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# Dress and Womanhood of Ancient Rome

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**Dress and Womanhood of Ancient Rome**

**By**

**Eliza Burbano**

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## ABSTRACT

BURBANO, ELIZA Dress and Womanhood of Ancient Rome

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Fashion transcends its own role of imagery, as it becomes the medium through which individuals express their place in society. Fashion history would not consider the ancient world as part of the history of the discipline. Nevertheless, the function of dress in ancient cultures like that of Rome has definitely helped shape social hierarchies that are still present today. Clothing structured Roman society deeply, just as class, race, and sexuality did. Scholar Kelly Olson (2002) defines the function of clothing as part of a sign system. This study argues that dress in ancient Rome goes beyond this idea, in that it is not only a tool that provides certain signs, but it also communicates deep messages of social inequalities. This thesis focuses on exploring the experience that women had in classical antiquity with respect to the different perception other social groups had about their dress. To do this, the thesis carefully dissects ancient pieces of clothing by texture, fabric, color, and overall design to analyze the impact each element and component had on ancient Roman culture.

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## **I. Introduction**

Fashion transcends its own role of imagery, as it becomes the medium through which individuals express their place in society. Fashion history would not consider the ancient world as part of the history of the discipline, but the structuralist function of dress in ancient cultures like that of Rome has definitely helped shape social hierarchies that are still present today. In “Matrona and Whore” by Kelly Olson, she defines the clothing as part of a system that was employed as a set of signs. I argue that dress in Ancient Rome goes beyond that in that it is not only a tool that provides certain signs, but it also communicates deep messages of societal dynamics amongst genders and social class. I am interested in exploring the experience that women have with the different perceptions of their dress by other social groups, in order to shed some light on how they perceived themselves.

In order to contextualize the role of fashion in history and specifically within the Roman period, it is crucial to understand that fashion history and its definitive qualities pertain to a European tradition that starts after the crusades, which places its study post fourteenth century. In other words the formal study of fashion starts alongside the consolidation of Europe itself. European markets unlike Roman markets included finished garments. Market here refers to the actual loci where products were sold. With that being said, Europe developed a market for art and design and fashion developed through the lens of capitalism. The Romans, on the other hand, developed their sense of femininity through the development of strict roles women were expected to fulfill in order to be considered women in the first place. Women in Roman society were expected to know how to make garments for themselves, their husbands, and the family in general.

This elevated a woman's value through the lens of Roman moralism while it was not a marketed skill.

Nevertheless, women's accessibility to different job markets in the history of ancient Rome was close to non-existent. To start with there is very little evidence of the lives of women from this time period, which may be a setback to any study of a woman's place in society. With that being said there are a number of accounts that outline a woman's role in society. According to Mary T. Boatwright in her book *The Romans, from Village to Empire*, women (even those with citizen status) were not recruited to be part of the army nor the navy. In addition, all women were banned from election processes during the republican era and consequently were not eligible to be councilor or senator (Boatwright 209). At the same time women could not evade their principal social responsibility to bear children and to take care of the house. In fact motherhood was the only reputable role that women maintained. Some were driven to become prostitutes, craftworkers, hairdressers, chorus girls, and barmaids. In the eyes of society, all professions outside the bounds of domesticity were seen with a low regard and even equated with prostitution (Boatwright 209).

Furthermore, the intent of the study at hand is one that considers the clothing of Roman women as part of their formal social expression and therefore worth studying. Clothing, to some extent was the only medium of self expression for Roman women because of the social laminates just discussed above (Boatwright 209). At the same time, Roman fashion influenced different modern social and stylistic tendencies. The evidence of it is still entrenched in society today. The draping of the toga itself, for example, transitioned from being a statement piece of power and social status to being a mark of

femininity today. To some extent the fact that it transitioned from a neutral garment in terms of its structure to a gendered garment made it lose the value of political power it represented in its ancient conception. This refers to the fact that toga-like garments evolved into dresses and gowns that became exclusive to a woman's wardrobe. Dresses alone are agents of elements that define femininity over time after ancient cultures blended into feudal cultures. For Roman culture it became an element that helps describe intricate dynamics of gender and social hierarchies.

One can argue that Rome's success in terms of its expansion was its ability to organize its social institutions very rigidly, to the point that they were hardly porous (Boatwright 86). Clothing was the first layer that allowed for steep hierarchies to organize labor, wealth and eventually, expansion. It was also a tool that in parallel justifies the marginalization and impoverishment of large sectors of society. Since the focus of this thesis is on the female expression of identity through clothing, it is important to unpack the different terms that help construct the idea of gender and femininity in the first place. In order to do so, one has to visualize women within the social expectations that were traditionally pressed on them.

Taking all into consideration, the following thesis will explore the role that men have in ancient societies. They constructed and segregated women, by oppressing them with dress as a vehicle to do it at a visual level. The first chapter will describe the role of the male gaze as the main actor in society to segregate societal groups. In particular the chapter will use patriarchal hierarchical structures of Rome to analyze the stronghold grip men had over women's life through the visual lens of dress. The second chapter will then explain the main divide between women of high class and high-class courtesans as

exemplars of patriarchal stratification. The analysis will be carried out using dress as the medium through which the stratification and gender oppression occurred in ancient Rome. The third chapter will delve into the analysis of women's dress and its role in conforming to patriarchal and social expectations. The fourth chapter will deal with the power that dress had in the Roman world to subordinate Roman, even when the styles were kept static and hardly changed throughout the civilization's history. Finally the thesis will end with concluding remarks on the role of dress in Ancient Rome in social stratification through gender discrimination.



