

Two matrons of the late republic

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IN A PROVOCATIVE ESSAY of some years ago, M.I. Finley spoke with conviction and disapproval of "the silence of the women of Rome."¹ In his view upper class Roman women, with a few scandalous exceptions, led passive, repressed lives in the shadow of their fathers, husbands, and sons to a degree unparalleled in subsequent periods of high culture in the West. This somber picture of the social reality of the life of women under the late Republic and early Empire has been questioned, more recently, by Sarah Pomeroy, who asserts rather: "The momentum of social change in the Hellenistic world combined with Roman elements to produce the emancipated, but respected, upper class woman."² She argues that Roman matrons had a range of choices in their roles and lifestyles as well as a demonstrable influence on the cultural and political life of their times.³ While this view seems rather optimistic, a careful study of the lives of several aristocratic women, as revealed in Cicero's correspondence, suggests that it may be closer to an objective picture.

Two examples are Servilia and Caerellia. The former, mother of Brutus the Liberator and mistress of Julius Caesar, appears in the correspondence in a decidedly political role. Cicero seems, at any rate, to take her political influence for granted when he twice mentions her efforts to have the *curatio frumenti*, grain commission, removed from a Senate decree.⁴ Caerellia was a *necessaria*, or intimate friend, of the orator. She seems to have lived quite independently — she had wealth of her own, including property in

Asia;⁵ she engaged in large-scale financial transactions;⁶ and she had intellectual pursuits as well.⁷

Women such as these acted in some instances with a surprising degree of independence of thought and action without at the same time going beyond the bounds of what was then defined as "respectable" behavior. Hence their lives belie the notion cherished by Roman moralists, and not a few classical scholars, that Roman matrons of the late Republic were either "bad women" as exemplified by Clodia, Sempronia, and Aurelia Orestilla,⁸ or paragons of virtue as idealized in Latin literature, particularly in funeral encomia — the kind of women who, it was enthusiastically asserted, lived for no other purpose than to bear viable, legitimate offspring and to dwell with the same husband for decades *sine ulla querela*, without a single disagreement.⁹

Two prominent examples of the more independent type of matron are the wife and daughter of Cicero. The aim of the present discussion is to examine their biographies in greater detail in an effort to delineate the type of activities such women could and did engage in and the degree of independence attainable under the social circumstances of the late Republic.

Some cautionary remarks are in order concerning the sources on which this discussion is based, for we are dealing with at least two layers of bias. First, there is the generalized cultural bias resulting from the fact that we see Terentia and Tullia through the eyes of men only, Cicero and Plutarch chiefly. The interpretive problems created, however, are common to all examinations of the status of women in Roman antiquity since with few notable exceptions, such as the love elegies of Sulpicia, an indifferent poetess of the late Republic, little written evidence comes to us from the hands of women.

The more specific bias is the attitudes of the two main literary sources. Cicero in his correspondence from the period leading up to and including his divorce had a vested interest in vilifying Terentia so as to elicit pity and sympathy from his friends.¹⁰ Plutarch, probably following the biography written by Tiro, shared this bias.¹¹ However, the hostile depiction of Terentia in these sources is more than adequately balanced by the earlier

correspondence in which Cicero portrayed his family candidly and without rancor.

A more immediate problem is that of the degree to which the independence shown by Terentia and Tullia was peculiarly a function of Cicero's personality. Even a cursory reading of the correspondence reveals him to have been a man who, by the standards of his day and class, was somewhat irresolute. His indecisiveness in both political and personal affairs is manifest. Hence his failure to live up to the stern, authoritarian Roman male stereotype must be taken into account in examining the lives of his wife and daughter.

Yet it is also necessary to ask to what extent traditional notions of male authority and control were current in this age. In this period all members of a Roman family were in the *potestas*, power, of the oldest living male ascendant, the *paterfamilias*, who could, both in theory and practice, control almost every practical aspect of their lives. In addition to the well known *ius vitae et necis*, power of life and death over family members, he had control of marriage and divorce (all marriages required his consent; those already married could be forced to divorce); property (those *in potestate* could own no property, borrow or lend money, or make gifts); and partial legal jurisdiction (the *paterfamilias* with the aid of a "family court" could try family members on charges related to family reputation and could assess penalties up to and including death). This power was absolute and terminated only with the death of the holder or an act of emancipation on his part, voluntarily undertaken.¹² *Patria potestas* survived into the Christian era and was confirmed by the emperor Constantine.¹³

