The Elegiac Cityscape

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IN THE POPULAR version of her myth, found in Varro, Livy, Dionysius of Halicarnassus, Ovid, Valerius Maximus, and Plutarch, and reflected in all extant visual representations of her story, Tarpeia is a Roman maiden who betrays the Capitol to Titus Tatius, commander of the Sabine forces besieging Rome in response to the rape of the Sabine Women. Her motivation in all these versions, whenever expressed, is greed; in return for her betrayal she demands what the Sabines wear on their arms. She means, of course, their bracelets and rings, but the Sabines reward her instead by crushing her with their shields, which they also wear on their arms. As a grim reminder of Tarpeia’s betrayal, the Romans christened the Tarpeian rock on the Capitol, a particularly nasty crag from which, as tradition holds, traitors were thrown to their deaths. Tarpeia’s story, and the rock named for her, came to represent the threat posed to the state by the selfish pursuit of private goals over public needs.

To be sure, Tarpeia’s myth was not uncomplicated, and variations appear in other versions of her story. Like the mutable identity of Vertumnus, these variations in Tarpeia’s myth point to tensions in Roman ideology. Though her betrayal was memorialized in the Tarpeian rock, for example, Tarpeia was also venerated at her tomb in the city, which is no longer extant. These two Roman places—Tarpeia’s rock and her altar—create an ideological contradiction: her betrayal of Rome is to be condemned (the symbolism of the rock), while her contribution to Roman pluralism is to be commended (via worship at the tomb). Simi-
lar tensions arise from her status in Rome: Tarpeia was either daughter of the Roman commander with no other known social role, or a Vestal Virgin. If the former, as in most versions, her transgression was a private act, while if the latter, as in Varro’s telling, it was sacrilege that tainted the state’s public institutions and required public expiation. She may not even have been Roman. Another variant, preserved in Simylus’ elegy of unknown date, has Tarpeia betray Rome to the Gauls rather than the Sabines; in this case, there is no resulting assimilation of the invader to palliate her guilt. Another oddity appears in Simylus’ version: the girl acts out of love, not greed. This variant raises questions about the extent to which these two motives are interchangeable in the threat they pose to the state.

In this chapter I explore the tensions in Roman identity that are exposed by Propertius’ particular combination of variant details, and his intricate use of Roman topography to emphasize these tensions. Propertius’ telling veers sharply from the popular version. First, the elegist follows Varro in making Tarpeia a Vestal Virgin, a public role that emphasizes her duty to the state and raises the heinousness of her treason. Second, innovating if Simylus’ elegy postdates his own, Propertius motivates Tarpeia not with greed but with love for Tatius—a motive she elaborates in the long monologue she delivers at the heart of the poem (4.4.31–66). This detail changes the conflict of her story from private gain against the state, as it is in the version given by Livy et al., to emotion against the state, or amor vs. Roma. Tarpeia in love, and the dilemma she faces because of this love, reveal an elegist’s perspective on Roman history. Her emotional motivation generates sympathy for Tarpeia, and we see her in this poem searching for a way to reconcile the irreconcilable: her private passion and the needs of the state.

Propertius makes Tarpeia’s predicament even more vivid by his careful placement of her in the Roman landscape. Though Propertius’ poem is ostensibly an action of the Tarpeian grove and tomb (4.4.1–2), the spatial scope of the poem’s action is much wider, ranging across the Capitol and the Forum valley, two areas rich with patriotic timbre. In the poem Tarpeia spends most of her time between these two areas, comfortable in neither and ultimately unwelcome in each. I argue that Tarpeia’s confinement to this liminal area, a place precipitous and rugged in Propertius’ poem, mirrors her confinement to a chaste and loyal life in the service of Rome. The elegist’s mapping of Tarpeia’s struggle onto Rome’s most symbolic locales thus emphasizes her predicament as a feeling individual within a state that subsumes all to...
itself, and draws attention to Tarpeia’s alterity and its confrontation with (and contribution to) Roman ideology. As we shall see, the elegist’s combination of Tarpeia and the city comments not only on Tarpeia’s unfortunate situation, but on the city’s threatening power as well.

TARPEIA IN AUGUSTAN ROME

Tarpeia’s myth was told not only through words such as in the texts mentioned above, but also through images and places. Tarpeia’s rock and her altar had been visual reminders of her story and her demise since the third century BCE at least, but the end of the Republic saw three new visual tellings of her story: two coin types and a monumental sculpture. The first coin, a silver denarius minted by L. Titurius Sabinus in 89 BCE, shows Titus Tatius on the obverse, with or without a laurel victory branch near his chin. The reverse shows Tarpeia about to be crushed by Sabine shields; a crescent moon appears over the girl’s head, suggesting perhaps the nocturnal setting of her treachery or indicating some of her cult associations. Titurius issued his coin during the Social War, a crisis that, like the legend of the original Sabine synoikism, brought ethnic identity to bear on Rome’s understanding of itself. Depending on the holder, it could mark hope for a renewed Sabine synoikism, a call to a stronger (and perhaps anti-Roman) current of Sabine nationalism; or, from a Roman perspective, a promise of Rome’s supremacy over threats to her hegemony.

