CHAPTER
5
Over her dead body

The death of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world.

(Edgar Allan Poe, 'The Philosophy of Composition')

In Greco-Roman mythology and legend, the death of a beautiful woman often serves as the prelude or postlude to war. Thus the Greek expedition to Troy departs from Aulis only after the sacrifice of Iphigenia, the daughter of the commander-in-chief. When the Greek army is similarly becalmed in Thrace after the Trojan war, the sacrifice of Polyxena appeases the wrath of Achilles' ghost and secures the Greek ships favourable winds for the homeward journey. Although Homeric epic takes as its primary subject the Trojan war and its aftermath, the poems ignore the deaths of these maidens in their focus on male death and heroism. This omission is striking since we know that two of the Cyclic epics included the deaths of Iphigenia (Cypria) and Polyxena (Iliupersis; cf. Cypria fr. 27). Although the motif gained prominence in fifth-century Athenian

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1 In a provocative study with this title, Bronfen (1992) discusses the thematic connections of 'death, femininity and the aesthetic' (her subtitle) in nineteenth-century European literature and art. Her focus precludes sustained exploration of the intersection of these themes in earlier European artistic traditions.
2 Burkert (1979), 72–6, and (1983), 64–7; Dowden (1989).
4 Cf. the death of Penthesilea, narrated in the Aethiopis.
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Sabinas into a single people whom Romulus organizes into thirty wards named after the raped women (1.13.6–7). The Sabine women’s rape and narrow escape from death find an analogue on the Roman side in the betrayal of the city to the Sabines by Tarpeia, variously identified as the daughter of the Roman commander and a Vestal Virgin. Although Livy (1.11.6) and Plutarch (Rom. 17.2–3) attribute her treachery to greed, others ascribe it to love for the enemy commander. In both versions Tarpeia is killed by the very enemy whom she helps, and the site of her treachery and death, the Capitoline citadel (from which criminals were thrown to their death in the historical period), is commemorated as the ‘Tarpeian rock’.

Among these figures we may include Ilia, or Rhea Silvia as Livy calls her, who is raped by the war-god Mars and bears the twins Romulus and Remus, the eponymous founders of Rome (1.4.4–8). Her story has garnered relatively little attention, perhaps because Livy’s treatment is so brief. The historian passes swiftly over the Vestal’s claim to have been raped by a god (which he discretely, devoting his narrative instead to the birth of the twins Romulus and Remus, and their upbringing and education (1.3.11–4.8). Livy entirely omits the Vestal’s death by drowning in the Tiber and subsequent ‘marriage’ to the river: after he records her imprisonment she vanishes from his narrative altogether. Yet she stands at the very head of the legendary history of Rome and inaugurates the sequence of women raped and killed in the course of the establishment of the city and its political institutions. She is thus a paradigmatic figure, central not merely to the elaboration of a Livian topos, but also to the elaboration of a Roman ideology of gender relations, for her rape and death received canonical treatment in the first book of Ennius’ Annales, an account which influenced all subsequent versions of her tale, including Livy’s.

This chapter explores the representation of female death in Latin epic, not to suggest that it replaces male heroism and death as the focus of

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6 Hainsworth (1991), 57–75.

7 This development may be connected with the Romans epics’ well-documented interest in Athenian tragic models, with close interplay between Latin epic and Euripidean tragedy from the start, since Ennius composed Euripidean tragedy: see Jocelyn (1967).

she has heard his words), to her heartfelt disappointment (corde capitus, 47). Neither her hands raised to the heavens (manus, 48), nor her tears (lacrumans, 49) provoke any further response. The passage invests Ilia with a striking materiality of body (tears, hands, heart, foot, life, strength, body), while denying a comparable physicality to either her divine rapist or her father. Indeed, embodiment in this passage is exclusively reserved for the female characters, as Ennius also endows Ilia's aged nurse with 'shaking limbs' (tremulis . . . artubus, 34).

I argued in chapter 3 that the physical setting of the locus amoenus is closely associated in the Ennius's narrative with Ilia's body and we may extend that conclusion here by considering the gendered distribution of grammatical subjects and objects in the passage. Mars, Aeneas, and Amulius are represented as agents acting upon an objectified Ilia (Ann. 38–9, 43–5 Sk.). Mars is the subject of the verb raptare of which Ilia is the grammatical object me (38), in the phrase which both alludes to and occludes Mars' sexual assault of Ilia. His sexual possession of Ilia prefigures her son's political possession of the landscape in which she will be immersed. Aeneas addresses Ilia (43) but neither waits to hear her response nor appears to her anxious gaze (46–9), while the speech he addresses to her casts her as the unwilling recipient of the troubles which she must endure (44–5) and the destiny which awaits her. The evidence is admittedly scanty, but it appears that Ennius dealt with this part of the story by depicting Ilia's death by drowning as analogous to marriage with the river.19 Porphyrio, commenting on Horace C. 1.2.18, remarks that 'according to Ennius Ilia was hurled into the river Tiber on the order of Amulius, king of the Albans, and was joined in marriage with Antennius Aonio',20 in a summary that casts Ilia as the subject of two grammatically passive verbs (praecipitata, iuncta est). Two fragmentary lines of the Annales seem to belong to this part of Ilia's story: a half-line quoted by Servius, discussing Aen. 3.333, shows Ilia duly delivered for marriage (at Ilia reddit na nupturn, 56), while another line may relate the accomplishment of Amulius' orders (haec ecastus, ibique latrones dicta facessunt, 'he said this and the brigands thereupon fulfilled his orders', 57).

This putative redefinition of death as marriage parallels the treatment

14 On the themes of male heroism and death in Latin epic, see Heuze (1985); and Hardie (1993), 3–11.

15 This tendency finds further expression in the displacement of sexualised violence onto the feminised body of the young hero: cf. Fowler (1987), and Oleniuss (1995).


