ROMAN MYTH

There are those who would argue that a course on "classical" mythology should cover Greek stories alone, that Roman stories are "pseudo-mythology" at best. They might subscribe to H. J. Rose's attitude when he asserts that "Romulus and Remus are not genuine mythology."[1] He continues by noting that to understand the earliest Roman history, we have to rely on early Greek writers, archaeology, and

> such traditions as Italian historians have preserved for us. The mythologist is concerned with these alone; and he must share the disgust of the historian when he realizes that the overwhelming majority of them are not genuine popular native traditions at all, but comparatively late, artificial tales, put together either by Greeks or under Greek influence.[2]

If Greek mythology is taken as the standard, much of Roman mythology hardly appears to be mythology at all, especially since Roman stories come from sources much later than those we have for Greek myths. Anyone well versed in Greek myth might feel somewhat at a loss when s/he turns to Roman stories. For one thing, many of the stories of the gods are based on Greek stories. This is in part due to the fact that the early Roman *numina* were not conceived of in anthropomorphic terms and did not recommend themselves to storytelling. Instead, the Romans tended to take Greek stories and adapt them to their own needs. Even if we grant all of this, the fact remains that the Romans took their stories seriously, especially at those times, as during Augustus' reign, when they were redefining themselves and developing a mythology to undergird that redefinition.

I want to urge not only that Roman traditional stories should be included in a classical mythology course, but that they should be given more than lip service.[3] In fact, the three most frequently used mythology handbooks—Morford and Lenardon's *Classical Mythology*, Powell's *Classical Myth*, and Harris and Platzner's *Classical Mythology: Images and Insights*[4]—do include chapters on Roman stories, although the extent of these discussions varies considerably. The discussion most complete in range and depth appears in Harris and Platzner. All three of these texts distinguish between stories which are heavily influenced by Greek stories and those which are more clearly "Roman."

I understand mythology to be a traditional story that explains that which cannot be explained in any other way. Mythology tends to explain the world around us and provides a model for the relationship between humans and the created world. Participants in mythology include human as well as divine characters. Legend, on the other hand, is a traditional narrative which has a kernel of historical fact and which features heroic

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[1] H. J. Rose, *A Handbook of Greek Mythology* (1928; repr. London 1995) 288.

[2] Rose (above, n.1) 305.

[3] I am indebted to Lisa Hughes for her insights.

[4] M. P. O. Morford and R. J. Lenardon, *Classical Mythology*, 7th ed. (New York 2003); B. B. Powell, *Classical Myth*, 4th ed. (Upper Saddle River, N.J., 2004); and S. L. Harris and G. Platzner, *Classical Mythology: Images and Insights*, 4th ed. (Boston 2003).

characters. Finally, a folktale is a traditional narrative which tends to appeal to the underdog. Stories of all these types may provide insights into social realities. Roman traditional stories are often a combination of all three kinds of narrative and frequently appear in the sources as Roman history.

The story of Romulus and Remus reminds us how much the Romans owed to Greek and Etruscan traditions at the same time that it includes a decidedly Roman touch. The motif of brothers' antagonism appears at the start with Amulius' taking the throne from Numitor. Fear of a grandson who might challenge his power prompts Amulius to make his niece Rhea Silvia a Vestal Virgin. When she is raped by Mars, Amulius incarcerates her and exposes the infant twins. As often happens in the lives of Greek heroes, Romulus and Remus are raised by foster parents until their true parentage is revealed, and the brothers restore Numitor to the throne of Alba Longa. Romulus and Remus do not get along any better than most brothers do in Greek tradition, however, and they argue over who should give his name to the new city that they have decided to found. They resort to augury to decide this issue, but even here they argue over how to interpret the flights of vultures. There are different versions of what happens next. Either Romulus himself kills Remus for disdaining the walls of his new city, or one of Romulus' men kills Remus at Romulus' orders. Rose declares that this story is not "mythology";[5] I could not disagree more. It clearly shares many details with the myths of Greek heroes—Heracles, Perseus, and Jason all come to mind—but it also includes very Roman details: the intimate tie with the foundation of Rome and the lesson of Remus' death: *sic deinde, quicumque alius transiliet moenia mea* ("Such be the fate of anyone else who will leap over my walls," Livy 1.7.3). That is, this is not simply a city's foundation story; it teaches us what happens to those who disregard the city of Rome.

