

THE 'NEW' ROMAN WIFE AND 1 TIMOTHY 2:9-15: THE SEARCH FOR A *SITZ IM LEBEN*

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Summary

A challenging passage for exegetes and theologians alike is 1 Timothy 2:9-15. What has eluded the discussion has been the source of the image of the wife against which the passage is set. In this essay evidence will be presented which shows that the 'new' Roman wife was a contemporary perception which influenced this discussion. The evidence for her is threefold, viz., literary works, the poems of leading elegists of the era of the late Republic and early Empire, and the Augustan laws on marriage which aimed to rein in her promiscuous behaviour. This essay does not seek to comment on the passage as a whole but simply to highlight those sections where this background illuminates specific issues.¹

Introduction

1 Timothy 2:9-15 is the most succinct but detailed of all the New Testament discussions on the behaviour of women or wives. In one verse three aspects of a female dress code are proscribed and modest dress is prescribed. In the concluding sentence a mother's 'safety' in what is traditionally perceived to be 'childbearing' is made conditional upon her continuing 'in faith, hope and holiness with modesty' (vv. 9-10, 15). The literature generated in the past two

¹ I am grateful to the graduate students at Beeson Divinity School, Samford University whose request for a lecture on this topic in May, 1999 as part of a course on biblical interpretation began my investigation. I delivered a broad ranging paper on women in the Pauline churches to the TransPennine Ancient History seminar in Liverpool in December of the same year as part of its ongoing work on the Ancient Family. The British New Testament Conference provided the opportunity to present a shorter version of this paper in September this year. The responses were invaluable in refining my own views.

decades reflects in part the ongoing search for a *Sitz im Leben*.² The purpose of this essay is to provide representative samples of the evidence for what some ancient historians have designated the ‘new’ Roman wife and to see how it helps in understanding certain enigmatic comments in 1 Timothy 2:9-15.³

‘Of the various aspects of *patria potestas*...that of the notorious right of the father to put his children to death’ is known. It was very rarely exercised in Republican times and not at all in the imperial period.⁴ There are instances where a wife was subject to the judgement of her husband or his family resulting in capital punishment. In the Republican period, Pullicia, who poisoned her husband, consul Postumius Albinus, and Licinia, who did the same to her spouse were put to death by their late husbands’ kinsmen.⁵

Tacitus records Pomponia Graecina in the time of Claudius: ‘a woman of high family, married to Aulus Plautius—whose ovation after the British campaign I recorded earlier—and now arraigned for alien superstition, was left to the jurisdiction of her husband. Following the ancient custom, he held the inquiry, which was to determine the fate and fame of his wife, before a family council, and announced her innocent.’⁶

These examples provide evidence that, in terms of life and religion, the head of the house held total sway. It gives support to the perception that all Roman wives of the period were subject to, or were made subject to, their husband’s dominance. There is also a popular understanding that after marriage wives were kept away from the public gaze, being confined to the role of a dutiful wife engaged in childbearing and domestic duties. There is, however, evidence that shows this is an incomplete picture of first-century wives. In this short essay it will be shown (I) that a ‘new’ type of wife who was very different from her predecessors emerges in the closing decades of the

² See for example I.H. Marshall, *The Pastoral Epistles* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), pp. 436-37.

³ Additional evidence will be incorporated in a forthcoming book on the wider subject of the *New Roman Women and the Pauline Churches*.

⁴ W.V. Harris, ‘The Roman Father’s Power of Life and Death’ in ed. R.S. Bagnall and W.V. Harris, *Studies in Roman Law in Memory of A.A. Schiller*, (Leiden: Brill, 1986), pp. 81, 88.

⁵ Valerius Maximus, *Memorable Deeds and Sayings*, 13.3.8.

⁶ *Annals* 13.32. J. Jackson suggests this superstition was Christianity as the catacombs have inscriptions to Pomponii Bassi and Pomponius Graecinus. ‘Her creed, as was often the case, gave rise to immorality, on which she was tried and acquitted by the family council,’ Loeb, (1956), 52, n.3, 53 (cf. II.50).

Roman Republic, and (II) that it is against this phenomenon the discussion of the Christian wife in 1 Timothy 2:9-15 takes place.

I. The New Roman Wife

It is well-known that the sexual propriety demanded of the wife contrasted starkly with the culturally acceptable unfaithfulness of her husband with female household slaves and female dinner companions. The rationalisation of the husband's behaviour is presented by the early second-century AD writer, Plutarch, in a speech traditionally delivered in the nuptial bedroom. It demanded of the wife faithfulness to her husband's gods, and the acceptance of his casual sexual liaisons. The latter activity was defended on the grounds that they were a means of gratifying his lust, for it would be inappropriate for him to find sexual release with the wife he loved.⁷ Many brides were married in their early or mid-teens to men who were some ten years older than they were.⁸ Such a speech only re-enforced her expectations of her husband's sexual dalliances.

Around 44 BC a 'new' type of wife emerged in certain circles in Rome.⁹ 'Both in ostensibly factual texts and in imaginative writing a new kind of woman appears precisely at the time of Cicero and Caesar: a woman in high position, who nevertheless claims for herself the indulgence in sexuality of a woman of pleasure.'¹⁰

What could have given rise to such a change in the traditional behaviour of married women? They brought to marriage the all important dowry and could hold property in their own name. It was also possible for them to terminate the marriage, and receive back portion or all of the dowry.¹¹

⁷ Plutarch, 'Advice to Bride and Groom' 140B, D.

⁸ P. Veyne, 'The Roman Empire,' in P. Veyne, ed., *Histoire de la vie privée*, ET, *A History of Private Life* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987), p. 20 where he indicates that a girl was regarded as an adult at age fourteen.

⁹ See R.A. Bauman, *Women and Politics in Ancient Rome* (London: Routledge, 1992) on their 'liberation' and the role of élite women in public life. See also E. D'Ambra, 'Virgins and Adulterers', *Private Lives, Imperial Virtues: The Freeze of the Forum Transitorium in Rome* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), ch. 3.

¹⁰ E. Fantham et. al., 'The "New Woman": Representation and Reality', *Women in the Classical World* (Oxford: OUP, 1994), p. 280.

¹¹ S. Treggiari, 'Dos', *Roman Marriage: Iusti Coniuges From the Time of Cicero to the Time of Ulpian* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1991), ch. 10 and p. 446.

Along with this measure of financial independence came social freedom for some. ‘To judge from our sources in the last years of the republic, the more independent women of good family were beginning to decide for themselves what kind of social occasion they enjoyed.’¹² Roman wives began to compete with those from whom they had been traditionally differentiated viz., foreign women and freedwomen. The latter plied their charms as *hetairai* during the banquets and provided sexual pleasures in the ‘after dinners’ for their individual dinner companions. Among their clients were the husbands of Roman wives. The revolt by wives of social status against these totally inequitable moral values is explicable.

The ‘realistic prose reportage and the emerging genre of the personal love elegy offer glimpses of glamorous and assertive women, living a life of parties and self-gratification and choosing their own lovers. They are portrayed both inside elite society and in a more shadowy undefined half-world.’¹³ At least two of these women named by Cicero and Sallust were historical figures. Of the women celebrated by love poetry Catullus’s beloved has been identified with the historical Clodia, wife of Metellus’, and so has Sempronia.¹⁴ The evidence we possess is threefold—the views of contemporary writers covering the late Republic and the early second century AD, those of the poets, and finally the evidence from a Roman constitution and criminal law.

Contemporary Views

Sallust (86?-35? BC) who wrote of Sempronia, a married woman with children said that she was

able to play the lyre and dance more skillfully than an honest woman should, and having many other accomplishments which minister to voluptuousness. But there was nothing which she held so cheap as *modesty* and *chastity*. Her desires were so ardent that she sought men more often than she was sought by them...she was a woman of no mean endowment; she could write verse, bandy jests and use language which was modest or tender or wanton.¹⁵

Sallust himself took a noble woman ten years his senior as his mistress. Cicero wrote of her that she was ‘the daughter of one of Rome’s noblest families claiming the sexual freedom of a woman of

¹² Fantham, ‘The “New Woman”’, p. 280.

¹³ Ibid., pp. 281, 285.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 281.

¹⁵ Sallust, *Catiline* 25.

no social standing to lose, and making no effort to conceal her behaviour—“a woman not just noble but notorious”. A subsequent lover, Caelius, was accused of ‘passions, love making, adulteries, visits to Baiae, beach picnics, parties and revelling, songs, choruses and boat-trips’.¹⁶

In March, 50 BC in a letter written from Laodicea to his friend Atticus, Cicero records the sexual conduct of Vedius Pollio, a friend of Augustus and a wealthy and powerful son of freed persons. His baggage was mistakenly taken to be that of his host who had died suddenly and was opened for inventory purposes. In it were found five cameos of distinguished Roman women, who had given them to him as mementos of sexual liaisons. One of the high-class women was, he tells Atticus, ‘the sister of your friend “the brute” and wife of that “charmer” who takes things like this so lightly’.¹⁷ It was but one instance of a husband turning a blind eye to his wife’s conduct.

