

Powerful concubines and influential courtesans

But business with the second class is so much safer –
I'm talking about freedwomen ...

What does it matter whether you sin with a matron or a toga-wearing maid?

Horace, Satires 1.2.47–63, trans. adapted from H. Rushton Fairclough

On May 3, 49 BCE, the Roman Republican statesman Marcus Tullius Cicero wrote a letter to his dear friend Atticus about current gossip in Rome. “Marcus Antonius,” (the famous Mark Antony), Cicero sputtered, “is carrying Cytheris about with him in an open litter, like a second wife.”¹ Cytheris was a notorious actress and Antony’s mistress, as well as the lover of various other prominent Roman politicians. At a dinner party two years later, Cicero was shocked to discover that Cytheris was also attending the party and reclining in a position of honor below the host, just as if she was the *materfamilias*. As soon as the party was over, Cicero immediately wrote his friend Paetus to share his titillated outrage. Having social interactions with such a courtesan, Cicero moralized, was technically acceptable, as long as it was clear that “*Habeo non habeor*,” “I own her but I am not owned by her.”²

A hundred and twenty years later, during the reign of the Emperor Vespasian in the 70s CE, Antonia Caenis, a freedwoman long-term concubine of the Emperor, had just returned to court after a trip of several months to the Balkans. She entered the imperial palace and went to the reception hall where Vespasian’s two adult sons, Titus and Domitian, were holding court. “As usual (*ut assuerat*), Caenis offered a kiss, but the younger son, Domitian, held out his hand instead.”³ The nearly contemporaneous biographer Suetonius offers this anecdote as a shocking

indication of Domitian's haughty and rude behavior. He cites it as an omen of Domitian's future career as an arrogant and cruel emperor. The story also offers a glimpse of some undoubtedly complex family dynamics; Domitian, an imperial prince, is expected to honor a freedwoman and his mother's unofficial replacement with respect and affection – as if she were a legitimate member of the imperial family. Of course, this may not be due to Domitian's inherent evil nature but rather more common interfamilial tensions. For the imperial family, private drama was enacted necessarily in public, much like it is for celebrity families today.

These two stories, which are representative of their time periods, reveal a stark contrast in attitudes towards ex-slave concubines. Cicero was shocked that a man of his social stature would be expected to have dinner with a woman like Cytheris, whereas Suetonius was outraged that the Emperor's son Domitian was unwilling to greet his father's mistress Caenis with a polite kiss. At the same time, both women are clearly public figures: Cicero assumes that Atticus knows Cytheris by both name and reputation, while Caenis appears openly in the imperial court (and travels on her own as well).

These two tales exemplify the general stereotypes that were used to shape narratives of historical Roman concubines in these two different eras, as well as the influence and power of such women. Relationships that caused disgrace during the late Roman Republic were subsequently valorized and praised during the high Empire. It was not the interaction between mistress and client that particularly changed, nor the nature of high-class Roman prostitution, but the political and social climate of Rome itself. In particular, the discourse about these “second-class women” in these two eras helps demonstrate that a leading criterion for female moral virtue was not just loyalty to a specific man, but support of the established patriarchal equilibrium.⁴ Even women like Cytheris, who generally had only one patron at a time, could be condemned for disturbing the Roman aristocratic oligarchy. During the Principate, women like Caenis who wielded equal or greater influence were applauded because their relationships and acts upheld the Roman social pyramid, usually by indirectly denying power to more elite, well-established women.

Romans were unusual among ancient Mediterranean and Near Eastern peoples for both their monogamous marriages and their comparative levels of integration of women into the public sphere. Most ancient cultures practiced some form of resource polygyny, in which wealthy men would claim multiple women in various forms of official and unofficial relationships, while poor men often went unmarried.⁵ While monogamous

marriage has become normative in modern Western societies, the Greeks and Romans were highly unusual at the time in their emphasis on the importance of the tie between a single man and a single woman. Such an ideal was perhaps most famously expressed in the centrality of the Odysseus–Penelope relationship in Homer’s *Odyssey*, despite Odysseus’ numerous extramarital infidelities en route and Penelope’s plethora of suitors.⁶ The Romans and Etruscans were particularly notable for their emphasis on companionate marriage, rather than marriage purely for the purpose of procreation or economic alliance. As Foucault notes, the Roman philosopher Musonius Rufus places equal weight on the marital goals of offspring and “community” – what Homer calls “like-mindedness” – as well as praising physical desire within the context of marriage.⁷

As previously established, Roman matrons fulfilled not only the role of sexual companion but also of financial and familial partner in their husbands’ lives. While respectable classical Athenian women were expected to remain inside the women’s quarters of the house except for religious occasions, Roman wives sat in the open courtyard of their homes, and dined in mixed company.⁸ It may seem that in such a social system, there was little room for an elite concubine or courtesan, since men could potentially find intellectual, emotional, and sexual fulfillment within marriage. At the same time, concubines did exist and often played an important role in Roman politics and society. Because of their anomalous, seemingly unnecessary position, however, such women generated much more social anxiety and tension among elite authors than they did in many other ancient societies.

While most Roman *meretrices* were poor streetwalkers and brothel girls serving undistinguished customers, a few women used their charms to gain unofficial positions of great influence, political power, and wealth within Roman society. Successful concubines and prosperous courtesans who were the long-term mistresses of powerful Roman men had potentially more indirect power than any other non-elite women in Roman society. The discourse about these women by their contemporaries and later chroniclers sheds light on the complexity of attitudes towards Roman prostitutes and on the interactions between elite, powerful men and sexually active, unmarried women. While most of these women were not paid by the act or hour, and most concubines maintained only a single sexual relationship at a time, the elite *meretrices* still occupied a liminal status that distinguished them fundamentally from the social status and roles of respectable wives.

Roman male attitudes towards high-status *meretrices* changed significantly from the Republic to the Augustan Age and High Empire. For instance, during the second century BCE, the proconsul L. Quinctius Flaminius was dismissed from the Senate on charges that his prostitute lover convinced him to gratuitously execute a Gaulish chieftain during a banquet.⁹ In contrast, four hundred years later the concubine Marcia was praised for using her influence with the Emperor Commodus to spare dozens of Christian prisoners from the mines of Sardinia.¹⁰

In each case, a lover possessed inappropriate levels of influence over the justice system, but the Flaminius anecdote highlights the corruption and immorality associated with Republican prostitutes, whereas the later story represents Marcia as a virtuous woman sympathetic to the cause of the poor and religiously oppressed. These two tales, along with those of Cytheris and Caenis, exemplify the general stereotypes that were used to shape narratives of Roman concubines in these two different political eras. These women's stories also support the established historical pattern that autocratic monarchies in patriarchal societies tend to offer more power to women than republican or democratic governments in similar societies.¹¹

From the late Republic through the high Empire, male authors accused Roman women from all backgrounds of subverting the political process and exercising undue influence over the men in their lives. The most prominent examples are probably Fulvia, wife of Marcus Antonius and Publius Clodius, Livia, wife of Augustus and mother of Tiberius, and Agrippina the Younger, wife of Claudius and mother of Nero.¹² These were all elite, wealthy women who exercised their power during times of political transition and uncertainty; they gained their power not only through their male relatives but through their own familial backgrounds and status. During the late Republic, however, male invective was particularly directed against ordinary freedwomen who wielded such power through extramarital liaisons, such as Cytheris, Praecia, and Chelidon.¹³

These accusations were all designed to tarnish the reputations of these women's lovers, powerful politicians like Marcus Antonius, C. Cethegus, and Gaius Verres, by effeminizing them and representing them as under the control of freedwomen. Lowell Edmunds refers to this inversion of the normal power dynamic as the "scale of power," in which women dominate their lovers or husbands who in turn rule Rome.¹⁴ Power is represented according to this theory as a line – A rules B who rules C; this structure is consonant with the late Republican emphasis on the patron–client relationship. If a woman had excessive influence over a

public official, she controlled Roman politics herself by proxy and thus endangered the fundamental hierarchy of government and of society itself. This reversal of the normal power structure becomes even more extreme when the women in question were themselves former slaves and publicly notorious. Social anxiety here focused on the permeability of the political hierarchy; were inappropriate people, either by class or gender, wielding influence in the waning days of an aristocratic oligarchy?

Disparaging anecdotes about the outrageous behavior of influential concubines were not used purely as a weapon to attack male political enemies. Authors like Cicero also sought to reinforce the ideal of the traditional Roman family controlled by a respectable *paterfamilias* and his devoted wife, even despite Cicero's own early financial dependence on his wife Terentia.¹⁵ Men like Marcus Antonius, who publicly paraded the actress-prostitute Cytheris as a second wife (*altera uxor*), threatened Roman family values and the traditional social hierarchy.¹⁶ According to an anecdote of Plutarch's, Roman elite women feared nothing so much as the potential of legalized polygyny.¹⁷ Regardless of accuracy, such a story suggests the perceived fragility of the unusual Graeco-Roman monogamous family structure.

