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978-0-521-19456-3 - She-Wolf: The Story of a Roman Icon

Cristina Mazzoni

Excerpt

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INTRODUCTION: ROME AND THE SHE-WOLF

THE WORD *TROIA* IN ITALIAN MAY DESCRIBE A FEMALE ANIMAL – a sow – or a human sex worker: *troia* is a derogatory term for a female prostitute. Capitalize the word, however, and it becomes, instead, the illustrious ancient city of Troy, Rome’s urban ancestor. Likewise, the Latin word *lupa* has two meanings: It indicates, metaphorically, a prostitute; yet *lupa* is also the she-wolf who suckled Romulus and Remus. It is from the fusion of two separate legends embedded in each of these two ambiguous, grammatically feminine words – *troia* and *lupa* – that the story of Rome’s birth derives: the fifth-century BCE Greek legend, which attributed Rome’s founding to the Trojan hero Aeneas around the twelfth century BCE, and the later indigenous legend of the she-wolf, dating from 300 BCE and according to which a native founder and his twin brother were saved by a local beast four and a half centuries earlier. By the first century BCE, the two legends had blended harmoniously, making Romulus a descendant of Aeneas as a compromise and with a few hundred years elapsing between the births of the two alleged (and, until then, competing) founders. However crucial Aeneas’s arrival on Italian soil, though, and no matter how necessary Romulus’s building of Rome’s first wall and his murder of his brother, it is the scene of the she-wolf nursing two baby boys – and the narrative that this image tells – that remains the most visible and most frequently represented moment in the story of Rome’s foundation. How and why this has been and continues to be the case form the subject of this book.

It is with these puns of *Troia* the city and *troia* the whore and *lupa* the she-wolf and *lupa* the prostitute that our story must begin. At the end of the most famous war in Western history, the ancient city of Troy finally burned. According to conventional dating, this took place in the year we would today call 1184 BCE. The war started because Aphrodite,

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grateful to have been chosen by Paris as the most beautiful of three goddesses, caused the loveliest of all Greek women, Helen, to fall in love with Paris himself, a Trojan. This turned out to be not much of a gift because beautiful Helen, alas, was married already – and to a Greek king no less. Paris abducted Helen from her husband Menelaus and took her to his home on the other side of the Aegean. Menelaus’s countrymen went to Troy, in present-day Turkey, to get Helen back and besieged the city for ten years. The crafty Greeks eventually defeated the city of Troy through the memorable trick of the hollow wooden horse, but only after much death and destruction. Aphrodite’s Trojan son Aeneas managed to escape his burning city and, after some adventures, landed on the shores of the region of Latium in the center of the Italian peninsula’s western coast. With Aeneas were his father Anchises – representative of the past and sometime lover of the Greek goddess of love – and Aeneas’s own son Ascanius – the hopeful image of the future. Aeneas’s wife, Creusa, daughter of the Trojan king Priam and mother of Ascanius, became lost somewhere during the flight. Unable to keep up with the men in her life, she had no place in Aeneas’s impending adventures and would have impeded his strategic marriage to Lavinia, the daughter of Latium’s King Latinus. Ascanius was also known as Iulus: From him, the Julian dynasty – of Julius Caesar fame – would take its name. Ascanius founded the city of Alba Longa, the “Long White City,” in the countryside about 12 miles southeast of the place that would later become Rome.

Eleven generations after Aeneas’s flight from Troy, Rhea Silvia – the daughter of Alba Longa’s former king Numitor and descended from Ascanius – gave birth to twin boys, Romulus and Remus; or rather, as the ancients would say, Remus and Romulus: The former was firstborn, and the Romans regularly referred to their adventures as the story “de Remo et Romulo” (Wiseman, *Remus* xiii). Beautiful Rhea Silvia was also known as Ilia, meaning “the Trojan girl” – a reminder that Aeneas was her ancestor. She was a Vestal virgin, tradition claims, and bound by religious vows to abstain from sexual intercourse. Her uncle Amulius had forced her into this chaste position. After traitorously deposing his brother Numitor and killing his nephews, Amulius feared the retaliation of Numitor’s descendants through Rhea Silvia; her perpetual virginity would ensure Amulius’s own safety. Rhea Silvia’s religious vows did not stop the god of war, Mars, from raping and impregnating the princess in her sleep (in a seriously weird version of the story, Mars takes Rhea Silvia – or, alternately, her handmaid – in the form of a wooden phallus that appears in the middle of her house). Amulius, fearful of what Rhea

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Silvia's sons might do to him when they grew up, ordered his servants to get rid of them by drowning them in the Tiber River. At this point, Rhea Silvia disappears from the story: She is either killed or imprisoned by Amulius and – her biological task accomplished – we never hear of her again.

