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# Documents

## Considering the Evidence: Patriarchy and Women's Voices in the Classical Era



In American colleges and universities, courses in world history as well as those in women's history and gender history entered the curriculum at about the same time, both of them growing rapidly in the last decades of the twentieth century. During that time, world historians have increasingly sought to address on a global level the issues about gender raised by other historians within a national or local setting:

- How did patriarchy emerge? How was it expressed and experienced? How did it change over time?
- What mix of opportunities and limitations did women encounter in various societies and at various times?
- To what extent were women able to act in the arena of public life and in domestic settings?
- How did different cultural traditions define appropriate gender roles and gender identities, both feminine and masculine?

In exploring such questions, historians face a major problem: the scarcity of sources written by women themselves, especially in the pre-modern era. Furthermore, most of the female-authored sources we do have derive from elite women. As a result, scholars must sometimes make careful use of documents written by men, often "reading between the lines" to discern the perspectives of women. The documents that follow explore various expressions of patriarchy and the women's voices that emerged within them in several of the classical civilizations.

### Document 6.1

#### A Male View of Chinese Women's Lives

In the third century C.E., Fu Xuan, a male poet, described the life of a Chinese woman. Raised as an impoverished orphan, Fu Xuan only later gained fame and wealth owing to his literary talents. Perhaps it was this early experience that allowed him to sympathize with the plight of women.

- What differences between the lives of women and men does the poem highlight?
- What is Fu Xuan's own attitude toward the women he describes?
- In what ways does this portrayal of women's lives reflect or contradict Confucian values? (See pp. 193–95 and Document 5.1, pp. 217–19.)

FU XUAN

### *How Sad It Is to Be a Woman*

Third Century C.E.

*Document not available.*

Source: Fu Xuan, "How Sad It Is to Be a Woman," in Arthur Waley, *Translations from the Chinese* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1941), 72–73.

°**Hu from Ch'in**: two distant places.

°**Ts'an and Ch'en**: two distant stars.

#### Document 6.2

### *A Chinese Woman's Instructions to Her Daughters*

Confucius himself apparently said little about women, perhaps reflecting his assumptions about their limited importance in Chinese society. Nonetheless, Confucianism as a social philosophy, formulated by the sage's later followers, had profound implications for the lives of women. Those sentiments found expression in the work of Ban Zhao (45–116 C.E.), a remarkable woman born into an elite family with connections to the imperial court. Although she received a fine literary education, she was married at the age of fourteen, gave birth to several children, and was widowed early in life. Although she never

remarried, Ban Zhao had a significant career as a court historian and as an adviser to the empress-dowager (the widow of a deceased emperor). Her most famous work, *Lessons for Women*, was an effort to apply the principles of Confucianism to the lives and behavior of women.

- Why do you think Ban Zhao began her work in such a self-deprecating manner?
- In what ways does *Lessons for Women* reflect Confucian attitudes (see Document 5.1, pp. 217–19)? Why do you think *The Analects* itself seldom referred directly to women?
- How would Ban Zhao define an ideal woman? An ideal man? An ideal marriage?
- In what ways is she critical of existing attitudes and practices regarding women?
- How does she understand the purposes of education for boys and for girls?
- Does *Lessons for Women* support or undermine the view of women's lives that appears in Fu Xuan's poem?

BAN ZHAO

### *Lessons for Women*

Late First Century C.E.

I, the unworthy writer, am unsophisticated, unenlightened, and by nature unintelligent, but I am fortunate both to have received not a little favor from my scholarly Father, and to have had a cultured mother and instructresses upon whom to rely for a literary education as well as for training in good manners. More than forty years have passed since at the age of fourteen I took up the dustpan and the broom in the Cao family [the family into which she married]. During this time with trembling heart I feared constantly that I might disgrace my parents, and that I might multiply difficulties for both the women and the men of my husband's family. Day and night I was distressed in heart, but I labored without confessing weariness. Now and

hereafter, however, I know how to escape from such fears.

Being careless, and by nature stupid, I taught and trained my children without system.... I do grieve that you, my daughters, just now at the age for marriage, have not... learned the proper customs for married women. I fear that by failure in good manners in other families you will humiliate both your ancestors and your clan.... At hours of leisure I have composed... these instructions under the title, *Lessons for Women*.

#### Humility

On the third day after the birth of a girl the ancients observed three customs: first to place the baby below the bed; second to give her a potsherd<sup>o</sup> with which to play; and third to announce her birth

Source: Nancy Lee Swann, trans., *Pan Chao: Foremost Woman Scholar of China*, (New York: Century, 1932), 82–90.

