Subversive Motherhood and the Roman Revolution

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Speakers, Titles, and Abstracts

Silvia Lacorte, Cristina Rosillo-López (Universidad Pablo de Olavide, Sevilla)
A Mother with Political Ideas: Cornelia and the Letters to Her Son

For centuries, the authenticity of the letters of Cornelia to her son Caius Gracchus, preserved in the manuscripts of the work of the 1st century BCE Roman historian and biographer Cornelius Nepos, has been questioned. This paper will review this issue and analyse Cornelia's role as mother of a tribune of the plebs. It will consider how this role enabled her to have a public presence in Roman politics, that conformed and challenged, at the same time, her role as *matrona*. At the same time, these letters provide us with a female voice in the political discourse and exchange of ideas of the late Roman Republic.

Lewis Webb (University of Gothenburg)
Subversive* verba*? Maternal Prayer and/in Crisis in Rome

Prayer pervaded the city of Rome. Recent scholarship has uncovered various communicative, linguistic, rhetorical, spatial, and cognitive aspects of Roman prayer, particularly the work of Hickson (1993; 2004; 2007), Chapot and Laurot (2001), Patzelt (2018; 2019), Stock (2021; 2022), and Mackey (2022). These prayers were typically aimed at changing the status quo, as exemplified by the popular petitionary prayer *di bene vortant* (may the gods change it for the better), uttered by male and female characters in Roman drama (Plaut. *Aul.* 175, 272; *Pseud*. 646; *Trin*. 502; Ter. *Adelph*. 728; *Eun*. 390; *Hec.* 196; *Phorm*. 552). In general, prayer is an illocutionary speech act that embodies a speaker's intention to produce an effect in a god (Mackey 2022). This paper examines how staged and historical Roman mothers employed prayer and prayer-like language to respond to personal and political crises, instrumentalizing divine power and religious language to challenge or subvert established power structures. Drawing on a corpus of female prayers from Latin literature and inscriptions, I argue that both male and female authors represent maternal prayers as powerful and persuasive, as capable of radically altering events. For example, when Ennius' Ilia begged her divine ancestor Venus to gaze upon her from heaven for a moment, using the language of kinship (*ted Aeneia, precor, Venus, te genetrix patris nostri*, *ut me de caelo visas, cognata, parumper*), the goddess responded with warmth and sympathy, acknowledging their kinship (*Ilia, dia nepos, quas aerumnas*

tetulisti), and encouraging Ilia to have no concern for her children, Romulus and Remus (*cetera quos peperisti ne cures*) (Enn. *Ann.* 1.58-61 Sk.). As we will see, similarly powerful *verba* were uttered by many other Roman mothers, to gods and humans alike, to effect change in their world.

Hannah Sorscher (University of Otago)
***The Pregnant Prize: Fertility and Enslavement in Vergil's* Aeneid**

Vergil's *Aeneid* contains two brief references to the capacity for pregnancy of enslaved captive women, whose fertility is presented as a virtue marking them as worthy prizes for high-status men. These women (Cretan Pholoe at 5.284-85 and the captive mothers at 9.272-73) are treated only in passing in the epic, but their mention stands out both because their children are emphasized and because Vergil includes captive women much less than they crop up in Homeric epic (as a major goal of warfare at *Il.* 2.354-55 as well as the ultimate γέρας of the epic hero, e.g., Briseis and Chryseis). The inclusion of these mothers in the Roman epic, then, must matter. Especially Pholoe's twin sons, still nursing, cannot but evoke Romulus and Remus as she is given as a prize in the ship race to Sergestus, progenitor of the *gens Catilina.* In this paper, I consider how these captive mothers complicate Roman succession and fertility goals both at the city's founding and Augustus' refounding, as well as how the reference to these mothers, their families, and their experience might impact the careful reader or enslaved listener of Vergil's epic.

Robert Cowan (The University of Sidney)
"*Bitches be Crazy*": *Ecofeminism, Posthumanism, and Subversive Motherhood in Virgil, Grattius, and Columella*