At the time of the babies' birth, however, the Tiber River had grown big and treacherous. Amulius's timid servants, rather than murder the two boys, simply abandoned them on the riverbank. They did not want to jeopardize their own lives by getting too close to the risen waters; to the servants, the babies' death must have seemed inevitable. However, the infants were eventually washed up on another shore, in the Velabrum – a marshy area at the foot of the Palatine Hill, where Rome would later be founded – and were rescued by a newly delivered she-wolf. Thirst had attracted the beast to the river and her cubs were gone: dead in some accounts, simply ignored in most others. The she-wolf's sore udders, swollen with unsuckled milk, needed relief. According to the tale, it was the twins' father, Mars, who sent this providential foster mother to the babies, for the wolf was an animal sacred to the god of war. Aided by another of Mars's sacred animals – a woodpecker – the she-wolf nursed the twins in a cave later known as the Lupercal, located at the southwestern corner of the Palatine Hill, near a fig tree. This tree was the famed *Ficus Ruminalis*, which some say is named after Rumina, goddess of sucklings and lactating mothers. The she-wolf nursed Remus and Romulus until Amulius's herdsman, Faustulus (a shepherd in some versions of the story, a lowlier swineherd in others), found the babies, took them away from the beast, and brought them home to his wife. In many accounts, her name is Acca Larentia, and her own child had been stillborn, some historians say.

The twins grew up and eventually killed their great-uncle Amulius, their would-be murderer. With Amulius dead, Romulus and Remus returned the throne of their birthplace – the ancient town of Alba Longa – to its rightful ruler: their grandfather Numitor. It was now the year 753 BCE, a date calculated by a Roman scholar of Caesar's time, named Varro, seven hundred years after the fact and controversially confirmed, interestingly, by recent archaeological findings (Carandini, *Roma*). Unsatisfied with the passive role of heirs and wildly restless like the animal whose milk they once swallowed, the two brothers decided to start their own city. Romulus wanted to build it on the Palatine Hill, showing his attachment to the place where he had been found as a baby by the she-wolf. Remus, however, had chosen a different location,

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probably the neighboring Aventine Hill. They decided to let a flight of birds settle the matter. Some accounts say that Remus on the Aventine saw six vultures and Romulus on the Palatine saw twelve of the royal birds. The brothers were unable to decide peacefully whether the winner should be the one who saw the most vultures or the one who saw fewer birds but saw them first (some deception was also involved in this episode). It is obvious that each brother wanted to be the winner. So, Romulus and Remus got into a fight and Remus was killed. An alternate version of the story postpones the murder by having each brother build city walls on different hills: Romulus on the Palatine, Remus on the Aventine. Remus contemptuously mocked or stepped over Romulus's walls (they were low), and the ending of the story is the same: Romulus killed his brother in what is – after Cain's murder of Abel – the most famous fratricide in Western culture.

There are several stories of Rome's birth. Only one, however, has gained enough popularity to be generally accepted as the report of what might have happened: the story of the twins Romulus and Remus, the she-wolf who rescued them, and their ancestor Aeneas who came from the other side of the sea. This is the narrative that is found in history books and city guides. It is the official story, but – make no mistake – it is not the only one. As the ancient Greek historian Plutarch acknowledged, “From whom, and for what cause, the city of Rome obtained that name, whose glory has diffused itself over the world, historians are not agreed” (*Lives* 31). Indeed, it is around the very name of Rome, as Plutarch implied, that the questions about the city's beginnings revolve.

My favorite alternate story remembers a female founder who, like Aeneas, came from Troy. Greek legends describe how a few surviving Trojans took to the sea to escape the fire that was destroying what was left of their homes. The wind brought them to the mouth of the Tiber River, where they set anchor. The women, discouraged and weary of life amidst the waves, instantly took to this land and, unbeknownst to their men, burned their own ships to put an end to the tiresome voyage. The women's leader was of the highest birth and brightest intellect: Her name was Rhome. Unlike her husband, Rhome saw the home-making potential of that land in the bend of the river. The Trojan men were angry at first, but their wives – no less crafty than the besieging Greeks they had fled – pacified their husbands with kisses, caresses, and doubtless other more intimate acts discreetly left unrecorded. The women's blandishments achieved the intended effect; to this day, said Plutarch – who told this story in the first or second century of the current

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era – Roman women remain exceedingly affectionate toward their husbands and kinsmen because they still seek forgiveness for that long-ago act of insubordination (*Lives* 31). Left with neither ships nor choice but likely abundant sexual availability on the part of their eager-to-appease partners, the Trojan men settled on what later became known as the Palatine Hill. Here, within a short time, they came to see the wisdom of their women through the happiness they found in the verdant country and among the courteous locals. With this appreciation of a rebellious lady's defiance came the honor of naming their new city after Rhome, the women's acknowledged leader and the one who turned a pit stop into a permanent home.