<sup>o</sup>**potsherd**: a piece of a broken pot.

to her ancestors by an offering. Now to lay the baby below the bed plainly indicated that she is lowly and weak, and should regard it as her primary duty to humble herself before others. To give her pottersherds with which to play indubitably signified that she should practice labor and consider it her primary duty to be industrious. To announce her birth before her ancestors clearly meant that she ought to esteem as her primary duty the continuation of the observance of worship in the home.

These three ancient customs epitomize woman's ordinary way of life and the teachings of the traditional ceremonial rites and regulations. Let a woman modestly yield to others; let her respect others; let her put others first, herself last.... Always let her seem to tremble and to fear. When a woman follows such maxims as these then she may be said to humble herself before others....

Let a woman retire late to bed, but rise early to duties; let her nor dread tasks by day or by night.... When a woman follows such rules as these, then she may be said to be industrious.

Let a woman be correct in manner and upright in character in order to serve her husband.... Let her love not gossip and silly laughter. Let her cleanse and purify and arrange in order the wine and the food for the offerings to the ancestors. When a woman observes such principles as these, then she may be said to continue ancestral worship.

No woman who observes these three fundamentals of life has ever had a bad reputation or has fallen into disgrace. If a woman fails to observe them, how can her name be honored; how can she but bring disgrace upon herself?

### Husband and Wife

The Way of husband and wife is intimately connected with Yin and Yang and relates the individual to gods and ancestors. Truly it is the great principle of Heaven and Earth, and the great basis of human relationships....

If a husband be unworthy, then he possesses nothing by which to control his wife. If a wife be unworthy, then she possesses nothing with which to serve her husband. If a husband does not control his wife, then the rules of conduct manifesting his

authority are abandoned and broken. If a wife does not serve her husband, then the proper relationship between men and women and the natural order of things are neglected and destroyed. As a matter of fact the purpose of these two is the same.

Now examine the gentlemen of the present age. They only know that wives must be controlled, and that the husband's rules of conduct manifesting his authority must be established. They therefore teach their boys to read books and study histories. But they do not in the least understand that husbands and masters must also be served, and that the proper relationship and the rites should be maintained. Yet only to teach men and not to teach women—is that not ignoring the essential relation between them? According to the “Rites” [a classic text], it is the rule to begin to teach children to read at the age of eight years, and by the age of fifteen years they ought then to be ready for cultural training. Only why should it not be that girls' education as well as boys' be according to this principle?

### Respect and Caution

As Yin and Yang are not of the same nature, so man and woman have different characteristics. The distinctive quality of the Yang is rigidity; the function of the Yin is yielding. Man is honored for strength; a woman is beautiful on account of her gentleness. Hence there arose the common saying: “A man though born like a wolf may, it is feared, become a weak monstrosity; a woman though born like a mouse may, it is feared, become a tiger.”

Now for self-culture nothing equals respect for others.... Consequently it can be said that the Way of respect and acquiescence is woman's most important principle of conduct.... Those who are steadfast in devotion know that they should stay in their proper places....

If husband and wife have the habit of staying together, never leaving one another, and following each other around within the limited space of their own rooms, then they will lust after and take liberties with one another. From such action improper language will arise between the two. This kind of discussion may lead to licentiousness. But of licentiousness will be born a heart of disrespect to the

husband. Such a result comes from not knowing that one should stay in one's proper place....

If wives suppress not contempt for husbands, then it follows that such wives rebuke and scold their husbands. If husbands stop not short of anger, then they are certain to beat their wives. The correct relationship between husband and wife is based upon harmony and intimacy, and conjugal love is grounded in proper union. Should actual blows be dealt, how could matrimonial relationship be preserved? Should sharp words be spoken, how could conjugal love exist? If love and proper relationship both be destroyed, then husband and wife are divided.

### Womanly Qualifications

A woman ought to have four qualifications: (1) womanly virtue; (2) womanly words; (3) womanly bearing; and (4) womanly work. Now what is called womanly virtue need not be brilliant ability, exceptionally different from others. Womanly words need be neither clever in debate nor keen in conversation. Womanly appearance requires neither a pretty nor a perfect face and form. Womanly work need not be work done more skillfully than that of others.

To guard carefully her chastity; to control circumspectly her behavior; in every motion to exhibit modesty; and to model each act on the best usage, this is womanly virtue.

