

## Fifty-Two

# SEPARATED SPOUSES AND EQUAL PARTNERS: CICERO, OVID, AND MARRIAGE AT A DISTANCE

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In “The Transformation of the Husband/Wife Relationship during Exile: Letters from Cicero and Ovid” (2001), Sabine Grebe argues that Cicero and Ovid’s letters from exile reveal a transformation of the marital relationship and its gender roles. In traditional, patriarchal Roman society the wife was dependent upon and subordinate to the husband in many ways. The wife’s activities were restricted to the private, domestic realm. The husband was engaged in public, legal, and political matters. The wife cooked, made and washed clothes, cared for the husband and the children, or supervised slaves in these tasks, and nursed ill slaves. The husband handled the finances. The wife depended on her husband for emotional support and comfort. The husband bore this burden as the stronger partner.

These traditional arrangements were reversed, Grebe observes, when the orator Cicero and the poet Ovid were banished. Grebe notes that both husbands could have chosen to take their wives with them into exile, but both decided their interests would be better served by having their wives remain in Rome. By doing so Cicero’s wife Terentia and Ovid’s wife (whose name we do not know) could protect their family’s estates, manage finances, and more effectively advocate for their husbands’ return. It is uncertain whether these arrangements were supposed to be practical advantages for the wives, the husbands, or both. Grebe remarks that Terentia “suffered physically and psychologically from Cicero’s exile, and worries made Ovid’s wife slim” (this volume, p. 436). So while Cicero benefited from Terentia’s dutiful protection of the family’s interests, this came at the cost of his wife’s physical and emotional health. Ovid’s interests too were better served by his wife acting as the custodian of the family. In his letters he is more considerate of her than Cicero was of Terentia. Grebe says that, “Cicero is very self-absorbed: all his thoughts revolve around himself. He thinks about Terentia on only one occasion” (ibid.). This characterization of Cicero does not square with Grebe’s claim in the conclusion of her paper that Cicero treated his spouse as an “equal partner” and that their marriage, as described in the letters, is “not characterized by Rome’s original patriarchal marriage” (ibid., p. 446). To the contrary, Cicero apparently did subordinate many of Terentia’s needs to his own, as is typical of a patriarch.

Grebe explains that both wives wanted to join their husbands in exile. But notice that Terentia offers to go to Cicero only if he wants to receive her. Thus Cicero retains the position of authority in the marriage. He could opt to subordinate Terentia's desire to be reunited with him to his own desire that she continue to function in his place at Rome. Ovid, in contrast, insists that his wife make her own decision independently of him. As for emotional support, Grebe reports that Cicero considers himself weaker and in greater need of comfort and encouragement than his wife. Again, the letters portray Ovid more favorably. His technique of persuading his wife to endure their separation is more artful.

Grebe cites texts from the letters in which Cicero and Ovid praise their wives' courage, fidelity, steadfastness, modesty, loyalty, goodness, and piety. But she does not provide textual references to support her further claim that Cicero and Ovid describe their wives as acting as very good friends. While this may seem to amount to no more than a quibble, I think it is quite revealing. Cicero and Ovid significantly do *not* call their wives *amicae* (friends). The boundaries between spouse and friend do not appear to be as blurred in the minds of the husbands as Grebe infers from the language with which they praise their wives.

Closer scrutiny of the concept of exile may make the issues under discussion easier to grasp from our contemporary perspective. Exile, after all, is what transforms the husband/wife relationship as Grebe so vividly describes it. While exile was a common enough punishment for prominent citizens of ancient Rome, it is very rarely a situation we experience in our time. Exile has not been a punishment available to political leaders in the West for centuries, and so it obviously poses no threat to our marital or personal relationships. Yet I suggest that the circumstances faced by Cicero and Terentia and by Ovid and his wife are not that different from those that couples in long distance relationships still face. We can sympathize with the hardships and challenges the two Roman couples wrestled with long ago precisely because many of us today have, at some point, been involved with partners who lived far away.