## II. Male Manus

### *The Male Gaze: Its Role in Structuring Women in Society*

According to Mieke Bal “the gaze” was first studied under the lens of art history, and later on became a tool to analyze literature and history itself. Furthermore she describes the development of the term as it became a device to critique certain social practices (Frederick 2002). Taking into consideration the function of “the gaze” Bal brings forth the idea that “the gaze” in ancient Roman culture should be regarded within its historical context. In other words, it is crucial to separate the notion of a fallen empire by contextualizing cultural aspects before its decline. The thesis at hand strives to stay within ancient Roman history when analyzing effects of female clothing with regards to social perception. At the same time, any comparisons with other periods made in this study are present, but they all consider Roman culture a starting point and its influence in more modern social constructs (Frederick 2002).

The male gaze was first studied through the lens of nude art in the ancient world. John R. Clarke makes the assertion that there is extensive memorabilia of the way male and female bodies were depicted in art. In the city of Pompeii particularly still contains a number of nude depictions within the walls of public spaces such as the Roman baths. Clarke first analyzes the idealization of the Roman body, both female and male, and asserts that the nude functioned as a type of pornographic display to entice citizens into getting nude to take a bath comfortably. Even though his analysis does not consider the hierarchy of gender roles within the society of ancient Rome, his work does leave behind important questions relevant to this thesis. The most important being: who is the main spectator of this art, and whose perception is being depicted though it (Frederick 2002)?

Moreover, Carlin Barton provides an analysis of how the gaze played a role in defining the perceptions of honor and *pudor* (*modesty*) in Roman society. In her view there is a clear dynamic where women were not allowed in the public sphere, which allowed for men to maintain domination over women, thus all public spaces as well. This allowed for women who stayed in the household to maintain honor (in the eyes of societal sanctions), but only from the point of view of the male gaze who is in charge of making most decisions outside the household. Carlin Barton 's study does not consider the development of Roman society, which allowed women to partly break out of the domestic sphere after the period of the Roman Republic. One of the scholars who reviews her work points out that as Roman society progressed women (*matronae*) started to enter the public sphere sometimes which allowed them to gain empowerment because they were outside of a traditional space of femininity (Frederick 2002). Nevertheless, said empowerment was tarnished because matrons encountered that their public appearance did not inhibit their husbands from ascribing social roles on them. As a result, men maintained a steep social hierarchy that benefited a patriarchal status quo.

The gaze then becomes both a lens to analyze the culture of Rome and also a cultural point of view through which all social dynamics develop. Women's dress within that context is the main mechanism the gaze employs to justify the way in which the hierarchy discriminates and objectifies women in Ancient Rome. The objectification lends itself to be "natural" because the primary viewer (the man) is in control of the perception of women. Moreover, men in such a society also become the lawmakers and judges of a woman's wardrobe and ultimately a woman's function in society.

*Gendered Dynamics Between Men and Women in Ancient Rome*

Men were agents of authority in ancient Rome and this included their authority over women (Pomeroy 150). In Latin the word for gender dynamics such as this one was denominated *manus*. *Manus* was the medium through which a woman's subversion was justified. She was under male control all her life. Most reputable women in ancient Rome were considered property. First they belonged to the wealth of the family and were submitted to the desires and interests of her father first, and then they became property of a husband chosen by the father (Pomeroy 155). Men also controlled women's *manus* by preventing the erotization of *matronae* through dress, which is why the exposure of a woman's body was always the main guideline to follow in Roman society.

There was legislation that allowed for the perpetuation of fatal violence against women who did not follow moralist guidelines. In that sense, the voice of a woman, even within the intimacy of marriage, was a public good to be assessed and controlled by men in control. Therefore there was a law where women were sentenced to death if they committed adulterous acts with men of lower socioeconomic standing such as slaves (McGinn 327). The law itself was written in order to prevent women from becoming "too" liberal regarding their sexuality. Thus, the state not only controlled the attire of women, but it was also a repressor of women's pleasure and sexuality. Men on the other hand were to some extent encouraged to seek for and therefore create an institution that provided pleasure for them.

The *manus* of men extended further within marriage and regarding prostitutes when laws like Ulpian's passed. The law stated that sex should be regarded as a form of reproduction only. That alone allowed for the stratification of women and it also serves as

the primary justification to create all social systems based on the assumption that men are to control women and are therefore sustain more power. Ulpian's law also repressed women exclusively because men were encouraged to maintain extramarital sexual relations (McGinn 130). In addition, men were legally allowed to have relations with unmarried women and widows. Conversely, *matronae* were sentenced to death if they were ever found committing adulterous behavior (McGinn 127-130).

