Women’s Costume and Feminine Civic Morality in Augustan Rome

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Augustus was eager to revive the traditional dress of the Romans. One day in the Forum he saw a group of citizens dressed in dark garments and exclaimed indignantly, ‘Behold the masters of the world, the toga-clad race!’ He thereupon instructed the aediles that no Roman citizen was to enter the Forum, or even be in its vicinity, unless he were properly clad in a toga.¹

In the terms of Augustan ideology, the avoidance of Roman dress by Romans was another sign of their abandoning the traditional Roman way of life, character and values in preference for the high culture, pomp, and moral and philosophical relativism of the Hellenistic East. This acculturation of foreign ways was frequently claimed to have brought Republican Rome to the edge of destruction in both the public and private spheres.²

Roman authors of the late first century BCE depict women in particular as devoted to their own selfish pleasure, marrying and divorcing at will, and preferring childlessness and abortion to raising a family. Such women were regarded as having abandoned their traditional role of custos domi (‘preserver of the house/hold’), a role that correlated a wife’s body and her husband’s household. A Roman wife was expected to maintain her body’s inviolability and to preserve her husband’s possessions, while increasing his family by bearing children and enriching his wealth through her labors.³

The mindful care of the ideal wife was epitomized in the legendary story of the chaste Lucretia, who became an important symbol of wifehood in Augustan literature. In recounting the events that led to the fall of the last king of Rome, the Augustan historian Livy relates how Lucretia’s husband and his friends amused themselves during a tedious siege of a nearby city by boasting about the virtues of their wives. To settle the contention, they made an unexpected journey home and discovered that all the wives, save Lucretia, were attending dinner parties. Only Lucretia was found at home, weaving cloth for her husband.⁴ Though by the late Republic upper-class women may have mostly abandoned this traditional occupation of Roman wives, according to the biographer Suetonius Augustus none the less regarded it as a still potent symbol of a wife’s virtue and devotion to her husband’s
Two important aspects of Augustus’ program to reform public and private morality involved legislation and public ‘propaganda’. Augustus instituted legislation concerning the proper exercise of female sexuality. These laws prevented unmarried persons from receiving inheritances and legacies and rewarded freeborn women who had three or more children by removing them from statutory guardianship. An essential part of his program of cultural and moral renewal was the creation of a ‘new pictorial language’ that gave the Romans a new image of themselves as heirs of the traditional Roman morality that had gained them an empire.6

Within this pictorial language, depictions of female subjects were used as ‘moral signs’ of civic morality and health.7 Such female subjects included deities or personifications of fertility and regeneration.8 On the quintessential Augustan monument, the Altar of Augustan Peace, the healthy state (Tellus) that Augustus presented himself as restoring is depicted as a full-breasted woman who caresses twin babies and holds on her lap various fruits and cereals, symbols not only of the regeneration that accompanies peace, but of the additional children she will yet bear9 (Figure 1). In the panel accompanying this scene is another female figure (Roma) who represents civic morality. Depicted as an Amazon, armed with helmet, shield, sword and spear, Roma sits enthroned, with one breast exposed, on a pile
of weapons captured from the enemy. As Eve D’Ambra notes, ‘No doubt, she serves as an appropriate defender of the honor of the city and empire because she is chaste and pure. The body of Roma, replete with bronze armor, repels advances, both sexual and military …’ An image of a mortal woman serving as dual sign of civic health and morality adorned the frieze of another Augustan monument, the Basilica Aemilia. Here, in the Forum, the civic heart of Rome, the image of the legendary Tarpeia connects the destruction of Rome with the wrong use of female sexuality. According to Livy, in his account of the reign of the first king of Rome, Romulus, the Sabines were nearly successful in their siege of Rome due to the treason of Tarpeia, daughter of the commander of Rome’s citadel. Whether she was seduced by love of the Sabine commander or by greed for Sabine gold with which to adorn her body and make herself more desirable—Roman authors differ as to her motivation—she let the Sabines into the citadel. The relief depicts her fate: as each Sabine soldier passed by, he threw his shield upon her. Tarpeia is shown half-covered by the shields, arms spread wide in a fruitless gesture for mercy. All three of these reliefs (Tellus, Roma and Tarpeia) show how the female body was troped as the body politic in Augustan pictorial language: a woman who is a custos (preserver/defender) of her chastity is configured as a defender of the state’s health and survival and a provider of future citizens, while a woman who yields her body to lust (whether of sex or luxury) betrays the state to its destruction.

