

[Intro music]

Philomena Lindquist: From the University of Wisconsin Madison, this is Ask a Historian. I'm your host, Philomena Lindquist. Today's episode is brought to you by the Department of History Board of Visitors at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. Our thanks goes out especially to Jon Leibowitz, Peter Hamburger, and Rick Kalson. On today's episode, I will be talking with PhD candidate Sheena Finnigan about ancient femininity — what it meant to be a woman and how ideas of femininity manifested in ancient Rome. We also examine the nuances femininity took then and continues to take in our modern world. As Finnigan points out, though there may be ideals for femininity and women's behavior, these ideals are often more complicated and nuanced than they may seem and focus on a very small elite section of the population. Before we get started, please be advised that this episode will touch briefly on mature themes, specifically involving a story that mentions sexual assault. This conversation was recorded in November 2021.

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PL: Alright, so we are here today with Sheena Finnigan. Sheena, can you introduce yourself, please?

Sheena Finnigan: Sure. Hi, Sheena Finnigan. I am a PhD candidate in the History Department. I study Roman history, mostly history of motherhood and womanhood. So I'm interested in thinking about what it meant to be a Roman mother — like how often women actually became mothers, or whether they did other things and kind of how all those different aspects of their life intersected. So that's the historian part of me, I actually live in Chicago right now and moved here with my family a little over a month ago, and I've got three kiddos. And right now I'm just trying to finish writing. Before that, I had a professorship in Milwaukee. But I left that so that I could focus in on finishing up the dissertation.

PL: So Sheena, you're here today, because we got a question to Ask AHistorian that said, "I'd actually be very curious to know how ideas of femininity have changed over time. How did they work in ancient Rome?" We got this question from one of our history professors here, actually, Paige Glotzer. And so today, we're going to talk about femininity in ancient Rome, but also then how that has kind of evolved. So Sheena, just to kind of start us off, can you just kind of paint us a picture of the feminine ideal in ancient Rome?

SF: Yeah, I'll do my best. I think it's actually kind of a tough question. Because femininity, of course, it's a lot more varied than we imagine it to be. We could think about ranges of femininity in our own life and time period. But usually, when we're thinking historically — especially when we're pushing way, way back a couple hundred, or thousand, years, in this case — we tend to think that there was a "women were ... fill in the blank." Answering it straightforwardly is probably not fair. And there are a few reasons. Of course, the Roman period is really, really long. We probably should focus on what

people think about like the classical Roman period, which would be about 100, BC to maybe about 200 AD. The second thing is that our written evidence is really concentrated among elite authors, almost exclusively men. We have very, very little written evidence from women at all. So it's hard to say whether what they wrote corresponds with a feminine ideal that's observed in daily life, or that extends beyond their group of really academic thinkers. A third thing is that Rome was massive — geographically and ethnically really diverse. So every region and ethnic group had its own perspective on femininity. And then, finally, society was really organized by status. And status is defined in a few ways, most importantly, by wealth and by citizenship. So are you a Roman citizen? Are you a foreigner? Are you a free person: somebody who's been a slave, but became a citizen, with limited rights? Or are you a slave? And all of that it's going to change what it means to be feminine.

I would say, as I gave all of these different reasons why we shouldn't talk about a [singular] femininity, I do think that there are some good examples of how we received ideas of femininity. The idea that we get says women are supposed to be really hard working, they're supposed to be emotionally restrained, obedient, pious, modest, good wives, good daughters, and good mothers. Those are the categories that we are looking at. And I think a really good example of that comes from Livy, a historian who wrote during the time that Augustus was the emperor — at the very beginning of the Roman Empire and the very end of the Republic — and he writes about the founding of Rome, and for about 150 years, kings ruled. And then, near the end of that period, the legend goes that the kings just became so prideful that they'd completely lost any sense of what their responsibilities were as king.

