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INFLUENTIAL WOMEN

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When Greek colonists set up new cities in the then unknown frontier of Italy, they were quick to compose myths that connected them to their ancestors, and that gave their customs and their shrines legitimacy. So I suppose it is no surprise that people who initiate new styles of government or patterns of living — political colonists, we might call them — also seek precedents in the prestigious civilisations of the past. Proponents of slavery in the United States discovered Greek and Roman writings that supported their views; so, of course, did the Abolitionists.¹ Karl Marx found that the notion of free (rather than enforced) sale of labour first occurred in the Roman army.² Most recently, and in some ways most absurdly, feminists have come up with supposed evidence for matriarchal societies, such as the Amazons, and have called attention to extraordinary achievements of a few women, as if they set a pattern that twentieth-century women could emulate and revive, and finally bring into full realisation.³

But as Simon Pembroke has shown, there is no evidence whatever for the existence of matriarchal societies in the ancient world, and the myths about Amazon societies that have come down to us were originally designed only to indicate how bad things could be when women got the upper hand.⁴ Similarly, at first sight, the ancient world may seem to offer some encouraging examples of women who played important roles in political life. When I observe that women neither had nor sought political power, but worked through their husbands or fathers or sons, people often object: what about Antigone or Clytemnestra or Artemisia or Agrippina? But I believe that it is possible to show in all these cases, as well as in many others, that women take political action only under certain closely defined conditions, and that unless they do so at least ostensibly on behalf of a male relative, they and others around them come to a bad end. I will begin by talking about women in myth, as represented in specific works of literature, because myths illustrate common attitudes more clearly and simply than history; but history too can be shown to follow the patterns of myth, in part because those were the only terms in which most writers could interpret human experience, and in part because ancient societies

for practical reasons offered women little opportunity to act as individuals outside the context of their families.

Ancient women could certainly be courageous, but they could not be truly independent. Antigone herself is an example. In Sophocles' drama, she contrives to bury her brother in defiance of an order by her uncle Creon, the king of Thebes, that her brother Polynices, who had attacked his homeland, should remain unburied. Denial of burial was a traditional penalty for treason;⁵ but Antigone has the moral sensibility to see that Creon's order runs counter to another established custom, the obligation of the family or *genos* to bury and to worship the remains of their deceased members.⁶

Recently feminist critics have suggested that Antigone, in taking action against her sister's advice and Creon's edict, assumes an essentially masculine role;⁷ that in defending her blood relationship to Polynices, she 'must undercut the form and potential of the family';⁸ that Antigone has adopted the aggressive stance of an Orestes, 'a younger son revenging or redeeming the death of an unburied brother'.⁹ In the process of interpretation these critics assume that Creon, or the city elders in the chorus, represent not themselves but the state, a government supported and accepted by the majority of Theban citizens, whose laws and customs Antigone is threatening;¹⁰ therefore, the drama *Antigone* calls into question the traditional structure of society.

But I do not believe that Sophocles or his audience would have seen Antigone's action as unconventional, or have recognised in the play an attempt to define or promote new family structures or modes of behaviour. In the first place, it is not established custom that Antigone opposes, but the orders of one particular individual, Creon; Creon himself may equate his own opinions with the city's (e.g., 736), but the outcome of the drama makes it clear that he is mistaken. The analogy of Antigone to Orestes is misleading, because Antigone is not trying to avenge or redeem her brother's death, but is seeking only to bury him with appropriate rites for the dead. The difference may seem trivial to us, but to the Greeks it was (and in remote villages still is) essential; men avenge murders of kin, women prepare bodies for burial and sing laments over the body.¹¹

If Sophocles from time to time in the play states explicitly that Antigone and her sister Ismene are women, it is to emphasise to his audience that Creon's edict violates established custom, and that by demanding obedience to it he is misusing his power as a ruler, that is, he is behaving like a tyrant.¹² 'Consider', says Ismene to Antigone at the beginning of the drama, 'that we two are left alone [i.e., without father

or brothers to protect them], and how cruelly we will perish, if we oppose the edict of the king [*tyrannon*] or his power. You must remember that the two of us are born women and as such do not fight with men; since we are in the power of those who are stronger, we must obey these orders, and orders even more painful than these' (61-4).¹³ When he has Creon complain that he would be weaker than a woman if he allowed her to get away with disobeying his order (525, 579), or insist that 'she and her sister must now be women and not allowed outside the house' (579), Sophocles is not describing normal male-female relations; he is portraying a man desperately trying to justify a decision that only he in the whole city (690ff.) considers to be correct.

