'You Owe Me': Affections and Duties between Elderly Mothers and Their Adult Children in Ancient Rome

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Abstract: This paper explores the relationships of affection and duty that elderly Roman mothers established with their adult daughters and sons. Analysing the written sources, it shows what duties adult children had towards their mothers in consideration for the care received during childhood, and how mothers demanded this support. The paper looks at the affective relationships between mothers and their offspring and highlights the importance of older women for the cohesion of the Roman family. This study draws five main conclusions. First, that care practices performed by Roman mothers gave them a privileged position in old age. Second, that the survival of Roman women in old age depended largely on the ties they had with their younger relatives. Third, that the relationships these women established with their adult sons and daughters were characterised by a mixture of affection and authority. Fourth, that the women studied here used old age as a discursive weapon to achieve their ends, presenting it as an especially vulnerable stage in life, but also as a source of power. And lastly, that the relationship elder Roman mothers had with their children was dependent on the gender of the child.
Keywords: old age, the Roman family, the history of emotions

This paper deals with the relationship between mothers and their children in Ancient Rome once their offspring reached adulthood and did not need their parents for basic survival.[1] We thus examine motherhood in old age, a moment in the life cycle

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that has been little studied in comparison with pregnancy, birth, and the child-raising years. How did the passage of time affect the mother-child relationship? What did mature or elderly mothers expect from their offspring? And what did the latter expect from their mother? Here, we focus on analysing the relationships of affection and (moral and material) duties that existed in Ancient Rome between mature and elderly mothers and their offspring. In this paper aged mothers are defined as all women over 50 years of age,[2] as well as those with adult children, and all women who are described in the sources as old, even though we do not know their age. In addition, I will apply a gender perspective and analyse whether the relationship that the mothers established with their sons was analogous to that which they had with their daughters.

To do this, I will rely on literature, papyrus, and epigraphy from between the 3rd century BCE and the 4th century CE. I realise that I am dealing with a very broad period and with diverse types of sources. This is due to the relative scarcity of sources that exist for the subject of this paper, a fact that has been noted in general for all issues relating to old age in Ancient Rome (Harlow, Laurence 2002; Laes 2005; Parkin 2003). On the other hand, an analysis of such varied types of texts and an extensive chronology allows us to appreciate the existence of certain gender roles, stereotypes, and social constructs that are recurring over time.

I approached the sources from different methodological perspectives. On the one hand, gender history has abundant reference works on the Roman family and the role of women in it and on the configuration of gender roles in Ancient Rome. To explore age as a socially constructed category and how old age interacts with gender, I turned to social gerontology. This discipline has already been used successfully to address old age in a historical perspective. Finally, I drew on the history of emotions as a tool to analyse affective relationships between mothers and children.[3]

I begin by exploring what it meant to be an elderly mother in Ancient Rome. I then address the relationships of affection and duty that existed between Roman mothers and their children, and how *vetulae* could demand respect from their offspring. After this, I examine to what extent these relationships were marked by gender.

This study draws five main conclusions. First, that care practices exercised by Roman mothers gave them a privileged position in old age. Second, that the survival of Roman women in old age depended largely on the ties they had with their younger relatives. Third, that the relationships these women established with their adult sons

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[2] On the choice of 50 years as the threshold upon which women entered old age in Rome and the biological, demographic, and legal reasons for this, se Casamayor (2019) and Harlow and Laurence (2011).
[3] Some examples are provided in Dixon (2014), Hackworth and Salzman (2012), and Sánchez and Cid (2018) (Gender History), Casamayor (2019) and Rubiera (2018) (Social Gerontology), and Hernández (2014), Kaster (2005), and Langlands (2006) (History of Emotions).

and daughters were characterised by a mixture of affection and authority. Fourth, that the women we study used old age as a discursive weapon to achieve their ends, presenting it as an especially vulnerable vital stage but at the same time as a source of power. And lastly, that the relationship elderly Roman mothers had with their children was probably gendered, which is to say that it depended on the gender of the child.

The aged Roman mother and her adult children

Roman mothers, particularly among the elite, were very important in maintaining the family group, especially in terms of their public image. While they lacked power because of their sex, at least in theory, Roman women could attain public renown by becoming role models; hence the importance of education and the example the maternal figures set for their children.

