Sexual Agency and Erotic Depictions of Sexually Non-Normative Women in Ancient Roman Art

Laura Young

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Sexual Agency and Erotic Depictions of Sexually Non-Normative Women in Ancient Roman Art

An Honors Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in Art History

By
Laura Young

Summer 2023
Art History
J. William Fulbright College of Arts and Sciences
University of Arkansas
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**CHAPTER ONE:**
Introduction ................................................................................................................................ 4  
Literature Review ......................................................................................................................... 6

**CHAPTER TWO:**
Understanding Roman Perspectives on “Normative” Female Sex and Gender Roles ................12

**CHAPTER THREE:**
A Fresh Look at Women in Erotic Art ..........................................................................................19  
Suburban Baths (VII.16a), Pompeii ..............................................................................................19  
Baths of Trinacria (III,XVI,7), Ostia ............................................................................................30  
The Brothel (VII.12.18), Pompeii ...............................................................................................33  
Commercial and Domestic Spaces ..............................................................................................40

**CHAPTER FOUR:**
Conclusion ....................................................................................................................................47  
Limitations ...................................................................................................................................48

**Bibliography** ..................................................................................................................................50
CHAPTER ONE: Introduction

Ancient Roman women, regardless of their status, were to some extent bound by the sexual norms of their time. Much of the textual and visual evidence constructs the ideal Roman woman as a chaste and sexually submissive matron figure, loyal to her husband and the bearer of his citizen descendants. Society expected women, elite women in particular, to uphold these values as a reflection of the virtue of their families and the prosperity and propriety of the Roman state more broadly. These patriarchal social norms appear to have given women little room to exercise their own agency in and out of their sexual relationships. Accepting these ideals of female sexuality, scholars have often characterized normative male-female sex in the ancient Roman world as a sexual act in which the woman is in the passive, penetrated position and the man is in the active, penetrator position. Women who deviated from this norm, or even expressed their own sexual desires at all, were denigrated in the textual sources and labeled “non-normative” in scholarship.

As I explore in my thesis, the reality of Roman sex and sexuality was far more complicated and did not always conform to the normative ideal constructed largely by elite male authors and patrons. The 50 million people living in the early Roman Empire represented a diverse socio-economic, multicultural population, and there were likely many women who did not adhere to social and sexual standards (Aldrete, 2004). Women were a relatively invisible group in Roman society, so it is difficult to construct their lived experiences with the scant unbiased evidence that remains of their lives. The literary sources of the time are overwhelmingly male, and present a biased perspective of the women discussed.

However, I believe that public and private works of Roman erotic art can offer evidence of female sexual agency, especially among the lower classes, which were perhaps less constrained by elite ideals. My thesis applies feminist and queer lenses to rethink how women in erotic Roman art are depicted and interpreted and how such depictions may have shaped the
self-perception of female viewers. My work attempts to expand upon our understanding of female sexual agency in Roman society, with sexual agency being defined as a person’s ability to exert control and authority over their sexual encounters.

This research builds off of a paper that I wrote for the “Roman Social Networks Honors Colloquium” in Fall 2021. The paper focused on textual references to women in same-sex relationships and women who were otherwise characterized as sexually non-normative by authors such as Ovid and Martial from the Late Republic and Early Empire. My thesis will shift focus from the literary sources to the visual depictions of erotic scenes surrounding these same topics. The visual evidence for same-sex couples is scant, so I will focus more heavily on depictions of women who appear to be performing an active rather than a passive role in sexual relationships with men, which I interpret as communicating some sort of sexual agency within these relationships.

To approach this topic, I will be analyzing a series of nine Roman erotic art works—mainly Pompeian wall paintings and frescoes due to the site’s high level of preservation—which show women engaging in possibly active, and thus non-normative, sexual roles. While some of the images I have chosen depict acts that are clearly what many Roman viewers might consider non-normative, I have also included some that appear at a glance very normative. Considering viewing context, viewership, and form, I propose that these works may be read in a different way to give agency back to the woman depicted. For each piece, I will establish the traditional view of the work before using Deborah Kamen and Sarah Levin-Richardson’s Penetration-Agency Mode for Roman Sexuality (2015), explained later on in this chapter, to recategorize the roles of the women in these works. Then, I will consider possibilities for how the content of each work may have interacted with its surrounding viewing and commissive contexts.

While this type of analysis is inherently speculative, it could provide meaningful insight into the possible lived experiences and perspectives of Roman women, in particular sub-elite women. While men are assumed to have been the primary commissioners and viewers of erotic
images, any women present in these spaces would have viewed them as well, an aspect of analysis of these works which is often overlooked. My research shifts the gendered gaze to explore how a woman may have interpreted these images, tying back into the issue of self-perception. Sexual relationships that fall outside of the conventional sexual norm are also historically understudied and often dismissed, so this topic is valuable to further explore.

**Literature Review**

The standard belief among scholars of ancient sexuality is that in the Roman world sexual relationships were not categorized based on gender, but instead by which party was penetrating and which party was being penetrated (Karras, 2000). This penetrator-penetrated or active-passive dichotomy is still seen as foundational to understanding Roman sexuality.

The concept has origins in the writings of 20th century philosopher Michel Foucault. In his 1976 *History of Sexuality*, Foucault proposes what he calls the "role or polarity specific" view of the active and passive sexual entities within a phallocentric system (Kamen and Levin-Richardson, 2015). He equates the “active” partner with the sexual subject and the “passive” partner with the sexual object. He also states that all sexual relations are conceived in the model of penetration. Within classical studies specifically, the active and passive dichotomy was first used by Kenneth Dover in 1978 to study Greek homosexuality. The concept was later applied to Roman homosexuality and expanded to heterosexuality in Holt Parker’s teratogenic grid (Figure 1), which classified sexualities within a grid using the active and passive dichotomy (Parker, 1997). One axis of the grid categorizes the sexual subject as either active or passive, while the other axis lays out the “action-locus,” or possible orifices of penetration: the vagina, anus, or mouth. Each permutation of this grid matched the sexual role with its appropriate Latin term. For example, an active man who was vaginally penetrating a woman would be referred to as a *fututor*. 
While a useful tool, Parker’s grid is flawed. His conception of Roman sexual dynamics and the foundations it was built upon equate “activity” with having a penis or being lustful. He asserts that a woman could not be truly active during sex because of her lack of a penis and because the proper woman is not lustful (Kamen and Levin-Richardson, 2015). The proper, normative woman is passive and chaste, while the active and lusty woman is abnormal. Thus, active women are not included in the grid at all. The grid assumes that only those who penetrate can be active, so the entire model is phallocentric, with the penis conceptually being the only thing able to penetrate any of the three orifices. Additionally, some scholars—such as scholar of gender and sexuality Ruth Karras—take issue with the existence of the grid in and of itself. While Parker created the grid with the intentions of accurately reflecting the established beliefs on sexual dynamics present in Roman society, Karras (2000) asserts that he over emphasizes the presence of a set system for categorizing sexuality when, in reality, the evidence for such a system is lacking. Regardless of its accuracy, the model has become a foundational part of the study of classical sexuality that warrants acknowledgement.

