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ABSTRACT
Slut-shaming, the public exposure and shaming of individuals for their (perceived or actual) sexual behavior, is rife on the Internet; it primarily affects women, and it too often has tragic outcomes. Slut-shaming is not new, but a form of cultural suppression of female sexuality that has been practiced since antiquity. In this paper, I historicize this phenomenon, by comparing and contrasting cases of slut-shaming from the Roman Republic with recent cases on the Internet, and I maintain that the focus of this slut-shaming, namely sexual virtue, has remained the same over time, but that the unregulated nature of the Internet has increased its scope and impact. A central contention of this paper is that women have been complicit in this slut-shaming; they have shamed other women for their sexual behavior, and have done so because it conferred social benefits on them. We will see that men and women have used the Internet to perpetuate and maintain the cultural suppression of female sexuality, and expose women to increased scrutiny over their sexual behavior.

1. Introduction

On 10 November 2013, Júlia Rebeca, a 17-year old from Piauí, Brazil, tweeted a farewell and an apology to her parents: “I’m scared but I think this goodbye is forever” and “I love you, I’m sorry for not being the perfect daughter but I tried, I’m sorry I’m sorry I love you so much” [1]. Shortly thereafter, she committed suicide.

Brazilian media report that, prior to this tragic event, a video of Júlia engaged in sexual acts with a male and female friend was leaked on the Internet via the mobile messaging application WhatsApp; it was subsequently shared on social networks such as Instagram, and even sold on a Web site called SP News [2]. In one instance, an individual created an Instagram account entitled “juliarebecaputa”, shared the video of Júlia, and suggested that she would “burn in hell” and was a “slut” [3]. According to news reports, Júlia was traumatized by these events [4]. The identity of the individual(s) who shared the video is not in the public domain, but it was plausibly the individual(s) involved in the creation of the video [5]. Júlia was shamed and exposed online for her so-called lack of sexual virtue, that is, her perceived non-conformance to normative sexual behaviors, in this case due to her sexual acts with multiple partners. This was an act of slut-shaming and it had a tragic outcome, an outcome echoed in many contemporary cases of Internet slut-shaming [6].

By slut-shaming, I refer to a societal process that is predominantly directed at women, where individuals are publicly exposed and shamed for their “perceived sexual availability, behavior or history” [7]; to put it another way, slut-shaming is the “multiplicity of ways in which females are called to task for their real, presumed or imagined sexuality” [8]. Slut-shaming promotes sexual virtue, namely conformance to normative sexual behaviors, and supports the cultural suppression of female sexuality, which has precedents throughout history [9]. At the extreme end of this phenomenon lies the promulgation of explicit material to shame an individual, as exemplified by revenge porn cases on the Internet, where revenge porn constitutes nude or semi-nude images of an individual disseminated by a former romantic partner without the victim’s consent [10]. Reports indicate that slut-shaming is increasingly prevalent on the Internet [11], and this paper provides a historical lens on this phenomenon.

How recent is this phenomenon, what impact has the Internet had on it, and what role might women play in it? To address these questions I compare and contrast several cases of slut-shaming that have affected women in the Roman Republic (circa 509 to 44/33/27 BCE) and on the Internet. Tanenbaum, author of popular feminist critiques of slut-shaming and female competition, has recently published a volume on slut-shaming on the Internet, entitled I am not a slut: Slut-shaming in the age of the Internet [12]. This volume is commendable but it does not historicize slut-shaming adequately, nor indicate the longevity of the phenomenon. In this paper, I provide a preliminary framework for reevaluating the longevity and tenacity of this phenomenon, by conjuring up the (Roman) past to “speak to the [transnational and digital] present” [13]. I reveal how the process of slut-shaming injured women in Rome and how it continues to do so today. As Richlin and others have shown, societal processes that injured women in antiquity, including body shaming, human trafficking and (involuntary) sex work, continue to thrive to this day [14].

The Roman Republic is a useful space for historicising the slut-shaming of women. Female sexual virtue and shame was an important part of Republican discourse; a veritable wealth of ancient sources attest to this. Themes and images of sexual virtue, violence and shame were ubiquitous in elite and popular literature (e.g., plays, history, poetry), artwork (e.g., wall and vase paintings), and other forms of media.
(e.g., graffiti, curses, epitaphs) [15]. This discourse affected both women and girls [16]. Latin itself contains many terms for "slut", "prostitute" or "adulteress", e.g., lupa, scortum, meretrix, and moecha, and they semantically overlap; such terms are present in our earliest extant Latin literature (third century BCE), which attests to their antiquity [17]. As we will see, slut-shaming was as alive in the Roman Republic as it is now on the Internet. This was not a uniquely Roman or Republican phenomenon; many other ancient cultures include similar phenomena [18]. The limited focus of this paper is designed to provoke a broader conversation on slut-shaming in antiquity.