Another important part of the Augustan pictorial language was the establishment of distinctive ‘Roman’ costume. Since Augustan ideology viewed public peace and social stability as particularly ‘dependent on the proper conduct of women in domestic life and the encouragement of productive sexuality’, Augustus not only made the toga once again the national costume of Roman men, but also re-established the distinctive costume for their wives: the white stola, which they wore over their tunic, and the woollen bands (vittae), with which they bound their hair. Thus in the friezes of the Altar of the Augustan Peace, members of Augustus’ family, proudly wearing toga and stola, pose as models of the traditional Roman family that Augustus wanted to reinstate in place of the sexual immorality that was thought to have conduced to the collapse of the Roman Republic (Figure 2). Just as the toga signified the Roman male in his civic role as ‘master of the world’, so the woman’s costume signified her in her private role as protector (custos) of her body, its sexuality and her husband’s household.

In re-establishing what he thought was traditional Roman costume, Augustus was undoubtedly influenced by the research of such antiquarian scholars as Varro (116–27 BCE) and Verrius Flaccus (deceased BCE 4), tutor to Augustus’ own grandsons. They shared their contemporaries’ view that Romans were abandoning the traditional Roman way of life, and this sense of a lost or disappearing past spurred their interest in collecting and investigating what information they could find on ‘antique’ Rome. These antiquarian authors treat the subject of costume neither comprehensively nor
systematically. Rather, their attention is caught by interesting etymologies or explanations of costume items.

As the antiquarian accounts of early Republican costume suggest, the protection of a woman’s sexuality began in childhood. Children of both sexes wore the *toga praetexta*. This toga had a border of purple (*praetexta*) that indicated its wearer was in an ‘inviolable’ state. The *praetexta*, for example, adorned the togas of magistrates who presided over sacrifices as one of the duties of their offices and the toga worn by the mourning son who conducted his parent’s funeral, and it bordered the veils of the Vestal Virgins. The *praetexta* on a garment, therefore, signified prohibition and precaution; the wearer was inviolable (*sacer*), and those nearby were not to pollute his/her inviolability by word or deed, particularly not by sexual language, acts, or gestures.

That the purple border on the child’s toga also signified inviolability to the Romans is indicated by the words of the orator Quintilian: ‘I swear to you upon that sacred *praetexta*—by which we make sacred and venerable the weakness of childhood.’ Verrius Flaccus, moreover, defines ‘praetextate speech’ as speech devoid of ill-boding words that would harm a child if uttered in its presence. The *toga praetexta*, therefore, indicated that the child was to be treated with respect, especially in reference to actions or speech that concerned sexuality. Cicero plays on this reverence owed the child in its sexual immaturity when he cites, in the climax of his denunciation of the debauchery of Apronius, the fact that at a banquet Apronius danced naked before a boy clothed in a *toga praetexta*.

On the processional panel of the Altar of Augustan Peace, the artists depicted the grandchildren of Augustus prominently in the foreground. These grandchildren correspond to the theme of ‘the blessings of children’
represented elsewhere on the altar by the twin babies whom Tellus fondles on her lap. Clad in their *toga praetextae* on this important public monument, Augustus’ grandchildren also serve as exempla of the respect that individuals and society owe to children (Figure 2).

Though the child’s costume represented sexual inviolability for both sexes, the costumes worn by youth and maiden in the rite of transition to adult status were partly the same and partly different, reflecting their ambiguous state of transition to their divergent adult roles. Both youth and maiden wore the *tunica recta*. It was called *recta* (‘upright’) because ritual required that it be woven on the upright loom, the earliest loom used by the Romans. This tunic may have had purple bands that, like the child’s *praetexta*, indicated sexual inviolability.

