
Roman Girlhood and the Fashioning of Femininity

LAUREN CALDWELL



ROMAN GIRLHOOD AND THE FASHIONING OF FEMININITY

Elite women in the Roman world were often educated, socially prominent, and even relatively independent. Yet the social regime that ushered these same women into marriage and childbearing at an early age was remarkably restrictive. In the first book-length study of girlhood in the early Roman Empire, Lauren Caldwell investigates the reasons for this paradox. Through an examination of literary, legal, medical, and epigraphic sources, she identifies the social pressures that tended to overwhelm concerns about girls' individual health and well-being. In demonstrating how early marriage was driven by a variety of concerns, including the value placed on premarital virginity and paternal authority, this book enhances an understanding of the position of girls as they made the transition from childhood to womanhood.

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Contents

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	<i>page</i> vi
Introduction	i
1 Formal education and socialization in virtue	15
2 Protecting virginity	45
3 “All kinds of exercises fitting for girls”	79
4 The pressure to marry	105
5 The wedding and the end of girlhood	134
Epilogue	166
<i>Bibliography</i>	170
<i>Index</i>	185

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Introduction

About nineteen hundred years ago, the remains of a twenty-one-year-old woman were buried outside Rome. A small white marble stone was erected in her honor. Today, two parts of the stone are broken in the upper left-hand corner, obscuring the young woman's name. The small gap suggests a short name, and the editor of the inscription has posited Fannia. Her epitaph reads:

For the spirits of the dead. [Fan]nia Sebotis, daughter of Publius. Quintus Minucius Marcellus, son of Quintus, of the Palatine tribe, to his most dear, most dutiful, most chaste married wife, who never wished to go to a public place or to a bath or to any place at all without me, whom I led in marriage as a virgin of 14 years, from whom I have a daughter, with whom I saw the sweet time of life, who made me happy, but I would prefer that you were alive. She was my happiness. If only I had left you surviving. She lived 21 years, 2 months, and 21 days.¹

Fannia's death cannot be precisely dated but seems likely to have occurred in the late first or early second century CE.²

The gravestone and its content were commissioned by Fannia's husband, Quintus Minucius. The lament expresses sentiments commonly found on Latin tombstones from the city of Rome in the early empire. Husbands often used the adjectives *carissima*, *pietissima*, and *castissima* to describe their deceased wives.³ Here Fannia is remembered for her devotion, sweetness,

¹ AE 1987.179: [D(is)] M(anibus) | . . . nia P(ublii) f(ilia) Sebotis, | Q(uintus) Minucius Q(uinti) f(ilius) Pal(atina tribu) Marcellus | coniugi carissimae, pietissim(ae), castissim(ae) | coniugali, quae numquam sine me in publicum aut in balineum aut ubicumq(ue) ire voluit, | quem virgine(m) duxi ann(or)um XIII, ex qua filia(m) habeo, | cum qua tempus dulce<m> luminis vidi, quae me | felicem fecit, set ego mallebam viveres; illa erat | mea felicitas si te superstite(m) reliquiss(em); vixit ann(is) XXI m(ensibus) II, d(iebus) XXI. See the original publication, Sijpesteijn (1987) for "Fannia" or "Annia" as the name of the deceased.

² On the date of the inscription and interpretation of lines 9–10, see Solin (1987) 119–20.

³ See Sijpesteijn (1987) 151 for the sentiments expressed. Treggiari (1991) 229–61 offers a full analysis of the adjectives spouses used to commemorate each other.

and unfailing chastity: she never even walked alone in public. Minucius married her at the tender age of fourteen, a fact he regards as worth mentioning on her tombstone in addition to her age at death, twenty-one.

Even in its brevity, this inscription offers a wealth of information about the timing of events in a life cut short. Most notably, we see that for Fannia the beginning of adolescence coincided with marriage. This timing of the transition to her adult social role, and the compression of puberty, marriage, and childbearing into a short span, were the product of norms and expectations at work in the society in which Fannia lived.⁴ Her epitaph explicitly lays out some of the factors influencing her movement into marriage: strong and enduring links to her father and husband, value placed on premarital virginity, and concerns about successful procreation. Even her early death may have been the unhappy result of cultural expectations. Although the cause is not stated, Fannia was in her early twenties, and she may have suffered fatal complications in childbirth.

It has been persuasively demonstrated that older Roman women of the upper social strata were often educated, socially prominent, and relatively legally independent.⁵ At the same time, the social regime that ushered girls like Fannia into marriage at a young age was quite restrictive. To this point, this apparent paradox – a central feature of Roman womanhood – has not been addressed; this study aims to fill that gap. Perspectives on girls' coming-of-age appear in a variety of sources, including epitaphs, medical prescriptions, legal rulings, poetry, and moralizing treatises. These sources reveal that the Romans pondered the implications of the relative timing of girls' marriage, sexual initiation, and childbearing. Marriage, the socially and legally sanctioned relationship for procreation and for female sexual activity, was a nearly universal experience for respectable Roman women, and it was a relationship which some girls entered at a very young age. In addition, for most women in a society that lacked effective methods of contraception and viewed the production of legitimate children as a primary purpose of the marital relationship, pregnancy soon followed marriage.⁶ Pregnancy and childbearing were risky enough affairs for all

⁴ Helpful for comparison are studies of the female transition from youth to adulthood in other historical periods, such as Hunter (2002) on nineteenth-century America.

