CHAPTER 1

Setting the Stage

Ancient and modern analysts have praised the government of the Roman Republic for its dedication to shared power, which its leaders apparently achieved without significant dissent. Rome’s ‘mixed constitution’ required multiple levels of cooperation to function: not only did Polybius’ three main bodies of consul, senate, and people need to work together, but each level had to share power within itself. The consuls shared military and administrative power with each other; they would also ideally seek the advice of the previous possessors of this office, the senators. This more centralized, experienced authority was supplemented and offset by other offices. The Roman populace also had some degree of authority: it elected its magistrates, declared war and peace, and voted on laws. This system was perfectly balanced, according to Polybius, during its prime in the late third century BCE.¹

The mixed constitution is also the government that Cicero praises in his treatise on the state, the De Re Publica.² But Cicero does not claim that the government still functions. Reconciliation of the ideal of shared power with the reality that individuals were granted exceptional powers with great frequency created anxieties that were increasingly transferred to accounts of the city’s past. By constructing these accounts, writers suggested a way to explain and interpret the present. This present changed immensely over the course of the second and first centuries BCE, yielding a rich variety of foundation narratives and lessons for contemporary Roman elite readers.

The uneasy balance of individual and shared power appears in Rome’s earliest history. For example, Livy praises the hero Camillus for sharing his power with a colleague, even when he is appointed chief of the consular tribunes; the

¹ See Plb. 6.11.11 for praise; 6.11.1 for the date. Walbank’s (1957) commentary on this section is still standard; see also Walbank 1943:79–81 for the argument that this section comprises Polybius’ positive view of the still-functioning Roman political system. This is an obviously simplified outline of Republican government and does not enter into important debates in modern research, such as the potential role of the plebs; for this, see the works cited in n. 40. The Republican system of government has been extensively discussed in modern scholarship; see e.g. the survey of Staveley 1956; Lintott 1999; the reviews of scholarship in Flower 2010 and Hölkeskamp 2010:1–52 is also useful.

² Cic. DRP 1.70–71; this praise arguably extends to the end of book 2, but at the most moderate measure includes the foundation of the Republic at 2.47. A thorough comparison of Cicero’s and Polybius’ versions of the state is made by Asmis 2005.
praise suggests that the action was atypical. In Roman authors’ reconstruction of their own history, we might expect to find the fulfillment of the Republican ideal: that two men in power on the whole worked together without dispute and in the interest of the state. But this is often not the case. Many of the major players depicted in Rome’s founding episodes are instead strongly marked as individual actors who work best alone. Although they begin as one of two men who have been chosen as leaders, sharing power does not work. Instead, the ideal harmony between the two leaders is consistently set up for failure. This is particularly the case when the two men are in a position of supreme power at the head of the Roman state. I call the portrayal of such men in Roman historical writing ‘dyadic rivalry,’ and will define this term more precisely below.

In the chapters that follow, I explore the use of these dyadic rivals as a means of problematizing shared power, aristocratic virtue, and the rewards granted to individual predominance. I argue that these concerns are visible in the various retellings of Roman legends, and that such accounts are reinterpreted under the influence of changing socio-political situations. This development continues over the course of the second and first centuries BCE in a variety of media. Stories from later eras show less certainty about the potential benefits of grants of unusual authority, reaching a nadir around the assassination of Caesar; such uncertainty is marked by the ambiguous or negative portrayal of the protagonists. Dyadic rivalry establishes a discursive situation in which new leaders, such as Augustus, can be fit into the narration of the traditional past. But the preoccupations of these tales were ultimately Republican, as is shown by their virtual disappearance after the Augustan era. This is not an accident, nor proof that Livy was superior to his predecessors. Livy’s Ab Urbe Condita marked the end of a tradition of historical writing on the origins of the city. As I will argue, that tradition was intimately concerned with problematizing, justifying, and exemplifying the virtues of collegiality. With the establishment of the Principate, shared power ceded to individual predominance.

3 Livy 6.6.6–17.
4 This is perhaps more likely in earlier historical episodes than more recent ones; however, for the Roman tendency to see a repetitive cycle among past and present actors within the same family, see Richardson 2012.
5 Farrell 2013:57 considers this theme “of the exceptional individual, the unus homo who was so necessary to the success of the state and at the same time such a threat to its communitarian ethos,” central to Republican history.
6 See pp. 14–18.