Feminists in the Roman Empire

Contrary to the Hollywood portrayal of women in the Roman Empire as little more than harlots, sex objects, or decorations for luxurious villas, a certain class of Roman women actually enjoyed social and political rights that women in later periods had to struggle to attain. For instance, women were allowed to inherit property and manage it themselves, and they could attend social functions of a kind reserved for men in other ancient cultures. They could even wear modern-style bikinis at the beach, something a Victorian woman would never dream of doing. Despite these freedoms, women could not vote in the Roman Empire. Even so, one has to wonder where these freedoms came from. Is it possible that there was actually a feminist movement in Roman times? Research suggests that “feminist” might be too strong a word for Roman women, but there was definitely a different climate for women in the Roman Empire than in other parts of the ancient world. Several sources illustrate this important aspect of how women fit into the culture of ancient Rome. For example, Women and Politics in Ancient Rome by Richard A. Bauman gives examples that sound like the modern women’s movement, with Roman women organizing and standing up for themselves and their beliefs. Likewise, Judith Evans Grubbs’ Women and Law in the Roman Empire: A Sourcebook on Marriage, Divorce and Widowhood focuses on laws and forms of power within the family structure.