To choose her words with care; to avoid vulgar language; to speak at appropriate times; and nor to weary others with much conversation, may be called the characteristics of womanly words.

To wash and scrub filth away; to keep clothes and ornaments fresh and clean; to wash the head and bathe the body regularly, and to keep the person free from disgraceful filth, may be called the characteristics of womanly bearing.

With whole-hearted devotion to sew and to weave; to love not gossip and silly laughter; in cleanliness and order to prepare the wine and food for serving guests, may be called the characteristics of womanly work....

### Implicit Obedience

Whenever the mother-in-law says, "Do not do that," and if what she says is right, unquestionably the daughter-in-law obeys. Whenever the mother-in-law says, "Do that," even if what she says is wrong, still the daughter-in-law submits unflinchingly to the command. Let a woman not act contrary to the wishes and the opinions of parents-in-law about right and wrong; let her not dispute with them what is straight and what is crooked. Such docility may be called obedience which sacrifices personal opinion. Therefore the ancient book, *A Pattern for Women*, says: "If a daughter-in-law who follows the wishes of her parents-in-law is like an echo and shadow, how could she not be praised?"

## Document 6.3

### An Alternative to Patriarchy in India

About the same time that Ban Zhao was applying the principles of Confucianism to women in China, *The Laws of Manu* was being compiled in India. A core text of classical Indian civilization, those laws defined and sharply circumscribed the behavioral expectations appropriate for women. According to one passage, "In childhood a female must be subject to her father, in youth to her husband, when her lord is dead to her sons; a woman must never be independent."

One path of release for women from such conditions of Indian patriarchy lay in becoming a Buddhist nun and entering a monastery where women

were relatively less restricted and could exercise more authority than in ordinary life. Known as *bikkhunis*, such women composed hundreds of poems in the early centuries of Indian Buddhism. They were long recited and transmitted in an oral form and brought together in a collection known as the *Psalms of the Sisters*, which was set to writing probably during the first century B.C.E. These poems became part of the officially recognized Buddhist scriptures, known as the Pali Canon. As such, they represent the only early text in any of the world's major religions that was written by women and about the religious experience of women. A selection of those poems follows here.

- What kinds of women were attracted to Buddhist monastic life? What aspects of life as a *bikkhuni* appealed to them?
- What views of the world, of sensuality, and of human fulfillment are apparent in these poems?
- In what ways might these poems represent a criticism of Hindu patriarchy?
- What criticism of these women would you anticipate? How might advocates of Hindu patriarchy view the renunciation that these nuns practiced?
- How do these poems reflect core Buddhist teachings?

## *Psalms of the Sisters*

First Century B.C.E.

### Sumangala's Mother

O woman well set free! how free am I,  
How thoroughly free from kitchen drudgery!  
Me stained and squalid 'mong my cooking-pots  
My brutal husband ranked as even less  
Than the sunshades he sits and weaves away.  
Purged now of all my former lust and hate,  
I dwell, musing at ease beneath the shade  
Of spreading boughs—O, but 'tis well with me!

### A Former Courtesan

How was I once puff'd up, incens'd with the  
bloom of my beauty,

Vain of my perfect form, my fame and success  
'midst the people,  
Fill'd with the pride of my youth, unknowing the  
Truth and unheeding!  
Lo! I made my body, bravely arrayed, deftly  
painted,  
Speak for me to the lads, whilst I at the door of  
the harlot  
Stood, like a crafty hunter, weaving his snares,  
ever watchful.  
Yea, I bared without shame my body and wealth  
of adorning;  
Manifold wiles I wrought, devouring the virtue  
of many.  
To-day with shaven head, wrapt in my robe,  
I go forth on my daily round for food;...  
Now all the evil bonds that fetter gods  
And men are wholly rent and cut away....  
Calm and content I know Nibbana's  
Peace.

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Source: *Psalms of the Sisters*, Vol. I, in *Psalms of the Early Buddhists*, translated by Mrs. Rhys Davids (London: Henry Frowde, Oxford University Press Warehouse, Amen Corner, E.C., 1909), poems 21, 39, 49, 54, 70.

### The Daughter of a Poor Brahmin

Fallen on evil days was I of yore.  
 No husband had I, nor no child, no friends  
 Or kin—whence could I food or raiment find?  
 As beggars go, I took my bowl and staff,  
 And sought me alms, begging from house to  
     house,  
 Sunburnt, frost-bitten, seven weary years.  
 Then came I where a woman Mendicant  
 Shared with me food, and drink, and welcomed me,  
 And said: “Come forth into our homeless life!”...  
 I heard her and I marked, and did her will.

