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MULIER EST URBIS CONFUSIO?—THE FUNCTION OF RHEA SILVIA, TARPEIA, AND HORATIA AS EXEMPLA IN LIVY'S THE EARLY HISTORY OF ROME

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Abstract

In *The Early History of Rome*, Livy focuses his narrative upon the moral, emphasizing it through the employment of several devices of literary art. Given that the Roman women Rhea Silvia, Tarpeia, and Horatia all form part of the colorful cycle of stories that make up the early growth and development of Rome, this paper explores how these women function as exempla and how Livy frames them in the broader context of his masterpiece. Livy uses these female exempla not in a factual record but rather in a masterpiece of moral instruction, with the women serving as exempla of a flexible or open kind.

The study of history is the best medicine for a sick mind; for in history you have a record of the infinite variety of human experience plainly set out for all to see; and in that record you can find for yourself and your country both examples and warnings; fine things to take as models, base things, rotten through and through, to avoid.

—Livy, *The Early History of Rome*, Preface

Livy's famous preface clearly proclaims that history is a valuable moral device. The specific wording of the preface clearly connects history and historiography as partners in moral instruction, yet Livy's use of both does not necessarily mean that his use of either results in clear-cut moral lessons for the reader to simply internalize. "History" was full of "records," or exempla, for moral agents of Livy's time. Through understanding of the events of history, proof "of the infinite variety of human experience" can be found. According to scholar Tara Welch, Livy "draws in his audience not only as impressionable moral agents but also as readers and learners" (2015, p. 137). Classicist Jane Chaplin adds, "At any point, Livy may intend his various internal and external audiences to respond to the same exemplum in different ways" (2000, p. 4).

Livy's exempla evidently have multiple audiences in mind, but in using them as moral devices, Livy seeks to establish an important relationship between those within the text and those outside it. The audience therefore appears to occupy a central role in the interpretation of these exempla, given the myriad ways to respond and to take moral lessons from them. Indeed, if "history" and "records" are the source materials that form the content of Livy's *chef d'oeuvre*, the use of these source materials as teaching and advising tools to "find for yourself and your country" and "to take as models" reveals the means by which the constituent material comes to the reader. This means the historiography that refers to the meeting point between the material and the learner. It is not, therefore, the past through which Livy delivers help to the audience as "impressionable moral agents" but rather the interpretative "study" of that past, yet what is the role accorded to women such as Rhea Silvia, Tarpeia, and Horatia in this interpretative exemplum scheme?

Welch (2015) writes that the three women exist in a gap while at the same time being that which constitutes the gap while also acting as the means by which that gap is bridged. She explains, "Rhea Silvia is the point of connection between the Alban kings and Rome's rulers; Horatia is both Roman and Alban; and Tarpeia exists in the moment between complete Sabine hostility and Sabine cooperation." She suggests that through the actions of Rome's early men, Livy highlights to his reader the centripetal forces at play, driving the development of his pluralistic city. Indeed, Roman men are at the center of continually driving Livy's narrative forward. The positions of these founding-figure women and the colorful cycle of their stories, however, indicate to Welch the centrifugal forces that are also at play in Rome's foundational stories. She writes that in positioning these women as capable of moving away from Roman norms, Livy highlights how Roman women are able to counteract the city's patriarchal centripetal forces (2015, p. 163). This paper therefore explores how these women function as exempla and how Livy frames them in the broader context of his masterpiece. This paper will analyze these female exempla not as a factual record but rather, as Livy himself intended in his preface, as a masterpiece of moral discourse. Indeed, these women all serve as interesting exempla of a flexible or open kind and highlight the tension between the centripetal and centrifugal forces in operation during Rome's founding.

Rhea Silvia features early on in Livy's work, given her primary contribution as the mother of the fraternal twins Romulus and Remus; however, it is possible to understand her as an innocent victim of Amulius's lust for his brother's throne. Tom Stevenson notes, "The common view ... is that she was raped by the war god

Mars and gave birth to twins. ... For her ‘crime,’ she was shackled, thrown into prison and not heard from again” (2011, p. 176). Livy naturally does not dwell much on developing her character, yet Welch indicates how Livy does explicitly describe the tyrannical behaviour of Amulius, who confines Rhea Silvia as a Vestal Virgin for having annihilated his brother’s male stock (2015, p. 162). Appearances can lead to deception, and what seems like a prestigious honor bestowed on Rhea Silvia is in fact a tactic to stem the family line. As with the other women featured in Livy’s exempla, Rhea Silvia is thus also victim to the extreme control that Roman menfolk seek to exert on the city’s women.