Motherhood lies near and arguably *at* the centre of ecofeminism. Whether one embraces or rejects the parallelism between woman and nature, that parallelism regularly focuses on the reproductive aspects of each. The privileged sites for this parallelism— in both modern theory and ancient texts— are large-scale anthropomorphic constructions of Mother Nature and Mother Earth. However, Graeco-Roman literature also abounds with plant and animal mothers, whose relationship to human mothers can be profitably explored employing an ecofeminist lens. Virgil's *Georgics*, Grattius' *Cynegetica*, and Columella's *De re rustica* are populated by mother vines and mother trees, bitches, heifers, ewes, sows, and hens, who are borne and nourished by mother earth, on farms worked by enslaved mothers. Their reproductive rights are constrained and exploited—at least as long as they are 'useful'— their relationship with their offspring manipulated and disregarded. They manifest conventional maternal affection, but this normative construction is frequently subverted: mother trees solipsistically deprive their sapling children of nourishing sunlight (Verg. *G.* 2.55–6); brood bitches must be shut away to prevent their committing adultery and destroying the family name (Grat. 279–85); she-goats are vulnerable to the incestuous passion of their kids (Col. 7.6.3); donkeys earmarked to sire mules must be suckled by mares to cultivate an incestuous desire for the species (Col. 6.4.8). The non-human mothers of these early imperial texts do not only subvert conventional constructions of motherhood by representing (partially) allegorical equivalents of human mothers. They subvert the very idea of motherhood as a universal essence, moving back and forth between familiar but disturbing anthropomorphism and a posthumanist sense of true alterity. As such, they challenge not

only the idea of motherhood, but through it the very idea of nature, and the power of humans—and particularly men—to control it.

Sara Borrello (Università Ca' Foscari Venezia)
Maternam obtinebat auctoritatem: *Servilia's Subversive Motherhood?*

This paper explores the motherhood of Servilia, M. Junius Brutus' mother and Julius Caesar's long-standing mistress, with a view to establishing to what extent she is to be seen as a subversive mother. Ancient pieces of evidence refer how Servilia's maternal role went well beyond her rearing and educational duties towards her offspring: she played a prominent part in forming alliances through the marriages of her son, Brutus, and her three *Iuniae* daughters; she also endorsed suitors for other families' youths of marriageable age, such as Tullia, Cicero's daughter (Cic. *Att.* 5.4.1; 6.1.10); more importantly, according to Asconius (*Scaur*. 19) she strongly influenced decision-making processes by her half-brother, Cato the Younger, who, as a praetor in 54 BCE, presided judicial tribunals; in addition to this, she has long shaped Brutus' political alliances with a view to connecting him to Caesar and introducing him to the latter's closest entourage.
Building upon this thriving scenario, this paper focuses on a peculiar instance of Servilia's maternal role that, if that were true, could label her as a subversive mother. According to Suetonius (*Iul*. 50.3), in 45 BCE, Servilia fostered an affair between Caesar, as a dictator, and Tertia Junia, her youngest daughter and wife of C. Cassius Longinus, one of Caesar's stubborn political opponents. My scrutiny will first reconstruct Servilia's family and political connections during Caesar's dictatorship, with a view to establishing the historicity of that episode. I will then consider also the aforementioned instances of Servilia's maternal role to assess the potential subversive nature of her motherhood: to do so, I will take into account the traditional matronal code a Roman woman was required to abide by; besides, I will contextualise her attitude within the broader background of the troubled decades of the late Roman Republic.

Giulia Vettori (Università degli Studi di Trento)
Unintended Outcomes of a Moral Reform Programme: Subversive Motherhood and the Augustan Marriage Legislation

To what extent was Augustan marriage legislation effective in establishing and imposing the model of the ideal mother? The answer to this question is far from straightforward: beyond the triumphalism of the emperor and his narrow circle (see *e.g. RGDA* 8; Hor. *Carm. Saec*. 17–20), overt opposition to Augustus' legislative project is documented by a significant range of literary and historiographical sources (see *e.g.* Prop. 2.7.1–6; Cass. Dio 56.1–10). As is well known, this opposition partly, but significantly, originated from within Augustus' own family (see *e.g.* Cenerini 2024). However, there were subtle and less subtle ways of resisting the motherly behaviour patterns enshrined in law, especially during the long and troubled process that led to the approval of the *lex Papia Poppaea* (9 CE; Eck 2019).
Focusing primarily on the cases of Vistilia (Plin. *Nat. Hist*. 7.39; Kavanagh 2010; Bruun 2010) and Septicia (Val. Max. 7.7.4; Osgood 2014, 144; González Estrada 2018, 77–79), this paper aims to explore the concept of subversive motherhood within the framework of Augustan marriage legislation.

The provisions envisaged by the laws paradoxically contributed to transforming motherhood into a tool of empowerment. In fact, despite the cautious reservations expressed by some scholars (Morrell 2020), the privileges associated with their status as wives and mothers probably offered at least some women tangible social and financial benefits (Vettori 2020; Hallett 2021). Did women consistently gain these advantages through fair means? Furthermore, how did they use them? Did they always conform to social and gender expectations, or are there hints of subversive attitudes? Finally, what do these signs of subversive conduct reveal about women's agency during the Roman Revolution?

