

## Female Fury In The Forum

Ancient Rome, 195 & 42 B.C.

From: <http://www.womeninworldhistory.com/lesson10.html>

### Hortensia

**Background:** During the years of the Roman Republic, women had no political rights. They were not allowed to vote, directly address the Senate, nor mill about in the forum. Respectable women who spent time in public places were frowned upon. Nonetheless, there were times when women used the power of public protest to get what they wanted. One was the demonstration of women against the Oppian Law. Another was Hortensia's speech to the forum.

The Oppian Law was passed following the disastrous defeat of the Romans by Hannibal at the battle of Cannae (216 B.C.). Because of the wars with Carthage, many men had died. Their wives and daughters had inherited their lands and monies, allowing many women to become quite rich. The state, in order to help pay for the cost of the wars, decided to tap into women's wealth by passing the Oppian Law. It limited the amount of gold women could possess and required that all the funds of wards, single women, and widows be deposited with the state. Women also were forbidden to wear dresses with purple trim (the color of mourning and a grim reminder of Rome's losses). Nor could they ride in carriages within Rome or in towns near Rome.

Roman women obeyed these restrictions with little fuss. Yet, at the end of the successful Second Punic War in 201 B.C., male Romans and women in towns beyond Rome again donned their rich clothing and rode about in carriages. Women in Rome, however, continued to be denied these luxuries because of the Oppian Law. With the end of the wars, upper class women chafed at these continuing restrictions and now wished to keep their inherited money for their own use.

In 195 B.C., some members of the Tribunal proposed eliminating the Oppian Law. Women throughout Rome kept an eye on these proceedings. When it seemed that the majority of Tribunal was about to veto the proposed repeal, they poured into the streets in protest. It was the first time anything by women on a scale such as this was seen in Rome. As a result of the women's protest, the tribunes withdrew their veto and approved the repeal.

Livy, a Roman historian, described the women's demonstrations and a portion of the debate between Consul Cato and Tribune Lucius Valerius in the Tribunal.

### 1) The Demonstration

"The matrons whom neither counsel nor shame nor their husbands' orders could keep at home, blockaded every street in the city and every entrance to the Forum. As the men came down to the Forum, the matrons besought them to let them, too, have back the luxuries they had enjoyed before, giving as their reason that the republic was thriving and that everyone's private wealth was increasing with every day. This crowd of women was growing daily, for

now they were even gathering from the towns and villages. Before long they dared go up and solicit consuls, praetors, and other magistrates.

When the speeches for and against the law had been made, a considerably larger crowd of women poured forth in public the next day; as a single body they besieged the doors of the tribunes, who were vetoing their colleagues' motion, and they did not stop until the tribunes took back their veto. After that there was no doubt that all the tribes would repeal the law."

## 2) The Debate in the Tribunal

Cato: "If each man of us, fellow citizens, had established that the rights and authority of the husband should be held over the mother of his own family, we should have less difficulty with women in general; now, at home our freedom is conquered by female fury, here in the Forum it is bruised and trampled upon, and because we have not contained the individuals, we fear the lot...

Indeed, I blushed when, a short while ago, I walked through the midst of a band of women. I should have said, 'What kind of behavior is this? Running around in public, blocking streets, and speaking to other women's husbands! Could you not have asked our own husbands the same thing at home? Are you more charming in public with others' husbands than at home with your own? And yet, it is not fitting even at home for you to concern yourselves with what laws are passed or repealed here.'

Our ancestors did not want women to conduct any - not even private - business without a guardian; they wanted them to be under the authority of parents, brothers, or husbands; we (the gods help us!) even now let them snatch at the government and meddle in the Forum and our assemblies. What are they doing now on the streets and crossroads, if they are not persuading the tribunes to vote for repeal? Give the reins to their unbridled nature and this unmastered creature, and hope that they will put limits on their own freedom. They want freedom, nay license, in all things.

If they are victorious now, what will they not attempt? As soon as they begin to be your equals, they will have become your superiors... What honest excuse is offered, pray, for this womanish rebellion? 'That we might shine with gold and purple,' says one of them, 'that we might ride through the city in coaches on holidays as though triumphant over the conquered law and the votes which we captured by tearing them from you...'

