

## A Woman's Virtus? Perceptions of the Female Gladiator

Thomas Kocjan

*In a response to the claim presented by Kathleen Coleman (2000), that female gladiators entered the arena only as an exceptional addition to a male-centric activity, this paper offers some reasons why female gladiators entered the arena. To achieve this, it is necessary to investigate other instances of the female entering the male-sphere, such as the female Roman prostitute, to construct parallels and arrive at a possible explanation. By drawing on surviving inscriptions and depictions of female gladiators, brothel graffiti at Pompeii, and the moralizing attitudes of the ancient sources such as Cicero, it will be argued that like the female Roman prostitute, female gladiators rejected Roman social values and norms. Living as infames – social and legal outcasts – the “gladiatrix” found herself within a dichotomy of the elite (femina) and non-elite (mulier) woman. This distinction is present within the imperial edicts of Septimius Severus and is repeated elsewhere when female gladiators are mentioned. Whether elite or non-elite women, female gladiators in the Roman world showed a certain type of womanly virtue which is exemplified in their rejection of the traditional mores, and in the countercultural pursuit of martial training.*

### Introduction

The topic of female gladiators during the Roman period has been difficult to address. The scant amount of archaeological evidence and the biases of the ancient sources are both a cause of concern and an opportunity to make dangerous assumptions. Instead of discussing whether female gladiators were considered a novelty or an exceptional addition to the male-centric gladiatorial arena as Kathleen Coleman suggests,<sup>1</sup> this paper will attempt to discover some of the reasons why, if at all, female gladiators entered the arena. It is not unreasonable to consider that female gladiators had no differing reasons to enter in this profession than many of their male counterparts, and this will be considered below. Naturally, the ancient sources will not disclose such information explicitly. Rather it is necessary to draw upon other instances of the female entering the masculine sphere, such as the Roman prostitute, where evidence is present archaeologically and receives a strong treatment in the ancient sources, to make parallels and arrive at a possible explanation. It will be argued that like the Roman prostitute, female gladiators existed in a state of rejection of the Roman social values and norms, living as *infames* within the dichotomy of *femina*, the lady, and *mulier*, the woman. A discussion on the impact of elite and non-elite women as gladiators and the reactions by ancient sources will follow.

### Background

Before a discussion on the female gladiator is made, it is necessary to make a few general points on the cultural and ideological complexities, which inform current knowledge of the world in which Roman women operated. The Romans saw women as by nature both responsible for and representative of the private and domestic spheres, which prioritized the family and household tasks.<sup>2</sup> Women were measured against certain standards and

ideals, including the ability to bear children, remain loyal to their husbands, and exhibit their expertise in household tasks.<sup>3</sup> Kristina Milnor makes the argument that since the domestic life of a Roman woman was for the most part static, there was little reason to record the life of a good woman.<sup>4</sup> Only in exceptional circumstances and concerning the lives of late republican and imperial women are there recordings of their deeds. The funeral oration and subsequent epitaph given by Murdia's son (*CIL VI 10230*) is indicative of the dichotomy between the private and domestic sphere of Roman women, resulting in Murdia's domestic virtues being put on public display.<sup>5</sup> This is further compounded by the fact that many women in the late republic began to conduct business *sui iuris*, without the need for involvement from male relatives, due to Augustus' social legislation.<sup>6</sup> Women conducting their own business affairs could not be ignored even by the likes of Cicero (*Att. 12.51.3*) and became integral in banking and loan making. What also could not be ignored, however, was the status of the female prostitute in Rome as both pervasive and marginalized.