17 On Ennius' debt to tragic models in Ilia's dream, see Krevans (1993).

18 Skutsch (1985), 199.
of Ilia's rape as a dream, and finds expression on the level of form in the 'remarkable delicacy'\textsuperscript{21} of the diction Ennius employs throughout the passage, and especially in the description of the rape itself (\textit{nam me usus homo pulcer per amoena salicta | et ripas raptare locosque nouos}, 'for a handsome man seemed to drag me through pleasant willow-groves, rivers and new places')\textsuperscript{38–9}. The Ennian Ilia gestures towards rape by metaphor (\textit{locos nouos}) and metonymy (\textit{raptare}).\textsuperscript{22} Both \textit{raptus} and \textit{rapio} have a basic sense of 'drag off into captivity' and imply that the act is carried out against the will of the victim; but the act of violence need not be sexual. The sympathetic representation of Ilia's subsequent disorientation and distress (39–50) confirms the implications of violence and unwillingness, though Ennius suppresses any reference to specifically sexual violence.\textsuperscript{22} We may relate this omission to a tendency Amy Richlin has recently observed in connection with the rapes in Ovid's \textit{Metamorphoses}: 'Ovid's rapes are not sexually explicit. But no such limits hamper the poem's use of violence, which sometimes stands in for the sexual.'\textsuperscript{24} Ennius' use of the verb \textit{raptare} 'gestures towards' or 'figures' the rape; it stands in for the rape but does not confront the rape directly. In this way, Ennius engages in what the editors of a collection of essays entitled \textit{Rape and Representation} have called 'the rhetoric of elision'.\textsuperscript{25}

Just such a rhetoric of elision can be discerned in Ennius' deployment of erotic vocabulary throughout Ilia's account of her dream.\textsuperscript{26} Ilia addresses her half-sister not by name but in a periphrasis (\textit{Eurydice prog-nata, pater quam noster amavit}, 'daughter of Eurydice, whom our father loved'),\textsuperscript{36} which recalls the love of Aeneas for his first wife and thereby evokes Ilia's love for her half-sibling. Ilia acknowledges her desire for her half-sister's comfort in her dream in the phrase \textit{corde capessere} (42), which Skutsch discusses at some length. He suggests translating 'to reach you',\textsuperscript{27} but observes that the phrase seems to convey the sense of \textit{cupiam capessere}, and compares Ilia's expression of desire for her father's comfort in the words \textit{corde cupitus} (47). Both phrases admit an undercurrent of desire to the narrative, especially since Ilia continues to call for Aeneas with a seductive voice after he stops speaking (\textit{blanda uoce, 49}).

\textsuperscript{21} Skutsch (1985), 198.
\textsuperscript{22} For the metonymy, see Adams (1982), 175; cf. Connors (1994), 101.
\textsuperscript{24} Richlin (1992a), 162.
\textsuperscript{25} Higgins and Silver (1991), 5–6.
\textsuperscript{26} Cf. Krevans (1993), 361; Connors (1994), 105.
\textsuperscript{27} Skutsch (1985), 199.
of Iphigenia at Aulis, adapted by Ennius in his *Iphigenia*). Discussion of 'woman' in *De Rerum Natura* has traditionally focused on the generative body, but Georgia Nugent has recently maintained, to the contrary, that Lucretius pervasively associates the female with death. In this connection she has drawn attention to the Epicurean poet's tendency to emphasise woman's corporeality and her link with dirt, disease and death in passages as diverse as the diatribe against love (4.1058–1287) and the discussion of earthquakes (6.535–607). The sacrifice of Iphigenia which the poet treats as paradigmatic of the evils of religio is an early example of this nexus of themes (which is not discussed by Nugent). Lucretius opens the passage with a graphic description of the maiden's blood defiling Diana's altar: *Aulete quo pacto Triuarii virginitis aram | Iphianassai turparunt sanguine foede | ductores Danaum defecti, prima uitrum* ('at Aulis, for instance, the chosen leaders of the Greeks, first among men, foully stained the altar of the maiden Diana with Iphigenia's blood', 1.84–6). In a tightly-focused four-word hexameter (1.85), the poet interweaves Iphigenia's blood with a verb and adverb connoting staining and pollution, in order to underline the sacrilegious impiety of her sacrifice. Although the Greek leaders are responsible for this impiety, it is the sacrificial victim whose blood contaminates the sacred altar and who is thereby constituted as 'a messy, bloody body'.

In his portrait of Iphigenia, Lucretius draws on Greek tragic representations of Agamemnon's daughter as bride of death. With her hair encircled by a fillet hanging down over both cheeks, Iphigenia is ritually prepared for both marriage and sacrifice (cui simul infusa virgines circumdata compitus | ex utraque pari malarum parte profusast, 1.87–8). This description of Iphigenia's hairstyle recalls the *sex crimini*, three 'braids' on each side, in which the Roman bride's hair is plaited on her wedding day. A series of verbal adjectives in the sacrifice scene evoke further elements of the Roman marriage ceremony: *sublata uirum manibus tremibundaque ad aras | deductast* ('lifted aloft in men's hands, she was led trembling to the altar', 1.95–6). The verb *deductast* (1.96) underlines the ominous intersection of sacrifice with marriage here in its evocation of the technical phrase *deductio sponsae in domum mariti*, the escort of the bride from the house of her father to that of her husband; *sublata* (1.95) suggests the Roman custom of lifting the bride over the threshold of the groom's house; and *tremibunda* (1.95) gestures towards the traditional reluctance of the bride on her wedding day. By emphasising Iphigenia's nubile youth, the poet explicitly invites us to recognise the profane coincidence of marriage ritual with sacrificial ritual in the death of Iphigenia: *non ut sollemni more sacrorum | perfecto posset claro comitari Hymenaeo, | sed casta inceste nurbiendi tempore in ipso | hostia consideret maclata maesta parentis, | exitus ut classi felix faustusque daretur* ('not that with the solemn custom of rites accomplished she could be accompanied by a ringing wedding-song, but that chaste she might fall in unholy sacrilege at the very season of her marriage, as a sacrificial victim by the slaughter of her father, in order that a fruitful and successful departure be granted to the fleet', 1.96–100). Lucretius underscores the Greeks' impious corruption of marriage ritual in the slaughter of Iphigenia by reassigning her generative potential to the Greek fleet through the application of the adjective *felix* ('fruitful, productive, fertile', 1.100) to the departure of the Greeks. The sacrifice of the maiden ensures not the fertility of the bride whose lot is death, but rather the prosperity of the Greek forces whose departure from Aulis brings death to the Trojans, a peculiarly morbid instance of the 'fructifying power of the dead'. Lucretius' account of the sacrifice of Iphigenia thus reveals *in nuce* the complex interrelation of the themes of dirt, disease and death which Nugent identifies as central to the representation of the female elsewhere in *De Rerum Natura*.