One question to ask is, "Who faces the tougher challenge, Roman husbands exiled from their wives or contemporary couples living in different cities?" At first glance, it appears that the Romans had it much worse than we do. Cicero and Ovid could only communicate with their wives through letters. Mail delivery was also considerably slower in the Roman empire since the means of transport were limited to horse, wagon, and galley (Casson, 1994, pp. 219–225). Not only is our postal service mail delivered exponentially faster, but our technologies include Email, fax, and telephone as means of communicating with each other. Partners can also reunite via air travel. So it might seem that ancient Roman couples separated by exile suffered more than couples in long distance relationships today.

This view, however, leaves a lot out of the picture. While modern couples can communicate with and visit each other more readily than the an-

cient Romans could, today's long distance relationships unfold in a culture that often makes ending the condition of "exile" more difficult and complex than the reversal of political fortune. In short, Cicero and Ovid were free to return to their wives in Rome as soon as their banishments were revoked. But today's separated couples are typically more equal partners than Cicero and Terentia ever were or could have been. Terentia had no career of her own that stood on an equal footing with Cicero's. Today both spouses typically have careers they value greatly. More often than not these separate careers constitute the reason why they must conduct their relationship at a distance. Decisions about who is to quit his or her job, leave his or her friends and community, and relocate to the other partner's city to search for a new job, new friends, and a new community amount to a decision about who is to create a new life. These decisions are extremely difficult to make. They always involve major sacrifices. Sometimes, sadly, these decisions are impossible to reach without damaging or even destroying the relationship itself. For this reason some couples choose to keep their jobs and live apart during the week while traveling to be together on weekends, holidays, and vacations. For them the long distance relationship is perpetuated indefinitely.

How does this bear on Cicero and Terentia, Ovid and his wife? While I agree with Grebe that the marital relationship in exile does dramatically change the role of the Roman wives by conferring upon them political, legal, and financial responsibilities they traditionally lacked in the ancient world, she goes too far in describing the spouses as *equal partners* whose marriages resemble friendships. She oversteps to assert that for these two couples the categories of marriage and friendship collapse. For, while Grebe has demonstrated, "in Rome, the wife could act as the husband's agent during his absence" (this volume, p. 446), the similarities between marriage and friendship she points to must be balanced by significant dissimilarities. For example, to claim that the letters show Cicero and Terentia as equal partners is false. Terentia was performing what traditionally were her husband's duties while Cicero was in exile, yet Grebe presents no evidence that she shared these duties with him upon his return. *Cicero*, not his wife, decided she would stay behind in Rome. Later, *he*, not she, decided that she would not join him. Granted, Ovid was less authoritarian than Cicero, but the poet was more subtle in crafting praises and arguments that convinced his wife not to join him in exile. Both husbands controlled the decisions about what their wives' roles must be.

In light of a comment he makes in his work *On Friendship*, perhaps we should not be too critical of Cicero's decision to have Terentia bear by herself the burden of defending the family's interests despite the toll it took on her health. Cicero has the wise Laelius, pupil of Diogenes the Stoic, say, "Often, too, important duties arise which require the temporary separation of friends; and he who would hinder the discharge of those duties because he cannot easily bear his grief at the absence of his friends, is not only weak and effe-

minate, but, on that very account, is far from reasonable in his friendship” (Cicero, 1946, p. 185). We can easily imagine that Cicero considered the duties imposed on his wife Terentia as a result of his exile to require both of them to endure their separation despite the grief they shared at the other’s absence. Nevertheless, I doubt the accuracy of the claim that Cicero considered Terentia to be his *friend*. Not once in *On Friendship* does Cicero mention the possibility of friendship between a woman and a man. His comment about weakness and effeminacy arguably casts further doubt on this possibility. All the examples of friendship he writes about in the dialogue are between men. Could a husband and wife ever be friends as Cicero understands friendship? Genuine friendship between husband and wife requires that they be genuine peers.

Grebe succeeds in clearly illustrating the untraditional shift of roles in the husband/wife relationship found in the letters from Cicero and Ovid. My goal has been to raise some questions for further reflection on the similarities and dissimilarities of marriage and friendship. While I remain skeptical that the letters show that Cicero and his wife and Ovid and his wife were equal partners, I believe that Grebe’s essay raises an interesting question about the complex ways in which the boundaries between modern marriage and friendship may blur. For example, I submit that a *friend* would not make the enormous changes necessary to relocate, change jobs, and create a new life with another friend. Such a sacrifice is sometimes made by one *spouse* for another, but never by friends.

### Works Cited

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