⁵ Studies include Hemelrijk (1999) on women's education; Gardner (1986), Treggiari (1991) and Evans Grubbs (2002) on legal status of *matronae*; Dixon (1988) and (1992) on women's position in the family; and Setälä (2002) and Kleiner and Matheson, eds. (2000) on women's social and economic power.

⁶ "Natural fertility" describes the age-specific marital fertility pattern in societies before the modern fertility transition, when married couples began to use effective contraception as a family-limitation practice. In the early empire, other indirect methods were responsible for limiting population

Roman women but especially for young teenagers. Pliny the Younger writes that his wife, Calpurnia, nearly died of a miscarriage because of her youth.⁷

At the outset, then, it is worth laying out what is known about the age at which Roman women began marrying and bearing children. A combination of sources provides the evidence for recent scholarly studies of Roman marriage and fertility patterns. For marriage patterns, Latin epitaphs have been the major source of evidence, with literary evidence and papyri from Roman Egypt helping to fill in the picture. From these sources, the mean age of first marriage among upper-class girls in the empire has been estimated to be in the late teens.⁸ Tombstones, which survive from across the Roman Empire in large numbers, have been an invaluable resource for scholars attempting to understand the age at first marriage for Roman women and men.⁹ For example, Fannia's epitaph offers the age at which she married, fourteen, and states that she had a daughter; other funerary inscriptions provide the number and sometimes age of children and the duration of marriage.¹⁰ Even when these details are not provided, information about age at marriage can be inferred from the deceased's age and the dedicator, with unmarried women more likely to be commemorated by parents and married women by husbands.¹¹

Adding substantially to the data for the western part of the empire provided by tombstones are census records from first- and second-century Egypt, which offer a listing of property and persons (including age, sex, and status) in individual households. The census records are valuable for providing information about a cross-section of the Egyptian population and suggest an average age at first marriage in the mid- to late teens for women that aligns with the findings from tombstone evidence.¹²

growth, such as postpartum abstinence, breastfeeding, and the tendency of women not to remarry after age thirty-five. For discussion, see Bagnall and Frier (1994) 138–55; Frier (1994).

⁷ Plin. *Ep.* 8.10, 8.11; see Sherwin-White (1966) 459 on Calpurnia's undoubtedly young age.

⁸ An overview of scholarship addressing the question of age at first marriage in the empire is provided by Scheidel (2007) and (2001) 35 and Saller (2007) 90.

⁹ Hopkins (1965) was the groundbreaking study; his argument for very early female marriage age was modified by Shaw (1987) and Saller (1987).

¹⁰ As Shaw (2002) 195 notes, it is in fact rare for the age at marriage to be recorded on a tombstone, as it is on Fannia's. Instead, the age at marriage usually must be calculated based on the age at death and the length of the marriage, both of which are very often included in an epitaph.

¹¹ Shaw (1987).

¹² Bagnall and Frier (1994) 20–26 and 47–49 describe the form of the census records and, while conceding the difficulty of measuring the records' social bias, observe that “declarants were often of humble origin, and certainly not predominantly of high status.”

Moreover, the census records combine with tombstone evidence to suggest near-universal marriage for Roman women and marriage to a husband who was older by about ten years.¹³ Because the census documents are geographically confined to Egypt, the extent to which the demographic data they provide can be applied to the other provinces of the empire has been questioned.¹⁴ Egypt may have differed from some parts of the empire in some respects, such as mortality rates, given the distinct climate and urbanization of the Fayum, where the census records originate.¹⁵ However, in analysis of mean age at first marriage and the age gap between spouses, the Egyptian data are in general agreement with the evidence of epitaphs from the western empire. The cultural difference that may have affected marriage patterns – and the extent to which it did is unclear, because of a scarcity of evidence – is the pattern of brother-sister marriage practiced in some parts of Roman Egypt, where older brothers married sisters who were young teenagers.¹⁶

Offering a different perspective on the marriage pattern are literary texts written by educated members of the Roman elite. These texts, when they mention girls and first marriage, concentrate on the pattern as it played out among elite families. Girls in aristocratic circles, it appears, married earlier than the mean age at first marriage, in their early to mid-teens.¹⁷ Cicero's friend Atticus placed his fourteen-year-old daughter, Caecilia Attica, in a marriage with Marcus Agrippa.¹⁸ Pliny the Younger writes of Minicia Marcella, who died on the eve of her wedding at the age of twelve or thirteen.¹⁹ Quintilian's wife, who died before age nineteen, had already borne him two sons, the younger of whom died at age five a few months after his mother.²⁰

¹³ Scheidel (2001) 33; Saller (2007) 90.

¹⁴ Doubts about the applicability of the census records of Egypt to the empire as a whole are expressed by Parkin (1992) 58–59, 129 and Scheidel (2001) 16–19.

¹⁵ Scheidel (2001) 16 cites the unfavorable climate and high population density of urban areas of Roman Egypt, from which the census returns come, as perhaps lowering life expectancy.