In fact, far from being unconventional or independent, Antigone is only doing what her family might have expected of her, as she herself says: 'but I have great hope that when I come [to the lower world] I shall come welcome to my father, and welcome to you, mother, and welcome to you, dear brother, since when each of you died I washed and dressed you and poured libations on your tombs' (897-902). In the fifth and fourth centuries (that is, in Sophocles' lifetime and for a century afterwards), it was common belief that families were reunited in death.¹⁴ Special care was taken to bury family members in the same plot, even if bones had to be exhumed from other localities and re-buried. I do not think an ancient audience would have considered it unusual or excessive when Sophocles' Electra laments over what she supposes to be the urn that holds her brother's ashes: 'so now you receive me into this house of yours, I who am nothing to your nothing, so that for the rest of time I can live with you below; for when we were above ground I shared the same things with you, and now I wish to die and not be left outside your tomb' (*El.*, 1165-69). When Antigone is captured, even Ismene asks to die with her and to give the rites to their dead brother (544-5). The guard who catches Antigone says that when she saw the corpse of Polynices unburied, 'she wailed out the sharp cry of an anguished bird, as when in its empty nest it sees its bed stripped of its nestlings' (424-5). To us Antigone's or Electra's failure to distinguish between living and dead may seem strange; but to Antigone the important link was not life but blood-kinship: 'my life died long ago, so that I might serve my dead [family]' (559-60). Antigone says explicitly that she would not have risked her life for a husband, or if she had had children of her own; but without any other family, her first duty was to her brother — whether dead or alive does not seem to matter.¹⁵ Nor does Ismene count as a reason for her to stay alive, because she is female, and so not able to inherit or continue the family line. When

Antigone replies to Creon's accusations that she could disobey his edict, but not the 'unwritten customs' (*agrapta nomima*) of the gods, she is simply claiming that family loyalty must take precedent over rulings that have not existed since time immemorial; she is not questioning Creon's right to power or the structure of government, but his own intelligence and judgment: 'if I had put up with [?] my mother's son having died an unburied corpse, that would have caused me pain; but I am not pained by what I have done. If I seem to you to have acted foolishly, then I have been accused of folly by a fool' (466-70).

To put it another way, Antigone must be female for the dramatic action to occur in the first place, because only a mother or sister would have felt so strongly the obligation to bury the dead.¹⁶ As Ismene suggests, it would have been possible for her instead to ask the gods of the lower world for forgiveness, if she had failed to bury her brother, on the grounds that she was forcibly prevented by the rulers of Thebes (66-7). It would also have been possible for her to have tried first to work through a man, like Haemon; as Aethra persuaded her son Theseus to allow the mothers of the Argive heroes who fell at Thebes to bury their sons, 'it's natural for women, if they are clever, to do everything through men' (Eur., *Suppl.* 40-41). We might choose to call her courageous or generous, but the chorus state that she is foolish: 'unhappy child of an unhappy father Oedipus; what has happened? It isn't true that they have caught you in folly and bring you in disobedient to the king's laws?' (379-82). They regard her, as she does herself, as a victim of the family curse that destroyed her parents and her brother: 'your respect [for your brother] is one kind of right respect, but one also ought not to transgress in any way the power of him to whom power belongs. Your self-willed anger has destroyed you' (872-5). This anger and folly (*aphrosyne*, 'un-thinking') are aspects of the family curse, and the action of the curse, far from being disapproved of by the gods, is part of their system: 'evil seems good to the person whose mind the god is leading toward delusion' (622-3).

I would not have been able to see several years ago, and in a way regret that I must now admit, that Sophocles' audience would have seen Antigone's action as courageous, laudable, but risky (she does end up dead, after all), and certainly within the bounds of acceptable female behaviour. Antigone's conduct does not set a new revolutionary standard any more than it can be said to serve as a prototype of female Christian martyrdom – an interpretation that profoundly impressed the composer Mendelssohn, even though he knew Greek.¹⁷ Like other women in epic and drama, Antigone wins praise for acting on behalf of

her family: Penelope deceives the suitors (and so holds out for her husband Odysseus) for three years before she is discovered unravelling her weaving at night; Andromache defies Hermione and Menelaus in order to protect her young son; Iphigenia tricks the wicked king in order to save her brother Orestes; Helen tells lies to rescue Menelaus. It is important to note that in all these cases the women offer only passive resistance. Apparently acts of treachery are acceptable in a woman only if they are non-violent and are undertaken on behalf of a male relative.