A word or two must be said on the problems with engaging with Roman women’s lives. Essentially, ancient sources provide us with veiled representations of Roman women, making it difficult to recover their real history [19]. These representations are influenced by the “dominant voice and gaze” of authors that were (predominately) "male, élite, Italian, middle-aged and citizen Roman” [20], and are strongly affected by genre, with different stereotypes employed across poetry, philosophy, and history. Female activity is often interpreted sexually in these ancient sources, due, in part, to “the strong tendency of the male gaze to sexualize its female object,” ensuring that “sex frequently plays a role in other representations, including the vilification of political women” [21]. There are thus tensions between “ideologies, self-image, public image and lived experience,” and a complex relationship between literary representation and reality [22]. Driven by a desire to “see the woman” in the ancient sources and produce a gender-inclusive history, Richlin has identified a set of strategies for the feminist historian who wishes to respond to these problems [23]: consider a wide range of ancient sources (both elite and popular); think about how different audiences "talked back” to the ancient sources; acknowledge that all history is contemporary history (in that a historian is speaking to their present); underline uncertainty and ambiguity in the ancient sources; consider the co-implications of gender, class and ethnicity; accept that women necessarily participated in a variety of cultural systems (religion, medicine etc.); and, above all, argue with silence (in our sources and scholarship) [24]. We should not see these strategies as panacean, but, rather, as a methodology for critically engaging with the lives of Roman women. So-warned and so-armed, I will grapple with some of the ancient sources on Roman slut-shaming.

In this paper, I provide some background on female sexual virtue and shame in the Roman Republic, and then compare and contrast three cases of slut-shaming from the Republic with three from the Internet. The Republican cases include: a slut-shaming speech by a Roman politician (56 BCE), a public religious rite promoting sexual virtue over promiscuity (circa 215 BCE), and a public trial of married women for sexual misconduct (213 BCE). The Internet cases include: a slut-shaming video by Jenna Mourey (2012), a revenge porn Web site, isanyoneup.com (2010), and a slut-shaming Web site, shesahomewrecker.com (2012). I show that this slut-shaming occurs in public spaces, that its focus is sexual virtue, and that the impact is severe; I trace how the unregulated nature of the Internet has increased this practice’s scope [25]. I contend that, within a number of the cases examined, women have been complicit in the acts of shaming, which is in keeping with findings in other research on female complicity in the patriarchy [26] and female intrasexual competition [27]. I propose that their complicity conferred social benefits upon them, namely sexual resource control and sexual privilege [28]. Previous research on gender and the Internet has often focused on utopian or dystopian models where Internet technologies are either liberating (utopian) or damaging (dystopian) for women [29]. Inspired by the critical impulse of Foka and Arvidsson’s Digital gender: A manifesto, I do not adopt this dichotomy, but focus instead on how the “digital intermingles with the social” [30], and show that the Internet has been used to perpetuate and maintain the cultural suppression of female sexuality, exposing women to increased scrutiny over their sexual behavior.

2. Roman slut-shaming

What form did slut-shaming take in the Roman Republic? To answer this question, we must first understand the limits placed on female sexual behavior in the Republic. The male control of female sexuality was a central component of Roman ideology; women of the Roman Republic were (typically) subject to the authority of their father or husband or legal guardian. Normative female sexual behavior was restricted to "conventionally sanctioned partners: the woman’s husband” [31], and cultural conventions required that Roman women who were not prostitutes appear sexually virtuous [32]. Prostitution itself was not illegal, but great shame was attached to the role of prostitute (both male and female). In Republican discourse, the married woman was ideologically and sartorially (clothing-wise) contrasted to the “slut”; at least prescriptively, a sexually virtuous married woman was meant to wear thestola, whilst a prostitute wore a toga or other symbols of the trade [33]. It was dangerous for a woman to be labeled or accused of being a “slut”, “prostitute” or “adulteress”; the semantic overlap in our ancient sources between “adulteress” and “slut” or “prostitute” is indicative of the shame attached to women engaging in extra-marital sexual activity [34]. Women who engaged in such activity could face serious consequences, including exile or death, as we shall see. Needless to say, there was a sexual double standard; men were able to engage in such activity (with some limits) [35]. We shall trace some literary and funerary examples of these cultural conventions and then move to our three historical case studies.
Female sexual virtue was wrapped up in Roman narratives about identity and religion. The aetiology of the Roman Republic itself was linked to the rape of the sexually virtuous Lucretia and her subsequent suicide [36], while the Vestal Virgins, their sexual virtue, and their sexual misconduct were linked with the health of Rome [37]. Moreover, the origins of the cult of Pudicitia, deified sexual virtue, was linked with public competition for sexual virtue by married women [38]. When Roman women, fictional or otherwise, transgressed the boundaries of normative sexual behavior, they entered a dangerous space where they risked punishment and censure [39].

Themes of sexual virtue and shame exist throughout some of our earliest extant Republican texts, including the famous comedies of Plautus and Terence (third and second century BCE) [40]. Such themes can also be found in the fragmentary satires of Gaius Lucilius and the mimes of Decimus Laberius (second and first century BCE) [41]. Several lines from Lucilius’ satires epitomize the theme of slut-shaming present in these texts:

Surely you don’t think that any woman with beautiful locks and beautiful ankles could not touch her belly and even her groin with her breasts, and that Amphitryon’s wife Alcmena could not have been knock-need or bow legged, and that others, even Helen herself, could not have been — I don’t want to say it [slut]; see to it yourself and choose any bisyllabic word you like [e.g., words for “slut”, such as lupae, scortum, moecha] that a ‘maid’en born of a noble father could not have had some distinguishing mark, wart, a mole, a pit in the skin, one tooth projecting a bit [42]?