Rhome's story is a good one but not quite good enough. Plutarch is generally considered reliable; his writings are among our most important sources of knowledge about the ancient world. However, he too mentioned this tale almost in passing – Rhome's adventures had already been told in the account of Hellanicus of Lesbos, fifth century BCE (Raaflaub 127) – before getting to the real story, the one his readers had come to expect: the one that by the time Plutarch wrote it had already become famous throughout the Roman world. Rhome's story, therefore, rarely is told and much less remembered. That a smart and educated woman, by choosing the right location and burning a few ships, should have promoted the founding of Rome – such a potent city, such a virile empire – was and unfortunately remains unthinkable. Far more convincing, then and now, is the story of a man who tried to kill his baby nephews, a virgin princess who slept through a rape, twin newborns who survived waters wild enough to scare away grown men, and a savage beast who suckled the two babies instead of eating them.

It is not an edifying story, the one leading to Rome's birth on April 21, 753. This was a month of fertility, celebrated by the pre-Roman dwellers of Latium with feasts of lamb and sheep's-milk cheese. For Rome to be born, however, someone had to die: Rhea Silvia steps out of the picture immediately after giving birth. The she-wolf's cubs likewise are gone, making their mother's milk available to hungry, needy humans. Romulus kills Remus because Rome could have only one founder. Roman and Greek historians write of usurpation and murder, rape and deception, child abandonment, the convenient elimination of baby animals, and, in the end, fratricide. Rome's birth is a tale made of transgression upon transgression, not the least of which is the scandalous suckling of the city's future founder by a smelly, dirty, ferocious beast – a she-wolf, no less – as wild and dangerous an animal as was likely to be found in Italy, then

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and now. However, the surprise of the she-wolf is of a different sort than the shock of a man usurping his own brother's kingdom, of a god raping a virgin girl, or of a young man murdering his own twin brother. The she-wolf's unsettling act is a surprise because the animal, however savage, acts with mercy when none is expected, replacing human iniquity with kindness. In a story of substitutions – the king's brother on the king's throne, the god of war in the body of a seductive human rapist, a virgin performing the maternal work of giving birth – this is the most shocking of all: a wild animal in the place of a human mother, her eight udders supplanting Rhea Silvia's two breasts in the babies' famished mouths.

“When the infants' lips close upon the she-wolf's teats,” as Michael Newton (5–7) suggestively writes in his book on feral children, “a transgressive mercy removes the harmful influence of a murderous culture. The moment is a second birth: where death is expected, succor is given, and the children are miraculously born into the order of nature.” The twins' family intended to destroy them but the natural love of a beast instead preserves them: “Nature's mercy admonished humanity's unnatural cruelty: only a miracle of *kindness* can restore the imbalance created by human iniquity.” Some feral children – whether nursed by wild animals in mythological tales or treated as animals in more harrowing contemporary accounts of abuse – are able to escape, according to Newton, “to a nature that appears unexpectedly merciful and kind.” In other words, redemption very well could rest for abused children today – as it did in the eighth century BCE – in what the Romulus and Remus story represents as a she-wolf: the unexpected kindness of nature's mercy. Regardless of their veracity, what is believed about the stories of feral children – the mercy of nature, for instance – allows a glimpse into the workings of the cultures that narrate them because, Newton contends, these stories are “like a screen on which to project their own preoccupations. Silence is the great guarantee of mystery, but it also permits a thousand fancies, the projection of a multitude of needs” (235).