But a woman is not permitted, even with justification, to take the law into her own hands.¹⁸ After the fall of Troy, when all the Trojan men are dead, Hecabe herself avenges the murder of her youngest son Polydorus. He had been sent to Polymestor in Thrace for safekeeping, but Hecabe discovers that Polymestor has murdered him, and when Polymestor arrives in Troy with his young sons in the hope of collecting more money, Hecabe and her servant women use their brooches to put out Polymestor's eyes and to stab his sons to death. Polymestor asks Agamemnon to punish Hecabe, but Agamemnon lets her get away with her revenge. 'Alas,' Polymestor complains, 'it seems that I have been defeated by a woman and a slave, and suffer vengeance from my inferiors' (Euripides, *Hecabe*, 1252-3). But Hecabe's triumph is short-lived: Polymestor predicts that Hecabe will throw herself from the ship that takes her from Troy and be turned into a dog, and that her grave will be known as the 'poor dog's tomb', a landmark for sailors (1273). Her death, in other words, will be sordid (the Greeks did not like dogs), and more significantly, anonymous. On the other hand, for Penelope, who could leave the execution of the suitors to her husband and son, 'for her the fame of her virtue [*arete*] will never perish; the immortals will fashion a lovely song for mortal men about good Penelope; she did not devise evil deeds, like Tyndareus' daughter [Clytemnestra], killing her wedded husband; but for Clytemnestra there will be a hateful song among men, and she will give women a bad reputation, even to the woman who does good deeds' (*Od.* 24, 196-202).

It may seem unfair that the speaker of these lines, the dead Agamemnon, believes that no woman can be trusted after what Clytemnestra did. Polymestor, too, after he has described to Agamemnon how the Trojan women stabbed his children and put his own eyes out, concludes by condemning women in general: 'neither sea nor land sustains a race like them' (1181-2), in other words, they are monsters (cf. Aeschylus, *Choephoroe*, 585ff.). Semonides of Amorgos, in his satire on women (fr. 7 West), identifies nine types of bad women, but only one good type. Perhaps the low proportion of good women

could be taken as evidence of enduring misogyny on the part of (male) Greek poets; but it is important to remember that these statements about bad women all occur in the context of invective, and so are likely to be exaggerated. Compare how an angry woman who feels she has been wronged, like Medea in Euripides' drama, contrasts the unfortunate lot of (all) women with the enviable life led – without exception – by men (230ff).

I think that it is also possible to argue that the limitations that apply to women in epic and in drama apply as well to the 'political' women in Aristophanes' comedies. *Lysistrata* in particular is often cited as the first liberated woman; but consider what she actually accomplishes. In order to bring about peace, she summons all Greek women to a meeting (they of course arrive late), and gets them to swear not to have sexual intercourse with their husbands until the men agree to end the war between Athens and Sparta. Her plan works, and then her organisation of women disbands and the women go back to their husbands. So even in the fantasy world of comedy, women only take action to preserve and to return to their families. Women have intelligence and understanding, but speak out only in emergencies, and even then their models are men. *Lysistrata* says, as she concludes the peace, "although I am a woman, I have intelligence" [quoting from a lost play of Euripides];¹⁹ for my own part, I do not have bad judgment. I have listened to many speeches by my father and older men and so am not badly educated' (*Lysistrata*, 1125-7). When in the *Thesmophoriazusae* the women meet to attack Euripides, their proceedings are a burlesque of the Athenian men's assembly. Aristophanes realises that his audience would find the very notion of women meeting together, making speeches and voting, hilariously funny.²⁰

In the comedy *Ecclesiazusae* (or 'Women Meeting in the Assembly') women in male disguise manage to infiltrate the assembly and vote to let women run the city, on the grounds that 'we [the assembly] ought to turn the city over to women, for we use them also as guardians and stewards in our households' (210-12). The infiltrated assembly passes two new laws: (1) that all possessions (including wives and children) shall be held in common; (2) that the ugliest and oldest women will have first chance at getting men. The first law is a parody of what Athenians understood to be the constitution of Sparta; after Athens lost the war to Sparta, the Spartan system of government appeared to have special merit. In 392, when the *Ecclesiazusae* was performed, Aristophanes could still make fun of the notion that women might have equal rights with men. A generation later Plato realised that people

might still ridicule the idea that women should be educated (*Resp.*, 452b), but nonetheless he incorporated into the model government of his *Republic* equal education for men and women and common marriages and children, so that women might be able to be companions of men and co-guardians of his ideal state (456b). But even in his utopia Plato included the proviso that women, because their natures were weaker, should be assigned lighter duties in wartime (he doesn't specify what they would be).