More dramatically, Tarpeia’s legend was enshrined in the sculptural program of the Forum Romanum. The Basilica Aemilia had been a focal point in the Forum since its erection in c.200 BCE. It was restored between 54 and 34 BCE by L. Aemilius Paullus and then his son L. Aemilius Lepidus Paullus; the restoration was financed by Julius Caesar. The Julian restoration boasted a sculpted frieze of scenes from Rome’s foundation, of which several fragments survive. Among reliefs of Romulus and the 

spolia opima, the building of the first walls, and Romulus and Remus’ departure from Alba Longa for Rome are depictions of the punishment of Tarpeia and the rape of the Sabine women. In the Julian context, the frieze of Rome’s foundation sets Rome’s new dynast in the context of her first monarchic founders—Romulus (here building walls) and Numa alike, since Tarpeia’s felix
culpa led to the Sabine partnership in Rome that made Numa’s kingship possible, and Numa is an ancestor to Julius Caesar via the latter’s grandmother Marcia. Augustus thus inherited a myth of Tarpeia that was becoming increasingly meaningful in the changing order, and her myth took on further nuances under his rule. In 19 BCE, the moneyer P. Petronius Turpilianus issued another coin featuring the doomed maiden’s punishment—again a silver denarius, showing Augustus on the obverse and Tarpeia buried under shields on the reverse (Figure 3).

Turpilianus’ coin, like his other coins that feature Liber and Feronia, attests his own Sabine background and connects him to Tarpeia by punning on their names, Tarpeia and Turpilianus. With the influx of new peoples added to the Roman citizenship during the civil wars, the Tarpeia coin sends a message to its holders: that the elite gens Petronia Turpiliana had been a part of Rome since the very birth of the city. More to the point, the combination on this coin of a monarchic image with Augustus’ image, as well as the celebration of Princeps and moneyer alike, both speak to the evolving sense of the Augustan regime, ready to use the imagery of kingship in its visual program of tradition and innovation. By associating Augustus with Tarpeia, the coin draws attention to the Sabine, and specifically Numan, strain of Augustus’ Julian ancestry. As Grimal suggests, Tarpeia’s act contributed to (and was indeed necessary for) Augustus’ pedigree.

A few years later, Augustus’ name would again be associated with Tarpeia. In 14 BCE, Augustus paid to restore the Basilica after a fire and added a portico to his grandsons and heirs Gaius and Lucius (Figure 4).
Augustus’ restoration of the building served many purposes. First of all, it associated the Princeps and his restoration of Rome with the foundation and building of the original city—an association already palpable in the restoration of cults and temples around Rome, and soon to be further monumentalized on the Ara Pacis and in the Forum of Augustus. Second, the restored Basilica strengthened his dynastic claims to Roman rule by associating his own urban activity with Caesar’s, and by extension with Caesar’s ancestor Numa as described above. Third, it built Augustus’ heirs Gaius and Lucius, honorees of the new entrance hall, into the legends of Rome’s urban founders.

Yet even before the fire of 14 BCE, the building, and the frieze in particular, spoke in subtle and more overt ways to the concerns of the
new order—foremost among them the role of women. The Sabine women and Tarpeia are two of the very few examples of women on civic monumental art in the Augustan age. Their presence at the heart of the Forum, in a place marked by many kinds of public traffic, is striking. Augustus’ legislation on marriage and adultery, passed in 18 BCE, spoke to the ability of women to undermine proper relationships between men. The laws on marriage and adultery sought to stabilize families via children, social classes via restricted intermarriage, and female conduct via the punishment of adultery. They also established a new relationship between the individual and the state, subordinating private desires and personal liberties to public needs and state authority. In this context, the reliefs of the Sabine Women and Tarpeia instructed Romans as to the benefits of proper female behavior. When they behaved appropriately as wives, daughters, and mothers, Roman women acted as social mediators between men and even facilitated Roman expansion. Tarpeia’s perfidy, on the other hand, represented the danger of unregulated female conduct.

On the Tarpeia relief, the girl stands framed by billowing drapery, with a heap of shields at her feet (Figure 5). Like an Amazon, her left breast is bared, a mark of her marginality and of her hostility to the natural order. There is a soldier on either side of her adding his shield to the heap. These three characters are flanked by two men who contemplate the scene, variously identified as Mars/Romulus and Titus Tatius. The man on Tarpeia’s far right, most probably Tatius, is in a position of repose and looks upon the girl with what Warden calls “the sternness of the incorruptible judge.” His pose, however, is also that of the lover gazing upon his beloved. Tatius’ gaze at once casts him as desiring subject of the object Tarpeia (and, as such, master of her narrative) and as

FIGURE 5. Tarpeia relief from the Basilica Aemilia. The panel’s visual narrative stresses the acts of viewing and judging—lessons for viewers outside the sculpture? Photo courtesy of the Fototeca Unione.
object of the lesson she imparts, transfixed by his sight of her. These contemplative men also constitute a paradigm for the male viewer of the relief. Like the sculpted onlookers, men visiting the Basilica after 18 BCE were to look upon Tarpeia’s punishment and contemplate its meaning, both interpreting her story and being interpreted by it. Seeing Tarpeia as the other, as a woman, an Amazon, an outsider, a traitoress, the male viewer reinforces the construction of his own identity as the self, male, Roman, insider, and loyal. The female viewer, on the other hand, sees in Tarpeia an extreme and dangerous version of herself: on the margins, not quite fully Roman but potentially so, if she does not act as Tarpeia does. It is no coincidence that adjoining Tarpeia’s scene on the frieze is a proper marriage scene; the pair encapsulates the scene lesson succinctly: the matrona, not Tarpeia, is the model women should choose. As Miller says, “The Augustan Symbolic quintessentially operated to recuperate the alien, through a complex movement of dialectical synthesis. . . . Augustus from the perspective of these works (sc. the coin and the frieze) is portrayed as both the scourge of treason, who recuperates and incorporates the transgressive, and the direct beneficiary of Tarpeia’s act.”

Given the themes of Tarpeia’s legend—gender, patriotism, assimilation—it is not surprising that her story became popular in the last century of the Republic, when the role of the individual in the state was in flux, and when traditional paths to success gave way to new models of power. As Romans struggled to define themselves and their public and private roles against this changing backdrop, the new Princeps used Tarpeia’s myth to encourage deference toward the state. For Romans of the Augustan age, Tarpeia’s legend spoke to the new Roman identity or, rather, to Roman nonidentity.

