Hannah Gaertner

Latin 310: Writing Rome

The Road to (Anti-)Greatness

Various theories regarding the reason for Rome’s seemingly eternal reign, their manifest destiny, floated about—they were strategically positioned inland with water access, they were afforded the soundest mind and body by their latitude, they had the gods on their side—but perhaps the most self-validating and widely-propagated theory was their adherence to their virtues. The Romans praised piety, they valued vigor, they stressed strength, and they courted the cunning. Their city, the outward embodiment of these concepts, and their duly cultivated rewards are clearly depicted on Augustus’ Ara Pacis in the form of the victorious helmet-clad woman Roma sitting atop enemy arms, apparently a symbol for the successes this path brings. And yet these qualities were not quite so celebrated when exhibited by actual women. While men were held to the standards portrayed by Roma, women were instead expected to be largely passive and obedient to both their men and their role in society; when they dared deviate from this and take action that might have been applauded if by a man, they often faced punishment and infamy rather than fame, being paraded as an example of what not to do. Nevertheless this came with a dash of irony because in this shaming, the women were actually elevated beyond their usual station. This is best embodied by Tarpeia, who, upon deciding to give in to deviance and take a risk that could potentially pay off personally and for her *patria*, received death, shame, and an everlasting place in Roman history that Augustus could only hope to match.

Livy introduces the character of Tarpeia in his *Ab Urbe Condita*, a work billed as an ethical history, presenting her as not much more than an exemplum of whom not to be: greedy, traitorous, shameful. Her story goes like this: *Sp. Tarpeius Romanae praeerat arci. Huius filiam virginem auro corrumpit Tatius ut armatos in arcem accipiat* (Livy, *Ab Urbe Condita* 1.11.6), and then they killed her. This seems like the kind of clean-cut example Livy championed when he earlier stated, *hoc illud est praecipue in cognitione rerum salubre ac frugiferum, omnis te exempli documenta in inlustri posita monumento intueri; inde tibi tuaeque rei publicae quod imitere capias, inde/foedum inceptu, foedum exitu, quod vites* (1.1.10-11). Yet the story of Tarpeia is more than just proof that a rejection of virtue and adoption of sin and avarice will lead to downfall. No, if this was the case then Tatius would have perished with her. Despite taking up only five lines, the double standard becomes clear from two remarks: *Consilio etiam additus dolus* (1.11.6) and *pepigisse eam quod in sinistris manibus haberent; eo scuta illi pro aureis donis congesta* (1.11.8). The first line was stated just before Tarpeia’s introduction, but regarding the Sabines; the second came after her death. Livy commends Tatius for being deceptive and then rightfully betraying Tarpeia while condemning Tarpeia for similar deception and betrayal. The Sabines betray her by going back on their deal because they, too, are greedy, but when they do it, it’s a logical act to be admired for advancing their collective goals, not portrayed as actual greed.

Propertius seems to recognize the unfairness of the situation to some extent, and so in his telling he gives Tarpeia a voice, a more admirable motive, and a strength previously omitted. In his love poetry Propertius’ muse was a woman named Cynthia, after the maiden goddess of the hunt and wilderness. Giving her such a moniker suggests Propertius values her as an independent and forceful person, and his various characterizations of her in his poetry continue to break from the traditional views of women as needing to be pure and passive to be desired. He at one point states, *sed tu non debes inimicae cedere linguae:/semper formosis fabula poena fuit* (Propertius, *Elegies* 2.32.25-26). If you extend *formosis* from just physical beauty to the metaphorical as well, this suggests that he sees women as people whose greatness goes punished, but nevertheless they shouldn’t try to stifle it.

In his telling of the story, Propertius depicts Tarpeia’s reaction to Tatius: *Vidit harenosis Tatium proludere campis/pictaque per flavas arma levare iubas:/obstipuit regis facie et regalibus armis,/interquel oblitas excidit urna manus* (4.4.19-22). The emphatic position of *vidit* at the beginning of the line and clause draw attention to it and thus paints Tarpeia as an active player from the start. The final line visually paints the action with *urna* physically falling between *oblitas* and *manus*, once again drawing attention to itself and leading the reader towards its reference. Micaela Janan suspects that the urn that fails to hold its water (in this case by falling between her hands) is reminiscent of the Danaids and their punishment. Such a conclusion could be supported by the fact that Propertius earlier mentioned them as he described the city— *tota erat in spatium Poenis digesta columnis,/inter quas Danai femina turba senis* (2.31.3-4). Based on Ovid’s inclusion of them, too, (*Quaque parare necem miseris patruelibus ausae/Belides et stricto stat fetus ense pater* (Ovid, *Ars Amatoria* 1.73-74) they are well-known and easily conjurable by most Romans, making it not a stretch to imagine this as a subtle reference.