The story that this is channeled through for Livy is a story of a woman named Lucretia, who was the wife of one of the leading men of Rome — a general, his name was Collatinus. And Collatinus and a bunch of his buddies, including a prince, Sextus Tarquinius, were all together, bragging about their wives and arguing about whose wife was better than the rest. Of course, they were drinking too. And they decided, on Collatinus's recommendation, that they should ride back from their camp to the city of Rome, and basically go check on all their wives and really see who was the best. And Collatinus was sure that his was the best. And, of course, he was right, because all the other women were off partying together. But Lucretia was home, spinning wool.

Her piety and modesty were super attractive to the prince, Sextus Tarquinius. And so he snuck out sometime later, went to her home as a dinner guest, and then later that night, attempted to rape her. And she kept refusing. But she submitted, ultimately, because he said that if she didn't, he would set it up so that it looked like she had had a relationship with a slave and that they were caught in both together killed. In the end, she takes her own life out of shame. And her husband and her father and her friends use her story as a prerequisite for overthrowing the kingdom.

From all of that, you know, you'll get a sense of, not only is this what a woman is supposed to be, but this is also what gets representative of civilization. She represents Rome being abused by a king. And so I think that's really helpful — in a disturbing way — but helpful for thinking about what ideal met.

And there are other examples that are less dramatic. But you have a philosopher named Seneca, who wrote a letter to his mother praising her for being really hardworking and studious and simple in dress and a good financial manager and really authoritative parent.

Another philosopher Plutarch, writing advice to a newlywed couple reminding the wife to be obedient to her husband. So we have a lot of examples of what some people say women are supposed to be or what the ideal was. But I think one thing that's really important about all three of the narratives I was just talking about — Livy's, Seneca's, and Plutarch's — is that they're all statesmen. They're all philosophers. They all have political and philosophical goals. And even though both Seneca and Plutarch are writing letters that are personal, they're published. And they were published by them intentionally as part of their philosophical and political programs. This is what these guys think women should be. And they're trying to popularize that idea. It's hard to know if their efforts at popularizing the ideas corresponded with what people actually thought at the time outside of their circles.

PL: Sure, that makes sense. You mentioned that women were really active both in private and public lives. Do we know why we don't have more female perspectives on women?

SF: Yeah, I think it's more that we don't have the stuff because it didn't survive than that women weren't actually writing because we do have a lot of references to women writing. And we have bits and pieces. There are two poets named Sulpicia, which is confusing, right? They have the same name, but we have just bits and lines from their poetry. One, her poetry was preserved in the collection of a man and the other one, we just have references to in other texts. But they seem to have been pretty prolific. They seem to have been pretty well respected as authors. And we know that a lot of stateswomen, in particular, wrote important and influential letters. Partly it doesn't survive because women weren't publishing like men were.

PL: Okay. So, yeah, you mentioned that there isn't necessarily one ideal and it's far more nuanced than a lot of people perceive and that we don't necessarily even have all the information to know what that was like. But the ideal that we do have or what we do know about it, where is that coming from? You alluded to the fact that it's generally men in power, but who is actually forming this ideal of quote, unquote, how a woman should be.

SF: I think it comes from a patchwork of things. So of course, Rome was very large. And there are lots and lots of Mediterranean cultures. Greek influence is huge, although Greek women had way less power and visibility than Roman women did. In addition to that, you know, we've got North Africa, we've got Germanic influences. And there are definitely influences, too, just based on practicality: What needs to happen? Someone who is really committed to their work, studious, a good financial manager, is able to control their emotions so that they can be effective in their job; I think all of that, as far as a practical side, really does matter a lot.

I also get the sense, just from my own research, that people tended to value women who were independent to a certain degree. There were limits on their independence; women were always under the direction of a man their entire life and they were, of course, expected to obey them, but really only to a certain degree. There's a huge massive eulogy that's written to a woman by her husband where her husband praises her for being really pure and obedient and faithful and for weaving. Even though these are the characteristics she's given, you know, like, you get the sense that she's demure. But when you read through the eulogy, you find out that she avenges her parents' murder; that her

husband was exiled for a while and she negotiated his pardon; that she actively protested against different activities in the government. She couldn't have children and so she offered to divorce her husband so that he could marry someone else and have children. You know, like, so she's really, really active. And she's taking a lot of initiative and making really big decisions on her own, even though he's praising her for being obedient and demure, etc.

