REVIEW ARTICLE

EXPANDING THE WORLDS OF ROMAN WOMEN

CHILTON, Bruce, *Berenice. Queen in Roman Judea*. Pp. xii + 198, map. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2026. Cased, £18.99. ISBN: 978-0-300-27425-7.

KEITH, Alison, *Sulpicia. Life, Love, and Literature in Ancient Rome*. Pp. xvi + 198, ills. New York: Oxford University Press, 2026. Paper, £17.99. ISBN: 978-0-19-760697-1.

MULDER, Tara, *A Womb of One's Own. Lost Histories of Childbirth in Ancient Rome*. Pp. xii + 376, ills, map. Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2026. Cased, US$29.95. ISBN: 978-0-520-39874-0.

SEVERY-HOVEN, Beth Andrea, *Octavia. The Life of a Roman Matron between Antony and Augustus*. Pp. xviii + 269, ills, maps. New York: Oxford University Press, 2026. Cased, £91 (Paper, £17.99). ISBN: 978-0-19-751893-9 (978-0-19-784294-2 pbk).

STEEL, Catherine / WEBB, Lewis (edd.), *Women, Wealth and Power in the Roman Republic*. Pp. xiv + 394, ill. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2026. Cased, £110. ISBN: 978-1-009-69180-2.

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The study of women in antiquity has entered an era of self-confidence that is illuminating, creative and unapologetic. The five books under review traverse the Roman world, mining its literature and material culture for insight into women of all social classes, ages and stages of life. Scholars identify biases in ancient and modern works and offer correctives to past publications; thoughtfully consider understudied evidence and ask new questions of popular texts; assert the presence and influence of women in decisive historical moments and social structures; offer plausible biographies and narratives of women's experiences, occupations and communities; and recognise various ways in which women actively helped shape Rome and Roman politics.

The works include one conference publication, three biographies (two from Oxford's *Women in Antiquity* series and one from Yale's *Ancient Lives* series) and a trade book. I consider them in roughly chronological order, beginning with Steel and Webb's edited collection. Many of the issues introduced in this volume pertain to Severy-Hoven's biography of Octavia the Younger and Keith's biography of the poet Sulpicia. The women of the late Republic find a counterpoint in the Jewish queen Berenice, the subject of Chilton's biography. I close with Mulder's history of childbirth and midwifery in ancient Rome, which consistently creates ties between ancient and modern concerns and practices. These are thoughtful, historically grounded works that model a range of theoretical approaches. We witness scholars using a vast array of evidence and writing for a range of

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audiences, grappling with the past as well as its interpreters to push the boundaries of scholarship.

Several common issues are present. Each author works with ancient textual and material sources to confront stereotypes and aims to construct readings that are reparative, corrective and resistant. Past scholars are scrutinised for bias: in several chapters in Steel and Webb, for example, T. Mommsen is taken to task for allowing his own historical context and a cultural system of gender discrimination to influence his readings. Another challenge concerns the limitations of our evidence. Past scholars tend to prioritise literary texts and gravitate towards well-known women and catalogues of *exempla*. The strongest arguments in these books counterbalance literary with non-literary and documentary evidence, legal texts, epigraphy, material objects and archaeological sites.

Each work is at its best when the authors incorporate understudied sources or ask new questions of well-examined texts. The funerary inscription known as the *Laudatio Turiae* (*CIL* 6.41062) provides proof of concept. The *laudatio* has become a familiar anchoring text for discussions of women in the triumviral period. J. Osgood's biography brought the loving and beloved wife of the *laudatio* to life (J. Osgood, *Turia: A Roman Woman's Civil War* [2014]). Recent work continues to look beyond the wife and her immediate context to the historical and social realities and pressures that shaped her experience. Steel and Webb cite the *Laudatio Turiae* as evidence of different forms and uses of women's wealth in the late Republic and use the text to argue that crisis moments in Roman history brought visibility to the economic power of women. Within the volume, the *laudatio* is useful as a counter-example in F. Rohr Vio and A. Valentini's discussion of women accused of mismanaging wealth; in P. Keegan's catalogue of *patronae*; in C. Kunst's discussion of matronage and female networks; and in A. Finn's study of violence perpetrated against or by women. Severy-Hoven's Octavia links to similar female social networks, while Keith uses the same technique as scholars of the *laudatio*, extrapolating from concrete lexical analysis to build an image of a life. For Mulder, the epitaph serves as a prelude to medical theories of infertility and the religious, magical and medical efforts a woman might make to counter it. The wife thus encapsulates several themes present in current feminist scholarship. She is far more than an object of praise and *exemplum* of womanly virtue: she is an active participant in a world at war, an advocate for her husband, a protector of personal wealth and a woman acutely aware of societal expectations to extend her family line.