### The Daughter of a Wealthy Treasurer

Daughter of Treas’rer Majjha’s famous house,  
 Rich, beautiful and prosperous, I was born  
 To vast possessions and to lofty rank.  
 Nor lacked I suitors—many came and wooed;  
 The sons of Kings and merchant princes came  
 With costly gifts, all eager for my hand....  
 But I had seen th’ Enlightened, Chief o’ the  
     World, The One Supreme. [the Buddha]  
 And [I] knew this world should see me ne’er  
     return.

Then cutting off the glory of my hair,  
 I entered on the homeless ways of life.  
 ’Tis now the seventh night since first all sense  
 Of craving dried up within my heart.

### The Goldsmith’s Daughter

A maiden I, all clad in white, once heard  
 The Norm,<sup>o</sup> and hearkened eager, earnestly,  
 So in me rose discernment of the Truths.  
 Thereat all worldly pleasures irked me sore,  
 For I could see the perils that beset  
 This reborn compound, ‘personality,’  
 And to renounce it was my sole desire.  
 So I forsook my world—my kinsfolk all,  
 My slaves, my hirelings, and my villages,  
 And the rich fields and meadows spread around,  
 Things fair and making for the joy of life—  
 All these I left, and sought the Sisterhood,  
 Turning my back upon no mean estate....  
 See now this Subhā, standing on the Norm,  
 Child of a craftsman in the art of gold!  
 Behold! she hath attained to utter calm....

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<sup>o</sup>**Norm:** Buddhist teaching.

## Document 6.4

### Roman Women in Protest

On occasion women not only wrote but also acted in the public arena. A particularly well-known example of such action took place in Rome in the wake of the Second Punic War with Carthage in North Africa. In 218 B.C.E. the Carthaginian commander Hannibal had invaded the Italian peninsula and threatened Rome itself. In those desperate circumstances Roman authorities passed the Oppian Laws (215 B.C.E.), which restricted women’s use of luxury goods so as to preserve resources for the war effort. Twenty years later (195 B.C.E.), with Rome now secure and prosperous, Roman women demanded the repeal of those laws and in the process triggered a major debate among Roman officials. That debate and the women’s protest that accompanied it were chronicled early in the first century C.E. by Livy, a famous Roman historian.

- How did Roman women make their views known? Do you think the protesters represented all Roman women or those of a particular class?

- How might you summarize the arguments against repeal (Cato) and those favoring repeal (Lucius Valerius)? To what extent did the two men actually differ in their views of women?
- How might one of the Roman women involved in the protest have made her own case?
- What can we learn from Livy's account about the social position of Roman women and the attitudes of Roman men?
- This document was written by a male historian and records the speeches of two other male officials. How might this affect the ability of historians to use it for understanding Roman women?

LIVY

## *History of Rome*

Late First Century B.C.E. to Early First Century C.E.

The law said that no woman might own more than half an ounce of gold nor wear a multi-colored dress nor ride in a carriage in the city or in a town within a mile of it, unless there was a religious festival. . . . [A] crowd of men, both supporters and opponents [of repeal], filled the Capitoline Hill. The matrons, whom neither counsel nor shame nor their husbands' orders could keep at home, blockaded every street in the city and every entrance to the Forum. As the men came down to the Forum, the matrons besought them to let them, too, have back the luxuries they had enjoyed before, giving as their reason that the republic was thriving and that everyone's private wealth was increasing with every day. This crowd of women was growing daily, for now they were even gathering from the towns and villages. Before long they dared go up and solicit the consuls, praetors, and other magistrates; but one of the consuls could not be moved in the least, Marcus Porcius Cato, who spoke in favor of the law:

"If each man of us, fellow citizens, had established that the right and authority of the husband should be held over the mother of his own family,

we should have less difficulty with women in general; now, at home our freedom is conquered by female fury, here in the Forum it is bruised and trampled upon, and, because we have not contained the individuals, we fear the lot. . . .

