Roman Women Demonstrate Against the Oppian Law

Cultures shape our conversations, minds, and the things we do, overall shaping the way we live our lives. Everyday life is influenced by the culture we live in or were raised in. As time passes some values and cultures change, which is why writing about specific cultures or time periods is so popular among authors. The Roman historian Livy is a prime example of an author whose writings are founded on cultural understanding, and in this document specifically his focus is on women and their role in Roman society. Throughout most of the world, the role of women in society has progressively changed during the course of history, and it is still changing today. Livy demonstrates that although women in 195 B.C.E. were still very much valued in their traditional roles, when they did step outside these boundaries heated debate among powerful men would ignite and suddenly women were a force to be reckoned with.

This piece written by Livy, Roman Women Demonstrate Against the Oppian Law, presents a great deal of clues into the past. Livy provides many of the most complete histories that exist from Rome’s early days and this is just a glimpse into one particular instance. It is a reconstructed account of a debate that took place some one hundred and thirty years prior to Livy’s birth. From the first lines of this source we see that war and violence were highly valued in Roman culture and that unrelated matters were seemingly trivial. Livy also emphasizes the importance of those men in power, such as consuls and praetors, while overall presenting a case of outspoken women. The overarching premise of Livy’s writing was to show the role of women in Roman society, and how when they stepped behind the traditional roles of wives, daughters, and mothers they became, in some high-ranking officials’ opinions, a noisy voice that needed to be silenced.

Gender roles in history vary from country to country, and have been a prominent topic to
study for centuries. Women’s place in Roman society was similar to the rest of the world during the time in which Livy’s document was based. First off, women were always classified based on their relation to a male: wife, daughter, mother, etc. Secondly, women were basically under the control of their male counterparts because of the assumption that they were not of sound mind to make important decisions. This was the well-known legal principle at the time *infirmitas sexus* and *levitas animi*” (Dunstan 103). Throughout the document Marcus Porcius Cato and his arguments for why the Oppian law should not be repealed brought these realities to light. “Our ancestors permitted no woman to conduct even personal business without a guardian to intervene in her behalf; they wished them to be under the control of fathers, brothers, husbands; we allow them now even to interfere in public affairs, yes, and to visit the Forum and our informal and formal sessions” (Livy 2). Cato was clearly bound to tradition and argued that the law stay intact and women remain under the control of men. However, times were changing right around the Second Punic War, before the Oppian law was even established. Women were not supposed to be protesting in the public sphere, they were meant to remain at home in the private sphere.

However, according to Dunstan, aristocratic women were encouraged to seize new opportunities and help in the expansion of the empire. Aristocratic women in particular took on the task of flaunting the gains that came with expansion. These women displayed their wealth via clothing, jewelry, etc. and in turn their husbands gained prestige. These women also had the privilege of controlling family property while the males of the family were fighting in the Second Punic War (Dunstan103). It was at this time, when Rome faced economic hardships from the war that the Oppian law was passed, limiting women’s display of wealth via multi-colored clothing, jewelry, and carriages.

In the latter half of the document Lucius Valerius made his appeal for why the law should
be repealed and he did a splendid job of pointing to the past when women helped the empire as a whole. For example, when matrons contributed their gold to the city after being captured by Gaul. However, Valerius, like Cato, associates women with matters that are less substantial and not entirely connected to the empire as a whole. “No offices, no priesthoods, no triumphs, no decorations, no gifts, no spoils of war can come to them; elegance of appearance, adornment, apparel—these are the woman’s badges of honour” (Livy 5). The apparent connection between women and appearance shows that women in Roman society were something to be looked at or shown off. Women were the prizes of men and the better they looked or the more they had was directly linked to his status in society. Valerius’s point also proves that women were to remain out of high ranking positions and their accomplishments did not compare to that of the war trodden men. This was because women were considered weak and frail by nature.

As Livy states in the early portion of his account the law was passed to reduce friction between the rich and poor, therefore opposition to the law came when the war was over. At the time there were clear class distinctions and struggles between them. Leaders clearly understood the desires of the masses which were not elites and in turn created laws like the Oppian law to avoid further issues on the home front. The article alludes to these facts that not only were there gender role distinctions, but also class distinctions. Whether it be that you were an office holding general or a woman adorned in gold, the rich were on top of society. Their apparel and positions only confirmed their status. The Oppian law proved to be taking away what made the rich the elite. When these women could not wear jewelry or ride in carriages, they were seemingly on the same level as the lower classes, and in turn their male counterparts were by means of association on that lower level too.

Gender roles were a dynamic of everyday life and in turn they affected the government
and laws. Women who stepped out of the house, suddenly had a voice and therefore became a threat. Livy’s reconstructed account of the women demonstrating against the Oppian law proves useful in defining what Roman society was like in the second century. From Livy’s piece it can be assumed that women were frail and weak voiceless individuals under the control of men. They were beautifully adorned prizes that would help to distinguish a man’s status and prestige. This document also points to the ever present class struggles that took place in Roman society between the rich and the poor. Lastly, it shows the importance of high ranking officials like praetors, tribunes, and consuls and the influence they had over people and the law. Roman culture was shaped by the way in which everyone fit into their proper place whether it be women, high ranking officials, or plebeians.