Implicit in this nexus is Iphigenia's profound isolation within the

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30 On Ennius' adaptation of Euripides' play, see Jocelyn (1967), 318–42.
31 On Ennius' adaptation of Euripides' play, see Jocelyn (1967), 318–42.
32 Denis Feeley suggests *(per litteras) that Aulete* (1.84) alludes to the title of *Euripides' tragedy*.
33 Elsom (1992), 217, discussing the scene in which Chaireas watches the (false) death of Callirhoe in Ctesiphon's *Chaireas and Callirhoe*.
35 On the conflation of Athenian marital and sacrificial ritual in the portrayal of Iphigenia in Attic drama, see Foley (1982) and Rabinowitz (1993), 31–54; on the confusion of sacrificial ritual with erotic intercourse, see Bataille (1962), 90–3.
36 Bronfen (1992), 265, employs the phrase in a discussion (364–5) of the Romantic refiguration of the classical muse from the incorporeal divinity of Greek poetry via the corporeally-manifest mistress in Roman elegy (citing Commager (1962), 2–8 and 20–2), into a 'corporally existent beloved' who is now 'dying or already dead' (365) in nineteenth-century literature.
group, an isolation which emerges starkly in Lucretius' handling of the tale. Lucretius emphasises her youth in order to underscore the impurity of her slaughter at the hands of the Greek leaders, and the poet even hints at his own sympathy for her fate in his observation that the onlookers were moved to tears at the sight of her (I.91). Yet looking at Iphigenia is precisely the point of this passage, for only by looking at her sacrifice can we see the injustice of religio and therefore respond with an informed Epicurean disavowal of superstition. Iphigenia is isolated before an otherwise all-male group not only by virtue of her sex but also because of her singularity as the object of the sacrificial ritual. Lucretius specifies the participants in the sacrificial ritual as Agamemnon and the male attendants (et maestum simul ante aras adstare parentem | sensit et hunc propter ferrarum celere ministros, 1.89–90) who assist him in his role of sacrificial priest by carrying Iphigenia to the altar (nunc sblata ururn manibus tremibundaque ad aras | deductas, 1.95–6). Moreover, the poet sets the sacrificial scene before an assembly of Greek soldier-citizens who weep at the sight (aspectuque suo lacrimas effundere citrus, 1.91). Iphigenia is thus the object of the combined gaze of the male characters, who stand in here for the poet and his audience. The predominance of male agents in this brief tableau reproduces in small compass the predominance of male characters in the poem and the primacy of men in its implied audience. The poet invites his audience to identify with the male characters who bring about and gaze upon Iphigenia's death, symbolically establishing the hierarchy of gender through the exposure of the dead woman to the public (male) gaze.

The objectifying force of the combined gaze of male poet, readers and characters on the female sacrificial victim undergirds the aestheticisation of her body (parts) in this passage. Lucretius begins with Iphigenia's blood (sanguine, 1.85) but dwells on her maidenly locks (urigineos compositus, 1.87), cheeks (utaquae malarum parte, 1.88) and shaking knees (genibus summis, 1.92), on which the Greek soldiers gaze (aspectu suo, 1.91) as she goes trembling (tremibunda, 1.95) to her death. By forging an analogy between the display of the bride's liminal sexuality and the display of Iphigenia's death in sacrifice, Lucretius presents Iphigenia as

37 Cf. Marsh (1992), 275–6, on the dynamics of the gaze in the sacrifice of Iphigenia in Aeschylus.

38 On the predominantly male implied audience of Lucretius' poem, see Nugent (1994).

the object of both an erotic and aesthetic gaze. Although the poet explicitly denies that the spectacle of her death is pleasurable for the onlookers, the accumulation of physical detail in his description of a noble Iphigenia, whose blood flows in sacrifice rather than in defloration, suggests to the contrary the intersection of Roman male erotic pleasure and violence at the site (and sight) of the beautiful female corpse. To be sure, Lucretius distances his philosophical project from the superstition central to the myth of the sacrifice of Iphigenia and indeed from the type of literature that traffics in this sort of unedifying tale. He narrates the myth in the high style, using the elevated diction characteristic of and appropriate to heroic epic, notably that of Homer and Ennius who are both named immediately afterwards (I.117–26). Precisely because the myth emblematises the evils of superstition (tantum religio potuit suader e malorum, 1.101), Lucretius treats it with all the poetic authority and rhetorical power at his command, with the paradoxical result that the lurid tale of Iphigenia's sacrifice functions as moral exemplum. On the one hand, his procedure implies that the pleasures of heroic epic style and content are congruent, and he suggests that both pleasures will be superseded by the freedom from disturbance promised by Epicurean doctrine. On the other hand, although he discredits the religious superstition that motivates the sacrifice, he nonetheless contrives to rehearse the salacious details of Iphigenia's death. In this way he excites in his audience a delicious pity for the beautiful corpse of the maiden—who is clearly marked as the excluded other. Thus while Lucretius distances himself from the heroic ethic, he is still complicit in the fetishisation of the female corpse for his own project of Epicurean persuasion. In its differential solicitation of male subjects and female object, this passage engages Roman literary, philosophical and cultural technologies of gender in a complicated counterpoint that both undermines and reinforces the Roman sex-gender system.

Unlike Ennius and Lucretius, whose epic narratives engage mythological traditions rich in dead and dying women, Virgil recounts in the Aeneid a version of Rome's legendary foundation that was conspicuously


40 The Homeric name Iphianassa (1.85; cf. Il. 9.145, 287) is prominent in a passage which contains linguistic features characteristic of Ennian epic.

41 On Roman sexualities, see Hallett and Skinner (1997).
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lacking in them. The hero's wife, conventionally called Eurydice (as in Ennius' account of Ilia's dream), traditionally survived the sack of Troy and accompanied her husband into exile. It was well known that centuries elapsed between the fall of Troy and the floruit of Dido, whose love affair with Aeneas in Virgil's narrative was a scandal in antiquity. The Italian queens Amata and Camilla, moreover, were both shadowy figures. Despite this unpromising material, however, Virgil retains and even enhances the importance of the sacrificial female for the Latin epic plot with the wholesale adaptation of the motif in the Aeneid.

Virgil introduces the subject of his poem with a portrait of the hero's divine antagonist, Juno, whose relentless glance (saenae memorem Iunonis ob irem, Aen. 1.4), like Achilles' wrath in the Iliad, propels the plot of the Aeneid from start to finish. Throughout the proem, Virgil metaphorically figures Juno's wrath as a wound, describing her godhead as injured by events at Troy (namine laeso, 1.8) and the goddess herself as inflamed in her hostility towards Aeneas by the anger that festers in her heart (1.25–32; cf. flammato corde, 1.50). The opening action of the poem proceeds directly from her wound: scarcely have the Trojans set sail from Sicily for Italy when Juno, 'preserving the eternal wound within her breast' (cum Iuno aeternum seruans sub pectore uilnus, 1.36), catches sight of them and decides to interfere by stirring up a storm at sea. Since Juno is immortal her wound is metaphorical rather than literal (as Servius recognised), and therefore cannot kill her; but the wounds inflicted on the mortal female characters in the Aeneid, and especially on Dido, Juno's avatar, prove lethal.

