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The Politics of Home: How Life Within the *Domus* Reflected Contemporary Roles of Men, Women, and Slaves in Ancient Rome

As Republican Rome entered her Imperial Era, Roman culture remained highly hierarchical and patriarchal. This gendered societal hierarchy was especially evident in the home, where men, women, and slaves coexisted and carried out tasks specifically delegated to them based on age, status, and sex. Whereas one male family member known as the *paterfamilias* commanded the social, political, and religious life of a wealthy patrician household, his female counterpart, the *materfamilias*, directed the affairs of the family’s slaves and aided her husband in his entertainment ventures. A number of Latin authors, including Petronius in his satirical *magnum opus*, the *Satyricon*, explicated these affairs in lavish detail. This research paper will analyze and investigate the typical Roman *domus* through the dual lenses of architecture and gender studies. Then-contemporary authors and modern historians alike contend that the *domus* provided an ideal space for men, women, and slaves to perform their expected functions as citizens, wives, and indentured servants, respectively. Furthermore, spaces in the home actually developed over time to be utilized exclusively and independently by either men or women. With spaces specifically designated for men, women, and slaves, the physical structure of the traditional urban *domus* reinforced contemporary societal and gender roles in ancient Rome.

Areas designated for entertaining within the Roman *domus* encouraged a life of comfort and leisure for male heads of household, while other areas allowed the elite space to conduct official business. The eldest male family member within a *domus* was called the *paterfamilias* and held great power both within and without the home, serving as his family’s chief citizen and religious leader. According to Saller, “Roman social historians regularly use *paterfamilias* today as a heuristic device to explain the patriarchal family characteristic of Rome” (183). Additionally, “[t]he ‘family’ headed by the paterfamilias extended for social and economic reasons far beyond the immediate family members” (Clarke 4). The cultural and societal value of a wealthy patrician man was determined by his ability to attract a wide variety of loyal businesspeople, known collectively as his *clientela*. These clients often accompanied their *paterfamilias* during his business activities in the city and joined him in the *domus* for evening entertainment. The *tablinum* offered men of the house a private space to receive visitors, conduct official business, and spend personal time with their respective clientele. According to Clarke, these “visit[s] by dependents . . . to the paterfamilias, their patron or *patronus*,” were known as *salutationes* (4). Clarke provides a detailed description of *clientela* and *salutationes* in his 1991 work, *The Houses of Roman Italy, 100 B.C.- A.D. 250: Ritual, Space, and Decoration*:

The clientela included relatives who could not have the status of a paterfamilias, such as sons who had established independent households, all those who worked for the paterfamilias, including both slaves and freedmen (former slaves of the family), plus an assorted group of unattached persons who made the daily rounds of *salutationes* to assure their political and economic security. The ritual of the *salutatio* secured the power and fortune of the paterfamilias through those who served his interests. This ritual structured the domus. (Clarke 4)

Not only did patrician men commonly host *salutationes* for their *clientela*; they also made extensive use of dinner parties and *symposia* (in the vein of the ancient Greeks) to further their political and economic agendas. Meanwhile, Roman wives and armies of servants facilitated these lavish evenings for their respective husbands’ and masters’ guests.

Whereas Roman men managed their family’s business affairs, women in ancient Rome devoted much of their time to managing the household and overseeing any slaves owned by the family who resided within their *domus*. Roman women were especially adept accountants and trained their daughters to manage matters of the home upon spousehood. Typically the eldest female residing in a *domus*, the *materfamilias* rather than the *paterfamilias* veritably commanded her family’s slaves. Wealthy *uxorēs* often worked in conjunction with slaves to carry out daily tasks, prepare meals for feasting in the *triclinium*, and aid their husbands in hosting *salutationes*. Consequently, women were considerably involved in the affairs of men. As Cooper states in her article, while “[r]ecent scholarship on the maternal premises of the Roman household has emphasized the visual cues of decoration and the alignment of space as a medium through which the *dominus* could make visible his claim to status” (14), women utilized traditionally male spaces daily. Cooper delineates this usage in the following passage:

Towards the front of the house stood the atrium, a large high-ceilinged space which was often centered around an impluvium open to the sky, and towards the rear of the house a peristyle, or open courtyard lined with columned porticoes. The atrium served as a venue both for business and patronage activities such as the *salutation*, and—presumably at different times—for the wool-work of the *materfamilias* and her maids, as well as for children at play. This said, the *materfamilias* was often in evidence in the midst of ‘masculine’ business; already in the first century BC Cornelius Nepos had noted it as a point of difference between Romans and Greeks that the *matrona* could be found moving throughout the house, rather than confined to a *gynaecaeum*. (Cooper 14)

Though their Athenian cultural predecessors were notoriously uninvolved in the affairs of men, Roman women were, in effect, free to manage affairs of the *domus* and interact with their husbands’ *clientela*.

