

## Laudatio Turiae

By Julia Ann Calabrese

It seemed that our misfortunes would never end. Even I, with all of the suffering I had endured and overcome, could not see a path forwards for myself and my beloved husband. How I lamented that after his death, or mine, either of us should be left childless, like an unfinished inscription.

In all my wifely duties I had transcended expectations, my courage and bravery befitting of a man! Oh, the stories I could tell of when I faced abuse and cruelty against the criminals responsible for the deaths of my mother and father, when I stood up to Marcus Lepidus when he ignored Cesar's orders to reinstate my beloved husband...

Perhaps the gods, with their all-seeing eyes, could not allow a woman such as myself to bear children. Who do I blame for this — Venus?

By day, I was a dutiful wife, I took care of my husband, we kept each other company in our loving union, I oversaw our blessedly peaceful household. By night I was a shadow. I took to the streets in my cloak, I knocked on doors, scratched on them like an animal until the candlelight spilled over me like sweet nectar.

“Please, I must speak to the physician!”

Perhaps it was the pleading rosiness of my cheeks, the tearful wide eyes, or my sickly thin hands, but the servant always stepped aside. I pursued the physicians like a general at war, at war with an incurable sickness!

The answers were always the same. My blood was ‘weak’.

“But how can my blood be poor? I bleed so thickly and achingly, and do you see the rosiness of my complexion? Oh physician, what should I do?”

“You can drink wine — this will increase your blood. You should also make offerings to Venus.”

By morning I returned to my darling husband, exhaustion paling my face.

“My dear, you look unwell!” he would say, cupping my face.

“I am a little tired, that is all.”

I bid him goodbye that morning, for he had business in the forum. I spent the remainder of the day reading the medical texts we kept in the household, sipping bitter wine, but none offered any insight into my condition.

“Here is a possibility, now, do not take offence at what I am going to say, for it is purely founded on my medical knowledge and Lucretius’s writing. There may be an incompatibility between yourself and your husband, and you might consider re-marriage as the best course of action.”

After all that we had been through! But if it was the only way to ensure his family line did not end, to produce young, healthy citizens...

When I wandered through the streets on my morning errands, my heart was cold. I stared at the baker’s wife, plump with child, as she wrapped the warm brown loaf. What hardships had she endured? Had she needed to protect her husband from the turbulence and violence of politics? Had she brought murderers to justice? Prostrated before Marcus Lepidus and been dragged away like a slave? Why was she, an average woman, blessed with fertility where I was empty, sick-blooded, and incompatible with my beloved?

Perhaps I was not a woman, but something else... a mistake. Or I had been too brave, too stubborn, too manly, and the gods saw fit to steal my womanhood from me.

“From my examination, I believe the cause of your inability to bear children is the size of your womb. It is too small, there is not enough room, I believe, for the seed to mix with your blood.”

“Is there anything I can do to fix this?”

“You must increase its size... I will recommend a compound to be drunk once a day, and correction of the womb’s opening. This will involve using an instrument, but it is not too painful, and has demonstrated hopeful results from other patients.”

One morning, my husband approached me, “My dear, you do seem better now. Your complexion is much healthier, and I am glad.”

“I have... I have been receiving treatment,” I told him. He looked surprised. Was I ill? Yes, I was ill, there was something wrong with my body, and I told him so. “We have been trying for a child for years, and if I have been acting different recently, it is because I was heavy with sorrow about my inability to bear children. But I have hope now.” I clasped his soft hands. “I have seen many good physicians and have been carefully following their instructions. I hope that soon I will finally bear you a child!”

My husband embraced me joyfully.

“You never cease to surpass all expectations of yourself,” he said, “My darling wife, I hope what the physician recommended is right and we can indeed have children together.”

My husband is a good man — I would not have fought so hard to protect him, sold my jewellery, provided slaves and food to him in hiding, were he not and if I did not love him dearly.

“Is it possible that your transition to womanhood was interrupted by these awful events you have mentioned? This might increase the difficulty of childbearing, but perhaps it will not be impossible if you keep a healthy lifestyle to promote fertility. Make sure you bathe frequently and eat the foods I listed. I’m afraid there is nothing more I can suggest.”

“But there must be!” I took the list in my weak hands, the corner scrunching. “Is there nothing more I can do? I have been trying to help my condition for a year to no avail...”

“It may be difficult, but perhaps speak with the Greek physician, Asclepiades. His medicine is Greek, but I hear good things about his practice.”

My hopes rested heavily on the Greek physician. I set out early with my husband in our cart, my cloak wrapped around my sunken shoulders, jewellery concealed in its folds. The journey was not long, but it felt like a day trundling through the streets of Rome, to a serene villa on the outskirts of the great city. Here, in the fresh countryside air, was where Asclepiades’s practice was situated.

Boldly, I strode up to the entrance, only to be met immediately by a young servant boy. He addressed me by my husband’s name.

“Do wait outside just a moment, please,” the servant boy asked us. He gestured to a slab for us to sit on. “The physician is finishing with his previous patient. He won’t be long.”

My husband and I sat, silent at first, until I spoke.

“I don’t know what I shall do if there is nothing more to try,” I said. The pleasantly sweet, warm countryside air and swishing grass beneath me soothed my mind. In the vast view, the city of Rome, the hills, the forests, I could finally grasp everything that I had been through to get here, all in the size of my fist.

“Do not fret, my darling. If nothing comes of this, then nothing more we shall do,” he said. “I could not have asked for a more loving wife, and if you are to be my only family until I die, so you shall be.”

At that moment, I might have burst into tears of sorrow. But I didn't, because the servant boy called to us to say that the physician was ready to see me. I was let inside the grand white villa. Its beautiful paintings of the human body and medicinal herbs breathed life into the walls and the green air of the countryside cleaned out any stagnant feeling in the rooms, any bitter sickness.