### Evidence of the Infames and the Social Rankings of Women in Roman Society

The female prostitute in Rome is described in our sources as a shameless figure who donned the toga.<sup>7</sup> Catherine Edwards argues that in comparison to the courtesan, who wore expensive clothing, the wearing of the toga was a prostitute's display of her recognition as a marginalized figure and was thus a display of the anti-male citizen.<sup>8</sup> Using prostitutes in invective speech was a way for the moralizing Roman elite to attack their political opponents. One such example was Cicero's attack on Clodia, the sister of his enemy Clodius, and his description of her as a *meretrix*, the term for a legally registered prostitute (*Cael. 48-50*). The dichotomy of the prostitute as pervasive and marginalized is further complicated by the argument that

prostitution in Rome contributed greatly to its economy.<sup>9</sup> While it makes sense to assume that low-status women in Rome were a marginalized group, there were further instances of marginalization for women as a whole in this society. Within the definition of “respectable” women, Thomas McGinn argues that there were two classes of *mulieres* in Rome. Best described in terms of their respective religious cults, the *mulieres humiliores*, less respectable women, were a category of women which included prostitutes who were assigned to cults worshipping Fortuna Virilis, the manly, while the second group, the *mulieres honestiores*, more respectable women, worshipped Venus Verticordia, the promoter of chastity.<sup>10</sup> As will be seen, there was a certain ambiguity present in the discussion of female qualities from the ancient sources. Some qualities were praised, while others which were seen as “manly” were berated.

Life for elite male citizens in Rome during both the republic and empire was fiercely competitive, placing a heavy emphasis on political life and rhetorical ability. A man that failed to play within the gender norms ran the risk of being labelled as effeminate. Thus, the presence of “manly” virtues in women was seen as a threat in a society in which men were expected to both perform and prove their manliness.<sup>11</sup> In women, however, there seemed to be two senses of “manliness” that were on the one hand, negative, and on the other, positive. In the negative sense, the use of immorality to negatively describe women and using that as an attack on their husbands was done by Cicero (*Philippics* 2.48, 99). The description of a masculine Fulvia was further used by Velleius Paterculus (2.74) and by Cassius Dio (48.10) in a condemning sense, though likely as a veiled attack on her husband, Lucius Antonius. In the positive sense, the praising of Lucretia by Valerius Maximus (6.1.1) and how her suicide led to the overthrow of the Etruscan kings is one example. Her pudicitia brought her into the

public sphere. Yet as Milnor notes, Valerius describes her as a *virilis animus*, manly spirit/state of mind, in a *muliebre corpus*, female body.<sup>12</sup> How her *animus* could be interpreted as “manly” requires further investigation. For Foucault, moderation was a key virtue of men and the same was expected from women, thus moderation in reference to women would have been in virile terms.<sup>13</sup> In order for a woman to be moderate it was necessary for her to establish self-dominance and this was by definition a virile act.<sup>14</sup> To illustrate this, Foucault refers to Xenophon’s *Oeconomicus* (10.1), where Socrates praises the virile merits of the wife of Ischomachus, whom Ischomachus has educated himself. Praising a woman’s merit occurs because Socrates believes manliness can be taught to women (*Xen. Symposium*. 2.9; 2.19). The mocking of prostitutes in the ancient sources seems rather ambiguous as they are not chaste, yet they are presented as antithetical citizens.

Prostitutes lost their legal citizenship and gained an unsavory social reputation, yet their inclusion at religious festivals suggests that they were not completely excluded from Roman society.<sup>15</sup> Prostitutes were present at festivals such as the *Ludi Florae*, celebrated in April and associated with the goddess Flora. This festival featured a licentious and pleasure-seeking atmosphere and the participation of prostitutes can be assumed from Juvenal (6.104, 246-7). Yet in this passage, Juvenal seeks to mock women who were obsessing over gladiators. Prostitutes danced naked and fought mock gladiatorial combats in the *Ludi Florae*, and the particular woman Juvenal describes training in the manner of a gladiator *omnis implet numeros dignissima prorsus / Florali matron tuba* (6.249f). The description of her equipment seems to suggest that she is training as a *secutor*, a heavily armored gladiator more appreciated and lauded in the Roman mindset, yet mocked by Juvenal nonetheless. The participation of women in the religious context such as the *Ludi Florae* was generally both important and separate

to that of men. The role of women in the religious context was thus important enough to merit segregation of “respectable” women from “non-respectable”.<sup>16</sup> According to McGinn, prostitutes were promiscuous, while wives were supposed to be sexually loyal to their husbands, and unmarried respectable women were supposed to be sexually inactive.<sup>17</sup> Prostitutes exchanged their services for payment, while the Roman wife did not demand material rewards and instead used the dowry to signify the idealized seriousness of the type of relationship brought through marriage.<sup>18</sup> Finally, the bond of marriage was thought of as affective, while the transaction with the prostitute was not. The fact that female prostitutes were categorized and assigned their own cult is significant, as it is indicative of an incomplete marginalization.

