In the modern western world the clothed body is integral to self-representation and identity. For us, this expression of identity through dress implies both agency and a range of available options. An individual can use a dress style that reinforces or resists social stereotypes and, even in societies which have strong cultural rules surrounding dress and the body, there is often the facility to subvert social mores or expectations (Twigg 2007: 286). Here, I want to explore how far Roman women could make choices about how they dressed and whether dress could give them access to a mode of self-representation that transcended the dominant literary and visual discourses – in short, can we uncover a level of female agency in the surviving source material. In examining Roman dress we are constrained by the surviving sources, and in discussing Roman female dress we are further hindered by the lack of a female voice in the relevant literature and, arguably, also in the surviving visual and material culture. The question of agency tends to be side-stepped by discussing Roman female dress in terms of how it reflects, reinforces or rejects social and cultural meanings (see for example Harlow 2004b; Olsen 2002). This chapter will be confined to two aspects: the role of sculpture in providing images to emulate and the act of choice in the question of colour.

The impetus for the chapter came partly from a trip to Iran made in 2006 organised by Dr Lloyd Llewellyn-Jones. This was my first real close encounter with a society where female dress is prescribed in a way very different from western Europe. The chador, the long black cloak which covers the head and body, is typical dress in both the cities and the countryside (see Fig 3.1 Llewellyn-Jones, this volume). It is not the only form of female dress, and in discussing Roman female dress we are further hindered by the lack of a female voice in the relevant literature and, arguably, also in the surviving visual and material culture. The question of agency tends to be side-stepped by discussing Roman female dress in terms of how it reflects, reinforces or rejects social and cultural meanings (see for example Harlow 2004b; Olsen 2002). This chapter will be confined to two aspects: the role of sculpture in providing images to emulate and the act of choice in the question of colour.

Looking at shops and market stalls in some of the cities it was striking to see on one side of a shop the traditional dark clothing that was visible on women in the streets while on the other side of the same shop there would be a wealth of colour, style and textiles that seemed completely out of keeping with the public image. Brightly coloured, long, short and quite revealing styles are not uncommon. In response to the question of when women might have the opportunity to wear such fashions, the answer was simply at home with their husbands or at social events where normal practice dictated sexual segregation. The implication is that women could dress to please themselves when among other women of the family. Other glimpses of such ‘choice’ were revealed as we travelled through the country: a woman opening a door to another woman – the one on the street covered with the chador, the one inside the house wearing a brightly coloured shirt and carefully arranged hair; younger women in jeans and T-shirts getting out of cars and quickly ensuring the chador covered all but a glimpse of dress beneath. As a long garment with no fastenings the chador requires at least one hand to keep it closed so restricts movement. However, women manage to hold it closed while carrying bags of shopping, small children – and sometimes both, but in this case the chador was held tight in the teeth. In the cities more than the countryside we also saw blatant subversions of this public female image. These came in the form of very obvious uses of cosmetics or elaborately plaited or dyed fringes just visible under the head covering – and in one case a very elegant turban which covered the head but left the neck exposed. I was merely an observer of this phenomenon, standing outside the social mores of Iranian society and, with no understanding of the spoken or written language, it was hard to interpret these different images. An outsider has little sense of where such dress choices sit in the moral spectrum that dictates female dress in modern Iran. 1 This, it seems to me, is very much the position historians are in when viewing the sources for Roman female dress.