Tacitus and other Imperial-era authors, in contrast, living in a more cosmopolitan world than that of the late Republic, were relieved at the prospect of emperors having freedwomen mistresses, because such women did not come from dangerously ambitious elite families.¹⁸ In eras where the imperial family itself represented a nexus of power, reducing the status of imperial women released more power for the male senatorial oligarchy. Emperors, especially those who already had heirs, could safely indulge themselves with relatively dependent, loyal freedwomen mistresses. Like the "good prostitutes" examined in Chapter 2, these women represented a combination of the faithful, devoted wife archetype and the alluring, sexually available prostitute, which contrasted with the possibility of a powerful conniving elite wife, as analyzed in Chapter 4. Nonetheless, while these imperial mistresses were lauded for their comparative harmlessness and dedication to their lover's interests, several of them still managed to achieve economic or political influence within the imperial court, suggesting another gulf between male fantasy and female reality. Unlike their Republican counterparts, however, their influence was largely ignored or even praised, rather than viewed as a sign of dangerous social upheaval.

This chapter examines Roman mistresses' social roles and influence on their elite lovers through four different lenses: women used as political

bargaining chips to form alliances between two men, women who gained personal political power through manipulation of their lovers, women accused of using their influence over their powerful lovers in order to amass great personal wealth, and those concubines who achieved the unofficial but symbolically important status of an “almost-wife.”

I focus on a set of eight notable courtesans and concubines who lived from the late Republic through the high Empire.¹⁹ From the Republic, I examine Flora, best known as Pompeius the Great’s mistress; Praecia, Cethegus’ mistress; Chelidon, Gaius Verres’ mistress; and Volumnia Cytheris, principally known as the favored courtesan of Marcus Antonius. From the Imperial period, I study the accounts of Acte, the Emperor Nero’s first concubine; Antonia Caenis, Vespasian’s long-time companion; Lysistrate, the primary concubine of Antoninus Pius, and Marcia, the extremely influential mistress of the Emperor Commodus.

Flora and Praecia were both prominent courtesans of the late Republic known for relationships with multiple men, who largely served as political pawns rather than having significant influence of their own. Chelidon and Volumnia Cytheris made their reputations primarily as the mistress of one prominent politician, although they likely had multiple relationships during their careers. They possessed high levels of political influence, social status, and wealth. In contrast, Acte, Caenis, and Lysistrate are praised for their faithful devotion to their emperor-lovers and their status as almost-wives, as well as noted for their financial profiteering through their relationships. Finally, Marcia was publicly married to Commodus’ chamberlain while simultaneously serving as the Emperor’s concubine and influential political advisor.

These particular concubines and courtesans were accused of assuming either elite male political roles, the privileges of elite wives, or both. Through analyzing the discourse about them, we can develop an overall understanding of Roman social attitudes towards women who transgressed so many distinct normative social barriers.

Source material and modern scholarship

As always, we are circumscribed by our sources and by their inherent biases. In this case, the main primary sources for the late Republican women are Cicero, a detailed if biased contemporary, and Plutarch, a Greek biographer writing three hundred years later, who may also have relied significantly on Cicero for source material. Cicero used the threatening idea of the dominant, emasculating, freedwoman courtesan in

several of his rhetorical speeches.²⁰ Plutarch, however, tended to emphasize and glorify the role of women in politics whenever he found them.

During the Imperial period, the major sources are Tacitus, Cassius Dio, and the *Scriptores Historiae Augustae*. The *SHA* have a notable and unusual lack of sensationalist detail about most of the imperial concubines; they are described as a standard part of the imperial household. This does not necessarily render the imperial biographies more trustworthy than they usually are, but, at the least, they do not betray the traces of melodramatic exaggeration common to the descriptions of the emperors themselves, such as the caricature of young Elagabalus.

Few modern scholars have studied the influence of Roman freedwomen upon Roman politics and governmental policies; the lack of scholarship is particularly evident for the high Imperial period. While Rebecca Flemming argues that there is no evidence to support multiple social levels or classes of prostitutes, suggesting that the elite courtesan is purely a product of the Greek world, various ancient texts contradict this assertion.²¹ In 9.32, Martial proclaims his desire for a cheap, streetwalking prostitute, who stands in contrast to the greedy *amica* or courtesan:

I want an easy (*facilis*) mantle-wearing girl,
 who strolls around (*palliolata vagatur*);
 I want one who has already given herself to my slave;
 I want one who sells her whole self for a denarius or two ...
 The cock of a thick Burdigalan can have the kind of girl
 Who wants coins and talks big. (Martial 9.32)

Greedy girls and eloquent courtesans are here reserved for rich *parvenu* Gauls from Burdigala, modern Bordeaux. As Martial frequently does, he here expresses a desire for simplicity, cheapness, and nature over expensive artifice. Although our material and legal evidence for high-paid courtesans such as those who might have formed the basis for the elegiac women is highly limited, epigrammatists like Martial draw a sharp contrast between the cheap street girls and the expensive courtesans who “talk big” (*grandia verba sonantem*).²² This suggests, at a minimum, that while the upper strata of Roman prostitutes may not have achieved the international celebrity status of some Greek *hetairai*, not all Roman prostitutes were lowly streetwalkers or brothel girls.²³ The specific case studies addressed in this chapter will further demonstrate that some Roman courtesans achieved positions of high if ambiguous social status and wealth through their liaisons with Roman noblemen.

Various scholars have recently addressed the legal aspects of Roman concubinage.²⁴ In the Roman Empire, concubinage generally served as a means for men of higher social status to form long-term relationships with women of lower status, especially freedwomen. Roman men could not legally have both a concubine and a wife simultaneously, although this restriction was only fully codified under Constantine.²⁵ According to epigraphic evidence for the early western Empire, freeborn men's non-marital relationships generally occurred with slaves and freedwomen rather than with freeborn women.²⁶ This is an unsurprising conclusion that also fits the surviving literary and legal sources.

Concubines were generally of lower social status than their partners, but there is much debate as to whether freeborn women ever engaged in concubinage, particularly among the poorer urban groups. In general, Treggiari's conclusion that concubinage was legal but discouraged for freeborn women is extremely plausible.²⁷ The possibility that freeborn women of higher social status engaged in concubinage with lower status men, particularly freedmen, is intriguing but goes beyond the scope of this chapter. Concubines were considered by the legal sources, however, to be either a subset of *meretrices* or functionally wives, and it is according to this rubric that we shall evaluate their representation as moral or immoral women.²⁸

Courtesans of the Republic

Some freedwomen or slaves were used as bargaining chips between elite men to sweeten political deals or gain allies. Unlike the common exchange of respectable women in marriages to gain valuable allies, as in the case of the marriage of Julius Caesar's young daughter Julia to his senior ally Gn. Pompeius Magnus, prostitutes were not used as pawns in formal, permanent alliances.²⁹ In a marriage for political reasons, the woman possessed a certain level of status and insurance due to the protection of her natal family. She could potentially break the alliance if mistreated by her husband and return safely to her family. Freedwomen mistresses, in contrast, were often given as presents against their will, even if they technically had freed status, or were used as intermediaries for communication between two powerful men. Women like Pompeius' mistress Flora, Cethegus' lover Praecia, and Nero's concubine Acte were essentially the tools of elite male political leaders.³⁰

The prostitute Flora was bartered for a political alliance between Pompeius Magnus and his friend Geminus during the 70s

BCE.³¹ According to Plutarch, our only source on her, she was a woman of uncertain age and origin, presumably named after the goddess whose festival was publicly celebrated by prostitutes.³² Geminus apparently fell in love with Flora but was refused by her, as she claimed a prior attachment to Pompeius. However, Geminus then appealed to Pompeius, who promptly gave his consent to the liaison and furthermore broke off his own relationship with Flora. While at first Flora appears to have the significant right of refusing lovers, suggesting a free status, the fact that her former partner Pompeius can “give” her to Geminus without her consent or desire indicates that she may have been his freedwoman or at least under significant obligation to him.

This story thus reveals the fragility of courtesans’ supposed agency, at least when faced with pressure by elite and powerful men. Flora’s initial right of choice is ultimately abrogated by Pompeius. Plutarch asserts that Flora “languished for some time afterwards, under a sickness brought on by grief and desire.”³³ He uses the incident as a means of displaying Pompeius’ attractiveness to women and ability to inspire love in them. Flora nevertheless carried a certain amount of value for these two young men; her trade between them helped cement their own relationship.

The exchange of women to form alliances is of course a long-established tradition in exogamous ancient societies. Generally, however, such exchanges involved a father bestowing his daughter on the son of another family and creating a permanent bond between two families. The trade of a prostitute here is markedly different: Flora passes from Pompeius’ hands to those of Geminus, without any possible production of shared grandchildren or any permanent link between the families.

The only contemporaneous example of Roman wife-trading for political reasons is the transfer of the respectable matron Marcia, daughter of the politician L. Marcus Philippus, between the household of her former husband Marcus Porcius Cato Minor and the elderly orator Quintus Hortensius in 56 BCE.³⁴ This incident caused a fair degree of scandal and gossip, as the formation of a bond of *amicitia* through the sequential sharing of a wife was highly unorthodox.³⁵ In contrast, Flora’s favors were a specific gift that Pompeius could bestow upon Geminus, rather than the initiation of a permanent bond between the two men. Alison Keith notes the formation of homosocial networks through “the display and/or exchange of slave- and freedwoman” and equates it with more conventional elite marriage alliances.³⁶ However, the prostitute’s lack of family means that the woman functions more as a one-time gift than as an ongoing tie.

