

Roman Women in Shakespeare and His Contemporaries

Late Tudor and Stuart Drama

Gender, Performance, and Material Culture

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Roman Women in Shakespeare and His Contemporaries

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Domenico Lovascio

Introduction: Roman Women in Early Modern English Drama

“Appellata est enim ex viro virtus,” explains Cicero in *Tusculanae Disputationes* (first century BCE): *virtus* takes its name from *vir*, the Latin for “man.”¹ The ideal of *virtus*, embracing a much broader assortment of values than the current notion of “virtue,” was a foundational staple of Roman society and was viewed as the (almost) exclusive province of men. Building on Cicero (and Varro), Lactantius—a Christian scholar who became an advisor to the first Christian Roman emperor, Constantine I—would argue a few centuries later in *De opificio Dei* (third through fourth centuries CE) that “Vir itaque nominatus est, quod maior in eo vis est quam in femina; et hinc virtus nomen accepit. Item mulier (ut Varro interpretatur) a mollitie, immutata et detracta littera, velut mollier.”² Simply put, Lactantius contends that men are stronger than women, and so they gave *virtus* its name; woman, on the contrary, takes her name, *mulier*, from weakness itself. Accordingly, women cannot really aspire to *virtus*: they just lack the necessary strength. The uttermost to which they can tend is living by the ideal of *pudicitia*, that is, chastity. Thus, the arena in which men’s *virtus* should ideally be put to the test is war; the arena in which women are supposed to test their *pudicitia* is sex.

In general terms, such a conception of the gender landscape of the society of ancient Rome widely penetrated the early modern English social imagination, which saw ancient Rome as a model for art, culture, politics, military technique, and, especially, masculinity. The Roman man was simply the best man there could exist: disciplined, loyal, strong, constant, and, above all, in control of himself. As Clifford J. Ronan famously remarked, “‘Roman’ meant ‘man’ to the superlative degree: stereotypically masculine man the ruler, the killer, the Stoic, the builder, the wielder of words—someone self-secure enough to protect (when so inclined) weak and vulnerable females, children, subject peoples, or artists.”³ Hence, the plays with a Roman setting produced for the early modern playhouses seem to have appealed especially to a male audience that relished the opportunity to watch a compelling and inspiring array of masculine virtues enacted on

1 Cicero, *Tusculanae disputationes* 2.43; see also Varro, *De lingua latina* 5.73. Ironically enough, the grammatical gender of *virtus* in Latin is feminine.

2 Lactantius, *De opificio Dei* 12.57–58.

3 Ronan, “Antike Roman,” 41.

a stage by male players acting renowned male personalities from the Roman past on the backdrop of well-known momentous events in Roman history. By and large, it would be difficult to deny that the manly sphere is far more fully developed than the female one in the early modern English plays set in Rome.

Small wonder, then, that, when it comes to scholarly discussions of the Roman plays of the period, the attention is predominantly focused on male characters, masculine roles in society, and manly systems of values, with the partial exception of William Shakespeare's plays.⁴ I say "partial" because, even though Shakespeare's Roman women have been the subject of numerous thought-provoking critical contributions in the form of journal articles and book chapters, there is no book-length study dealing systematically with Roman female characters across Shakespeare's entire Roman corpus apart from Coppélia Kahn's landmark *Roman Shakespeare: Warriors, Wounds and Women*.⁵ Over twenty years have gone by, but nothing even remotely comparable to Kahn's study has been produced in this period on Roman women in Shakespeare or any of his contemporaries, whereas, for example, the Greek women and the European women of early modern English drama have been recently dealt with in a monograph and a special journal issue respectively.⁶

At a time in which the reception of the Roman past in early modern English literature and culture shines as a particularly thriving area of inquiry, it seems