Pity that husband - the one who gives in and the one who stands firm! What he refuses, he will see given by another man. Now they publicly solicit other women's husbands, and, what is worse, they ask for a law and votes, and certain men give them what they want...

I vote that the Oppian Law should not, in the smallest measure, be repealed; whatever course you take, may all the gods make you happy with it."

Lucius Valerius: "I shall defend the motion, not ourselves, against whom the consul has hurled this charge. He has called this assemblage 'succession' and sometimes 'womanish

rebellion,' because the matrons have publicly asked you, in peacetime when the state is happy and prosperous, to repeal a law passed against them during the straits of war. Not too far back in history, in the most recent war, when we needed funds, did not the widows' money assist the treasury?...

What, after all, have they done? We have proud ears indeed, if, while masters do not scorn the appeals of slaves, we are angry when honorable women ask something of us...

Since our matrons lived for so long by the highest standards of behavior without any law, what risk is there that, once it is repealed, they will yield to luxury? Shall we forbid only women to wear purple? When you, a man, may use purple on your clothes, will you not allow the mother of your family to have a purple cloak, and will your horse be more beautifully saddled than your wife is garbed?...

By Hercules! All are unhappy and indignant when they see the finery denied them permitted to the wives of the Latin allies, when they see them adorned with gold and purple, when those other women ride through the city and they follow on foot, as though the power belonged to the other women's cities, not to their own. This could wound the spirits of men; what do you think it could do to the spirits of women, whom even little things disturb?

They cannot partake of magistracies, priesthoods, triumphs, badges of office, gifts, or spoils of war; elegance, finery, and beautiful clothes are women's badges, in these they find joy and take pride; this our forebears called the women's world...

Of course, if you repeal the Oppian Law, you will not have the power to prohibit that which the law now forbids; daughters, wives, even some men's sisters will be less under your authority - [But] never, while her men are well, is a woman's slavery cast off. It is for the weaker sex to submit to whatever you advise. The more power you possess, all the more moderately should you exercise your authority."

Source:

Livy, *History of Rome*, Maureen Fant trans., in Mary R. Lefkowitz and Maureen B. Fant, eds. *Women's Life in Greece & Rome*, Johns Hopkins Press, 1982.

Hortensia's Speech to the Forum

Background: Over a hundred years later, in 42 B.C., war again preoccupied the Romans. This time it was civil war, and the ruling triumvirs were badly in need of monies. To raise funds they voted to tax 1,400 of the richest women in the state. Fearing that taxes collected from them might be used in battles against their own families, the women mounted a protest. They chose Hortensia, the educated daughter of the famous orator Quintus Hortensius, to speak on their behalf. Rudely forcing their way into the forum, the women pushed Hortensia toward the triumvirs' tribunal. No female had ever spoken here before. A second century historian, Appian, in later years recorded what he understood to be Hortensia's speech.

"You have already deprived us of our fathers, our sons, our husbands, and our brothers on the pretext that they wronged you. But if, in addition, you take away our property, you will reduce us to a condition unsuitable to our birth, our way of life, and our female nature.

If we have done you any wrong, as you claimed our husbands have, punish us as you do them. But if we women have not voted any of you public enemies, nor torn down your house, nor destroyed your army, nor led another against you, nor prevented you from obtaining offices and honors, why do we share in the punishments when we did not participate in the crimes?

Why should we pay taxes when we do not share in the offices, honors, military commands, nor, in short, the government, for which you fight between yourselves with such harmful results? You say 'because it is wartime.' When has there not been war?...

Our mothers did once rise superior to their sex and made contributions when you faced the loss of the empire and the city itself through the conflict with the Carthaginians. But they funded their contributions voluntarily from their jewelry not from their landed property, their fields, their dowries, or their houses, without which it is impossible for free women to live...

Let war with the Celts or Parthians come, we will not be inferior to our mothers when it is a question of common safety. But for civil wars, may we never contribute nor aid you against each other."

Furious at the women's demands, the triumvirs tried to drive them away. But the crowd yelled their support for the women, and the following day the triumvirs reduced to four hundred the number of women subject to taxation.

Source:

Mary R. Lefkowitz and Maureen B. Frant, eds. *Women's Life in Greece & Rome*, Johns Hopkins Press, 1982.