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The Art of Forgetting: Disgrace and Oblivion in Roman Political Culture

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Review of The Art of Forgetting: Disgrace and Oblivion in Roman Political Culture by Harriet I. Flower.

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Review of *The Art of Forgetting: Disgrace and Oblivion in Roman Political Culture* by Harriet I. Flower.

arrangement of the old Roman *triclinium*. But this critical change in Roman dining practice is barely mentioned here (one assumes because of the book's chronological limitations). Only twice do we find reference to a *stibadium*, once in a Pompeian wall painting (146) and once in a passage of Dio Chrysostom (*Or.* 7.65) (122). The latter gives a rare description of a dining scene in which the male diners recline, while the only adult woman present, the host's wife, eats sitting close by (the dinner takes place outdoors). This scene is paralleled by a passage in Apuleius (*Met.* 1.22) in which the host Milo reclines at table while his wife sits to eat on a nearby stool (or perhaps on the couch itself). Again Roller seeks to explain away these "anomalies" as contrived contrasts to normal contemporary practice, designed to emphasize moral behavior and, by implication, moral values. What Roller does not ask is whether the introduction of the *stibadium* might in any way have changed Roman dining custom. Might there perhaps have been practical reasons (the increased physical proximity resulting from use of the *stibadium*) that led eventually to greater segregation of the sexes in Roman dining rooms?

What this book offers is Roman dining through a narrow lens. For those keenly interested in the use and significance of different dining postures in the period of the Late Republic and Early Empire, the book will have much to offer. For the more general reader, or even the reader interested more generally in Roman dining culture, Roller's exhaustive and repetitive analysis of so many texts and images showing scenes of Roman dining will be of limited interest. These readers would be better served by looking at Katherine Dunbabin's *The Roman Banquet: Images of Conviviality* (Cambridge 2003), which offers a more global and accessible approach to the topic.

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HARRIET I. FLOWER. *The Art of Forgetting: Disgrace and Oblivion in Roman Political Culture*. Studies in the History of Greece and Rome. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006. xxiv + 400 pp. 75 black-and-white ill. 1 map. Cloth. \$59.95.

Despite its title, this book is not really about forgetting. Forgetting, as Tacitus knew to his cost, cannot be done to order, whether the order be one's own or another's. Erasure, rather. Indeed erasures of a wide variety, from official memory sanctions mandating the removal of names from inscriptions and *imagines* from funerals, to spontaneous erasures on or of monuments associated with the disgraced, to literary attacks targeting posthumous reputations. The emphasis is on the first category; the book is structured around a chronological survey of official memory sanctions and the physical traces thereof from the early Republic

up to the first year of the principate of Antoninus Pius, but the other types are well integrated into the discussion. *The Art of Forgetting* is a fascinating study of the battle between the living and the dead or disgraced for prime turf in the memory space of the Roman elite.

As with so much of Roman history as we can know it, the “memory wars” and “memory games” treated in this book are an elite phenomenon. The erasures discussed (and, happily, often pictured) here are most accessible to us when they are accomplished in the same enduring media to which the Roman elite entrusted its public record and reputation. The title of Flower’s first chapter, “Clementis’ Hat,” alluding to the chance survival of a photographic testimonial for Czech politician Vladimir Clementis, captures Flower’s early assertion that we can only know the incompletely successful erasures (12), but this seems to me to collapse an essential distinction, preserved elsewhere in the book, including its subtitle, between memory and reputation. The senate-mandated erasure of the man accused of Germanicus’ murder is accomplished both by chiseling his name out of the dedication of a statue of Germanicus and by chiseling it into the empire-wide inscriptions on which the senate’s verdict in his trial was recorded. The former deprives him of prime memory space; the latter assigns him space on the wrong side of the tracks, so to speak. Both oblivion and disgrace are weapons in the memory wars, and their relative salience varies.

