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FROM THE PRIMORDIAL MOTHER TO A HOLY-EROTIC BODY:
Some reflections on the representation of Rhea Silva in Latin Literature[1]

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Abstract: Rhea Silvia, the first female character of great prominence in the Roman mythical period, embodies the antinomy of the sacred-profane body - a body noteworthy for its chastity, heroic motherhood, and bearing the marks of violence. Drawing on passages from Virgil's *Aeneid*, Horace's *Odes*, and Ovid's *Fasti* - all written by male authors - and supported by studies authored by women, this paper aims to reflect on the configuration of the character Rhea Silvia, observing her role as a moral subject, the political utilization of her body, and the conception and appropriation of her female body within the discourse of Roman male ideology, in the preservation of social and political harmony.
Keywords: Rhea Silvia; Roman mythical period; Sacred-profane body; Female body.

Resumo: Reia Silvia, primeira personagem feminina de grande protagonismo no período mítico romano, reúne em seu corpo a antinomia do corpo sacro-profano, um corpo notável pela castidade, pela maternidade heroica e que suporta as marcas de inúmeras violências. Tomando como base passagens da *Eneida* de Virgílio, das *Odes* de Horácio e dos *Fastos* de Ovídio, fontes escritas por autores masculinos, e apoiada em estudos de autoria feminina, proponho refletir sobre a configuração da personagem Reia Silvia, observando o seu papel como sujeito moral, o uso político do seu corpo e sobre a concepção e a apropriação do corpo feminino da personagem Reia Silvia pelo discurso ideológico masculino romano na preservação da harmonia social e política.
Palavras-chave: Reia Sílvia; Período mítico romano; Corpo sagrado-profano; Corpo feminino.

1 A version of this text has been published in Portuguese with the title "Quando o corpo fala e a gente escuta: a representação de Ilia - Reia Silva na poesia latina" in the anthology "O feminino na literatura grega e latina" (EdUFPI 2023). Special thanks are extended to George Madeiro for his kindness in translating this paper from Portuguese into English.

Introduction

Rhea Silvia – sometimes called Ilia – is a woman, princess, priestess, daughter and mother to twins. Rhea Silvia[2] is one of the protagonists of the mythical story of the foundation of Rome, however, narratives about the origins of Rome tend to focus on the male figures of the Trojan Aeneas and the famous-twin-brothers Romulus and Remus. The first female protagonist of the mythical Roman period,[3] Rhea Silvia brings together in her body the antinomy of the sacred and the profane body, a body remarkable for its chastity and heroic motherhood, yet bearing the traces of countless violent acts. An oppressed body – raped, imprisoned and, in certain versions of the myth, murdered – a tragic destiny veiled by the poetics of the marvellous, echoed in the very stripping of her life journey, since, in the mythological tradition, Rhea Silvia disappears after the birth of her children.

Despite the fact that the primitive Roman narratives cover an imprecise historical period, the material featuring heroism on which the primitive mythical tradition is based, encompasses a symbolic relevance, spread through the *exempla*, which will later influence moral paradigms in Roman society.[4] From this perspective, understanding the representation and the place of the character Rhea Silvia in the mythical narrative of the foundation of Rome, calls for a reflection about how the social order of attributes is so intimately associated with gender relations. It is to analyse the symbolic complexity of the body and how human corporeality produces and reproduces social and cultural reasoning. It also invites reflection on the construction of the dominant discourse embedded in the imagination of the Roman people.

Based on passages from Virgil's *Aeneid*,[5] Horace's *Odes*[6] and Ovid's *Fasti*,[7] all sources written by male authors that comprise the initial phase of Octavius

2 Standard term to be used in this study.
3 After Rhea Silvia, other female figures from the period of the Roman foundation were the target of great violence and had their episodes propagated as an example, namely: Tarpeia and the Sabines.
4 Rocha Pereira 2002, 27; Langlands 2006, 28.
5 Verg. *A.* 1.272-274; 7.659-661.
6 Hor. *Carm.* 1.2.17-20.
7 Ov. *Fast.* 3.9-42.

Augustus' empire, and supported by supported by feminist scholarship,[8] I suggest a reflection on the configuration of Rhea Silvia's character, observing her role as a moral subject,[9] the political use of her body and about the conception and appropriation of the female body of Rhea Silvia as a character by the Roman male ideological discourse in the preservation of social and political harmony.[10]

Ilia - Rhea: anthroponyms that unite a single body

The narratives surrounding Rhea Silvia as a character possess a certain impenetrability, stemming from the importance of her role in the foundation of Rome and the political-moral entanglement resulting from the events involving the Vestal priestess Rhea Silvia and her sacred, unchaste, and pregnant body.

From this perspective, various versions of the myth circulate, most notably the well-known story of Romulus and Remus. This narrative, shaped by genre conventions and programmatic intent, reflects facets of a civic and patriotic ideal, and plays a significant role in the development of a national identity.

Before analysing the poetic sources selected for this study, I present a historical variant, to create a generic contrast that may contribute to a better perception of the appropriation of Rhea Silvia's female body as a political-moral construct.

The version of the myth that I present here is taken from *Roman Antiquities*[11] by historian Dionysius of Halicarnassus. The choice of this author as a guide for the mythical narrative is justified by his focus on the passages where Ilia is mentioned,[12] as well as his effort to highlight throughout his work the virtuous

8 As Ariadne Staples' study *From good goddess to Vestal Virgins: sex and category in Roman Religion* (2004), Sandra Joshel's *The body female and the Body Politic: Livy's Lucretia and Vergenia* (2002), and also the study by Rebecca Langlands, *Sexual morality in Ancient Rome* (2006).