During the same period, Praecia, a woman described by Plutarch as an ordinary *hetaira*, served as a similar intermediary between the general Lucius Licinius Lucullus and the powerful politician Cornelius Cethegus. Plutarch describes her as someone who “used her associates (*entugchanousin*) and companions (*dialegomenois*) to further the political efforts of her friends (*philon*), and so added to her charms the reputation of someone who was a true comrade (*philetairos*) and a ‘fixer’ (*drasterios*) and had thus gained very great power.”³⁷ Plutarch employs masculine adjectives to categorize Praecia’s influence – she is described simultaneously as part of the “Old Boys’ Network” and as a woman who gained power through her sexual favors. Various vocabulary choices of Plutarch in this passage, such as *entugchano*, could be interpreted both as friendly and as sexual; the innuendoes are deliberate given the subject material. *Philetairos*, for instance, is both someone who takes good care of (his) friends and someone who is very friendly. Applied to Praecia, it implies a certain degree of promiscuity.

According to Plutarch, Lucullus secured the governorship of Cilicia in 73 BCE by appealing to Praecia to use her influence with her lover Cethegus. It is not clear whether or not Lucullus and Praecia had a purely platonic relationship. Plutarch claims that her affections were won through “gifts and flattery;” he also mentions that being publicly seen with Lucullus was a *misthos* or wage for Praecia, a Greek term often used for prostitutes’ fees.³⁸ Praecia, according to Plutarch, also desired to increase her own reputation by consorting with famous and powerful men like Lucullus. He conferred *fama* upon her; she returned his favor by introducing him to her lover Cethegus. In any case, Praecia’s support was only effective because she caused Cethegus to advocate on Lucullus’ behalf.³⁹ As soon as Lucullus had obtained Cilicia, he promptly ceased the friendship with the scandalous prostitute “fixer” and her influential lover. This was another singular deal rather than the formation of a long-term alliance.

During the 50s and 40s BCE, Publius Volumnis Eutrapelus, a wealthy Roman knight and probable freedman (given the Greek cognomen of “Trickster”) used his own freedwoman, the previously mentioned Volumnia Cytheris, to gain important friends and improve his social status.⁴⁰ Cytheris was an accomplished *mima*, an actress in Roman farces. Mimes were marked by improvisation, lewd dialogue and actions, and sometimes, especially during the Floralia, by the public nudity of the actors and actresses. In any case, such a profession gave Cytheris public notoriety and *infamia*.

It is quite likely that Eutrapelus was an early lover of Cytheris himself, although he may later have found more profit in offering her services to friends and allies, or even, as Sarah Pomeroy optimistically suggests, letting her choose such liaisons herself.⁴¹ Treggiari notes that Eutrapelus, her patron, initially functioned as Cytheris' male relative in the same way that a father or brother would have, using her in order to establish valuable political alliances.⁴² However, rather than remaining as a permanent part of Eutrapelus' *familia*, Cytheris was able to use his connections as a springboard to establish far more valuable and prominent later liaisons than her relationship with him.⁴³

It was certainly disgraceful, at least according to the view of conservative orators like Cicero, to keep regular company with an actress, regardless of her legal status. Cytheris may well have been able to purchase her own freedom through her earnings as an actress or as a prostitute, or she may have been freed as a reward for prior services. In any case, freedom did not remove her from obligations to her patron, and initially she still functioned as his political pawn.

Cytheris' first appearance in the historical record is as the publicly acknowledged lover of the propraetor Marcus Antonius in May of 49 BCE, shortly after Caesar had taken over Rome and subsequently departed to wage the civil war in Spain.⁴⁴ Eutrapelus was Marcus Antonius' *praefectus fabrum*, an important and profitable managerial post, although we do not know of any direct connection between his position and Cytheris' relationship with Antonius.

Cytheris does seem to have exercised a certain degree of political influence: in January of 47 BCE, Cicero wrote his wife Terentia about a failed attempt to gain a favor from a woman named Volumnia, who is likely synonymous with Volumnia Cytheris.⁴⁵ In any case, Cicero told Terentia that "Volumnia ought to have been more attentive to you than she has been, and even what she has done she might have done with greater zeal and caution."⁴⁶ If this Volumnia was Cytheris, then even the contemptuous Cicero and haughty Terentia found it necessary to seek her support when trying to regain admittance to Italy after Pompeius' defeat.

This letter also suggests more social contact between elite wives and prominent courtesans than has previously been imagined. Cytheris is viewed as a natural contact for Terentia's female-female negotiations, despite her lower social status. The notion that elite Roman women generally sought favors from other women rather than men, when possible, is borne out by Hortensia's speech in 42 BCE, where she declares that she and other senatorial women first sought aid from Octavian's

sister Octavia, Antonius' mother Julia, and Antonius' wife Fulvia when complaining about a new tax levied on them. They only took to the Roman Forum for Hortensia's speech after Fulvia threw them out of her atrium.⁴⁷ In this case, however, Cytheris functions as Antonius' female point of contact, perhaps because he was temporarily unmarried, having divorced his wife Antonia Hybrida and not yet married Fulvia.

The next documented appearance of Cytheris is at the dinner party of Eutrapelus in 46 BCE, attended and chronicled by Cicero, and discussed briefly at the beginning of this chapter.⁴⁸ Cicero was a friend of Eutrapelus, with whom he apparently shared a passion for literature.⁴⁹ While this incident does not depict any particular political role or influence displayed by either Cytheris or Eutrapelus, it does suggest that Eutrapelus continued to exhibit Cytheris in semi-public settings as a means of impressing his companions.

Cicero himself was apparently somewhat shocked by the presence of a prostitute at a respectable Roman dinner party, claiming to Atticus that "he had no suspicion she would be there," but he also emphasized that concubines were tolerable fellow guests, even to philosophers like himself, as long as they "are not the master."⁵⁰ For Cicero, concubines are socially acceptable, if risqué, but they must be aware of the "scale of power." This story also implies that, even after her relationship with Antonius had begun, Cytheris remained in a close patron-client relationship with Eutrapelus. Appearing at elite dinner-parties may have been part of Cytheris' duties to her former master. Such displays served as a mark of Eutrapelus' pride in his patronage of a famous and attractive actress, despite her unorthodox social status.

Cytheris was one of the first Roman courtesans to be treated with a high degree of respect. Social conservatives like Cicero, however, reacted to such pandering with outrage and indignation. When Antonius was carrying Cytheris around in his litter "like a second wife" in 47 BCE, Antonius was already married at that time to his cousin Antonia Hybrida. His display of Cytheris was scandalous because it forced a public recognition of the relationship between the most powerful man present in Rome and a notorious *meretrix*. The *Boni* conservative political faction could do little to stop Antonius' blatant parade of his mistress. Furthermore, this parade blends the traditional triumphal procession, which emphasized male political and military dominance, with the raucous prostitutes' parade during the Floralia, as discussed later in Chapter 7. Cytheris' presence at Antonius' side implicitly crosses both social and religious boundaries.

Antonius may have displayed Cytheris deliberately to annoy men like Cicero and in order to demonstrate his own disregard for contemporary mores. Cicero repeatedly mentions this public parade of Cytheris and Antonius, emphasizing the presence of Antonius' lictors, which appeared to give official governmental sanction to the excursions.⁵¹ Cytheris' presence in Antonius' litter was particularly scandalous because Roman matrons cherished their privilege of riding in litters or carriages, as known from the historical dispute over the *lex Oppia*.⁵² Roman prostitutes typically walked on the street. Therefore, the means of transportation became a method of defining social status for women, implying that Cytheris here flouted social convention at multiple levels.

The "parade of prostitutes" is mentioned by a variety of later sources, including Plutarch and Pliny the Elder, who are all likely referencing either Cicero's original indignant comments to Atticus or his later denunciation of Antonius in the *Philippics*. By the time of Cicero's formal speeches attacking Antonius in the fall of 43 BCE, he had significantly elaborated on the original tale of Cytheris and the litter:

The tribune [Antonius] was carried in a chariot, lictors crowned with laurel preceded him; among whom, on an open litter, was carried an actress; whom honorable men [greeted] not by the name by which she was well known on the stage, but by that of Volumnia. A carriage followed full of pimps (*lenonibus*); then a lot of debauched (*nequissimi*) companions; and then his mother, utterly neglected, followed the mistress (*amicam*) of her profligate son, as if [Cytheris] had been her daughter-in-law ... If you had no shame before the municipal towns, had you none even before your veteran army? For what soldier was there who did not see her at Brundisium? (Cicero, *Philippics* 2.58–61)

It is difficult to tell whether the addition of the pimps and debauched companions is factual or merely one of Cicero's stylistic embellishments to emphasize his invective, several years after the events in question. Certainly, the latter hypothesis seems rather more plausible. In any case, regardless of the facts, the additions to the account emphasize Cytheris' misrepresentation as a respectable matron – she is addressed as Volumnia, a citizen woman's name, by local magistrates, and given the status of a daughter-in-law, preceding Antonius' mother Julia in the procession. Cytheris claimed a status to which she had no right, and Cicero retroactively claims to have been horrified at both her transgression and Antonius' outrages.

Cicero also jokingly refers to Antonius as *noster Cytherius*, our Cytherian, suggesting that Antonius had taken his female lover's name, rather than Cytheris marrying into his family.⁵³ In the *Philippics*, Cicero

also calls Antonius himself a *meretrix* and claims that he practiced the trade of a *volgare scortum*, a public streetwalker. Furthermore, Cicero accuses Antonius of wearing a *muliebre togam*, a woman's toga, referring to the togas worn by female prostitutes, and jokes that he was "rescued" from his profession by his supposed male lover, C. Scribonius Curio.⁵⁴ In Cicero's rhetoric, Antonius loses his privileged status as an elite senator and even as a proper man, because he behaved like a *meretrix* himself and treated a prostitute like a wife. Antony, despite his considerable actual power, is represented as under the sexual subjugation of someone else.⁵⁵ Cicero repeatedly focuses on this issue of violated normative social boundaries and transgressive behavior, as will be seen again in Chapter 4 with regard to his attack on Clodia Metelli. This may be due to Cicero's own politically ambiguous status as a *novus homo* or simply because of its effectiveness as political rhetoric aimed at traditional Roman noblemen.