Here, Lucilius’ narrator shames beautiful women, including paradigms such as Alcmena and Helen, for perceived deficits in their appearance and insinuates that they lack sexual virtue. These lines immediately conjure up the untrammeled invective directed at women on the Internet. Lucilius’ fragments are, of course, satirical, designed to mock mythical figures such as Alcmena and Helen, but they offer us examples of how women could be slut-shamed in the elite literature of the Republic [43]. In Laberius’ mime Compitalia, which constituted a form of popular media (as opposed to elite literature), a female protagonist expresses her transition from married woman to “slut”: “... how far a courtesan’s desire (prolubium meretricis) has forced me to go, away from my matronly decency (a matronali pudore)[44]” Here, the female protagonist shames herself (in effect), underscoring the ideological chasm between the sexual virtue of a married woman and the sexual desire of a “slut”. In these examples, Lucilius and Laberius certainly use slut-shaming as part of their literary palette (as did Plautus and Terence), although we must keep in mind that this is not necessarily indicative of the lives or experiences of real women per se, but of elite and popular cultures that were preoccupied with such themes and images.

Several Republican funerary epitaphs (circa second to first century BCE) for women indicate the ideological importance of (perceived) sexual virtue (e.g., ILS 7472, 8403, 8395, 8404); the women they eulogize, Aurelia Philematium, Claudia, Sempronia and Albia Hargula, are praised for their devotion to their husbands and their sexual virtue (Aurelia, Sempronia and Albia are casta, chaste, and Claudia has a modest or appropriate gait, incessus commodus) [45]. These epitaphs cut across class: Aurelia and Albia were freed slaves, while Claudia and Sempronia were conceivably members of the elite Claudian and Sempronian families. Furthermore, two extant funeral eulogies for elite women from circa first century BCE, the laudatio Murdiae (ILS 8394) and the famed laudatio Turiae(ILS 8393), paint pictures of devoted and sexually virtuous wives (Murdia has modesty and sexual virtue, modestia and pudicitia, and the addressee of the laudatio Turiae has sexual virtue, pudicitia) [46]. Clearly, Roman families (elite and otherwise) wished to publicly advertise the sexual virtue of their women [47].

These examples have shown how prevalent themes of sexual virtue and shame were in the literary and funerary culture(s) of the Roman Republic. But how did women experience slut-shaming? We turn now to our three case studies of historical slut-shaming; this will illuminate some of the forms of slut-shaming that occurred in the lives of women.

A multitude of male Roman authors voiced concern over female sexuality and actively shamed historical women for their sexual behavior [48]; one in particular is well known, namely Marcus Tullius Cicero. Cicero was an elite member of the political class in Rome in the first c. BCE, and he had much to say about “sluts”. In his Pro Caesio, a speech delivered at a public trial in 56 BCE, Cicero denounces unmarried women who behaved like prostitutes:

If an unmarried woman opens her house to everyone’s desire and openly sets herself up as a prostitute (meretricia vita) and decides to enjoy parties with men with whom she has absolutely no connection, if she
does this in Rome, in her gardens, in the crowds at Baiae, if in short she behaves loosely not just in the way she walks (incessu) but in what she wears (ornatu) and who her friends are (comitatu), it’s not just her flashing eyes (flagranta oculorum) and loose language (libertate sermonum) but her hugs, her kisses, her beach parties, her boat trips, her carousals that make her seem not only a prostitute but a prostitute who solicits men shamelessly (proterva meretrix proxax) [49].

In this passage, Cicero associates a woman’s public behavior with her lack of sexual virtue; he links the status of prostitute with a woman’s friends, her gait, her clothing, her gaze, her speech, and her acts of affection. Notably, his characterization of such a woman is the inverse of the characterization of the women on the funerary epitaphs and eulogies we saw earlier. In short, Cicero was slut-shaming [50]. The purpose of the Pro Caelio was to malign the reputation of Clodia Metelli, a socially independent female and sister of Publius Clodius Pulcher, Cicero’s political enemy [51]. Clodia had accused Marcus Caelius Rufus, her former lover, of attempted poisoning, which resulted in his being taken to trial. Cicero acted as Caelius’ defense advocate, and successfully hijacked the trial by accusing Clodia of promiscuity and behavioral impropriety, obtaining an acquittal for Caelius. Clodia had her legal case dismissed due to some skillful slut-shaming on the part of the defense — plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose. As far as we are aware, Clodia disappears from public life after this trial; this public slut-shaming had a profound impact on her social life [52].

We turn back now to an earlier stage of Republican history, when women’s sexual virtue came under particular scrutiny. At the beginning of the Second Punic War (218 to 201 BCE), Rome suffered crushing defeats at the hands of the Carthaginians and their leader Hannibal at the Rivers Ticinus and Trebbia in 218 BCE, at Lake Trasimene in 217 BCE, and Cannae in 216 BCE [53]. As a result of these four Roman defeats, there was a substantial reduction in the male citizen population [54]. Furthermore, between 218 and 215 BCE, about 108,000 men were “called up to serve with the legions” [55]. The social impact of the death of male citizens and troop mobilization cannot be overstated [56]. Scholars agree that this population shift led to an increase in the economic and social independence of Rome’s women [57]. Due to the absence of male relatives, it appears that Rome’s women were more able to engage in non-conventional religious and sexual activities. This led to a backlash from Rome’s state apparatus, which regulated women with senatorial decrees, laws, exile, asset seizure, and religious rites that promoted female sexual virtue [58]. I will focus now on two examples of this regulation.