9 According to Langlands (2006, 7): "*Pudicitia* offers us a new route into studying ideologies of sex in Roman culture, one which allows us to move beyond the idea of penetration, of sex as necessarily phallic and involving activity and passivity (although these will inform our understanding too) and beyond the male desiring subject, to deal with women, children and even slaves as moral subjects."

10 Joshel 2002; Staples 2004; Langlands 2006; Azevedo 2017.

11 For this study, the translation by Elvira Jimenéz and Ester Sánchez was used 1985.

12 Dionysius of Halicarnassus adopts the Greek term "Ilia" and makes seven direct references in his first book, namely: 1.76.3; 77.1; 79.2-4.9; 84.2.

character of the Roman people, which contributed to their numerous achievements and the rise of Roman civilization.[13]

In accordance with the historical variant,[14] Numitor, the eldest son of Procas (a member of the Aenead dynasty) was the king of Alba Longa and the father of Aegestos and Rhea Silvia. Amulius, younger brother of Numitor, ascends to the throne of the Albanians, after dethroning his brother Numitor. Fearing revenge and determined to secure his hold on power, Amulius murders Aegestos and compels Rhea Silvia to serve as a priestess in the temple of Vesta, goddess of the sacred hearth. The Vestal priestesses were responsible for preserving the sacred fire in the temple of Vesta (*aedes Vestae*).

Still according to the historical narrative,[15] Numitor supposes that Amulius's main motivation in giving Ilia away to the priesthood was related to the chastity vow taken by the Vestal priestesses. In this way, Amulius would have ensured the absence of heirs and could have continued his political project. The narrative continues by adding that four years after assuming the priesthood, Rhea Silvia was raped by a man who had fallen in love with her.[16] The crime would have happened while the priestess was walking through the forest dedicated to the god Mars, in search of water for her rites. According to another version, the rape would have been committed by her own uncle, who had used artifices to hide his identity. To hide the pregnant body, Rhea Silvia, following her mother's instructions, pretends to be sick and stops attending the temple, her ritualistic commitments performed by the other priestesses. Growing suspicious of his niece's seclusion, Amulius initiates an investigation, dispatching his trusted physician and placing his wife under watch.[17] Facing the imminence of childbirth, the pregnancy was revealed and then Amulius places armed guards to control his niece's actions. Summoning Numitor to a council, Amulius announces the crime, publicly accuses his brother of being an accomplice along with his wife and orders the rapist to be denounced. Rhea Silvia revealed to her father that the crime had been committed

13 D.H. *Antiquitates Romanae* 1.89.
14 D.H. *Antiquitates Romanae* 1.77.
15 D.H. *Antiquitates Romanae* 1.77
16 The term used by Elvira Jimenéz and Ester Sánchez in the Spanish translation is "violación" (for edition; D.H. *Antiquitates Romanae* 1.77, 1984, p. 137).
17 D.H. *Antiquitates Romanae* 1.78

by a god, thus guaranteeing the protection of the twins, an argument that would be confirmed with the upcoming birth. Having not accepted the facts presented by his brother, Amulius condemns Rhea Silvia and determines that his niece must be punished. While Amulius announced his sentence, the twin sons were born. Numitor appeals, arguing that his daughter was not responsible for her condition and that what happened was a divine intervention, a version that could be sustained with the birth of the twins. However, Amulius not only rejects the appeal, but also accuses Rhea Silvia of having planned to deceive him, including, at the time of childbirth, another child brought with the help of other women. The advisors support Amulius in his accusation and condemn the Vestal priestess for having broken her vow of chastity under death penalty – being buried alive and her offspring thrown into the river.[18] Despite Dionysius of Halicarnassus (1.78.5) reporting that previously the penalty for Vestal priestesses who broke their vow of chastity was death by whipping with rods, he also mentions variations of this account. In some versions, Rhea Silvia is immediately executed, while in others, the priestess is sentenced to be confined in a hidden prison under surveillance. This version seems to have guided the narrative of Dionysius of Halicarnassus, who presents Rhea Silvia's punishment as having been buried alive (D.H. 1.78.5).[19]

Rhea Silvia is perhaps the way in which this character is most commonly recognized, however, two of the poets analysed here – Virgil and Horace – also use the Greek term Ilia (*Ilia*), a noun form possibly taken from the feminine form from the Greek gentile *ílios, -a, -on*, which designated the inhabitant of Ilium (Troy), so the proper name "Ilia" has the meaning of "the Trojan woman".[20]

The terms "Ilia" and "Rheia Silvia" are related to different versions of the narrative, which are distinguished, namely in what concerns to affiliation, since Ilia would be one of the daughters of the Trojans Aeneas and Lavinia, and Rhea Silvia, daughter of Numitor, king of Alba Longa.[21] Although there is a distinction

18 The breaking of the vow of chastity by the Vestal priestesses would result in the merciless condemnation of being "buried alive in an underground chamber, in a place known as the *Campus Sceleratus*, located near the Colina Door", as described by Paul Harvey (1998, 513).

19 According to Pierre Grimal (2000, 406), in the variant in which Reia Silvia survives, she is rescued by her sons Romulus and Remus, when the twins claim the throne of Alba Longa.