STEEL AND WEBB'S WORLD OF FEMALE WEALTH AND POWER

Women, Wealth and Power in the Roman Republic emerged from a 2021 conference; the result is an invaluable collection suitable for advanced students and scholars. The aim is twofold: first, to use specific case studies to explore the political and social consequences of female wealth, and second, to consider the institutional frameworks and social conventions that constrained and enabled women's wealth more broadly. Case studies showcase the variable experiences and privileges of women of different statuses, and authors note the limitations of our evidence when attempting or avoiding larger conclusions. Readers will note the frequent appearance of Cornelia (mother of the Gracchi), Licinia (wife of Gaius Gracchus), Servilia, Clodia, Fulvia, Octavia Minor, Hortensia and the wife praised in the *Laudatio Turiae*, and learn to appreciate the political significance of women's wealth. In sum, the work evinces the impact of women and female networks on the state.

The book comprises an introduction and seventeen chapters that are divided into six parts. The introduction explicates each term in the title. Women are legal persons with a complicated set of rights and responsibilities to the state. Wealth may come in many forms,

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including properties, jewellery, land, money, houses and enslaved persons, and has many uses, from financial contributions to patronage and the provision of dowries. Crises bring visibility to women's wealth and economic power. As a period of indeterminacy and crisis, the late Republic provides a good place to look for evidence of women's wealth.

Part 1, 'Institutional Parameters', considers female participation in civic life from several perspectives. K. Morrell's groundbreaking chapter on *tutela mulierum* elaborates on the constraints of women under male oversight and shows the immense variability in women's experiences of *tutela*. C. Rosillo-López uses mainly anecdotal evidence to consider whether women had a duty to register in the census. Webb convincingly shows that laws and senatorial decrees make some women visible. Webb's argument gains strength from an array of evidence, including Plautus, the *senatus consultum de Bacchanalibus*, an Oscan legal text, the *lex Voconia* and a senatorial decree concerning the Vestal Licinia. H.I. Flower uses a different Licinia, the wife of Gaius Sempronius Gracchus, to argue convincingly that the dowry could include the *domus* where the couple lived. Keegan provides an extensive catalogue of epigraphic evidence for *patronae* in Roman cities during the Republic. On the whole, the section amplifies female visibility and shows the integration of women in their communities, especially in funerary and religious contexts. Readers are advised to consider Republican precursors to the Augustan era, but not to use Augustan realities to inform or bias our understanding of the Republic.

Part 2 considers women's economic power, focusing on Tertia Aemilia, Papiria, the Corneliae and the Caeciliae Metellae, and shows that political crises provided an opportunity to gain wealth. B. Hopwood offers a close reading of testamentary dispositions from the second century BCE in the Aemilian and Cornelian families as a way to elucidate the impact of the *lex Voconia*. Rohr Vio and Valentini, as well as C. Tobin, interrogate evidence of Sulla's wife Caecilia Metella, who acquired properties of proscribed enemies and used them to build up her fortune. The authors show how this led to invectives against her, including accusations of mismanagement and greed. G. Vettori considers other women who used their property to make more wealth, showing an ancient practice of 'flipping' properties (p. 170). Women's ability to control their wealth thus gives rise to examples of female agency and acuity in property management as well as evidence of male anxieties resulting in invective or legislation.