Circa 215 BCE, after the crisis of Cannae and at the behest of the Senate, Roman married women chose from amongst themselves a virtuous candidate to dedicate a statue of the goddess Venus Verticordia [59]. The virtuous candidate was Sulpicia, daughter of the patrician Servius Sulpicius Paterculus and wife of the distinguished military hero, Quintus Fulvius Flaccus. The Roman author Valerius Maximus indicates that Sulpicia was selected for her strict adherence to the public display of sexual virtue [60]. Valerius narrates how the women selected Sulpicia from a hundred of their number as the most sexually virtuous; he indicates that she was judged the most blameless due to her chastity, and that she dedicated the statue of Venus Verticordia to “turn the minds of virgins and married women from lust to modesty (a libidine ad pudicitiam)” [61]. Non-conventional sexual behavior is demonized in this attestation with the term “lust (libido)” and compared unfavorably to the term “modesty [or sexual virtue] (pudicitia)”; it would seem that the rite to Venus Verticordia had a didactic and regulatory purpose. Indeed, Langlands characterizes this rite as a “state-organized religious practice designed to inculcate sexual virtue among Roman females” [62]; she views the ethical function of the rite for Venus Verticordia as “cult [that] helps to direct the minds of citizens away from vice and towards virtue” [63]. Similarly, Evans views this rite as a public attempt to “discourage adultery” [64]. The statue of Venus Verticordia was a religious image meant to generate sexual virtue, just as Sulpicia herself was chosen as a living image of such virtue [65]. For Langlands, this rite was didactic and competitive, where the “purpose of drawing attention to such a phenomenon is clear: the anticipation of honor and recognition by the community [was] a spur to the pursuit of moral excellence” [66]. Sulpicia, an elite Roman woman, was selected by her peers to promote sexual virtue via a religious rite; in doing so, she gained status, and was immortalized as a paragon of sexual virtue. Hallett has shown that Valerius is polyvocal in his characterization of Sulpicia here: he conjures up the image of the virtuous Sulpicia from the third century BCE and, at the same time, criticizes and evokes the “immoral” verses of the Augustan elegist Sulpicia, namely those that supported extra-marital sexual activity [67]. Essentially, Valerius shames one Sulpicia by praising another. In a somewhat similar fashion, the married women in this case were, broadly speaking, praising the sexual virtue of one of their number, while simultaneously slut-shaming those who did not fit her example (i.e., those women who committed sexual misconduct). In this event, women (and Valerius) were promoting normative sexual behaviors, and suppressing non-conventional sexual behaviors.

In 213 BCE, amidst religious turmoil in Rome, a group of married women were put on public trial for sexual misconduct. Livy, the Roman historian, indicates that this trial was managed by state religious
officials, the plebeian aediles, and that it resulted in the exile of some of those being tried. This public trial and exile was highly unusual; it was, however, occurring in unusual times [68]. As noted earlier, women were traditionally subject to the authority of their father or husband or legal guardian [69]. The war and the resulting death or absence of male relatives, however, had led to many women becoming legally autonomous. Evans proposes that “the men with authority over these adulteresses were either dead or absent from Rome on military service,” and that, unconventionally, these charges had to be dealt with by an aedilician as opposed to a domestic tribunal [70]. Evans argues that the Romans themselves were acutely aware of the “moral consequences of warfare that freed women from the authority of their husbands, fathers or guardians for extended periods of time,” and he links the public trial with adultery (2:1); similarly, Fantham proposes that “after Cannae there were many widows, and loneliness or poverty would quickly turn them to irregular unions or outright prostitution” [72]. The charge of sexual misconduct in this trial may have arisen from the women’s violation of “private and public masculine authority” in the realm of female sexual behavior [73]; such a violation could have constituted a threat to public order during wartime. The issue of whether the charges related to actual practice is immaterial here; the state saw fit to conduct a public trial that shamed and punished women for their perceived non-conformance to normative sexual behaviors.

In these three historical cases, men and women used the legal and religious apparatus of Rome to publicly shame women for their sexual behavior. Cicero had Clodia’s case dismissed by publicly shaming her, elite Roman women participated in a public religious rite that promoted normative sexual behaviors and shamed those who did not fit their example, and Roman officials shamed and punished married women for sexual misconduct in a public trial. The cultural suppression of female sexuality was mediated here by the slut-shaming of women in public spaces, and the focus of this slut-shaming was female sexual virtue; women were either censured or praised for their conformance to normative sexual behaviors. The themes of sexual virtue and shame we saw in the literary and funerary culture of the Republic are omnipresent here; such themes were firmly entangled with power, status, politics and religion in Rome.

We cannot know with certainty how Roman women themselves responded to this slut-shaming, or how it made them feel; no contemporaneous texts authored by women exist that refer to such events. We do know that at least two Vestals from the third century BCE, accused of sexual misconduct, committed suicide; but theirs were exceptional cases, as Vestals they were already facing ritual execution by live burial according to religious custom [74]. What about ordinary women? It is possible that men were legally allowed to kill their wives if they were found to have committed sexual misconduct; this appears to have been the case in the domestic executions of women following the suppression of the Bacchanalia in 186 BCE [75]. If this was so, women may have chosen suicide over this sentence. If we consider these factors, along with the cultural preoccupation with female sexual virtue, and the impact slut-shaming had on Clodia (case dismissal and withdrawal from public life) and the matrons of 213 BCE (exile), we can presume that slut-shaming had profoundly damaging psychological and social effects on Roman women. We turn now to instances of this same phenomenon on the Internet.

