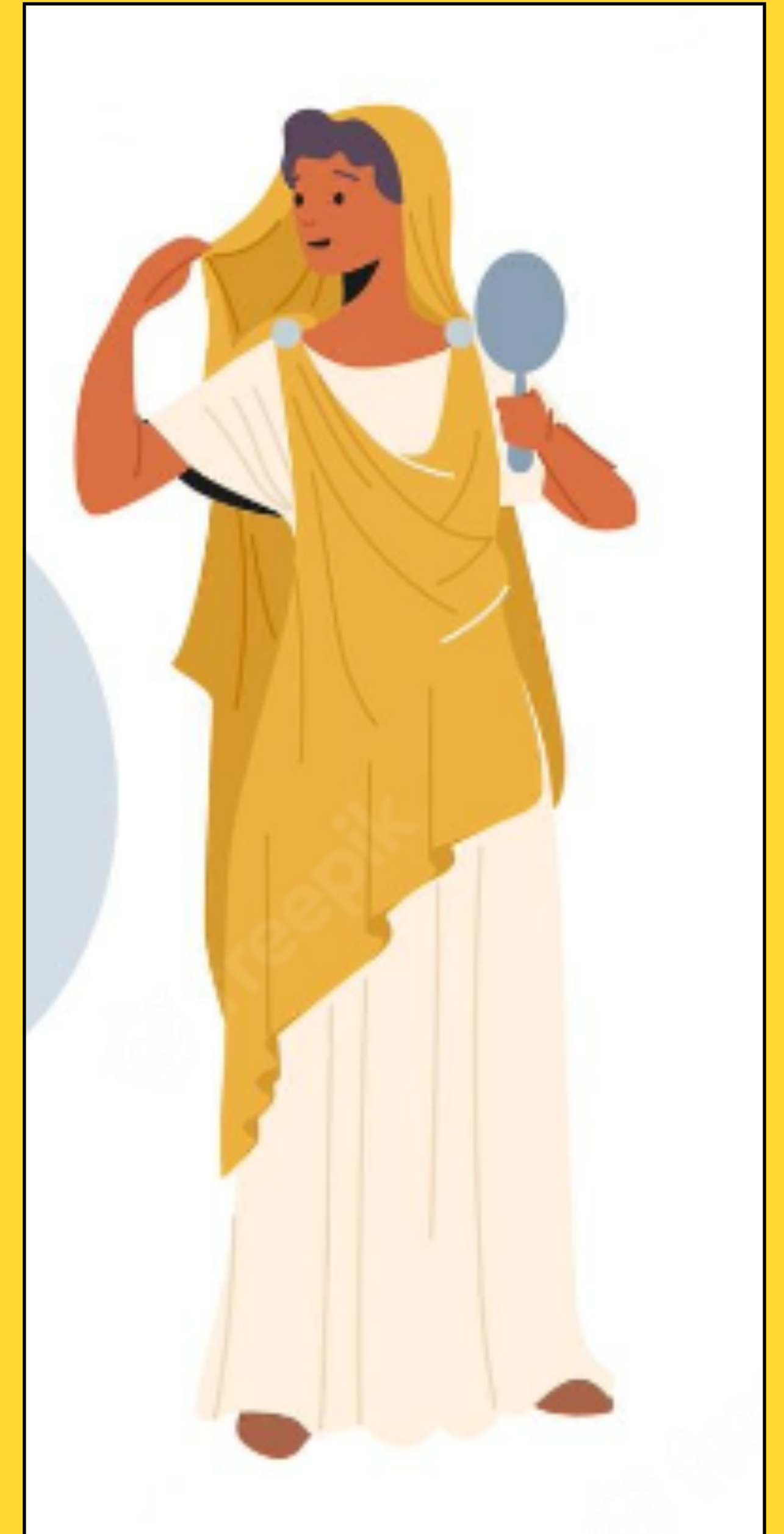


# Roman Women

A day in the life of Metella

Component 3B > Latin GCSE



## Learning about Roman women: the problem of BIAS

It is much harder for us to know about the lives of women in the Roman world than it is about those of men, since the overwhelming written evidence comes from men. This means that we usually learn about women from a male perspective – be it in plays, poems, histories, or court cases; as a result, our evidence about Roman women is based on how men chose to see the women in their lives. Moreover, we generally hear about wealthier women who married into families of a high social status. The majority of women must have lived simple, hard lives of poverty – either in the city or in the country – but these were not the sort of women to interest educated writers.