The responsibility that mothers had in the earliest education and socialisation of their children could have led to the forging of close emotional relationships between them. For example, classical authors believed that moral values were transmitted to children through breastfeeding, so that their behaviour as adults would depend partly on the personality of their mothers (Gell. 12.1.17-32, Macrob. Sat. 5.11.15-18, Plut. *Mor.* 12.1).[4] Either directly or by supervising the tasks of others, it was up to Roman mothers to ensure that their children were well socialised and grew up according to Roman customs (Dixon 2014). Moreover, due to the demographic patterns of ancient societies, the likelihood of growing up with a mother was higher than that of growing up with a father (Parkin 2003). Therefore, so was the possibility of establishing solid and lasting emotional ties with them. That is why the sources speak of the loss of sons and daughters as the worst thing that could happen to a mother (Apul. *Apol.* 10.26.2, Apul. *Met.* 10.28.2, *CIL* 6.30110, Ov. *Met.* 3.133-135, 6.320-323, 6.500, Plin. *Ep.* 3.10, Sen. *Helv.* 16.2, 18 and *Marc.* 16, 19).[5] Adult sons and daughters are presented to us as their parents' support in old age and as their primary emotional support.[6] An example of this can be found in the epitaph of Papyria Tertia (1st century CE), in which she states that it is better to remain childless than to lose your child and live a miserable

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[4] However, there is an important debate about the actual role that upper-class mothers played in early natal care, including breastfeeding. Recent works on this are Centlivres (2017), Mulder (2017), and Reboreda (2018).

[5] The classic texts that have been consulted here are editions from the Loeb Classical Library or The Latin Library and Perseus digital libraries. For the inscriptions I drew on/referred to Arachne CIL Open Access and the papyri in the digital database of Duke University and in Bagnall and Cribiore (2006), Huebner (2013), and Winter (1933).

[6] However, in the absence of children, *vetulae* could turn to other members of the family, as well as to their friends (Casamayor 2019; Huebner 2013).

old age (*CIL* 5.2435). The inscription, in which Papyria is represented together with probably her husband and son, seems to have been commissioned during her lifetime by the *vetula*. We do not know how many children Papyria had, nor at what age they died, but they left an emotional void in her that became unbearable in old age.

Socially, parents without offspring would also be disadvantaged because, as Huebner points out, 'children were important for establishing one's social identity because they integrated their parents into the wider community. Children offered them the possibility to take part in networks and social events, such as rites of passage, marriages, or education' (Huebner 2013: 168).

Not only did the relationship of affection, care, and obedience between a Roman mother and her children remain in place over time, but the authority of the mother inside the family would grow as she grew older and the number of people under her supervision increased, both in relation to her sons and daughters and in relation to the other members of the group, as grandmothers, aunts, and mothers-in-law (Casamayor 2019; Dixon 2014). In literary sources, old women appear to have a significant role associated with their age and position in the life cycle. They were moral models for young women, especially in their role as mothers, by virtue of their experience and the *auctoritas* and *gravitas* that growing old brings.

One of the key concepts relating to Roman families was the idea of *pietas* or respect and obedience towards one's parents – and towards family members in general. As filial piety, *pietas* served to regulate intergenerational solidarity, both in private and in public. Thus, disrespect or disobedience towards one's parents, as well as lack of support in vulnerable situations like old age, had negative effects on the child's public image (Huebner 2013). The most exemplary cases of compliance with *pietas* towards parents that are found in the sources do, in fact, occur in the context of old age. The best-known example is that of Aeneas, who fled Troy carrying his elderly father on his shoulders, even though that could have slowed down his escape (and therefore increase the chances of being captured by the enemy) (Verg. *Aen.* 2.27.707-710). This action was emulated in the 1st century CE by Pliny the Younger, who, during the eruption of Vesuvius, saved his elderly mother from the toxic cloud (Pliny Ep. 6.20.11-13). If we read Pliny the Elder, the goddess Pietas herself owes the location of her temple in Rome to a daughter's act of care for her elderly mother:

> A woman of quite the lower class, and whose name has consequently not come down to us, having lately given birth to a child, obtained permission to visit her mother, who was confined in prison; but was always carefully searched by the gaoler before being admitted, to prevent her from introducing any food. At last, however, she was detected nourishing her mother with the milk of her breast; upon which, in consideration of the marvellous affection of the daughter, the

mother was pardoned, and they were both maintained for the rest of their days at the public charge; the spot, too, was consecrated to Piety, a temple to that goddess being built on the site of the prison, in the consulship of C. Quintius and M. Acilius, where the theatre of Marcellus now stands. (Plin. NH 7.36)[7]

On a more real level, fulfilling *pietas* would involve everything from maintaining emotional relationships to economic sustenance, to providing a roof over a parent's head, or food, clothing, and medical care, etc. (Nep. *Att.* 17, Ov. *Fast.* 5.55-79, *P. Giss.* 21, *P. Mich.* 8.514, Plin. *Ep.* 2.18.2, Plut. 479f, Sen. *Contr.* 7.4, Val. Max. 2.1.9-10). All these tasks would be done with the collaboration of other family members and with the enslaved people, who would probably take care of the more daily and less pleasant tasks, such as personal hygiene or feeding and transport a dependent or sick older person, although the ultimate responsibility for this would lie with the children (Casamayor 2018; Huebner 2013). Sometimes the situation was the opposite, and old mothers would continue to take care of their children – and grandchildren in their parent's absence – by paying them frequent visits, exchanging letters, and sending goods and money (*BGU* 2,380, *P. Brem.* 63, *SB* 5,7572). When analysing this issue, we must bear in mind that the fulfilment of these precepts would depend on many factors, such as the quality of the parent-child relationship, the economic situation of the children, or the geographical distance between both parties.