3. Internet slut-shaming

Slut-shaming is a growing issue on the Internet [76], and women are the predominant targets [77]. Despite advances made in cultural conceptions of gender and sexuality, the slut-shaming of women persists. Gong and Hoffman read the phenomenon as a “disapproval of female sexual desire and expression,” a “privileing of sexual abstinence or ‘purity’ prior to marriage,” and a “judgment that women who do engage in sexual activity or are simply perceived to be interested in such activity are bad or dirty” [78]. The discourse of sexual virtue is as alive today as it was in Republican Rome. As Poole indicates, slut-shaming is typically gendered, such that “when it comes to sexual expression, females are denied the freedoms enjoyed by males,” “it is the norm rather than the exception that females are shamed for acting on their sexual desires,” and “it is the girl that faces society’s judgment when her behavior is made public” [79]. The Internet has provided a new forum for slut-shaming, allowing “attacks on female sexuality to flourish” against women of all ages [80]; Internet slut-shaming is a part of the broader phenomenon of cyber-bullying, which also chiefly affects women [81]. While this activity seems to negate utopian models of gender and the Internet [82], and support dystopian models [83], I will not adopt such models; instead, drawing on the conclusions of Foka and Arvidsson, I propose that Internet activity “shapes and is shaped by societal processes and contexts” [84], and I will show that men and women have used the Internet to perpetuate and maintain the cultural suppression of female sexuality.

Like Cicero, the YouTube commentator Jenna Mourey (a.k.a. Jenna Marbles) had a lot to say about “sluts”. In a December 2012 YouTube video that she entitled Things I don’t understand about girls Part 2: Slut edition, Mourey excoriates women who have a lot of casual sex:

“A slut is someone that has a lot of casual sex. […] It’s the girl that you’re like, ‘Pyeah [sic], yeah, she’s a slut.’ Yeah, that girl. Those are the
group of people that I’m talking about. [...] Help the sluts of the world make less bad slutty decisions. [...] We need to look out for the sluts of the universe together. Because I think they are just a little lonely and sad [85].

Mourey has a vast audience, as evinced by her 14.6 million subscribers, and the 5.8 million views of this slut-shaming video [86]. In this video, Mourey used her powerful platform to shame women for their sexual behavior [87]. While not as eloquent as Cicero, Mourey used similar techniques to shame and humiliate women, namely applying the label “slut” to female sexual behavior, thus stigmatizing women for their so-called lack of sexual virtue. Although Mourey does not target a specific individual in this video, her message is still damaging, because it teaches her audience that if a woman enjoys frequent sexual activity, she is a “slut” [88]. Mourey’s voice is one amongst many on the Internet; the medium is increasingly being used to attack and malign female reputations and criticize female sexual behavior.

Isanyoneup.com was a revenge porn Web site, founded by Hunter Moore in 2010 [89]. It was characterized by the submission of revenge porn [90]; in this case, primarily nude or semi-nude images of an individual disseminated by a former romantic partner without the victim’s consent [91]. These images were then connected with the individual’s social media profiles. Each submission tended to be comprised of a similar series of images: a snapshot of the individual’s social media profile, then a clothed image of the individual, then a nude image of the individual, then a reaction image, which was usually an Internet meme [92]. The format of the Web site allowed the public to comment on all of these submissions, which led to a bevy of slut-shaming and vitriol, aimed primarily at women and their bodies [93]. This slut-shaming Web site had a large audience; at the height of its popularity circa 2011–2012, isanyoneup.com had hundreds of thousands of views a day according to compete.com [94]. A woman writes about the personal impact of this slut-shaming on her Tumblr account:

I was submitted on Isanyoneup by my ex boyfriend. I am confronted by friends, family, and strangers that they have seen me naked online everyday. People who I would never show my body to now have the privilege of doing so without my consent at anytime. With just the click of a cursor my life was ruined. [...] I am hesitant of my own body. Anybody who doesn’t know me instantly views me as a slut. They don’t care about my story they just see those pictures and form their stereotypical opinions on the spot [95].

This woman’s statement reflects the devastating effects this form of slut-shaming can have on its victims. Poole has outlined the severe psychological impact of revenge porn, noting that several victims of this type of slut-shaming have committed suicide [96]. Revenge porn Web sites are generally designed to exploit viewers’ interest in the female body, to allow individuals to punish a former romantic partner, and to shame women for their sexuality. Fortunately, multiple lawsuits and campaigns were launched against Hunter Moore, and isanyoneup.com was eventually shut down in 2012 [97]. Unfortunately, revenge porn has behaved like the mythical Hydra. With the death of one site, many more have sprung up, most notably texxxan.com and yougotposted.com. Both of these sites were shut down in 2013 [98], but their specter lives on in other revenge porn Web sites that target women [99], including the site pinkmeth.com that operates through the anonymizing network Tor [100].

Shesahomewrecker.com is a Web site that allows women to shame their partner’s alleged mistresses; it was founded in 2012 by a woman with the pseudonym “Ariella Alexander” [101]. On this site, women post photos, personal details and narratives about the alleged “home-wreckers”, and the site allows public commentary [102]. The narratives about these alleged “home-wreckers” are vitriolic, and often attack their character and attributes:

This is a public service announcement for all to know that [redacted] has KNOWINGLY chosen to be a homewrecking whore. At 50+ years of age she is a stupid, groupie slut and as you can see in the photo included, the stoner look certainly does nothing for her especially when combined with her cray-cray looking eyes [103].

