Roman tears and their impact: a question of gender?

Les larmes romaines et leur portée : une question de genre ?

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In Republican and Imperial Rome, tears were an integral part of political, social and religious life. Emperors and senators, common soldiers and common people indulged in them. Plutarch goes so far as to declare that the Romans cried more readily than the Greeks.¹

There was no shame associated with crying in public; in expressing their feelings, men never seemed slower to cry than women, rather the contrary. Research into Roman tears leads to the astonishing conclusion that they challenge sexually-defined identities and that their “gender” is not where one might imagine it to be.

Of course, men and women did not necessarily cry in the same circumstances. The taxonomy of Roman tears is often gendered. In funeral rituals, women are the principal source of lamentations, while philosophical tears, those that accompany meditations on the inconstancy of fortune, are a masculine prerogative. So we see important officials give way to demonstrations of grief, generals bewailing the fate of the conquered. To classify tears as a feminine

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² In fact, men did not restrain their tears until the nineteenth century, despite the self-control promoted by Protestantism, which already caused Norbert Elias to remark: “In the seventeenth century, men could weep in public; today such a thing has become more difficult and infrequent. Only women are still able, still socially allowed to do so – for how much longer?” Elias 1985: 27.

³ On the question of the “sex” of tears, much the same is noted by Suter 2009: 59. In tragedies, men – Theseus, Philoctetus, Creon, Agamemnon, and even Herakles – shed abundant tears. On the Greeks, see also Monsacré 1984, and Arnould 1990. The work edited by T. Fögen, with a contribution by Lateiner, examines in turn tears in tragedy, in Plato and Aristotle, and then in Greek historiography, etc. using a very literary approach. There is no conclusion providing a synthesis of these various analyses. The history of mourning naturally also leads to the study of tears, see Sterbene Erker 2004 and Hollenburger-Rusch 2001. On lamentations, see for example Corbeill 2004 (especially chap. 3: “Blood, milk and tears. The gesture of mourning women”).

⁴ R. Barthes had already noted this: “Since when have men (and not women) stopped crying?” in Barthes 1977: 214.

⁵ Cf. infra.
response then, is to risk falling into contradictory propositions, like Livy who criticizes women’s weak spirit, the *imbecillus animus*⁶ that leads them to cry easily, yet who, at the same time, depicts great men beset by tears.⁷

Tears are so common in Roman society that they are worth a careful examination.⁸ They have long gone relatively unnoticed because, although the history of emotions is presently an important topic, interest in it with respect to Rome is only recent, while much has been written about tears in the Greek epic. The Romans’ (bad) reputation for being tough and unrefined, was perhaps enough to discourage any extended “dacryological” investigation into their tears. In those cases where Roman tears have indeed been studied, it has been by looking at single works taken in isolation, without a sense of the whole, which does not allow the social import of such behaviors to be reconstructed.

Although they are rarely contemporary with the events they recount, literary sources seem to be the best place to seek data for a history of Roman emotions. In literature, tears are at the center of many standard scenes with roots in classical Greek historiography.⁹ At the end of the Roman Republic and the start of the Empire, historians, as philosophers did for other purposes, reproduced these stereotypes without hesitation. They were then reworked by Christian authors, starting in the second century.

In this vale of tears, is gender the most important distinctive element? Are other criteria involved in deciding where and when it was useful to resort to tears? At what point in time does the expression of affliction change its sights?

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⁸ Along the lines of Mauss’s 1921 study based on the ethnography of Oceania.
Men’s tears, women’s tears

In Rome, as we have said, men cried as much as (or more than) women. We are faced with some distortion as a result of the nature of our sources: for the most part, texts give pride of place to men, and as a consequence they appear to be much more given to tears. Certainly, women and their tears were important at funerals, as in supplicationes, [propitiatory offerings to the gods]. In the course of these ceremonies, Roman women pleaded with the gods in order to obtain their good graces in advance, or to thank them following military victories. The details of such rituals had variants, but might include, for an expiatory ceremony, kneeling with arms raised to the heavens, and suitable laments.

