Female Patronage in Early Imperial Rome

In *Epistulae ex Ponto* III.1 Ovid, writing from exile, encourages his wife to approach Livia and petition Augustus’ wife to assist in convincing the *princeps* of the need to recall Ovid from Tomis. The poem is of great interest, not only in that Ovid presents such a situation as plausible, but that he grants great power to Livia and details a particular social interaction exclusively between two women. Commentators on the poem have characterized the possibility of Ovid’s wife even approaching Livia as far-fetched, and the idea that Livia wielded such power as to convince her husband to undertake any action as unbelievable- dismissing the episode as wishful fiction from a desperate poet.

In this paper I examine the advice Ovid gives his wife (*Pont*. III.1.105-166) and argue that Ovid’s presentation of his wife’s action with Livia is representative of a wider societal convention. The *Senatus Consultum de Cn. Pisone Patre* (SCPP), dating shortly after the composition of the exile epistles, provides a concrete comparative example which details the effectiveness of such practice. Piso’s wife Plancina appealed to Livia, who subsequently intervened on her behalf with Tiberius and the senate. The two texts, I argue, reveal aspects of a larger social process in which women could exert influence and effect change, and support a reevaluation of female social behavior, formerly biased by modern preconceptions about the role of women in Roman society.

Livia is in fact praised by the senate (SCPP 109-120) for her assistance to Plancina, who had been implicated and charged in relation to the actions undertaken by her husband concerning the death of Germanicus. The outcome, as detailed in the inscription, demonstrates the power and authority of the *femina princeps* (cf. Ov. *Tr*. I.6.25, *Pont*. III.1.125). I argue Livia’s behavior as attested in the SCPP- as an intermediary to the *princeps* and focal point for female patronage- was indicative of a broadly recognized social practice and system of patronage which would have offered to Ovid (if carried out properly) some hope for his recall. I relate these texts to a broader discussion of evidence for the social protocols between women and a female patron/client relationship which functioned beside male-based relationships, but also offered moments where male and female spheres could intersect. This allowed women to directly intervene with their husbands, or male acquaintances, and offered an alternative avenue for patronage and honor of noble families, and subsequent benefits for the client and her family.

In this light I also consider Ovid’s presentation of Marcia, the wife of Paullus Fabius Maximus, in *Pont*. III.1.75-84 and elsewhere in the Ovidian corpus. Ovid also recognizes that his wife had worked to foster a relationship with the Fabii (or held one, cf. Helzle {1989}) and expresses the hope that continued reverence and honors would result in Marcia’s willingness to intercede with her husband.

I conclude with a discussion of Ovid’s characterization of Livia in the poem. Though Ovid’s presentation of the scene as such is not unbelievable, Ovid depicts Livia in association with negative female figures from mythology (Scylla, Medea, Circe, Cytemnestra, et al.), which, as Patricia Johnson (1997) has noted, would probably have done little to help his case. I question how such a representation would have affected the poem’s reception, how such a depiction is consistent with Ovidian representations of Augustus, and we might interpret Ovid as expressing his hostility and frustration with the entire house, not only the *princeps* himself.

Helzle, M. (1989) “Mr. and Mrs. Ovid,” *Greece and Rome* 36: 183-193.

Johnson, P.J. (1997) “Ovid’s Livia in Exile,” *CW* 90.6: 403-420.

Potter, D.S. and C. Damon (1999), trans. “The *Senatus Consultum de Cn. Pisone Patre*,” *AJPh* 120: 13-42.