Of course such socialistic theories, however much they were debated in intellectual circles, were never practised, at least in Athens.²¹ In fact, Aristotle claimed that the liberty permitted to Spartan women in the days of Sparta's great military successes had by the middle of the fourth century led directly to her defeat by the Thebans. Women, he observed, had not been subject to the same restrictions as men under the Spartan constitution, and so lived intemperate and luxurious lives, while the men remained in military training. As a result, the Spartan women at the time of the Theban invasion of 369 were 'utterly useless and caused more confusion than the enemy' (*Politics*, 1269b5). 'The disorder of women,' he observed, 'not only of itself gives an air of indecorum to the state, but tends to foster avarice' (1207a9). In his view, one particularly unfortunate consequence was that two-fifths of Sparta was owned by women (1270a10-11), who unlike their Athenian counterparts could inherit and bequeath property.²²

Here, as in his theories of human physiology, Aristotle appears to regard as normative what was acceptable in Athenian life and to consider all other practices deviations. But he and not Plato had the last word. If Greek women — in history or in literature — ever had an opportunity to govern, it was only for a brief period, in order to cope with a particular problem or emergency, or in the case of monarchies and tyrannies, if they happened (like Artemisia or Cynna) to be related to the man in charge.²³

I will now consider briefly the role played by women in history, as opposed to women in literature, to the extent that the two can be separated. References to women by biographers and historians tend to be anecdotal, and so not necessarily pinned down to particular times or events; rather, they are illustrative of character in general and timeless ways. For example, Cornelia is praised by several ancient writers for having educated her sons the Gracchi, but how and when and what she taught them is not specified.²⁴ But whatever the source of the information, the same rules seem to apply in history as well as in myth: women can affect the course of political events only if they act through or on

behalf of the men in their families. They can take independent action, like Lysistrata, in an emergency, but then must retire when the problem is solved. The earliest instance of such an event in history is recorded by Plutarch in his treatise on the bravery of women. Early in the fifth century, according to Plutarch, Telesilla of Argos, an aristocrat who because of her weak constitution had been encouraged to compose poetry,²⁵ when the Argive army had suffered a severe setback, organised the women of Argos to arm themselves and successfully defend their city's fortifications against the Spartans (*Mor.*, 245c-f). But as soon as the crisis was over the women resumed their conventional roles; according to Herodotus (who doesn't mention Telesilla) the Argive women were married to slaves (6.83.1), or as Plutarch insists, because they deserved better, to the aristocratic citizens of the neighbouring cities.²⁶

Plutarch also preserves another dramatic instance of a woman's political effectiveness in a crisis, this time as he says, from a period much closer to his own time, the first century BC.²⁷ Aretaphila of Cyrene was compelled to marry the tyrant who had murdered her husband; first she tried to poison him, then survived torture when her plot failed, and finally succeeded in getting rid of her tyrant husband by marrying her daughter to his brother and persuading him to murder his brother, and then contrived to have the ruler of a neighbouring state capture her son-in-law and turn him and his mother over to the citizens of Cyrene to be murdered. The people of Cyrene treated her like a hero, and asked her to share in the government and management of the city with the aristocrats, but she 'as if she had played in a sort of drama or competed in a contest up to the point of winning the prize' returned home to the women's quarters and spent the rest of her life working at her loom in the company of her family (*Mor.*, 257d-e).

Even if the original story of Aretaphila has been embellished by Plutarch or his sources to the point where it conforms with the standard pattern of women's behaviour in myth, it does indicate how implausible it seemed even in the Hellenistic age that women should share in the actual process of government (*synarchein*, *syndioikein*, 257d). It seems clear from papyri and inscriptions – the most authentic contemporary evidence preserved about the role of women in public life – that even when women were legally entitled to own property and to make wills, they were welcomed as benefactors of cities and given honorific titles, but never a real place on the town council or an actual vote in the assembly. The traditional female virtues were listed along with their benefactions, and even though their own names are now conspicuously mentioned (unlike proper aristocratic women in the fifth

and fourth centuries, who remained incognito),²⁸ due credit was always given to the *men* in their families: 'Phile, daughter of Apollonius, wife of Thessalus son of Polydeuces; as the first woman *stephanephorus*, she dedicated at her own expense a receptacle for water and the water pipes in the city [Priene]' (Pleket 5, 1st cent. BC); 'the council and the people, to Flavia Publicia Nicomachis, daughter of Dinomachis and Procle . . . their benefactor, and benefactor through her ancestors, founder of our city, president for life, in recognition of her complete virtue' (Pleket 19, Asia Minor, 2nd cent. AD); Aurelia Leite, 'daughter of Theodotus, wife of the foremost man in the city, Marcus Aurelius Faustus . . . she was gymnasiarch of the gymnasium which she repaired and renewed when it had been dilapidated for many years . . . She loved wisdom, her husband, her children, her native city [Paros]' (Pleket 31, AD 300).²⁹ (See further Van Bremen, this volume).