Because female prostitutes were mostly poor and non-citizens, they would have also lived in conditions that perpetuated that status. They were generally slaves or ex-slaves, who likely lived in similarly servile conditions. Not only were they excluded from voting or holding public office because of their gender, but their profession further isolated them. There is also the possibility however, that contrary to the view of the Roman elites on prostitutes, the role of a prostitute was sometimes taken on as a temporary status, which served as a means for re-integration into the working class.<sup>19</sup> Graffiti from Pompeii seems to suggest that female prostitutes may have been aware of this social isolation, and lived in an environment of social deviance.<sup>20</sup> When discussing the social conditions of the prostitute, it is necessary to illustrate the parallels in the condition of *infamia* that prostitutes and gladiators suffered along with all entertainers.

Gladiators were drawn from a multifarious group of marginalized persons. There were slaves and freedmen, with many also being *ingenui*, freeborn, criminals *condemned ad ludus*, and prisoners of war

as well.<sup>21</sup> Those who voluntarily entered the gladiatorial career were subject to slave-like treatment by contract.<sup>22</sup> Anyone who entered into service as a gladiator suffered from the socio-legal condition of *infamia*. This meant a loss of full citizen status and could also be a consequence of civil and criminal trials.<sup>23</sup> The ancient sources despised *infames* on moralist grounds, claiming that those with *infamia* could not be trusted, were unsuitable for marriage, and any wealth accumulated by them was illegitimate however legal.<sup>24</sup> This effect did not seem to occur in the Greek east, where entertainers and gladiators alike were treated with great respect and were made up of wealthy aristocratic individuals.<sup>25</sup> Leppin argues that there were two types of legal *infamia*. The first, the *praetorian infamia*, came about during the republic, and the second, a type of *infamia* which followed the former from the end of the republic.<sup>26</sup> The second type seems to have been more structured, as it mentioned specific groups who would be subject to *infamia* and included entertainers.<sup>27</sup> *Infamia* itself however, as described by Cicero (Leg. 1.90.50-1), was not necessarily brought by the consequences of the courtroom, but was also a social imposition brought on by acts considered shameful. This type of *infamia* was associated with the offender regardless of the legal outcome.<sup>28</sup> Entertainers at Rome found themselves in a doubled status. In their role as a key part of festivals, they were both praised and mistrusted. Yet they were able to influence the political sphere while having no legitimate claim to political power.<sup>29</sup> Edwards argues that the gladiator was a profession associated with transgressive sexuality in that they were the objects of desire.<sup>30</sup> In this way they were subject to *infamia* by the public gaze regardless of elite or non-elite status.

#### The “Gladiatrix”

It seems appropriate to now discuss some of the evidence on the status of female gladiators. Perhaps the most convincing

piece of archaeological evidence for female gladiators is the first or second century C.E. slab from Halicarnassus which depicts two female gladiators. On the slab are two women, named “Amazon” and “Achillia” respectively. Kathleen Coleman argues that the inscription and how both women are shown with their helmets removed demonstrates that they had both received *missio*, or reprieve from their fight.<sup>31</sup> The fact that both of these gladiators were granted *missio* is in itself significant. If Coleman is correct in assuming that the gladiators depicted on this slab were each other's opponent, it was uncommon for both fighters to be granted *missio*.<sup>32</sup> This suggests that this particular event was exceptional and worthy of being recorded on a commemorative slab.