I met Asclepiades in the garden, surrounded by neatly trimmed bushes and a little pool of water. He stood from his stone slab to greet me, grey tunic cascading like a waterfall with every movement.

"Do sit," he said, gesturing to the adjacent slab. "And tell me what ails you." His accent was Greek, and he had a kind, elegantly bearded face.

"Oh Asclepiades, I have tried and tried everything the physicians in Rome have told me to try —," I grasped his hand and sat before him "— but I am unable to bear children for my husband. I will have to divorce him even though I love him dearly!"

"Don't be silly, woman," he said. "If you love your husband, do not divorce him. If you have tried everything in Rome, I suspect you have been told your blood is weak, you have drunk red wine, made offerings to Venus, been told that you are incompatible with your husband, and that your womb is too small, misplaced, or misshapen!"

"Yes, that is what I have been told."

"And I suppose that the cures were unpleasant! And that the more pleasant ones involved concoctions of herbs and such things to promote fertility."

"That's right."

"Well, I will tell you that, if you have tried all that, and nothing has worked, then there is nothing wrong with your womb that can be cured by a physician."

"Then... I must make more offerings to Venus!"

"You might, however, I think it best if you follow this regimen. Exercise regularly, but not too vigorously — just enough to keep the body in harmony, eat healthy foods and don't drink too much wine, I also recommend the occasional massage and some relaxing music. Perhaps one day you will bear a child, perhaps not. What I am telling you to do is to stop worrying about it, because all the little particles in your body will be swirling around so fretfully and anxiously and you will do your health no benefit!"

I was silent for a moment, and my shoulders rose with a heavy sigh.

“I understand. Thank you, Asclepiades, I know what I must do now.”

My husband and I journeyed home. We arrived in the afternoon, and the servants had prepared our evening meal. After we had eaten, I took him aside.

“My dear husband,” I began. “I know that you are waiting to hear what Asclepiades told me, so here it is. There is nothing more that can be done, and this is my situation. I must stop worrying about bearing children or my health may suffer. So, I have a solution. We shall be divorced, and I will choose a good woman for you who is certain to have a fertile womb, then we shall all live together, and I shall treat both of you as my family and love your children as if they were my own.”

My husband had opened his mouth throughout my speech, as though the interjection was on the tip of his tongue. When I was finished, he closed it, and looked at me for some time.

“My beloved wife,” he then said, “that is the most unacceptable thing I have ever heard! I love you and we shall not be divorced. It is too bad that we cannot have children, but I don’t want you to worry about it any longer, as the physician Asclepiades said. Additionally... perhaps the issue is mine!”

I gasped when he said that, as though a coin had just dropped from the sky! How shocking it was to think that could have been the reason all along.

Truthfully, we can never be sure why I could not have children with my husband. We lived happily together for many years, and it was wonderful even without children, and I did not worry about it even slightly. If I ever looked forlorn, my husband quickly cheered me up with a story or a compliment, and all was well again.

## Scientific Statement

This piece is based on the *Laudatio Turiae*, a tombstone inscription from a husband to his wife in classical Rome, dated to around 10 B.C.E - 1 B.C.E. Although much of it has been lost, it is amongst the longest surviving Latin inscriptions (Horsfall, 1983) and praises the *pietas* (duty/devotion) of an unknown woman, initially presumed by scholars to be Turia (identified by her husband, thought to be Q. Lucretius Vespillo). Turia’s role in protecting her husband during a period of political unrest and bringing charges against her parents’ murderers is highly abnormal for a Roman woman, however, the text stresses that Turia’s traditional virtues were not undermined by her dalliance into heroism, portraying this as her true virtue. Horsfall (1983) also notes, significantly, how anti-Augustan the *Laudatio Turiae* is. Like many

dictators, Augustus was concerned with fertility; he wanted lots of new Roman citizens and put laws in place to financially disadvantage those who did not produce children. These contradictions are only some of the many reasons this inscription still fascinates scholars to this day.

In terms of the advice Turia receives to ‘cure’ her infertility, there is historical evidence to suggest that all of these methods were used around the first century B.C.E. in Ancient Rome, and I have tried to be as accurate as possible in incorporating these into my work. Causes of infertility could range from an incompatibility of the partners (re-marriage was recommended by the philosopher Lucretius [see Fleeming, 2021]) to misalignment of the uterus (as discussed by Flemming [2013]; these ideas are from the Hippocratic Corpus, a collection of Greek medical texts which cover the ‘diseases of women’). Male infertility was therefore not inconceivable, but methods of treatment focus on female infertility, suggesting that she was often believed to be responsible for childlessness. Some methods of treatment include purification by fumes or chemicals and use of a ‘probe’ to fix the opening of the womb; Flemming (2013) includes a list of methods recommended by the ancient text *On Infertile Women*, part of the *Hippocratic Corpus*. Asclepiades was a Greek physician who practiced medicine in Rome. He is probably so well thought of in modern times because of his relatively non-invasive approach to medicine, challenging the Hippocratic idea of the four humours. According to Hippocrates, illness was caused by an imbalance blood, phlegm, yellow bile and black bile. Originating in the fifth century B.C.E., this idea was not properly disproven until the 1800s. Asclepiades recommended diet, exercise and relaxation (bathing, music) to promote health. He was also very particular about when herbal remedies should be prescribed and believed illness was caused by issues with small particles that passed through the body. It is possible that his medicine had a therapeutic effect; in modern times we are aware of the negative health impacts of stress and anxiety on the body, although research into a possible relationship between stress and fertility is ongoing (Rooney and Domar, 2018).

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