Once married, a woman would remain within her father's power unless he transferred it to his son-in-law. When this transfer did not take place, the marriage was termed a *conubium sine manu* and conferred a certain degree of freedom from the husband's control since the wife was under the control of her agnate male relatives. A woman became *sui iuris* (legally independent of the *paterfamilias*) if the *paterfamilias* died, leaving no other male ascendants. Nevertheless, she still had to have a *tutor*, legal guardian, the rest of her life; and *tutores* were, of course, male.¹⁴

The theory and practice of male control over women was

maintained not just out of a sentimental attachment to the *mos maiorum*, the way of the ancestors, but out of the social and economic interests of the state. The family was the basic unit of social organization and recognized as such, as was bound to be the case in a traditional society lacking the pervasive differentiation of social functions which characterizes so-called modern societies. There were, after all, no public agencies or institutions on any universal scale to see people through the practical realities of living. All ultimately devolved upon the family through its male head; and when Roman society grew in size and complexity, upon the system of patronage which was an extension of the same institution. In the supervision and regulation of a woman's life fundamental practical issues were at stake — the continuation of the family life and of domestic religion through the production of viable and legitimate offspring; and the maintenance of the family's financial resources through the regulation of property rights as a function of inheritance and dowering. Both the individual aristocrat and the state as a whole had a vital interest in maintaining a woman in her role as a *matrona* first and foremost. Even in moral and philosophical treatments the concern for marriage and the family was motivated primarily by this realization. These institutions were "the right thing" since they promoted social stability and cohesion. Companionship and sexual compatibility were desirable but hardly necessary.

Certain social and economic developments of the late Republic served to undermine these theoretical and philosophical traditions. The widowing of many upper class matrons during the Punic Wars and wars of conquest, for example, resulted in large amounts of capital devolving upon women. The diminishing size of aristocratic families may also have in some degree contributed to the accumulation of wealth in women's hands in spite of the *lex Voconia* of 169 B.C., which had limited the amount of property that women could inherit. Furthermore, men of public affairs were required by their military and political activities to spend long periods abroad, becoming in effect absentee *patresfamilia*rum. Aristocratic women also had more leisure time as a result of the rising standards of material culture and the abundance of slaves to

perform the day-to-day tasks of domestic management. As a result of these and other factors, some women were in a position to make major decisions on their own initiative, as we shall see in the case of Cicero's family, for Cicero was certainly not the only Roman aristocrat who failed for whatever reasons to exercise tight control over the members of his immediate family.

Since, as we have noted, marriage was a matter of practical considerations, and in the upper classes, of political expediency, it comes as no surprise that Cicero most likely married in 79 B.C. for reasons other than romantic love. Terentia's family background and wealth would have been a definite advantage to this *novus homo*, or parvenu. She was related to the patrician Fabii and came to the marriage with considerable wealth of her own. Nevertheless, the marriage was not lacking in mutual respect and affection for over three decades. Cicero's letters until 48 B.C. are filled with expressions of love and gratitude. In them he calls her *mea vita*, my life, and *mea desideria*, my darling, and other terms of endearment. Terentia certainly kept to her end of the bargain, discharging her domestic duties competently and cheerfully, providing moral support, and enduring danger and humiliation on her husband's behalf. One incident reflecting her commitment to him occurred when she was compelled under duress in 58 B.C. to make a public declaration concerning Cicero's proscribed properties after the loss of their Palatine mansion to fire. Clodius, Cicero's arch-enemy, had apparently used this occasion to humiliate Cicero *in absentia*.¹⁵ For his part, Cicero never ceased to commend Terentia for her courage and resolve in the letters written from exile.

Yet there are also many indications that Terentia was loath to take a totally passive, unquestioning role; in fact, the marriage at times seemed to approach a notion of partnership. In three particular areas Terentia exercised considerable discretion — finance, politics, and match-making.

As regards the first, we have already noted that she came to the marriage with ample resources of her own. Plutarch seems to have underestimated her financial worth by a good deal.¹⁶ The correspondence variously reveals that she owned in Rome two blocks of *insulae*, high-density apartment houses, which yielded a hefty

annual income.¹⁷ She also owned forest land near Tusculum,¹⁸ and a farm which must have been of considerable value inasmuch as she considered putting it up for sale in 58 B.C. to alleviate the financial distress caused by Cicero's exile and the proscription of his property.¹⁹ Furthermore, on at least one occasion, she had converted for her own use and gain, without paying the rents due, a portion of *ager publicus*, public land.²⁰ Terentia in all her financial dealings appears to have been free from Cicero's control, proceeding quite independently in the management of her properties with the able assistance of her freedman, Philotimus.²¹ Some of her property did, however, eventually come into Cicero's hands as part of the divorce settlement.²²

