

Love – Another Aspect of Roman Marriage

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When I think about the ancient Roman husband, the word “love” is not the first one to come to mind. The concept of a harsh, tyrannical *paterfamilias* is deeply ingrained in our concept of a Roman family man. One can easily recall the horrific tales of husbands beating their wives to death for drinking or committing adultery,¹ while husbands were free to have concubines.² Taken alone, these stories give a one-dimensional image of the *paterfamilias* which helps form a stereotype of Roman husbands that still clings with us today. In an environment where the *paterfamilias* is depicted as a heavy-handed tyrant, it is hard to imagine that the common Roman husband, regardless of class or social stature, could possibly show kindness or fondness towards his wife, let alone harbor genuine, romantic love (or have it returned for that matter). Moreover, the majority of upper class Roman marriages were arranged by parents and it is hard for our culture to imagine love blooming from forced matrimony. It also does not help that many historical accounts concerning marriage are in the form of legal agreements that deal with divorce and the technicalities of dowry ownership, property, power and money. Nevertheless, I believe that there is ample evidence to prove beyond any reasonable doubt that the Romans had an idyllic expectation of marriage where both parties not only were committed to each other but desired to be with each other and were genuinely in love. Whether or not this was an actual widespread reality is open to debate, but just because the Romans lived in

¹ Jane F. Gardner and Thomas Wiedemann. *The Roman Household – A Sourcebook*. (New York, NY: Routledge, 1991). 57. Valerius Maximus, 6, 3.9.

² Beryl Rawson. *Marriage, Divorce and Children in Ancient Rome*. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1991.) 105. Susanne Dixon.

another time, spoke a different language, worshipped different gods and had different customs is no reason to conclude that spouses did not love each other.

Some argue that feelings and expressions of love between Roman spouses were not the norm and that marriage had other, more important purposes than simply romance and affection. Even when we do find examples of a Roman longing for his wife or using flowery adjectives to describe his love for her, argue some, such sentiments take a back seat to more important aspects of the marriage, such as money and political alliances, and indeed, some of the more important players in the marriage who received just as much attention, if not more, were brothers and the father of the wife, not the wife herself. Keith Bradley uses the case of Cicero and his exile to argue that yes, one could use instances like Cicero's longing for his wife Terentia as evidence of "a characteristic Roman preoccupation with the nuclear family," but goes on to say that "Cicero's sense of familial obligations was not narrowly circumscribed but spanned a wide range of familial connections" and involved the whole household, stressing children and fortune.³ Bradley also notes that the personal letters of the Roman elites, like Cicero, often simply exclude any mention of wives. Because of this, Bradley concludes that the Romans emphasized "the arranged nature of most marriages, especially those controlled by the world of politics, and the relative unimportance of sentiment in compacting marital unions." He notes "the imminence of the belief that marriage and procreation were culturally induced social obligations, not the result of individual choices."⁴

Brothers and fathers were indeed very important to a Roman husband, but I wouldn't go so far as to say that they were always more important than his wife.

³ Keith R. Bradley. *Discovering the Roman Family*. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1991.) 169, 181, 182.

⁴ *ibid.*, 171.

Sometimes they were, but I do not think that we can shrug off the numerous records we have of husbands praising their wives, bewailing their loneliness and longing for their wives and expressing romantic, emotional sentiment towards their wives. The cases of Cicero and other Roman elites are problematic in that they give us a glimpse into the ideals held by the Roman elites and not Roman slaves, merchants, soldiers and the lower to middle classes. While certainly important and revealing, I think they are inadequate to paint a picture of how Romans felt about marriage, and that we must first turn elsewhere to see what other Romans say.

Funeral epitaphs show us how a good wife was supposed to act. Husbands or sons go on and on about the same good virtues; beauty, excellence at wool-working, devotion, chastity, modesty, thriftiness, happiness at home, being a mother to many sons, being pleasant to talk to, and so on.⁵ The formulaic format of many of these epitaphs and the recurrence of the same good virtues shed doubt onto the truthfulness of their claims and causes me to wonder whether these are examples of how the commemorated actually lived or if they are examples of how the father or son *wanted* her to live. Indeed, Hanne Sigismund Nielson says that “this does not imply that the epitaphs inform us what real life had been for the dedicators and the commemorated persons mentioned in the epitaphs.”⁶ Nielson gives us a breakdown of the eight most common words used in epitaphs from CIL6, recording every fifth readable epitaph. Of these eight, eighty-four percent of the time *bene merens* (deserving good), *dulcissima* (very sweet), *carissima* (very dear), *pientissima* or *pissima* (very discrete) are used to describe the

⁵ Gardner and Wiedmann, 52 – 53. ILS 8402 = CIL VI, 11602 (Rome); ILS 8403 = CIL I, 1007 (Rome; second century BC).

⁶ Beryl Rawson and Paul Weaver. *The Roman Family in Italy – Status, Sentiment, Space*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997). Chapter 8, Hanne Sigismund Nielsen. 170.

commemorated.⁷ This does not mean that the writers of these epitaphs did not mean what they said. As Nielson puts it, "...they [the epitaphs] express society's expectations, but therefore also the individual's expectations."⁸ Just as modern grave stones or plaques are generally small and epitaphs are short, so then might a Roman husband write the obligatory commemoration in what little space was allowed. This is no evidence that the sentiments were not heart-felt.

However, we do find some Roman epitaphs that break from the stilted norm. For example, Paternus, who erected an epitaph to his deceased wife Urbana, calls her "sweet" and "exceptional", adding, "I am sure that nothing has been more wonderful than her." He goes on to say that they lived together with "married affection" in addition to hard work. He concludes: "I have added these words so that those who read them may understand how deeply we loved one another."⁹ From the tomb of the Statilli we find these words written by a husband for his deceased wife: "When I was alive I pleased my husband as his first and dearest wife and I left my soul in his cold mouth. Weeping, he closed my eyes."¹⁰ A butcher described his wife on her tombstone calling her his "one and only—a lovely woman who possessed my heart...[living] with affection equal to my own..."¹¹ These unique phrases reveal husbands who were not simply pleased that their wives worked hard, bore them children and did not quarrel with them. Rather, these men loved their wives most dearly and wanted everyone to know exactly how much.

⁷ *ibid.*, 175.

⁸ *ibid.*, 176.

⁹ Gardener and Wiedmann, 53. ILS 8450 = CIL VI, 29580 (Rome).

¹⁰ Mary R. Lefkowitz & Maureen B. Fant. *Women's Life in Greece & Rome – a source book in translation*. (Second edition, London: Gerald Duckworth & Co. Ltd, 1992.) 19. Rome, 1st century AD. (CIL VI.6593 = CLE 1030. L).

¹¹ *ibid.*, 181. Rome, 1st century BC. ILLRP 793 = CIL I2. 1221 = CIL VI.9499 = ILS 7472 = CLE 959. L.

The Roman jurist Modestinus¹² tells us that “Marriage is the association of a man and a woman, and the sharing of every aspect of life; a point where human and divine laws meet.”¹³ His comment on the divine aspect of marriage suggest that marriage was not simply a legal means of distributing, maintaining and acquiring property; neither did it exist to force women into sexual servitude. I believe this demonstrates that the Romans realized that marriage was not a human invention, but something greater. Indeed, Pomponius¹⁴ tells us that “...the right of marriage has a moral, not a legal, basis.”¹⁵ I believe the Romans perceived this moral basis to be a marriage of mutual affection and love, based on consent from both the husband and the wife,¹⁶ which served legal, political and financial purposes which were (ideally) incidental to the marriage relationship. As Susan Treggiari puts it, “[i]mportant as the approval and knowledge of family and friends were in practice, in theory a marriage depended on the will of the husband and wife alone (unless either was *in patria potestas*).”¹⁷

Despite the ideal of mutual love and affection, we learn that divorce was common¹⁸ and a significant amount of ink was spilled in order to designate who got what in the event of a divorce. Bradley argues that due to the frequency of divorce, death of the wife through childbirth or disease, death of the husband through war and disease and natural death of one partner due to the sometimes extreme age difference between husbands and wives, married couples had no expectation of a life-long partnership. He says “that upper-class families at Rome were not composed predominantly of married

¹² Herennius Modestinus, a Roman Jurist and student of Ulpian who wrote about AD 250.

¹³ Gardner and Wiedmann, 17. Modestinus, *Rules*, Book 1.

¹⁴ Sextus Pomponius, Roman Jurist, second half of second century AD.

¹⁵ Gardner and Wiedmann, 18. *Digest* 23, 2.1.8. Pomponius, *On Sabinus*, book 5.

¹⁶ *ibid.*, 17. 2.1.3. Modestinus, *Rules*, book 1.

¹⁷ Susan Treggiari. *Roman Marriage – Iusti Coniuges from the time of Cicero to the time of Ulpian*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991.) 503.

¹⁸ Gardner and Wiedmann, 58. Plutarch, *Cato the Younger* 24-5.

couples who as individuals expected only one-spousal partner in their lives...” and continues by saying “that, on the contrary, many, perhaps most, men and women would anticipate at least two marriages in the course of their adulthood, the birth of children in each marriage and step-parental association with other children...”¹⁹ Indeed, we find remorse on the part of Romans that divorce was a sad reality. “Not many marriages last so long to be ended by death rather than broken up by divorce,” wrote a husband in the eulogy of his wife, Turia. “We were privileged that ours lasted for forty-one years, without argument. I only wish that the final end of the marriage had come about through my own death instead...”²⁰ The prevalence of divorce and the reorganization of family ties is a certain reality, but I do not think this necessitates that Roman couples predominantly expected their marriages to end with anything other than death by old age, due to their remorse over violent and untimely deaths, and the feeling of loss even from a spouse who was much older and died of natural causes.

Children were an important part of marriage, for men wanted sons in order that they themselves might become immortal in some way.²¹ One could therefore argue that one of the greatest purposes of a wife was to bear children. This is indeed true, but I do not think that ceding this point excludes love being a naturally expected aspect of marriage. Some husbands viewed their desire for children secondary to their desire for their wife. I will again refer to the Eulogy of Turia, where her husband recounts this very issue for us. “We wanted children. ... Doubting your own fertility [and] distressed at my being without children, you spoke of [divorce], so that I should not, by remaining [married] to you, forfeit hope of children. ... I must admit that I was so furious that I was

¹⁹ Bradley, 161-162.

²⁰ Gardner and Wiedmann, 50. The *Laudatio Turiae* (‘Eulogy of Turia’). Column 1, 1.27.

²¹ Rawson, 100. Susanne Dixon.

beside myself, so [horrified] at your proposal that I could scarcely recover my composure. To think that divorce between us could be discussed...or that [you] could contemplate anything that [made you cease] to be my wife..., you who steadfastly remained loyal when I was almost an exile from life.”²² He continues: “What desire, what need to have children could I have had that was so great that I should have broken faith for that reason and changed certainty for uncertainty? But no more about this! You remained with me as my wife, for I could not have given in to you without disgrace for me and unhappiness for both of us. But on your part, what could have been more worthy of commemoration and praise than your efforts in devotion to my interests: when I could not have children from yourself, you wanted me to have them through your good offices, and since you despaired of bearing children, to provide me with offspring by marriage to another woman.”²³

This man does not have money and immortality foremost on his mind. A man that did would surely have discarded his barren wife, eager to father children and eager to fool around with a new woman. Instead we find a man who loved his wife so much that he could not bear to be without her. It is not the loss of her money, her family, her status or her sex appeal that upsets him. Rather, she was his friend and loyal companion, a partner whose disappearance has broken him because he loved her as a person. I think this is clearly demonstrated in the length and detail of his eulogy. He goes on and on about her, saying “[w]ould that the life-span of each of us had allowed our marriage to continue until I, as the older partner, had been borne to the grave—that would have been more just—and you had performed for me the last rites, and that I had died leaving you still

²² Gardner and Wiedmann, 51 – 52. The *Laudatio Turiae* (‘Eulogy of Turia’). Column 2, lines 35-36, 50.

²³ Lefkowitz, 138-139. Rome, 1st century BC (ILS 8393. Tr. E. Wistrand. L).

alive and that I had you as a daughter for myself in place of my childlessness. . . . along with you I have lost the tranquility of my existence. . . . Natural sorrow wrests away my power of self-control and I am overwhelmed by sorrow. I am tormented by two emotions: grief and fear—and I do not stand firm against either. When I go back in thought to my previous misfortunes and when I envisage what the future may have in store for me, fixing my eyes on your glory does not give me strength to bear my sorrow with patience. Rather, I seem destined to long mourning.”²⁴ I do not get the impression that he writes all of this because he feels obliged to or because he thinks it is what his peers would like to hear, but because he is devastated and needs to express his loss.

Sadly, epitaphs and anecdotes are really all we have from Romans too poor to write books. The rich and powerful had enough free time to write and we have a plethora of material left from them. There are two major similarities between the well-to-do Romans and the not-so-well-to-do Romans; they are both Roman and they are both human. As humans they expressed their love and sorrow similarly, and I do not believe that we should disregard the words of the elite when considering Roman marriage as a whole.

Pliny the Younger spoke endearingly of his third wife. “She also loves me, a sign of her virtue,” he wrote. “Because of her love for me, she has even gone so far as to take an interest in literature; she possesses copies of my writings, reads them repeatedly and even memorizes them. . . . She has even set some of my poems to music, and chants them to the accompaniment of a lyre, untaught by any music-teacher, but rather by the best of teachers, love.”²⁵ His wife did not have to do all of this. She did so because she

²⁴ *ibid.*, 139.

²⁵ Gardner and Wiedmann, 62. Pliny, *Letters* 4, 19.2-4.

apparently admired him and was proud of his accomplishments. She worried about him when he went to the Senate and eagerly desired his success and well-being.

When Antistius Rusticus died in Cappadocia, his wife Nigrina was inconsolable. “...Nigrina brought back her husband’s bones in her arms and complained that the trip was too short; and as she gave the sacred urn to the tomb, which she was jealous of, she saw herself twice bereft of her stolen spouse.”²⁶

Some spouses went to great lengths in order to remain together. When Acilius fled Rome after Julius Caesar’s assassination, he told his wife to remain because he did not want her to be harmed. He fled to Sicily, but she disobeyed him because she did not want to be parted from him and traveled to Sicily to find him. Upon finding him “living not as a praetor should, but on a pallet and with disheveled hair and wretched food because he was longing for his wife,” she “threatened to inform on him if he escaped without her” forcing him to take her along.²⁷

“I never complained more about my duties than when they kept me from accompanying you...” wrote Pliny to his wife Calpurnia after she left him to go to Campania in order to improve her health. “Indeed, I would still worry about you when you were away even if you were not ill; there is an anxious suspense in not knowing about someone you love dearly. ... Please, then, ease my anxiety and write to me once a day, or even twice. I’ll feel more secure—but then will start worrying again as soon as I’ve finished the letters.”²⁸

Our evidence, however, represents only one point of view. Men erected monuments and wrote epitaphs for their wives, men wrote the eulogies and men

²⁶ Lefkowitz, 34. Rome, late 1st century AD (Martial, Epigram 9.30. L).

²⁷ *ibid.*, 134. Rome, 43 BC (Appian, *Civil War* 4.39-40, 2nd century AD. G).

²⁸ *ibid.*, 185. Rome, AD 104-108 (Pliny the Younger, *Letters* 6.4. L).

described the emotions of their wives. This leaves us knowing only what men expected from their wives, what they thought marriage was, and their own view of how their wives felt towards them. Sadly, there is not much we can do about this, since we have so little that was actually penned by a Roman woman. Sulpicia is the only Roman woman whose poetry we have in more than fragmented form. The addressee of much of her poetry is a man named Cerinthus, and her poetry primarily concerns her relationship with him. “Light of my life, may I no longer be your love’s fire...if I ever again do such a stupid girlish thing that would make me sorrier than leaving you alone last night, in my desire to keep from you my desire.”²⁹ Here we see a woman expressing her love verbally and lamenting that she did not express that love physically the previous night. What we can deduce from this is that love between Roman couples was not always one-sided, that husbands were not so deluded as to be convinced that their wives loved them when they did not, and that sex was not always forced upon a wife but that it was consensual; indeed, as in Sulpicia’s case, the wife had power over her lover and could deny him sex if she so chose. Now, we cannot take this one example and assume that this was the way it was with every marriage relationship, but the existence of this woman’s own writing clarifies for us how at least one woman felt about her relationship with a man, and we have no reason to suspect that her feelings were peculiar or abnormal.

Though marriage served many purposes, such as producing children and legitimate heirs and tying families together for political gain, we must not neglect the existence and prevalence of love between spouses that appears to be just as important to many husbands and wives if not more so. From Roman epitaphs and letters by husbands

²⁹ *ibid.*, 8. Sulpicia (Rome, 1st century BC.) *To Cerinthus* (Tibullus 3.18. L)

to wives, to expressions of longing from men and women alike, we clearly find evidence that love was an important aspect of Roman marriage.

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