

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

ROMAN FOLKLORE

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Overview Distinctions between folklore and mythology are difficult, notably so when it comes to Ancient Rome, in which the allegedly founding role of early tales plays importantly into the self-image of the people. Many of those narratives derive from the early period of Roman history--756 B.C.E. to 27 B.C.E., the foundation of the Empire--which remains a touchstone for value and identity, among the Roman people. The stories involved--interestingly enough they are still resonant to our own age, and were basic thought-shapers for the founders of the American Republic--are tales (myth or lore?) concerning the heroic people or deeds of the founders of the Roman personality: larger than life (Romulus and Remus), formative and risking (The Rape of the Sabine Women), or manly heroic (Horatius at the Bridge.)

Folklore and myth These narratives all carry the gene of myth in them--in our entry on mythology we included these entries as myth, because they carried the element of belief (if not of 'god')--but at the same time they are placeless tales, never never land stories that survive through the ages for a good retell, or a pictorial retake--notoriously in painting. In addition to these narratives there exists a body of folktale, in Roman literature, which has no interface with belief (myth), but works the reader's curiosity, fascination, or love of 'a good story.' The richest example of this vein is Apuleius' *Golden Ass*, the only complete extant Roman novel, written toward the end of the second century C.E.

Romulus and Remus The thing about these folktales with a myth stinger in them, as the Romans fashioned them, is that they like remember themselves. The outlines are clear and sharp: the Vestal Virgin mother of the country-born twins incurs the anger of her uncle, who vows to destroy the twins before they can overthrow him. The twins are put out by the river to die, are found by a she-wolf, who suckles the future founders of the Roman state, supporting their lives until they can become rival contenders for leadership of the new state. In the end, quarreling with each other over which hill to make their capital, Romulus kills Remus, and rules. The long sacrosanct tale has elements both of myth and folktale in it. There is the founding material of belief wrapped around the endlessly engaging folk story of the suckling wolf, the rivalry of the brothers, and the drama of hill choosing.

Horatius at the Bridge The (seventh century B.C.E.) heroism of Horatius, an enlisted man if a patriot, in defending the bridge over the Janiculum hill against the onslaught of forces vowing to overthrow Rome, remained of adage centrality to successive generations of Romans, as they selected out paradigms of heroism around which to define their valor. This folk story--carefully built up through ancient authors like Livy and Suetonius-, who delight in describing the ways Horatius leapt from the bridge in full armor, and swam to the father of the waters, or later inherited all the material blessings the city of Rome could bestow--is also mythic, a tale for belief.

The Sabine Women The founders of the city of Rome need women, to marry and to carry on their line. They trick the women of the Sabine people into a festival, at which the Romans abduct the women and overpower the Sabine men. This brutal act--which spins many further narrative consequences from its belly--lives on in Roman self-creation, an honored memory: a fiery tale shaped to shore up belief.

The Golden Ass An example from Book 1 will do, to illustrate the folktale shorn of belief, with no element of myth in it. The narrator takes us into his confidence, then tells us he has recently had a terrible experience, being overwhelmed by a witch. The two guys go to sleep in the house where the narration is taking place, and in the middle of the night the narrator wakes up to see two dreadful looking women sprawled on the floor, evidently, as it turns out, plotting the murder of the narrator's friend. After stabbing their victim to death, capturing his blood in a vial, and bandaging him up, the two women escape, in their passage urinating on the narrator himself. The narrator, horrified, realizes that suspicion may fall on him, for having killed his friend, and he consequently prepares to hang himself. To his astonishment, at just this moment, the narrator's friend comes back to life, but then collapses again, grows mortally pale, and once more dies. This stroke of fate is too much, and the narrator now flees, en route, as it happens, to a

new stage of picaresque adventures.

The tone of the Golden Ass, and of the early folktale/myths. Apuleius, author of *The Golden Ass*, clearly has no interest in creating myth. We see, from following his loosely constructed sequence of scarifying events, that he is simply pulling us forward into a labyrinth without organized parameters. He is creating the horror story type of folktale. The mindset of the early Roman creators, of the mythologically slanted folktale, is very different from that of Apuleius. That mind is credent, and even while telling points toward the point of the tale.

Reading

Dorson, Richard, *Folklore and Folklife: An Introduction*, Chicago, 1976.

Georges, Robert; Jones, Michael Owen; *Folkloristics: An Introduction*, Bloomington, 1995.

Discussion questions

Is the mythological tale kin to the religious perspective, or is it a tale for pure entertainment? Was the tale of The Sabine Women created as entertainment?

Why do you suppose the early period of Roman history was a favored harvesting area for tales about Roman virtue and heroism?

Is a folktale, like that we noted from *The Golden Ass*, related to a *Fairy Tale*? Does the fairy tale contain any element of myth?