In Part 3 prominent women take centre stage, and scholars emphasise that separating the late Republic and Augustan periods is both artificial and dangerous. J.L. Beness and T. Hillard offer thoughts on symbolic capital and contested memories. Kunst brings our attention to Mucia Tertia and uses the term 'matronage' to consider female networks, wealth, types of capital and prestige. C.H. Bagger turns to the soft power of Octavia Minor and her role as a mediator: Bagger defines Octavia as the 'manifestation of internal *concordia*' between Octavian and Antony (p. 232). Octavia is a symbol or tool, comparable to the Sabine women; this reading provides an effective contrast to Kunst and anticipates Severy-Hoven. While Bagger labels Octavia 'The Last Civil War Matron' in the chapter's title, Severy-Hoven considers whether she was the '*first* "first lady" of imperial Rome' (Severy-Hoven, p. 1).

Part 4 demarcates how the economic roles of women were challenged or changed in times of crisis. C.H. Lange adopts the language of the American Civil War to identify the 'antebellum' state of Rome as a state in *stasis*; his innovative reading transforms Fulvia's actions as a wife grieving over the body of Clodius into an intentional incitement to *stasis* that provides a template for Antony after the death of Julius Caesar. Finn uses Fulvia to consider the physical violence perpetrated by women against other members of their household. From Fulvia, we turn back to Octavia Minor as a central figure in the transition between Republic and Empire. While Bagger centred on *concordia*, L. Van Geel focuses on

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elite *paideia*: in the Treaty of Tarentum, the speech of Plutarch's Octavia functions as a type of *suasoria* that reflects Octavia's education.

K. Welch and C. Scott add a coda on settings in Europe that have obfuscated our view of the ancient world. The opening of their argument captures the volume as a whole: 'Despite the gendered nature of Roman society, we argue that its laws regarding marriage, property and inheritance assisted rather than hindered married women in managing their lives, and especially their livelihoods' (p. 305). In an afterword, J.P. Hallett asks that we continue to recognise and identify bias and provide a corrective in future scholarship, and encourages an expansion of our understanding of the categories of women, wealth and power.

SEVERY-HOVEN ON OCTAVIA'S WORLD BETWEEN TWO MEN

In *Octavia: The Life of a Roman Matron between Antony and Augustus*, Severy-Hoven defines Octavia by the two most prominent men in her world and maps her life onto overlapping historical and biographical periods: her youth in the late Republic, marriage to Antony during the triumviral conflict, and life as model mother and matron in the early years of the Augustan regime. Three distinct aims guide the work: first, to offer a corrective that recognises and reconsiders anti-Antonian rhetoric from the Augustan period; second, to complicate the image of Octavia as an exemplary matron following the blueprint of Cornelia; and third, to consider Octavia as an individual rather than primarily a comparative figure for Cleopatra, Fulvia and Livia. To achieve these goals Severy-Hoven uses literary evidence, coins, statues, inscriptions and poetry contemporary with Octavia's lifetime, building an image of the political landscape and how Octavia featured in it as an actor and advisor. The result is an insightful study defined by negotiation: Severy-Hoven balances different types of evidence, urges readers not to allow themselves to be overly influenced by their historical knowledge, and guides us to see Octavia as an intercessor between her husband and brother who simultaneously (and successfully) navigated changing expectations and roles of women between Republic and Empire.

The first two chapters consider Octavia's upbringing in the late Republic. Severy-Hoven distinguishes her history by emphasising the role of matrons in teaching Octavia how to manage a household and be an economic agent, and the parallel impact of Roman legends and historical figures that shaped her understanding of women as wives, mothers and daughters. Octavia's matronal obligation to maintain her family's 'sociopolitical network' was achieved through her marriage to Gaius Claudius Marcellus (p. 30); the discussion dovetails well with Kunst's concept of 'matronage' and Van Geel's emphasis on *paideia*, discussed above.

Chapter 3 considers the years following the assassination of Julius Caesar. As in Steel and Webb, Severy-Hoven shows how women's work becomes more visible in periods of conflict. She places continued emphasis on women's roles in maintaining social networks, gathering and distributing reliable information, negotiating assistance and asking for clemency. Octavia's intercessions on behalf of Tanusia are comparable to those of the wife in the *Laudatio Turiae*. However, these and other manoeuvres show that gender norms and expectations were starting to fray as Rome suffered under the control of the 'strongmen' Antony and Octavian.

