

Given the nature of our male-dominated source material, perhaps the most difficult familial relationship to study in the ancient world is that of mothers and their daughters. In most respectable Greek and Roman families, this bond is invisible to us, although it was undoubtedly important both emotionally and educationally to the women involved. Two exceptions are the families of Cicero and Pliny, but even here, we possess few concrete details. One of the only means of glimpsing such a mother-daughter relationship is therefore to examine atypical familial structures that lacked a central male figure as the focus of attention. Perhaps the most common type of such a family was the household of a madam and her prostitute daughter.

Relationships between women who were themselves prostitutes or former prostitutes and their “working girl” daughters appear with some frequency in ancient comedies and humorous dialogues, as well as in actual law cases. In ancient fiction, prostitute-mothers are generally portrayed as antagonists to the young male hero or lover-figure, and they view their daughters largely as sources of further profit. Lucian’s *Dialogues of the Courtesans* is a prominent source of such characters and features many greedy, nagging mothers, echoing the hostile, witch-like *lenae* figures that we see elsewhere in Greek and Roman poetry. Conversely, one of Seneca the Elder’s hypothetical law speeches portrays a loving, generous prostitute-mother who nurses her dying lover, and, as a reward, sees her child adopted into an aristocratic family (Seneca, *Cont.*, 2.4.1).

The historical Greek and Roman legal cases featuring mother-daughter prostitute pairs also suggest a frequent financial relationship between the two women, one which had extra resonance beyond the normal societal emphasis on children taking care of their elderly parents. We learn from the famous 4th century BCE trial of the Greek *hetaira* Neaera that Neaera had a maternal figure in the madam Nicarete, who raised and trained her; Neaera herself eventually had a biological daughter, Phano. While Phano may have had some extramarital sexual experience, Neaera worked hard to promote a respectable lifestyle for her, eventually marrying her to a prominent Athenian citizen. Although the text of the speech is highly hostile, it nevertheless gives substantial insights into the bonds of both responsibility and presumed affection between a mother and her illegitimate daughter. A late antique papyrus from Hermoupolis details a poor mother’s lawsuit against the man who killed her prostitute daughter, thus depriving the mother simultaneously of her child and the income needed to support her in old age (Berlin papyrus 1024.6-8, exc. G).

When compared and examined as a whole, these different glimpses of life in mother-daughter prostitute households offer a startling alternative to the conventional narrative of the ancient family. We cannot discount the misogyny and stereotypes present in these tales; even the law cases draw on general societal assumptions about the greed of the female prostitute. Yet these stories also suggest a lifelong, emotionally close, and nurturing relationship. For most of these women, their daughters formed their only permanent familial bond. These cases therefore offer a unique chance to study the relationship between non-elite adult mothers and daughters in the ancient world.