What is interesting is what Coleman suggests the possible reactions to this particular relief were meant to be. Since the relief depicts the women without their helmets, but with their helmets on either side of the relief, it makes sense that this image is not mocking or satirical – adding to the significance in the monumentality suggested by the choice of medium.<sup>33</sup> As evidence from the ancient sources show, particularly from the *senatus consulta* of 11 C.E. and 19 C.E., the primary opposition in the attitude towards women as gladiators was their social rank, not their gender.<sup>34</sup> This also suggests that many free born Roman women may have been training for spectator sports, and the *consulta* were a means to close a loophole.<sup>35</sup> This leaves open the possibility that women may have had similar motivations as men for entering spectator sports, such as the fame and glory that accompany martial training. The persistence of the senate in their attempts to prevent women from the gladiatorial arena suggests that a precedent for women in the arena had existed.<sup>36</sup> Cassius Dio (66.25.1; cf Martial *Spect.* 6) notes that women as *venatores* were present at the dedication of the Flavian Amphitheatre in 80 C.E., and that this presence was tolerable if the women

were not of the senatorial or equestrian orders.<sup>37</sup> Dio also mentions (76.16.1) the ban on elite women entering the arena in the late second or early third century C.E. during the rule of Septimius Severus. It is uncertain if this was an empire-wide ban, but the boast by a certain Hostilianus at Ostia during the third century C.E. needs to be addressed. The highly fragmentary inscription at Ostia (*EAOR IV.I no. 29*) reads:

[---]+sa [---H]ostilīan[o]  
 [--- II v]ir(o), q(uaestori) aerar[i Osti]  
 ensum, flam(ini) d(ecreto) d(ecurionum),  
 cur(atori) lusus Iuvenal(is),  
 [---] qui primus om[niu]m ab urbe condita  
 ludos cum  
 [--- edidit item? ---]or(---?) et mulieres [a]d  
 ferrum dedit, una cum  
 5 [--- Sa]bina u[x]orē fecit sibi et  
 [---]nio Agon[---]  
 [---c]orporis togat[ens(ium)]  
 [---]VM+[---]  
 -----?

What is of interest here is that Hostilianus claims to be the first person (*primus om[niu]m*) since the foundation of the city (*ab urbe condita*) to arm women (*mulieres [a]d ferrum dedit*).<sup>38</sup> If Coleman's interpretation of this inscription is correct, then it suggests that other games featuring female gladiators had been established elsewhere, meaning that Hostilianus' boast was that he was the first to have women fight at Ostia.<sup>39</sup> Lastly, the choice of wording in *mulieres is* significant. The ban by Septimius Severus targeted elite women, and as discussed, the term *mulier* refers to a woman who was not elite. Hostilianus was then either not going against this ban, or it did not apply to him in some other way.

The literary sources on elite women appearing in the arena are silent on the appearance of non-elite women. This is significant as it suggests that the latter must have appeared in order to have created such a reaction about the former.<sup>40</sup> Anna

McCullough notes that the difficulty in addressing the topic of female gladiators is that it represented a nontraditional practice, which in itself was subject to the biases of its reporters.<sup>41</sup> What is out of place here, is that the Augustan period saw no mention of female gladiators in its moralizing literature. The oddity lies in the *senatus consultum* of 22 B.C.E. which Levick argues was the first instance of a ban on women from the arena.<sup>42</sup> This legislation was aimed at banning elite women, but McCullough suggests that non-elites may have already been involved with gladiatorial combat at this point.<sup>43</sup> The very fact that non-elites were not considered noteworthy would explain their absence from the literature of this period.

In the literature that mentions women as gladiators, the wealth of their private sponsors seems to indicate that female gladiators were an indulgence of the wealthy elite.<sup>44</sup> Their mention in the imperial games then, is an association and appropriation to the emperor's wealth and his ability to provide the most ostentatious games.<sup>45</sup> The damnation from the sources on female gladiators is a result of the negative connotations associated with the elite class taking part in an activity which also included the non-elite. McCullough notes that literary evidence of non-elite women, though not explicitly stated by the authors, do not have the same negative connotations of shame and astonishment.<sup>46</sup> The issue here is that the authors are more concerned with the overturning of social order rather than gender. The noblewoman training like a gladiator is a source of concern for Juvenal (6.253) because of the threat she poses to the social order by equating herself in status to that of a non-elite woman.<sup>47</sup>

### Conclusion

Performers in the arena included women, who were at times forced to fight by emperors (Suet. *Dom. 4.1*). Among them also were foreign women, such as the Ethiopians

as described by Dio under the reign of Nero (Dio 62[63]3.1). Tacitus also mentions that elite women took part in gladiatorial matches under Nero (*Ann. 15.32*).<sup>48</sup> Cornelia Ewigleben argues that the majority of the spectators would not have been concerned with the questions of morality that the elite pose in their attitudes towards spectacle.<sup>49</sup> This would have contributed to the immense popularity not only of the games themselves, but also allowed an avenue for the entertainers themselves to enjoy an equivalent of the modern celebrity status.