⁴ Among the studies on Shakespeare's Roman plays produced in the twentieth century, see MacCallum, *Shakespeare's Roman Plays and Their Background*; Spencer, "Shakespeare and the Elizabethan Romans"; Barroll, "Shakespeare and Roman History"; Charney, *Shakespeare's Roman Plays*; Traversi, *Shakespeare: The Roman Plays*; Simmons, *Shakespeare's Pagan Worlds*; Cantor, *Shakespeare's Rome*; Platt, *Rome and Romans according to Shakespeare*; Hunter, "A Roman Thought"; Wilders, *The Lost Garden*; Green, *Plutarch Revisited*; Miola, *Shakespeare's Rome*; Siegel, *Shakespeare's English and Roman History Plays*; Leggatt, *Shakespeare's Political Drama*; Thomas, *Shakespeare's Roman Worlds*; Martindale and Martindale, *Shakespeare and the Uses of Antiquity*; Wells, *The Wide Arch*; Miles, *Shakespeare and the Constant Romans*; Kahn, *Roman Shakespeare*. For twentieth-century studies of the reception of the Roman past in early modern literature and culture beyond Shakespeare, see Gentili, *La Roma antica degli elisabettiani*; Ronan, "Antike Roman."

⁵ On Shakespeare's Roman women, see, with no pretense to exhaustiveness, Maus, "Language and Violence in Shakespeare's *Rape of Lucrece*"; Traub, "Jewels, Statues, and Corpses"; Paster, *The Body Embarrassed*; Marshall, "Portia's Wound, Calphurnia's Dream"; J. O. Newman, "'And Let Mild Women to Him Lose Their Mildness'"; Harris, "Sexuality as a Signifier for Power Relations"; Weber, "'Worse than Philomel'"; Roulon, "Silencing the Feminine Voice in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*"; Griffin, "Cato's Daughter, Brutus's Wife"; Del Sapio Garbero, "Lucrece's *Tabula Anatomica*"; Hopkins, "Men's Busts and Women's Thighs."

⁶ Pollard, *Greek Tragic Women on Shakespearean Stages*; Semple and Vyroubalová, *European Women in Early Modern Drama*.

rather odd that no monograph study or edited collection has emerged focusing on the Roman women of early modern English drama.⁷ Thousands of pages have been written in the past three decades on Roman *male* characters as well as on *non-Roman* women in early modern English drama (e.g., Cleopatra, Boudicca, Dido, Cordelia, Desdemona, etc.); nevertheless, little has emerged regarding what makes Roman women “Roman” and what their role in those plays is beyond their supposed function as supporting characters or even mere backdrops for the male protagonists. In other words, as Lisa Hopkins and I lamented in 2016 in the introduction to the thematic issue of *Textus. English Studies in Italy* on *The Uses of Rome in English Renaissance Drama*, it seems legitimate to argue that “not enough has been done about what might be gathered about the representation of female characters in the specific context of Roman drama, especially given that the narrative of the founding of the Republic was centrally bound up with the story of a woman, Lucrece.”⁸ At the time, Hopkins and I formulated a number of questions that we perceived as especially urgent:

Do female characters in Roman plays feature the same traits that can be found in other genres or do they present any peculiar traits? Does the Roman ideal of *virtus* in any way clash with the popular stereotype of woman as invariably disorderly and possessed with an insatiable sexual appetite? Are Roman female characters somehow “special” in early modern English drama? Do the portrayals of women in Roman drama mirror to any extent the actual condition of English women by projecting English values onto their implicit judgments

⁷ The last twenty years witnessed the publication of Parker, *Plato's Republic and Shakespeare's Rome*; Del Sapio Garbero, ed., *Identity, Otherness and Empire*; Hatchuel and Vienne-Guerrin, eds., *Shakespeare on Screen*; Del Sapio Garbero, Isenberg, and Pennacchia, eds., *Questioning Bodies in Shakespeare's Rome*; Chernaik, *The Myth of Rome*; Pennacchia, *Shakespeare intermediale*; Burrow, *Shakespeare & Classical Antiquity*; Starks-Estes, *Violence, Trauma and Virtus in Shakespeare's Roman Poems and Plays*; Innes, *Shakespeare's Roman Plays*; Holland, ed., *Shakespeare and Rome*; Cantor, *Shakespeare's Roman Trilogy*; Del Sapio Garbero, ed., *Rome in Shakespeare's World*; Guardamagna, *Roman Shakespeare*; Gray, *Shakespeare and the Fall of the Roman Republic*; Bate, *How the Classics Made Shakespeare*. For twenty-first-century studies of the reception of the Roman past in early modern literature and culture beyond Shakespeare, see A. Miller, *Roman Triumphs in Early Modern English Culture*; Hadfield, *Shakespeare and Republicanism*; Hopkins, *The Cultural Uses of the Caesars on the English Renaissance Stage*; Cox Jensen, *Reading the Roman Republic in Early Modern England*; Paleit, *War, Liberty and Caesar*; Cadman, *Sovereigns and Subjects in Early Modern Neo-Senecan Drama*; Cheney and Hardie, *The Oxford History of Classical Reception in English Literature, Volume 2: 1558–1660*; Lovascio, *Un nome, mille volti*; Cadman, Hopkins, and Duxfield, eds., *Rome and Home*; Lovascio and Hopkins, eds., *The Uses of Rome in English Renaissance Drama*.