Cytheris' extreme public visibility defines her as an especially notorious and immoral woman. Every soldier in Brundisium is expected to have seen her, and perhaps even to have known her sexually. Cicero redefines Cytheris as notorious rather than notable; her public presence is a matter for shame rather than pride. Furthermore, her presence in the army camp discredits Antonius himself, who is again diminished to the status of an effeminate man dependent on women, rather than being portrayed as a brave Roman warrior.

Plutarch's account of the aforementioned parade is even more sensational, although of dubious accuracy given its late authorship:

When [Antonius] went on his progress, [Cytheris] accompanied him in a litter ... and common women and singing girls were quartered upon the houses of serious fathers and mothers of families. (Plutarch, *Antonius* 9.4)

Cytheris is specifically characterized as a professional actress, one of a group of entertainers, and Antonius is accused of forcing *patres* and *matresfamilias* to accept prostitutes and entertainers into their homes. Antonius' imposition doubly erases social divisions: Cytheris plays the role of a matron while the true matrons are forced to house prostitutes. This inversion of appropriate social standards reflects the later attempts to portray Antonius as the opposite of Octavian and the enemy of all traditional Roman values. It presages his later alleged subjugation to the foreign queen Cleopatra, herself reviled as a *meretrix*.⁵⁶

Caesar, upon his return from Spain and Gaul, sternly rebuked Antonius for his luxurious and decadent behavior; Antonius either chose or was

forced to sever his ties with Cytheris. In the *Philippics*, Cicero describes this breakup in terms of a divorce:

He desired that mistress of his (*illam suam*) to take possession of whatever belonged to her, according to the laws of the Twelve Tables [concerning traditional *usucapio* divorce]. He has taken his keys from her, and turned her out (*clavis ademit exegit* ... Nothing is more honest in his life than when he made a divorce with an actress (*quod cum mima divortium*). (Cicero, *Philippics* 2.69)

Cicero deliberately chooses the formal language of divorce, including the repossession of the household keys, in a rhetorical device intended to emphasize both the importance and the inappropriate nature of Antonius' relationship with Cytheris: he has treated her like a wife in metaphorically giving her the keys to his house and chests. Furthermore, Cicero suggests that Antonius only "divorced" Cytheris for financial reasons, not out of a desire to return to sober propriety.⁵⁷ Even the end of this affair does not return Antonius to moral sanctity, as it is caused by greed.

Cytheris' other purported relationships, with Cornelius Gallus the poet and, more dubiously, with Marcus Brutus the assassin of Caesar, do not seem to have been motivated by political connections or arranged by Eutrapelus.⁵⁸ Eutrapelus, in his capacity as a literary patron, might have introduced Gallus to Cytheris, but we have no actual evidence for this hypothesis. It is possible that Cytheris, under Eutrapelus' guidance, pursued a consistent series of lovers who were members of Antonius' political faction. According to Vergil's *Eclogues*, Cytheris or at least her poetic persona, Lycoris, eventually deserted Gallus in favor of a new lover, a soldier en route to the Alps.⁵⁹ In the tense conflicts of the late 40s and early 30s between the Antonian, Octavian, and "Republican" factions, Cytheris may well have simply sympathized with her original lover and felt loyalty towards the Antonian factions, whereas Gallus supported Octavian.

Cicero accused Antonius of settling some of the legionary veterans' retirement land in Campania on *mimos et mimas*; Traina suggests that Cytheris herself may have profited from this generosity.⁶⁰ However, there is no direct evidence of such a gift. Cytheris certainly received many gifts from her lovers, but we cannot prove that she illegally received soldiers' lands. We do not know Cytheris' eventual fate. Augustan Rome may have been a less tolerant environment for proud, aging actress-prostitutes who had tried to claim the status and respect reserved for elite matrons. Alternatively, she may have simply retired into Eutrapelus' household. Either way, she departed the stage at the dawn of the Roman Principate.

While Flora and Cytheris served largely as the sexual objects of powerful Roman senators, valuable only because of their attractiveness, other courtesans and concubines managed to affect governmental policies during the Republic and were accused of virtually taking over official male roles in government. I do not wish to overestimate the power of these women. Stories of their influence were often intended to degrade their lovers rather than to glorify the mistresses themselves. The change towards a more positive attitude regarding such figures in Imperial times will become particularly evident as we examine the representation of these women as political agents.

During the same period in the late Republic when Flora and Praecia were prominent, the freedwoman Chelidon exercised power over much of Rome through her influence over Gaius Verres, urban praetor during the year 74 BCE. Our only source for Chelidon's life and role in Roman politics are Cicero's speeches *Against Verres*.⁶¹ These orations are primarily directed against Verres' abuses in Sicily while governor there, but they also detail other instances of corruption during Verres' lengthy career.

As such, Cicero's testimony is highly biased and designed to tar Verres with the traditional charge of domination by a woman, made more spectacular by the idea of subordination to a *meretrix*.⁶² While this may cause us to doubt the historicity of his account, the anecdotes that Cicero chronicles in his speeches are intended to portray a woman of almost unparalleled direct political power:

They resolve that the best thing they could do, which indeed might have occurred to any one, was to beg Chelidon for her aid. She, while Verres was praetor, was not only the real judge in all civil law, and in the disputes of all private individuals, but was also supreme in this affair of the repairs of the public buildings. Gaius Mustius, a Roman knight and tax-farmer (*publicanus*), a most honorable man, came to Chelidon ... With what shame, with what suffering, do you think that such men as these went to the house of a prostitute? These are men who would have encountered such disgrace on no account, unless the urgency of their duty and of their relationship to the injured youth had compelled them to do so. (Cicero, *In Verrem* 1.136–7)⁶³

Chelidon, despite her lowly and female status, is uniquely described as “the real judge in all civil law,” the arbiter of private disputes, and the commissioner of public buildings. In other words, according to Cicero, she is in charge of all the internal judicial affairs of the city of Rome itself. It is precisely Chelidon's status as a *meretrix* that renders her influence over Verres so damning: she taints the praetor with her own *infamia*.⁶⁴ Indeed, Cicero claims that Chelidon's notorious reputation stains all

those with whom she comes in contact: even sober gentlemen were forced to face the *turpitudinem* of association with a prostitute.

The specific nature of Cicero's example and the legal setting suggests that this particular political intercession by Chelidon may in fact have occurred. However, Cicero provides only two such concrete examples of Chelidon's influence. His generalizations concerning Chelidon's ubiquitous control of Roman affairs and her usurpation of the role of praetor are almost certainly rhetorical exaggerations. On the other hand, there were more than sufficient criticisms of Verres' character available. Cicero's emphasis on Chelidon suggests both the height of her authority and the degree to which such power infuriated his sensibilities and those of the jury.

Chelidon is not only accused of assuming the duties of a public official but also of usurping the role of a formal patron; such an act mocked the structure of the patron–client system that informally governed elite Roman society in the late Republic. She threatened the social order not just by influencing Verres but by directly exercising political power. Cicero added a lengthy description of Junius' and Titus' visits to her house, paralleling it to the traditional morning calls paid on important political patrons by their clients:

They came, as I say, to Chelidon. The house was full; new laws, new decrees, new decisions were being solicited ... Some were paying money; some were signing documents. The house was full, not with a prostitute's train, but rather with a crowd seeking audience of the praetor... (Cicero, *In Verrem* 1.137–8)

Chelidon's house, and, metaphorically, her genitalia, were stuffed full of men. While normally the Roman elite would consult renowned advocates such as Cicero himself, in this year they sought the expensive advice of the courtesan Chelidon. Furthermore, Chelidon's position made a mockery of any attempt to exercise proper justice, as Verres was willing to listen to her regardless of the merits of the case. The parallels between prostitute and politician could hardly be more explicit: rather than a train of clients for sex, Chelidon has a gathering of men seeking political favor. She wears the toga of a *meretrix*, not a praetor.

Furthermore, Cicero claims that Chelidon drove Verres' own political ambitions, claiming, "when he was made praetor, leaving the house of Chelidon after having taken the auspices, he drew the lot of the city province, more in accordance with his own inclination and that of Chelidon, than with the wish of the Roman people."⁶⁵ Chelidon may even have focused particularly on the inheritance rights of women; Cicero refers

to a case where Verres denied an inheritance to an orphan heiress after a bribe by her distant male relative and remarks:

Who would ever believe that Verres would be an adversary of women? Or did he do something contrary to the interests of women, in order that the whole edict might not appear to have been drawn up at the will of Chelidon? (Cicero, *In Verrem* 1.105)

This claim suggests that Chelidon might generally have influenced Verres to give favorable decisions to women, although it may well be simply another smear on Verres' supposed domination by a lowly female. Cicero views women as natural allies with each other, despite the lack of any known social relationship between this respectable orphaned maiden and the notorious prostitute.

