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Source: *The Classical World*, Vol. 101, No. 2 (Winter, 2008), pp. 197-209

Published by: The Johns Hopkins University Press on behalf of the Classical Association of the Atlantic States

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25471938>

Accessed: 29-11-2016 20:55 UTC

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FEMALE GLADIATORS IN IMPERIAL ROME: LITERARY CONTEXT AND HISTORICAL FACT

ABSTRACT: *Female gladiators were a definite presence in Rome whose participation paralleled that of men, though the scale of this presence in frequency and number is unknown. Senatus consultum decrees from A.D. 11 and 19 confidently mark the first appearance of this phenomenon. Later literary sources (including Martial, Cassius Dio, and Juvenal) expand the evidence, but often consist of mere sentences, giving little detail. The concentration of literary mentions in the Neronian and Flavian periods is explained by two factors: one, the intent to mark a games as splendid and lavish, and two, the intent to use this luxury context to comment on past emperors and moralize on Roman society.*

Among the many arresting images from the ancient world, one which seems to have particularly captured a corner of the public imagination, is the spectacle of a woman fighting as a gladiator, to the cheers of the thousands watching in the arena. The idea of the female gladiator has inspired a number of tributes and representations in modern culture, including historical fiction such as *The Light Bearer* by Donna Gillespie;¹ cinematic portrayals such as the female chariot-fighter's cameo in *Gladiator*,² and *The Arena*³ starring Pam Grier; a bevy of Web sites dedicated to the theme of women with weapons; and more mainstream, though no less melodramatic, approaches such as the 2002 Discovery Channel special entitled *Gladiatrix* and narrated by Lucy Lawless of *Xena: Warrior Princess* fame.

Classical scholarship has traditionally been less interested in the topic than pop culture; major works usually include only a brief mention of women gladiators, with the consensus that the phenomenon was a marginal practice within the arena, a novelty without much to say about Roman culture or the games themselves.⁴ Thankfully this is changing, with the appearance in recent years of engaging articles on the topic which have expanded the body of knowledge on female gladiators. In contribution to this new effort, this paper will give a brief chronological and substantive overview of the evidence used, and argue that literary mentions of female gladiators increased in frequency along with the increase in imperial displays of luxury. General conclusions will then be drawn concerning the basic aspects of women's involvement with the arena: that female gladiators were indeed "true" gladiators; that their numbers were most likely low; and that the type and circumstances of their training and actions in the arena did not differ from men's.

¹ New York 1996.

² Directed by Ridley Scott (2000).

³ Directed by Joe D'Amato and Steve Carver (1974 [DVD, 2004]).

⁴ E.g., K. Hopkins, *Death and Renewal*, *Sociological Studies in Roman History*, vol. 2 (Cambridge 1985) 23; T. Wiedemann, *Emperors and Gladiators* (London and New York, 1995) 112; R. Auguet, *Cruelty and Civilization: The Roman Games* (New York 1994) 169.

There was no specific Latin word for a female gladiator, nor did a feminine form of gladiator (i.e., *gladiatrix*) exist. *Ludia*, the feminine form of *ludio* or *ludius* (“stage performer”), is the closest option; according to the *Oxford Latin Dictionary* it refers to “a female slave attached to a gladiatorial *ludus*.”⁵ But it was not a very common word, and a PHI search reveals only six uses, three of which appear in the authors who acknowledge female gladiators. Juvenal uses it twice, once at 6.104 in connection with Eppia, the notorious noblewoman who abandoned her respectable husband and family to be the paramour of a gladiator; and again at 6.266, a more significant usage. It appears at the end of the passage on elite women gladiators: *dicite vos, neptes Lepidi caecive Metelli / Gurgitis aut Fabii, quae ludia sumpserit unquam / hos habitus? quando ad palum gemat uxor Asyli?*⁶ His meaning is clear—the woman *without* the sword, the one *not* playing/fighting as a gladiator, is the *ludia*: the gladiator’s wife. Martial also makes this distinction at *Epigrams* 5.24.10, when in a description of the gladiator Hermes he notes, *Hermes cura laborque ludiarum* (“Hermes, the sweetheart and distress of gladiators’ women”). In these cases and all others, *ludia* very clearly refers to a gladiator’s lover, concubine, or wife, and not a woman who participates in the gladiatorial arts. Moreover, the descriptions of female gladiators in the sources always use some form or adjectival cognate of *femina* or *mulier*. So, while the *OLD* definition of *ludia* may hypothetically allow it to refer to a female gladiator, it was not used in that sense, referring instead to the followers or significant others of male gladiators. The sources are thus clear as to the position of the *ludia* in relation to male gladiators, and it is not as a colleague.