In a very real sense the story of Lucretia is emblematic of Roman mythology in that it includes features found both in legend and in stories which we would call myths. Lucretia's story appears in a variety of sources: Livy (1.17.1–1.19.13), Ovid's *Fasti* (2.723–856), and Dionysius of Halicarnassus (especially 4.64.1–4.67.4), none of which date before the first century B.C.E. It does little good to lament that Roman mythology is so late just because the version we have may date to the end of the first century B.C.E. All the classical mythology we have is comparatively late. There is a tendency to speak of a Greek myth as if what we have is the tale's original form when, in fact, we may have the story as Euripides tells it as recently as the fifth century. Moreover, whether the storyteller be Hesiod or Euripides or Ovid, in each case we have a literary artist working on a traditional story.

Greek mythology includes a number of rape stories, but these differ sharply from the story of Lucretia, as becomes clear when we compare it to the Greek story of Io as told by Ovid in *Metamorphoses* 1.566–747. Io, the daughter of Inachus, attracts Jupiter's attention when she is out walking alone. She runs away from him; he follows and rapes her. To hide his deed from Juno, he changes Io into a cow. As with his other rape stories, so here, too, Ovid emphasizes that rape dehumanizes its victims. Io is unable to speak, unable to use the facility which antiquity regarded as especially characteristic of humans. When she sees her father, Io manages

[5] Rose (above, n.1) 305.

to reveal her identity only by scratching her name in the earth with her hoof. Whether or not we read Io's story with an eye to the behavior of the imperial family or as a revelation of gender politics, what we learn from this story is the consequence of the brutal exercise of power.

The story of Lucretia continues the theme of abusive power at the same time that it introduces features into the rape story which are far removed from what we find in the Io story. These features render the story of Lucretia Roman. I might put it this way: At the risk of being simplistic, we see a striking difference between the Homeric shield of Achilles and the Vergilian shield of Aeneas. Homer's shield is a generic image of Greek life, the life to which Achilles will never return. On the other hand, the shield of Aeneas portrays the history of Rome, complete with the Battle of Actium in its center. This kind of specificity is a particularly Roman habit; we see the same kind of difference between the stories of Io and Lucretia.

During the siege of Ardea, as Livy narrates (1.57–59), a group of young men argue over whose wife is the most virtuous, each claming the title for his own spouse. Deciding to settle the argument, the men ride off to surprise their wives in their homes. Only Lucretia, wife of Collatinus, proves to be truly virtuous, for they find her working wool with her slaves late into the night. The son of the king, Sextus Tarquin, is taken by the beauty and virtue of Lucretia and returns to the house where Lucretia welcomes her husband's friend. Late at night when the household is asleep, Tarquin creeps into Lucretia's bedroom and tries to seduce her. She resists, even when he menaces her with bodily harm. Finally, he threatens to kill her and to kill a slave whose body he will then put in bed with her; he will tell everyone that he found them in an act of adultery. Lucretia submits, but when he has left, she summons her husband and father and orders them to bring with them a trusted friend. Collatinus brings Lucius Junius Brutus. Lucretia tells the men what has happened and requires them to swear they will avenge her dishonor. Vowing that no woman in the future will find her an *exemplum* for inappropriate behavior, Lucretia kills herself. In Livy's version, Brutus (who until now had pretended to be a dullard, hence the cognomen) raises the bloody dagger and swears to drive out the Tarquins; the other men swear as well. Then they take the body of Lucretia into the Forum, where the sight of it and the news of what has transpired rouse the people, who have their own grievances against the Tarquins.

