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The Exploration of Nationalism in the Works of Livy and Jacques-Louis David

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The concept of nationalism is one that occupies a prevalent position in many ancient and modern works. Manifestations of such "valuation of the nation-state above all else" in art is often a natural consequence of a patriotic artist's work. Art provides on opportunity for the artist to express feelings, to educate their audience, and to further their own political agendas. Two such artists that took advantage of the widespread capabilities and audience of art are Titus Livius and Jacques-Louis David. These men recognized the ability of art to inspire passion and to reach the masses, and they used it to their own advantage. Though the two are from widely varying times and cultures, the artists are similar in that the creations of their works serves as a means of promoting their respective nationalistic ideals. In this paper, I plan to explore the inclusion and advancement of those nationalistic political agendas by the artists. This will include an overview of David's paintings the *Oath of the Horatii*² and the *Intervention of the Sabine Women* ³ as related to the corresponding passages recorded by Livy and a look at their potentially relatable messages, goals, and the achievement of those goals.

To fully understand the works of the two artists, knowing and understanding the context of each of the works as well as some background regarding the artists is necessary. Jacques-Louis David was born in Paris on August 30, 1748.⁴ Born into a middle class family, he was soon essentially orphaned by his father's death and his mother's subsequent removal to the

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¹ "nationalism," *A Dictionary of Sociology*, ed. John Scott and Gordon Marshall. Oxford University Press 2009. *Oxford Reference Online*. Oxford University Press. Xavier University. 7 December 2011, http://www.oxfordreference.com/views/ENTRY.html?subview=Main&entry=t88.e1518.

² Appendix 1.

³ Appendix 2.

⁴ Warren Roberts, *Jacques-Louis David, Revolutionary Artist: Art, Politics, and the French Revolution*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1989),1.

country.⁵ David's guardians were reportedly very unaffectionate uncles, but the true male figure in his life was family friend, Michel-Jean Sedaine.⁶ Sedaine was prominent in the art scene of the day as a playwright and with a post at the Royal Academy of Architecture.⁷ Sedaine was responsible for introducing David to the art world and for encouraging the young David to pursue his artistic dreams in the face of familial scorn.⁸

Being born during the first years of excavations at Pompeii and Herculaneum, David was present in the resurgence of classical antiquity and his interest in the subject is evident in his works. After traditional schooling in the arts and a government-awarded, formational trip to Italy, David was influenced by a number of his predecessors, including Poussin and Caravaggio. Despite claiming that, "The art of antiquity will not seduce me, for it lacks liveliness," David turned toward the classical in light of popular sentiment as well as a visit to Pompeii and Herculaneum. His first widely recognized and acclaimed work was his *Oath of the Horatii*. Finished and displayed in 1785, the *Horatii* represents David's early work, his prerevolution work. It has been said that the idea of the *Horatii* began to form after David saw Pierre Corneille's tragedy *Horace*, but that the final image was David's own. With this work

⁵Thomas E. Crow, *Emulation: David, Drouais, and Girodet in the Art of Revolutionary France*, (New Haven: Yale University Press in Association with the Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, 2006), 5.

⁶ Ibid., 5.

⁷ Ibid., 5.

⁸ Ibid., 6.

⁹ Anita Brookner, *Jacques Louis David*. (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1980), 52.

¹⁰ Ibid., 57-58.

¹¹ Simon Lee, *David*. (London: Phaidon, 1999), 1736.

¹² Crow, Emulation: David, Drouais, and Girodet in the Art of Revolutionary France, 33.

and many others, David became the central artistic figure in France at the time. His paintings were wildly successful as well as controversial, gaining interest from all classes.

During David's rise to fame, the French Revolution began to take shape and to become a force in French politics. David was a staunch supporter of the Revolution. Having been rejected from numerous teaching positions by the French Academy, David turned to fellow artists for solace and company. This group was predominantly liberal and, from constant association, David came to adopt their philosophies concerning the monarchy and hierarchy in France, a power to which they were stringently opposed. Roberts writes, "Like all of his liberal friends," David welcomed a revolution that offered hope of a better future for the nation. He became friends with prominent men of the revolution, like Maximilien Robespierre and Jean-Paul Marat. For these friendships and his radical actions in the early years of the Revolution, he was arrested and jailed twice in 1794 and 1795. He was still allowed to paint while imprisoned, and created a surprising number of works during this time. Following his imprisonment, David set his politically extremist tendencies aside and spent some years teaching and making portraits. He came bounding back onto the art scene, however, in 1799 with his massive canvas work, *The Intervention of the Sabine Women*, which received much acclaim. The Sabine Women was

¹³ Roberts, Jacques-Louis David, Revolutionary Artist: Art, Politics, and the French Revolution, 30.