Exactly when female gladiators first appeared is not known, though it seems likely that their emergence coincided with the growth in popularity of the games in general in the late Republican and Augustan eras. B. Levick believes women were first banned from the arena in 22 B.C. by Augustus in a *senatus consultum* which also banned equestrians and the grandsons of senators from stage and arena; she argues that even though Cassius Dio does not specifically say women fell under the ban, he makes mention of both knights and noblewomen appearing on the stage in 23 and 22 B.C., and so it is logical that women would also be prohibited from stage and arena in the ban.⁷ This measure, if it did indeed include women, was repeated and extended in A.D. 19. This S.C. specifically banned the daughters, granddaughters, and great-granddaughters of senators,

⁵ See S. Brunet, “Female and Dwarf Gladiators,” *Mouseion* 4 (2004) 153 n.29, and A. Zoll, *Gladiatrix: The True Story of History’s Unknown Woman Warrior* (New York 2002) 29–31.

⁶ 6.265–267: “Tell us, you granddaughters of Lepidus and blind Metellus and Fabius Gurgitis, what gladiator’s woman ever assumed these trappings? When does the wife of Asylus ever groan at the practice post?” All translations of the Latin in this article are my own.

⁷ B. Levick, “The *Senatus Consultum* from Larinum,” *JRS* 73 (1983) 107.

as well as the wives, daughters, and granddaughters of equestrians, from stage and arena; this S.C. also mentions an earlier mandate of A.D. 11 that prohibited freeborn women under the age of twenty from entering the arena.⁸ S. Brunet questions whether these measures are evidence of the actual problem of women fighting as gladiators, or if they are simply examples of legal inclusiveness in listing all the possible relationships subject to the ban.⁹ While it is difficult to prove either position, the persistence of the Senate in issuing such measures, and its evident concern that elite women not have any loophole to exploit in a crazed desire to enter the arena, to my mind indicates some kind of precedent, or at least the very real possibility in the senators' minds of such a precedent occurring. Of course, these inscriptions deal with women of the senatorial and equestrian orders appearing in the arena; though no sources attest to it, lower-status women might have fought as gladiators during this time, as they appear in the sources under later emperors.

After Augustus and Tiberius, the body of evidence expands and is almost exclusively literary, save for one first- or second-century A.D. marble relief from Halicarnassus, now in the British Museum. It was produced to commemorate the *missio* of the two women depicted, Amazon and Achillia; above the women is inscribed ΑΠΕΛΤΘΗΣΑΝ, and below are their names, flanked by two objects which are most likely their helmets.¹⁰ This evidence is from the East, whereas the literary sources identify female gladiators appearing nearly always in the city of Rome. Tacitus and Cassius Dio record female gladiators appearing under Nero on one and possibly two occasions,¹¹ and Petronius mentions a female charioteer at *Satyricon* 45. Martial and Dio attest to female beast-hunters under Titus at the games inaugurating the Flavian amphitheatre,¹² and Statius, Suetonius, and Dio have female gladiators appearing under Domitian on at least two occasions.¹³ Juvenal's portrait of an elite woman training in a *ludus*

⁸ W. D. Lebek, "Standeswuerde und Berufsverbot unter Tiberius: Das SC der Tabula Larinas," *ZPE* 81 (1990) 60–61, lines 7–9 and 17–18.

⁹ Brunet (above, n.5) 161.

¹⁰ K. Coleman, "Missio at Halicarnassus," *HSCP* 100 (2000) 487–500; E. Koehne and C. Ewigleben, eds., *Gladiators and Caesars: The Power of Spectacle in Ancient Rome* (Berkeley 2000) 127.

¹¹ Tac. *Ann.* 15.32; and Dio Cass. 62[61].17.3. Brunet (above, n.5) 145–70 believes both authors are referring to the same event, although Dio places the women in the games honoring Agrippina in A.D. 59, and Tacitus in unnamed events in 63; he takes the view that Tacitus is fudging the dates in order to make the elite women's appearances coincide with Nero's degeneration into vice, the beginning of which the *Annals* marks as the year 62.

¹² Mart. *Spect.* 7 [6] and 8 [6b]; Dio Cass. 66.25.1.