# Learning about Roman women: an overview



A further problem is that it is very hard to generalise about the lives of women in a civilisation which spanned both centuries and continents. However, if there is one statement which can be made, it is that Roman women were regarded as inferior to men, just as they have been in the vast majority of societies throughout history. It was accepted without question that a woman's main purpose in life was to marry and have children, while her other main task was to run the household and manage domestic chores such as childcare, cooking, cleaning and sewing. At no stage in Roman history did women have any political rights, while every woman lived under the power of a *paterfamilias* – usually either her father or her husband.

## Metella – A Day in the Life of a Roman *Matrona*

### Key Vocab

'Matrona' - a Roman woman, of wealth and married to a Roman citizen



Metella, like her husband, rises at daybreak and is helped by her personal maid. This maid has known Metella since they were both children for she was born into slavery in the house of Metella's father and given to Metella when she married Caecilius. Her name is Lutetia and she lives as the wife of the family's gardener, a Gallic slave called Clemens. Lutetia is training a new, younger slave-girl to be Metella's maid as she is very shortly to be granted her freedom. Metella and Lutetia are very fond of each other.

Metella is quite a traditional Roman matron who dresses elegantly but simply. She does not, like some of her friends, spend hours on makeup and elaborate hairstyles which is why she needs only one maid.

## Women's clothes

As underwear women wore a loincloth and, sometimes, a bra or corsets. Over this went a tunic, probably of fine wool or linen. On top of this was worn the *stola*, a robe which reached the ankles.

In early times women wore the *toga*, but later the *palla* was fashionable. It was a large piece of cloth which could be draped over the *stola* in many ways.



## Women's hairstyles

Rich women spent a lot of time and money on their hairstyles, and had slaves to do their hair for them. Some popular styles are shown here.

During the republic most women wore a simple bun.



In imperial times hairstyles were ornately braided and curled.

## Makeup

Women used various substances as makeup. They stored these in small pots and bottles.

Women whitened their faces with powdered chalk.



To tint their lips and cheeks red, they used the sediment from red wine, or a plant dye called *fucus*.

Hairpins



Heated tongs were used to curl hair.



Makeup pot



Hair comb





*Some Roman hair styles*

She crimps her hair into rows of curls, and builds it high, storey after storey. Look at her from the front, and you'll think she is an Andromache from the age of heroes: but from the back she's a different person altogether.

(Juvenal, VI, 505–7)



*Three maids dressing a lady's hair. This relief comes from the lady's tomb*





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# Book 1 - Stage 2

*Roman clothing*

After dressing, Metella eats breakfast with her two daughters and then carries out her domestic business. A Roman matron was responsible for the day-to-day running of the household and the welfare of the children and slaves. Metella is a wealthy woman and has quite a number of places to clean, shop, prepare food, and cook so she is mostly concerned with giving the slaves their daily instructions. Most of this is done through Strabus, the steward, but Flavia always discusses the evening meal with Grumio, the cook, personally.



Metella's eldest daughter Lucia Major sits in on her mother's meetings with the slaves so she can learn how to conduct herself when she is the mistress of her own house after her marriage. Then they are joined by Lucia Minor, the younger daughter, and both girls receive further instruction and advice on household management from their mother. Metella has even taught them how to spin and weave, a traditional female occupation which is rather dying out as slaves have become increasingly available. Metella believes in the old customs, however, and wishes her daughters to be properly educated.



Around mid-morning, Metella and Lucia Major set off to visit Metella's younger sister Tella who has recently given birth to her second child. Tella is married to a wealthy young senator called Sextus Publius Cotta and although they do not live far from Metella, she and her daughter are accompanied through the streets by the maid Lutetia and her 'husband' Clemens who goes along for protection. Upper class women did not usually go out alone.