The divergence in costume concerned the treatment of the head and its hair. Puberty is a significant watershed in the course of life because it is the ‘time when gender meanings become inscribed in bodily practices’. Molly Myerowitz Levine comments:

As a signifier, hair operates both metonymically and metaphorically. In its metonymic mode hair stands for the ‘whole person’. As such, hair is useful for rituals implying movement and exchange, passage and negotiation, changes in status ... Hair serves as both metonym and metaphor particularly in the case of adolescent rites of passage. These transformations, which are enacted as ritual death by the metonymic cutting of hair, enable the adolescent’s rebirth into a higher cultural order.

Through mapping mature sexuality on to the head and its hair, the Romans transformed these into a metonym for the sexual maturation of the genitals, which is marked in both sexes by the growth of pubic hair and, in the case of the male, also by the appearance of facial hair. As Carol Delaney explains, ‘The genitals are clearly the site of gender; but since they must be hidden, their meanings are displaced to the head, where they can be publicly displayed ... As different meanings are attributed to the genitals of each gender, so too are the heads of men and women treated differently.’ Thus, argues Levine, hair should be seen not solely as a *locus eroticus*, but as a ‘locus for the statement of social attitudes regarding the proper or desired relationship between nature and culture’. The Roman puberty rituals involving the youth’s beard and the maiden’s hair were complementary actions which youth and maiden performed upon themselves to signify their readiness to assume the adult roles in society that sexual maturation brought.

When the youth shaved his beard and dedicated it to the household gods, he performed an act of separation that connected his sexual maturation with his role as mature male, the role of citizen-soldier: he signified his willingness to separate himself from the social body through death in battle. Significantly, after this transition from childhood to adulthood, the youth began his military service. As a symbol of his willingness and capability to defend the state as its warrior, the youth assumed the plain white...
toga of manhood (toga virilis) and was enrolled in the census list. From this time on, if he so chose, a man could indulge himself sexually outside the bounds of marriage (provided he did not do so with the children and wives of his fellow citizens).

While the ritual of assuming the toga virilis continued to be an important ritual in the late Republic, Augustus took steps to link the donning of this garment more closely to the young man’s responsibility to the state. According to his biographer, Suetonius, he encouraged sons of senators to gain early familiarity with public affairs immediately after they assumed the toga virilis and required them to gain experience as officers both in infantry and cavalry units.

Once a young man gained the right to wear the toga virilis, he would doff it only when assuming special, temporary civic or social duties, such as when a magistrate, an officer of a military unit, or a mourner at the funeral of a family member. Even in such situations he simply wore a different kind of toga. The costume of the adult male citizen, therefore, varied not according to his age or marital status, but according to his civil status, that is, as a ‘private’ citizen (one holding no elective or religious office), an elected official, or chief mourner. On the Altar of Augustan Peace, the adult males of Augustus’ family are depicted wearing either military cloaks to signify that they were currently serving as officers or the toga virilis to signify their participation in state affairs (Figure 2).

The transition of the maiden (virgo) to her adult status was through marriage. Verrius Flaccus seems to have done much research on the symbolism of bridal costume, which indicates that this was a topic of great interest to Augustan ideology. His research ties the symbolism of the bridal costume to the important concepts of Augustan ideology that concern women and their fertility within marriage.

On the evening before her marriage, the maiden confined her hair with the yellow hairnet she had woven. The confinement of her hair was an act of association that signified the binding and confining of her mature sexuality first to pre-marital chastity, and then, after marriage, to her husband. As she was required to weave both the tunica recta and her hairnet (reticulum), her production of these garments indicated that she had mastered the skill most emblematic of her adult role as custos domi.

These two garments, moreover, covered her head and her body, which therefore became loci of her sexuality. Before she even took on the role, through marriage, of custos domi, she proved herself as the custos of her chastity which she ‘protected’ through the garments she had woven. Her future costume changes, as bride, matrona (‘married woman’) and materfamilias (‘mother of the extended family’), also involved distinctive garments for her head and body, mapping chastity on to each of these two loci.