The chronological survey of the Roman evidence is preceded by a contextualizing chapter on memory sanctions in the Greek world, particularly in the Hellenistic world, in which Rome’s elite saw first hand the battles over what went into the monumental record that followed (or even preceded) battles for territory. Early-attested sanctions such as the razing of a disgraced person’s house seem to combine practical and symbolic ends: displacement of the individual and his immediate family and erasure of an avatar. The record of sanctions in democratic Athens, which adds to house-razing the expulsion of remains and the erection of *stelai* publicizing the names and crimes of offenders against the *demos*, already shows the complementary effects of oblivion and disgrace later exploited at Rome. A helpful distinction is drawn between amnesties such as that of 403 B.C.E. Athens, in which “a new start was made by promising not to use the past as a political weapon” (23), and the kind of memory politics manifested in sanctions. The discussion of the Hellenistic world establishes the connection, later relevant to the treatment of Rome’s imperial women, between extravagant honors and harsh penalties in the symbolic realm: in the rhetoric of relations between cities and kings, for example, a ruler in favor is honored as a god, while a ruler out of favor may find his cult appropriated, his record erased, and his memory cursed.

Rome had its own long-standing traditions of memory sanctions. Or at least by the Augustan age it felt it had. Chapter 3 tries to get back beyond the triumviral phase of Roman memory sanctions, citing fifth- and fourth-century house-razings for “citizen traitors” (45). The evidence for these is underwhelming, and the discussion sheds more light on annalistic recastings of the distant past to provide precedents for present conditions than on the distant past itself.

Better attested is a self-imposed measure whereby members of the *gens Manlia*, like the Claudii later, avoid giving their sons the *praenomen* of a disgraced family member, Marcus for the Manlii, Lucius for the Claudii. An important section of the chapter discusses the development of Roman memory as political memory during the consensus-driven middle Republican period and describes the growing variety of ways of staking out territory in the elite memory space: “the texts of inscriptions, public buildings that were mostly erected by victorious generals (temples, basilicas), victory monuments, family tombs, historical paintings (often kept in temples), honorific statues, and public processions such as those at games and at triumphs” (53). Senatorial control over most of these, as well as over *imagines*, determined the limits within which a *gens* might design its corner of elite memory space.

Chapter 4 tells the depressing story of the ever-more aggressive memory wars that accompanied growing civil discord in the last two decades of the second century B.C.E. and of their inadequacy as a mechanism for restoring harmony: “memories of the disgraced haunted generations of their successors” (68). Discussion of the sanctions against the younger Gracchus is preceded by a lengthy look at the aftermath of his older brother’s death, which focused not on the erasure of Tiberius but on the placation of Ceres and in fact involved hostility to Tiberius’ attackers. The contrast brings into relief the aspects of C. Gracchus’ movement that link it with the more overt civil wars of the following century. Among the many posthumous sanctions voted by the senate, some specifically targeted memory: mourning was banned, the house of M. Fulvius Flaccus razed. But the temple of Concord erected by the victorious consul Opimius to mark a newly stable era was soon defaced by graffiti and trumped by spontaneous cult offerings to both Gracchi. The issue, first encountered here, of plebeian memory as a separate space, crops up tantalizingly from time to time but remains elusive. Also included in this chapter is the response to Saturninus, which included, for the first time, an official ban on a portrait “in all media and in all locations” (83), a ban enforced under the *maiestas* law; neither episode involved the erasure of inscriptions, either officially or, so far as can be seen, unofficially.

In chapter 5 we are introduced to Sulla’s gruesome innovations in the “politics of portraiture” (84): “Whether at the *rostra* or in an *atrium*, severed heads represented a striking and dramatic reversal of the commemoration bestowed by the wax ancestor masks that Roman politicians earned with high political office” (92). Sulla’s attacks on the *familia* of a man declared *hostis* (confiscating slaves and freeing them in his own name to produce new Corneliis by the thousand) and on his posterity (exclusion from public office for two generations) likewise had memory consequences. Marius was the biggest loser: “Marius, who had been consul seven times and who had in his own lifetime received libations from his fellow citizens, was not recalled by a single image or monument in the city from 82 until the restoration of some of his honors in the 60s by his relative Julius Caesar” (93). An early example of the phenomenon of the eraser—Marius had Sulla declared *hostis* in 87—erased. The chapter carries the story to the end of

the Republican period, pausing briefly to consider Cicero's memory dilemma—his fame “was directly dependent on the demonization of Catiline” (99)—and treating Caesar's active reversal of past sanctions. In this period the pace of change was such that violence is more evident than are memory sanctions.

