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**Violence in Print:  
A Brief Look into Violence Against Women as a Plot Device in Livy's History**

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**Abstract:**

Ancient Rome was a vast empire with a rich culture that has fascinated people for generations. Much of what is known of the early days of Rome is thanks to the work of Titus Livius, a historian living in Rome during the first century CE. Livy, as he is more commonly known, wrote a comprehensive history of Rome, starting with its early mytho-history, detailing Roman legends about its founding and journey to empire. In this early history, Livy discusses many now famous women, however, he treats these women more as plot devices than as actual characters. Using Livy's translated work, as well as scholarly interpretations, in my article, I aim to examine how Livy uses and even misrepresents the reality of life in Ancient Rome for women in order to further his narrative.

**Content Warning: This paper discusses topics related to violence against women**

### **Titus Livius and His History of Rome:**

Ancient Rome is remembered today for its vast empire, resilience, and religion. While Rome did eventually turn to Christianity during the reign of the emperor Constantine in the early third century CE, for many hundreds of years it followed a system of polytheism that gave rise to the collection of stories known today as Roman mythology. This mythology explained many things that would be important to a Roman citizen, including how Rome came to be, and how it grew into the great city it became. Nevertheless, these founding stories tend to reflect the patriarchal characteristics of Rome, and underscores how violence against women in the ancient world was a fundamental, recurring theme within these narratives.

The historian Titus Livius, better known today as Livy, wrote during the early Roman Empire, and is best remembered for his massive and comprehensive history of Rome. While parts of his original document are now lost, some of what has survived is his history of the early days of Rome, known as Book One. The narrative focuses on the people who founded Rome and how they influenced the early days of the city, including famous names such as Romulus and Remus, among other Roman gods and goddesses, playing integral parts in Livy's record.<sup>23</sup> While scholars are not certain how much of this is fact or fantasy,<sup>24</sup> what remains is the story of Rome's founding as the Romans themselves likely believed it during the time of the first emperor, Caesar Augustus.

Livy's tale is all encompassing. Book One begins with the events leading up to the founding of Rome, deals with the trials surrounding the start of the city, and then details the reigns of each of the seven kings of Rome. This narrative launches into the beginning of the

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<sup>1</sup> Livy Book 1, Paragraph 3

<sup>2</sup> Claassen, J.-M., "The Familiar Other: The Pivotal Role Of Women In Livy's Narrative Of Political Development In Early Rome.," 1998, in *Acta Classica*, 41, p. 73.

Roman Republic, focusing in on the major players of each era. Usually, these major players were men, such as Romulus and Remus, or the seven kings who ruled Rome; however, for as much of patriarchal society as Rome was, it is perhaps surprising how integral of a role women play throughout this narrative.

In the first six books of his history, Livy mentions different individual women or distinct groups of women upwards of twenty times.<sup>25</sup> These women are notable because of the specific acts of violence committed against them, rather than praising or commending an action they themselves took or were involved in of their own free will. There is a significant amount of violence towards women in Livy's histories and the founding myths of Rome, however these do not accurately portray the effects of violence towards women in Ancient Rome. Livy's histories instead use the stories of Rhea Silvia<sup>26</sup>, the Sabine women,<sup>27</sup> and Lucretia<sup>28</sup> as tools for his masculine-centered story where men singularly established the early foundations of Rome.

### **The Rape of Rhea Silvia:**

The first book of Livy's history begins with the actual founding of the city of Rome itself. He explains the legend of Aeneas, the demigod ancestor of Romulus, the future founder of Rome. Aeneas was a Trojan man who escaped from the fall of the city during the Trojan War<sup>29</sup>. He went on a journey similar to that of Homer's *Odyssey* before finally settling in Italy. Once Aeneas' line is fully settled and secured in the Latin area of Italy, Livy switches his focus to the story of the actual founding of the city. This tale begins with the usurpation of Aeneas'

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<sup>3</sup> Claassen, J.-M., "The Familiar Other: The Pivotal Role Of Women In Livy's Narrative Of Political Development In Early Rome.," 1998, in *Acta Classica*, 41, p. 80.

