

# WOMEN LATIN POETS

Language, Gender, and Authority, from  
Antiquity to the Eighteenth Century

JANE STEVENSON

OXFORD  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

**OXFORD**  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

**CATHEDRATICAE ORNATISSIMAE**  
**MARGARET J. M. EZELL**

Great Clarendon Street, Oxford OX2 6DP

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford.  
It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship,  
and education by publishing worldwide in

Oxford New York

Auckland Cape Town Dar es Salaam Hong Kong Karachi  
Kuala Lumpur Madrid Melbourne Mexico City Nairobi  
New Delhi Shanghai Taipei Toronto

With offices in

Argentina Austria Brazil Chile Czech Republic France Greece  
Guatemala Hungary Italy Japan Poland Portugal Singapore  
South Korea Switzerland Thailand Turkey Ukraine Vietnam

Oxford is a registered trade mark of Oxford University Press  
in the UK and in certain other countries

Published in the United States  
by Oxford University Press Inc., New York

© Jane Stevenson 2005

The moral rights of the author have been asserted  
Database right Oxford University Press (maker)

First published 2005

First published in paperback, 2008

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced,  
stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means,  
without the prior permission in writing of Oxford University Press,  
or as expressly permitted by law, or under terms agreed with the appropriate  
reprographics rights organization. Enquires concerning reproduction  
outside the scope of the above should be sent to the Rights Department,  
Oxford University Press, at the address above

You must not circulate this book in any other binding or cover  
and you must impose this same condition on any acquirer

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data  
Data available

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Stevenson, Jane, 1959–  
Women Latin poets : language, gender, and authority, from antiquity to the  
eighteenth century / Jane Stevenson.  
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index. (alk. paper)

1. Latin poetry, Medieval and modern--Women authors--History and criticism.
2. Latin poetry--Women authors--History and criticism.
3. Women--Europe--Intellectual life.
4. Feminist and literature--Europe.
5. Women and literature--Europe.
6. Authority in literature.
7. Sex role in literature.
1. Title.

PA8050.S74 2005 871.009'9287--dc22 2004029384

Typeset by SPI Publisher Services, Pondicherry, India  
Printed in Great Britain  
Biddles Ltd, King's Lynn, Norfolk

ISBN 978-0-19-818502-4 (Hbk.) 978-0-19-922973-4 (Pbk.)

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

notifs, though even so, there are more details about the individual (his age, his childlessness) than are to be found in the poem cited by Courtney.<sup>18</sup>

What is interesting, however, about the epitaphs raised by women is that a surprising number of them are highly idiosyncratic. One which is of special interest for the level of concentrated emotion which it expresses runs as follows:<sup>19</sup>

V. Salvidiena Q. L. Hilara  
Salvidienae Faustillae  
Deliciae suae  
eruditate omnibus artibus  
reliquisti mammam tuam  
gementem plangentem plorantem.  
vixit an. xv  
mensib. iii, dieb. xi, hor. vii  
Virginem eripuit Fatus malus  
Destituisti Vitilla mea  
miseram mammam tuam.

V. Salvidiena Hilara,<sup>20</sup> freed slavegirl of Quintus  
to Salvidiena Faustilla,  
her darling,  
educated in all the arts.  
You have left your mamma  
groaning, wailing, weeping.

She lived for fifteen years, three months,  
eleven days, and seven hours.

An evil Fate tore her away, a virgin.

My Vitilla, you have left your mamma miserable.

Formulaic expressions such as 'may the earth lie light on you', 'in eternal sleep', 'farewell', are notably absent in this inscription. The sad specificity of years, months, days, and even hours bespeaks a culture in which horoscopes were made, so the hour of birth was precisely recorded;<sup>21</sup> but here it adds to the obsessive quality of the inscription. Latin epitaphs commonly give the age of the deceased in years, and quite frequently give months and days,<sup>22</sup> but hours are unusual. Many Latin epitaphs see a special pathos in the virgin stolen by death,<sup>23</sup> but few lay such stress on the emotional state of the bereaved: consider the emphatic line, 'gementem plangentem plorantem'. The upbraiding of the dead

<sup>18</sup> Latimore, *Themes*.

