through the third century CE, the era of greatest Roman dominance in the Mediterranean and, not incidentally, the period possessing the most reliable source material. Spatially speaking, this work is largely concentrated on sources from the Italian peninsula, since I sought to assess specifically Roman attitudes towards prostitutes rather than the fusion of ideas found in the Eastern Empire or the limited sources on the perspectives of people from the Western provinces. However, I do look at archaeological evidence throughout the Empire in order to establish general patterns.[45]

I have primarily organized this book according to the different stereotypes of Roman women examined: good wives, wicked prostitutes, good prostitutes, wicked wives, and the morally ambiguous courtesans and concubines. Each of the first few chapters addresses the representation and consistent characterization of a particular typology in a variety of distinct literary and historic genres. Later chapters focus on the depiction of "good" and "wicked" women in art and religion, and on the evidence for interaction between prostitutes and matrons in the archaeological record. The first four labels are static caricatures that the

Roman elite used to define and restrict women's roles. I do not therefore particularly focus on the evolution or change of these stereotypes over the 400-year period that I focus on (approximately 200 BCE–200 CE), although I do discuss the significance of the Augustan "family values" legislation and the literary and historical reactions to it, as in the aforementioned case of Vistilia.

I draw my case studies from a variety of ancient genres, each with their own unique issues of source criticism and historiography. Historians like Livy and Tacitus or authors of moral exempla like Valerius Maximus generally narrate the stories of actual historical figures, whose lives can testify to the complexities of female roles in Roman society. At the same time, these narratives are shaped and shaded by the particular agenda of each author and a general tendency to sacrifice accuracy in favor of moralizing anecdotes and dramatic incidents.[46] The Roman comedies of Plautus and Terence are valuable for their multiple disparate iterations of prostitute stereotypes, but their depictions of courtesans are also significantly influenced by earlier Greek comic *hetairai*.[47] These plays still serve to illuminate Roman prejudices and stereotypes about prostitutes as well as Greek ones; they also showcase likely elements of daily life for prosperous freelance Roman courtesans.

Wives, whores, and women of deliberately ambiguous social status also play prominent roles in both Augustan elegy and Imperial satires and epigrams. In elegies, such women serve in part as a literary trope: the narrator requires a beloved object whose relationship with him is potentially temporary, allowing for the dramatic possibilities of pursuit and rejection.[48] As Chapters 3 and 4 will discuss in more detail, in some cases these women are portrayed as adulterous wives, in other cases as elite courtesans, and often without direct reference to social status.

Wife and prostitute stories were also popular in both historical and hypothetical legal speeches.[49] Several of these declamations concern questions of female social status and, in particular, whether women can freely move from the condition of wife or virgin to whore and vice versa. As with poetry, these tales bear little resemblance to the real lives of Roman women, whose danger of being kidnapped by pirates was somewhat less dire than might be suggested by its frequency in declamation. However, they serve as vivid exempla of the Roman elite male discourse about the intersection between absolute moral categories and consideration of the possibility that not all women might fall neatly into prescribed boxes.

General source issues

One common source issue is the sharp distinction between the fictional literary glamorization of *meretrices* and the harsher depiction in rhetorical sources and other types of representations such as Pompeian graffiti. Many of the Roman poetic and comedic sources about *meretrices* present a misleading picture of predominantly independent, freelance prostitutes, who ply their trade openly and profitably without male supervision. Such women may be immoral, but they are depicted as possessing much more agency over their lives than many Roman matrons did.

While prostitutes were not subordinate to fathers or husbands like most Roman women, it would be risky and inaccurate to use terms like "independent" or "free" to describe the lives of most historical Roman sex workers.[50] Many if not most Roman *meretrices* were slaves and most others were freedwomen with obligations to their patrons, if their former masters were still alive.[51] Unfortunately, we have very few sources of information about slave prostitutes, much less slave women who were casually used for sex by their masters without remuneration of any sort. This type of evidence is particularly unlikely to have been chronicled by elite male authors or to have survived in archaeological documentation, due to the temporary nature of their sex acts.

While the vast majority of Roman *meretrices* were slaves or under the control of a *leno* or *lena*, some freedwomen courtesans may indeed have possessed more control over their economic and political lives than most normal married women. Any discussion of both positive and negative representation of Roman prostitutes must address the issue of whether or not such women could actually have possessed legitimate agency over their lives. An apposite example suggesting a certain degree of control comes from one of the first recorded prostitutes in Roman history, Manilia, who refused to service a drunken Roman aedile, Hostilius Mancinus, in 151 BCE.[52] According to Aulus Gellius, Hostilius brought Manilia up on charges for assault after she drove him from her house by throwing stones at him from her window. The tribunes of the plebs dismissed Hostilius' suit and found Manilia's actions justified under the circumstances.

