

# Section 10 – Roman Christianity

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## Sex in Rome

Romans had contradictory ideas about how women should behave. Roman noblewomen – setting the standard for all free women – were expected to be chaste and faithful, and to produce noble children.<sup>1</sup>

While this was the ideal, the practice was very different. Prostitution and the possession of sex slaves were commonplace in the Empire. Roman women attended orgies and had sex with slaves for illicit pleasure because this did not carry the heavy sanction that adultery with another noble entailed.<sup>2</sup> Although the Romans were nominally monogamous, it was commonplace for a man to have several wives in succession, and the usual prerequisite that a bride should be a virgin only applied to her first marriage. It was common for a man to divorce his wife, and for her to marry again. This was even a matter of public policy; Augustus Caesar divorced his first wife Scribonia in order to marry Livia, who herself was married and had to be divorced. Fortunately her first husband Nero, whose child she was carrying at the time, was a willing participant in this exchange – for which he was well recompensed by Augustus.<sup>3</sup>

For the ruling patriarchy, a model had to be found to inspire Roman women; one whose virginity was sacrosanct, whose sexual pleasure was totally under the control of her husband, and who saw herself as the loving mother of a new generation of Roman men. For many Romans, this ideal was symbolised by Atia of the Julii, who was matriarch of her household. In her personal history, mythologically at least, she was chaste and responsible; she deferred to her son, Caius Octavius, later Augustus Caesar, but was still a powerful figure. Augustus himself, according to legend, was not sired by a man, but by the god Apollo. This made Augustus the son of a god and moreover, he promoted himself as and was worshipped as such by the Romans. In her personal mythology at least, Atia was proud, of noble birth, chaste and supportive of and loyal to her menfolk.<sup>4</sup>

This cultural motif was much too strong to ignore, so Mary, at least in Roman times, was Atia, the ideal Roman woman, and the idealised role she played would remain the idealised role of women for hundreds of years. Mary is intended to represent the ideal of womanhood within the culture: chaste, devout, obedient, devoted.

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<sup>1</sup> Like many Roman ideals, this one was rather more for public display than private reality. The moral superiority of Patricians over Plebs had to be demonstrated.

<sup>2</sup> Very strict laws forbade adultery, which was punishable by death.

<sup>3</sup> Roman women had no legal choice in this. As possessions of men, they could be exchanged at the will of men.

<sup>4</sup> A mythology somewhat at odds with her personal history.

This is a patriarchal vision of womanhood; it is a straitjacket, or perhaps a chastity-belt. It appropriates women's sexuality and fertility and makes these the property of a male – in Mary's case, Jahweh/Jesus. Fascinatingly, while the Catholic and Orthodox traditions insist that Mary had no other children, in order that she might remain a virgin all her life, the Gospels clearly state that Jesus had brothers and sisters.<sup>5</sup> This has nothing to do with mistranslations or differences in grammar because, in Catholic mythology, Mary is the bride of Jahweh/Jesus, not Joseph.<sup>6</sup> According to this tradition, Mary's marriage to Joseph was never consummated, making it invalid. Since adultery is completely condemned, at least for women, Mary, who as Jahweh's bride is the Goddess, must never have sex with anyone other than Jahweh. Mary's perpetual virginity is a part of the patriarchy's campaign to appropriate the sexuality and fertility of women. Since authority in Catholicism comes not from the specific words of the Bible but from the priestly interpretation of them, it sufficed simply not to mention the other children to support the doctrine of Mary's perpetual virginity.<sup>7</sup>

In Rome, a particular set of attitudes towards sex had become established, which inform Western attitudes today. Sex was seen as an act of status in which the penetrator dominated the penetrated.<sup>8</sup> A whole hierarchy of sexual behaviour was established around this, and culturally associated with a system of honour. Men (the penetrators) were dominant over women (the penetrated). Men, therefore, had more honour than women. All acts of penetration were seen as dominant and therefore honourable for a man. So a man who penetrated another man was not demeaning his own honour, but reinforcing it, since the important issue, for the Romans, was not with whom one had sex, but how. On the other hand, a man allowing himself to be penetrated had abandoned all male honour and was a laughing-stock.<sup>9</sup>

Other sexual acts too, were subject to this hierarchical model. Since fellatio involves oral penetration, the person performing it loses status. For man to perform cunnilingus on a woman was also seen as submissive and a betrayal of his male honour. In fact, all of the techniques used to give women sexual pleasure were seen as dishonourable, and a man who practised them reduced his status.

Even women's sexual pleasure itself became dishonourable. The patriarchy condemns women's sexual pleasure, and this is nowhere more starkly obvious than in the hideous practice of Female

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<sup>5</sup> Three of the Gospels mention Jesus' brothers: Matthew 12:46, Luke 8:19, and Mark 3:31. The Gospel of Matthew gives their names: James, Joseph, Simon, and Judas (Matthew 13:55), and also states that Jesus had sisters (Matthew 13:56). This is not a translational issue, since the specific Greek words for 'brother' and 'sister' are used.

<sup>6</sup> For Catholics, authority does not come from the Bible but from priestly (not individual) interpretation of it, or *dogma*. Where dogma and the Bible disagree, dogma is relied upon.

<sup>7</sup> When they are mentioned at all, in response to a literate questioner, it is as children of Joseph by a previous marriage.

<sup>8</sup> Skinner, Marilyn B. *Sexuality in Greek and Roman Culture*. Wiley-Blackwell. 2013.