<sup>4</sup> Livy Book 1, Paragraph 3

<sup>5</sup> Livy Book 1, Paragraph 9

<sup>6</sup> Livy Book 1, Paragraph 57

<sup>7</sup> Livy Book 1, Paragraph 1

descendant, the rightful king Numitor, by his brother Amulius.<sup>30</sup> Numitor had a daughter named Rhea Silvia, who after her uncle, Amulius usurped her father, forced her into the role of a Vestal Virgin in order to preserve her virginity and prevent the continuation of her father's line.<sup>31</sup> Vestal Virgins were Roman women who became priestesses of the goddesses Vesta, and were sworn to celibacy during their tenure at the temple of Vesta.<sup>32</sup> They were seen as highly sacred and breaking their vows would lead to severe punishment. By installing Rhea as a Vestal, Amulius had intended to prevent any great nephews who could challenge his rule. His scheme was unsuccessful, though, as Rhea is raped and impregnated by an entity who she claims is the god Mars, leading to the birth of the twin boys Romulus and Remus.<sup>33</sup> Despite being a victim of rape, Rhea Silvia is imprisoned by her uncle for breaking her vows of celibacy, and her children are taken from her to be drowned. Unbeknownst to her, the twins are instead saved by a she-wolf, and adopted by a lower-class couple.<sup>34</sup> When they reach the age of maturity and learn of their true heritage, Romulus and Remus eventually avenge their mother's imprisonment with Romulus' founding of Rome. Despite this form of retribution, the emotions of Rhea Silvia are largely left out of the text, highlighting the void left by underrepresented feminine points of view and lived experiences.

From what is known of Rome in the late republican and early imperial period, the violation of a Vestal Virgin was a heavily punished crime for both the victim and the offender.<sup>35</sup> What this means is that the story of Rhea Silvia would have been extremely shocking to the readers of Livy's history, as such a thing would be highly improbable in their time. While

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<sup>8</sup> Livy Book 1, Paragraph 3

<sup>9</sup> Claassen, J.-M., "The Familiar Other: The Pivotal Role Of Women In Livy's Narrative Of Political Development In Early Rome.," 1998, in *Acta Classica*, 41, p. 80.

<sup>10</sup> Livy Book 1, Paragraph 3

<sup>11</sup> Livy Book 1, Paragraph 3

<sup>12</sup> Livy Book 1, Paragraph 4

<sup>13</sup> Mark, J, "Vestal Virgins," World History

women did experience sexual assault in the late republic and early empire, it was mostly a threat to noncitizens and enslaved women, as opposed to an upper-class woman such as Rhea Silvia.<sup>36</sup>

With this knowledge in mind, it can be safely inferred that Livy uses the tale of Rhea Silvia as a plot device to further the story of Romulus and Remus, as well as an indirect provocation of his readers. This violence against a sacred member of Roman society would have been seen as scandalous and would have been upsetting to the ideals of the sacred Vestals. She does not have much of a role in the narrative outside of her unjust imprisonment and rape. She is only present in the story to give the eventual founder of Rome a royal lineage as the daughter of the rightful king to give Romulus a godly heritage, as Livy asserts that Rhea Silvia claims his father to be the god Mars.<sup>37</sup> Notably, her children do nothing about the fact that their mother was raped by a god, but instead punish their great uncle for forcing her to become a Vestal Virgin and return their grandfather to his rightful place as king. It is important to keep in mind the cultural context when considering this aspect of the story. In what is today known as Roman mythology, and what in Roman times would have been commonly accepted stories about the gods, the occurrence of rape of a mortal woman by a divine being was fairly common.<sup>38</sup> The story of Rhea Silvia fits a common pattern behind the birth of many demigods according to what is today known as Roman myth, and so it is likely that Livy would not have even thought to comment on that aspect while writing this tale into his history.

Beyond her role as a mother and motivator, Rhea Silvia has no significant contribution to the narrative based solely on her own merits. If, as has been established, the threat of sexual

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<sup>14</sup> Witzke, S. S. (n.d.), "Violence against Women in Ancient Rome: Ideology versus Reality," University of Michigan Press p. 260.

<sup>15</sup> Livy Book 1, Paragraph 3  
Ovid, Book IV

violence towards upper-class women and Vestal Virgins was so slim, then one may conclude that Livy misrepresents the reality of violence towards ancient women through this particular story.

### **The Story of the Sabine Women:**

As the adage goes, Rome was not built in a day, and so Romulus recruited men from the surrounding area to help him establish the city.<sup>39</sup> Once Rome was complete, they began to recruit people from the area around their new city to build up its population. Rome opened its borders, and men began to flock to the new settlement. However, this caused Romulus to realize that Rome was facing its first major challenge: a lack of women.<sup>40</sup> Rome drew in many men, but they did not have enough women to start families with and properly develop as a city; essentially, they were a city lacking the potential of population growth. To combat this, Romulus came up with a simple plan; He asked the men of the neighboring Sabine cities if they would allow their “chaste daughters”<sup>41</sup> to marry the men of Rome. When the fathers of these women refused, Romulus took this as a slight, and decided that the Romans would simply take the women by force. He invited all of the neighboring Sabine cities to a large religious feast in Rome, insisting that they bring their unwed daughters, to which they accepted if only out of sheer curiosity. Once the families arrived, however, the men of Rome leapt out and forcibly kidnapped the daughters, carrying them off. These Sabine women were married to the Roman men and became the founding mothers of Rome.<sup>42</sup> Predictably, the fathers of the Sabine women were unhappy with the actions of Romulus and his followers, so they decided to attack the city and take their

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<sup>16</sup> Livy Book 1, Paragraph 8

<sup>17</sup> Livy, Book 1, Paragraph 9

<sup>18</sup> Claassen, J.-M., “The Familiar Other: The Pivotal Role Of Women In Livy's Narrative Of Political Development In Early Rome.,” 1998, in *Acta Classica*, 41, p. 83.