Part of this support would perhaps be to share a home with the aged parent in order to take care of them. This seems to be the case in Roman Egypt, where it occurred more frequently in the case of mothers than fathers (Huebner 2013).[8] In other cases, children could live not under the same roof but near the elderly mother, paying frequent visits or moving in with her when needed (187 *Ar* 5). For example, at the end of the 3rd century CE, Aurelia Techosis moved from Small Oasis to Oxyrhynchus to take care of her widowed mother, who was ill: 'My mother was stricken with illness, and I in the goodness of my heart nursed and tended her and was assiduous in performing what is owing from children to parents.' (*P. Oxy.* 8.1121)[9] When the old woman died, Techosis also provided her with the corresponding funeral services.

Fulfilling *pietas* could also be seen as a means by which to obtain certain benefits. Teochis, whom we have already mentioned, argued that taking care of his mother during her final moments and arranging her funeral were sufficient reasons for him

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[7] Translation by Mayhoff (1906). The same case and a similar one between a *senex* and his daughter are narrated by Valerius Maximus in 5.4.ext.1 and 5.4.7. For the meaning of these episodes, see Mulder (2017), who points out that none of the ancient writers explain the difference between the mother or the father being imprisoned, nor the possible symbolic significance of this.

[8] For some examples, see 11 *Ar* 1; 117 *Ar* 6; 201 *Ar* 9; 173 *Pr* 14.

[9] Translation by Winter (1933: 110).

to be entitled to inherit her properties (Huebner 2013: 84–85). In the year 211, Isidoros renounced his rights of inheritance in favour of his brothers, Hermeinos and Theognotos, in exchange for not assuming his father's debts or taking care of his mother (*P. Lond.* 3.932). A century later, Aurelia Ammonia divided her property equally between her two sons in her will, breaking the custom of bequeathing more to the first-born, because the younger son had taken care of her when she became a widow and had taken over the family business (*P. Coll.* 2.83). This care could not be taken for granted. For example, Horace (*Sat.* 2.1.54-57) recommended going to a certain Sceva to kill an aged mother. This commentary should not be taken as proof of a common practice, given the author's satiric intentions, but it illustrates the existence of a stereotype about the controlling mother who becomes a burden in her old age.

Sometimes these benefits could be received while the parent was still alive. In 46 BC an older couple gave their property to their children (two sons and two daughters) and a grandson in exchange for the male heirs providing them, for the rest of their lives, with wheat, oil, and money, and arranging the funeral after their death (*P. Mich.* 5,322).[10] Other women from Roman Egypt came to a similar arrangement with their daughters (*BGU* 1.86, *BGU* 4.1013, *P. Oxy.* 3.472).

With regard to the emotional relationships, the mothers come across in the sources as affectionate persons, who supported their offspring, even against the will of the *paterfamilias* (Huebner 2013: 67). Letters exchanged in the 1st century CE between Apollonios and his mother Eudaimonis contain references to the concern for the health and general wellbeing of both, as well as for the rest of the family (*P.Giss.* 21, 22 and 58, *P. Flor.* 3.332).[11] The sources also show us adult children concerned about the emotional wellbeing of their mothers (Catull. 9, *P. Col.* 8.215, *SB* 3.6263). One such case is Atticus, who maintained a close relationship with his mother Cecilia, who died at the age of 90. When he was away from her, he frequently showed interest in her wellbeing, never argued with her, and gave her a proper funeral (Cic. *Att.* 1.7-8, Nep. *Att.* 17). Some of the references may not have been sincere displays of affection, as they were standardised formulas that were routinely included in letters, or ways of deliberately presenting oneself as a good son or daughter and thus a good citizen. Nevertheless, they show that a socially acceptable attitude towards mothers included taking care of their physical and emotional wellbeing.

Vetulae in general, and in their role as mothers in particular, appear as unifying elements of the family, possessing an integrative power, with the capacity to inspire loyalty and to unite others through respect, love, and compassion towards the family

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[10] For more details on this case, see Huebner 2013: 135–137.