¹⁴ Ibid., 30.

¹⁵ Ibid., 51.

¹⁶Ibid., 5, 65.

¹⁷Ibid., 104.

¹⁸ Brookner, Jacques Louis David, 124.

¹⁹Ibid., 137.

²⁰ Ibid., 137.

admired even by Napoleon, though he was doubtful of David's ability to accurately portray war, and, nevertheless, led him to hire David as a government painter.²¹ When Napoleon fell in 1815, David was sent into exile as the employee of "The Usurper."²² He then spent the rest of his life pursuing the "meditative life" and painting in Brussels until his death in 1825.²³

With his politically active life, it is no wonder that David's paintings are steeped in political meaning. David sought to represent the modern conflict and to possibly influence society through his works on a scale unlike any other. His distinct hatred of the monarchy, born and cultivated by his friendship with other artists, did not taint his opinion of his fatherland, however. As a revolutionary, he fought for freedom within France and the advancement of the French nation. Though he utilized a neoclassicist style, the Roman and Greek figures and settings he portrays in no way diminishes his articulation of that love of country or of the political climate of the day. As David Carrier writes, "David's art *looks* political at first sight and *is* tied closely to the context of contemporary politics, its edge *not* blunted by time."²⁴

In the *Oath of the Horatii*, the truth of Carrier's statement is evident. There have been many differing opinions as to the context of this painting. Crow argues that the *Horatii* is a prerevolutionary painting and suggests David's own suppositions or foresight with regards to the future revolution.²⁵ This view is contrary to other, previous opinions of the painting as "fully republican," as it shows the painting is more than just a passive republican statement, but more

²¹ Brookner, Jacques Louis David, 135-136.

²² Roberts, Jacques-Louis David, Revolutionary Artist: Art, Politics, and the French Revolution, 191.

²³ "Jacques-Louis David," *Encyclopedia Britannica Online Academic Edition*, Encyclopedia Britannica Inc., 19 Nov. 2011, http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/152567/Jacques-Louis-David.

²⁴ David Carrier, "The Political Art of Jacques-Louis David and His Modern Day American Successors," *Art History* 26.5 (2003): 733.

²⁵ Roberts, Jacques-Louis David, Revolutionary Artist: Art, Politics, and the French Revolution, 19.

an engaged commentary on the political developments. ²⁶ Despite the contrast of opinions concerning David's motivation, his message is clear. The three brothers from the Horatius family are willingly and even eagerly accepting the swords extended to them by their father. Accepting their father's commission and taking up arms against the Curiatii shows their willingness to lay down their lives for the Roman cause. They put aside all ties, both familial and personal, for the sake of the state.

Such devotion to one's nation was admirable to David, a sentiment he wished the French people to be acquainted with. As Carrier states, "in showing a scene of the past, the artist may intend to allude to the present," and David does just that.²⁷ In this painting, David is demonstrating the necessity of allegiance to one's country, that the people of France must put country before all else just as the Romans did. The outstretched arms of the brothers come together in the reaching for their duty, and their rigid posture speaks of the determination of their will to do as their father asks. Additionally, the men pay no heed to the crying women who are minimized and off to the side and are "resolved to subordinate kinship to country.²⁸ One of the women, the brothers' sister, mourns the death of her fiancé, one of the Curiatii and her brothers disregard her emotion in the face of duty. David places the men in the forefront of the picture with an indistinctive background to emphasize the importance of patriotism and nationalism and how all else, like the women, are secondary. David masterfully portrays a contemporary meaning from such an old story and, "while glorifying the patriotism of the Romans, [he] implies a

²⁶ Ibid., 19.

²⁷ Carrier, "The Political Art of Jacques-Louis David and His Modern Day American Successors," 734.

²⁸ Andrew Stewart, "David's 'Oath of the Horatii' and the Tyrranicides." *The Burlington Magazine* 143.1177 (2001): 212-19.

criticism of the French monarchy and its tyrannical rule." ²⁹ The painting can be seen as a revolutionary piece of art as Simon Schama states,

if the outstretched arm of the Horatii was to become the standard manner of taking a revolutionary oath ... it would be because the gesture had been appropriated by the Revolution. But it would be equally myopic not to notice that all the required ingredients for revolutionary rhetoric were spectacularly announce in this painting: patriotism, fraternity and martyrdom."³⁰

The nationalistic message in this painting is evident; it is a call to the French people to defend their rights and preserve the nation.

