

SPRING 2022

THE UMASS AMHERST
UNDERGRADUATE
HISTORY JOURNAL

UNIVERSITY OF
MASSACHUSETTS AMHERST

THE EDITORS:

Anthony Colace

Ellie Costello

Alison Chicca Audette

James Griffin

FACULTY ADVISOR:

Professor Daniel Gordon

The Editorial Board would like to thank the History Department and all who have submitted their work to the UMass Undergraduate History Journal. With special thanks to Domenico Colace of the School of Visual Arts at Boston University's College of Fine Arts - Class of 2022.

Undergraduate Editorial Board

Anthony Colace, Editor-in-Chief. Anthony is a senior Political Science and History Dual-Degree Candidate, with a Minor in Classical Civilization. Winner of the Harold W. Cary and Simon & Satenig Ermonian Scholars departmental prizes for undergraduate academic excellence, he will be attending law school this upcoming Fall semester.

Ellie Costello, Executive Editor. Ellie is a junior History major in the Commonwealth Honors College, with a primary concentration in modern Latin America. She is a member of Phi Alpha Theta History Honors Society and in the Fall, will be working on an Honors thesis focusing on economic history in the region. Ellie plans to work towards a master's degree in Latin American History following graduation.

Alison Chicca Audette, Associate Editor. Alison is a senior History major. Her undergraduate work was focused on Modern American Social History. After graduating, she plans to work as an elementary school teacher and hopes to eventually obtain a PhD in History.

James Griffin, Associate Editor. James is a sophomore History major in the Commonwealth Honors College whose undergraduate coursework has primarily focused on United States history, especially in the 19th century. He plans to explore Latin American history further in his studies and pursue a major or minor in Political Science.

Founded in 2016 by members of Phi Alpha Theta, the national history honor society, the UMass Undergraduate History Journal is devoted to showcasing the diverse historical work of undergraduate students. This publication includes essays and historical reflections written either within or outside the framework of undergraduate courses. The UMass Undergraduate History Journal is not an official publication of the University of Massachusetts Amherst. The views expressed herein are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of the Journal, the editors, or the University. All rights reserved.

Contents

<i>Gender, Biology and Power: Social Constructions and Womanhood</i>	1
ROBERT CAHILL	
<i>A Brief Look into Violence Against Women as a Plot Device in Livy's History</i>	19
CAITLYN FOSTER	
<i>History as Debate: An Analysis of Different Approaches to History</i>	33
BRET HACKENSON	
<i>The Evolution of a Myth: Romulus and Remus</i>	52
LAURA HASKELL	
<i>The Purpose and Relevance of the Grand Narrative</i>	74
BRIANNA HASTRY	
<i>The Cultural Importance of Greek Mythology and its Impact on Youth Culture in the United States Using Percy Jackson: The Lightning Thief</i>	94
ZACHARY RICHARDS	

2022 University of Massachusetts Undergraduate History Journal

**GENDER, BIOLOGY, AND POWER: SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONS AND
WOMANHOOD**

Robert Cahill
Department: History

Abstract:

For decades, feminist scholars engaged in discourses surrounding women as a biological and social identity. Scholars unpacked normative ideas of womanhood and gender, often drawing very different conclusions from one another. They theorized that womanhood was a social construction to ensure their subservient status to patriarchal institutions. The line between biological and social identity was and still is contentious between scholars. Writers like Judith Butler, Caroline Smith-Rosenberg, and Natalie Zemon Davis analyzed gender constructs in both a theoretical and historical sense and formed their analysis in different ways. Their work breaks down how medical orthodoxies created biological ideas of womanhood and how biology was used as a method to effectively enforce normative ideas of gender. This work seeks to compare the approaches of each scholar and their analysis of womanhood.

The field of gender and women's studies was shaped and reshaped by vanguard scholars and activists, and that legacy continues to shape the way we analyze ourselves and the society around us. Within a few generations, countless scholars have developed their own theories about gender and power in society, but have yet to reach a consensus on one question: what is gender? There is nothing more terrifyingly personal than the body and identity. It is so frightening and vulnerable, exposing the way the body is scrutinized, picked apart, and observed. It asks us: are we more than what's beyond our skin, and beyond our organs? Or are we nothing more than flesh and DNA, our will and self-determination nothing more than the constant interplay of nature and nurture? Women's historians and gender theorists were interlocutors in a debate about the nature of womanhood, and what that meant for how power and cultural assumptions defined gender. Feminist scholars theorized that notions of gender were constructed by culture and could adapt over time to changing power structures. The constructionist arguments over gender altered a conversation dominated by bio-essentialism, though even the constructionists themselves differed in their analysis. Some often conflated sex and gender, while some suggested that sex itself could also be constructed. After decades of the debate, there still are no clear answers. Scholars like Judith Butler, Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, and Natalie Zemon Davis incorporate similar ideas of gender into their works, but even those who find common ground as feminists demonstrate differences in their arguments. The way theorists and historians grapple with these questions vary, even among those who incorporate constructionism into their analysis. This work intends to compare the approaches each scholar takes in regard to social constructs and womanhood.

Feminist discourses on gender had been developing for decades without a clear consensus on the realities of womanhood. The question of nature and nurture and its relationship to gender had not been resolved, and scholars continued to argue amongst themselves. The theory that sex and gender were different and that gender was socially constructed, whilst sex was biological was a common argument by feminist scholars. The social expectations and behaviors placed on women through this construction is referred to as normative womanhood. These academics did not fully reject a naturalistic argument, which younger scholars like Judith Butler had developed contentions with. Butler intended for her book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* to be a critique of certain forms of feminism she fundamentally opposed; and to add to the already existing body of feminist theory. Upon its release in 1990, *Gender Trouble* became much larger than she had intended. Now considered a formative piece of feminist literature and queer theory, Butler's work shaped the debate on sex and gender. She both developed and critiqued the constructionist theory; accepting some ideas posited by other feminist scholars and pushing the terms of the debate in a more radical direction - outlining her theory of performativity and arguing that even sex was a construction reified by gender.

Butler's *Gender Trouble* began to outline some central contentions that had arisen amongst feminists and their struggle to define womanhood and sex distinctions. She raises several contentions with other feminist scholars about fundamental formulations of gender. In order to make the gender and sex distinction, gender theorists posited that gender was culturally established, whilst sex and sex distinctions were a product of biology and natural phenomena. Butler contests this idea. She instead suggested that biology itself is a variable construction of culture and that genealogy and binary options of sex may also be a construct. Therefore, to suggest that sex is a natural occurrence is to suggest that sex is a politically

neutral categorization. To argue that sex is a concept that predated culture means that there is no need to break down or question how binary sex is categorized in the first place. Butler argues that “Gender ought not to be conceived merely as the cultural inscription of meaning on a pre-given sex (a juridical conception); gender must also designate the very apparatus of production whereby the sexes themselves are established.” Butler explicitly suggests that the debate¹ on gender and sex distinctions are tautological. Binary conceptions of gender therefore create sex distinctions, just as sex distinctions create gender: gender and sex are one and the same.

Butler questions if the body is simply a medium in which gender is created, which then creates philosophical questions of free will and fixed ideas about gender. Since culture creates gendered laws that one must follow, therefore biology does not determine destiny, culture does. Thus, as an extension of this, one’s culture must define how gender regulates the body and its forms. Butler suggests that the discourse between fixed and free ideas of sex simply limit the terms of the debate about gender. “The locus of intractability, whether in “sex” or “gender” or in the very meaning of “construction,” provides a clue to what cultural possibilities can and cannot become mobilized through any further analysis...These limits are always set within the terms of a hegemonic cultural discourse predicated on binary structures that appear as the language of universal rationality.”²

The terms of the debate are limited by language, as the use of womanhood and manhood as terms already limits ideas about future gender formulations. Questions about what gender ‘is’ are always constrained by the cultural context in which they are asked and

¹ Judith Butler, “Gender: The Circular Ruins of Contemporary Debate,” in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. (New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 11

² Butler, “Gender: The Circular Ruins”, p. 13

our already limiting conceptions of gender. Rather, "...gender does not denote a substantive being, but a relative point of convergence among culturally and historically specific sets of relations."³ The concept of normative womanhood and masculinist oppression that some feminists had suggested is therefore ignoring racial, class, and other forms of oppression that are much more variable than universal. The universality of female identity must be therefore called into question and calls for unity and coherence between women as an oppressed category must consider the cultural and political intersections in which the category of 'woman' is formed.

For Butler, gender identities must have been formulated after there became a recognizable standard of "gender intelligibility."⁴ All of the standards and norms created by a⁴ society must coalesce into a functional meaning in order to create a functional identity; or at the very least an identity that is recognized as functional within a society. It is relative to culture what regulations, boundaries, and divisions create a fully formed gender. Therefore, a society must generally agree on some sort of gendered coherence; thus normative sex, gender, and sexual practices are formed. However, "Inasmuch as "identity" is assured through the stabilizing concepts of sex, gender, and sexuality, the very notion of "the person" is called into question by the cultural emergence of those "incoherent" or "discontinuous" gendered beings who appear to be persons but who fail to conform to the gendered norms of cultural intelligibility by which persons are defined."⁵ For this reason, gendered and sexual 'incoherence' must therefore be prohibited. Through this, the 'natural' sex is created out of the rules and regulations manufactured by coherent gender norms. Those who fall outside

³ Butler, "Gender: The Circular Ruins", p. 15.

⁴ Butler, "Identity, Sex, and Metaphysics of Substance," in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. (New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 22.

⁵ Ibid, p. 23.

intelligible constructs of gender are deemed a logical impossibility, perhaps even an indicator of developmental failure or a sexual disorder. Without the categories of ‘man’ and ‘woman,’ human beings become a dissonant mass of gendered features. The gendered self is created from a carefully developed regulation of these features.

Butler argues then that “In this sense, gender is not a noun, but neither is it a set of free-floating attributes, for we have seen that the substantive effect of gender is performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence.”⁶ Not only does Butler suggest that gender is an act of performance, she goes on to argue that there is no gender identity behind the expression; that the identity is simply the result of the display. Gender essentialism and its power dynamics create the realities and unrealities of womanhood. Gender is reified by the performance, the theatrical set of gesticulations that create gendered coherence. She believes that this gendered coherence is bound to fail, as what is repressed is bound to rupture and reemerge. *Gender Trouble* does not argue that the performative nature of gender makes it frivolous or artificial. Butler suggests that normative gender, in its attempt to create gender coherence, must draw lines of what is ‘real’ gender and what is truly ‘authentic.’ To expand its authority, there must be a rigid boundary between the real and unreal. The only way to regulate what the hegemony deems ‘unreal’ and unacceptable is to firmly regulate the behaviors of those within the culture.

THE FEMALE ANIMAL: CARROLL SMITH-ROSENBERG AND WOMEN’S HISTORY

When discussing the study of womanhood, it is critical to outline the effect of feminist

⁶ Butler, “Identity, Sex, and Metaphysics of Substance,” in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. (New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 33.

discourses on historical scholarship. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg deals with the pathologized woman, with much of her work analyzing how biological and medical ideas of womanhood were used to justify their place in society. Like Butler, she also breaks down notions of the 'normative woman'. However, Smith-Rosenberg sought to understand its place in the historical canon rather than dealing with the theoretical or philosophical. Central to much of Smith-Rosenberg's work deals with how the medical and biological sciences have defined traditional sex roles. Though the body of her work began in the decades prior to Butler's *Gender Trouble*, there are echoes of similarity between the works. Both make note of sexual laws that were used to simultaneously regulate normative gender roles and attempt to justify the normative gender roles already in place. Smith-Rosenberg does not entirely reject the role of the universal woman, however. Nor does she fully question sex as a construct, though she suggests that sexual norms were created as a response to gendered constructions that already existed. Despite these differences she is firmly in the constructionist camp, and her work largely reflects this idea.

Womanhood and the gendered construction of power in certain cultures play a key role in both Butler's and Smith-Rosenberg's analysis, but the latter's work considers what it meant beyond the theoretical. Women's historians used social constructionist theory to break down ideas of gender when bio-essentialism was previously the norm. In doing so, they opened the field of history to a new analytic framework. Women's historians "became myth decipherers, skeptical of all institutions and processes that presented themselves as 'natural.'⁷ Historians like Smith-Rosenberg criticized the field of history, where the social processes that characterized women's lives were often overlooked, oversimplified, or outright ignored. Understanding of family life, religion, and labor in relation to gender were no longer rigid

⁷ Carol Smith-Rosenberg, *Hearing Women's Words: A Feminist Reconstruction of History*. (Oxford University Press, 1986.), p. 14.

and unchanging institutions; they were analyzed as a product of social and cultural influences. Early women's historians first looked to gendered divisions of labor and its historical role. When removing previous assumptions about what was 'natural,' this skepticism allowed for a more complex understanding of the workforce. For example, gendered division of labor in the nineteenth century did not seem to develop alongside increased mechanization, which piqued the interest of scholars. Smith-Rosenberg noted that "Mechanization, by minimizing the importance of brawn to production, had opened a host of new areas to the potential of female employment. Certainly, it was to the economic advantage of the entrepreneurial class to expand the labor force. Why, then, did entrepreneurs bar women from most areas of manufacturing?"⁸ Cultural assumptions about women's abilities prevented women from becoming laborers, rather than biological reasons. If divisions of labor were natural, women would be able to join the labor force en masse with increasing mechanization. It was the gendered assumptions of women's place in society that prevented them from doing so, not biology.

If gender is not purely a biological phenomenon, the way 'gendered' diseases are studied must be altered. Smith-Rosenberg raised questions about medical history in her study of hysteria, largely considered a disease of the female sex. She sees hysteria as a phenomenon of gendered socialization altering biology, instead of biology altering gender. She suggests that hysteria "can be seen as an alternate role option for particular women incapable of accepting their life situation."⁹ Women often had to balance two difficult and often contradictory roles: the weak ¹⁰ and demure wife and the strong and stable mother. As women's place in society

⁸ Carol Smith-Rosenberg, *Hearing Women's Words*, p. 12-13.

⁹ Carol Smith-Rosenberg, *The Hysterical Woman: Sex Roles and Role Conflict in 19th-Century America*. (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972), p. 655.

developed throughout the nineteenth century, these contradictory positions placed an undue amount of stress on married women. Patterns in nervous behavior were not uncommon for urban middle class and working-class women alike, and “Physicians reported a high incidence of nervous disease and hysteria among women who felt overwhelmed by the burdens of frequent pregnancies, the demands of children, the daily exertions of housekeeping and family management.”¹⁰ Falling ill to a nervous disease was a way out of this oppressive environment.

¹¹ The hysterical woman was given a sudden sense of power over the household, as children were no longer her responsibility and the husband had to nurse her back to health. The hysteric could use her illness to assert autonomy in the domestic sphere. For this reason, one of the main suggestions to ‘cure’ hysteria was to remove the woman from the household entirely. Overt aggression in women was strongly discouraged in young girls from a young age,¹² and this socialization required them to assert themselves and reject their established role by embodying the most extreme form of femininity. By exaggerating the emotional and infantilizing behaviors that were impressed upon her, a woman was able to assert her will in a male-dominated space. Rather than hysteria being a disease of the sex, Smith-Rosenberg posited that hysteria was a product of gendered socialization - a way out of the established order.

The nineteenth century was a landscape of constant change and development. As medicine and science progressed at an unprecedented pace, women began to contest their traditional role in society. Just as society’s understanding of the natural world began to develop and change, scientists also sought to justify existing roles and social structures. Women’s physiology had long since developed a medical and biological literature that had attempted to justify their subservient roles within society. Medicine and the study of sex was used to legitimize women’s role in the home and as caretakers.

¹⁰ Carol Smith-Rosenberg, “The Hysterical Woman,” p. 657.

Smith-Rosenberg believed these normative roles “exist rather as a formally agreed upon set of characteristics understood by and acceptable to a significant proportion of the population.... Such social role definitions, however, have a more than platonic reality; for they exist as parameters with which and against which individuals must either conform or define their deviance.”¹¹ During the nineteenth century, however, these roles engendered increasing anxiety and conflict as American society began to enter the modern age. In Victorian society, women’s roles as inherently passive, affectionate, and nurturing were deeply entrenched in the medical and scientific fields. It formed a deeply fixed and unchanging set of values that supported traditional female roles; this ideological framework was legitimized by the scientific literature of the era. This scientific orthodoxy defined the two sexes as strikingly different from one another. Women’s skulls were smaller, their muscles frailer, and the nervous system more irritable and neurotic. Women were enslaved by their emotions, and it was natural that women were to show more affect. They were enslaved by their reproductive systems; creatures of the internal organs that greatly limited their intellectual capabilities. “Few if any questioned the assumption that in males the intellectual propensities of the brain dominated, while the female's nervous system and emotions prevailed over her conscious and rational faculties.”¹²

However, this orthodoxy began to be challenged as more women sought out higher levels of education. As income mobility grew and the middle class widened, more affluent women no longer had to rely on subsistence work to survive from day to day. With more free time, middle class women began to grow agitated with their roles within the home and sought

¹¹ Carroll Smith-Rosenberg and Charles Rosenberg, “The Female Animal: Medical and Biological Views of Woman and Her Role in Nineteenth Century America,” (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 333.