The imperial period proper begins with a lull in the area of memory sanctions. Once Antony was safely dead, the multifarious attacks on his memory immediately post-Actium seem to have been chastened. Despite his *hostis* status, his name remained in official lists, much as his relatives retained their place in the imperial household. The fate of his name on inscriptions empire-wide is mixed: some erasures, to be sure, but plenty of survivors, too, including one at Alexandria celebrating “Antony the Great, unrivaled among lovers” (119). Two-edged, perhaps. Augustus found various ways to produce an acceptable design for the Augustan memory space—silence kept enemy names out of the *Res Gestae*, friends lost out to appropriation (Raurica, a colonial foundation by Octavian's partisan L. Munatius Plancus, became Augusta Raurica) and dissuasion (M. Licinius Crassus refrained from dedicating the *spolia opima*)—but official memory sanctions were not among them. Private measures were also sufficient for the removal of public monuments erected by the equestrian C. Cornelius Gallus operating as the *princeps*' direct representative in Egypt. Gallus' case is a particularly interesting one for two reasons. First, as an equestrian he would not normally have aspired to monuments recording military success and public munificence. Second, his literary career gave him access to parts of Roman memory space outside of those controlled by senate and *princeps*. Flower mentions Servius' assertion that Vergil removed the *laudes Galli* from *Georgic* 4 at Augustus' request, but she does so quietly, in a note (316, n. 38); whatever reality (if any) underlies Servius here, Gallus' indubitable survival as a figure of literary importance would seem to have deserved more comment in a discussion of imperial “memory games” (the title of chapter 6). Ditto for Ovid (132).

The principate of Tiberius supplies a rich fund of evidence for the topic of this book. Front and center, naturally, is the *Senatus Consultum de Cn. Pisone patre*, here well contextualized by a consideration of the fate of Piso's name elsewhere in the inscriptional record. As with Antony, some erasures, some survivors, with local initiative playing an important role in both. This factor may take some of the sting out of measures the senate designed to be more punitive than the death Piso inflicted on himself. Another antidote to memory sanctions is illustrated by the fate of Agrippina the elder, out of favor and exiled under Tiberius, rehabilitated during the principate of her youngest son, Gaius. His “memory project” (140), Flower argues, eventually gave Agrippina a bigger lot in Roman memory space than the one she had lost by her earlier disgrace: reburial in the Mausoleum with inscriptions attesting her presence there, games in her honor, coins commemorating the games, all reinforced, again, by local initiatives echoing the message from the center. That Gaius' effect extends to her portrait in Tacitus' *Annals*, as Flower also suggests (143), is perhaps to be taken *cum grano* (see below). Gaius' own death brought the problem of how to remodel an emperor's memory space.

Claudius' measures were more temperate than those later devised on occasions of dynastic change and seem in general to have aimed for oblivion rather than ignominy: burial place unmarked (the second time round, anyway), statues removed or recarved, *aes* coinage melted down, name stripped of imperial titles in the *Fasti Ostienses*, and so on. The senate, although according to Suetonius it discussed memory sanctions against the whole house of the Caesars in the first post-assassination flush of liberation, seems not to have been involved in the measures actually enacted.

