

No Leg to Stand On:

Menenius Agrippa's fable in Book 2 of Livy's *Ab Urbe Condita*

While they differ in their exact interpretive approach, scholars analyzing the Fable of the Belly in Book 2 of Livy's *Ab Urbe Condita* (2.32.8-12) tend to read Menenius Agrippa's analogy as an emblematic representation of Livy's own political philosophy of how a state should function (Lincoln 1989; Kapust 2011; Mineo 2015). Although some scholars, like Vasaly (2011) and Connolly (2015), recognize the limitations of the fable for understanding Livy's views, they do not elaborate on what consequences these limitations have on the effect of the analogy on the narrative. Most scholars divorce the parable from the surrounding historical context of Book 2 more broadly, or minimize that context. In this paper, I locate Menenius Agrippa's analogy more intentionally within the background of Book 2 by bringing the fable into conversation with the debt crisis, the first *secessio plebis*, and the plebeian tribunes. I argue that Livy's representation of Roman history, political conflict, and the restoration of *concordia*, rather than being helpfully captured by the analogy, actually undermine the analogy's political lesson, thereby complicating and ambiguing the *exemplum* of Menenius Agrippa.

In the first part of my argument, I claim that the fable, as Agrippa frames it, does not accurately portray the nature of the conflict that caused the first secession. In the fable, the *seeditio* of the body parts against the stomach is caused by their misunderstanding of the stomach's important role in the body; the first secession, however, is caused not by a misunderstanding, but by the patricians' very real abuse of power against the plebeians. Furthermore, while Agrippa's story emphasizes the vital purpose of the stomach in maintaining the health of the body, Livy's narrative leading up to the secession foregrounds just how ineptly

the senate handles the debt crisis; it is torn apart by factional politics and headstrong senators like Appius Claudius. The fable, consequently, rather than instructively symbolizing the conflict, misrepresents the dynamics at play. While the fable involves a healthy body that becomes sick and then is restored to health, Livy's narrative of the debt crisis and secession involves a political body that is already sick to begin with, and then grows worse.

In the second part of my argument, I turn to the resolution of the first secession. Menenius Agrippa's fable convinces the plebeians to return to Rome, but it is the establishment of the plebeian tribunate that actually restores *concordia* (2.33.1). The creation of this office further complicates the applicability of Agrippa's parable, for three reasons. First, the office restructures the constitution of the republic, as it gives the plebeians access to political power, while in the fable, the nature of the political body remains unchanged. Second, Livy explicitly identifies conflict and abuse between the patricians and plebeians as the reason for the tribunate's existence (2.33.1), which further undermines the spirit of harmony, goodwill, and compromise that scholars like Kapust (2011) identify in the fable. Third, Livy's ambivalent portrayal of the tribunes as potentially dangerous demagogues throughout the rest of Book 2 calls into question just how meaningful and stable the *concordia* they restored really is, as the source of civic harmony very often also disrupts it. This further limits the applicability of the *concordia* that the fable idealizes.

As a consequence of this analysis, a reassessment of the effect of both the fable and Menenius Agrippa in Livy's history is needed. Despite the limited helpfulness of the fable, the historian still portrays Menenius Agrippa as an admirable *exemplum* who restored harmony. The contrast between the inadequacy of the fable and Livy's praise for Menenius Agrippa suggests two conclusions. First, Livy's use of Menenius Agrippa and his fable warns readers against

extracting *exempla* from their context: *exempla* must be read within their narrative. Second, the limited applicability of the fable challenges readers to avoid drawing simplistic lessons from Livy's history, and to consider that figures like Menenius Agrippa can serve noble, exemplary roles in the narrative even as their lessons present complications and resist easy answers.

Bibliography

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