FASHION AND POLITICS:

How Roman Women
Groomed their Public Images

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Back in the benighted years before the women's movement of the '70's (and yes, there are some of us old enough to remember them), jokes about female frivolity and vanity were not yet considered politically incorrect. I once, therefore, found myself in an exchange of rather edgy banter with a male friend about the possible direction of my future scholarship. He implied that my publications would have largely to do with hairstyle and clothing. Some three decades later, therefore, it is a matter of some chagrin to admit that indeed, a great deal of my scholarship on the portraits and public images of women has dealt with exactly those topics. In my own defense, however, I must add that male scholars were paying attention to those same aspects of portraiture long before my generation of women scholars entered the field. The reasons for this fixation on fashion, however, are a bit more serious, or so we hope, than a concern with what the well-dressed Roman man or woman would be wearing in the social season of A.D. 83.

Portraits, as I think we can all agree, are not just neutral or mechanical likenesses of people; they always have messages to convey. No one would sit for a portrait unless some audience was meant to see it, whether that audience consisted of a few relatives and close friends or the entire population of an

empire. The portrait, therefore, presents its subject in the way that the patron wanted other people to perceive that person, and as such they have an enormous amount of information to tell us about the societies that produced them, their social organization, their political systems, the roles they assigned to men and women, and their attitudes toward leaders. What gives a leader his authority over people: his age and experience, or his youthful vigor? Should he have charisma, or should he have the humility not to try to claim such a special gift? Should he have an aristocratic aloofness, or an approachable and down-to-earth nature? And once he's made his choice, how does he convey it? Obviously, the portraits of rulers can tell us a lot about what their followers wanted to see. And part of every ruler's public image is the image of his family. Even in our democratic system of government, the role of the "First Lady" is a subject of constant, often very polemical debate, and so, often, is that of his children. Is the press out of bounds, for example, to publicize the news that Jenna and Barbara Bush were caught using fake ID's, or do the First Daughters have a responsibility to set an example for other college students? But in our society, at least, the significance of the President's wife and children is little more than symbolic. In an hereditary system of government, the ruler's wife, children, and other relatives play a crucial role in politics. His ancestors, both male and female, justify the ruler's current position of authority, while his wife and heirs represent his plans for the future, and his guarantee to the people of an orderly transition of government. Their images also must inevitably carry strong political messages.

But before we can understand the significance of ancient Roman portraits, there are a few rather mundane but necessary questions we have to answer; first and foremost, "Who is this?" Very rarely can we enjoy the luxury of simply reading an inscription on a portrait, since ancient statues almost never survive still attached to their original bases. Coins, fortunately, usually do combine a portrait face with a name, and our best hope for identifying sculpture is often comparison with a nu-

mismatic image. But coins are limited both by their small scale and by the fact that they can only show us a profile view. We have to compare sculptured portraits not only with coins, therefore, but with each other. Portraits of private individuals are usually unique, original works of art, but patrons who wanted to set up statues of the ruling emperor in their public square or town hall could seldom afford that luxury. They would need to order a copy of some standard, official prototype. What that means to the modern scholar is that if two or more surviving portraits appear to be exact replicas of the same original, the chances are good that they both represent some public figure whose images were copied for widespread distribution. And one way to verify whether or not two works are in fact copies or just happen to have a coincidental similarity is to examine the hair. If the pattern of locks corresponds almost point for point, then yes, they are probably replicas. It's not likely that two artists would coincidentally produce that same pattern in two separate works. Articles about Roman portrait sculpture, therefore, tend to go on at mind-numbing length about "fork and pincer patterns," Y-shaped and V-shaped patterns of strands, one versus two rows of curls around the face, full waves versus artificially flattened and stiffened waves, and so forth. Tedious as they may be, however, these typological studies are the crucial groundwork we have to undertake before we can begin to interpret an image. After all, if we develop an elaborate theory about the portraits of Agrippina the Elder only to find out that we based our arguments on portraits of her daughter Agrippina the Younger by mistake, a lot of energy has gone for naught.

Once we've answered the question "who is this," however, the second question has to be "when was this portrait made," followed closely by the question "why?" Was it when she married the emperor's chosen heir? When she gave birth to her first child? When she received the title "Augusta," after her husband succeeded to the throne? After he died, and she became the priestess of his cult? Or after she herself had died, and was being honored as the mother or ancestress of the new

emperor? And closely related to both those questions is, "What sort of person does the artist want us to think that she is?" One of the best ways to manipulate how others perceive you, of course, is by how you dress and wear your hair. Let's examine, therefore, a few of the ways that women of the imperial families of Rome did exactly that.