The senators' traditional role in allocating memory space returns, albeit in untraditional guise, in the following chapter, devoted to the Julio-Claudian innovation of official memory sanctions against women—imperial women, Livilla and Messalina in particular. Already in the late republic memory turf had been claimed for the womenfolk of prominent men to supplement that held by the male relative making the claim. Memory sanctions are a natural corollary for which the need became more pressing as women of the *domus Augusta* played increasingly public roles. Under Augustus himself the old model of familial action prevailed in the punishment of the two Julias. But the senate passed *atroces sententiae* about the images and memory of Tiberius' daughter-in-law Livilla (*Tac. Ann.* 6.2.1) with such effectiveness that “her name has not survived in any inscriptions from Rome” (169) and no securely identified portraits survive (175), though Flower demonstrates well how prominent she was before 32 C.E. The senate acted again after the summary execution of Messalina in 48, calling for the removal of her name and image from public and private places in aid of *oblivio* (*Tac. Ann.* 11.38.4). A portrait of Messalina recarved as her successor Agrippina (329–30, n. 53) reminds us that Messalina's memory soon had a powerful rival. Statue groups figuring members of the imperial household seem to have been particularly vulnerable to “editing” as individuals close to power flourished or fell.

Chapters 8 and 9 detail the memory work needed when a whole dynasty fell, first the Julio-Claudians, then the Flavians: “the erasure and/or denigration of the previous ruler was accompanied by policies and actions that contrasted or competed with what was . . . most ‘memorable’ from the immediately previous years” (199). In these chapters the definition of memory space is broadened considerably. Nero's successors, it is argued, had to wrestle away from Nero not just the physical monuments to his name and image but also his popularity. This leads to the least satisfactory part of the book, the claim that the *Octavia* was a political play sponsored by Galba that “showed the people of Rome how tyrannical and bloodthirsty Nero had been” (205). I see no warrant for the assumption of official propagandizing in a literary medium, nor is the date of the play securely Galban. The argument, presented as a parallel (208), and more broadly in 228–32), that “the Flavian amphitheater bears witness to the perceived need to compete with Nero as a provider of mass entertainments in the center of the city” (232) is much better served by evidence as to the role of the central authority. The discussion of the fate of Nero's inscriptions, wide-spread and plentiful as they are, and marked by a “seemingly random” (217) distribution of erasure and

non-erasure, is particularly fine, offering as it does a wide-ranging consideration of the reasons why individuals and communities might defy an official memory sanction: these include dedications to a divinity, epitaphs and other texts important to an individual's identity, inscriptions in which Nero is mentioned but not directly honored, monuments honoring Nero the child or heir apparent rather than Nero the *princeps*, etc. The "uniquely fierce" (234) sanctions decreed by the senate against Domitian's memory in September of 96 again focus on name and image. There is an astonishing amount of evidence: more than 400 extant inscriptions, some 40 percent showing mutilation (240). Flower argues in this connection that the relatively smooth transition from Domitian to the Antonines "contributed to the energies available to reshape the public sphere" (262). Private considerations antiphonal to those that motivated Cicero's post-63 references to Catiline reappear here in the discussion of the younger Pliny's denigration of Domitian in order to "dissociate himself . . . from his *own* past" (263).

The chronological survey concludes with Antoninus Pius' "no" to the senate's proposal of memory sanctions against Hadrian, a salutary change from the drastic remodelings of memory space that followed Nero and Domitian. Flower argues that the senate wanted to make new political capital out of its traditional role as the arbiter of elite memory, to "appropriate Hadrian's choice of successor at the same time as it erased Hadrian himself" (273). When the senators deified Hadrian instead of disgracing him, Pius became *Divi filius* and the principle of dynastic succession was reaffirmed.

The core of this book is its detailed discussion of a physical record of remarkable richness. The material evidence seems particularly lively in a study that shows how mutable these ostensibly permanent monuments in fact were. The generous supply of illustrations is welcome, although too many of them, being neither transcribed nor translated, show no more than the fact that an erasure has taken place, instead of allowing the reader to see what was erased and how the text reads post-erasure. Where the discussion moves beyond official memory projects to literary ones, it is less successful in that the literary record comes off as a servant or shadow of the official position. In light of the plentiful evidence for the resistance of those in charge of material *monumenta* to sanctions decreed at the center, more independence might have been ascribed to literary *monumenta*, which, except in the case of the book-burnings derided by Tacitus, were never directly subject to central control. The complementarity of the two types of memory space is perhaps particularly important in view of Flower's concluding point, that "the loss of a shared past contributed in significant ways to the loss of a shared future" (279).

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