¹² Carroll Smith-Rosenberg and Charles Rosenberg, “The Female Animal: Medical and Biological Views of Woman and Her Role in Nineteenth Century America,” (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 333.

increased access to education. The medical field met the prospect of women seeking higher education with grim predictions about America's future. Physicians were certain that education would bring about a great deterioration in American women. Medical orthodoxy posited that "The girl who curtailed brain work during puberty could devote her body's full energy to the optimum development of its reproductive capacities. A young woman, however, who consumed her vital force in intellectual activities was necessarily diverting these energies from the achievement of true womanhood."¹³ A developed brain would lead to an underdeveloped uterus; and intellectual ¹⁵ activities could perhaps even lead to sterilization, or at least the birth of sickly and neurotic offspring. Physicians predicted these unnatural roles for young girls attending school would surely lead to the death of the human race. Biology and medicine adapted as a response to changing social roles, justifying and responding to challenges against traditional roles. Medicine and biology reified gender in their theories of sex. Scientific orthodoxy was used as a justification of gender well after those roles were established, and its legitimacy was weaponized to maintain women's place in the hierarchy. Scientific and medical ideas of sex were more influenced by constructed ideas of gender, which changes in Victorian society began to threaten. Smith-Rosenberg's work analyzed how medical orthodoxies and broader society used biology as a tool to enforce normative gender roles. However, she does not fully question the boundaries of sex and gender distinctions, and her work largely focused on white womanhood. As Butler later criticized, the idea of universal womanhood breaks down when introduced to a racial and class analysis, which is largely missing from Smith-Rosenberg's work.

SOCIETY IN FLUX: NATALIE ZEMON DAVIS

¹³ Carroll Smith-Rosenberg and Charles Rosenberg, "The Female Animal." p. 340.

The work of Natalie Zemon Davis and her work as a historian diverges from the ideas of Butler and Smith-Rosenberg, but she is still a vanguard historian in her own right. Her work as a historian was highly innovative; she specialized in the art of storytelling and a cross-disciplinary approach to issues that were previously overlooked by other historians. Often her history making describes a process of ‘history from below,’ documenting the lives of ordinary people, and especially gender and women’s history, from this perspective. One central difference between the works of Butler and Smith-Rosenberg compared to Davis is the way they frame womanhood. Davis often refers to sex and sex roles; the role of women and the female sex are often used interchangeably in her work. Though her work draws upon some aspects of the constructionist theory, it is apparent that her scholarship does not focus on this. Davis does not draw a rigid line between gender and sex, as she more often focuses on archival research. However, she does draw from these ideas to evaluate ideas of sex, gender, and sexuality in the early modern period. Her work reflects her belief that “the study of the sexes should help promote rethinking of some of the central issues faced by historians - power, social structure, property, symbols, and periodization.”¹⁴ Sex roles and sexual symbolism are a large segment of her study of how these ¹⁶ forms either maintained social hierarchies or created change. Central to her historical analysis is the idea “...that sexual economies and matters of gender vary over time as political economies change.”¹⁵

In Davis’ discussion of the early modern period, the pathologizing of womanhood took a different form than the nineteenth century, largely due to the lack of available scientific information. This did not stop scientists from theorizing about the nature of the body, and often

¹⁴ Natalie Zemon Davis, “Women's History" in Transition: The European Case.” in *Feminist Studies*. (Feminist Studies, Inc, 1976), p. 90.

¹⁵ Roger Adelson and Natalie Zemon Davis, Interview with Natalie Zemon Davis, in *The Historian* Vol. 53, No. 3.(Taylor & Francis, Ltd., 1991), p. 415.

those theories were used to develop and justify existing power structures. For women, their place in society was founded in their physiology. During Europe's early modern period, humoral theory was the predominant medical justification for these gender roles. A woman "was composed of cold and wet humors (the male was hot and dry), and coldness and wetness meant a changeable, deceptive, and tricky temperament."¹⁶ She was controlled by her "wandering¹⁸ womb," and by her sexual juices. If her sexual desires were not satiated, she would fall victim to fits and hysteria (note the similarities here and developing medical theory in the nineteenth century analyzed by Smith-Rosenberg). Humoral theory was applied to women and their labor in sixteenth-century Lyon. Because of their humoral temperaments, women were considered more adaptable to change which led to more variable employment, with "the women's energies available to be shifted into other work channels if the situation demanded it."¹⁷ For this reason,¹⁹ women often moved and labored in many different fields during their lifetime. Even as medical theory developed to include theories of animal spirits, pioneering physicians "still maintained that the female's mind was more prone to be disordered by her fragile and unsteady temperament."¹⁸ As the medical field progressed, physicians continued to justify women's inferiority as a purely natural phenomenon. Ideas of sex were used to prevent women from having access to positions of power that men typically maintained. While women's physiology was a justification for female subordination, women were able to use these sexual theories to assert themselves and improve their condition. Davis notes that women in the fifteenth century would use the language and sexual conventions of the time to advocate for women's interests. For example, historian Christine de Pizan argued in 1405 that "with their delicate bodies and

¹⁶ Natalie Zemon Davis, *Society and Culture in Early Modern France*. (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1986), p. 124.

¹⁷ Natalie Zemon Davis, "Women in the Crafts in Sixteenth-Century Lyon", in *Feminist Studies*. (Feminist Studies, Inc., 1982.) p. 49.

¹⁸ Natalie Zemon Davis, "Society and Culture," p. 125.

sharper minds, women might even do better” when understanding the nuances of the arts and sciences.¹⁹ The roles were formed as a function of early modern society; and theories of medicine²¹ were developed to legitimize those roles. Though social constructions of gender are not a focal point of Davis’s analysis, her breakdown of women’s roles demonstrate how culture uses sex to justify existing power relations.

Social construction is a function of Natalie Zemon Davis’ analysis of gender in early modern France. Female disorderliness was considered an intrinsic quality of the sex, which women would sometimes exploit to disrupt the political order in early modern Europe. Despite this rigid definition applied to sex, womanhood was more than a natural role of humors or animalistic spirit. As Davis explains, womanhood was an act to create social upset - that was either to be controlled by men or would lead to a provocation of the established order. In fifteenth century France, to adopt unruliness was to adopt femaleness itself. For this reason, womanhood as a political role was temporarily adopted and discarded by men and women alike to galvanize rebellion. Sexual inversion, as Davis describes it, allowed for men to “hide behind that sex” to adopt the symbolic rebelliousness associated with womanhood. The seventeenth century was ripe²⁰ with examples of gendered inversion, of men dressing as women either to maintain the social order or push for change. Across Europe, both men and women alike donned female clothing to engage in political violence. A notable example took place in Ireland, where “For about a decade, from 1760 to 1770, the Whiteboys, dressed in long white frocks and with blackened faces, set themselves up as an armed popular force to provide justice for the poor, “to restore the ancient commons and redress other grievances.”²¹ Davis does not analyze the racial²²

¹⁹ Natalie Zemon Davis, “Gender in the Academy: Women and Learning from Plato to Princeton”, in *The Princeton University Library Chronicle* Vol. 52, No. 1. (Princeton University Library, 1990), p. 127.

²⁰ Natalie Zemon Davis, “*Society and Culture*,” p. 147.

²¹ *Ibid*, p. 149.

²² *Ibid*, p. 147.

implications of the Whiteboys using blackface. The lack of analysis about the intersection of race and gender is what Butler sought to critique in *Gender Trouble*. Womanhood, though defined as a natural and unchanging sexual role in early modern Europe, was more a ritualistic expression of social agitation that transcended biology. Womanhood was a social category that could be adopted to maintain the established order or to alter it as society developed. Davis and Smith-Rosenberg took a narrower view in their approach to womanhood, analyzing normative roles without fully investigating gender and sex distinctions. They also do not fully question the intersection of race as it pertains to womanhood, which is an important critique in Butler's analysis.

CONCLUSION:

As society shifts and changes, it is a dance between breasts and beards, bodies intertwining and breaking apart. As the categories of sex and gender break down and meld into one another they then split apart, the people dance and sing and celebrate. The walls that separate us are being broken, there is no longer a ravine that splits the world into two. The beautiful tapestry of the human animal flows and shimmers like stars, billions hanging in the midnight sky; it is sex, and it is gender, it is both and it is neither. Perhaps there will never be a clear answer to what gender is and ought to be. Perhaps it should not matter. Ultimately, the human imagination is limited in its visions of the future, and how gender will develop alongside biological research is unclear. Maybe we as a species would better understand our own physiology if ideas of gender were abolished altogether - and develop for ourselves a new taxonomy. Perhaps if the medical field were to make hormones and gender-affirming surgeries more accessible to those who want them, we as a species would better understand the complexities of the body and how gender roles regulate appropriate sexual characteristics. The work of scholars and historians like Butler,

Smith-Rosenberg, and Davis are just small pieces of a vast and unfinished body of knowledge about women and their place in society and history. All three incorporate the constructionist theory of gender into their arguments but vary in their interpretation. In their breakdown of normative ideas of gender throughout time, all three give an insight into the world humans have created for themselves. And in doing so, they help develop a better framework for what gender may be as society develops alongside us.

Bibliography

- Butler, J. (1999). *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (2nd ed). [E-book]. Routledge.
- Davis, N. Z. (1990). Gender in the Academy: Women and Learning from Plato to Princeton. *The Princeton University Library Chronicle*, 52(1), 126. <https://doi.org/10.2307/26403785>
- Davis, N. Z. (1975). *Society and Culture in Early Modern France: Eight Essays* (1st ed.). Stanford University Press.
- Davis, N. Z. (1976). “Women’s History” in Transition: The European Case. *Feminist Studies*, 3(3/4), 83. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3177729>
- Davis, N. Z. (1982). Women in the Crafts in Sixteenth-Century Lyon. *Feminist Studies*, 8(1), 46. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3177579>
- Davis, N. Z., & Adelson, R. (1991). Interview with Natalie Zemon Davis. *The Historian*, 53(3), 405–422. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-6563.1991.tb00814.x>
- Smith-Rosenberg, C. (1972). The Hysterical Woman: Sex Roles and Role Conflicts in 19th Century America. *Social Research*, 39(4), 652–678.
- Smith-Rosenberg, C. (1983). The Feminist Reconstruction of History. *Academe*, 69(5), 26. <https://doi.org/10.2307/40249062>
- Smith-Rosenberg, C., & Rosenberg, C. (1973). The Female Animal: Medical and Biological Views of Woman and Her Role in Nineteenth-Century America. *The Journal of American History*, 60(2), 332. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2936779>

2022 University of Massachusetts Undergraduate History Journal

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

Caitlyn Foster

Departments: History (Ancient World Concentration), Classical Civilization Minor

Acknowledgements to Dr. Timothy Hart

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.²³ While scholars are not certain how much of this is fact or fantasy,²⁴ 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

¹ Livy Book 1, Paragraph 3

² 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.²⁵ 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 Silvia²⁶, the Sabine women,²⁷ and Lucretia²⁸ 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 War²⁹. 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'

³ 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.

⁴ Livy Book 1, Paragraph 3

⁵ Livy Book 1, Paragraph 9

⁶ Livy Book 1, Paragraph 57

⁷ Livy Book 1, Paragraph 1

descendant, the rightful king Numitor, by his brother Amulius.³⁰ 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.³¹ 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.³² 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.³³ 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.³⁴ 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.³⁵ 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

⁸ Livy Book 1, Paragraph 3

⁹ 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.

¹⁰ Livy Book 1, Paragraph 3

¹¹ Livy Book 1, Paragraph 3

¹² Livy Book 1, Paragraph 4

¹³ 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.³⁶

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.³⁷ 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.³⁸ 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

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

¹⁵ 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.³⁹ 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.⁴⁰ 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”⁴¹ 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.⁴² 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

¹⁶ Livy Book 1, Paragraph 8

¹⁷ Livy, Book 1, Paragraph 9

¹⁸ 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.

¹⁹ Livy, Book 1, Paragraph 9

daughters back by force.⁴³ 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.⁴⁴

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,⁴⁵ 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.⁴⁶ 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

²⁰ Livy Book 1, Paragraph 11-13

²¹ Livy, Book 1, Paragraph 13

²² 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.

²³ 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 Superbus⁴⁷. 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.⁴⁸ One day between military campaigns, Colatinus, whilst speaking with his men, began a competition over whose wife was the most impressive.

²⁴ Livy, Book 1, Paragraph 2

²⁵ 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.⁴⁹ Livy describes Lucretia as an extremely modest woman, who, even in the face of sexual violence, attempted to maintain her virtue.⁵⁰ 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.”⁵¹

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.⁵² 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.⁵³ and this chain of events is what leads to the expulsion of the Roman kings, and the beginning of the Roman Republic.⁵⁴

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,

²⁶ Livy, Book 1, Paragraph 57

²⁷ Livy, Book 1, Paragraph 58

²⁸ Livy, Book 1 Paragraph 58

²⁹ Livy, Book 1, Paragraph 58

³⁰ Livy, Book 1, Paragraph 58

³¹ 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.⁵⁵ 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.

⁵⁵ 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.

Bibliography:

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, 71–103.

Livius, T., “The History of Rome,” Project Gutenberg, Nov. 6, 2006.

<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/19725/19725-h/19725-h.htm>

Mark, J., “Vestal Virgins,” May 8, 2021, from

https://www.worldhistory.org/Vestal_Virgin/#:~:text=If%20a%20Vestal%20Virgin%20failed,lead%20poured%20down%20one's%20throat.

Naso, P. O., & Riley, H. T. (n.d.), “Metamorphoses.,” Project Gutenberg, from

<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/21765/21765-h/21765-h.htm>

Stevenson, T., “Women of Early Rome as Exempla in Livy,” in *AB Urbe Condita*, Book 1.

Classical World, 104(2), 175–189.

<https://doi.org/10.1353/clw.2011.0042>

Witzke, S. S. (n.d.), “Violence against Women in Ancient Rome: Ideology versus Reality,”

University of Michigan Press.

History as Debate: An Analysis of Different Approaches to History

Bret Hackenson
Departments: Computer Science, History
Acknowledgments to Professor Daniel Gordon

Abstract:

Historical interpretation is the process by which historians analyze historical evidence and craft an explanation of the past. This essay explores unique interpretations of history, including Haskell Fain's approach to history as science, George M. Trevelyan's belief in history as education, Karl Marx's historical materialism, and Alexis de Tocqueville's comparative history. Comparing each of these approaches reveals that although historians may disagree on how history should be interpreted, each interpretation offers unique insights into historical questions that some historians might not have considered. This condition helps provide complete answers to these historical questions by considering all interpretations, whether they be history as science or education, as materialism or comparisons, or even those not discussed here.

Introduction:

There is never a single article, book, or essay on a specific historical event. Historians are constantly debating any given topic; these debates go beyond the mere "facts" found in a historical archive. Rather, disagreement occurs on a more fundamental level: how these facts are to be interpreted and even what constitutes a fact. Why are historians disagreeing over what is considered fact? Is it not counterproductive to blend a fact with subjectivity? As historian Johann G. Droysen explains, interpretation is necessary because the historical archive does not, and cannot, provide a complete picture of any historical event. Furthermore, while historical evidence may explain *what* happened in the past, it cannot answer *why* it happened in such a way.⁵⁶

So, if interpretations are necessary, where do they come from? How many are there if it is even possible to count them all? Is there a limited number of archetypes of interpretation, or does

¹ Hayden White, "Interpretation in History," *New Literary History* 4, no. 2 (1973): 284.

each historian have a unique approach? There have already been several attempts to categorize interpretations, such as Droysen's causal, conditional, psychological, and ethical categories, as well as Georg W. F. Hegel's class of interpretations in what he called Reflexive Historiography, which includes universal, pragmatic, critical, and conceptual approaches.⁵⁷ However, I argue that interpretations of history provide more than just Droysen's claims. Not only do they construct a complete picture of a historical event, but they also define the study of history itself, a condition that establishes the framework for how historians will interpret it. In the following I offer my own classifications that describe several ways of defining history, from viewing history as a discipline of science or a work of literature to as a causal series of events or a study of making comparisons.

History as Science: Haskell Fain and the "Narrative History"

One approach to interpreting history borrows from the sciences by crafting mathematical equations to explain historical patterns. This approach is favored by twentieth-century historian Haskell Fain, who argues in his article "History as Science" that history should be viewed through a more scientific lens. Fain suggests changing what is meant by history, saying, "Suppose, however, that by "science" one referred to geology, and by "history" one also referred to geology. Is geology not an historical science? And is it not one of the geologist's tasks to produce a narrative history of the earth, just as a cosmologist must write a narrative history of the universe and an evolutionary biologist must construct a narrative history of the origin of species?"⁵⁸ Fain argues that history is not different from any other social science, since historians

² White, "Interpretation in History," 283.

³ Haskell Fain, "History as Science," *History and Theory* 9, no. 2 (1970): 156.

write a “narrative history” of humanity similarly to how these other scientists write histories of their own fields.

Note his use of the phrase “narrative history.” Fain is clear in his distinction between “narrative” and “history.” He explains this difference in an example using biological evolution, saying, “The *story* of evolution traces the descent of man and other contemporary species from their ancestral species. The *history* of evolution includes an appraisal of how that story was “composed”; it contains an account of how, by mutation and natural selection, profound changes were wrought in the structure and form of living organisms.”⁵⁹ In other words, to Fain, a story explains *what* has happened in a series of events, while history explains *how* this event happened, including the underlying mechanisms that led to such a series of events that create the story.

Although arguing that narratives and history are distinct, Fain also writes that the two complement each other: “Writing a story of evolution presupposes that the elements of the story are genetically related to one another. Writing a history of evolution, in turn, presupposes a story of evolution. To compose a story of evolution requires genetic insight, an ability to arrange one’s historical material into ancestral patterns. To transform a story into a history, however, the historian must seek the mechanisms which underlie the genetic relationships he perceives between historical incidents.”⁶⁰ Thus, according to Fain, crafting a “narrative history” is a two-step process: a historian must first seek recurring patterns in history to establish some historical event or topic, then find underlying mechanisms that explain these patterns.