Already at her earliest appearance in the poem Dido suffers, like her divine patroness, from a 'long injury' (longa est inuria, 1.341). The early application of a metaphorical injury to Dido would be of slight significance were it not for the reappearance of the trope at the opening of book 4, where Virgil famously characterises Dido as suffering from a burning wound (at regina graui iamdudum saucia cura] uilnus altis uenis et caeco carpitur igni, 4.1–2). Dido's metaphorical wound of love receives considerable emphasis in the early part of the book, and Virgil expressly draws the link with Juno by echoing his portrait of the goddess preserving the eternal wound within her breast in a description of the injurious force of Dido's love: est mollis flamma medallas | interea et tacitum uiiit sub pectore uilnus ('the soft flame consumes her marrow, and in the meantime the silent wound lives within her breast'), 4.66–7. The reminiscence of Juno's injured godhead in the description of Dido's wound links the Carthaginian queen closely to her divine patroness and invites us to see in the fate of Dido a displacement of the motif introduced in connection with Juno. Indeed, Juno's pity for Dido's suffering at the close of the book (4.693–705) may be in some sense motivated by recognition of the displacement of the deadly effect of her own eternal wound on her protégée.

Virgil follows his elaboration of Dido's metaphorical wound with a simile that implies that her injury will prove fatal:

uritur infelix Dido totaque uagatur
urbe furens, qualis conicta cerau sauita,
quam procul incitaem nemora inter Cresia fixit
pastor agens teis liquitque uolalite ferrum
nescius: illa fuga silius saltusque peragrart
Dictaeos; haeret lateri letalis harundo.

(4.68–73)

Unhappy Dido burns, and wanders impassioned in the whole city, just like a deer, struck with an arrow, which all unsuspecting a shepherd shot from afar amid Cretan glades, hunting with his weapons, and unaware he abandoned the flying iron: the deer traverses woods and Cretan pastures in flight; the lethal arrow sticks in her side.

Like the hind of the simile, who is the subject of a verb of motion (peragrart, 4.72) and the object of the hunter's active verbs (fixit, 4.70; agens, 4.71), Dido is the subject of passive and intransitive verbs (urit, uagatur, 4.68): both animal and woman are objectified and laid open to our view in the narration. By characterising the arrow that clings in the hind's flank as letalis, 'deadly', Virgil intimates that Dido's injury will also

42 Heinze (1993), 34 (= (1915), 58); Austin (1964), 286–9; Perkell (1981), 358.
43 Mact. Sat. 5.17.5–6; see further Pease (1935), 14–21 and Horsfall (1973–4).
46 On Virgil's debt to tragic models in his portrait of Dido, see Muecke (1983), with further bibliography; Moles (1984) and (1987), and Hardie (1993), 19–29, and (1997).
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lead to her death, and when Dido and Aeneas indulge their passion in the course of a real hunt, the poet explicitly identifies the occasion not only as the source of Dido’s ensuing troubles but also as the cause of her death (ille dies primus lei primusque malorum | causa fuit, 4.169–70). Thereafter, Virgil repeatedly alludes to the queen’s impending death: Dido applies the adjective moritura, ‘about to die’, to herself in her speeches (4.308, 519, 604: moribunda, 4.323), and evokes the certainty of her approaching death in her pleas to Aeneas (4.318, 385–7, 436).47 The poet attributes to Dido a desire for death before her time and thereby exculpates Aeneas from responsibility for it. He thus makes the Carthaginian queen an accomplice to the narrative logic that requires her death.48

The second half of the book narrates Dido’s elaborate preparations for her death, as Virgil all but ignores his hero to focus the narrative on her ‘decision’ to die (4.450–1, 474–5, 644). He sets the scene of Dido’s death in the innermost part of her palace (at regina, pyra penetrati in sede sub auras | erecta, 4.504–5), thereby opening up her dwelling for the viewer’s inspection in a way that mirrors on the spatial level the autopsy of her psychological state that he undertakes so effectively in the nine scenes he puts into her mouth in the course of the book.49 He represents Dido constructing her funeral pyre in such a way that she replicates the marriage-bed she shared with Aeneas (super exuudias ensenque locitum | effigiemque toro locat, 4.507–8), so as to confirm the androcentric Roman requirement that she pay for a sexual transgression identified as exclusively hers.

Virgil sends Dido to her death in a luric tableau far from typical of male death scenes in Latin epic:

at trepida et coepitis immanibus offera Dido
sanguinem uolens aciem, maculisque trementis
interfusa genas et pallida morte futura,
interiora domus inruptim limina et altos
condescit furibunda rogos ensenque recludit
Dardanum, non hos quasitum munus in usus.

(4.642–7)

47 Cf. the characterisation of Amata as moritura (12.55), with Lyne (1987), 116–17.

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But fearful and frantic from her huge undertakings, rolling her bloodshot gaze, her trembling cheeks suffused with spots and pale with her death at hand, Dido burst into the inner recesses of the house, climbed the high pyre in a frenzy, and unsheathed the Dardan’s sword, a gift not sought for this purpose.

On one level, this description of the queen’s wild appearance, especially her bloodshot eyes and the spots on her cheeks, suggests physical illness, an intimation that finds confirmation in Juno’s perception of the queen’s affliction as a sickness (quam simul ac tali persensit peste teneri | cara luis coniunx, 4.90–1). Yet Virgil admits an erotic undertone into his description of her death with the red-white colour contrast (4.643–4) which conventionally symbolises sexual initiation in Latin poetry and here evokes Dido’s sexual transgression in having broken her vow to remain chaste out of piety to her dead husband Syllaeus (4.24–7).50 The poet emphasises the queen’s mad desire for death and conflates this desire with her sexual passion for Aeneas in Dido’s action of grasping her lover’s sword.

Although Virgil represents Dido taking manifold precautions to safeguard the secrecy of her purpose and to screen her actions from prying eyes, his depiction of the queen’s death exposes her to view: atque illam media inter talia ferro | conlapsam aspicient comites, enseamque cruore | spatum, sparsusque manus (‘and in the midst of such words her companions see her fall on the iron, the sword foaming with blood, her blood-spattered hands’, 4.663–5). Dido’s companions, unmentioned before, stand in for the hero,51 as well as the poet and his audience, directing our gaze to the queen’s bloody hands and her former lover’s dripping sword. Watching Dido die in this fashion confirms not only that the queen must die for her sexual and social transgressions (of Roman norms), but also that she must die so that the man may live.52 The death of Dido thus emerges as a requirement for Aeneas’ foundation of the Roman cultural order. Roman societal norms are proleptically confirmed

51 Cf. Aeneas . . . moenia respiciens quae iam infelicis Elisaeae | conlamentis flammis (5.1–4); Dido . . . quam Trois heros | ut primum luxia steat agnuitique per ubras | obscuram, qualem primo qui surgere mens | aut uideet aut uideat fatal per nubila lunam (6.450–4).
52 Catherine Connors suggests (per litaras) that Dido must die so that Hannibal may live, since her curse calls for an avenger to arise from her bones (4.625).
and secured over the dead body of a Carthaginian woman whose political activity poses a profound challenge to the nascent Roman order.