This story, like the story of Io, is about the consequences of abusive power. Unlike the story of Io, however, there is no divine machinery here. Instead, this story is grounded in explicitly human experience, and the specificity of the narrative is striking. The virtue contest takes place under the reign of the Etruscan Tarquinius Superbus; we can even date the rape to 509 B.C.E., the last year of the monarchy. Io had been out in the woods independent of male control when she was raped. Lucretia, by contrast, is behaving precisely as a good Roman matron should, taking care of the household and providing hospitality to a guest. Lucretia's story, however, goes beyond providing a model of what was expected of a Roman matron. Sextus Tarquin's ultimate threat takes us into the realm of Roman family law; for it not only speaks directly to the charge of adultery and its consequences, but it also raises the issue of a child's status when s/he is conceived under these circumstances. The specificity of this story is as Roman and as far removed from the Greek story of Io as is

the shield of Aeneas from that of Achilles. According to Livy's account, it is Lucretia who requires the men in her family to swear that they will avenge her dishonor. The exposure of her corpse in the Forum, and Brutus' assumption of authority in removing the Tarquins from power, resolve the rape story by shifting its focus to the realm of civic politics and the establishment of the Republic. Thus, the strains of myth and legend intertwine; the result is a genuinely Roman story.[6]

In class we might go further to ask a series of questions: How does the story vary in the different versions? What role does the story play in each source? What does the story of Lucretia tell us about how the Romans made use of their traditional stories? Does Roman mythology serve the same purposes as Greek mythology? What do we learn about gender politics from this story in all its forms? To what extent does the rape of Lucretia, like the rape of Io, underscore the silencing of women? The story of Lucretia is preceded by the rapes of Rhea Silvia and the Sabine women; what roles do rape and sexual violence play as a motif in the stories told about early Rome?

So, what can we say about Roman mythology? Is it really a case of "so little, so late"? To some extent it is, but there remains a rich body of Roman traditional narratives. Their inclusion in a classical mythology course does more than highlight the differences and correspondences between Greece and Rome. Their inclusion completes the picture of the stories the Greeks and Romans told about and for themselves.[7]

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[6] For discussions of rape and Lucretia, see J. A. Arieti, "Rape and Livy's View of Roman History," in S. Deacy and K. F. Pierce, eds., *Rape in Antiquity: Sexual Violence in the Greek and Roman Worlds* (London 1997) 209–29; R. A. Bauman, "The Rape of Lucretia, *Quod metus causa* and the Criminal Law," *Latomus* 52.3 (1993) 550–66; N. Bryson, "Two Narratives of Rape in the Visual Arts: Lucretia and the Sabine Women," in S. Tomaselli and R. Porter, eds., *Rape* (Oxford 1986); J. D. Chaplin, *Livy's Exemplary History* (Oxford 2000); J. M. Claassen, "The Familiar Other: The Pivotal Role of Women in Livy's Narrative of Political Development in Early Rome," *AClass* 41 (1998) 71–104; L. C. Curran, "Rape and Rape Victims in the *Metamorphoses*," *Arethusa* 11 (1978) 213; J. de Luce, " 'O, For A Thousand Tongues to Sing': A Footnote on Metamorphosis, Silence, and Power," in M. DeForest, ed., *Woman's Power, Man's Game: Essays on Classical Antiquity in Honor of Joy K. King* (Wauconda, Ill., 1993); S. Dixon, "Rape in Roman Law and Myth," in S. Dixon, ed., *Reading Roman Women: Sources, Genres, and Real Life* (London 2001) 45–55; I. Donaldson, *The Rapes of Lucretia* (Oxford 1982); A. Feldherr, *Spectacle and Society in Livy's* History (Berkeley 1998); J. F. Gardner, *Women in Roman Law and Society* (Bloomington 1986); J. Hemker, "Rape and the Founding of Rome," *Helios* 12 (1985) 41–47; P. K. Joplin, "Ritual Work on Human Flesh: Livy's Lucretia and the Rape of the Body Politic," *Helios* 17 (1990) 51–70; M. M. Mathes, *The Rape of Lucretia: Readings in Livy, Machiavelli, and Rousseau* (University Park, Pa., 2000); R. M. Ogilvie, *A Commentary on Livy Books 1–5* (Oxford 1965); and A. Richlin, "Reading Ovid's Rapes," in A. Richlin, ed., *Pornography and Representation in Greece and Rome* (Oxford 1991) 158–79.

[7] For further discussion of Roman mythology, see J. F. Gardner, *Roman Myths* (Austin 1993) and M. Grant, *Roman Myths* (New York 1971).