My husband and I are working on our marriage and things are going great then out of no where this stupid desperate hoe finds out my husband is working and has a damn good job and tries to pin a baby on him. [...] HELLO HE DOESN'T WANT YOUR DIRTY ASS NASTY P**SY. He has a faithful loving clean wife who doesn't sleep with every man that
has money in a strip club [104].

These narratives have been designed to publicly shame and punish women for their sexual behavior; the insults are pornographic and visceral, target the female body, depict the alleged “home-wreckers” as disgusting or dirty, and malign their sexual virtue [105]. Women can release personal details of the “home-wrecker” on the Web site, including her full name, address and occupation; this ensures that this slut-shaming will impact the “home-wrecker” off-line as well as online. While not as popular as isanyoneup.com, the site still receives significant traffic; it had just under 50,000 unique U.S. visitors in June 2014 according to compete.com [106]. Dries argues that shesahomewrecker.com is a prominent example of women slut-shaming other women, and that it represents a wider trend of Internet attacks on women [107]. From these narratives, it is clear that shesahomewrecker.com is another space on the Internet where women are shamed for their sexual behavior, and that the slut-shaming therein is mediated by women.

In all of these cases, we have seen that men and women have used the Internet to shame and punish women for their sexual behavior. Mourey has shamed women who had regular casual sex, isanyoneup.com and similar sites have been used to propagate damaging revenge porn, and shesahomewrecker.com was and is used to publicly shame and punish women for their sexual behavior. The number of viewers these sites have attracted is colossal; these have been very public exercises in slut-shaming. The focus in these cases has been female sexual virtue; terms like “slut”, “whore”, “hoe”, and “dirty” have been used to censure women for their non-conformance to normative sexual behaviors. This Internet activity has been shaped by the societal process of slut-shaming, and men and women have used this forum to perpetuate and maintain the cultural suppression of female sexuality.

4. Discussion

In this paper I have explored several cases of slut-shaming. Admittedly, they exist in very different milieus, and have various differences. The cases I examined in the Roman Republic were part of the state’s legal and religious apparatus, whereas the cases on the Internet were initiated by private individuals. The Roman slut-shaming occurred in a central location (Rome), whereas the Internet slut-shaming occurred in a more diffuse and global environment. Furthermore, the cases of Internet slut-shaming were far more pornographic and visceral than the Roman ones; that, however, may be a function of the source material, and the difference in inception, namely private (Internet) versus state (Rome). There was also a disparity in potential audience size for this slut-shaming; during the Second Punic War, Rome had a potential audience size in the hundreds of thousands [108], whereas the potential audience size on the Internet was much larger, within the millions, as evinced by the Web traffic for Mourey and isanyoneup.com [109].

Despite these differences, these cases have significant similarities. Women in both time periods have been shamed in public spaces, namely in public in Republican Rome, and on the Internet on platforms with significant Web traffic; the focus of this slut-shaming has been sexual virtue, namely women’s conformance or non-conformance to normative sexual behaviors; women have participated in some of the slut-shaming cases; and, the outcomes for victims have been severe, including legal inequalities, withdrawal from public life and exile for victims of Roman slut-shaming, and psychological trauma and suicide for victims of Internet slut-shaming. Women and their sexual virtue were put on trial in all of these cases, both literally and metaphorically. Men and women judged and judge women for their sexual activity in the Republic (in public trials and religious rites) and on the Internet (on digital platforms). In that respect, not much has changed between these cases, except that women are now judged in much larger fora and by strangers. While these cases are millennia apart, the phenomenon of slut-shaming appears to have persisted and flourished.

Recent research on social media shaming, cyberbullying and slut-shaming underscores how the Internet has magnified the impact of slut-shaming [110]. In general, shaming on the Internet “often transforms to ‘aggravated shaming,’ insofar as a vast (potentially global) audience is brought to bear against the individual(s)” [111]. The Canadian Coordinating Committee of Senior Officials (CCSO) released a report on cyberbullying in 2013 which suggested that the very nature of the Internet, that is, its global quality, its instantaneousness, its anonymity, and its enduring quality can lead to significant harm for cyberbullying victims [112]. Poole claims that the impact on victims is particularly severe [113], and that the “Internet has expanded the power and scope of shaming,” due to “anonymity and the lack of consequences […] instant and widespread communication […] the near impossible removal of harmful material […] and […] a lack of respite from torment” [114]. The unregulated nature of the Internet greatly amplifies the impact of slut-shaming on victims; slut shamers are often free to shame without consequences [115]. Internet shaming can also feed into offline shaming, and the ubiquity and necessity of the Internet to modern life makes it difficult for victims to avoid [116]. We saw earlier in the case of Júlia from Brazil
that Internet slut-shaming can have tragic consequences [117], and Poole has recorded many similar cases [118]. Based on these assessments of social media shaming, cyberbullying and Internet slut-shaming, I contend that the unregulated nature of the Internet, that is, its anonymity, its diffuseness, its inescapability, its enduring quality, and its limitless audience size, has vastly increased the scope of slut-shaming, and exposed women to increased scrutiny over their sexual behavior. This contention is supported by the large audience sizes and distributed impact of Mourey, isanyoneup.com and shesahomewrecker.com. Fortunately, researchers are exploring ways to legally regulate the phenomenon [119], and governments and the judiciary in America and other nations including Australia and Israel are targeting pernicious forms of Internet slut-shaming such as revenge porn [120].

