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Balzer

Western Civilization

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The Dichotomy of *Pudicitia*

“Feminine virtue was used in antiquity as a sign of the moral health of the commonwealth,” and as such provided many limited and confining, yet simultaneously liberating, forces. *Pudicitia*, as a defining moral quality of women in the Roman Republic, acted as both an oppressive and liberating force; its commitment to chastity and a solely female sphere limited women, yet its requirement of public displays of piety and duty to the state allowed women to gain a public voice in political and social issues.

The rights and lives of women during the Roman Republic were primarily defined by the system of *Paterfamilias*, which I contend is a form of institutionalized patriarchy¹. Throughout the republic, women were recognized legally and socially only under the service of their paterfamilias, the oldest male in the household. Through this frame of society, anyone not attributed the title of paterfamilias had the concept of *pudicitia* – translated loosely as ‘chastity’ or ‘sexual virtue’ – a morally- and physically-defined quality of a person. *Pudicitia* served as a moral code primarily for women, and in some instances for men, in ancient Rome, connoting cultural and moral aspects one should possess in order to maintain purity. More than just expecting virginity until marriage and faithfulness to one’s spouse, as is the common Christian sense of chastity, *pudicitia* also defined the life of a woman, delineating all of her social, political, moral, familial, and more duties. Those that

¹ For a discussion of *mater familias*, and how *pater familias* may not have applied to all women, see Richard P. Saller’s “Pater Familias, Mater Familias, and the Gendered Semantics of the Roman Household.”

will be addressed here include moral shame for sexual acts or desires, a patriotic duty to the state, public displays of piety and making one's devotion to *pudicitia* known.²

As an aspect of a broader society, *pudicitia* both reflected and defined Roman attitudes about morality and political and philosophical thought. Roman culture placed emphasis on public displays, specifically in a religious context, and *pudicitia* was no exception. Because “how they [women] are seen to conduct themselves is... intimately bound up with the civic and religious duty of the individual, and with the wellbeing of the community as a whole” women had to make publically known their virtues, with conflicting implications (Langlands 51). It also added to Roman thought, as it was one of the few qualities women could possess that publically “appear[s] alongside such qualities as justice, liberty, peace, dignity and temperance in Roman philosophical works” (Langlands 7). In the broader context of society, *pudicitia* added a public sphere to the role of women by placing their qualities on par with prominent ideals and allowing those ideas to interact within that space.

Although recognizing the limited position of women of the Republic, in three critical and illustrative instances *pudicitia* both limited women and allowed them a political or social importance in a public sphere. First, with the rape of the Sabines, *pudicitia*'s duty to the state and to virginity conflict in the mythological founding of Rome. Then, the Cults of Plebeian and Patrician *Pudicitia* allowed women of both classes to compete in a limited female sphere and contribute to the conflict of the orders. Finally, the vestal virgins' rebellion through use of their sacrosanctity, a byproduct *pudicitia*, contributed to politics in the Gracchi period.

The story of the Rape of the Sabines provides an example of contradicting aspects of *pudicitia* by proposing that the founding of Rome came from the rape of women from neighboring tribes, juxtaposed with supposed guilt of sexual acts and a woman's duty to the state. Livy, Ovid,

² The traits listed here are a brief selection. For a full list and analysis, see Rebecca Langlands' “Sexual Morality in Ancient Rome” pages 29-36

and other Roman historians recount the story something like this: Romulus needed women in order to carry on his fledgling city of Rome, so he sent envoys to neighboring towns to request women for legal marriages to Roman men. When no town agreed, Romulus invited the Sabines to a Roman festival, during which he signaled his citizens to rush into the crowd and take the Sabine girls for wives (Setälä and Savunen 4).

Although this fabled encounter likely did not occur, the symbolism reflects on Roman attitudes and the meaning of *pudicitia* from the founding of the state, particularly that the women's virginity was necessary for them to be instruments to gain power. Livy, in *The Early History of Rome* makes special note that the women are "young" and "beautiful," no doubt alluding to the crucial importance of their chastity above all else (Livy 1.9). Later, Romulus tells the women to "give their hearts to those to whom chance had given their bodies" (Livy 1.9). Besides the obvious implications of such a violent act that would permanently damage the Sabine women involved, the systematic rape violated the quality of *pudicitia* that serves as "a combatant against libido" because it was motivated by lust (Langlands 32). In one sense of the word, *pudicitia* clearly forbids an act such as the rape of the Sabines, or an action by any gender motivated by lust.

Although such a rape may conflict with one aspect of *pudicitia*, it can be justified by the quality that stresses service to the state and one's husband. Romulus insists the women are necessary for the continued survival of Rome, and the act is thus justified to the Roman men. As such, women were important as a catalyzing component in the founding and creation of Rome, even if by force, rather than their own accord. This discussion, and seeming necessity, of rape at the beginning of a significant event is not unprecedented; in fact, "Mars rapes a Vestal to father Romulus;... Tarquin rapes Lucretia and so... founds the Republic..." excreta (Setälä and Savunen 4). Robbing women of their chastity, a core aspect of *pudicitia*, has consistently marked and been essential to political change. The violent taking of *pudicitia* shows ultimate power, and, while being a

horrendously cruel act, it has been important in historical events and myths that shaped public perceptions of societal roles in Rome. Here, the importance of *pudicitia* is defined by explicitly physical sexual acts, which can either give or take away power and status. While this neither provides women an autonomous voice nor justifies their brutal rape, it is important to note as an explanation of the view and influence of *pudicitia*, and by extension women, in Roman society as important in their bodies.

Although women in were confined to an all-female sphere, they were able to use not only their chastity, but also their directive to publicly express moral virtue, to participate in the conflict of the orders which is loosely dated from 494 to 287 BCE. Women were largely excluded from the political sphere, but during the conflict of the orders, pitting Plebeians and Patricians against one another for political and social power, women participated through Cults of *Pudicitia*, by worshipping the personified deity *pudicitia*. As Langlands states, the Cults of *Pudicitia* exemplify “*pudicitia*’s association with... public display, and the negotiation of the boundaries of social status” (37). When Verginia was rejected from a cult of Patrician *Pudicitia* in 296 BCE because of her marriage to a Plebeian, she created her own Plebeian Cult of *Pudicitia* and encouraged women to “compete in modesty as men competed in valour (sic.); let them cultivate the new altar even more reverently than its patrician counterpart” (Bauman 15). Although women could not directly engage in the same political sphere as men, they used their gender-prescribed roles to participate through competing to be the most chaste, reverent, pious and obedient. The women had to participate under the guise of their formally recognized place in society by only competing with other women, because “any change in what the mythological status of women had been would be regarded as a threat to the moral structure of Rome, even if that mythological woman had never existed” (Bullough et al. 68). *Pudicitia* disallowed women from competition in the same sphere as men, that of politics and outright protest, but they were still allowed a limited role.

However, the requirement of *pudicitia* to display its aspects “in public acts which are often violent or startling” allowed the confined sphere of women to expand into the public eye (Langlands 31). Verginia’s contest with the Patrician women became a public and publicized event as she and her followers showed piety by building grandiose temples and holding public rituals. Without such a public requirement of women, this competition would have remained strictly indoors and hidden. Because of *pudicitia*’s public role, women were allowed to add to the social reconstruction of the Conflict of the Orders, exploring a prescribed space and expanding that sphere to the public.

Last are the Vestal Virgins, a group of young women selected to serve the city of Rome through religious offerings and to embody *pudicitia*. The virginity and purity of the Vestal Virgins was an essential component to their “embodiment of the city and citizenry of Rome” to reflect on the moral superiority of the Roman people, while “her unpenetrated body was a metaphor for the unpenetrated walls of Rome” and showed military superiority (MacLachlan 68-69). The Vestal woman held significant political power by exemplifying the ideal mother, wife and virgin, while also serving as a reminder to the Roman people of their everlasting empire. Although this status required many confining duties, such as living a life primarily in solitude and service, the sacrosanctity of their positions allowed a degree of power.

Because the Vestals represented such a holy position, their chaste bodies came to have “special sanctity by the imposition of various observances of which the chief was virginity” (Livy 1.20). Enforced chastity, while it can be seen as incredibly confining to a person’s spiritual and emotional self, brought a degree of political activism not experienced by many, regardless of sex, at the time. The Vestal Claudia, for example, protected her father’s triumph from an angered tribune by throwing her sacrosanct self on her father’s lap (Bauman 47). Although some criticize this act as “more like an abuse of power than a heroic act of piety,” Claudia’s ability to stop such a powerful

man like a tribune simply with her presence, regardless of her intention, shows the influence of *pudicitia's* chastity and public piety on empowering women (Langlands 353).

Vestals were also liberated from part of the patriarchal society by their exemption from the *pater familias* system. Because “the priestesses were paid out of public funds” and served only the state, they did not belong to any one man, and were thus exempted from this confinement by their virgin marriage to the state (Livy 1.20). Although the Vestals certainly did not enjoy all the rights granted even to a common man, “she necessarily acquired the right to dispose of her property by will and the right to be a witness,” rights that were typically reserved only for those of masculinity (MacLachlan 73). Although few women in Roman society were granted these privileges, and those who were typically hailed from the Patrician or wealthy classes, they provide an instructive example of the simultaneously restricting and freeing effects of *pudicitia*.

Primarily women of the Patrician class or wealthy classes could participate in such events described above. Thus, examination of the poor or lower classes' experiences may reveal different implications of *pudicitia* this work does not seek. However, I suppose that these women would less often experience the unique situations that allow *pudicitia* a liberating force as they were less often placed in such positions.

Although we cannot say these women were intending to begin a movement for women's rights or any version of feminism, their participation in public political and ethical life through limited allowances of *pudicitia* becomes the foremothers of feminist thought. The coined “radical feminist” movement and its horribly misrepresented “I'm a Woman, Hear me Roar” slogan may have been necessary to reject and protest previous, more subversive participation in political life like those in the cults of *pudicitia*. Also, examining the current, Christian western world, this complicated definition of ‘chastity’ can show how previous cultures assigned diverse meaning to such a word. Such examinations may aid in the re-conceptualization of the meaning of sexuality in womanhood,

breaking stereotypes that it is defined strictly by sexual acts or that those sexual acts define the person. Even in a society dominated by *pater familias* there was a – albeit limited – role for women.

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