Metella is visiting her sister for a number of reasons. Firstly, she wants Lucia to have contact with the baby and get used to the idea of pregnancy and childbirth. Secondly, she is concerned about Tella's health. Tella has a healthy three-year-old called Publia but she has also had a miscarriage and the latest pregnancy and birth were difficult. It is unlikely that she will be able to have any more children. Thirdly, Metella wants to enquire after Sextus Publius' father who has been suddenly taken ill.



On arriving at Tella's house, the party is welcomed by Sextus Publius' steward. Lutetia and Clemens are shown to the kitchen where they can catch up on the gossip with the other slaves. The news Metella receives is not good. Sextus Publius is away from home at his father's house. The older man has had a stroke and is not expected to live for more than a few days. The new baby, a boy who has not yet received his name, is a rather sickly child and Tella is recovering from the birth only very slowly. The atmosphere in the house is understandably rather gloomy.

Metella and Lucia are shown to Tella's room and as they talk Metella becomes satisfied that the baby will live and Tella will regain her strength. However, as they are about to take their leave, Sextus Publius returns home with the sad news that his father has died peacefully in his sleep. Sextus Publius must now make arrangements for the funeral which will take place in three days' time. His joy at having a new son is temporarily forgotten.



Having tried to console Sextus Publius, Metella and Lucia Major return home for lunch. They are again joined by Lucia Minor. While they have been out, she has been receiving tuition in literature and music from the Greek slave woman who is the nursery maid. Lucia Minor, like many other Roman girls, including her older sister, had attended a school of a *'litterator'* for a couple of years to learn basic reading and writing, but it is now considered more appropriate to her age and status to be taught at home. These are the sort of accomplishments a husband would expect in an upper-class wife.



Metella is not in the mood for going out this afternoon but normally she might visit friends, go shopping, or choose from her two favourite public entertainments – a recitation or a visit to the theatre. Metella enjoys literature and she often takes her daughters on these outings too.





## The *matrona*: A summary

Once a Roman girl was married, she became known as a \_\_\_\_\_. If she was married to a *paterfamilias* she would be known as the \_\_\_\_\_. *matronae* were usually responsible for running the \_\_\_\_\_ and bringing up the children, but the *paterfamilias* would have authority over the slaves, \_\_\_\_\_, and dependent \_\_\_\_\_ women of the *familia*. Although women couldn't sell \_\_\_\_\_, free slaves, or bring \_\_\_\_\_, she could own property and \_\_\_\_\_.

unmarried property land *paterfamilias* lawsuits *matrona* household children

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# But what about life for poorer women?

## Working women

The lives of Roman women depended on how rich they were. Rich families thought it inappropriate for women to go out to work.

Wealthy women were expected to have babies and organize the running of the home. Slaves helped them bring up their children.



In ordinary families women had to spin and weave wool cloth to make clothes. All women were taught these skills, but most rich families bought ready-made cloth.



Poorer women worked in markets, as needlewomen, or as attendants at the baths. Some served customers, as shown in this relief.



In the country, women worked on farms and as shepherdesses. A farmer's wife worked on the land with her husband.

## Home task - due Monday 31st October

- **TASK:** Write a diary entry from Metella's point of view about a typical daily routine for a Roman woman

- **Include:**

- What she did
- When she did it
- How she felt

**GOOD IF**  
I INCLUDE DETAILS OF AN OVERVIEW OF THE DAY IN A SEQUENCE/ORDER OF WHAT A ROMAN WOMAN WOULD DO

**EVEN BETTER IF**  
I AM ABLE TO DESCRIBE **HOW** AND **WHY** A ROMAN WOMAN WOULD DO THESE THINGS

**BEST IF**  
I CAN SHOW MY UNDERSTANDING OF ROMAN CULTURE BY EXPLAINING WHY A ROMAN WOULD BE EXPECTED TO DO THESE THINGS