20 As evidenced by Pierre Grimal (2000, 249).

21 Pierre Grimal 2000, 249.

in affiliation, Ilia and Rhea Silvia share the same tragic destiny, neglected by the Roman mythical tradition, as it will be seen in the sources presented.

In the Augustan period, a moment of moral reforms and national reassurance, three poets recover the myth of the foundation of Rome and allude to the character of Rhea Silvia in their poems, namely, Virgil, Horace and Ovid. Although the metric and other elements make them peculiar, one aspect brings them together, namely: the ideological atmosphere of the constitution of a Roman identity.[22]

The Virgilian Ilia-Rheia: The foremost mother, a body abode for the other-heroic

Virgil, in the *Aeneid*, refers to Rhea Silvia twice. Firstly, the reference is made through the Greek term "Ilia", right away in the first book of the epic. In this passage, Venus seeks Jupiter to question him about the fate of the Trojans, particularly that of her son Aeneas, who, along with his companions, had been stuck by a violent storm orchestrated by Juno. Faced with the misfortune of Aeneas and shaken by the son's suffering, Venus intercedes with her father Jupiter, who will appease the heart of the afflicted mother with the revelation of the prosperous destiny of Aeneas and her descendants. Jupiter's arguments draw from the History of Rome, beginning, chronologically, with the episode of Rome's foundation. In Virgil's account echoed by Jupiter, Aeneas triumphs in *Latium*, being succeeded by his son Ascanius, who will transfer the kingdom from the seat of Lavinium and fortify Alba Longa, where he will reign for thirty years, and his Trojan descendants will reign for three hundred years. At this moment, Virgil advances the narrative and introduces Ilia, as it can be seen in the following passage:

> *Hic iam ter centum totos regnabitur anos*
> *Gente sub Hectorea, donec regina sacerdos,*
> *Marte grauis, geminam partu dabit Ilia prolem.*[23]

22 Virgil's Aeneid: dactylic hexameter; Horace's Ode 1.2: Sapphic stanza and Ovid's Fasti: elegiac couplets.
23 Verg. *A.* 1.272-74.

The transition of the narrative is mediated by the Latin temporal conjunction *donec*, which takes the reader through the dynasty of the Enneads, suppressing the political context of Alba Longa in which Ilia is inserted. However, even before the name "Ilia" is known, Virgil presents us with its attributes: *regina sacerdos*. The first characteristic attributed to Ilia reveals its royal origin – *regina*, a term that, in its first sense, means "queen", and, in this excerpt, it is used by the poet, with the meaning of "princess". Despite Virgil omitting Ilia's lineage, the term *regina* demonstrates that Ilia is the daughter of the ruling family of Alba Longa, location indicated by the poet in line 271 – *Albam*, and reinforced by the adverb *hic* "here", which introduces the next verse. The mythical narrative says that Ilia, as already shown, is a variant of the anthroponym Rhea Silvia, however, since Ilia is the daughter of Aeneas and Lavinia, it would not be possible for Ilia to be alive for more than three hundred years later, time in which the episode narrated by Virgil will be developed, as described in lines 272-274 of the Aeneid. As Oliva Neto points out, contradictions like this can be found in other episodes of the Aeneid – far from being a trivial and disjointed inconsistency, these contradictions reflect the poet's effort to present multiple versions of the same myth as a display of erudition, ultimately highlighting the version to which the poet was most inclined. From this perspective, it is possible to see that Virgil knew the variant "Ilia", but he appropriated it from the narrative context of the version about Rhea Silvia.[24]

The second attribute given by Virgil is *sacerdos*, "priestess". Ilia was a Vestal priestess. The Vestals were a group of six virgin women,[25] who had to take a vow of chastity, which initially lasted five years and which, from Numa, became a thirty-year period.[26] The virginity of the Vestals justified with the pure and immaculate nature of chastity, characteristics that are also identified in the sacred fire, which they should preserve.[27]

24 Oliva Neto 2014, 61.
25 Staples 2004, 132.
26 D.H. *Antiquitates Romanae* 1.76.
27 2004, 148.

The social and religious status of the Vestal priestesses was quite relevant, as it can be seen in the expression used by Livy [28] – *uenerabiles et sanctae* (venerable and holy) and the preservation of this condition, mediated by chastity, symbolized Roman integrity.[29] When using the term *sacerdos*, Virgil announces not only a relevant religious service performed by Ilia, but he also highlights a key characteristic for the Roman ideological discourse – *pudicitia*,[30] a moral value, characteristic of the Roman society,[31] which moderates the relationship between mind and body, making it possible to think about sex and ethics.[32] Despite the fact that there is no unified definition of the concept,[33] it can be understood, in accordance with Langlands, that *pudicitia* is "a moral virtue ... that refers to the regulation of behaviour (whether of oneself or of other people) specifically associated with sex."[34]

Considering, therefore, the vow of chastity assumed by the priestesses of Vesta, virginity is configured as a sacred commitment,[35] giving to the term *sacerdos*, to which Rhea Silvia is qualified, the status of moral authority. This principle, consolidated in the sacred and inviolable body, reflects a religious, ethical and civic commitment, since the Vestal priestess is intrusted with preserving the sacred fire of the city. Moreover, the socio-religious position granted to the Vestal priestesses admits a restructuring of the Roman social order making the priestess, in general, and Rhea Silvia, in particular, a moral figure. This is especially significant given that *pudicitia* was not merely a measure of personal morality but also a quality with profound religious and political implications, embodying the expectations and values of Roman society regarding female behaviour.