Livy does not definitely relate that Rhea Silvia was violated by Mars, however, writing instead, “Mars, she declared, was their father—perhaps she believed it, perhaps she was merely hoping by the pretence to palliate her guilt” (Livy 2002, p. 34). The absence of an equivocal statement is important, as while the violator’s identity is kept ambiguous, the innocence and moral purity of this exemplum are called into question. Indeed, the reader cannot but question the truth surrounding not only Rhea Silvia but also her sons and Amulius himself. Did she undermine her vows as a Vestal Virgin? Were Amulius’s actions toward her for undermining her vows in themselves indicative of those of a tyrant? Who, exactly, was the boys’ father? Although the danger posed by women in incorporating external bloodlines is readily present here, the record remains unresolved and is certainly complicated and intricate rather than simple and straightforward. What is clear, however, is that Rhea Silvia exists in a gap and serves as a point of connection between the Albans and the Romans.

Livy’s usage of exempla also motivates the reader to delve more deeply into each particular record and to understand more the general process of deciphering them. Regarding Tarpeia, another Vestal Virgin and daughter of the Roman commander Spurius Tarpeius, Stevenson describes how common accounts of her story reveal her as “a traitor who receives just punishment” (2011, p. 178). A simple reading of Livy’s narrative uncovers how Tarpeia betrayed Rome to the leader of the Sabine army, Titus Tatius, and consequently was murdered as punishment. Livy offers three different explanations to justify the incentive behind Tarpeia’s perfidy, however, thus again leaving the reader questioning the true interpretation that can be obtained from this exemplum. Livy writes first, “When she had gone outside the walls to fetch water for a sacrifice, [Tarpeia] was bribed by Tatius ... to admit a party of his soldiers into the fortress” (2002, p. 44). The blame is thus first posited on Tatius and the Sabines to show that Tarpeia’s treachery came not from greed but from a scrupulous bribe. It is almost as if her betrayal of Rome was not her direct

fault but rather the consequence of Sabine bribery. Although Tarpeia did indeed “admit a party of his soldiers into the fortress,” her motivation came from the force of attraction rather than from inherent greed or selfishness.

Yet Livy conveys another account of Rome’s betrayal by remarking that Rome’s exposure came not from bribery but from greed itself: “There is also a story that this girl had demanded as the price of her services ‘What they had on their shield-arms’ ” (2002, p. 44). Here, Livy posits that Tarpeia’s avarice was the key factor in her ultimate death. Such was her greed and rapacity that she, in essence, sold out her city, the disgust at and aversion to which prompted Rome’s very enemies to heap their shields upon her, resulting in her death.

Finally, Livy’s third version of events explaining Tarpeia’s perfidy fuses the two previous accounts: “Some say that after bargaining for what they ‘had on their left arms’ she did actually demand their shields” (2002, p. 44). Similarly to his previous account, Livy again blames Tarpeia here, but unlike in the prior version, Tarpeia in this one directly demands the shields, rather than the gold, of the Sabine soldiers. In this scenario, Tarpeia even appears to be acting in Rome’s best interests. As Stevenson keenly notes, she can be interpreted as a “national heroine, who attempted to disarm the Sabines by trickery” (2011, p. 179).

Although these three versions feature the same result—Tarpeia’s eventual death at the hand of the Sabines—the true meaning behind Tarpeia’s exemplum is thus difficult to discern. Livy’s presentation of Tarpeia’s tale clearly leaves much material for the reader to analyze. What is beyond doubt is that as a direct result of Tarpeia’s actions, Rome was betrayed and Tarpeia received a fatal punishment. What is clear, however, is that Livy’s description of alternatives frames the overall narrative of the story. His refusal to come down and make a judgment on one side or the other opens Tarpeia’s exemplum to the interpretation of the reader. Indeed, after relating the three various points of view, Livy moves seamlessly to advance his general narrative, immediately continuing, “The Sabines were now in possession of the citadel” (2002, p. 44). Welch concludes, “In Tarpeia’s case, Livy places himself in the maze-walker’s position, confronted with the forks and paths of alternative traditions amongst which he may choose” (2015, p. 145), yet according to Stevenson, “[t]he implications of the various traditions once more frustrate resolution” (2011, p. 179). Given so many options for the original narrative of Tarpeia’s betrayal beyond the mere fact that she opened Rome to the Sabines, doubt exists. The meaning of an exemplum is thus not fixed or set but evolves through time and with context. The point behind each of Livy’s exempla therefore appears to be more about the process itself than the end product. Livy’s skill lies in