In Deborah Kamen and Sarah Levin-Richardson’s proposed Penetration Agency Model (Figure 2), the scholars outline an expanded version of Parker’s teratogenic penetration grid
with added categories for female active and penetrator roles to the possible set of dynamics (2015). They separate the previously entwined notions of “active” and “penetrator,” defining “activity” instead as anything the subject is doing to participate in the act, whether that be penetrating, moving their body, or “moving their soul,” rather than just phallically penetrating. This allows a woman to be categorized as active despite her lack of a penis.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ORIFICE</th>
<th>Vagina</th>
<th>Anus</th>
<th>Mouth</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PENETRATING</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verb</td>
<td>futuere</td>
<td>pedicare</td>
<td>irrumare</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Person</td>
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<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>fututor</td>
<td>pedicator/pedico</td>
<td>irrumator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>tribas/fututor</td>
<td>tribas</td>
<td>—</td>
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<tr>
<td>PENETERATED</td>
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<tr>
<td>Verb</td>
<td>futui</td>
<td>pedicari</td>
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<td>Person</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Male (passive)</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>pedicatus/fututus</td>
<td>irrumatus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male (active)</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>cinaedus/pathicus (?)</td>
<td>fellator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female (passive)</td>
<td>femina/puella/fututa</td>
<td>pathica (?)</td>
<td>irrumata</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female (active)</td>
<td>futurix</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>fellatrix</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2. Penetration-Agency Model for Roman Sexuality. From Kamen and Levin-Richardson (2015).

Kamen and Levin-Richardson’s model was developed in the context of epigraphic analysis of the prolific graffiti found in Pompeii, including those found in the city’s purpose-built brothel (Levin-Richardson, 2013). Levin-Richardson found that the brothel’s graffiti often mentions prostitutes by name, describing and sometimes praising their sexual services. She noted that many of these statements can be read in the grammatical first person, indicating that the graffiti could have been written by the prostitutes themselves. For example, one inscription reads “Fortunata fellat,” translating to “Fortunata sucks/fellates.” This statement features a female subject, Fortunata, and a third-person verb. While the verb is in grammatical third-
person, this sentence structure is commonly used for Latin statements written in first-person. The use of the verb *fellare*, an active verb, indicates that the subject was serving an active role in this encounter. Rather than being subjected to oral sex by her partner, use of this verb indicates that she was instead performing oral sex as an active participant. (Levin-Richardson, 2013).

The average prostitute was probably only semi-literate, but likely would have been able to write their own name and very simple sentences, so this theory is plausible (Levin-Richardson, 2013). Levin-Richardson (2013) also proposes that even if the graffiti was not written by the prostitutes themselves, they may have been able to read these phrases to themselves or aloud as a self-affirming way to gain back some of their sexual agency. Even for derogatory or threatening statements written by men, she hypothesizes that women could have “tried on” socially dominance and agency by reading them aloud. This is largely what my own research seeks to do: find avenues for agency by envisioning the ways in which a woman may have interacted with and internalized a part of the material record. Some of the images I will analyze are also from the same Pompeian brothel where ca. 130 examples of graffiti were found. While my project focuses most heavily on the art within the space, I also keep in mind the presence of this graffiti when analyzing the art, as it gives valuable insight into the potential mindset of the prostitutes seeing these artworks daily.

This graffiti, as well as literature of the time, provide the Latin words that fill in the formerly blank spots on the teratogenic grid. The three main categories that Kamen and Levin-Richardson (2015) add to categorize active women are the *fututrix*, the *fellatrix*, and the *tribas*. The *fellatrix* is a phallically penetrated yet active woman. This woman would still be assuming the penetrated role, but also be engaged in the act in some way. The *fellatrix* is an active woman who performs oral sex on a man. Oral sex in the Roman world was generally looked down upon regardless of who was performing it, as the mouth was seen as extremely dirty and poor oral hygiene was a point of ridicule; the status of oral sex will be further explored later in
my analysis (Levin-Richardson, 2013). The last category is the tribas, or the woman who penetrates either men or women anally or vaginally. The word literally means “woman who rubs,” but it is used in the grid largely to refer to penetration. These women may have either used dildos for penetration or would have had enlarged phallic clitorises, as much of the literature describes. The origin story of the tribas found in Aesop’s Fables written in 6th c. BCE Greece—translated in the 1st c. CE by Roman author Phaedrus—describes the god Prometheus drunkenly attaching male genitalia to women by mistake in the process of shaping humans out of clay, thus creating the tribas. In addition to pseudo-phallic penetration, tribades are often also performers of cunnilingus, despite it being considered a passive act in the Roman world. In this way, they perform a role that is simultaneously active and passive, but altogether non-normative. Interestingly, although Kamen and Levin-Richardson’s model greatly improves upon Parker’s initial grid, there still is no category that clearly categorizes the recipient of cunnilingus, an issue that will be touched upon further on in my analysis.

These three terms—fututrix, fellatrix, and tribas—and Kamen and Levin-Richardson’s updated grid as a whole, are central tools that I use throughout my analysis of the roles of women in erotic art in the following chapters. While based on a flawed system, I see this updated grid as a helpful framework that I can use when describing and analyzing my selected works.

Concerning the act of viewing media itself, we find a dichotomy of active and passive similar to Parker’s in the theory of the male gaze, first conceptualized by film scholar Laura Mulvey in 1975. Mulvey articulates the idea that in cinema created under a patriarchal society where there is a clear power imbalance between sexes, female characters are often framed as sexual objects to be looked at from the perspective of male desire. Through camerawork, costuming, and other film techniques, the woman becomes the passive object of the active gaze of the male characters. The male viewer is able to identify with these characters and similarly project his gaze onto the woman. All spectators to a film, including other women, are thus forced
to view women through this gaze, complicating the relationship that female spectators have to female characters conceived under the gaze. Art critic John Berger addresses this conflict in the context of fine art in his 1972 seminal work “Ways of Seeing,” which explores how works of art are perceived by their audience. Under a system in which erotic depictions of women are catered toward a male audience, Berger writes that women face the dilemma of trying to see themselves reflected in art while also looking at themselves being watched by the intended male audience (Berger, 1972). In many cases, the female viewer takes on the male gaze and objectifies a female figure in the same way a male audience does, being unable to remove her from the male-centric context of her creation. This dilemma is important to consider when approaching my research, as I am primarily concerned with the viewpoint of the female spectator operating in a male dominated society. However, as difficult as it may have been for a Roman woman to truly identify with the female figures depicted in these erotic works, I wanted to examine the possibility that women could utilize them as a means of empowerment in a similar manner that Levin-Richardson (2013) has proposed is the case for explicit or even derogatory graffiti.

The next chapter will establish Roman perspectives on the normative woman in literary and visual sources, while Chapter 3 will begin the analysis of my chosen works. I will conclude with limitations and future directions for this research.
CHAPTER TWO: Understanding Roman Perspectives on “Normative” Female Sex and Gender Roles

The textual sources indicate that women in ancient Rome were held to a set of idealized behavioral standards of modesty and chastity. These sources also reflect what Roman authors viewed as "normative" female sexual activity. Elite statuary also physically manifests these ideals through visual language. This chapter will discuss textual and visual sources that outline the social and sexual norms that applied to Roman women.