Janan points out that Propertius seems to draw a contrast to the Danaids when he has Tatius murder Tarpeia:

Tatius' last words to her echo this expectation when he says, “Marry, and ascend the bed of my kingdom!” (“*nube*,” *ait, “et regni scande cubile mei,*” 4.4.90). But in contrast to the Danaid myth, the “bridegroom” kills the “bride”: the Capitoline that Tatius mockingly calls his “marriage bed” sees his murderous duplicity, not hers. And though scrupulous to punish her, Tatius happily keeps the fruit of her treachery: Rome. (Janan, p.436)

It seems hypocritical that when the Danaids decide to stand up and commit an act that takes great strength for the good of their own kingdoms, they are immortalized as villains, yet when Tatius does it he is fondly remembered for stopping this girl and then using the new resource of the information to act in favor of his own kingdom. However, it is because of this poorly perceived act that the Danaids find themselves on this portico in such a place of prominence that two different authors feel the need to include them on their literary strolls through the city. The Danaids achieved fame by trying to employ the same defensive and vanquishing actions that brought Roma to her place on top of the enemies’ shields, as depicted in the Ara Pacis, but found themselves reviled in infamy rather than celebrated as the role models they should have been.

Overall, Propertius seems to depict Tarpeia in a more positive light than Livy’s initial introduction. Harry C. Rutledge comments that while several authors tell her story, “only Propertius introduces another motive for the betrayal; namely, the inordinate desire that Tarpeia conceived for Tatius and her hope to become the Sabine's bride and queen,” (Rutledge, p.69) and Tara Welch extends this to suggest that, when paired with the new context from Propertius, “all women in Livy’s first book act as ‘foundational mothers’ in Rome’s rise, without whom the growth of Rome might have been quite different or even stunted. What they bring to Rome is the ability, and the means, to incorporate outsiders into the state” (Welch, p.182). The latter comment is meant to point out that women such as Lavinia or the Sabines were vital to Rome’s existence and growth because they provided the bond of marriage between separate peoples, allowing them to combine and share their strengths. Perhaps in this case Tarpeia was trying to do this, as is suggested by her statement to Tatius: *commissas acies ego possum solvere nupta:/vos medium palla foedus inite mea* (Propertius, *Elegies* 4.4.59-60). Tarpeia seems to be trying to unite both sides, end the conflict, and force a stronger nation to come into being, a vision that takes bravery and great love for one’s country to dare to attempt. Should a figure like Augustus attempt to do this, to arrange a marriage for the political strengthening of ties or to take action to extend Rome’s safety and domain, the result would be praise. Tarpeia, however, receives only criticism and infamy.

Rutledge also notes that in Propertius’ version, Tarpeia is continuously associated with water: *sibi tingendas dixit in amne coma* (4.4.24), *lacrimis spargitur ara meis* (4.4.46), *rorida terga* (4.4.48). He especially notes that “the hexameter that opens this central passage ends with *ignes* (45); the closing pentameter with *aquas* (50)” (Rutledge, p.70). This serves to align Tarpeia with the element of water while distancing her further from Rome and its principal exemplary element, fire. Tarpeia serves as a threat to Rome as her tears can extinguish Vesta’s flame: *Pallados exstinctos si quis mirabitur ignes, ignoscat: lacrimis spargitur ara meis* (Propertius, *Elegies* 4.4.46)*.* Rome is often equated with a flame, and so by positioning Tarpeia as both a threat to this and its polar opposite, she is robbed of any connection she might have had with Roma as depicted on the Ara Pacis. She is not portrayed as exhibiting values but actively compromising them. The triumphant and fierce figure seen on the altar seems to sneer at the other lost and misguided woman.

The water imagery also serves to connect Tarpeia to other women who dared to act out according to their values and faced famous punishments for this. Propertius mentions Scylla, the eventual sea-monster, and Ariadne, who was left marooned on Naxos in the middle of the sea: *quid mirum patrios Scyllam secuisse capillos,/candidaque in saevos inguina versa canes?/prodita quid mirum fraterni cornua monstri,/cum patuit lecto stamine torta via?* (4.4.39-42). The anaphora created by asking *quid mirum* twice serves to emphasize that this shouldn’t be such a shock that women at times take action based on their own agendas. In all three of these cases the woman defied expectations for love, but as mentioned earlier, isn’t the only reason that Rome came to hold its current seat because of women who reached across the divide of “other” and united kingdoms? Should they have been successful, or perhaps in the eyes of the other kingdoms in the tale, the women would be the heroes. As it is, they, too, are paraded to demonstrate how women should not behave, but their names still remain much more widely known than they would have been had they kept to themselves.