Beyond the religious realm, great shedding of tears occurred in tense political situations. In this case, the tears are unquestionably those of men hoping to move their audience. The term for this procedure in manuals of rhetoric is miseratio. Tears accompanied pathetic speeches, obvious tear-jerkers that nevertheless had an effect on the masses. Tiberius Gracchus was a great believer in these tears-

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10 Painted scenes of lamentation and epitaphs do not seem to allow close analysis. Certainly, the rhetoric of tears sometimes is suggested in some epitaphs: lugere, flere, lacrimae [cry, weep, tears] appear on the most “literary” funerary inscriptions, those belonging to the type of the carmen [song]. But on first approach, reading these inscriptions does not seem to us to support real conclusions about the “gender” of funeral regrets. Still, this should be investigated thoroughly and deeply. Some examples where men and women cry, either separately or side by side: CIL X, 4022 (Capua); AE 1903, 377 (Aquileia); AE 1905, 103 (Rome); CIL VI, 37965 (Rome); AE 1972, 41 (Rome); AE 1995, 393 (Iuanum); AE 1999, 732 (Brescia); CIL VI, 12652 (Rome).

11 Cf. supra n.1. See also Scheid 1984. On the continued use of ancient practices of mourning in southern Italy in the twentieth century, see De Martino 2000 [1975].


13 That is, in an unfortunate context. The last supplicatio of this kind is attested in 64 CE, after the Great Fire of Rome (Tacitus, Annals, 15: 44).

14 On the auctor in rhetoric and the role of the miseratio in some late Republican trials, see David 1992: 72-74, 426-427 and 620.
on-order intended to move the people. In another example, Fulvius’s young son, bearing a caduceus and shedding tears, was sent to the curia, to play on their feelings. Later, making use of his famous white hind, Sertorius shed crocodile tears, causing the naïve barbarians in Spain to believe him.

Men used tears to further their negotiations: embassies lent themselves to tears. At the start of the fourth century BCE, the Sutrian delegation used them to gain the favor of Camillus and the Romans present; all were profoundly touched by the account of the fall of Sutrium, Plutarch tells us. Two centuries later, in 197 BCE, after having listened to the account of the Greek ambassadors, the Roman senators were moved to tears. Another Greek, Archelaos, sent by Mithridates, used his tears to awaken Sulla’s pity, in spite of the latter’s reputation for intransigence. But when the “transmigration” of tears failed, the embassy did not obtain what it sought. This was the case of the Carthaginians, who, although they wept and prostrated themselves on the ground before the Senate, left the Romans no more moved than stones. Tears also had their place in internal negotiations. During the rule of Cato and Flaccus as censors, it was with tears that the publicans, threatened by a new tax ruling, convinced the senators to review their decisions.

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15 Plutarch 1951, *Tiberius Gracchus*, vol. 3: 139. [See Bibliography: sources, for edition]
16 Plutarch 1951, *Caius Gracchus*, vol. 3: 156.
17 Plutarch 1951 *Sertorius*, vol. 3: 324-325, recounts that Sertorius claimed to receive messages from Diana and other gods by way of a white hind (or fawn) that the natives had given him as a gift.
18 Plutarch 1951, *Camillus*, vol. 3: 218. The considerable time that separated the events and the time of writing permits one to wonder about the truth value of Plutarch’s note in this case, as about all the details of weeping concerning characters in Rome’s early years. Without any emotive information (annalists during the Republic, with whom the author was familiar, probably included few such details), might not the desire to embellish his tale have taken the upper hand? This remark applies to Livy as well.
19 Livy, 32:37:2-3.
22 Livy, 39:44:5.
Tears shed in judicial or para-judicial settings show more distinctions between the sexes. In these cases, supplications and the weeping that accompanied them were not a respected mode, especially when those pleading were women. Their despondent moans, accompanied on occasion by a call for vengeance, were intended to inspire the pity of the person beseeched. In the majority of these cases, women’s tears seem particularly artificial, lending themselves to parody, a temptation Apuleius did not resist. It seems that women were especially suspected of shedding hypocritical tears. Under the reign of Tiberius, the mother of Sextus Papinus, whose son had just committed suicide, was accused of incest. She failed to move her judges, the more as tears came readily to her, the “weakness proper to women under such circumstances” lending itself too easily to making a spectacle. In sum, women were seen as passive when they shed tears, as in most of their social dealings.

But women were not the only Romans to be disparaged for their tears. A man too could be disgraced as a result of excessive or

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23 Apuleius, *Metamorphoses*, 3:8: a parody of *supplicatio*: “A weeping woman (*lacrimosa*) ran across the stage. In tears and dressed in black, she held a small child to her breast. Another woman followed her, an old woman dressed in dreadful rags, equally afflicted, and like the first, weeping. Both waved olive branches. Placing themselves at the sides of the bed where the victims’ cadavers lay covered by clothes, they began loud, lugubrious wails and lamentations: ‘By public mercy and the common rights of humanity’ they said, ‘have pity on these young men unworthily massacred, and comfort our state of abandonment and solitude by avenging them. At least, help the misfortune of this child left unprotected from his first years; at least shed the blood of this bandit as reparation of your laws and public order.’”