⁸ Lovascio and Hopkins, “Introduction,” 14.

or do they in fact constitute a privileged venue in which to project desires and aspirations about women through the creation of idealised female characters?⁹

Such questions, however, could be only tangentially answered by the contributions in that venue, because, for several reasons, we could not focus *exclusively* on women. Hence, I decided to embark on a further, more targeted exploration of such issues in order to contribute to filling this critical gap through the present collection, which welcomes the voices of ten young and promising Italian scholars (three of whom had already contributed to the aforementioned thematic issue of *Textus*) with a view to further complicating and problematizing our understanding of the conception of the Roman world and of women in early modern English drama.

That the Roman women of early modern English drama have attracted so little scholarly attention is arguably all the more striking in light of the fact that Gender Studies and Women's Studies are now firmly established critical avenues.¹⁰ The reason behind this gap is possibly to be attributed to some sort of critical misconception that there may be no satisfactory insights to be gained by subjecting Roman women to the same scrutiny that has been reserved for Roman men in early modern English plays. According to Ronan, "As for Roman women, they are sometimes patronizingly termed 'masculine,' but often-er freakish, whorish, or ripe for being violated and victimized. Stage Rome's obvious inability to treat women as people thus points to an instability, a hollowness, in two cultures: the Ancient and the Early Modern."¹¹ Ronan's curious idea that the early modern Roman plays were *obviously* unable "to treat women as people"—this collection sets out to demonstrate—is simply inaccurate.

Not only were Roman female characters frequently portrayed as people with separate identities of their own and not merely as commoditized entities; more

9 Lovascio and Hopkins, "Introduction," 14.

10 On women in early modern English literature and culture, see, among others, Bamber, *Comic Women, Tragic Men*; Jardine, *Still Harping on Daughters*; Woodbridge, *Women and the English Renaissance*; Henderson and McManus, *Half Humankind*; Adelman, *Suffocating Mothers*; Hopkins, *The Female Hero in English Renaissance Tragedy*; Keeble, ed. *The Cultural Identity of Seventeenth-Century Woman*; Charney, *Shakespeare on Love and Lust*; Kemp, *Women in the Age of Shakespeare*; Richards and Thorne, eds., *Rhetoric, Women and Politics in Early Modern England*; Malcolmson and Mihoko, eds., *Debating Gender in Early Modern England*; Bach and Kennedy, eds., *Feminism and Early Modern Texts*; Higginbotham, *Girlhood of Shakespeare's Sisters*; Johnson, *Staging Women and the Soul-Body Dynamic in Early Modern England*; Crawford, *Mediatrix*; Kusunoki, *Gender and Representations of the Female Subject in Early Modern England*; Gillen, *Chaste Value*; Alfar, *Women and Shakespeare's Cuckoldry Plays*.

11 Ronan, "Antike Roman," 41.

importantly, a sharper focus on their often crucial role in the plays in which they appear in fact produces unexpected insights into how the events and personalities of the Roman past were—and were not—susceptible to being molded, shaped, and fashioned by current social, political, and cultural discourses about the condition, role, and prerogatives of women, especially regarding issues connected with the control of their bodies and the expression of their ideas; regarding their potential for political agency and their position in respect of education and learning; regarding masculine anxieties over their supposed sexual voracity as related to the moral as well as the economic worth of virginity before marriage and of chaste monogamy thereafter; regarding the incessant threat of feminization to which men felt they might be dangerously exposed in the presence of women; as well as regarding more specific controversies concerning gender roles such as those sparked by such pamphlets as Joseph Swetnam's *The Arraignment of Women*, and the anonymous *Hic Mulier* and *Haec Vir*.