Modesty, purity, fidelity, and submission were of great importance to the respectable Roman woman and her family. However, as Kamen and Levin-Richardson (2015) outline, women were often stuck between opposing male desires. Women of lower class, such as prostitutes, were most associated with immoral and non-normative pursuits of pleasure, and an upstanding woman was not meant to behave in the same way. To some, the very manner in which a prostitute moved her body during sex fundamentally contrasted with the expected behavior of the ideal wife (Kamen and Levin-Richardson, 2015). 1st c. BCE poet Lucretius (4.1274–77) writes:

Whores indulge in such motions [e.g. thrusting, gyrating] for their own purposes, so that they may not conceive and lie pregnant, and at the same time that their intercourse may be more pleasing to men; which our wives evidently have no need for.

The poet claims that if a wife moves her body in the way that a prostitute would, she would have a lower chance of conceiving a child, the intended purpose of sex for a married woman. Whether this claim is true or not, here we find a practical reason that supports the societal standard that a proper woman be an inactive, submissive partner during sex.

While women were often ridiculed for expressing their own sexual desires or subverting sexual norms, a passionate partner is also something that men desired. 1st c. CE poet Martial thought that even proper wives should be as expressive and lusty as prostitutes, despite the
societal norms that berate these types of women. He writes that his wife should be “Lucretia by day… but Lais by night” (Mart. *Epigrams*, 11.104), with Lucretia being a famous paragon of female virtue (further discussed below) and Lais being the name of a prostitute. This conflicting virgin-whore dichotomy complicates how we read some of my chosen artworks in the coming chapter.

Favorable female traits highlighting sexual virtue seem to have been reflective of the moral character of the entire household. I have two examples of this from literature contemporary with the period I am examining, 1st c. BCE to 1st c. CE, that draw a connection between a woman’s sexual virtue and the dignity of her family. Dionysius of Halicarnassus, a Greek historian writing in the 1st c. BCE, tells the story of the aforementioned Lucretia, a noblewoman whose death led to the very foundation of the Roman Republic in 509 BCE. One night, Lucretia’s husband boasts to his fellow soldiers about how his wife is of the highest virtue. The group goes to spy on her, finding her weaving with her slaves as a proper Roman matron should. Her chastity and virtue ignites lust within the king’s son, relating back to the virgin-whore dichotomy. When she refuses his advances, he threatens her with death and defamation. He states that if she does not comply, he will kill both her and her slave and place their bodies together, making it seem as if she has committed an adulterous act with the slave, bringing disgrace to her as an upstanding wife. This ultimately forces her to submit to him. After being raped, Lucretia commits suicide in front of her father due to the shame that she feels. She tells her father before dying: “avenge both me and yourself,” (Dion. Hal. *Roman Antiquities*, 4.66) indicating a concern for the larger impact of her rape on her family’s reputation.

The Roman historian Livy, active in the 1st c. BCE, tells a similar story about Verginia, set in the 5th c. BCE in the early years of the Roman Republic (Livy 3.44). Verginia was a Roman woman of a plebeian family, meaning that she was non-elite and belonged to the class of citizens, while her father, Verginius, was a respected military commander. Verginia was the object of desire of Appius Claudius, a Roman senator. After Verginia refuses his advances, he
has her abducted and crafts the lie that she was actually a slave of one of his clients. Verginius and a crowd of his supporters gather in the Roman forum to dispute this claim publicly, but Claudius does not let him speak. When permitted to question his daughter, Verginius pulls a knife off the table of a nearby butcher shop and kills her as his final attempt to defend her virtue.

These two women’s stories show a concern for the maintenance of a woman’s dignity as well as her obligation to her family. Both scenarios see the women as objects of desire for men who seek to force themselves upon them. Neither of them reciprocate the men’s feelings and instead are subject to death, Lucretia by her own accord and Verginia by that of her father, as a consequence of or as a means to prevent sexual defilement or the shame that accompanied it. In the case of Verginia, her agency is completely removed, as her father takes control and ends her life. At this point in Roman society, fathers had full control over the lives of their children, and women specifically were always subject to the control of either their husbands or fathers. Verginia’s father’s actions were actually permissible under the law, as his power as head of the household afforded him the ability to kill a woman of his family who displayed reproachable sexual behavior (Cantarella, 2016). To him, the loss of her sexual purity would have been a fate worse than death. In the case of Lucretia, however, she takes her own life after being raped, but it is still out of concern for the negative impact her impurity has on the family. She not only endures the rape to avoid being defamed as an adulterer, but then kills herself out of shame. Both of these stories indicate a concern for a woman’s sexual virtue among not only the elite, but also the plebeian class. Both stories also became didactic, with both women serving as exemplars of female virtue that women in the late Republic and early Empire were meant to emulate. These literary sources and the ideals that they upheld also influenced the way in which women were visually depicted.

One of the best visual sources of information on the standard of the ideal woman comes from public monuments and statuary. Public portrait statues and honorary monuments, especially for the elite, were one of the best ways to glorify the virtues of a person, immortalizing
them in stone. People worthy of such monuments were exemplary members of society with
traits that the general public could aspire to. Influential Roman women, while perhaps less
commonly than men, utilized public monuments to fashion these ideal versions of themselves.
Eumachia, one of seven possible female patrons from Pompeii, was a public priestess in the 1st
c. CE who commissioned a building with her own money to support her son’s political career in
Pompeii (CIL X.810, 811). Inside the building, excavators found a statue of Eumachia paid for
by the guild of fullers, or laundry men, which suggests that she was probably the patroness of
their professional association. The inscription below her statue identifies her as “Eumachia,
daughter of Lucius, public priestess, [dedicated by the] fullers” (CIL X.813). While very typical of
Latin inscriptions, the inclusion of her father’s name reflects the previously discussed significant
presence of a woman’s father in her life. The inscription is brief, and does not lay out her virtues
in writing as many monuments do, but context allows us to extrapolate them. Firstly, Eumachia’s
connection to the guild of fullers evokes an association between herself and the production of
cloth and textiles, which a virtuous woman was expected to partake in (as seen in the story of
Lucretia). Most obviously, her statue (Figure 3) emphasizes her modesty, as she wears heavy
drapery and holds the ends of her head veil close to her chest. The reserved positioning of her
arms is typical of female statuary. There are many examples in Roman art, especially in
sculptures of elite women, that convey modesty and submissiveness through pose. As is the
case with Eumachia, figures often hold their head coverings close to their chests, a gesture that
signified a woman’s pudicitia, or chastity and sexual virtue. Whereas sculptures of male figures
will often have spread arms and legs, statues of women typically hold their arms close to their
bodies, read by some scholars as a public reinforcement of gender norms of dominance and
passivity, respectively (Davies, 2008).
Eumachia’s monument as a whole makes several references to the imperial family, drawing a parallel between herself and Livia, wife of the emperor Augustus (Figure 4). As an influential patron, Eumachia connects herself with another elite woman who commissioned building projects with her own finances (e.g. Temple of Concord). Beyond these connections, Eumachia may also be evoking Livia’s womanly virtues. A secondary statue found at the site features a woman wearing a stola, a garment worn specifically by matrons that was often associated with Livia and her role as a model wife (Longfellow, 2014). Accounts of Livia speak of her unwavering chastity and ability to ignore Augustus’ pursuits of passion with other women (Cass. Dio, 58.2.5), favorable female traits that Eumachia may have wanted to evoke through
her dress. *Stolae* were also worn by the Vestal Virgins, priestesses that served the virgin goddess of home and family, further illustrating the connection between this garment and female sexual virtue.