[11] For more examples, see *BGU* 1.332 and 2.380, *P. Mich.* 8.510, *SB* 3.6263.

group, the children, the country, or any social or cultural entity (Martínez 2012, Mustakallio 2011). These elderly mothers – or, in their absence, the grandmothers or mothers-in-law – were responsible for resolving internal conflicts, organising daily domestic issues, and guiding young family members, especially women (Cass. Dio. 5.18, Liv. 39.9-14, *P. Bre.* 63, *P. Mich.* 8.514, *SB* 3.6264, Tac. *Dial.* 28.5-6, Val. Max. 5). They could do so because the wisdom that comes with the passage of time granted them authority, but also because, as women, Roman society had assigned them an affectionate character that was part of the ideal model of motherhood.

However, *vetulae* were also represented as particularly vulnerable and sensitive, both because they were women and because they were aged (Ter. *Hec.* 590-595, Verg. *Aen.* 7,440). Despite the fact that Eudaimonis appears in the letters exchanged with her son as a strong woman capable of taking care of the family estate, on one occasion when Apollonius was away from home she wrote to him with her concerns that in his absence she feared that Diskas (her brother, with whom she had an otherwise unexplained conflict) would take advantage of the situation to act against her (*P. Flor.* 3.332). The widow Aurelia (4th century CE) experienced a similar situation: she was robbed by her estate manager while her sons were away (*P. Oxy.* 1.71). In satirical texts a regular topos is a rich old woman looking for young lovers on whom to spend her money, with subsequent complaints from her children, who see their inheritance decreasing (Hor. *Ep.* 1.1.75-80, Juv. 1.37-40, Mart. 2.34, 3.76, 4.56 and 9.80, Plaut. *Mostell.* 275-280). It is worth asking whether, beneath this stereotype of an old libidinous woman, there were perhaps women who were looking for affective/romantic relationships in old age, involving sex or not, in response to the poor or non-existent relationship they had with their offspring. Aside from the comic purpose of this notion, this is precisely one of the arguments that was used by Apuleius (2nd century CE) in his defence of Pudentilla: it was logical that this woman favoured her new husband over her children, when the latter did not fulfil their affective duties (Apul. *Apol.* 85).[12]

What could an older Roman woman do if she was going through difficulties of any kind and her children did not comply with the requirements of *pietas*? Parkin (2003) supports the theory that the great power of the *paterfamilias* would guarantee that he would always receive adequate care and be well provided financially and materially. But what about those older people who were not *patresfamilias*, or when children did not obey the orders of the head of the family? If we consider Dionysius of Halicarnassus (20.13.3), in the Republican era part of the work of the censors would be to ensure that children respected their parents' wishes. Although we do not know to what extent this statement is true, we can find various rhetorical-legal exercises in which both sons or daughters did not take care of their aged parents,

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[12] On this case, see Harlow (2007) and Hidalgo (2011).

and which refer to laws that would oblige them to comply with the *pietas* or that would allow a father to transmit his powers to a child in exchange for care in old age (Quint. *Inst. Or.* 5.10.97, 7.1.55, 7.6.5, Sen. *Contr.* 1.1, 1.7, 7.4). Although in this case we cannot know if these were real cases or simple school exercises, in the second case they must have been inspired by a reality in which the helplessness of an older person was a possibility. Both the *Digest* (23.3.73, 24.3.20, 25.3.5, 42.1.15) and the *Codex Iustinianus* (5.25.1-3, 8.46.5) allude to cases of parents who demand that their children support them in their old age. As Parkin (2003: 214) points out, it does not seem that there was a law regulating these relationships, but simply that those older people who felt abandoned by their children could go to court to obtain the necessary care or resources to survive. In relation to the contracts for the transfer of property in exchange for care that existed in Roman Egypt, mentioned above, we have a letter in which Theogiton threatens to denounce a certain Appollonios – a friend or relative according to Huebner (2013: 137) – if he did not comply with the care he had promised to his old widowed mother (*P. Fay. 124*). Imperial rescripts in the *Codex Iustinuanus* are another source of the distress that elderly mothers sometimes suffered.[13] To give just one example of a mother (we do not know her age) complaining about her offspring, there is a rescript from the 3rd century CE in which a woman named Galla claims that her children were not respectful towards her, perhaps to the point of physical abuse (*Cod. Just.* 8.46.4).

In other cases, it is possible that the conflict over the care of the aged mother arose among her own children. In the 2nd century CE, a certain Sempronius wrote a letter of reproach to his brother Maximus, who was responsible for the care of their mother Saturnila, as he had heard that she was not receiving the proper care:

> Sempronius to Maximus his brother, very many greetings. Before all I pray for your health. I learned that you are treating our revered mother harshly as if she were a slave. Please, dearest brother, do not distress her in anything. If anyone of the brothers talks back to her, you ought to box their ears. For now you ought to be called father … For we ought to worship her who bore us as a god, especially when she is so good. This I have written to you, brother, since I know the sweetness of dear parents. Please write to me about your health. Farewell, brother. (*SB* 3.6263)[14]

Among the reasons that Sempronius alludes to in justifying a proper *pietas* is the fact that Saturnila had given birth to him and his brothers and had been good to them,

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[13] On the specific characteristics of rescripts as a source, see Evans (2005).
[14] Translation by Winter (1933: 49).

which can be understood to mean that she raised them well. It is this need to revere the elderly mother as repayment for the care received in childhood that we deal with in the following section.

