All Together Now: National Unity in Livy's Early $History\ of\ Rome$

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In his Early History of Rome, Livy uses the "Conflict between the Orders" as a vehicle to explain from whence Rome's power derives. He strives to convince his readers that national unity and social cohesion were the vital factors that gave early Rome her magnificent successes while factionalism and sectional infighting lead to her darkest hours. In order to do so, Livy embellishes the tales of and glorifies citizens who placed the welfare of the state or larger society above themselves and denigrates those individuals who put their own interests ahead of those of their countrymen. I will explore several of Livy's passages to demonstrate how his portrayal of historical actors reflects his judgment as to whether or not they advanced or retarded the cause of national unity.

Consider the case of Lucretia, wife of Collatinus. After being raped by Sextus Tarquinius, the king's son, she called her father and husband together and told them of his treacherous violation (Livy, 2002, p. 101). Despite being held blameless by her husband and father, Lucretia took her own life, exclaiming "Never shall Lucretia provide a precedent for unchaste women to escape what they deserve" (Livy, 2002, p. 102). Assuming the story is true, Livy could have chosen to present it in any number of ways. He might have faulted Lucretia for her disobedience to her father and husband or her overzealousness in the face of her shame. Instead, Livy praises her virtue, pointing out that "even the most resolute chastity could not have stood against" Sextus' threat of dishonor (Livy, 2002, p. 101) and that she was the clear winner "in the contest of womanly virtue" (Livy, 2002, p. 100). Livy chose to portray her in a very favorable light because of the fact that she was willing to die in the service of her society, defending a moral line that Livy feels had long since decayed (Livy, 2002, p. 30). Self sacrifice not just to the society at large, but in the service of its moral strictures

earned Lucretia Livy's adoration.

This episode poses further lessons for us about what Livy valued. He points out that upon Brutus' death, "the women of Rome mourned him as a father...as their special tribute to his fierce championship of a woman's honor" (Livy, 2002, p. 115). Likewise, upon the death of Publius Valerius, "the women of Rome went into mourning for him, as they had done for Brutus" (Livy, 2002, p. 127). By taking the time to show how much honor befell Brutus and Valerius for their vengeance against the rapist, Livy suggests that there actions were special. In particular, he suggests that their virtue lay in their willingness to repay an attack on another as if it were against themselves, even at tremendous danger to themselves. After all, they could have easily ignored the assault, since it didn't directly concern them; Livy writes that they were friends of the Lucretia's father and brother (Livy, 2002, p. 101). But they did not because of their belief in the unity of the Roman people. This demonstrates that Livy not only valued self sacrifice to the societal ideal (as in the case of Lucretia), but also efforts to effect practical change in the world as well, especially when those efforts carried with them significant personal risk.

As much as Livy heaps praise upon those who sacrifice their own interests for betterment of national unity, so too does he heap scorn upon those who in the pursuit of their own interests injure the body politic. Consider the case he makes against the commanders Sergius and Verginius. Livy describes the two as being pig-headed and arrogant (Livy, 2002, p. 377). He claims they "showed more energy in quarelling with one another than in pressing forward the siege" (Livy, 2002, p. 377). In describing their trial he summarizes their real sin: they were not "concerning themselves with the real issue – the national welfare" (Livy, 2002, p.

378). Both men are condemned strongly because they were willing to let their own petty bickering interfere with their duty to the state.

Even before the backdrop of the most horrific acts, Livy still favors those who act in the interests of national unity. Consider the case of Horatius, the Roman champion who won the battle of Cluilius' Trench against the Albans (Livy, 2002, p. 56). As he returned to Rome, his sister saw that her lover had perished in battle and was so overcome that "in a voice choked with tears, she called her dead lover's name" (Livy, 2002, p. 61). "That his sister should dare to grieve at the very moment of national rejoicing filled Horatius with such an uncontrollable rage that he stabbed her" according to Livy, saying "What is Rome to such as you, or your brothers, living or dead? So perish all Roman women who mourn for an enemy!" (Livy, 2002, p. 61). Such a monstrous act filled everyone with horror (Livy, 2002, p. 61). And yet, king "Tullis shrank from the responsibility of passing the death sentence" (Livy, 2002, p. 61).

