

Making Goddesses in Rome: Ovid's Hersilia

While Hersilia, Romulus' wife, plays a substantial role in historical narratives of the rape of the Sabines, she plays no role in the visual or religious record of Augustan Rome. It is thus surprising that Ovid endows her with religious significance in both the *Metamorphoses* and the *Fasti*. In this paper, I investigate Ovid's Hersilia episodes to demonstrate how they interrogate both the new ideologies of imperial divinity and the old ones of traditional feminine behavior.

Hersilia's apotheosis in the *Metamorphoses* (14.829-851) is unique in its immediate context, as the only apotheosis of a "historical" woman in the *Metamorphoses*. It is also the first extant example we have in any work of Hersilia's transformation into a goddess called Hora (Myers 2009, Granobs 1997). Ovid's Hersilia is defined as a proper wife to her husband Romulus (*coniunx* lines 829 and 834; *dignissima tanti...viri* lines 833-834), and her deified husband is the one who effects her deification; thus her divine power may seem circumscribed by masculine control. The unprecedented nature of her apotheosis, however, as well as its positioning as the culmination of Book 14, suggests otherwise. Scholars (e.g. Flory 1995 and Domenicucci 1991) have claimed that Ovid's Hersilia is a reference to Livia, who was a powerful figurehead both during the lifetime of her husband and thereafter. Indeed, as I will show, there are compelling parallels between the language used to describe Hersilia in the *Met.* and the language used to describe Livia in the exile poetry, even though Livia had not yet been deified in Ovid's time. Whether or not Ovid intended to flatter Livia with his deification of Hersilia, the fact remains that he has not only created a goddess from a mortal but also given her pride of place next to her husband, who was a powerful deity in the Roman pantheon. In doing so, Ovid continues the trend, identified by Feeney - who, unfortunately, is silent about Hersilia -

of playing with the dynamics of apotheosis that were so central in contemporary political thought.

In the *Fasti*, Hersilia counsels the Sabine women to intervene in the hostilities between Romans and Sabines in an episode intended to explain the Matronalia in March (Book 3 lines 203-252). Though her role as the leader of the Sabine women is established in historical writings, generally any direct speech accorded to her is a highly emotional plea to the men on the battlefield, delivered as the women put themselves in positions of submission that reinforce the masculine-centric narrative of the Sabine women (Miles 1992). In Ovid's version, however, Hersilia is shown conjuring up a manipulative plan *before* the battle takes place and stirring the women's courage before they perform an ostentatious supplication for the men. Ovid's Hersilia is a woman who purposefully exploits her position as victim (she calls herself one of the *raptae* at line 207) to effect a result. Miles (1992) argues that Ovid's account is subversive because it makes explicit the masculine point of view that is implicit in other accounts. Indeed, *Mars* narrates the account and not only denies Hersilia her name (calling her his *nurus* instead) but also attempts – clumsily – to make the Matronalia, a celebration of matrons, all about himself, the god of war. But Hersilia's compelling direct speech defies Mars' attempts at masculine appropriation, and the true reason for the Matronalia – the celebration of Juno and female concerns – subtly asserts itself at the end of the account.

Thus, while Hersilia displays the characteristics of an “ideal wife,” her actions in both the *Metamorphoses* and the *Fasti* threaten to escape the bounds of masculine control into which she – and the other Sabines – have been placed by contemporary historians and iconographers. Her apotheosis in the *Metamorphoses* also implicitly critiques the process of deification, since Ovid is able not only to *invent* an apotheosis but also to make it as great as the traditionally-accepted

apotheosis of Romulus. Hersilia, then, is yet another figure whom Ovid has manipulated in order to challenge Augustan ideology.

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