The King and his Imaginary Friend: Numa, Egeria, and the Excess of the *Pia Fraus* in Livy Book 1

In *Ab Urbe Condita* Livy uses characterization of treated figures, as Ann Vasaly says, "to comment on larger political and moral questions directly relevant to the challenges Livy and his fellow-citizens faced as a society in the Augustan present" (2009: 257). His characters offer, sometimes not so subtly, examples with timeless qualities. In the case of extremes his purpose in thusly portraying the them is clear: entirely negative characters, such as Tarquinius Superbus, Tullia, and Appius Claudius Decemvir, are to be shunned, but those who display laudable Roman traits in an entirely positive way, such as Lucretia, Brutus, and Cincinnatus, are to be emulated. But what of the rest? Livy often inserts elements before or after certain episodes to undercut or diminish the effect of a seemingly positive occurrence. So how should the reader respond to ambiguous cases, like when the character shows selfless excellence followed by mindless brutality as the surviving Horatius does when he impulsively kills his sister, or when the individual accomplishes something beneficial for the state at the price of duplicity?

In Book 1 Livy describes Numa as known for justice and religious scruple (*iustitia religioque*) and very much experienced in every human and divine law (*consultissimus vir...omnis divini atque humani iuris*: 1.18.1-2). After the martial reign of Romulus, Numa is the bringer of peace who will re-establish with the rule of law a city founded originally by the rule of might (*urbem novam conditam vi et armis, iure eam legibusque ac moribus de integro condere*: 19.1). His is the only name agreed upon for the kingship (18.5-6), and only he can moderate the savagery of the Roman people (*mitigandum ferocem populum*: 19.2). He even has a divine advocate—in some versions a wife—in the nymph Egeria. The only problem is that this patronage is entirely fabricated. Livy clearly depicts the interaction between Numa and Egeria

as a lie (*commentum* and *simulare*: 19.5). Moreover, it is a lie situated firmly in the divine sphere as Egeria's pretended words are not trifles about the weather; they are prophesies about the Roman state (*monitu*: 19.5).

R.M. Ogilvie states: "The deception of an ignorant people for their own good was a traditional feature of Numa's work," and "Such *pia fraus* was permissible for the Philosopher King" (1965: 95). The notion of the noble lie goes back to Plato's *Republic* (414b), but Livy characterizes Numa as the very model of piety. Surely he would have had some compunction at inventing a deity. Also, there is his use of prophecy as a legitimating factor for his reign. James O'Hara states that "The role of divination in politics was considerable in Vergil's lifetime: men used the rituals of divination to justify or nullify political actions, and often manufactured old prophecies (mostly Sibylline oracles) that could be made relevant to present-day political ambition" (1990: 128). Livy acknowledges that such an uncouth and ignorant bunch (*multitudinem imperitam...et rudem*: 19.4) as the early Romans needed to be tricked in this way, but the Roman reader must have recognized the vehicle by which power-seeking strongmen in their not so distant past, and perhaps present, had sought to legitimate themselves.

So why does Livy unequivocally depict Numa as making up his congress with a nymph? He could have relied on his common technique of offering two views of an occurrence, the marvelous one followed by the more mundane, as with the *lupa* in his Romulus episode, either a wolf or a prostitute depending on the reader's take, but for Numa no room is given for fable (*locum fabulae...datum*: 4.7-8). Tacitus writes: "Titus Livy, a man famous among the first ranks for eloquence and trustworthiness, held Gnaius Pompey in such great esteem that Augustus called him 'Pompeianus,' but this did not block their friendship" (*Ann.* 4.34.3). T.J. Luce asserts that "Livy deserves to be believed because he cannot be thought to have written as Augustus

wished" (1989: 27). But he also would have wanted Augustus to read his work and hopefully to take something away from it. So it is my contention that Livy's ambiguous characterization of Numa is meant to be a warning to the present about the potential for duplicity by those in power, even when their intentions are good.

Bibliography

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