

# Roman Nobility and the Power of the Spectacle

By Madeleine Brown

Livy's purpose of writing history is commonly found in ancient historiography, but its illustration in the story of the Falisci children is nonetheless visually and morally striking. Livy states his purpose, character education, in his Preface: "The special and salutary benefit of the study of history is to behold evidence of every sort of behavior set forth as on a splendid memorial; from it you may select for yourself and for your country what to emulate, from it what to avoid, whether basely begun or basely concluded." Another purpose is "to celebrate...the history of the greatest nation on earth." "[T]here has never," writes Livy, "been any state grander, purer, or richer in good examples, or one into which greed and luxury gained entrance so late." His examples occur through a series of character portrayals and spectacles. Livy places a number of characters and actions on a pedestal for the education of his audience—the new Augustan Rome. One such educational spectacle is that of the kidnapping of the Faliscan children.

In 5.27, Livy tells a peculiar story. In the Greek custom, large groups of Falisci children were taught by one educated man. In 394 BCE, Rome was at war with the Falisci, and the teacher of the noble children seized, he thought, an opportunity. He brought the Faliscan noble children to the Roman commander, Camillus, so that the Romans could negotiate a victory using the children as hostages. Camillus, however, takes the moral high ground:

A villain yourself, you have come with a

villainous gift to a people and a commander unlike yourself...There are laws in warfare, as there are in peace, and we have learned to follow them with as much justice as with bravery...You have defeated the Faliscans in the only way you could—by unheard-of treachery. I shall defeat them in the Roman way—by courage, siegeworks, and arms, as I did at Veii.

The story, however, does not stop here with a mere declaration of Roman moral superiority. The Roman commander gives the Falisci a visual sign, a *spectaculum*, of Roman fairness. The wicked teacher is swiftly stripped and bound, and the children, armed with switches, drive him back to the Falisci. The spectacle thus becomes the central moment of this scene: “The people at first rushed to catch sight of the spectacle; then the magistrates convened the senate to discuss the strange turn of events.”

Only after the Falisci witness this spectacle do they convene their senate and make a decision. They come to a surprising decision: the entire population, swayed by Roman fairness, demands peace. The Falisci would rather live under upright Roman law than under their own government. Livy’s lesson is articulated by the Faliscan envoys to the Roman senate: “The conclusion of this war teaches mankind two salutary lessons: you preferred fair dealing rather than taking advantage of the victory offered you, while we, under the stimulus of this fair dealing, have presented you with that victory.” In the end, Camillus is rewarded with a spectacle of his own: a triumph.

This scene is spectacular in several respects. First, the juxtaposition of evil in the face of innocence makes this scene remarkable. The Falisci had accorded the highest degree of trust and confidence in their children’s teacher. He was, after all, employed to raise and educate the future of their race and

society. In one stroke, he proved himself to be base and self-serving, in contrast to the innocence of his charges. The scene leading up to the main spectacle (the teacher being whipped back to town) is itself a spectacle: the reader has to pause and wonder at the strangeness of the scenario: “by telling stories and engaging them in play, he strayed further away than usual, ultimately bringing them to the outposts of the enemy and from there to Camillus at his headquarters.” Livy creates a picture of teacher and students engaging in normal, benign activities, but the purpose of the teacher’s seemingly innocuous activities is to use the children for his own perfidy.

Camillus, however, counteracts this display of corroded character with nobility, in another spectacular aspect of this scene. Though the Romans may believe they are right in the end, Camillus’ ultimate motivation is higher than mere victory: he behaves according to a code, the laws of warfare. So as not to behave unfairly, he gives up an advantage that could win him the war. We expect self-sacrificial nobility of this kind to be futile, and merely gestural. In this case, the Romans take a moral high ground while giving up a tactical high ground and are rewarded for it. As unusual as this noble display is in warfare, even more unexpected is the response: gratitude and capitulation. This story is ancient legend: it almost certainly did not happen as reported, and Livy has free rein to tell it as he wishes. That he brings us this particular and spectacular example of noble principle in his study of character is revealing. As Livy says in his Preface, he is writing in order that his readership may choose to emulate or to disparage certain behaviors.

Finally, we come to the visual spectacle itself. For the purpose of Livy’s message, it might have been enough to end with Camillus’ admonition. Livy, however, creates a dramatic conclusion to the tale. It would have been anticlimactic had such a treachery been capped with a simple return of the

children. The magnitude of the treachery has to be met with an equal retribution, and Livy accomplishes this brilliantly. And what a strange turn of events, indeed. The teacher is now subordinate to his pupils: stripped of his vestments (much less those of authority), he is driven back to face the citizenry he sought to betray. The children, his former subordinates, are now the masters: they turn him back to the town in a reversal of power that is no less amazing and instructive for being amusing. This may represent the turnabout of Roman fortunes: in 5.26, Livy points out that the Romans had “lost momentum” in this war. This story then involves a reversal within a reversal: the about-face in the children’s fortune is framed by the change in the Romans’ success in the war.

This spectacle works well with the kind of history Livy was writing—essentially a series of micro-episodes that contribute to large-scale lessons. This small episode instructs the audience about the importance of nobility on personal, community, and state levels. It seems the opposite of the spectacle in 9.4, in which the Samnites had captured the Roman army and refused to release it on the advice of their most respected elder. The Samnites are judged in this instance as hotheaded and foolish in opposition to Camillus’ rational, moral actions.

There are other such spectacles in Livy’s work that, like the episode of the Falisci children, turned the tide of the history about which Livy is writing. Three notable examples are the Battle of the Triplets in 1.25, the episode of Horatius Cocles blocking enemy entrance into Rome in 2.10, and the spectacle of the geese that alerted Marcus Manlius to the presence of the Gauls on the Capitoline Hill in 5.47. In Book 1, there occurs a decisive battle between the early Romans and the citizens of Alba Longa. The war is ultimately decided by a battle between a set of triplets from each side. One of the Roman triplets eventually wins in a public spectacle. Rome

may not have gone on to secure itself as a dominant power in Italy without this victory. In Book 2, the only force stopping the Etruscan enemy from crossing into Rome was one man, Horatius Cocles, standing in its way: “[I]t was Rome’s good fortune to have had him as her sole bulwark on that day,” declares Livy, after describing this spectacular and heroic effort. Finally, when the Gauls, besieging Rome in Book 5, are about to scale the Capitoline Hill and destroy the last of the Roman strongholds, a commotion caused by sacred geese awakes Marcus Manlius, who is able to rouse enough Romans to push the Gauls off the Capitoline cliff. Each of these episodes, like the instance of the Faliscan children, exemplifies a spectacle in Livy’s work that significantly alters the history he is writing.

The episode of the Faliscan children works beautifully for Livy’s larger purpose. He uses it to further his relationship with his audience. By placing human behavior on display, he leads and induces his readers to develop moral judgment and incorporate his lessons into their lives. The stark opposition of the decayed, cynical character of the teacher against the nobility of Camillus and the innocence of the children, teaches Augustan Rome the meaning of true nobility, heightened the more when it comes at a seeming disadvantage. Nobility, Livy subtly suggests, can be more than a mere gesture. This is one of the characteristics of Rome that makes it “the greatest nation on earth,” as Livy maintains in his evocative version of this spectacular legend.

## References

- Livy, *The Rise of Rome: Books 1-5*. Trans. T.J. Luce, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.
- Livy, *Rome and Italy: Books VI-X*. Trans. Betty Radice, London: Penguin Books, 1982.

**Note:** This paper was originally written for Professor Cynthia Damon's Spring 2013 course CLST 312: Writing History in Greece and Rome.

---