In Chapter 4 Octavia is objectified as a 'tool' to connect the strongmen through her diplomatic marriage to Antony. The first part of the chapter centres on Antony's former wife, Fulvia, as an 'actively engaged but norm-observing elite matron' who later had a 'pioneering role as part of the Triumviral proto-court' (pp. 60, 71). It is not a complete defence of Fulvia, but a recognition of the varied interpretations of her 'unprecedentedly

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public presence' (p. 71). Octavia's second marriage emblematises a growing trend in which marriages were used to 'reinforce treaties and other political agreements' (p. 72). The following chapter presents a novel perspective, characterising Octavia as a complicated trendsetter. First, when Octavia moved to Athens with Antony, she set a precedent for women going abroad with their husbands. Second, Octavia's appearances on coinage together with Antony as well as her public imagery made her part of the Hellenising royal image of Antony. Both trends reappear later in the Julio-Claudian era.

In Chapter 6 Octavia's roles as power broker, negotiator, conciliator and direct link between Octavian and Antony become paramount as we arrive at Tarentum in 37 BCE. Severy-Hoven's comparison of Octavia to Livy's Sabine women parallels Bagger's argument above, and Severy-Hoven even suggests that Octavia's speech in Plutarch may have influenced Livy (p. 109). Where Van Geel sees a *suasoria*, Severy-Hoven emphasises how Octavia was extending her traditional duties as an elite Roman matron by mediating between husband and brother, innovatively performing those duties in public. Severy-Hoven's main scholarly intervention concerns Octavia's return to Athens, where she did not see Antony: while others interpret this moment as the beginning of the end of their marriage, Severy-Hoven rightly emphasises that they did not divorce until 32 BCE. Rather, we should compare Octavia's actions in Athens to those at Tarentum, and consider them both as peacekeeping missions. Her discussion of Octavia between 37 and 32 BCE shows, first, how Octavia continued to be Antony's 'avatar' in Rome (p. 126); second, that Antony did not intend his relationship with Cleopatra to be 'mutually exclusive of a marriage alliance with Octavia' (p. 132); and third, that Shakespeare is to blame for making those pivotal years seem insignificant.

Chapter 7 looks at the honours of 35 BCE granted to Octavia and Livia, and finds the freedom from *tutela* particularly 'provocative', considering Octavian was likely his sister's guardian (p. 144). Severy-Hoven follows Octavia through her divorce, an act that became 'tantamount to civil war' (p. 163). In 32 BCE Octavia moved into Octavian's house and took all of Antony's children with her. The following chapter focuses on Octavia's education and care for her children, her association with scholars and intellectuals who served as their tutors and her role in arranging high-level marriages for them. We have returned to the opening chapter's discussion of female social networking: in a new era, marriages were used to cultivate loyalty to the imperial house.

In Chapter 9 Octavia continues to participate in and even anticipate trends through her public munificence. The Portico of Octavia exemplifies the blurring of lines between public and private: where Van Geel centres on the libraries as evidence of Octavia's intellectual life, Severy-Hoven uses the statue of Cornelia to suggest that Octavia may have had a role in crafting Cornelia's public image and legend as an *exemplum*. By rewriting the memory of Cornelia to present her as a role model, Octavia strengthened her own public image as an exemplary mother. The nearby Theatre of Marcellus and Octavia's literary representation as a grieving mother are not the focus. In closing, Severy-Hoven remains true to her purpose: to use Octavia as a lens through which to examine a critical period in history. We witness Octavia as trendsetter and innovator, a woman caught between the politics of two men who occupied an increasingly public role over the course of her life without providing material for invectives against her.

KEITH ON SULPICIA'S WORLD OF POETIC INSPIRATION

The elegiac poet Sulpicia provides a cultural counterpoint to Octavia. While Octavia became a cornerstone of the first imperial household, Sulpicia made a place for herself

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amongst the poets of her day. Throughout Keith's biography, *Sulpicia: Life, Love, and Literature in Ancient Rome*, we glimpse an educated young woman on the brink of becoming a wife, full of emotion and intellectual promise, aware of societal expectations, and hopeful that love and marriage may be wedded together.