Just as she seems to have guarded her financial independence from Cicero, except for the offer to sell her farm in 58, so he in turn tried to keep his own financial dealings confidential from her. He continuously implored Atticus, his confidant and banker, to do so. Eventually Cicero ended up viewing his wife with outright distrust in matters of finance and even suspected her of theft. One letter, for example, alludes to the disappearance of income from some of his real property with the suggestion that Terentia is involved; he also hints that she may have diverted for her own use a portion of the first installment of the dowry for their daughter's third marriage.²³ Elsewhere we read that Terentia has allegedly cheated Cicero out of a small sum of money and that he suspects her of systematic embezzlement.²⁴ (Plutarch repeats the charges of financial irresponsibility on her part.²⁵)

After the divorce in 47 or 46 B.C., Terentia assigned her dowry, which Cicero was obliged to repay as initiator of the proceedings, to Balbus in repayment of a loan.²⁶ As a leading Caesarian, Balbus could have brought pressure to bear upon Cicero for prompt settlement, a situation which would have been onerous to Cicero, who was always capital rich and cash poor as a result of his personal extravagances. In addition, the situation must have caused not a little personal and political embarrassment. There were also other financial dealings of an obscure nature occasioned by provisions in her will.²⁷ Terentia even seems to have employed financial considerations to some degree in her dealings with her

son Marcus. It would seem that she had at one point dangled the prospect of an allowance or inheritance before him as a means of gaining his loyalty and of inflating her settlement from Cicero.²⁸

All these various activities reveal Terentia to have been a person of financial acumen as well as accomplishment. No doubt her wealth made her attractive to the subsequent spouse (or spouses) that tradition accords her.²⁹ She was clearly a Roman matron who did more than tend to her family and work in wool.

She also appears to have been involved in politics to some extent, in spite of Cicero's assertion at one point that her proper sphere of activity was religion, while his was the affairs of men:

... neque di quos tu castissime coluisti neque homines
quibus ego semper servivi nobis gratiam rettulerunt.

... neither the gods whom you have worshipped so purely
nor men whom I have always served have shown us gratitude.³⁰

Plutarch preserves two accounts of her political involvement. The first was said to have occurred during the Catilinarian crisis of 63 B.C. when Cicero was undecided as to the course of action to take concerning punishment of the convicted conspirators. It so happened that the Vestals had been performing the annual sacrifice to the Bona Dea in his house by virtue of his position as consul for the year. A bright flame suddenly burst forth from the ashes on the altar. The Vestals promptly took this as a sign that Cicero should do what he had resolved for the good of the country. Terentia then related this omen and its interpretation to Cicero, using it to incite him against the conspirators. Plutarch here interjects a comment on Terentia's involvement in these terms:

καὶ γὰρ οὐδ' ἄλλως ἦν πραεῖς τις οὐδ' ἀπολμος τὴν
φύσιν, ἀλλὰ φιλότιμος γυνὴ καὶ μᾶλλον, ὥς αὐτὸς ὁ
Κικέρων, τῶν πολιτικῶν μεταλαμβάνουσα παρ' ἐκείνου
φροντίδων ἢ μεταδιδούσα τῶν οἰκιακῶν ἐκείνῳ.

... for she was otherwise by nature neither at all
meek nor timorous but an ambitious woman and, as
Cicero himself says, taking a larger role in his
political affairs than she shared with him in domestic
matters.³¹

The other incident which Plutarch reports involved Terentia's allegedly having goaded Cicero into the prosecution of Clodius because of her jealousy over Clodia's romantic designs upon the orator.³² Here Plutarch characterizes Terentia as χαλεπή δὲ τὸν τρόπον καὶ τοῦ Κικέρωνος ἄρχουσα, ill-tempered and domineering over Cicero.³³

If these accounts are at all accurate and not merely the biographer's attempts to shift the blame for Cicero's downfall away from Cicero himself,³⁴ then Terentia contributed to her husband's political demise by goading him into taking extreme measures in the first instance — he had the conspirators executed without allowing them recourse to *provocatio ad populum*, appeal to the people — and, more significantly, by making Clodius his implacable foe. As tribune of the plebs in 58 Clodius introduced the legislation which would have led to Cicero's prosecution and certain conviction, had Cicero not anticipated him by fleeing into exile.