THE ELEGiac TARPEIA: AMOR VS. ROMA

Thus Propertius inherited the mythic tradition of Tarpeia in the first century BCE. To be sure, Book 4 in all likelihood predates the Augustan restoration of the Basilica; the last datable reference in Book 4 is the consulship of Scipio in 16 BCE (4.11.65–66), and no more notice of Propertius or his poetry is given until 2 BCE, when Ovid mentions his death using the past tense (Rem. Am. 764). Nevertheless, there is no doubt that Tarpeia’s presence was pervasive in the cityscape as a negative example, and that the new demands of the new order had already
pressed the moral of her story to further heights when Propertius
turned his pen to it.

Propertius disagrees with the use of Tarpeia as a negative example.
He exonerates her from the greed named in other sources by changing
her motive to love. In good Alexandrian fashion, the elegist lends
Tarpeia extra sympathy by granting her a subjectivity lacking in other
sources. Focusing the narrative through Tarpeia’s perspective, Proper-
tius portrays Tarpeia’s love as compelling and her concerns real.27 Like
Ovid’s heroines who are in part patterned after her, Tarpeia tells her
own story, and the reader is allowed a glimpse into her feelings and
motivations. His Tarpeia is not greedy, nor does she think only of her-
self, nor is she naively blind to the implications of her passion.28 Rather,
in her long monologue—more than a third of the poem—Tarpeia
demonstrates that she is aware of the potential consequences of her
desire, and loath to do harm to the state. Her oscillation between desire
and duty gives her a moral dimension she lacks in other sources.

Throughout Tarpeia’s speech her mind flickers back and forth,
between following her desires (marked as ‘amor’ below) and noting the
costs of these desires to herself and the state (marked ‘Roma’):29

ignes castrorum et Tatiae praetoria turmae
et formosa oculis arma Sabina meis,
o utinam ad uestros sedeam captiua Penatis,
dum captiua mei conspicer ora Tati!30
Romani montes, et montibus addita Roma,
et ualeat probro Vesta pudenda meo:
ille equus, ille meos in castra reponet amores,
cui Tatius dextras collocat ipse iubas!
quid mirum in patrios Scyllam saeuisse capillos,
candidaque in saeuos inguina uersa canis?
prodita quid mirum fraterni cornua monstri,
cum patuit lecto stamine torta uia?
quantum ego sum Ausoniis crimen factura puellis,
improba uirgineo lecta ministra foco!
Pallados extinctos si quis mirabitur ignis,
ignoscat: lacrimis spargitur ara meis.

O fires of the camp, and headquarters of Tatius’ squadron, and Sabine
weapons lovely to my eyes, O would that I might sit at your hearth as a
captive, as long as I might gaze upon the face of my Tatius in captivity!
Roman hills, and upon the hills, Rome, and you, Vesta, who must be shamed by my sin, fare well: that horse, that horse will carry my passions back into his camp, that horse whose mane Tatius himself smoothes to the right. Why wonder that Scylla violated her father’s hair, and her shining loins were changed into vicious dogs? Why wonder that the monstrous brother’s horns were betrayed, when the twisted path lay revealed by a gathered thread? How great a crime am I about to commit for Italian girls, I, a sinful girl chosen to be minister to a virgin’s hearth! If someone should wonder that the fires of Pallas have gone out, let him forgive me: the altar is wet with my tears. (4.4.31–46)

As quickly as a new line unfolds Tarpeia’s thoughts shift; she is searching for solutions to her dilemma, and finding none so far. For example, she first expresses her desire to be a member of Tatius’ household (a testament to her amor), but realizes that she can only do so as a captive (a capitulation to Roma). Even in her choice of mythical exempla Tarpeia sees tensions: both Scylla and Ariadne choose love over fatherland (amor; 4.4.39, 41–42), but not without punishment (Roma, 4.4.40). At 4.4.43–46, she recognizes not only a general danger posed by her desire (quantum . . . crimen) but even the specific transgressions caused by that desire: she violates the virginal chastity of her priesthood (improba . . . ministra, 4.4.44) and lets the sacred fire go out (extinctos . . . ignis, 4.4.45). Her tears reveal Tarpeia’s perplexity at her impasse: with her mind searching for explanations and solutions, she realizes she is caught in an irreconcilable situation. Her very pain is a sacrifice at Vesta’s altar.

At 4.4.53, her mind takes a sudden turn. With a balanced case for amor and Roma, Tarpeia instead justifies her transgression by condemning Rome:

to toga picta decet, non quem, sine matris honor
nutrit inhumanae dura papilla lupae.

It is you the toga picta befits, not that one whom, without the honor of a mother, the harsh nipple of a wolf-bitch nursed. (4.4.53–54)

Tatius, she says, is more worthy of her loyalty than wolf-suckled Romulus, who is unaccustomed even to a mother’s love. Tarpeia questions the loveless state that she serves. However, this resentment toward Rome does not last long, as her flickering mind soon seizes upon
a solution that would benefit the city, the Sabines, and herself: namely, that her marriage to Tatius would bind Romans to Sabines:

hic, hospes, patria metuar regina sub aula?
dos tibi non humilis prodita Roma uenit.
si minus, at raptae ne sint impune Sabinae
me rape et alterna lege repende uices!
commissas acies ego possum soluere nupta:31
uos medium palla foedus init mea.
adde, Hymenaeae, modos: tubicen, fera murmura conde:
credite, uestra meus molliet arma torus.