¹³ Stat. *Silv.* 1.6.51–6, at a Saturnalia; Suet. *Dom.* 4.1; and Dio Cass. 67.8.4, at a triumph of Domitian's. The language used in the Suetonius and Dio passages is sufficiently similar that they may well be referring to the same event; see Brunet (above, n.5) 150–51.

(6.246–267), while published no earlier than A.D. 115, most likely takes its inspiration from Domitian's reign as well.¹⁴

After 96, evidence is limited, a condition perhaps reflective of decreased literary production after the death of Trajan. One inscription, undated but thought to come from the second half of the second century A.D., was erected by one Hostilianus, who boasts of being the first in Ostia since Rome was founded to make women fight.¹⁵ In the literary sources, only Dio provides any evidence for women gladiators post-Domitian, and that is the mention of Septimius Severus' ban in A.D. 200; strangely, while he identifies the offending event which provoked the ban as a gymnastic competition, and the participants as athletes, he states the ban was against women appearing in single combat (*μονομαχεῖν*), a clear reference to the arena.¹⁶

In terms of archaeological evidence, in 1996 the Museum of London discovered the grave of what some believe was a female gladiator. A team from the Museum of London excavating a Roman cemetery in Southwark found the cremated bones of a woman (the telltale pelvic bone fragment has since been lost, however) whose grave included plant and animal remnants, pinecones, melted glass, and eight ceramic lamps, three with Anubis and one with a fallen gladiator;¹⁷ the mix of decorated and undecorated lamps suggests a date for the grave as c. A.D. 70–80. The find was sensationalized by the highly speculative program *Gladiatorix* on the Discovery Channel and the equally speculative book of the same name.¹⁸ Arguments in favor of its being a female gladiator include the presence of the lamps with a gladiator and Anubis, whom the Romans associated with Mercury, a representation of whom sometimes removed bodies from the arena floor; the pinecones, which were from a stone pine, a species native to Italy and in Britain only found next to the London amphitheatre; and the presence of the grave on the outskirts of the cemetery, possibly indicating a person of outsider status, but a wealthy one, given the remains of a feast in the grave and evidence of cremation.¹⁹ For

¹⁴ The satire was written/published no earlier than 115 A.D., as it refers to a comet and earthquake of that year (M. Coffey, *Roman Satire* [London 1976] 123); so, did Juvenal take inspiration for this passage from Domitian's or Trajan's reign? Given that Suetonius and Dio testify to both elite and low-status women in the arena under Domitian, and book 1 of the *Satires* uses events and people from Domitian's tenure, it is more likely that Juvenal's description of a noblewoman in gladiatorial training was drawn from his reign and not Trajan's.

¹⁵ M. Cebeillac-Gervasoni and F. Zevi, "Revisions et Nouveautés pour Trois Inscriptions d'Ostie," *MEFRA* 88 (1976) 612–20. Coleman (above, n.10) 498 believes the inscription may be third century A.D., not second.

¹⁶ Dio Cass. 76[75].16.1. For a brief discussion of this issue, see Brunet (above, n.5) 162.

¹⁷ D. Alberge, "Woman Gladiator Found Buried in London," *The Times* (Sept. 13, 2000) 3.

¹⁸ Zoll (above, n.5).

¹⁹ Zoll (above, n.5) 12–13.

Simon Thurley, the director of the Museum, this particular combination of artifacts and burial method point inextricably to the dead woman as a female gladiator.²⁰ Scholars should remain skeptical, however. Paraphernalia bearing the images of gladiators, like the lamp found in the grave, was very common; pocket mirrors showing gladiatorial scenes, lamps in the shape of helmets, figurines of gladiators, and numerous other everyday objects decorated with gladiatorial images were very popular across the empire.²¹ Moreover, if she was indeed of outsider status, a conclusion based solely on the location of her grave, her wealth does not necessarily exclude her from being anything but a gladiator. Imagining alternative scenarios, one can envision the grave's inhabitant as a wealthy freedwoman who was a big fan of gladiatorial games. Because of its speculative identity and therefore questionable relevance and reliability, this London find will not be used for the purposes of this paper.