1 Acknowledgements: I would like to thank my colleagues Elena Theodorakopoulou, Niall McKeown and Gillian Shepherd for their comments on this paper – it is undoubtedly better for them. For studies of modern Middle Eastern Dress see: Vogelsang-Eastwood 2010: 288-307; Stillman and Stillman (2003); Sabbagh (1996); El Guindi (1999); Arthur (2000).
The other impetus for this paper is also a side effect of the trip to Iran. Even in hotels that were clearly aimed at the western traveller there was a distinct shortage of full length mirrors. Often the only mirror was a small face glass in the bathroom. As western women we were preoccupied with how we looked, essentially to ensure that we were not transgressing any major rules in terms of general covering and colour (which we did often, despite our best efforts) and the lack of a full length mirror to check appearance was a disadvantage for those of us used to giving ourselves the once-over before we leave the house. The implications for the study of Roman women and female cultus in general are apparent. Roman women had face mirrors of which the reflective ability was variable but nothing like the range or quality we have available now. Today it is possible to view oneself in full length mirrors, in the reflections of windows and in various shiny surfaces; but the same degree of self evaluation was not available to Roman women so how did they assess their overall image? Did they trust the opinions of their slave maids if they had them? How far were they influenced by styles or ways of wearing clothes they saw on other women? Did the visual images of female statuary and women in wall paintings which surrounded them in their daily lives influence a choice of style? Were women constrained by the prescriptive tone of male literary voices, and did they police each other? How far could they exercise choice and still remain within the realms of respectability – if in fact that was their aim? Could women such as prostitutes and courtesans who stood outside the notion of moral society achieve the veneer of respectability through dress? These are all matters that deserve consideration.

Sources for Roman female dress are essentially of three types: literary images; visual images and some very limited fragments of extant textiles. These elements cannot be jigsaw-ed together to create a unified image, each has to be taken in context. For modern dress, a similar set of interpretive issues was articulated by Roland Barthes in *The Fashion System* (1967). He identified three types of garment: image-clothing, written clothing and real clothing (1985: 3-4). In his reading image-clothing is that represented in photographs and fashion drawings; written clothing is the literary description of such an image; real clothing is the garment itself. He makes the point that these three types of garment do not speak the same language. Not only that, they have internal rules and agenda that control the messages they put across: fashion photography, for instance is a genre in its own right, it follows its own trends and presents an image that conforms to the language of that genre. Written descriptions of clothing likewise conform to the genre in which they are written (Barthes 1985: 12-20, Taylor 2002: 90ff). Actual garments themselves are yet another dimension. While the item of dress is the material reality that image and written clothing mean to represent, it is different again. It is the starting point, model and frame of reference for the first two but it is unique in structure and signals yet more layers of meaning to the viewer. In looking to read dress at any interpretive level we are faced with multiple layers of meaning created from sources (visual, literary and material culture) that do not speak the same language. They are self-referential and have connections but none can be elided with the others and there is no easy way of reading them as a single or homogenised system (Warwick & Cavallerio 1998: 62).

For Roman dress evidence is remarkably varied: visual evidence comes from sculpture, wall paintings, mosaics and some plastic arts such as gold glass, silverware etc. Written descriptions of dress can be found in almost all genres of literature. Material remains are few and fragmentary and mostly come from eastern contexts (see Harris this volume). I have argued elsewhere that the media from which we garner information about Roman dress control what we can say about it (Harlow 2004b and 2007a). However, this approach is arguably too prescriptive and closed in terms of allowing any sense of female expression through dress and adornment. It works on a series of presuppositions based on the source of information and makes genre the ruling component. In this reading the demands of the genre supersede or confound any attempt at accessing even a tentative social reality. For example: women in elegy – not representative of ‘real’ women; women in satire – not representative of ‘real’ women; women in moralising texts – not representative of ‘real’ women; statues and paintings of mythological/divine women – not representative of ‘real’ women; honorific statues/portraits of actual women – still not representative of ‘real’ women because they were controlled by strict demands of public sculpture as a reflection of accepted social morality. Each genre of evidence – visual or literary – will produce a particular image of the dressed or undressed woman that is shared by the audience, who will recognise subtle nuances depending on their own experience, education and gender. For the rest of this paper I want to re-examine some of this material, keeping in mind the issues raised by genre (but not simply surrendering to them) in order to search for areas where Roman women may have shown agency through dress, rather than assuming them to be simply one-dimensional symbols. This is not to suggest a simplistic recreation of ‘real’ women, or to blur realism with social reality, but to allow a more flexible approach to the evidence imagining how women may have made choices about what to wear.

