

Impar coniunx: Attitudes Towards Intermarriage in Livy

Livy deals explicitly and at length with the issue of plebeian-patrician intermarriage at an obvious point in the *Ab Urbe Condita*: in Book 4, when he narrates the debate over *conubium patrum et plebis* in the Senate in 445 BCE. The debate is an important event in the history of the “Struggle of the Orders”, one of the main themes of the first ten books of Livy’s history.

However, as Livy states in his preface, besides recording the achievements and practices of the Roman people in peace and in war, one of his principal aims is to provide instructive *exempla* for his audience’s contemplation and imitation (*Praef.* 1, 9-10). It makes sense, then, to examine the individual anecdotes in which issues relating to patrician-plebeian and other forms of intermarriage are manifest.

Inter-order marriages should perhaps be seen within the wider context of marriage alliances and *conubium*, which are occasional, though notable subjects in Livy’s first decade. In Book 1 alone, we see the linking of Aeneas’ people to the Latins through his marriage to Lavinia, the theft of the Sabine women as brides without a pre-existing intermarriage agreement, the consequential marriage of Tarquin and the ambitious Tanaquil, and the fateful marriages of the Tullias to the sons of Tarquinius Priscus. The joining of partners even from similar socio-political backgrounds is presented as both potentially powerful and fraught with risk, and the scholarship concerning Livy’s unique take on anecdotes such as that of the Sabine women demonstrates the ideological complexity with which he constructs the socio-political dynamics and ideals of Roman marriage (Miles 1992, Brown 1995).

The story of the patrician Fabia Minor and her unhappiness in her marriage to a plebeian in Book 6 is the plainest exposition of personal feelings about a patrician-plebeian marriage in Livy, and has been analyzed with respect to its role as the antithesis to the story of the Tullias in

Book 1 and as the ostensible catalyst for political change (Kraus 1991, 1994; McClain 1998). Far less attention has been paid to a later, briefer example in Book 10—the story of Verginia, the patrician widow of a plebeian, who is barred from the temple of Patrician Chastity—besides discussion of the historicity and religious context of the story (Oakley, 2008). This anecdote, in which the woman’s perception of her marriage is altogether positive, contains some verbal echoes of the earlier stories, and I argue that Livy presents it as the last and most laudable in a small series of examples in the first decade in which a woman is wed to an *impar coniunx*—stories which he intends to be compared with one another in a way that has not yet been fully developed in the Livian scholarship. Livy’s examples of such marriages place much of the responsibility for marital *concordia* on the woman’s attitude towards the match, particularly when her husband holds the inferior rank. This pattern may be usefully contextualized as part of a larger consideration in Livy’s first decade, among those principles to which he would have his reader give close attention in his own day (*Praef.* 9): that successful and harmonious marriages are instrumental to the stability of a state with a socio-politically heterogeneous population, and must therefore be contracted with great care.

Works Cited

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