No patron or master is mentioned in this story. Manilia was probably a freedwoman given her aristocratic name, which was presumably bestowed by her former patron. She clearly exercised the right of choice of client, even to the extent of refusing a powerful official, and the tribunes upheld that privilege. In contrast, while respectable women

theoretically had the right to refuse choices of husbands made for them by their fathers, one of the only recorded historical examples is the third marriage of Cicero's daughter Tullia. The evidence suggests that most elite Roman *matronae* were married without regard to personal preference.[53]

Manilia's case also directly raises the question of whether Roman *meretrices* were considered to be citizens. The inferior legal status conferred by their *infamia* and the marital restrictions placed on them by Augustus would appear to confer a second-class legal status.[54] At the same time, one of the most fundamental social rights of a Roman citizen was freedom from rape. This privilege is vividly demonstrated in the numerous popular uprisings that were legendarily sparked by Roman elite men inappropriately using their authority to rape Roman citizen women and men such as Lucretia, Verginia, and Publilius.[55] Sexual abuse of a slave was freely permitted under Roman law; sexual abuse of a free-born woman or man was rape and punishable by severe penalties, including death. Freedwomen prostitutes thus once again fall into a nebulous category here.

Gellius' tale about Manilia strongly implies that she had legal protection from rape and the ability to exercise sexual choice. However, there are almost no other surviving legal or literary examples of prosecution for the rape of a Roman prostitute.[56] The closest incident is a late antique successful lawsuit by an Alexandrian mother whose prostitute daughter was raped and murdered by her client.[57] Even in this case, the mother merely receives monetary recompense for the loss of her daughter's earnings; the elite male client is not punished for the murder of a citizen. *Meretrices* remain liminal figures in society and the law; any support of their legal rights to sexual and personal autonomy probably depended largely on the particular judge rather than established doctrine.

General outline

Chapter 1 discusses the two most stereotypical ancient social categories of Roman women. I examine a variety of different literary and epigraphic genres to develop the paradigms of the good Roman matron and the greedy, selfish prostitute and to note their differences from other representations in the Mediterranean world.[58] Chapter 2 explores representations of virtuous prostitutes in Roman and Graeco-Roman texts, demonstrating that individual generous sex workers could be portrayed as national heroines or benevolent martyrs. Chapter 3 analyzes the portrayal of historical Roman women who reached high levels of social status

and influence without ever being legally married to their lovers. These women formed a "second class" of females in Roman elite society that threatened the established social structures. Chapter 4 uses historical and literary depictions of politically active, allegedly promiscuous matrons to establish how the "whore" label became a more general term of gendered abuse. I also discuss non-elite female workers, such as innkeepers and grocers, who were assumed to be part-time prostitutes.

Chapter 5 examines the visual representation of Roman wives and whores, focusing particularly on the domestic paintings of Pompeii and Rome. Chapter 6 uses archaeological evidence to demonstrate the prominence and ubiquity of prostitutes in the Roman urban landscape through a study of Roman brothels. Chapter 7 discusses the role of Roman religion in both delineating social and moral categories for Roman women and simultaneously transgressing them. These three chapters focus in particular on the use of material culture to locate prostitutes within both public and private spaces in the community. Finally, Chapter 8 briefly analyzes the impact of the Roman "whore" label on later Western attitudes and the effect of Christianity upon this discourse. Through a close study of Procopius' portrayal of the Byzantine Empress Theodora as a debauched whore, I examine how all these stereotypes can overlap and accentuate each other.

The Roman tradition of collectively labeling as *meretrices* promiscuous matrons, Imperial concubines, and streetwalking prostitutes has influenced modern discourse about the role of women in society and the conflict between women's careers and their loyalties to their families. Prostitutes and prostitution are common symbols today in the general debate about women's public roles and the choices that women make about their lives. The traditional stereotype that a successful career woman may have "slept her way to the top" echoes ancient Roman labels.

Roman society was one of the earliest and most influential Western cultures in which women could play even indirect public roles. The anecdotes and legends told through the generations about good and bad Roman women to their daughters and granddaughters therefore form a crucial set of texts in understanding the origins of this long-running historical anxiety. In contrast to eastern Mediterranean society, the spectre of an influential, politically and economically active woman was not simply a mythic legend designed to justify continued patriarchal oppression.[59] In the Roman world, any handful of coins would remind their

owner of the prominent roles played by legendary heroines and contemporaneous empresses in shaping their society. By creating the stereotype of the "whore," elite men introduced a means of punishing and repressing women who strayed too far outside the permissible boundaries of a male-centered social structure.

