

Friendship between Men and Women in Ancient Rome

For the non-sexual relationships between Roman men and women, the literary works of the Roman writers (virtually all male) give one impression, but other sources suggest a different picture.

Cicero in the *De Amicitia* and the *De Oratore* has nothing to say about Laelia, the daughter of one of the main characters (C. Laelius) even though he was well acquainted with her and talks about her father, son-in-law and husband. He has Laelius say that many people see weaker people - such as women, the poor, the unfortunate - needing friendships. There seems to be no sense that women might want *amicitia* simply for affection. The emphasis in Roman society is on male-male bonding. The feminine form of *amicus* ("male friend"), *amica*, is sometimes used between two females, but used by a man it = "sexual partner" (often paid), whereas *amicus* is primarily a friend, with "lover" as only a minor meaning. (Note the derogatory use of *amica* of Clodia in Cicero's *Pro Caelio*.) Friendship, then, is a preserve of the male elite, if one considers only the literary sources.

But Cicero's correspondence shows evidence of non-sexual male-female friendship, especially his relationship with Caerellia, whom he calls "necessaria" ("closely-bound relation") rather than "amica". (Cf. *Pro Murena* where a Vestal Virgin is referred to as *necessaria* and *propinqua*.) In writing to Atticus, Cicero refers to Servilia as "tua familiaris", as he does regarding many other women connected with Atticus, though his commonest use of the term "familiaris" is for men. Cicero stresses that Atticus was a friend to people (male and female) not to fortune.

Plutarch, writing in Greek about things Roman, refers to Cornelia (mother of the Gracchi) as *polyphilos*, and Tacitus uses "amicitias muliebres" as similar to the relationship between men. Pliny speaks of his "amicitia" with Helvidius Priscus and with Arria and Fannia, those models to our wives and to us for courage.

Why should "amica" be so derogatory when, in fact, there were often close non-sexual male-female relationships? Michael Grant maintains that Cicero's male bias in the *De Amicitia* comes from his many failed relationships with women, but there were Caerellia and Tullia, and the work is dedicated to Atticus, who had many female friends. Respectable women were generally referred to in public only as "mother of x" or "sister of x".

Cicero's *De Senectute* shows later life as something that only men took part in, not women. Perhaps, since Plato and Xenophon wrote only about men, Cicero thought it inappropriate to include women in works modeled on theirs.

If we look at the attitude of the Roman elite on how women become friends of men, we find that sexual and financial attraction are assumed unless there is blood relationship. Cicero in *Pro Caecina* questions the relationship of Caesennia to Aebutius: *voluntarius amicus mulieris non necessitudine aliqua* - there was no tie of kinship. Similarly, Clodia is assumed to have been wanton in *Pro Caelio* because she took Caelius as a friend without any necessity to.

Calenus accuses Cicero of having divorced his young wife Publilia to please his old friend Caerellia. We know that Pliny fills his letters to Paetus with sexually flavored jesting; perhaps Cicero did the same in his letters to Caerellia, treating her in the same way as if she had been a male buddy.

Seneca, in his *Consolatio ad Marciam*, cites examples of male courage that Marcia should (and presumably therefore could) imitate, thus treating a female friend in a masculine manner, as in the modern use of the term "guy" for male or female.

Between 50 BC and 150 AD it seems to become more acceptable to speak about male-female friendships. Catullus had already, speaking of his love for Lesbia, used the term *sanctae foedus amicitiae*, politically loaded terms to elevate his passion, thereby dignifying a non-marital sexual relationship by using of it terms normally reserved for male-male bonds. Propertius takes the same approach when talking to Cynthia, referring to himself as Cynthia's "amicus" and giving her instructions for his own funeral. This process assimilates female friends not only to male friends but also to blood relations. When women are praised, it is often for demonstrating the best qualities of their male relatives.