With such a relatively small body of evidence, there are obvious difficulties in extracting the maximum amount of information about the historical reality of women gladiators, not least because a female presence in the arena was culturally charged; indeed, one problem with evidence of nontraditional practices such as this is that authorial biases or agendas may motivate or inform mentions of such phenomena. First looking at the problem in a broad sense, the question to be asked is, why do these particular authors address the topic? Why not other authors, and most notable in their absence, why do no Augustan authors make reference to women in the arena? After all, the image of the noblewoman playing at gladiator would not be out of place in moralizing Augustan literature, and evidence points to female gladiators first appearing under Augustus.

The answer to that particular question might be a simple one if one accepts Brunet's argument (discussed above) that the Augustan S.C.s banning women from the arena were not inspired by any actual instances of women fighting as gladiators—that is, there are no Augustan references to female gladiators because there were none under Augustus. But the S.C.s were aimed at women of equestrian or senatorial status; who is to say that women of lower status were not already appearing in the arena at this point? De-link social status and the lack of references becomes more understandable; the appearance of slave or low-status women in the arena, while probably still a novelty to audiences and authors, would not be as worthy of inclusion.

So what might account for the cluster of Latin literary references centered in the period between Nero and Trajan? One answer to the why and wherefore can be found in the literary context in which female gladiators appear. This context did not vary significantly between

²⁰ Alberge (above, n.17) 3.

²¹ C. Ewigleben, "What These Women Love is the Sword," in Koehne and Ewigleben (above, n.10) 131, 133–35.

genres or time periods; women in the arena, no matter what their status or purpose or ability, are consistently linked in the sources with luxury, expensiveness, and excess on both the private and state levels.

In Petronius' *Satyricon*, the freedman Echion waxes enthusiastic about an upcoming three-day spectacle sponsored by a local magistrate named Titus, who will include a *mulierem essedariam* ("a woman fighting from a chariot," 45). For Echion, the woman is a shining example of Titus' generosity and privileged status, in that he is wealthy enough to put on such lavish and special games; Titus therefore represents a position and legitimacy to which Echion aspires, but will never attain because of his freedman status.²² The woman herself is incidental—it is the sponsor of the woman who is the object of the passage. Petronius thus links female gladiators not only with spectacular games, but also with personal wealth and high social status. In this vein, Dio's account at 76[75].16.1 of the contests which prompted the ban by Septimius Severus emphasizes their huge scale and variety; that Severus ultimately disapproved of their display of women indicates a private sponsor for the games. Juvenal's women are negatively associated with the wealthy elite; rather than low-status women who are symbolic of an elite sponsor's generosity, they are instead members of the wealthy elite themselves who, when not playing at being gladiator, *tenui sudant in cyclade, quarum / delicias et panniculus bombycinus urit* ("sweat in thin gowns, whose delicate skin is rubbed sore by silk scraps," 6.259–260). Female gladiators were thus representative of indulgence on the part of the wealthy elite: either the inappropriate self-indulgence of Juvenal's noblewomen, or the indulgence of sponsors in procuring expensive novelty fighters for their games. So, in private hands, female gladiators were explicitly associated with the elite, whose wealth and status allowed them to buy women for the arena, or become gladiators themselves.

As strong as these associations are, the sources link female gladiators with imperial displays of wealth and excess even more consistently than with private ones. In fact, the majority of sources have female gladiators appearing in games sponsored by the emperor, likely a result both of the imperial office's appropriation of the general right to sponsor games, and of the emperor's great wealth and associated ability to put on more costly games than the aristocracy. As previously discussed, Tacitus and Dio record that Nero used women in his games, including some of high status, and Tacitus notes the *magnificentia* of these events.²³ Suetonius recounts that Domitian *spectacula assidue magnifica et sumptuosa edidit non in amphitheatro modo, verum et in Circo* ("continually gave magnificent and expensive spectacles not only in the amphitheatre, but

²² M. Kleijwegt, "The Social Dimensions of Gladiatorial Combat in Petronius' *Cena Trimalchionis*," in H. Hofmann and M. Zimmerman, eds., *Groningen Colloquia on the Novel*, vol. 9 (Groningen 1998) 79–80.

²³ Tac. *Ann.* 15.32; Dio 62[61].17.3.

also in the Circus," *Dom.* 4.1) at which there were *nec virorum modo pugnas, sed et feminarum* ("not only fights between men, but also between women," *Dom.* 4.1); Dio notes a similar occasion at 67.8.4. Statius in *Silv.* 1.6 praises the variety and generosity of Domitian's Saturnalia, which presented combats between women. Finally, Titus' games dedicating the Colosseum included female *venatores*²⁴ and were of special magnificence, befitting the occasion; Dio claims that nine thousand animals were slain in the course of blooding the new arena (66.25.1). On the imperial level, then, as on the private, female gladiators functioned as signifiers of games noteworthy for their quality, large size, and expense, and reflected the benevolence and high status of the emperors who provided them.