Here, stranger, will I be revered as queen in your country’s palace? Rome betrayed comes as no humble dowry to you. Or, as punishment for the rape of the Sabine women, take me and settle the score by the law of retribution! I, as a bride, am able to resolve the battles that have begun. Enter into a compromise through my wedding gown! Hymenaeus, add your strains! Trumpeter, stop your wild sounds! Believe me, my marriage bed will soften your weapons. (4.4.55–62)

Like the Sabine women, Tarpeia envisions herself combining marriage and peacemaking. Her mention of dowry, the Hymenaeus, wedding dress, marriage-bed, the reference to herself as *nupta* and her sexual pun in *molliet* all reveal Tarpeia’s hope for a marriage with the Sabine king.32 Indeed, she sees the solution that eventually does bring peace—the reconciliation brought about by the Sabine women through their marriage. Tarpeia wants to facilitate, not undermine, this process, an interesting comment since Tarpeia and the Sabine women are so often foils for each other in the sources, such as Livy’s history and the relief sculptures in the Basilica Aemilia. Tarpeia’s hopes for a treaty with the Sabines and an end to the war, seen in *solue* and *foedus*, and encapsulated in the chiastic *arma torus* (4.4.59, 60, and 62, respectively), embody a hope of all Roman marriages: namely, that marriages blur the distinctions between families and strengthen the community, rather than sever community ties.33 Tarpeia’s hopes are noble. In envisioning a winning situation for all parties, the elegist’s Tarpeia would become a positive example for all time.

The extended moral debate she has with herself, in which she tries to reconcile her private desires with her public duty, makes Tarpeia human, and therefore sympathetic to us. Propertius further complicates her situation by making her a Vestal Virgin. In no other version of
her story is Tarpeia so torn by conflicting forces; Propertius alone combines Tarpeia’s ritual chastity and her desire. For some interpreters, Tarpeia’s status as a Vestal Virgin only serves to increase her shame. In this view, as a girl whose ritual chastity was so beneficial to the state, Tarpeia’s love constitutes an especially selfish and heinous crime. The combination of chastity and love in the poem and the resultant erotic frisson would therefore produce a more rousing condemnation of the girl than had appeared in earlier versions of her legend. On the contrary: this combination highlights the barrenness imposed on Tarpeia’s life by the cult of Vesta and throws into high relief the conflict between Tarpeia’s private desires and her public duty. This conflict aligns her with the elegiac poet and lover, who disdains public institutions, especially those that mandate or limit sexual activity. Tarpeia recognizes the tension inherent in her situation: her criticism of unmothered Romulus at 4.4.53–54 hints that, for her, love is incompatible with the Roman state. Indeed, her mention of the wolf recalls the story of another Vestal Virgin, Rhea Silvia, whose sexuality was activated (albeit by a god) and who was punished for it. Like Tarpeia, Rhea Silvia was performing her Vestal duties when she was caught by amor.

This tension between amor and Roma is emphasized by Vesta’s disconcerting appearance in the poem:

\[
\text{... et incerto permisit bracchia somno, nescia se furiis accubuisse nouiss. nam Vesta, Iliacae felix tutela fauillae, culpam alit et plures condit in ossa facies.}
\]

And she gave her arms to fitful sleep, not knowing that she was going to bed with new demons. For Vesta, propitious keeper of the torch from Troy, feeds her sin and plants more fires in her bones. (4.4.67–70)

Vesta is thus the goddess who mandates Tarpeia’s chastity as a Vestal Virgin, and makes that chastity impossible by fanning the flames of her love. Some editors, at a loss to explain Vesta’s perplexing behavior, emend this line to read “Venus.” As one editor states, “the fires of torches and love are the province of Venus and Amor, and for Vesta to arrogate them to herself to compass so cruel a purpose as the further undoing of her votary is monstrous.” Indeed it is, but in my view the reading stands: the poem’s malicious Vesta is a distilled and potent image of Tarpeia’s own predicament. As Vesta is the focus for Tarpeia’s public duties, this goddess’s intervention makes all the more
problematic the tension between *amor* and *Roma* that Tarpeia feels: the very state the maiden serves fosters her transgression against it. The problem is not only Tarpeia’s, and this poem dramatizes the contradictions inherent in the broader cult of Vesta. This goddess’s priestesses guaranteed Rome’s growth and fertility via their own unfruitfulness, an ideological conundrum manifest in the ambiguous sexual status of Vestal Virgins in Roman thought. Such contradictions indicate a Roman attempt to negotiate sexual identity and to tease out permutations of gender. Tarpeia’s elegiac story, therefore, speaks not only to the difficulties of her own situation but also to deeper fissures in Roman ideology, “fault lines . . . in the larger architectonics of Roman ideology.”

Propertius’ Tarpeia is thus stuck, confined in her public role and confounded in her desire. Tarpeia rejects her priestly virginity, and convinces herself that proper service to Rome requires that women be married. She envisions a solution that would restore her fertility and serve the state: a marriage with Tatius that would unite the two peoples. By exposing her tormented inner thoughts and by emphasizing the contradictions in her priesthood, Propertius causes the Roman reader to question both the suppositions behind Tarpeia’s negative legend and the urban monuments that are its legacy, such as the rock named for her and the Basilica Aemilia reliefs. Tarpeia’s love therefore constitutes a subtle challenge to the contemporary status and use of her legend.

CAUGHT IN THE MIDDLE

*Tarpeia and the Capitol*

Tarpeia’s monologue reveals to the reader that she is fully aware of the conflict she suffers and of the ramifications of her decision. She is pulled in opposite directions by two forces: her loyalty to the state of Rome, and her love for the Sabine king Tatius. This tug of war between state and love is played out in her movements in the city as well, as she is pulled toward the Capitol on the one hand, the temporary location of Rome’s forces, and the Forum on the other hand, the site of Tatius’ Sabine encampment. Tarpeia’s emotional struggle takes place in sites of strong Roman ideological signification.