Plutarch passed comments on the ‘new’ women. He refers to those who were ‘bored by uncompromising and virtuous men, and take more pleasure in consorting with those who, like dogs and he-goats, are a combination of licentiousness and sensuality’.¹⁸ He warned husbands that ‘those who are not cheerful in the company of their wives, nor join with them in sportiveness and laughter, are thus teaching them to seek their own pleasures apart from their husbands’.¹⁹ ‘New’ wives pursued wealthy young single men.²⁰

Evidence of the Poets

The ethics of these ‘new’ women are presented in the poems of Catullus (85?-54 BC) and Propertius (c. 54-52 BC), and the erotic poems of Ovid (43 BC-AD 17).²¹ Greene in her introduction to *The Erotics of Domination* argues that they all ‘proclaim in their poems a radically unconventional philosophy of life with their apparently deliberate inversion of conventional sex roles—in which women are portrayed as dominant and men as subservient....The conventional

¹⁶ Fantham, ‘The “New Woman”’, p. 284 citing Cicero, ‘For Caelius’ 32, 35.

¹⁷ Cicero to Atticus, 6.1.24-5.

¹⁸ Plutarch, ‘Advice to Bride and Groom’, 7, *Moralia* 139B.

¹⁹ Plutarch, ‘Advice to Bride and Groom’, 15, *Moralia* 140A.

²⁰ Propertius, 1.5.59-60, 67-8, 2.16.

²¹ The restraints of space prevent a treatment of the evidence of all three poets and therefore the discussion is restricted to Ovid. For such a discussion see my forthcoming *New Roman Woman and the Pauline Churches*, ch. 1.

stance of the elegiac lover is one of enslavement to his emotions and servitude to his mistress.²²

Ovid, in his *Art of Love* not only undertook to instruct men but also women.²³ Furthermore, he scoffed at husbands: 'That man is so provincial who is hurt by an adulterous wife', *Amator* l. 37, the implication is that he is simply unsophisticated. He went on to argue that Rome was founded on adulterous practices for the husband 'does not recognise the character for which Rome is famous. Romulus and Remus, Ilia's Martian twins, were not born without guilt', ll. 38-40. 'By having the husband to "pimp" for their wives and justify it by alluding to a "heroic" tradition that sanctions brutality towards women, Ovid presents a view of Roman society which includes a persuasive acceptance of deception and exploitation as an inevitable part of amatory relations, including marriage. By constructing an argument in favour of adultery from the perspective of how it will benefit the husband, Ovid reveals how easy it is to rationalize corrupt practices.'²⁴

Legal Restraints

It has been said that 'We shall never know to what extent women of an established family endorsed the life of pleasure described by the elegists, or the degree to which the poet's own actions matched their profession of enslavement to love'.²⁵ However, legal evidence show that we are not just dealing with a topos.

The constitution framed in 44 BC in Rome for the Roman colony of Urso in Spain prescribed: 'Respecting all persons, who are or shall be colonists of the *colonia Genetiva Julia*, the wives of all such persons, being within the colony in accordance with this law, shall obey the laws of the *colonia Genetiva Julia* and of their husbands'. Given that reference elsewhere in this particular constitution is to 'all the conditions and with all the rights in every colony',²⁶ one is justified in drawing two conclusions. As Corinth was established in the same year the constitution drawn up for it in Rome would be no different in its provision. The most important observation is that it is clear that in

²² *Art of Love*. E. Greene, *The Erotics of Domination: Male Desire and the Mistress in Latin Love Poetry* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1998), p. xiii.

²³ 'Sexual Politics in Ovid's Amores', *The Erotics of Domination*, ch. 4.

²⁴ Greene, *The Erotics of Domination*, pp. 105-106.

²⁵ Fantham, 'The "New Woman"', p. 290.

²⁶ *Lex Coloniae Genetivae Juliae Ursonensis*, ch. CXXXIII, LXVI.

44 BC there were concerns about the misconduct of the wives of colonists.

Most significant, however, is the fact that in 18 BC and again in AD 9 Augustus legislated on marriage, remarriage and divorce.²⁷ The reason for this was his concern about flagrant, promiscuous marital unfaithfulness among Roman women of social status. This unprecedented move in Roman law arose from his belief that the licentious and adulterous conduct of married women with younger single men who were themselves avoiding marriage, was responsible for the falling birth rate among Roman citizens and the breakdown of family values. His legislation not only made adultery by a woman a criminal offence which could be initiated only after her husband divorced her, it also decreed ‘the condoning of adultery by an “injured” husband an offence open to criminal prosecution and punishable by expulsion from society.’²⁸ This severe penalty of exile and loss of property for the unwillingness of a husband to curb or punish his wife pressurised him into taking action against the profligate behaviour of his ‘new’ Roman wife.