![Figure 4. Marble statue of Livia wearing a stola (1st c. CE).](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Livia_Drusila_(15708884953).jpg)

Roman poet Ovid dedicated the third and final book of his *Ars Amatoria*, the didactic poetry collection dedicated to the topic of love and sex, specifically to women. Published in the 1st c. CE, this chapter outlines ways in which a woman can attract a man as well as instruction on how she ought to behave in bed. In the last section dedicated to sex, Ovid advises women to take on a variety of positions depending on what their best bodily attributes are. He also encourages them to express themselves during sex and let their partner know when they feel pleasure. However, in Chapter 1 of the text, dedicated to how men ought to pursue women, he
Ovid says (Ov. *Ars Am.* 1.17.15-22):

> Though you call it force: it’s force that pleases girls: what delights is often to have given what they wanted, against their will.
> She who is taken in love’s sudden onslaught is pleased, and finds wickedness is a tribute.
> And she who might have been forced, and escapes unscathed, will be saddened, though her face pretends delight.
> Phoebe was taken by force: force was offered her sister: and both, when raped, were pleased with those who raped them.

In this excerpt, Ovid instructs the man to take the lead, stating that force is what pleases women, and in essence justifies rape by saying that it is what women truly want. Here, Ovid reaffirms a woman’s place in a sexual encounter as the passive party who receives, often by force. While perhaps a woman’s position in the bedroom is variable, passivity seems to be integral to her role.

As we will see in several of the examples in the coming chapter, much of the explicitly erotic art found in the Roman world follows these established norms present in society, featuring heterosexual couples performing their acceptable roles of active, penetrating male and passive, penetrated female. Presence of such works, often in public spaces, reaffirms a woman’s expected sexual role. However, as we will also see, some works in these same public spaces subvert these expectations.
CHAPTER THREE: A Fresh Look at Women in Erotic Art

Following our exploration of the “normative” Roman woman, this chapter will present the non-normative side of Roman erotic art. I will discuss scenes that are explicitly non-normative, but also present seemingly normative works with my proposed alternate readings of the roles of the women in these sexual encounters. The chapter is subdivided by location, with a section designated for works found in bath complexes, brothels, and domestic or commercial spaces. This division allows us to read works found in similar viewing contexts in conjunction with each other. For each artwork, I will present its date, location, a description of the work’s content, viewing context, and an analysis of possible viewership. For each scene depicted, I will present a traditional interpretation of the woman’s role, and then present my reframed role for her based on Kamen and Levin-Richardson’s updated model.

Suburban Baths (VII.16a), Pompeii

We begin the exploration of erotic art in Pompeii’s Suburban Baths, located at the west end of the city just outside the Marina Gate (Figure 5, far left). Bathing in ancient Rome was a communal activity, and vast bath complexes were key architectural features of cities. We can imagine that bathing would have been a daily occurrence, so the images found inside the baths would have been semi-public works seen by the common people on a regular basis. Sex was also common at the baths, and prostitutes often offered their services to bathers, so the presence of erotic art in this space is not out of place (Toner, 1995). One example of sex in the baths is found in Roman poet Juvenal’s 1st-2nd c. CE Satires, in which he writes about a married woman who goes to the baths to receive sexual favors from the male anointer. He writes (Juv., Satires, 6.419-423):

She goes to the baths at night, orders her staff with the perfume jars
Around at night, all because she delights to sweat amidst the tumult.
When her weary arms fall back after exercising with heavy weights,
The practiced masseur will press his fingers into her crest, and will
Force a cry from his mistress, as he strokes the surface of her thigh
Although this work is a satire, we can assume that it does play off of the reality of the baths.

Figure 5. Labeled map of Pompeii. [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Pompeii_map-en.svg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Pompeii_map-en.svg)

The works I will explore in this section are all from the *apodyterium*, or changing room (Figure 6, Room 7), of the baths and date to the 1st c. BC. They are presented together in a series located on the upper wall of the room, significantly above eye level (Figure 7, right wall). Under these images were painted depictions of numbered containers, suggesting that this was likely a storage area where patrons would leave their clothes before entering the baths. Slave attendants escorting patrons to the baths may have spent the most time in this space, watching over their masters' belongings.
Figure 6. Floor plan of Pompeii’s Suburban Baths.
https://www.pompeiiinpictures.com/pompeiiinpictures/R7/7%2016%20a%20plan.htm

Figure 7. View of the **apodyterium** upon entering. Copyright © of Jackie and Bob Dunn.
https://www.pompeiiinpictures.com/pompeiiinpictures/R7/7%2016%20a%20apodyterium.htm
Some Roman baths, especially in the Republic, had two separate sets of bathing facilities, and thus scholars have hypothesized that they may have been segregated by gender. The Suburban Baths, however, have a singular set of facilities, an architectural choice which became commonplace by the early Empire. With this change came a mixing of genders in the baths. Literature of the time features a multitude of references to women and men interacting in the baths, indicating that this would have likely also been the case at the Suburban Baths (Ward, 1992). Thus, both men and women would have been the audience of these works.

The typical reading of the erotic scenes from the baths is that they were meant to be amusing (Clarke, 1998). Patrons of the baths would have been able to easily associate the location of their clothes with a comical and memorable image. The reason for this assumption that the works were humorous is because of the non-normative nature of the scenes depicted. Almost all of the works feature a sex act considered somewhat shocking and outlandish by Roman standards. While relatively small and placed high upon the wall, the explicit nature of the scenes and their association with the storage area would have likely made them a point of interest to the bath’s patrons. While they could have humorous intent, I will be looking at them through an alternate, more serious lens. Literature of the time characterizes the baths as a space where the social restraints of gender and class could be relaxed and subverted, as well as a place where displays of sexual “immorality” were present (Toner, 1995). The woman from the aforementioned Juvenal excerpt is a good example of both a subversion of gender norms and a display of sexual immorality in the baths. There, we see a married woman engaging in the more “masculine” activity of lifting weights as well as receiving sexual favors at the baths. Thus, both women and men could potentially have used the space of the baths to subvert sexual norms in ways that the art of the apodyterium displays. Because of this, regardless of the humor that could potentially be read into these works, I believe that we can still utilize them as a means to understand Roman sexuality.
Figure 8 is the most sexually normative of the erotic works found in the Suburban Baths. The work features a nude woman with short hair sitting astride her male partner, about to be vaginally penetrated by him, categorizing her as a *fututa*. This is a common position found in male-female erotic art of the period. The woman faces the viewer, with her legs spread to reveal the act of penetration.

![Figure 8. Scene I, Suburban Baths, Pompeii (1st c. BCE).](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Pompeii_-_Terme_Suburbane_-_Apodyterium_-_Scene_IV.jpg)

Reading this image with male viewership in mind, the woman’s position on top of the man and the way she frontally exposes herself could be read as an appeal to male patrons.
Very little focus is put on the male figure in the scene, whose face is barely visible, while the woman is the center of attention, towering above him at nearly twice his size. Returning to the concepts established in gaze theory, we could perhaps compare this composition to the common framing of modern heterosexual porn intended for a male audience. Often, the male actor is barely visible while the woman is the focus, as the assumed male viewer is meant to imagine himself in the spot of the faceless man. In this way, this image is an apt example of the male gaze at work.

However, I propose the centrality of the female figure could be read differently by female viewers. In this encounter, perhaps she performs a more active role. She dominates the physical space, so she could be read as the party in control. We could imagine that this position affords the woman the ability to move her body and further engage in the act. While her eyes are obscured, she faces the audience, acknowledging the gaze of the spectator and suggesting awareness of the perception of her own body. A reframed categorization of her role within the grid of sexual dynamics would be the fututrix, a woman who is vaginally penetrated yet maintains her activity within the sexual encounter.

Figure 9 introduces us to the complicated realm of oral sex in Roman society. Here, we see a woman on her knees performing oral sex on her reclining male partner. This is woman as irrumata, or orally penetrated by a penis.
Kamen and Levin-Richardson characterize the word *irrumata* as derogatory, as it connotes an oral sex act that is forceful from the penetrator’s side (Kamen and Levin-Richardson, 2015). The Latin verb *irrumare* means “to abuse” or “to defile,” so this form of the word implies that the woman is not given agency in this encounter. *Irrumata* is the perfect passive participle of the verb, translating to “having been abused,” grammatically removing the agency from the penetrated person.
Here we see a physical representation of male domination, which may have appealed to the normative male spectator. The male figure is higher in the frame and looks down upon the woman. The image is greatly weathered, but the man appears to place his hand atop the woman’s head. This could be read as a controlling gesture of holding the woman’s head down on his phallus, reinforcing the characterization of the woman as the forced *irrumata*.

As previously mentioned, performing oral sex was a heavily stigmatized activity in Roman society. The pollution of the mouth incurred by performers of oral sex was a common point of ridicule. An example of the derogatory nature of oral sex is found in 1st c. BC poet Catullus’ use of the term *pathicus*, which most sources roughly translate to “cocksucker,” to insult another man (Catull.,16). Therefore, Figure 9 further degrades the woman by putting her in the orally penetrated, and thus polluted, role. This stigma did not apply to the penetrator. Thus, the male figure and any male spectator who imagined himself in the figure’s place would be able to receive sexual pleasure without stigma or degradation.

While the woman in this encounter has the odds stacked against her, there is the potential to reframe her as an agent. As we saw in the case of “*Fortunata fellat,*” some women may have considered themselves sexual agents even in sexual dynamics that typically necessitate their passivity. In this way, our figure of interest could be read as a *fellatrix* by some women, especially in a space such as the baths where sexual subversion was possible.

Figure 10 features the reverse of the position seen in Figure 9. Here, the woman reclines with her legs spread and receives cunnilingus from a male partner. She lies back on a bed with what appears to be a wooden frame and green and brown bedding. The woman is nude and central to the composition, again likely appealing to male spectators, while the man is fully clothed.
The negative stigma attached to oral sex was especially prominent in the case of cunnilingus. It also introduces a complication to the penetrator-penetrated dynamic. This is our first image with no phallic penetration. Here, the mouth or tongue would seem to be the agent of penetration. However, in this case, the partner performing cunnilingus would be considered passive by Roman standards. Parker states that cunnilingus is an act in which the partner performing cunnilingus is being vaginally “used” by their female partner, in turn making them in his words both passive and penetrated (Parker, 1997). He also presents examples of
cunnilingus as passive as articulated in the literature of the time. In Martial’s *Epigram* VII, 67, the *tribas* figure, Philaenis, performs cunnilingus on other women and perceives it as a dominant act. However, the text establishes cunnilingus as passive and pokes fun at the character for misunderstanding this, saying (Mart. *Epigrams*, 7.67.16-17):

> May the gods give you a mind, Philaenis, you who imagine that licking cunt is manly!

In a similar manner to Figure 9, Figure 10 now degrades the oral sex performing male participant by attaching the stigma of oral pollution to him and highlighting the pleasure of the woman. The man is in the subordinate position spatially and categorically, performing the least socially acceptable role that a man could take on. According to Parker’s grid, the man in this encounter would be categorized as *cunnilinctor*, a man orally “penetrated” by a woman, yet he includes no categorization for the woman as active despite the man’s obvious contrasting passivity. As mentioned in the introduction, even in Kamen and Levin-Richardson’s grid, the woman’s role is difficult to determine. If we follow Parker’s logic, perhaps she is a *fututrix* because she orally penetrates. Regardless of her specific categorization, her activity in this act is clear.

Our last image from the Suburban Baths, Figure 11, is unique in that it features two women—indicated by their hairstyles—possibly engaging in a sex act. While the original image has become extremely weathered and difficult to see, Clarke (2013) has provided a recreation of what it may have looked like (Figure 12). Here, we see the woman on the left holding up the legs of the woman on the right and penetrating her with what is likely a dildo. In this pseudo-phallic encounter, we see the penetrating woman as *tribas* and the penetrated woman as *fututa* or *fututrix*. Clarke calls the scene “clearly parodic,” citing how Roman men believed that sex between females required one partner to perform the role of the man (Clarke, 2013). In this way, the *tribas* still adopts a partially “normative” role within an overall non-normative encounter.
Thus, the *tribas* has the most agency in the encounter by traditional standards, as she assumes the typically “masculine,” active penetrator role. In Clarke’s recreation, we also see the penetrated woman wearing a breast band, perhaps emphasizing her modesty. In assuming this sex position, the couple performs the gender roles of dominance and modesty associated with the normative penetrator male and the penetrated female.

Figure 11. Scene V, Suburban Baths, Pompeii (1st c. BCE).
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Pompeii_-_Terme_Suburbane_-_Apodyterium_-_Scene_V.jpg
Baths of Trinacria (III,XVI,7), Ostia

Another reference to cunnilingus in the baths comes from the Baths of Trinacria in Ostia, a port city near Rome. This site, constructed in the 2nd c. CE, is a source of valuable information on bathing culture during the high Imperial period. Here, in one of the bath’s heated rooms, we find a floor mosaic that reads “STATIO CVNNULINGIORUM,” roughly translating to “station of cunnilingus” (Figure 13). Some scholars hypothesize that this designation was a joke relating to the Square of the Corporations, a square in Ostia centered around trade. The perimeter of the square featured around 60 small rooms or stationes which each featured a floor mosaic related to a different trade (e.g., ship builders, rope makers, grain traders) (Koloski-Ostrow, 2015). The mention of a statio along with the mosaic flooring has led scholars to draw this parallel between the two locations. There is also the possibility that humor could be derived from the act of reading the mosaic itself. The mosaic faces a bench that runs along the wall. The text would be
upside down to anyone not sitting at the bench. Thus, the act of sitting on the bench in order to read the text could put a person in a position to be laughed at for sitting at the “station of cunnilingus” unknowingly.