But what does Fain mean by “genetic insight”? Such a word choice seems to imply that relationships between two events are causal, where one event directly leads to the next. If that

⁴ Fain, “History as Science,” 173.

⁵ Fain, “History as Science,” 173.

were the case, a scientific approach to history is synonymous with a cause-and-effect approach. Fain explains that this implication is not the case. He displays the difference between a genetic and a causal relationship through an example of the parent-child connection:

Generative acts, of course, must be performed by parents in order to produce offspring. Certain "events" must transpire. But parents are not events and children are not events, though parents cause the birth of their children. If one is on the trail of cause and effect, of course, one will focus upon the relationship between reproductive causes and parturition effects. But the relationship between parents and child is not that of cause and effect, though an act of the father and mother causes the birth of their child. The relationship between parents and child is genetic, not causal.⁶¹

More generally, genetic relationships identify links between historical incidents, whereas causal relationships identify actions that advance a historical narrative from one event to another. Therefore, relationships that are genetic do not imply that they are also causal, so this approach to history is valid and distinct from a cause-and-effect approach.

The second step of Fain's process, exploring "mechanisms which underlie the genetic relationships," refers back to his definition of history as a social science. As the geologist applies numerical modeling, the cosmologist theoretical physics, and the evolutionary biologist genetics to write their narratives, the historian can apply scientific fields to write their narrative as well. Fain encourages historians to apply scientific methods in history similarly to these fields, such as applying mathematics, statistics, or numerical analysis to explain how or why some historical pattern had occurred. This approach broadens the scope of the subject beyond just the humanities and into fields we may not have considered applicable.

⁶ Fain, "History as Science," 168.

History as Literature: George M. Trevelyan and Education

At the other end of the spectrum, some historians argue there is no distinction between “narrative” and “history” and instead believe that a historical event is synonymous with a narrative. Among these advocates is nineteenth and twentieth-century historian George M. Trevelyan. Trevelyan argues in his book *Clio, A Muse and Other Essays Literary and Pedestrian* that history cannot be considered a science because history does not fit in his definition of science. He writes that scientific subjects must have “direct utility in practical fields” or “the deduction of laws of ‘cause and effect.’”⁶²

Immediately it is clear that Trevelyan and Fain do not view history the same way. For Fain, history is a science because it can apply scientific principles to explain the past. In this case, science acts as a tool historians can use as part of their studies. For Trevelyan, if history were a science, it must be applicable to direct real-world scenarios, such as “invent[ing] the steam engine, or light[ing] a town, or cur[ing] cancer, or mak[ing] wheat grow near the arctic circle.”⁶³ History as a science through this lens means that science must be applied to the whole of history, as opposed to being used as a tool for historians to employ.

While these two perspectives do not seem to have much in common, Fain and Trevelyan may agree on some components of what it means to study history. First, Trevelyan’s definition of science is for the physical sciences, fields that include physics, mathematics, and engineering, while Fain argues that history is a social science, fields that include anthropology, economics, and evolutionary biology. But these social sciences, like history, also do not necessarily have

⁷ George Macaulay Trevelyan, *Clio, a Muse and Other Essays Literary and Pedestrian* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1914), 6.

⁸ Trevelyan, *Clio, a Muse*, 6.

“direct utility in practical fields,” since knowledge in a social science like economics also does not help in “inventing[ing] the steam engine, or light[ing] a town,” or other real-world applications. So, while Fain does not define physical science or differentiate physical science from social science, he may perhaps agree with Trevelyan and his assertion of history not being a physical science.

Secondly, both agree that history is not a study of cause-and-effect relationships. Fain explains that while historical events can be related to each other and can form patterns, not every relationship is causal, as described by his parent-child analogy. Meanwhile, Trevelyan’s second definition of physical science, the “deduction of laws of ‘cause and effect,’” applies particularly to the sciences like theoretical physics. He uses the law of gravitation as an example to show why history is not cause-and-effect, explaining that “The law of gravitation may be scientifically proved because it is universal and simple. But the historical law that starvation brings on revolt is not proved; indeed, the opposite statement, that starvation leads to abject submission, is equally true in the light of past events.”⁶⁴ Although through different perspectives, Fain and Trevelyan ultimately end up at the same conclusion that there are no cause-and-effect relationships in history. This situation demonstrates how even such contrasting interpretations of history can lead to similar conclusions about the field.

However, Trevelyan still asserts that science has no place in the field of history. Trevelyan explains that “even if cause and effect could be discovered with accuracy, they still would not be the most interesting part of human affairs. It is not man’s evolution but his attainment that is the great lesson of the past and the highest theme of history.”⁶⁵ For Trevelyan,

⁹ Trevelyan, *Clio, a Muse*, 7.

¹⁰ Trevelyan, *Clio, a Muse*, 12.

learning about the past is itself the most important function of history; for Fain, finding patterns and explaining how or why these patterns have occurred is instead.

While arguing against an emphasis on history as science, Trevelyan's perspective toward history instead suggests an emphasis on education, and indeed, Trevelyan states that "[history's] true value is educational."⁶⁶ He argues that in approaching history as literature one can help ordinary people learn about the past and include everyone in historical debate, not just scholars. This emphasis makes the literature approach unique compared to other approaches: it teaches history, while others analyze it. However, that is not to say that historians cannot or should avoid crafting an argument while pursuing the literature approach. One recent example of this idea is Ronald Chernow's book *Washington: A Life*. His work is an ambitious project to chronicle the life of George Washington and provide ordinary people a single, one-volume resource that teaches an important figure in American history. At the same time, though, Chernow also argues against the popular belief that Washington was a stoic and instead claims that he was "a man of many moods, of many passions, of fiery opinions. But because it was all covered by this immense self-control, people didn't see it."⁶⁷

History as Cause-and-Effect: Karl Marx and Materialism

Although Fain and Trevelyan can agree that there are no cause-and-effect relationships in history, not all historians feel the same way. One individual who favors the cause-and-effect approach to studying history is nineteenth-century thinker Karl Marx. In *The German Ideology*, Marx proposes a "materialist method" of history and explains this new perspective by first

¹¹ Trevelyan, *Clio, a Muse*, 12.

¹² Ronald Chernow, "Q & A with Ron Chernow, Part 1," interview with Brian Lamb, *American History TV*, Cable-Satellite Public Affairs Network, New York, New York, United States, October 2, 2010, 3:43.

defining a “first premise” of history, saying, “The first premise of all human history is, of course, the existence of living human individuals. Thus, the first fact to be established is the physical organization of these individuals and their consequent relation to the rest of nature. Of course, we cannot here go either into the actual physical nature of man, or into the natural conditions in which man finds himself—geological, orohydrographical, climatic, and so on. The writing of history must always set out from these natural bases and their modification in the course of history through the action of men.”⁶⁸ Marx elaborates on this relationship between the human and the environment, saying that humans distinguish themselves from other animals “as soon as they begin to produce their means of subsistence, a step which is conditioned by their physical organization. By producing their means of subsistence men are indirectly producing their actual material life.”⁶⁹ Marx then claims that these “means of subsistence” define an expression of life for an individual and argues that this claim shows a relationship between the nature of humans and their environment, saying:

The way in which men produce their means of subsistence depends first of all on the nature of the actual means of subsistence they find in existence and have to reproduce. This mode of production must not be considered simply as being the production of the physical existence of the individuals. Rather it is a definite form of activity of these individuals, a definite form of expressing their life, a definite mode of life on their part. As individuals express their life, so they are. What they are, therefore, coincides with their production, both with what they produce and with how they produce. The nature of individuals thus depends on the material conditions determining their production.⁷⁰

¹³ Karl Marx, *The German Ideology* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1968), in *Marxists Internet Archive*, transcribed by Tim Delaney and Bob Schwartz (2000), 6.

¹⁴ Marx, *The German Ideology*, 6.

¹⁵ Marx, *The German Ideology*, 6.

According to Marx, not only are individuals and their physical surroundings related by these surroundings offering “a definite form of expressing their life,” but changes in these surroundings can produce entirely new individuals, since the “means of subsistence” may be changed. This situation suggests a cause-and-effect relationship between the environment and an individual since manipulations in the environment lead to a different nature of an individual. To complete his “materialist method” of history, Marx extends this reasoning to define history itself, saying, “History is nothing but the succession of the separate generations, each of which exploits the materials, the capital funds, the productive forces handed down to it by all preceding generations, and thus, on the one hand, continues the traditional activity in completely changed circumstances and, on the other, modifies the old circumstances with a completely changed activity.”⁷¹ Since material conditions create the nature of individuals, a succeeding generation of individuals will inherit the material conditions of the previous generation and create themselves based on these past circumstances. And since each generation “exploits the materials,” change in society arises from this new set of material conditions. Thus, Marx extends his concept of historical materialism to define history itself: just as how material conditions determine the nature of an individual, changes in material conditions over generations determine the nature of human societies. This historical materialist perspective of history is also a cause-and-effect perspective of history because it proposes that manipulations in the environment change the nature of an individual; likewise, on a larger scale, the material exploitations of one generation impact the material conditions of the next, which exploits these conditions for the next generation to inherit, and the cycle continues.

¹⁶ Marx, *The German Ideology*, 16.

Marx also takes a cause-and-effect approach to history toward the relationship he establishes between the workers and the owners of production. Returning to Marx's "first premise" and the relationship between humans and the environment, recall his statement that the way humans produce their means of subsistence "is a definite form of activity of these individuals, a definite form of expressing their life, a definite mode of life on their part. As individuals express their life, so they are."⁷² Labor, therefore, is an important aspect of expressing an individual's identity, an act of not merely subsistence but also of self-conception. However, in Marx's earlier work, the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, he criticizes the capitalist economic system of depriving workers of their identities by expropriating their labor to make a profit. The worker in a capitalist world "becomes a servant of his object, first, in that he receives an object of labor, i.e., in that he receives work, and, secondly, in that he receives means of subsistence. This enables him to exist, first as a worker; and second, as a physical subject. The height of this servitude is that it is only as a worker that he can maintain himself as a physical subject and that it is only as a physical subject that he is a worker."⁷³ This conflict between the worker and the owner forms the basis for Marx's arguments in *The Communist Manifesto*, where the working class, or the "proletariat," and the owners of production, or the "bourgeoisie," form antagonistic relationships that inevitably lead to the overthrow of the bourgeoisie and the capitalist system: "Of all the classes that stand face to face with the bourgeoisie today, the proletariat alone is a really revolutionary class. The other classes decay and finally disappear in the face of modern industry; the proletariat is its special and

¹⁷ Marx, *The German Ideology*, 6.

¹⁸ Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1959), in *Marxists Internet Archive*, translated by Martin Milligan, revised by Dirk J. Struik, transcribed by Andy Blunden, proofed by Matthew Carmody (2009), 29.

essential product.”⁷⁴ But Marx takes this idea a step further and describes “the history of all hitherto existing societies” as “the history of class struggles,”⁷⁵ and that “every form of society has been based, as we have already seen, on the antagonism of oppressing and oppressed classes.”⁷⁶ Thus, Marx generalizes his proposed conflict between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie to include all other social conflicts of the past. Furthermore, since this conflict in the capitalist system must follow with the new mode of production of communism in addition to the overthrow of the bourgeoisie, Marx’s “history of class struggles” explains why societies shift to different modes of production throughout history, such as from feudalism in the Middle Ages to capitalism in the sixteenth century.

Such a way of thinking about the past reflects an additional approach to studying history known as dialectical materialism. Similar to debate, dialectics refers to a process of establishing a truth on a subject that people may disagree on. Marx was influenced by nineteenth-century German philosopher Georg W. F. Hegel, who proposed a three-part dialectic model to explain social change. Although Hegel did not use the following terms, this model became popularized as the thesis-antithesis-synthesis method, where a thesis, or some idea, creates an opposing reaction, which is resolved by the synthesis, only for the synthesis to generate a new opposing reaction in a continuous cycle of social development.⁷⁷ Marx, however, believed this model was too abstract and instead proposed his own dialectic model to explain social progress:

My dialectic method is not only different from the Hegelian, but is its direct opposite. To

Hegel, the life process of the human brain, i.e., the process of thinking, which, under the

¹⁹ Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, introduction by Jodi Dean, “Manifesto of the Communist Party,” in *The Communist Manifesto*, 47-103, Pluto Press, 2017, 65.

²⁰ Marx and Engels, “Manifesto of the Communist Party,” 49.

²¹ Marx and Engels, “Manifesto of the Communist Party,” 67.

²² Julie E. Maybee, “Hegel’s Dialectics,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Winter 2020 ed., edited by Edward N. Zalta (Stanford University: Metaphysics Research Lab, 2020).

name of “the Idea,” he even transforms into an independent subject, is the demiurgos of the real world, and the real world is only the external, phenomenal form of “the Idea.”

With me, on the contrary, the ideal is nothing else than the material world reflected by the human mind, and translated into forms of thought.⁷⁸

For Hegel, dialectics deal with the mental world, where human ideas are the core of social change; for Marx, dialectics deal with the material world, where production and economic activity are the core instead. Thus, dialectical materialism is Marx’s belief that societies go through necessary changes in social organization due to a conflict among social classes driven by the material world and economic activity. This belief, like historical materialism, is a cause-and-effect approach to history. Marx asserts that the capitalist system must decay because the conflict between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie must be resolved, and so the development of communism to replace capitalism becomes the resolution.

Marx, however, never states that history is predetermined, as the cause-and-effect approach to history may imply. Human agency remains important in his models. But this belief does not change his emphasis on historical materialism, where actions in preceding generations directly impact those in future generations, as he explains in his book *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*: “Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past.”⁷⁹ Hence, the cause-and-effect approach and Marx’s historical materialism both suggest a “directional” point of view toward history, but neither claim that the future is predetermined or that our efforts toward social change are futile. However, this idea of

²³ Karl Marx, *Capital, Volume 1* (Moscow: Progress Publishers), in *Marxists Internet Archive*, translated by Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling (2015), 14.

²⁴ Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (New York: International Publishers, 1963), in *Marxists Internet Archive*, transcribed by Zodiac and Brian Baggins, proofed by Alex Blain and Mark Harris (2010), 5.

“direction” nevertheless led to tendencies to seek deterministic patterns across history in the twentieth century. One notable example is Oswald Spengler’s book *The Decline of the West*, which argues that the history of humans can be explained in terms of groups of people called cultures, each of which experiences a predetermined period of growth and decline.⁸⁰

History as Comparisons: Alexis de Tocqueville and the Spirit of Equality

While some historians like Spengler adopted Marxist thought and the materialist perspective toward history, others rejected such beliefs and took a different approach. One example was French aristocrat and historian Alexis de Tocqueville, who laid out a comparative approach to history in his book *Democracy in America*. Tocqueville traveled to the United States in 1831 and was fascinated by the system of local state government, in contrast to France’s centralized government that he was part of. He believed that such local government was the key to liberty and a sense of freedom among the American people, saying: “Yet it is at the local level that the strength of a free people lies. Local institutions are to liberty what elementary schools are to knowledge; they bring it within the reach of the people, allow them to savor its peaceful use, and accustom them to rely on it. Without local institutions, a nation may give itself a free government, but it will not have a free spirit.”⁸¹ For Tocqueville, liberty is the freedom to participate in government. Although Americans may not be socioeconomically equal, this “free spirit” pervades American society because ordinary people can vote on important issues and believe that their vote is just as important as any other. Thus, Americans not only embody a spirit of liberty for having a say in government, but they also have a spirit of equality for believing

²⁵ Northrop Frye, “‘The Decline of the West’ by Oswald Spengler,” *Daedalus* 103, no. 1 (1974): 2.

²⁶ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, vol. 1, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (New York: The Library of America, 2004), 68.

their votes are equally important, even with the existence of socioeconomic inequalities. It is immediately clear that Tocqueville and Marx do not view society the same way. For Marx, liberty derives from the abolishment of social classes, which are created by economic activity; thus, liberty for Marx is economic. For Tocqueville, liberty derives from a system of local, democratic governments where ordinary people have a voice in current affairs; thus, liberty for Tocqueville is political.

Furthermore, Tocqueville also argues that this “spirit” of equality grows in a continuous upward spiral. He argues in the second volume of *Democracy in America* that once some social justice is reached, there will be more criticism toward smaller social injustices:

The hatred which men bear to privilege increases in proportion as privileges become fewer and less considerable, so that democratic passions would seem to burn most fiercely just when they have least fuel. I have already given the reason of this phenomenon. When all conditions are unequal, no inequality is so great as to offend the eye; whereas the slightest dissimilarity is odious in the midst of general uniformity: the more complete this uniformity is, the more insupportable does the sight of such a difference become. Hence it is natural that the love of equality should constantly increase together with equality itself, and that it should grow by what it feeds on.⁸²

This theory of social progress can be applied to Hegelian dialectics: the thesis would begin with some social system, which would face criticism as having elements of some social injustice. This injustice would be resolved, only to be left with a system that might have smaller injustices but would face equal criticism as the previous. Applying Tocqueville’s theory of social change to the Hegelian dialectic illustrates the difference between this model and Marx’s dialectical

²⁷ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, vol. 2, trans. Henry Reeve, ed. Francis Bowen (Cambridge: Sever and Francis, 1863), 362.

materialism: For Marx, social change occurs through the *decline* of social systems; for Tocqueville, social change occurs through the *improvement* of social systems.