In some of the cases examined in this paper, women have participated in the slut-shaming of other women. Previous research has broached the subject of female complicity in the patriarchy [121], but female complicity in slut-shaming has been glossed as a form of internalized oppression [122]. That is far too simple a picture; women are “not simply unwitting victims of men’s dominance” when they participate in slut-shaming [123]. Following Armstrong, et al., this paper complicates this picture, and spreads the responsibility for slut-shaming across the gender divide, indicating that women have agency within this phenomenon. What might women gain from such involvement? Recent research and reporting on the cultural suppression of female sexuality, female intrasexual competition and slut-discourse sheds some light on this phenomenon [124].

Based on a meta-analysis of the literature on the cultural suppression of female sexuality, Baumeister and Twenge argue that women are the “main proximal influences that restrain female sexuality” [125]. They propose that this suppression is effected through “direct socialization by females of other females to convince women and girls not to be highly sexual,” and through informal sanctions such as “ostracism and derogatory gossip” [126]. Their explanation for this phenomenon includes a range of factors, namely the restriction of the supply of sex by women to “earn a high price,” “altruistic concern to protect other women (especially daughters) from the aversive consequences of sexual indulgence,” and the “wish to restrict sex generally so that individual women will not have to meet all of the sexual demands of their partners” [127]. According to this model, women slut-shame other women “because sex is a limited resource that women use to negotiate with, and scarcity gives women an advantage” [128]. Vaillancourt offers a similar model, asserting that female slut-shaming is related to female intrasexual competition and the control of the “resource” of sex:

Sex is coveted by men [...] accordingly, women limit access as a way of maintaining advantage in the negotiation of this resource. Women who make sex too readily available compromise the power-holding position of the group, which is why many women are particularly intolerant of women who are, or seem to be, promiscuous [129].

Research has shown that such female intrasexual competition is often mediated through indirect aggression, where a victim is derided in a concealed way that “diminishes the risk of a counterattack,” and serves to reduce “same-sex rivals’ ability, or desire, to compete for mates” [130]; a salient example of this is the slut-shaming on isanyoneup.com and shesahomewrecker.com where men and women were and are free to shame their victims anonymously without repercussions. Vaillancourt indicates that such strategies confer benefits on the female shammers including “fewer competitors and greater access to preferred mates” [131], and this is supported by research by Campbell on female intrasexual aggression [132], and in research by Buss and Dedden on female derogation and human mating strategies [133].

In an ethnographic and longitudinal study of slut discourse amongst college women in an American university, Armstrong, et al. have demonstrated that high-status college women participated in slut discourse or slut-shaming to maintain their sexual privilege in high-status spaces [134]. Armstrong, et al. offer a similar rationalization to Baumeister, Twenge and Vaillancourt for this behavior, namely that “women are actively invested in slut shaming because they have something to gain [...] sexual privilege” [135]. This research provides us with a possible solution for why some women participate in slut-shaming: they do so to control the resource of sex and to maintain sexual privilege. As we have seen in one Roman case, the women involved in the religious rite for Venus Verticordia were actively limiting the resource of sex by promoting chastity over promiscuity. This also explains the behavior of the women who shamed on shesahomewrecker.com: they censured and shamed their sexual rivals for “sluttiness”. Perhaps women in Republican Rome and on the Internet have shamed to maintain a form of status or sexual privilege; Sulpicia certainly gained status from her religious promotion of chastity, while Mourey gains her own form of status in the form of high Web traffic. These are tentative and controversial propositions and it is outside the scope of this paper to defend them fully. Nevertheless, we have seen that women have been complicit in slut-shaming; and I propose that they were so because it conferred social benefits upon them.
5. Conclusion

In the cases explored in this paper, I have shown that, despite the differences between the Roman Republic and the Internet, many aspects of the societal process of slut-shaming have transcended time and culture: women were shamed in public spaces in the Roman Republic and continue to be on the Internet; the focus of this slut-shaming was and is sexual virtue, conformance to normative sexual behaviors; women in both time periods have participated in the slut-shaming of other women; and the outcomes of this slut-shaming have been severe for some victims. In physical and digital fora, women and their sexual virtue have long been on public trial. Slut-shaming is ancient, intractable and dangerous.

The unregulated nature of the Internet has, however, conferred a new vigor upon slut-shaming. The Internet’s anonymity, diffuseness, inescapability, enduring quality, and limitless audience size have vastly increased the scope of this phenomenon. As we saw with Júlia from Brazil, this can lead to tragic consequences. It is thus imperative to understand more about Internet slut-shaming and explore ways to regulate it.

I have shown that women were complicit in the slut-shaming of other women in the Roman Republic and on the Internet. Women may have done so to limit and control the resource of sex and to maintain a form of status or sexual privilege, according to recent research and reporting on the cultural suppression of female sexuality, female intrasexual competition and slut-discourse. At the very least, women participated in this phenomenon because it conferred social benefits upon them. This conclusion is difficult; it reveals that slut-shaming is pervasive, diffused across the gender divide, and firmly embedded in oppressive gender and sexuality discourses.

Slut-shaming is effected by both men and women, and the unregulated nature of the Internet has amplified its scope and impact. An off-line societal process has shaped an online practice, and the nature of the Internet has reshaped and transfigured it into something monstrous. Men and women have used the Internet to perpetuate and maintain the cultural suppression of female sexuality and expose women to increased scrutiny over their sexual behavior.