Figure 13. Mosaic with the text STATIO CVNNVLINGIORVM in heated room 7, Baths of Trinacria, Ostia (2nd c. CE). https://www.ostia-antica.org/regio3/16/16-7.htm

Others see the mosaic as a literal identification of the function of this space. The mosaic’s proximity to the bench where patrons may have sat could indicate a possible location where women could sit and have cunnilingus offered to them by prostitutes, possibly of both sexes. If we assume that this hypothesis is true, we find support for the idea of female sexual agency being on display in a semi-public space. Sex in the baths, as we have seen, was a common occurrence, so this hypothesis is not out of place.
Within heated room 7 (see Figure 14), the bench sits beside the doorway connecting rooms 7 and 8, situating it within the room’s southern right corner. The placement of the bath’s entrance and exit inform us of the flow of traffic through the baths. There is no entrance or exit at the southern end of the baths, meaning that anyone wanting to access room 7 would have been coming from room 5—a buffer space between the cold and hot baths. Coming from room 5 means that the bench and any sexual acts occurring there would have been in bathers’ direct line of sight upon walking into the room. There is a possibility that a screen could have divided the space further and concealed the sexual act, but if not then this purchasing of cunnilingus would have been on display for other bathers to see. This could be interpreted as another assertion of female agency. Instead of being an environment in which the expected standards of female modesty needed to be upheld, this space may have instead provided a designated outlet
for women to fulfill their sexual desires. While not a figural depiction like the rest of the works I have chosen, this work could suggest the visibility of female sexual agency and pleasure in a public space.

While I acknowledge the possible shock value and humor that can be derived from the works found at the baths in both Pompeii and Ostia, I read the overall presence of these non-normative erotic works as a preview of real possibilities for what could have occurred at the baths.

**The Brothel (VII.12.18), Pompeii**

Moving away from the baths, we enter the brothel of Pompeii. Sex work was common and legal in ancient Rome, and would have been one of the few jobs available to lower class women (McGinn, 2004). Free and enslaved men of any status could utilize the service of prostitutes working at the brothel.

The erotic art I will be focusing on is found in the main passageway of the brothel and, like the Suburban Baths, is part of a series of works that run along the upper walls (Figure 15). Instead of sitting above clothing markers, these works sit above several small cubicles where clients would be taken to receive their services from the prostitutes. The patrons of the brothel, who would have likely been overwhelmingly male, were the key audience of these works. The placement of the art emphasizes this point that patrons were the intended audience, as the only art in the building is found in the main hallway where guests would have been received. Meanwhile, there is no art preserved inside of the cubicles where the prostitutes would have spent most of their time. Scholars have thus hypothesized in the past that these works may have been used to display the different services offered in the brothel, although this is contested by some (Clarke, 1998). These works may have given a male viewer an indication of the experience he may have at the brothel.
Unlike the *apodyterium* of the Suburban Baths, the hallway of the brothel is a more cramped space (Figure 15). Although both spaces have art high on the walls above the patrons' eye level, room in the baths seems to allow more room to stand or sit and comfortably view these works. This main hallway is relatively narrow, and does not allow a viewer much physical space to step back and view the frescos close to the ceiling. Also, considering the structure of the space - one large hallway, the tangential separate rooms that a patron would be taken into upon entering, and no real designated communal space - neither the patrons nor the prostitutes may have spent much time looking closely at these erotic works. However, the prostitutes likely had more opportunity to view the decoration in general despite not being the intended audience, as they may have even lived at the brothel (Levin-Richardson, 2019).

![Figure 15. Main hallway of the Brothel of Pompeii. Copyright © of Jackie and Bob Dunn.](https://www.pompeiiinpictures.com/pompeiiinpictures/R77%2012%2018.htm)
The main hallway takes the shape of an L, with a doorway on each end of the hall serving as the entrance or exit. The modern visitor to Pompeii must enter through the doorway that opens up to the longer portion of the hallway (Figure 16, 18). This is likely also the main entrance that was used when the brothel was active as well. Entering from this doorway would have provided a patron the most amount of information about the brothel, including a full view of all the individual cells and the artwork on display. The opposing wall to this entrance also originally featured a large depiction of Priapus, male god of fertility, with a double phallus (Figure 16, vi). Since the phallus was an apotropaic symbol in ancient Rome, the patron seeing this image upon entering would have understood that the space was under the god’s protection. Entering from the other doorway (Figure 16, 19) would not have allowed for this image nor the
cells to be fully seen without turning one’s body to the right. Here, the interior design choices likely informed how one moved through the space.

Under this assumption about spatial context, Figure 17 would have been one of the closest images to a patron who entered the brothel. While not in their direct line of sight like the image of Priapus, it would have been the first image above the cubicle on their left (Figure 16, i) and thus may have caught their attention upon an initial glance around the room. This image, as well as most of the works from the brothel, is much less explicit than those found in the baths. In this work, the woman sits atop her male partner, as the woman in Figure 8 does, but she is much more covered in comparison. We can assume that she is a vaginally penetrated fututa, but her leg covers both her and her partner’s genitals, hiding the actual act of penetration. She also wears a band across her chest that covers her breasts. Unlike Figure 8, this work emphasizes the woman’s modesty rather than the sensuality of her body.

Figure 17. Scene i, Brothel of Pompeii (1st c. CE). Copyright © of Jackie and Bob Dunn. https://www.pompeiiinpictures.com/pompeiiinpictures/R7/7%2012%2018.htm
A closer look at the gazes of the two figures could tell us about the level of engagement each party has in the sexual encounter. The male figure does not look the woman in the eyes, but the woman stares directly into his eyes (Clarke, 1998). She also grasps the back of his neck, indicating engagement. We can compare this gesture to that of the man in Figure 9, which may indicate control and dominance. The woman’s similar gesture may indicate this same control. The man’s relative disengagement could speak to the Roman ideal of respectable men having self-control. While the woman’s more passionate behavior could be used to demean her by comparison, this engagement also characterizes her as an active participant and thus a sexual agent. Paired with the fact that she sits atop the man and has a significant physical presence in the scene, this could speak to her being more of a futurix than a fututa.

The brothel also introduces us to the presence of the aforementioned graffiti (see Introduction) which grammatically indicate that they may have been written by the prostitutes themselves. The nature of some of these messages left behind indicate that some of these women were aware of their sexual prowess and may have even been proud of it. One notable example from the brothel that could possibly indicate female agency is a collection of four inscriptions that refer to a presumed sex worker named Victoria. This graffiti, interestingly, refers to her with titles that evoke military associations, such as “Conqueress” and “The Unconquerable.” Toner (1995) states that sex took on a gladiatorial symbolism during the Imperial period. This usage of military terminology to describe Victoria, whether written by herself or someone else, could illustrate the power and agency that she brought to her sexual encounters. As a so-called conquerress, she perhaps had the agency to control the act of sex rather than solely be subject to the control of her patrons. Reading Figure 17 with Victoria in mind, the female figure’s controlling hand and intense gaze could speak to her serving a similar role. In general, we can imagine that these same women who were already embracing and advertising their sexuality through graffiti may have viewed this work and others like it as a reflection of themselves as active sexual agents.
While the graffiti paired with the artwork of the brothel could be read as an avenue for empowerment, their presence does not erase the abuse that likely occurred in a space like this. Prostitution was a demonized profession that women, especially slaves, could have been forced into without a choice. Many of these graffiti “advertisements” that I discuss may have been necessary in order to attract clients. Even if any harm was inflicted upon a prostitute, their infamous status rendered them unable to bring accusations to court (Edwards, 1997). My intent in reframing these images of prostitutes is to expand the way that they can be interpreted, but not to diminish the undeniable harsh reality that most of these women surely faced.

