

The Modernization of Myth: Sabine Women Reinterpreted in *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers*

Cinema depicting antiquity can be problematic, as it frequently attempts to create non-existent parallels between antiquity and the present-day by weaving modern themes into ancient narratives. The 1954 film *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* follows this pattern, as it modernizes and romanticizes the Ancient Roman myth about the rape of the Sabine women which is recreated into a musical set in 1850s Oregon. While Plutarch's *Parallel Lives* (Rom x.x) and Livy's *The History of Rome* (1.x.x) suggest that the Sabine women chose to remain with the Romans because of their newfound familial ties, *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* redefines the rape as a comical courtship in which the men and women fall in love. For these reasons, I argue that the film *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* romanticizes and modernizes the myth of the Sabine women by establishing an emotional relationship and courtship between the brothers and women to make the ancient narrative more palatable for contemporary audiences.

To show the stages of reinterpretation which the myth undergoes, first I will examine Plutarch and Livy's accounts of the Sabine women. Both Plutarch's *Parallel Lives* and Livy's *The History of Rome* address the Romans' capture of the Sabine women and the eventual end of the war between the Romans and Sabines. In particular, I will examine how Plutarch and Livy's differing accounts of the myth interact and how this influences modern interpretations. I will use these texts as primary sources to correlate with *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers*. To substantiate the indirect relationship between Livy, Plutarch and *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers*, I will briefly address Stephen Vincent Benet's parody "Sobbin' Women" which directly links the ancient texts and film together. Written in 1937, Stephen Vincent Benet's short story parodies the founding myth of Rome by reconstructing the narrative in 1850s Oregon territory as the Pontipee brothers [Romans] are unable to obtain wives [Sabines] in a traditional manner. In a gender reversal from

the original myth, a woman named Milly takes on Romulus' persona and helps the brothers arrange the kidnapping of local women.

The 1954 Hollywood musical is a true adaptation to Benet's short story "Sobbin' Women" excluding one key difference; the film reverts to original myth by having men arrange the kidnapping of the women. The transferring of gender roles in "Sobbin' Women" and *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* from the original Sabine women myth is significant as it testifies how modern gender roles influence our interpretations of antiquity. In addition to the reversal of gender roles, *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* attempts to justify and romanticize the rape by elaborating further on Livy suggestion of a courtship between the Romans and Sabine women. After Romulus seizes the Sabine Women in Book One of *The History of Rome*, he consoles them suggesting that the women would "find their husbands kinder, and that every man would earnestly endeavor not only to be a good husband, but also to console his wife for the home and parents she had lost"(Livy, 15). As these words were spoken, the Roman men seconded this notion by wooing the Sabine Women and excusing their actions based on their passion and love. With this in mind, I will address how *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* inadvertently reflects Livy's account in an attempt to romanticize the myth.

As a classical adaptation, *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* misconstrues the Sabine women myth. While watching the 1954 musical, audiences make the assumption that similar to the film, the Sabine women must have fallen in love with the Romans "just as Plutarch says." Consequently, it is imperative to separate modern influences from our interpretations of antiquity, as they can prejudice our findings. In the course of this paper, I will address this issue by examining how our romanticized understanding of the Sabine women has been influenced by modern adaptations.

Work Cited

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