Finally, slaves performed routine manual labor on behalf of their masters as well as tended to their needs within the *domus*. Slavery in ancient Rome differed greatly from more modern chattel slavery. Though domestic slaves nonetheless diligently served the families to whom they were indebted, in some respects, Roman slaves were their own autonomous human beings despite their statuses as either prisoners of war or Romans forced into bondage as a result of irreconcilable debt. The duties of Roman slaves were notably gendered. While male slaves often tutored their masters’ children and accompanied them to grammar school, female slaves spent much of their time in the kitchen, or *culina*, preparing food for the day. Regardless of sex, slaves were also responsible for serving meals in the *triclinium* and greeting guests in the *atrium* in the absence of their masters. Wallace-Hadrill provides a comprehensive overview of the many duties delegated to domestic slaves in ancient Rome, including the following tasks:

Slaves were omnipresent in the rich household: *cubicularii*, *pedisequi* and *ancillae* in the master’s and mistress’ bedroom—and presumably on call through day and night, sleeping on mattresses at the bedroom door or in an antechamber; in the dining room, servers, cooks, tasters, carvers, entertainers; round the children nurses, *paedagogi*, tutors, even grammarians and philosophers; and round the master at work, secretaries, clerks, *dispensatores*. Slaves indeed were as important as architecture in ensuring the proper social flow around the house, presenting living barriers to access to the master, from the *ostiarius* at the door to the *cubicularii* and *nomenclatores* guarding the more intimate areas. (Wallace-Hadrill 78)

The sheer number of responsibilities consigned to servants in ancient Rome reveals a profound truth about Roman society: The success of the Roman Republic and the later Roman Empire revolved around slave labor. The *domus* itself was no exception to this truth; day-to-day life in the typical Roman home relied extensively on forced labor as well. While *patresfamilias* and *matresfamilias* indeed managed familial affairs and commanded the home, prosperous life in the *domus* was inarguably made possible by slaves.

Perhaps more than any other contemporary Roman source, Petronius’s *Satyricon* offers a fascinating glimpse into its author’s contemporary Rome. The ancient novelist’s masterclass in satire explores the many gendered and hierarchical aspects of the Roman household, including the roles and duties of the *paterfamilias*, *materfamilias*, slaves, and freedmen through the characters of Trimalchio and his wife, Fortunata. Though satirical and largely fictitious, the plot, which revolves around the traveler Encolpius, a former gladiator visiting friends throughout Rome and the surrounding countryside, also centers heavily on the character of Trimalchio, a nouveau-riche freedman who invites Encolpius into his large *domus* for an ostentatious dinner party. As *paterfamilias* of his estate, Trimalchio makes frequent reference to his position, even once calling himself “praesidium domus familiaque” (Petronius 196-197) and relishing in his newfound status as a freed slave. Moreover, Fortunata is presented as the perfect wife, praising her husband in his drunkenness as she facilitates a tawdry and tasteless banquet, satirizing every Roman man’s desire for submissive and servile wives in addition to masses of servants.

Petronius’s *Satyricon*, in conversation with texts by a number of renowned classicists, reveals as much about ancient Republican and Imperial Roman society as it does about the *domus* itself. The building transcended the physical to reinforce existing societal and gender roles upon its occupants. Rooms specifically designated for men enabled business affairs which contributed to the Roman economy; women found purpose in spaces formerly reserved for men, managed essential household functions, and enabled the political and social lives of their husbands; and slaves served as the backbone of the *domus* and Roman society at large. Throughout the early first century A.D., the politics of home reflected the politics of Rome, and the *domus*, in turn,came to reflect these politics through architecture. In its own unique way, the traditional urban *domus* acted as a microcosm of the greater Roman world, for better and for worse.

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