At first blush, this might potentially make it look like there is nothing particularly remarkable about the depiction of Roman—as opposed to the portrayal of non-Roman—women in early modern English drama. But this is not the case. Even though the representation of Roman female characters inevitably shares several traits with that of their non-Roman counterparts, it is nonetheless possible to single out aspects that would seem to be broadly identifiable as specific of Roman women. In discussing the depictions of Roman personalities on the early modern English stage in general terms, John E. Curran, Jr., has recently argued that “Whether exhibiting demi-godlike virtue or devil-worthy depravity, they could endow a *dramatis personae* with a built-in stateliness and sublimity—and with, also, an undeniable relevance. For, ... given Roman stories’ truth and importance, they were ubiquitously held to supply moral lessons, utility for personal and political life.”¹² As it happens, Roman women tend to be depicted at the extremes of the continuum virtue-depravity, with very few of them lying in between. Sometimes, their very *Romanitas* seems to frame them as examples even in spite of themselves. The Roman ideal of *pudicitia*, for instance, appears to be felt as much more alive by these female characters than by others, insofar as Roman women are usually viewed as either epitomes of chastity or irredeemable whores; in other words, it is as though the ideal of *pudicitia* were closer to home, thus making either their praise greater or their condemnation harsher. In addition, as the chapters in the collection show, the Roman female characters of early modern English drama very often play pivotal roles or serve crucial functions in the plays in which they appear. Hence, it is reductive, limiting, even mis-

¹² Curran, “Roman Tragedy,” 101.

leading to look at these plays as exclusively male-centered. Besides, these female characters seem to possess a self-consciousness about their identities, as well as about their places in history and in the socio-political processes that define and are in turn defined by their actions, which, too, would seem to set them apart from non-Roman female characters. This is again in line with what Curran has recently acknowledged as typical of Roman characters in early modern English drama at large: “Romans are imagined as: alive to their own history and their identity as Romans; attuned to their own political traditions and processes; and at least ostensibly dedicated to the directives of Stoicism.”¹³

That historical and socio-political processes are so important in this context is hardly surprising, in that the Roman plays tend to be primarily—albeit by no means solely—focused on political issues. To be sure, the Roman women brought on stage in England in the early modern period are mostly women who to some extent contributed to shaping Roman history by dint of their political influence (e.g., Agrippina and Messalina) or who satisfied the Roman historians’ need to provide edifying female portraits (e.g., Lucrece and Octavia). In light of the predominant political dimension of the plays in which they are featured, a critical focus particularly—though not exclusively—directed to the exploration of their agency and effectiveness in the political arena is a particularly apt perspective to look at these Roman female characters and make sense of their role, importance, and defining qualities. Such an approach proves to be extraordinarily productive of fresh insights into the plays examined in this volume, especially in the case of the Roman tragedies set in the imperial era, in which the characterization of the female characters often responds—more or less overtly—to the depictions of tyrannical Roman emperors as feminized by lust (first extensively discussed by Rebecca W. Bushnell), in particular concerning whether women gain or are denied power in contradistinction to men.¹⁴

As the chapters that make up this volume seek to demonstrate, the Roman women of early modern English drama are not invariably marginal or peripheral; in fact, the playwrights frequently alter the historical accounts in order to expand female roles or foreground them. Despite seldom performing lengthy soliloquies, Roman women are at times even able to usurp tragic grandeur from men or display higher political alertness than their male counterparts and thus exert significant influence on the political world, albeit in less direct ways and in more fluid contexts than those traditionally appertaining to men. Roman women can be highly educated and rhetorically skillful, and their depic-

¹³ Curran, “Roman Tragedy,” 102.

¹⁴ Bushnell, *Tragedies of Tyrants*.

tion needs not be limited to the enactment of the values of *pudicitia* through the paradigm of the silent, chaste, and obedient wife; nor are Roman women necessarily viewed as leaky vessels, unable to keep secrets and contain bodily fluids, or talking too much as a correlative of their insatiable sexual appetite.