In short, the sources place female gladiators within a context of notably expensive and ostentatious games, personal wealth, and imperial extravagance and decadence. In this light, one might understand why no references to female gladiators were published under Augustus. The opulent and expensive games in which women appeared did not fit in with the image of Empire and emperor which Augustus officially encouraged through his literary circles, nor with his program of moral and cultural renewal. That is not to say that he explicitly banned mentions of women appearing in the arena at their games, but rather that by discouraging praise of the general context of luxury which surrounded female gladiators both in literary construct and arena reality, Augustus discouraged such references. Augustan (and later Neronian) propaganda featured "the court as a center of literary patronage and the expectation that the image of the reigning princeps would be appropriately burnished and his policy goals depicted in a favorable light."²⁵ This mission took the form of the Golden Age principles of "peace, justice, beauty, and culture."²⁶ The conservative, neotraditional Roman moral virtues Augustus sought to reinforce in society through legislation and literature also conflicted with the decadence which produced female gladiators. With the priority of advertising these noble principles, authors who wished to celebrate imperial luxury and imperial and private sponsorship of ever more fabulous spectacles were not welcome.

The change becomes apparent with Nero, whose fantastic extravagance overrode his overall wish to portray his reign in a Golden Age light. Petronius' *Satyricon* demonstrates this triumph of Neronian excess over Augustan morality. The *Satyricon* held special appeal for Nero, combining "culture, decadence, and a taste for low life,"²⁷ of which the above-discussed mention of an *essedaria* in the *Cena Trimalchionis* is

²⁴ Mart. *Spect.* 7 [6] and 8 [6b].

²⁵ J. P. Sullivan, *Literature and Politics in the Age of Nero* (Ithaca and London, 1985) 180; see also A. Powell, ed., *Roman Poetry and Propaganda in the Age of Augustus* (London 1992).

²⁶ Sullivan (above, n.25) 50–51.

²⁷ Sullivan (above, n.25) 161.

a part. Under the Flavians, who did not promote a coherent program along the Augustan model, motives for mentioning female gladiators represented a reversal of this attitude. Witness Statius: one goal of the *Silvae* is to celebrate exactly that luxury, opulence, and wealth in both the imperial and private spheres which ran against the grain of traditional Roman morality. His celebration of luxury is part of what Carole E. Newlands labels a new “poetics of empire,” and his position of flattery in offering panegyrics of everything from emperors to parrots is sourced in his time, writing under Domitian as he did. This “poetics of empire” recast Roman virtue as something different from the traditional, conservative, austere model of the Republic and Augustus. In this version, the arts, and the leisure and wealth with which to pursue and cultivate in oneself these arts, are now a source of virtue and identity for the Roman nobility, superseding birth and acting alongside legal and political ability as an equal force.²⁸ In this poetics of empire, Statius casts female gladiators as one ornament in the backdrop to a new society.

But Statius’ praise of wealth and its expressions were more the exception than the rule. Generally speaking, luxury and decadence were negative values for Roman authors, and given that authors place women gladiators within this context—never mind the potential upsetting of gender/sex roles—one might therefore assume that references to women in the arena would be overwhelmingly negative. As has already been hinted at, however, despite female gladiators’ associations with imperially-approved luxury, corruption, and decadence, and despite their being women in a traditionally male format performing male activities, not all references are uttered in condemnation of the women themselves. This is because an author’s judgment has a direct correlation with a specific motive: status.²⁹ It was only possible to condemn women in the arena if the women were of the senatorial or equestrian orders. In fact, sources which either identify low-status women or do not specify status are noncommittal or mildly enthusiastic. Statius uses female gladiators in flattery by picking them out as examples of Domitian’s generosity in providing a splendid *Saturnalia*.³⁰ Martial *Spect.* 6–6b and Dio 66.25.1 both describe female *bestiarum* at Titus’ games without invoking any wrath (indeed, Martial even comes off as somewhat impressed), with Dio also careful to note that the women were not of high status. Suetonius *Dom.* 4.1 and Dio 67.8.4, in describing Domitian’s games at his triumph, do no more than state that women fought by torchlight. Indeed, Suetonius even places the sponsorship of female gladiators in 4.1, at the beginning of his outline of the positive aspects of Domitian’s reign (books 4–9),

²⁸ C. E. Newlands, *Statius’ Silvae and the Poetics of Empire* (Cambridge 2002) 5–6, 29, and 117–18. See also N. K. Zeiner, *Nothing Ordinary Here: Statius as Creator of Distinction in the Silvae*, *Studies in Classics*, ed. D. Obbink and A. Dyck (New York and London, 2005).