Philosophical theory, as so often, was based on and reinforced social practice. Aristotle believed that women were capable of virtue and of understanding, though he could not accept what Plato proposed, that self-control, courage and justice were the same for women and for men. Aristotle stated that 'man's courage is shown in commanding [or ruling, *archein*] and women's in obeying' (*Pol.*, 1260a8). A treatise on women written in the third or second century BC by Neopythagorean philosophers in Italy, in the form of a letter from one woman to another, also assumes that women's capacity to govern was considerably less than a man's: 'some people think that it is not appropriate for a woman to be a philosopher, just as a woman should not be a cavalry officer or a politician . . . I agree that men should be generals and city officials and politicians, and women should keep house and stay inside and receive and take care of their husbands. But I believe that courage, justice and intelligence are qualities that men and women have in common . . . Courage and intelligence are more appropriately male qualities because of the strength of men's bodies and the power of their minds. Chastity is more appropriately female.'³⁰

The apparent exceptions only prove the rule that women could not be accepted as governors unless they acted in conjunction with a man. Hellenistic queens have been regarded as the first examples of truly independent women. They organised court intrigues (including murders); they directed strategy of naval and land battles; they made decisions affecting governmental policy. But it is important to remember that even the most capable of these women worked through or at least with the titular presence of a male consort.³¹ Arsinoe, queen of Egypt from 274-70, enjoyed power as the consort of her brother; Berenice, wife

and cousin of Arsinoë's adopted son Ptolemy III Euergetes, was praised by Callimachus for the courage she showed as a young girl, which won her her husband.³² The unwritten law appears to be that the co-ruling (*synarchein*) and co-management (*syndioikein*) unthinkable for Aretaphila in conjunction with unrelated males (above, p. 56), is available to women with husbands, fathers or brothers. Cleopatra VII came to the throne with her brother. Then she enlisted the aid first of Julius Caesar, who became at least for a short time her consort, to remain on the throne by defeating her brother and installing a younger brother as co-ruler. Then she used Mark Antony to stay in power, though even when she sat with Antony on twin thrones she was addressed as 'co-ruler with Caesarion', her son (allegedly) by Caesar (Plut., *Ant.* 54).³³ For ordinary women also civil law ensured that men had at least nominal control. Women in the Hellenistic age could draw up contracts and make wills, but only with the consent of a male guardian or *kyrios*, usually a close relative.³⁴

Upper-class Romans in Cicero's day could claim that their wives enjoyed greater social freedom than (certainly) women in Greek cities (Nepos, *Praef.*, 6); the aristocratic Aretaphila of (Greek) Cyrene returned to the women's quarters and saw only other women and members of her family. Inscriptions and letters explain how women assisted the men in their families in their political careers. A husband records in a long eulogy of his wife (neither of their names is preserved) how she managed to have him brought back from exile in 43BC: 'you lay prostrate at the feet [of the triumvir Lepidus] and you were not only not raised up, but were dragged along and carried off brutally like a slave. But although your body was full of bruises, your spirit was unbroken and you kept reminding him of [Augustus] Caesar's edict with its expression of pleasure at my reinstatement, and although you had to listen to insulting words and suffer cruel wounds, you pronounced the words of the edict in a loud voice, so that it should be known who was the cause of my deadly perils' – the husband even claims that his wife's accusations helped contribute to Lepidus' downfall.³⁵ The proscriptions of the triumvirs apparently elicited similarly heroic behaviour on the part of other aristocrats' wives: Acilius' wife (like a proper Athenian woman, her own name is not given) bribed soldiers with her jewellery not to turn her husband over to be executed; Lentulus' wife donned male disguise in order to join her husband in exile;³⁶ Reginus' wife hid her husband in a sewer; Coponius' wife slept with Antony in order to purchase her husband's safety, 'thus curing one evil with another', as the historian Appian remarks (*Bel. Civ.* 4.39-40).

Brutus, the murderer of Caesar, appears to have been aided at every step in his career by his mother Servilia.³⁷ Certainly one reason that Caesar pardoned Brutus after he had fought against him in 48 was that Servilia had been his mistress. After the conspiracy that led to Caesar's death, she received and transmitted messages for her son (*ad Att.* 416.4). Cicero in a letter describes how she took charge of a family conference at Antium at which she contrived to silence even Cicero with the comment that she had 'never heard anything like' what he was proposing; she herself proposed to have legislation changed on her son's behalf, and apparently was successful (389.2). But for all her initiative, Cicero himself clearly thinks of her as her son's agent, rather than as an independent operator. He remarks to his friend Atticus (whom he teased about having Servilia as a 'pal,' *familiaris*, 389.2): 'it's just like you not to fault Servilia, which is to say, Brutus' (394).