In the introduction Keith identifies the challenges in constructing a life based on Sulpicia's poetry, for everything we know about her 'derives solely from the poems in which she speaks and is named' (p. 3). Sulpicia's poetry offers the possibility of 'direct contact with a historical Roman woman', an image that has not been refracted through other people's writing (p. 3). In what follows, Keith combines a history of Roman love poetry and the lexicon of Latin poets of the first century, a literary history of female poets, a background to Roman political history, and a history of both gender and genre conventions and how they feature in Sulpicia's corpus. She identifies and celebrates pointedly feminine aspects of her poetry, considers her entire literary production and illuminates her role as a (female) artist. Readers will come away with a deep understanding of Sulpicia's poetry and her self-representation as a young, erudite, sexually confident Roman aristocrat.

Part 1 considers the texts. Keith's history of textual transmission is also an exploration of centuries of scholarly thought on what might constitute a female voice and feminine perspective in Roman love poetry. Sulpicia has struggled against various forms of delegitimisation that range from a full denial of her existence to questioning which poems were written by her and how to assess her poetic technique and engagement with other poetry. Keith reclaims Sulpicia's voice, elucidating her biography and literary talent in equal measure.

In Part 2 Keith breaks down Sulpicia's family tree, tracing the Sulpicii back to the dawn of the Roman Republic and linking her to the Augustan aristocracy. The dense prosopography has thematic ties with Severy-Hoven's life of Octavia: family legends played a similar part in Sulpicia's moral education and connected ancestry to moral excellence. Keith is insightful, detailed and meticulous in drawing both paternal and maternal lines, and acknowledges unanswerable questions. Part 2 closes with an illuminating chapter on Sulpicia's upbringing and the education of elite Roman girls in ethical and linguistic standards. Keith harnesses evidence from inscriptions, frescoes and sculptures, biographical anecdotes from Cicero, Caesar and others, and Sulpicia's poetry. Toy dolls, for example, provided a means for young girls to learn about the roles of adult women, including adornment; Sulpicia's focus on her hairstyle at the opening of poem 3.8 suggests that she had a privileged upbringing that included an education in elegance. Keith outlines the process of betrothal, courtship and marriage in Sulpicia's era and emphasises the role of women in negotiating each step; Sulpicia's poetry reveals an amatory relationship that reflects the preliminaries to a socially suitable marriage match. Frescoes from the Villa della Farnesina complement the text, but there is room for closer engagement.

Keith proceeds with Sulpicia's biographical poetry, picking apart individual lexical items in order to build up an impression of her life. The entire Sulpicia cycle is included at the end of the volume in Latin and English: readers should (re)familiarise themselves with the poems under consideration in order to appreciate Keith's analysis. Knowledge of Latin is not a prerequisite for books in this series, but Keith's argument often depends on particularities in language, style, syntax and metre. Sulpicia was an erudite elite woman with advanced knowledge of poetic *topoi*, themes and metrical conventions; specificities in the language allow Keith to draw together the first-person poems with those written in the third person as a cohesive cycle.

Part 3 is a masterful analysis of Sulpicia's poetry and literary contexts. Keith emphasises the importance of Sulpicia's genealogy and upbringing and the roles played by her father and uncle as leading statesmen, prominent patrons and practitioners in the literary circles of

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early Augustan Rome. She theorises the potential impact of Messalla's patronage, centring on how Sulpicia was exposed to the genre of Roman love poetry and its composers. Sulpicia was indebted to Greek female poets, Hellenistic epigram and Latin love poets. Meleager's *Garland* and its inclusion of female poets was exceptionally influential. On the Roman side, Keith reads Cornificia as 'the single most important Latin female model for Sulpicia' (p. 86). Sulpicia emerges not as an anomaly for writing poetry: the anomaly is that her poetry survived.

