

The Crown Jewel:  
Female Agency Through Jewelry

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American businesswoman and fashion icon Iris Apfel once said “Jewelry is the most transformative thing you can wear.”<sup>1</sup> Even though Apfel made this statement in the 21st century, millennia after the height of Rome, her sentiments date back to the Roman Republic. At first glance, Apfel’s remarks might appear to be superficial. It may seem as though she was claiming, just as many Roman male authors did, that the presence or absence of a piece of jewelry defines a person. In reality, Apfel’s assertion is not so simple. Although jewelry does in fact change the appearance of the person wearing it, jewelry can perform a deeper type of transformation. These types of transformations can be seen throughout ancient Rome, especially regarding women and their adornment practices. In a society in which women were politically, culturally, and socially oppressed, jewelry provided Roman women with the ability to gain forms of agency. Thus, Roman women, adorning themselves with necklaces, rings, bracelets, brooches, amulets, and earrings, found a way to express influence over their image, finances, and health through jewelry.

Before jumping into the impact that jewelry had on women’s agency, it is important to first examine the types of jewelry that women were using in the Roman Republic and Empire. The most common forms of jewelry were necklaces, earrings, rings, and bracelets.<sup>2</sup> Ancient women also adorned themselves with less common types of jewelry, such as body chains, anklets, and even golden hairnets.<sup>3</sup> Gold was the most highly valued and expensive type of metal. Gemstones were also in high demand. Pearls, emeralds, rubies, lapis lazuli, diamonds, opal, and many other stones were incorporated into Roman jewelry. Since Roman jewelry relied on color for its desired effect,

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<sup>1</sup> Tina Trinh, “Iris Apfel Jewelry Collection Proves Style Is Less About Money, More About Attitude,” ABC News, ABC News Network, September 9, 2014, <https://abcnews.go.com/Lifestyle/wear-womans-jewelry/story?id=25376817>.

<sup>2</sup> Alexandra Croom, *Roman Clothing and Fashion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 136.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, 140.

pearls, rather than diamonds, were the most sought-after stone.<sup>4</sup> The pearl was also highly valued for its connections to Venus and its difficulty to procure.<sup>5</sup> Since carving stones could be extremely difficult, most Roman jewelry left the stones in their natural state.<sup>6</sup>

Although jewelry could be made from expensive materials, such as gold and gemstones, it could also be made out of leather, glass, bronze, or iron.<sup>7</sup> An example of such jewelry is KM 0000.00.2781, a bronze pendant from the DeCriscio Collection at the Kelsey Museum of Archaeology. This pendant was excavated from Pozzuoli, Italy. This pendant could have been worn as either an earring or a necklace. As an earring, KM 0000.00.2781 would have been worn through pierced ears.<sup>8</sup> As a necklace, it would have hung on some form of wire.<sup>9</sup> This piece of jewelry was most likely worn by a woman, as Roman males neither pierced their ears nor wore pendant necklaces other than the *bullae*.<sup>10</sup> Although not made out of gold or silver, this bronze pendant still may have been adorned by a wealthy woman, as pendants were the most esteemed and expensive type of earrings.<sup>11</sup> Additionally, bronze may have been chosen for this earring since bronze, in comparison to more precious metals, was seen as less licentious. So, by opting to wear bronze, the woman wearing this pendant may have been trying to avoid criticism for her

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Kathia Pickernelle, "The Iconography of Ancient Greek and Roman Jewelry," MPhil Thesis, (University of Glasgow, 2007), 57-58.

<sup>6</sup> Croom, *Roman Clothing and Fashion*, 137.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 139.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 140.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 89.

<sup>11</sup> Croom, *Roman Clothing and Fashion*, 141.

adornment. An alternative explanation is that the owner of this pendant simply could not have afforded gold or silver, so she was limited to bronze.