Put differently, the plays under scrutiny in this collection do not necessarily offer women who abide by the rules of patriarchal society as *exempla imitanda*, nor do they invariably expose those who to varying degrees defy the strictures of patriarchal society as *exempla execranda*. Much more interestingly, they treat female characters with a high degree of complexity that ends up challenging to some extent the standard early modern categorization of women as obedient daughters and wives, devoted widows, caring mothers, promiscuous mistresses, or lustful prostitutes. And whereas the respective gender spheres ultimately stay broadly unchanged (the public is masculine; the domestic is feminine), they do not remain untouched either; on the contrary, by coming into contact, they affect each other in unexpected ways, thus opening up imaginative spaces and venues of discussions concerning some of the most crucial gender-related issues of the early modern era. In other words, the portrayal of Roman women in early modern English drama seems to provide a particularly effective exemplification of Kathryn Schwarz's claim that although "masculine dominion forges a totalizing structure, which women disrupt only through local, ephemeral incursions ... yet, ... feminine will execute social imperatives, and plays a legitimate part in the operations of power."¹⁵

The fact that all the plays tackled in this collection were written by men (as well as performed onstage by boys and men) ought not to be seen as potentially making the conclusions drawn about the representation of Roman female characters in early modern English drama irrelevant. As Valerie Traub believes, "male-authored discourses were an intrinsic, indeed, constitutive part of women's lived experience. They provided the images and idioms that women encountered, discussed among themselves, willfully appropriated, silently disavowed, and publicly contested."¹⁶ As a matter of fact, what we find in these texts is, as Schwarz again suggests, "the fact that male authors do not represent agency as the sole province of men. The patriarchal enterprise is far less than the sum of its parts, and stories about feminine volition divulge a great deal about the strains and the breaks."¹⁷

¹⁵ Schwarz, *What You Will*, 14.

¹⁶ Traub, *The Renaissance of Lesbianism*, 21. See also Dolan, *Dangerous Familiars*, 3.

¹⁷ Schwarz, *What You Will*, 16.

With a sharp focus crucial for the collection to display a monograph-like level of coherence and consistency, thus unifying its ten chapters—arranged in chronological order (i.e., from Shakespeare to Richards)—by as many different scholars, each bringing a slightly different background to the table, *Roman Women in Shakespeare and His Contemporaries* highlights the crucial role of Roman female characters in the plays of Shakespeare and his contemporaries by exploring with an unprecedented thoroughness and variety of perspectives the diverse issues connected to female identities in the early modern English plays set in ancient Rome, with particular attention to the question of their agency in the man-dominated political sphere as a common thread among the works of very different playwrights. In this respect, a potentially wider theoretical variety (mainly intended as the possibility of going farther beyond the question of female agency) gave way not only to extensiveness of coverage, but—much more importantly—to the monograph-like tightness of focus with which we resolved to endow this collection.

Although none of the chapters in the collection adopt a presentist perspective, we are confident that a close and comparative examination of the Roman women of early modern English drama proves to be particularly timely now that the spread of the #MeToo movement, the emergence of an increasing number of women candidates for political office, and a growing hostility throughout the world to the LGBT+ community have resulted in the issue of gender, widely conceived, being urgently debated and under revision in quite fluid and more multiple ways than ever before. More or less decisively, all of the plays here examined are part of a cultural heritage that has informed and contributed until today to gender relations and representations, as well as to conceptions of female power. In this sense, the contributors' focus on female agency, masculinity, and femininity, which are investigated with a pronounced political and rhetorical bent, is not merely an organizing principle, insofar as all the contributors display keen awareness of the fact that each of the text discussed in the volume presents feminine subjects who to varying degrees engage conventions of gender, thus to some extent altering the ways in which those conventions operate and signify.

In spite of its being similarly concerned with agency, *Roman Women in Shakespeare and His Contemporaries* does not share the same feminist approach as Kahn's *Roman Shakespeare*, since this volume looks at the texts from a more pronounced historicist perspective. That being said, however, it is necessary to stress that all the chapters in this collection do take into account the important developments that have been made possible in Early Modern Studies by the previous interventions of feminist scholarship, which, as Schwarz remarks, "have resisted totalizing accounts of subordination and containment. Rather than take feminine subjectivity as fully conscripted to patriarchal ends, such scholar-

ship reveals that women can transform, commandeer, or manipulate the terms of convention, and expands our understanding of what the enactment of social roles might mean.”¹⁸ Albeit not in a feminist key, this volume does explore these crucial issues with a view to yielding new insights into the plays under scrutiny, as well as into early modern discourses on gender more broadly conceived.