The comparative approach enabled Tocqueville to think about history differently compared to other scholars in his time. Dialectical materialism and historical materialism were influential visions of approaching history in the nineteenth century, defining abstractions like “equality.” However, Tocqueville’s stay in the United States revealed to him that “equality” was not necessarily economic equality, but equality in the sense of feeling just as important in society as everyone else, even with inequalities like socioeconomic status. Equality for Tocqueville is thus more of a perception within an individual as opposed to some quantifiable measurement, such as receiving equal pay. Through his traveling experience, Tocqueville demonstrates the uniqueness of the comparative perspective and how it can not only find patterns in history as the cause-and-effect approach can, but it can also point to differences across societies and generate a new idea or belief through this manner as well.

Conclusion:

Each of these approaches represents a unique definition of history that shapes the way a historian finds patterns and analyzes historical evidence. For Fain, history is a science, so historians should analyze historical evidence like how a geologist would analyze theirs, such as through numerical modeling; for Trevelyan, history is education, so scholars should emphasize ways to distribute historical evidence to a general audience; for Marx, history is a chain of causal events, so historians should analyze one society to make predictions about what that society will look like in the future, with particular emphasis on the economy; and for Tocqueville, history is

comparative, so historians should analyze similarities and differences across societies to find historical patterns.

This survey of approaches not only proves J. G. Droysen's claim that interpretation in history is necessary to explain why historical events occurred in a certain way, but it also argues that *multiple* historical interpretations are necessary. Each approach offers a unique perspective of analyzing the past, and debate among historians with competing perspectives regarding a historical event provides the best analysis toward the event, offering new perspectives and insights to historians that they might have otherwise overlooked.

Admittedly, analyzing only four interpretations leaves out other approaches that belong in this conversation. However, this debate among historians can surely be extended to include those who view history in ways that were not discussed here. In any case, interpretation in history is important in explaining and analyzing the past. In the words of Hayden White, "...there can be no "proper history" without the presupposition of a full-blown "metahistory" by which to justify those interpretative strategies necessary for the representation of a given segment of the historical process."⁸³

²⁸ White, "Interpretation in History," 283.

Bibliography

- Chernow, Ronald. "Q & A with Ron Chernow, Part 1." Interview with Brian Lamb. *American History TV*, Cable-Satellite Public Affairs Network, New York, New York, United States, October 2, 2010. <https://www.c-span.org/video/?295700-1/qa-ron-chernow-part-1>.
- Fain, Haskell. "History as Science." *History and Theory* 9, no. 2 (1970): 154-173. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2504124>.
- Frye, Northrop. "'The Decline of the West' by Oswald Spengler." *Daedalus* 103, no. 1 (1974): 1–13. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20024181>.
- Marx, Karl. *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1959. In *Marxists Internet Archive*, translated by Martin Milligan, revised by Dirk J. Struik, transcribed by Andy Blunden, proofed by Matthew Carmody. 2009. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/pdf/Economic-Philosophic-Manuscripts-1844.pdf>.
- Marx, Karl. *The German Ideology*. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1968. In *Marxists Internet Archive*, transcribed by Tim Delaney and Bob Schwartz. 2002. https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/Marx_The_German_Ideology.pdf.
- Marx, Karl, and Friedrich Engels. Introduction by Jodi Dean. "Manifesto of the Communist Party." In *The Communist Manifesto*, 47–103. Pluto Press, 2017. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1k85dmc.4>.
- Marx, Karl. *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. New York: International Publishers, 1963. In *Marxists Internet Archive*, transcribed by Zodiac and Brian Baggins, proofed by Alex Blain and Mark Harris. 2010. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/pdf/18th-Brumaire.pdf>.
- Marx, Karl. *Capital, Volume I*. Moscow: Progress Publishers. In *Marxists Internet Archive*, translated by Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling, edited by Frederick Engels, transcribed by Zodiac, Hinrich Kuhls, Allan Thurrott, Bill McDorman, Bert Schultz, and Martha Gimenez, proofed by Andy Blunden, Chris Clayton, Mark Harris, and Dave Allinson. 2015. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/pdf/Capital-Volume-I.pdf>.
- Maybee, Julie E. "Hegel's Dialectics." In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Winter 2020 ed. Edited by Edward N. Zalta. Stanford University: Metaphysics Research Lab, 2020. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2020/entries/hegel-dialectics/>.
- Tocqueville, Alexis de. *Democracy in America*. Volume 1. Translated by Arthur Goldhammer. New York: The Library of America, 2004.

Tocqueville, Alexis de. *Democracy in America*. Volume 2. Translated by Henry Reeve, edited by Francis Bowen. Cambridge: Sever and Francis, 1863.

Trevelyan, George Macaulay. *Clio, a Muse and Other Essays Literary and Pedestrian*. London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1914.

White, Hayden. "Interpretation in History." *New Literary History* 4, no. 2 (1973): 281–314.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/468478>.

2022 University of Massachusetts Undergraduate History Journal

THE EVOLUTION OF A MYTH: ROMULUS & REMUS

Laura Haskell

Departments: History Major and Classical Civilization Minor

I. Abstract

Myths offer an explanation of something unknown, as is the case with Rome's founding myth of Romulus and Remus. The first known record was written four hundred years afterward and survives only as a reference in later material. In each subsequent account from the first, authors contribute the influence of their time to grasp the imaginations of their audience and renew interest in days long past. In 2019, director Matteo Rovere molded the Romulus and Remus myth to suit a modern audience in his film *Il Primo Re*, using reconstructed Proto-Latin to create an immersive 8th-century experience. Comparing early accounts such as those written by Livius' and Plutarch, and methods of storytelling through film, we will examine how the myth of Romulus and Remus evolved and adapted to audiences of the past and present.

II. Introduction to the Myth and its Evolution

Every culture possesses a unique origin story from which its people can draw pride and understand the society to which they belong. These stories can sometimes be mundane or a logical explanation of beginnings, often full of unrealistic elements to pique the listener's interest. For the Romans, the commonly accepted origin story of their once vast empire is no exception. The tale of the twins, Romulus and Remus, contains mythological claims in their infancy and tragic fratricide in their adulthood. Like many origin stories, the legend of Romulus and Remus and the founding of Rome has been told and retold for thousands of years. Over time, the shift in collective morality and external influences adapt the story to better relate to a changing audience. Deviations are seen even between the ancient accounts of Ovid, Plutarch, and Livy. By analyzing the 2019 film adaptation of Romulus and Remus in *Il Primo Re*, we will see the various ways in which the modern world can influence an ancient myth and renew its

relevance. This research project aims to better understand the evolution of a story and how that is a story within itself.

To understand how the story of Romulus and Remus compares to Matteo Rovere's *Il Primo Re*, we must first know the accepted narrative as it stands today, taken primarily from the account of Livy. In 794 BCE, the kingdom of Alba Longa was to be passed to Numitor, the eldest son of Proca. Numitor's brother, Amulius, seized the opportunity to bypass the line of succession by killing his nephews and committing his niece, Rhea Silvia, "to perpetual virginity" as a Vestal Priestess.⁸⁴ Numitor was sure his place on the throne was secure and had done away with any chance of an heir to challenge him, as his brother would not, but fate turned against the power-hungry tyrant. Rhea Silvia, the daughter of the rightful king, Amulius, was found to be with child by the god Mars.⁸⁵ Upon the birth of the twins, Amulius imprisoned Rhea Silvia and ordered the boys to be drowned in the Tiber to rid himself of the potential rivals to his throne.⁸⁶ However, the swell of the river worried the men sent to execute Amulius' orders, and instead, they disposed of the two boys at the riverbank. The basket was picked up by the rising waters and gently floated downstream until coming to a stop under the shade of a Rumina fig tree.⁸⁷ A she-wolf, looking for a drink, found the twins and cared for them as if they were her own.⁸⁸ Soon after, a shepherd found the unlikely group and brought the boys home to his wife Larentia, who recently suffered the loss of their child.⁸⁹ In the house of Faustulus and Larentia, Romulus and

¹ Livius, Titus, "The History of Rome from Its Foundation," *Ancient Rome: An Anthology of Sources*, ed. Christopher Francese and R. Scott Smith (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2014), pp. 146, 3.2.

² Livius, pp. 146, 4.1.

³ Livius, pp. 146, 4.1

⁴ Naso, Publius Ovidius, *Fasti*, translated by James G. Frazer, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1931), <https://www.theoi.com/Text/OvidFasti3.html>.

⁵ Livius, *The History of Rome*, pp. 146-147, 4.1-2

⁶ Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *The Roman Antiquities Book 1*, trans. by Earnest Cary (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1937), pp. 269,

Remus grew to be men before embarking on the adventure that would lead to their founding of Rome.

From the beginning, we can see divorce from reality in the telling of Romulus and Remus. Having been suckled by a wolf seems more plausible when considering Romulus and Remus are demigods, which is clear evidence of initial fabrication. Regardless, these building blocks would appear as nonsense when attempting a more realistic and relatable tale for a modern audience, as Rovere aims in *Il Primo Re*. In the film, we meet Romulus and Remus as young men tending to their flocks in the river valley. There is no reason to believe the brothers got to this moment in their lives through any extraordinary or otherworldly means. Romulus and Remus appear precisely how a modern audience would imagine two ancient shepherds spending their days; dressed in sheepskin, praying to an unknown god, and waiting for the sun to set. Their journey begins with an overflowing of the Tiber -- a flash flood sweeping Romulus and Remus off to meet their destiny and “stake their claim for the foundations of Rome.”⁹⁰ A raging river is dangerous enough for two babes floating along in a basket, and Rovere increases the excitement by sending Romulus and Remus tumbling down the flooded river like ragdolls, sustaining injuries, and losing consciousness. Instead of being found by a suckling wolf and taken in by a shepherd, the two men are found by soldiers from Alba Longa and taken as slaves.⁹¹ The violence of the brothers' introduction in the film *Il Primo Re* panders to a modern audience expecting an unusual opening incident.

<https://archive.org/details/romanantiquities01dionuoft/page/268/mode/2up?view=theater&q=faustulus>.

⁷ Travis, Ed, “The First King (Il Primo Re): A Savage Tale of the Founding of Rome,” (Cinapse, 2019), <https://cinapse.co/the-first-king-il-primo-re-a-savage-tale-of-the-founding-of-rome-2c949d4765aa>.

⁸ *Il Primo Re*, directed by Matteo Rovere (Rome, Italy: Groenlandia, 2019), DVD.

Matteo Rovere's *Il Primo Re* may differ significantly from what we know as Rome's founding myth. However, as previously mentioned, early sources of the legend of Romulus and Remus differ, presumably from the original as well, as we have no record from the time of Romulus himself. In fact, there are so many early records that we are often confronted with completely incompatible versions of the Romulus and Remus tale.⁹² Rovere contributed to the various renditions of this immortal story through his creation of the film *Il Primo Re*, shedding new light on this ancient and mysterious time in Western history. By embarking on this research project, we too can make our own contribution by understanding how a story thousands of years old still captivates the imagination today. In an interview, Rovere says to Giacomo Savani, "I hope that *Il Primo Re* might stimulate curiosity and interest in the classical world and ancient history," and that is certainly true here.⁹³

Rovere's choice of writing Rome's origin story as someone of our modern age could realistically imagine it does not dishonor history. Quite the contrary, by offering a new interpretation, Rovere continues the Romulus and Remus myth tradition by keeping it alive. The actual events surrounding the formation of the city of Rome are lost to time, and the surviving rhetoric may be more of a reflection of a much later Rome than any factual early ancient cultural influence. Rovere writes *Il Primo Re* as a historical drama, rather than historical fantasy as early Roman writers Livy or Ovid paint the story of Romulus and Remus to be. A she-wolf caring for the two infant boys is not so outlandish when considering how often children adopted by animals are depicted in fiction. Even real life occurrences of wild children periodically crop up, such as the story of Marina Chapman, abandoned in the Colombian jungle and raised by capuchin

⁹ Beard, Mary, *SPQR*, (New York: Liveright, 2015) pp57.

¹⁰ Savani, Giacomo, "Omnia vincit amor? An interview with Matteo Rovere, director of *Il Primo Re*," (Classical Reception Studies Network, 2019), <https://classicalreception.org/omnia-vincit-amor-an-interview-with-matteo-rovere-director-of-il-primo-re/>.

monkeys.⁹⁴ So why then would Rovere choose to omit the twins' canine surrogate? One reason could be that being suckled by a wolf removes a particular aspect of normalcy in the lives of the two shepherders. Rovere wished to immerse himself and his audience in the world of 753 BCE, which meant leaving behind some of the more unrealistic elements.⁹⁵

To make *Il Primo Re* a more immersive ancient experience, Rovere scripted the dialogue in reconstructed Proto-Latin. Rovere hired a team from The Sapienza University of Rome to create the long-dead language using a previously reconstructed Proto-Indo-European language to accomplish this ambitious linguistic task.⁹⁶ Without a doubt, the moment a viewer hears Romulus reciting prayers in the opening scene, the feeling of that exact moment in history is overwhelming. Mel Gibson attempted using a mix of ancient languages in his 2004 *The Passion of the Christ* and Yucatec Mayan in his 2006 *Apocalypto*, achieving a similar level of immersion as Rovere. It is difficult to argue against the use of reconstructed dead language in historical films. Even language pieced together incorrectly acts as a steppingstone in future endeavors and provides valuable insight. The most significant contribution of Proto-Latin to the film, as mentioned earlier, is the sense of total immersion in the ancient world of Romulus and Remus. The ancient cadence of speech paired with a wild and dangerous landscape full of unknowns is well executed by Rovere, earning *Il Primo Re* a respected spot in a storytelling lineup going back thousands of years.

¹¹ Fitzner, Zach, "Real cases of children raised by wild animals," (Earth.com, 2018), <https://www.earth.com/news/children-raised-wild-animals/>.

¹² Savani

¹³ The Philological Crocodile, "Il Primo Re (Review)," (WordPress, 2020), <https://philologicalcrocodile.wordpress.com/2020/03/27/il-primo-re-review/>.

III. A Story Evolves

Matteo Rovere's 2019 *Il Primo Re* is the most recent installment of an ancient story shared for hundreds of years before finding its way to written text. Rovere's modern narrative arguably has little to do with the original Roman origin story, aside from finding inspiration to captivate the modern viewer. What one sees in *Il Primo Re* feels more of a retelling of history rather than myth, as the story of Romulus and Remus is regarded. Rovere's tale begins with Romulus and Remus passing the time while watching their flock in the Tiber river valley. The adventure begins when a flash flood sweeps through the valley and, as Ed Travis put it, literally hurls the two brothers towards their future.⁹⁷ The opening scene of *Il Primo Re* reflects Plutarch's *The Life of Romulus*, in which the two brothers are likewise offering a sacrifice and walking about while tending their flock. In Plutarch's telling of Rome's founding myth, these actions occur moments before the twins' lives are forever altered, though differently, and they set off to fulfill their destiny.⁹⁸

As mentioned before, *Il Primo Re* begins with Romulus and Remus being taken as slaves by soldiers from neighboring Alba Longa. It is not long before the brothers trick their captors and escape their bonds, freeing their fellow slaves and taking a vestal priestess captive. The group of men make their way across the rugged Italian terrain, hoping to secure their newly regained freedom. Within the dark, almost ethereal tree cover of the forest, Remus undergoes a transformation of character and declares himself king, defeating those in disagreement. The group soon comes upon a village where Remus demands hospitality and again asserts his role as king. Remus kills the village leader and demands the Vestal priestess perform haruspex, the

¹⁴ Travis, "The First King."

¹⁵ Plutarch, "Plutarch's Lives; The Life of Romulus," (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1914), vol. 1, 7.1, <https://forms.gle/bVVCToHjZTJ4oxBi9>.

interpretation of a sacrificed animal's liver. The Vestal reluctantly speaks the prophecy to Remus; the city of the king will become an empire so long as he kills his brother.⁹⁹ Remus rejects the Vestal's prophecy and orders his followers to burn the village and slaughter at will. Remus' band of brutes clears out sometime in the night, leaving Romulus in a great state of unease over his brother's wanton cruelty and disregard for piety. The remaining villagers choose to follow Romulus, and after relighting the sacred fire extinguished by Remus, the group sets off to found a new city.

Rovere's *Il Primo Re* concludes at the banks of the Tiber, where the Alban soldiers sent to re-capture the escaped prisoners attack Remus and his men. When all seems lost, Romulus and the villagers emerge from the forest to aid the doomed men by defeating the Albans. Despite the turn of events, the villagers continue to reject Remus as their king, which forces Romulus to step up and defend his followers, fulfilling the Vestal's prophecy. In the final scene, Romulus stands before his brother's funeral pyre and declares that Rome will become the greatest empire in history.¹⁰⁰

The differences between Matteo Rovere's *Il Primo Re* and the generally accepted narrative of Romulus and Remus are at times enormous, and at other times closely respected. Expanding on a comparison mentioned earlier regarding the film's opening scene and Plutarch's 75 CE account where Romulus worships the gods with fondness while Remus focuses on the world around him, Rovere is clearly attempting to include ancient opinions of the men's character to tell his version.¹⁰¹ To a Roman in Plutarch's time, Romulus upholds the virtue of

¹⁶ Petrizzo, Francesca, "Closer Than Blood - "Il Primo Re" and Rome's Origin Myth," (Medium, 2020), <https://medium.com/@francescapetrizzo/closer-than-blood-il-primo-re-and-romes-origin-myth-998ef5d571ce>.

¹⁷ Gravino, *Il Primo Re*, 1:58.