Virgil emphasises the narrative necessity of Dido’s death and suggests Aeneas’ implicit responsibility for it in a final reference to the physical wound gaping in her flesh (infixum stridit sub pectore ulna, ‘the wound fixed within her breast hisses’, 4.689). The description of her self-injury combines an echo of the metaphorical wound of love that had earlier afflicting her (tacitum... sub pectore ulna 4.67) with a reminiscence of the kind simile, the variation of infixum for tacitum recalling both the shepherd’s careless shooting of the deer (quam... fixit | pastor, 4.70–1) and the lethal force of his arrow (haeret lateri letalis harundo, 4.73). Dido’s suicide thus literalises Aeneas’ rejection of her, and exposes her instrumental function in his epic mission. Aeneas, however, emphatically denies any knowledge of or responsibility for Dido’s death in his interview with her in the underworld (6.456–64), and Virgil seems to endorse his hero’s view of the matter with his repeated ascription of the language of choice and agency to Dido in book 4.

Philippe Heuzé has demonstrated that there are only two death scenes in the Aeneid, those of Dido (4.663–705) and Camilla (11.799–835), in which Virgil prolongs the physical suffering of the characters in artistic development of the spectacle of agony.53 In both cases, moreover, the poet anticipates the deaths well in advance (4.169–70, 11.587–94). This procedure is especially striking by contrast to Virgil’s practice elsewhere in the poem, for he regularly occludes the suffering attendant upon violent death.54 Heuzé summarises the aesthetic consequences of the depiction of the suffering of Dido and Camilla in an analysis that recalls Poe’s observation, cited in the epigraph to my chapter, that the supreme subject of poetry is the death of a beautiful woman:

Virgil perfects a technique of pathos the scope of which is formulated like this: nothing is more moving than death, nothing is more touching than a beautiful woman. Consequently, the most compelling subject that an artist could represent is the death of a beautiful woman... so Virgil perceives that the body of the woman, more delicate and more moving, reacts better to suffering — or, to put it like painters, that it ‘expresses’ suffering better, that on it suffering stands out more.55

This interpretation of the two women’s death-agonies emphasises the aesthetic premium that the (male) poet and his (male) readers realise at the sight of the beautiful female corpse, but fails to account for the gender asymmetry implicit in the paradigm. For the deaths of the two female characters are gratuitous, ‘not required by the plot or even the myth’,56 and we might therefore ask what these death-scenes imply about women, death, and the Virgilian epic aesthetic. I suggest that by depicting the death-agonies of Dido and Camilla in such lavish and graphic detail Virgil presents the beautiful woman as the erotic and aesthetic object of his readers’ prolonged gaze. He thereby renders the reified female corpse radically distinct not only from the male survivors, the epic hero and his epigones, who gaze upon and profit from her death, but also from the male war dead who perish quickly and apparently without pain in battle.57

It is a critical commonplace that both Dido, Aeneas’ Carthaginian lover, and Creusa, Aeneas’ Trojan wife, are in some sense sacrificed to the hero’s mission.58 In strict chronological sequence, however, Creusa is the first woman sacrificed to the epic plot. It is she who offers the spirited objection to Aeneas’ abnegation of his responsibilities to his family that stops the hero from further futile fighting in Troy (2.671–8) and thereby ensures that he witnesses the portent of the flame that encircles Iulus’ temples (2.679–86) and finally convinces the reluctant Anchises to leave Troy (2.687–704). Aeneas accordingly leads his household to a shrine of Ceres some distance from the burning city, where he discovers a single desertion from the group: hic demum collectis omnibus una | defuit: et

54 Heuzé (1985) identifies two primary techniques for occluding suffering in death scenes: speed (111–28) and aestheticisation (290–5). He notes (292–3) that the suffering of Euryalus (9.435–7) and Pallas (11.68–71) is aestheticised in flower similes drawn from Homer (I. 8.306–8) via Catullus (11.21–4 and 62.39–47); ‘in the Latin text what one sees at once is the death-agon of a beautiful flower’ (292, my translation).
55 Rabinowitz (1992), 43, on the suicides of Eurydice (Creon’s wife) and Jocasta in Athenian tragedy. Denis Feeney, however, reminds me (per literam) that there was a persistent pre-Virgilian version of Dido’s death which said that she committed suicide to avoid marriage with a local prince: see Horsfall (1973–4).
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comites, natumque, uirumque fessellit ('here at last, one woman alone was missing from the assembled company; she disappointed her comrades, son and husband', 2.743–4).  

Creusa’s loss constitutes a narrative enigma that engenders her sepulcr al reappearance in a passage sketching the central themes of the poem. At the conclusion of the second book, the ghost of Creusa appears to Aeneas and absolves him of responsibility for her loss. Her shade chastises him for opposing the plan of Jove (2.776–9) and prophesies his long wanderings in exile until he reaches Latium and there founds a new kingdom and family with Lavinia (longa tibi exsilia, et uastum maris aequor arandam; | et terram Hesperiam unies, ubi Lydius arua | inter opima uirum leni fluit agmine Thybris | illic res laetae, regnumque, et regia coniuix | parta tibi, 2.780–4). Virgil represents Creusa here freely accepting the necessity of her own death, as she urges Aeneas to do (lacrimas diletae pelle Creusa, 2.784) so that he can realise his epic destiny, for in the very words by which she constitutes herself the first casualty of Aeneas’ mission, she imparts his great destiny to her erstwhile husband. If Aeneas seals the success of his imperial mission with the ‘sacrifice’ of Turnus at the conclusion of the poem (12.950–23), he inaugurates the epic project over the ghostly shade of his wife (2.792–5). 

Virgil emblematizes the exemplary function of the beautiful female corpse in his epic on the shield of Aeneas, in an echphasis that registers the profound distance of Latin from Greek epic and signals Virgil’s immense debt to Homer. Modelled on the shield of Achilles in Iliad 18, the shield Aeneas carries into battle depicts the history of Rome as a series of military campaigns featuring a succession of Roman heroes. At the centre of the shield Vulcan engraves the battle of Actium and commemorates Augustus’ triple triumph after the battle as the culmination of Roman history with the (re)establishment of Roman order (8.675–728). Just as Aeneas inaugurates his imperial mission over his wife’s ghost (2.792–5) and reaffirms his devotion to the project over the entreaties of the dying Dido (4.345–50; cf. 6.460–4), so Vulcan depicts Augustus, Aeneas’ descendant on the shield, restoring order to the Roman world with the defeat and death of Cleopatra. In the thick of battle, the Egyptian queen is attended by twin snakes (regina in mediis . . . necdam etiam geminos a tergo respicit angues, 8.696–7), which here as elsewhere in the poem portend death.  