<sup>9</sup> This association between male homosexuality and male honour leads directly to the abuse of homosexual men, since by acting in a way that the patriarchy considers demeaning, they impinge on the 'honour' of all men, and defy the patriarchy; which no man may do with impunity.

Genital Mutilation, which carves out a woman's clitoris, an organ that has no function other than providing pleasure.<sup>10</sup>

Women's honour in Rome derived from being good and loyal wives and mothers. Sex for a woman was about procreation and satisfying her husband, rather than her own pleasure. The chaste and loyal wife could ameliorate the debasement of honour that being penetrated entailed because she served a greater honour: the production of Roman sons who would carry their father's name. Women were not expected to take pleasure in sex; it was only for the purpose of reproduction, an idea that remains central to patriarchal belief today.

At the same time, however, Romans were extravagant libertines. Julius Caesar has been described as a 'pan-sexual playboy' and this was a commonplace lifestyle for patrician men. Although the public expression of sexual indulgence was at its height during the notorious reigns of Caligula and Nero, even the socially conservative Vespasian, who followed them, merely insisted on greater discretion and privacy; the practices continued apace.

Clearly there is a dichotomy here, and it needs to be explained: how could all the sex that we know was going on have been happening in this bizarre construct of sexual morality?

Nearly all the workers in the common brothels and bath-houses were slaves, and many Roman households kept slaves specifically to service the desires of the masters, and even, sometimes, the mistresses. A Roman man had power of life and death over everyone in his household. They were all his personal property, to do with as he wished, from the lowest scullion to his wife, and while his wife did enjoy limited legal protection, absolutely none was afforded to slaves. He could have sex with as many of them as he liked, in any way he liked. We know from Pompeii that patrician homes had special rooms designed as places where orgiastic acts of sex could be performed, with slaves.

Roman society was divided into four different strata, the Patrician or noble elite, the common people or Plebeians, 'Freed' men and women, who had once been slaves, and slaves themselves. All of these groups wore badges to identify their class; the toga was only worn by Patricians, for example, and Freed people wore a distinctive cap.

Being born free gave honour to the Patrician noble class and the Plebeian common people, but this honour could be lost – if, for example, they were sold into slavery. People from either of these classes could rise to the highest echelons of Roman society. Freed people could own businesses and gain respect and honour, but they could not take part in government, though their children, born in freedom, could.

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<sup>10</sup> This disgusting cruelty is still practised today within Islamic communities even in Europe, but also by other groups.

Honour supported the patriarchy. Since honour flowed from men, it was hierarchical and could be won and lost in terms of how one behaved or was seen to behave. Rising through the ranks of the army by dint of his ability afforded the great general Pompey Magnus sufficient honour to become a Consul of Rome, even though he was a commoner. So the system did, to an extent, reward ability and merit, at least for men.

Slaves' absolute lack of honour meant that they could never dishonour anyone, no matter what they did or was done to them, any more than a horse could. This was the key to the double standard of Roman life, and nowhere more so than in matters sexual.<sup>304</sup><sup>11</sup>

After Augustus Caesar passed a law that required all prostitutes to be registered, this dichotomy took another twist. Prostitutes' names were entered in a register, and they were issued a licence. Once a name was on the register, it could never be removed and this was tantamount to the surrender of any honour the person might have had. To mark their distinction from 'honourable' women, female prostitutes were not allowed to wear their hair up, but had to leave it down. They were not allowed to wear matronly gowns, and they were forbidden to wear the colour purple. Even if the person were free and so possessed honour, entry on the register formally removed it, so that no matter how she or he might be used, it would have no consequences for the honour of the user. This conveniently removed the wild and libidinous sex that was an everyday part of Roman life from the rigid honour system.

Sex in a religious context was also excluded from the prohibitions, and in many temples, particularly those to Bacchus, orgies were organised several times per month. For a Roman wife to commit adultery with another noble would have been illegal, yet Roman women of good families attended such orgies, where all manner of sexual acts were performed. Nothing was taboo here.<sup>12</sup>

Roman culture associated particular sexual behaviours with honour, status and class. It made appearing to be sexually abstinent honourable, while turning a blind eye on what was actually going on. Romans thought very little more of having sex with a slave or a prostitute – of either sex – than with a modern sex toy. Slaves were possessions, their lives at the whim of their owners, and free prostitutes had adopted the same status.

This attitude toward sex and honour had two important consequences as Roman culture was crystallised into the nascent Christianity. The first was to associate women's sexual independence with prostitution, and prostitution with slavery – that is, to have no honour. Being

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<sup>11</sup> Burton, Neel. *Hide and Seek: the psychology of self-deception*. Acheron Press. 2012

<sup>12</sup> The patriarchy relies on lower-class, mostly female prostitutes to sexually satisfy high-status men and preserve the illusion of 'moral' rectitude. Limiting their freedom to own property or businesses or to be employed in other ways tends to ensure a ready supply.

a sexually independent woman became dishonourable, and being a prostitute was the abandonment of all honour. By implication, for a woman to seek sexual pleasure became dishonourable.

This is reflected in the Christian opposition to women enjoying sex for its own sake, and of course lesbian sex, which cannot be procreative.<sup>13</sup> The function of women in the patriarchy is to produce sons that bear their fathers' names; were they to enjoy sex, then they might take control of their own sexuality, and this the patriarchy cannot countenance.

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<sup>13</sup> This is one of the causes of the widespread fallacy of female sexual reticence, still promoted by patriarchal apologists, even when they are pretending to be scientists.