

## Sallust's Use of Gendered Space: The Case of Sempronia

Latin and Greek historiography from the late Republic and early Empire reflected contemporary concerns about the proper place of the *matrona* in polite society. As women in the upper classes came to attain higher degrees of power and independence outside the confines of the *domus*, traditionalist elements of the Roman elite reacted violently to what they perceived as an upset of the *mos maiorum* (Bauman 1992). Conservative thinkers asserted that well-educated, politically active women were not simply a nuisance to their menfolk, but an insurgent force that threatened civic stability (Boyd 1974). In the didactic world of historiography, where traditional notions of right and wrong dominated ethical consideration, sexually charged invective operated principally on a synecdochal level: such women furnished negative *exempla* of femininity which could be set in narrative contradistinction to nobler figures from Rome's ancestral past (Milnor 2009), thus instantiating the subversion and eventual annihilation of the current social order. Key to this mode of normative discourse was a culturally salient distinction between publicity and domesticity (Glazebrook 2013). Interplay between the realms of *forum* and *domus* in the Roman consciousness linked themselves inextricably to notions of masculinity and femininity. Women who exploited the household in order to execute political maneuvers transgressed a sensitive social boundary by polluting the private, feminine domain with activity strictly relegated by patriarchal society, on both a conceptual and physical level, to the male-dominated and pointedly communal areas of the polity.

The careful and complex manner in which historians such as Sallust and Livy defined negative female *exempla* in terms of the perversion—or, rather, inversion—of sexually specific locations should encourage us to consider Roman spatial domains with regard to the social

realization of gendered categories. A close reading of the ancient sources reveals how meretricious power, sexual prowess, and the effete inconstancy of the fairer sex came to be defined in opposition to the *res publica*. Historians stoked their readers' Fears about the collapse of sexual boundary lines by drawing connections between the *matronae* and political corruption (Hemelrijk 2004). The conflation and permeation of gendered categories—whether through pedagogical, philosophical, or political means—took concrete form by the illustration of real conspiracy. Abiding beliefs in the degeneracy of socially active women prefigures their portrayal in the historiographical record, where they are made to act the parts reserved for purveyors of turbulent sedition and catalyzers of domestic disquiet.

In a brief paper I would like to examine this interaction between space and gender via the figure of Sempronia from Sallust's *Bellum Catilinae*. Sempronia serves as a useful case study for several reasons. Firstly, her relative obscurity makes it easy for us to analyze her as a narrative fiction. Unlike more famous women from the period such as Fulvia and Lucretia, Sempronia is known almost exclusively through her cameo in Sallust's monograph. Without a load of external baggage, we are better able to make sense of the *exemplum* the author is trying to present. This leads us to a second reason for choosing Sempronia: her clearly delineated role as both a *matrona docta* and a moral *monstrum*. In all of extant Roman historiography, she is perhaps the plainest embodiment of the kind of *femme fatale* outlined above. Finally, singling out Sempronia allows one to exploit a wealth of scholarship on Sallust's liberal, character-driven use of exemplarity and spatial dynamics in order to better understand her position with respect to the broader arc of the conspiracy. My forthcoming textual treatment will show that Sempronia not only demonstrates the contradictions internal to her dualistic character, but also the inherent tensions of the spatial dynamics through which she is viewed (Feldherr 2021). By opening up his

subject's private life to public scrutiny, Sallust facilitates the breakdown of the very social boundaries which his peers seek to uphold, ironically revealing the conceptual untenability of traditionalist divisions of gendered space.

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