24 Tacitus, *Annals*, 6: 49:1-2: “Sextus Papinius, member of a consular family, chose a sudden and dreadful death: he threw himself into the abyss. His mother, long since repudiated [divorced], was thought to be the cause; by encouraging his luxurious tastes, she incited the young man to actions that he could escape only by death. When she was brought before the senate with these accusations, it was in vain that she rolled at their feet, reminded them of their common woes and the weakness of women in such an ordeal, resorted to all possible expressions of sorrow and compassion to persuade them; she was nonetheless banished for ten years, until such time as her younger son had outgrown the pitfalls of youth.”

inopportune weeping. Thus Tacitus tells of the legionnaire Vibulenus, who fomented disorder among the Pannonian legions, and used his emotive body to defend his cause:

To these incendiary words he added tears, beating his breast and his face. Then, having moved aside those who were carrying him on their shoulders, he threw himself to the ground and rolled at their feet.26

This character, who did not know how to temper his display of emotion, gave away his lowly birth and his political defeat by choosing an easy, hackneyed, defensive strategy. A few years later, in 69, Tampius Flavianus, caught up in events, found himself compromised by his blood ties to Vitellius, and brought the same “imagery” of the law court into the military context:

There was no way for him to defend himself although he held out his hands in supplication, threw himself to the earth several times, his clothes torn, his body and his face wracked by sobs.27

These gestures were of no use to him and he was finally saved at the last moment by the intervention of Marcus Antonius Primus.

The choice to resort to tears does not, then, always produce the desired result. Going back a little in time, this is also the lesson of Cleopatra’s last hours.28 As Dion Cassius tells it, the queen put on her

26 Tacitus, Annals, 1:23:1: Incendebat haec fletu et pectus atque os manibus uerberans. Mox, disiectis quorum per umeros sustinebatur, praceps et singulorum pedibus aduolutu.

27 Tacitus, Histories, 3:10:4: “The soldiers’ anger was aimed at Tampius Flavianus, although there was no proof of his guilt; but as he had long been detested, a sort of popular tempest demanded his death. A thousand voices cried out: ‘He is related to Vetellius, he betrayed Otho, stole money from the donativum’ [emperor’s gift to the soldiers]. There was no way he could defend himself although he held up his supplicating hands, threw himself to the ground several times with torn clothes, his breast and face shaken by sobs (pectus atque ora singultu quatients). This behavior was exactly what set off his enemies because they took his excessive reaction as an admission of guilt.”

28 Dio, 51:12:1-3: “She had prepared splendid rooms and a sumptuous bed; she herself was dressed with a studied negligence – her mourning clothes brought out her beauty. She sat on the bed with several portraits of Octavian’s father placed in front of her and clutched to her breast all the letters he had sent her. Then when Octavian entered, she stepped gracefully forward and said to him: ‘Master, I greet you! A god granted you this title and took it from me. You can
mourning dress (Antony having already killed himself), but her tears did not soften Octavian’s heart. It was only a well-acted script, too obviously staged to be effective. Her intentions were plain: the portraits of Caesar were too carefully arranged, and everything too clearly calculated for the queen to succeed in cajoling her conqueror. It was Cleopatra’s misfortune to be a woman, a foreigner, and a political adversary.

In contrast to ordinary soldiers and to women, powerful men could cry without fear of humiliation. Their tears were more likely to bring them respect than to diminish it. This is the sense in which we should understand the oft repeated scene in Roman historiography of the general who, suddenly wracked by sobs, lays down his arms. Paulus Emilius wept when Perseus surrendered. Caesar was moved to tears when he saw the severed head of Pompey. The great leader’s superiority is reflected in the object of his tears: often his distress is not limited to the loss of a known person but, magnanimously, to an entire city or people. He himself knows that the disaster now visited upon the enemy could one day turn against Rome. Camillus was troubled by the fate of Veii and, outside Syracuse, Marcellus lamented the ancient glory of the city, vetusta gloria urbis. Flamininus could not restrain himself when faced with the Greeks’ despair; Lucullus shed tears at his powerlessness before the sight of the sack of Tigranocerta; Brutus was not unmoved by the final hours of the city of Xanthos.