The volume also crucially puts Shakespeare’s Roman world in dialogue with a number of Roman plays by playwrights as diverse as Matthew Gwinne, Ben Jonson, John Fletcher, Philip Massinger, Thomas May, and Nathanael Richards, some of whom are seldom tackled by scholars. Thus, the chapters in this collection also seek to challenge conventional wisdom about the plays under scrutiny by specifically focusing on their female rather than male characters, while at the same time enriching our understanding of Shakespeare’s Roman women and sharpening our awareness of the fact that the Roman world on the early modern stage *cannot* be straightforwardly and simplistically equated with Shakespeare’s, and that pitting the depictions of female characters by this range of playwrights against each other is likely to produce insights into the range of possibilities available to them and into the reasons behind their specific dramatic choices.

As a matter of fact, there is more to Roman femininity in early modern English drama than Volumnia and Virgilia, Portia and Calpurnia, Lavinia and Octavia. What about, say, Fulvia and Sempronia, Lucina and Eudoxa, Agrippina and Poppaea? In this sense, *Roman Women in Shakespeare and His Contemporaries* also aims to contribute to correcting the general hegemony of Shakespeare in scholarly discussions of early modern drama by viewing him as one among several playwrights who were deeply fascinated by ancient Roman culture and were keenly aware of the implications of the portrayal of women in such a setting. Although the Shakespearean project is without a doubt uniquely interesting for its subtlety, we believe that a more consistent and assiduous exploration of the canons of other playwrights of the period can reveal both what is common to and

18 Schwarz, *What You Will*, 10. Also see, e.g., Adelman, *Suffocating Mothers*; Amussen, *An Ordered Society*; Belsey, *Shakespeare and the Loss of Eden* and *The Subject of Tragedy*; Berry, *Of Chastity and Power*; Dolan, *Dangerous Familiars* and *Marriage and Violence*; Ezell, *The Patriarch’s Wife*; Ferguson, *Dido’s Daughters*; Gowing, *Domestic Dangers*; Howard and Rackin, *Engendering a Nation*; Hutson, *The Usurer’s Daughter*; Jardine, *Still Harping on Daughters*; Jordan, *Renaissance Feminism*; Kahn, *Man’s Estate*; Kelly and Leslie, eds., *Menacing Virgins*; Korda, *Shakespeare’s Domestic Economies*; N. Miller and Yavneh, eds., *Maternal Measures*; Neely, *Broken Nuptials*; K. Newman, *Fashioning Femininity*; Paster, *The Body Embarrassed* and *Humoring the Body*; Rose, *The Expense of Spirit*; Schwarz, *Tough Love*; Shannon, *Sovereign Amity*; Traub, *The Renaissance of Lesbianism*; Wall, *Staging Domesticity*; Willis, *Malevolent Nurture*. This list is inevitably suggestive rather than exhaustive.

what is distinctive in the visions of the individual playwrights, while simultaneously leading to a more accurate and engaging assessment of the extent to which Shakespeare is actually representative of the vibrant and variegated ways of appropriating the classics on the early modern stage and page.

Alice Equestri opens the collection by bringing to the fore the realization that Lavinia is represented throughout *Titus Andronicus* via recurring images of precious commodities, jewelry, and luxury food. This metaphorical system, she suggests, is part of a rhetoric of craftsmanship that encompasses the play more at large. In her chapter, she analyzes the meaning of the images referred to Lavinia, thus highlighting the essential quality of their referents as products to be enjoyed through the senses. In Equestri's view, the symbolical transformation of a woman into valuable static objects at once foregrounds her nature as a medium of exchange and expresses masculine anxiety for female sexual empowerment. Such constructions of Lavinia's femininity are also the starting point for an investigation of her link with Tamora, whose characterization partly shares similar tropes.

In contrast to more traditional critical readings of Volumnia in Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* focusing upon the relationship between her and her son in ways that stress their interdependence and/or the construction of the eponymous hero's masculinity in relation to his mother, Michela Compagnoni's chapter sheds light on Volumnia's maternity, here viewed as the confluence of most of the meanings attached to motherhood both in ancient Rome and early modern England, which the Renaissance stage aptly intercepts. Her composite construct, she suggests, becomes paradigmatic as the point of contact between two antithetical notions of maternity that can blend in Volumnia as nowhere else in the Shakespearian canon. Compagnoni ultimately argues that only in Shakespeare's Rome can such monstrous motherhood be foregrounded and triumph without being demonized and consequently annihilated.