Chelidon died shortly after 74 BCE. Cicero mentions that Verres had received an inheritance from the deceased Chelidon sometime between 73 and 71 BCE; he specifically refers to valuable accoutrements (*ornamenta*) as a part of this inheritance.⁶⁶ This may imply that Chelidon was Verres' own freedwoman, as he would then be her patron and traditionally entitled to some sort of inheritance. However, she may have simply bequeathed her fortune out of affection to her lover. In any case, it suggests strongly that Chelidon profited financially either from her activities as a prostitute or from her peddling of access to the urban praetor, as she had substantial money to bequeath. Since the inheritance included ornaments, at least some of her wealth was probably in the form of jewelry and items of clothing. As we know from the first-century BCE elegies, such baubles were traditional gifts to prostitutes in return for their services.⁶⁷

Chelidon was replaced in Verres' embraces by two other influential prostitutes, Tertia and Pippa, who were of even lower original social status but also apparently affected the path of politics during Verres' Sicilian praetorship.⁶⁸ We have no other references to Tertia or Pippa, but Tertia was definitely an infamous woman of lowly social status, since she was the daughter of an actor and the former mistress of a flute-player. Even after the death of the "praetor" Chelidon, new lovers supposedly drove Verres to greater depths of excess and greed. While we should be rightly suspicious as to the actual crimes of these women or the extent of their power, their historical existence and status as Verres' prostitute mistresses is highly likely, as this sort of information would have been readily available to both Cicero and the defense counsel, Hortensius. Verres may well have been motivated more by his own greed and lust than by the blandishments of his concubines. However, the Verrine orations relate a story

of almost unparalleled direct power for a freedwoman *meretrix* in Roman Republican politics. While the speeches' purpose is to attack Verres, they reveal elite male anxiety about the intrusion of freedwomen prostitutes into the masculine world of politics, echoing a similar although distinct anxiety about male freedmen.⁶⁹

Concubines of the Principate

Acte was a freedwoman from Asia Province who became the mistress of the Emperor Nero in the mid-first century CE. She apparently remained devoted to him for his entire life. While Acte was not a professional prostitute, her informal, ambiguous status as one of many imperial concubines gives her the same sort of liminal social status as Cytheris or Praecia.

Acte, unlike the Republican courtesans, was praised for her loyalty and devotion to Nero. At the same time, her presence and influence in the imperial palace became yet another component of the general representation of the Emperor's corruption and debauchery. The first mention of Acte in Tacitus' *Annales*, our major source about her, occurs shortly after Nero's accession to the throne at the age of 17 in 54 CE. The couple remained romantically involved at least until the year 58, when Nero married Poppaea Sabina.⁷⁰ Nero was already married in 54 to his cousin Octavia. However, this marital tie proved no barrier to the liaison with Acte:

Meanwhile his mother's [Agrippina Minor's] influence was gradually weakened, as Nero fell in love with a freedwoman named Acte ... and even the prince's older friends did not thwart him, for here was a girl who without harm to any one fulfilled his desires, since he loathed his wife Octavia, high born as she was, and of well-known (*nobili*) virtue. (Tacitus, *Annales* 13.12)

This relationship was actively sponsored, if not created, by Nero's friends and, in particular, by the political faction opposed to Agrippina. From the beginning, Tacitus represents Agrippina, the most important woman in this section of the *Annales*, as highly antagonistic towards Acte. Either due to Agrippina's power or some sense of propriety, Acte was initially passed off as the mistress of Nero's friends Otho, Senecio, and Serenus, while Nero himself saw her secretly.⁷¹ She is described as a *muliercula nulla cuiusquam iniuria*, a harmless little woman. In Tacitus' narrative, Acte is a counterpart and foil to Agrippina – the submissive, obedient, loving woman as opposed to the controlling, domineering, aggressive figure of Nero's mother.

Since Nero hated his wife, his advisors reasoned, it was better for him to have a harmless sexual outlet than to pursue debauchery with respectable women, who might either be insulted or use the affair to gain power. Acte's lowly social status made her unthreatening, precisely because she was not an elite woman from a powerful family. The mention of "older friends" in these passages probably refers particularly to Nero's tutor and advisor, Seneca the Younger:

Agrippina, however, raved with a woman's scorn about having a freedwoman for a rival and a slave-girl for a daughter-in-law ... Nor would she wait till her son repented or tired of his passion. The fouler her reproaches, the more powerfully did they inflame Nero, until, completely mastered by the strength of his desire, he threw off all respect for his mother, and put himself under the guidance of Seneca.⁷²

In this passage, the primary target of Tacitus' invective is of course Agrippina herself. Having initially emphasized Agrippina's power and influence, he now represents her as possessing the typical feminine vices of excessive emotion and a lack of self-control. She is angry *in modum muliebriter*, in a woman's manner. Furthermore, her particular rage is focused on issues of the household – she is unwilling to accept such a lowly freedwoman as a putative daughter-in-law (and empress, who would outrank her). Although Tacitus elsewhere represents Agrippina as having an unfeminine concern with politics and government, he here emphasizes her gender by suggesting that Agrippina has a typical motherly concern about status and familial issues. Agrippina is not afraid that Nero is hurting the state of Rome by consorting with Acte; she rather complains that he diminishes the nobility and social status of their family.

Acte herself is a mere object for their rivalry; her actual personality and motives disappear entirely from the text. However, Tacitus portrays Nero's relationship with Acte as the spark for a major power shift within the imperial household. In the early years of his reign, Agrippina served as Nero's regent and held great power. However, as a result of her contempt for the slave-girl Acte, Seneca gained Nero's ear and seized control of the malleable young ruler. Indeed, Seneca apparently actively sponsored and promoted this relationship through his friend Serenus. The entire affair might thus have been one part of larger political machinations to remove Agrippina from her position of power, at least according to Tacitus' account.

Acte appears in the accounts of Nero's life on two more occasions. Agrippina, desperate to regain power, eventually allegedly tried to seduce her own son. Seneca responded by bringing in Acte as an intermediary

in order to broach the difficult subject with Nero and warn him of his danger: “Seneca sought a female’s (*femina*) aid against a woman’s fascinations, and hurried in Acte, the freedwoman, who alarmed at her own peril and at Nero’s disgrace, told him that the incest was notorious, as his mother boasted of it, and that the soldiers would never endure the rule of an impious sovereign.”⁷³ Acte is here again used as a pawn by Seneca to undermine Agrippina’s influence. It is unclear how Acte supposedly knows the soldiers’ opinion on the matter; presumably Seneca had coached her. In any case, whether represented as a pawn or a political figure in her own right, Acte again makes a move against Agrippina’s power and successfully encourages Nero to further repudiate his mother’s influence. Since she is allied with the largely positive figure of Seneca in the *Annales*, Acte is represented as a rare virtuous woman in the *Annales*, along with the doomed and generally ignored Octavia.

Epigraphic and papyrological evidence suggest that Acte possessed considerable property and wealth, presumably as a result of gifts from her lover. She had considerable lands in North Africa, for instance, as well as being able to spend the extravagant sum of 200,000 *sestertii* on Nero’s funeral and burial.⁷⁴ Tacitus seems to praise Acte for this supposed act of generosity, rather than criticizing her for her wealth or ostentation, and the public commemoration of her property also suggests that her economic success was neither hidden nor viewed as shameful.

Suetonius and Cassius Dio further emphasize the importance of the relationship, implying that Nero treated Acte as his primary romantic partner, despite his simultaneous marriage to Octavia. Suetonius claims, “he all but made the freedwoman Acte his lawful wife (*quin iusto sibi matrimonio coniungeret*), after bribing some ex-consuls to perjure themselves by swearing that she was of royal birth.”⁷⁵

Cassius Dio adds to this account by suggesting that Nero tried to have Acte adopted into the Attalids, the royal family of Pergamum; there is no indication that Acte’s original slave background was at all lofty.⁷⁶ However, this act does suggest the magnitude of Nero’s passion and Acte’s own position of influence. Dio argues that Agrippina’s anger came specifically from being displaced as the most powerful woman in the palace by Acte.⁷⁷ The attempted royal adoption and marriage never came to fruition, probably because of the entry in 58 CE of Nero’s new love interest, the elite, wealthy, and married Poppaea Sabina.

According to Tacitus, Poppaea goaded Nero into marriage by claiming that she did not wish to risk an illegitimate liaison with him when she had a respectable and lofty marriage already, whereas he was “tied down

to a concubine housemaid through his attachment to Acte, and that he had derived nothing from his slavish associations but what was low and degrading.”⁷⁸ For Poppaea, her rival Acte was not the innocent, harmless object of Nero’s passion; rather, Poppaea refigures Acte as a negative influence who degraded the social status of the Emperor and taints him with *infamia*. Tacitus uses *paelice*, a Latin transliteration of the Greek *pallake*, here, both hinting at Acte’s Greek foreigner status and invoking the Greek concept of the *pallake* as a long-term, live-in concubine or mistress of lowly social status.

Tacitus, who was sympathetic to neither Nero nor Poppaea Sabina, also explores issues of comparative social status and morality in this passage. While Acte was a freedwoman, she did not goad Nero into further excesses or crimes; indeed, most of Nero’s policies during his early reign were relatively benign. In contrast, in order for Poppaea to marry Nero, Octavia had to be removed from the equation, and that meant a variety of preliminary murders and other foul crimes, including Nero’s infamous extensive attempts at matricide. Tacitus’ description of Poppaea is far more negative than his picture of Acte; the matron is more immoral than the slave-girl and a far more malign influence upon Nero. In particular, Poppaea’s political influence over Nero and her advancement of her natal family is a threat to the power of the male politicians and philosophers like Seneca who had previously held sway.