see for yourself your father as he often came to me, you know what honors he bestowed upon me, especially in making me queen of Egypt. Read the letters he sent me, written in his own hand, so that you may learn about me in his own words.’ While saying this, she read many of Caesar’s words of love. At some moments she cried and kissed the letters, at others she fell and prostrated herself before the portraits (Καὶ τοτὲ μὲν ἔκλαε καὶ τὰς ἐπιστολὰς κατεφίλει, τοτὲ δὲ πρὸς τὰς εἰκόνας αὐτοῦ προσέπιπτε καὶ ἐκείνας προσεκύνει).”

29 Livy, 45:4:2-3.
30 Livy, Periarchae, 112.
Moreover, native-born Romans were not the only ones to have the right to tears: several enemy dignitaries are readily depicted in their displays of human emotion. Clearly, the Roman reader profited from these portraits of rivals who, almost in spite of themselves, attacked Rome and afterwards were forced to admit that they had been legitimately vanquished. Tears are a sort of expression of the *nemesis*, the fated destruction, visited upon them. Hannibal wept at the fall of Carthage and the betrayal of his countrymen\(^{35}\) while Mithridates and Tigranes were afflicted by their “shared misfortune”.\(^{36}\) But these non-Roman tears were received with a certain amount of suspicion, just as Cleopatra’s were. Moagetes, tyrant of Cybira, was known to have made use of feigned tears, *simulatis lacrimis*.\(^{37}\) As if separating by gender was not enough, tears also distinguished Romans from foreigners.

Under the Empire, people were also accustomed to differentiate good from bad emperors.\(^{38}\) When Augustus, having become the Father of his country, *Pater Patriae*,\(^{39}\) burst into tears, no one questioned his emotional reaction which concurred with a moment of

\(^{35}\) Livy, 30:20:1.


\(^{38}\) Tears crowned moments of political consensus. In the early days of Roman history, the episode concerning Coriolanus already attests to this. Tears mark the hero’s return to the strait road, his reintegration into Rome’s heart. Cf. Livy, 2:40 and Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Ant. Rom.*, 8:53. See furthermore Loraux 1990: 50. On the motif of the weeping emperor (in this case, Constantine) intending to make himself accessible by this means, see Hostein 2006.

\(^{39}\) Suetonius, *Augustus*, 58:1: “The title ‘Father of his Country’ was given him by all, in sudden and total agreement. At first it was the plebeians who sent a delegation to him at Antium; then, when he refused, a big crowd, wearing laurel crowns, when he entered the theater in Rome; finally the senate, in the curia, neither as a decree nor by acclamation, but from the mouth of Valerius Messala, who, speaking in the name of all, said to him: ‘May my words be sign of happiness for you and your family, Caesar Augustus! We believe that they will provide the state with eternal prosperity and a source of pleasure. The senate in accord with the Roman people greets you, Father of the Country’. Then Augustus, shedding tears, replied in these words – I quote them word for word as those of Messala: ‘Having achieved my aspirations, senators, what more can I ask of the immortal gods but to see you keep this agreement among yourselves until the last day of my life?’.”
agreement with the senatorial order represented by Valerius Messala Corvinus. In contrast, reigns considered less brilliant than that of Augustus were marked by the exaggerated use of tears. When Tiberius died, his funeral oration delivered by Caligula, was interrupted too often by tears to be sincere. It was a factitious display intended “the better to show his filial piety”.\textsuperscript{40} When Claudius wept and cried in front of the Senate he had convoked,\textsuperscript{41} he came close to appearing ridiculous. Later, the revolt of the Gauls devastated Nero,\textsuperscript{42} where more resolve might have been expected from him. He too shed tears in advance of his own end, thereby proving his lack of courage.\textsuperscript{43} His last moments were exactly the opposite of a philosophical and stoic death.\textsuperscript{44}

**A reasoned use of tears**

It was only with the Stoics that Rome voiced a concern for controlling one’s emotions. As a general rule, philosophy, especially in the Platonic tradition, was distrustful of tears and of all immoderate corporal expressions. Feelings were allowed a narrow margin and only the true φιλόσοφος [philosophos] was in control of his feelings. Aristotle was the exception to this tendency, allowing tears and other signs of empathy as long as they responded to precise poetic

\textsuperscript{40} Suetonius, *Caligula*, 15: “[Caligula] also enflamed emotions by all sorts of gestures the people found pleasing. As soon as he had pronounced the praise of Tiberius – for whom he ordered an elaborate funeral – to the people assembled, while shedding abundant tears, he hurried to Pandatria and Ponties to look for the ashes of his mother and brother, despite terrible weather, to make his filial piety apparent. Then, approaching them with respect, he himself placed them in urns.”