A separation of gender roles creates a parallel to the role that clothes played in ancient Roman acculturation. On the one hand, women are perceived as entities that provide reproduction and pleasure, but not as active citizens. For example, women and men wore clothing very similar in style but the significance of a toga carried loaded political significance. The toga was only worn by men and was the main way in which men expressed high political status. *Toga candida*, for example was a special garment used by candidates to a political office, and it was usually white. The *toga picta* was a garment used by triumphant officials after conquering territory elsewhere (McManus 2003). More importantly clothes, like citizenship, played a crucial role in justifying the perverse hierarchies of ancient civilizations. This is evident in the lack of professional garments for women. Moreover today we are able to single out certain tropes of ancient Rome that have maintained women as powerless. This thesis will discuss the social implications of ancient fashion on today's gendered social constructs.

Prostitutes of ancient Rome became the antithesis to the married women, but were still within the realm of womanhood, which made them vulnerable to male control as well. Rape, for example, was only prosecuted when the husband of a *matrona* pressed charges (McGinn 326). This layer of lawful protection of course excluded prostitutes.

Even when prostitutes were expected to be exposed due to their sheer clothing any type of sexual freedom they may have been enjoying was stripped by the fact that they were always inferior in the eyes of other women and of all men too. Nevertheless, it is important to contextualize the period in which I am analyzing clothes. As mentioned before, the code of ethics the Romans followed was also oppressive and it promoted gendered notions. This code was known as the *mos maiorum*. At its core the *mos maiorum* aimed to outline ancestral traditions and these were praised as a social code of law of replicate (Hölkeskamp 7).

The codification of morals in the ancient world also collaborated with the role that clothes played in segregating women. The belief that purity was correlated to chastity in the ancient world attempted to prevent women from becoming “too liberal” and therefore free from male control. Again, chastity was expressed through appropriate attire, especially for women. In the end, the exposure of a woman’s body and sexuality in the eyes of Romans was frowned upon. In that same vain, the exposure of women’s bodies is still a contentious topic today. Today, women are reclaiming their bodies and sexuality, which has been depriving patriarchal societies from assimilating gender equality.

Furthermore, womanhood in the ancient world was developed within the family structure and it was under that structure that men controlled a woman’s autonomy. At the same time motherhood was not only a woman’s main role, but it was also the agent that expressed her social standing compared to other women. Women who were not married and prostitutes were less likely to enjoy certain freedoms. For example, *matronae*, at some point in Roman history, were granted some type of inheritance if the husband dies,

but only if she was a mother (Pomeroy 163). This allowed for fortunes to stay in the family, but again these were measures that did not benefit the women, but the legacy of the father. Family dynamics are crucial to understand in order to emphasize the immeasurable level of *manus* that women were under in ancient Rome. The political machine and its hierarchies were reproduced in family dynamics in order to ensure principles of order and loyalty. This brings us back to the concept of how women and their clothing are also agents that reflect order and justify patriarchal *manus* to become the norm.

Moreover ancient Roman culture provides us with layered complexities of the division of roles amongst women of different classes. Some prostitutes in the ancient world were regarded as high-class courtesans. These women were usually educated in literature, language, instruments, and politics. These women were usually brought to symposiums, which were social parties where men drank and mingled in order to share intellectual and social conversations. These events did not include *matronae*, but men did solicit prostitutes (Pomeroy 157). When powerful men hosted the event the women they contracted were expected to be literate in order to entertain them beyond sexual exploits. This alone gave women of low stratification the edge of education over other women, but again the purpose behind the education of these women was to entertain men in whatever subject they were interested in. The dynamic between high-class courtesans and powerful men is a parallel to the “freedom” that women receive from their revealing clothes. Both these behaviors are out of character in terms of social constructs and the expectations associated with femininity.

*Contextualizing the Effects of the Male Gaze: Today's Standards of Fashion*

Unfortunately history carried the traditions that kept women illiterate and oppressed by the opposite gender, especially those women who were impoverished. Now, with the democratization of education women are still at a disadvantage because of patriarchal traditions, but now enjoy a more equal experience. What's more important, women are not entirely exploited in order to be noticed within a male social group to the same extent they were in ancient Roman culture. To some extent, dress still keeps women under a modern *manus* because of the way fashion has developed. Women in the social scene are expected to dress in order to exude sex appeal. This usually requires females to use dresses and high heels. Dress in this case is the agent that invites the objectification of women. Dresses are directly inherited by Greek and Roman cultures, nevertheless it is a gown that was historically feminized. The dress itself has been contested by designers like Coco Chanel when she wore the first pair of pants to a social event in Paris (1940's), but at the same time it is still a staple of female dress and directly correlated to the hyper-feminization of girls still today. Moreover, heels impair women's balance and agility and due to that are bound to be uncomfortable, while men are never put in that position. The workplace also discriminated women with dress codes that often grant women the unsolicited responsibility to avoid the sexualization of her body by her male coworkers. In both scenarios women are still bound to dress for men, like they did in the ancient world.

### III. Marriage vs. Prostitution

#### *Marriage in ancient Rome*

Marriage in Roman culture was perceived as a contract intimately linked to the value of inheritance and as the means through which men bequeathed the general, and much valued, desire of eternity. The offspring were the carriers of the legacy of previous men and therefore the only way to keep the memory of their ancestors alive. Therefore, the philosophical and contractual perception of marriage expected extramarital relationships (Pomeroy 157). It was in this setting where men sought further pleasurable experiences that were not linked to the preoccupation of their inheritance and the quality of their legacy. The logic followed that women's role was to bear children only, and pleasure was a byproduct of the experience instead of a vehicle for female empowerment.