"Indeed, I blushed when, a short while ago, I walked through the midst of a band of women. Had not respect for the dignity and modesty of certain ones (not them all!) restrained me. . . . I should have said, 'What kind of behavior is this? Running around in public, blocking streets, and speaking to other women's husbands! Could you not have asked your own husbands the same thing at home? Are you more charming in public with others' husbands than at home with your own? And yet, it is not fitting even at home. . . . for you to concern yourselves with what laws are passed or repealed here.' Our ancestors did not want women to conduct any—not even private—business without a guardian; they wanted them to be under the authority of parents, brothers, or husbands; we (the gods help us!) even now let them snatch at the government and meddle in the Forum and our assemblies. What are they doing now on the streets and crossroads, if they are not persuading the tribunes to vote for repeal? Give the reins to their unbridled nature and this unmastered creature. . . . They want freedom, nay license. . . in all things. If they are victorious now, what will

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Source: Livy, "History of Rome" in *Women's Life in Greece and Rome*, 2nd ed., edited by Mary R. Lefkowitz and translated by Maureen B. Fant (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1982), 143–47.

they not attempt?... As soon as they begin to be your equals, they will have become your superiors....

"What honest excuse is offered, pray, for this womanish rebellion? 'That we might shine with gold and purple,' says one of them, 'that we might ride through the city in coaches on holidays and working-days'..."

"The woman who can spend her own money will do so; the one who cannot will ask her husband. Pity that husband—the one who gives in and the one who stands firm! What he refuses, he will see given by another man. Now they publicly solicit other women's husbands, and, what is worse, they ask for a law and votes, and certain men give them what they want.... Fellow citizens, do not imagine that the state which existed before the law was passed will return..., as when wild animals are first chafed by their chains and then released."

After this... Lucius Valerius spoke on behalf of the motion....

"[Cato]... has called this assemblage 'secession' and sometimes 'womanish rebellion,' because the matrons have publicly asked you, in peacetime when the state is happy and prosperous, to repeal a law passed against them during the straits of war....

"What, may I ask, are the women doing that is new, having gathered and come forth publicly in a case which concerns them directly? Have they never appeared in public before this?... Listen to how often they have done so—always for the public good. From the very beginning—the reign of Romulus—when the Capitoline had been taken by the Sabines and there was fighting in the middle of the Forum, was not the battle halted by the women's intervention between the two lines?... When Rome was in the hands of the Gauls, who ransomed it? Indeed the matrons agreed unanimously to turn their gold over to the public need.... Indeed, as no one is amazed that they acted in situations affecting men and women alike, why should we wonder that they have taken action in a case which concerns themselves?... We have proud ears indeed, if, while masters do not scorn the appeals of slaves, we are angry when honorable women ask something of us....

"Who then does not know that this is a recent law, passed twenty years ago? Since our matrons

lived for so long by the highest standards of behavior without any law, what risk is there that, once it is repealed, they will yield to luxury?..."

"Shall it be our wives alone to whom the fruits of peace and tranquility of the state do not come?... Shall we forbid only women to wear purple? When you, a man, may use purple on your clothes, will you not allow the mother of your family to have a purple cloak, and will your horse be more beautifully saddled than your wife is garbed?..."

"[Cato] has said that, if none of them had anything, there would be no rivalry among individual women. By Hercules! All are unhappy and indignant when they see the finery denied them permitted to the wives of the Latin allies, when they see them adorned with gold and purple, when those other women ride through the city and they follow on foot, as though the power belonged to the other women's cities, not to their own. This could wound the spirits of men; what do you think it could do the spirits of women, whom even little things disturb? They cannot partake of magistracies, priesthoods, triumphs, badges of office, gifts, or spoils of war; elegance, finery, and beautiful clothes are women's badges, in these they find joy and take pride, this our forebears called the women's world. When they are in mourning, what, other than purple and gold, do they take off? What do they put on again when they have completed the period of mourning? What do they add for public prayer and thanksgiving other than still greater ornament? Of course, if you repeal the Oppian law, you will not have the power to prohibit that which the law now forbids; daughters, wives, even some men's sisters will be less under your authority—never, while her men are well, is a woman's slavery cast off; and even they hate the freedom created by widowhood and orphanage. They prefer their adornment to be subject to your judgment, not the law's; and you ought to hold them in marital power and guardianship, not slavery; you should prefer to be called fathers and husbands to masters. The consul just now used odious terms when he said 'womanish rebellion' and 'secession'. For there is danger—he would have us believe—that they will seize the Sacred Hill as once the angry plebeians did.... It is for the weaker sex to submit

to whatever you advise. The more power you possess, all the more moderately should you exercise your authority.”

When these speeches for and against the law had been made, a considerably larger crowd of women

poured forth in public the next day; as a single body they besieged the doors of the Brutuses, who were vetoing their colleagues' motion, and they did not stop until the tribunes took back their veto. . . . Twenty years after it was passed, the law was repealed.