Acte’s last appearance emphasizes her devotion and loyalty to her emperor and former lover; she is portrayed as highly virtuous and characterized in the same terms as the *bonae meretrices* of Chapter 2. After the disgraced Nero’s suicide, at a time when the entire city of Rome was in uproar and chaos, Suetonius tells us that his old nurses and Acte quietly took his body and buried him with appropriate rites.⁷⁹ The burial was paid out of Acte’s own purse, and they deposited his ashes in the family tomb of the Domitii.⁸⁰

Like a loyal freedwoman and a devoted lover, Acte paid her respects to Nero’s grave, even after losing her own status as his dominant concubine and witnessing Nero kill his mother and both of his legitimate wives. In the *Annales*, a set of stories that feature many dangerous and highly ambitious women, Acte is represented as the ideal loyal servant, a woman who loved Nero the man rather than the emperor. Although she is described as “all but a wife,” Tacitus largely uses her as a foil to compare favorably with the other powerful women in Nero’s life, Agrippina and Poppaea Sabina. Acte was focused on Nero’s own interests, just as a proper Roman *matrona* should be, whereas Agrippina and Poppaea were

both greedy and personally ambitious. Just as Livy used Hispala Faecenia to emphasize the wickedness and impropriety of the Bacchanalian matrons, here Acte becomes a useful foil not to denigrate Nero but to attack elite women who ought to know better and behave better. As the harmless, good little concubine, she is preferable to the ambitious and intellectual empresses.

Caenis, the official concubine of the Emperor Vespasian, also gained significant influence and wealth as a result of her relationship with the Emperor. We do not know Caenis' precise social origins, but we can date her lifespan from roughly 11 CE or earlier to 75 CE.⁸¹ Cassius Dio tells us that she was already the private secretary of the Julio-Claudian matron Antonia the Younger, in 31 CE; in that year she wrote a letter for Antonia denouncing Sejanus to the Emperor Tiberius.⁸² Caenis was involved with Vespasian romantically both during the 30s and again in the 50s and 60s CE after the death of Vespasian's wife.⁸³

Cassius Dio claims a high degree of influence and power for Caenis in the general realm of the imperial court:

And not only for this reason does she seem to me to have been a remarkable woman, but also because Vespasian took such excessive delight in her. This gave her the greatest influence and she gained incredible wealth, so that it was even thought that he made money through Caenis herself as his intermediary. For she received vast sums from many sources, sometimes selling governorships, sometimes procuratorships, generalships and priesthoods, and in some instance even imperial decisions. For although Vespasian killed no one on account of his money, he did spare the lives of many who gave it. While it was Caenis who received the money, people assumed that Vespasian willingly allowed her to do as she did. (Cassius Dio 64.14)

Caenis fits readily into the Chelidon mold of the greedy, politically active concubine; she perverted the normal Roman administrative system in order to serve her own needs. However, in Caenis' case this is not depicted as a dire offense against appropriate roles for women or even as a sin against Rome itself. Rather, the assumption is that Caenis served as an intermediary for Vespasian, and that he allowed her to take lobbying fees. Furthermore, she is represented as merciful; she took bribes to spare lives, not ruin them, in contrast to the alleged callousness of Chelidon, who sold her influence to the highest bidder.

Vespasian and Caenis had a relationship both before and after Vespasian's official marriage to Flavia Domitilla; however, they apparently did not maintain their romance while he was married. This implies that Caenis had a semi-formal status that was incompatible with

Vespasian's simultaneous marriage to another woman.⁸⁴ According to Suetonius, after the resumption of their relationship Caenis possessed a very lofty if still unofficial status:

After the death of his wife he resumed his relations with Caenis, freedwoman and amanuensis of Antonia, who was formerly his chosen companion; and even after he became Emperor he treated her almost as a lawful wife.⁸⁵

In the 30s CE, Caenis was Vespasian's "chosen woman (*dilectam*)," a special relationship but certainly not an official one, particularly given the label of their liaison as *contubernium*. This term, according to Treggiari, normally described an informal relationship between a slave and another person.⁸⁶ This may also suggest that Caenis was a slave and not yet freed during the pair's initial romance. After the production of legitimate heirs and the death of his wife Flavia, however, Caenis, now a freedwoman, had a much loftier position with Vespasian and stood in the place of a wife. The "almost" (*paene*) is a crucial insertion here; Caenis cannot quite conquer the barriers of her lowly position as a freedwoman.

From Flavia's death forward, Caenis served as Vespasian's acknowledged concubine and, as noted at the beginning of this chapter, part of his family. Caenis must have been nearly sixty when Vespasian became Emperor; it is a tribute to the long affection between the pair that she remained Vespasian's mistress for so many years. We do not know the date of her death, although Vespasian took other mistresses after her, so she must have preceded him into the grave.

Lysistrata, the official concubine of the Emperor Antoninus Pius during the mid-second century CE, also exercised direct political power through her relationship with her lover and received a relatively favorable treatment from ancient writers.⁸⁷ After his wife Faustina the Elder died in 141 CE, twenty years before the Emperor's own death, Antoninus may have preferred a lengthy relationship with a companion who bore no risk of producing legitimate heirs. Any new children would have complicated the succession of his adopted sons Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus. This choice also avoided the dangers of remarriage to an elite woman from a powerful family who would advance her own sons' interests.

The unreliable *Historia Augusta* claims that Lysistrata arranged jobs for her political allies: "[The prefect of the praetorian guard]'s place, upon his death, he [Antoninus] filled with two prefects, Furius Victorinus and Cornelius Repentinus. But Repentinus came under fire through a rumor that he had reached the prefecture through the agency of the Emperor's concubine."⁸⁸ In this case, unusually for the Imperial period, Repentinus

was hurt by the taint of his connection with a concubine, although the negative reaction may be more due to Repentinus' other lack of qualifications for his lofty post rather than an association with a woman who possessed *infamia*. However, we may see here indications of a mild backlash against powerful concubines within the imperial court.

Marcus Aurelius also took a concubine after the death of his wife Faustina in 175 CE, five years before his own death. We do not know the name or origin of this woman, although she was of low enough status that she was not a reasonable marriage possibility: "He took for himself as a concubine the daughter of his wife's procurator, so as not to place a stepmother over all his children."⁸⁹ While the procurator could have been a slave, he is much more likely to have been a freedman or free, and thus his daughter would also have been free although of comparatively low social status. McGinn notes the controversy over this woman's status, which generally otherwise supports his theory that imperial concubines came from imperial matrons' households, theoretically guaranteeing their morality and good upbringing.⁹⁰ McGinn's theory attempts to rehabilitate concubines and represent them as virtuous women rather than *meretrices*, but both strands of opinion are present in the ancient discourse – Acte is both a loyal servant and a symbol of Nero's lowly taste in women.

In this case, Marcus' stated reason for not remarrying was explicitly to protect the political and emotional interests of his children. The stereotype of the "wicked stepmother" was apparently more fearsome than that of the evil concubine. Domitian's rudeness to Caenis suggests that tensions between legitimate children and concubines may have existed regardless of the legality of the bond.⁹¹

Like other imperial concubines, Marcia was an imperial freedwoman and probably originally belonged to the household of Lucius Ceionius Commodus, later known as Lucius Verus, the co-ruler of the more famous Marcus Aurelius.⁹² She was likely born in the late 150s or early 160s CE, although we have no direct evidence on this point. According to a dedicatory inscription from the Italian town of Anagnina, she was the daughter of an imperial freedman.⁹³ She may have been raised in Rome by a wealthy eunuch named Hyacinthus, who was also the Christian presbyter of Pope Victor I.⁹⁴ While a child, she may have known or at least observed the Emperor Verus' prominent and beloved concubine, Panthea, who was eulogized by various poets of the period and praised by Marcus Aurelius himself.⁹⁵ Panthea's success might have inspired Marcia's own ambitions towards a prominent role in the imperial household.

According to Cassius Dio, Marcia began her career as the mistress of the consul Marcus Ummidius Quadratus, who was executed on charges of attempted assassination in 182 CE. After Quadratus' death, she became Commodus' concubine from 182 until his death at the end of 192. At some point during this time period, she married Commodus' *cubicularius*, or chamberlain, a man named Eclectus. However, this did not affect her ongoing sexual liaison with Commodus.⁹⁶

Unlike other imperial examples, Marcia was neither originally a slave in an imperial woman's household nor sexually faithful and loyal to her emperor. Since she is called Commodus' concubine on multiple occasions, we must assume that she maintained a sexual relationship with Commodus while also married to his chamberlain, a relatively lofty position within the imperial court. McGinn theorizes that Imperial freedwomen concubines were carefully chosen for their relative respectability and moral purity, but Marcia appears to be a major exception to this paradigm.⁹⁷ Presumably, her husband tacitly or explicitly permitted her sexual relationship with Commodus.⁹⁸ The *Historia Augusta* notes with questionable veracity that Commodus was infamous for having both "matrons and harlots" as his concubines, rather than simply slaves or unmarried freedwomen. Even if this is an accurate allegation, it is unclear whether "matron" here means a noble married woman or a freedwoman like Marcia.⁹⁹

Relationships with Commodus' concubines may have been another means of rising in the convoluted hierarchies of the imperial court. By marrying a concubine, bureaucrats gained indirect access to the emperor himself. Commodus' other concubines also apparently made prestigious marriages, as in the case of Damostratia, who married Cleander, another *cubicularius* or chamberlain of Commodus.¹⁰⁰ Marcia's relationships with Quadratus and Eclectus may have been a pragmatic method for the men to gain power and the favor of Commodus himself.

