You Were What You Wore in Roman Law: Deciphering the Dress Codes of 1 Timothy 2:9-15

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One unique aspect of the first century is the extent to which Roman law, including criminal law, undergirded all aspects of society. This phenomenon was peculiar to that empire, and Roman legal historians contend that it was never replicated to the same extent in subsequent civilizations. That being the case, one would expect that conventions concerning various spheres of life as well as appropriate dress codes would have been reflected in Roman law.

In *The Digest* that codified Roman law and its interpretation, Roman legislators and jurists made rulings based on the premise that in the society of their day "you were what you wore." This applied equally to men and women in daily life. During the time of Augustus there were even sharper distinctions — observed in part by dress and seating arrangements on public occasions such as in the theatre and at banquets.

The status of first-century citizens was readily identified from dress codes. Men were what they wore in Roman Law. Senators were the highest class and were notionally social equals of the emperor. They wore a broad purple stripe on their tunic (*latus clavus*), particular sandals and a gold ring. These and other senatorial privileges were extended to all close relatives and descendants of a senator. Members of *equires Romani* had long required a property qualification and Augustus distinguished them more markedly from the senatorial class by establishing a financial differential. They secured the right to wear the special gold ring of senators and to sit in the front rows of the theatre. The clothes did not make the man but they certainly indicated who the man was in the first-century class system.

Women also were what they wore in Roman law. This was true of the modest married woman and the chaste unmarried younger women, as well as the *hetairai*, the high-class prostitutes. These marital and moral categories could also be decoded by their attire in the public place and have been recorded for posterity in different statue types.

The Provocative Attire of the "New" Woman

The dress of the first-century married woman consisted of a considerable amount of fabric falling in folds from the shoulder. This was made from a non-transparent material. A mantle was wrapped around it, part of which was draped on the top of her head as it had been for the first time on her wedding day. This was the marriage veil she subsequently always wore in public as a sign to others of her marital status. Modest dress was the hallmark of the respectable matron. The statue type of them confirms them. The young unmarried girl was portrayed in first-century statue types that differed from those of the married woman. She did not wear the mantle over her head but wrapped it around her body, drawing it across both her breasts, and her left hand was symbolically at her side ready to guard her virginity.

By contrast, see-through clothing had traditionally been the provocative attire of the high class prostitutes who entertained single and married men as dinner companions and later, in what was politely said to be "after dinners," in that first-century unholy trinity of eating, drinking, and sexual intercourse. She was what she wore, and deliberately so, given her profession.

In the late Republican period and the early empire another type of married woman began to emerge, designated by some ancient historians as the "new" woman. She differed from the "modest" wife; indeed

the latter was epitomized by that one cardinal virtue. Some of the "new" married women began to wear provocative clothing similar to that of the *hetairai*, the high class prostitute, who "entertained" at dinner parties. Others felt the social pressure of their peers to adopt this latest trend in dress.

In the 40's AD Seneca the Younger, a contemporary of Paul, with his usual elegant turn of phrase wrote in a letter to his mother, "*Never have you fancied the kind of dress that exposed no greater nakedness by being removed*" (Seneca the Younger, *ad Helviam*, 16:4). The whole letter is enlightening because in it Seneca notes that pressure was on his mother and other married women of his day to dress and live as the "new" woman did.

You also "were what you wore" in terms of jewelry and hairstyles. In Greek, "dresses and gold" was the standard phrase used of the accoutrements of an *hetairai*. Pliny recorded that "women spend more money on their ears with pearl earrings, than on any other part of their person." Seneca also noted of his mother in the same letter, "*Jewels have not moved you, nor pearls. You have never defiled your face with paints and cosmetics*" (Seneca the Younger, *ad Helviam*, 16:3). Given the lead content in ancient cosmetics, it was a good thing she had not.

Hairstyles also reflected a woman's virtue (or a lack of it). Juvenal commented on the incredibly lavish nature of certain first-century hair-dos — "*So important is the business of beautification; so numerous are the tiers and stories piled one upon another on her head!*" (Juvenal, Satires 6.501-3). The appearances of the promiscuous woman and the matron had, in some cases, become indistinguishable. Traditionally the matron's hairstyle had been relatively simple by comparison. (See http://www.romanchristianwomen.com for evidence of dress codes encapsulated in standard statue types.)

Legal and Other Responses

Augustus' legal intervention: A number of legal moves were made to counter what was seen in some circles as a new movement among married women. For the first time in Roman history, Augustus made adultery a criminal offense in two highly significant pieces of legislation. Convicted adulteresses were forbidden to dress like the modest wife but had to wear the toga that was the dress code of *heterai*. Roman law, as recorded in *The Digest*, reflects the dictum that you were what you wore.

> If anyone accosts women [who are dressed like prostitutes, and not the mothers of families if a women is not dressed as a matron [veiled] and someone calls out to her or entices away her attendant [chaperone], he will not be liable to action for injury. (The Digest, 47.10.15.15)

To the outsider, women were what they chose to wear, and thus this stipulation in the Roman legal code.

