Visiting the House of Rumor

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OVID, AS TRANSLATED BY HORACE GREGORY AND PROVIDED HERE BY KENNETH HARWOOD

[The celebrated Roman poet of love and fable, Ovid (also known as Naso P. Ovidius, who lived from B.C.E. 43 to C.E. 18), guides us through a current conundrum in "The House of Rumor."]

A mountain-round-house tower is her home.

Innumerable doorways all around it.

A thousand entrances, exits, arcades,

And none with doors. Or night and day

The place keeps open house, and its brass walls

Reflect the lightest word, the lowest whisper;

The place is silent, never noisy,

Yet full of voices, like the sound of waves

Heard from a lighthouse set a mile inshore,

Or like the stilled and trembling trail of sound

Jove's thunder leaves after black clouds collide.

Through tower halls the Many come to talk,

Lies twisted into truth, truth into lies;

All come and go, and gossip never ends.

Talk, talk, talk, talk fills many hundred ears

That empty as a story's told, rehashed,

And told to someone else, or fiction grows;

Each time retold adds what is heard

To what's been said before. And Innocent

Believe-It-All walks there, Deaf-And-Blind Error,

Pushing his way or runs and hides, and dear,

Foolish, Without-A-Leg-To-Stand-On Joy,

Mad Fear, Glib Treason, Confidential Whisper.

Rumor takes in all things at sea, on land,

And, at a distance, in the skies in heaven,

Everything heard or seen throughout the globe.

What might media ethicists make of this tour of the House of Rumor?

Ovid himself has remarked that Rumor sometimes is mistaken for great Fame—and more often is seen as Notoriety. A few main points stand out. Persistence of "true news" mixed with "false" reaches across two thousand years and more. Centuries before printing arrived in Germany from China (c. 1454 C.E.), the task of sorting fake accounts from real ones continues. The task of finding ways to tease out the truth and knock falsehood back on its heels is only a partial success today and in the long term—for otherwise we could see little but the losses we suffer from accepting the false.

- *Horace Gregory translated and introduced this edition of Ovid's The Metamorphoses (copyright by The Viking Press, Inc., 1958). This extract is from the prologue to Book 12, which deals with the start of the battle for Troy. Kenneth Harwood is an Adjunct Professor of Communication in the University of California, Santa Barbara, and may be reached at harwood.ken@gte.net (mailto:harwood.ken@gte.net).*