Diverging from this more confrontational message of nationalism, David expresses a new outlook on the French nation in his *Intervention of the Sabine Women* in 1799. In this painting, David depicts the aftermath of the famous episode of the rape of the Sabine women. After being seized as wives for the Romans, Sabine women accept their fate and assimilate themselves into everyday Roman life. When their former country and new fatherland raise arms against one another, the women, lead by Hersilia, intervene to stop the bloodshed of their kin on both sides. After all of the controversy in his life and the end of the Revolution, David wants peace personally and for his country. In this work, Anita Brookner writes

The *Intervention of the Sabine Women* was intended to prove to the nation factional strife was no longer desirable and that appearement should be welcomed. It is yet another political picture, both at objective and subjective levels, for in admitting the peace-making matron Hersilia to the central position on the canvas

²⁹ Carrier, "The Political Art of Jacques-Louis David and His Modern Day American Successors," 740.

³⁰ Simon Schama, Citizens: A Chronicle of the French Revolution, (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1989), 174.

David sacrifices his own tense wariness of the mollifying power of female intervention into masculine quarrels.³¹

Whereas in the *Horatii* the women are in the background and thus of lesser importance, in the *Sabines*, there is a distinct role reversal. The women are in the forefront and represent a successful entity. Their goal of ending the war was achieved and evident in the painting with Titus Tatius lowering his sword on the left and Romulus loosening his grip on his spear on the right. The determined and desperate nature of the women prevails in opposition to the brutish violence of the men. Through this subjugation of the men, David emphasizes the drastic changes and shifts in power that have occurred in the previous few years, changes that he hopes will end in peace as they do in his painting. David with the *Sabines* "demonstrated a public appetite for painting that glorified the theme of relaxed tensions in the language of consensual classicism." This painting was a call to normalcy and to rationality, almost a complete contrast of its predecessor. Despite the change in message between the *Horatii* and the *Sabines*, the underlying theme of nationalism remains strong. In both of the paintings, David seeks the good for the French nation as a means of continuing its former glory.

In Livy's *Ab Urbe Condita*, similar nationalistic underpinnings occur in his recounting of the story of the Horatii and the Sabine women in chapters 24 to 26 and 13 in Book 1. In his work, Livy sought to provide a work for the Roman people to guide them in the living of the life of a good Roman citizen. He desired "to rekindle the flagging patriotism of his countrymen and to raise his politically and socially degraded contemporaries to the level of their ancestors'

³¹ Brookner, Jacques Louis David, 137.

³² Crow, Emulation: David, Drouais, and Girodet in the Art of Revolutionary France, 236.

exploits."³³ He uses his narrative as a means to promote his view of nationalism on a broader scale as well as to promote his own political views. As James E. Reubel writes, Livy's

[...] first pentad is the greatest manifestation of the literary enactment of the politicization of Roman folktales. Livy clearly approached his goal with conscious motivations, but the sheer size of his project led to repeated failures and losses of direction. [...] The emergence of Rome as a serious world power was contemporary, and not by coincidence, with her first native writers of history, and with their attempts to justify and vindicate Rome's political position, and hence with both the mythologization of their past and the politicization of their myths.³⁴

Livy makes use of the tales passed down from generation to generation and, with his unusually literary approach to history, intertwines the stories with relevant political insights. Though the distinct political preferences of Livy are much speculated, they are not definitively known. It is sufficient, however, to recognize his love of state. As Livy writes in his preface, *aut nulla unquam res publica nec maior nec sanctior nec bonis exemplis ditior fuit* (preaf. 6) There never was any state either greater or more moral or richer in good examples).³⁵

In the tale of the Horatii, nationalism is overtly expressed in the story itself and in the telling of it. As in David's painting, the brothers on both sides choose to enter the battle and, if necessary, forfeit their lives for their country. Livy writes

Datur signum infestisque armis velut acies terni iuvenes magnorum exercitum animos gerentes concurrunt. Nec his nec illis periculum suum, publicum

³³ Oskar Seyffert, Henry Nettleship, and John Edwin Sandys, *A Dictionary of Classical Antiquities: Mythology, Religion, Literature and Art*, (London: W. Glaisher, 1895), 361.