Viewing art of the brothel has also been discussed in scholarship as an opportunity for viewers to transport themselves into a more refined, upper class space than what the brothel could provide. Clarke (1998) argues that the level of ornamentation featured in the art of the brothels would not have reflected the real conditions of the physical space of the brothel. By viewing these works, a patron could envision themselves within that scene. Clarke suggests that the art provided a fiction of luxury for the lower class. We see some of the four canonical styles of Pompeian wall painting already serving this transportative function, with the hyper realistic second style creating illusions of deeper space with painted trompe l’oeil columns and the fourth style providing decorative spaces beyond the realistic. In this way, Clarke’s proposition for the function of the work fits within the established uses of wall painting.

Levin-Richardson (2019) partially disagrees with Clarke’s proposed idea, by arguing that there was more overlap between the actual space and the space depicted. She points out the presence of glass vials and colored glass cups found in the space and also hypothesizes scenarios in which the prostitutes and patrons could have spent their time leisurely, drinking together during downtime and spending meaningful time with one another. She does not see the works as a fiction of luxury, but argues that actual luxury and leisure would have been possible in the brothel. She points to Figure 18 in which a couple contemplates a pinax, or painted board, with an erotic scene on it. This is a leisurely activity that could have easily been
replicated by the patrons and prostitutes. In the image, the male figure lays in a bed and gestures toward the *pinax* while his female partner stands next to him in a green dress. While the erotic art in the hallway would not have been visible from inside the bed chambers, a patron and prostitute could have stepped out into the hallway to view it, however the constraints of the small space would have made the view less ideal.

![Figure 18. Scene v, Brothel of Pompeii (1st c. CE). Copyright © of Jackie and Bob Dunn.](https://www.pompeiiinpictures.com/pompeiiinpictures/R7/7%2012%2018.htm)

Clarke (1998) uses the same image to argue for the viewer’s imagined elevation of status. He reads the woman’s green dress as a style of clothing atypical for a lower class prostitute, as prostitutes were required by law to wear togas and likely would not have had access to such high quality pigmented clothing. Thus, Clarke instead identifies her as a *hetaira*, a Greek term for a sexual servant to the upper class (Clarke, 1998). These women still
belonged to a class of *infamia*, serving as both performers and prostitutes, but they were also educated beyond the level of the average prostitute.

Levin-Richardson suggests that many of the works in the brothel could instead lend themselves to a possible negation of social status, as none of the couples depicted are attended by slaves (Levin-Richardson, 2019). This lack of this mark of social status allows patrons of any status to identify with the male figures. I argue that the same idea applies to the prostitutes working in the brothel. The shedding of status of both figures in the encounter puts the two on a more equal playing field. While most of the prostitutes would have been low status or even slaves themselves, the ability to identify with a generic female figure may have provided them with an increased sense of agency. Combining Clarke and Levin-Richardson’s hypotheses, I believe that real and imagined luxury could coexist within the brothel, and that prostitutes had the opportunity to either elevate or negate their status depending on how they chose to interact with works such as Figure 18 and the environment of the brothel as a whole. Here, we find avenues for reading both the sexual and social agency of women through art.

**Commercial and Domestic Spaces**

While the discussion so far has centered around artwork within semi-public spaces, we now shift focus to works within commercial and domestic contexts. This changes context and viewership and centers around a more personal experience with each artwork.

Our first work comes from the *Caupona of Donatus and Verpus or House of the King of Prussia* (VII.9.33) in Pompeii. Scholars identify this space as a *caupona*, or tavern, suggesting that it would have been a commercial public space. This image was taken from its original context within the building when it was excavated in the 1800s, so there is little information recorded about which room of the house it originally belonged in and where it was located inside the room itself. Escehbach (1993) documented it as being from “the first room on the right,” which opens up the possibility of the work being present within a semi-public space off the
atrium, an open-air courtyard at the center of the structure. Rooms within a space intended to be more private were often located towards the back of the building, so the fact that this fresco was closer to the front entrance indicates that it was likely meant to be displayed and not hidden away despite its erotic nature. While we cannot truly recreate the viewing experience of a person entering the tavern due to the lack of a specific findspot, we can assume that the work may have been seen by the shop’s patrons and their slaves, both of whom could have been of any gender.

The work itself (Figure 19) shows a male-female couple in a position that we have not yet seen. Here, the female figure is on her hands and knees and is penetrated from behind by the kneeling male figure, and is thus a fututa. Both figures are nude and there is minimal background. The position of the figures here clearly conveys the active participation of the male figure in the sex act. He looks down upon her and has his hand on her back, reading as an
indication of control. His position over the woman reflects the man’s overall dominant role within Rome’s patriarchal society.

While the work itself does not seem to lend itself to framing the woman as sexual agent, aside from her head turned towards the man which may indicate some activity, its interaction with an adjacent graffito does. Right above the woman’s head is an inscription which reads “lente impelle” in Latin, a command in the imperative mood meaning “impel slowly.” Read in conjunction with her turned head, this appears to be a direct request from the female figure, indicating her participation and agency in the encounter and characterizing her as a *futurix*. This is a clear indication of an understanding that a woman could potentially be a participant in a sexual act, giving her partner instruction as to how to perform. As discussed in the previous chapter, Ovid encourages women to tell their partner when they feel good. However, another line in the poem (Ov., *Ars am.*, 3.18) reads:

> She who asks fondly for a gift after love’s delights can’t want her request to carry any weight

perhaps suggesting that for a woman to ask something of her lover during or after sex may not have been entirely acceptable, indicating a possible subversion of norms.

Our only clearly domestic work comes from a late 1st c. BCE Roman house discovered below the Villa Farnesina on the bank of the Tiber River in Rome, a site roughly contemporary in date with those at Pompeii. Unlike most of the previous examples, this is a visibly elite space, as indicated in part by its lavish and colorful wall paintings, and may have belonged to a friend or relative of the emperor Augustus (*Digital Augustan Rome*). While the bending and subverting of social norms seems to have been more acceptable in lower class spaces, the same sexual agency afforded to women can be observed here.

Unfortunately, I cannot locate a full floor plan of the house, so the full spatial context is unclear. However, the room that this work was situated in (Figure 20) is hypothesized to be a
bed chamber because of the presence of an alcove in one of the walls where a bed may have been placed (Clarke, 1998). Although, the level of high quality decoration in the room indicates that it may have also been a space intended to be seen by guests. Important guests may have been brought into the room despite it possibly being a semi-private space. At the very least, we can assume that the members of the household would have seen this work, including the *matrona*. Like the images from the baths and brothel of Pompeii, this work is high upon the wall and is accompanied by several other works of assorted subject matter.

