

Women in the Ancient World (GCSE)

Ovid *Metamorphoses*, transl. D. Raeburn

Sick of the vices with which the female sex has been so richly endowed, he [Pygmalion] chose for a number of years to remain unmarried, without a partner to share his bed. In the course of time he successfully carved an amazingly skillful statue in ivory, white as snow, an image of perfect feminine beauty – and fell in love with his own creation. This heavenly woman appeared to be real... art was concealed by art to a rare degree.

Euripides *Medea*, transl. D. Kovacs

Medea: Of all creatures that have breath and sensation, we women are the most unfortunate. First at an exorbitant price we must buy a husband and take a master for our bodies.... The outcome of our life's striving hangs on this, whether we take a bad or a good husband. For divorce is discreditable for woman and it is not possible to refuse wedlock. When a woman comes into the new customs and practices of her husband's house, she must somehow divine, since she has not learned it at home, how she shall best deal with her husband. If after we have spent great efforts on these tasks our husbands live with us without resenting the marriage yoke, our life is enviable. Otherwise, death is preferable. A man, whenever he is annoyed with the company of those in the house, goes elsewhere and thus rids his soul of its boredom. But we must fix our gaze on one person only. Men say that we live a life free from danger at home while *they* fight with the spear. How wrong they are! I would rather stand three times with a shield in battle than give birth once.

Chorus: Men's thoughts have become deceitful and their oaths by the gods do not hold fast. The common talk will so alter that women's ways will enjoy good repute. Honor is coming to the female sex: no more will women be maligned by slanderous rumor.

The poetry of ancient bards will cease to hymn our faithlessness. Phoebus lord of song [the god Apollo] never endowed our minds with the glorious strains of the lyre. Else I could have sounded a hymn in reply to the male sex.

Propertius 1.3, transl. C. P. Goold

Like the maid of Cnossus [Ariadne] as in a swoon she lay on the deserted shore when Theseus' ship sailed away; like Cepheus' daughter Andromeda as she rested in her first slumber on her release from the rugged cliff; no less like the Thracian bacchant, exhausted after incessant dances, when she collapses on the grassy bank of the Apidanus; even so did Cynthia seem to me to breathe a gentle repose, her head pillowed on a cushion of her hands, when home I came dragging footsteps unsteadied by much wine and the slaves were shaking their dying torches in the far-gone night.

...I did not venture to disturb my lady's peace, fearing the chidings of a cruelty I had tasted before; but I remained rooted with eyes intent upon her... And now I was taking off the garlands from my brow and arranging them about your temples, Cynthia; and now I took pleasure in building up your fallen locks...

At length the moon hurrying by the parted shutters... opened with its gentle beams Cynthia's fast-closed eyes. Then, with elbow propped on the soft couch, she cried: 'Has another's scorn then at last brought you to my bed, expelling you from doors closed in your face? For where have you spent the long hours of the night which was due me, you who come, ah me, exhausted, when the stars are driven from the sky? Oh, may you spend nights like these, you villain, such as you are always compelling poor me to endure!'

Sources: female voices

Exercise 1: lyric poetry and 'subjectivity'

Sappho 31 (c. 500 BCE), translated by Anne Carson

He seems to me equal to gods that man
whoever he is who opposite you
sits and listen close
to your sweet speaking

and lovely laughing – oh it
puts the heart in my chest on wings
for when I look at you, even a moment, no speaking
is left in me

no: tongue breaks and thin
fire is racing under skin
and in eyes no sight and drumming
fills ears

and cold sweat holds me and shaking
grips me all, greener than grass
I am and dead – or almost
I seem to me.

..... (fragment breaks off)

Q. What is the dramatic scenario described in Sappho's poem?

Q. What are the emotions we find in this poem? How are they made 'poetic'?

Q. Why might people have disputed the sex of the author, and con imagined a man writing under the name of 'Sappho'?

Catullus 51 (c. 50 BCE), translated by Guy Lee

That man is seen by me as a God's equal
Or, (if it may be said) the Gods' superior,
Who sitting opposite again and again
Watches and hears *you*

Sweetly laughing – which dispossesses poor me
Of all my senses, for no sooner, Lesbia*,

Do I look at you than there's no power left me
<Of speech in my mouth,>

But my tongue's paralysed, invisible flame
Courses down through my limbs, with din of their own
My ears are ringing and twin darkness covers
The light of my eyes.