On the other hand, Marcia might have gained her opportunity to be a concubine through her role as Eclectus' wife. The *cubicularii* controlled imperial access through their roles as guardians of the bedchamber; they participated in daily work and leisure activities with the emperor, much like early modern European royal companions or a twenty-first century American president's "body man."¹⁰¹ Thus, being the wife of a *cubicularius* would have itself offered opportunity for frequent contact with the emperor. While neither *cubicularii* nor concubines had direct political power, their daily contact with the emperor and control over access to him caused courtiers and senators to perceive them as powerful

influences within the world of the imperial court. Such a position therefore transcended the lowly origins that we can presume for both Marcia and her husband.

The *cubicularius* Cleander gave large sums of money “to Commodus and his concubines,” which suggests that these women were seen as valuable agents for those interested in influencing the Emperor.¹⁰² Marcia’s loyalty, at least initially, seems to have been to Commodus himself rather than to any other patrons. Certainly, Cleander’s generosity did not stop Marcia from turning on him when politically expedient in the year 190 CE. When a rioting mob, angry about high grain prices during a famine, approached Commodus, Marcia, here described as “the notorious wife of Eclectus,” warned the Emperor of his danger. Commodus responded by immediately ordering Cleander and his son to be killed in order to placate the crowd.¹⁰³

Olivier Hekster suggests that Marcia’s role in this story was invented by later chroniclers in order to increase the narrative drama of the situation, rather than simply describing Commodus’ unprovoked execution of Cleander.¹⁰⁴ This incident is similar in nature to Acte’s warning of Nero about his reputation among the soldiers in Tacitus’ *Annales*; this may imply that only one version, at most, is true. However, there is no particular reason to think that this story is invented except for its suspicious similarity to the earlier story of Nero and Acte. There is further controversy raised by the problem that Cassius Dio describes Commodus’ informant as Marcia, whereas Herodian names another woman, Fadilla. Cassius Dio is a more reliable source in this case, and Marcia therefore a more likely candidate than the more obscure Fadilla.¹⁰⁵ Among other reasons, Herodian might have omitted Marcia so that her appearance at Commodus’ death was more dramatic and more hostile; the role of a “messenger” may have been purely a historical trope, since large riots in the Forum rarely required a concubine to overhear and announce them to an emperor on the Palatine Hill above.¹⁰⁶

In both the Neronian and Commodean stories, a concubine allied to a political rival undermines the position of a powerful figure by warning the emperor about threats to his popularity. However, Marcia and Eclectus also secured their own safety through this move, as well as rising personally higher in the imperial power structure by arranging for Cleander’s execution. While Marcia’s influence might have been exaggerated in this case, she certainly possessed both the motive and means to protect Commodus and simultaneously overthrow Cleander.

It is impossible to determine, however, whether Marcia was merely a pawn used by more powerful male politicians or whether she was also advancing her own personal ambitions. Certainly, there is a long tradition in Roman rhetoric of attacking men by representing them as being under the domination of women, especially low-status women.¹⁰⁷ We must therefore be careful to treat critically any depictions of Marcia as a powerful, influential figure in her own right. Most of the surviving histories are highly hostile to Commodus. These sources thus adopted the traditional anti-imperial criticism that Commodus was controlled or influenced by freedmen, concubines, and slaves, rather than by senators of the same elite aristocratic status as the histories' authors.¹⁰⁸

Nevertheless, Marcia's high level of influence over Commodus' policies is detailed in several specific instances by multiple authors. If nothing else, this suggests that she was a plausible target for misogynistic accusations. The *Historia Augusta* offers a few tantalizing although unreliable anecdotes, such as the claim that Marcia encouraged Commodus' desire to name the rebuilt city of Rome "Colonia Commodiana" after himself, a purely symbolic if impolitic move likely inserted to link Commodus with earlier "bad" emperors like Nero.¹⁰⁹ The late fourth-century CE *Epitome de Caesaribus* describes Marcia as "gaining control over Commodus' mind (*cum animum eius penitus devinxisset*)."¹¹⁰ Herodian describes her as his "favorite mistress (*pallake*)" and notes that "she was treated just like a legal wife with all the honors due to the Empress except the sacred fire [carried before empresses in processions]."¹¹¹

Marcia may also have supported her lover in his gladiatorial ambitions: Commodus "was called Amazonius because of his passion for his concubine Marcia, whom he loved to have depicted as an Amazon, and for whose sake he even wished to enter the Roman arena in Amazon's dress."¹¹² Marcia's alleged Amazon costume invokes the motif of the mythical female warrior, which may have been a common one for female gladiators. One of our only surviving visual depictions of female gladiators, the famous relief from Halicarnassus, identifies one of the bare-breasted combatants as "Amazon" or "Amazonia."¹¹³ While the visual record portrays female gladiators as sexualized but praiseworthy athletes, such an association is also strongly linked with literary discourse about unconventional or immodest elite women who defy normal Roman social mores.¹¹⁴ Furthermore, this anecdote also associates Commodus with earlier canonically "bad" emperors: Nero supposedly dressed up his own concubines as gladiators.¹¹⁵

Marcia is best known for her supposed support of Christianity and for being the instigator of Commodus' amnesty for Christians.¹¹⁶ The sources on this matter are somewhat mixed: Cassius Dio, perhaps our most reliable chronicler for the period, mentions Marcia's support of Christianity. However, Dio gives us no details about such support; the *Historia Augusta* and the *Epitome de Caesaribus* authors do not mention any such connection; Herodian and the Christian writer Hippolytus both provide specific accounts.¹¹⁷

Hippolytus reports a specific incident in which Victor, the Bishop of Rome in the 190s CE, appealed to Marcia to gain mercy for convicted Christians in the mines in Sardinia:

Marcia, a concubine of Commodus, who was a God-loving woman, and desirous of performing some good work, invited into her presence the blessed Victor, who was at that time a bishop of the Church, and inquired of him what martyrs were in Sardinia ... Marcia, obtaining her request from Commodus, handed the letter of emancipation to Hyacinthus. (Hippolytus, *Philosophumena* 9.2.12)

The salvation of Christians through the intercession of a concubine and a notoriously evil emperor somewhat devalues the status of the rescued martyrs. Hippolytus' account is highly influenced by internal Church politics, and he may have deliberately shaded his account to denigrate one particular martyr, the future Bishop of Rome, Callistus. Callistus was a personal enemy of Hippolytus, who accused him of corruption and heresy. In this account, Callistus is accidentally saved not through Victor's compassion but through his own cowardly pleas and the intercession of a eunuch and a concubine. While Callistus himself would presumably have been highly grateful to Marcia, we have no surviving texts from his perspective or that of his supporters.¹¹⁸ However, there is little reason to doubt the actual facts of the incident: Marcia succeeded in procuring amnesty for a number of Christian "martyrs." She also demonstrated her own sympathy for their religion, or at least her personal affection for Bishop Victor.

We should not overestimate Marcia's impact on preserving Christianity during this period, given the scattered comments of historians suggesting a single intervention in a specific case. However, there is a notable lack of recorded Christian martyrdoms during Commodus' reign.¹¹⁹ Certainly, her liberation of the Sardinian martyrs does not necessarily imply that Marcia herself was Christian; Cassius Dio's statement that she "greatly favored the Christians" is the most accurate assessment of her behavior available.¹²⁰ While Christians were not actively prosecuted during Commodus' reign, it would still have been dangerous for such a highly placed figure to practice Christianity openly.

Notably, the early Church did not respond to Marcia's generosity by beatifying her or otherwise honoring her, further suggesting that while she may have protected the Christians, she was not a member of their faith. The incident demonstrates Marcia's power and ability to influence imperial policy in this regard, although there is little way of knowing what priority Commodus himself placed on persecuting Christians. L. Tomassini suggests that Marcia favored Christians as a means of bolstering her own support and gaining a loyal faction, but this seems an unlikely motive, given the precarious position of the Christian religious leaders at the time.¹²¹

Marcia may also have been given a high degree of public recognition and status because of her relationship with the Emperor. She may be represented on some of Commodus' official medallions and on treasure pieces from Britannia. Michael Rostovtseff and Harold Mattingly argued that the handle of a silver skillet or *patera* from 192 CE, which depicts Commodus as Hercules, shows a Roman empress who bears the features not of Commodus' wife Crispina but those of Marcia (Figure 2).¹²² Unfortunately, as we have no definite portraits of Marcia, this identification is largely a case of elimination of other likely possibilities. The silver handle depicts a middle-aged woman with an elaborate Antonine hairstyle and an idealized, if determined face; her clothing appears fairly modest although she does have a sash crossing her chest diagonally between her breasts, which might suggest the Amazon style of clothing associated with her.

It would be a rare honor for an imperial concubine to be depicted in such a way and would indicate her lofty status as Commodus' partner. While Republican prostitutes and concubines may have frequently been used as the visual models for official art, as in the case of Flora's portrait in the Temple of Castor and Pollux, official imperial numismatic imagery was generally reserved for the legitimate members of the imperial family, especially wives and sisters.¹²³ Thus, there are reasons to be skeptical about the appearance of Marcia on this piece, particularly given the plethora of other women in the Commodan household, although the possibility is highly intriguing.

