

Livy: The Capture of the Sabine Women¹

According to legend, Rome, founded as it was by adventurers and immigrants, had an acute shortage of women. The story of Romulus's plan—to take their neighbors' maidens—was told in the later Republic most of all because it was justified in retrospect by the maidens' defense of their new home.

The Roman State had now become so strong that it was a match for any of its neighbors in war, but its greatness threatened to last for only one generation, since through the absence of women there was no hope of offspring, and there was no right of intermarriage with their neighbors. Acting on the advice of the senate, Romulus sent envoys amongst the surrounding nations to ask for alliance and the right of intermarriage on behalf of his new community....

As to the origin of Rome, it was well known that whilst it had received divine assistance, courage and self-reliance were not wanting. There should, therefore, be no reluctance for men to mingle their blood with their fellow-men. Nowhere did the envoys meet with a favorable reception....

The Roman youth could ill brook such insults, and matters began to look like an appeal to force. To secure a favorable place and time for such an attempt, Romulus, disguising his resentment, made elaborate preparations for the celebration of games in honor of "Equestrian Neptune," which he called "the Consualia"...

There was a great gathering; people were eager to see the new City, all their nearest neighbors ... and the whole Sabine population came, with their wives and families. They were invited to accept hospitality at the different houses, and after examining the situation of the City, its walls and the large number of dwelling-houses it included, they were astonished at the rapidity with which the Roman State had grown.

When the hour for the games had come, and their eyes and minds were alike riveted on the spectacle before them, the preconcerted signal was given and the Roman youth dashed in all directions to carry off the maidens who were present. The larger

part were carried off indiscriminately....

Alarm and consternation broke up the games, and the parents of the maidens fled, distracted with grief, uttering bitter reproaches on the violators of the laws of hospitality and appealing to the god to whose solemn games they had come, only to be the victims of impious perfidy.

The abducted maidens were quite as despondent and indignant. Romulus, however, went round in person, and pointed out to them that it was all owing to the pride of their parents in denying right of intermarriage to their neighbors. They would live in honorable wedlock, and share all their property and civil rights, and—dearest of all to human nature—would be the mothers of freemen.

[War breaks out between the Sabines and the Romans.] Then it was that the Sabine women, whose wrongs had led to the war, throwing off all womanish fears in their distress, went boldly into the midst of the flying missiles with disheveled hair and rent garments. Running across the space between the two armies they tried to stop any further fighting and calm the excited passions by appealing to their fathers in the one army and their husbands in the other not to bring upon themselves a curse by staining their hands with the blood of a father-in-law or a son-in-law, nor upon their posterity the taint of parricide. "If," they cried, "you are weary of these ties of kindred, these marriage-bonds, then turn your anger upon us; it is we who are the cause of the war, it is we who have wounded and slain our husbands and fathers. Better for us to perish rather than live without one or the other of you, as widows or as orphans."

¹Source: Livy 1.9–1.33. Translated by William Masfen Roberts. In *The History of Rome*. London: J.M. Dent, 1912.

Livy: The Rape of Lucretia²

In this excerpt, Livy repeats a legend that was extremely important to Romans during the Republic. The sons of the King of Rome, L. Tarquinius Superbus, are at Ardea, a city which the army is attempting to conquer, when they hear of the virtue of the Roman matron Lucretia. The virtues this story puts forth for Roman society through the example of Lucretia helps explain why this story would have mattered to later Romans.

One day when the young men were drinking at the house of Sex. Tarquinius, after a supper where they had dined with the son of Egerius, Tarquinius Conlatinus, they fell to talking about their wives, and each man fell to praising his wife to excess. Finally Tarquinius Conlatinus declared that there was no need to argue; they might all be sure that no one was more worthy than his Lucretia. “Young and vigorous as we are, why don’t we go get out horses and go and see for ourselves what our wives are doing? And we will base our judgment on whatever we see them doing when their husbands arrive unannounced.” Encouraged by the wine, “Yes, let’s go!” they all cried, and they went on horseback to the city.

Darkness was beginning to fall when they arrived and they went to the house of Conlatinus. There, they found Lucretia behaving quite differently from the daughters-in-law of the King, whom they had found with their friends before a grand feast, preparing to have a night of fun. Lucretia, even though it was night, was still working on her spinning, with her servants, in the middle of her house. They were all impressed by Lucretia’s chaste honor. When her husband and the Tarquins arrived, she received them, and her husband, the winner, was obliged to invite the king’s sons in. It was then that Sex. Tarquinius was seized by the desire to violate Lucretia’s chastity, seduced both by her beauty and by her exemplary virtue. Finally, after a night of youthful games, they returned to the camp.

Several days passed. Sex. Tarquinius returned to the house of Conlatinus, with one of his companions. He was well received and given the hospitality of the house, and maddened with love, he waited until he was sure everyone else was asleep. Then he took up his sword and went to Lucretia’s bedroom, and placing his sword against her left breast, he said, “Quiet, Lucretia; I am Sextus Tarquinius, and I have a sword in my hand. If you speak,

you will die.” Awakening from sleep, the poor woman realized that she was without help and very close to death. Sex. Tarquinius declared his love for her, begging and threatening her alternately, and attacked her soul in every way. Finally, before her steadfastness, which was not affected by the fear of death even after his intimidation, he added another menace. “When I have killed you, I will put next to you the body of a nude servant, and everyone will say that you were killed during a dishonorable act of adultery.” With this menace, Sex. Tarquinius triumphed over her virtue, and when he had raped her he left, having taken away her honor.

Lucretia, overcome with sorrow and shame, sent messengers both to her husband at Ardea and her father at Rome, asking them each to come “at once, with a good friend, because a very terrible thing had happened.” S. Lucretius, her father, came with P. Valerius, the son of Volesus, and Conlatinus came with L. Junius Brutus; they had just returned to Rome when they met Lucretia’s messenger. They found Lucretia in her chamber, overpowered by grief. When she saw them she began to cry. “How are you?” her husband asked. “Very bad,” she replied, “how can anything go well for a woman who has lost her honor? There are the marks of another man in your bed, Conlatinus. My body is greatly soiled, though my heart is still pure, as my death will prove. But give me your right hand in faith that you will not allow the guilty to escape. It was Sex. Tarquinius who returned our hospitality with enmity last night. With his sword in his hand, he came to take his pleasure for my unhappiness, but it will also be his sorrow if you are real men.”

They promised her that they would pursue him, and they tried to appease her sorrow, saying that it was the soul that did wrong, and not the body, and because she had had no bad intention, she did no wrong. “It is your responsibility to see that he gets what he deserves,” she said, “I will absolve myself of blame, and I will not free myself from punishment. No woman shall use Lucretia as her example in dishonor.” Then she took up a knife which she had hidden beneath her robe, and plunged it into her heart, collapsing from her wound; she died there amid the cries of her husband and father.

Brutus, leaving them in their grief, took the knife from Lucretia’s wound, and holding it all covered with blood up in the air, cried, “By this blood, which was so pure before the crime of the prince, I swear before you, O gods, to chase the King L. Tarquinius Superbus, with his criminal wife and all their offspring, by fire, iron, and all the methods I have at my disposal, and never to tolerate Kings in Rome evermore, whether of that family of any other.”

²Source: Livy 1.57–59. Translated from the original in Jean Bayet, ed., Tite-Live: Histoire Romaine, Tome I, livre I. Paris: Société d’Édition “les belles-lettres,” 1954, pp. 92-95.