\textsuperscript{41} Suetonius, *Claudius*, 36: “Certain conspiracies having been revealed to him without much thought, he was so frightened that he wanted to abdicate control of the empire. When a person carrying a dagger, who was close by as he made sacrifices, was arrested, as I mentioned earlier, he was quick to have criers call the senate into session, then weeping and wailing, he lamented his unhappy fate which left him no safety, and refused to appear in public for a long time.”


\textsuperscript{43} Ibid., 49:1.

\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., 49:2-3.
objectives: in the end, this was the function of catharsis, emotions enclosed in the frame of the delimited space of the theater. Stoic thought tended to propose a particularly masculine ethics of self-control. The object of *deus*, behaving properly, was never to overstep the bounds of what was seemly and l and appropriate.

In this vein, Cicero urges the reader of his *Tusculan Disputations* to master his emotion in moments of grief. But the horrors of the civil wars provoked tears. Cato the Younger, although a believer in a philosophy of restraint, could not hold back his tears as the end of the Republic approached. In the following century, Seneca proposed regulating tears that, he said, are proof of the failure to reflect, and go against instinct itself.

No animal except man laments its offspring for a long time. Man becomes the accomplice of his pain and suffers, not in proportion to what he feels, but as he himself determined it. Do you require proof that nature does not demand that we wear ourselves out with regrets? First, the same grief affects a woman more than a man, a barbarian more than a civilized person, a person without an education more than one who has been well schooled.

This gendered, ethnic and sociological division of pain reappears, almost word for word in Plutarch’s *Consolation of Apollonios*.49

45 Vöhler & Seidensticker 2007.
46 Cicero, *Tusc.*, 2:55: “Especially in cases of suffering, attention must be paid to avoiding anything low, fearful, weak, anything that might be ascribed to a slave or a woman, and above all, the cries of a Philoctetus are to be condemned and proscribed.” A man may emit a single sigh, but lamentations are forbidden even to women, and this is no doubt what was understood by the *lessus* [wailing cry] whose use at funerals was forbidden in the Twelve Tables.”
47 Plutarch 1951, *Cato the Younger*, vol. 3, 56.
48 Seneca, *Consolation to Marcia*, 7:3, *nec uli animali longum fetus su desiderium est nisi bonini, qui adest dolori suo nec tantum, quantum sentit, sed quantum constituit, adficitur. Ut scias autem non esse hoc naturale, luctibus frangi, primum magis feminas quam viros, magis barbaros quam placidae eruditaque gentis bonines, magis indoctos quam doctos eadem orbitas vulnerat.*
49 Plutarch, *Consolation to Apollonios*, 22: “The legislator of the Lycians, so it is said, forbade his fellow citizens, while they mourned, to wrap themselves in women’s clothing. He wanted to show them that overt signs of sadness were women’s work and not suitable to manly beings whose life is under control and who claim to have been educated as free men. The real sign of an effeminate character,
Seneca, then, imagines the feminine as “impatient in affliction”,\textsuperscript{50} but his attempt to make a gender-linked assignment of tears falls short.\textsuperscript{51} In his various \textit{Consolations}, the philosopher stresses that tears, be they masculine or feminine, are useless\textsuperscript{52} and inappropriate, synonymous with weakness.\textsuperscript{53} Tears are devalued by their frequency. They end up signifying nothing: is human life not a promise of endless suffering? The topos of a laughing Democritus is in the end worth more than a weeping Heraclitus.\textsuperscript{54}

From the Epicurean point of view, all sensations are legitimate, so long as they are positive. Therefore, tears should be resisted as much as possible. Weeping is, for humans, the mark of ignorance: the harshness of the human condition is no cause for despondency, there is no need to lament inescapable death. The soul itself is not immortal and expecting some kind of comfort from the gods will inevitably result in disappointment. In short, logic demands that we weak and ignoble, is to give oneself over to grief. Women are more inclined to this than men, barbarians more than Greeks, common men more than superior men. And among the barbarians, it is not the most noble of them, Celts and Galatians, and all those to whom nature granted a more manly character, but rather, if what people say is true, the Egyptians, the Syrians, the Lydians and all those like them.”