<sup>19</sup> Livy, Book 1, Paragraph 9

daughters back by force.<sup>43</sup> This is where Livy's tale takes a surprising narrative turn. Rather than escaping their captors-turned-husbands, the Sabine women actually stop the fighting, insisting that they are happy as the wives and mothers of Rome, and use their bodies and those of their newborns as shields between the two fighting groups of men.<sup>44</sup>

While this story is admittedly rather fantastical, it is likely that Livy only included it as Roman society compelled him to do so. Many scholars note that while he deals with the subject of the Sabine women, he makes an effort to move on from it quickly,<sup>45</sup> and others note that this was likely not a celebrated Roman experience, as it features women directly interfering with and dictating the outcome of a critical early military engagement.<sup>46</sup> This is not something that a patriarchal and militaristic state such as Rome would want to present as a proud part of their history. In addition to this, women in the late republic and early empire were not in danger of being snatched and married off to foreign men, meaning that this was not an accurate description of violence towards women in Rome during Livy's time. Instead, Livy includes this event in his narrative in order to serve as an example of the loyalty he believes Roman women of his time should show, both to Rome and to their husbands.

The Sabine women, despite being kidnapped and forcibly married off, still choose to be loyal to Rome and their new husbands. Livy uses this act of violence to try to impart upon his readers, especially the women, the value of choosing Rome over all else. By presenting these foreign women as paragons of female Roman citizenship, Livy uses them to inspire the women

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<sup>20</sup> Livy Book 1, Paragraph 11-13

<sup>21</sup> Livy, Book 1, Paragraph 13

<sup>22</sup> Claassen, J.-M., "The Familiar Other: The Pivotal Role Of Women In Livy's Narrative Of Political Development In Early Rome.," 1998, in *Acta Classica*, 41, p. 83.

<sup>23</sup> Stevenson, T., "Women of Early Rome as Exempla in Livy," in *AB Urbe Condita*, Book 1. *Classical World*, 104(2), p. 180.

of his time to act in a similar manner, as well as encourage them to be loyal to their husbands, regardless of who they may be.

In a similar fashion to Rhea Silvia, the Sabine women have no real impact on the narrative besides serving to help grow the population of Rome, both as mothers and through the adoption of their Sabine family members into the city. In addition to using their story as an example of what he sees as righteous behavior, Livy uses these women to further the story of Rome. It is important to note that this is the second example of Livy using the history of violence against women as a way of producing male offspring that will go on to play an important role in Rome. He is using these acts of violence as a way to forward his narrative, and not focusing on the actual women that experienced it. The thoughts and emotions of these women are not expressed beyond their joy as a part of this new city of Rome, and even that is used to encourage loyalty in the women of Livy's own time. With both Rhea Silvia and the Sabines, women are presented as having no real agency in their own stories, despite being an essential part of both Rome's foundation and growth.

### **The Life of Lucretia:**

Just a few generations after the abduction of the Sabine women comes the story of Lucretia. At this point in time, Rome is being ruled by one of the seven legendary kings by the name of Tarquinius Superbus<sup>47</sup>. During Superbus' reign, there lived a woman named Lucretia, who was a virtuous and chaste noblewoman married to a man named Lucius Tarquinius Colatinus, who served in the Roman military.<sup>48</sup> One day between military campaigns, Colatinus, whilst speaking with his men, began a competition over whose wife was the most impressive.

