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Livia's Power in Ancient Rome

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Western Civilization

Research Paper

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Livia's Power in Ancient Rome

“Livia could thus be called Rome’s first lady in the broad sense, in that no Roman woman before or after her succeeded in evoking a deeper or more long-lasting respect and devotion” (Barrett 8). There are few women in ancient history who have had the opportunity to become as influential as Livia. Often, thoughts of women and history are joined with thoughts of oppression and discrimination. There were many barriers between women and power, but barriers can be broken. Livia, wife of Roman emperor Augustus and first lady of Rome, overcame many obstacles to become an influential person in Roman politics. Livia was able to secretly manipulate politics in Rome as a mother and a wife, as seen in honorific statues, Ovid's poetry, and honorific titles, becoming an inspiration for women in the near and far future.

In an effort to build up his empire, Augustus, Livia’s husband, passed laws that would restore traditional Roman family structure. Girls could be married off as young as 12, and were penalized if they were still single at age 20. Boys could be married at 14 and were punished for being single at 25 (Lora 40). Augustus wanted to build an army, and the best way to do so was to encourage marriage and having children. And while these laws forced both men and women into parenthood and matrimony, their roles were far from equal.

Part of this family structure is the paterfamilias, which existed long before Augustus, and still existed during his reign. The title “paterfamilias” was given to the father of the family, and it meant that he had total control over of the entire family and all its possessions. A wife could

divorce her husband, but he would end up with the children (Lora 43). All decisions had to be made through him, and he was the ultimate authority figure. His sons would grow up to become the paterfamilias in their own families, but only after his death. Daughters and wives never had this power. Single and widowed women weren't free either; they belonged to their families. As a result, the men that were forced into the role of husband had some authority, while the women were forced to become property.

One way for a woman to gain power was to have a lot of children. Mothers of three could have a say about their property (Lora 43). And still, this was a fraction of the power her husband had. The mother inherently had no power, but this rule made it seem like it was the only way to gain any voice at all. Augustus' reforms made it so women were forced into roles that gave them little authority. If they did not fall into these roles, they were penalized with higher taxes and restricted freedom.

This was the life of a common woman, though Livia was not common. Livia was born on January 30th, 58/59 BC (Barrett 14). She was a descendant of the Claudians, one of the most powerful Roman families at the time. "Livia's descent on her father's side from one of Rome's oldest and most prestigious families would have conferred enormous status on her" (Barrett 22). Because of her high status, it's no surprise the powerful Augustus fell in love with her. Augustus was Caesar's adopted son and successor. She left her first husband, Tiberius, with whom she already had a child, to marry Augustus.

Livia was first able to make her impact as the emperor's wife. She did so in secret, and out of the view of the public. In his book *Livia: First Lady of Imperial Rome*, Barrett suggests that Livia was strategically sneaky in politics: "She no doubt anticipated that during this formative period of the principate a powerful imperial woman who meddled where she had no

business would attract attention to her misdeeds, actual and imagined” (28). Livia knew how a perfect Roman woman should act, and played that role in the public. It was in private, as a wife and mother, where she was able to spread her influence.

After Augustus’ death, Livia was able to shape Rome as the mother to the emperor. Edward Best, in his piece *Cicero, Livy and Educated Roman Women*, argues that women had a significant impact on the Roman world as mothers to its leaders. These leaders spent the first years of their lives under the care of their mothers; “Yet these were the formative years for Rome's future consuls, generals, and dictators and these were the years Rome's sons lived under the watchful and determining influence of their mothers and nurses. The manner and quality of such influence then must be considered important in the development of the minds and characters of Roman leaders, who later shaped the policies of the state and the world; and the education or intellectual training of Roman women takes on significant proportions” (1). As mothers, Roman women were able to shape Rome through their sons. Livia had this opportunity when her son, Tiberius, took over after Augustus.

Barrett speculates that she played a part in getting him this power; “...sources give Livia a prominent role in ensuring that Tiberius would be on the scene when Augustus died, and that the transmission of power would be a smooth one...” (Barrett 74). She wanted to ensure that her son rose to power, which also ensured that she stayed in power. As the mother to the emperor, she was able to advise and guide him. She had raised Tiberius and shaped him into the man he became.

One of the ways we know that Livia impacted Rome is by looking at ancient Roman statues. It was not Roman tradition to have statues of women, (Flory, “Honorific Statues” 11) but there were a few statues of Livia. In her piece *Livia and the History of Public Honorific Statues*

for Women in Rome, Flory speculates that the statues could have been propaganda by Augustus, advertising himself, his family, and his marriage (9). She also suggests that the statues were made to contrast himself and Antony, from whom he was attempting to gain power. "... Livia and Octavia were "Roman," that is, the women appeared in Roman dress, and the style and material of the statues were consistent with Roman portraiture for women, primarily attested at this period in a funerary context," (10) . Livia and Augustus' portrayal in the statues is supposed to make them seem more Roman than Antony. Because of his connection with Cleopatra, Antony seemed more Egyptian than Roman. This statue makes Livia a symbol for Rome and for the ruling family. Livia's use in this propaganda shows her importance to Rome. Augustus must have believed her image had some sort of influence on the Romans. If the statue was intended to display true Roman power, as Flory believes, then Livia must have played a powerful role in order for her to make it onto the statue.

