

Roman Character and Gender in the Augustan Age: Livy's Gender Hierarchy and Ovid's Complex Women

Two authors, writing at either end of the Augustan Age, take up the tale of the Sabine women with very different purposes. Livy, in the mid-twenties, uses the tale as part of his program to re-establish Roman national character. In juxtaposing the Sabine women and Tarpeia, he illustrates what it means to be a "good" and "bad" Roman woman, setting forth examples for all Romans to follow (Vandiver 1999, Welch 2012, Santoro L'Hoir 1992). Implicit in Livy's story is a rigid gender hierarchy upon which the Roman state is founded. While he hoists Romulus and the Roman men up as prominent leaders and strong warriors, he lauds the Sabine women for their acquiescence to male will, loyalty, and bold self-sacrifice. In *Fasti* Book 3, at the end of Augustus' reign, Ovid challenges Livy's androcentric account. His description of the Sabine war highlights the women's agency and their importance in forging stability in the state, while also showcasing the way men forcefully attempt to assert their control and authority over these women. Study of the women's speeches in each account reveals the differences between the authors' examinations of gender and power in Rome.

In Livy's tale, the women demonstrate the relationship between a citizen woman's body and the Roman state. Women's bodies are the medium through which, and upon which, the state is forged. First, the women are forcibly taken by the Romans in order to produce the Roman race (*AUC* 1.9). Second, the women end the war by throwing themselves between the two armies and assuming responsibility for the conflict: '*in nos vertite iras; nos causa belli...*' (*AUC* 1.13). Livy depicts their actions as sudden and emotional, yet brave. They sacrifice their bodies for the sake of their male kin, claiming it is better to be dead than to live without a husband or a father

(melius peribimus quam sine alteris vestrum viduae aut orbae vivemus, AUC 1.13). When peace is made by means of women's intervening bodies—the same bodies that gave birth to a new race uniting Sabine and Roman blood—the female body becomes the vehicle through which the Roman state is unified, expanded, and fortified. For valuing the lives of their male kin and children over their own, Livy's Sabine women function as exemplars of morality for all Roman women to follow.

Ovid's account, by contrast, emphasizes the ingenuity and agency of the Sabine women. The women act for themselves and their families, but do not accept responsibility for the war or offer to sacrifice themselves for their kin. Hersilia delivers a powerful speech to the women and drives them to action amidst the male-inflicted chaos (3.2017-12). First, she legitimizes the female experience by articulating a perspective distinct to the women (*o pariter raptae, quoniam hoc commune tenemus*, 207). Then, she asserts the women's power by proclaiming their relationship to the conflict and their ability to affect the outcome before offering a plan: *stant acies, sed utra di sint pro parte rogandi, eligite: hinc coniunx, hinc pater arma tenet* (209-10).

I argue (contra Miles 1992) that through the women's plotting and bold, yet quiet, demonstration, the *Fasti* underscores women's independence. The women articulate neither responsibility to their husbands nor willingness to accept blame for the war. Their silence on the battlefield emphasizes their premeditated plan and shows them as an authority independent from the men. Their bodies speak for them and signify a feminine perspective that counters the violent language of Mars and Romulus. By highlighting the disparity between men's forceful and rash actions and the cautious, strategic actions of the women, the *Fasti* showcases male-inflicted chaos and the essential role of women in establishing a peaceful, productive Roman state—a role that Livy attributes primarily to men.

Livy valorizes women for their support and echoing of masculine values. In juxtaposing the Sabine women with Tarpeia, he warns his readers of the dangerous dichotomy of female behavior: women are weak when victim to their subjective desires, but strong when they support the patriarchy. Ovid, on the other hand, interrogates masculine authority and underscores the unique female agency residing in the shadows, at the center of Roman foundations.

Bibliography

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