Verbal echoes link Cleopatra’s death closely with that of Dido: the Egyptian queen ‘grows pale at the approach of death’ (pallentem morte futura, 8.709) as the Carthaginian queen is ‘pale with the approach of death’ (pallida morte futura, 4.644). Cleopatra’s death metonymically represents those of her soldiers, as Mary Hamer notes: ‘[t]he visible female body opened and eroticized by the snakebite guarantees the absent male bodies, opened by weapons, of the enemies of Rome’. In memorialising the restoration of Roman order over Cleopatra’s corpse, this artefact conjoins the themes of death and femininity that constitute one paradigm of the Latin epic aesthetic. 

Cleopatra is an especially compelling figure for the exploration of these themes because Octavian’s propaganda against Antony and his Egyptian consort in the years before Actium prompted later historical commentary on the queen’s sexual debauchery and morbid fascination with death. The fragmentary remains of an early imperial Latin epic concerning Octavian’s campaign against Antony and Cleopatra in Egypt, the so-called carmen de bello Actiaco, reveal the rich literary resonances of this thematic nexus in connection with the Egyptian queen. Both Virgil and the anonymous author of the carmen de bello Actiaco heavily foreshadow Cleopatra’s death. Just as Virgil portrays her as shadowed by snakes already at Actium (Aen. 8.696–7) in an allusion to the tradition of her death by snakebite, so the author of these fragments anticipates her impending death by stressing the queen’s ignorance of her fate: haec regina gerit. procul hanc occulta uidebat | Atropos inriddere | consilia interitum, quam iam sua fata manerent (‘the queen organises these things. From afar Atropos mockingly watched her wandering amid the various secret plans of death, whose destiny already awaited her’, col. vii.55–7 Courtney). But the civil war poem’s focus on the events of recent history allows its author to engage in the sustained characterisation of Cleopatra from which Virgil is precluded in the Aeneid because of his mythological subject matter.

61 Perkell (1981), 362, suggests that by phrasing his discovery of Creusa’s absence in this way the Virgilian Aeneas implicitly blames his wife for her ‘deception’.


63 Cf. 2.203, 7.450, 8.289.

64 On her sexual immodesty, see Plu. Ant. 26, 53, 58; on her testing of different modes of death on criminals, see Plu. Ant. 71; Ael. HA 9.11; Dio Cass. 51.11.2.

The poem’s date has been much debated: see Benario (1983) and Courtney (1993), 334, for bibliography and discussion.
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The poet represents Cleopatra as both director (cf. haec regina gerit, 55) and audience of a spectacular theatre of death, and he even introduces her into the drama she stages when he describes her descent from the throne to mingle with the criminals in their death-agonies (52). She thereby suffers vicariously the deaths of the condemned criminals whom she joins at the moment of their demise. In this way the poet foreshadows her death by snakebite, which he presumably narrated later in the poem. He also admits a sexual undercurrent to the scene in the phrase libido mortis, which evokes the commonplace of amor mortis. 63 Desire for death is implicit not only in Cleopatra’s decision to arrange this display of death-techniques, but also in her participation in the spectacle itself. The author of the carmen de bello Actiaco thus both eroticises and aestheticises the morbid tableaux which Cleopatra assembles and enjoys.

The extended description of the queen’s theatre of death, coming (as it seems) after a portrait of the victorious Octavian restraining his troops from further killing on the capture of Pelusium (cum [s]uper[ans L]atus Pelusia [m]oenia Caesar [ [coep]erat im[pe]ris animos coh[ib]ere su[o]/rum, col. ii.14–15 Courtney), constructs and confirms distinctions between Roman and foreigner, conqueror and conquered, living and dead, male and female. Paradoxically, however, Cleopatra’s spectacle seems especially calculated to appeal to a Roman audience since it participates in a distinctly Roman tradition of ‘fatal charades’. 64 Long before 29 B.C.E., when Octavian’s henchman Statilius Taurus built the first stone amphitheatre in Rome, the ‘murderous games’ 65 of gladiatorial combat, wild beast shows, and mass execution of condemned criminals were wildly popular forms of public entertainment at Rome. Staged in the forum until the construction of permanent venues in the imperial period, the Roman games required huge numbers of prisoners of war and condemned criminals, in addition to professional gladiators (themselves usually slaves or condemned criminals), beast-handlers and exotic wild animals. 66 In this context, we may conclude that the spectacular tableaux of death staged by the fictional Cleopatra in the carmen de bello Actiaco solicit and satisfy the viewing pleasure of the author’s Roman audience.

63 Benario (1983), 1658.
64 The title of Coleman (1990) about mythological role-playing in the Roman arena; on Roman games, see also Hopkins (1983) and Wiedemann (1992).
Such an appeal to Roman tastes and appetites undermines the neat dichotomies outlined above by blurring the divisions between Egypt and Rome. Moreover through a simile that compares Cleopatra's tableaux of death to the spectacle of battle (v. 38–41), the poet complicates his own aestheticisation of battle in the poem (coll. i, ii, and viii Courtney). In this way the author of these tantalising fragments both confirms and critiques not only Roman (male) order but also his aesthetic project of memorialising that order over Cleopatra's dead body.

While the poet of the *carmen de bello Actiaco* explores the intersection of death, femininity and the aesthetic on the historical level, Ovid articulates this thematic on the mythological level. In the *Metamorphoses*, the rape and subsequent death of Daphne initiate a series of rapes and gruesome metamorphoses that receive lurid description in the course of the poem. Ovid offers sustained exploration of the intersection of these themes in the narrative of the Trojan war and its aftermath (the return of the Greek warriors and the wanderings of Aeneas), which constitute the supreme subjects of heroic epic (*Met.* 12.4–14.609). His Trojan war narrative opens with a close reworking of Lucretius' treatment of the sacrifice of Iphigenia. Beginning, like Lucretius, with the virgin's blood (*sanguine virgineo placandam virginitatem esse deae, 12.28–9; cf. cruorem, 12.30*), Ovid emphasises the prominent role of Agamemnon and his weeping attendants in the ritual (12.30–1), but he disrupts Lucretian expectations by following the version of the story in which a hind is substituted for Iphigenia in the sacrifice (*subposita fertur mutasse Mycenida cerva, 12.34*). The metaphorical association of woman with hind recalls the simile applied to Dido in *Aeneid* 4, and underlines a homology between women and the object of the hunt. Ovid occludes the real physical violence entailed in the sacrifice to titillate his audience by tendering and then withdrawing a display of sacrificial female flesh.