²⁹ Coleman (above, n.10) and Brunet (above, n.5) 169.

³⁰ 1.6.51–56; see also Newlands (above, n.28) 243.

indicating his tacit approval or at least appreciation of the practice. If the women involved were senatorial or equestrian, however, themes of disgrace, shock, and dishonor are invoked.

The strongest of such expressions is from Juvenal's sixth satire, which "is directed almost exclusively at rich women who have lost all sense of the dignities and duties of their sex."³¹ And true, in his portrait of a noblewoman training as a gladiator, he focuses on how she *fugit a sexu* ("flees from her sex," 6.253) by publicly taking up arms (returning to her femininity upon shedding her equipment); his parting shot, the final indignity, however, is that not even a gladiator's wife would be seen doing such a thing (6.266–267). In other words, for Juvenal, elite women who train as gladiators and/or appear in the arena betray their order to a great degree and by a method which not even the wife of a man tainted with *infamia* and of almost the lowest status possible would use; the implication is that women of extremely low status possess just as much honor and dignity as senatorial and equestrian women gladiators (and perhaps more). Thus, Juvenal's criticism is twofold: first, that noblewomen betray their gender, and second, that they betray their social order. Of the two, the latter is more serious, because it involves not just personal shame (to the woman and her family), but also shame for the senatorial and equestrian orders, made public by its exhibition in the arena.

That was the threat to Rome—not the violation of gender order, traditional Roman values, or *libertas*, but rather the overturning of social order. Emperors who allowed such a thing or even encouraged it—as did Nero by his inclusion of highborn men and women in his games to honor Agrippina in A.D. 59—were particularly evil and degenerate.³² Low-status women, while part of the luxury/decadence context, were not themselves judged by authors; condemnations were reserved for senatorial and equestrian women for two reasons: one, to demonstrate the degeneracy and failure of the aristocracy and therefore of Roman social order; and two, to lay blame, directly or indirectly, for this breakdown of social order at the feet of evil emperors, specifically Nero (*Tac. Ann.* 15.32) and, more subtly, Domitian through Juvenal.³³ After all, if an emperor was supposed to be the role model for society, then problems in society reflected problems with his character and quality as an emperor—hence the ability of high-status women (and men) in the arena to reflect (negatively) on their ruler.

So, authorial motives for including references to female gladiators were one, to signal the particular brilliance and quality of a games, and two, to use that context of luxury, when the women fighting were of high status, to condemn past emperors and moralize on the state of Roman society; these priorities naturally prevented Augustan

³¹ D. Wiesen, "Juvenal's Moral Character: An Introduction," *Latomus* 22 (1963) 468.

³² Tacitus, Dio, and Juvenal all (retroactively) attest to elite women in the arena under these emperors.

³³ See also n.14.

authors from mentioning female gladiators, especially if one accepts that high-status women fought then, as they were officially encouraged to promote Golden Age principles and glorify the imperial line. Female gladiators could thus be either a cause for bragging, e.g., Hostilianus; for celebration, e.g., Staius; for commemoration, e.g., Halicarnassus; or, they could be cause for shame and judgment, as in Tacitus and Juvenal. Motive was dependent on the status of the participants, who, when of senatorial or equestrian status, triggered an attack on the individual women, the phenomenon of elite volunteers, the state of society, and the emperor who encouraged or sponsored such behavior. If the women's status was low or unidentified, then the appearance of women gladiators was the signifier of a good games, a particularly lavish or brilliant or quality display.

This literary context, in combination with the overall relatively small body of evidence—a handful of inscriptions and asides from major authors—necessarily encourages a certain degree of speculation in drawing conclusions. Nevertheless, with a reasonable degree of confidence, the following points about women's involvement with the arena can be made.