Dress played a role in differentiating women between the institutions that provided pleasure and those that provided legacy. Purity itself was a specific trait within the spectrum of desired female morale and identity that was intimately linked to her social desirability (Olson 399). With that being said women were systematically marked through static clothing that carried a meaning in order to represent the values that Roman leaders found crucial to the success of Rome itself. Within that context, the purity of a woman was reflected in *her* clothing when she followed the social cues of dress. Social standing and the expression of it in Rome defined its institutions because physical desirability (prostitutes) belonged to the service sector of roman society and social desirability belonged to the reproductive (married women) sector of roman society.



*Married Women v. Whore in Ancient Rome*

To some extent the institutions of prostitution and marriage were separate because of the roles assigned to women in the ancient world. It can be argued that this set up was inherited by most subsequent centuries and cultures. The social model set by ancient cultures such as Roman culture purposely separated institutions of marriage and prostitution (as one that provides pleasure) to keep men in power whilst normalizing the oppression of women. It is only at present that women's liberation movements are challenging the power dynamics that oppressed women for all of human recorded history. Working and confident women who set their own fashion trends do not subscribe to simple traditional roles, which is why the institutions that provide pleasure and reproduction are now slowly breaching a historical gap as well. With that the definitions of marriage, monogamy, and relationships are redefined constantly now. What is interesting is that the current movements of female empowerment are rooted in free expression and dress can be used as a primary element that breaches inequalities amongst gender, class, and race.

Conversely, in Ancient Rome the men built social constructs that would place them in the position that objectified the women and placed themselves as agents of order within political, social, and spiritual realms. The man therefore expressed his *virtus* (manliness) and *pietas* (devotion), highly regarded values in ancient Rome, through his dress (Boatwright 99). These values themselves served to structure society through the means of stratification and differentiation which is why a simplified division amongst genders was clear and kept consistent order. The *virtus* of a man on the one hand was

expressed through a man's position in society and this was usually expressed with the use of a purple stripe.

*Virtus* in the Roman context encompassed both military dexterity and a high political rank that would allow for the politician to have military influence. *Pietas* on the other hand encompassed the devotion to Rome itself whilst it also encompassed religious expressions. These core values maintained the men driven to achieve a common goal of expansion as mentioned earlier and they were all best expressed through dress. In the imperial period of Rome in particular emperors would disperse their image throughout the empire in the form of statues or coins. The paraphernalia as a form of propaganda was appropriately dressed in order to express the power of the man on display. The details of male dress are essential to the thesis at hand because they all contextualize the ways in which men constructed social ideals and it explains how they constructed that of women in turn.

Married women known as *matronae* were judged vehemently based on their moral value. Their value was also very much associated to the modern term known as chastity. The expectations were higher under different consuls during the republican era and emperors during the imperial era. Olson discusses how Tertulian (Roman historian) claims that some high-class *matronae* denominated as mistresses were exiled (Olson 400). She explains that sexual escapades were especially judged under emperors like Augustus because he vehemently promoted the conservation of traditional values. These values included the conservation of societal order under which women were expected to maintain sexual intercourse for the purposes related to reproduction. This expectation along with expectations related to dress coerced women into becoming objects of their

male counterparts. Nevertheless, men maintained sexual escapades outside the home with a higher degree of liberty than women did. In terms of power dynamics this places women at a disadvantage and ultimately disempowers them.

Ultimately dress was the object that differentiated female institutions of pleasure and reproduction. Thus, not only segregating women and disempowering them further, but also condoning the stratification amongst Roman citizens of the same gender. With that being said there was some fluidity amongst women of different classes. This was mainly possible because of dress. A matron for example would sometimes imitate creative styles worn by courtesans and vice versa. Tertullian, claims Olson, shared this tale in order to illustrate that there was a degree of creative spillover, but more importantly sharing styles amongst women of different classes blurred the lines between the institutions of pleasure and reproduction in the ancient world (Olson 400). Se describes such time periods as times when *mantrona*e could be confused with courtesans and vice versa.

The lack of clarity that developed as dress became more similar gave traditionalists, like Tertullian, anxiety because this behavior reminded him of female stereotypes that labeled women as deceiving creatures with ulterior motives. As a result, the development of patriarchy justified the oppression of women based on assumptions such as the ones made by Tertullian. Therefore, even though dress evolved into a market and an industry of its own there are still clear vestiges that stratify and therefore separate women. Conversely men held power over women because they maintained their leadership positions by discriminating women based on false claims justified by gendered

structures. Ultimately, this maintained the power of patriarchy as a predominant structure which is why it is still present today.

Prostitutes were clearly separated from *matronae* because they wore a toga. The toga placed them into the institution that provided the service of pleasure, mostly for men. In addition women of all classes had access to jewelry, materials and colors, and like dress, helped stratify women for the most part. Gold was usually associated with women of high class while silver was employed more by women of lower class. It is important to note that Roman culture valued humility which is why an excess of decor was never associated with educated *matronae*. The segregation of women alone depicts a stark difference between the concept of marriage that later developed into the institution we know today. The role of dress regarding the social construct of marriage in ancient Rome was clear. Dress served as an element of provocation and lust for prostitutes. At the same time, dress was the main actor in stratifying women of Roman society because the society was geographically homogeneous. So, on the one hand, Pomeroy, for example, describes how brothels were not segregated and therefore the city relied on markers like dress distinction and signs to distinguish between villas and brothels (McGinn 162).