Another key concept of Roman society that should be noted before evaluating women's agency is the interconnectedness of appearance, social standing, and treatment. Roman society was very hierarchical with limited movement between statuses. And one of the strongest ways to reinforce the hierarchy was through appearances. One was supposed to conform to the traditional roles/virtues associated with their social rank by dressing the part. *Matronae* and *virgines* were



Photo of KM 0000.00.2781 at the Kelsey Museum

supposed to be modest in public life, while sex workers were allowed to appear more sexually promiscuous and adorned.<sup>12</sup> In enacting these sartorial restrictions and classifications, Rome was facilitating the deciphering of one's social status through appearance alone, which permitted people to receive the treatment awarded to their social status. In other words, appearances were incredibly important for differentiating between members of distinct social classes, meaning sartorial restrictions were necessary to uphold the rigid hierarchy.

Jewelry was not immune to these restrictions. There were strict social codes, according to male literary sources, that *matronae* were encouraged to deny themselves the luxury of jewelry, as jewelry could make women appear to be deceptive, unchaste, and uncontrolled.<sup>13</sup> All of these traits defied what it meant to be a *matrona* and *virgo*, signaling that jewelry threatened the traditional

<sup>12</sup> Kelly Olson, *Dress and the Roman Woman: Self-Presentation and Society* (London: Routledge, 2008), 106.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

Roman hierarchy as it could blur the boundaries between social statuses, traditional appearances, and associated morals since jewelry could allow women to be viewed as having values associated with a social class other than their own. For example, a *matrona* wearing priceless jewelry could be viewed as uncontrolled and unchaste, meaning that un-*matrona*-like traits were being applied to a *matrona*, blurring her standing in society. The discouragement of *matronae* from wearing jewelry can be seen in Valerius Maximus' *Memorable Deeds and Sayings*. Valerius Maximus claims that when Cornelia, an astute *matrona* and the mother of the Gracchi, was asked about jewelry, she responded "These are my jewels,"<sup>14</sup> referring to her sons. This highlights that the ideal *matrona* focused on her family, not the luxury of jewelry. Furthermore, in Plautus' *Poenulus*, a character relates jewelry to a sex worker, claiming she was "adorned for the public" since she was wearing jewelry.<sup>15</sup> By associating jewelry with licentiousness, Plautus' play reflects the goal of Roman men to convince *matronae* to not indulge in jewelry as it would stain their reputation. Thus, since jewelry hindered the effortless differentiation of people based on appearance, the rigid social hierarchy of Rome was undermined, causing men to actively campaign against the use of jewelry by *matronae* and *virgines*.

Despite the crusades of Roman men against female adornment, jewelry flourished among Roman women.<sup>16</sup> One potential reason for this is that jewelry provided women agency not granted to them through political establishments and social norms. The first type of agency gained by women focuses upon their perception. Roman women were aware that their physical appearance

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<sup>14</sup> Mary R. Lefkowitz and Maureen B. Fant, *Women's Life in Greece and Rome* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), 241.

<sup>15</sup> Kelly Olson, "Matrona and Whore: The Clothing of Women in Roman Antiquity," *Fashion Theory* 6, no. 4 (2002): 395.

<sup>16</sup> Eve D'Ambra, *Roman Women* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 112-113.

was thought to be indicative of both their social status and personal morals. Understanding this, women could shape how people perceived them by altering their adornment of jewelry.<sup>17</sup> For example, if a woman wanted to be viewed as an upstanding *matrona*, she could wear little to no jewelry, as the absence of jewelry signified her restraint and chastity.<sup>18</sup> If a woman wanted to be seen as sexually promiscuous, whether she actually was or not, she had the option to adorn herself with a wide variety of jewelry to signify her availability for sex. Through jewelry, women had a choice: maintain the expected image of one's social position or completely breach the rigid hierarchy by altering perceptions. And regardless of a woman's choice in wearing jewelry, her choice gave her power over her image and thus gave her a form of agency.

Women's adornment of jewelry also gave women influence over the public's perception of their male relatives. Since Roman women were often viewed as objects of their fathers/husbands, women's choices of adornment often reflected upon the men in their lives. Women's choices of jewelry could function as vehicles to display their male relatives' qualities. For example, a woman wearing elaborate, expensive jewelry could suggest that her father/husband was also immensely wealthy. On the other hand, a woman who did not opt to adorn herself with jewelry could illustrate that their father/husband had a higher moral standing, since luxury, including jewelry, was deemed as morally weakening. The bronze pendant from the Kelsey Museum (KM 0000.00.2781) demonstrates this phenomenon. Since the pendant is bronze, rather than gold, the woman wearing the pendant could signal that her husband either could not afford gold or that her husband had self-control and socially acceptable morals since the jewelry was not

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<sup>17</sup> Ann Stout, "Jewelry as a Symbol Status in the Roman Empire," in *The World of Roman Costume*, ed. Judith Sebesta and Larissa Bonfante (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1994), 83.

<sup>18</sup> Mary Harlow, "Dressing to Please Themselves," in *Dress and Identity*, ed. Mary Harlow (Oxford: BAR Publishing, 2012), 39.

tremendously extravagant. Thus, women's agency of perception extended not only over how they were perceived but also to how their fathers and husbands were viewed.

Although jewelry did provide women with the capability to alter others' perceptions of them, it is also important to view women's usage of jewelry in light of personal preferences. Due to the patriarchal nature of Rome, women had very little influence over many aspects of their lives, including when/whom to marry, when to have children, the fidelity of their husband, etc. But one thing they may have been able to control is their adornment. They could express themselves through jewelry by showing off their personal preferences. Roman women had a variety of materials and colors to choose from: gold, silver, bronze, pearls, emeralds, rubies, etc. Women had the opportunity to only wear colors, styles, pieces, and materials that they found appealing. They may have chosen pieces of jewelry based on what suited their complexion.<sup>19</sup> Some pieces might have looked better on certain body shapes or certain skin tones than on others, meaning women could choose to wear what they believed best complemented their bodies.<sup>20</sup> This can be seen through the KM 0000.00.2781 bronze pendant at the Kelsey Museum. The woman who wore that pendant may have chosen the style, material, shape, and size, to reflect her personal preferences. As KM 0000.00.2781 highlights, the option to adorn oneself based on personal sartorial proclivities emphasizes the importance of jewelry in providing Roman women a sense of agency, as jewelry granted women the ability to express themselves in a society that actively attacked female expression.

Extravagant jewelry was frightfully expensive. Only the wealthiest Romans could have afforded first-rate jewelry. This meant that those who adorned ornate necklaces, bracelets, and

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 42.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

earrings were noticeably wealthy. Since jewelry could be so expensive, it naturally provided women with economic agency. By wearing elaborate jewelry, women could choose to display and emphasize their families' wealth and prestige.<sup>21</sup> The desire of the Roman elite women to display their wealth through jewelry even caused some slaveholders to adorn their slaves with jewelry as a display of their poshness.<sup>22</sup> However, jewelry played a larger role in female financial agency than functioning as a display of a family's wealth. Much of the jewelry that wealthy women were wearing was purchased with their own money, not with the resources of their husbands.<sup>23</sup> And the value of jewelry was fixed, it did not fall precipitously over time.<sup>24</sup> So once a woman had a piece of jewelry, she could easily sell it if she needed access to money. This meant that jewelry allotted women a form of financial independence from the *patres familias* since they had access to reliable funds. And this financial independence led to the rise of female economic agency and the undermining of the traditional, patriarchal economic system.

Women's agency through jewelry also extends to medicine. According to Amy Richlin, "women incorporat[ed] rituals into their daily lives with amulets, necklaces, and bracelets."<sup>25</sup> Amulets were the most significant and widely used form of jewelry that women used to extend agency over medicine and health. Medical amulets could be made from a variety of materials, including hematite, feathers, or even sting-ray stingers.<sup>26</sup> Amulets were believed to be medical

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Olson, *Dress and the Roman Woman*, 43.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 98-99.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Amy Richlin, *Arguments With Silence: Writing History of Roman Women* (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 2014), 242.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 263.

devices capable of treating a variety of illnesses and ailments. Amulets, and jewelry more broadly, provided women with a belief of influence over their lives in two specific ways. The first of which is through the protection of their children. One of the most widespread uses for medical jewelry was mothers forcing their children to wear them.<sup>27</sup> The ancient world was incredibly dangerous and dirty, leading to low life expectancies and fear among mothers for the wellbeing of their children. One of the ways mothers attempted to protect their children from the dangers of the world was through amulets. Mothers hoped that their children would be saved from the dangers of the world if they wore an amulet. Amulets and medical jewelry signify mothers attempting to extend protection to their children in situations outside of their authority. Amulets did not guarantee the safety of their children, but the action of Roman mothers utilizing amulets to safeguard the welfare of their children demonstrates that they were attempting to seize agency for their children's prosperity.

