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Literatur
Gender Symmetry

Pliny epist. 6.32, Women’s Processions, and Roman Life Choices

Over the years, F.-H. has often corrected my Latin and this offering is based on one such passage. In the opening years of the 2nd century CE, the younger Pliny (epist. 6.32) wrote to a friend, Quintilianus:

I know that you are retiring (continentissimus) and that you have brought your daughter up to conduct herself as befits your daughter and the grandchild of Titillius. Since, however, she is about to marry the very worthy (honestissimus) Nonius Celer, upon whom consideration of public office (raito civilium officiorum) imposes a certain need for elegance (quandam nitoris), she ought to have clothes and a retinue (veste comitatu) in keeping with her husband’s position. These things cannot increase social standing (dignitas), but they can embellish it and give it physical form. I know that you are rich in intellect but restricted in means. I therefore claim part of your burden for myself and, in the manner of a second father, I confer upon our daughter 50,000 sesterces [...].

Although the identity of Quintilianus is not known, the passage suggests something of his relationship with Pliny. Apparently friends of long standing, perhaps from boyhood, they have made different life choices: Pliny, to pursue a political career in Rome, Quintilianus the modest life of a scholar, perhaps in Cisalpina. Now Quintilianus’ daughter has made a good match and he is expected to outfit her for a more public sort of life than he has chosen for himself. Seeing his predicament, Pliny offers to help in a way that cannot be refused: he becomes ‘a second father’ to the girl, assuming Quintilianus’ responsibility as his own.

Epist. 6.32 draws upon themes developed at greater length elsewhere in Pliny’s correspondence: first, that the mark of successful parenting is to raise a child very much like his or her own father; second, that Pliny is unfailingly generous with his friends, their wives, and their children. As argued extensively by others, the information communicated in these letters is not incidental but intended to display Pliny’s own character and virtues: in epist. 2.4, for example, the offer to fund another dowry highlights the difference between his own responsible financial behavior and that of the girl’s father, who has fallen into debt and is unable to provide for her. Epist. 6.32 offers a milder contrast between Pliny and Quintilianus and may also draw attention to the choices made by the young couple—Celer who is honestissimus by contrast with the continentissimus Quintilianus and on his way to a public career, and Quintilianus’ daughter, more adaptable than her father, who will need help from Pliny, a ‘second father’ to fit with and further Celer’s image.

This is not the ‘meatiest’ letter in Pliny’s corpus, but it has interesting details, especially that of the “clothes and retinue” (veste comitatu) that are to be part of the girl’s dowry or her trousseau. Since most of the activities associated with the ideal wife in imperial literature (ca. 40-104 CE) and his family, like Pliny’s, may have been composed of local landowners in Comum and lawyers in the civil courts. According to Sherwin-White 1966, young Celer is also likely to have been a lawyer.

1 Quamvis et ipsa sis continentissimus, et filiam tuam in institueris ut debeat tuam filiam, Titill neptem, cum tamen sit nuptura honestissimo viro Nonio Celeri, cui ratio civilium officiorum necessitatem quandam nitoris imponit, debet secundum condicionem mariti <quip> veste comitatu, quibus non updated augeatur dignitas, ornatur tamen et institutur. Te porro animo beatissimum, modicum facultatis scio. Haec partem oneris tu mihi vindico, et tamquam patres alter puerae nostrae confero quinquagesimae milia nummorum plus collaturnus [...]. As I recall, this passage was translated ‘rather loosely’ for F.-H.’s taste so he should not be held responsible for its remaining shortcomings.

2 On the identity of Quintilianus and others cited in the passage, see Sherwin-White 1966: 398. Titillius may have belonged to the generation of Marcellus.
and epitaph keep her rhetorically at home—managing the servants and “working with wool”—we are not accustomed to thinking about her public image. As an institution, however, what Pliny refers to here as “clothes and retinue”—what we might call the ‘matron’s procession’—was a structural element of Roman public life: Etruscan reliefs of the regal and republican eras show processions with women in carts, with servants. At the other end of the chronological spectrum, ca. 160-240 CE, Tertullian (Cult. Fem. 2.9.4) acknowledges grudgingly the importance of the practice for elite society, admonishing women that “if consideration of wealth, birth, or former status compels [you] to step out [into public] with great show, take care to temper this sort of ill-look, completely unfettered, you practice lack of restraint under the pretext of necessity— [...] quas divitiarum vel natualium vel retro dignitatum ratio compellit ita pompticas progrædi [...] temperare malm huiusmodi curate, ne totis habentis licentiam usurpetis praetexta necessitates. As an institution of long duration the ‘matron’s procession’ brings the social reciprocity between marriage partners into sharper focus. These processions were competitive public theater, a feature clearest in texts of the second century BCE. According to Polybius (31.26), the wife of the renowned Scipio Africanus, Aemilia (d. 162 BCE),

[...] used to receive the better part of the crowd’s admiration during the women’s processions (ἐν ταῖς γυναικεῖαις ἔξοδοις) in as much as she had shared the life and fortune[s] (τούχαι) of Scipio. For indeed, quite apart from the embellishment of her person and her wheeled-carriage, and apart from the baskets, cups, and other sacrificial implements, some of gold, others of silver, that were carried along with her in these distinguished processions (κατὰ τὰς ἐπιστὰς ἔξοδος), the number of man—and maid—servants who accompanied her were their equivalent.