crafting the development of Tarpeia's exemplum rather than in providing a clear resolution.

The record of Horatia, which gives a far more comfortable outcome than that of Tarpeia, offers a particularly strong point of comparison. As Welch explains, "In contrast to Tarpeia's story, in which no one is heroic, Horatia's story is full of commendable behaviors" (2015, p. 136). Horatia's exemplum is conventionally described in relation to family and state disloyalty. Indeed, her life coincided with the hostilities between Rome and Alba Longa, which featured a prominent battle between her brothers, the Horatii, and three Albans, the Curiatii. When the sole surviving Horatii returned victorious to Rome but saw his sister mourning the death of a Curiatii to whom she had been betrothed, he immediately killed her, exclaiming, according to Livy, "What is Rome to such as you, or your brothers, living or dead? So perish all Roman women who mourn for an enemy!" (2002, p. 61). As Stevenson notes, "If the story were to end at this point, a superficial reading might generate sympathy for Horatius's point of view. ... The story continues, and the events which follow make it clear that the simple reading of Horatia as a traitor to her family and to Rome is inadequate" (2011, p. 182). In fact, Livy proceeds to describe a deep difference of opinion among those who were present at Horatia's killing.

Indeed, Horatia's story also does not have a clear-cut resolution. As scholar Joseph Solodow outlines, "The people initially had been ambivalent about Horatius upon his slaying of his sister ... and at the end they are still of two minds" (1979, p. 257). The debate surrounding whether Horatius's heroism on behalf of Rome outweighed the murder of his sister ultimately resulted in the acquittal of Horatius. As Livy notes, "Though he was guilty in law, popular admiration of his quality obtained his acquittal" (2002, p. 62). Horatia's record seems to indemnify everyone, with Horatia garnering sympathy from the crowd because "there were none who did not feel the horror of this deed" (Livy, 2002, p.61) and the law seemingly vindicating Horatius.

This is in contrast to Tarpeia's tale, which flatters no protagonist. Tarpeia's commonly viewed status as a renegade thus also becomes unsure. Her exemplum appears to hint at an underlying instability of sacrifice, in which the Roman community sympathizes with both the sacrificant and victim. Horatius the sacrificant, having defended the honor of his family and state, becomes willing to kill his own sister for dishonoring both, with the sacrifice seemingly expiating the wrong in the eyes of both their father and early Roman law. Horatia the victim, despite dishonoring her own clan and state by mourning the enemy, has also lost

her betrothed and her hopes for the future. The conditions thus appear for the reader to sympathize with both Horatius and Horatia, despite the gravity of both of their actions. As Soldow notes, “Even at the end ... we, like the people of Rome, cannot be sure how to judge” (1979, p. 257).

From the characters of Rhea Silvia, Tarpeia, and Horatia, it is therefore clear that Livy gives a definite degree of attention to records involving women within his general foundational narrative. Rhea Silvia serves to connect Rome’s rulers with Alban kings. Tarpeia exists during the moment between Sabine belligerence and Sabine collaboration, and Horatia is in essence both Roman and Alban. Through their function as exempla, the women appear to highlight the tension between the centripetal and centrifugal forces at play in Rome’s founding story. Thus, as Welch concludes, the function of these women highlights how “women may exert themselves toward or away from Rome, and may be pulled toward or away from Rome” (2015, p. 163). When Livy (2002) says in his preface that the “study of history is the best medicine for a sick mind; for in history you have a record of the infinite variety of human experience plainly set out for all to see,” it is not that he has lost creative control of his narrative amongst the presence of conflicting accounts and sources; rather, Livy wants his readers to use these women to reconsider their own multiple stances, which brings an added nuance to his moralistic discourse.

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