Through the rite of marriage, the young woman transferred her sexuality to her husband and his family line. On her wedding day she tied her tunica recta with the bridal belt. This belt (cingulum) was made from the wool of
a ewe (symbolizing fertility) and ‘tied’ to her not only her fertility, but also her role of wool worker. The belt was knotted with the nodus Herculaneus (‘knot of Hercules’), which Romans considered difficult to untie. Verrius Flaccus states that this knot was used because it too signified fertility, for Hercules had fathered seventy children. Moreover, Verrius Flaccus adds, the belt itself was to be untied only by the bride’s husband in their wedding bed. Verrius Flaccus explains that just as the wool was carded into long strands and spun together, so her husband should be bound and tied with her. Given that the knot was so difficult to untie, the bridal belt signified not only that the bride’s chastity was tied to her husband, but that it was indissolubly tied—no other man should, through adultery, ‘untie’ the belt.

The second locus of the bride’s sexuality, her head, was dressed in a special hairstyle and covered by the bridal veil. The bridal hairstyle (seni crines, ‘six tresses’) was, according to Verrius Flaccus, ‘the most ancient hairstyle … which commits brides’ chastity to their husbands’. Over her hair the bride wore the special bridal mantle (flammeum). The importance of veiling the bride is indicated by the etymology of the Latin verb nubere (‘to veil herself’ = ‘to be married’) that was used only of women. In preparation for the wedding ceremony, the bride completely veiled her hair. At the conclusion of the marriage ceremony, she was uncovered by her husband, an act that symbolized the surrender of her virginity to him.

The clothing of the married woman (matrona) visually represented her chastity and marked her as a woman to whom respect ought to be shown. Both loci of sexuality—head and body—had to be covered completely by her garments. The matrona bound her hair with fillets (vittae) made of long rolls of carded wool that were tied at intervals to form ‘beads’. Such fillets also adorned anything that was religiously pure to warn of its inviolability: sacrificial animals, sacred trees, altars, columns and so on. Like the hairnet of the maiden, these fillets expressed the binding (reservation) of the matrona’s sexuality to her husband and indicated her inviolability. When out in public, the matrona wore the palla, a large rectangular mantle that she draped over her head and wrapped around her body. That this veiling of her head and body out of doors was an important act is shown by an anecdote concerning Sulpicius Gallus, consul in 166 BCE, which is related by Valerius Maximus, a historian who dedicated his work to Augustus’ adopted son and successor, Tiberius. When his wife left his house one day unveiled, Gallus divorced her, stating: ‘By law, only my eyes should see you … That you should be seen by other eyes … links you to suspicion and guilt.’ By unveiling her head and body, his wife had in essence removed herself from the category of married women, and his divorce recognized and legally ratified her self-exclusion.

The matrona covered her body—her second locus of sexuality—with the stola, a long, strapped dress resembling a modern full-length slip, which covered her feet. The garment is clearly depicted on the official statues of Augustus’ wife, Livia (Figure 3). The stola was often called simply ‘the long...
Figure 3: Livia, wife of Augustus. She wears a *stola* and fillets in her hair and has her *palla* pulled up over her head. National Museum, Naples, Inv. 6041. Inst. Neg. Rom. 76.1157
dress’, and its length protected the lower legs and feet of its wearer from the gaze of others. There was a similar taboo that forbade the priestess called the flaminica Dialis, the ‘archetypal matrona’, to allow others to view her lower legs and feet. This priestess was specifically forbidden to climb higher than three steps of any staircase or ladder that had no risers to block the view of her limbs. To see a woman’s ankles and feet uncovered was essentially equivalent to seeing her ‘naked’, a right reserved only to her husband. Thus, as Paul Zanker points out, ‘In the context of the (Augustan) social legislation the stola became a symbol of female virtue and modesty’.41

These costume items (stola, palla, vittae) are prominently worn by the women of Augustus’ family on the Altar of Augustan Peace (Figure 2). The folds of the long stola flow over their feet, and the palla is pulled over their heads. Although one figure, identified as Antonia minor, has let her palla slip from her head, none the less she has wrapped it tightly around her body in the way that art historians call the pudicitia (‘modesty’) pose and displays the vittae binding her hair. Her dedication to chastity is further indicated by her pose: she turns her head towards her husband Drusus and gazes deep into his eyes.