A somewhat different attitude to that of Sempronius or Atticus was that of Tiberius, Augustus' heir (1st century CE). The relationship between him and Livia illustrates how the Romans constructed the figure of the elderly mother. Livia is presented to us as a severe woman, invested with prestige and authority, but at the same time affectionate to her husband and concerned about Tiberius' wellbeing and about ensuring he has a successful political career (Tac. *Ann.* 5.3.). However, Tiberius is also presented as openly despising his mother, a hatred that increased in her old age, leading to her not being visited during a long period of illness (Suet. *Tib.* 50, Tac. *Ann.* 1.14). The aversion he felt towards Livia was one of the causes, according to Tacitus, that Tiberius decided to retire to the countryside, being already a *senex* himself: 'It is also transmitted that he was ousted by the unruliness of his mother, who he spurned as his partner in despotism but could not dislodge, since he had received that very despotism as her gift.' (Tac. *Ann.* 4.57)[15] It is true that Tacitus was not favourable to Livia and Tiberius, and that he intended here to present them as conspirators. If in other cases, such as that of Atticus, a mother of impeccable morals raised a child of impeccable morals, a woman such as the one Tacitus imagined Livia to be could only beget an immoral son like Tiberius. On the other hand, Livia is here a suffocating mother who controlled her weak son like a puppet, a situation that caused him to tolerate her less and less as the years went by and he became a grown man who remained in his parents' shadow.[16]

The discursive use of the elderly mother

The previous section has shown that the elderly Roman mother was a figure who moved between affection and severity. Elderly mothers were vulnerable as ageing individuals and as women, but at the same time were portrayed as being able to handle family matters with authority. If we listen to what the classical authors have to say, women themselves made use of this apparent duality to get their children to do what they wanted.

One episode that best illustrates this recourse to old age is the story of Veturia and Coriolanus. The episode, which allegedly took place around 488 BC, was reflected in the writings of various authors between the 1st century BC to the 3rd century CE (Cass. Dio 5.18.8-11, Liv. 2.40.1-12, Plut. 4 and 23-37, Val. Max. 1.8.4, 5.2.1 and 5.4.1), although the one who provides the most information is Dionysius of

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[15] Translation by Woodman (2004).

[16] When Augustus died (in 14 CE), Tiberius was 56 years old. When Livia died (in 29 CE), he was 71.

GENDER A VÝZKUM

Halicarnassus (8.40-54.2). He is the closest source to the events, and we must consider that four centuries later the story had become a legend and therefore somewhat distant from the real facts. Coriolanus, a prestigious Roman general who had been expelled from Rome, had allied himself with the Volscian army and was fighting against his homeland. After several failed attempts to convince him to sign a peace treaty, a woman named Valeria decided to create a retinue of *matronae* led by Veturia and Volumnia, Coriolanus' mother and wife, respectively. Veturia accepted Valeria's proposal and, after an emotional meeting between mother and son in the Volscian camp, Veturia asked Coriolanus to sign the peace treaty with Rome, otherwise misfortune would befall Roman citizenship and herself:

> For this is a right which the law of Nature has prescribed for all who partake of sense and reason; and putting my trust in this law, Marcius, my son, I too beg of you not to make war upon your country, and I stand in your way if you resort to violence. Either, therefore, first sacrifice with your own hand to the Furies your mother who opposes you and then begin the war against your country, or, if you shrink from the guilt of matricide, yield to your mother, my son, and grant this favour willingly. … When you were left an orphan by your father, I took you as an infant, and for your sake I remained a widow and underwent the labours of rearing you, showing myself not only a mother to you, but also a father, a nurse, a sister, and everything that is dearest. When you reached manhood and it was in my power to be freed from these cares by marrying again, to rear other children, and lay up many hopes to support me in my old age, I would not do so, but remained at the same hearth and put up with the same kind of life, placing all my pleasures and all my advantages in you alone. Of these you have disappointed me, partly against your will and partly of your own accord, and have made me the most wretched of all mothers. For what time, since I brought you up to manhood, have I passed free from grief or fear? Or when have I possessed a spirit cheerful on your account, seeing you always undertaking wars upon wars, engaged in battles upon battles, and receiving wounds upon wounds? … and my life thereafter – if, indeed I ought to call it life since you departed leaving me and these children, too, desolate – has been spent in this squalor and in these rent garments of mourning. In return for all this I, who was never a burden to you nor ever shall be as long as I live, ask this favour of you – that you will at last be reconciled to your fellow citizens and cease nursing that implacable anger against your country. In doing this I am but asking to receive what will be a boon common to us both, and not mine alone. (Dion. Hal. 8.51.2-52.2).[17]

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[17] Translation by Cary (1945).