¹⁶ Saller (2007) 90. On brother-sister marriage, see Huebner (2007) and Remijsen and Clarysse (2008).

¹⁷ Lelis, Percy, and Verstraete (2003) 103–25 collect literary references to age at first marriage of thirty-one women and eighty-three men. They calculate that the average marriage age for women is between fourteen and fifteen years and note a concentration of marriages between the ages of seventeen and twenty-one for men. Saller (2007) 90 concurs that “literary and legal texts for aristocratic practice suggest it was not uncommon for girls to be married in their early teens.”

¹⁸ PIR² P 769 offers the sources on Attica's age. See also Lelis, Percy and Verstraete (2003) 123 no. 8.

¹⁹ Plin. *Ep.* 5.16 refers to her as thirteen while her epitaph (*CIL* 6.16631=*ILS* 1030) says twelve. For further discussion of Minicia's age and life-stage, see [Chapter 1](#).

²⁰ Quint. *Inst.* 6. pr. 4–16. On the dates of death and ages of the children, see Vollmer (1891) 347–48 and Lelis, Percy, and Verstraete (2003) 124 no. 18.

The imperial family used young daughters either to keep power within the family or to cement alliances.²¹ Augustus' daughter Julia married her first cousin Marcellus when she was fourteen;²² Livilla, Tiberius' niece, was married by thirteen;²³ Agrippina the Younger wed Cn. Domitius Ahenobarbus at eleven or twelve;²⁴ Lucilla, daughter of Marcus Aurelius, married at thirteen or fourteen.²⁵ For female members of equestrian, decurional, and senatorial ranks, marriage by the early teenage years was likely the norm, and it is this pattern among the upper classes, and how it was evaluated and understood by the Romans, in which I am particularly interested.²⁶

Elite girls' movement into marriage and childbearing is particularly worth examining in the empire when marriage and procreation were transformed by the Emperor Augustus into matters of public policy and became explicitly tied to civic duty.²⁷ Augustus' marriage legislation, the *lex Iulia et Papia*, as we will see in [Chapter 2](#), rewarded marriage and childbearing and imposed penalties on respectable young persons who failed to marry.²⁸ This legislation was Augustus' way of refashioning elite practice to serve his own goal of encouraging marriage and procreation in propertied families.²⁹ The office-holding advantages offered to married men with children by the *lex Iulia* may have encouraged ambitious aristocratic men to marry at a younger age although authors such as

²¹ Severy (2003) 62–78 examines the endogamous marriage pattern characteristic of Augustus' family.

²² Vell. Pat. 2.93; Suet. *Aug.* 63; Cass. Dio 53.27.5. On Julia's age at marriage, see Treggiari (1991) 159, Lelis, Percy, and Verstraete (2003) 123 no. 9, and Hahn (1994) 106.

²³ To Gaius Caesar; Tac. *Ann.* 4.40. Hahn (1994) 126 and Lelis, Percy, and Verstraete (2003) 123 no. 12 discuss her age.

²⁴ Tac. *Ann.* 4.75, 6.45, 12.64; Suet. *Ner.* 5, *Gal.* 5; Cass. Dio 58.20.1. See PIR² I 641, Hahn (1994) 186, and Lelis, Percy, and Verstraete (2003) no. 14.

²⁵ Her husband was Lucius Verus; see *SHA Marc.* 9.4–6 and *Verus* 7.7. See Lelis, Percy, and Verstraete (2003) 124.

²⁶ As Scheidel (2007) and Saller (2007) 90 both observe, the evidence for age at first marriage in Roman society, while not overly abundant, is more plentiful than for ancient Greece. Still important is Harkness (1896).

²⁷ The Augustan laws punishing adultery and sexual misconduct will be discussed in [Chapter 2](#). On the implications of the legislation for marriage, procreation, and women's modesty, see Milnor (2005) 142–52, Fayer (2005) 79–82 and 563–98, and Severy (2003) 52–56.

²⁸ *Tit. Ulp.* 15–16 describes how the statute rewarded marriage and procreation for women aged twenty to fifty and men aged twenty-five to sixty by allowing full inheritance only to those who married and had children. Men who had children could also hold political office at a younger age: see *Ulp. D.* 4.4.2 and *Plin. Ep.* 7.16.2 with Sherwin-White (1966) 420.

²⁹ McGinn (1999) 624: "What Augustus appears to have done in fact is to take a practice of early marriage favored by most patricians and many *nobiles* in the late Republic and converted it into a standard to be followed by all aspiring office-holders in the future."

Cassius Dio and Suetonius indicate a reluctance among some elites to comply with the marriage legislation.³⁰

This study will concentrate mainly on girlhood among the families who were the focus of the Augustan legislation. The decision to focus on these girls, who admittedly formed a small segment of the population, is driven by a number of factors, the most influential of which is the evidence. Doctors writing prescriptions, jurists creating rules about dowry, poets commemorating weddings with all the trappings, and philosophers discussing the lofty aims of education were writing to and about those of the elite, propertied classes. But another reason to focus on elite girls is that the evidence suggests that the pattern of early marriage appears to have applied particularly to them.³¹ A combination of pressures pushed these girls into early marriage, including competition among upper-class families for brides, traditional paternal authority in the family, state promotion of marriage, the custom of dowry, and cultural expectations of youthful femininity, including the preservation of sexual purity until marriage and the belief that female passions began to become unruly at puberty.