![Figure 20. Cubiculum D of the Villa Farnesina (1st c. BCE).](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:0_Fresque_de_la_villa_Farnesina_(2).JPG)

The scene (Figure 21) shows a male-female couple on a bed with two slave attendants standing near them. Both the man and woman are nude from the waist up. They embrace each other, with the man’s right arm around her shoulder and his left arm nearly touching her breast.
as the woman’s left hand holds the back of his neck. The scene is intimate and treated with care. They are not yet engaged in the act of sex, but seem to be leading up to it. The woman leans into the man’s touch, and it is this perceptible engagement in the sexual act that leads me to classify her as a fututrix.

Figure 21. Erotic scene from the Villa Farnesina. (1st c. BCE). https://www.flickr.com/photos/41523983@N08/12172004766.

The slave to the right stares directly out at the viewer, seeming to acknowledge that this scene is being watched by outsiders. The couple, however, does not acknowledge the viewer. The viewer is a voyeur, watching without their knowledge. Voyeurism, an important aspect of gaze theory, is acknowledged in Roman literature and art such as this image and others like it in which a painted subject meets the viewer’s gaze. Archaeological evidence also suggests the presence of architectural features specifically designed with a voyeuristic purpose in other
Roman structures. At the House of the Centenary at Pompeii, for example, a small window was found high upon the wall, looking into a room that features two erotic scenes that similarly depict this window. This is hypothesized to be a peephole that gave outsiders a view of sexual acts occurring in this room (Pollini, 2010).

Some scholars initially read the woman’s expressive face and engagement in the sexual act as a clear indication that she was a prostitute, emphasizing again how sexual subversion was more acceptable for and even expected from lower class women. However, as mentioned in reference to Figure 18, prostitutes were obligated by law to wear togas and other garments that would be easy to take off, and this garment appears to be of a higher quality (Clarke, 1998). This more vibrant, saffron-colored heavy dress along with the presence of slaves in the room indicates that she is probably not a prostitute, but more likely an elite matron shown subverting the norms of her social class and expressing her own sexual desire and agency.

The woman’s juxtaposed matron status and expression of lust exemplify the virgin-whore dynamic discussed in the previous chapter. If commissioned by the man of the house, this image may speak to his desire to have a lover that is both an upstanding woman of the house and an engaged sex partner. He does not have to turn to a prostitute to observe sexual passion. The presence of this dynamic at work is also echoed by the other erotic works found in this room, which all feature much more restrained and covered up female figures sitting with their male lovers. Clarke hypothesizes that the series of works depicts the narrative of a couple on their wedding night. Because of the presence of non-erotic mythological scenes elsewhere in the room, he also posits that the erotic works were not meant to be documentary, but were included as part of a greater appreciation for erotic beauty (Clarke, 1998). Because of this, we cannot be sure that Figure 21 would have been reflective of the behavior of the woman of the house. However, the depicted woman’s clearly indicated elite status may have made her a figure that the woman of the house could have still identified with upon viewing the work.
There are several possibilities for how we may imagine the woman of the house’s interaction with this work. Under the assumption that her husband commissioned it, she may have read the work as his fantasy for how she might act in the bedroom, modest yet passionate. In this way, she may have perceived such a work as a standard to live up to in order to please her husband. She may have seen it as a reflection of her freedom to act in the bedroom in a manner seen as unfitting for a woman of her status. In public, she could maintain a respectable image but indulge in pleasure when in private and not be ridiculed for it. Alternatively, as an elite woman with the ability to utilize her own finances, she may have even commissioned the work herself. In choosing to have the female figure depicted in such a manner, this could suggest that the narrow ideal built from literary texts on the acceptability of elite women expressing pleasure did not reflect reality to the extent that scholars imagine. The slow and intimate build up featured in the scene also could emphasize the elite luxury of taking time to have sex, which in this case seems to have been enjoyed by both men and women.
CHAPTER FOUR: Conclusion

In summary, this project has explored avenues for reading female sexual agency through erotic art in public and domestic spaces at Pompeii, Ostia, and Rome. While public art memorializing women as well as literary sources written by male authors establish the ideal woman as socially and sexually submissive, I propose that women of both low and high status may have had space to exercise some sexual agency through the viewing of active female figures in non-normative erotic art. By combining foundational scholarship on erotic art with new frameworks for reading them, my research has expanded on possibilities for interpreting women's roles in these works.

Non-normative works found in Pompeii’s Suburban Baths and Ostia’s Baths of Trinacria, while initially dismissed as existing solely for comedic purposes, indicate possibilities for subverting sexual norms in a semi-public space. Works in the brothel of Pompeii, while largely normative and inoffensive, are juxtaposed with graffiti possibly written by prostitutes themselves that proclaim their own sexual prowess. Reading the works in conjunction with such graffiti opens up the possibility for prostitutes to reclaim some of the power stripped from them. A more systematic approach to reading the graffiti and artwork together in their spatial contexts, perhaps through a VR reconstruction of the brothel’s interior, is a future direction that this research could take. The brothel artwork’s simultaneous presence and absence of markers of status could have provided the prostitutes an avenue to claim not only sexual agency, but social agency in a society where they had very little. Like the brothel, the Caupona of Donatus and Verpus offers another example of a normative work that can be read through a non-normative lens when paired with surrounding graffiti. Finally, we see female agency in the elite space of the Villa Farnesina through an image of a passionate matron, able to express her desire despite the societal expectations of chastity that come with her elite status. Overall, there is a notable connection between leisure and sex in all of the examples I have examined, perhaps indicating
that sex was viewed as a leisure activity, able to be enjoyed by both men and women to some extent.

**Limitations**

This project does have its shortcomings that I would have liked to address if I had more time. One of the biggest issues that I would have liked to address more fully is that of ascribing agency to women in a compromised position, such as the prostitutes at the brothel of Pompeii. I acknowledge the abuse that occurred at the brothels, but I did not spend significant time exploring it. Because sources that document the perspectives of Roman prostitutes are scarce, I would have liked to possibly integrate perspectives from modern sex workers during my discussion of prostitutes to give more insight into their lived experience.

My work was also obviously constrained by the Penetration Agency Model itself. Although Kamen and Levin-Richardson’s model is more expansive, it is still somewhat limiting and binary. The system is still largely phallocentric despite its disentanglement of activity and penetration. My work is similarly limited by the aforementioned dilemma of women seeing women in art through the lens of the male gaze. Additionally, for the purpose of this project, I focused almost exclusively on women’s perception of other women in erotic art. However, I think that a discussion of the possibility of male figures in erotic art being subject to a *female* gaze could have enriched this analysis.

I believe that it is critical that we continue to explore alternate interpretations of women in Roman art that move beyond the constraint of the male gaze and the phallocentric conception of activity and passivity. My thesis research contributes to this effort, asking the important questions of how such art might instead be read subversively by female viewers as a means of female empowerment.
Bibliography