In Veturia's speech we can see how mothers sometimes demanded that their children fulfil their duties, resorting to maternal nurturing as well as to the economic and emotional effort involved in raising them. Veturia, in whom old age is marked by her very name and who is called a woman of advanced age (Liv. 2.40.2), possesses the typical *auctoritas* of the Roman mother, which also increased as she aged. She is portrayed as a wise woman, perfectly aware of the political situation of the time, and the history of Rome. She is both firm and compassionate, reminding Coriolanus of the importance of his *romanitas* but without forgetting her love for him. For his part, her son is also moved to see his mother, treating her with the honours that magistrates are due, rushing to embrace her, acknowledging his mistake, and assuring her that even if he goes into exile he will not lose contact with her or the rest of his family. If he continued with his plans of attack, Coriolanus would have committed a double treason against the woman who gave him life and against the Roman state. We also see how, in the absence of the *paterfamilias*, the responsibility for maintaining the family fell on both women, Veturia and Volumnia, as grandmother and mother of Coriolanus' minor children. However, as we have noted above, the sources narrating this episode were written long after the events and are therefore probably telling us more about the late Republican and early Imperial model of motherhood than that of the 5th century BCE. The alteration of the original story into a moralising legend may also be the cause of the elderly mother's suspicious name, although it supports our argument that the *vetula* was a figure of sufficient authority to be highlighted throughout the episode.

Centuries after the Veturia episode, Cornelia reproached her son Gaius for the political decisions he had taken, fearing that he would suffer the same fate as his brother Tiberius, as eventually happened in 121 BC, when he was beaten to death. In a letter reported by Cornelius Nepos, the authenticity of which is disputed (Dixon 2007: xiii; López 2008), Cornelia wrote the following to Gaius:

> I would swear a solemn oath that, apart from those who slew Tiberius Gracchus, no enemy has given me as much vexation and pain as you have in this affair-you who should have assumed the roles of all those children I once had and have seen to it that I had as little trouble as possible in my old age, and that, whatever things you were up to, you would chiefly want them to please me, and that you would consider it a crime to take any major step against my will, especially since I have but a brief time to live. So you can't be of service for even that short length of time without going against my will and destroying the state? Where will it finally end? Will our family ever cease being mad? Will there ever be a limit put on it? Will we ever stop taking and giving offense? Will we ever feel thoroughly ashamed of setting the state in an uproar and confounding it? Well, if that just

can't be, seek the tribunate when I'm dead; feel free to do what you like when I won't know about it. When I am dead, you will perform the last rites and call upon my parental spirit. Won't you be ashamed at that time to invoke the spirits of those whom, while alive and present, you left abandoned and deserted? May Jupiter above not allow you to continue on this course or permit such insanity to visit your mind! But if you continue on, I'm afraid that, thanks to your own fault, you will experience such pain throughout your entire life that you yourself will not be able to be pleased with yourself at any time. (Nep. *Fr.* 2)[18]

Whether or not these words were written by Cornelia, one can see in them the influence that Roman mothers could have on their adult children. An attitude that would also not be considered reprehensible, since Cornelia became the image of a model wife, widow, and mother, embodying the perfect *matrona* in the Roman imagination: she was an exemplary wife, had 12 children – only one daughter and two sons reached adulthood – and raised and educated them and their grandchildren, and she helped her sons achieve notable political positions and her daughter to marry an influential man, which benefited the whole family. The letter also tells us how Roman society expected children to take care of their elderly mothers and how *vetulae* did not hesitate to reproach their offspring, mentioning the headaches inherent in upbringing, thus highlighting the authority of the maternal figure and their right to be proud of having raised men who fulfilled their political and family duties. On the other hand, we can see in both speeches how mothers used their age as a way of persuading their children, either by seeking compassion from them, or as a way of reinforcing their authority. Moreover, these women were only reminding their children of the values that they were taught when young: the male role of power, the feeling of belonging to a particular family, and one's duty to the state.

The use of old age and childhood care as a weapon is not only found in legendary discourses, as it also appears in other literary genres and private correspondence. In the 1st century CE, Hikane wrote a letter to her son Isidorus, who was away from home, begging him to think of her: 'I wrote you a letter [?but did not receive a] letter. Was it for this that I carried you for ten months and nursed you for three years, so that you would be incapable of remembering me by letter?' (*P. Berenike* 2.129)[19] In Terence's work *The Mother-in-Law* (590-595), the old woman Sostrata uses the vulnerability of old age as a discursive weapon to elicit compassion from her son. Those who also

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[18] Translation from the website Diotíma: Materials for the Study of Women and Gender in the Ancient World. Retrieved 15/6/2021 (https://diotima-doctafemina.org/translations/latin/cornelias-advice-to-her-son-gaius-gracchus/).