Roman society was a very visual culture in which, to paraphrase Mary Douglas, the social body controlled the physical body – outward appearance was important and considered to reflect both the social position and the moral character of the individual. The dress of both men and women was subject to scrutiny. Male rhetoric on the subject of female dress and toilettte, whether in prose or poetry, almost always took a negative view, and any female self-representation that deviated from that considered ‘natural’...
was deemed deceptive, and thus undermining of the social order. There is a tension between the dominating literary discourses and the material remains: the archaeological and iconographic material suggests that women spent time and care cultivating their appearance, and that a refined elegance was very much part of the identity of the good Roman wife.4

A brief outline of the ‘uniform’ of the upper class Roman women as expressed in the sources and the moral values ascribed to particular items of clothing follows to provide context.5 The basic dress of all Roman women was essentially made up of some form of tunic and mantle. The tunic was in fact the basis of all dress in Rome, male and female; it cut across class, age and gender. It could be as simple as two rectangles of cloth with a gap for arms and head or it could have more complex shaping. Even the basic rectangular shape could allow for sleeves which appear to be gap-fastened from elbow to neck. Later versions appear to have inset sleeves. The essential differences in the basic garment were in terms of the textiles it was made from and its length. It could be plain, coloured or decorated, depending on status and class, and perhaps age of the wearer (for full details see Pausch 2003). For women it was usually bound under the bust, although this must have been tricky to maintain even for the usual activities of a restricted upper class life style. Length also varied, again, primarily dictated by class and rank. Wealthy and upper class women wore tunics that came to the ground and showed very little of the foot. Working women appear to have worn more practical lengths, but the short tunic – above the knee – would indicate slavery or extreme poverty.

A married woman (matrona) could wear a garment over the tunic known as the stola. This resembled a pinafore with shoulder straps and reached to the ground, again belted under the bust (Olsen 2008a: 27-33; Croom 2002: 73-6; Wilson 1938: 155-62). Upper class women wore it long, perhaps with a band around the lower edge (insitita – see discussion, Olsen 2008a: 30; Sebesta 1994: 49; contra – insitita as straps - see Beiber 1977: 23; Croom 2002: 74). The stola (perhaps also synonymous with the phrase longa vestis – see Olsen 2008a: 28-30; Sebesta 1994: 49) could only be worn by a woman who was in iusitum matrimonium (legitimate marriage) so it immediately signalled a woman who was a citizen, and of a certain status. It therefore embodied all the virtues of the ideal wife: modesty, chastity, faithfulness and honourable behaviour, and was used as shorthand for such by some authors (e.g Ovid Ars Am. 1.31-2; Martial 1.35.). The length of the stola and the fact it was worn over another garment effectively hid the body from view re-enforcing notions of modesty and submissiveness (Horace Sat 1.2.99; Martial 11.104.7; Aulus Gellius N.4 6.12). Moreover it could also be pulled up and used as a veil to cover the head, and if required also pulled across the face (for general descriptions of the mantle see Croom 2002: 87-9; Olsen 2008a: 33-6).6

An upper class Roman woman then was ideally swathed in relatively long, loose drapery which wrapped around, rather than clung to the body. How far the physical dress would restrict body movement, and the ways could women manipulate this relatively restricted wardrobe are issues that need consideration. Wearing the tunic, stola and palla the Roman matron would have had relatively restricted movement. Hands and arms would have been needed to keep material in place and physical movement constrained by the length and relative bulkiness of the layers. Dress would have been made up of perhaps one light layer of

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4 Veiling is a problematic issue for historians of Roman dress. The few references to veiling which imply that it was the norm for women to cover their heads when out in public are at odds with the many statues and portrait busts displaying unveiled women and illustrating elaborate hair styles. Wall paintings of outdoor scenes also show women with uncovered heads but the status of such women is harder to discern. A piece of evidence often quoted to support the notion of female veiling is a story told by Valerius Maximus (1st century AD) about C. Sulpicius Gallus, consul in 166BC. Gallus apparently divorced his wife for going outside with her head uncovered (capipe aperto foris). His reason for this was that she had exposed to everyone what only his eyes should see (Val Max. 6.3.10). It should be noted that this anecdote is part of a section on severity and is followed by two more short stories of wives being divorced: one for talking to a freedwoman (libertina vulgari, so perhaps a prostitute) in public and the other for attending the games without her husband’s permission. The moral here is: ‘while women were thus checked in the old days, their minds stayed away from wrongdoings’ (Val Max. 6.3.11-12). The idea that morals were better and women were better behaved in ‘the good old days’ is a topos of Latin literature. There are other mentions of veiled women but they are few and we should be careful of creating social norms from such a paucity of evidence. For further discussion see Macmullen (1980), Sebesta (1994: 48-9); Olsen (2008a: 33-4); D’Angelo (1995: 131-64).
underwear, with a wool or linen tunic over that, belted somehow to contain the width and retain modesty if not fully sewn up both sides; a matrona might have worn a wool stola over the top. These layers would not have sat easily on top of each other, there would have been bunching of fabric and shifting of layers. The palla added yet another layer. Hands had to be occupied holding dress in place when in movement, and steps needed to be short and controlled in order to keep the whole ensemble in some sort of containment, and avoid tripping up. Roman women must no doubt have learned how to wear such layers with ease in the same way that Iranian women wear the chador but similarly such dress also meant that when in public women needed to concentrate literally on ‘holding themselves together’. When outside domestic confines then, the respectable female body was physically covered and metaphorically wrapped in a series of social codes expressed in her dress and her movement.