Embodied in a generous, silent she-wolf and materialized in numerous verbal and visual objects – including an unforgettable bronze statue – the story of Rome's birth also has endured for centuries as a screen for the preoccupations of both single individuals and entire nations. One such preoccupation is everyone's natural curiosity about our origins and about the effects of the time and place from which we came on the time and place lying before us. In this, the Romans' embrace of the she-wolf – for all her prodigious and fantastic details – speaks to a common desire. What effects, for example, will the suckling by a fierce she-wolf

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have on the character of Rome's people, given the close physical and metaphorical bonds that Western culture posits between a mother and her offspring? The contested relationship between nature and culture is implicit in this question, for the nursing she-wolf abbreviates the distance between humans and animals; visual and textual, physical and imaginative ways must be found, then, to reestablish difference in order to assert our humanity. Through animal similes and metaphors – for example, greedy and hungry people act like wolves, promiscuous women are she-wolves – we remember that *they* are not *us*, even as their proximity remains undeniable. Analogous are the workings of symbols and – in the case of the she-wolf – of political symbols especially: They orient and unify a group even as they separate its members from those not in it. Only Romans have been mothered by the beast; only they should have the right to claim the she-wolf's image as their own. Intrinsic to the she-wolf as political symbol are preoccupations about identity. It is true that human societies like to identify with a past that is suitably illustrious to explain present greatness or console current woes; the Romans did this consistently and they are not alone. However, if the she-wolf herself could represent to the same people different things at different times (e.g., the power of the Empire or the authority of the Church, Italian nationalist identity or every immigrant's right to call Italy home) and if the she-wolf could also represent different things to different people even at the same time (e.g., the mercy of nature, the looseness of women), then how can the she-wolf's ability to symbolize a group remain sufficiently stable and unambiguous to be ideologically effective?

As a sign, the “she-wolf” – word or image, legend or history – has no special allegiance to a single, unbroken meaning. Her ambiguity and variability invite us to question how we acquire knowledge, particularly knowledge of the legendary past that the she-wolf represents. Legends by definition are untrustworthy, yet it is precisely through the discourse of legend that we may learn something about the beast that saved Rome's founder. Because they elaborate the past, legends underscore the meaning rather than the facts of those memories we hold dear. Legends rely on the power of their narrative more than on the truth effects of verisimilitude; legends depend on the human ability to create necessary stories effective in understanding identity. Unlike fables, legends are narratives in which people believe, identifying with what they have to tell: Legends repeat belief and reinforce it, affirming the values of the group to whose tradition they belong. “Who'd believe the boys weren't hurt by the beast?,” asked Ovid in his *Fasti*, when he narrated the she-wolf's rescue of the royal

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infants (39). Ousted as a dependable way of knowing by the current dominance of scientific discourse, belief is a practice crucial to the she-wolf narrative; belief is embedded in the dual interpretation of the Latin *lupa* as both beast and whore. In their need to re-create the past, to tell their own history – even when there is no reliable evidence and legends are all that remain – the Romans are not alone. The creation of a narrative for a time that is all but lost is something all modern nations have done, for without a proper history – and especially without the availability of a sufficiently developed birth legend – no culture can sustain itself.

All nations, in a sense, have their own she-wolf. “Some say,” historians of early Rome preface their accounts, “others think.” Although no one can trust with certainty his or her own knowledge of remote events, we keep telling stories like the she-wolf’s because there is something in them that makes sense to our memory, if not to our sense of historical veracity. With its moral and narrative complexity, the she-wolf’s story speaks about the persistence of sibling rivalry and the mercy of nature, no less enduring. It affirms that wicked relatives have their place in every family’s narrative: Their cruel actions may hurt but, the story reassures us, they will not prevail. The legend promises that in the end, everything may turn out right for two discarded youngsters – although much suffering, even disproportionate suffering, will be experienced in the meanwhile; that the beast within us may be placated by the cry of the needy – after all, the she-wolf did not eat the babies, she fed them instead of feeding *on* them; that natural mercy will conquer human greed, however murderous; and that out of likely death, new life – and a great life such as Rome’s – might rise again. The she-wolf narrative recalls as well the importance of the complex workings of memory in the act of remembering: The instability of historical narratives may be reflected in our shaky understanding of our past and of ourselves. The she-wolf never stops reminding us that without the continuity provided by these stories – however flawed, even unbelievable – we can never hope to achieve a sense of identity: the knowledge, that is, of who we are, have been, and might become.