¹⁸ Plutarch, *Plutarch's Lives*, 7.1.

pietas, which is every Roman's duty to his family, friends, himself, and the divine.¹⁰²

Throughout Rovere's film, numerous examples reinforce this contrast between Romulus' and Remus' priorities. The most blatant example in the film is when Remus prioritizes extinguishing the sacred flame during his brutal attack on the villagers. This act of unforgivable disrespect causes the villagers to mark him as their enemy. Romulus neither excuses his brother's heartless deed nor tries to apologize for him. Instead, Romulus reignites the sacred flame and appoints a new Vestal priestess to watch over it.¹⁰³

Further contrast to early accounts of the tale, Matteo Rovere chose to begin his telling of Romulus and Remus when the brothers are grown men. Consequently, Rovere eliminates the most far-fetched aspects of Rome's founding myth; immaculate conception and being suckled by a wolf. However, when it comes to Rhea Silvia, a Vestal virgin, it is likely a myth from the start that she is with child by the god Mars. Perhaps the way the story is sometimes told makes Rhea Silvia's claim a falsehood. In Livy's first century BCE account, Mars takes Rhea Silvia against her will, and perhaps her claiming the assailant was the god of war was to preserve her honor.¹⁰⁴ Ovid, writing around the same time as Livy, puts the encounter between Silvia and Mars under a softer light. Ovid implies rape but does not use the word; instead, he paints a sensuous picture of a beautiful Silvia resting under a tree when "Mars saw her, the sight inspired him with desire, and his desire was followed by possession."¹⁰⁵ Strangest of all, Plutarch recounts a very different tale of Rhea Silvia's pregnancy being caused by a phantom phallus appearing in the hearth of the Alban king, Tarchetius.¹⁰⁶ Today, Mary Beard points out that it would be easy to agree with Livy

¹⁹ Philo, L. Curtius, et al., "Restoring the Ancient Roman Virtues," (Res Publica Romana, 2020), <http://romanrepublic.org/roma/bibliotheca/roman-virtues/>.

²⁰ Gravino, *Il Primo Re*, 1:36.

²¹ Livius, "The History of Rome," pp. 146 - 147.

²² Ovid, *Fasti*, III.

²³ Plutarch, *Plutarch's Lives*, 2.3-5.

in that Rhea Silvia was likely not raped by Mars but had broken her vow of chastity through “an entirely human affair.”¹⁰⁷

When consulting early texts regarding Romulus and Remus, it quickly becomes clear that the original tale is lost. The earliest known written record of Rome’s founding myth, completed by Diocles of Peparethus in the 4th century BCE, is Greek in origin, not Roman. However, Diocles’ account did not survive, and the only evidence known to us today comes from references to his work by Quintus Fabius Pictor a century later. Further still, as Plutarch informs us, Pictor’s work is likewise lost.¹⁰⁸ So who are we to believe when it comes down to accuracy? Matteo Rovere’s *Il Primo Re* could be more or less accurate to the truth as Ovid’s *Fasti* or Dionysius’ *Roman Antiquities*, assuming Romulus and Remus ever existed at all. As mentioned in the introduction, it seems likely that all the known early accounts of the twins may be more of a reflection of the times they were written in, just as Rovere’s work is. There is no doubt that Diocles gathered his knowledge of Rome’s first king through an earlier, unknown document or an oral history heard during his travels. Therefore, every mark set down by Diocles would have been influenced by his modern understanding of the world, even if he did not intend it.

By looking at the events in early accounts that lead up to Rhea Silvia’s pregnancy, it quickly becomes clear that several different narratives were passed down. In *The Life of Romulus*, written in 75 CE by Plutarch, he mentions there was disagreement on the twins’ parentage and that Rhea Silvia may not have carried the boys at all. Two alternative options given as parents are Latinus, the son of Telemachus, and his wife, Roma, as well as the daughter of Aeneas, who was met by Mars similarly to Rhea Silvia.¹⁰⁹ Plutarch also briefly mentions

²⁴ Beard, *SPQR*, pp. 58.

²⁵ Plutarch, *Plutarch’s Lives*, 3.1.

²⁶ Plutarch, 2.3.

rumors of Amulius forcing himself on his niece Silvia.¹¹⁰ According to Ovid, in *Fasti* Book IV, Romulus himself claimed his parents to be Venus and Mars.¹¹¹ Regardless of who was responsible for bringing the twins into the world, it is agreed that the boys were seen as a threat to Amulius and, by his request, brought to the banks of the Tiber so that the current might swallow them up.

Another varying aspect in the original accounts of Romulus and Remus is in their survival of the swollen river and rescue by the she-wolf. In Livy's account, the babes are tucked into a basket intended as a coffin and were left by the riverbank under the shade of a Ruminalis fig tree.¹¹² In contrast, Ovid explains how the little ark which contained the twins floated down the Tiber river and came to rest under a Ruminalis fig tree.¹¹³ Regardless, it is under this tree where a she-wolf finds Romulus and Remus and takes pity on them. Romulus and Remus showed no fear of the wolf, proving they were the sons of the god Mars.¹¹⁴ To further prove divine issue, a woodpecker, the bird of Mars, is sometimes joined in caring for the twins by bringing food.¹¹⁵

Here enters a herdsman named Faustulus, who happens upon the infant twins, Romulus and Remus. However, as Plutarch mentions, in some accounts, Faustulus is the name of the servant sent to dispose of the boys in the river, adding yet another discrepancy.¹¹⁶ The herdsman and his wife Larentia, a prostitute, a profession that shares the Latin word "lupa" for she-wolf, happily adopts the boys and raises them up in their community.¹¹⁷ It is here, within the role

²⁷ Plutarch, 4.2.

²⁸ Ovid, *Fasti*, IV, 19.

²⁹ Livius, "The History of Rome," pp. 147, 4.

³⁰ Ovid, *Fasti*, II, 381.

³¹ Ovid, II, 381.

³² Ovid, III, 11.

³³ Plutarch, *Plutarch's Lives*, 3.4.

³⁴ Livius, "The History of Rome," pp 147, 4.

Romulus and Remus take up as part of the farming community, that Rovere has chosen to begin his version of their adventure. Plutarch claims that the story written by Diocles has the “widest credence and the greatest number of vouchers,” which also happens to be the most likely inspiration for Rovere’s *Il Primo Re*.¹¹⁸

Continuing the narrative put forth by Plutarch, Remus is taken as a prisoner of Amulius, during which time he learns that he and his brother are not the sons of Faustulus and Larentia. Concurrently, Faustulus reveals to Romulus the truth of the brothers’ origins before they set forth to rescue Remus from his fate. After speaking with Remus, Numitor is moved to seek justice for his grandson. Upon finding Amulius, Romulus at once took his life, and the brothers, not wishing to be kings of Alba Longa so long as Numitor lived, reinstated their grandfather to his rightful place. Romulus and Remus then set out to found a new city, bringing the slaves and fugitives that had joined them in their fight for justice.¹¹⁹ There are similarities here between Plutarch’s tale and Rovere’s film. In *Il Primo Re*, both brothers are taken prisoner by men of Alba Longa, but there is no mention of discovering their divine birth. Romulus and Remus are joined in their quest to found a new city so that they might live free by slaves, fugitives, and refugees, just as Plutarch suggests.¹²⁰

In Rovere’s *Il Primo Re*, Romulus kills his brother Remus after Remus attempts to extinguish the sacred fire of Vesta once again.¹²¹ Livy, Ovid, and Plutarch tell us that Remus was slain by Romulus after jumping over his wall while building the city of Rome. Both Livy and Plutarch claim this sudden act of fratricide was brought on by Remus mocking the state of

³⁵ Plutarch, *Plutarch’s Lives*, 3.1.

³⁶ Plutarch, 7.2-7, 8.1-7, 9.1-2.

³⁷ Plutarch, 4.

³⁸ Johnson, Anthony M., “#2 - Remus is Rome’s first King. If we consider a legend to be a myth...,” (Medium, 2019), <https://medium.com/@anthonyspqr/2-remus-is-romes-first-king-e839066b80e9>.

Romulus' wall.¹²² However, the inciting incident to Remus' death was a conflict over the number of vultures Romulus had seen upon receiving the augury.¹²³ Plutarch continues that a fight broke out between the followers of each brother, during which Faustulus and an uncle were also killed.¹²⁴ The differences between the early accounts of fratricide and Rovere's modern interpretation are at first quite apparent. Though deeper analysis could say that Remus' breach of a barrier around the sacred fire in *Il Primo Re* is a representation of the wall described by ancient authors. Remus challenges his brother's authority and faith in a way that pays homage to the original while appealing more to the emotions of a modern audience. In the words of Ovid, "walls were built, which, small though they were, it had been better for Remus not to have overleaped."¹²⁵

IV. The Art of Immersion

Italian director Matteo Rovere successfully brought to life the myth of Romulus and Remus and the world as it was in their time through his 2019 film *Il Primo Re*. Rovere chose to rewrite the ancient myth of Rome's founding with more focus on the inner strength of his characters, giving the modern viewer a more relatable interpretation of Romulus and Remus.¹²⁶ Rovere chooses to emphasize the journey of Remus, who is more of a side character in early tellings of the myth. In *Il Primo Re*, we watch Remus transform as he is consumed by a lust for power, believing himself greater than the gods. Remus' strength overshadows his brothers' throughout Rovere's story. By the end of the film, the viewer is convinced that Remus' death is

³⁹ Livius, "The History of Rome," pp. 148-149, 7.; Plutarch, *Plutarch's Lives*, 10.1.

⁴⁰ Plutarch, 9.4-5.

⁴¹ Plutarch, 10.2.

⁴² Plutarch, 3.43.

⁴³ Savani, "Omina Vincit Amor?"

necessary and that Romulus is the rightful leader of Rome. Rovere, in a sense, justifies and forgives the murderous deed committed by the pious and wise Romulus.

Il Primo Re is set out to give the viewer a hypothesized history of the founding of Rome. Additionally, the movie is made in a way that completely immerses one in the ancient world of Romulus and Remus, leaving no doubt that the story may very well be true. Rovere ensured every detail of his film pandered to the modern image of the ancient world. The world of *Il Primo Re* has a closeness to the grit of nature, full of life-threatening danger and hardship. Settlements are crude, and the people are seen as almost insignificant compared to the daunting wild nature in which they dwell. The use of light through the progression of the set while Romulus and Remus make their way through the story adds to the emotional ties felt from the onset. Aside from the incredible visual impact of the film, Rovere employs the use of an ancient language to engross his audience further.

When traveling far from home, one finds their senses confronted by a myriad of unfamiliar sights, smells, and ways of speech -- total immersion. To transfer the same experience of immersion in film is impossible. However, some very captivating methods of putting together a screenplay come close. For example, using a language native to the time and place in which the story takes place can transform the way a viewer perceives the entire film. Rovere embarks on the task of reconstructing a long-dead early form of Latin, a method used to great effect in the aforementioned films *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) and *Apocalypto* (2006). Though there are many more examples in film of language reconstruction, Gibson's attempts are widely known and scrutinized, making them a more compelling selection for comparison. The use of language in film is a powerful way to tell a story; it pulls the viewer into the world of the characters in such a way that it becomes difficult at times to remember it is not real. As Farhad Safina, a writer

and co-producer of *Apocalypto*, which uses Yucatec Mayan dialogue, says about the use of language in film, “[the audience] had to buy into the story from the moment they saw the first characters.”¹²⁷

Matteo Rovere chose to use a reconstructed form of Proto-Latin because he wanted his audience to hear a language that sounded “ancestral,” which would allow them to “attune ... with the story being told.”¹²⁸ Mel Gibson reflects this sentiment in his film *The Passion of the Christ*, where the primary goal of using ancient Aramaic and Latin was to create a sense of going back in time.¹²⁹ A more accurate addition of Classical Greek and Hebrew is omitted from Gibson’s film to prevent auditory overload, causing some viewers to see the partial use of archaic language as sloppy, and still overwhelming.¹³⁰ It is easy to agree with Francesca Petrizzo that Rovere did a much better job incorporating ancient language than Gibson had done, despite the unavoidable mistakes.¹³¹ For instance, accent and grammar are not consistent throughout *Il Primo Re*, which is of little consequence compared to Gibson’s linguistic chaos.¹³²

The use of reconstructed or invented language can hugely enrich a story, of which we have myriad examples. For instance, in Anthony Burgess’ 1971 novel, *A Clockwork Orange*, Burgess creates an entirely fictitious slang called Nadsat using a mixture of Cockney (a modern English dialect), Romany, Early Modern English, and Russian to immerse his reader.¹³³ Burgess’

⁴⁴ Aghotte, Karen, “Becoming Mayan: Creating Apocalypto,” (Santa Monica: Icon Productions, 2007) <https://youtu.be/qZnaM6Yadfk>.

⁴⁵ Cowan, Rich, “The Making of ‘The Passion of the Christ,’” (Spokane: North by Northwest Entertainment, 2004), <https://youtu.be/859EpXpRebw>.

⁴⁶ Cowan, “The Making of the ‘Passion of the Christ,’” 4/5 0:23.

⁴⁷ Petrizzo, “Closer Than Blood,” 8.

⁴⁸ Petrizzo, 2.

⁴⁹ Philological, “Il Primo Re (Review).”

⁵⁰ “A Clockwork Orange and Nadsat,” (The International Anthony Burgess Foundation, accessed 13 November 2021), <https://www.anthonymburgess.org/a-clockwork-orange/a-clockwork-orange-and-nadsat/>.

skill in language creation caught the eye of Jean-Jacques Annaud, who directed the 1981 film *Quest for Fire*, which is based on a 1911 novel by J.H. Rosny of the same title. Burgess constructed a language to befit Annaud's prehistoric characters based on the languages of native Inuit and Cree peoples of Canada.¹³⁴ While *Quest for Fire* contains no subtitles for the unfamiliar dialogue, Annaud successfully created a profoundly moving and triumphant film about prehistoric humans. In a third example, Philip Glass wrote *Akhnaten*, a 1984 opera, using language derived from ancient Egyptian texts, Akkadian, and Hebrew to add depth to the performance.¹³⁵ Stepping into the realm of science-fiction, Ridley Scott makes a contribution to the language construction pool in his 2012 film, *Prometheus*. *Prometheus*, a story set in Scott's *Alien* universe, follows a team seeking the creators of man, known as the Engineers, who speak a form of Proto-Indo-European.¹³⁶

Il Primo Re may be different from the examples given for language construction in storytelling, as each example hails from its own unique time and place, but they all share the same quality. The use of language is a vital component of the viewer or reader's understanding of the story being told. For example, *Il Primo Re* was also released in an English dubbed version, which changes the entire experience of watching the film. Hearing the actors speak in a language their characters would have never come in contact with separates them from the world in which they are meant to be immersed. The viewer is unable to find the same connection with the characters, making the film less meaningful. Father William J. Fulco, the translator for Gibson's

⁵¹ Hollywood Suite, "How Quest for Fire Developed a Language and Became a Hit," (Toronto: Hollywood Suite, 2019), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pv2XxPumE&ab_channel=HollywoodSuite.

⁵² Finesilver, Carla, "Glass : Akhnaten / ENO, 4th February 2016," (WordPress: Opera Britannia 2016), <https://operabritanniak.wordpress.com/2016/03/05/glass-akhnaten-eno-4th-february-2016/#more-2735>.

⁵³ *Prometheus*, directed by Ridley Scott (Los Angeles, CA: Scott Free Productions, 2012), DVD.

The Passion of the Christ, tells us how a person's language can reflect different personalities and ways of life, which becomes very important when these things are different from our own.¹³⁷

Language can deepen our understanding of an unfamiliar world and impact us in ways more profoundly than if the words were familiar to those living in a very different time and place.

V. Concluding the Myth's Evolution

Every culture possesses its own myths, and some of these stories have evolved more than will ever be fully realized. Perhaps it is the sense of mystery that surrounds the stories passed down through innumerable generations that hold our interest. So desperate we are at times to dispel the unknown, that one of our numbers produces a sensational falsehood. An example of such which failed to alter the narrative is *Some Account of the Roman History of Fabius Pictor*, discovered and translated by an unnamed 'English Gentleman' in 1746. This publication of Pictor's history turned out to be 18th-century political satire, perhaps no more accurate than *Il Primo Re's* re-imagined founding of Rome, but equally as captivating to the intended audience.¹³⁸ Nevertheless, from the undying interest of the true origins of the Western world also comes great contributions, the work of Theodor Mommsen being a 19th-century example, whose publications are still used in modern research on Roman history.¹³⁹ The world which birthed Rome, whose empire was among the greatest in history, remains firmly in the minds of those living today. It would be an arduous task indeed to find someone in our modern-day who had never heard the name Caesar or did not recognize the uniform of a Roman soldier. So naturally,

⁵⁴ Cowan, "The Making of the 'Passion of the Christ,'" 4/5 0:23.

⁵⁵ Anonymous, "Some Account of the Roman History of Fabius Pictor," (M. Cooper: London, 1746),

https://www.google.com/books/edition/Some_Account_of_the_Roman_History_of_Fab/8bhXAAAcAAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1&pg=PP11&printsec=frontcover.

⁵⁶ Mommsen, Theodor, "The History of Rome, Book 1," translated by William Purdie Dickson, e-text by David Ceponis, (The Project Gutenberg, 16 March 2005)

<https://gutenberg.org/cache/epub/10701/pg10701.html>.

curiosity remains regarding the mystery of Rome's founding, a time which leaves little trace compared to the hundreds of years that followed.

