

ALISON SHARROCK : *Uxorius: The Praise and Blame of Husbands*

The aim of this paper is to put to ancient texts of the Roman period a question about which they themselves are remarkably coy: what makes a good (or bad) husband, or what are the characteristics that we would expect to see in such a creature? I begin by warning the reader of the trap which awaits both ancient texts and modern commentators, which is that discussions of what makes a good husband very quickly slip into discussions of what makes a good wife, as if it were more the duty of a woman to be a good wife than it is of a man to be a good husband. Despite the efforts of ancient texts to keep the focus away from the question of what makes a good husband, I attempt to interrogate a number of texts on a number of related questions. I begin and end with a well-known moment in Virgil's *Aeneid*, when Mercury uses the word *uxorius* to disparage Aeneas' behaviour in directing building work in Dido's Carthage. The messenger god clearly intends the adjective as an insult, but my wider investigations suggest that in doing so he is drawing on only one end of the range of meaning available in this word. When I return to Aeneas' husbandly credentials at the end of the paper, I suggest that the kind of Roman reader who would sympathise with Mercury's scornful twist to the term *uxorius* might in fact see in the coldly political future husband of Lavinia the "ideal Roman husband". Other Roman readers, however, would also be able to find justification in their culture for a more positive reading of his earlier manifestations: the bereaved husband of Creusa, who went back into the destroyed Troy to search for the wife he had lost (it has to be admitted, carelessly, if not misogynistically), and the almost-husband of Dido, whom he almost-loved in an almost-perfect almost-marriage, until Mercury came and spoiled everything. That Roman reader, however, would have to face the fact of a strong value in Roman discourse which emphasises above all else control of the self and especially of the emotions. It is this need for control that can undermine other Roman values and stop them from showing through the texts as much they otherwise might. One such value, surprisingly, is for love and tenderness as part of what makes a good husband. An element in my paper, therefore, is to contribute towards a challenge to the common modern notion that ancient marriage has nothing to do with love.

Mots-clés :

husband – wife – marriage – love – self-control – Virgil – Plutarch – Plautus – Pliny – adultery – wife-beating – gender relations