As we have seen, putting Tarpeia in the city center was not new. The Tarpeian rock on the Capitol eternalized her betrayal, and Caesar (and
later Augustus) chose the Forum as a fitting place to commemorate her punishment. Propertius rewrites the girl’s relationship to the city center, repositioning Tarpeia within the cityscape so that she is an example not of how the individual threatens the state, but rather how the state threatens the individual. Stahl, a critic concerned with the tension between public and private in this and all Propertius’ poems, touches on this locality of Tarpeia’s situation: “Thus her conflict, expressed in local terms, is that, though physically on her state’s territory (in the neighborhood of Iuppiter Optimus Maximus), she emotionally longs to be in the enemy’s camp. It is worth noting how once more Propertius chooses the scenic as a vehicle for the emotional.”

It is important to realize that Propertius’ topographical tableau is decidedly not an accurate, or even plausible, representation of the city at war with the Sabines. As Richardson indicates, the Sabines would have come to Rome on the Via Salaria and encamped near the Comitium. The Romans would have fortified the Palatine and perhaps the Temple of Vesta. Nothing as yet existed on the Capitol to warrant the Romans’ encampment there. Propertius’ placement of Tarpeia on the Capitol may be the result of a tradition confused by many centuries of lapsed time and by many variations in her legend, including the fact that the Tarpeian Rock is located on that hill rather than the Palatine and is often called Mons Tarpeius. We must admit that the legend grew and changed as Rome did. What is more to the point, historical accuracy is not the point of the elegist’s aetiological poem. Rather, his ancient Rome is an imaginative prototype of the imposing city it would become, a forerunner of the urbs aeterna that is believable without being either archaeologically sound or even internally consistent from poem to poem or within a single poem. The malleability of Rome’s early landscape is, indeed, a conclusion Propertius’ poetry encourages.

We begin, as does Propertius, with the Capitol, the temporary home for Tarpeia and the Roman state. Each day Tarpeia descends the Capitol to fetch water, and to gaze upon her Tatius. Evenings she ascends again, scratched by brambles, into the Roman camp. She delivers her monologue while sitting on the edge of the hill, overlooking Tatius’ camp. This hill was the religious and ideological head of the Roman empire. Rome’s most important temple, that of Jupiter Optimus Maximus, stood at its crest, as did its oldest, the temple of Jupiter Feretrius. Both these temples figured prominently as symbols of Rome’s imperial domain. The triumphal ceremony, a splendid celebration of Roman military victory, reached its climax atop the Capitol in the great Temple
to Jupiter. Regalia from these ceremonies were dedicated in the temple and displayed permanently along the triumphal route up the hill, making it a permanent museum of Rome’s dominion. The Temple to Jupiter Feretrius housed *spolia opima*, the state’s rarest and highest possible military honors. Finally, the Capitol testified to Rome’s eternity.\(^46\)

The Capitol was so fully considered a symbol of Roman dominion that most colonial outposts, even those built on flat land, featured a Capitolium.\(^47\) To revise the popular maxim, as long as the Capitol stood, so would Rome stand.

With these associations, the Capitoline Hill forms a pointed setting for Tarpeia’s unhappy situation. Tarpeia’s crime is multifaceted. She violates the city religiously by transgressing the rules of her priesthood; by violating the sacred fire, a crime she mentions in 4.4.45, she opens Rome to possible disaster. She violates the city militarily by opening its defenses to the enemy, literally opening a path for the enemy to enter. Finally, she violates Rome symbolically by betraying the Capitol, Rome’s strongest symbol of itself. Her final journey down the Capitol, in a sense, reverses the Roman triumph in which victorious generals would bring foreign resources into the city. Tarpeia, exiting the Capitol, leads those very resources out of the city, away from its head.\(^48\) These layers of her betrayal heighten the notion of the damage she does to the state.

Tarpeia’s final departure from the Capitol emphasizes her rejection of Rome’s public realm. In choosing Tatius she rejects cult, state, and urban center, fleeing the pervasive public presence in her life in order to achieve her private desires. In short, her private desires cannot be met on the Capitol, a place where her actions are interpreted as treason and permanently enshrined as such in the establishment of the Tarpeian rock. Propertius has expressed Tarpeia’s crime against the community in topographical terms that raise the stakes for both betrayed and traitor, a point he underscores in the poem’s introductory lines:

\begin{quote}
Tarpeium nemus et Tarpeiae turpe sepulchrum
fabor et antiqui limina capta Jovis.
\end{quote}

I shall tell of Tarpeia’s grove, and Tarpeia’s shameful grave, and how the threshold of ancient Jove was captured. (4.4.1–2)

The Temple of Jupiter gets captured, and Tarpeia gets a grave.\(^49\)
Tarpeia violates the Capitol to achieve her love with Tatius, who is encamped in the Forum valley below. In so doing she hopes to escape the restrictions placed on her by Rome and by her public role as a Vestal Virgin. However, in her escape she rushes into another urban area loaded with symbolic meaning about Rome’s political dominion. Tatius has stationed his troops in the Forum Romanum, the area that would become the political, commercial, and social center of Rome. Though she imagines otherwise, Tarpeia’s fate in this urban sector will be no better than it was on the Capitol under Rome’s jurisdiction.