Women in Pompeii joined with men in supporting candidates for local political offices, as graffiti on painted walls reveal: 'Amadio along with his wife asks you to vote for Gnaeus Sabinus for aedile' (*CIL* iv. 913). Some of the men and women appear to have been co-workers in shops: 'Appuleia and Narcissus along with their neighbour Mustius, ask you to vote for Pupius' (*ILS*, 6408a). One woman, Statia, asks on her own for support of her candidate (*CIL* iv. 3684) — she of course couldn't vote for him herself.

But generally women who spoke out on their own behalf, rather than that of a close male relative, were criticised for being selfish, licentious and avaricious. The speech attributed by Livy to the formidable moralist Cato the Elder provides an example of the kind of thing that was said about ambitious women; the issue is whether to repeal the Oppian law limiting women's rights to own property (195 BC): 'our ancestors did not want women to conduct any — not even private — business without a guardian; they wanted them to be under the authority of parents, brothers or husbands; we (the Gods help us!) even now let them snatch at the government and meddle in the Forum and our assemblies... Give rein to their unbridled natures and these unmastered creatures, and hope that they will put limits on their own freedom! They want freedom, nay licence (if we are to speak the truth) in all things... If they are victorious now, what will they not attempt? As soon as they begin to be your equals, they will have become your superiors...' (xxxiv, 2.11-3.2). Of Sempronia, who supported the conspiracy of Catiline (who was not a relative of hers), it was said, 'there was nothing she set a smaller value on than seemliness and chastity, and she was as careless of her reputation as she was of her

money' (Sallust, *Catiline*, 24-5).³⁸ We are told that one could use the name of Gaia Afrania (a contemporary of Caesar's) who brought lawsuits herself, without using (male) lawyers, to designate *any* woman with low morals (Val. Max. 8.3).

In popular belief, not only was self-assertion on a woman's part regarded as self-indulgence and licentiousness; crowds of women were considered a public menace. Livy has Cato complain of the women seeking repeal of the Oppian law 'running around in public, blocking streets, and speaking to other women's husbands'. In practice, women were permitted to organise themselves into formal groups only for some social or religious purpose, rather on the lines of a modern ladies' auxiliary; for example, in the third century BC the matrons 'purely and chastely' dedicated a golden bowl to Juno out of contributions from their dowries (Livy, xxvii. 37. 8-9).³⁹ Inscriptions from the Empire record grants of money donated to women's organisations for public services; and women apparently could meet to set rules of social conduct and to discipline one another (Suetonius, *Galba* 5. 1; *Historia Augusta, Life of Elagabalus*, 4. 3-4).

On the other hand, Hortensia, herself daughter of a famous orator, was praised for pleading in 42 BC to the triumvirs that rich women be relieved of a special tax: 'Quintus Hortensius lived again in the female line and breathed in his daughter's words' (Val. Max. 8.3). Her speech — unlike that of any other woman — was said to have been preserved verbatim, probably because what she said would have won male approval. In the one version of the speech that has come down to us, she claims that women had never supported despotic governments in the past; she recalls to the triumvirs what women have done to serve the state, and also reminds them that in the present crisis the women have lost fathers, husbands and sons. Significantly she does not dwell on issues like taxation without representation or women's rights, or the pleasures and luxuries that their money might buy (Appian, *Bellum Civile*, 4. 32-3). If such arguments had had any appeal, Livy would have put them into the mouth of Valerius, the opponent of Cato the Elder in the senatorial debate about the repeal of the Oppian law. But instead Livy makes Valerius concentrate on the services that Roman women in the past performed on behalf of their country. He allows Valerius only one 'equal opportunity' argument, and this with great condescension: men can wear the purple in civil magistracies not available to women; depriving men of such honours 'could wound the spirits of men; what do you think it could do to the spirits of our little women [*mulierculae*], whom even small problems disturb?' Livy's Valerius concludes by

arguing that women prefer that their adornment be subject to their husband's or father's judgement rather than to a law: 'a woman's slavery is never put off while her male relatives are safe and sound, and they hate the liberty that widowhood or orphanage allows them . . . It is for the weaker sex to submit to whatever you advise. The more power you possess, all the more moderately you should exercise your authority' (xxxiv. 6-7).