While the early marriage pattern appears to have applied to girls of aristocratic families, definitive answers about how many Roman girls married in their early teens elude us since the evidence is slight.³² Yet the nuptiality and fertility rates of women derived from the census records, in particular, offer one final insight that serves as the launching point for this study: the very early marriage of women of any social class was not a demographic necessity, even in a high-mortality regime such as the Roman Empire. Married women who survived to menopause would have had to bear, on average, 5.87 children in order to replace the population.³³ Although it appears high from a modern standpoint, this number does not represent the “maximum” number of children that a woman could bear in a lifetime.³⁴ Nearly all Roman women married by age thirty, so that

³⁰ Treggiari (1991) 79; Saller (1987); McGinn (1999) 623–24; Tac. *Agr.* 6.1, 3; Plin. *Ep.* 7.24.3. Reluctance: Cass. Dio 54.16.7 and Suet. *Aug.* 34.

³¹ As Saller (2007) 90 notes, “Among men and women of humbler social strata, marriage took place at a somewhat older age, though still with an age gap between men and women.”

³² The census records, valuable as they are, record information only for 1 of every 80,000 Egyptians as Scheidel (2001) points out.

³³ Frier (1994) 327 contends that there is no reason not to apply these conclusions from Roman Egypt to the rest of the empire: “The census records display a pattern of natural fertility that otherwise obtains generally in pretransition populations.” Bagnall and Frier (1994) 330 calculate that “if the Total Fertility Rate had fallen by just one child, from 5.7 to 4.7, then Egypt’s population . . . would have halved every century.”

³⁴ Frier (1999) 94 notes that “even at levels of mortality that we would today regard as exceedingly high, virtually all human populations retain considerable reserves of unused reproductive capacity.”

the burden of childbearing was spread over a very large segment of the female population, easing pressure on individual women.³⁵ To argue that girls had to marry at or near menarche to maximize their fertility is thus mistaken.³⁶ An age at first marriage in the late teens or early twenties would have allowed Roman women to bear enough children to replace the population.³⁷ Nor would marriage at menarche necessarily have translated into a longer period of fecundity for Roman women. Physical immaturity in early adolescence impedes both pregnancy and childbirth as the above example of Calpurnia's dangerous miscarriage illustrates. Girls in the first years after menarche are less likely to become pregnant in the first place.³⁸ Those girls who do become pregnant face a high risk of complications or, in premodern societies such as Rome, death in childbirth – a pattern noted by Roman physicians.³⁹ The Roman Empire thus displays a surprising parallel with the modern developing world, in that its early marriage pattern was driven less by fertility demands and more by social expectations for the proper fulfillment of gender roles.

Although quantitative studies confirm that early marriage and childbearing were motivated by pressures that were not solely demographic, they still provide only a partial picture of young women's experiences. Questions about how early marriage and childbearing were viewed from a social and cultural perspective – the “social dimensions of demography”⁴⁰ – lie at the heart of this study.⁴¹ For members of the Roman elite, as Augustus' marriage legislation makes clear, the motivations for and consequences of age at first marriage radiated out from the individual and the family into the wider world of politics and state concerns. As the following chapters will demonstrate, concerns as diverse as fertility, sexual purity and modesty, education, dowry, and politics played a part in perpetuating early

³⁵ Bagnall and Frier (1994) 143; Bagnall, Frier, and Rutherford (1997) 105; Frier (2000) 800.

³⁶ Scheidel (2007) 399–400 and (2001) 44–46 cite comparative evidence from medieval and early modern Europe in arguing that even in a high-mortality demographic regime, “late marriage does not excessively constrain marital fertility, as long as most women eventually marry.”

³⁷ Frier (2001) 148–50.

³⁸ Ferin, Jewelewicz, and Warren (1993) 83–87 note that girls experience a period of subfecundity for up to two years after menarche.

³⁹ Sor. *Gyn.* 1.33–4 (*CMG* 4, 22–4 Ilberg). See Laes (2004) for an overview of the evidence for young mothers who died in childbirth. Parkin (1992) 124–25 argues that girls' physical immaturity meant that at Rome “the reproductive span would on average have remained much the same, whether women were marrying at fourteen or eighteen years.”

⁴⁰ Bagnall and Frier (1994) 32 observe that “we need also to know, especially, how early marriage and childbirth, or infant mortality, are viewed and evaluated from a social and cultural standpoint.”

⁴¹ And, as Caldwell (2004) 12 notes, social history can begin to fill in the picture sketched by sparse population data from the empire: “Certainly, more family and social analysis will help clothe the indistinct demographic findings, and may make some more probable, but not certain.”

marriage and childbearing at the level of family and state. Offering explanations for the pattern of girls' age at first marriage is critical for understanding not only the trajectory of girls' lives but also the dynamics of Roman social and legal institutions. To put this point another way, quantitative studies can illuminate broad patterns critical to understanding the workings of Roman society; however, investigating these patterns from a cultural perspective adds color to these patterns, by asking how the Romans themselves might have understood them.

