

Secrecy and Silence: Revealing the Character of the Roman Lares

Lares, multifaceted gods whose precise definition remains elusive, occupied a highly visible place in the Roman religious world. They were depicted in the public areas of private homes, prominently displayed on shrines at the crossroads, and, as the *Lares Praestites*, they had their own shrine near the Roman Forum. So too the Lares are prevalent in Roman literature: Plautus has a Lar deliver one of his prologues in the *Aulularia*, Varro discusses offerings to the Lares (*frag. Non.* 863.15L), and the word “Lares” is ubiquitous as metonymy for “home.” Despite their high visibility, I propose that the Lares maintain connotations of silence and secrecy throughout their history and that the range of evidence for these connections indicates that these features, like their visibility, were intrinsic qualities of the Lares.

I start with the only extant mythological story for the birth of the Lares, which Ovid provides in his *Fasti* (2.533-638). Ovid identifies the mother of the twin Lares as Muta, who was once called Lara and who will become Tacita, their father as Mercury. Due to their mother’s shifting identity, the Lares are born of Silence herself and in the underworld, a “place suitable for silence” (*locus ille silentibus aptus*) (*Ov. Fast.* 2.609). The Lares are not central to this tale and are only mentioned at the end as an afterthought, since the main purpose of the story is to explore the concept of silence, highlighted by the semantically transparent name of Muta/Tacita (McDonough, 2004). It is tempting to ignore the Lares’ inclusion as the result of Ovid’s own imagination, and in fact the idea may be Ovid’s alone. However, even if the birth story is his creation, Ovid is still expressing preexisting ideas about the Lares; the silent circumstances of the tale allow for the incorporation of the Lares’ into it.

Tracing the connection back to Plautus, we see that although the Lar has the ability to speak, he may also choose to be silent, in this case about the existence and location of a certain pot of gold concealed under the hearth (*Plaut. Aul.* 6-8). Similarly, the shrine of the Lares in Trimalchio’s house contains a box, the contents of which are suspected but unconfirmed because the box is concealed (*Petron.* 29.8). I suggest that the same phenomenon may occur in the *lararium* in the *atrium* of the House of Menander, where wooden lattice work obscures the interior of the shrine. Finally, Apuleius, brought to court on a charge of magic, is accused of hiding magical tools among the Lares of his friend (*Apul. apol.* 53 and 55). From Plautus to Apuleius, and with Ovid in between, the Lares have been consistently identified with the concepts of secrecy and silence.

The Lares are an integral part of Roman life and religion; yet Roman religion normally takes place in public and audible spheres. The silence and concealment, therefore, associated with the Lares is striking within this general religious context. While the secrecy is apparently not a concern to earlier authors like Plautus, by Ovid’s time, the Lares’ secrecy has overtones of magic – it is a witch casting a silencing spell who conjures their mother Muta/Tacita. Furthermore, this background allows us to reconsider Apuleius’ magic trial, and, since Apuleius found the Lares natural companions of his sacred mystery objects, to speculate on the connection between Lares and mystery cults, which are known for their silence. We may remain uninitiated in fully understanding the Lares, but by identifying and exploring their connections to silence, we may come to a closer understanding of their nature.

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