PL: I think it's so interesting that they did praise obedience so much, because that doesn't sound obedient to me. But just this idea that women were very self-possessed within these larger boundaries of maybe the men in their lives.

SF: Yeah, I totally agree. I don't think she sounds very obedient, either. I think she sounds really persistent and self motivated, and she knows what she wants and needs, and she's gonna get it done. But maybe he's tying in with the fact that everything she's doing she's doing to serve her family. She's serving her father, she's serving her husband. She's supporting them in their causes. I guess we don't know whether she agreed or not but she must have, right. I think it would have been hard to be as active as she was if she didn't agree with the positions they were taking on some level.

PL: Sure. So the idea we've kind of been talking about here, how did that change? Or look different between social classes? Or like you said, ancient Rome, happened over a long period of time? And so how did femininity maybe change over that period of time as well?

SF: Yeah, so one of the things that most historians, I think, agree on is that in the earlier periods of Roman history, women had less freedom and power than they did over time. So we don't know a lot, really, about Rome at all, but I think women in particular, before the first or second century BC. And after the first century BC, marital customs changed which gave women a lot more independence than earlier marital custom, they were like the possession of their father, and then they became the possession of their husband. But later, the vast majority of women never went into the possession of their husband. And so they retained an independence from the husband and were legally in her father's household, rather than her husband's household. She still always had someone who was legally a guardian. But as time went on, the guardian seemed to have less and less authority over her.

And people didn't have a lot of children. Most of the evidence shows that Roman families were kind of small — like maybe two children per family. And of course, that could be that survived, because infant mortality rates are really quite high. But either way, you know, you're not seeing like these massive families. Like we imagine that on the prairies and you know, where you have 10 and 15 children all helping out on the farm or something — that wasn't Rome. So I think the idea that women are mostly mothers can't be true, you know, otherwise, you would be seeing, I think, more of these large, large families.

PL: Can you talk a little bit more about motherhood in ancient Rome, my notes, that's your range of study, and I would love to know more about how that factored into their role in the larger society.

SF: Yes. Motherhood was a lot of delegating, first of all. So lots and lots of women, you know, made use of wet nurses. But there were also women who didn't, and there was a huge debate about

whether women should or not. And if you had enough money to have full-time childcare — and I think basically anyone who are sort of like middle class and up would have had enough money to have full time childcare — then women, they were doing other things and would be following up quite regularly with their children. Women were generally characterized, as I was saying before, it seems, as kind of authoritative parents. They weren't the ones the kid just went to and hugged whenever, you know, they felt really sad. That was probably their nurse, not their mom. You know, their mom was as much of a rule-keeper as we imagined dads to be in our society; the way we think of dads being enforcers, it seems that moms are enforcers as well.

And motherhood was not something that ended when a child moved out of the house. Sons were still expected to consult with their mothers if she was living. And daughter-in-laws were especially important because the son is, of course, the one who's responsible for carrying on the family line. And so the daughter-in-law, then, would become a really important member of the family, and she was always expected to be deferential to her mother-in-law because her mother-in-law's the matriarch of the house and of the family.

But I think that women didn't always actually aspire to be mothers. I think we have some pretty good evidence that motherhood was one aspect of womanhood. It wasn't the main aspect of womanhood. There's a lot of evidence of women who did spend their lives preparing to become wives and mothers. But there were lots of women who didn't. We've got funerary monuments for women that don't mention children or spouses at all and others that do. So I think motherhood in the Roman period was not the same as contemporary motherhood, but maybe closer to it than we would imagine. You know, I don't think it was, like I said, sort of Little House on the Prairie kind of motherhood. I think it was a lot more nuanced and complicated. And women had a lot of obligations outside of the home. And sometimes those obligations outside of the home were more important than the obligation to become a mother or to be a certain kind of mother.