Fannia's epitaph is particularly instructive in this regard. As it emphasizes virtues particularly valued in wives, it serves as a reminder that the image of young women that emerges from any given text is selective and depends on the perspective of its author. As this study will demonstrate, an array of Roman imperial writers – physicians, jurists, moralists, and poets – were fascinated by the physical and social transitions that girls experienced in youth. Their vantage points and subject matter are wide-ranging, and a central contention of this book is that these authors' writings must be juxtaposed, to allow for an evaluation of the ways in which they conform to and depart from each other. Such comparison of the sources promises to add to our understanding of attitudes toward girls who stood between childhood and adulthood. In doing so, it follows the lead of recent fruitful studies of the position of various age and sex groups in Roman society, such as children, the elderly, and male adolescents.⁴²

While it is indebted to previous lines of inquiry, the approach of this book also differs from that of previous studies of Roman girls' transition to adulthood. Earlier studies fall roughly into two groups. The first are those which treat girls' coming of age as a small part of a broader topic such as women's education, women's health, marriage, or the demarcation of various life-stages in the Roman world.⁴³ The second group tends to treat girls' movement into their adult social role as celebrated by the ritual of the wedding. This approach has so far dominated, and several studies have successfully analyzed bridal costume, and the ceremony itself, as symbolizing the movement of the bride from childhood to womanhood.⁴⁴

⁴² Laes (2011), Dixon (2001), and Rawson (2003) examine children and childhood in the Roman world; Parkin (2003) evaluates the position of the elderly; Eyben (1993) and Kleijwegt (1991) discuss Roman attitudes toward male teenagers and the place of education in their socialization.

⁴³ Alberici and Harlow (2007) 193–203, Harlow and Laurence (2002) 54–64, Flemming (2000) 236–37, Hemelrijk (1999) 20–30, and Treggiari (1991) 398–403 address aspects of the female transition to adulthood in the Roman world.

⁴⁴ Hersch (2010) 295–96 asserts that “in the eyes of Roman society, the wedding made girls . . . into useful, functioning women.” Harlow and Laurence (2002) 54 also prioritize the wedding: “Where

Yet viewing a girl's transition to her adult social and sexual role as signified through ritual can advance our understanding only in a limited way since there is no evidence for publicly sanctioned rituals in which girls participated other than the wedding. Boys took part in the ceremony of the *toga virilis*, the adoption of the adult toga, to celebrate their physical and political maturity,⁴⁵ and an analogous public ceremony celebrating girls' physical puberty would provide a valuable counterpart to surviving descriptions and depictions of nuptial ritual. Such evidence is available for classical Greece: Athenian girls celebrated their puberty in a rather flamboyant ceremony, the Arkteia, at Brauron.⁴⁶ The Romans appear not to have imbued girls' achievement of puberty or menarche with such cultural or religious significance.⁴⁷ Only one early imperial author, Persius, briefly refers to a *virgo*, an unmarried girl, who dedicates dolls to Venus.⁴⁸ Christian authors from the second to fifth centuries who are hostile to polytheistic or "pagan" practices listed girls' dedication of their dolls, toys, and childhood togas as practices that should be decried.⁴⁹ Still, these authors say nothing about rituals specifically connected to or celebrating puberty. The visual and archaeological record does not preserve information about a puberty ritual, for boys or for girls.⁵⁰ Even if there were more substantial evidence for girls' ritual, this, too, would provide only limited insight into girls' experience, which was surely shaped by "family, friends, economic forces, and values at work in the larger society" in which they lived.⁵¹ Rather than considering wedding ritual as a pivot-point between childhood and adulthood, it is possible to conceptualize the experience of transition as taking place over an extended period of time. This model of transition draws attention not only to its length but to its

her brother may have made the transition to adulthood in a series of gradual stages and growing experiences, a girl made it on the day of her wedding."

⁴⁵ In a ritual marking his transition to political adulthood, a teenage boy made dedications in his home and was then led by his father and family friends into the Forum to take up the adult toga. See Rawson (2003) 144, 325; Plin. *Ep.* 8.14; Mart. 1.31.6 and 10.42.2; Fayer (2005) 419–20.

⁴⁶ King (1998) 259 n.2 describes how girls played the part of *arktoi*, she-bears, apparently anticipating the transition from *parthenos* to *gyne*, with Artemis overseeing the transitions. See Ar. *Lys.* 645 and Cole (1998) 27–43. For scenes from the Arkteia on vases, see Sourvinou-Inwood (1988) 31–66.

⁴⁷ Rawson (2003) 145.

⁴⁸ Pers. 2.70: *quod sint Veneri donatae a virgine pupae*. See also Fayer (2005) 476.

