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Elizabeth D. Walker
Clackamas High School

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Elizabeth Walker

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Western Civilization

29 February 2016

Women in Power: The Unique Position of Vestal Virgins in Ancient Rome

You see, if there's a good reason for undertaking a dangerous voyage, then women are fearful; their cowardly breasts are chilled with icy dread; they cannot stand on their trembling feet. But they show courageous spirit in affairs they're determined to enter illicitly. If it's their husband who wants them to go, then it's a problem to get on board ship. They can't stand the bilge-water; the skies spin around them.

The woman who goes off with her lover of course has no qualms. She eats dinner with the sailors, walks the quarter-deck, and enjoys hauling rough ropes.

Meanwhile the first woman gets sick all over her husband. (Juvenal)

Juvenal's opinion on women's fidelity reflects the general viewpoint of a woman's character in Rome. Citizens of this ancient society viewed women as devious creatures, prone to immoral acts that would defile the public images of their families. Because of what they believed to be the evil nature of womankind, men set forth the proper lifestyle for women and enforced it. The Romans held many lofty ideas about the character of an outstanding woman, all of these ideas ultimately serving men's domination over women. Vestal Virgins embodied these ideals as a representation of Rome, for the sanctity of these priestesses was a symbol for the sanctity of Rome (Parker 568). Vestal Virgins served a role that was uncommon for the time, for they lived differently than other women, yet they were not equal to men in status or power. The Vestal

priestesses lived in constant limbo, stuck between weakness and power; virginal and motherly, holy and feminine. Vestals lived in a unique position in Ancient Rome, but it was still a position of submission to male authority. While being a Vestal Virgin offered women certain powers, this responsibility still held women under the authority of men. Moreover, the status of Vestal Virgin was used as a guide that all Roman women should follow to meet the patriarchal expectations set for Roman women. The illusion of power given to the Vestal Virgins served as a means for Roman leaders to impose conventional gender norms on to the women of Rome.

Romans viewed women positively when they conformed to the role of homemaker and mother. Roman women did not control their own lives; rather they lived under the rule of a paterfamilias, a male relative who ruled over the rest of the household. Everything a woman did was subject to the consent of her paterfamilias. Generally, Roman women who were poor learned how to perform household duties, whereas wealthier women learned how to manage households. Both groups of women learned how to weave and spin (Clark 198). The home was also the workplace for Roman women and most of their lives were spent away from the public world. Roman men, and ultimately the Roman state, used typical women as instruments to carry out their wills.

The Vestal Virgins were Roman priestesses who represented the goddess of the hearth, Vesta. Vesta was the sacred protector of Rome, her eternal fire representing the everlasting safety her presence offered to Rome. Vesta's protection over Rome was extremely important to its inhabitants, since they believed that her protection kept the Roman state intact. This is why the Romans dedicated a whole priestesshood to her. The Vestal college lasted for around a thousand years up until 394 CE. Some may argue that Vestal Virgins possessed special powers

that were restricted from other women. While the Vestal Virgins had extraordinary opportunities, they were also confined in other ways. Vestals were not bound to typical duties of Roman women but they were still held to the same concept of womanhood.

Roman Vestals had many duties: they tended to the sacred fire, they attended social events, and they maintained political relationships. The Vestals also had many rules and regulations, such as an oath of chastity and exemption from marriage and motherhood. The Vestals could exert influence on men of importance, but they could not hold any actual political power, as is shown by a Vestal's ability to attend a Senate meeting while being unable to speak at one (Kroppenberg). The Vestal priestesses' duties were enforced by the authorities above them and completion of these duties was seen as integral to the safety of Rome. Thus the Vestals experienced extreme punishment, such as the ritual burial of unchaste virgins for any transgressions (Beard 16). The better they performed the duties, the more blessings and protection Rome would receive from the goddess of the hearth.

The costume Vestal Virgins wore represented the seemingly conflicting role that Vestal Virgins served. This costume held meaning surrounding certain characteristics of a priestess, such as motherly but also sexually innocent (Gallia 223). Vestal Virgins still lived within the bounds of typical Roman womanhood when it came to their representative role in society. The benefits given to Vestals, such as public outings and freedom from a paterfamilias, were not to empower women but to empower those who praised the old Roman gods. The strict disciplinary actions suggest that Vestal Virgins' powers did not provide them with self governance. Roman women were an extension of the men they represented and Vestal Virgins were an extension of Rome.