1

Faithful wives and greedy prostitutes

> Since the funeral tribute of all good women should be simple and alike, because their natural virtues, kept safe through their own care, do not require variations in language, since it is enough that all have done the same things, each deserving of a good reputation… In this way my mother, dearest to me, won the greatest praise of all, in that in modesty, decency, chastity, obedience, wool-making, energy, and loyalty she was like and similar to other good women nor yielded to any, [having] an equal glory from her work, wisdom, and dangers.
>
> *"Laudatio Murdia,"* CIL *VI, 10230*

> They many times ask for gifts, they never give in return: you lose, and you'll get no thanks for your loss. And ten mouths with as many tongues wouldn't be enough for me to describe the scandalous tricks of prostitutes.
>
> *Ovid,* Ars Amatoria *1.433–6*

When ancient texts discuss the social roles of Roman women, they usually focus on either the ideal of the *femina bona* – the wool-working, faithful, fertile, brave Roman matron defined by her duties as a wife and mother – or the selfish, greedy, promiscuous independent prostitute – the *meretrix*. Elite literary authors distinguish these two female stereotypes by their dress, behavior, and location, but most particularly by a set of virtues or vices associated with each representation.[1] Through a comparison of these tropes in different literary sources, I will briefly establish the construction of Roman concepts of female morality. While this book focuses on atypical Roman women, this chapter briefly lays out the normative stereotypes in order to establish their nature and significance for Roman gender relations.

Crucially, neither of these archetypes appears to have changed significantly over time, although their emphasis in literature and legal sources is particularly dominant during the early Empire, due perhaps to Augustus' legislation promoting traditional "family values."[2] A *femina bona* like Cornelia, Mother of the Gracchi in the late second BCE, was characterized by the same general set of virtues as Murdia a hundred years later or the Empress Plotina, wife of the Emperor Trajan, in the early second century CE.[3]

The idealized epitaph of Murdia above represents one example of the highly repetitive discourse about the character traits of "good women" in the Roman world. Epitaphs are one of the most common sources of information about historical Roman women, but they must be interpreted as idealized narratives rather than as literal descriptions of the women whom they commemorate.[4] Von Hesberg-Tonn identifies five distinct types of morally respectable women in Latin literature, ranging from the sacrificial martyr to the urban, educated, morally impeccable woman.[5] All, however, are unified by a dominant trait of loyalty to family members and, directly or indirectly, to the Roman state itself. As Chapter 2 will demonstrate, there is no standardized system for commemorating an unmarried adult woman's virtues.

In the case of Murdia, her son explicitly praises his mother's similarity to other good women; she fits the paradigm in that she is modest, decent, chaste, industrious, and loyal. All of these attributes relate to a wife's role as helpmate for her husband. Not only her sexuality but her hard work and brave deeds are restricted to actions that serve his interests. The seven most common adjectives used to describe women in Roman epigraphy are *dulcissima* (sweetest), *pia* (dutiful), *bene merens* (well deserving), *sua* (his), *carissima* (dearest), *optima* (best), and *sanctissima* (holiest).[6] While several of these are common generalizations which appear on tombs around the world today, as a group they emphasize the woman's relationship to her family members and her gods rather than her individual identity. Unlike many epigraphic representations of ancient Greek women, the good Roman woman is considered to be a valuable and worthy person in her own right, rather than simply her husband's property.[7] However, the *femina bona* demonstrates her virtue by using her skills and her economic assets solely in subordinate support of her husband or children.

While *pudicitia*, which can be best if imperfectly translated as sexual modesty, is one of the chief virtues of Roman wives, it is distinguished

from Greek ideas of female modesty and segregation in that it is an explicitly public virtue.[8] A truly virtuous Roman wife is famous for her loyalty and chaste behavior, just as a greedy prostitute is infamous for her selfishness and sexual availability. Even while Murdia's son emphasizes her similarity to other good women and the unchanging universality of female virtue, he simultaneously insists on its individual commemoration in the form of his mother.[9] A wealthy Roman *femina bona* has her name and reputation celebrated with inscriptions, statues in the marketplace, public eulogies given in her honor, or even coins.

We know from ancient sources that Roman women of all social classes traveled through the marketplace, went to schools in the Forum, attended public entertainments, and worked proudly as shopkeepers and doctors.[10] Roman female virtues are analogous to Roman male virtues with regard to their use as the foundation of a "directly political public image," especially during the Republic.[11] While Augustan Age authors focused on the redomestication of the Augustan woman, even Livia and Julia's ostentatious spinning was praised and commemorated publicly. Furthermore, their household duties did not stop them from attending the theater or strolling the porticoes commissioned in their names.[12]

Such commemoration stabilizes and establishes the gendered assignments of social roles.[13] The ubiquitous images and texts describing the *femina bona* reinforced the social and moral status quo for both women and men. A young elite Roman woman would hear the stories of virtuous ancestresses and, perhaps, the cautionary tales of black-sheep relatives or friends, as well as listen to poetry and see plays in which women earned the rewards commensurate with their virtues or vices.[14] When she walked or was carried in a litter through the Roman streets, she could view the statues and paintings of other prominent women around her; the names of revered female relatives might be inscribed on the walls of her family atrium.[15]

Roman texts lack some of the Greek paranoia about what women were doing secretly in their quarters or at female religious festivals. A *femina bona*'s activities and actions were as open to the world as her family's atrium, in which she ideally sat like Lucretia, "in the middle of the house," and wove wool while her husband conducted his daily business in the same space.[16] While not an active public participant in the business and politics of the Roman world, the respectable Roman matron was also not segregated or secluded from public life. How then, can she be distinguished from the disrespectable woman who is not just publicly known but common and *palam*, publicly available?