Did you know that, according to Plutarch, when Cato the Younger did not wish to force his daughter to marry his friend Bibulus as he wished, he offered his own wife Marcia instead? Did you know that women in ancient Rome owned workshops, were relief metal-workers, resin-workers, incense merchants, doctors, midwives, clerks and secretaries? That the Lex Papia et Poppaea decreed that freedwomen who produced four children were not only released from male guardianship, but were entitled to make wills?

Women in Ancient Rome: A Sourcebook by Bonnie MacLachlan (Bloomsbury 2013) presents a wide selection of sources in translation and in context, and in doing so, provides many vivid images of mythical, literary and real women in the ancient world.

The book is divided into five parts, starting with “Rome’s beginnings” and concluding with “The Later Empire”. MacLachlan hones her material into snippets and extracts which adhere either to a tight timeline or an interesting topic. Each chapter’s bridging paragraphs, summaries and extracts from ancient sources are beautifully written, edited and translated (in this otherwise carefully crafted and presented book a few typographical errors obtrude).

The book is a relatively slim volume of 222 pages, and its contents are concise; the author intends it as a teaching tool for the study of women in ancient Rome, and assumes that the instructor of such a program will supply “fuller contextualization and interpretive guidance”, and that “a fuller array of texts will be consulted as needed” (vii). Indeed some chapters are very brief, such as “Weddings” in Part 3 – the only source used is Catullus’s poem in honour of Manlius Torquatus’s wedding. MacLachlan explains that “although some familiar elements in the ritual are omitted such as the wedding feast” most features in the poem are representative of weddings as found in other sources. In another well-known sourcebook, Women’s Life in Greece and Rome (2005), the original texts are provided in less pared-down and summarised form (enabling one, should one wish, to read six consecutive pages by Hippocrates about the menstrual cycle).

The introduction makes reference to diachronic and synchronic text examination; some chapters pursue a clear chronological thread, such as the early history of Rome, civil war and the forming of the triumvirates, and the early empire. Interspersed are sources on related topics of interest such as the Oppian law, the Voconian law, women accused of poisoning, religious life and the types of jobs undertaken by lower class women.

Of the various sources used for the first nine chapters, Livy is drawn on the most heavily, and the chronological thread of the chapters is spun smoothly from the tales of women such as Rhea Silvia, Tarpeia, Horatia, Lucretia, Cloelia and Veturia. The sequence of extracts allows the storyline of Rome’s myth and history to unfold naturally and engagingly with women as the central focus.

The chronological presentation of source material is not so much interrupted as enhanced when MacLachlan departs from the sequence of historical events to include sources other than histories, letters and speeches. Inscriptions, gynaecological theories and women’s depictions in poetry are equally valid and of interest when considering the role and perceptions of women in Ancient Rome, such as in the chapters, “Women in Roman comedy”, “Women in the inscriptive record”, and “The Latin elegiac poets”. When covering the early history, the narrative is clearly maintained by focusing on the women. However, the illusion that the story of Rome can be told in this way cannot be sustained. For example, Chapter 13, “Women and powerful men”, begins with the admission that “A discussion of the women of the turbulent period that immediately preceded the Principate cannot be detached from the portraits of the strong men in whose hands the fate of Rome rested” (83). Sulla, Pompey and Julius Caesar march through events...
leading to the momentous collapse of the Republic while the women are relegated to what MacLachlan calls the “trafficking in wives for personal gain” (92). The reader might ruefully reflect that this sourcebook exists for a reason; there could be no purpose in publishing a book called *Men in Ancient Rome*.

The extracts from ancient sources are well supported by introductory comments and historical information. Bridging summaries help the reader to leap into the story in medias res, for instance: “According to Livy, after a rain of stones and the birth of an enormous hermaphroditic child the priests decreed that 27 virgins should form a procession through the city singing a hymn” (55). For someone new to the study of ancient Rome, the sourcebook provides adequate information to contextualise and explain the supplied extracts. Authors’ backgrounds are also given, including brief discussions of author bias where relevant. For example, MacLachlan warns that Suetonius’s “salacious personal details” about Augustus “must be read with caution, given the highly charged political atmosphere of the Principate” (132).

Parts 3 to 5 each offer an introduction providing basic historical background about the period covered, with enough detail for the beginner classicist, such as an explanation of Octavian’s name change to Augustus. Each part concludes with a list of titles for further reading, and MacLachlan provides a general bibliography and an index of ancient authors and texts. The general index is, however, adamently arranged purely for the book’s stated purpose as a sourcebook about women; while Aeneas, Romulus and Numa are listed, as well as Clodius and both Catos, surprisingly, others such as Cicero, Mark Antony and Octavian are not included unless under an entry pertaining to a woman.

Although Part 5, “The Later Empire”, carries the same threads begun in previous chapters (Vestal Virgins, women in poetry, women of the ruling elite, adultery, working women of the lower classes), it lacks the same feeling of cohesion offered by previous sections. The diffusion of the later empire emerges in some of the sources provided, with Greek physicians (Aretaeus, Galen, Soranus) giving their opinions, and the Apostle Paul delivering instructions about the role of women, “It is shameful for a woman to talk aloud in church” (208). The sourcebook concludes with Hypatia, the Greek philosopher and mathematician murdered in 415 CE, who lived in Alexandria and held influence with the Roman governor. Hypatia is a striking figure, and her inclusion in any sourcebook on women in the ancient world is most likely irresistible to an author. While the vast reach and cultural diffusion of the Roman Empire by the 4th Century CE must be acknowledged, Hypatia’s inclusion stretches the scope of the book’s Roman focus.

*Women in Ancient Rome* is not just about women; it is about ancient Roman life. It is not a replacement for ancient texts written by women (although it does include extracts from the few there are), but is a soothing tonic for the feminist Classicist, and anyone else who cares to be walked through the fascinating stories of Rome by a very well-researched guide.

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**Bibliography**