Finally, in the area of match-making Terentia exercised a good deal of independence in the matter of Tullia's third marriage. There had been two previous marriages without issue. Cicero had been scouting prospects for the third only to discover that his wife and daughter had preempted him, choosing a candidate not only younger than Tullia but also notorious for his political radicalism and private profligacy. Cicero himself on two previous occasions had barely saved Dolabella from prosecution on capital charges.³⁵

It seems that neither women took into consideration the fact that Cicero might be politically compromised. Certainly, if Terentia had been actively involved in Cicero's public affairs, she could not have been unaware of the political ramifications of the match. Dolabella had impeached Appius Claudius, with whom Cicero had assiduously been trying to ingratiate himself:

Ego, dum in provincia omnibus rebus Appium orno,
subito sum factus accusatoris eius socer!

While in my province I was showing honor to Appius
in every respect, suddenly I became the father-in-law
of his accuser!³⁶

The marriage occasioned a written *apologia* to Appius in which Cicero disclaimed responsibility for the match.³⁷

Cicero's undoing had been his unbounded affection for his daughter. Indeed his relationship with his Tulliola, his little Tullia, was so close as to have led in antiquity to baseless charges of incest.³⁸ Moreover, the Church Father, Lactantius, was so appalled by Cicero's expressed wishes for her apotheosis as to remark,

Fortasse dicat aliquis prae nimio luctu Ciceronem delirasse.

Perhaps someone may say that Cicero was delirious through excessive grief.³⁹

Tullia's physical and temperamental resemblance to her father may have accounted to a great extent for the closeness of their relationship, for Cicero clearly saw himself mirrored in her as when he called her *effigiem oris, sermonis, animi mei*, the image of my appearance, speech and mind.⁴⁰ Relying on this intimacy, Tullia appears to have acted with a certain disregard for the personal and political consequences to her father of the marriage alliance with Dolabella. She was not likely to have been unaware of them, as her mother surely would have understood them. Yet Tullia and Terentia assumed that Cicero would pay the dowry in spite of his misgivings; and subsequent events confirmed their expectations. Moreover, after the marriage was clearly faltering, Cicero blamed not his daughter but himself for the disaster, even though he had previously labeled her attitude one of *fatuitas*.⁴¹

After her death Cicero kept her memory alive through literary and philosophical activity, chiefly in the writing of the lost *Consolatio*. He had originally planned a *fanum*, or shrine, in her memory and had spoken often of his hopes for her apotheosis.⁴² The shrine was never built despite an initial flurry of negotiations; one suspects that it had been intended more as a monument to Cicero than to his daughter.

Both Terentia and Tullia, in the final analysis, departed in some significant respects from the traditional ideal of the *matrona*. We

have seen that they acted with determination and independence in certain key areas and willfully disregarded the wishes and opinions of Cicero. In this regard a remark addressed to them by Cicero from exile is enlightening. In a burst of pride and gratitude he had asserted,

Cohortarer vos quo animo fortiores essetis nisi vos
fortiores cognossem quam quemquam virum.

I would urge you to be stouter of heart were it not
that I have recognized you to be stronger than any man.⁴³

That remark, perhaps intended to be no more than a figure of speech, was confirmed in some degree by their conduct.

On the other hand, they did not radically exceed the traditional expectations of women of their class and time. Their concerns were still primarily those of hearth and home. Their independence was asserted in those areas and threatened neither the overall function of their households nor the larger social order; their choices and activities remained largely circumscribed. In spite of her financial and political activities, Terentia played the role of *matrona* above all. Twenty years into the marriage, as we have seen, she had been willing to some extent to subordinate her own financial interests to those of her family. After the marriage was dissolved, she went on, according to tradition, to marry again, choosing to forego a course of complete independence that her financial position could have made possible.

Tullia, even more than her mother, fulfilled traditional expectations in her course of life. Her main role seems to have been to act as an extension of her father's ego and a tool of politics, as the need arose. For all his fondness for her, Cicero, no less than other Roman aristocrats, did not fail to exploit her political value. Once it became obvious that Dolabella as a protégé of Caesar could prove more than a little useful, Cicero came to regard his son-in-law as a valued friend, even rejecting for a time the idea of Tullia's divorcing him. After her death in 45 B.C. Cicero maintained amicable relations with Dolabella in spite of his having to some extent contributed to her demise.⁴⁴ No doubt Dolabella's personal

charm as well as the protection he could afford Cicero in those perilous times understandably inclined Cicero to maintain their friendship. Cicero even considered dedicating a political treatise to Dolabella, but Atticus advised against this measure.⁴⁵ Tullia, then, served her father as all good Roman women were expected to. Had she been able to choose an alternative, it seems unlikely that she would have done so.