The Virgilian narrative, however, conceals the first major violence inflicted upon Ilia, as the priesthood was not a role Rhea Silvia sought willingly. The princess of Alba Longa was compelled by her uncle Amulius to serve the goddess Vesta,

28 Liv. 1, 20.3
29 Staples 2004, 147.
30 According to Langlands (2006, 4), although the concept is part of the moral construction of Roman society, the term *pudicitia* is hardly used, having been identified by the author in the following authors: Plautus, Propertius, Cicero and Juvenal.
31 According to Langlands (2006, 2), there is no equivalent concept in Greek for *pudicitia*, although there is a certain relationship with the Greek concepts of *sophrosyne* (self-control) and *aidos* (shame).
32 Langlands 2006, 3-8.
33 Langlands (2006, 31-32) identifies seven facets to *pudicitia* and emphasizes the multifaceted character of this concept.
34 Langlands 2006, 31.
35 Staples 2004, 147.

under the subterfuge of granting her niece an honourable status. In addition to Amulius' political motivations, it is also possible to understand, in the light of the concept of *pudicitia*, since the fact that he forced Ilia to go against her will demonstrates a control mechanism of the female sexuality. The management of the woman's body was a Roman project, which had moral and political purposes and was instrumentalized through laws that punished married and unmarried women, as it can be seen in the ninth law, from the tenth board of the Law of the XII Boards, which authorized fathers to kill their unmarried daughters who had premarital sex, and husbands to kill wives who had sex with a man other than their husband.[36]

In the context of the works analysed here, there was the implementation of the Marriage Laws of Augustus, established in the scope of the moral reform elaborated by the emperor, who promulgated, in 18 BC, the Julius Law on adultery (*Lex Iulia de adulteriis*). The regulatory logic of female sexuality remains in Octavian legislation, preserving power to those who had the social and legal role of protecting and avenging the honour of the father or husband, as can it be seen in the concise description of the law by Langlands:

> The law made provision for the punishment of transgressive sex (usually *stuprum*, sometimes called *adulterium*) involving a man having sex with any freeborn Roman (except his own wife), especially married women, but also unmarried women, widows and male and female children. It punished not only those who perpetrated *stuprum* on a free body, but also those who abetted such an act. A father who was *paterfamilias* could kill a married daughter and her lover if he found them under his own roof; a husband could kill the lover provided he was of a low social status.[37]

More than the control of the female body and its sexuality, the implementation of these laws must be understood as a legal device, based on political, economic and moral assumptions, promoted by encouraging marriage between aristocrats, boosting the birth rate and the coercion of adultery, as Azevedo points out.[38]

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36 Langlands 2006, 21.
37 Langlands 2006, 20.
38 2017, 66.

Following the reading of Virgil's excerpt, it is possible to observe that Ilia's name is presented only in verse 273, inaugurated by the term "Mars", followed by the adjective "*grauis*" (274), used here with the meaning of "pregnant". The use of this term shows that Ilia is pregnant and to whom the parentage of her offspring is linked – the god Mars. Once again Virgil's omits another violence suffered by the princess of Alba Longa, since Ilia's pregnancy is the result of rape. Her chaste body was violated, forcing her to break the sacred vow of chastity and, consequently, branding her a transgressor deserving of punishment.

Virgil's verses interpreted by Jupiter, nevertheless, would not dare to recall the aridity of this reality. And how would the mythical tradition welcome an unchaste, pregnant Vestal priestess? In fact, it would not be possible to see the voice of the god of gods echoed in the realization of a crime, which he himself had committed so many times. Except in the case when the rape was committed by a god, it was not considered a crime. Furthermore, since Rhea Silvia was a vestal priestess, her violation would imply the conservation of the city's sacred fire, as fire was a symbol for chastity, as well as for the integrity of the city, as Staples comments:

> The fire was also a potent symbol for the chastity of the Vestals and its consequence, the stability of the Roman state. They had to tend it ceaselessly for its extinguishing might be a sign of their unchastity and presage disaster for the city. If it was determined that it was indeed such a sign a Vestal would be tried and punished in the customary fashion If the fire had been extinguished merely through a Vestal's negligence, she was whipped by the pontifex maximus.[39]

From this perspective, when revisiting the Roman foundation myth, Virgil ensures the Roman stability echoed and endorsed by Jupiter, protects Rhea Silvia's chastity and, consequently, her *pudicitia*, as a result of a prodigious argument, which makes the violated body of Rhea Silva, a giving body, a body abode, which makes room for the founder of Rome.

In another passage of the Aeneid, Virgil, in Book 7, takes up the mythical image of the princess of Alba Longa presented in Book 1, but now making

39 Staples 2004, 148.

use of the more popular variant of the name – Rhea, as it can be seen in the verses below:

> *Collis Aventini silva quem Rhea sacerdos*
> *Furtivum partu sub luminis edidit oras,*
> *Mixta deo mulier, postquam Laurentia victor*[40]

The highlighted excerpt presents some controversy, as Rhea's name is associated with a new lineage. However, certain elements of Rhea Silvia's narrative are maintained, which prompts Plessis and Lejay[41] to reference Servius Honoratus in order to clarify such ambiguity. According to the authors, Honoratus does not hesitate to state that it is, in fact, Rhea Silvia, and he justifies the use of the anthroponym as a copy of the myth of the Princess of Alba Longa. Therefore, following the reading of Plessis and Lejay, it is possible to observe another representation of the legendary princess of Alba Longa with emphasis on her *pudicitia*, since Virgil returns to the term *sacerdos* to again emphasize the religious and moral attribute of the princess of Alba Longa. Rhea Silvia's pregnancy is also resumed in this passage, as well as the presentation of the progenitor, however, the poet from Mantua suppresses the name of Mars from this passage, replacing the name of the deity with the generic term *god*. The excerpt also reveals that Rhea gave birth in a stealthy way (*furtiuum*), this condition may be supported by the variant of the myth that presents Rhea Silvia as a fugitive, since the Vestal priestess escaped from the prison imposed by her uncle Amulius.

In both passages where Virgil mentions Ilia or Rhea, there is no reference to the violence endured by the princess of Alba Longa. It should be noted that the Virgilian version of the Roman foundation myth idealizes the figure of Ilia-Rheia by emphasizing her royal ancestry (*regina*), her religious devotion and chastity (*sacerdos*), the carnal union of her body with a god (*Marte grauis / Mixta deo mulier*) and, last but not least, her role as the mother of the great founder of Rome.

40 Verg. *Aen.* 7.659-661.
41 1920, 606-07.

The Horatian Ilia: The painful mother, a repository body for the pain of many

The reference to the Princess of Alba Longa is made by Horace, in his first book of the *Odes*, in the second poem, which, alongside other poems,[42] composes a cycle, which recaptures the past of Rome. In these verses, Horace, who recovers the Greek anthroponym, presents new outlines for the myth of Ilia, delimiting the mythical narrative in his epilogue, as it can be seen in the following excerpt:

> *Vidimus flavom Tiberim retortis*
> *litore Etrusco violenter undis*
> *ire deiectum monumenta regis*
> *templaque Vestae,*
> *Iliae dum se nimium querenti*
> *iactat ultorem, uagus et sinistra*
> *labitur ripa Iove non probante*
> *u-xorius amnis.*[43]

Horace's verses present a different picture from the one given by Virgil. While the poet from Mantua emphasizes in his verses the episode of the birth of the twins Romulus and Remus, Horace, in this passage, demonstrates Ilia's pain and lament. In addition to Horace presenting us with a painful Ilia, the passage also reveals an apotheotic outcome of Rhea Silvia, since, in the most tragic variant of the myth, Ilia is thrown by her uncle Amulius into the Tiber River, who received her as his wife and rose to heaven beside his bride.[44] However, the suffering presented in Horatian verses does not reveal the violence experienced by Ilia herself, as one familiar with the myth might be led to suppose. Through the myth of the foundation of Rome, Horace appropriates the symbolic body of Ilia and remodels the pain of the foremost mother, associating the lament of the princess of Alba Longa with the death of Caesar, who, as a descendant of

42 According to Pedro Braga Falcão, in introduction "Roteiro para una leitura temática das odes" (2008, 35), this Ode is part of the cycle that addresses the recent past of Rome. Other odes from the group: 1.2; 1.14; 1.35, 1.37; 2.1 and 3.24.
43 Hor. *Carm.* 1.2.13-20.
44 Grimal (2000, 405-406).

Aeneas, is also affiliated to the priestess herself.[45] The Horatian simile is supported by a series of natural phenomena that took place in Rome at the time of Caesar's death, as observed by Falcão,[46] and demonstrates, on the one hand, the power of a foundation myth in the formation of a national identity, and, on the other hand, the political use of Ilia's suffering, a body that is taken to claim Caesar's place.

In this passage, Ília's suffering, expressed by the nominal verb form *querenti*, present participle of the verb *queror* (to lament), is embodied in tears, reverberated in the revenge of the spouse-river, which increases its volume and overflows, causing an enormous flood in the city of Rome. The poetic image of the overflowing river amplifies the lamentation of a complaining Ilia. If in Virgil, Ilia became the foremost mother, here, the Horatian Ilia is the *mater dolorosa*. The body that made room for the founder of Rome, here is a body in mourning, a repository body for pain, making room for the pain of the descendants of Romulus, or even the brothers of Ilia, since every Roman was considered the brother of a Vestal priestess, as presented by Azevedo.[47] A suffering that leverages the tragic *pathos* of Caesar's death and that translates the patriotic feelings of recognition and belonging, supporting the conception of a national identity.

Another aspect stands out in the Horatian excerpt – Ilia's marriage to the Tiber River. The *pudicitia*, demonstrated more evidently in Virgil's verses, takes on a new outline in the Horatian version of the myth, since Ilia, here, is married, yet another divine union that protects Ilia's sacred body. Through the marvellous, Horace's poetic construction preserves Ilia's immaculate body and sexual purity, reestablishes control of the solo female body and restores Ilia to the ideal place of women in Augustan society, thus safeguarding the political-moral integrity of Rome, as observed in Joshel:

> Woman was to be returned to her proper place. Marriage was to be regulated by the state; women's sexuality was to form the images and establish the boundaries so necessary to secure Rome's domination of others and Augustus' structuring of power.[48]

45 Villeneuve cf. Horace, 1954, 9.
46 2008, 51, n.17.
47 Azevedo 2017, 102.
48 Joshel 2002, 174.

The union of Ilia with the Tiber River also allows recognizing that the celestial marriage, as well as the apotheosis of Ilia, configure the construction of a new mythical persona – the deified matron. The conception of a chaste and married body would reinforce the representation of Ilia in the Roman social imagination, not only as a *mater*, but also as a *matrona*, symbols that reinforce moral values recognized by the Roman society. In this perspective, the Horatian representation of Ilia would fill a representative void in the mythical tradition, since the representation of the matron is suppressed in the founding myth of Rome.[49] As observed by Staples, indeed, it is possible to identify in the Roman foundation myth a masculine ideology about the female body, outlined in the female sexual categories constant or not in the myth, namely, the virgin – Rhea Silvia –, the prostitute – Aca Larencia –, and the wife – not represented in the myth. According to Staples, the representative gap would be justified by its socio-political importance, since only a matron could generate legitimate children for a Roman citizen.

