

Cristina Mazzoni, *She-Wolf: the Story of a Roman Icon*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010. Pp. xiv + 256. ISBN 978-0-521-14566-4. \$24.99 (pb)

At first glance it might seem a relatively simple project: to take one image—the Roman she-wolf—and explore its various depictions and meanings over time; however, Cristina Mazzoni’s research quickly shows that this is anything but a straightforward undertaking. In *She-Wolf: the Story of a Roman Icon*, Mazzoni explores the complexities and subtleties of the *lupa* as a historic, literary, political, and artistic figure to provide intriguing insight into several aspects of the social history and culture of Rome, Italy, and even the larger Western world.

A short preface sets the tone for a work “in which the personal and professional cannot be disentangled from one another” (p. xiii). Mazzoni is at once an Italian, a Roman, an American, a scholar, a woman, a mother, as well as a feminist and it is these multiple identities that in many ways guide her interpretive journey through the literary and artistic evidence she has gathered together.

The main text begins with a thoughtful introduction that presents the Roman she-wolf as a series of questions to be investigated. First, why was the story of the she-wolf nursing two abandoned twins so successful among the multiple myths of Rome’s birth that were in circulation (e.g., Aeneas or Rhome)? Second, how can we come to terms with the derogatory connotations of the main characters and events of the episode (e.g., fratricide and prostitution)? And finally, in light of these previous questions, what were the various depictions and meanings of the she-wolf over time, and how or why did these change?

The remainder of the book is dedicated to exploring such questions. Mazzoni divides her work into three main parts—Part I: the Capitoline She-Wolf, Part II: Writing About the She-Wolf, and Part III: the She-Wolf in Art. Each of these three sections is further subdivided into three chronological sections—Antiquity, Middle Ages and Renaissance, and Modern and Contemporary Times. The (in)famous bronze *Lupa Capitolina* currently on display in the Capitoline Museum in Rome is both the literal and figurative starting point for the entire project and is the main focus of Part I. In this section, Mazzoni introduces the reader to the inherent difficulties of interpreting the past, first discussing the debates over the she-wolf statue’s origin and meaning (as well as that of the two bronze infants displayed with it), and then illustrating how the use and significance of an object or image are subjective, negotiable, and fluid. Part II explores written representations of the she-wolf, focusing primarily on how the *lupa* functions as a symbol, metaphor, or allegory in a variety of literary genres. Of particular note is Mazzoni’s discussion of changing discourse on the female, which fostered either positive images of nurturing and creation or negative images of lasciviousness and greed. Part III then engages with visual representations of the she-wolf, focusing much more on the symbolic function of the image than did the previous section. The concluding chapter discusses the captivity and display of a live she-wolf on Rome’s Capitoline Hill for over 100 years, an account that helps tie together the book’s various thematic and narrative

threads.

The strengths and weaknesses of the book are closely related to Mazzoni's analytical methodology and her narrative organization. Her interdisciplinary approach enables her to include a remarkable variety of evidence, and she takes evident care not to privilege literary representations over visual ones or vice versa. Because she cannot touch on every she-wolf representation ever made, her choice of which examples to include and how to deal with them becomes of key importance. Mazzoni's descriptions and discussions of the evidence are plentiful and engaging, but there is a frustrating lack of illustrations; even in Part III many would-be interesting images are not shown (the Felsina stele, examples of Social War coinage, Fellini's movie poster, and the Marengo political cartoon to name a few). This may simply be a factor of copyright permissions or constraints from the publisher, but a picture is truly worth a thousand words—especially in a project of this sort.

The “eclectic style” of Mazzoni's criticism is firmly rooted in her training in comparative literature, “with its tendency to flout disciplinary boundaries and sense of entitlement to poach from all” (p. xiii). On the one hand, this freedom of choice in critical approaches adds an admirable richness to her study, leading to the fascinating incorporation of Lévi-Strauss' study of totemism (p. 18), Derrida's gift theory (pp. 53, 73), and Benjamin's discussions of art and reproduction (pp. 26, 81, 84) into Mazzoni's own interpretations. On the other hand, this embarrassment of riches results in several essential points left surprisingly underdeveloped—issues of identity and memory in particular. Mazzoni clearly understands the power of a verbal or visual image in the creation, manipulation, or maintenance of identity and public memory (through her discussions of processes like Romanization of the provinces, the unification of the Italian state, and even tourism) but it is unclear how central this pattern is to her overall analysis.

The structure of the book also has great benefits and slight drawbacks. The descriptions and discussions are ordered by evidence type (literary and visual) rather than by chronology, a unique arrangement that allows Mazzoni simultaneously to explore continuity and change, universals and specificities, while refraining from the notion of there being linear progression over time. The structure does somewhat slow the momentum of Mazzoni's argument and some critical connections are broken up, downplayed, or even lost as a result. For example, how symbols function in shaping identity by unifying its members and separating them from others (p. 7) is a fascinating theme, but one that is not given a unified analysis: the change of Rome's lion to she-wolf totem is discussed early on in the book (p. 49) while similar adoptions of the she-wolf by Perugia and Siena are mentioned much later (pp. 197–204).

Mazzoni sets a huge task for herself—which she readily acknowledges in her preface (p. xii)—but she accomplishes much of what she sets out to do in a very lively and engaging book. Mazzoni's fundamental conclusion is that the she-wolf is and always will be elusive—indeed, it is the qualities of variety and uncertainty “that makes her who

she is” (p. xiii–xiv)—and this indeterminacy allows her to endure over time (p. 11) as long as she has an “aura of authenticity and relevance” (p. 82). “As a legendary rather than historical figure, the she-wolf can never leave her status as representation” (p. 179), but she can be reused, recycled, reinvented, and reassembled. The challenge in addressing the history and significance of this “Roman icon” is therefore not merely to assemble a variety of historical representations, but rather to engage with their nuances while at the same time acknowledging that every representation is shaped by preceding constructed and reconstructed shades of meaning; *She-Wolf: the Story of a Roman Icon* achieves just that.

CAROLYN SWAN
THE JOUKOWSKY INSTITUTE FOR ARCHAEOLOGY AND THE ANCIENT WORLD
BROWN UNIVERSITY