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Replicating the body politic: the Herculaneum Women statue types in Early Imperial Italy

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Roman visual imagery is striking for its repetition of form, from the portrait types of emperors to the replication of mythological figures to the sameness of details in architectural ornamentation. Even portrait statues — a genre we might expect to demonstrate greater individuality — frequently exhibit individualized heads atop replicated bodies. This visual emphasis on uniformity contradicts the profound socio-economic, historical and cultural differences that constituted the Roman world. This tension can be fruitfully explored by looking at the two most numerous female statue types, the so-called Large Herculaneum Woman and Small Herculaneum Woman. From the Augustan period until the early 3rd c. A.D., from Syria to Spain, these body forms were replicated again and again: at least 153 statues of the Large Herculaneum Woman type and 125 of the Small survive, and more continue to be found.*

This replication is astonishing, yet such statue types have long been dismissed as imitative or considered interesting only as evidence of lost Greek originals. More recently, the types have been studied in terms of stylistic developments over time. Still, little has been done to explain these forms' immense popularity in the Roman empire, or the conceptions that affected their appearance, commission and viewing there. A contextual approach offers a different perspective. Asking who commissioned these statues, whom they represented, in what kinds of spaces they were displayed, who saw them there and to what effect, offers insight into these images' contemporary contexts of creation, display, and reception. Such a study shows that the visual continuity of these formulae was balanced by changes in their significance, function and meanings across space and time.

Here I wish to explore a key moment in the history of the Large and Small Herculaneum Woman types, that of their appropriation into Roman art at the beginning of the Principate. This exploration begins with the eponymous statues from the Herculaneum theater. These two figures have had a profound effect on modern understanding of these types, so a first task is to disentangle historiography and history. The discussion then turns to the evidence of Hellenistic precedents, the dynamics of viewing in the Herculaneum theater, and the patterned employment of these two body forms in Augustan and Julio-Claudian Italy. In contrast to statues of the types in other times and places, these share certain contextual characteristics. They stood in public, urban buildings, and were often elements in the ceremonial representation of the imperial régime, as in the installation of Small Herculaneum Woman statues in the Augusteum

* Frequently cited sources are abbreviated as follows:

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