[19] Translation by Bagnall and Cribiore (2006: 169).

allude to care in old age as payment for upbringing are mature or older prostitutes who urge their daughters to follow in their footsteps (*Plaut. Cist*. 105 and 120–145). Although these characters belong to comedy and are largely intended to reinforce the stereotype of the evil and greedy old woman who corrupts younger women and seeks to harm men, their words are a good example of the feelings that Romans had of female old age and how it could be used as a persuasive element (Casamayor 2019, Strong 2012). We must not forget that stereotypes are constructed by the ruling ideology in order to reinforce its assumptions and remain in power, but at the same time they influence reality, so society takes them as real and even imitates them.

In the 2nd century CE, Lucian recreated a situation of this kind in the dialogue between Crobile and her daughter Corinna, in which the mother tries to convince the daughter to become a prostitute:

'We've no other way of earning a living, you know, daughter. Do you realize how badly we've lived these last two years since your blessed father died? When he was alive, we had everything, with no problem. He worked metal and had a great name in Piraeus… When he died, first of all I sold his fire-tongs and his anvil and his hammer for two *minae,* and we managed to live off of that for seven months. Then I earned our daily bread with difficulty, sometimes by weaving, sometimes by spinning the two kinds of thread, for woof and warp. I was feeding you, daughter, waiting for you to fulfill my expectations… I reckoned that when you were the age you are now, you'd be able to look after me, and easily get yourself clothed well, grow rich, and have purple robes and maids. (Luc. *Dial. Meret*. 6.1)[20]

Interestingly, some of the examples mentioned refer to the fact that the protagonist could have remarried after being widowed, which would have been beneficial to her, but instead decided not to do so in order to favour her offspring. This is a curious thing when we consider that, in antiquity, it was the stepmother who had a bad reputation, not the stepfather (Apul. *Met*. 9.30, Tac. *Ann*. 1.3.) As Huebner (2009) points out, supporting the family after being widowed meant a significant economic, physical, and mental burden, even for wealthy women, and to highlight not having done so because of the possible prejudices this could have had for her children's inheritance is one more way of pointing out all the sacrifices she made as a mother and justifying her request for compensation.[21]

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[20] Translation by Strong (2012: 125).

[21] While there was also a danger that the widow spent the state the dead father left to their children, as happened to a man from Karanis in the 2nd century CE (*P. Lond.* 2.198). On the specific vulnerability of widows in Ancient Rome, see Rathbone (2006).

Affections and duties between elderly mothers and their children in Ancient Rome: a gendered phenomenon?

Gender bias has had a significant effect on this paper from its very beginning. It is the reason why there are many more surviving sources on the relationship between Roman mothers and their sons than between mothers and their daughters, even in the ruling families. Not only were mother-daughter relationships of less interest to classical writers than mother-son relationships, but, as Strong (2012: 121) explains, most of the conversations and interactions we know of between mothers and daughters in antiquity are written by men and are probably highly unrealistic and almost always focused on matters related to other men, either to praise them or to plot against them. Although some scholars have tried to ameliorate this imbalance with excellent works that show the nature and characteristics of these female relationships (Cid 2018, LaFosse 2017, Phillips 1978, Strong 2012), the difference in the amount of available information continues to be a major obstacle. In addition, as we argue below, and perhaps due to this noted inequality, the way in which Roman society constructed gender roles, and specifically motherhood, shaped the way Roman women interacted with their offspring. Or at the very least it shaped how Roman writers portrayed these interactions. While they were probably reproducing and exaggerating culturally constructed stereotypes about motherhood, old age, and intergenerational relationships, written sources that are less conditioned by literary style, such as private letters, show that to some extent these roles were adopted by society.

In her book on Roman motherhood, McAuley (2016: 148) analyses the different image of motherhood that Venus and Ceres project in Ovid. In her relationship with Cupid, Venus is viewed as an ambitious and ruthless woman trying to fulfil her desire for power through the political success of her son, while Ceres maintains a more intimate and emotional relationship with her daughter and presents herself as a mother terrified for her daughter's physical and emotional wellbeing (Ov. *Met.* 5.438). In this sense, these relationships can be read as a sample of the differentiated behaviour that elite Roman mothers were theoretically expected to display in relation to their offspring depending on their gender, seeking for their sons a good political career and providing their daughters with protection from the dangers posed by men.