Tatius is encamped in the northern portion of the Forum Romanum, in an area stretching from the Tullian Spring (his water source) to the Curia (4.4.13). This whole area was visible from the southwestern edge of the Capitol. Propertius pays careful attention to his description of this locale:

\begin{quote}
Tarpeium nemus et Tarpeiae turpe sepulchrum
fabor et antiqui limina capta Iouis.
lucus erat felix hederoso conditus antro
multaque natuius obstrepit arbor aquis,
Siluani ramosa domus, quo dulcis ab aestu
fistula poturas ire iubebat ouis.
hunc Tatius fontem uallo praecingit acerno,
fidaque suggesta castra coronat humo.
quid tum Roma fuit, tubicen vicina Curetis
cum quateret lento murmure saxa Iouis?
atque ubi nunc terris dicuntur iura subactis,
stabant Romano pila Sabina Foro.
murus erat montes: ubi nunc est Curia saepta,
bellicus ex illo fonte bibebat equus.
\end{quote}

I shall tell of Tarpeia’s grove, and Tarpeia’s shameful grave, and how the threshold of ancient Jove was captured. There was a lush copse, hidden by an ivy-clad overhang, and many a tree rustled by the local spring. It was the wooded home of Silvanus, where the sweet pipe used to bid sheep to come out of the summer heat and drink. Tatius surrounded the spring with a maple palisade, and he ringed his trusty camp with heaped-up earth. What was Rome then, when the nearby trumpeter of
the Sabines shook the stones of Jove with a low rumbling? And where
now laws are pronounced for conquered peoples, Sabine javelins used to
stand in the Roman Forum. Their walls were hills: where now the Curia
lies, there used to be sheep-pens, and the warhorse used to drink from
that fountain. (4.4.1–14)

Propertius begins his poem with a mention of Tarpeia’s grove (nemus,
4.4.1). This reading is contested, however, and some editors emend
nemus to scelus.51 Though scelus is attested in no manuscripts, the pri-
mary problem these editors find with nemus is that there is no monu-
ment known that was Tarpeia’s grove. I believe nemus should remain,
for four reasons. First, the action on the Capitol’s slopes suggests a
grove; Livy describes the asylum of Romulus as situated in the saddle
between the hill’s two peaks, inter duos lucos (between two groves,
1.8.5). Second, the poem spends much time describing proto-Rome’s
natural, undeveloped landscape. Springs, trees, plants, and flowers
abound on Tarpeia’s path, and these seem as grove-like as any such
description. Third, the juxtaposition of nature and the built environ-
ment is prominent in elegy 4.4, emphasizing the various Romes on the
spot; in the lines above, the natural (nemus) stands in sharp contrast
with the constructed (sepulcrum). Fourth, and most importantly, the
lack of a formally attested “Tarpeia’s grove” in the cityscape—indeed,
its replacement by the Tarpeian rock—testifies to the city’s ability to
organize its myths according to its need. The Tarpeian rock, like the
Basilica Aemilia and the tomb mentioned in 4.4.1, focuses attention on
Tarpeia’s punishment rather than her motivations or intentions. Pro-
pertius’ Tarpeian grove, on the other hand, painted in pastoral
terms, focuses attention on the girl’s predicament. Tarpeia’s grove can
be seen as a “. . . topographical crystallization point from which . . .
Tatius and Tarpeia can now be measured . . . by reference to their atti-
dute towards peaceful pastoral landscape.”52 In short, Tatius makes the
lucus a locus for warfare, while Tarpeia makes it a locus for her love.

Tatius’ camp is a perversion of the pastoral landscape, as he turns a
locus amoenus into a military locale. Trees appear not as a source of
pleasant shade (as in Vergil Ecl. 1.1) but rather as a military barricade.
The hills, too, are defenses, rather than pleasant places to relax and
sing (Vergil Ecl. 1.82–83). Tatius’ camp disrupts the normal sounds of
the pastoral world as well; instead of singing shepherds and piping
goatherders who pass peaceful days (as in Vergil Ecl. 1.10), we hear the
trumpeter call Sabines to war. Even the animals in Tatius’ realm are
militarized: the fountain sates not sheep but the warhorse (cf. Vergil
Ecl. 7.11–13). The first half of poem 4.1 similarly blends a pastoral proto-Roman landscape with its future monuments of military might, and with the men who made Rome great. In that portrait of early Rome, the poet adopts what Stahl calls the Palatine viewpoint—not only focalization from the Palatine, but also evaluation according to the values of the Augustan state. Tatius adopts this same viewpoint, seeing the grove not as Tarpeia’s locus amoenus but as a place where he may prepare for war.

Propertius, moreover, identifies the Forum Romanum for his Roman audience as a place where laws are pronounced for conquered lands (4.4.11–12), but at the narrative time of the poem as an area for Sabine weapons. This identifies the Forum as the nucleus for the exercise of military power—whether Roman or Sabine does not really matter, since this war will unite the two into a single military force. The poet also brings before our eyes the Senate House (Curia, 4.4.13), the seat of Republican political power and the site where Roman foreign policy was formulated until it was superseded by Augustus’ Forum several years after Propertius’ poem appeared. The war-horse mentioned in 4.4.14, though certainly referring to the Sabine horse, hints at the future Lacus Iuturnus, a monument to the great Roman victory at Lake Regillus in 496 BCE. As Grimal notes, Propertius’ readers would also “see” in this area the Forum Iulium, which abuts the Curia—dedicated as the Curia Iulia in 29 BCE.

With these details (the laws for the conquered, the Curia, and the war-horse) Propertius draws attention to the Forum as a place symbolic of Rome’s manifest destiny, more particularly, of that destiny as fulfilled by Caesar and his heir Augustus. Tarpeia seeks out this locale in order to escape the pressure put on her by the state; yet like Vertumnus in elegy 4.2, she stands outside the Forum looking in (curiously, too, both characters predate the Forum proper). Tarpeia’s perspective on the proto-Forum landscape from its sidelines is much softer than what it would later be; it is not Stahl’s “Palatine viewpoint.” For her, the place is a playground for Tatius’ erotic sport and for her desiring gaze:

uidit harenosis Tatium proludere campis
pictaque per flauas arma leuare iubas:
obstipuit regis facie et regalibus armis,
terque oblitas excidit urna manus.
saepe illa immertae causata est omina lunae,
et sibi tingendas dixit in amne comas:
saepe tult blandis argentea lilia Nymphis,
She saw Tatius exercise on the sandy fields and raise his painted weapons above his golden crests. She stood fast, struck by the face of the king and by his royal arms, and her urn fell through her forgetful hands. Often using omens of the blameless moon as a pretext, she said she had to wash her hair in the river. Often she carried silver-white lilies to the soft-hearted Nymphs, praying that Romulus’ spear not scar Tatius’ face. When she ascended the Capitol hazy with the first smoke of night’s fires, she returned with arms cut by bristling thorns, and Tarpeia thus sitting down wept for her wounds from the citadel, wounds that nearby Jove would not tolerate. (4.4.19–30)

