

The most intractable problem in the feminist study of the ancient Mediterranean world is the lack of ancient female perspective in surviving texts. While perhaps less elegant than the poems of Sulpicia or Sappho, Pompeian graffiti from the first century CE can offer a rare glimpse at non-elite Roman women's feelings and attitudes. Female-authored graffiti reveal the daily lives and experiences of Roman women, particularly when we examine the physical context of the text and contrast domestic and public graffiti. By considering the authors and audience of these texts, I reshape scholarly understanding of the Roman sense of privacy and provide insight into the question of ancient female literacy (Wallace-Hadrill 1988, Milnor 2006). In this paper I focus particularly on graffiti about private relationships, as women's inscriptions about elections and economic issues have already been exhaustively analyzed (Bernstein 1998; Savunen 1995).

Past scholarship, especially that of Antonio Varone (1994) and Elizabeth Woeckner (2002) has generally presumed that public female romantic or sexual statements are all authored by prostitutes or other non-elite working women like the innkeeper Hedone, whereas domestic texts are authored by wives and addressed to their husbands. In the first case, the literacy of both Roman prostitutes themselves and of their expected audience of clients is quite remarkable. If the graffiti found in public locations like the Pompeian basilica or on tombstones are authored by respectable wives, however, we must expand our notions of acceptable public spaces for women and their acts in such places. Graffiti within the home also raise questions concerning interactions between slaves and family members. We must significantly adapt our theories of Roman interfamilial dynamics to imagine literate slaves writing erotic graffiti to or about each other or to their masters on the walls of their masters' homes. If we argue that the owners of the household wrote all these texts, why did they choose to immortalize publicly their relationship with their own slaves or their extramarital affairs with prostitutes?

In house VII 2, 51 in Pompeii, a partially preserved graffito reads: "Virum Vendere Nolo meom [sic] ...quanti quantque VIR VEN..orum." - 'I don't want to sell my husband for any price.' This text, CIL IV.3061, serves as an excellent foundation for a discussion of intended authorship and audience. I compare this graffito to CIL IV. 8824, another domestic inscription in which a presumably slave female writer rejects her master's attempt to call her "domina." Within the public sphere, I examine the motivation behind public accusations of impregnation (CIL IV 10231) as well as women's public denunciations of men for poor romantic behavior. By making a careful study of female-authored romantic graffiti in Pompeii, I demonstrate that both matrons and non-elite women, perhaps even slaves, participated actively in the written social conversations of Roman life and used inscriptions to declare both love and hatred for their sexual partners.