It might be argued that Augustus’s law was merely a propaganda move or a show of strength in a matter unrelated to the issue at hand. That it was strongly resisted at the time of its introduction by those who stood to lose most, i.e. young men, undermines this contention. It was Suetonius who recorded that the knights ‘persistently called for its repeal at a public gathering’ but to no avail.²⁹ Young men were deprived of their sexual liaisons with experienced partners and were to be penalised for not marrying.

In addition, the relegation of the daughter of Augustus, Julia, from Rome for the rest of her life for adultery on the basis of this legislation shows that not even members of the imperial family were exempt from it. It also points to the strength of his convictions concerning the punishment of the new Roman wife.³⁰ ‘Ordinary anonymous citizens might continue to be chaste or promiscuous unnoticed, but respectability was now enforced in the public eye.’³¹

Augustus was appalled at Ovid’s defiance of this legislation with the publication of further sections of his love poems and finally exiled him to a Black Sea garrison outpost.³²

²⁷ For discussion see L.F. Raditsa, ‘Augustus’ Legislation concerning Marriage, Procreation, Love Affairs and Adultery’, *ANRW* II 13 (1980), 278-339.

²⁸ Fantham, ‘The “New Woman”’, p. 290.

²⁹ Suetonius, *Augustus* 34.2.

³⁰ Fantham, ‘The “New Woman”’, p. 292.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 290.

³² *Ibid.*, 292.

In the British Museum there is an early first-century AD tombstone from Rome of Lucius Aurelius Hermia and his wife, Aurelia Philematium, representing the Roman ideal. She is modestly attired with her marriage veil over her head, wearing an ankle length dress and kissing his hand; he is dressed in his toga affectionately gazing at her.³³ This image stands in opposition to the promiscuous wife promoted by Ovid and attacked by Augustus in vain through his draconian legislation.

II. The ‘New’ Roman Wife and 1 Timothy 2:9-15

‘Likewise also [I wish] wives to dress themselves in orderly adornment with propriety and modesty (ἐν καταστολῇ κοσμίῳ μετὰ αἰδοῦς καὶ σωφροσύνης κοσμεῖν ἑαυτάς), not with braided hair or gold or pearls or “flashy” clothes’. A social historian reading this for the first time could not but be arrested by the description of the wife with whom the contrast is being made.

First, there is the reference to the way a wife should not dress. Their immodest dresses, outlandish hairstyles, and lavish jewellery including gold and pearls distinguished the *hetairai* from wives in society.³⁴

Second, by contrast first-century wives, both in statue types and literature, wore a distinctive dress which was made of a considerable amount of material. It was meant to convey the modesty that epitomised the married woman. In addition, they wore the marriage veil in public to distinguish themselves from others.³⁵ Augustus had taken upon himself in his legislation to provide for distinctions in dress codes for the modest wife over against the adulteress and the prostitute.³⁶

Third, the wife was told to adorn herself with that great Roman virtue of modesty or discretion (*prudentia*, σωφροσύνη). That virtue was lauded on tombstones and commended to women.³⁷ In the

³³ No. 2274.

³⁴ T.A.L. McGinn, *Prostitution, Sexuality, and the Law in Ancient Rome* (Oxford: OUP, 1998), pp. 154-70.

³⁵ For the significance of the removal of the marriage veil as in 1 Cor. 11:2-16 see my ‘Veiled Men and Wives and Christian Contentiousness’, *After Paul left Corinth: The Impact of Secular Ethics and Social Change* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), ch. 6.

³⁶ McGinn, *Prostitution, Sexuality, and the Law*, p. 154.

³⁷ R.A. Kearsley, ‘Women in Public Life in the Roman East: Iunia Theodora, Claudia Metrodora and Phoebe, Benefactress of Paul’ *TynB* 50.2 (1999), 197.

concluding verse ‘salvation’ for wives is contingent on her remaining (ἐὼν μείνωσιν) in ‘faith and love and holiness’. The discussion is concluded with the phrase ‘with modesty (μετὰ σωφροσύνης)’. The passage began with an emphasis of modest adornment and concludes with an instruction to live by that same virtue.

Fourth, the term τεκνογονία has been the subject of intense discussion.³⁸ A variety of words recorded in Liddell and Scott was used across the whole of the Greek *corpus* in connection with the role of childbearing/rearing. τεκνύω means to procreate children, τεκνοσπορία can mean the ‘begetting of children’, τεκνοποιία either the ‘begetting’ or ‘rearing of children’, and τεκνοτροφία the ‘rearing of children’, so there is no standard term. This is not untypical of the Greek language. Arius Didymus discussed in the first century BC what men should be taught and the need to write down important things to be used to change their attitudes. With respect to household matters they are told to be patient concerning ‘these things’, viz. ‘going down together also for the purpose of marriage and the begetting of children’ (καὶ τὸ συγκαταβαίνειν καὶ εἰς γάμον καὶ εἰς τεκνογονίαν).³⁹ It is suggested that the term in 1 Timothy 2:15 refers not just to the birth of children but also to raising them.⁴⁰ The promise is that she would be saved through the raising of children rather than following her secular sisters who used contraception and/or abortions to avoid becoming a mother and to pursue instead adulterous dalliances—hence the reference to remaining in holiness.⁴¹ It was Juvenal who observed ‘Childbirth hardly ever occurs in a gold-embroidered bed since abortionists have such skills and so many potions, and can bring about the death of children in the womb’.⁴²

³⁸ For a history of the treatment of the text and the term τεκνογονία see A. Köstenberger, ‘Ascertaining Woman’s God-ordained Roles: An Interpretation of 1 Timothy 2:15’, *BBR* 7 (1997), 107-144.

³⁹ 76.1.22.

⁴⁰ W.M. Ramsay, *The Teaching of Paul in Terms of the Present Day* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1913), pp. 170-75 argued nearly a century ago that the term teknonogonia points to ‘the power of maternal instinct’ or ‘motherhood’; he renders the term teknosporiva thus. Earlier commentators take the same view; see Köstenberger, ‘Ascertaining Woman’s God-ordained Roles’ for discussion.

⁴¹ On the use of contraception see K. Hopkins, ‘Contraception in the Roman Empire’, *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 8 (1965), 124-51, and on abortion L.P. Wilkinson, ‘Population and Family Planning’, *Classical Attitudes to Modern Issues* (London: William Kimber, 1979), ch. 1.

⁴² Juvenal, 6. 593ff. Ovid, *Amores*, 2.13-14, Tactius, *Germania* 19.5.

It is sometimes overlooked that the Christian movement was not the only one that sought to represent its view of marriage against an antithetical image in society. In a letter from the Pythagorean School of philosophy written by a woman, Melissa, to Klearete the issue of modest dress for a wife was also the subject of discussion.

The fact that you eagerly want to hear about a wife's adornment promises fair hope that you are going to perfect yourself in virtue. So the modest (σωφροσύνη) and free wife should dwell with her lawful husband, embellished by her quietness, pure white and clean with her clothing, simple but not expensive, unaffected but not elaborately worked and overdone. For she must shun the [...] and garments woven with purple or gold threads. For these are useful to prostitutes for hunting more men....The free and prudent wife...[has] on her face the blush of modesty more than of rouge and white lead, and also having nobleness and decorousness and prudence in place of gold and emerald. For the prudent wife ought not to direct her love of beauty toward lavish expenditure on her dress or body, but on good management of her household and the preservation of her family.⁴³

Neither from the Pythagorean letter nor 1 Timothy 2:9-15 can it be assumed that there were 'new' Roman wives adhering to that philosophical school or the Christian community but it was against society's image of the 'new' wife that the interactions took place.

Because of the limitations of space a comparison of this text with the influence of the 'new' Roman widow on young 'merry' Christian ones in 1 Timothy 5:11-15 is not possible,⁴⁴ nor are wider questions of educated women and teaching,⁴⁵ and the social status of wives and widows in this congregation.⁴⁶ It is suggested, however, that the evidence discussed above provides a *Sitz im Leben* for 1 Timothy 2:9-15 and a framework in which to make judgements on aspects of the text.

⁴³ P.Haun. II 13 is a third century AD copy of letter from a much earlier period. For a discussion of dating and it having been written from one woman to another see S.B. Pomeroy, *Women in Hellenistic Egypt: from Alexander to Cleopatra* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1990), pp. 61-70.

⁴⁴ P. Walcot, 'On Widows and their Reputation in Antiquity', *Symbolae Osloenses* 64 (1991), pp. 5-26.

⁴⁵ E.A. Hemelrijk, *Matrona Docta: Educated Women in the Roman elite from Correlia to Julia Domna* (London: Routledge, 1999).

⁴⁶ These issues will be discussed in my forthcoming book.