Looking at Tatius’ activities Tarpeia sees not military exercises, the technical meaning of *pro ludere,* but rather hints of the poetic and amatory activity that is the hallmark of elegiac poetry: *pro ludere.* She pays attention to Tatius’ adornment (*picta arma, flauas iuba*) and to his face (*facie*), and she prays to pastoral rather than patriotic or martial gods to preserve her beloved’s face (*Nymphis*). She temporarily forgets her duties as a priestess, and even drops the urn with which she was carrying out her duties. She is transfixed by her gaze, and, like the Propertian lover of 1.3 before her, her perception of the landscape matches her erotic fantasies. Also, like that lover, Tarpeia’s vision is proven to be illusory. Just as the sleeping Cynthia awakens and shatters the lover’s fantasy, so, too, Tarpeia finds not love but rather death in the Roman landscape. She escapes the Capitol, sure that with Tatius her private desires will be fulfilled and the good of the state will be served by reconciliation between the two peoples, accomplished by her:

*commissas acies ego possum soluere nupta*

*uos medium palla foedus inite mea.*

I, as a bride, am able to resolve the battles that have begun. Enter into a compromise through my wedding gown! (4.4.59–60)

However, in joining the Sabine commander she enters into an arena equally marked for Roman public life, equally resonant with Roman
public institutions, successes, and policies. There she finds herself in a predicament similar to that she faced on the Capitol—faced with a military leader unwilling to sanction her love. Like the Capitol, Tatius’ encampment is an unsafe place for her personal goals: the Sabine king kills her on the spot (4.4.91–92), reinforcing the Roman values that mandated her public service, and eventually leading to a pact between the two people, a pact entered not by Tarpeia’s love but by her death. Tarpeia’s grove thus becomes not a nostalgic glance that privileges the “lost—and irretrievable—natural innocence of the unpopulated preurban community,” as has been suggested. Rather, her grove forebodes the meaning and power of the future city.

Though Tarpeia believes she is acting in Rome’s interest and her own, combining love and state in a way ominously resonant with the new state Augustus was trying to create, her actions are, to the Roman eye, criminal and doomed to fail. Her departure from one site of Roman power, the Capitol, enacting as it does the reverse of a triumph, nevertheless leads her to the other urban axis of Roman dominion, the Forum Romanum. She departs from one center of Roman ideology to rush into another in which she is equally bent to the will of the state—in which, indeed, her story would be enshrined as a negative example in the Basilica Aemilia. She has nowhere to go.

THE PERILS OF THE THRESHOLD

Tarpeia, as we have seen, spends most of her time moving between the Capitol and the Forum, from the edge of the precinct of Jupiter Optimus Maximus to the edge of Tatius’ camp below. Each day she descends the hill on the pretext of washing her hair, drawing water, gathering lilies, or expiating omens (4.4.15 and 23–25), and each night she climbs the hill again: subit primo Capitolia nubila fumo (she ascends the Capitol hazy at the first smoke of night’s fires, 4.4.27). Her exact path is of little concern; all approaches to the Capitol are abrupt, even with modern paving. More important is the way Propertius presents the area through which she moves. It is dark and threatening.

Tarpeia describes in her soliloquy the path that she travels, the very path that she eventually reveals to Tatius:

tu cape spinosi rorida terga iugi.
lubrica tota via est et perfida: quippe tacentis
fallaci celat limite semper aquas.

You, seize the dewy back of the thorny ridge. The whole path is treacherous and slippery, for always it hides silent waters along its deceptive track. (4.4.48–50)

She does not describe a pleasant locale, but one difficult to maneuver, beset with hidden dangers, and perilously wet. The poet later confirms her evaluation: *mons erat ascensu dubius festoque remissus* (the mountain was difficult to climb and neglected for a holiday, 4.4.83); this is one reason Romulus left it unmanned during the celebration of the Parilia. Tarpeia, moreover, is wounded by thorns and brambles along the way:

dumque subit primo Capitolia nubila fumo,
   rettulit hirsutis bracchia secta rubis,
   et sua Tarpeia residens ita fleuit ab arce
   uulnera, uicino non patioenda Ioui.

When she ascended the Capitol hazy with the first smoke of night’s fires, she returned with arms cut by bristling thorns, and Tarpeia thus sitting down wept for her wounds from the citadel, wounds that nearby Jove would not tolerate. (4.4.27–30)

Indeed, her dangerous path is similar to that negotiated by Ariadne, who also, Tarpeia argues, used her womanly resources (thread, the implements of weaving) to help a man travel a tricky route:

prodita quid mirum fraterni cornua monstri,
   cum patuit lecto stamine torta uia?

Why wonder that the monstrous brother’s horns were betrayed, when the twisted path lay revealed by a gathered thread? (4.4.41–42)

Both Tarpeia and Ariadne betray their families for the sake of love, by making accessible to men the contorted, dangerous paths they themselves have maneuvered. The women are masters of paths neither straight nor straightforward. At either end of Tarpeia’s travels, where men dwell, the ground is habitable—the Forum valley below and the crest of the hill above. Her in-between area, the slope of the
hill where she treads daily and where she sits nightly, is steep and hazardous.