\textsuperscript{50} Seneca, \textit{Consolation to Marcia}, 10.
\textsuperscript{51} Seneca, \textit{Letters to Lucilius}, 99:18: “Does [the public] see someone bravely bearing his grief? The call him hard hearted and unnatural. Do they see someone else bent low, prostrate near a corpse? Effeminate (\textit{effeminatum}), they declare, weak soul […]. In my view, there are tears which the wise man sheds intentionally, and others that flow mechanically.”
\textsuperscript{52} \textit{Ibid.}, 22: “useless tears fall from our eyes.”
\textsuperscript{53} \textit{Ibid.}, \textit{Consolation to Helvia}, 16,1: “Do not try to excuse your weakness on grounds of your sex. The right to cry excessively is almost a right accorded it. That right has its limits, and if our forefathers gave widows nine months to wear mourning for their husbands, the purpose of this official rule was to come to terms with the obstinate grief of women; they did not forbid sorrow but they set limits to it.”
\textsuperscript{54} \textit{Ibid.}, \textit{On Peace of Mind}, 15,2: One must “work to find human vices not hateful but risible, and to imitate Democritus rather than Heraclitus. The latter was unable to appear in public without crying, the other without laughing.”
cast aside tears: *Aufer abhinc lacrimas [...] et compesce querellas*, away with your tears, curb your complaints.\(^{55}\) Over time, many authors seem to agree on a common base: care should be taken to limit tears, and even to aim at total self-control. The worst would be to exaggerate the expression of one’s sorrow. In successive steps, reflections on controlling one’s feelings and learning inhibitions created a grave doubt about the sincerity of certain physical expressions. In this spirit, Tacitus noted in the German tribes’ expressions of grief, a sobriety that he wished to offer as a model for Romans. “They quickly leave off their tears and lamentations, but not their sorrow and regret: mourning is suitable for women, remembering for men.”\(^{56}\) However, this aspiration to have the body subjected to the will was not applied for a long time. What people thought important was not to be in agreement with oneself, not to avoid excess, but on the contrary to give the appearance of having been overwhelmed by tears: “Many people shed tears only so that they may be seen streaming down their cheeks, and are dry-eyed as soon as no one is looking”.\(^{57}\)

**Political body, sensitive body**

Philosophers’ prescriptions had a limited effect. The plaints of certain important men or more broadly of the general populace continued and were taken as political messages.\(^{58}\) Especially in scenes of collective tears there is no question of spontaneity. Men and women assembled together. In ancient Rome, popular rallies or big political gatherings did not have the same tone as those of our time and tears there seem to

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\(^{56}\) Tacitus, *Germania*, 27.


\(^{58}\) If the law of the Twelve Tables sought to control tears and other expressions of desolation in funeral processions, even then the aim of this was to maintain public order, by reining in rivalries between great clans, avoiding all excessive demonstrations of grief.
have served the same purpose as our booing. As a group, they loudly and dramatically expressed their anguish or their anger.

In this way, great “national” losses kept the whole population, men and women, oscillating between revolt and distress. As early as the death of Sylla, Roman matrons bewailed the death of the dictator as one of their own.\textsuperscript{59} In 14 CE, when Augustus died, Dion Cassius reports that crowds expressed grief,\textsuperscript{60} motivated by the logic that made the head of state part of the family of every citizen. The plaints of the masses were especially clearly heard at the death of Germanicus in 19 CE.\textsuperscript{61} In his case, there were “universal lamentations”.\textsuperscript{62} The death in uncertain circumstances of this very popular figure was enough to set off scenes of collective “hysteria”: there were tears, supplications to the gods; stones were thrown at temples, houses and tribunals were shut. There was unanimity in these tears:

The consuls M. Valerius and M. Aurelius, who had already taken office, the Senate and some of the people spread out as a crowd on the road. They moved forward in no particular order and each person wept as s/he wished.\textsuperscript{63}

While these “tears of the forum” spread, the emperor (Tiberius) did not know how to react,\textsuperscript{64} finally creating a sort of tearful genealogy to justify his own coldness.\textsuperscript{65}

In the army, another theatre of political life, soldiers did not care about showing the sort of manliness that would have made self-restraint a point of honor. The outcries of soldiers, (bronca, clamor,)


\textsuperscript{60} Dio., 56:43:1.