First, were they true gladiators? One might also ask, how did they fight? After all, “gladiator” usually suggests an individual trained to fight in the arena under contract, but often both “ancient and modern sources sometimes use ‘gladiator’ broadly to refer to any participant in the arena . . . even ones without skills, armor, or hope.”³⁴ As previously discussed, however, because Latin lacked a specific word for “female gladiator,” Roman authors must take the long way around in describing women in the arena, and in so doing often include details of their actions in the arena, status, and/or the circumstances of their involvement (i.e., voluntary vs. compelled). As a result, there are three mentions of female *venatores*;³⁵ eight which describe women fighting in combat, one specifically of single combat, two referring to swordfighting in particular;³⁶ and one fictional mention of an *essedaria*.³⁷ These are significant for clarification purposes because they imply a certain level of training. With the *venatores*, the fact that the animals were killed indicates the women were not prisoners or criminals thrown to the beasts without the skills or equipment characteristic of true beast-gladiators; with the swordswomen, the most definitive indication of true gladiators is the Halicarnassus relief, although the audience satisfaction in Staius and

³⁴ D. G. Kyle, *Spectacles of Death in Ancient Rome* (London and New York, 2001) 78.

³⁵ Dio Cass. 62[61].17.3 and 66.25.1; Mart. *Spect.* 8 (6b).

³⁶ Dio Cass. 62[61].17.3, 67.8.4, 76[75].16.1; Juv. 6.250–251; Stat. *Silv.* 1.6.51–56; Suet. *Dom.* 4.1; the Hostilianus inscription; the Halicarnassus relief. It should be noted that Juvenal's swordswomen were merely training as such and did not necessarily fight in the arena.

³⁷ Petron. *Sat.* 45.

other authors points to high-quality fights with trained participants, and not prisoners, slaves, or criminals given a sword and ordered to fight to the death. These women would therefore seem to fit with the true gladiator model. As exceptions, senatorial and equestrian women would probably not have gone into the arena on a contractual basis, even if they had some training (as Juvenal implies some did). The elite “might enter the arena on an unpaid basis” for various reasons “without the stigma of *infamia* attached to entering a contract (*au-toramentum*) with a *lanista* for financial gain.”³⁸ Unless, of course, they sold themselves into the lifestyle because of debt; but there is no mention in the sources of the women’s motives for entering the arena. In short, the women examined in our sources must be assumed to be gladiators and not anything else; their training and the appreciation of the authors for their abilities support taking the women seriously as fighters and gladiators. Besides, while authors may have used “gladiator” as a catch-all term when convenient, they could not do so with women because the terminology did not exist. Instead, they had to go out of their way to describe women’s involvement, often in more specific terms, and are therefore more likely to be accurate as to the distinction between gladiators and prisoners, slaves, or condemned criminals.

Second, one of the biggest problems is determining the frequency with which women appeared in the arena. Hitherto scholars have assumed their numbers to have been small because of their novelty value;³⁹ in other words, female gladiators appeared on rare occasions as novelties to appease the appetites of jaded audiences for something new. Since the sources do not indicate specific numbers, any conclusions made must be largely inferential. If one accepts Levick’s argument (discussed above) that women were banned from the arena as early as 22 B.C. by Augustus, then women gladiators were present from the beginning of the explosion in the popularity and scale of the games; even if, however, one adopts Brunet’s caution and doubts that this measure and the subsequent S.C.s of A.D. 11 and 19 actually addressed a problem of women appearing in the arena, these mandates certainly place the possibility of elite women gladiators firmly in the reign of Augustus, and their (potential) emergence as a social concern, problem, and threat, given the bans’ place in “a nexus of measures . . . designed to strengthen the existing social structure and keep its strata distinct.”⁴⁰ While there is no more evidence after the S.C. of A.D. 19 for female gladiators under Tiberius, or indeed until Nero, and then on less than ten occasions through A.D. 200, it is difficult to believe that they did not appear during these years otherwise.

³⁸ Kyle (above, n.34) 89–90.

³⁹ E.g., Kyle (above, n.34) 89; Brunet (above, n.5) 165; and D. Potter, “Entertainers in the Roman Empire,” in D. S. Potter and D. J. Mattingly, eds., *Life, Death, and Entertainment in the Roman Empire* (Ann Arbor 2002) 303.

⁴⁰ Levick (above, n.7) 114.