From literary contexts, we turn to literary interlocutors. Keith identifies echoes of Propertius, adding to scholarship on intertexts with Ovid and Tibullus. Propertian allusions are also the subject of Keith's chapter in a masterful recent volume on the poet (A. Keith, 'Sulpicia and Propertius', in: G. Celotto and L. Fulkerson [edd.], *Sulpicia: A Woman's Voice from Ancient Rome* [2025], pp. 100–32). In Keith's analysis, Sulpicia becomes a poet of playful yet culturally significant disruption: Sulpicia disrupts Roman social norms, gender and status hierarchies, age hierarchies, as well as conventions in the lexicon and syntax of Latin erotic poetry. Her 'consummate control' of generic conventions allows her to add an 'innovative feminine voicing' to elegy (p. 100). The strain she puts on the elegiac lexicon is exemplified by her use of *cura* in poem 3.16 (p. 114). Her idiosyncratic style also allows Keith to attribute to Sulpicia the authorship of more poems in the cycle than many prior scholars have accepted, as well as the fascinating epitaph of the freedwoman Sulpicia Petale, a 'reader' in Sulpicia's household.

The question of Sulpicia's reception is taken up in Chapter 7. Using Catullus, Cornificia and Ovid's 'Perilla' as evidence, Keith argues that Sulpicia may have associated with elite male poets in Messalla's patronage and gained access to elite masculine literary culture, but that she would have had to go through domestic channels. The importance of her family connections thus comes full circle. We can only conjecture about how her collection came together and was edited and potentially distributed; similarly, we do not know Sulpicia's fate and whether she married her beloved 'Cerinthus'.

CHILTON ON BERENICE'S OVERLAPPING WORLDS

In Keith's biography the story of Sulpicia's life ends when she is on the brink of a socially acceptable marriage. For Chilton, this moment is where Berenice's life begins. In *Berenice: Queen in Roman Judea*, Chilton centres his study firmly on the inherited political aspirations of a consequential figure in both Jewish and Roman history. Chilton places Berenice in the context of the development and history of Judaism and Roman Judea, counters the negative portrait of Berenice present in Josephus, Juvenal and others, and offers a balanced reading.

Chilton focuses on Berenice's intentions as gleaned from her actions: her inner, emotional life and temperament are elusive. Part 1 follows her path to becoming queen. A background to Herod the Great and Second Temple Judaism establishes the thematic interconnectedness of religious and political history. As a child, Berenice was less of a person than a tool for securing power. At age ten, her marriage to Marcus Julius Alexander was arranged. The marriages of her and her sisters 'undoubtedly functioned within their culture's paradigmatic expectations of their gender' (p. 26). Berenice serves as political capital, and she and her sisters were 'sexual pawns in the great Herodian game' (p. 25).

Chapter 2 follows Berenice and her first husband to Alexandria. Berenice's actions suggested her larger ambitions: she gained her 'financial and diplomatic' skills from her mother and 'capacity for drama' from her father (p. 29). At this stage, she occupies a complicated position as both a 'victim of circumstance' and an 'agent of her dynasty's

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success' (p. 30). As evidence of the latter, Chilton points to her husband's family as financial resources for her father; as evidence of the former, Chilton records the death of her first husband when she was fifteen or sixteen and her prompt betrothal to Herod, king of Chalcis. She was now a queen, but still a dynastic pawn.

In Part 2 Berenice advances to an active role as a Roman influencer. Herod of Chalcis dies after four years of marriage. In that time he and Berenice had two sons, Berenicianus and Hyrcanus. We do not hear about her motherhood or role in the lives of her children. After Herod's death Berenice made decisions about her domestic life. While her brother Agrippa II used marriage arrangements as an 'instrument of policy', Berenice and her sisters, Drusilla and Mariamme, demanded circumcision as a requirement for marriage (p. 68). In this demand, politics and religion confront each other. Berenice asserted her power by contracting her own marriage to Polemon, king of Pontus, Colchis and Cilicia in Asia Minor, but the marriage did not last.

Chilton expertly contextualises Berenice in relation to other wives and women in the region before turning to a complicated history of conflict. The actions of Agrippa II and Berenice after the arrest of the apostle Paul are pivotal: although the sources do not give Berenice a voice, Chilton asserts that Berenice was instrumental in shifting the Herodian position towards Paul. The silence imposed on Berenice in the sources means that we need to search for her intentions: she becomes a counsellor to Agrippa II, encourages him to make balanced decisions and proves a powerful negotiator. Accusations of incest with her brother and animosity towards her sisters, present in the ancient sources, are biased misrepresentations. Josephus' varying depictions of Berenice in the *Jewish War* and in *Jewish Antiquities* are based on Josephus' relationship with Rome rather than the realities of Berenice's life.