In this perspective, the "matron", together with the "virgin", would play, through *pudicitia*, a relevant and, at the same time, threatening role, enabling:

> Our sources therefore offer the sort of information about women' s engagement with the moral sphere usually lacking in Roman moral discourse. We are given a rare chance to compare the moral development of men and women, and to explore evidence for women as moral subjects (as opposed to objects of control) in parallel with that for men.[50]

The Ovidian Rhea: a holy-erotic body

Our third and last source is Ovid, in his work, *Fastos* (*Fasti*), "a kind of poetic calendar in elegiac couplets",[51] in which the poet proposes to present the most important Roman ephemeris based on the calendar of his time, that is, the beginning of the imperial era. In this work it is possible to experience a more

49 Staples 2004, 63.
50 Langlands 2006, 2.
51 Citroni 2006, 606.

developed narrative of the myth of Rome foundation and a greater participation of Rhea Silvia, as seen below:

Tum quoque inermis eras, cum te Romana sacerdos
cepit, ut huic urbi semina magna dares.
Silvia Vestalis (quid enim vetat inde moveri?)
sacra lavaturas mane petebat aquas.
ventum erat ad molli declivem tramite ripam;
ponitur e summa fictilis urna coma:
fessa resedit humo, ventosque accepit aperto
pectore, turbatas restituitque comas.
dum sedet, umbrosae salices volucresque canorae
fecerunt somnos et leve murmur aquae;
blanda quies furtim victis obrepsit ocellis,
et cadit a mento languida facta manus.
Mars videt hanc visamque cupit potiturque cupita,
et sua divina furta fefellit ope.
somnus abit, iacet ipsa gravis; iam scilicet intra
viscera Romanae conditor urbis erat.
languida consurgit, nec scit cur languida surgat,
et peragit tales arbore nixa sonos:
utile sit faustumque, precor, quod imagine somni
vidimus: an somno clarius illud erat?
ignibus Iliacis aderam, cum lapsa capillis
decidit ante sacros lanea vitta focos.
inde duae pariter, visu mirabile, palmae
surgunt: ex illis altera maior erat,
et gravibus ramis totum protexerat orbem,
contigeratque sua sidera summa coma.
ecce meus ferrum patruus molitur in illas:
terreor admonitu, corque timore micat.
Martia, picus, avis gemino pro stipite pugnant
et lupa: tuta per hos utraque palma fuit.'
dixerat, et plenam non firmis viribus urnam
sustulit: implerat, dum sua visa refert.
interea crescente Remo, crescente Quirino,
caelesti tumidus pondere venter erat.[52]

52 Ov. *Fast.* 3.9-42.

The Ovidian version of the myth naturally displays more elements than those previously observed, which is justified by the programmatic proposal presented in the first paragraph of this section. In this passage, Ovid begins by evoking Mars (1-8), on the grounds that the month of March, the month the poet discusses, has its origin in the name of that god. Soon afterwards, Ovid, who had already described that Mars had laid down his weapons on the ground (1-2), says that Mars was defenceless (*inermis*) until the moment of being conquered (*cepit*) by a Roman Vestal (*Romana sacerdos*, 9). In these few initial verses, it is possible to observe various aspects of gender relations and male idealization of the female body. To understand this construction, I highlight the term *sacerdos*, which is again used to introduce Rhea Silva as a character, who has not yet been mentioned by name. The use of this term reinforces, as already observed in Virgil's representation, the sacrosanct atmosphere conferred on the Princess of Alba Longa. However, Ovid begins his second verse with the verb *cepit*, past tense of the verb *capio*, which means, among other things, "to capture", and which was translated by Gouvêa Júnior as "to conquer", the first action attributed by the poet to the Roman priestess. From this perspective, the verb *cepit* is the reading key to understanding that, despite being presented as *Romana sacerdos*, Reia Silvia's body is perceived as a female body and as an erotic body, a temple of enchantment, a body that brings together the holy-profane dichotomy and becomes the object of desire of a god without weapons.

The association of seduction as a feminine artifice is foreshadowed in the description of the god Mars stripping down his weapons, as observed in the following excerpt:

> Bellice, depositis clipeo paulisper et hasta,
> Mars, ades et nitidas casside solve comas.[53]

When Mars first sees Reia Silvia, he is unarmed, and Ovid portraits their encounter with the god appearing helpless (9), captivated by the priestess who conquers him simply by being herself. Rhea's body is thus presented as a female

53 Ov. *Fast.* 3.1-2.

form imbued with eroticism, which, even unintentionally, provokes desire. In this perspective, the rhetoric of love at first sight eclipses, in a first act, the logic of the eroticized female body and, subsequently, the upcoming sexual violence.