Indeed, despite their apparent horror, Rome was clearly conflicted in this matter. Livy points out that the death sentence, which Rome granted for far lesser infractions, was most unpopular in this case. Moreover, even Horatius' father came to his defense, saying that "his daughter deserved her death . . . had it been otherwise, he would have exercised his right to punish Horatius himself" (Livy, 2002, p. 61). The fact that that statement was decisive suggests that there was a consensus that Horatius' murder was wrong, but that his sister's behavior justified it. The warrior king Tullis, no doubt bending to the mixed public mood, "wanted to temper the severity of the law" (Livy, 2002, p. 61). Livy concludes the affair positively, noting that "even though Horatius was guilty in law, popular admiration

obtained his acquittal.

Livy portrays Tullis very favorably in this episode, even though his actions are objectively weak. This contrasts sharply with Livy's later evaluation that the monarchial period was vital for Rome's development since the king's power restrained the people, preventing them from "setting sail on the stormy sea of democratic politics, swayed by gusts of popular eloquence" (Livy, 2002, p. 107–108). Yet Livy praises Tullis for doing the exact opposite, for cowering before the mob and allowing them to dictate policy after being swayed by eloquent speeches, such as that given by Horatius' father (Livy, 2002, p. 62). Worst of all, Livy fails to criticize Tullis for bending the law before a popular (and therefore powerful) individual, despite his strict condemnation of the very same behavior in the early republic. There, Livy mocks young aristocrats who were frustrated that the "law was impersonal and inexorable; it had no ears" (Livy, 2002, p. 110).

Further examples abound. Consider the case of Tarquinius Collatinus, Brutus' fellow consul who helped depose the monarchy (Livy, 2002, p. 108). Despite his service to the infant republic, which Livy alludes to when he has Brutus pronounce that "we remember your part in the expulsion of the kings" (Livy, 2002, p. 109), the Roman mob still practically forces him out. Livy describes Collatinus' fears that he would be "publicly disgraced and forced to submit to the confiscation of his property" (Livy, 2002, p. 110). Livy thus whitewashes what was really an ugly episode: Collatinus was forced out from his position as consul and even his home not of his own free will. Even more strangely, Livy praises Collatinus' father in law for exhorting Collatinus to leave Rome (Livy, 2002, p. 110). Yet Livy makes no comment on the fact that Spurious Lucretius, a man "much respected in public life" (Livy, 2002, p. 110).

had chosen to marry his daughter with the Tarquins, had chosen to join their two families, in effect endorsing their rule. In the anti-monarchial fervor following the Tarquin defeat, one would expect that powerful collaborators such as Lucretius would face public censure, not the praise Livy showers upon him. But because Spurious Lucretius acts in the interests of national unity, in Livy's eyes, he can do no wrong.

Moreover, it is instructive to compare this incident with another case where Roman suspicion fell upon an early consul. After Brutus died and Valerius returned from the battle field to Rome, he found himself "not only disliked but suspected on the gravest possible grounds" (Livy, 2002, p. 115). Both because Valerius stalled in calling for an election for a new consul to replace Brutus, and because he was building a house atop the Velia, which many felt could become "an impregnable fortress", people feared that "he was aiming at the monarchy" (Livy, 2002, p. 115–116). Livy portrays Valerius in a very positive light, indicating that the problem was not with Valerius, but with the Roman people whose "passions were notoriously fickle" (Livy, 2002, p. 115). This portrayal contrasts sharply with how Livy portrayed Collatinus. There, Livy claims Collatinus was urged to "free his country from her fear" (Livy, 2002, p. 109) by going into exile. Thus while the mob's fears proved sufficient in Livy's eyes to send one brave consul into voluntary exile, those same fears fail to merit the exile of Valerius.