The fate of gladiators in the arena rested upon their ability to demonstrate both to the *exhibitor* and the crowd that they upheld several critical Roman virtues: *virtus* (manly courage), *disciplina* (discipline), *clementia* (clemency and moderation), and *iustitia* (upholding the law).<sup>50</sup> Womanly virtue was not an anomaly, nor was it exotic. Its presence is noted in Greek philosophical discussions, and a rejection of social values in Rome for what a woman should be is attested to the role of the female prostitute. The female gladiator, when seen as an elite woman, training and mocked in satire, was an expression for the desire to seek martial training, and served as a possible commentary on the traditional role of women in Roman society.<sup>51</sup> The unmentionable non-elite woman, however, did not enter the arena to make a statement on Roman mores, but, like their male-counterparts they had little other choice, rendering gender irrelevant in the bestowment of *infamia*.

### Acknowledgements:

I would like to thank Chronika's editor-in-chief Heather Rosch and the anonymous peer-reviewers for their valuable suggestions, which aided in the completion of this article in its current form. I would also like to thank Prof. Michael J. Carter, who encouraged me to submit this article and offered many helpful comments on an earlier draft. Any errors of fact or judgement are my own.

## Endnotes:

- 1 See Coleman 2000.  
 2 Milnor 2011, 610; cf. Cooper 2007.  
 3 Milnor 2011, 611.  
 4 Milnor 2011, 611; cf. Hemelrijk and Woolf (eds.) 2013. See F. Cenerini's, and C. Holleran's respective chapters for a fuller discussion on the sway of women as benefactors and as merchants in the Roman west.  
 5 Milnor 2011, 611.  
 6 Milnor 2011, 612.  
 7 McGinn 1998, 156-171; cf. Plaut. *Mil.* 791-793; Non. 868L; Mart. 2.39, 10.52; Juv. 2.70.  
 8 Edwards 1997, 81.  
 9 McGinn 2011, 644.  
 10 McGinn 2011, 644; see also Manas 2011.  
 11 Milnor 2011, 614-5.  
 12 Milnor 2011, 614-7; cf. Bremner and Formisano 2012.  
 13 Foucault 1985, 83.  
 14 Foucault 1985, 83-4.  
 15 McGinn 1998, 24; 2011, 653-4.  
 16 McGinn 2011, 653.  
 17 McGinn 2011, 657.  
 18 McGinn 1998, 81, 184.  
 19 McGinn's (2011, 654) reference here is likely an expansion of the social death and rebirth theory that Wiedemann (1992) brought about in his discussion of gladiators.  
 20 McGinn 2011, 652, 654-5.  
 21 Wiedemann 1992, 103.  
 22 Leppin 2011, 667.  
 23 Edwards 1997, 69.  
 24 Leppin 2011, 671.  
 25 Mann (2009) argues that gladiators in the Greek east likened themselves to the status of Greek athletes.  
 26 Leppin 2011, 671-2.  
 27 Leppin 2011, 672.  
 28 Edwards 1997, 69.  
 29 Leppin 2011, 662, 670.  
 30 Edwards 1997, 68.  
 31 Coleman 2000, 487-8.  
 32 Coleman 2000, 488, 491.  
 33 Coleman 2000, 497; Brunet (2014, 485-6) also suggests that women fighting and exhibiting Roman martial values would have been inspirational.  
 34 Levick 1983, 97-115.  
 35 Vesley 1998.  
 36 McCullough 2008, 199.  
 37 Coleman 2000, 497.  
 38 Whether *ab urbe condita* refers to the foundation of Ostia or to Rome itself remains unclear. The exact meaning of *mulieres [a]d ferrum dedit*, also needs clarification. It is certain that Hostilianus did not put women to death, which would normally use a form of *recipere*; cf. *OLD s.v. ferrum §4*. Rather, this phrase seems to point to a gladiatorial fight; cf. *OLD s.v. ferrum §7*.  
 39 Coleman 2000, 498.  
 40 McCullough 2008, 199.  
 41 McCullough 2008, 201.  
 42 Levick 1983, 107; see also Brunet 2014, 488.  
 43 McCullough 2008, 201.  
 44 McCullough 2008, 202.  
 45 McCullough 2008, 202-3; see also Wiedemann 1992, 176-180.  
 46 McCullough 2008, 204-6.  
 47 McCullough 2008, 205.  
 48 See Brunet 2004, 154 for a discussion on the games Tacitus and Dio mention.  
 49 Ewingleben 2000, 138-9.  
 50 Leppin 2011, 667. Wiedemann (1992) also stressed that gladiators who fought in the arena did so as a means for (re)integration into Roman society, and so their demonstration of these Roman virtues was a means to that end.  
 51 Vesley (1998) discusses inscriptions from the *CIL* which provide for a possibility that girls in an organized setting outside the domestic sphere received martial training through the *collegia iuvenes*.