The original tale of Romulus and Remus is unknown, its first recording coming roughly three hundred years after, which is itself lost to time. The evidence comes from later scholars, an additional couple hundred years after Pictor's initial account.¹⁴⁰ The problem with this is that we do not know what influences would have made their way into the Romulus and Remus myth. We can only assume that the authors creating a record of Rome's founding would have done so in a way that reflects the time in which they lived. To confirm this thought, we must consider how one would write about the trial of Joan of Arc today, a story that took place roughly as long past as Romulus and Remus to Plutarch's time. Even if the author did not intend to include their modern understanding of the world in how they explained Joan of Arc's ordeal, it would bleed through. With this in mind, there is no way to truly know and understand the thoughts and actions that would have compelled the cast of 8th century BCE characters in Romulus and Remus' tale. We can only speculate based on the logic of 1st century BCE writers, who claimed to glean their knowledge from a man of the 4th century BCE. Even if this knowledge is had, stories will not likely appeal to the modern thinker in the way they were intended by their authors. Hence the need for a myth nearly three thousand years old, such as the founding of Rome, to change and adapt with time to remain an inspiring tale.

Matteo Rovere shares his fascination with Rome's founding myth with the world through his film *Il Primo Re*. By putting forth the effort to recreate a language long lost to match the best guess of how the people of Romulus and Remus' time would have communicated with one another, he has contributed significantly in two ways. The first contribution is scholarly, by

⁵⁷ Beard, *SPQR*, pp. 138.

begging the question of where a language still used, albeit quite different, can trace its roots. The team from The Sapienza University of Rome not only reconstructed Proto-Latin for Rovere's film but has added to further research in the early use of Latin. Rovere's second contribution is to the culture of millions of people living in the Western world today. Rovere has created for the average person a chance to hear and be immersed in the world which saw the founding of Rome, which is "considered the event that allowed power to [become] order."¹⁴¹

Matteo Rovere's *Il Primo Re* is a worthy addition to the legacy of Romulus and Remus and the founding of Rome, despite the many artistic liberties taken in its telling. *Il Primo Re* reflects the attitudes of our time while inspiring further interest in a world long gone. Rovere successfully appeals to his viewers' sympathies, fears, and desires by offering a deeper look into the personalities and struggles of Romulus and Remus. Rovere upholds the narrative of Romulus being superior in both mind and body to his brother Remus, as implied by ancient writers such as Plutarch and Ovid.¹⁴² In contrast to the way early writers expressed the difference between the brothers, Rovere caters to a modern audience in need of justification for Romulus' fratricidal crime by shedding light on the downfall of Remus. Remus is no longer the brother who must die, as he appears in the old texts -- he is a man whose strength becomes his undoing. Undoubtedly, *Il Primo Re* is a perfect example of how a myth evolves over time.

⁵⁸ Savani, "Omnia vincit amor?" 3.

⁵⁹ Plutarch, *Plutarch's Lives*, 6.2.; Ovid, *Fasti*, III, 11.

Bibliography

“A Clockwork Orange and Nadsat.” The International Anthony Burgess Foundation, accessed 13 November 2021.

<https://www.anthonyburgess.org/a-clockwork-orange/a-clockwork-orange-and-nadsat/>.

Aghotte, Karen. *Becoming Mayan: Creating Apocalypto*. Santa Monica, CA: Icon Productions, 2007. Video, . <https://youtu.be/qZnaM6YadfK>.

Anonymous. *Some Account of the Roman History of Fabius Pictor: From a Manuscript Lately Discover'd in Herculaneum, the Underground City Near Naples in a Letter from an English Gentleman Residing at Naples to His Friend at London*. London: M. Cooper, 1749.

[https://www.google.com/books/edition/Some Account of the Roman History of Fab/8bhXAAAACAAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1&pg=PP11&printsec=frontcover](https://www.google.com/books/edition/Some_Account_of_the_Roman_History_of_Fab/8bhXAAAACAAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1&pg=PP11&printsec=frontcover).

Beard, Mary. *SPQR*. New York: Liveright Publishing, 2015.

Contributors. “Romulus and Remus.” Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia. Last modified 2 April 2022, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Romulus_and_Remus.

Cowan, Rich. *The Making of 'The Passion of the Christ.'* Spokane, WA: North by Northwest Entertainment, 22 February 2004. Video, . <https://youtu.be/859EpXpRebw>.

Dionysius of Halicarnassus. *The Roman Antiquities Book 1*. Translated by Earnest Cary. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1937.

<https://archive.org/details/romanantiquities01dionuoft/page/n6/mode/1up?view=theater>.

Finesilver, Carla. “Glass: Akhnaten / ENO, 4th February 2016.” WordPress. Opera Britannia, 5 March 2016.

<https://operabritanniauk.wordpress.com/2016/03/05/glass-akhnaten-eno-4t h-february-2016/#more-2735>.

Fitzner, Zach. “Real cases of children raised by wild animals.” Earth.com, 8 September 2018.
<https://www.earth.com/news/children-raised-wild-animals/>.

Hollywood Suite. “How Quest for Fire Developed a Language and Became a Hit.” YouTube.
Toronto, Ontario: Hollywood Suite, 27 March 2019. <https://youtu.be/pv2XxPu-m E>.

Johnson, Anthony M. “#2 - Remus is Rome’s first King. If we consider a legend to be a myth...” Medium, 19 September 2019.
<https://medium.com/@anthonyspqr/2-remus-is-romes-first-king-e839066b80e9>.

Livius, Titus. “The History of Rome from Its Foundation.” In *Ancient Rome: An Anthology of Sources*. Edited by Christopher Francese and R. Scott Smith. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2014.

Mommsen, Theodor. *The History of Rome, Book I*. Translated by William Purdie Dickson, e-text by David Ceponis. The Project Gutenberg, last modified 16 March 2005.
<https://gutenberg.org/cache/epub/10701/pg10701.html>.

Ovid. *Fasti*. Translated by James George Frazer. Loeb Classical Library Volume. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1931. <https://www.theoi.com/Text/OvidFasti1.html>.

Petrizzo, Francesca. “Closer Than Blood - “Il primo re” and Rome’s Origin Myth.” Medium, 19 February 2020.
<https://medium.com/@francescapetrizzo/closer-than-blood-il-primo-re-and-romes-origin-myth-998ef5d571ce>.

Philo, L. Curtius, L. Hostilia Scaura, and P. Iunius Brutus. “Restoring the Ancient Roman Virtues,” Res Publica Romana, 4 September 2020.

<http://romanrepublic.org/roma/bibliotheca/roman-virtues/>.

Philological Crocodile. “Il Primo Re (Review).” WordPress. The Philological Crocodile, 27 March 2020.

<https://philologicalcrocodile.wordpress.com/2020/03/27/il-primo-re-review/>.

Plutarch, Lucius Mestrius. “Plutarch’s Lives.” Translated by Bernadotte Perrin. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1914.

<http://data.perseus.org/citations/urn:cts:greekLit:tlg0007.tlg002.perseus-eng1:1>.

Savani, Giacomo. “Omnia vincit amor? An interview with Matteo Rovere, director of Il Primo Re.” Classical Reception Studies Network, 29 January 2019.

<https://classicalreception.org/omnia-vincit-amor-an-interview-with-matteo-rovere-director-of-il-primo-re/>

Gravino, Filippo, Francesca Manieri, and Matteo Rovere, directed by Matteo Rovere. *Il Primo Re*. Rome, Italy: Groenlandia, Gapbusters, Rai Cinema, 2019. DVD.

Spaihts, Jon, and Damon Lindelof, directed by Ridley Scott. *Prometheus*. Los Angeles, CA: Scott Free Productions, Brandywine, Dune Entertainment, 2012. DVD.

Travis, Ed. “The First King (Il Primo Re): A Savage Tale of the Founding of Rome.” Medium. Cinapse, 17 September 2019.

<https://cinapse.co/the-first-king-il-primo-re-a-savage-tale-of-the-founding-of-rome-2c949d4765aa>.

The Purpose and Relevance of the Grand Narrative

Brianna Hastry
Department: History

Abstract:

Scholars such as Jean-Francis Lyotard often disregard the grand narrative as far too broad to be considered an academic form of history. However, scholars such as Akhil Amar, Nikole-Hannah Jones, and Dorothy Ross prove otherwise. The grand narrative provides a broad perspective of historical events and answers philosophical questions that may appeal to the way society functions today and brings conversations to the table that may improve society overall. Admired and respected scholars use the grand narrative method to answer questions that add to society's understanding of history, proving this method to be a useful and academic tool.

As journalist and 1619 Project-creator Nikole Hannah-Jones shares the story of her Black father proudly waving the American flag outside of their home throughout her childhood, she explains that her “father knew exactly what he was doing when he raised that flag. He knew that [their] people’s contributions to building the richest and most powerful nation in the world were indelible, that the United States simply would not exist without [them].”¹⁴³ But for Jones’ perspective on the importance of Black Americans’ contributions to the United States to hold truth, focusing on one specific area of history won’t help her case; this is a job for a grand narrative. It is extremely common for historians to specialize in a certain field of the broad and extensive topic of history, but is it so bad to take a step back and look at the bigger picture? Scholar Jean-Francois Lyotard defines grand narrative as “a theory that tries to give a totalizing, comprehensive account to historical events...based upon the appeal to universal truth or universal values.”¹⁴⁴ The grand narrative provides a new perspective and offers answers to a variety of questions, including more philosophical ones. Writers who use this method are allowed to move through history at a faster pace and examine broader themes and ideas from a larger time period, focusing on what society can learn to understand how it got to where it is today. Through writings by various admired scholars and writers, the grand narrative proves to be more academic and useful than what many, including Lyotard, give it credit for.

I. The 1619 Project

The 1619 Project, published in the *New York Times*, “aims to reframe the country’s history by placing the consequences of slavery and the contributions of Black Americans at the

¹ Nikole Hannah-Jones, “The 1619 Project”, *New York Times*, (August 2019), 16.

² Jean-Francois Lyotard, “The Field: Knowledge in Computerized Societies”, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, (Manchester University Press: 1984), 3.

very center of the United States' national narrative.”¹⁴⁵ Rather than just focusing on the history of Black Americans during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, the project takes an even larger step back to help answer more questions. Although not a historian, Nikole Hannah-Jones uses the grand narrative method to effectively share a new perspective on American history and the importance that Black Americans have contributed to it and its ideals. She claims that, through various examples like the American Revolution, the Civil War, and Reconstruction, Black Americans “have helped the country live up to its founding ideals” and “without [their] idealistic, strenuous, and patriotic efforts...our democracy today would most likely look very different- it might not be a democracy at all.”¹⁴⁶ With this broader perspective and the approach of American history through the eyes of African slaves and Black American citizens, the reader not only understands their contributions and sufferings, but has a fresh idea of what it means to be an American and learns that the ideas that the country were built on are simply a work in progress. This method allows for a new perspective to emerge and answer questions that are rarely touched upon.

A common theme of the 1619 Project is the use of the grand narrative by multiple writers to show the significant impact Black American citizens have had on the United States; one such author is Tiya Miles, who writes two different examples of how slavery spread throughout and built America. In Miles' first feature, she uses the grand narrative to describe the migration and spread of slavery across America and its lasting effects. Although short, she finds the key points that highlight how and why slavery spread, as “slaveholding societies of the Southeast and Mid-Atlantic were...reaching limits in soil fertility” and the untouched west- that is, untouched by the white slaveholder and disregarding the indigenous people who lived there- “looked

³ Nikole Hannah-Jones, “The 1619 Project”, *New York Times*, (August 2019).

⁴ Nikole Hannah-Jones, “The 1619 Project”, *New York Times*, (August 2019), 16.

irresistible.”¹⁴⁷ She states that “a complex interstate slave trade became an industry of its own” and moves the story along by explaining that “armed conflict between American-identified enslavers and a Mexican state that outlawed slavery in 1829 was among the causes of the Mexican-American war, which won for the United States much of the Southwest and California.”¹⁴⁸ To conclude, Miles references how this had lasting effects for the newly freed Black men who served in the Civil War, as “even while bearing slavery’s scars, black men found themselves carrying out orders to secure white residents of Western towns, track down ‘outlaws’” and “police the federally imposed boundaries of Indian reservations and quell labor strikes.”¹⁴⁹ In this broader view of how slavery migrated west, although Black citizens are free, they still face the cruelty of jobs that do the dirty work for white residents, a reflection of the past. They face targeted racism and segregation for what seems like will last forever. This story on how slavery swept across the nation is useful as it can answer questions like causes of the Mexican-American war, the location of Black populations across America, the underlying causes and problems of the Black struggle, the lasting effects of this migration of slavery, and more.

Using a different angle, Miles once again effectively uses the grand narrative to demonstrate that Black Americans built and continue to build the country, with the example of Wall Street. She begins with how Black slaves physically built New York City, as “New York’s enslaved put in place much of the local infrastructure, including Broad Way and the Bowery roads, Governors Island, and the first municipal buildings and churches.”¹⁵⁰ Miles goes more in-

⁵ Tiya Miles, “Chained Migration: How Slavery Made its Way West”, *New York Times*, (August 2019), 22.

⁶ Tiya Miles, “Chained Migration: How Slavery Made its Way West”, *New York Times*, (August 2019), 22.

⁷ Tiya Miles, “Chained Migration: How Slavery Made its Way West”, *New York Times*, (August 2019), 22.

⁸ Tiya Miles, “Municipal Bonds: How Slavery Built Wall Street”, *New York Times*, (August 2019), 40.

depth, stating that “New York City’s phenomenal economic consolidation came as a result of its dominance in the Southern cotton trade” and “gained its status as a financial behemoth through shipping raw cotton to Europe and bankrolling the boom industry that slavery made.” This still has its impacts today, because “the capital profits and financial wagers of Manhattan, the United States, and the world still flow through this place where...the wealth of a region was built on slavery.”¹⁵¹ When thinking of Wall Street, slavery typically is not at the forefront of a person’s mind. The thought of the stock market, restless white men in suits, and money are common images that may possibly pop up in the brain. As Miles uses the grand narrative by moving through the history of Wall Street, she opens up a range of new answers and explanations to the impacts of slavery in America.

The 1619 Project has created a buzz in the media and conversation between scholars and typical American citizens alike. It is not a surprise when a new perspective-- or any perspective-- has critics, especially when a perspective of history comes from a non-historian. The 1619 Project is on a more disputed and somewhat sensitive topic, so it already got a lot of attention. One critic of Jones and her project is Sean Wilentz, who, with five other historians, wrote a letter to the *New York Times* claiming that Jones’ article had several inaccuracies, stating that “we wholeheartedly support the stated goal to educate widely on slavery and its long-term consequences. Our letter attempted to advance that goal, one that, no matter how the history is interpreted and related, cannot be forwarded through falsehoods, distortions, and significant omissions.”¹⁵² Wilentz emphasizes that the letter was not intended to judge the topic of the

⁹ Tiya Miles, “Municipal Bonds: How Slavery Built Wall Street”, *New York Times*, (August 2019), 40.

¹⁰ Sean Wilentz, “A Matter of Facts”, *The Atlantic*, (January 2020).

<https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/01/1619-project-new-york-times-wilentz/605152/>

project, but simply wanted to help the argument by making sure the facts were accurate. Whether the intentions of the letter claimed by Wilentz were genuine or not, the focus of the fine details is not what Jones wants her audience to take away. Small errors in the 1619 Project do not take away from the key points being made because the use of the grand narrative allows not only scholars but the general public to find answers to more long-term and philosophical questions and understand the big picture as to why there is still much work to be done in systematically gaining true equality for Black citizens in America.

II. Lyotard and the Question of Scientific vs Historical Relevance

There is of course no debate if there is no opposing side, and Jean-Francois Lyotard is the leading critic of the grand narrative, a term that is surprisingly coined by the critic himself. Although more focused on grand narratives in science rather than in history, Lyotard's distaste of big-picture generalizations is not hard to miss, as he goes to great lengths describing how, in postmodern society, the use of grand narratives is no longer needed. He defines postmodernism as "the status of knowledge" being "altered as societies have entered what is known as the postindustrial age," with this transition being "under way since at least the end of the 1950s."¹⁵³ Lyotard goes on to say that "narratives, as we have seen, determine criteria of competence and/or illustrate how they are to be applied. They thus define what has the right to be said and done in the culture in question, and since they are themselves a part of that culture, they are legitimated by the simple fact that they do what they do."¹⁵⁴ Although Lyotard does legitimize the grand

¹¹ Jean-Francois Lyotard, "The Field: Knowledge in Computerized Societies", *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, (Manchester University Press: 1984), 3.

¹² Jean-Francois Lyotard, "The Pragmatics of Narrative Knowledge", *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, (Manchester University Press: 1984), 23.

narrative, he is claiming that they are too literal, and society feels it must stick to this general story. He uses Marx as an example of this and how his work cannot apply to the society in which we live today, simply because his prediction has ultimately failed, stating that:

What guides Marxism then, is a different model of society...this model was born of the struggles accompanying the process of capitalism's encroachment upon traditional civil societies...in countries with liberal or advanced liberal management, the struggles and their instruments have been transformed into the regulators of the system; in communist countries, the totalizing model and its totalitarian effect have made a comeback in the name of Marxism himself, and the struggles in question have simply been deprived of the right to exist.¹⁵⁵

However, is Marx not relevant today? Are these so-called class struggles that Marx claims shape the evolution of society truly non-existent? It is true that a transition to socialism or communism in places like the Soviet Union or Latin America did not result in a utopian society, even less an overall success, but has capitalism either? Marx's prediction did not completely come true, but it is a prediction after all. Is capitalism not still splitting the class divide even further into appallingly rich and beggarly poor people, especially in poorer countries like Latin America who are forced to depend on the most capitalistic countries in the world to barely survive? Like Marx says, "our epoch...has simplified the class antagonisms...into two great hostile camps."¹⁵⁶ These are questions that can be looked at through the grand narrative perspective to possibly understand. Marx's theory of societal evolution is a grand narrative itself, as it moves through history to answer broader questions on how society has functioned and may

¹³ Jean-Francois Lyotard, "The Nature of the Social Bond: The Modern Alternative", *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, (Manchester University Press: 1984), 13.