The second common use for amulets was for treating female reproductive concerns. Uterine amulets could be used to unlock the uterus, with the goal of either becoming pregnant (by allowing semen into the uterus) or having a safe birth. Locking the uterus was another function of uterine amulets. Locking the uterus prior to sex functioned as a contraceptive, as it was believed semen could not penetrate a locked uterus. Women could also lock a uterus after sex in hopes of retaining semen in her uterus to become pregnant. Moreover, *hysterike pnix*, or "uterine suffocation," was one of the largest reproductive health difficulties for ancient women. And amulets could be used to solve the condition. In antiquity, it was believed that the uterus had the ability to wander around the body, leading to significant health troubles, such as seizures, choking,

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 264.

fainting, asphyxia, and even death.<sup>28</sup> There have been scholarly debates about *hysterike pnix*, with Hellen King arguing it was a term used as a literary tradition, while Susan Mattern argues it is a real condition. Regardless, women in ancient Rome used uterine amulets to counteract the problem.<sup>29</sup> Women relied upon jewelry to attempt to stop their uteri from moving. In doing so, they were trying to exert agency over their medical conditions. Therefore, even in situations where they had virtually no control, such as physical health complications, Roman women attempted to invoke influence over their lives through jewelry.

Jewelry is often associated with the elite upper-class and traditionally excludes anyone outside of the upper echelons of society. By this reasoning, the agency for women that is accompanied by the presence of jewelry could only be attained by wealthy women. However, that is not the case. Even though gold and precious stones were typically limited to the upper-class, jewelry was available to the non-elite. Poor and less well-off women could purchase jewelry made out of leather, iron, or bronze.<sup>30</sup> As noted above, KM 0000.00.2781, the pendant from the Kelsey Museum of Archaeology, is made out of bronze, illustrating that it was not uncommon for jewelry to be made out of less valuable materials. Even the effects of gemstones, like opals, emeralds, sapphires, and even pearls, were not limited to the upper-class, as colored pieces of glass could be fastened to jewelry as if they were jewels.<sup>31</sup> Women who were not immensely wealthy yet came from a family with a stable income could even wear jewelry that was silver or gold-plated.<sup>32</sup> The

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<sup>28</sup> Susan P. Mattern, "Panic and Culture: *Hysterike Pnix* in the Ancient Greek World," *Journal of The History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* 70, no. 4 (2014): 496-497.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, 501.

<sup>30</sup> Pickernelle, "The Iconography of Jewelry," 55.

<sup>31</sup> Olson, *Dress and the Roman Woman*, 46.

<sup>32</sup> Olson, "Matrona and Whore," 399.

kinds of materials may have differed among classes, but the agency granted by the jewelry to women did not differ significantly. Although women of lower classes had hindered economic agency, they could still exhibit their personal preferences, attempt to improve their health, and even change others' perceptions of them using jewelry.

In the ancient Mediterranean, women were marginalized. Their voices were excluded from the political domain. They were largely prevented from receiving an education. Social and cultural precedents were based on their denial of power. Yet, through jewelry, Roman women transformed their situations. They manipulated their appearances through jewelry, causing their contemporaries to view them differently. Jewelry provided Roman women with the ability to express their personal preferences and to dress for themselves. Women gained a form of financial independence through jewelry, undermining the established economic structure. Women even tried to protect themselves and their children by using jewelry as a medicinal object. All of these depictions of women using jewelry validate the notion that women employed forms of jewelry, such as KM 0000.00.2781, to create agency for themselves in a society that tried to deny power to them at every opportunity.

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## Images:

