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The Idealization of Women in Roman Literature

Ancient Romans deeply valued the characteristics of piety and almost servile submission and devotion in a woman. Women were commonly idealized in Roman art, literature, and mythology by renowned historical and legal minds such as Livy and Pliny the Younger. Upon analyzing excerpts from both Livy’s *Ab Urbe Condita* and Pliny the Younger’s *Epistulae*, the idealized Roman woman is unmistakably evident. Though Livy writes on the legendary rape of Lucretia during the reign of Tarquinius Superbus and Pliny on the passing of his friend Fundanus’s adolescent daughter, the two authors’ descriptions of both women reveal a common attitude and deference toward societally ascribed female virtue.

In the passage by Livy, the historian describes the rape of Lucretia by Sextus Tarquinius, son of the Roman king. He labels Lucretia, wife of Collatinus, a “femina bona” and devoted wife, praising her on account of her “magnum amōrem virtūtis” (59). Such patronizing terms the author employs to articulate a message of accountability on the part of Lucretia, commending a woman for committing suicide because she had been raped out of wedlock. These terms stand in stunning contrast to the words and phrases Livy attributes to Sextus, including “malus” and “tyrannī” (59). While Lucretia is characterized primarily by loving, intimate, familial terms, Sextus is described using terms from the lexical field of politics, demonstrating the Roman view of women as first and foremost wives and caretakers and men as prolific public figures.

The selection from the *Epistulae* of Pliny the Younger relays a message from the author to his friend, Marcellinus, informing him that their mutual friend Fundanus’s daughter has tragically passed away due to unknown illness. Pliny’s insistence that the daughter of Fundanus had been granted wisdom by the gods before her death first appears to break from the classical notion of women as mere caretakers by praising the young girl’s intellect, though it is soon apparent her wit is indeed not the subject of Pliny’s praise. Rather, the girl’s devotion to and love for her “mātrem patremque, frātrem sorōremque,” and others were ostensibly the most praiseworthy aspects of her brief life (102). Pliny employs parallelism here and elsewhere throughout the passage to further emphasize the extent to which Fundanus’s daughter remained faithful to her family, even as she endured terminal illness.

What the writings of Livy and Pliny ultimately do best is serve to illustrate the sanctimonious idealization of women in Roman literature. Both Lucretia, a grown, married woman, and the daughter of Fundanus, a young girl of only thirteen years, are treated as epitomizing the Roman woman. Fiercely devoted to their families and dutifully subservient to their husband and father, respectively, Lucretia and Fundanus’s daughter exemplify every Roman man’s expectations of a Roman woman around the first century C.E. Though Livy’s passage recounts a classic legend for the general public and Pliny’s is addressed directly to a close friend, the ways in which both authors refer to their passages’ respective subjects are consistent with the prevailing ideals expected of women in the ancient Roman world.