Given this background, I do not find it at all surprising that during the Empire, when the principal liberty guaranteed to male citizens was the right to petition, that women's initiative was restricted to helping male relatives.⁴⁰ Arria killed herself before her husband, who was about to be taken away to be executed, while uttering the famous words, 'look, it doesn't hurt' (Pliny, *Ep.* 3.16). Agrippina, Nero's mother, was even more aggressive than Servilia, Brutus' mother, in promoting her son's career. She married her uncle, the emperor Claudius, and got him to appoint her son as his heir.

Wives and mothers of emperors appeared on coins for propaganda purposes, for example, Antony with Cleopatra.⁴¹ Clearly the rulers of these vast and constantly threatened realms needed the participation of wives and mothers for political as well as for personal reasons.⁴² Again mythology (that is, literature) gives us the best indication of the response the emperors were seeking to elicit from their subjects. A man who had the support of a wife or mother was more easily approachable and more capable of clemency. In Euripides' drama the *Suppliant Women*, the mothers of the Argive captains who helped Polynices attack Thebes first ask Aethra, Theseus' mother, not Theseus himself, to help them get military protection so that they can bury their sons (Polynices' burial was not the only problem created by that war). The mothers appeal to Aethra: 'you have borne a son yourself, O queen' (55-6). When the king of Argos, Adrastus, fails to convince Theseus to help, Aethra intercedes. Theseus listens to her, because 'even women can provide much intelligent advice' (294). Aethra is successful where Antigone fails, because she is able to persuade Theseus to help; he is of course a much more reasonable man than Creon: 'for what will my detractors say, when you, my mother, who are anxious on my behalf, are the first to tell me to undertake this task [of allowing the Argive women to bury their dead]' (342-5).

In Rome, emperors' wives and even mistresses could save the lives (or fortunes) of individuals who were able to approach them directly and so get the emperor's ear.⁴³ That, as we have seen, was only a traditional pattern of behaviour. But the pattern survived through the

Middle Ages and well into our own time. By the fifth century AD the characterisation of Christian divinities had undergone subtle but important changes. In iconography Jesus, once kindly and approachable, becomes more closely identified with and sometimes even indistinguishable from his Father. To receive his mercy, appeal must be made to his Mother, who in the synoptic gospels is not at all an important or influential figure.⁴⁴ Thus the model of the 'power behind the throne' was incorporated into religion from the world of politics, and survives not only in modern Christianity, but in notions of approved behaviour for women in the twentieth century.⁴⁵

Notes

1. Wiesen (1976), pp. 199-212.
2. de Ste. Croix (1981), pp. 24-5.
3. Lefkowitz (1981), pp. 1399-401; Cantarella (1981), pp. 19-34. That graves of armed women from the fourth century BC have been found in the Ukraine does not prove that the Saurōmatians were matriarchal (Herodotus, iv. 114-17); only that some women in that society were warriors, as in nineteenth-century Russia; cf. David (1977), pp. 130, 148, 151.
4. Pembroke (1967, 1965); cf. Cartledge (1981), pp. 104 n. 126.
5. Lacey (1968), pp. 80-81.
6. Lacey (1968), pp. 54-5.
7. E.g., esp. Foley (1975), p. 36; Sorum (1982), p. 206; cf. O'Brien (1977), pp. xiii-xxx.
8. Sorum (1982), p. 207.
9. Heilbrun (1973), p. 9.
10. Foley (1975), pp. 33-6. Heilbrun (1973), p. 10, cites an unidentified verse translation: 'but to defy the State - I have no strength for that.' The Greek says only 'do you intend to bury him, when it is forbidden [by Creon] to the city?'
11. Campbell (1964), pp. 193-4, 168-9; Alexiou (1974), p. 22; Daube (1972), pp. 5-10. Alcmena refuses to sleep with Amphitryon until he has avenged her brothers' deaths (Hesiod, *Scut.*, 15-17).
12. Cf. the behaviour of Mithridates (first century BC). He decreed that the corpse of his enemy Poredorix be left unburied, but when the guards arrested a woman burying the body, Mithridates permitted her to complete the burial and gave her clothes for the corpse, 'probably because he realised that the reason behind it was love' (Plutarch, *Moralia*, 259d).
13. Translations, unless otherwise noted, are my own.
14. Humphreys (1980), pp. 112-13; Lacey (1968), pp. 148-9.
15. Cf. the behaviour of Intaphernes' wife, who chooses to have her brother spared rather than her husband (Herodotus, iii. 119.6), and of Althaea who brings about the death of her son because he killed her brothers (Bacchylides, 5. 136-44). The 'illogicality' (in modern terms) of Antigone's argument and its similarity to the Herodotean passage have caused scholars to question its authenticity, e.g., most recently, Winnington-Ingram (1980), p. 145 n. 80; but cf. Lefkowitz (1981a), p. 5, n. 8.
16. Daube (1972), pp. 6-7.

