

### *Femina Princeps*: In Defence of Ovid's Exilic Livia

The earliest extant depiction of Livia as a poetic figure comes in Ovid's exilic poetry. Dubbed *femina princeps* by the poet, her portrayal has been dismissed as "sickeningly fulsome" (Barrett 234), whilst others see her character primarily as an object of very advanced Ovidian criticism (Johnson 405-406). Yet many such readings seem to assume a Tacitean bias into Ovid's diegesis, resulting in cynical readings that neglect the tradition concerning similar characters. I would like to suggest that an analysis of the character actually represented in the exilic poetry reveals a very different picture: an able, powerful semi-divine leader, depicted in a way befitting the literary tradition surrounding such a figure.

Though mentioned by name only six times in the *Tristia* and *Ex Ponto*, Livia's appearances underpin the entirety of the exilic corpus as she comes to represent the force of imperial power post-Augustus. Ovid represents Livia within a cross-section of Augustan roles—wife (*Tr.* 2.1; *Ex. P.* 2.8, 3.3), priestess (*Tr.* 4.2; *Ex. P.* 4.13), divinity (*Ex. P.* 3.1, 4.13). These distinct yet interrelated positions focalize her character as the unmistakable centre of the imperial family and its power; Ovid gives attention to her relationships with her son and husband, her role as priestess and thus central point of religious importance, and her gradual incorporation into the divine framework. I argue all these points are carefully calculated to parallel in a narrative sense, and set her equal to, Augustus himself.

Ovid adeptly represents this diegetic 'augustanization' of Livia, creating a complex but balanced character whose significant features and roles are drawn directly from the world surrounding him. Even a cursory review of numismatic and epigraphic evidence, such as that documented by Barrett and Pandey, from Rome's provinces demonstrates Livia's widespread influence and image. It seems plausible to assert these depictions may have influenced Ovid's

portrayal of Livia. Ultimately, I argue that Ovid's *femina princeps*, as a combination of existing literary tradition with contemporary influences, demonstrates the political prowess and contemporary reception of its inspiration whilst remaining an integral part of the poetic narrative.

### Bibliography

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