\textsuperscript{61} In and out of Rome: Tacitus, \textit{Annals}, 2:72:2.

\textsuperscript{62} Tacitus, \textit{Annals}, 3:3:1.

\textsuperscript{63} Tacitus, \textit{Annals}, 3:2:3.

\textsuperscript{64} Tacitus, \textit{Annals}, 3:3:1: “Tiberius and Augusta avoided appearing in public, either because they believed it was below their dignity to grieve publicly, or perhaps to avoid having so many eyes examining their faces, lest their hypocrisy be read there.

\textsuperscript{65} Tacitus, \textit{Annals}, 6:1: “It was now time for hearts to be strong, as in times past when the divine Julius, after losing his only daughter, and the divine Augustus, after the death of his grandsons, banned sorrow.”
and especially their tears accompanied their demands and expressions of discontent. When Hasdrubal crossed the Ebro, Roman soldiers were in great distress, allowing a reversal of the situation at the last minute. When the Batavian auxiliaries in Valens’ army revolted, Alfenius Varus found a maneuver which reduced the soldiers’ discontent. He suspended all activity, leaving the troops leaderless; in response, the situation was resolved, once again, by an exchange of tears: those of the troops and those of Valens, in a demonstration of humility that won over their hearts. During these same disturbances of 69 CE, Mucian’s cohorts encountered Cerialis’s army and they all wept together. At Otho’s death, his men paid their final tearful homage to him, as a man who had himself appeared before them with tears in his eyes.

In sum, during the imperial period, there were rules for tears in ceremonies of grief, but they were not yet proscribed in daily life, flooding even public discussions. Men and women could shed limitless tears in defense of their case. But starting with the first Christian texts of the second and third centuries, tears took on a new sense. A new idea of the body appeared, accompanied by suitable “dacryologic” language. Until then, tears had been used to implore the pity of superiors, to add to a demonstration of political clemency, to indicate how much the effects of destiny were felt. But, progressively, Christianity wished to shift all these tears toward an asceticism, in which bodily suffering was not only accepted but valued.

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66 Tacitus excelled at providing a sound-track to his account, for example in *Annals*, 11: 35: 1.
67 Tacitus, *Annals*, 1:24:3: “When Drusus approached, the legions, as if in homage, came to meet him, although without their usual joy, without shining ornaments, dressed carelessly and with faces which, pretending to show sadness, rather signaled revolt.”
Christianity: in tears all are equal?

The Hebrew Bible contains a number of scenes comparable to the great Roman sufferings: tears flow freely, there is moaning, suffering is displayed.\textsuperscript{72} The Gospels too are filled with tears. The Gospel of John shows us Christ weeping over the body of Lazarus, to stress Jesus’ own embodied state, literally his incarnation.\textsuperscript{73} When Jairus’ daughter was resurrected, the weeping women mourners were chased away by the author of the miracle.\textsuperscript{74} And Jesus’s tears in the Garden of Gethsemane did not have the emotive significance we might be inclined to attribute to them.\textsuperscript{75}

Apologists played on the ambiguity of tears, sometimes required, sometimes punished. Tears, persuasive elements, were linked in pagan times to the hoped-for efficacy of carefully chosen words pronounced in public. However, beyond any form of speech,\textsuperscript{76} Christians valued silence, wherein, as Ambrose said, “Is found the repose of all the virtues”.\textsuperscript{77} And on the whole, women, whoever they might be, were advised not to speak in public.\textsuperscript{78} The codes of ancient rhetoric were slowly revised to favor authority, solemnity, and tranquility; Christians did not readily accept excessive behaviors.\textsuperscript{79} Tears in public attracted suspicion. In Minucius Felix’s \textit{Octavius}, the pagans are reproached for letting tears mislead them, whether those

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{72} A few examples among many: Genesis 27:38; Judges 21:2; Ruth 1:9 and 1:14; Samuel 24:17.
\item \textsuperscript{73} John, 11:35.
\item \textsuperscript{74} Luke, 8:52.
\item \textsuperscript{75} Matthew, 26:38-39. Origen, PG 12, 1741-1742.
\item \textsuperscript{76} Except for preaching, of course.
\item \textsuperscript{78} Tertullian, \textit{Prescription Against Heretics}, 41:5: “Among female heretics, what impudence! They dare even to go so far as to teach or debate.”
\item \textsuperscript{79} St Ambrose, \textit{On the Duties of the Clergy}, [see note 77 above] 18:75: “There is also a praiseworthy procedure filled with the appearance of authority, assured gravity, the mark of tranquility, provided application and research be missing, but the movement be simple and clear; in short, nothing affected will be found pleasing. Let nature be master of the movement.”
\end{itemize}
Roman tears and their impact: a question of gender?