Regarding sacredness and, by extension, chastity, as an element of the masculine drive, Bataille, in his study of eroticism, comments that there is an impulse that leads the being to tarnish the beautiful, as observed in this passage: "Si la beauté, dont l'achèvement rejette l'animalité, est passionnément désirée, c'est qu'elle la possession introduit la souillire animale. Elle est désirée pour la salir. Non pour elle même, mais pour ja joie goûtée dans la certitude de la profaner" (Bataille, 1987, 143). In the author's opinion, beauty is in itself a impulse for violation, a human transgression, as observed:

> À propos de la beauté, j'ai parlé de profanation. Tout aussi bien, j'aurais pu parler de transgression, puisque l`animalité, par rapport à nous, a le sens de la transgression, l'animal ignorant l'interdit. Mais le sentiment de profaner est plus immédiatement intelligible pour nous. (Bataille 1987, 144)

Despite of the fact that the French philosopher's reflection does not make gender distinction, we can verify, from the Ovidian narrative, that the profanation impulse is characteristic of the male figure, represented, in this passage, by the god Mars, and the profaned being, in this context, a female body, symbolized by the Roman priestess, Rhea Silvia.

The rhetoric of the female body as source of eroticism makes it possible to understand that the reification of the female body is guided by attributes elaborated by the male socio-ideological discourse, which identifies youth,[54] beauty, chastity and sacredness as an ideal of a desirable female body. Taking sexuality as a patriarchal mechanism, "sexual objectification is the primary process of the subjection of women. It unites act with word, construction with expression, perception with enforcement, myth with reality".[55]

The Ovidian narrative continues with the description of Rhea Silva, who rests in the woods and ends up falling asleep. During her sleep, the Vestal priestess

54 According to Bataille (1987, 143-45), youth and formal distancing from animalities are constituent elements of beauty from a human perspective.
55 MacKinnon apud Scott 1986, 1058.

is raped by the god Mars, who, with divine powers, hides his crime, as seen in verses 3.21-22.

The sequences of Mars actions are summarized in "seeing" (*uidet*), "desiring" (*cupit*), "possessing" (*potitur*) and "concealing" (*fefellit*), mirroring the patriarchal template of "Man fucks woman: subject verb object," as mentioned by Joan Scott (1986), in reference to the analogy developed by Catharine Mackinnon. A succession of practices, stealthily disseminated through an idealized loving discourse that praises the desiring male subject. A narrative device that has been conserved by the literary tradition without a reflection on gender relations, which guide this dynamic. Mechanisms that mitigate violence against the female body can be reproduced at various levels of discourse, whether in original works or in translations. One example can be observed in the Portuguese translation of the same highlighted verses (Ov. *Fastos*, 3. 21-2) according to Seabra and Castilho's translation:[56]

> Mavorte ao vê-la,
> Arde, ferve de amor; ousa... triunfa;
> E, por mago condão só dado a numes,
> Da mesma a quem roubou seu furto encobre[57]

Another important aspect to be highlighted about the violence suffered by Rhea Silva concerns the loss of her chastity. Virginity, as previously noted, was not merely a prerequisite for membership in the Vestal priesthood but a value in itself (symbolizing the integrity of Roman society) – the violation of a Vestal's vow of chastity was perceived as a dangerous manifestation of her sexual power.[58] The loss of virginity by a Vestal would still be an ideological transgression in the sense of what the priesthood represented, making the great deviation not be the loss of virginity itself, but the impossibility of remaining a Vestal.[59] Moreover, sexual violence against women, more specifically, rape would symbolize, according

56 Seabra et Feliciano de Castilho 1949 (Ov. *Fast.* 3.21-22).
57 Ov. *Fastos*, 3. 21-2.
58 Staples 2004, 132,147.
59 Staples 2004, 148.

to Joshel, a threat to men and, therefore, to political balance, as it can be seen in the analogy presented by the author that translates the female body as a threshold:

If women are boundaries, rape, which assaults an orifice, a marginal area of the body, creates a special vulnerability for the "center," that is, men.[60]

Joplin's analysis, based on the rape of the mythical character Filomela, is consistent with the perception of the female body as a frontier, since, in the author's opinion, "the woman's hymen serving as the physical or sexual sign for the limen or wall defining the city's limits."[61] The author, through Mary Douglas, also offers a very enlightening metaphor for reflecting on the appropriation of the female body as a political body:

> the human body is always treated as an image of society. . . Interests in apertures depends on the preoccupation with social exits and entrances, escape routes and invasions. If there is no concern to preserve social boundaries, I would not expect to find concern with bodily boundaries. The relation of head to feet, of brain and sexual organs, of mouth and anus are commonly treated so that they express the relevant patterns of hierarchy. [62]

Unlike Virgil who presented Rhea Silvia's narrative within the poetics of the marvellous, Ovid incorporates more tangible elements in his portrayal, particularly when he contextualizes the sexual violence Rhea Silva suffers during her sleep. This setting allows Ovid to repress the lament of the princess of Alba Longa for the crime suffered, which leads us to assume that the lack of awareness of the crime would lead to a moral unconsciousness, which would distance Rhea Silvia from the feelings shaped by the concept of modesty, defined by Langlands as ". . . a sense of shame and socio-ethical discomfort stemming from an awareness of oneself as the constant focus of the moralizing gaze of the community, which placed constraints upon the behaviour of a subject".[63] The poet does not seem to find arguments to echo this suffering in his narrative, either because the violence experienced by Rhea Silvia is an event irrelevant compared to the distinction of giving birth to the one who will found Rome, or because to emphasize the violence committed by the god Mars is to tarnish Rhea Silvia's *pudicitia*, to render her

60 Joshel 2002, 179.
61 Joplin 2002, 267.
62 Mary Douglas apud Joplin 2002, 267.
63 Langlands 2006, 18.

impudica, a moral corruption, which is unseemly for the mother of the founder of Rome. However, Rhea Silvia's pregnant body is her power, an authority conferred by motherhood that makes the creature a creator. Moreover, the oneiric atmosphere is conducive to the foreshadowing of the birth of Romulus and Remus and the other difficulties of survival that the twin brothers will face through the work of Amulius, a vision that will be revealed in the next verses by the voice of Rhea Silvia herself.