As well as a perfect Roman woman, Livia was also portrayed in the statue as a mother: "...Livia's presence explained by her pivotal role as wife, daughter, priestess of the deified Augustus, and Augusta. She was the linchpin that held the family together" (Dynastic Ideology 11). The mother, though not a powerful figure, was a vital member of the family. She raised and guided the children. In order for her to be featured on the statue, the Senate and Augustus must have admired her in this role.

Livia was also honored with a statue of herself after the death of her son, Drusus. In fear of upsetting her, the Senate put up a statue of herself, instead of erecting a statue of her deceased child (Flory, "Honorific Statues" 14). The gesture showed that Livia was valuable to the Senate. It showed respect for her and her feelings. It was also something that had never been done before; "The decision in 9 B.C. to console Livia with a statue shows this was still a special honor

not yet hackneyed by repetition, especially as it was joined to the once- in-a-lifetime grant of the *ius liberorum*” (19). Livia was important to the state, enough so to honor her publicly. It gave her power by depicting her as someone to respect. The Senate, taking the time and money to build Livia a statue, show how much they valued her. It also made a statement to the Roman people: this woman is important, and we are going to take care of her.

Along with the statue, Drusus was also given a grand funeral, even though he was only Augustus’ step son, and had never been adopted. The procession included “images of both Claudians and Julians” (Barrett 45). By connecting the two families, Augustus gave the Claudians power. He presented Drusus as both a Julian and a Claudian, even though he was never actually a Julian. This elevation of status for the Claudians, as well as the statue, make Livia seem important in the public’s perception.

We can also see how Livia was important based on Ovid’s writing. Ovid was a famous poet in ancient Rome. Flory discusses his portrayal of her in her paper *Dynastic Ideology*: “Livia is always described in some detail, flattered, or mentioned by name. A few examples suffice. Livia is called *Livia mater* (Pont. 3.3.87), “Livia, the Vesta of chaste married women” (Pont. 4.13.31), and in two fulsome verses Ovid wishes that “Livia, a woman who was suited by rank to no other husband may complete her harmonious years with you (i.e., Augustus)” (Tr. 2.2.161-62). (295). Ovid’s praise of Livia shows her importance as a Roman figure. Much of ancient Roman literature is focused on men. For example, Virgil’s *Aeneid* seldom mentions a woman who isn’t a god. Ovid’s mention and flattery of her in his poetry is a great change.

Ovid also mentions her in his poem *Fasti*, while discussing the future of Rome, in a prophecy:

The safety of the country will lie with Augustus’ house:

It's decreed this family will hold the reins of empire.
 So Caesar's son, Augustus, and grandson, Tiberius,
 Divine minds, will, despite his refusal, rule the country:
 And as I myself will be hallowed at eternal altars,
 So Livia shall be a new divinity, Julia Augusta.

After Caesar's death, Augustus declares that Caesar is a god. By doing this, he makes himself divine, as he is Caesar's son. He even changed his name from Octavian to Augustus, because of its divine overtones. In Ovid's poem, Livia is the "new divinity". This not only establishes her as powerful being, it equates her to her semi-divine husband, the emperor. In fact, Livia was given the title Julia Augusta after Augustus' death. In his will, he adopted her into the Julian family (Flory, "Dynastic Ideology" 12). This makes her divine to the people and even more powerful. Ovid gave her great power over the people by making her a goddess in this poem.

In addition, Livia was nearly voted the title of "mater patriae", which means mother of the fatherland. While still alive, Augustus was known as Pater Patriae (Barrett 118). "By the time of Augustus' death, when the Senate unsuccessfully attempted to vote Livia the official title of "mater patriae," which Tiberius summarily turned down for her, the idea implicit in 9 B.C. was already becoming a demonstrable fact of a political system based on family succession" (Flory, "Honorific Statues" 16). Though she never received the position, it was still a huge change to even consider honoring her this way. The leaders in Roman politics were always wealthy men. Livia's time as the mother in a reigning family must have proved her to be a capable leader. This title would have made her the face of power. This implies that she played a significant role in politics behind the scenes. Her consideration for "mater patriae" is evidence that she proved

herself to be trustworthy. The only reason she didn't receive the title was because Tiberius thought it was unnecessary. She already had the power.

Despite Livia's progression, women still faced oppression in Rome, both socially and politically. It can be argued that because of this continued injustice, Livia didn't bring on any real change for Roman women. There is no evidence of new laws passed in favor of women, or of any woman rising to power. Livia herself was never given any credit. The Roman Empire continued on as it had before Livia. Every law and reform passed in imperial Rome is credited to a man.

However, Livia was only one woman. She alone couldn't completely eliminate the oppression that existed for hundreds of years. But because of her public honors, she becomes a symbol of potential power for Roman women. The statues of her send a message that women can be successful, even if they don't have the same rights. Livia, as a woman not directly in power, becomes the ultimate symbol of how to spread one's influence out of view of the public. Women didn't need direct authority to achieve. They used what they were given. They were forced into the roles of wives and mothers, but like Livia, they could use these roles to their advantage.

Unfortunately, inequality between the sexes still exists today. Women are still not well represented in U.S. politics. As of 2014, women hold only 18.7% of the seats in U.S. Congress ("Women in Congress", 1). After 44 presidents and 57 elections, we have yet to elect a female president. As one of the first and only ancient women to rise to power, Livia's accomplishments are astonishing. In a time of far worse oppression she rose to success. She is an inspiration to future female leaders. By teaching women about people like Livia, we can encourage them to be more involved in politics. Livia is proof that women can be powerful and influential despite obstacles.

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