Respectable women out in public had an image to maintain and they had various ways of assessing that image, in the absence of adequate mirrors. The most obvious way would no doubt be viewing other clothed women but they would also have seen visual images of clothed (and unclothed) female bodies wearing dress in very particular ways, mainly in statuary. The question of how far ‘real women’ would have internalised the public images they saw around themselves is debatable. Jane Fejfer is in no doubt:

However, common to all the different statuary representations of Roman women is the fact that they were not ‘real’. This is because the costumes and the way in which they were draped were characteristic of images of goddesses rather than normal women. The Roman viewer may not have associated a particular statuary type and its variants with the goddess whom it originally represented, but its costume was probably clearly distinguishable from the everyday dress which a woman wore during her appearance in public (Fejfer 2008: 344-5).

While Fejfer accepts that the tunic, stola and palla were the central garments in the Roman woman’s wardrobe, she argues that the way they are depicted in sculpture would have borne little relation to the garments actually worn by women. Female statuary at Rome is divided into six main types: the ‘Ceres’ type, ‘Pudicitia’ type, ‘Small’ and ‘Large Herculaneum’ women types and the so-called ‘shoulder-bundle’ and ‘hip-bundle’ types (Fejfer: 2008: 335). Three of these styles embody an ideal of the virtuous and virtuously dressed woman: the so-called ‘Pudicitia’ type and the ‘Small and Large Herculaneum women’ (see also Beiber 1977: 148-62; Davies 2002; Trimble 2000: 56-65 on the role of such statues as visual representations of the Augustan moral codes). Pudicitia is a complex concept. For women it meant modesty, sexual purity, chasteness within marriage, and repelling the advances of anyone, especially males, from outside the family (see Langlands 2006). It was a virtue that needed to be visible in manner, body language and dress, and appears to be embodied in these representations. These statue types used the wrapped, draped and usually veiled female body as their starting point. The pudicitia pose usually has one arm wrapped in the mantle bent across the front of the body. The other arm, bent at the elbow, is raised and the hand, with index finger raised, touches the mantle as it passes along the side of the head or face. This gesture implies a readiness to pull the mantle across the face (in the act of full veiling) if required. In these images the head, or certainly the eyes, have a downward cast. The so-called Herculaneum women types are likewise heavily draped, usually with one hand held loose down the side of the body, often hidden by the palla, while the other, bent at the elbow and wrapped inside the mantle, pulls the cloth across the body. These figures are usually, but not invariably, veiled. The only parts of the body visible in these models are the face, the hands and the feet. Scholars have noted several things about these figure types: the inclined head and lowered gaze suggest modesty – the figure is not making eye contact with the viewer. This modesty is re-enforced by the body language of the figures: the arms are set in defensive, postures and the force and fall of the drapery presents a closed body image, again suggesting vulnerability; but also unassailability and sexual integrity. (Davies 1997: 102-4; Trimble 2000: 65-6). The images are ambiguous: they embody the paradox of modesty on display. Modesty, of course, is a virtue that should eschew display. The figures appear at first glance to conform to the ideal of the modest matrona but they are not quite the visual version of Seneca’s model wife who if she ‘wants to be safe from the lust of a seducer must go out dressed up only so far as to avoid unkemptness’. Any communication, even with relatives, should be with eyes cast down and cause a blush (Contr. 2.7.3). In Seneca, the contrast is with the woman who is the physical embodiment of impudicitia – one who goes out with a ‘face made up to look utterly seductive, naked hardly less obvious than if you had taken off your clothes’ and giving advance warning of her shamelessness in ‘the way she dresses, the way she walks, the ways she talks, her appearance’ (Contr. 2.7.4). For Seneca, it seems, a Roman husband could have a dull wife or an adulterous one, with little middle ground.