Aemilia’s contemporary, Papiria, had been separated from her famous husband (L. Aemilius Paullus) for many years and her means were, according to Polybius, “insufficient to achieve the appearance of a well-born woman [...]” (κατὰ τὴν ἐγγένεσαν φανεροκτίας). As a result, she had “absented herself from these rank-revealing processions” (ἐκ τῶν ἐπιστήμων ἔξοδον) for a long time. After Aemilia died, her adoptive grandson and biological nephew, Scipio Aemilianus gave her sacrificial accoutrements to Papiria, his birth mother, and “thereafter, whenever [Papiria] made a personal appearance or attended a public sacrifice, she had herself driven out in the trappings of Aemilia, including, in addition to the other things, the muleteers, team, and the lady’s own carriage.” The refurbishment of Papiria’s image impressed the other women who, according to Polybius, “were astounded by the kindness and generosity of Scipio and, all stretching out their hands to him, wished him many blessings.”

It is not clear from the Republican sources whether dress and retinue were part of a woman’s dowry, as epist. 6.32 suggests, or funded by her spouse. For Plautus, processions like these exemplify the extravagance of women and the burdens they place on their husbands: his Megadorus complains (Au. 165-168 and 491-535) that women with big dowries are able to exert too much pressure on husbands for ivory-trimmed carriages, maids and muleteers, purple-trimmed garments and cloaks; he
parodies the procession as institution in the Poenula, substituting for the matrons a confluence of prostitutes, two of whom, Adelphasia and Anterastias, debate the advisability of the display, the competition created, and its expense (210-305): Adelphasia, the voice of (masculine) reason, argues (237f., and 284-288) the rationality of dressing "within their master’s means", which is ambiguous but may again point to the spouse as the bearer of these costs.12 Elsewhere he relates women’s public adornment to the pursuit of a husband, noting (Epid. 215-226) that whores use it to capture a lover (215: ornatae occurebant suis quaeque amatoribus, eos captabant) and that "many (women/girls)" (noun not specified) parade through the streets with entire estates on display (226: fundis exornatae multae incidant per vias), a double allusion perhaps to the cost of their clothes and to the property (to be?) exchanged as part of their dowries.13 These passages are often read literally—i.e. as a story about real prostitutes attending a real festival of Venus—but the characters are ambiguous—free-born girls, kidnapped as children, sold to a pimp, but rescued by their father, prostitutes who think it more becoming for a meretrix to be dressed in pudor than in purple and gold (300-305)—and Plautus could have dressed these and other "prostitutes" in the toga if he wanted to make their status clear.14 His matrons echo the long-established topos of the wife as a drain on her husband’s resources, but these wives demand access to their own money, adding a new, contemporary dimension to the joke.15

12 For a broader discussion of the Poenula and its historical context, see Johnston 1980.


14 Real prostitutes: Olson 2008: 49, 85. My understanding of these passages and their imagery is closer to that of Stäsk 1990: 73-76, who sees Plautine comedy as a fantasy world with exaggerated characters acting out moral messages. The dress-related terminology used for matrons (stolate) and prostitutes (togatae) in Latin literature is often ambiguous; the dress codes it reflects were not actually followed and authors used it for satiric or critical effect: Olson 2008: 47-51 and 2002. Pudor and pudicitia were virtues typically associated with wives: Olson 2008: 88-92.

15 Women’s greed for adornment is a commonplace as old as Hesiod (for Latin literature, see Olson 2008: 84f.; Schuhmann 1977: 51-54 and 63-65); the

Pliny’s letter to Quintilianus provides a window into the fixing of a dowry and reminds us that, in spite of the rhetorical ideal, the life of an elite woman was highly public, whether at home, where she worked to embody the image of the retiring helpmate, or in the streets of the city where she competed with other matrons for the admiration of the crowd. No one can doubt that Roman men had a wider range of life choices than their wives—and more arenas for social display. Nevertheless, we might infer from this brief account of the procession that it acted as an alternative arena for feminine dignitas, allowing elite women to communicate, as Tertullian (Cul. Fem. 2.9.4) outlined their choices: quas divittiarum vel natalium vel retro dignitatum.16

Bibliography:


image of the poor husband dominated by his rich wife became its own stereotype (Saller 1994: 220f.). Stärk 1990: 73-76 understands the type of the uxur dotata to come from an Italic rather than a Greek tradition; according to Johnston 1980: 144 the imagery was fueled by 2nd-century concern for the growing wealth and power of women. Husbands had nominal control over dowries but wide variation within the legal statutes show that, from at least the 2nd century forward, there were many ways around it: Saller 1994: 207, 210f.; Treigliari 1991: 327-340.

16 Crafting of a woman’s physical appearance in relation to her social standing: Olson 2008: 96-112.