Maria Elisa Montironi focuses on the complex and challenging early modern views on silence, which she regards as central to Shakespeare's characterization of female figures. The use of silence in his depiction of female Roman *dramatis personae*, Montironi contends, is especially pregnant on a symbolic level, because Shakespeare's Roman plays are essentially political tragedies abounding in topical references. In Montironi's view, the dramatization of *res populi Romani* is both a means of negotiating and an instrument used to discuss issues pertaining to English society. Such concerns include ways of coping and "doing things" with silence, as she seeks to demonstrate through her exploration of five Shakespearian Roman women and their relation to non-speech: Lavinia in *Titus Andronicus*, Portia and Calpurnia in *Julius Caesar*, and Volumnia and Virgilia in *Coriolanus*.

In his chapter, Cristiano Ragni tackles Gwinne's tragedy *Nero*, one of the most ambitious neo-Latin plays of early modern England, which has been unduly neglected by scholars despite representing one of the few contributions given by academic drama to the successful genre of the history play. By analyzing some of the female characters in *Nero*, namely Messalina, Agrippina, and Pop-paea, Ragni highlights Gwinne's personal refashioning of the historical accounts of the lives of these Roman women as provided by Tacitus, Suetonius, Dio Cassius, and Seneca. Ragni especially underscores Gwinne's attempt to provide an unprecedented insight into these women's psychology, viewed as a sign of the influence exerted by the multifaceted female characters created in London by the playwrights of the commercial stage, thereby somehow reassessing the image of some of these Roman matrons.

Michele De Benedictis focuses on Julia Maior, the only legitimate daughter of the Roman Emperor Augustus, and her role in Jonson's comical satire *Poetaster*. Following the Renaissance scholarly tradition, this play set in ancient Rome historically misidentifies Julia with Corinna, the literary pseudonym adopted for Ovid's love mistress in his wanton *Amores*, and attributes to her a crucial role in the scandal determining the poet's banishment from imperial court. According to De Benedictis, Jonson represents her illicit relationship with Ovid's character and its elegiac overtones as a defiant insubordination to the *decorum* imposed to Roman young noblewomen, in contrast with Augustus's severe reform of laws concerning patriarchal authority on sexual license and adultery. The playwright's satirical (and ethical) attitude, De Benedictis remarks, is further complicated by his allusions to the late Elizabethan fashion for Ovidian narrative poems and by Julia's self-conscious assertiveness derived from her fertilizing interaction with Ovid, beyond the mannerisms of sacrilegious revelry or dissolute eroticism.

The presence of misogyny or lack thereof and, more broadly speaking, the ways in which gender and sexual identities are configured in Jonson's Roman tragedies *Sejanus His Fall* and *Catiline His Conspiracy* are the main concerns of Fabio Ciambella's chapter. Jonson's Roman women, he argues, demonstrate a peculiar talent for levelling the playing field with men of power, even linguistically, thus offering a unique perspective on the configuration of gender-related issues. This is true, in Ciambella's opinion, even when comparing the women in *Sejanus* and *Catiline* with more "canonical" (i.e., more traditionally submissive) Roman females of the early modern stage. For these reasons, he compares and contrasts Jonson's Roman women with each other, especially as regards their speeches and dialogues, with a view to understanding whether and to what extent their role can be considered subversive.

Angelica Vedelago draws attention to the fact that May's tragedy *Julia Agripina* and its closest near-contemporary model, Jonson's *Catiline*, both feature strong-willed female characters with high political ambitions. Her chapter discusses how Jonson's and May's Roman women achieve and exert their political power as well as considering possible topical resonances with influential women active in the contemporary political arena of early modern England. Set in the context of the transnational and age-old *querelle des femmes*, the two plays, Vedelago points out, can be seen as reflexes of contemporary debates on women's access to education and politics. A close comparative reading finally reveals how Jonson and May probably read their classical sources through their direct experience of contemporary women's ability to devise alternative, non-standard means of exerting their political agency.

