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Manly Matrons in Seneca and Valerius Maximus

This paper focuses on a number of instances in which two Roman writers of the first century CE, Seneca and Valerius Maximus, explicitly describe the exemplary virtue of adult women as a kind of manhood. It argues that these passages embody not mere rhetorical hyperbole but rather a tension between received, traditional Roman ethics and a newer, still developing view of the relation between virtue and gender. The motivating causes for the growing presence of this latter view almost certainly included (1) the altered legal status of women after the *lex Julia de adulteriis* of 18 BCE, (2) the rise of the principate and (3) the increasing influence of Hellenistic philosophies (especially Stoicism) on Roman ideology (on all three see e.g. I. Stahlmann, *Der gefesselte Sexus* Berlin 1997).

In the consolation to his mother Helvia, for example, Seneca exhorts her not to 'use the excuse of the name of woman'(Dial. 12.16.1: non est quod utaris excusatione muliebris nomine) but instead to follow the example of those 'women whose proven uirtus has placed them among the great men'(Dial. 12.16.5: feminas quas conspecta uirtus inter magnos uiros posuit). As instances of such 'manly matrons' Seneca offers the names of Cornelia and Rutilia, a pair of exemplary Roman mothers from republican times. What Seneca accomplishes by this paradoxical formulation is not so much a problematizing of the concept of uirtus as an extension of the class of uiri (implicitly defined as those persons capable of moral deliberation and morally commendable action) to include women. If traditional Roman ethics had denied ethical subjectivity to all beings other than men, Seneca's version of Stoic ethics insisted on an ethical (though certainly not a social) equality of the sexes.

Valerius Maximus' exempla of pudicitia (6.1), written during Seneca's lifetime but belonging to a vastly different generic register (narrative vignettes illustrating 'practical' ethics) from the philosopher's treatises, nevertheless offer some instructive parallels to Seneca's manly matrons. Pudicitia ('modesty') is by no means an exclusively or even predominantly 'feminine' virtue for Valerius. But significantly, the only offended parties whose pudicitia rises to the level of heroic 'manliness' are the two examples of women that open and close the collection: Lucretia, the 'commander'(dux, 6.1.1) of Roman modesty, and the widows of the Teutons who, after Marius had refused their request to be received as Vestal virgins, committed mass suicide by hanging. 'If [the Teutons] had been willing to imitate the manliness of their women (mulierum suarum uirtutem),' Valerius opines, then it is highly uncertain whether the Romans would have been victorious over them (6.1. ext. 3). Valerius does not mean (pace H.-F. Mueller, TAPA 1998) that the Germans should have done a better job of protecting their wives' virtue. He means that the matrons were manlier than the men.