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### Using the Evidence: Patriarchy and Women's Voices in the Classical Era

1. **Comparing gender systems:** Based on these documents, how might you compare the gender systems of China, India, and the Roman Empire? What common features of patriarchy did they share? In what ways did they differ?
2. **Evaluating the possibilities of action for women:** In what ways were women able to challenge at least some elements of their classical-era patriarchal societies? Is there evidence in these documents of anything similar to the feminist thinking or action of our own times?
3. **Internalizing social values:** To what extent did women in the classical era civilizations internalize or accept the patriarchal values of their societies? Why might they have done so?
4. **Making judgments:** If you were a woman living in the classical era, which of these civilizations would you prefer to live in and why? Do you think this kind of question—judging the past by the standards of the present—is a valid approach to historical inquiry?

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# Visual Sources

## Considering the Evidence: Pompeii as a Window on the Roman World



You could hear the shrieks of women, the wailing of infants, and the shouting of men; some were calling their parents, others their children or their wives, trying to recognize them by their voices. People bewailed their own fate or that of their relatives, and there were some who prayed for death in their terror of dying. Many besought the aid of the gods, but still more imagined there were no gods left, and that the universe was plunged into eternal darkness for evermore.”<sup>20</sup>

Written by a prominent Roman known as Pliny the Younger, this eyewitness account details reactions to the volcanic eruption of Mount Vesuvius, located on the southwestern side of the Italian peninsula, on August 24, 79 C.E. That eruption buried the nearby Roman city of Pompeii, but it also preserved the city, frozen in time, until archaeologists began to uncover it in the mid-eighteenth century (see Map 4.4, p. 156). Now substantially excavated, Pompeii is an archaeological and historical treasure, offering a unique window into life in the Roman Empire during the first century C.E.

As this city of perhaps 20,000 people emerged from layers of ash, it stood revealed as a small but prosperous center of commerce and agriculture, serving as a point of entry for goods coming to the southern Italian peninsula by sea. Pompeii also hosted numerous vineyards, production facilities for wine and olive oil, and a fisheries industry. In addition, the city was a tourist destination for well-to-do Romans. The houses of the wealthy were elegant structures, often built around a central courtyard, and decorated with lovely murals displaying still-life images, landscapes, and scenes from Greek and Roman mythology. An inscription found on the threshold of one house expressed the entrepreneurial spirit of the town: “Gain is pure joy.”<sup>21</sup>

Laid out in a grid pattern with straight streets, the city’s numerous public facilities included a central bathing/swimming pool, some twenty-five street fountains, various public bathhouses, and a large food market as well as many bars and small restaurants. More than thirty brothels, often featuring explicit erotic art, offered sexual services at relatively inexpensive prices. One inscription, apparently aimed at local tourists, declared: “If anyone is looking for some tender love in this town, keep in mind that here all the girls are very



**Visual Source 6.1** Terentius Neo and His Wife (Scala/Art Resource, NY)



**Visual Source 6.2** A Pompeii Banquet (Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Naples/Roger-Viollet/The Bridgeman Art Library)

friendly.” Graffiti too abounded, much of it clearly sexual. Here are three of the milder examples: “Atimetus got me pregnant”; “Sarra, you are not being very nice, leaving me all alone like this”; and “If anyone does not believe in Venus, they should gaze at my girlfriend.”<sup>22</sup>

The preserved art of Pompeii, especially the wall paintings, provides a glimpse into the social life of that city. Most of that art, of course, catered to and reflected the life of the more prosperous classes. Visual Source 6.1 shows a portrait of Terentius Neo, a prominent businessman and magistrate (an elected public official), and his wife. He is wearing a toga and holding a papyrus scroll, while she wears a tunic and is holding to her lips a stylus, used for writing on the wax-covered wooden tablet that she carries. Her hair is styled in a fashion popular in the mid-first century.

- What do you think the artist is trying to convey by highlighting the literacy of both people?
- What overall impression of these two people and their relationship to each other does this painting suggest?

Terentius Neo and his wife were no doubt served by slaves in their home, as slave owning was common in the Roman world, particularly among the upper classes. In the streets and homes of urban areas, slaves and free people mingled quite openly. Roman slavery was not distinguished by race, and the outward signs of urban slavery were few, especially for those practicing professions. Such a couple no doubt gave and attended banquets similar to the one depicted in Visual Source 6.2, where well-to-do guests reclined on padded couches while slaves served them food and drink. Dancers, acrobats, and singers often provided entertainment at such events, which provided an occasion for elites to impress others with their lavish display of wealth and generosity.