And yet, Livy's later comments suggest the Valerius may have been more deserving of exile and less deserving of praise than this historian portrait suggests. Shortly after this incident, Valerius and the newly elevated consul Horatius drew lots to determine which of them would dedicate a new temple. Valerius' relatives "were unreasonably hurt" that the

lot fell to Horatius and "did everything they could to prevent" Horatius from conducting the dedication (Livy, 2002, p. 117). This behavior seems more in keeping with the obsessed fixations of a power mad politician's supporters than the acts of the modest and virtuous family of a loyal civil servant. In addition, Livy describes how Valerius postponed electing a new consul until his populist measures "were carried through", since he "was anxious to have all the credit" (Livy, 2002, p. 117). Nevertheless, Livy describes how when faced with Roman suspicion, Valerius voluntarily and with great modesty gave up his house on the Velia, opting instead for a house "at the very base of the hill, so that you can live above me and keep a wary eye on the citizen you mistrust" (Livy, 2002, p. 116). Like the other cases reviewed so far, Valerius was given an especially warm portrayal because of his efforts at enhancing national unity.

Livy pushes his case even, and perhaps especially, in war. Fighting against the Tusculans and the remnants of the Tarquins at the battle of Lake Regillus (Livy, 2002, p. 129), the Romans "began to give ground" (Livy, 2002, p. 130). Livy reports that the Dictator Postumius "urged his mounted troops to abandon their horses and fight on foot should to shoulder with the exhausted infantry" (Livy, 2002, p. 131). The infantry was reinvigorated, "once they saw the young nobles ready to share their dangers on equal terms" (Livy, 2002, p. 131). The symbolism of this passage is intriguing. At the call of their leader, the young aristocrats voluntarily forsook their lofty positions which afforded them both honor and a measure of safety the infantry lacked and came down to join themselves with the common soldiers. Livy praises them, but more than that, he links their difficult victory that day with the aristocrats act of humility. In a society that valued *Dignitas* above all else, the

willingness to cast aside one's own honor and join with the commons for the greater glory of Rome must have been very difficult indeed. Here we see Livy, perhaps most clearly, demonstrating his belief that Roman strength derived from the willingness of Romans to cast aside their individual advantages and sacrifice for each other; the notion that the state transcended the individual not by sheer force of arms, but because citizens willingly bowed before it was perhaps new in the world.

Members of the government did not escape Livy's scrutiny. In fulfillment of his goal of communicating the vital importance of national unity, Livy alternately skewers and then praises both representatives of the wealthy and of the commons. For example, after Tarquin dies, Livy comments that "the patricians welcomed [news of his death] far too much as an opportunity for self-indulgence at the expense of the masses, who hitherto, had been treated with every consideration . . . now they began to feel the weight of oppression" (Livy, 2002, p. 132). After the fall of Veii, Livy comments that "the people's tribunes began to stir up trouble again" and that "their attacks were confined to the absent as they lacked the impudence to abuse any who faced them squarely" (Livy, 2002, p. 399).

Rome's strength depended on the unity of her people in more direct ways as well. Livy notes numerous cases where Rome was able to prosecute foreign wars and sometimes even defend herself against imminent attack only because the different Orders were willing to cast aside their disagreements and rally to the republic's defense. Indeed, despite her comparative disadvantages in engineering, economics, and culture compared to her neighbors, Rome was far more unified than her fractious greek cousins and her Etruscan neighbors who suffered the division of a society polarized by extreme wealth and poverty. Livy knows this, and thus

takes the opportunity time and time again to highlight how the Romans unique ability to

put aside their differences and come together gave them their strength. In case after case, he

embellishes the stories of those who exemplify this ideal while denigrating those who fail to

do so. For Livy, the story of history was not merely the recitation of facts, but a framework

on which to display the exposition of deeper meaning hidden beneath those facts.

References

Livy. The Early History of Rome. Penguin Classics, 2002.

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