Prostitutes also fit outside the compartmentalized gender structures, and were beyond traditional narratives of typical familial structures. At the same time, they subscribed to social expectations such as the segregation of themselves when they were identified because of the use of a toga. The toga not only separated married women from prostitutes, but like married women there were prostitutes of different social classes. Prostitutes of high class wore a distinctive dress, which separated them from married

women and they also contributed to the segregation of women within the Roman industry. Due to this fact some prostitutes of a lower socio-economic standing relied on their charm and nude to attract costumers. Nevertheless both high and low-class prostitutes usually wore the same type of hairdo. The hairdo evolved throughout Roman history but it was described as a tied bun in its most basic form.

The amount of literature regarding prostitutes and their distinctive perspective on Roman society is slim to none. Unfortunately the history of this period, like most, is written mostly by men and about male experiences. Therefore there is not much evidence from the period of ancient Rome itself, so a narrative of female experiences is mostly non-existent. This is why the experience of marginalized groups such as prostitutes of ancient Rome should be studied through the lens of material evidence like clothing. In the case of Rome, clothing already had the role of separating high from low classes, so the expression of women within the sex-industry is better reviewed by analyzing their dress. The value of a cross-sectional study between a dress analysis of female prostitutes and their role in society can provide a layered perception, especially, of their significant role in challenging a status quo that not only divided their own gender group, but allowed for males to thrive only.

Even though Foucault reviews the perception of sex in the ancient world as an exhibition of lack of control and therefore an act of low value in the scheme of morality and intellectual worth, the role of female prostitutes challenges this notion (Hallett 1997). Women in other sectors of society lacked the basic right to be in public, so the fact that prostitutes were able to sell a service in the public sphere alone empowered prostitutes. Prostitutes used their dress and their distinctive hairdo to attract costumers (Olson, 396),

which granted them agency to act upon their own business almost by branding their strategy. Unlike high-class women, prostitutes wore toga-like garments and these were usually of purple and red hue. The fact that their dress was closer to that of men also invites a an analysis with an angle that praises the privileges prostitutes enjoyed when compared to other women of Roman society. At the same time, the culture of Rome considered the industry of pleasure to be of low value because it was linked to a lack of control over bodily desires. With that being said, one can consider that the role of prostitutes within the gender dynamics of bodily pleasures placed the prostitute above the costumer. This happened because women held the power to deliver a service that even though it was not highly valued by men it was sought with frequency.

#### IV. Women's Stratification Through Dress

The Romans had strict expectations regarding a person's expression of status. The obsession the culture developed regarding order spilled out to every aspect of the life of every citizen. For instance: the strict dress codes that Romans imposed on its female citizens justified the stratification of women within their gender group. As a byproduct women were forced to comply to most of the social implications of being female and were eager to imitate women of higher standing in order to increase their societal value. Within female groups women were mostly distinguished between married women, courtesans, freed women and slaves. For the sake of this study, I focused on the stratification that exists between married women of high class and high-class courtesans. Their differentiation is crucial to the structure of the Roman family and the political implications of such a structure is crucial to the political superiority (when compared to other cultures like the Germanic culture) the Romans enjoyed. Married women and courtesans were segregated from one another and thus the institution of pleasure and the institution of legacy (through birth) were separated. In that sense women were bound to a portion of life's freedoms, but never all which is the first form of segregation they experienced in Roman society. In order to distinguish prostitutes and married women in the streets of Rome each group wore distinctive outfits and each had its own implications when seen by other members of society.

Furthermore Olson also weighs in with the idea that clothing defined a person's place in society. A woman's place in this context was keenly defined by type of fabric, design, and accessories worn in conjunction. Women that belonged to a high class would wear an undergarment dress beneath a *stola*, which was a type of loose dress (Olson 392).

These women were usually *matronae*, which directly translates into legally married women. Olsen also adds that women in ancient Rome wore garments that reflected their status in Rome and this included layered garments in order to preserve the exposure of their bodies. Conversely, men had a distinctive set of symbols and rules regarding their dress that represented their rank and some of these include different colors of stripes on the toga and a ring (Olson 398). Purple in particular represented power and men of high political standing would wear a purple stripe across their body to express their position in society. Some male political figures wore a ring. The ring was not only an ornament, but usually had a code of arms that was used as a tool to stamp mail.

The description just given formally confirms that dress not only differentiates the structures of power between gender but was also indicative of a woman's position in society generally. More importantly, position is first achieved visually in social groups. This dynamic places the man at higher standing and as the viewer and the woman at a lower standing as the object to be looked at. Moreover, the dynamic of seeing and being seen descriptively denounces Roman society as one that measures the value of a person through what that person wears. And the person wearing the garment appropriately fits into a complacent dynamic where he/she expresses her standing and value through the menus of dress. In the case of Rome, fashion in and of itself is a reflection of one's first impression, which is why dress as a set of symbols and social coding are still relevant today. Notwithstanding, clothing can still be indicative of one's socio-economic status, but it is also a medium to transfer a primary reflection of one's degree of complacency to the constructs of society.