What are a few of the public images that a woman of the ruling family might want to project? Well, there are several that are still very popular today. First and foremost, there's the "modest, respectable lady." This is the First Lady who wants to appear gracious in public, well groomed and well dressed, a good hostess, and a good spokesperson for some causes that interest her, but definitely does not want to seem like a frivolous publicity hound. A type we're not likely to see so often in a democracy, but that's still very important in Britain is the "marriageable princess," whose function, to be blunt, is as a brood-mare for royal offspring. No patriotic Briton would have been so crude as to describe the late Princess Diana in such terms, but why else was the public so fascinated with her beauty, her clothing, her diets, her weight, her possible eating disorders, her health in general, the problems in her marriage, and so many other personal details about her? The wife of the heir to the throne could not help but be a national sex symbol—sex of the most respectable kind, but sex nonetheless, and she fulfilled that role admirably by promptly producing two male heirs. Contemporary Britain also offers us a stellar example of another important type: the Queen Mum, the beloved link to an earlier generation. Let's examine how several Roman women tried to live up to these various sorts of images.

Livia Drusilla was the wife of Rome's first emperor Augustus. Officially and legally, her status was exactly the same as that of any other citizen's wife, but in practical terms, her husband's position gave her an extraordinary degree of public importance, and she knew it. She frequently presented petitions to her husband on behalf of people or groups who wanted some political favor, and her activities were no secret—

indeed, they were a matter of public record. She used her considerable personal wealth for philanthropy, making grants to poor families to raise their children, donating funds to restore old temples and sanctuaries that had fallen into ruin, and sometimes sponsoring the construction of new shrines. Not coincidentally, she chose to focus her efforts on cults that most directly related to women and to the "family values" that her husband was trying to promote with his social legislation. And she made a point of exhibiting those "traditional values" herself. Like an old fashioned Roman wife, she would spin yarn, weave fabric, and make clothing for her husband that he proudly wore in public on all but the most formal occasions. Livia was a savvy politician, but the image that so many people know from Robert Graves's *I Claudius* is based largely on the very politically biased and misogynistic writing of Tacitus. When he wished to portray any regime as tyrannical, Tacitus was fond of attributing every unpopular decision to scheming behind the scenes in the imperial family, and blaming every death of a popular figure on poisoning. That usually meant blaming everything on the woman nearest to the man in power. There is no real evidence that Livia ever killed anyone, and a great deal of evidence that many people admired and were grateful to her for the ways that she used her wealth and influence.

In the portraits datable to her husband's lifetime, (fig. 1), Livia always wears a neat, rather prim coiffure, but one that still shows careful attention to fashion. A section of her hair on the top of her head is combed forward, swept up into a topknot, and then drawn back along the top of the crown in a braid. The rest of the hair forms full, soft waves at each side of the face, but is drawn back into a tight chignon at the nape of the neck. One or two little strands may escape here and there, softening the severity of her appearance, but this is obviously not a sexy or glamorous "do." It is, however, a style quite flattering to women like Livia who have short, broad faces, because it adds height to her proportions. The poet Ovid, in his *Ars Amatoria,* recommended the style to women of that facial
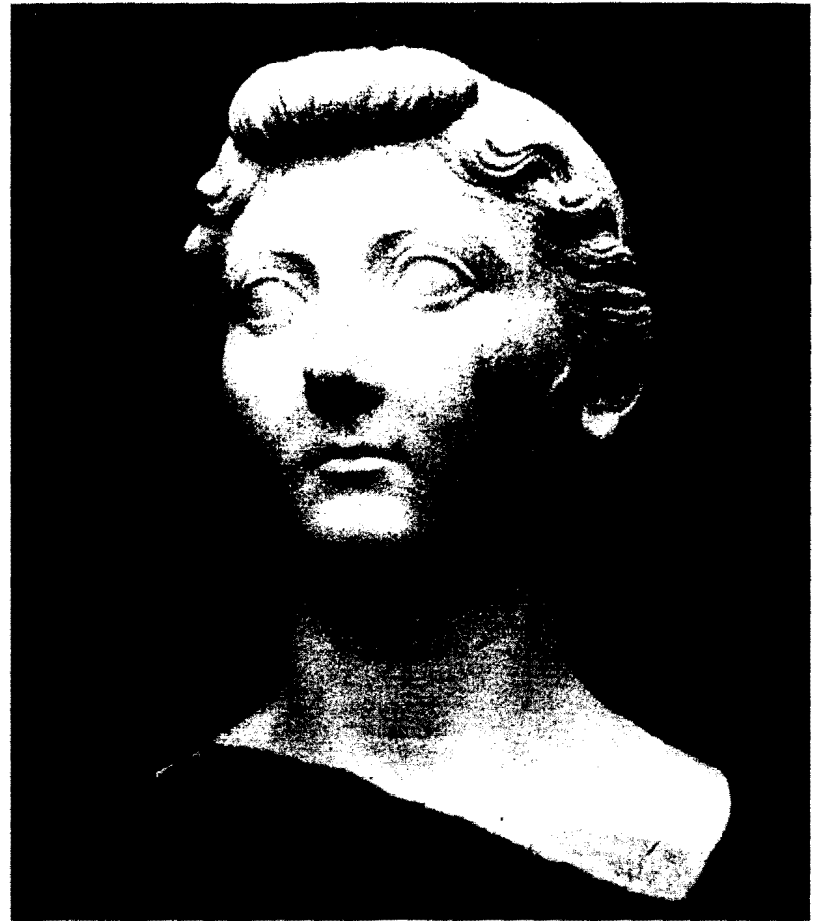