⁴⁹ Lactant. *Div. inst.* 2.4.12 quotes Pers. 2.70: *verum illud ridicule subdidit: 'hoc esse aurum in templis, quod sint Veneri donatae a virgine pupae'* ("[Persius] subjected to ridicule the fact 'that there is gold in temples, and that dolls are dedicated by a virgin to Venus'"). Arnobius, *Adv. nat.* 2.67, asks, *puellarum togulas Fortunam defertis ad Virginalem?* ("Do you still dedicate the little togas of girls to Fortuna Virginalis?"). See Fayer (2005) 476. A late commentator on Horace mentions girls' dedication of toys to the *lares* (Pseudo-Acro ad Hor. *Sat.* 1.5.65).

⁵⁰ See further discussion in Chapter 3. ⁵¹ Brumberg (1993) 102.

deep-seated and lasting effects as a study of girls' adolescence in the modern developing world has noted:

Adolescence is a powerfully formative time of transition to adulthood, roughly concurrent with the second decade of life. What happens between the ages of 10 and 19, whether for good or ill, shapes how girls and boys live out their lives as women and men – not only in the reproductive arena, but in the social and economic realm as well.⁵²

By considering an array of perspectives on this formative second decade of Roman girls' lives, my goal is to provide a more expansive methodological framework than previous studies have allowed.

In fact, it seems a book-length examination of Roman girls has not yet been written precisely because scholars have assumed that there is little to study beyond the wedding ceremony. Typifying the perspective of most studies of Roman youth is the notion that girlhood was less complex than boyhood.⁵³ Yet while it is true that there was no life-stage for Roman girls that corresponds to modern adolescence, a period in which young people are physically mature but “not yet burdened with adult roles and responsibilities,”⁵⁴ the contention of this study is that this absence of extended time between physical and social maturation need not be an insurmountable methodological obstacle. Interpreting the source material does require reconfiguring the way “youth” for girls is approached: the focus must turn to uncovering the reasons and consequences of the close timing of physical maturation, sexual initiation, marriage, and childbearing, rather than to identifying a protracted period of adolescence that mirrored boys' experiences. That is to say, the very fact that many upper-class girls “were still children when they became spouses” is worth further exploration.⁵⁵

The sources themselves, which were written largely by and for a well-born male audience, set up substantial, if familiar, challenges. The evaluation of girls or girlhood in these texts (and it is textual evidence on which this study will draw most extensively, with the scantier visual evidence incorporated where possible) is almost exclusively provided by male viewers and interpreters. The view we have is therefore partial and oblique. Moreover, because these authors did not generally discuss adolescent girls

⁵² Mensch, Bruce, and Greene (1998) 1.

⁵³ Eyben (1993) 3. Laes (2011) takes a more expansive approach by including girls in a study of childhood under the headings of sexuality and child labor. Fraschetti (1997) 69 remarks that “the case of girls was far simpler . . . There was only one sole rite of passage in the historic period for *puellae* and *virgines* after reaching puberty, and that was marriage.”

⁵⁴ Mensch, Bruce, and Greene (1998) 4. cf. Sherrod, Sorensen, and Weinert (1986).

⁵⁵ Eyben (1993) 3.

at length, the evidentiary net must be cast widely. Scattered sources can create a picture of girls' lives that is uneven, sketchy, and sometimes ambiguous. Yet in some ways this ambiguity – the fact that not all writers viewed girls in the same way – is what makes the evidence intriguing. The perspective on girls we receive from our sources depends on who is looking, and why.

Chapter 1 of this study, “Formal education and socialization in virtue,” shows that inculcation in proper feminine virtue was a concern of the community as well as of individual families. I build upon studies of Roman women's education, which have portrayed elite families as pouring energy into their daughters' literary and virtue training to equip them with skills that would appeal to prospective husbands. The chapter juxtaposes the formal education of girls, as revealed by the comments of Roman writers and by school exercises and letters surviving on papyri from Roman Egypt, with traditional moralizing stories about virtuous girlhood that circulated in society and even became the subject of public artistic display. The legend of the young heroine Cloelia, for example, provides an intriguing glimpse into how moralizing stories could be used to construct an ideal vision of Roman girlhood. A statue of Cloelia was also placed on the Sacred Way, one of most highly traveled roads in Rome, to celebrate the girl who safeguarded the virginity of a group of Roman maidens against a wartime enemy. Exposure to such a message, along with participation in a circumscribed set of semi-public activities such as state-sponsored choruses, informed girls about both their opportunities and their limitations.

To further examine how the Romans thought about girlhood and its relationship to being Roman, Chapter 2, “Protecting virginity,” treats the question of how female sexual purity, considered all-important for the stability of both family and state, was protected. Mock-forensic speeches from the early empire, known as *controversiae*, point to the extent to which virginity was a culturally valued quality. Such speeches frequently treat the theme of the raped, unmarried girl, her reputation and marriageability compromised, who seeks to have her attacker brought to justice. Increasingly in Roman society, the law was invoked to help rehabilitate a girl's reputation after rape. This is important, since contemporary moralizing writings offer a dark picture of the traditional Roman method for avenging rape within the family: killing the unchaste daughter. Rules associated with the marriage and adultery laws of the Emperor Augustus, in particular, spurred the transformation of chastity protection into a public policy concern. In the empire, authority for restoring order in a situation of rape

was shifting from the domain of the family to that of the law, ideally providing a way for a girl to maintain her social existence even if her virginity had been spoiled.