The Vestals' embodiment of a typical Roman woman begins with the choices they personally lived by. The Vestal's attainment of female perfection is demonstrated through one of the most important requirements for Vestal priestesses: the vow of chastity. The Vestals' virginity carried heavy significance, as examined by Giovanni, "Her physical intactness is also viewed as a sign that her family possesses the unity and strength necessary to protect its patrimony" (qtd. by Parker 569). A woman's actions could either prove or disprove the character of her and her family, and her virginity was just one way in which her family contributed to a strong image of Rome. A Vestal's continual chastity demonstrated that Roman women's sexuality should be controlled. Vesta herself was a virgin who was protected by the male gods surrounding her. Vesta's virginity was fragile and she could not protect it by herself, just as the Vestal Virgins needed to be under the control of the high priest. Ultimately, all Roman women needed to be under the control of men to preserve their own characters. The maintenance of virginity was honored since Romans believed that "women... because of their inherent vice of feminine sexual weakness, are in constant danger of becoming whores and adulteresses" (Parker 569). Romans saw a woman's virginity as so vulnerable, due to her "inherent vice", that a man must protect it. Vestal Virgins upheld a vow that was viewed as virtually impossible for women in Ancient Rome, thus upholding the ideal image of a female life. Vestal Virgins demonstrated a mode of sexual conduct that was controlled by men and in line with the character that Roman women should strive for.

The selection of Vestal Virgins further reveals the minimal power held by these priestesses on a familial level. Those chosen to be Vestal priestesses were usually daughters from aristocratic families, in order to place more power in the image of the Vestal, effectively placing

more power in the image of Rome (Kroppenberg 422). However, this selection process demonstrated the power of a family, not the merits of an individual wishing to become a priestess. Image was key to a Vestal's existence because she represented her family, her country, and even her gender. Roman authorities would go to extreme measures to ensure that this image of strength and purity remained unviolated.

Though the Vestal Virgins were not subject to the rule of their fathers, they were still under the authority of the Roman state. The Vestal priestesses' legal status was seemingly different from other women because they were freed from a paterfamilias, yet they still did not hold equal legal rights to male citizens. Parker describes the distinct legal standing of Vestals:

Accordingly, for a virgin to incarnate the collective, she must be extraordinary. She must be freed not only from her father but also from all possible and catalogued forms of familial tie...The oddities of her position seem rather to arise from her position as one in charge of a worship central to the state and not belonging to any one family in the state. She was taken out of her family, with certain legal consequences, but she did not cease to be a woman. (572)

As Parker examines the role of Vestal priestesses, he notes that Vestals were still held to the same understanding of femininity as other Roman women. The Vestal's freedom from her family ties only placed her into the hands of another authority figure. The Vestals were not allowed control over their own lives because they were women. On the surface, Vestal virgins defied the norm for women in Rome, but in actuality the lives they presented to the public asserted traditional roles.

Just as Roman women were completely held to the will of the men in their family, so the Vestal Virgins were held to the will of the Roman authorities. Even if a priestess was not responsible for an act she was accused of, it was likely that she would still be punished for it. Beard illustrates the similarities of the relationship between Roman authorities and Vestals and the relationship between a Roman husband and wife: “the right of punishment exercised by the high priest over the virgins was directly comparable to the disciplinary powers of a Roman man over his wife, and that the action taken when a Vestal broke the rule of chastity was parallel to the action taken by a husband in the case of an adulterous wife and her paramour” (Beard 14). This disciplinary situation between the high priest and the Vestals demonstrates a power structure in which men are still in a position of great power over women. The high priest was a Vestal priestesses’ equivalent of a husband, meaning that the high priest exercised the same rights over a Vestal as a husband did over wife. The actions of a wife presented an image about the unity of a man’s household and in the same manner, the actions of a Vestal represented the unity of Rome. A Vestal was like the wife of the Roman state, as shown through these disciplinary measures. Thus Vestals were subject to the complete will of the Roman state and possessed little to no autonomy.

Not only were Vestal Virgins’ decisions made for them, but the consequences for deviating from said decisions reflected the absence of true power in a Vestal’s life. Harsh punishment kept Vestal Virgins from straying from expectations, as shown in Gallia’s paper, “The risk of being charged with *incestum* and possibly buried alive represented a powerful motive for conformity” (237). The severe consequences endured by the Vestal priestesses further asserts that the Vestals did not hold power over themselves. The moral upstanding of the

priestesses represented the strength of the Roman state, which explains why breaking the rules led to strict discipline. Despite their highly coveted position as priestesses, the Vestals' power relied on their chastity and obedience to other priestess laws. Any small infraction led to major discipline and the loss of virginity was punished by execution. The threat of being buried alive if one broke the vow of chastity is the harshest example of the punishment inflicted upon the Vestals. Many Vestal Virgins faced this fate and only those with great political influence could escape it (Cadoux). Vestal Virgins, just like the other women of Rome, were stuck in a power structure in which they were at the bottom.

