

Vernae in the (*Ecce*) Roman Family

While beginning Latin textbooks such as *Ecce Romani* and the Cambridge Latin Course have more women characters than textbooks of earlier decades, women, as Laurie Churchill has pointed out, are still under-represented in the picture of Roman life the textbooks give¹—and, I would add, non-elite women are severely under-represented. My task as a teacher of beginning Latin students is to improve that picture.

Whether through TV shows such as *Rome*, or movies such as *Gladiator*, my students are familiar with Roman slavery—or so they think, until they read, with surprise, in chapter 47 of *Ecce Romani* that Cornelia is making a doll to give to the daughter of the family's *vilicus* Davus as a birthday gift. A plausible explanation is that Davus' unnamed daughter is a *verna*, a slave born of a slave mother on the family's *villa rustica*. Through this paper I show how I have used this possible explanation to increase both the inclusion of additional women into my early Latin classes and to increase the inclusion of non-elite persons in Roman society into the depiction of Roman life that this textbook presents through two inscriptions. Teachers can use these inscriptions either in translation (as the inscriptions use indirect statement²) with beginning textbooks such as *Ecce Romani* or in the original Latin in advanced classes, e.g. when teaching Martial's Erotion poems or texts such as Pliny's letters to illustrate Roman social life.

Growing up in the household, such a young “home-born” slave could establish personal attachments to members of the *dominus*' family, perhaps by being a foster nursling (*collactaneus/collacteus*), or just a charming child. The general expectation of *domini* that home-born slaves were better behaved and more reliable than bought slaves, particularly if such were foreign-born (see Statius, *Silv.* 5.3-66-70), helped *vernae* to have

a higher ranking among the other slaves of *familia*. Given the mortality of children in general, a *verna* might serve as an affective substitute in place of the deceased children of the *dominus*. *Vernae*, therefore, could, and did, receive favored treatment by their masters, and Roman law recognized the special relationship between *collactanei* by allowing early manumission (Rawson, 197).

In addition to presenting information on this class of slaves, this paper gives examples of such special relationships and favored treatment in its discussion of two inscriptions concerning *vernae*. The first concerns the *verna* Helene of M. Aurelius Ammonion of Egypt, who bestows on her 2200 silver *drachmae* as a dowry. Additionally, the inscription presents students with the legal language of her manumission--and a romance! The second inscription, from a stele erected in Dalmatia by her grieving husband, records vividly, in elegiac stanzas, the laments of mother, sisters, and brothers over the death in childbirth of the recently wed Vitalis Pieris, *verna* of L. Pomponius Pietas.

Beryl Rawson, "Degrees of Freedom: *Vernae* and Junian Latins in the Roman familia," in Véronique Dasen and Thomas Späth, *Children, Memory and Family Identity in Roman Culture*. Oxford University Press, 2010. Pp. 195-221.

¹ Laurie Churchill, "Is there a Woman in this Textbook? Feminist Pedagogy and Elementary Latin," pp. 89, in John Gruber-Miller, ed., *When Dead Tongues Speak. Teaching Beginning Greek and Latin*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.

² Indirect statement is introduced in Chapter 47 in which the present of the doll is mentioned in the reading passage.