Figure 1. Livia Drusilla, ca. A.D. 14

type for just that reason, and although Augustus banished Ovid, his wife was evidently not too proud to take that advice. Despite the deceptive simplicity of the neat, closed contours, she would need to have a few skillful ladies' maids to help create this look, since this is not the sort of hairstyle that one could put together easily in a few minutes. Livia would not dream of appearing in public looking like a glamorous bimbo, but she wouldn't appear unkempt or unattractive, either.

Six decades after Livia's death, another formidable woman entered the Imperial residence for the first time. Be-

fore crossing the threshold, she turned and announced to the assembled people, "I enter this palace such a woman as I would be when I leave!" The speaker was Trajan's wife Plotina, who was determined to show the public how different she was from the scandal-plagued women of the preceding Flavian dynasty. Fairly or unfairly, the wife and the niece of Domitian, the late and unlamented emperor who had been assassinated just two years earlier, had been the subject of lurid gossip. Both women had been accused of extramarital affairs, his wife Domitia Longina with an actor and Julia Flavia of an incestuous affair with the emperor himself. The two women who both held the title of "Augusta" were believed to have been engaged in a ruthless cat-fight both for the affections of the emperor and for political power. Plotina was determined to avoid such perceptions. She knew that she would have to share her prominence with the emperor's sister Marciana, since Plotina had no children, while Marciana had two daughters. Marciana, therefore represented the only hope of perpetuation for the Ulpian family. But there would be no repeat of recent history if Plotina or Marciana could do anything to avoid it. Plotina therefore wanted it known that she had no ambitions to be anything more than the wife of a citizen, and to prove it, both she and Marciana turned down the title of "Augusta" when it was first offered to them. The women both took their cue from Trajan, who had likewise refused the title "Father of his Country," saying "Wait until I've earned it." When Pliny composed a panegyric to Trajan, he made a point of complimenting both women on their decision, as well as on their modest demeanor, their lack of personal ambition, and their harmonious relationship with each other.

And again, Plotina's portraits, on coins and in sculpture, present a prim, tidy, rather dour person, whom no one could accuse of frivolity. (Fig. 2: Munich portrait of Plotina). Fashions had changed several times since Livia's generation; the younger Julio-Claudian women wore short-cropped curls around their faces, and longer hair bound or braided in back, while women of the generation after that one wore high, full

Figure 2. Plotina, ca. A.D. 98

masses of curls above their foreheads. Plotina still wears a crest of curls in her early portraits, but mashes every bit of spontaneous texture out of it, lacquering the curls into a stiff, linear arrangement. A few years later, despite her promise to remain exactly the same woman she had always been, she did change her hairstyle—but in the direction of greater severity. Now, her hair is not curled at all, but combed straight back over

some sort of comb or frame. She still wears a sort of crest over her forehead, as fashion dictates, but the texture is strictly linear and severe. (Fig. 3). This new portrait type probably coincides with an important honor to Plotina: in A.D. 105 she did, finally, accept the title "Augusta." Perhaps the new honor in titulature requires some compensation in the form of a more severe and modest public image.

Plotina's sister-in-law Marciana preferred a somewhat more decorative coiffure, one that continued to show crests of curls above the forehead, but in her images, as in Plotina's earlier type, the curls are again lacquered stiff and flat, with dry, linear textures. A viewer might be excused for assuming, when looking at these women's portraits, that sculptors simply lacked the skill imagination to create anything livelier, but she would be wrong. In fact, artists of Trajan's time, as of many eras, had choices. They could create rich, naturalistic looking textures for hair if they wished to do so, and in a portrait that may represent one of Marciana's granddaughters, they outdid themselves. (Fig. 4). The lavish drill-work in the huge pile of curls above the forehead displays extraordinary virtuosity, while the porcelain-like skin areas create a stunning contrast of textures with the rich treatment of the hair. At the same time, this elegant young woman appears rather demure, turning her face gracefully to one side so that the portrait does not readily make eye contact with the viewer. Here is a classic specimen of the "marriageable princess" type, even including the shy, sidelong glance that many of us remember from the early photographs of Princess Diana.

This magnificent work, a staple of art history textbooks, is often described simply as "A Roman Beauty." We can't be certain just whom it represents, because she never appeared on coins that would allow us to establish a clear identification. She was, however, sufficiently important for sculptors to make at least two replicas of this same prototype; a nearly identical, although less well-known bust, survives in Fiesole, near Florence. The existence of replicas would strongly suggest a woman of the imperial family, someone whose likenesses ap-

Figure 3. Plotina Augusta, ca. A.D. 105

Figure 4. Matidia, the Younger?, 98–117 A.D.

peared in several different public places, in portrait groups of the emperor with his relatives. Furthermore, her rather long, rectangular face and squarish jaw give her a definite family resemblance both to Marciana and to Trajan. Marciana's daughter Matidia had two daughters, Matidia the Younger and Sabina. The family tendency to produce girls must have been rather frustrating to Trajan, but girls are not useless in a dynastic family; they can be married off to the emperor's adopted successor, in the hopes that someday their sons will

inherit the principate, and that imperial power will ultimately remain in the family. Matidia the Younger and Sabina, therefore, must have been as important to the Roman people in their youth as the young daughter of the crown prince of Japan is to her contemporary countrymen. Sabina became the wife of an aristocrat named Hadrian who did eventually succeed Trajan as emperor, and her later portraits are very well known. This young woman is definitely not Sabina, who has a shorter and broader face. She may very well, however, be Sabina's sister. In any case, the coiffure is of the type fashionable during the principate of Trajan, even though it is represented here with far more flamboyance than in the images of the older women of his family. In other words, this glamorous portrait must be closely contemporary with the dry, dour portraits of Plotina. Sculptors obviously could work in very different styles depending on the personae that they wished to convey.

The third of the stock characters mentioned above, the "Queen Mum," also recurs regularly throughout the history of the Roman empire. The Roman custom of deifying imperial figures who had died guaranteed that important men and women of the emperor's family would remain in the public eye, as the objects of religious cult. Temples require cult images, and so portraits of a revered imperial figure might continue to be produced many years after his or her death. The family of Trajan and Hadrian offers us a particularly beautiful example of such images in the late portraits of Sabina. Hadrian's wife died in A.D. 136, two years before her husband, at the age of about 50, and was deified. Portraits of Sabina were of course produced throughout her life, but the marble head illustrated in Fig. 5 most closely corresponds to the image in a relief that commemorates her deification. In the relief, which probably decorated an altar in her honor, she is borne to heaven from her funeral pyre on the back of a winged figure, and there, as here, she wears a veil over her head that conceals most of her coiffure. What we can see, however, the simple middle part and soft waves around the

Figure 5. The Deified Sabina, A.D. 136 or later

face, closely resembles the ideal coiffures on the statues of the Olympian goddesses like Juno, Minerva, and Venus. By concealing just how she arranges her hair at the back of the head, the sculptor of this portrait removes her from the temporal realm of passing fashions, and allows her to become timeless. The lovely and serene face does not reveal her age or the illness that may have led to her death, but again, that sort of realism would no longer be appropriate in the image of a *diva*.

Her features, however, must remain recognizable, because her personal identity is still a matter of great importance. Although she had no children of her own, she is the adoptive mother of Hadrian's chosen heir Antoninus Pius, and as such he honors her in inscriptions and public art as one of his two deified parents.

The terms "public image" and "spin control" may be new, but the phenomena are as old as human politics. Public figures have always tried to control how the public perceives them, and their physical appearance offers one way to do so. Al Gore took unmerciful ridicule for consulting Naomi Wolf about how to dress and present himself in public, but can we seriously believe that any candidate for public office would not put just as much careful thought and consultation into choosing his clothes and hairstyle? Both the men and the women of Rome's imperial families certainly did, and the choices that they made about how to present themselves can still tell us a great deal today about the politics of their times.

NOTES ON ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure 1: Livia Drusilla, wife of Augustus. Ca. A.D. 14. Copenhagen, Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek. All photographs by Louisa Ngote, Curator of Visual Resources, Department of Art and Art History, Oakland University, Rochester, MI.

Figure 2: Plotina, wife of Trajan, earlier portrait type. Ca. A.D. 98. Munich Glyptothek, photo by Louisa Ngote.

Figure 3: Plotina, wife of Trajan, later portrait type, ca. A.D. 105. Rome, Museo Nazionale Romano, Palazzo Massimo.

Figure 4: A young woman of the Trajanic era, A.D. 98–117 (Matidia the Younger?) Rome, Museo Capitolino.

Figure 5: The Deified Sabina, A.D. 136 or later, Rome, Museo Nazionale, Palazzo Massimo.