Part 3 sees Berenice become the imperial consort of Titus. Berenice and her brother needed to cultivate their relationship with Rome and used patronage as a technique. A dedicatory inscription for a statue that was once in the Areopagus in Athens celebrates Berenice as a queen (*IG* II^2 3449); Chilton uses this to evince her independent wealth and influence. As violence shook Jerusalem, Berenice turned to religious penitence and decided to complete a Nazirite vow. It is unclear how unusual this was for a woman of her status or what the risks were. The standout act of her life is undertaken on behalf of her family and in defence of the sanctity of the Temple and becomes an act of implicit resistance.

In the spring of 67 CE Agrippa II and Berenice welcomed Vespasian and his son Titus to Caesarea Philippi / Neronias. Chilton asserts that from that time Titus and Berenice were 'in love' (p. 106). Chapter 6 follows Berenice as Titus' paramour. Chilton dissects Josephus' continued bias against Berenice and turns to Tacitus for the argument that Berenice used her wealth and influence to support Vespasian. Chilton finds her advocacy on his behalf 'critical' to Vespasian's success (p. 115). In 79 CE there was a hope of marriage to Titus, but various crises conspired against the Herodians. Titus' death in 81 CE ended the dream of the restoration of the Temple as well as Berenice's imperial prospects. Titus' death is also the end of Berenice's story.

Chilton's epilogue addresses the effect of Domitian's reign on Berenice's reputation and literary afterlife and provides an excellent summation. Chilton has constructed a political biography centring on Berenice and her intention to extend the Herodian dynasty and its influence. Her actions must be interpreted within the contexts of Second Temple Judaism, Rome's empire and the Herodian 'scramble for power' (p. 142). The death of Titus cut short her political, religious and personal agenda. We do not know what happened to Berenice or what she thought about her life's efforts.

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MULDER'S WORLD OF MIDWIFERY AND CHILDBIRTH

Mulder's *A Womb of One's Own: Lost Histories of Childbirth in Ancient Rome* is exceptional. The impetus for this trade book arises from a desire to counter a common claim in scholarship on Roman women: 'It generally goes something like, "Childbirth in ancient Rome was deadly and terrifying"' (p. 237). Mulder challenges readers to consider birth in antiquity without this assumption. A second impetus underlies Mulder's feminist stance: a history of male doctors seizing authority over childbirth, which had been a traditional realm of female midwives. Her work joins a trending interest in the history of reproduction in ancient Rome (e.g. A.B. Freidin, *Birthing Romans: Childbearing and its Risks in Imperial Rome* [2024]; A. Hug, *Fertility, Ideology and the Cultural Politics of Reproduction at Rome* [2023]). Her solidly feminist perspective and capacious knowledge of ancient medicine provide the foundations for innovative readings and plausible narratives that flesh out the experience of women from prenatal to postpartum care.

An introduction and eleven chapters are divided into specific phases of the birth process, from preconception to immediate postpartum care. The introduction sets up the work primarily as a 'birth story' that takes place in Rome, and secondarily as 'a feminist history of the cultural forces that shaped the experience of giving birth in the ancient Roman world' (p. 1). She asserts that male medical writers are to blame for characterising pregnancy and birth as a 'conflict between mother and fetus', rather than a natural process during which medical practitioners should value a woman's experience and trust in her knowledge of her own body (p. 1). Mulder shows that the conflict between male doctors and mostly female midwives is present in ancient Greece and especially identifiable in medical texts of the second-century CE Roman world. Her sources cover a vast territory, beginning with Greek medical texts from the fifth century BCE and ending with her experiences as the daughter of a midwife. Her own story of giving birth exemplifies the trust and sympathy for midwives that undergirds her history.