The first part of this book is dedicated to the bronze statue that is the she-wolf’s most famous and influential representation: the *Lupa Capitolina* or *Capitoline She-Wolf*. With or without the toponym linking the bronze to Rome’s Capitoline Hill, these are the names (always capitalized and italicized) that I use throughout this book to refer to the bronze statue now at the Capitoline Museum. The lowercased “she-wolf” and, occasionally, the Latin *lupa* refer to the Roman beast more generally. For sentimental, grammatical, and practical reasons, the female pronoun is

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used throughout when referring to the she-wolf – whether it is the live beast or an inanimate object representing her that is being described. Like the second and third parts, the first part of the book is divided chronologically into three chapters: The first chapter of each part concentrates on antiquity, the second on the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, and the third on modern and contemporary times – from the nineteenth to the twenty-first century. With her contested geography (Where was the *Lupa* made? Where did the *Lupa* reside until the ninth century?), meaning (Does the *Lupa* actually represent *the* she-wolf legend?), and chronology (Is she ancient or medieval?), the bronze *Capitoline She-Wolf* is not only the most influential representation of the Roman animal nurse but also embodies many of the contradictions and ambiguities of the she-wolf more generally – as a historical, literary, political, and artistic figure. The uses to which this particular statue was put range from ancient prophet of political collaboration (perhaps) to medieval protector of pontifical justice, from Renaissance patron of the rebirth of antiquity to invasive symbol during this same period of the pope's temporal power. A Romantic icon of ancient grandeur, the *Lupa* guaranteed the authenticity of early tourists' experiences of Rome, through the material connection to the ancient past that her bronze shape embodied. This authenticating function endures in contemporary poetry and guidebooks, as it did – ironically – in the replicas of the *Lupa* sent by Italy to friendly nations during the fascist era. Whether as public gift or private sight, as religious icon or political symbol, the *Capitoline She-Wolf* directs her viewers to consider the ever-changing meaning of even a single artwork and, more generally, to reflect on what it is that shapes our interpretation of the objects we experience.

The second part of this book examines the she-wolf's presence in written texts, beginning with Roman antiquity and ending with a 2006 novel set in contemporary Rome. In the work of classical writers, ingestion of the she-wolf's milk established for Romans an indisputable cultural and ethnic identity (and, furthermore, one as aggressive as the wolf's). The beast's misogynous and allegorical representation in later literature, however, identified in the she-wolf's milk-producing, life-saving udders the very source of physical and spiritual danger for all susceptible men: irresistible female breasts. The linguistic ambiguity of the Latin *lupa* shapes the she-wolf's connotations in many of her written representations: The literal she-wolf is either revered for her maternal compassion or feared for her marauding ferocity; the metaphorical she-wolf has inspired devotion as the image of Rome's antiquity and grandeur but also terror

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for the voracious greed and lascivious nature that she personifies. No less ambiguous is the she-wolf as a literary representation of history: Her nursing image commands compassion for the past, but, alternately, her wild-animal nature triggers a sense of distance from it. This is related, in turn, to either pride in the superiority of the here and now or apprehension, on the part of a weak present, regarding the encounter with so formidable a past. Whereas knowledge of having imbibed the she-wolf's milk can provide that sense of Italian national identity craved by nineteenth-century patriots and twentieth-century fascists, Romulus and Remus were no one's legitimate sons – and certainly not the she-wolf's. This fact turns the very notion of national identity into something so fluid that, like the she-wolf's milk, it may be assimilated by seemingly “illegitimate” children, such as foreign immigrants to Rome.

The third part of the book turns to visual representations of the she-wolf (excluding the bronze *Lupa Capitolina* examined in the first part), with a chronological division analogous to that of the two previous parts. As was the case for both her bronze statue and her written representations, the she-wolf preserves her fundamental ambiguity in the world of images. Despite the undecidable meaning of some of these visual representations (e.g., Do all she-wolves from the Italian peninsula refer to the story of Romulus and Remus?), together, these images form a pattern of meaning that allows the signification and the interpretation of each she-wolf through the understanding of the entire complex of beasts. Ancient images of the nursing she-wolf expressed a public statement concerning divine intervention at the birth of Rome; as such, the she-wolf was disseminated throughout Rome's territories as a reminder of the city's protective authority. Alternately, the nursing beast embodied a private companion in each person's journey to the underworld – hence, her frequent appearances on funerary steles and urns. Spectacularly, she exemplified the ideal female conduct: obedient to the powers above and self-sacrificially maternal. Christian iconography had no trouble appropriating the she-wolf's quintessentially pagan image as the earthly support – often represented as a physical pedestal – for its new spiritual order. As a visual connection to divine power and ancient greatness, and placed within a visibly Christian context, the nursing beast identified the importance of Rome for the spread and the authority of the Christian Church, even as she mediated the renewed appreciation of antiquity in the Renaissance. Neoclassical art as well as fascist propaganda saw in the she-wolf the ideal embodiment of patriotic sentiments even though, as a political symbol, the she-wolf – in contemporary as in ancient, medieval,