Mairéad McAuley (University College London)
Myrrha's transcorporeal maternity in Ovid* Met. *10

Scholarship on the Myrrha episode in *Metamorphoses* 10 has focused primarily on its treatment of incest and punishment, which, recently, Ziogas (2016) has interpreted as a critique of Augustan laws on sex and marriage and a challenge to *patria potestas*. But incest, exile and transformation are not the end of Myrrha's story. Instead, Ovid segues into a vivid and bizarre description of arboreal pregnancy, labour and parturition, when the infant Adonis is born through the sympathetic touch and spells of the goddess Lucina, from the swollen, splitting bark of his mother, the myrrh-tree. A poetics and politics of birth are intertwined in this episode, which describes a "transcorporeal process" (Alaimo 2010) of material, sensory and affective entanglement, challenging a binary epistemology that seeks to separate the arboreal from the human, bark from flesh, woman from tree. In this paper I consider Myrrha's birth narrative in relation to Ovid's wider tendency to both reproduce and subvert aspects of the 'maternal politics' of Augustan Rome. As with other mother-narratives (e.g. Niobe, Alcmena), Ovid here seems to valorise real, embodied parenthood over the ideal of a family 'tree' (i.e. paternal genealogy), which in this case is tarnished by incest. Might we read the story of Myrrha's transcorporeal birth as a subversive critique of the allegorization of maternity in the service of Augustan power and the incompatibility of this with the culturally-abjected, messily embodied aspects of motherhood – pregnancy, labour, lactation, nursing, and bodily vulnerability? And to what extent might the story's suggestion of human-tree kinship also be a commentary on grand Augustan claims to genealogical destiny and the teleology of history?

Henriette van der Blom (University of Birmingham)
The Agency of Maternal Testators in Valerius Maximus

Valerius Maximus' *Facta et dicta memorabilia* (27-31 CE) offers several *exempla* about women making decisions about their inheritance in relation to their children, some passing on their property and some deciding not to do so. Especially the latter group of testators are presented as subverting societal norms and expectations, whose misdemeanours need to be put right, thus offering one category of subversive motherhood. Yet in the former group of testators, the ethical quality of their action is sometimes unclear, leaving the reader wondering whether they also illustrate an aspect of subversion.

In this paper, I am interested in Valerius' projection of female agency in designating heirs and what his representations of these mothers can tell us about expectations of such testators in the Tiberian period (Valerius' time of writing), and about female agency when dispensing property through wills. I shall focus on a handful of *exempla* of such women, including a Greek woman acting in the presence

of prominent Romans. My interest in these *exempla* arise from a larger project which examines Valerius' engagement with Roman republican oratory and, as part of that, his representation of female speakers in the public space. Where possible, I shall therefore bring to the forefront any speech situations in relation to these cases of maternal testators. I hope to situate my discussion within wider debates of gendered norms relating to public speaking and rights of property and inheritance, and debates around Valerius' projection of ethical dilemmas.

Jacqueline Fabre-Serris (Université de Lille 3)

Is It Love of/for the Mother or Incest? Tacitus' Account of the Relations between Agrippina and Nero and Seneca's Involvement: Backgrounds and Stakes

My starting point is Tacitus' account of how Agrippina was accused of having an incestuous attitude when she attempted to reconcile with her son, Nero. I will examine Tacitus' narrative considering that he does not present 'facts', but rather constructs a 'plausible' account although this account includes some narrative bias that render it suspect. Tacitus attributes to Seneca an intervention and words that highlight the power struggle he was waging against Nero's mother. In my opinion, Seneca's denunciation of the threat posed by the love of/for mother must be put in relation and examined in relation with his position on mother/son relationships. I will argue that this position cannot be dissociated from his personal experience of being separated from his mother in early childhood and the resulting trauma (as alluded to in the *Consolation to Helvia*). This trauma had a decisive impact on his negative view of the love of/for the mother, of his conception of incest as a return to the mother (as described in his *Oedipus*), as well as his conception of philosophy as a life practice that aims for self-restraint through emotional control.

Simona Martorana (The Australian National University)

Parta ultio est: *Embodied Motherhood and (Meta)Literary Identities in Seneca's* Medea

As a mythological and literary figure, Medea represents a subversion of traditional notions of motherhood. While drawing on the previous dramatic tradition (most notably, Euripides' *Medea*), Seneca enhances his character's self-division and intrinsic contradictions (Gill 1987). Building upon gender-based readings of the drama (Roisman 2005; Rimell 2012; Winter 2018), this paper explores (meta)literary aspects of Medea's ambivalent relationship with her motherhood as an articulation of Seneca's antagonistic engagement with previous sources of the myth.