Both women, in spite of their relative freedom, were defined and defined themselves in terms of their connection with a male figure. If by their behavior they affected contemporary events, it was by virtue of this connection alone. Their primary interests and activities remained in the domestic arena, the traditional environment of the *matrona*. Still, for all that, they were hardly "silent women." They did indeed speak up for themselves and make choices on matters which were of immediate concern to them; and Cicero clearly listened.

Notes

1. M.I. Finley, "The Silent Women of Rome," in his *Aspects of Antiquity: Discoveries and Controversies*, 2nd ed. (New York 1977) 132, first published in *Horizon* 7 (1965) 57-64.
2. Sarah B. Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves: Women in Classical Antiquity* (New York 1975) 149. See, more recently, Elizabeth Lyding Will, "Women in Pompeii," *Archaeology* 33 (1979) 34-43.
3. Pomeroy, *op. cit.*, p. 189.
4. *Ad Att.* 15, 11, 2; 15, 12, 1.
5. *Ad Fam.* 13, 72, 1.
6. *Ad Att.* 15, 26, 4.
7. *Ad Att.* 13, 21, 5.
8. On Clodia, see Cicero, *Pro Caelio*, *passim*; on Sempronia and Aurelia Orestilla, see Sallust, *Catiline* 25 and 15, respectively.
9. For a typical specimen, see *CIL* 6.1527, 31670.
10. The standard edition of the correspondence is R.Y. Tyrrell and L.C. Purser, *The Correspondence of Cicero*, 6 vols. and index (Dublin 1885-1901). See also D.R. Shackleton Bailey, *Cicero's Letters to Atticus* 6 vols. and index (Cambridge 1965); and W.W. How and A.C. Clark, *Cicero, Select Letters*, 2 vols. (Oxford 1925-26, rep. 1959-1962).
11. On Plutarch's probable sources for his biography of Cicero, see R.H. Borrow, *Plutarch and His Times* (Bloomington, Indiana 1967) 154-155.
12. For a discussion of *patria potestas*, see John Crook, *Law and Life of Rome* (Ithaca, New York 1967) 107-113.

13. Gaius, 1.55; 2.86-87; *Inst. Iust.* 1.9; 2.9; *Dig.* 1.6; 49.17; *Cod.* 8.46; 6.61; 12.30.36.
14. On *tutela*, see Crook, *op. cit.*, note 12, 113-116.
15. *Ad Fam.* 14, 2, 2.
16. Plutarch, *Cic.* 8.3, estimated the dowry at HS 1,200,000.
17. *Ad Att.* 12, 32, 2; 15, 17, 1; 15, 20, 4 (where reference is made to *mercedes dotalium praediorum*, or "rents of the dower property"; 16, 1, 5 (where the annual yield from the *insulae* is given as HS 80,000).
18. *Ad Att.* 2, 4, 5.
19. *Ad Fam.* 14, 1, 5.
20. *Ad Att.* 2, 15, 4.
21. If, as we might expect, Terentia had a *tutor* to help administer her finances, his name never appears in the sources, as Crook notes, *op. cit.*, note 12, 115.
22. *Ad Att.* 12, 32, 2.
23. *Ad Att.* 11, 2, 2.
24. *Ad Att.* 11, 24, 2-3.
25. *Cic.* 41.
26. *Ad Att.* 12, 12, 1.
27. *Cic.* 41; *Ad Att.* 11.16, 5, 24.
28. *Ad Att.* 12, 19, 4.
29. St. Jerome, *Adv. Iovin.* 1.48. Terentia's reported marriage to Sallust is dismissed as fiction by modern scholarship.
30. *Ad Fam.* 14, 4, 1.
31. *Cic.* 20.
32. Plutarch's ascription of jealousy as a motive is hardly credible, given Cicero's attitude toward Clodia as depicted in the *Pro Caelio*.
33. *Cic.* 29.
34. In general, Plutarch's criticism of Terentia's conduct must be viewed with suspicion, given his generally uncritical attitude toward Cicero.
35. *Ad Fam.* 3, 10, 5.
36. *Ad Att.* 6, 6, 1.
37. *Ad Fam.* 3, 12, 3.
38. Dio Cassius, 36, 18, 6; Ps.-Sallust, *In Cic.* 2.
39. *Divin. Inst.* 1, 15.
40. *Ad Q. Fr.* 1, 3, 3.
41. *Ad Att.* 11, 25, 3.
42. *Ad Att.* 12, 12 1; 12, 36, 1; 12, 37, 4.
43. *Ad Fam.* 14, 7, 2.
44. *Ad Fam.* 11, 11, 1; *Ad Att.* 13, 9, 1.
45. *Ad Att.* 13, 10, 2.