

Enter RUMOUR, painted full of tongues

A few words on Fama, the Goddess of Gossip...

In the Greek version she's called Pheme, in the Roman equivalent she's Fama. Both names relate to Greek and Latin words for 'speech', which also give us the English word 'fame'.

As with the more famous God of Communication, Hermes (also known as Mercury), Fama's feathered wings signal airborne transmission. Both Hermes and Pheme are creatures of the wind—both are renowned for their swiftness, and both are associated with birds.

Unlike Hermes, however, the Goddess of Gossip doesn't deliver stable messages between designated senders and receivers; she exists in the endless circulation of retellings and adaptations, where the message is mostly unattributable, unauthorised and unauthoritative. While Hermes is the son of the sky god Zeus, heralding the official word from above, Pheme is the daughter of Gaia, and remains always in the midst of earthly retellings.

The classicist Philip Hardie writes that while Mercury is consistently allegorised 'as *Logos*, *Ratio*, the unperverted word,' Fama is 'a divinity of perverted speech' whose language is 'involved and indirect.' Hardie also compares the descent of Mercury, who arrives from the heavens above, to the *ascent* of Fama who takes flight from the earth into the wind—where Mercury's descent represents 'the reimposition of Olympian order in a space which has been threatened by an evil chthonic power.'<sup>1</sup>

This is the threat of the disorderly, the unpredictable and uncontained, the crooked and contaminated. In practice, of course, it can be very difficult to keep the abstract ideals of orderly and official speech separate from Fama's rumourous chit-chat. As Hardie points out, even Mercury himself 'is not above giving his own twist or elaboration to the word of the supreme god.'<sup>2</sup> There is, for example, a part in Virgil's telling, where Mercury is delivering a message for

Aeneas, warning him against Dido, but the official messenger can't resist adding his own misogynistic gloss on the message: after he has delivered the information, Mercury is like, *You know, though, woman is always a fickle and changeable thing.*

Since this comes from the mouth of ostensibly unmediated and unperverted Logos, it's clear that gossip operates as marginalised speech while also running through all knowledge production, so that she's never far below the surface, even when her principals are most feared and shunned.

In modern English usage, the word 'gossip' tends to be loaded with negatively feminised associations of malice, triviality, unreliability and idleness, but this wasn't always the case. Etymologically, a gossip was a godparent, of any gender—the god-sib, the sibling in god, the relative whose familial status was established outside of the institutions of bloodlines or marriage. The word gossip came to refer more generally to companions in childbirth and childrearing, or just to the idea of friendship—a gossip was someone you could gossip with, back when gossiping just meant hanging out.

The title of this text, *Enter RUMOUR, painted full of tongues*, comes from a stage direction in Shakespeare's *Henry IV Part 2*, where the embodiment of Rumour arrives on stage and says, 'Open your ears; for which of you will stop / The vent of hearing when loud Rumour speaks?'

The personification of Rumour as a figure who is 'painted full of tongues' goes back to Virgil: in the fourth book of *The Aeneid*, he describes Fama as 'a monster awful and huge, who for the many feathers in her body has as many watchful eyes beneath—wondrous to tell—as many tongues, as many sounding mouths, as many pricked-up ears.' This sprawling assemblage of eyes, ears, tongues and feathers signals a hyper-sensory and radically mobile body. She's as expressive as she is receptive, and her monstrosity is one of unbounded proliferation: gossip as many-tongued transmission, where things are collectively sculpted, without clear authorship or traceable origin.

The goddess's spatiality makes no sense: Virgil described her as crossing vast horizontal distances, while also having her feet on the ground, and also having her head in the sky. Semantically, she's also unresolved: as Virgil puts it, the Goddess of Gossip 'clings to fictions and distortions as much as she heralds the truth.' This is what can happen in gossip: fiction, distortion and truth operate through each other, so that things can *ring true* even as we cling to their fabrications. And this is perhaps where myth and gossip meet—the iterations keep shifting the shape of things, so that the same story gets to be a different story, while continuing to resonate.

1 Philip Hardie, *Virgil's Aeneid: Cosmos and Imperium* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 277–78.

2 Philip Hardie, *Rumour and Renown: Representations of Fama in Western Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 94.