The ritual of the courts, where the accused sobbed as hard as possible, was discarded. The judge was now Christ: “Penitence belongs only where the offence was knowingly and deliberately committed, where there is a sense of sin and of forgiveness. Only that man who knows both what he has lost and what he will recover sheds tears (lugere) and rolls on the ground,” wrote Tertullian. In Christian times, christiana tempora, the law comes from God and woman is well placed to ask absolution from her sins as a “weeping and repentant Eve”, (Euam lugentem et paenitentem).

In some apologetics, tears themselves will disappear when the world has become Christian. But while waiting for the end of time, the whole of Christian literature was gradually submerged in sobs. St Augustine, who tells of the tears of his mother Monica during her prayers, or of his own tears of conversion in the garden in Milan, is among those who recommend lamenting the omnipresence of evil. His contemporary, St Jerome, is also a tearful believer (he says he “spoke” and “wrote” in tears). His taste for penitence even allows him a curious change of gender as he imagines himself as Mary Magdalene washing the feet of Christ with her tears and her hair.

Tears of grief also take another turn. Cyprian forbids crying over the dead, since in Christian terms death meant freedom.

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80 Mincius Felix, Octavius, 21 and 36.
81 Tertullian, On Modesty, 10:2.
82 Tertullian, On the Veiling of Virgins, 1:1
83 Ramelli 2009: 393.
84 St Augustine, Confessions, IV:V:10. He also wants to “weep with those who weep” (Letter 99:1).
85 St Jerome, Letters, 39,2.
86 An example: St Jerome, obsessed by women’s appearance and their dangerous effects, considers tears as the best make-up remover. Cf. for example his letter 54:7 (to Furia).
87 St Jerome, To Eustochium, 22:7: Alone and without any help, I lay at the feet of Jesus, I watered them with my tears (rigabam lacrimis), I wiped them with my hair.”
Chrysostom speaks out in the same way against tears and funerals evoking excessive reactions, especially from women. For Gregory of Nyssa, tears welling up at the mention of the dead would dry quickly; Saint Macrina reprimanded her brother, explaining to him that all sorrows are the will of providence.

Finally, if Christianity saw men and women as equals with respect to tears, this was a means of subverting rites inherited from centuries of paganism and imposing new social patterns where interiority had pride of place. This was perhaps the first step toward a “privatization” of tears.

In Rome, tears – the ultimate resource or mark of approval, signs of symbolic or real grief – were shed to be seen. For a long time, the rules pronounced by some ancient philosophers and by Christianity did not seem to contravene this broadly shared tendency to cry. Understanding the frequent use of tears certainly requires a reevaluation of the role of the body and its expressions in Roman society. Political dialogue took on unexpected forms in Rome. Bodily and sensory contact among citizens took on proportions that today seem inappropriate. Thaumaturgy (performing miracles), had its place in Rome, and many of the requests addressed to the powerful included physical contact. Thus, in imploring imperial grace, Q. Haterius, the author of a regrettable phrase, threw himself suddenly at Tiberius’s feet, causing him to fall, while a veteran seized Germanicus’ hand, forcing him to touch his toothless mouth so that he might understand his extreme old age.

90 Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Saint Macrina*, 17:17-22: In the course of our discussion the memory of Basil the Great was evoked; my soul lost heart and, in my sorrow, I lowered my head to earth, while tears sprang from my eyes. But she, far from letting herself go to share our pain, took this reference to the saint as the starting point of a higher philosophy.”
In this context, where public life demanded involving the whole body, tears could give men additional authority, especially if they benefited from a desirable social and political position. Tears seemed to be summoned up consciously, and strongly-expressed emotions were the more striking as they were rare. In contrast, when a woman cried, accusations of duplicity were never far off. If women’s plaints did not surprise anyone, the tears of great men were, by contrast, supposed to astonish, whence their greater symbolic content. What made their tears important, what gave them weight, were the circumstances (the gravity of the moment, imminent military danger). The social rank of the person shedding tears, like his ethnicity, counted for much, but the performative value of tears was also dependent on gender. Ultimately, only a very worthy and very Roman man had the right to cry.

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