One problem with determining frequency lies in the differing visibilities of the public and private sectors, and the center versus periphery. That is, female gladiators mostly appear with private sponsors outside Rome: the *Satyricon*'s Titus, in Cumae; the Hostilianus inscription, in Ostia; and probably also the Halicarnassus relief. Only the games in A.D. 200 which prompted Severus' ban occurred in Rome and with a potentially private sponsor. In all the literary sources and the five (possibly seven) occasions they describe⁴¹ in which female gladiators appear, the games were shown in Rome and sponsored by the emperor. So, events outside Rome which included female gladiators may be underrepresented.

Other factors which might indicate or affect the scope of female participation include the novelty value of female gladiators. It is possible that this value lay not just in sparse numbers of such women, but also in the shock of seeing a female, especially one of senatorial or equestrian status, engage in male activity with all the boldness, virtue, and skill of men—a shock that might not have worn off. Since, then, their novelty was not solely dependent upon small numbers, women could appear in the arena more often without sacrificing that element of the unusual. On the other hand, the lack of a specific Latin term and an almost complete absence of visual representations, excepting the Halicarnassus relief, suggest that female gladiators were rare.⁴² In short, the conflicting evidence and messages means all that can safely be said on the numbers of female gladiators is that as gladiatorial games grew in popularity after the death of Julius Caesar, the incidence of women in the arena also rose, but never did their figures approach male participation.

Third, the general picture which emerges of women's involvement in the arena is as a microcosm of men's; in other words, the variety of gladiator types and circumstances of people entering the arena are present in both male and female participation. Sources identify female *venatores*, an *essedaria*, and typical gladiators in combat against other women. There is evidence for senatorial and equestrian women and men participating,⁴³ some of whom were compelled,⁴⁴ while others volunteered to fight,⁴⁵ all to the same scandalized and shocked reception. Indeed, the only restriction put on women's participation is that they did not fight male opponents. So, the arena took women of all statuses, as with men, and under any circumstances, as with men. In addition, some women were trained to fight. Of the noblewomen who volunteered for training in a *ludus*, some did not reach the arena, but others did (Juv. 6.246–267). Women of lower or

⁴¹ See above, nn.11 and 13.

⁴² Brunet (above, n.5) 165.

⁴³ Tac. *Ann.* 15.32; Dio Cass. 62[61].17.3 and 76[75].16.1; the S.C. from Larinum.

⁴⁴ Dio Cass. 62[61].17.3 and 76[75].16.1.

⁴⁵ Dio Cass. 62[61].17.3; the S.C. from Larinum; Juv. 6.246–267.

unknown status, such as the combatants on the Halicarnassus relief, the beastfighters at Dio Cassius 66.25.1, and Petronius' charioteer, also presumably trained. But *ludi* were not the only potential training grounds for women. According to Mark Vesley, intriguing inscriptions indicate that the *collegia iuvenum*, institutions sponsored by Augustus for the instruction of freeborn young men in, among other things, weapons and martial arts, may also have included girls in their training exercises.⁴⁶ The most notable source is a post-Augustan funerary inscription dedicated by the *magister iuvenum* to Valeria, a girl who lived seventeen years and belonged to the *collegium* (CIL 9.4696). Another inscription potentially mentions *collegium* members of both sexes (CIL 8.1885). Hostilianus, who boasted in an inscription that he was the first to set women fighting, was also "the patron who put on the local edition of the Iuvenalia, the games of the Ostia *collegium iuvenum*," and so it is possible that "female combatants in these games were trained in the Ostian *collegium*."⁴⁷ Interestingly, the ages of the participants in these *collegia* coincide with the A.D. 11 S.C. which banned women under the age of twenty from entering the arena. But no matter where they may have received their training, the point is that female gladiators were trained, indicating a degree of professionalism equal to that of male gladiators.

In conclusion, female gladiators appeared in the literary sources as one element in a picture of sometimes private, but predominately imperial, luxury and decadence. Despite this particular motive, and the relatively small body of evidence, we can still extract valuable information on female participation in the arena, namely: there was no specific Latin term for female gladiator; the numbers of women in the arena were low and increased along with the popularity of gladiatorial games; and female gladiators' experience was a microcosm of men's in that the various types of gladiators, motives for becoming gladiators, and training methods true for men were also true for women.

Al Ain, United Arab Emirates
Classical World 101.2 (2008)

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⁴⁶ M. Vesley, "Gladiatorial Training for Girls in the *Collegia Iuvenum* of the Roman Empire," *EMC* 42 (1998) 88–90.

⁴⁷ Vesley (above, n.46) 91.