Leisure, Catullus, does not agree with you.
At leisure you're restless, too excitable.
Leisure in the past has ruined rulers and
Prosperous cities.

**The name Catullus gives to the addressee of most of his love poems.*

Q. What are the main ways in which Catullus has transformed Sappho's poem?

Q. Who is Lesbia, do you think?

Q. Compared with Sappho's poem, are women more, or less, powerful in Catullus' poem?

Catullus 50, translated by Guy Lee

At leisure, Licinius, yesterday
We'd much fun with my writing-tablets
As we'd agreed to be frivolous.
Each of us writing light verses
Played now with this metre, now that,
Capping each other's jokes and toasts.
Yes, and I left there fired by
Your charm, Licinius, and wit,
So food gave poor me no pleasure
Nor could I rest my eyes in sleep
But wildly excited turned and tossed
Over the bed, longing for daylight
That I might be with you and talk.
But after my tired aching limbs
Were lying on the couch half dead,
I made this poem for you, the charmer,
So you could spot my trouble from it.
Now don't be rash, please – don't reject
Our prayers, we implore you, precious,
Lest Nemesis* make you pay for it.

She's a drastic Goddess. Don't provoke her.

**Goddess of vengeance.*

Q. How does Catullus' relationship with his male friend Licinius compare with his relationship with Lesbia?

Q. What do we learn about the process of writing poetry from this poem?

Exercise 2: an elegiac woman speaks

Sulpicia 13 (late 1st century BCE), translated by Guy Lee

At last has come a love which it would disgrace me more
to hide out of shame than expose to someone.

Prevailed upon by my Camenae* Cytherea

Delivered him into my arms on trust.

Venus has kept her promise. My joys can be the talk
of all who are said to have none of their own.

I would not wish to send a message under seal
so no one could read it before my man.

But I'm glad to sin and tired of wearing reputation's
mask. The world shall know I've met my match.

**Roman Muses*

**Venus, goddess of love*

Q. Is Sulpicia proud of the love she feels, or not?

Q. How legitimate does her relationship seem?

Q. Why does Sulpicia appeal to divine figures in this poem?

Q. What function does poetry-writing fulfil for Sulpicia, do you think?

Exercise 3: female friendship (the Bechdel test?)

T.Vindol. II 291 (lime-wood diptych, c. AD 97-103) [in BM], translated by Dominic Rathbone

The earliest known letter in Latin from a woman in the Roman world, and the earliest document with handwriting by a woman in Britain.

It comes from Vindolanda, one of the forts along the northern frontier of Roman Britain which were later replaced by Hadrian's Wall. Many documents on lime-wood, including this letter, were found in ancient rubbish pits at Vindolanda.

The recipient Sulpicia Lepidina was wife of Flavius Cerialis, prefect of the 9th cohort of Batavians, stationed at Vindolanda (the Batavians came from the modern Netherlands). The writer Claudia Severa was wife of Aelius Brocchus, probably the prefect of another unit at a nearby fort. She dictated the text of the letter to a scribe (1st hand), but wrote the more personal farewell herself (2nd hand).

Claudia Severa to her Lepidina, greetings.

On 11 September, sister, for the day of celebration of my birthday, I ask you warmly to arrange to come to us, so you make the day more enjoyable for me by your presence, if *you can come*(?).

Greetings to your Cerialis. My Aelius and little son send their greetings. (2nd hand) I shall expect you, sister.

Be well sister, my dearest soul, as I may be well, and ciao.

(On back; 1st hand) To Sulpicia Lepidina, (wife) of Cerialis, from Severa.

Q. Does this pass the Bechdel test?

Q. Write a potential reply from Sulpicia Lepidina

Exercise 4: memorialising women

CIL VI 15346 (Rome, c. 100 BC)

Passer-by, what I say is little; pause and read it through.

Here is the unbeautiful tomb of a beautiful woman.

The name her parents named her was Claudia.

She loved her husband with all her heart.

She gave birth to two sons, of whom one she left on the earth, the other she placed under the earth.

Her conversation was charming, then too her movement graceful.

She took care of the house. She made the wool. <I have?> said it. Off you go.

Q. List the qualities that Roman women seem to have wanted to have celebrated, or that their husbands felt were worthy of commemoration.

Q. Which of those qualities seem to be normal, and which are presented as unusual?

Q. Write an epitaph for a woman you value, and consider what you would celebrate.