“All kinds of exercises fitting for girls,” Chapter 3, considers a category of sources that dissented most loudly from the pattern of early age at first marriage: medical writings from the Roman Empire. Physicians, like other sources, share concerns about preserving girls’ virginity and promoting virtuous behavior, but their portrayal of female puberty exposes anxieties about girls’ early movement into marriage and shows a sensitivity to the health risks of teenage childbearing. Rufus of Ephesus, for example, attempted to explain the potentially negative consequences not only of early pregnancy and childbearing, but also, perhaps more surprisingly, of the puberty process itself, for girls’ health. The Romans, of course, knew nothing about the role of hormones in controlling the puberty process,⁵⁶ but they did chart the different stages of puberty and were most interested in menarche as the signal of the beginning of reproductive capability. They also observed, not altogether incorrectly, that diet and exercise influenced the timing of menarche.⁵⁷ Intriguingly, Roman physicians also recognized the risks posed by pregnancy and childbearing in early adolescence, and this awareness shaped their prescriptions for a later marriage age.⁵⁸ In his second-century CE treatise *Regimen for Young Girls*, Rufus criticizes the early marriage of girls as unhealthy. Having observed the perils of early adolescent childbearing, Rufus advocates a marriage age of eighteen. Though he adheres to the dominant Hippocratic model of female health as innately precarious and requiring intervention to remain stable, Rufus innovates by prescribing an alternative to early marriage: a parent-supervised regimen of diet and exercise to keep girls healthy and to squelch inappropriate sexual desires believed to be generated by the biological changes of puberty. How widely Rufus’ advice might have circulated in Roman society is a question I address by investigating evidence for medical writers’ interactions with their wider audience through public lectures, demonstrations, and patient contact.

⁵⁶ The process of physiological development leading to menarche is outlined by Ferin, Jewelewicz, and Warren (1993) 78–87 and by Frisch (2002) 25–26.

⁵⁷ Modern studies, such as Frisch (2002), have shown a close connection between body weight and the onset of menses. Experiments have shown that even a 10 to 15 percent decrease in normal weight is enough to delay menarche or to cause amenorrhea.

⁵⁸ A study of early childbearing in modern developing countries by Senderowitz (1995) 17–18 notes even older adolescents, aged fifteen to nineteen, face a 20–200 percent greater chance of dying during pregnancy than older women.

But to what extent did Roman families listen to the cautionary advice of physicians? Not to a great extent, it would seem: various social and economic pressures in the household seem to have outweighed the physicians' suggestions. Chapter 4, "The pressure to marry," begins by demonstrating that the light regulation of marriage by the law – minimum age, consent to marriage, and ceremony – was designed to leave families, primarily fathers, much freedom to propel girls into marriage at the time and in the way they saw fit. The Roman law of marriage developed in a direction that recognized the value of a virgin bride for enabling an alliance between two men, her father and her prospective husband, at an opportune time. A number of legal cases ask whether a girl should be called a wife if she is led into the home of her husband when she is under the minimum marriage age of twelve. The jurists' view, that a girl should be treated legally *quasi uxor* ("as though she is a wife") in such scenarios, reveals the tendency of the law to yield to social pressures that pushed the marriage age downward. The cultural importance of virginity at marriage, too, combined with concerns about forging favorable family connections and providing an ample dowry – which virginity, in fact, might be considered a part of – may have lowered the marriage age for well-born girls.

Funerary inscriptions for girls who died on the brink of marriage, meanwhile, make clear that parents believed that a daughter was not meant to remain in a state of permanent virginity. The role of wife and mother was her life's goal, and failure to achieve it was mourned as especially tragic. "The wedding and the end of girlhood," Chapter 5, suggests that the idea that a girl made her all-important transition to womanhood on the wedding day goes some way toward explaining one seemingly odd component of wedding ritual: ribald joking at the expense of the couple. Sexual humor, combined with the traditionally lively ceremony's display of a girl as a legitimate object of public attention, made the wedding a powerful vehicle for broadcasting to an audience and to a girl herself the importance of her transition. Catullus 61, a poetic depiction of a wedding from the first century BCE, forms the center of the discussion in this chapter, around which are placed more abbreviated treatments of ritual in rhetorical handbooks, legal writings, novelistic accounts, and advice literature. The wedding ritual, which appears to have been commonly performed among the upper classes, introduced the bride and groom to the community's expectations for their behavior, and authors as diverse as Catullus, Martial, and Petronius make clear the wedding's social significance. Descriptions and portrayals of the wedding night consistently convey the assumption

that the sexual initiation of the bride will be traumatic and thereby imply a recognized downside to marriage at a tender age.⁵⁹

Literary and juristic evidence mostly centers on Rome, but much of the medical evidence was authored by physicians of Greek origin. When the geographical origin of a source poses a difficulty, I attempt to address it, but I also hope to demonstrate that the diversity of the evidence ultimately comes across as more coherent than chaotic as the perspectives offered by different sources and genres address a core of underlying cultural concerns about girls' entry to adulthood. While the emphases may differ, the anxieties about virtue, health and sexuality are broadly consistent. What we can take from the range of viewpoints represented in the sources, moreover, is that the pattern of early marriage was not an inevitability for girls. In the end, then, the purpose of this study is to uncover more about Fannia's transition from daughter to wife to mother than her brief epitaph reveals.