Throughout the tragedy, the language of childbirth overlaps with Medea's allusions to her plans for revenge, which is framed as a distorted (pro)creative process. First, Medea states that her vengeance "is already born", along with her children (*parta iam, parta ultio est / peperi*; *Med*. 25-26); in her subsequent dialogue with the nurse, Medea anticipates the tragic destiny implied in her name as well as mythological background: "Medea…", "I will be" (*"Medea" / "Fiam"*; *Med*. 171). After accomplishing several crimes, Medea acknowledges that she is Medea now (*Medea nunc sum*, 910). Towards the end of the drama, the embodiment of Medea's motherhood (her children as well as her maternal body) is replaced by the plotting and execution of her revenge: *sterilis in poenas fui – / fratri patrique quod sat est, peperi duos* ("I have been too barren for vengeance – yet for my brother and my father there is enough, for I have borne two sons"; *Med*. 956-957).

The overlap between Medea as a (hideous) mother of two children and Medea as the architect and

author of her revenge gestures toward Seneca's incorporation and, at the same time, rejection of the previous literary tradition. Seneca has Medea articulate a conflictual relationship between the awareness of his own literary belatedness and his attempt at doing something "greater" than previous appearances of Medea in tragedy – the quintessentially *maius opus*.

Julene Abad Del Vecchio (The University of Manchester)
Archetypal Grief in the *Achilleid*

In this talk, I would like to focus on a previously understated dimension in Thetis' characterisation in Statius' *Achilleid*: her exemplary status as an eternal mourner, a leitmotif displayed elsewhere in Statius, in the literary tradition, and in the Graeco-Roman cultural imagination. In the *Achilleid,* she acts as a mother against a decidedly hyper masculine education (Bernstein, 2008), but also, as I will argue, acting desperately against enshrinement in the role that unquestionably lies at the poem's edges.

The tragic aspect of her portrayal is heightened through her unwillingness to the death of Achilles, as she tangibly tries to push away the prospect of inhabiting the unchanging role that lies ahead. This 'exemplary' mismatch—a paradoxical stance—heightens her tragic characterisation, as well as the apparent senselessness of her actions. I will also explore the temporalities of her grief: grief is usually assumed as an agony *after* a loss or a traumatic event. Statius instead presents Thetis as grief-stricken ahead of time, thus showing the implications of Thetis' grief for the present, the imagined future ahead of her (the death of Achilles), and then the consequences of her grief, a sort of 'mortalisation', when she will have to endure, eternally, the suffering of that most mortal among the emotions.

It is precisely her depiction as the canonical mourning mother which also intensifies this topsy-turvy temporality: Thetis will acquire exemplary status as a result, but her anticipatory grief is unusual and disruptive, as no one but *her* could possibly be compared to her *exemplum* in the *Achilleid*. It is that very future of loss before her, all too clear to her through her divine, at times metapoetic, knowledge, which impel her actions from the poem's start.

The aim my talk, then, is to think more about the relationship between Thetis' uniquely subverting and subversive, motherhood, and the status of the *Achilleid* as a poem of feminine matrix (Abad Del Vecchio, 2024; Bessone, 2020; McAuley, 2016), by focusing on the sphere of maternal grief.

Marguerite Johnson (The University of Queensland)
"Run Away!": Roman Responses to Boudicca's Subversive Motherhood

Prasutagus, King of the Iceni, died in 60 CE. Either one of the original eleven kings who submitted to Claudius in 43 CE or later installed by the Romans in 47 CE following an uprising, his reign is described as one of *obsequium* (Tac., *Ann.* 14.31.1). He bequeathed his kingdom to his two daughters and Nero. Nothing was willed to his wife, Boudicca.

With the absence of a husband and any discernible male relatives, Boudicca seized upon a vacated political space and blazed a trail of rebellion, chaos, and death, the likes of which the Romans had never experienced at the hands of a woman. Much to their shock and horror, Boudicca and her forces thrashed the Romans on the battlefields of Britain, until her eventual defeat somewhere in the West Midlands in 61 CE.

Boudicca wanted revenge at all costs, for the sake of the Britons, and also for her daughters, who had been raped by centurions during the pillaging of Prasutagus' kingdom following his death. Her fury is partly that of a mother and its manifestation upturned traditional Roman concepts of both the *matrona* and the *univira.* Rather than embracing *obsequium*, quietly living out her days as a widow and mother, Boudicca switched the gender code – revelling in torture, mutilation, and slaughter – bringing death instead of life. In so doing, she not only broke every assumption about a woman's gentle and nurturing nature, but also exposed the crisis of Roman masculinity, most powerfully evidenced by the failures of the vaunted *vir Romanus* on the British battlefield.

This presentation provides a high-level analysis of the gender code-switching in the rebellion of Boudicca, focusing on maternal masculinity and emasculated machismo, with attention to a discrete selection of passages from Tacitus and Dio.