17. See Jacob (1963), p. 290; Jebb (1900), p. xlii.
18. Cf. also Althaea (n. 15), listed first in a catalogue of evil women by the (female) chorus of Aeschylus, *Choephoroe*, pp. 603ff.
19. *Melanippe the Wise*, according to the Aristophanes scholia; the play provided later writers with many quotations both for and against women (e.g., 497-9, 502, 503 N).
20. Cf. Pomeroy (1975), pp. 112-14.
21. See esp. Annas (1981), pp. 181-5. Cf. Adam (1963), I 345.
22. See esp. Cartledge (1981), pp. 86-9. Redfield (1978), by analysing the condition of Spartan women in terms of the artificial polarities of *oikos* and *polis*, suggests that 'we can see the Spartan policy as a somewhat extreme enactment of general Greek ideas' (p. 160); but surely Aristotle regarded it as anomalous, and ultimately self-destructive. On women's status in the *polis*, see Gould (1980), p. 46.
23. Lefkowitz (1983).
24. E.g., Plutarch, *Gracchi*, 2, 19; Cicero, *Brutus*, 58. 211; Seneca, *de Consolatione*, 16; Tacitus, *Dialogus* 28, Valerius Maximus, 4.4 praef. Cf. Lefkowitz-Fant (1982), p. 138.
25. Pausanias saw a statue of her in Argos (ii., 20. 8-10). Cf. the male poets Solon of Athens and Tyrtaeus of Sparta, both of whom were assumed to have been generals, perhaps because of the hortatory stance they adopt in their poems; Lefkowitz (1981b), pp. 38, 42.
26. In part, the story appears to be an aetiology for the annual Argive festival of Impudence (*Hybristika*), one of several Greek rituals involving transvestism and role-change; Burkert (1977), p. 388 n. 53. Cf. how an Argive woman was celebrated for killing king Pyrrhus when he attacked the city in 271; Stadter (1965), p. 52.
27. See esp. Stadter (1965), pp. 101-3.
28. Cf. Schaps (1977), pp. 323-30.
29. Cf. also Pleket (1969), no. 15, and *CIL* viii. 23888, and see Van Bremen in this volume for discussion of women's dedications in the Hellenistic period.
30. Thesleff (1965), p. 151.
31. See esp. Cantarella (1981), pp. 113-4.
32. Callimachus (in Catullus' translation, 66. 25-6) may have been alluding to how Berenice helped assassins dispose of her first husband Demetrius (her mother's lover, whose presence kept her mother in power) so that she could marry Ptolemy (Justin 26.3); Macurdy (1932), pp. 130-6.
33. Cf. Pomeroy (1975), p. 124; Macurdy (1932), pp. 202-5. Her daughter Cleopatra Selene issued coins in her own name, but with her husband Juba on the reverse; Macurdy (1932), p. 225.
34. Cf. Pomeroy (1975), pp. 126-7.
35. Tr. Wistrand (1976), p. 25; cf. also Balsdon (1962), pp. 204-5.
36. Probably Sulpicia, wife of Cornelius Lentulus Crussello, Valerius Maximus, 6.6.3; *RE* IV (1901) 1384.
37. Balsdon (1962), p. 51.
38. Balsdon (1962), pp. 47-8.
39. Cf. Lefkowitz-Fant (1982), pp. 244-6.
40. Millar (1977), pp. 546-8.
41. Macurdy (1932), p. 205.
42. E.g., the titles awarded to and coins issued by the women in Elagabalus' family, Balsdon (1962), p. 160; cf. p. 142.
43. E.g., Antonina is alleged to have got her husband Belisarius's life spared through Theodora's intervention: Procopius, *Secret History*, 4.
44. Warner (1976), pp. 285-6.

45. Perhaps one reason Theodora's contemporaries (like Cleopatra's) disliked her is that she often seemed to function literally as well as figuratively as co-ruler, oaths, for example, being sworn to Justinian and Theodora jointly – though not too much should be made of this either: see Bury (1923), II, pp. 30f.

Further Reading

- Balsdon, J.P.V.D. (1962), *Roman Women: Their History and Habits*, London
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 Lacey, W.K. (1968), *The Family in Classical Greece*, London, repr. Auckland, 1980
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