

The Dangers of Misusing Livy's *Exempla*: How Tullia Minor Misconstrues Tanaquil

Scholars have long noted the importance of *exempla* in Livy's monumental *Ab Urbe Condita* (e.g., Walsh, Moore). More recently, scholars have noticed that Livy offers parallel *exempla*, and that characters within the work use earlier characters as *exempla* (Kraus, Chaplin, Roller). We understand that "these repeated narrative elements...are meant to be read together and often allude directly to one another" (Kraus, 314). It has, however, gone largely unnoticed that Livy's characters often misread *exempla*. This misreading can provide what I call a *meta-exemplum*: an example for Livy's readers of how to avoid misusing his *exempla*. In this paper, I argue that Tullia's response to her grandmother, Tanaquil, provides such a *meta-exemplum*.

In the waning days of her father's reign and after she has already helped to murder her first husband and older sister, Tullia Minor, the soon-to-be last queen of Rome, cites Tanaquil as the basis for her next familicidal deed. Livy reports her internal thoughts (1.47.7):

nec conquiescere ipsa potest si, cum Tanaquil, peregrina mulier, tantum moliri potuisset animo ut duo continua regna viro ac deinceps genero dedisset, ipsa regio semine orta nullum momentum in dando adimendoque regno faceret.

Tullia cannot be at peace if she herself, born of royal stock, was making no progress in giving and removing the kingship, even though Tanaquil, a foreign woman, was able to accomplish so much with her mind that she gave two consecutive kingships to her husband and later to her son-in-law.

The historian makes patently clear that Tullia considers her grandmother an *exemplum* on which she can model her own actions.

Armed with this revelation, the reader can now fully make sense of the multiple parallels that Livy has hitherto been writing and continues to write between Tullia and Tanaquil. Both queens share in the following four categories: an impetus for action (desiring a higher position in life), a method of persuasion (convincing their husbands to heed their advice), similarity of speech (adopting nearly identical phrases), and their mobility (choosing where to go). These mutual actions make clear how important Tanaquil is to Tullia: nearly every action that Tullia takes finds a precedent in her grandmother. In other words, Tullia cherry picks Tanaquil's legacy and, thus, behaves like a king-making Tanaquil.

Unfortunately, Tullia has grossly misapplied and misjudged Tanaquil's *exemplum*. Tanaquil's role in the reign of her husband, Tarquinius Priscus, and later of her son-in-law, Servius Tullius, does not quite align with Tullia's overwhelmingly negative and simplistic interpretation. The reader may recall negatives, especially Tanaquil's deception of the Romans after assassins kill Priscus (1.41.4-5), but also positives, like how rationally Tanaquil influences her husband to leave Etruria for Rome (1.34.4-5), her piety (1.41.3) and her gift of prophecy (1.34.9), which helps to establish Servius Tullius as the next king (1.39.3). Tanaquil, perhaps the most ambiguous character in Book 1, cannot be easily categorized as wholly positive (e.g., Smethurst) or entirely negative (e.g., Stevenson). Furthermore, Tanaquil's king-making actions fit the extraordinary time and circumstance—the assassination of her husband—but Tullia's king-making ambition most certainly does not. The time for “king-making” is not when one's father is both healthy and competently ruling, and the consequence of this mistaken application culminates in a reign of bloody terror.

Tullia, therefore, provides a meta-*exemplum* for Livy's reader: she shows the danger of misreading, misusing, and misapplying an *exemplum*. As Roller has demonstrated, Roman ideology surrounding *exempla* "presupposes that deeds performed in the past, together with the beliefs and values that motivated them, are comprehensible, morally compelling, and reproducible in the present" (Roller, 18). Tullia's story shows that this presupposition can be dangerous if it is not applied carefully. Tanaquil's ambiguous *exemplum* merits thoughtful and careful contemplation, not the reckless interpretation of Tullia Minor. This hot-headed approach to *exempla* serves as Livy's meta-*exemplum*, his warning to his own audience. There is no doubt this would be a worthwhile lesson for anyone reading an exemplary history of the Republic at a time of great social and, especially, political change.

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