¹⁴ Karl Marx, "The Communist Manifesto", *Selected Writings*, (Hackett Publishing Company: 1994), 159.

continue to function in the future. Lyotard claims that Marx and his theory are things of the past and should stay there because society has moved on. But with the social and economic strain that capitalism still puts on this world, there are scholars still searching for answers and alternatives, and some are still turning to Marxism. Many students across the world are still learning about Marx, simply because of his impact on history. Before we tuck Marx away into the dark hole of forgotten history, we must consider how bits and pieces of his narrative may still help to provide explanations on other ways we can try to improve the world and prevent such stark class divide, because the phrase “the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggle” is worth looking into when wondering how society got to where it is today.¹⁵⁷

As Lyotard claims that grand narratives are for too literal and society should not stick to just this one story, he also argues that the knowledge we now have today as a society through technology and science has progressed to the point where narratives are far too simple because we have so much knowledge at our fingertips through media and computers. With this newly developing technology he explains:

These transformations can be expected to have a considerable impact on knowledge. Its two principal functions- research and the transmission of acquired learning- are already feeling the effect, or will in the future...it is common knowledge that the miniaturization and commercialization of machines is already changing the way in which learning is acquired, classified, made available, and exploited.”¹⁵⁸

The way we have access to knowledge and learning has come far in how readily available information is. Lyotard believes because of this there is no one story that can tie something like

¹⁵ Karl Marx, “The Communist Manifesto”, *Selected Writings*, (Hackett Publishing Company: 1994), 158.

¹⁶ Jean-Francois Lyotard, “The Field: Knowledge in Computerized Societies”, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, (Manchester University Press: 1984), 4.

science together, because "scientific knowledge does not represent the totality of knowledge; it has always existed in addition to, and in competition and conflict with, another kind of knowledge...narrative...its model is related to ideas of internal equilibrium and conviviality."¹⁵⁹ Because there are so many tangents and specific topics of science with the advancement of our knowledge and technology, to Lyotard it is impossible to place it in a grand narrative as it is too general and impractical.

What if one were to write about the grand narrative of the history of science? Maybe the grand narrative is impractical in terms of science, but when it comes to history it can be truly useful. According to historian G.M. Trevelyan, history cannot be seen or analyzed in such a way as science, for "there is no way of scientifically deducing causal laws about the action of human beings in the mass. In short, the value of history is not scientific. It's true value is educational. It can educate the minds of men by causing them to reflect on the past."¹⁶⁰ Like science, there are several topics and themes under the great umbrella of history with complex moving parts, opinions, and emotions. However, for example:

"In dealing even in affair of which the facts are so comparatively well known as those of the French Revolution, it is impossible accurately to examine the psychology of twenty-five million different persons, of whom- except a few hundreds or thousands- the lives and motives are buried in the black night of the utterly forgotten. No one, therefore, can ever give a complete or wholly true account of the causes of the French Revolution. But several imperfect readings of history are better than none at all."¹⁶¹

¹⁷ Jean-Francois Lyotard, "The Problem: Legitimation", *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, (Manchester University Press: 1984), 7.

¹⁸ George Trevelyan, *Clio, A Muse, and Other Essays*, (Longmans, Green and Co: 1914), 12.

¹⁹ George Trevelyan, *Clio, A Muse, and Other Essays*, (Longmans, Green and Co: 1914), 8.

Although there are many moving parts to history, sometimes a more general account cannot only add more enriching knowledge to the public but also portray it in an easier to understand way.

This is proven in the 1619 Project as there are moving parts to Black history, but Jones' account allows these parts to be easily put together and reaches a broader audience.

The opposite of the grand narrative is the specialization of a certain topic, researching the minute details of specific time eras of countries, areas of the world, branches of governments, and more, something Lyotard finds more useful to current society. A historian who often researches specific events is Natalie Zemon Davis, with her focus on early modern Europe. In one of her writings, she dedicates a chapter to festival life in French societies, and how the societal roles flipped during these carnivals, mocking those at the top. For example, "one of these urban festivals was sponsored by the clerics- namely the Feast of Fools at Christmastime, when a choirboy or chaplain would be elected bishop and preside while the minor clergy burlesqued the mass and even confession and led an ass around the church."¹⁶² This can answer questions for those interested in the lives of the typical French citizens and what activities they participated in for entertainment. The question as to why these particular events question the hierarchical way of life during these times is a peculiar and interesting one, and Davis allows her audience to dig deeper into this world. However, Davis' audience is small. Her language can be confusing for those not experienced in the world of historical writing. There is no narrative across time. It is quite focused, and it does not reach a broader population. Focused history cannot always answer larger questions and a grand narrative is needed to connect these smaller topics to a greater picture.

²⁰ Natalie Zemon Davis, "The Reasons of Misrule", *Society and Culture in Early Modern France*, (Stanford University Press: 1975), 98.

This then leads to the question of public history and the use of the grand narrative.

According to Robert Kelley:

“in its simplest meaning, public history refers to the employment of historians and the historical method outside of academia: in government, private corporations, the media, historical societies and museums...an issue needs to be resolved, a policy must be formed, the use of a resource or the direction of an activity must be more effectively planned- and a historian is called upon to bring in the dimension of time.”¹⁶³

Public history allows for knowledge to be spread in a more meaningful and accessible way to encourage the sharing of ideas and information for more debate and understanding into society about the world around it, and the 1619 Project can be considered an example of this. As mentioned previously, Nikole Hannah-Jones is not a professional historian, she is an award-winning journalist. However, she is bringing the history of the Black struggle into the public spotlight through the popular and widely trusted media of the *New York Times*. Her use of the grand narrative to portray her message of the deep racism of America and the exercising of American ideals by Black citizens spreads to a wider audience because its pace is easy to keep up with and easy to understand for the average American citizen. Her simple language and general points can be understood, while her story still leaves a lasting impact on the reader and society at large due to the attention it has gotten across America in the media. The 1619 Project’s grand narrative offered a new kind of debate among historians, journalists, and ordinary citizens alike about an important aspect of American history and culture, introducing a conversation that has the ability to improve society. Therefore, Lyotard’s argument that grand narratives should be

²¹ Robert Kelley, “Public History: Its Origins, Nature, and Prospects.” *Public History Readings*, (1978), 111.

left in the past may not be so applicable to history, as grand narratives are still relevant in the field of public and academic history today.

III. Amar and Other Scholars' Perspectives

The 1619 Project is not the only recent example of grand narrative use. The question of what it means to be an American can be looked at through multiple different lenses along with Black history, and in a traditionally academic manner as well. Akhil Amar is an American legal scholar who has a passion for the United States Constitution. He uses a broader storytelling of US history to explain the importance of the Constitution. He emphasizes the metaphor of the Constitution set up like a structured building, with the Founding Fathers and the American people as the architects. The American people are the true creators of the Constitution however, because it fits to the people's needs and rights and remains up to date on said needs through amendments. Amar suggests that the most important part of the document is "the blank space" at the end as it "is a constant reminder to us that the document is not finished" and "had amendments been blended into the original text, the document might seem perfect and complete."¹⁶⁴ Amar celebrates the fact that the original text is never changed, simply amended. This is opposed to many other countries who completely rewrite Constitutions rather than change or amend it, such as France, which has changed its Constitution dozens of times throughout its history. Amendments allow America to not forget about its past mistakes; they are a confession. The democracy of America is still a work in progress, and without this blank space left for these amendments, progress cannot happen or be recognized. He states that "rather than prying loose and carting off embarrassing textual remnants of American's imperfect history, like the Fugitive

²² Akil Amar, "Architecture", *Indiana Law Journal*, vol. 77, (2002), 686.

Slave Clause or the Three-Fifths Clause, We, the People, have added on new rooms to the old edifice. No whitewash: the old mistake remains in place and in view as a lesson to all.”¹⁶⁵

Learning comes from mistakes and recognizing that mistakes like these exist is always a step in the direction of progress. Amar moves through the history of America through examples of how the Articles and Amendments have been exercised for centuries. He explains John Marshall’s aims to define the scope of congressional power under Article 1, then describes that “when Abraham Lincoln suspended habeas corpus...it does not say that only Congress may suspend, and there are good textual, practical, and structural reasons to think that a President in Lincoln’s situation should be able to make the decision.”¹⁶⁶ By bringing his audience through the history of America in the lens of the Constitution and using the metaphor of architecture, he portrays the importance, the influence, and the vital impact the Constitution has had in any government or societal decision for centuries. He uses this unique grand narrative to emphasize that We, the People truly keep this country moving forward, and it would not be possible to have this power without the Constitution.

In a similar writing by Amar, he claims that the reign of the filibuster can end by simple majority rule, and once again vividly takes his audience through the course of American government to answer this. He begins with how “some senators today...think that the Senate’s current filibuster system cannot be abolished by a simple majority vote. They should think again, for they have misread America’s Constitution, written and unwritten.”¹⁶⁷ The “unwritten” part is important, for in those parts is where the answer to how majority rule formed lies in four factors:

²³ Akil Amar, “Architecture”, *Indiana Law Journal*, vol. 77, (2002), 687.

²⁴ Akil Amar, “Architecture”, *Indiana Law Journal*, vol. 77, (2002), 696-7.

²⁵ Akhil Reed Amar, “LEX MAJORIS PARTIS: HOW THE SENATE CAN END THE FILIBUSTER ON ANY DAY BY SIMPLE MAJORITY RULE,” *Duke Law Journal* 63, no. 7 (2014), 1484.

“First, majority rule has unique mathematical properties that make it the obvious answer... second...majority rule was the natural default of all assemblies...third, the Constitution’s text evidently incorporated this majoritarian premise, albeit by implication...fourth...majority rule was not only implicit in the Constitution’s text, but also visible in its very enactment.”¹⁶⁸ Amar establishes what majority rule is before providing several examples of how it has been used through the years in order to emphasize how it can be used to end the filibuster. Examples of majority rule being used in government include the “enactment process in 1787-88” and “the 1892 case, *United States v. Ballin*, [in which] the Court explicitly embraced majority rule as the background master norm for each house of Congress.”¹⁶⁹ Using events that sweep across American history provides a broader outlook on how majority rule has influenced almost every decision made in the US, adding to Amar’s main argument that it can be used even on something like the filibuster. He explains that there have been instances where it has almost happened: “in the early twenty-first century, Republican senators frustrated by the success of the Democratic minority in blocking votes on various judicial nominations loudly threatened to revise the old filibuster rule by a simple majority vote. This threatened revision, popularly nicknamed ‘the nuclear option,’ never came to a conclusive floor vote.”¹⁷⁰ Although this writing is much more focused on the logistics of precisely how the filibuster could end and why it should, Amar still comes to this conclusion by increasing the lens on how decision making in American

²⁶ Akhil Reed Amar, “LEX MAJORIS PARTIS: HOW THE SENATE CAN END THE FILIBUSTER ON ANY DAY BY SIMPLE MAJORITY RULE,” *Duke Law Journal* 63, no. 7 (2014), 1485-87.

²⁷ Akhil Reed Amar, “LEX MAJORIS PARTIS: HOW THE SENATE CAN END THE FILIBUSTER ON ANY DAY BY SIMPLE MAJORITY RULE,” *Duke Law Journal* 63, no. 7 (2014), 1493.

²⁸ Akhil Reed Amar, “LEX MAJORIS PARTIS: HOW THE SENATE CAN END THE FILIBUSTER ON ANY DAY BY SIMPLE MAJORITY RULE”, *Duke Law Journal* 63, no. 7 (2014), 1495.

government has played out by majority rule and how it has been so useful to so many crucial and possible pivotal points in history. Amar's use of grand narrative once again shows that looking at the grander scheme of things can sometimes lead to more answers rather than looking so up closely.

In a final example of a recent and scholarly use of the grand narrative, Dorothy Ross tackles the challenge of examining the grand narrative in American historical writing (perhaps even a grand narrative of the grand narrative). She starts the conversation on how there has been "widespread discontent with the results of historical study pursued today" due to the "absence of an assured grand narrative in current American historiography."¹⁷¹ She references William Sloane, a 19th century history professor, in which his confidence in knowing that "the grand narrative of all history" is "a narrative of progress" stems from something "no longer available to us a century later: 'an evolutionary philosophy' that disclosed the unity and continuity of all history." Ross explains that the lack of a grand narrative in history academe has brought about discontent, because in the 1950s the "moment of American triumphalism initiated a political mentality and a retreat from grand narrative that have colored historical practice ever since."¹⁷² This may bring to reason why scholars like Lyotard are so critical of the grand narrative, as the attitude of the time was that of progress and not looking back to the past for answers because "the weakening of religious belief and the industrial transformation of society called it into question,"¹⁷³ hence Lyotard's argument of technological advancement being the answer for the present and future historical research and writings. Although someone like Amar is supportive of

²⁹ Dorothy Ross, "Grand Narrative in American Historical Writing: From Romance to Uncertainty." *The American Historical Review* 100, no. 3 (1995), 651.

³⁰ Dorothy Ross, "Grand Narrative in American Historical Writing: From Romance to Uncertainty." *The American Historical Review* 100, no. 3 (1995), 651.

³¹ Dorothy Ross, "Grand Narrative in American Historical Writing: From Romance to Uncertainty." *The American Historical Review* 100, no. 3 (1995), 654.

an attitude of progress as well, he believes that looking to and reflecting on the past is the best way for progress to happen. Perhaps if Amar's viewpoint were the attitude of the time, the grand narrative would not be lost. Ross goes on to say that "many of the historians who established the profession wished to separate history from its divine background and to recover the past realistically...history was to become a science, not literature."¹⁷⁴ It is interesting that just before this more scientific approach of history came about, Trevelyan drafted an entire essay on how history is not a science. As Ross examines the pros and cons of the grand narrative now, she states that "the regular or heuristic adoption of grand narratives is in many ways the easiest to imagine and construct, allowing historians to explore, as they question, familiar stories."¹⁷⁵ This perhaps is why many writers and scholars of today continue to use the grand narrative. They may not use it so intentionally to explain the existence of humanity or all of history, but, in order to get bold points across about current topics, the use of the grand narrative of areas of history does play out to be useful.

IV. A Brief Conclusion

With the topic of the grand narrative, the understanding of history is at stake. It is important to understand how to frame history and sometimes take a wider view of what has happened to gain answers to lingering questions. Specializing in a certain topic of history can add to knowledge. But, sometimes taking a step back and looking at the big picture is necessary in order to truly understand history, which respected authors like Amar and Jones have demonstrated. Whether it

³² Dorothy Ross, "Grand Narrative in American Historical Writing: From Romance to Uncertainty." (1995), 654.

³³ Dorothy Ross, "Grand Narrative in American Historical Writing: From Romance to Uncertainty." (1995), 676.

be a greater appreciation and understanding of the Constitution or a need to centralize Black history and culture into the American conversation, the grand narrative is a useful tool in what it means to be engaged with universal, not always so literal, questions.

Bibliography

Akil Amar, "Architecture", *Indiana Law Journal*, vol. 77, (2002).

Akhil Reed Amar, "LEX MAJORIS PARTIS: HOW THE SENATE CAN END THE FILIBUSTER ON ANY DAY BY SIMPLE MAJORITY RULE", *Duke Law Journal* 63, no. 7 (2014).

Dorothy Ross, "Grand Narrative in American Historical Writing: From Romance to Uncertainty." *The American Historical Review* 100, no. 3 (1995).

George Trevelyan, *Clio, A Muse, and Other Essays*, (Longmans, Green and Co: 1914).

Jean-Francois Lyotard, "The Field: Knowledge in Computerized Societies", *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, (Manchester University Press: 1984).

Jean-Francois Lyotard, "The Nature of the Social Bond: The Modern Alternative", *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, (Manchester University Press: 1984).

Jean-Francois Lyotard, "The Pragmatics of Narrative Knowledge", *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, (Manchester University Press: 1984).

Jean-Francois Lyotard, "The Problem: Legitimation", *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, (Manchester University Press: 1984).

Karl Marx, "The Communist Manifesto", *Selected Writings*, (Hackett Publishing Company: (1994).

Natalie Zemon Davis, "The Reasons of Misrule", *Society and Culture in Early Modern France*, (Stanford University Press: 1975).

Nikole Hannah-Jones, "The 1619 Project", *New York Times*, (August 2019).

Robert Kelley, "Public History: Its Origins, Nature, and Prospects." *Public History Readings*, (1978).

Sean Wilentz, "A Matter of Facts", *The Atlantic*, (January 2020).
<https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/01/1619-project-new-york-times-wilentz/605152/>

Tiya Miles, "Municipal Bonds: How Slavery Built Wall Street", *New York Times*, (August 2019).

Tiya Miles, "Chained Migration: How Slavery Made its Way West", *New York Times*, (August 2019).