- What signs of social status are evident in this painting?
- How are slaves, shown here in the foreground, portrayed?

The lives of the less exalted appear infrequently in the art of Pompeii, but the images in Visual Source 6.3 provide some entrée into their world. These are frescoes painted on the wall of a *caupona*, an inn or tavern catering to the lower classes. This particular *caupona* was located at the intersection of two busy streets where it might easily attract customers. The first image shows Myrtale, a prostitute, kissing a man, while the caption above reads: “I don’t want to, with Myrtale.” In the second image a female barmaid serves two



**Visual Source 6.3** Scenes in a Pompeii Tavern (©Ministero per I Beni e le Attività Culturali—Soprintendenza archeologica di Napoli)

customers with a large jug and a cup, while they compete for her attention. In the third image, two men playing dice are arguing.

- Why do you think a tavern owner might have such paintings in his place of business?
- What might we learn about tavern life from these images?
- What roles did women play in the tavern?
- What differences do you notice between these paintings and those depicting the lives of the upper classes?

The excavated ruins of Pompeii have much to tell us about the religious as well as the social life of the Roman world in the first century C.E., before Christianity had spread widely. Based on ritual observance rather than doctrine or theology, Roman religious practice sought to obtain the favor of the gods as a way of promoting success, prosperity, and good fortune. A core expression of the diverse and eclectic world of Roman religion was the imperial cult. In Pompeii, a number of temples were dedicated to one or another of the deified emperors, employing together a large cadre of priests and priestesses. Linked to the imperial cult were temples devoted to the traditional Greco-Roman gods such as Apollo, Venus, and Jupiter.

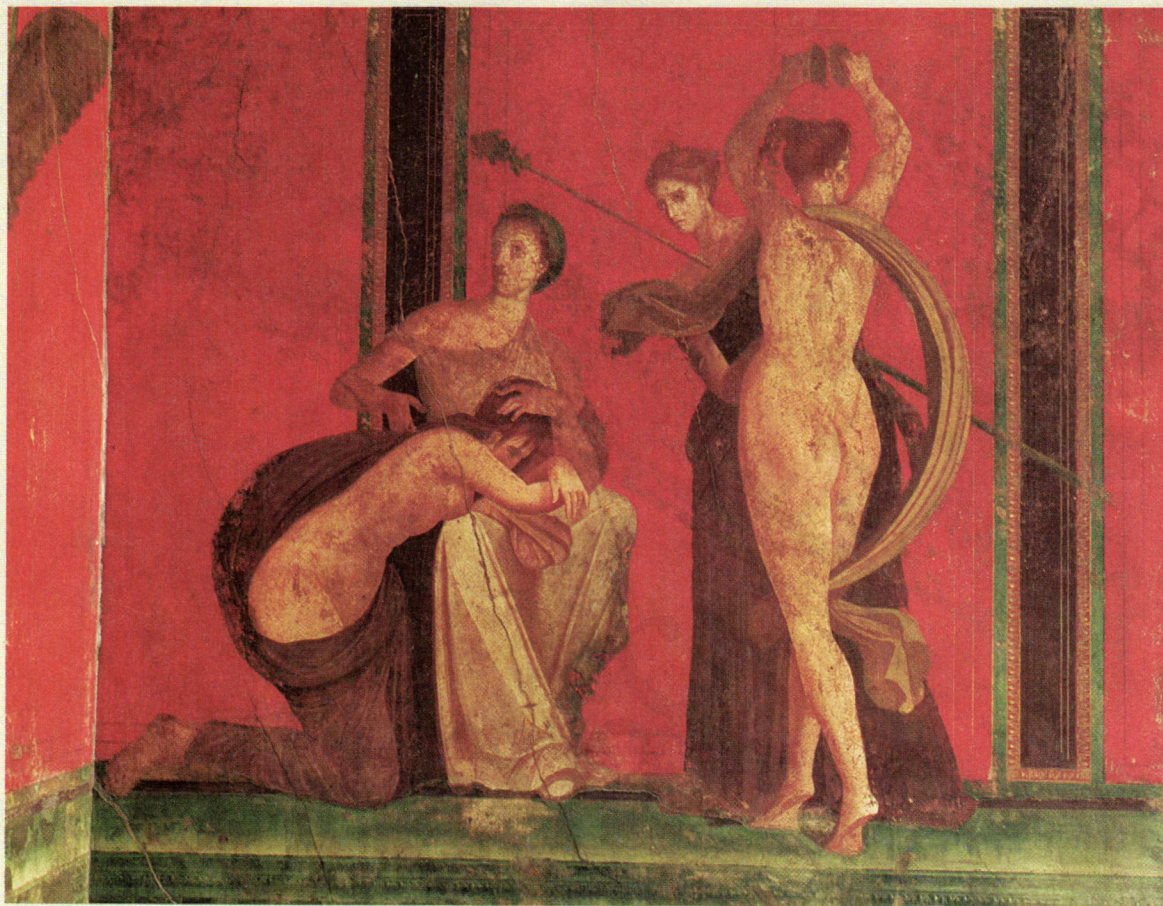
Probably more important to ordinary people were their *lararia* (household shrines), often a niche in the wall that housed paintings or sculptures of *lares* (guardian spirits or deities believed to provide protection within the home). Families offered gifts of fruit, cakes, and wine to these spirits, and the *lararia* were the focal point for various sacrifices and rituals associated with birth, marriage, and death. Visual Source 6.4 shows one of these shrines, uncovered in the home of a well-to-do freedman (former slave) named Vetti. Protecting the family from external danger were two *lares*, standing on either side of the *lararium* and holding their drinking horns. In the center was the *genius*, the spirit of the male head of household. Dressed in a toga and offering a sacrifice, this spirit embodied the character of the man, especially his procreative powers, and so guaranteed many children for the household. The snake at the bottom represented still other benevolent guardian spirits of the family in a fashion very different from Christian symbolism of the snake.