Despite this gloomy conclusion, the Internet also provides spaces where gender and sexuality can be challenged and interrogated. Future research should focus on using these spaces to limit the impact of slut-shaming. With this paper, I hope also to provoke broader conversations about slut-shaming in antiquity. Might other women of antiquity provide us with insight? Can they speak to our transnational and digital present?

I believe they can. One brief example will suffice. In the last few years, women (and men) across the globe have participated in digital and physical movements like SlutWalk, where they commendably strive to reclaim the term “slut” and protest against sexual violence. I alluded earlier to the Augustan elegist Sulpicia and her "immoral" verses; these verses are infused with the same defiant spirit of the SlutWalks. Sulpicia withes against cultural conventions and slut-shaming, reveling in her “sluttiness”, declaiming:

[I]t is fun to have misbehaved; it wearies me to wear a false expression for the sake of rumor. May I be said to be a woman worthy of having made love with a worthy man.

Eternal words. Sic semper."

About the author

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**Notes**

1. Berger, 2013, trans. Berger, 2013. The tweets were “E tô com medo mas acho que é tchau pra sempre” and “Eu te amo, desculpa eu n ser a filha perfeita mas eu tentei … desculpa desculpa eu te amo muito” (Berger, 2013).


3. Fernandes, 2013, translation by the author. The Instagram post was: “Essa desgraçada ainda quer respeito de alguém aahahahahaha vai queimar no inferno sua puta” (Fernandes, 2013). Translation is my own.


6. Poole, 2013.
8. Tanenbaum, 2015, p. xv.
9. Pomeroy, 1975; Tanenbaum, 2000; Baumeister and Twenge, 2002; Parker, 2004; Langlands, 2006; Schultz, 2006; Takács, 2008; Berkowitz, 2012.
15. By way of example, see: Segal, 1987; Deacy and Pierce, 1997; Hallett and Skinner, 1997; Koloski-Ostrow and Lyons, 1997; Edwards, 2002; Parker, 2004; Skinner, 2005; Langlands, 2006; Parker, 2011; Skinner, 2011; Dufallo, 2013; Richlin, 2014. For epitaphs, see: ILS 7472, 8398, 8403.
18. See, for example, Deacy and Pierce, 1997; Skinner, 2005; Mäntymäki, et al., 2015.
21. Ibid., p. 20.
22. Ibid.
25. Kofoed and Ringrose, 2012; Parsons, 2012; Poole, 2013.
29. For bibliography, see Foka and Arvidsson, 2014.
30. Ibid., p. 9.
33. McGinn, 1998; Olson, 2006; Olson, 2008.


38. Livy, 10.23.1–10; Langlands, 2006.


40. Segal, 1987; Packman, 1993; Leisner-Jensen, 2002; Richlin, 2005; Langlands, 2006; Dufallo, 2013.

41. On Lucilius and Laberius, see Gruen, 1992; Dominik and Wehrle, 1999; Panayotakis, 2009.


43. For elite and popular media, see Parker, 2011.


45. On gait and modesty, see O’Sullivan, 2011.

46. On these funeral eulogies, see Hemelrijk, 2004; Lindsay, 2004; Osgood, 2014. For the semantic range of these terms of sexual virtue, see Langlands, 2006.

47. For general commentary on Roman marriage and these materials, see Treggiari, 1991a; Treggiari, 1991b; Treggiari, 1991c; Treggiari, 1996.

48. Langlands, 2006; Fantham, 2011.


54. Livy 27.36; *Livy Per.* 20; Brunt, 1987, ps. 13, 46, 61.


59. Val. Max. 8.15.12; *Plin. HN* 7.120; Solin. 126; Pomeroy, 1975; Culham, 1982; Evans, 1991; Langlands, 2006; Parker, 2004; Schultz, 2006.

60. Val. Max. 8.15.12; Broughton, 1951.


64. Evans, 1991, p. 27.
66. Ibid., p. 60.
68. Livy 25.2.9; Pomeroy, 1975; Evans, 1991.
71. Evans, 1991, p. 27.
74. Oros. 4.5.9; Livy 22.47.2–5. On Vestals and their ritual execution, Beard, 1995; Staples, 1998; Parker, 2004; Wildfang, 2006.
77. Gong and Hoffman, 2012; Poole, 2013; Tanenbaum, 2015.
79. Poole, 2013, p. 222.
80. Ibid., p. 223.
82. For such utopian models, see Barlow, 1996; Plant, 1996; Schuler, 1996; Wittig and Schmitz, 1996; Castells, 1997; Tsagarousianou, et al., 1998; Morahan-Martin, 2000; Scott, et al., 2001; Carstensen, 2009.
83. For such dystopian models, see Sutton, 1996; Ferganchick-Neufang, 1998; Scott, et al., 2001; Carstensen, 2009; Shapiro, 2010; Reagle, 2013.
86. Ibid. Subscription and viewing numbers from 9 February 2015.
89. Dickson, 2014; Greenhouse, 2014.
96. Poole, 2013.
98. Rankin, 2013; Steinbaugh, 2013.
100. Nichols, 2014.
106. Compete. Search term used "shesahomewrecker.com".
108. Livy Per. 20; Brunt, 1987; Erdkamp, 2011.
111. Parsons, 2012.
112. CCSO, 2013.
113. Poole, 2013.
114. Ibid., p. 243.
116. Poole, 2013.
118. Poole, 2013.


126. Ibid., p. 172.

127. Ibid., p. 199.

128. Ibid., p. 166.


130. Vaillancourt, 2013, p. 5.

131. Ibid.


135. Ibid., p. 118.
