

## *Medica* and Patient: Contending with Identity as it Relates to Authority and Submission in Roman Medicine

A close investigation of Greek and Roman literature, medical treatises, and epigraphy shows that for centuries Romans navigated a world of medical pluralism, one where an individual might seek medical care via magic, prayers to the gods, and consultation with practitioners of rational medicine (Nutton 2013). Anthropological scholarship uses the concept of medical pluralism as a theoretical framework to consider the diversity, coexistence, and competition of local medical traditions against biomedicine (Khalikova 2021). As the field of biomedicine developed with the popularization of the Hippocratic Corpus, ancient scholars and practitioners needed to define their discipline against alternative types of healthcare in order to have authority over their patients. Competition forced strong delineation between rational and magical approaches to healthcare in ancient Rome, even though practitioners often incorporated both into their methods. Over time, this delineation between healing practices also became gendered (Vogler 2023). This paper investigates the identities of practitioners that would normally have limited authority in Roman culture due to their gender, class and social status, and/or ethnic identity. In particular, I look to understand what made for an acceptable Roman *medica* by analyzing both positive portrayals of women practicing medicine along with critiques of women operating in other spheres of healthcare. This is done as a means to better understand the relationship between a patient and their chosen healthcare provider.

When considering healthcare in the ancient Mediterranean world, it is important to remember that any medical practitioner needed to cater to the expectations of their patients, who were willing to use any means to prevent illness and restore health. This is necessary so that a patient will accept the instructions (and therefore, the authority) of the medical practitioner. Yet

the patient also has the power to refuse the authority of the medical practitioner through disobedience and deceit. From the Hippocratic Corpus and many other extant writings, we know that physicians preferred patients that submitted to their authority and endured painful or distasteful medical treatments (Upson-Saia, Marx, and Secord 2023). Those same medical treatises offer guidance on how to gain the compliance of the patient. If we compare these recommendations to the praise, critiques, and even indifference towards female medical practitioners evidenced in other writings and epigraphy, we may be able to discern choices or actions women (and therefore other marginalized groups) could take in order to be successful.

As one example, in his work *Parentali* Ausonius (4th c. CE) commemorates various family members through poems, including one dedicated to his maternal aunt, Aemilia Hilaria. One line from that poem celebrates how Aemilia, “...*more virum medicis artibus experiens*” or “practiced medicine, like a man.” Scholars understand this to mean that Aemilia Hilaria likely adhered to the various schools of medical philosophy usually associated with male physicians at that time (Ripat 2016). As such, one may question what constituted a ‘female’ type of healing in the Roman world, and why might it have been objectionable when compared to the type of medical care predominantly practiced by Roman male physicians. Furthermore, it is important to consider what other traits Aemeilia Hilaria possessed beyond practicing medicine “as men do,” to allow for her work as a *medica* to be praised. Similar to female Roman orators who could be both slandered and commended (Deminion 2022), women working as medical practitioners in some way violate the traditional social norms expected of their gender. Therefore, answering the question, What makes for an acceptable Roman *medica*? may also help us to answer the question: What did patients consider to be an acceptable/effective/successful healing practice?

## References

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