PL: Yeah, that was kind of what I was thinking about — how, at least family-size-wise, and even a little bit childcare-wise, and this idea that motherhood was only one aspect of a woman's person, all struck me as relatively close to what a lot of people see parenthood as today. So can you talk about some more similarities or differences that have struck you as you learn about and work with ancient history and femininity?

SF: Yeah. So I think the similarities are what is the most compelling to me. And I think the reason is that we have this idea of traditional womanhood or traditional motherhood, which is that a woman stays home, that she takes care of the household that she has kids, and she is, you know, really good at meeting her husband's needs and her children's needs. But it doesn't seem to me that Roman society was like that at all. And when we think about traditional motherhood we often do, in our minds, whether it really deliberately or not, at least sort of throw it back to Greek and Roman culture in the western tradition — when I say we, I mean, people from the American background — thinking that this is where it came from. But all of that is filtered through hundreds of years of actual Christian society and theology and revisions.

And then through the Victorian period, which was very much separation of public and private, we sort of reflect back and think that that's Roman, because that was often the way that it was described

or justified in that time period. And so thinking about how much Roman women were maybe like modern women in the sense that they had all these varied interests and responsibilities is, I think, really exciting, because it makes what people I think, sometimes think is like a modern anomaly feel less anomalous, you know.

I'm also really interested in looking at women from different statuses from lower statuses. And we often think about ideals of what a woman should be, or whatever. But those are almost always elite ideas. And that's true through the Middle Ages. And that's in the Victorian era. So when we think about traditional womanhood or ideal womanhood, we're really thinking about just this really tiny sliver of women in history. And when you start to dig down through the social strata, we start to see a lot more commonalities. But maybe the biggest difference is that instead of trying to make it seem as if this traditional womanhood, I guess, is the ideal, I think a lot of modern western women have kind of given up on that as an ideal and don't see it as an ideal anymore. And so maybe we're being a little bit more honest about how we're living.

PL: I mean, I agree, I think we've definitely seen a lot of changing norms in motherhood in the past, at least in the western world. And I'm with you, I think it's very interesting that ancient Rome has been used to justify some of these more strict or more divided households where there's a public space and a private space, when that was not necessarily the reality. And I agree that it does feel a little bit better that we're not in radical territory here — that these displays of motherhood and these expressions of femininity have been going on long before us. It almost kind of feels like we're coming full circle with something even though I don't know what that circle really looks like.

SF: Yeah, I like how you said that. Yeah. And I will say of this coming full circle idea, sometimes I just wonder if it's because we're actually looking at women, as women; We're studying what they actually did. We're studying how they actually lived, rather than just reading Plutarch, or Seneca. I don't know that that means that that's what everyone thought a Roman woman should be. And it certainly doesn't mean that that's what they were, whether they thought they should be or not, you know,

PL: Well, and too, like you said, women were also used as symbols. Like you talked about Lucretia, and how she was kind of the symbol in the story for the Roman Empire. And so, even there when she's this idealized version of a woman, the reason behind telling her story is maybe not because of Lucretia. There are these other motives going on because women are being used in place of something or as an allegory of something.

SF: Yeah, I think that's exactly right. The story isn't her story. It's Rome's story. She happens to be a good standing right. She's just kind of convenient.

[Music fades in]

PL: A huge thank you to Sheena Finnigan for being such a wonderful source to answer Professor Glotzer's question here on Ask A Historian. We're thrilled to be back for the new year and are working on an amazing bunch of episodes for this season. If you have any questions about the past that you'd like to bring to UW–Madison historians, you can send them to

outreach@history.wisc.edu. Thanks again to the UW–Madison History Department Board of Visitors, without whom conversations like these would not be possible on Ask A Historian. And finally, thank you for listening. Support Ask A Historian by subscribing, rating, and reviewing the podcast. Every little bit helps and our listeners and their support make it all worthwhile. Thank you and take care.