A woman became a materfamilias when her husband became a paterfamilias, that is, when upon the death of his own father, he assumed the ‘power of a father’ (patria potestas) over his own descendants. Though a paterfamilias assumed no special costume, a materfamilias adopted a new hairstyle, the tutulus. The tutulus was formed by twisting locks of hair around the top of the head to form a high chignon and then fastening them in place with fillets. In his discussion of this traditional hairstyle, the Augustan antiquarian Varro offers an etymology for tutulus that connects the woman’s head and hair, a locus for feminine fertility, with the citadel, the locus for the protection of the state. He suggests that tutulus derives either from tueri (‘to protect’) or tutissimum (‘most protected’) for, he argues, either the head must be protected for the sake of its hair or because the highest part of the city, the citadel, was the most protected. In linking the hair of the materfamilias to the citadel, Varro reiterates the trope (discussed above with regard to Augustan pictorial language) of the female body as a moral sign of civic morality and health: the tutulus is etymologized as the protector (custos) of the woman’s hair, itself a trope for feminine sexuality, just as the citadel is the protector of Rome.

In the preface to his comprehensive History of Rome, written just after Augustus became sole ruler, Livy expressed the hope that his contemporaries would profit from the instructive instances of courage, patriotism and morality that they were about to read in his account of the regal and Republican periods of Rome. Drawing upon the past idealized both in the pages of Livy and in the researches of antiquarians such as Verrius Flaccus and Varro, Augustan ideology used visual imagery of both art and costume.
and revived Republican symbolism in its cultural program to restore a sense of the morality and honor of the Roman people.

Integral to this Augustan program was the restoration and honoring of the traditional role and qualities of the Roman woman and her family and household. Augustan ideology expected a proper Roman wife to prove herself a good custos domi. Devoting the fertility of her body to her husband and her labors to his household, she was to waste neither the ‘wealth’ of her fertility nor her energies. The ideal matrona or materfamilias was expected to find fulfillment in her children, deriving from them, as the roots of matrona and materfamilias show, honor during her lifetime and praise on her tombstone after her death. Her assiduous devotion to her husband’s home was configured as the task of weaving, which also served as a metaphor for her preoccupation with the material prosperity of her husband’s household. Lastly, her role of custos domi also encompassed the ideal of inviolable matronal chastity. She was to be as fertile as Tellus, industrious as Lucretia, impregnable as Roma. If, in Augustus’ words, the ‘toga-clad race’ were the ‘masters of the world’, their wives, dressed in the stola, were the guardians of Rome itself.

Notes

5. Suetonius, Augustus 73. Women’s epitaphs of the late Republican period often contain the eulogy ‘She kept the house. She worked her wool.’
9. This matronly figure incorporates the iconography of other Augustan symbols, viz. Peace (Pax), Venus, the goddess who dispenses fertility, and Ceres, the goddess of grain and fruits. Thus, this matronly figure ‘deliberately combines various tokens of blessing and happiness’, according to Zanker, The Power of Images, p. 175.
10. D’Ambra, Private Lives, p. 89. The iconography of Roma also owes something to that of the goddess Athena, the virginal defender of Athens, who was frequently depicted with helmet, spear and armor.
14. Verrius Flaccus’ work survives in an epitome made by Festus, grammarian of the second century CE.
16. Festus 282, 283L. Persius, in *Satires* 5.30–1, calls the *praetexta* of his child’s toga the guardian (*custos*) of his childhood.
18. Festus 342L, 343L: ‘Manly garments are called “recta” that fathers take care to have made for their sons for the sake of good omen. They are called “recta” because they are woven by women who stand and weave at the top of the loom.’ The warp hung from the upper beam of the loom and was kept taut by weights attached to the bottom of each warp thread. The weaver stood before the loom weaving down from the top beam. Romans began to use the vertical two-beamed loom in the first century CE, and by the end of the second century CE the traditional warp-weighted loom had largely disappeared from use in Italy. See J. P. Wild, *Textile Manufacture in the Northern Roman Provinces* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1970), p. 63.
24. Upon certain occasions, this death was accomplished through a rite of self-dedication and sacrifice (*devotio*). In this rite the soldier ritually dedicated himself as a sacrificial victim through whose death the army would receive victory and life; see, for example, Livy, *History* 8.9.5.
25. *Vir*, from the root *vir*– (‘strong, vigorous’), denotes the male in his status as warrior; see Tucker, *An Etymological Dictionary*, p. 259.
27. Festus 272, 273L states that the male relative conducting the last rites for the deceased wore a *toga praetexta pulla*, a dark-colored toga with a purple border. The *praetexta* here indicated his religiously pure state while he was conducting a religious rite. A praetextate *toga virilis* was worn by magistrates who also conducted religious rites as one of the functions of their office.
28. As it was forbidden by law to wear armor and weapons within the city, military costume consisted of the military cloak (*sagum*) worn over the tunic.
30. Festus 364L: ‘The white *regilla* tunics and the yellow hairnets are made by each young woman standing at her loom and weaving at the top of her loom; the young
women go to bed clad in these garments the evening before their marriage for the sake of good omen, a custom also observed when young men are given their manly togas.'