The statue types reflect an ambiguity that is not present in Seneca’s declamation. The heavy but elegant drapery on the statues suggests wealth, while the modelling on some of the figures accentuates breasts and pubic area, so while the wrapped body suggests sexual integrity the modelling still manages to stress sexuality. Several modern authors have commented on the fact that the apparent veiling gesture could also be read as unveiling and inviting the viewer to gaze further with the promise of more (see for example, Davies 2002: 236; Smith 1991; 84-5; Trimble 2000: 66). In these statues the shape of the body is often revealed in surprising ways given at least two and often three layers of clothing are apparently worn. Both the tunic and the stola

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2 There is extensive literature on these statue types see also: Beiber (1962, 1977), Smith (1991, 1998).
can be depicted of a very light material, revealing breasts and navel, thus in theory contradicting the ideals of moral uprightness associated with it (Fe Jenner 2008: 335, 345).

However, Roman women, at least in urban contexts, were surrounded by such images and the statue types were replicated across the empire. Using idealised sculpted images as references for clothing is problematic and while I am not suggesting that statues act in the same way as fashion plates, such standardised images must have created an idea of the overall impression the dressed woman was meant to make in draped and wrapped garments, even if the version of the sculpted ideal could not be achieved in reality (Beiber 1977: 153 and figs 713-5 on the difficulty of replicating the styles). It may be, however, that the poses, particularly of the Herculaneum women types, did reflect some of the realities of wearing such garments: it was necessary that both hands and upper arms were held tight to the body to hold it all together, focussing the wearer inward. Images and social reality, in both literature and visual culture, tend to shape each other (see Trimble 2000: 64-67; D’Ambra 1996; Stewart 2008: 97-101). Sculptors followed artistic precedents but they also created images that spoke to a contemporary audience, they too may have looked at women wearing the tunic, stola and palla and used reality as a model. This is, of course, a circular argument. However, women did wear loose and draped clothing and it had to be held together in particular ways to make it function, and there are only so many ways of doing this and achieving an acceptable public look. We cannot know how the female viewer related to the images that surrounded them, if they laughed at them as preposterous male fantasies of the clothed (and unclothed) female bodies or if they sought to emulate them, but they are images that may have given women who lived without the benefit of full length mirrors an idea of what the dressed body looked like. We should allow women some room for agency rather imagining them conforming to the stereotypes. Ancient writers were clearly anxious about female intentions and the potentially subverting nature of manipulating drapery. As noted above, the wrapped body could also be unwrapped. The very basic nature of female dress with its fundamentally simple shaping allowed women a certain freedom about what they chose to outline, expose or hide. Women had the power to manipulate their drapery within the relatively limited wardrobe repertoire. Roman satirists and elegists talk about artfully arranged clothing that could hide flaws or show off more attractive body parts (Tib. 1.6.18; Propertius 2.22A 8; Martial 8.68; Juvenal 6.260). The idea that clothing not held together will easily come adrift is also a motif used to characterise mental disarray or lack of control (cf. Catullus 64. 63-70 on abandoned Ariadne), suggesting that it was easy to lose clothing if care was not taken.