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<sup>24</sup> Livy, Book 1, Paragraph 2

<sup>25</sup> Livy, Book 1, Paragraph 57

The son of the king, a man named Sextus, heard Colatinus brag about Lucretia, and, growing jealous, decided that he had to sleep with her. In turn, Colatinus' boasting inadvertently led to the rape of his beloved wife.<sup>49</sup> Livy describes Lucretia as an extremely modest woman, who, even in the face of sexual violence, attempted to maintain her virtue.<sup>50</sup> In fact, when Sextus came to seduce Lucretia:

“He saw her inflexible, and that she was not moved even by the terror of death... (Then) he added to terror the threat of dishonor; he says that he will lay a murdered slave naked by her side when dead, so that she may be said to have been slain in infamous adultery.”<sup>51</sup>

Lucretia is shown here to value her morals over her own physical well-being. She then seeks revenge against Sextus for the injustice done to her by revealing his crime to both her husband and her father.<sup>52</sup> They both swear to help her gain vengeance, but, against their wishes, Lucretia decides to end her life rather than live with the guilt of what happened to her. She states that she does not want to serve as a way for unfaithful women to avoid punishment, and so she takes her own life with a knife to the heart.<sup>53</sup> and this chain of events is what leads to the expulsion of the Roman kings, and the beginning of the Roman Republic.<sup>54</sup>

Lucretia's story serves multiple purposes in Livy's narrative, just as the abduction of the Sabine women. First off Livy uses an act of violence against Lucretia as a way to further the plot of his story, in this case using it to explain the very beginnings of the Roman Republic. This is notable as Livy is intrinsically tying a woman to the founding of the Roman state in this story,

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<sup>26</sup> Livy, Book 1, Paragraph 57

<sup>27</sup> Livy, Book 1, Paragraph 58

<sup>28</sup> Livy, Book 1 Paragraph 58

<sup>29</sup> Livy, Book 1, Paragraph 58

<sup>30</sup> Livy, Book 1, Paragraph 58

<sup>31</sup> Claassen, J.-M., “The Familiar Other: The Pivotal Role Of Women In Livy's Narrative Of Political Development In Early Rome.,” 1998, in *Acta Classica*, 41, p. 85.

which parallels the role that Rhea Silvia plays in the founding of the actual city of Rome. What is most interesting, perhaps, is that Lucretia does assist the plot through the virtues of her actions, a diversion from previous trends with women such as Rhea Silvia and the Sabines. By revealing the crimes of Sextus, Lucretia does actually move the plot forward through her actions, as opposed to an action taken against her. In contrast to previous examples, the plot here advances because the women were hapless victims, here Lucretia takes agency in her own story and advances the plot through her own actions in contrast to the first two examples.

However, this is not Lucretia's only role in Livy's narrative. Lucretia, by ending her life in order to restore her virtue, is meant to serve as a warning against adultery. While in modern times readers could interpret this as an instance of victim blaming, in the narrative this is meant to inspire women to maintain their virtue above even their own lives.<sup>55</sup> Livy uses Lucretia as an example to married women who may be considering whether or not they should commit adultery to seriously consider the consequences before they act. Through her suicide, Livy suggests a proper punishment for adultery. It may be important to note, however, that Livy wrote his histories during the time of Augustus, who had very specific ideas about the importance of monogamous marriage, and this warning may have been influenced by this change in policy.

Lucretia's story shows some evolution in the way Livy views and treats women in his narrative; however, she is still used as a plot device and a cautionary tale, just as Rhea Silvia and the Sabine women were before her. While she does have some measure of personal agency at least, she still serves to further the male-centric plot of the work and influence any women who may have read or otherwise heard his narrative. At the very least, while she acts as a plot device and warning, she is able to act as a role model for the women of Rome who came after her.

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<sup>55</sup> Stevenson, T., "Women of Early Rome as Exempla in Livy," in *AB Urbe Condita*, Book 1. *Classical World*, 104(2), p. 186.

**Conclusion:**

This essay is not intended to be a criticism of Livy or his writing style, but rather to serve as an analysis of his use of violence against women in his version of the founding of Rome and the events leading up to the formation of the Republic. While the events in his early works need to be examined with a skeptical lens due to their dubious status as potentially fiction, his collection of histories is greatly important for modern scholars studying the Ancient Roman world.

The entire history of Rome is a vast and complicated one, and it is thanks to historians such as Livy that so much of it has survived to the modern era. While Livy's storytelling and use of acts of violence against women as narrative pieces leave much to be desired from a modern perspective, his writing is indicative of his time period and culture, and much can be inferred from his choices. While historical works have often chosen to use the idea of violence against women as a plot device, the trend of violence towards women as a plot device to further the story of a narrative has continued to modern times. Examining where this trend comes from and why it is used in great works such as Livy's Histories can be helpful for researching this cultural trope. As so much of Livy's work has been lost to time, one must wonder whether or not women played any important roles in his narrative due to their own virtues in the now-lost sections. Notably, however, Livy was an upper-class male Roman citizen, so his work cannot be assumed to speak for the women of Ancient Rome. However, his work does reveal valuable insights about how the Roman elite saw the stereotypical roles that women played in the Roman mythos. Women served as mothers, motivators, but most importantly catalysts for change. If there is one

consistent theme surrounding these women, one unrelated to violence done to them, it is the great change that they help to bring about.

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