Moreover, it is important to note that the first visual factor that differentiated a married woman in ancient Rome from prostitutes, slaves, and women of other classes was dress, primarily. With that in mind, Ancient Rome prescribed the ideals of what each woman should wear in order to fit her role within society. In addition, dress was also an element that was indicative of a person's morality. The dress of a married woman was linked to her degree of purity and the restrictive rules that enabled the link between social standing and the value of personhood and it was first established because of dress codes. For instance, Kelly Olson points out that the garment denominated as *palla* was not worn by working women of low class status in the Augustan Era (Olson 392). The reason being that this overdress was restrictive and did not allow for women to carry out their work duties. In this case what separates women is class and socio-economic status was clearly depicted in the garments they wore.

The garments themselves are described in detail in a number of sources and this is important to direct in order to understand the implications of details like materials and colors regarding a woman's stratification. In terms of materials one of the materials that was used the most was Coan silk (Olson 398) and one of its properties is that it is mostly see through. This alone allowed for the stratification of the material because it was mostly used by courtesans because of the way it would expose the woman's body. Moralists like Seneca criticized the material and women who used it as a garment because of its translucent property (Olson 398). He described the exposure of a woman's body as ludicrous and as belonging to a prostitute. Even though women wearing Coan silk were highly criticized, women of high standing would sometimes imitate courtesans and vice versa (Olson 398). This comes to show that there was a degree of fluidity in

terms of female expression which can be regarded as a form of protest to the rigid social expectations that men had of them.

The color of garments like the materials used developed as the centuries went on and the Roman empire changed. Based on lyrical and some material evidence Olson brings forth a list of predominant colors used by women and their significance in terms of female social stratification. Sky-blue, marigold yellow, red orange, sea-blue, walnut brown, pale yellow and green were all worn by women of ancient Rome (Olson 398). These colors can be associated with fertility due to their resemblance to the earth, water, and other natural elements that bring upon its proliferation. Colors like pink, gray, and beige were regarded as spring colors by the Romans (Olson 398). Outside of the historical context of the ancient world these all stuck throughout history and were eventually equated with femininity itself, especially pink. This alone confirms a strong Roman influence in today's fashion and gendered structures as well. Green yellow and cherry red were deemed colors of the lower class (Olson 398) and there is a lot to be said with respect to how red developed into a color that is sometimes equated with lust in the fashion industry. The connection between the vestiges of color stratification and their similar significance now is within the stratification of a woman's morality. The more a woman projected lust and pleasure, the more her morality decreased and thus her value in the eyes of society decreased.

In addition, women of ancient Rome rarely participated in the public sphere as they were seen as inferior to men. The perception of inferiority of women was rooted in the gendered roles that they were assigned. These included that of motherhood and childcare, which was essential to maintain the growth and legacy of the empire. In

addition, the roles of *matronae* in particular, do not consider women to have more value than exceeds their functionality with regards to the needs of men. The power relationships between members of both genders alone presents a challenge in terms of source availability and source authenticity. In other words, the fact that women are less important in society translates into less primary accounts of female dress.

What is available between material evidence and what is recoded in literature is not as robust as what is available for male dress and male historical experience of the period of ancient Rome. Nevertheless, this imbalance in source availability is advantageous to this study of female ancient Roman dress because it provides an authentic lens to measure gender dynamics and power dynamics amongst different types of women. It is through evidence in literature that one can determine the spaces that women occupied in relation to her objectifier (the man). The lens then provides a sense of the role of dress with respect to a woman's role in Roman society. A personal account of a woman herself could be biased in constructing a reality in which she breaches societal expectations and norms which most women followed anyway. In addition material evidence accompanies the lens through which I am evaluating gender dynamics and roles of women in ancient times.

## V. Static Styles

### *The Toga*

We have discussed gender hierarchy through the lens of dress and its implications in terms of its influence on social constructs throughout history. What is most ironic about the dynamics of Roman dress and its different functions within its society is its simple design. The design encompasses drapery of cloths that would hug the body and were usually locked in place with pins. Also, men and women designed their garments around the concept of the toga, which in itself was a symbol of Roman citizenship. For most of the Roman Republic and the Roman Empire the Roman citizen would pride him/herself in expressing humility through a simplistic wardrobe. Augustus for example, prosecuted Anthony and Cleopatra for being foreign and distasteful due to alleged extravagant parties that they held and the extravagant clothes that they wore. The simplicity of the roman toga and *palla*, for women, was essential to the Roman essence of a Roman citizen, which is why dress did not develop like other artistic aspects of Roman culture such as architecture (ie. Domus Aurea).

In addition, the roman toga is discussed and described in ancient sources as deriving from the latin word *tegere* (*tego: clothe, cover, protect*), since the garment covered the whole length of a Roman's body (V.144, ed. Müller). The meaning and denomination is very fitting to Roman culture the way its simplistic design is. Roman culture was centered around ideals of protection through military strength and the expression of this power came through conquest. Apart from that, it is important to note that Roman design was very much influenced by Greek garments and the traditions of draped garments can be traced back to the Etruscans (Smith 1134). Moreover, the toga

did not originate from Rome itself, but its social significance was very much enforced through law and social pressures such as the ones discussed before (ie. marriage and social standing). The design and sign system that it carries was not premeditated as such but it did not evolve because it fit so well with Roman ideals.