Ovid makes good on the promised display at the conclusion of the war when he narrates the sacrifice of Polyxena (13.439–532), in a passage that also reworks, among several models, Lucretius' narrative of the sacrifice

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day of Lucretia, "the "stab to the heart" [cf. inuitusque sacerdos | prae-bita coniecto rupt prae cordia ferro, Met. 13.475–6], the showable wound, serves as a double for the vagina, the natural opening that must be covered."74

Hecuba's interpretation of her daughter's sacrifice, by contrast, focuses on the violence enacted upon Polyxena's body in the sacrificial ritual. Weeping, she laments her daughter's death and likens it to those of all her sons, killed in war by Achilles (nata, iaces, videoque tuam, mea ualherna, ualminus: | en ne perdiderim quemquam sine caede meorum, | tu quoque ualminus habes. at te, quia femina, rebar | a ferro tutan: cecidisti et femina ferro. totque tuos idem fratres, te perdidit idem, | exitium Troiae nostrisque orbator, Achilles, 13.495–500). Where the Ovidian Polyxena underscores the sexual violation implicit in the act of looking at the female corpse, the Ovidian Hecuba emphasises the physical violence of the sacrifice with her repeated references to Polyxena's 'wound' (13.495, his; 13.497; cf. 13.499), which assimilate her daughter's death in sacrifice to her sons' deaths in battle. Yet by drawing attention to her daughter's wound, Hecuba openly exposes that which Polyxena herself is represented as attempting to conceal. Indeed, the narrative frame of Hecuba's speech underscores this distinction, for we first see Polyxena's wounds when her mother weeps into them (13.490) and her blood when it masts Hecuba's hair (13.492). Ovid thus simultaneously veils and exposes the beautiful female corpse in a sacrifice at once violent and regulatory: over Polyxena's dead body the Greek army seeks to secure a safe return to Greece (13.439–48).

The narrative of Aeneas' wanderings that follows furnishes two variations on the theme. Aeneas and Anchises are hospitably received on the island of Delos by King Anius, who has also seen his family destroyed by the Greek army. Agamemnon demanded the services of his four daughters, whose touch Liber endowed with the ability to transform all matter into food and drink, to provision his army en route to Asia. The king narrates the Greek general's violent seizure of his daughters (abstrahit inuitas gremio genitores, 13.658) in diction that recalls the intimation of sexual violence in Ovid's description of the sacrifice of Polyxena (rapta sinu matris, 13.450). Anius' daughters forestall the Greek assault by flight to their brother Andros in Euboea, but when the Greek army threatens war he surrenders his sisters. Praying to their patron Liber for aid, they are transformed into birds in a metamorphosis that Anius starkly characterises as slaughter:75 tumultque | muneris auctor opem, si miro perdere more | ferre uocatur opem . . . | summa mali nota est: pennas sampseru tuaque | coniugis in uolucres, niveas abiere columbas ('and the author of their gift brought help, if to slay them in an amazing way can be called bringing help . . . the gist of the evil was known: they took on feathers and were transformed into the birds of your wife, snowy doves', 13.669–74). The Greek army's seizure of Anius' daughters initiates a chain of violence that draws into its ambit not only the Greeks, who threaten war in Euboea even before they reach the Troad, but also Anius' son Andros and the god Liber; death, however, is reserved for Anius' daughters. Ovid thus leaves a succession of dead women—Iphigenia, Anius' daughters, Polyxena—in the train of the Greek expedition to Troy.

At the end of the Trojans' stay on Delos, Aeneas receives as a guest gift from Anius a cup decorated by the artist Alcon with the deaths of the daughters of Orion. Since the two women's deaths are set in a narrative-epiphany relationship to those of Anius' daughters, the poet challenges us to interpret them interactively. On the cup are engraved the seven gates of Thebes and, before the city, tombs and funerary pyres around which women stand in postures of mourning. Ovid here alludes to a plague which once ravaged Thebes and was ended by the sacrifice of Orion's daughters:

eecce facit mediis natus Orione Thebis,

hac non femineum iugulo dare ualminus aperto,

illac demisso per forta pectora telo

pro populo cecidisse suo pulchrisque per urbem

funeribus ferri celebrique in parte cremari. (13.692–6)

74 Joplin (1990), 67. Ovid himself employs the motif of falling modestly in his (contemporaneous) account of Lucretia at F: 2.833–4.

75 The Ovidian Anius problematises the simple equation of metamorphosis with death when he supplements his initial use of perdere ('slay', 13.670) with another sense of the verb, figuram perdere ('be deprived of their form'); nec, qua ratione figuram per-diderint, potu scire, aut mune dicere possit ('nor could I recognise by what method they were deprived of their form or even now could I say', 13.671–2). The kaleidoscopic sequence of death (Polyxena), substitution of a lower animal (Iphigenia), and metamorphosis into a lower animal (Anius' daughters), exemplifies the metamorphic variety of Ovid's Trojan war narrative and constitutes a sophisticated commentary on the meaning of metamorphosis itself.
Look, in the middle of Thebes he engravés the daughters of Orion: on this side they offer unwomanly wounds to their bared throats, on that, the weapon plunged into their valiant breasts, they lie dead on behalf of the people and, carried through the city in beautiful funerary procession, are cremated in the thronging square.

A conventional analogy between war and pestilence (cf. II. 1.9–100) underpins the passage and links it thematically to the sacrifices of Iphigenia, Polyxena and the daughters of Anius in this section of the Metamorphoses. Just as the sacrifices of Iphigenia and Polyxena benefit the Greek military community of survivors, so the sacrifice of Orion’s daughters benefits the Theban community, in another instance of the ‘fructifying power of the dead’ that recalls the deaths of Ilii, Iphigenia and Creusa in earlier Latin epic. Paradoxically, this sacrifice even ensures the continuity of the male line, for from the ashes of Orion’s daughters arise twin youths, the Coronae, who lead the funeral procession in honour of their ‘mothers’ (tum de virginea geminos exire fauilla, [ne genus interesat, iuvenes, quos fama Coronas | nominat, et cineri materno ducere pompam, Met. 13.697–9]). The ecphrasis exposes the thematic centrality of the beautiful female corpse to the aesthetic project of Latin epic. Memorialised on Alcon’s cup, Orion’s daughters die quite literally for the viewing pleasure of the epic hero Aeneas and his readers.

