

The Matronalia of March 1 boasts a long history spanning the middle Republic to the end of the fourth century CE. Among ancient sources, the festival was commonly termed the ‘women’s Kalends’ or ‘women’s Saturnalia’ (Juv. 9.53, Suet. *Vesp.* 19.1, *Dig.* 24.1.31.8), designations that have influenced modern scholars who classify the celebration as a public ‘women’s festival’ (Wissowa 1912: 185, Scullard 1981: 87, Scheid 1992: 385, 2003: 138). *Sacra* to Juno Lucina, performed by *matronae* at the goddess’ temple on the Esquiline and perhaps other sites as well (Degrassi 1963: 121; Peronne 2003, Rescigno 2003), have dominated scholarly reconstructions and interpretations (Gagé 1963, Boëls-Janssen 1993). Yet the Matronalia appears to have been far more comprehensive than these labels suggest, for it comprised several distinct rites and involved the *domus* (upper-class household) in its entirety. By re-examining evidence for the festival’s participants and main components, I highlight the significance of the Matronalia as a family observance that contributed to the welfare of the domestic community. The festival brought together the diverse members of the household – women and men, freeborn and slave, adults and children – in a communal ritual experience that had the potential to promote unity and collective identity, while reaffirming core social values, especially regarding gender and juridical status.

To gain a better understanding of the Matronalia’s complexity, I begin with an overview of its composition. Despite the contention that the evidence is too meager to determine the festival’s structure, let alone its significance (Scheid 1992: 386), a picture can nevertheless be formed from literary, epigraphic, and material evidence from which a functional analysis can proceed. Drawing upon recent scholarship on gender and religion and the Roman family, supplemented by theoretical insights from sociology and the comparative history of slavery, I aim to elucidate the importance of the Matronalia in the religious lives of upper-class Roman families.

Each facet of the observance addressed issues of immediate consequence to the success of the *domus* first and foremost: the production of legitimate children, conjugal relations, and the interactions of *matronae* with their slaves. All of these constituted familial rather than exclusively feminine concerns and were thus met with ritual actions by both women and men. Wives’ vows to Juno for safe childbirth and husbands’ prayers ‘for the preservation of their wives/marriages’ (Ps-Acro *ad* Hor. *Carm.* 3.8.1) focused on the conjugal couple and gave expression to present and future anxieties. A feast presented by *matronae* to their slaves, as well as a gift exchange, two features the festival shared with the Saturnalia, concluded the festivities. According to ancient authorities, the feast provided slaves with both reward and incentive for obedience (Solin. 1.35, Macrob. *Sat.* 1.12.7), and helped ensure domestic security, while the act of gift giving strengthened the bonds between household members, especially spouses. Collectively, the rites of the Matronalia confirmed the importance of marriage and reproduction to the welfare of the *domus*, and fostered cohesion as members of the household united as a community of celebrants.