The Importance of Greek Mythology and Its Impact on Youth Culture in the United States
Using *Percy Jackson: The Lightning Thief*

Zachary W. Richards

Department: History

Abstract:

Rick Riordan's work with the *Percy Jackson* book series presented young readers with a connection to Greek Mythology unparalleled to anything they had experienced before. His work, crafted as an Americanized and easily consumable form of Greek Mythology for young readers, became an integral piece of a culture fixated on ancient classics. This study examines the impact on both the immediate and long-term effects on youth culture within the United States given this newfound interest and interpretation of Greek Mythology. Both ancient works, such as Homer's *Iliad*, and contemporary studies, such as Jan Bremmer's *Interpretations of Greek Mythology*, are utilized to grasp an understanding of how mythology is integrated into a society's culture and the lasting impact it may have, particularly with modern consumers. This led to the understanding that mythology may still be very pertinent to our society today, yet in a modern and revolutionized way.

For millennia, the utterly captivating and endless lore of Greek mythology has mesmerized the world's population, serving in duality as both an escape from harsh realities and as a tool of divine guidance. Through the stories of Greek gods and goddesses, people find themselves entranced with their likeness so much that they have been deeply ingrained in not only Greek culture, but popular culture across the globe. In the history of the United States, the study of its own social construct and popular culture has been best understood as a grand accumulation by outside influences, with ancient Greek culture holding a notable prominence in this respect. While live plays, poetry, and prose writing dominated most of the ancient world in covering the landscape of Greek mythology, modern American adaptations demonstrated their accounts best through interpolative novels, television shows, and movies. In lieu of historical epics and fantastical chronicles, the early 2000s was a monumental period for a cultural boom of old and new worlds to coincide with the mainstream of American popular culture. As *Harry Potter* spellbound a generation with magical spells and wizard games, or as the *Lord of the Rings* ignited the dream of dragon fighting in Middle Earth, *Percy Jackson: The Lightning Thief* introduced a whole new generation to the fabled world of Greek mythology. Rick Riordan, the author of the *Percy Jackson* series, which spans five novel entries, weaves between the lines of connecting contemporary lifestyles within ancient characters, creating a cast of relatable deities that are not only unforgettable, but inspiring. Riordan's Americanization of Greek mythology is not necessarily groundbreaking; western adaptations go as far back as the 19th Century with *A Wonder Book for Boys and Girls* (1851) and *Tanglewood Tales* (1853), yet Riordan's storytelling has propelled the *Percy Jackson* series to the single-most successful breakthrough of Greek mythology in American culture. For most of the adult population, these cultural influences are fun crazes that come and go. There will always be something new and exciting to cross the

landscape of the silver screen or the pages of a novel. However, for the youth in the United States, these influences stand as much more than that; mythical stories and characters become something to admire, something to cling on to when there is nothing else. Percy Jackson was a necessary protagonist to kids that could both relate to his out-of-the-box, outsider nature while finding admiration in his courage and heroism that could seldom be found elsewhere at his magnitude when the novel was released in 2005. While undoubtedly significant in the mainstream of popular culture, Rick Riordan's Americanization of Greek mythology was especially powerful for the way it introduced a seemingly innovative world of stories that young people connect with, learn from, and endlessly explore. What is most pertinent to question is both the immediate and long-lasting impact that Riordan's series had on young readers, specifically, how his Americanized submission into the mythological canon promoted a strong interest in the classics and how this might have affected the audience's interpretation of Greek mythology given this series was likely their first introduction to it. As the series remains alive through a Broadway musical and talks of a revitalized television series, its legacy suggests Riordan's series is the single-most successful rendition of the Greek classics in the new millennium.

As American culture finds Greek mythology as a constructive backbone, it is fundamental to understand the gravity of mythology and religion in ancient Greek societies before understanding its place in our American structure. Mythology, by ancient Greek standards, is fascinating as it holds an unparalleled connection between the divine and the natural world. To historians, understanding the sheer scale of mythology is challenging as the presence and functionality of supernatural monsters and deities surely had a larger impact on their world outside of pure entertainment. Cara Leigh Sanders proposes that there were eight functions to

mythology in Greek society, those being: history, education, explanation (for the unexplainable), cultural causality (to explain why a culture did certain things), governing legitimacy, understanding creation, understanding the afterlife, and lastly, entertainment.¹⁷⁶ All that considered, as difficult as it may be to retroactively comprehend the exact placement of Greek mythology in their ancient society, it is widely accepted that it was deeply interconnected within the lives of everyday people, more so than any folklore seen at this breadth. As a component of history, Greek myth could most realistically be understood through the tales of human heroics more so than the study of divine intervention. For example, Homer's famous epics, the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad* are both sequences of the same overarching story and yet both were delivered in subtly different ways. In these stories, Homer depicts the great duality that Greek myth is often broken down into, that of the Heroic and the Divine¹⁷⁷. The *Iliad* could much more accurately be perceived as a historical retelling of one of the largest wars ever fought in the pre-Greek kingdom era due to the nature of human heroism. While divine intervention is certainly present, it is much more prominently represented through the idea of fate and the emotional connections the deities have between the mortals and their actions. Alternatively, divine myths expand upon the origins and actions of the gods, often amongst themselves, yet there remain instances when the gods play an integral part in the dealings of humankind. In contrast to its precursor, the *Odyssey* introduces a significant increase in direct divine intervention that immediately impacts Odysseus' journey. This could be well exemplified by the end of book 12, as Odysseus and his men are divinely punished by Zeus due to their wrongdoing of slaughtering the Sun God's divine cattle:

“Then, then in the same breath Zeus hit the craft

¹ Sailors, Cara Leigh, *The Function of Mythology and Religion in Ancient Greek Society*. (2007).

² Sailors, *Function of Mythology*, 14

with a lightning-bolt and thunder. Round she spun,
 reeling under the impact, filled with reeking brimstone,
 shipmates pitching out of her, bobbing round like seahawks
 swept along by the whitecaps past the trim black hull—
 and the god cut short their journey home forever.¹⁷⁸

Homer's delivery of mythology is undoubtedly groundbreaking in the scope of classical studies and our modern understanding of ancient Greece and Greek mythology as one of the top primary sources from an era of forgotten or lost literature. The *Iliad* and *Odyssey* survive as prime examples of nearly all eight of Sailor's eight proposed functions of Mythology, not just history. Another major component of Mythology within society was its purpose of explanation which was regularly visited through the ideas of fate and divine explanation, which were found in many more stories and tales outside of Homer's. As understood by Jan Bremmer in his book, *Interpretations of Greek Mythology*, the muses and poets that told these stories were divinely inspired by deities, conveying the adventures of the gods as they bore important and relevant messages about life or about the gods to the people of Greece.¹⁷⁹ It is within this societal relevance that Greek mythology has graced the cultures of countless people outside the walls of its own history.

This is why in a college classroom in the year 2005, nearly three thousand years after the writings of Homer, Euripides, and Hesiod, students eagerly compare the

³ Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. Emily Wilson (New York: W.W. Norton And Company, 2018).

⁴ Jan N Bremmer, *Interpretations of Greek Mythology* (2014).

similarities between the story of Hercules and the 1987 cultural hit *Predator*.¹⁸⁰ Within weaving ancient mythology inside the fabric of popular culture, we see most potently how old stories can have a profound effect on all cultures, and how David Fraufenfelder puts it, can “illuminate both sides in ways otherwise impossible.”¹⁸¹ Rick Riordan became a powerful proponent of this effect. His *Percy Jackson* series delivered the pantheon of Greek gods in a way never-before-seen in the American media. He blends ancient mythology with everyday American life, allowing young readers to symbolically connect the stories of the Greeks to the locations and norms of American culture and society. As a seamless introduction into the world of Greek mythology, Riordan largely drops grand and imagined temples, caves, and palaces alike often found in ancient stories and interpolates them into familiar settings. Examples of this are found all across Percy’s journey, as he finds himself a new home in the form of a demi-god summer camp in Long Island, New York; and akin to Odysseus and his men encountering the intoxicating lotus flowers in the *Odyssey*¹⁸², Percy and his companions come across the Lotus Hotel in Las Vegas, where once you “check in, you stay forever.”¹⁸³ And to his ultimate destination, the Empire State Building, as the building’s grand elevators double as the celestial entrance to Mount Olympus.¹⁸⁴ In hand with this modernization of Greek mythology is naturally the representation of the deities themselves, imagined in ways a younger audience can draw easy connections to their character. For example, in *The Lightning Thief*, Ares, the God of war, is introduced in front of a “chrome-lined diner” and is

⁵ David Fraufenfelder, *Popular Culture and Classical Mythology*. (2005).

⁶ Fraufenfelder, *Popular Culture* (2005)

⁷ Homer, *The Odyssey*, Trans. Emily Wilson, 139

⁸ Riordan, Rick, *Percy Jackson: The Lightning Thief*, 273

⁹ Riordan, *Percy Jackson*, 351

imagined as a rough rider, described with aviator sunglasses and a studded leather jacket as he twirled around a pocket knife¹⁸⁵, in a scene that is distinctly reminiscent of the American “greaser” stereotype from the 1950s. Riordan’s connection with American iconicity continued through Ares’ counterpart, Aphrodite, the Greek Goddess of love and beauty, fittingly associating her with a retired “tunnel of love” amusement park ride where they come across her pink silk scarf that smelled of “indescribable-rose.”¹⁸⁶ It is within these walls of recognition that American audiences, most notably young readers, can draw lines of cognition that allows them to garner further interest in both the subject and the characters of classical literature. Not only that, but Riordan’s Americanized connotations of these gods present an easier and more natural path for young and interested readers to learn about the pantheon of the Greek Gods and Goddesses.

Riordan’s intentions to Americanize Greek mythology to tailor its stories to a younger audience is directly influenced by his own experience as both a teacher and a father. He presented Percy Jackson as a young student, unaware of where he fits in, struggling with ADHD and dyslexia, a protagonist capable of courage, cleverness, and heroism. Riordan idealized the learning disabilities of ADHD and dyslexia as pseudo-superpowers, driving the explanation as due to his brain possessing heightened senses and reflexes because of being a demigod¹⁸⁷. As his own son dealt with the same issues as Percy, Riordan created his character as an admirable figure, allowing his son, and children everywhere, to embody the capacities that they struggle with and wear it, as in Riordan’s words, “as a badge.”¹⁸⁸ It is important to take this admiration of Greek

¹⁰ Riordan, *Percy Jackson*, 233

¹¹ Riordan, *Percy Jackson*, 243

¹² Riordan, *Percy Jackson*, 88

¹³ Williams, Sally. “Percy Jackson: My Boy’s Own Adventure.” *The Guardian*, February 8, 2010

mythology honed by American society and understand the significance of its presence. The fundamental morality underlying the stories of classical mythology, such as loyalty, control, sympathy, forgiveness, and respect still prove themselves as powerful lessons to live by and Rick Riordan does an effective job to perpetuate, and in a way, enhance those models for his younger audience.

In reference to the aforementioned eight functions of mythology in Greek society, as proposed by Cara Leigh Sailors, it can be equally proposed that the *Percy Jackson* series introduced its own set of functions for its readers and the budding new generation. As a source of historical insight, Riordan relays the relationships between the gods in a relatively accurate manner while exploring the grand range of creative liberties that keeps the stories exciting and relatable to his target audience. Examine the titular character and his Greek mythological counterpart, Perseus. Rick Riordan weaves the connection between how Perseus was presented through Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (8 AD) while continuing to tell his own story. Just as Perseus was given a sword of adamantine forged by Hephaestus, Percy was given "Anaklusmos", a shimmering bronze sword that Percy translated as "Riptide"¹⁸⁹. And just as Perseus was gifted winged sandals by Hermes, Percy was gifted winged basketball sneakers by Hermes' demigod son, Luke.¹⁹⁰ Most notably, Riordan also links the characters' most heralded victory, that of slaying the gorgon, Medusa. Riordan's creativity through the novel is perhaps most visible in his inventive depictions of half-blood sons and daughters (children born from God-mortal relationships) of several Greek gods as vehicles to deliver relationships between Gods and Goddesses that are canonically accurate to ancient portrayals. For example, in Percy

¹⁴ Riordan, *Percy Jackson*, 159

¹⁵ Riordan, *Percy Jackson*, 156

Jackson's fight against Medusa, Anabeth, Athena's fictionalized demigod daughter, found Percy a reflective glass orb that he used to defeat the monster.¹⁹¹ As Anabeth first discovered the orb, she says, "A polished shield would be better." in reference to the polished shield that Athena had given Perseus in his battle against Medusa. While nothing is truly ever "set in stone" in ancient myth, Riordan's appreciation and acknowledgement towards the source material that is derivative of these characters speaks to the faith he has in the series as an educational tool for a reader's first introduction to the world of Greek mythology.

Understanding the importance and impact that Greek mythology has had on American culture is naturally found in the reception of the audience. The general fascination with Greek myth, which has sustained multiple millennia, has found its lore indoctrinated within the everyday life of society. So much so that several major American companies, institutions, projects, and programs pride their linkage with the characters and stories of Greek mythology. Nike, now the #1 clothing and sports brand in the country¹⁹², is famously named after the Greek Goddess of Victory by the same name. NASA's top space program, Apollo, follows suit after the God of the same name, which refers to his archery talents and accuracy to hit his target. Fast-forward to the late-20th and early-21st Century, and fascination with Greek mythology and culture rose to a new height thanks to the popular success of movies like Disney's *Hercules* (1997), which would become a household classic; games like *God of War* (2005), which won several "Game of the Year" awards; and of course with novels such as *Percy Jackson: The Lightning Thief*,

¹⁶ Riordan, *Percy Jackson*, 190

¹⁷ Fitzpatrick, Hayley, "The Top 10 Clothing Companies in America - Business Insider," Business Insider (July 6, 2015)

which was critically received as one of the top children/young adult novels of the year from its 2005 release. The groundbreaking footwork that these mediums put forward became the driving force behind the passionate national interest of Greek mythology and culture that entranced an entire generation.

Percy Jackson's equally successful and important reception to young readers was evidently vital to the teaching of the classics in school, as the book series transcended the material from something purely educational to something that was now fun, entertaining, and relatable. The garnered interest behind the series even influenced real-life renditions of summer camps modeled after the demi-god camp from the series, Camp Half-Blood, which allowed fans to immerse themselves in the lore and activities that they so enamored while reading. As stated by one of the camp's original coordinators from 2006, "We'll do anything to keep kids interested in reading. We try to make meaningful connections between history, mythology, literature, art, science, sports, current events, language, and rampant creativity."¹⁹³ Their activities, which pertained to sword training, rock climbing, archery, and chariot racing helped prompt an innovative insight into the world of ancient Greece to the younger generation that they would not have otherwise if it were not for the success and influence of Riordan's novels and his Americanization of mythological stories.

In a 2009 interview, Rick Riordan encapsulated his understanding of how powerful the presence of myth is in our modern context with this: "I think the more you understand myths, the more you understand the roots of our culture and the more things will resonate. Do you have to know them? No, but certainly it is nice to recognize how deeply these things are embedded in

¹⁸ Topher Bradfield, "Lareviewofbooks," lareviewofbooks, (2013)

our literature, our art.”¹⁹ Through the ancient Greek civilization, the tales of mythology were integral to their society in a multitude of ways, ranging from pure entertainment to giving legitimacy to a system of governance, or to simply explain what was once believed to be unexplainable. While the resulting impact on mythology today, as an influential building block of American culture, is not as direct and explicit, it may still be utilized as a framework for understanding human nature and the world around us. These creative, curated tales of recurring deities that are symbolic of both the natural world and the human psyche have been essential building blocks to art, literature, and education for thousands of years. What *Percy Jackson: The Lightning Thief* accomplishes is a revitalization of these ancient narratives to an audience that had seldom mythological outlets prior. With credit to the excellently crafted modern Americanization of these stories by the mind of Rick Riordan, a generational wave of readers and consumers have been given the breadth to further encounter the many questions and morals that mythology often employs.

¹⁹ Jacqueline Bach, “Battling Greek Mythology, History, and Reluctant Readers: An Interview with Rick Riordan,” *The ALAN Review* 37, no. 1 (2009)

References

- Bach, Jacqueline. "Battling Greek Mythology, History, and Reluctant Readers: An Interview with Rick Riordan." *The ALAN Review* 37, no. 1 (2009).
<https://scholar.lib.vt.edu/ejournals/ALAN/v37n1/bach.html>.
- Bradfield, Topher. "Lareviewofbooks." lareviewofbooks, June 30, 2013.
<https://tumblr.lareviewofbooks.org/post/54268763139/dedicated-to-the-demigods-our-lit-camps-by-topher>.
- Bremmer, Jan N. *Interpretations of Greek Mythology*. New York: Routledge, 2014.
- Fitzpatrick, Hayley. "The Top 10 Clothing Companies in America - Business Insider." Business Insider. Business Insider, July 6, 2015. <https://www.businessinsider.com/the-10-biggest-apparel-companies-in-the-us-2015-7>.
- David Frauenfelder. "Popular Culture and Classical Mythology." *The Classical World* 98, no. 2 (2005): 210–13. <https://doi.org/10.2307/4352933>.
- Homer. *The Odyssey*. Translated by Emily Wilson. New York: W.W. Norton And Company, 2018.
- Riordan, Rick. *Percy Jackson and the Lightning Thief*. London: Puffin, 2005.
- Sailors, Cara. "The Function of Mythology and Religion in Ancient Greek Society," 2007.
<https://dc.etsu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3471&context=etd>.
- Williams, Sally. "Percy Jackson: My Boy's Own Adventure." *The Guardian*, February 8, 2010, sec. Life and style. <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2010/feb/08/percy-jackson-rick-riordan>.