³⁴James S. Reubel, "Politics and Folktale in the Classical World." *Asian Folklore Studies* 50.1 (1991): 25.

³⁵ Trans. by Kelly Bunting.

imperium servitium que obversatur animo futura que ea deinde patriae fortuna, quam ipsi fecissent. 36

The signal is given and with hostile arms, as if in a battle line, the three youths run bearing spirits of the great armies. Neither by this one nor the other [is] their own danger [regarded], the public rule and slavery appear before the mind and what would then be the fate of the fatherland, which they themselves had made.

This total disregard for personal safety in the observance of duty demonstrates Livy's own passion for devotion to one's country as part of the life of a virtuous citizen. When the battle turns south for the Romans after the death of two of the brothers, Horatius, though wounded, chooses to continue his fight against the three remaining Curiatii. He successfully defeats two of the brothers and, before killing the third, exclaims that it is for his country that he plans to kill. As Livy recounts, *Romanus exsultans "Duos" inquit "fratrum minibus dedi; tertium causae belli huiusce, ut Romanus Albano imperet, dabo"* (1.25.11). The Roman rejoicing, said, "I gave two men to the ghosts of my brothers; the third I will give to the cause of this war, that the Roman may rule the Alban"). Horatius' thought at that crucial moment in battle, as Livy highlights, is for his country, a distinct display of nationalism.

Perhaps one of the most nationalistic scenes within the tale is upon the return of Horatius to Rome. He marches towards home in the front of his army but, instead of finding gracious and fawning sisters, he is welcomed by grief. His sister, who was betrothed to one of the Curiatii brothers, upon seeing the cloak of her beloved around her brother's neck, wails in anguish. Livy vividly paints the scene that follows,

Movet feroci iuveni animum comploratio sororis in victoria sua tantoque gaudio publico. Stricto itaque gladio simul verbis increpans transfigit puellam. 'Abi hinc cum immaturo amore ad sponsum,' inquit 'oblita fratrum mortuorum vivique, oblita patriae. Sic eat quaecumque Romana lugebit hostem.' ³⁷

³⁶ Titus Livius. Livy, Book 1. Ed. H. E. Gould and J. L., (Bristol: Bristol Classical, 2004), 1.25.3.

³⁷ Ibid., 1.41.3-5.

The wailing of his sister moves the spirit of the ferocious youth in his victory with such great public delight. Therefore having drawn his sword, he ran the girl through simultaneously rebuking with words. "Go hence," he said, "with your immature love to your spouse forgetful of your dead brothers and of the one living, forgetful of the fatherland. Thus it may be, every Roman woman will mourn the enemy."

Horatius, so angered by his sister's concern for the enemy, kills her as a punishment for her disloyalty. Though he is later brought to trial, he is dismissed and his deed seen in a favourable and noble light. However, there is a somewhat ambiguous connotation to the passage. Though Horatius is acquitted, it is more an acknowledgement of his achievements for the Roman state than an act of justice. As Livy writes, *absolveruntque admiration magis virtutis quam iure causae*. ([The people] absolved him more in admiration of his bravery than in the justice of the cause"). Again, Livy demonstrates the precedence of the good of the state and the extent to which that preference must reach, even so far as to taper with justice.

Livy paints an equally, though less obvious nationalistic picture in his narration of the story of the Sabine women. Again as in David's *Sabines*, the women have resigned themselves to their fates and become content in their new roles as Roman wives. This is evident when Livy writes, *iam admodum mitigate animi raptis*. ⁴⁰ (Now very much were the minds of the ones being seized soothed). Abruptly following this acceptance of home and country, the men of the two houses of the women join in battle. Distraught at losing either their fathers or their husbands and rending their new homeland, the women seek to end the fight and do so by the only means they can - bodily intervention. The women appear on the field *victo malis muliebri pavore*, ⁴¹ (having

³⁸ Ibid., 1.26.5-12.

³⁹ Ibid., 1.26.12.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 1.10.1.

⁴¹ Ibid., 1.13.1.

conquered the womanly fear by evils), and appeal to their men to stop the bloodshed. They cry in pathetic appeal,

'Si adfinitatis inter vos, si conubii piget, in nos vertite iras; nos causa belli, nos vulnerum ac caedium viris ac parentibus sumus; melius peribimus quam sine alteris vestrum viduae aut orbae vivemus.' 42

If the relationship between you, if the marriage annoys, turn your anger to us; we are the cause of the war, of the wounds and deaths of our husbands and fathers; it is better that we should die than that we live without either of you widows or orphans.