The ability to enact choice is one of the markers of agency

and, even within the relatively limited repertoire of styles, Roman women had access to a range of choice of material and colour. A text that gives some insight into the choices and reasons for those choices is Ovid’s Ars Amatoria 3. This is a piece of didactic writing which seeks to instruct, in the voice of the praeceptor (teacher), puellae (girls, young women) on how to appear in order to attract lovers. Ovid says the poem is a response to a demand from the girls to write a book for them to parallel the earlier two books addresses to men (Ars Am. 2. 745-6). Where the first two books taught the rules of the elegiac game to men, this was to teach them to women. As in more traditional didactic literature there are plenty of references to mythological figures but Ovid writes not in epic metre, the usual form for didactic verse, but in elegiac (Gibson 2003: 8). Gibson places the Ars Amatoria in the ‘erotodidactic’ tradition where the author assumes the role of a woman, often in the persona of a lena (procuress), instructing other women with the audience placed in the role of eavesdroppers (Gibson 2003: 18 - 21). It is a carefully constructed and manipulating literary work in which cultus is expounded in positive terms. The relevant section starts with an introduction (101-34) which claims that while in the old days young women did not cultivate their looks, now in the new (Augustan) Rome a different approach to cultivated beauty is allowable, in opposition to the rusticity (rusticius) of the past. Ovid is taking a very particular view here; instead of engaging in the traditional Latin trope of the good old days he actively welcomes the artistry and artifice of new Augustan Rome: ‘Let ancient times delight others, I congratulate myself I was not born until now’ (l. 121-2). In Book 3 Ovid suggests that women can now cultivate attractiveness; they should create themselves as a work of art that looks natural. However, even at the start the praeceptor warns against excess: while the ‘vast wealth of the conquered world’ (l.114) is available puellae should not wear exotic gems or dresses weighed down with gold thread (l.129-33). Ovid compares excess which ‘often repels’ with elegance which attracts (munditiis capitur l.133). In this area he is in line with fellow elegists (Richlin 1995: 187; Watson 1982: 239). Munditia carries implications of refined neatness, restraint and cleanliness and it is this tone that underlies all the subsequent advice coupled with the general principle that any choice of hairstyle or colour of dress should suit the

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1 For a similar contrast in art see example of half-dressed maenad paired with dressed matron from capitals from House of the Figured Capitals, Pompeii in Clarke (2003: 248-51). I thank Elena Theodorakopoulos for the Catullus reference.

5 There is an extensive bibliography on Ovid and the Ars Amatoria (see Richlin, Watson and Downing on bibliography) and for this paper I have made great use of Roy Gibson’s 2003 introduction and commentary on Ars Amatoria 3.

6 Ovid’s notion of cultus is at variance with that of Propertius and Tibullus. Where Ovid plays up elements of constructed beauty and emphasises artistry and technique in the maintenance of good looks, the others praise natural beauty and decry artificiality. See Watson (1982: 238-9).

7 The whole section of ll. 109-130 is an unpicking of ideas about the Augustan Golden Age, here stressing the advantages of the modern (Watson 1982, particularly p. 241). The idea of cultus is stressed: ‘Care will give good looks: looks neglected go to waste (l.105). This is direct contrast to Propertius who denigrates any form of artificial aid (Watson 1982: 238). See also Downing (1999); Gibson (2003: 139-48); Richlin (1995: 188).
shape and complexion of the individual. Ovid starts with
hairstyles. Hair should be controlled but as no single style
will suit everyone, women should choose one to suit the
shape of the face, for example, an oval face suits a centre
parting, a round face the nodus style (1.135-40). Ovid lists
a range of styles: loose, braided, waved, tightly bound, and
an artfully neglected look, but privileges none. Some styles
have mythological associations. For instance braided hair
is like that of Diana the huntress (1.143) – this reference
would assume that women might actually look at visual
and sculptural images and seek to emulate them in some
fashion in the same way that we see the nodus style of Livia
emulated by other women in sculpture (for examples see
Bartman 1999).13

The poem next moves on to give advice on dress and in
particular on colours. The topic is again introduced by a
rejection of excess succinctly phrased in terms of gold and
purple – both of which were synonymous with luxuria (1.
169-73). Next follows a catalogue of colours including
various shades of blue (colours of the sky); grey, yellow,
grey-green or sea-green, amethyst purple, rose-white, dark
brown of chestnuts and lighter brown of almonds, ending
with ‘as many colours as there are spring flowers’ (1.174-
89). The list highlights that a range of choice was available
but the context of the poem which Ovid’s immediate
audience would have recognised, suggests they might
only be appropriate for some women. Ovid’s catalogue has
similarities with the one given by Plautus: azure, saffron,
sea blue, buttercup, walnut, wax (Epistulae 229-35) which
is also about courteous preferences. Both lists make the
point that colour was possible and desirable in female
dress (Sebasta 1984: 65-76; Olsen 2008a: 11-13). Ovid
subtly stresses the idea of moderation, or at least restraint,
in the use of colour by making the point that it is wool
which holds such dyes (1.187).14 Wool is very much the
textile of the virtuous woman in contrast to expensive silk
or exotic more diaphanous, figure hugging or transparent
materials. In Ovid’s own time Augustus was said only
to have worn homespun wool worked by women of his
family (Suetonius, Aug. 73) – and even if this is a highly
disingenuous statement the inference of the association
of the good wife with wool working is clear. As with
hairstyles, Ovid’s praeeceptor suggests that women should
choose colours that complement their skin tones; pale
skinned women suit darker colours and those with darker
skins should wear white (1.189-92). There is no sense here
that women should wear a rainbow of available colours,
but rather chose one that suits. The conservative nature of
this advice gives weight to Ovid’s mock-serious intention
of writing a ‘handbook’ and gives a clear impression that
deliberately choosing to enhance physical appearance
could be viewed as positive. It also suggests women
could exercise choice not only in whether to engage with
culus or not but also to make minute decisions about all
aspects of their appearance depending on their budget and,
presumably, social status.

Textiles of many colours would have been available
on the Roman market and images of women dressed in
coloured clothing were visual as well as literary. Some of
the surviving Herculaneum women statues show traces of
colour (Trimble 2000: 43), wall paintings also survive with
coloured clothing but the best examples are in Egyptian
mummy portraits from the Roman period. Both time
and environment of survival may mean that the original
brightness, tone and even hue are not accessible to us –
but the point is that women could make choices. In the
world outside Ovid’s poem women of all classes could
choose to wear only colours that suited their complexions
(although even this is also a choice defined by cultural
codes and different tastes) or they could have chosen to
demonstrate wealth and status with the use of expensive
dyes and gold, or they may have chosen a colour that
pleased them regardless of its moral connotations in
literary texts. Likewise, while Ovid might stress the use of
wool, plenty of other textiles were available on the Roman
market. Silk comes in for a particularly bad press from
the moralisers – it was expensive, exotic and eastern and
could be very sheer and thus revealing – all elements that
were easily exploited in satire and rhetorical exaggeration
(e.g. Seneca De Beneficiis 7.9.5). Coan silk, a particularly
transparent weave originating in the island of Kos, came in
for particular diatribes and inferences (Seneca ad Helviam
16.4; Propertius 2.1.5-6; Horace Satires 1.2.101-2; Olsen
2008a: 14). Linen was also used for clothing and a silk
and linen mix was known. Cotton was less often used for
clothing. Women living in Rome would also have seen the
mixed checked weaves common in Gaul, light linens from
Greece and Egypt, decorated and brocaded silks from the
east. We can tell little about the clothing shopping habits of
any class of Roman woman but we should not imagine that
in their private lives at least they were constrained by the
literary proscriptions of male authored literature. Women
may indeed have chosen fabrics that suited their body shape
regardless of comment (cf. Ovid Ars Am. 3. 263-74).

While excerpts of text should not be considered outside
the whole or taken beyond the bounds of genre sections of
Ars Amatoria give a voice to advice that is not beyond the
realms of common sense and we might accept as an insight
into the range of choices a woman might have available
and the criteria by which she might decide. This is a rare

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13 There is a large bibliography on Roman hairstyles but for an
introduction see: Olsen (2008a: 70-76); Bartman (2001); Croom (2002:
See Myerowitz Levine (1995) on gendered meaning of hair in ancient
Mediterranean.
14 Cf Propertius 5.3 where the sleeping Cynthia is likened to a series of
known paintings and sculptures. Downing (1999: 235-51) argues that in
Ars Am. 3 Ovid’s preceptor is transforming a woman into a statue through
culus, in contrast to Metamorphoses where Pygmalion turns a statue into
reality.
15 On the range of ancient dyes available see Cardon (2007); Sebesta
16 Bradley (2009: 182-7) argues that the colours used by Ovid in Ars Am.
are yet another layer of literary games: colour allows women yet another
layer of deception. The names of colours recall a series of associations,
some mythical, which create yet more imaginative outlets for the informed
reader. Ovid makes a case for colour but warns his audience that this could
still be misleading.
moment in Latin literature and while it can hardly be judged neutral, it is at least not overtly stressing the negatives in the way women dress. The Ars Amatoria pretends not to be addressed to respectable upper class women, and indeed, explicitly warns them off: ‘keep away you slender fillets, emblems of modesty, and the long skirt (insitia longa) that hides the feet’ (Ars Am. 1. 31-2) but it is not too much to imagine that the advice it contains might reflect the conversations of upper class salons or between mistress and slave. If the puellae to whom the advice is addressed followed it they would not have looked like the ‘painted trollop’ of satire, on the contrary given the conservative nature of the advice they would have much in common, in outward appearance at least, with the Roman matron. Presumably this eliding of female imagery was part of the subtlety of Ovid’s writing in contrast to the Amores or other sections of Ars Amatoria (see Gibson 2003: 25-35 on the relationship between Ars Amatoria and lex Julia). Upper class men expected their wives to look elegant, despite rhetorical comments to the contrary. In order to maintain their appearances and conform to social mores upper class women must have mastered the ability to walk the fine line between excess and moderation in their appearance and this involved time for work on their dress, their hairstyles and their complexions. They had the economic power to choose finest wools and a range of dyes and if they could avoid the pitfalls of over-adornment, they might by default have made the choices reflected in Ovid’s writings. Conversely, of course, Ovid’s advice could have allowed the puella to cultivate the look of the refined and elegant matrona thus empowering her to move in upper class circles. This would confirm all traditional Roman prejudices that any cultivation of the female self was duplicitous and counterfeit.

The archaeological and iconographic record offers a picture that also differs from the dominantly pejorative literature. Material remains and depictions of women’s toilet items (mundus muliebris) demonstrate that arranging appearances was very much part of a woman’s life and presumably far more part of the lives of wealthy and upper classes who had time to expend on it (D’Ambra 2007: 111-28 includes toilettie in a chapter on ‘Women’s work’; Shumka 2008; Swift and Stewart this volume). Crafting a suitable appearance must have been an integral part of female identity in the Roman world, even if that identity was closely associated with that of their male kin. While the standard female garments of tunic and mantle could be worn in such a way as to establish very generalised identities: woman as wife, mother, widow etc., a woman could personalise her identity by refining this look – in making choices about which elements to adorn (or not). The cultivation of an elegant appearance took time and money within a relatively limited repertoire of styles a range of choice existed in terms of colour and textiles, and also that colour was very much part of the Roman visual world. The constant refrain against female adornment throughout the time span of the Roman empire suggests that women certainly were exploiting the market that was available to them despite any disquiet it might cause their menfolk. Roman writers were adept at manipulating the image of the dressed (and undressed) woman to suit their agenda and presumably women were equally as adept at manipulating their own draped clothing to suit their agenda, or at least give them power over their immediate social space.

As observers in Iran we saw the public image of women, with only glimpses of dress habits in the private domain; for Rome we lack even those glimpses unless we are prepared to allow some sense of social reality to reach us through the dominant male ideologies in the literary and visual culture. To return to the methodological issue exemplified by Barthes: there is a tension between the written and visual sources and a question of how far we can exploit them to access a sense of homogenised social reality. However, if we cannot find ways to do this we are in danger of turning the dressed women of Rome into entirely fictional personae. Roman social codes did define dress in particular ways and produced a very powerful idea in literature and art of what the upright moral woman should wear but even within this idea there is no single narrative and no single over-arching idea of identity. Evidence demonstrates that within a relatively limited repertoire of styles a range of choice existed in terms of colour and textiles, and also that colour was very much part of the Roman visual world. The constant refrain against female adornment throughout the time span of the Roman empire suggests that women certainly were exploiting the market that was available to them despite any disquiet it might cause their menfolk. Roman writers were adept at manipulating the image of the dressed (and undressed) woman to suit their agenda and presumably women were equally as adept at manipulating their own draped clothing to suit their agenda, or at least give them power over their immediate social space.

Bibilography

Cavallaro, D. and Warwick, A. (2001): Fashioning the

