

Envisioning Rhea Silvia's Dream in Art and Text

Beyond her role as mother of Romulus and Remus, Rhea Silvia (Ilia) has virtually no identity in the Roman literary and artistic imagination. Writers and visual artists have focused on the rape of the sleeping Rhea Silvia by the god Mars and her conception of the twins. Works of art most commonly depict the moment just before the rape, while the literary accounts of Ennius and Ovid, for example, feature the dream that Rhea Silvia recounts upon waking after the rape. This paper analyzes the dream imagery presented in Ovid's version of the tale in *Fasti* 3.11-42 in conjunction with the depiction of Mars approaching the sleeping Rhea Silvia in a second-century mosaic from Ostia (Figure 1, below) as means for engaging the respective audiences for these works. Specifically, this paper demonstrates that a work of art and the description of a dream in a poem use similar modes of non-verbal communication to convey meaning, since in both cases, viewer, reader, and dreamer are charged with decoding visual symbols.

The viewer of the Ostia mosaic can make numerous connections back to Ovid's version of the story. For example, the artist captures Mars and Rhea Silvia on a visual plane that includes additional elements such as the water jug, trees, and flowing water; these are all elements of Ovid's description of the setting. This coincidence led C. Pietrangeli (1943, 5) to interpret the mosaic as a faithful illustration of the imagery from Ovid's account. But one does not need to espouse such a literal approach to appreciate the similarities between the visual and textual representations of this story. Rather, this paper explores the comparable ways in which the artist of the mosaic and Ovid in his poem employ visual cues or dream symbols to convey to viewer or reader the aftermath of this violent encounter between male deity and female mortal, especially as they reveal Rhea Silvia's transformation from virgin to mother.

This paper looks in particular at the way poet and artist communicate narrative progression in their work, and how they hint to their viewers and readers about the important events that will follow the depicted dream/rape. Aside from the obvious symbolism of the large tree as an analogue for Romulus in Rhea Silvia's dream, for example, more subtle elements suggest the consequences of this encounter. P. Murgatroyd (2005, 19) has discussed Ovid's complex presentation of time in the Rhea Silvia passage, noting its confluence of prophecy and retrospective narration. This is evident in the verbs used by Rhea Silvia to describe the movement of the trees in the dream (*surgunt, protexerat, contigerat*), which convey their soaring motion and swift growth, as she recounts what she has seen from a detached perspective. In the Ostia mosaic Mars and Rhea Silvia assume strikingly contrasting poses. Mars is shown upright, moving forward, and brandishing a spear; Rhea Silvia is horizontal, languid, and resting on her neglected water jug. However, their postures do more than simply capture the moment of their interaction; rather their proxemic relationship hints at time and events beyond their encounter. For example, the forward thrust of Mars's movement towards Rhea Silvia in the foreground, accentuated by his fluttering cape, seems to defy the static medium in which it is contained and

thus calls attention to the fact that this image represents a moment along a continuum rather than a culmination. This paper concludes that Ovid, with his highly visual description of Rhea Silvia's dream, demanded an engagement from his readers that is similar to that solicited by the artist of the mosaic from his viewers, and that noting the similarities between these two modes for representation allows us to extract new information about the Roman conception of "seeing" dreams.



Fig. 1. Mosaic with Mars and Rhea Silvia from Ostia, Regio I. Palazzo Altieri, Rome.

Bibliography

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