At first, the toga was only worn within the city of Rome, and was not seen outside the developing city (Smith 1135). The garment eventually became a democratized garment as the Rome expanded. Eventually, the garment and its traditional significance drove society to mark it as a political symbol that pertained to the elite. As a result, the toga soon was replaced by the *pallium* and *lacerna* (Smith 1135). Both styles were draped and dress-like garments that hung from the body effortlessly. The way in which the toga was worn is still a contentious issue amongst scholar due to the significant social implications these costumes carry. According to Dionysius of Halicarnassus (III.61) the toga was semi-circular, but it is hard to know how the fullness of the draping was accomplished. It is important to know such details in order to understand the technological developments of textiles and in the case of women, the expression the toga expressed at different points in Roman history.

Some of the togas were also designed to have many folds in its drapery. The development of such design though the lens of fashion is crucial to the understanding of social dynamics. The contention lies in how a semi-circle shape would be long enough to drape and reach a certain length when placed over the body and also have the right slant to throw it over the shoulder and shut the clasp. The shape was then determined to be of semi-circular shape but not exactly (Quintillian 139-140-Smith) in order to meet the demands of its precise styling. It is speculated that weights such as tassels or balls were

employed in order to maintain the drapery of the garment in place due to the weightless quality of the fabric itself (Smith 1136). The careful draping of garments in the detailed ancient accounts add a ritualistic quality to the act. It was even in the name itself; toga and its meaning of protection is also present in the way the garment was styled.

More than that the expression of the garment itself through its drapery and its name is reflective of Roman culture. Roman obsession with maintaining tradition and protection within Rome in order to prosper as a culture, an empire, and a certain type of people. The careful ritualistic aspects of a Roman also reflect social hierarchies that maintained a certain social order based on homogenization. The strict ideals of the society itself were particularly imparted through religious and moral aspects. The *mos maiorum*, for example, was a code of ethics through which political leaders set and enforced Roman behavior. Religion on the other hand was based on a mantra of fear which kept the relationship between the gods and humans at a distance and as a byproduct Romans were forced to follow certain social rules to hope for a better fate. With that being said both religion and moral conducts act as deterrents for rebellions in Rome for centuries.

Within that context the toga was one more element that helped promote social hierarchies through the lens of the gaze. Furthermore, women within that context were at a greater disadvantage when compared to other Roman citizens as their rules were separatist and demeaning because of their role in society. As discussed before the women in ancient Rome held roles that were limited to reproduction, pleasure for men, and also the religious personification of purity.

### *Toga: Its Role in Stratifying Women*

Moreover women wore two main different designs of tunics known as *peplos* and *chiton* (McManus 2003). These designs are characteristically simple and could be considered gender neutral, especially when compared to garments men wore. The only characteristic that differentiated a male's tunic from a woman's tunic was usually the color and the length. Men would sometimes wear shorter versions of the toga while women were most likely covered from their heads to the floor (McManus 2003). The *peplos* consisted of two different squared pieces of cloth sown together with openings for arms and the head. The garment was usually fastened by pins which created a top with no sleeves and a belt usually secured the midsection of a women's body. The *chiton* was much closer to the Greek traditional design and its defining characteristic was the incorporation of sleeves. The sleeves were achieved by the use of a number of pins at the height of the arms where to pieces of cloth were sown together. This garment was usually fastened bellow the breast, at the waist or at the hips (McManus 2003). As discussed above a second layer called a *stola* would be dropped on top of the first tunic and this combination was usually worn by married women. As time progressed all women were expected to present themselves with a *stola* as a sign of respect for tradition.

In addition, women wore a *palla* in the public sphere to maintain a respectable perception in society. As mentioned before women (*matronae*) were rarely in public, but when they were out of the home they wore an extra layer in which signaled their marriage status and a justification to be in a given space. The *palla* was usually a rectangular cloth that hung from the left shoulder of the matron (McManus 2003). Also, some of the *pallae* were also draped over the head which simulated the structure of a modern hoodie. The

*palla* also distinguished itself from the *stola* by sometimes adding fringe to the end of the cloth. The evidence for all the garments are best appreciated in material evidence such as statues. The material evidence of high class matrons such as Livia showcasing the draping, layering, and style of the garments is in sculptures (McManus 2003). The evidence itself marginalizes large portions of the population because there is a tendency for art during this period to act as political propaganda. For that reason only the emperor and his family would be depicted through the use of sculptures. Nevertheless, the evidence is still valuable because it does provide an accurate representation of some of women's (high class *matronae*) dress in an accurate format.

Hair and jewelry were the only two accessories that differentiated one woman from another in ancient Rome. The styles and designs evolved with the development of the empire itself, but there are a number of styles that material and lyric evidence holds as classics. A lot of the material evidence points to updos, which are mostly buns where the hair is styled with curls. (McManus 2003). The women represented in the sculptures were usually wives of high profiled politicians, and their representations were usually idealized. Roman artisans sought ideal beauty standards from goddesses such as Venus and because of this all the sculptures were modeled similarly. From the point of view of the emperor the depiction of the emperor and his family through the lens of divinity was paramount to the creation of his image. The women were subject to a certain standard of beauty and social expression when they were presented with one of the numerous statues posed throughout the empire.