<sup>19</sup> *CIL* notes, 'found outside the Collatine gate (in Rome), in a vineyard', thus metropolitan in origin.

<sup>20</sup> Initial 'v' in a funerary inscription may stand for *vixit*: 'in life' (compare *CLE*, nos. 959, 1030, ii. 441, 474): my thanks to Dr Janet Fairweather for this observation. However, the fact that the daughter is later addressed as 'Vitilla' suggests this is a first name.

<sup>21</sup> Latimore, *Themes*, 16: 'In Latin inscriptions, the number of hours in the unfinished day is frequently stated, a practice which Cumont . . . attributes to belief in astrology.'

<sup>22</sup> For example, Julia Parthenope states that her daughter Lucina lived for 27 years, 10 months, and 13 days.

<sup>23</sup> See Latimore, *Themes*, 102-94, and also *Aeneid* 6. 305-7.

by the living is a theme which has its parallels, particularly in the case of spouses. Dronke quotes two: Seppia Justina calls her husband 'amanti mendax', false to the woman who loves him, because he has left her, while an anonymous Christian calls her husband 'improbus', villain,<sup>24</sup> but the emphatic use of the word *mamma* (twice) is remarkable. *Mamma* is a baby's word, and appears in only a handful of inscriptions (*maier* is far more usual): all the other examples given in the *Thesaurus Linguae Latinae* are inscribed by affectionate offspring—including the psychologically revealing 'patri et mammae'.<sup>25</sup> This is the only epitaph in which a speaker refers to *herself* as 'mamma'. The epitaph is normally very much a public genre, but this particular example locates itself insistently in the private world of inconsolable personal grief. Another highly idiosyncratic poem is the work of a mother, Clodia Africana, whose 12-year-old son died during the January festivities, when he had gone to the temple with his mother and sister; like Salvidiena Hilara's inscription, its strangeness authenticates it: both women are insistent on details, hopelessly trying to ensure that it is their own beloved child who is remembered. Another bitter poem of maternal bereavement, from a woman, Papiria Tertia of Ferrara, who had outlived the immediate agony of loss, runs:

Cernis, ut orba meis, hospes, monumenta locavi  
et tristis senior natos miseranda requiro.  
Exemplis referenda mea est deserta senectus  
ut steriles vere possint gaudere maritae.

Stranger, you see how, a woman bereft of my own [dear ones],

I had monuments erected

and sad, elderly, pitiable, I miss my children.

My isolated old age should be added to the exemplary proofs  
that barren wives may count themselves truly happy!

In general, it is noticeable that many of the epitaphs which speak in a woman's voice are more immediate, more personal, and more directly concerned with the relationship between the living and the dead than those which speak with the voices of men (though of course, this raises in an acute form the question of whether the Romans were already conscious of a style of writing proper to a female voice, an *écriture féminine*).<sup>26</sup> An example of this is the poem on the monument of Varius Frontonianus, with its strong focus not on the dead man, but on the quality of his wife's tender recollection of him.

Hic situs est Varius cognomine Frontonianus,  
quem contunx lepida posuit Cornelia Gallia  
Dulcior restituentis veteris solacia vitae

<sup>24</sup> *WMA*, 24, H. Geist and G. Pöhl (eds.), *Römische Grabinschriften*, 2nd edn. (Munich: Ernst Heimeran Verlag, 1976), 35. Latimore, *Themes*, 181, and see *ibid.* 198-9. Julia Marulla is addressed on her stone as 'virgo deceptrix' by her anguished parents (Geist and Pöhl (eds.), *Römische Grabinschriften*, 44).

<sup>25</sup> *Thesaurus Linguae Latinae*, s.v. 'mamma': *CIL*, vi. 10016; ix. 5228; vi. 38891, vi. 15585 (quoted).

<sup>26</sup> Courtney, *Musa Lapidaria*, is a good recent collection with translations.