Tarpeia’s literal marginality echoes her emotional marginality. She is threatened on both sides; on the one side—the top of the hill—she is constrained to be unnaturally barren as a Vestal Virgin; on the other—the bottom—she expresses her desire but is killed for it. Propertius has presented Tarpeia’s internal emotional struggle between amor and Roma in topographical terms, using the physical to convey the emotional. Yet his landscape invites us to consider Tarpeia’s social situation as well, i.e., her position in society with respect to others. We have seen how the areas between which Tarpeia travels are ideologically charged, urban shorthand for Rome’s power and glory, and its favor by the gods. Tarpeia’s assigned area is empty, liminal, un-urban and untamed in its lack of future monuments to Rome’s glory. To be sure, two “monuments” were located on the slopes of the Capitol, but both of them are testimonials of marginality, of exclusion from the Roman state: the Tarpeian rock and the Carcer Tullianum. Like the Carcer’s detainees and criminals and those condemned to the Tarpeian rock, Tarpeia is confined to Rome’s “no-man’s land.”

This liminal area is the only place in which she can speak. Tarpeia’s entire soliloquy is delivered from the threshold of the hill (fleuit ab arce, 4.4.29). On either side of her liminal space she is muted by indirect discourse. Furthermore, at the top of the hill she must lie, inventing pretexts for her visits to Tatius’ camp: saepe illa immertae causata est omina lunae (often using omens of the blameless moon as a pretext, 4.4.23) and at the bottom she is silenced by death: ingestis comitum super obruit armis (he overwhelmed her with the heaped-up weapons of his comrades, 4.4.91). Her confinement is replayed in the structure of the poem. Tarpeia’s soliloquy lies in the middle of the elegy between the descriptions of her situation and of her demise. Her subjectivity, therefore, is poetically bracketed by the voice of the omniscient narrator, just as she is bracketed by the urban axes of Rome’s dominion.

CONCLUSION

Tarpeia’s topographical confinement is more than a metaphor for her situation. By making her liminality central—Tarpeia has the poem’s most extensive voice, speaking thirty-six of its ninety-four lines (4.4.31–66)—the poet invites us to consider her point of view. The
reader is led to sympathize with Tarpeia. From this space in the margin between two dominant urban centers, her perspective is drawn, and it proves to be unlike the snapshot of her in the Basilica Aemilia. Though appointment as a Vestal Virgin was a high honor in Rome, in Propertius’ poem Tarpeia disagrees with the state’s appropriation of her sexuality for its own benefit, and this is expressed in her desire to marry Tatius and in her negative evaluation of Romulus, child of another Vestal Virgin whose sexuality had been activated (Rhea Silvia was raped by Mars). From the margin, Propertius’ Tarpeia also dreams of the best effects of personal affection: her affection would close off the margin between warring states, increasing Rome’s greatness. From the margin, however, Tarpeia can only ascend into one area of public, masculine control and values, or descend into another.

Yet Propertius has allowed Tarpeia to voice dissent against Rome’s mandates and leaves the reader with a sense of shock at her quick dispatch. The poet thereby creates a space for recovering women’s perspective. Gold has spoken of Propertius as opening up a space where the woman’s voice can be heard. She argues that having a woman (Cynthia) as anchor for his text destabilizes the gender roles; Cynthia’s multiple roles (as lover, topic, literary critic, and friend) further destabilize the status quo between men and women, opening up a space for consideration of the asymmetry of gender roles. Tarpeia’s complicated gender perspective is underlined by the situation of this poem between elegy 4.3, in which a woman physically confined within the city comments on the mobility of men and the locations available to them alone (see, e.g., 4.3.35–40 and 45), and elegy 4.5, in which an angry man (the poet?) seeks to confine a threatening woman (a lena) in the ultimately controlled, marginalized, and circumscribed space: a tomb under the earth itself (4.5.1–5). Like Tarpeia, the lena resists her confinement via an inset speech.

In elegy 4.4 Propertius creates an actual physical space for Tarpeia’s voice, a location where she may speak, though one riddled with problems, interstitial, and apart from the areas claimed by men. The fact that Tarpeia’s space lies between those that men have claimed for themselves draws attention to the imbalance of power with respect to gender in Rome. The characterization of Tarpeia’s liminal space as dangerous and treacherous destabilizes the construction of Roman gender relations that prizes traditional masculinity, for it reveals the cost of this construction for anyone who is “other.”

Propertius was one such other, and in this he shares a great affinity with Tarpeia. Both poet and puella are pressured by the state to
abandon their love affairs. Both try to reinterpret their own and others’ social roles within the state. Both are accomplished elegiac poets; Tarpeia’s monologue reenacts the traditional *paraklausithyron*, complete with weeping and complaining. Her song-before-the-gates employs the learned mythical exempla and rapid shifts of thought that are the hallmark of elegiac poetry. She performs it in a setting strongly resonant of Callimachean aesthetics. Indeed both Propertius’ poetry and Tarpeia’s poem look to the model of Parthenius, whose *Ερωτικά παθήματα* presents the psychological torment of love through first-person narrative in elegiac verse.

Given the displacement of the poet’s subjective voice onto the *puella*, it is tempting to see in Tarpeia’s situation a commentary on the relationship between elegiac poetry and the Roman cityscape. Elegy, like Tarpeia, dwells in Rome’s margins and is vulnerable to the city. By attaching Tarpeia’s story to Rome’s urban places, Propertius works a double purpose. First, he underlines some problems of Tarpeia’s particular situation, torn as she is between public and private duties. The second and subtler point is that, through Tarpeia’s punishment, the poet comments with foreboding on the physical areas of Roman identity and power. Threatened by the disorder Tarpeia represents, the city crushes her.