More importantly, women themselves were limited to try new styles. The reproduction of the actual sculptures show the elaborate hairstyles quite clearly, and their



meaning in terms of women and their position in society becomes complex. First, the styles available for “respectable” women aka. matrons were idealized forms of beauty from the point of view of the artist and the emperor who are both most likely men. The image of the woman then becomes more controlled through the male gaze of the emperor and the artist. This power dynamic is especially problematic when a certain image of womanhood is publicized widely, and when accompanied by the many unasked rules that already dictate the discrimination of women through dress.

With that being said, the demarcation that separates the woman from her own self expression is within the patriarchal umbrella. On the one hand, today the simplicity of a required garment may be viewed as an equalizer and an agent of egalitarian activism. On the other hand, the meaning behind a required dress code clearly differentiates the experience of most Roman women in the ancient world as being one of marginalization and oppression. Therefore, the static styles of women’s dress were kept that way for the sake of tradition in ancient Rome. The homogenization of women’s dress amongst women of the same class separated them from women of other class and or social institutions (ie. whore pertains to the institution of pleasure). In that same vein, the homogenization of a woman’s dress through the moral gaze and limitations of a male ruler places the women under the control of the male counterpart in Roman society.

### *The Social Effects Static Styles: Roman’s vs Modern World*

It is important to contextualize the history of Roman-ware to understand where the hierarchical and gendered aspects of Roman society came about. The simplicity of the garments was not only functional, but was historically pushed to stay that way.

Nevertheless, women of high class protested in 195 BCE to appeal to the Oppian law which prevented women from embellishing their garments (McManus 2003). Women of high class saw this law as an obstacle that prevented them from distinguishing themselves from women of lower classes. As discussed above sometimes courtesans could pass as matrons due to how styles and colors were copied between women of all classes. In addition, brothels were not segregated, so to some respect high-class matrons felt socially threatened by the lack of clear distinction between women of different classes. The appeal read as follows: “Women cannot partake of magistracies, priesthoods, triumphs, badges of office, gifts, or spoils of war; elegance, finery, and beautiful clothes are women's badges, in these they find joy and take pride, this our forebears called the women's world. (Livy, *History of Rome* 34.5-McManus 2003).” To some extent such an appeal seeks to equalize men and women of the same social standing in order to decrease the greatest hierarchical gap amongst Roman citizens. This gap fit between men and women of Rome in order to maintain a patriarchal sense of power distribution which always discriminated against women.

The static styles also provided men with the control of women’s ware and identity. Due to this dynamic women and men wore very similar designs known today as a tunic. This way women were not allowed to express their gender identity. A resisting social movement, starting with the protest of 195, may be the beginning of the feminization and masculinization of fashion (McManus 2003). To some respect the distinction created between clothing for men and for women today also creates an unhealthy divide between genders, and this is ironic given that at the root of fashion development as we know it today started when women sought more gender equality

through it. The common denominator that brings down both the reality of a Roman woman and a modern woman is patriarchy and its permanent hold on a woman's body and reproduction capabilities. In other words, no matter if women distinguish themselves from men through dress they are still subject to gender discrimination due to other gendered traditions that serve as gender oppressors that ultimately perpetuate patriarchal ideals.

## VI. Conclusion

In conclusion dress was a crucial element that influenced ancient social constructs that are still present in today's society. This thesis navigated the role of women's dress through the male gaze. This lens provided an appropriate historical context through which women's place in society can be analyzed. The male gaze became the main tool to analyze gendered dynamics of the ancient Rome's culture because the men constructed most of the cultural norms in society. Women were kept within the domestic realm, which already limited their ability to advance their self-expression. Gendered dynamics that favored a man tainted the culture with patriarchal principles that are still in place today's societies.

With that being said, women and their dress sheds some light on the intricacies behind certain oppressive social norms. The dress code ascribed to women in ancient Rome were strict and was employed as a symbolic set of expectations that placed women at a disadvantage. Women were dressed in tunic like garments in order to cover their bodies, which symbolized the conservation of their purity and virtue. The conservation of those qualities, (then considered values) allowed for women to become a men's property when married and a men's sexual object at a brothel. This alone allowed for a hierarchy amongst women to create and hence discriminate amongst their own gender group and between gender groups as well.

Legislation written by men linked respectability to women that were matrons and wives and they wore a superimposed garment when in public in order to send the message that they were married. Prostitutes had were known to dress in see through garments, and would be distinguished from matrons most of the time even though they

were expected to be in the vicinity of one another due to a lack of a zoning system in the city. In addition women were segregated between institutions of pleasure and marriage, further disempowering them. Matrons were expected to provide an heir and held domestic responsibility, but they were denied an intimate close relationship with their husbands. At the same time, prostitutes did enjoy an extent of sexual expression, but were seen as slaves by their clients, which further limited their self-expression.

Women and men in ancient Rome judged one another based on the colors used, the materials used, and the garments used, but women were at a disadvantage because dress alone limited them from challenging basic patriarchal and patrilineal norms. Furthermore, dress also was the first layer of social communication in ancient Rome, and it played into a dynamic known as seen and being seen. This was a basic interplay that allowed for both men and women to place each other in a socio-cultural spectrum. All in all dress is one of many lenses that provide us with a deep understanding of gendered dynamics. Understanding these becomes central to trace down patriarchal “norms” that are still with us today and should be challenged.

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