Imperial counter icons: It was not only in the field of legislation that Augustus sought to counter this "new" woman. Imperial coins and statue types of wives and female members of emperors' families were exported throughout the cities of the empire as images of modest women. They were deliberately designed to be the fashion-setters for married women, and their modest dresses and marriage veils were intended to counter new trends. Where they were portrayed without their marriage veils it was for the purpose of indicating the imperial hairstyle that was judged to be appropriate for the married woman.

Did women take notice of these imperial icons of fashion? Juvenal asked, "*What woman will not follow when an empress leads the way*" (Juvenal, Satires 6.617). Certainly, those wishing to conform to the lifestyle of a modest woman imitated the imperial image, while "new" wives deliberately flouted the restrained dress code of the Roman matron.

Dress wardens for women: In Greece and other parts of the East, public occasions and even pagan religious processions in honor of Demeter were supervised by officially elected women's dress wardens

(*gunaikonomoi*). They did not allow women who were dressed lavishly or inappropriately to participate in these processions. The wearing of transparent clothing is specifically singled out as unacceptable. They had the power to destroy such items and to monitor these breaches of modest dress codes in public life generally.

Instruction by philosophical schools: How did other groups in first-century society react to the "new" woman? Stoic and Neo-Pythagorean philosophical schools instructed their adherents to resist this movement by some married woman to flaunt immodest values. Stoic followers educated their daughters as well as their sons, the former being inculcated with "the virtue" that epitomized a married woman — "modesty." They demanded virtuous lives of their female adherents as well as their male counterparts — unlike the rest of society where an inequitable standard applied which did not call husbands to account for their adultery. Documents from the Neo-Pythagorean school also record older women were delighted that there were younger wives who wanted to dress and adorn themselves modestly rather than follow the trends of their promiscuous looking secular sisters.

The Two Ways of 1 Timothy 2:9-15

1 Timothy 2:9-15 takes us to the very heart of this same issue for the early church. There, alternative dress codes are succinctly described — married women are assumed to be the subject of the discussion, given the reference to childbearing in 2:15.

The passage commences with the injunction that Christian women must adorn themselves "modestly and sensibly" with "seemly apparel" to which is added the adornment of good works appropriate to those who profess godliness, 2:9-10.

Between the reference to modest dress and good works there is inserted a succinct discussion of the alternative dress code. It is that of the "new" wife. Her lifestyle was promiscuous, sometimes indulging in casual sexual liaisons as her husband might have done. Her interest was in self-gratification and not the good deeds that enhanced the lives of others.

Christian wives were not to adorn themselves with the braided hair that epitomized the loose living woman, or gold or pearls that was likewise part of a dress code appropriate to the hetairai. In addition, costly or transparent dress was ruled out for the Christian wife.

Lives adorned with modesty and good works and not the "come on" appearance were the order of the day for wives in the early Christian community in Ephesus to which 1 Timothy is addressed. They were what they chose to wear and the choice for Christian wives was clear.

Seneca, in the same letter to his mother, commented on the aversion by this new breed of women to having children. He wrote,

> *You have never blushed for the number of children, as if it mocked your age. You never tried to conceal your pregnancy as though it was indecent, nor have you crushed the hope of children that were being nurtured in your body.* (Seneca the Younger, *ad Helviam*, 16:3-5)

The use of dangerous contraceptives and abortion was to take the lives of many married women — first-century women married very early by Western standards, some immediately on reaching puberty and most others by their mid or late teens. Soranus, a contemporary gynecologist from Ephesus, refused to perform abortions as did other doctors who were aware of its risks.

The poet, Ovid, who was the promoter of many of the values of the "new" woman, spoke graphically against this — it is thought that he himself may have lost a mistress through an abortion.

> She who first began the practice of tearing out her tender progeny deserved to die in her own warfare. Can it be that, to be free of the flaws of stretchmarks, you have to scatter the tragic sands of carnage?...Why will you subject your womb to the weapons of abortion and give dread poisons to the unborn?...The tigress lurking in Armenia does no such thing, nor does the lioness dare destroy her young. Yet tender girls do so — though not with impunity; often she who kills what is in her womb dies herself. She dies herself, and is borne to the pyre with hair unloosed, and all who behold her cry out: "Tis her just deserts." (Ovid, *Amores*, 2:14, 5-9, 27-8, 35-40)

The Christian wife will be saved "through child-bearing if she continues in faith and love and holiness." This trilogy of Christian virtues counters the lifestyle of the "new" woman. The grammatical construction of the sentence suggests that it is through the process of pregnancy that she will be saved and not by its termination where often the opposite occurred. It is interesting to read of doctors in the early empire who would not perform abortions.

The discussion began with a call to modesty in 2:9, and concludes with this all-embracing first-century virtue that epitomized the married woman, for again "with modesty" is singled out in 2:15. It is preceded by the three Christian "virtues" of "faith, hope and love."

So there were two ways to live in the first century and in these short sentences the lifestyle of the "new" wife is contrasted with that of the modest wife.

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Further Reading

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