Propertius also brings up several other famous women remembered in history not for their great acts but for what history views as their vile shortcomings. Tarpeia references Medea when she says, *o utinam magicae nossem cantamina Musae!* (4.4.51). To most this would probably signal Tarpeia’s moral corruptness as Medea possesses the reputation of a heartless witch. Yet truly Tarpeia means she wishes she had Medea’s magical abilities so that she could help the one she loved, like Medea did for Jason in the part of her history that is often neglected. Medea’s myth is selectively remembered by most so that she is portrayed as a villain and not a Roma-like figure who used her abilities to further a noble cause.

Rutledge further illustrates additional connections to famed women that Propertius makes: “In her dream (71-2), Tarpeia sees herself as both Amazon and Bacchanal... That she is like an Amazon comes from the reference to the river Thermodon, the principal stream of the Amazons' legendary home in Pontus. The Strymon was a river of Thrace, associated with the rites of Dionysus” (Rutledge, p.71-72). Janan chimes in that “Bacchant and Amazon share a passion for the divine, whether Ares, Artemis or Dionysos; they share a penchant for violence and a capacity to exceed the place marked out for Woman within the polis” (Janan, p.439-440). Tarpeia is connected to these as she cares for the divine, hence her role as a Vestal Virgin (even if a bad one), she is fiery and takes actions, and she tries to break from her place in society and rise up to greater achievement. In fact, these are characteristics embodied and applauded by many Roman citizens who are pious and ambitious. Yet in women these qualities go from commendable to deplorable.

Janan also extends the connection to the Bachhant to refer to Dido as many other scholars do, citing one in particular when she says, “Warden marshals this duplicity to support reading Dido, the chaste warrior-queen turned impassioned lover, behind Tarpeia” (p.439). Dido, as Medea was, is not remembered for her heroics but her faults. She is not remembered for saving her people from her murderous and tyrannical husband. She is not remembered for building a brilliant and bustling city from nothing on a faraway land. She is not remembered for being a competent ruler, nor for demonstrating great hospitality as she cares for Aeneas and his shipwrecked men. No, she is only remembered for her manic reaction to his departure, for being too caught up in a scandalous love, for sliding into a role of a semi-villainess by attempting to prevent his departure and Rome’s eventual founding. If not for her failed romance, Dido would likely not be remembered at all. It was not her virtues and accomplishments but her unconventional and rather frowned-upon acts that translated her into a household name to this day.

Given all the gender-discrimination that Tarpeia faced, all those who condemned her, it truly is ironic that in the end she seems to have the last laugh with her place cemented in Rome’s heart for centuries. Propertius ends the poem with *a duce Tarpeia mons est cognomen adeptus / o vigil, iniustae praemia sortis habes* (Propertius, *Elegies* 4.4.93-94). To this Janan says, “The Capitoline is hers, finally, as mons Tarpeius-but whose is the injustice? The perfectly ambiguous vigil, "watcher," glances both toward Tarpeia and Jupiter, the Capitoline's god” (Janan, p.443). It seems as if there is purposeful ambiguity in terms of who this position is unfair towards, whether it is Jupiter for having to share a space with a disgrace or Tarpeia who received her fame but in such a negative context. Yet either way, Tarpeia shares a home with Jupiter forevermore—Jupiter Optimus, the greatest of the gods. One could say there is no superior place. While Augustus tried to push Apollo into the spotlight and built his own home next-door to Apollo’s, he still can’t deny that in most people’s minds and most legends of old the neighbor of Tarpeia’s rock is superior. Tarpeia, who is such an alleged shame to Vesta and Rome, lives on in coins still found 2000 years later, some of which she shares with Augustus himself—his face on the obverse and hers on the reverse. She was the antithesis of his Moral Code and a negative exemplum in many minds, and yet Augustus and Tarpeia ended up in the same place.

Work Cited

Janan, Micaela. “‘Beyond Good and Evil’: Tarpeia and Philosophy in the Feminine.” *The*

*Classical World*, vol. 92, no. 5, 1999, pp. 429–443. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/4352313.

Rutledge, Harry C. “Propertius' ‘Tarpeia’: The Poem Itself.” *The Classical Journal*, vol. 60, no.

2, 1964, pp. 68–73. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/3294008.

Welch, Tara. “Perspectives On and Of Livy’s Tarpeia.” *Eugesta,* vol. 2, no. 1, 2012, pp. 169-200.

*Eugesta*, https://eugesta-revue.univ-lille3.fr/pdf/2012/Welch-2\_2012.pdf