This wrenching petition from the women evokes the emotion and passion that they have for their cause. While it may seem that their fervor for ending the war is inspired solely to prevent the deaths of their family members, the Sabine women are doing more than just that. In seeking to save their husbands, there is also a desire to save the homeland to which they have become accustomed. They succeed in this goal in a two-fold manner, first in the ending of the war, second in the uniting of the two states. Vandiver writes, "The Sabine women's voluntary acceptance of their role as the *matres* of the Roman people is the essential condition for the emergence of this new *civitas*." In this way, Livy not only showcases love for ones country, but also emphasizes the necessity on peace within that country. Brown writes that, "the episode as a whole expresses his [Livy's] conception of *concrordia* as not only a marital idea but a paramount social and political one as well." This peace would have been especially desirable for Livy as he grew up amongst the civil wars.

⁴² Ibid., 1.13.3.

⁴³ Elizabeth Vandiver, "The founding mothers of Livy's Rome: the Sabine Women and Lucretia," *Life and the arts in Greco-Roman antiquity* (1999): 215.

⁴⁴ Robert Brown, "Livy's Sabine Women and the Ideal of Concordia," *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 125 (1995): 292.

When looking at the passages of Livy as compared to the paintings by David, one can see the underlying similarities in the works. In both of the Horatii portrayals, the artists seek to emphasize allegiance to one's country and that everything not affiliated with the state is a secondary concern. David's message is in response to the corrupt monarchy and oppressed populous of the time. Livy's message responds to the declining morals of Roman society and his wish for a return to the old Roman ways. The success of David's *Horatii* is more evident as the Revolution began following its unveiling. David's painting was by no means a true cause of the war, but it had a significant impact on the mood of the people and general sentiment towards the government in its Salon debut. Livy's success in the conveyance of his message is more difficult to elucidate. Though there seems to be a slight increase in the interest of living the life of a good and virtuous citizen during the rule of Augustus, it is not significant enough to be seen really as his influence. 45 Unlike the instant effects of David, it would seem that Livy has a more long-term effect in the continued reading of his text. In the Sabine works, the artists both seem to emphasize not only defense of the fatherland, but also the unity within that fatherland. David sought to calm the radical emotions in the aftermath of the Revolution and to remind France of its potential for glory with his painting. Livy utilized the Sabine women as a means of bringing harmony to warring states and to illustrate the zeal one should have in the protection of one's country. Again, David's impact is more easily seen with the return to reason in France, while Livy's impact is less tangible. The public sentiment in France cools from the fervor of the Reign of Terror, and the country settles in to some sense of normalcy. With Livy, the civil wars are completed and he witnesses the dawning of a golden age under the rule of Augustus. His works,

⁴⁵ Oskar Seyffert, Henry Nettleship, and John Edwin Sandys, *A Dictionary of Classical Antiquities: Mythology, Religion, Literature and Art*, 361.

again, would have contributed to the general shift in the public attitude, but would also have continued to affect sentiment over time rather than in such an immediate fashion as David's did.

The messages conveyed, though similar in their expression of nationalism, do not link the two artists in purpose or personality. As nationalism is such a universal idea, many may support their country while possessing other values. David painted for the purpose of inciting action on behalf of his country and in defense of what he held dear. He was a revolutionary. Livy, on the other hand, was not. He wrote as a history for his state to recognize how to live the life of the good Roman as exemplified by great men and women throughout Rome's extensive history. His work, though by no means a passive commentary of that history, is a less emphatic call to nationalism than the blatant representation in David's works. He did not desire upheaval within Rome, but a strengthening of its already admirable qualities.

Though the two artists worked in very different mediums and in very different social contexts and times, they managed to successfully convey similar messages of nationalism and patriotism to their audiences with their respective pieces of work. The concept of devotion to country is by no means a new one, and Livy and David were publicizing messages that are familiar and welcome to people in any setting. Such a call to support and fervor for a nation is applicable in any situation, be it in ancient times for the Roman Empire or in the countries of modernity. It appeals to a distinct and natural characteristic in man to take up the cause of his *patria*, to defend and extol the place in which he resides.

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Appendix 1:



Jacques-Louis David, *Oath of the Horatii*, 1784. Oil on canvas, 128×170 in. Louvre, Paris. http://www.bc.edu/bc_org/avp/cas/his/CoreArt/art/resourcesb/dav_oath.jpg.

Appendix 2:

