

## Re-imagining Rhea Silvia in the *Fasti*

Rhea Silvia (or Ilia) is a character best known in Roman legend for her rape by Mars, and accounts of this rape appear in many works of Latin literature. Her rape is one of the longest extant fragments of Ennius' *Annales* (1.35-50 Skutsch), Livy briefly summarizes his thoughts on the event in *Ab Urbe Condita* (1.4.2-3), its aftermath provides a lengthy tangent in Ovid's *Amores* 3.6, and Ovid retells the rape in the *Fasti* (3.9-25). Connors (1994) has done a comparative study of these accounts, in which she is primarily concerned with how the narratives are focalized through Ilia's experience. My interest, however, is in the *Fasti* version as a divergence from the previous narratives, insofar as the violence apparent in the earlier versions of the rape has been excised. I argue that in the *Fasti* Ovid has deliberately constructed this story to be innocuous to Rhea Silvia as part of a greater campaign to avoid any reference to Romulus harming others. Although the character of Romulus in the *Fasti* is not entirely irreproachable (the synchronism between Augustus and Romulus at 2.133-44 notoriously castigates Romulus for the many ways he falls short of the ideal embodied by Augustus), and scholars such as Hinds (1992) outline many implicit reproaches of Romulus that can be elucidated from a close reading of the *Fasti*, Ovid seems wary of harming the founder's reputation. To this end, there are many points in the *Fasti* in which Ovid takes an episode well known from other works and retells it to Romulus' advantage. One remarkable example of this phenomenon is when Ovid, contrary to all previous accounts, displaces the blame for Remus' death onto the obscure Celer, and the ghost of Remus returns to absolve Romulus of any wrongdoing in his death. In Rhea Silvia's case, Ovid likewise removes any unpleasantness for Rhea Silvia from the event of her impregnation, and narrative attention is deflected from her as soon as she might encounter any attacks from Aemilius.

While each of the accounts of Rhea Silvia's rape presents some unique features, Ovid's description of that rape in the *Fasti* is a substantial departure from these preceding accounts. To wit: while the *Fasti* account is a rape in the strict sense, insofar as Rhea Silvia does not consent to have sex with Mars (and, as a Vestal Virgin, is prohibited from having sex altogether), the rape itself is not violent or in any way unpleasant for her (unlike most *Fasti* rapes, cf. Murgatroyd (2005)), and the narrative gives no suggestion that any negative consequences will follow. In contrast, Ennius' account implies that Ilia, in her dream, is attracted to Mars and may willingly acquiesce to have sex with him, which event is followed by disastrous consequences as she is outcast from her home and suffers grave *aerumnae*; she wakes deeply shaken by the dream. Similarly, in the *Amores*, the reader observes Ilia in the wake of her rape by Mars, as if presently suffering the *aerumnae* that Ennius prophesied in her future. The narrator implies that the rape was violent and distressing for her, and as she wanders alone in the wilderness she bewails her predicament, only to be unpleasantly accosted by the river god Anio. Livy, despite the brevity of his summary, specifies that Rhea Silvia after her rape was subject to the king's *crudelitas* and was punished with imprisonment. In the *Fasti*, by contrast, Mars is such a gentle lover that, when he approaches her during an afternoon nap, he is able to impregnate Rhea Silvia without waking her. When she later awakens, she is perfectly comfortable and comments on how soundly she slept. Moreover, in the *Fasti* Ovid gives no hint that Mars' rape led to unpleasant consequences for Rhea Silvia: immediately after Rhea Silvia reports to the reader that the rape was not distressing to her, she disappears from the narrative and is not mentioned again. In the *Fasti*, Ovid removes any suggestion that Romulus might have caused problems for her, and thereby casts the founder in a more favorable light.

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