

Republican and Imperial Roman Women in Politics

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The change of the Roman state from being Republic to Empire, was not a special concern only to the men of Rome. It also affected women who were at least somewhat involved in Roman political life. They were more vulnerable than during the republican times and were affected by the web of the court intrigues. The women of the imperial family were used as marriage alliance tools, were expected to be an example for all the Roman state to follow and often became victims of the imperial legislation. Alongside with all these changes, certain ideals stayed the same through both the Republic and the Empire. The wife of the emperor seemed to be the only woman in a perfectly good position.

Under the emperor, women became extremely vulnerable and unprotected. At the time of the Republic, the wives of Roman Senators were honored and well regarded as the power over the state belonged to their husbands. A good example of this is Cornelia, the mother of the brothers Gracchi, who refused to marry the King of Egypt explaining that this matrimony would be a step down for a widow of a Roman Senator. This cannot be regarded just as an arrogant statement, for nobody, even the Pharaoh, objected to it. This illustrates very well how influential the Roman Senators were and how significant their wives felt while there was no sole rule in Rome.

After the end of the Republic, the Senators' and their wives role was diminished and they no longer had as much respect and power. Suetonius tells us about all the affairs Augustus had with the wives of Senators. If we can trust him with the evidence he provides, it becomes clear that most of these women did not have a choice. The most powerful one would always get what he wanted, even though some of them may have been pleased and interested in having a relationship with the most influential man in Rome.

Being involved with intrigues of the Empire increased the danger in women's personal life. Describing the schemes of the Roman court, Tacitus tells us about Marcia wife of Paullus Fabius Maximus, Augustus' confidant. According to his account, Marcia "had warned" Livia about the warmth shown by both Agrippa Postumus and Augustus during the visit of the latter to the island of Planasia. Since she had originally received this information from Fabius Maximus, by passing it down to Livia, Marcia might have caused the death of her husband.

The positive effect for the women was that the existence of a sole ruler replaced the need for the daughters of the politicians to be used for the marriage alliances. Under the Republic rule they would be forced to marry for political reasons. Under the Empire the emperor was the only bond necessary, there was no need to be allied with his subjects - the power was not with politicians. This made positions of the Senators quite unstable, for now they needed to be pleasing somebody above them instead of governing the State. "Upper class survivors found that slavish obedience was the way to succeed, both politically and financially" ¹. On one hand this has a negative effect. The power is now in the fate of one man. On the other hand, the

daughters of the Senators benefited from this kind of system as there was no need for them to be used as tools for sealing their fathers' alliances. The daughter of the emperor was the only one who did not benefit from this system, as she was needed to gain close associates and legal heirs for her father. For this reason, Augustus' only daughter Julia was married several times to those men whom her father needed to keep close to himself. Even after her husband Marcus Agrippa had died, it was dangerous to let her stay a widow for there would have been a potential for her to fall into power of some charming and power-hungry aristocrat. This would have been almost as dangerous as Sejanus was when ruling in Tiberius' place later, as Agrippa Postumus would have been if manipulated by somebody else. As a result, Julia, as the only daughter of the emperor, could have influence on her father, but never any freedom. She was required to choose the most beneficial husband for Augustus' power and reputation. She was envied the most among the women of the Empire for her nobility and power, but she could make no personal choice for her life.

Julia did not just silently disagree with the limitations imposed on her, she rebelled in the only way possible for her which was adultery. Some of her marriages were quite pathetic and suggested a total lack of a personal relationship with her spouse. The best example of this is her last husband, Tiberius, who was also her stepbrother. After Augustus' death, he was the one to cut off her food allowance, which left her without funds for existence².

The politics had also made some of the women powerless victims of the imperial legislation. Even though as a young man Augustus was accused of adultery³, moral legislation was one of the major changes he brought to Rome in later times. He put a lot of effort into passing the legislation and ensuring that it was being followed. The emperor temporarily failed to see his own daughter's transgressions, but as soon as he had his eyes opened he banished her from Rome. Away from her home and friends, Julia was given a modest allowance to live on and not allowed drinking wine or any kind of luxury. She was prohibited from seeing any male companions, except by special permission from Augustus and only after he had been given full description of the man's "age, height, complexion, and of any distinguishing marks on his body"⁴. This time Augustus really made sure that his daughter would have no opportunity to engage in any sort of relationship.

The apparent reason for this harshness was that in order to guarantee that his legislation would be followed, Augustus had to show that he was ready to impose the moral rules on those who refused to obey. Even when one of his favourite freedmen, Polus, was convicted of adultery, Augustus ordered him to commit suicide. Nobody was allowed to get away with the low ethics. He could afford no exceptions, otherwise his legislation would be useless. Julia was a victim to his rule. Accordingly to Suetonius, her father had even considered her execution. It is notable, however, that when she was exiled, her mother, of whom we did not know much since her divorce with Augustus, followed Julia the Elder into banishment. Several years later, Julia the Younger, granddaughter of Augustus, was exiled from Rome for the same reason.

The only woman that seemed to have a stable position with both power and security was the wife of the emperor. On the example of Livia Drusilla, wife of Augustus, we can see how influential a wife of a powerful man could be. Augustus married her

when she was very young taking her away from her first husband Tiberius Nero. From then on, Augustus' affection was fixed on her - they stayed together till the end. Despite certain insecurity from not giving Augustus an heir, Livia was the most powerful woman of her time. Augustus appeared to have taken most of her advice, for she was the only one whose interests resembled his own. If he was thriving - she would be thriving with him, if he got shaken - she would be shaken with him. She was even resented by the Senate for all the power she had without the accountability. However, all she had was totally dependent on the affection of her husband. As long as he loved her, her position was enviable. Still, what if he chose not to stay with her anymore? We have enough examples of this kind of situation with Augustus himself. He divorced his first wife Claudia, stepdaughter of Mark Antony, as soon as his alliance with the latter fell apart. An even scarier example is his second wife, Scribonia, whom he divorced on the exact day when she bore him his only daughter, Julia.

Tacitus, as most Senators, did not like Livia. In his *Annals of the Imperial Rome*, he accuses her of causing the deaths of, Lucius Caesar and Gaius Caesar - the sons of Julia the Elder, persuading Augustus to banish Agrippa Postumus, and later ordering his execution. He portrays her as a manipulative and controlling wife of an aging husband, at the same time calling her "feminine bully", "catastrophe to the nation and to the house of the Caesars". Tacitus suspected Livia of causing the death of Augustus himself⁵. This accusation, however, has no foundation. Livia had lost most of her power as soon as her husband died. She was still able to influence her son in certain issues, for example in case of Quintus Haterius, who had appealed to her for protection from the emperor's anger⁶. In most of his actions, however, Tiberius was not willing to share his power with her.

Suetonius mentions some of the unchanged Roman values in his *Life of Augustus*. He tells us that education of Augustus' daughter and granddaughters still included the tradition of spinning and weaving. According to the historian, the emperor on most occasions wore simple clothes made for him by Livia, Octavia, and Julia the Elder, or his granddaughters, Julia the Younger or Agrippina. Although this may not have been absolutely accurate, Augustus reflected on the ancient Roman ideals: in the imperial times, just as in the beginning of the Republic, all the women, even the wives of Senators, were expected to make clothes for their families.

From all these examples we can see what effect on the women of the Roman political world the change from Republic to Empire had. Many changes both positive and negative came with the coming of the Empire and the women generally improved their position under the rule of the Emperors.