- Why might such a shrine and the spirits it accommodated be more meaningful for many people than the state-approved cults?
- What significance might you find in the temple-like shape of the *lararium*?



**Visual Source 6.4** A Domestic Shrine (Alinari/Art Resource, NY)

In addition to the official cults and the worship of household gods, by the first century C.E. a number of newer traditions, often called “mystery religions,” were spreading widely in the Roman Empire. Deriving from the eastern realm of the empire and beyond (Greece, Egypt, and Persia, for example), these mystery religions illustrate the kinds of cultural exchange that took place within the Empire. They offered an alternative to the official cults, for they were more personal, emotional, and intimate, usually featuring a ritual initiation into sacred mysteries, codes of moral behavior, and the promise of an afterlife. Among the most popular of these mystery cults in Pompeii was that of Isis, an Egyptian goddess who restored her husband/brother, Osiris, to life and was worshipped as a compassionate protector of the downtrodden.



**Visual Source 6.5** Mystery Religions: The Cult of Dionysus (Werner Forman/Corbis)

Another mystery cult, this one of Greek origin, was associated with Dionysus, a god of wine, ecstasy, and poetic inspiration and especially popular with women. Often associated with drunkenness, trance states, wild dancing, and unrestrained sexuality, the cult of Dionysus encouraged at least the temporary abandonment of conventional inhibitions and social restrictions as initiates sought union with Dionysus. A series of wall paintings on a Pompeii building known as the Villa of Mysteries depicts the process of initiation into the cult of Dionysus, perhaps in preparation for marriage. Visual Source 6.5 shows a particularly dramatic phase of that initiation in which a woman is ritually whipped, while a naked devotee dances ecstatically with a pair of cymbals above her head and a companion holds a rod of phallic symbolism that is sacred to Dionysus. In any such process of religious initiation, the initiate undergoes a series of trials or purifications in which he or she “dies”

symbolically, achieves mystical union with the god, and is “reborn” into the new community of the cult.

- What aspects of the initiation process are visible in this image?
  - How might you understand the role of whipping in the initiation process? How would you interpret the relationship of the initiate and the woman on whose lap she is resting her head?
  - In what way is sexual union, symbolized by the rod, significant in the initiation?
  - Why do you think Roman authorities took action against these mystery religions, even as they did against Christianity?
  - What did the mystery cults of Isis or Dionysus provide that neither the state cults nor household gods might offer?
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### Using the Evidence: Pompeii as a Window on the Roman World

1. **Characterizing Pompeii:** What does the art of Pompeii, as reflected in these visual sources, tell us about the social and religious life of this small Roman city in the first century C.E.? To what extent, if at all, should historians generalize from Pompeii to the Roman Empire as a whole?
2. **Noticing class differences:** What class or social distinctions are apparent in these visual sources?
3. **Identifying gender roles:** What do these visual sources suggest about the varied lives and social roles of women and men in Pompeii?