Each chapter opens with a creative vignette based on historical sources and embellished to entertain. Chapter 1 uses Galen's account of the wife of Boethus in his *Prognosis* as an entry point into a discussion of preconception and the connection between marriage, potential motherhood and class. Galen's sobering narrative of her illness and treatment for flux introduces the thematic disparagement of midwives in medical texts. Chapter 2 asks how Galen's account can inform us about women's bodies in ancient Rome. Mulder emphasises the coexistence of therapies promoted by Soranus and Galen with 'medical-magical' treatments offered by priests and amulet carvers (p. 37).

In Chapter 3 Mulder considers ancient theories of conception. Galen's 'self-observant' women prompt questions on female knowledge and lived experiences. Treatments for infertility provide Mulder with a locus for the beginning of the medicalisation of reproduction. Chapter 4 takes Soranus' treatise on gynaecology as a starting point for a discussion of the control of conception. Chapter 5 locates readers in imperial Rome and uses Ovid's Corinna to consider the topic of abortion. The cumulative evidence is plentiful enough for some scholars to suggest that abortions were quite common. Mulder advises against this view.

Chapter 6 turns to the prenatal period. Mulder argues that, despite male attempts at reproductive control, midwives and experienced women still held authority in terms of knowledge and care. The bodies of pregnant women discovered in Pompeii and Oplontis offer a dramatic snapshot: medical texts present a view of ideal prenatal behaviour, but bioarchaeological evidence tells a story of nutritional deficiencies and other marks of suffering. In Chapter 7 we hear the voice of Petronilla, writing to magistrates in Roman Egypt in the second century CE about the legal status of her son, Lucius. In order to

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safeguard Lucius' patrimony, Petronilla must prove that she was pregnant with her husband's child. Midwives play vital roles as witnesses, but it remains unclear how often midwives might be called upon or whether their legal authority was recognised throughout the empire.

Chapter 8, the centrepiece of the work, celebrates the real midwives of ancient Rome, attested by archaeology, tomb inscriptions and material artefacts. Mulder repeats the focal points of her argument. First, 'physicians in ancient Rome were not necessarily more trained, learned, or respected than midwives' (p. 145). Second, the 'distinction between literary and non-literary practices broke along gender lines. On the whole – with some exceptions – men were writing and women were not' (p. 146). Thus, men could write midwives out of their texts. This distinction merits repeating and exists along the lines of status as well as gender. The male perception is misogynist, patriarchal and hierarchical. Mulder views midwives as valued members of the community, trusted by women. She continues with a detailed discussion of the birth process in Chapter 9, including practicalities of supplies, attendants, ideal birthing space and tools of labour management. Roman birth amulets are a highlight of the discussion. Soranus' *Gynecology* remains a main point of reference, although it is unclear whether it was descriptive or prescriptive (p. 179).

Chapter 10 addresses difficult births, beginning with an imagined account of Agrippina the Younger's footling breech birth of Nero. Mulder argues that, 'Far from being common, difficult birth – and, especially, maternal death in childbirth – would have been an uncommon experience' (p. 183). She considers potential causes of difficult labour and birth, including early age at first pregnancy, closely spaced pregnancies and nutritional deficiencies (p. 187). Mulder's personal knowledge of modern midwifery practices informs the chapter.

The final chapter considers the critical period following birth, including the pressures placed on mothers, wet nurses and midwives to help the infant survive. Mulder argues against claims that babies born with disabilities or congenital conditions were often exposed. A funerary epitaph of the enslaved child Threptus, set up by his wet nurse Oscia Sabina and mother Lamyra (*CIL* 6.23589), is used as possible evidence of 'queer family-making' (p. 235). Mulder concludes with resistance: women exist within structures of patriarchy, misogyny and slavery, but do not let those structures define them.

CONCLUSION

Many of our ancient sources suggest that a woman had to be extraordinary in order to be worthy of record. She must labour alone like a lioness and give birth to healthy male twins, like Empona; prove herself a powerful political intercessor, like Octavia; leave behind poetry so exceptional that men refused to believe a woman could have written it, like Sulpicia; or become known for her wealth, as wealth has always made a person powerful. These books counter assumptions of female inferiority in everything from economics to the body. They question why women are seen as second-rate in their intellect, abilities, influence, capacity to manage money and households, education and writing, and in their physical development from the time of conception. The initial answer is usually patriarchy, but it is never that simple.

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