The idea that there was a closer relationship between Roman mothers and their daughters than with their sons has been raised by various experts (Dixon 2014, LaFosse 2017). As Rosa Cid (2018) has argued, it is not strange to think about the existence of a 'gender complicity' that fostered closer relationships between mothers and daughters, with whom they shared domestic activities, a family cult, etc. Within the patriarchy, but at the same time at its margins, Roman women created community,

resources, and support within 'women's worlds', with behaviours and roles dictated by age and family position (LaFosse 2017: 208). This notion is reinforced by the idea, present in various satirical texts, that mothers are the best allies that women have against men in general and against their husbands in particular (Juv. 6.230-240, Plaut. *Cist*. 49-50). Mothers, and especially old women, are found in sources conspiring with young women to encourage adultery and take financial advantage of men, in passages that should perhaps be understood as manifestations of male rejection of sorority and the unknown female world (Casamayor 2019).

This close mother-daughter relationship may have been more important if both women were single or widowed. An example of mother-daughter economic dependence is the case of Theodora, a 4th-century woman who sold her daughter into prostitution in order to support both of them (*BGU* 4.1024). After the murder of her daughter, Theodora was left destitute, but she managed to get the governor to sentence the murderer to death and to give her a tenth of his property, as he had deprived her of her only livelihood. This relationship of economic and emotional dependence between a prostitute and her mother (who in some cases had also been a prostitute) is also reflected in the works of Plautus (*Cist*. 49-50), Petronius (*Sat*. 140, where the old woman prostitutes both her daughter and her son), and Lucian (*Dial. Meret*. 6.1-2) and it illustrates the vulnerability that old women from the lowest social strata could face. They may have been at greater risk of this extreme situation in families formed only by women, as shown in the examples above. According to Sabine Huebner (2013), co-residence with married daughters must have been a rare phenomenon, at least in Roman Egypt, and this would only have occurred when these women did not have children to look after them.

However, a look at papyri shows us that, at least in Roman Egypt, some parents maintained a close relationship with children who no longer lived with them, including married daughters, and that that they frequently visited each other (*P. Mich*. 3.203; *SB* 3.6263). Furthermore, as Huebner (2013) has shown, the letters that women in Roman Egypt wrote to their families of origin were usually addressed to their mothers even while their fathers were alive, which could indicate that the emotional bond between mother and daughter was stronger than that between father and daughter, and that these women did not lose contact despite living separately and in theory already belonging to different families (*P. Oxy*. 2.295; *SB* 5.7572).

On the other hand, in the previous pages we have seen how sons also appear in the sources as showing affection for their mothers and worrying not only about their economic wellbeing, but also about their health and happiness. This fact, together with the texts that tell us about how elderly mothers and adult daughters exchange food, clothes, and money, leads us to talk about complex relationships. Roman mothers could not get the political status for their daughters they could obtain for

their sons, but they could plan marriages that would leave both them and their daughters in a privileged position. Much remains to be said, therefore, about the relationships between elderly Roman mothers and their children.

Conclusion

In this paper we have seen how Roman mothers could expect a peaceful old age under the care of their children. Roman society understood that, as a reward for having raised their children and prepared them for adult life, they should care for and attend to their elderly mothers in ways that included providing them with money, a house, regular visits or letters, medical care, and resources. The relationship of dependency that extended over time (from mothers to children in childhood and from sons and daughters to mothers in old age) was also an affective relationship, which can be seen with particular intensity in private letters. On the other hand, we have seen how Roman society perceived that children's morals could be inherited from their mothers, and how Roman writers used this notion to reinforce the positive or negative image of various characters.

However, sometimes children did not comply with the precepts required by *pietas*, so elderly mothers were forced to remind their children of the obligations that had towards their mothers. In these cases, in addition to going to court or asking third parties to intercede for them, it seems that *vetulae* also used words to try to move and convince their children. In this sense, elderly mothers behaved in public in the same way as they did in private, using affectivity, motherhood, and *pietas* as discursive weapons. This is perhaps due to the fact that the men who wrote about them represented them in the roles they had seen them play in everyday life, the roles that social ideals assigned to them – mother, wife, respectable widow; roles that, though stereotypes, we have seen were internalised by the women studied in this paper. Found in private letters, but also in legal writings, satire, and theatre, these stereotypes were used to construct a model of elderly motherhood that remained valid throughout the centuries.

In addition, we have seen that both female old age in general and elderly motherhood in particular were viewed in Ancient Rome as especially vulnerable stages of life, both physically and economically. At the same time, however, there was also the figure of the authoritarian old woman, who defied social conventions by telling men how to act and women how to survive in a male-dominated world – a seemingly contradictory image that reinforces the idea that, in reality, social relations in Ancient Rome were much more complex than the texts have traditionally portrayed.

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