

Impervium Cribrum: The Paradigmatic Iconography of the Vestal Tuccia

In *Gorgias* 493, Plato compares the licentious soul to a leaky vessel. The reason he makes this comparison, through the mouth of Socrates, is because the sexual appetite of the soul is never satisfied. This metaphor stands out in relation to the Vestal Virgin Tuccia, who, having been accused of allowing the hearth fire to go out—a sign that Rome was in jeopardy and a metaphor for the loss of chastity—successfully carried a sieve full of water from the Tiber River to the Forum Romanum without spilling the contents. Through her actions, Tuccia merges an accused impiety with a proven innocence, transforming what is by nature a holed vessel into a whole vessel. Tuccia, of the Vestals recorded in ancient texts, had perhaps the greatest long-term influence on Western culture. In this paper I explore the various metaphors and meanings of the leaky jar image; I then apply it to Tuccia’s story before launching into an investigation of the aftermath of this curious iconography.

There existed in Delphi at the time of Plato, a painting by Polygnotus of Thasos, which depicted women carrying broken jars (Sissa 1990). In Pausanias’ *Description of Greece* (10.31.9), this scene represents “the uninitiated” women in the cult of Eleusinian mysteries. The broken jars signify that the women are not actually part of the cult. This can be extended further to view broken jars as representative of losing the privileges of the cult as well. Tuccia actually defies this imagery by proving that a seemingly porous vessel is, in her hands, a whole one. She was initiated into the cult of Vesta, and remained faithful to Vesta through this act. The role of her life was to be a servant to the goddess, and her miraculous deed confirmed her devotion and undergirded her virtuous character.

Amy Richlin writes about the symbolic significance of Tuccia’s deed. She sees the story of Tuccia as paradigmatic for all women, who are permeable yet must be impermeable and in

control of their sexual impulses. This is particularly true for Vestals, whose impermeability is connected to the continued wellbeing of the Roman state. Tuccia proved the complete inviolability of her own virginal body when she carried water in a sieve.

Dionysius of Halicarnassus provides the most robust account of the legend of Tuccia (*Antiquitates Romanae* 2.69.2), but her tale also appears in Valerius Maximus (*Facta et Dicta Memorabilia* 8.1.5), Saint Augustine (*De Civitate Dei* 22.11), and Petrarch (*Triumph of Chastity*, 194-198). Each of these records is brief but praiseworthy of Tuccia. Two other sources, however, refer negatively to Tuccia's tale, presenting antitheses to what we know of her from the aforementioned sources (Juvenal *Satires* 6.1- 86, Livy *Periochae* 20.5). I discuss Augustine and Petrarch in particular, who view Tuccia as a woman whose devotion to the goddess Vesta is exemplary for devotion to God and for the triumph of chastity. For Augustine, her sieve represents the miracles that can happen to those who faithfully devote themselves to their divinity, and for Petrarch it represents the virtue of maintaining chastity.

In the late 16th century, Queen Elizabeth I had a series of portraits painted that depicted her holding a sieve in her hand. This imagery came directly from the myth of Tuccia and symbolizes the lasting influence of her impervious sieve. Much like the chastity of the Vestals, the condition of the country depended upon the character of Queen Elizabeth (Strong 1987). In portraying herself as chaste, Elizabeth accentuated her vow to protect the state as part of her duty as queen. Tuccia created this ideal of virtue through her deed, and the queen adapted the symbolism of Tuccia into her reign in order to emphasize the virtue of her leadership.

The image of the sieve appears in paintings from the 15th century and into the early 20th century, and Tuccia's narrative occurs in literature beginning with ancient authors and extending to Shakespeare and beyond. During this 400-year period, Tuccia's sieve served as a symbol of

virtue, chastity, and renewed security, her tale became an exemplum of moral character and a metaphor for political stability, and she herself became a paradigmatic figure that emphasized the power of personal, religious, and political integrity.

Bibliography

- Richlin, Amy. "Carrying Water in a Sieve: Class and the Body in Roman Women's Religion." In *Women and Goddess Traditions in Antiquity and Today*. Edited by Karen L. King, 330-374. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997.
- Sissa, Giulia. *Greek Virginity*. Translated by Arthur Goldhammer. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990.
- Strong, Roy. *Gloriana: The Portraits of Queen Elizabeth I*. German Democratic Republic: Thames and Hudson 1987.