

CJ Online 2008.10.03
[orig. CJ 103.3 (2008): 342–4]

The Art of Forgetting: Disgrace and Oblivion in Roman Political Culture.
By HARRIET I. FLOWER. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006. Pp. xxiv + 400. Cloth, \$59.95. ISBN 0–8078–3063–1.

Most classicists know something about *damnatio memoriae*. If they have been to Rome, they may well have encountered evidence of one of the best known instances of the practice. On the arch of Septimius Severus overlooking the Forum Romanum, one can see firsthand how Caracalla removed the name and titles of his brother Geta, after ordering his murder. Though new text was added to fill the gap left in the inscription, a visitor can still see the channel carved into the marble to accomplish the erasure. On another archway, this one set up by the moneychangers in the nearby Forum Boarium, Geta's face has literally been cut out of the family portrait, and the names and images of Caracalla's wife and father-in-law have suffered a similar fate. The alteration of these monuments conjures up an image of a fratricidal tyrant who extinguished not only the lives of his victims, but their public memory. Still, it does not take long to realize that the cultural and political significance of these erasures goes far beyond what they reveal about the dysfunctional family dynamics of the Severan household. As Harriet Flower demonstrates in this ambitious and thought-provoking new book, the idea that punishment could extend to the destruction of a person's posthumous memory had a long and fascinating history in the Greco-Roman world.

F.'s first order of business is to disabuse the reader of the misconceptions that can be born of terminology. The preface opens with the restatement of a point made by Vittinghoff 70 years ago—namely, that *damnatio memoriae* is not classical Latin, and as such does not reflect a clearly defined ancient concept. In place of the false precision of this neo-Latinism, F. offers “memory sanctions” as a better rubric under which to examine the kind of things Caracalla did to Geta. This change in nomenclature is emblematic of F.'s meticulous approach. Rather than schematize from a range of divergent examples, she stresses the complexity and particularity of each individual case. This shift in focus also accounts for the breadth of the discussion, which encompasses the full range of circumstances in which memory could be modified or destroyed. The material discussed includes not just monuments and inscriptions, but religious rituals, dramatic performance and literary texts. The result is a richly contextualized history of the development of penalties involving memory that is full of original insights on nearly every aspect of Roman culture.

The book is arranged chronologically and is divided into two sections, covering the Republic and the first two centuries of the

BOOK REVIEW

Principate, respectively. (Memory sanctions in the Severan era are not discussed, but a line had to be drawn somewhere and few readers will feel shortchanged by this omission.) F. links the development of Roman memory sanctions to changes in the political order, arguing that memory was initially the exclusive province of the aristocratic family, and that any sanctions under the early Republic would have been a private affair. This stands in contrast to the contemporary situation among the Greeks, where communal authority was apparently stronger and the right of the *polis* to impose penalties on the memory of individuals was commonly acknowledged. With the opening of the Roman political class to competition, the new patricio-plebeian nobility found it in their collective interest to allow some public regulation of these traditions, but nothing that might rise to the level of punitive sanctions. Only in the 2nd century, after the Romans had been exposed to the possibilities of such practices through contact with the Hellenistic world, did the breakdown of consensus lead to the adoption of memory sanctions at Rome. These sanctions were used at first as a means of social control, but quickly became a weapon with which to punish defeated political rivals. As political chaos increased into the late Republic, matters snowballed.

F.'s reconstruction of the origins of Roman memory sanctions is mostly a success, but is itself subject to the limitations of memory. Any attempt to trace the development of a complex cultural phenomenon over the course of Republican history will necessarily be hamstrung by the scarcity and uncertainty of the evidence, particularly for the early period. F. argues—convincingly, to my mind—that accounts of the fate of M. Manlius Capitolinus and the other traitors of the early Republic were modeled to reflect the sanctions imposed on aspirants to tyranny in Greece, specifically the razing of their houses. While this attention to the effects of Hellenization is clearly on point, it would be nice to know more about when and how these changes were introduced. One wonders if earlier contacts with the Greeks in Italy and Sicily had any impact on Roman thinking about the relationship between memory and politics.

The situation is entirely different when it comes to the Principate. It is significant that the second part of this book is nearly twice as long as the first, with four times the number of illustrations. It is in this context that F.'s particularistic approach pays its greatest dividends, as she masterfully explicates a wide range of archaeological and epigraphic material, much of it new or recently discovered. Attention to nuance is critical here, since it is often difficult to determine if an erasure was the result of a formally decreed set of sanctions (like those enumerated in the *Senatus consultum de Pisone Patre*), or reflects a local initiative that may or may not have been in line with official policy. Further complicating matters is the fact that no

BOOK REVIEW

damnatio was ever completely effective. Domitian's systematic erasure from public space reveals a deliberate policy of denigration, but he nevertheless continued to be commemorated in private contexts after his assassination.

It perhaps goes without saying that it is impossible to discuss memory sanctions without discussing memory itself. This book is therefore as much about remembering as it is about forgetting, and deals with honor and rehabilitation as the inverses of disgrace and oblivion. By describing the complex interplay between these opposed elements, F. provides us with a vision of the Roman memory world as an intricate and ever-changing bas-relief in which the negative space between the figures is essential to the interpretation of the scene as a whole. That in itself is a major contribution.

ANDREW B. GALLIA

University of Minnesota