31. Festus 55L. This square knot (nodus Herculanus) was frequently used for good omen on rings, torques, pins and earrings, as well as on the diadem of the Macedonian royal house. On its apotropaic power, see Boëls-Janssen, La Vie Religieuse, pp. 75–6; Pliny, Natural History 28.6.17, 18.6; J. Heckenbach, ‘De nuditate sacra sacrisque vinculis’, Religionsgeschichtliche Versuche und Vorarbeiten, 9.3 (1911), p. 106. On the costume of the bride, see L. La Follette, ‘The Costume of the Roman Bride’, in World of Roman Costume, pp. 54–64.

32. Festus 454L. The passage is somewhat fragmentary; I have inserted the word ‘commits’. See also La Follette, ‘The Costume of the Roman Bride’, p. 56.

33. As its name indicates, the bridal veil (flammeum) was ‘flame-colored’, an intense orange-yellow. This dye was made from the stamens of the crocus, a flower part that had been used since the Bronze Age (and continues to be used in some Mediterranean countries) to promote women’s menstrual and reproductive cycles. On dye from the crocus, see Ovid, Heroides 20 (21).162, 168. On the crocus and women’s hygiene, see Ellen Reeder, ‘Representing Women: The Wedding’, in Pandora: Women in Classical Greece, ed. Ellen Reeder (Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1995), p. 127. See also E. J. W. Barber, Women’s Work: The First 10,000 Years. Women, Cloth, and Society in Early Times (W. W. Norton, New York, 1994), pp. 114–16 and 162. On the use in European cultures of the Crocus sativus for promoting menstruation, see W. H. Lewis and M. Elvin-Lewis, Medical Botany: Plants Affecting Man’s Health (Wiley & Sons, New York, 1977), p. 325.


35. J. F. Gardner, Women in Roman Law and Society (Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1986), p. 117. This respect included using only pure speech. Thus Ovid (Art of Love 1.31–2, 3.483) warns that a matrona should not read his racy love poetry.


37. Valerius Maximus, Memorable Deeds and Sayings 6.3.10 (my translation). Valerius’ interest in this anecdote reflects the continuing Augustan interest in the moral traditions of the Republic. For a similar attitude in Turkey, see Delaney, ‘Untangling the Meanings of Hair’, p. 64. See also L. Bonfante, ‘Nudity as Costume in Classical Art’, American Journal of Archaeology 93 (1989), pp. 545, 567–9. To see a married woman naked is to place oneself in the position of her husband. Thus, when Gyges sees the queen of Lydia naked and she realizes he has done so, she demands that Gyges either kill her husband and make himself king, or kill himself (Herodotus, Histories 1.10).

38. On the stola see B. I. Scholz, Untersuchungen zur Tracht der römischen matrona (Bohlau, Köln, 1992).


42. There could be no question in the minds of her contemporaries of Antonia’s devotion to her husband, Drusus. After his death in 9 BCE, within a few months of the dedication of the Altar, she refused steadfastly to marry again, thus becoming an exemplum of the concept of *univira* (‘wife of one man’), a traditional Republican feminine epithet of honor that was also esteemed in Augustan ideology.


44. Varro, *Latin Language* 7.44. The etymology of *tutulus* is unknown.