Classical Rome
Document-Based Question

The following question is based on the accompanying documents. The question is designed to test your ability to work with and understand historical documents. Write an essay that:

- Has a relevant thesis and supports that thesis with evidence from the documents.
- Uses all of the documents.
- Analyzes the documents by grouping them in as many appropriate ways as possible. **Do not simply summarize the articles individually.**
- Takes into account the sources of the documents and analyzes the authors’ points of view.
- Explains the need for at least one additional type of document.

You may refer to relevant historical information not mentioned in the documents.

- Based on the following documents, analyze the expectations men had for the behavior of women during the course of the Roman Empire. Explain what additional type of document(s) would help assess the changing expectations of women.
Document 1

Source: Seneca, a patrician, speaking of his mother, c41 CE

“You [mother] – unlike so many – never succumbed to immorality, the worst evil of the century: jewels and pearls did not bend you; you never thought wealth was the greatest gift to the human race; the bad example of lesser women...did not lead you to stray from the old-fashioned, strict upbringing you received at home...you never polluted yourself with makeup and you never wore a dress that covered about as much on as it did off. Your only ornament, the kind of beauty that time does not tarnish, is the great honor of modesty.”

Document 2


“In bringing up his daughter and his granddaughters he [Emperor Augustus Caesar] even had them taught spinning and weaving, and he forbade them to say or do anything except openly and such as might be recorded in the household diary [a record of the events involving imperial household]. But at the height of his happiness and his confidence in his family and its training, Fortune proved fickle. He found the two Julias, his daughter and granddaughter, guilty of every form of vice, and banished them.”

Document 3

Source: Marble busts of Roman women found in the homes of patrician families, 1st century CE
Document 4

Source: Juvenal, a Roman satiric poet from “Satire 6”, c 1st century CE

“And, if she still wants to appear educated and eloquent, let her dress as a man, sacrifice to men’s gods, and bathe in the men’s baths. Wives shouldn’t try to be public speakers...there ought to be some things women don’t understand.”

Document 5

Source: A Roman epitaph [a memorial inscription on a tomb], 2nd century BCE

“Stranger, my message is short. Stop and read it. This is the unlovely tomb of a lovely woman. Her parents gave her the name Claudia. She loved her husband with all her heart. She bore two children, one of whom she left on earth, the other beneath it. She had a pleasing way of talking and walking. She tended the house and worked wool. I have said my peace. Go your way.”

Document 6

Source: A woman’s portrait from a house in Pompeii, Italy, c63-79 CE

Document 7

Source: Excerpt from writings by Tacitus, a Roman Senator, 19 CE

“...the senate passed severe provisions to repress women’s dissoluteness [tendency toward immoral behavior] and prohibited prostitution for granddaughters, daughters and wives of Roman knights [members of the Roman aristocracy]. .... It is considered sufficient punishment for unchaste women to admit their shame publicly.”
Document 8

Source: Excerpt from the epitaph of Allia Potestas, a free woman

“Here lies a woman from Perugia. None was more precious than she in the world. One so diligent as she has never been seen before. ... Cruel arbiter of fate, and harsh Persephone, why do you deprive us of good, and why does evil triumph, everyone asks. ... 

She was courageous, chaste, resolute, honest, a trustworthy guardian. Clean at home, also clean when she went out, famous among the populace. She alone could confront whatever happened. She would speak briefly and so was never reproached. She was first to rise from the bed, and last to return to her bed to rest after she had put each thing in its place. Her yarn never left her hands without good reason. Out of respect she yielded place to all: her habits were healthy. She was never self-satisfied, and never thought of herself as a free woman.

Her skin was white, she had beautiful eyes, and her hair was gold. An ivory glow always shone from her face – no mortal (so they say) ever possessed a face like it. ... 

In her anxiety she never stayed still, but moved her smooth limbs, beautiful with her generous body; she sought out every hair. ... There was never a topic she thought she knew well enough. She remained virtuous because she never committed any crime.”

Document 9

Source: Excerpts from a letter of advice on marriage to a young friend and his wife, written by essayist Plutarch, from 2nd century CE

“The economical woman ought not to neglect cleanliness and the wife who is devoted to her husband should also show a cheerful disposition; ... 

But it is a finer thing still for a man to hear his wife say, 'My dear husband, but to me you are guide, philosopher, and teacher in all that is most beautiful and divine.' In the first place these studies will take away a woman's appetite for stupid and irrational pursuits. A woman who is studying geometry will be ashamed to go dancing and one who is charmed by the words of Plato or Xenophon is not going to pay any attention to magic incantations. For if they do not receive the seed of a good education and do not develop this education in company with their husbands they will, left to themselves, conceive a lot of ridiculous ideas and unworthy aims and emotions.”

Document 10

Source: Musonius Rufus, a Roman philosopher, commenting on women and the study of philosophy, 1st century CE

“Women have received from the gods the same ability to reason that men have. ... Likewise, women have the same senses as men, sight, hearing, smell, and all the rest. ... In addition, it is not men alone who possess eagerness and a natural inclination toward virtue, but women also. Women are pleased no less than men by noble and just deeds, and reject the opposite of such actions. Since that is so, why is it appropriate for men to seek out and examine how they might live well, that is, to practice philosophy, but not women? Is it fitting for men to be good, but not women?”