In a sweeping survey of the four Roman plays in the Fletcher canon—*Bonduca*, *Valentinian*, *The False One*, and *The Prophetess*—I focus on the contrast between Roman and non-Roman female characters. The non-Roman women of the canon, I argue, display superior dynamism, assertiveness, and complexity as compared to the Roman women, who remain dependent on patriarchal values and male gazes, their roles being limited to those of wives, widows, or prostitutes. More than examples of chastity, virtue, or corruption, the non-Roman women wield actual power and accomplish actions that have significant bearings upon reality. Such an evident contrast, I suggest, seems to foster the impression that Fletcher and his collaborators found the women of ancient Rome hardly adequate for the development of their ideal “masculine” female characters, thereby making the plays radiate a sense of skepticism and disenchantment as for the transtemporal viability of the female values and paradigms that the classical world had bequeathed to the early modern era.

A reassessment of the role of women in Massinger's *The Roman Actor* is at the heart of Cristina Paravano's contribution. Diverging from the writings of Suetonius and other Roman authors who dealt with the life of the Emperor Domitian, so she contends, Massinger seems to have amplified the importance of all the female characters in the play. Far from being marginal or peripheral, they pivotally influence the forces at work, since all of them, to varying degrees, are turned into vehicles of Caesar's ruin. According to Paravano, Massinger's powerful insight into the agency and mindset of women originates a nuanced portrayal, with more shadows than lights, apparently carrying fewer moral values than those expected from Roman women in early modern England.

Emanuel Stelzer closes the collection by exploring how early modern England had inherited a distorted representation of the Julio-Claudian *veneficae* (female poisoners) from Tacitus, Suetonius, and Juvenal, and then tapped into these models of criminal femininity to interpret the age. As Stelzer remarks,

whenever a woman was accused of poisoning, the figures of Livia, Agrippina, and Locusta were recalled: an example is the array of classical figures conjured up by contemporary commentators on the Overbury affair. Interestingly, the portrayal of these Roman women often featured Catholic overtones. A group of tragedies with a Roman setting (especially Gwinne's *Nero*, May's *Julia Agrippina*, and Richards's *Messalina*) dramatize the agency of female poisoners and reflect on their social subversiveness. Stelzer's chapter explores the question of gender in relation to this *corpus* of plays, an issue that the scholarship on the materiality and symbolism of poison has usually neglected.

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Alice Equestri

“Rome’s Rich Ornament”: Lavinia, Commoditization, and the Senses in William Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus*

Lavinia, one of the only two female characters in *Titus Andronicus*, is possibly the heroine that the audience pities the most in the whole Shakespearean canon. In what is usually regarded as the goriest Shakespearean play, Lavinia embodies, as has been observed, the focus and the bulk of *Titus*’s excess violence in her experiencing rape, torture, dismemberment, and finally murder.¹ Moreover, in the symbolic realm of drama, the violated body of a Roman woman whose very name alludes to the founding myth of Rome—and therefore at its very urban and cultural identity—acquires political significance: as Robin L. Bott contends, Lavinia’s body is the body of Rome, attacked by the Goths.² Yet, if on the one hand the image of the woman transcends its own bodily boundaries to rise both as the location of tragedy and as the symbol of a people and its values, on the other it also appears to regress into its basic meaning by participating in a complex, consistent, and specific framework of objectification. In this chapter, I will consider the ways other characters describe Lavinia, paying particular attention to the tropes they choose to convey to the audience the established image of her as an innocent, virginal, and abused woman. Specifically, I will show how Lavinia tends to be portrayed throughout the play via recurring images of precious commodities: the employment of such tropes, in the light of both Roman and English politics of womanhood, reveals a tension between the perceived high worth of Lavinia as an almost idealized subject and the diminished value of her personhood staged by the way the other characters choose to act upon her. This acquires special significance, insofar as very often metaphoric commodities are not just things with commercial value, but they additionally call for an explicit fruition through the senses. This analysis will therefore partly benefit from a critical angle that has turned out to be very productive in cultural studies in the last few decades and, more recently, in early modern studies: a “sensory model” which, as David Howes and others have noted, has started to recognize that sensorial perceptions are a social construct. Indeed, the meanings attributed to the sensorium or the ideas connected with the senses

1 Weber, “Worse than Philomel,” 698–99.

2 Bott, “O, Keep Me from Their Worse than Killing Lust,” 201.