Yet, before announcing the dream, Ovid points out that the priestess awakens already pregnant with the founder of Rome. The violated body of Rhea Silvia once again receives sacred outlines, here, the body of the Princess of Alba Longa is a guardian temple of the great Roman hero, the founder of Rome, "*Romanae conditor urbis*".[64] Continuing with the analysis of the passage, Ovid reveals, in direct speech, Rhea Silvia's auspicious dream. In other words, while the god Mars violates the sleeping princess of Alba Longa, the poet foreshadows the birth of the twins, the persecution of Uncle Amulius and the divine protection of Mars over the children. Rhea Silvia, unaware of the violence she has suffered, experiences the fate of Rome in her body.

And the Ovidian narrative continues with the birth of the twins and the next verses present relevant elements to observe the morality that affects Reia Silvia. In this passage, the poet describes the dissent of the goddess Vesta herself, when childbirth.[65] In this excerpt, Ovid stresses the seriousness of breaking the vow of chastity, hyperbolically causing even the vestal temple to tremble, thus reinforcing divine disapproval. The poetic image elaborated by Ovid makes it possible to understand that the goddess and, by metonymy, her temple assume the belief of public opinion, it is the moralizing perspective of the community that Langlands[66] speaks of, of a society that condemns the lack of chastity of the vestals, that refutes the female sexuality, which disapproves of a pregnant body outside of marriage. In this sense, it is worth noting the religious authority conferred to the Vestals, as observed in the comments by Staples:

64 Ov. *Fast.* 24.
65 Ov. *Fast.* 3. 43-48.
66 Langlands 2006, 18.

> A Vestal's unchastity was a sign of the dangerous resurgence of her sexual potential. It was also a sign that the constraints imposed on that potential – i.e. ideological virginity – had failed. The loss of her physical virginity removed the foundation upon which the ideal of a Vestal Virgin was constructed. It bears repeating – again – that the peculiar gravity of a Vestal's crime was not merely that she had ceased to be a virgin, but that she had thereby ceased to be a Vestal.[67]

After describing the birth of the twins and the reaction of the goddess Vesta, Ovid shifts the focus of his narrative to the twins, not revisiting Rhea Silvia's story. However, variants of the myth clarify that, after attempting to kill his grandnephews by casting them into the Tiber River, Amulius also throws Rhea Silvia into the same river. In other versions, Rhea is imprisoned by her uncle and only released when Romulus and Remus claim the throne of Alba Longa. While Ovid does not provide a version of Rhea Silvia's fate, both versions ultimately converge on the punishment endured by the princess.

All in all, what belief are we heirs to?

In this study, in response to the male dominance in ancient Latin poetry – resulting in portrayals of femininity shaped by male poetic perspectives and expressions – we strive to value the feminine and feminist viewpoint, both in our analysis and in the theoretical foundation drawn from female authors. In this sense, Augustan Latin poetry, as exemplified by the verses of Virgil, Horace, and Ovid, serves as a vehicle for preserving the ideal of morality associated with Rhea Silvia. The poetic use of the marvellous by these authors is interpreted as an ethical mechanism that reinforces a new imperial order and reveals the importance of poetic discourse in the formation of a national identity.

It was also possible to observe that the representation of Rhea Silvia brings together three mythical *personae*, namely, the "virgin", the "mother" and the "*matrona*", a social order closely associated with female sexuality, which

67 Staples 2004, 147-48.

demonstrates, on the one hand, a male control over the female sexuality, and, on the other hand, the perception of these categories as moralizing subjects.

The narratives observed in this study reveal that Rhea Silvia's body is portrayed as belonging to the "other." It is a non-belonging of her own body, a non-body that brings her closer to the divine, either through the priesthood or through the apotheotic epilogue – a patriarchal logic that replaces control of the female body in male hands. In this framework, the deification of the princess of Alba Longa becomes a moralizing resolution, which allows us to assimilate a character, who carries so many marks on her body. Yet, Rhea Silvia's deification can also be interpreted through her transformation into a pregnant body – a state that that grants the princess the power of creation, such as a god (and the creation of a Roman hero!). From this perspective, the poetics of the marvellous broadens its reach, by demystifying Rhea Silvia's virgin-mother body while simultaneously invalidating the socio-religious anomaly of an unchaste body – consequently, from the perspective of infamy, there is no one to be punished.

Following Langlands,[68] who understands the mythical *exemplum* as a unique and retold version, thus renewing the myth itself, revealing moral aspects of society, and understanding that each interpretation, in turn, is also a new way of seeing the myth, it was observed that the female body of Rhea Silvia is in itself an *exemplum*, since this body becomes a space for the construction of a socio-culturally predominant ideology. A body that brings together a divine offspring, that celebrates the Roman moral virtues and that makes a home for the hero-founder. A political body, guardian of a moral, social and political balance – a body that mimics Rome.

68 Langlands 2006, 28.

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