Works Cited:

- Brenmer, J., and M. Formisano (eds.). 2012. *Perpetua's Passions*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Brunet, S. 2004. "Female and Dwarf Gladiators." *Museion* 3(4):145-70.
- Brunet, S. 2014. "Women with Swords: Female Gladiators in the Roman World." In *A Companion to Sport and Spectacle in Greek and Roman Antiquity*, edited by P. Christesen and D. Kyle, 478-91. Oxford: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
- Coleman, K. 2000. "Missio at Halicarnassus." *HSCP* 100:487-500.
- Cooper, K. 2007. "Closely Watched Households: Visibility, Exposure and Private Power in the Roman Domus." *Past and Present* 197(1):3-33.
- Edwards, C. 1997. "Unspeakable Professions: Public Performance and Prostitution in Ancient Rome." In *Roman Sexualities*, edited by J. Hallett and M. Skinner, 66-95. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Ewigleben, C. 2000. "What These Women Love is the Sword: The Performers and their Audiences." In *Gladiators and Caesars: The Power of Spectacle in Ancient Rome*, edited by E. Köhne and C. Ewigleben, translated by R. Jackson, 125-39. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Foucault, M. 1985. *The History of Sexuality, Volume 2: The Use of Pleasure*. Translated by R. Hurley. New York: Vintage Books.
- Hemelrijk, E., and G. Woolf (eds.). 2013. *Women and the Roman City in the Latin West*. Leiden: Brill.
- Leppin, H. 2011. "Between Marginality and Celebrity: Entertainers and Entertainments in Roman Society." In *The Oxford Handbook of Social Relations in the Roman World*, edited by M. Peachin, 660-78. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Levick, B. 1983. "The *Senatus Consultum* from Larinum." *JRS* 73:97-115.
- Manas, A. 2011. "New evidence of female gladiators: the bronze statuette at the Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe of Hamburg." *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 28(18):2726-52.
- Mann, C. 2009. "Gladiators in the Greek East: A Case Study in Romanization." *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 26(2):272-97.
- McCullough, A. 2008. "Female Gladiators in Imperial Rome: Literary Context and Historical Fact." *CW* 101(2):197-209.
- McGinn, T. 1998. *Prostitution, Sexuality, and the Law in Ancient Rome*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- McGinn, T. 2011. "Roman Prostitutes and Marginalization." In *The Oxford Handbook of Social Relations in the Roman World*, edited by M. Peachin, 643-59. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Milnor, K. 2011. "Women in Roman Society." In *The Oxford Handbook of Social Relations in the Roman World*, edited by M. Peachin, 609-22. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Vesley, M. 1998. "Gladiatorial Training for Girls in the Collegia Iuvenum of the Roman Empire." *EchCl* 42(17):85-93.
- Wiedemann, T. J. 1992. *Emperors and Gladiators*. London and New York: Routledge.