The lack of power Vestal Virgins held is evident even in the creation story of Rome. Romulus, the fabled founder of Rome, was born of a Vestal Virgin who was raped and then put under the death sentence for it, thus beginning the tradition of putting to death Vestals who broke the vow of chastity (Takacs). This Vestal, Ilia, was punished for a crime committed against her, just as any other Roman woman would have been. This religious tale demonstrates that when it came to legal issues, Vestals were viewed just as other women were. The Vestals' religious duties did not offer them any freedom from normal consequences for women, rather in some cases their role in Roman society made the consequences even more severe. When a Vestal violated her requirements as a priestess she put the state in danger because she presented Rome as weak and divided.

As part of their control over the priestesses, Roman authorities organized the daily lives of Vestals, thus giving them virtually the same amount of control that other women possessed in their public lives. Women in Ancient Rome were responsible for taking care of homely duties,

and generally did not hold any social or political power. Vestal Virgins had much greater participation in public life than most other women:

During her appearances outside the shrine, which occurred rather often, a Vestal was actually constantly in the public eye. These appearances were virtually orchestrated, for instance by the fact that lictors would accompany her outside the sacred precinct, that consuls and praetors made way for her and lowered their faces before her, that she was the only person in the city allowed to use a two-wheeled vehicle (carpentum), and that she had her own seat of honor in the theater. Together with the magistrates and the senate, Vestals actively participated in many rural and municipal festivals and in a large number of non recurring ceremonies, and they regularly attended religious events for the imperial family during the Principate.”(Kroppenberg 420)

All appearances were part of the Vestal Virgins duties to the state. These appearances were not for the advancement of the priestesses, they were yet another mode through which Roman officials aimed to exert control over the citizens.

The Vestals sociability as representatives of the old religious ways presented the Roman lifestyle as picturesque. Caesar Augustus, who attempted to revive the old religion and traditional family values, held special seats for the Vestal Virgins at public games in an attempt to make the old religion seem appealing. The Vestal Virgins were viewed as matronly figures over Rome, thus placing them in the public eye encouraged traditional ideals for women.

Vestals were encouraged to make public outings to further the powers of those controlling them. Kroppenberg expands upon the political position of Vestals:

They were deployed on delicate diplomatic missions, often with the continued existence of the Roman state at risk. However, on these missions they did not have any influence or powers as regards the contents of the talks, but conveyed messages and put forward petitions. Consequently, they were not politicians as such, although their appearance as a state symbol was highly political.

(Kroppenberg 421)

Kroppenberg argues that the sacred bodies of the Vestals represented the “domestication of power” through different spheres of life in Ancient Rome. Vestals were held as a political symbol but they were not politicians. Vestals did not present their own ideas or solutions but “conveyed messages” for the authorities above them. Vestals took part in political activities to represent more than just the sanctity of Rome; Vestals participated in politics to show the power hierarchy between men and women in which women report to men and conform to the ideas of the men in their lives.

It is indicative of my sources that many historians believe the Vestal Virgins’ status to be a symbol of, albeit limited, female power in a structure of predominantly male leadership. My research suggests that on a surface level, this position that was granted to Ancient Roman women indeed seems to offer them an escape from the typical power structure of the time, however, the role of Vestal Virgin actually enforces the standards of the patriarchy in Ancient Rome. The Vestal Virgins unusual situation offers modern historians a glimpse into the expectations for women in Roman society. Even the Vestals, who were highly honored, did not have autonomy from male leadership. In fact, the Vestal Virgins came to epitomize the apparent need for male control over females. The Vestals combined matronly traits and virginal traits into the human

embodiment of Rome's protector goddess Vesta (Gallia). The Vestals were held to such a high standard because of this embodiment - if a Vestal compromised her own sanctity, she compromised the safety of Rome. Vestals held the sanctity of Rome in their hands but they did not act upon their own wills, likely due to the belief that women must be guided by the knowledge of men. Roman society esteemed Vestals to exemplify a social norm of appropriate gender based behavior.

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