⁵⁹ As Hemelrijk (1999) 9 rightly observes: "Marriage was a major transition in the life of an upper-class girl, changing her, rather abruptly, from a girl into a *matrona*."

Formal education and socialization in virtue

As soon as women turn fourteen, they are called “ladies” (κυρίαί) by men. Therefore, when they see that there is nothing else for them but sharing a bed with men, they start to adorn themselves and in this they place all their hopes. It is right then to be intent on making them perceive that they are valued for nothing other than decorous appearance and modesty.¹

With confident precision, Epictetus invokes a moment that marks the transition between childhood and adolescence for girls. In choosing fourteen, the philosopher concurs with medical and popular opinion that associated this age with the physical maturation for both sexes,² but he is more interested in the social or behavioral changes that accompany puberty. Suddenly, girls are on the brink of womanhood, and they begin to understand the inevitability of their future role as wives.

As Epictetus suggests, girls needed to be instructed in norms of feminine behavior. But what were these norms? Setting the virtue of modesty against the dubious virtue of sexual desirability, Epictetus hints at the necessity of teaching girls that protecting their virginity was their most important task at an age when sexual activity was possible but not permitted. Taking Epictetus’ commentary as starting point, this chapter investigates means of training in modesty, both through explicit instruction and through less

¹ Epict. *Ench.* 40: αἱ γυναῖκες εὐθύς ἀπὸ τεσσαρεσκαίδεκα ἐτῶν ὑπὸ τῶν ἀνδρῶν κυρίαί καλοῦνται. τοιγαροῦν ὀρώσαι, ὅτι ἄλλο μὲν οὐδὲν αὐταῖς πρόσσεστι, μόνον δὲ συγκοιμῶνται τοῖς ἀνδράσι, ἄρχονται καλλωπίζεσθαι καὶ ἐν τούτῳ πάσας ἔχειν τὰς ἐλπίδας. προσέχειν οὖν ὄξιον, ἵνα αἰσθῶνται, διότι ἐπ’ οὐδενὶ ἄλλῳ τιμῶνται ἢ τῷ κόσμῳ φαίνεσθαι καὶ αἰδήμονες.

² Sor. *Gyn.* 1.20 (*CMG* 4, 13–14 Ilberg) expects menarche around the fourteenth year; to these statements can be compared Macrobius. *In somn.* 1.6.71, *post annos autem bis septem ipsa aetatis necessitate pubescit. tunc enim moveri incipit vis generationis in masculis et purgatio feminarum* (“After fourteen years, the [child] becomes pubescent owing to the very requirement of the age. Then the ability to procreate begins to appear in males and menstruation in females”). Hadrian cited fourteen as the age of female puberty, according to Ulp. *D.* 34.1.14.1. For a collection of sources reflecting ancient views of puberty, see Eyben (1972) as well as Armisen-Marchetti (2001) 155 n.165. The medical perspective on female adolescence will be addressed in [Chapter 3](#).

formal influences on behavior encountered in the course of upbringing. The first part of the chapter focuses on the nature of scholastic instruction for girls of marriageable age and asks how education at this age served the purpose of shaping girls into modest proto-wives. As we will see, Roman writers generally agree that too much scholarly accomplishment for girls, or the wrong kind, could disrupt the transition to marriage.

Given the ambivalence about the compatibility of education and female virtue, it was important that other, less formal features of a girl's upbringing offered guidance about acceptable behavior. The second part of the chapter focuses on these less formal socializing influences in the household and community, including female role models and traditional moralizing stories about virtuous girlhood. Analyzing sources on formal education together with these sources on informal socialization contributes to an understanding of what was particularly Roman about the way that girls were trained in modesty and decorous behavior. Both scholastic and non-scholastic evidence, for example, present an image of the ideal unmarried girl as displaying both the feminine virtue of chastity and the masculine virtue of courage. Courage is invoked in a specialized way, to advance the message recommended by Epictetus: girls must know the value of their modesty and be prepared to defend it.

The examination of girls' socialization in this chapter brings together two related areas of scholarship, each of which has received much attention in recent years: the Roman educational system and the Roman moral landscape. In taking an interest in virtues such as chastity and courage, I am guided by recent studies of Roman morality, which have illuminated the ways in which authors took an interest in promoting or questioning norms of behavior for both men and women. Several recent studies have focused on single words describing a moral concept, such as sexual virtue (*pudicitia*) or shame (*pudor*) or courage (*andreia*), and their treatment across genres; these are helpful for considering the promotion of virtue for girls.³ My analysis has also benefited from recent studies that have treated the central role in Roman culture of exemplary stories, which transmitted messages about behavior worthy of imitation.⁴ The success of these previous lines of inquiry attests to the advantage of considering a variety of sources in a study of girls' socialization. It is by combining sources that we see an emphasis on girls' inculcation in courage, for example, that seems

³ *Pudicitia* is the subject of Langlands (2006); *pudor* of Kaster (2005) 28–65; and *andreia* of Rosen and Sluiter (2003).

⁴ Roller (2004).

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