While Marcia may have had a gladiatorial costume, she also supposedly spoke out against Commodus' own gladiatorial ambitions. According to Herodian, on December 31, 192 CE, Commodus told her his plan to appear at the New Year's festival dressed not as an emperor but as a gladiator, accompanied by the imperial gladiatorial troop. Marcia threw herself on her knees and, weeping, begged Commodus not to disgrace himself



2. A silver patera handle with the bust of a woman who may be Marcia, Commodus' concubine. Capheaton, Northumberland, late third century CE. British Museum.

in such a fashion “and not to endanger his life by trusting gladiators and desperate men.”¹²⁴ While we have no other evidence for this particular anecdote, its representation of Marcia as a pragmatic, nervous politician is consistent with other evidence. Marcia might have been perfectly willing to indulge Commodus' gladiatorial fantasies when he was a popular emperor, but she correctly saw them as dangerous and risky when he was at the nadir of his popular and aristocratic support. Unfortunately for all involved, Commodus was unconvinced by this advice. Indeed, he reacted by putting Marcia's name on a list for immediate execution at the end of 192 CE.

After discovering this “death list,” Marcia and a few co-conspirators, the praetorian prefect Q. Aemilius Laetus and Marcia's husband, the *cubicularius* Eclectus, allegedly murdered the Emperor Commodus in a desperate attempt to preserve their own power and perhaps to prevent further acts of insanity by the increasingly deranged ruler. This was

an elaborate and well-planned plot: they had already selected Pertinax, the urban prefect, as the new emperor.¹²⁵ The sources differ on whether Marcia was a pawn of Laetus and Eclectus in this matter or an equal partner. According to the *Historia Augusta*, Marcia initially maintained a position of power in Pertinax's reign as one of his principal advisors, suggesting that she had indeed played a key role in the conspiracy, but this version is not well supported by Dio or Herodian.¹²⁶

The power of Marcia, Laetus, and Eclectus' had fundamentally depended on their close personal ties to Commodus. While they may have saved themselves from immediate execution, they were not able to maintain their power or strengthen Pertinax' claim on the throne.¹²⁷ Unfortunately for Marcia, Pertinax reigned for only three months before being killed by the praetorian guard and replaced by Didius Julianus, who bought the affection of the praetorians through outrageous bribes. In an effort to associate himself with the last "legitimate" emperor and restore justice, Didius Julianus ordered both Marcia and Laetus to be executed for Commodus' murder.¹²⁸ While she may have survived being killed by Commodus, Marcia was unable to parlay her influence into a lasting role in a new imperial court.

Marcia may be remembered as the most powerful of imperial concubines, since multiple sources record not only her influence on politics but also her participation in the successful assassination of an emperor and the choice of his replacement. In many ways, she appears indistinguishable from a Roman empress: she had a political faction, exercised influence, and enabled her chosen heir to succeed. However, Marcia still fell into the role of the concubine due to her lack of a powerful family or official status, as well as, in particular, her lack of children. The only logical motive for Marcia's assassination of Commodus was fear; it would have been difficult for her to gain more power under Pertinax than she already possessed. In any case, the discourse about her is ultimately ambiguous and confusing; she protects Commodus and supports the Empire, yet also brings about the end of his dynasty and overthrows the social order entirely. Marcia does not fit into any of the prescriptive molds offered by our elite male ancient historians, which may be one major reason for her comparative neglect in both ancient and modern scholarship.

Conclusion

The elite courtesans and concubines of the Roman Republic and high Empire were fundamentally threatening to the stability of the Roman

social order. The discourse about them is largely designed to erase their liminality and ambiguity by neatly labeling them either as fitting the wicked whore stereotype or as the virtuous almost-wife figure, even though the latter status raises its own problems. In no known cases did these freedwomen from lowly backgrounds actually marry their imperial or senatorial lovers. The first example known of an emperor pursuing such a risky path is that of the Emperor Justinian and his wife Theodora, allegedly a former exotic dancer, in the sixth century CE Byzantine Empire, who will be discussed in Chapter 8.¹²⁹

Elite authors also used the conventional accusation of greed and avarice, frequently levied at *meretrices* as a class, in order to denigrate specific influential concubines. While, as discussed in Chapter 1, normal Roman prostitutes in literary texts sought new bracelets or baubles, women like Verres' lover Chelidon and Vespasian's concubine Caenis received large tracts of land from their lovers or significant financial incentives from men who sought to curry political favor with them.¹³⁰

We have few specifics on how much money these women received or what they chose to do with it. However, the discourse about these elite concubines focuses not only on their political influence but on their independent and substantial wealth. Even if this accusation is merely part of a standard package of invective, it suggests a continued elite male fear of female economic independence as well as of governmental corruption.

Just as Roman freedmen achieved power and wealth through their connections to their patrons during the Republic and to the imperial household during the Empire, Roman freedwomen also had opportunities for influence and profit. However, the major route of access to such power for women was through their sexual relationships with powerful men. While Caenis may have had access to secret knowledge as Antonia's secretary, it was not until she became the Emperor's mistress that she could sell imperial favors to the highest bidder. During the Republic, such influential concubines were generally popular freedwoman prostitutes who then became the exclusive mistresses of powerful politicians. During the Empire, these concubines were generally drawn from within the imperial household itself, as the power structure became more tightly centralized and compact. The ancient commentary about these women suggests profound ambivalence about not only the idea of women in power in general, but about the social flexibility of the elite Roman world and the ability of lower status women to achieve power through their sexual attractiveness and availability.

Unlike respectable matrons, Roman freedwomen could not gain influence through fathers, brothers, or sons; they were marked, as all Roman *meretrices* were, by their lack of a natural social or familial network. For Republican-era concubines, this independence only created more fear and outrage in the eyes of male authors like Cicero, who saw them usurping the privileges of respectable matrons or seizing the power of Roman male officials. In a time of chaos and civil war, women like Cytheris and Chelidon threatened even the most basic notions of the elite family and female social hierarchies.

In the Imperial household, however, their lack of ties served as an asset; freedwomen concubines were viewed as harmless antidotes to the swirl of intrigue surrounding official Imperial marriages to women from powerful families, whose loyalties might not be first to their husbands. Republican concubines were thought to disgrace their noble lovers; Imperial mistresses become “almost-wives” and served as trusted personal companions.

The positive or negative reaction of the sources towards these women depends not on the particularity of their actions but on whether their role in society was viewed as appropriate or necessary. For Cicero, freedwomen concubines were transgressive, ambitious prostitutes; for Suetonius, women following the same path in life were loyal and necessary servants. Political interference that was labeled as corruption by Republican authors seeking to denigrate their opponents was praised as benign mercy by Imperial authors terrified of the absolute power and abusive caprices of the Imperial family.

This evolution in attitudes towards elite mistresses also fits into established models of the change in elite access to power. In the Republic, political power was theoretically tightly restricted to a limited group of senatorial men. Any attempt to infiltrate this network, whether by Italian landowners like Marius and Cicero, or Greek freedwomen prostitutes, like Chelidon and Cytheris, was met with contempt and outrage by the established elites of Roman society. Under the Empire, power centered not on birth but on access to the emperor himself; thus, both the elite and lowborn members of his household could gain immense status and power.

As empresses became powerful public symbols of authority and controlled vast resources of their own, concubines like Vespasian's Caenis sometimes assumed the role of the traditional domestic wife in the private sphere, the *univira* who was solely dedicated to her male partner's interests. Therefore, the change over time in the discourse about

“second-class” women is not actually a story of increasing female and non-elite power and influence in the Roman world. It is more accurately a reflection of continued misogyny and an attempt to maintain the power of an elite patriarchy; only the specific types of targeted women have switched. If anything, the praise for imperial concubines suggests the deep concern about the power wielded by the public empresses.

Rather than gifting a respectable woman with the power and influence which became associated with the role of a Roman empress, various emperors chose to deliberately minimize female influence by choosing an unofficial concubine as their primary relationship, usually after the death of an heir-producing empress or between legitimate wives. Since this woman did not have ties to an external family, there was less chance of a new political faction forming around her; she would also not place her children's interests above those of her partner.¹³¹ Both freedmen and freedwomen formed a class of people who were loyal only to their former masters and unable to easily seek independent power.¹³²

However, the evidence that even these private mistresses wielded political influence and made themselves financially secure suggests that, as always, some women blurred and crossed the lines of the official male discourse. Any theory that freedwomen concubines would always be submissive, apolitical sex objects is proved incorrect by the historical facts. Women like Caenis, Marcia, and Lysistrate wielded a great deal of political power despite their unorthodox status. These women from slave backgrounds, during both the Republic and the Empire, managed to obtain and to use power over Roman politics and government in ways that were anathema to the traditions and mores of Roman society. While some of them were used and abused by their male lovers to curry favor with other powerful men, others managed to influence political policies in their own right, whether through hiring specific men for important jobs or saving prisoners from execution. These women also profited financially and benefited themselves through their sexual relationships with their powerful lovers.

Some of these women, like Caenis or Cytheris, almost transcended their social status, but the strict barriers in Roman society between *matrona* and *concupina*, noble and notorious, remained an important technicality. Caenis' life was radically different than that of a lowly *scortum* in a brothel, but, legally and socially, they were still linked in their lack of matronhood. A freedwoman concubine under the Republic or Empire could have the power of a praetor, the wealth of an imperial chamberlain, or the public recognition of an empress, but she could never, in the end, be a wife.