Bodies of Work: Young Female Dancers in the Roman World

Numerous children of slave and freed status, in addition to many poor freeborn children, were forced to work from young ages. Although jurists set no monetary value on the services of slaves under the age of five (*D.* 7.7.6.1), some were already at work even as toddlers. Augurius, for instance, an acrobat (*gymnicus*) commemorated at Puteoli, was just over two and a half when he died, while the little brother to a pair of five-year-old acrobats was only seventeen months when all three *gymnici* were memorialized at Rome (*CIL* 10.2132; *CIL* 6.10158; cf. Prosperi Valenti 1985). Girls of the lower classes were likewise entertainers and held various other jobs, though evidence is somewhat limited for their contributions to labour compared to boys. Inscriptions and literary sources record girls in urban settings performing primarily domestic tasks as dressers (*ornatrices*), maidservants (*ancillae*), and attendants (*pedisequae*) (Bradley 1991). Less often girls appear as masseuses or textile workers (Laes 2008, 2011), though the latter group may have been larger in reality given the jurists' contention (*D.* 15.1.27pr.) that an *ancilla* could also be a *sarcinatrix* (clothes mender) or a *textrix* (weaver).

Commemorations for such working girls tend to be spare and generally include only the girl's name and job title, her age at death and the name and relationship of the dedicator. No mention is usually made of particular qualities, attributes or specific job-related skills. Evidence for specialized training of female slaves is generally lacking, though *ornatrices*, for example, could receive two months of instruction by a *magister* (*D.* 32.65.3) and both literary and artistic representations of the mistresses these girls styled strongly suggest they possessed considerable abilities. Scholars have proposed female slaves likely received job training within the household (Bradley 1991: 122 n. 65; Rawson 2003: 206-7), and that freeborn girls, who seem very rarely to have been apprenticed to learn trades, may have acquired job skills at home or with relatives

(van Minnen 1998). In contrast, a range of apprenticeship contracts exists for boys of different statuses along with lengthy inscriptions which document their training and celebrate impressive skills and intellectual prowess, such as one for thirteen-year-old Melior, a famed *calculator* (accountant), or nine-year-old Xanthias, a *notarius* (short-hand writer) lauded for his speed (*CIL* 14.472; *CLE* 219).

While the skills and training presumably on display by many working girls seem to have been overlooked by ancient sources, one group garnered special interest: young female dancers. Scholars of Roman childhood have not devoted much attention to these performers, but the recent study of Alonso Fernández (2015) on the figure of the *docta saltatrix* in Roman literature, art and funerary epigraphy has shed important light on the girls included in this group. Her investigation of the relationship of dance to women's self-representation reveals that these young *saltatrices* were valued specifically for their training and corporeal knowledge, and were recognized for being *docta* and *erudita* (e.g., *CIL* 6.10096, 6.18324; *CLE* 1213). Building upon Alonso Fernández's observations and existing scholarship on Roman childhood, I aim to show the unique position of these young artists among their female peers. These girls stood apart from others of their social milieu for the investment made in their futures through education and training, and the pride expressed in their resulting accomplishments. Yet these girls also stood apart from their more socially elevated peers whose bodies were the focus of adult anxieties concerning chastity and fertility (Caldwell 2015) rather than being sources of pride and potential in the eyes of relatives and patrons, and perhaps also to themselves.

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