The ecphrastic articulation of this thematic nexus, already discussed in connection with the shield of Aeneas in the Aeneid, continues in Flavian epic. In the Punica, an ecphrasis early in the poem illustrates the structural relations that found the master plot of Silian epic on the spectacle of female death. Before the battle of Saguntum, the Ocean tribes of Spain present Hannibal with a set of armour that includes a breast-plate of bronze and iron overlaid with gold on which Gallic craftsmen have wrought designs (Pun. 2.395–405). The first scene Hannibal surveys on this cuirass depicts Dido’s foundation of Carthage. Silius briefly summarises the contents of Aeneid 4 to recall Dido’s building programme, her welcome of the ship-wrecked Trojans, the lovers’ secret tryst in the cave when the storm scatters the hunt, and Aeneas’ departure (2.406–25). By reproducing the ‘highlights’ of the Virginian narrative, the Flavian poet retains Virgil’s emphasis on the wounded queen’s stage-managed death (ipsa, pyram super ingentem stans, saucia Dido | mandabat Tyris ultricia bella futuris, Pun. 2.422–3) and the spectacle her agony furnishes to the Roman epic hero and his readers (ardentemque rogum media spectatbat ab undo | Dardanam et magnis pandebat carphae factis, 2.424–5). Aeneas’ great destiny is here clearly achieved at the cost of Dido’s life, yet Hannibal proudly outfits himself in the armour, mistakenly believing it to be the token of success against the Romans (2.453–6). Dido’s death functions in the Punica both to confirm Roman power for Silius’ Roman readership and to initiate the conflict with Carthage that constitutes the subject of Silius’ song.

The spectacle of Dido’s death on Hannibal’s shield pointedly recalls the opening scene of the epic, which Silius sets in a temple precinct at the centre of Carthage. Constructed on the very site of Dido’s death (hoc sese, ut perhibent, curis mortalibus olim | exuerat regina loco, 1.85–6), the temple is sacred to the dead queen (sacrum genericis Elissae | manibus, 1.81–2) and houses a marble statue of her, flanked by those of Sycheus and her ancestors, with Aeneas’ sword at her feet. Her effigy presides over the chthonic rites performed by her priestess (1.93–6), and even symbolically participates in these rites (tum magico solitant cantu per inania manes | exciit, uultusque in marmore sudat Elissae, 1.97–8). Here Hannibal swears by Dido’s ghost to undertake war with the Romans when he comes of age (1.99–119): hanc mentem iuro nostri per nunina Martis, [per manes, regina, tuos] (‘I swear this purpose by the power of our war-god and by your shade, queen’, 1.118–19). The dead queen’s body grounds the very architecture of the poem, thereby lending her uncanny authority to Silius’ narrative.

Elsewhere in early imperial Latin epic too, dead and dying women initiate the action of the narrative. Lucan, for example, founds civil war—subject and title of his poem—in part on Julia’s death (morti tua discussa fides bellumque mouere | permissum ductibus, 1.119–20), and at the opening of book three her ghost appears in a nightmare-vision to her former husband to goad him into the conflict with her father (3.1–45). Statius gestures towards the genre’s aesthetic investment in the beautiful female corpse at the outset of the Thebaid, where he ponders opening the poem with the rape of Europa or the deaths of Amphion’s wives (1.3–14). At the end of classical antiquity, Claudian explores the thematic

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76 Dowden (1989), 168, analyses the structural connections linking the tale (as attested in Nicander, opud Ant. Lib. Met. 25) with other myths of maiden sacrifice.
conjunction of death, femininity and the aesthetic in his unfinished *De Ruptu Proserpinae*. Taking the rape of Proserpina by Pluto, king of the underworld (1.26–8), as his subject, Claudian elaborates the intersection of marriage and death in the rape as the central theme of his most ambitious poem.

The theme is also implicit in Valerius’ handling of the myth of Phrixus and Helle in the *Argonautica*. The Valerian Pelias invokes the shades of Helle and Phrixus when he commissions Jason to recover the golden fleece (1.41–50), the goal of the Argonauts’ expedition to which Jason refers initially as ‘the fleece of Helle’ (1.167; cf. 1.425).77 Claiming that his sleep is troubled by the unquiet ghosts of Phrixus and Helle, Pelias demands that Jason avenge their deaths. His invocation of Phrixus is elsewhere shown to be a self-serving lie, however, for Phrixus not only survives his journey to Colchis on the back of the ram, but is cordially received into both the country and the family of Aeetes, who marries one of his daughters to the Greek stranger (1.520–4). The death of Helle thus emerges as the sole legitimate motivation for the Argonauts’ voyage of reparation, and so Orpheus presents it. He recounts her tragic death the evening before the Argonauts depart in a song that adheres closely to the familiar thematic paradigm, as befits the exemplary epic song of the exemplary epic singer (1.277–93).

Orpheus’ song locates the origins of the Argonauts’ expedition in Helle’s pathetic death at sea and challenges the first Greek sailors to succeed where she so lamentably failed, in a concentrated statement of the poem’s central theme. Fully half of Orpheus’ song is devoted to the elaboration of Helle’s death at sea (1.286–93). First picturing her sitting astride the ram (1.282), the bard emphasises the pathos (cf. heu, 1.287) inherent in Helle’s ‘desertion’ of her brother (*hic soror Aeoliden... deserit*, 1.286–7) and her desperate attempts to cling to the ram’s fleece (1.288–9) until she finally sinks beneath the waves, drawn down by the weight of her wet garments (1.289–90). Stricken with grief, her brother watches her die, apparently unable to save her though she beseeches him for aid: *quis tibi, Phrixo, dolor, rapido cum concitus aestus... respiceres misereae clamamia virginis ora... extremae manus sparsaque per aequora crines!* (*what was your grief Phrixus, when you, spurred on by the swift

swell, looked back upon the piteous maiden’s face as she cried out, the tips of her hands, and her hair spread out over the surf,* 1.291–3). Unlike Phrixus, whose gaze focalises Orpheus’ song for the Argonauts (and Valerius’ readers), Helle is anatomised as she succumbs to her fate—palms, face, hands and hair scattered over the sea.

Orpheus’ focus on Helle emerges particularly clearly from comparison with the cosmogenic song of *Apollonius’ Orpheus*, who makes no mention of Helle although he sings at the corresponding point of the Greek poet’s *Argonautika* (1.496–511). Indeed she is almost completely absent from Apollonius’ poem, receiving only one explicit reference (1.256) and an etymologising allusion (1.927). In Valerius’ poem, by contrast, Helle herself even appears before the Argonauts in an epiphany to offer them guidance in the form of a prophecy (2.587–612). Addressing Jason, she likens the Argonauts’ undertaking to her own ill-fated journey across the sea: *te quoque ab Haemonis ignota per aequora terris... regna infesta domus fatisque simillima nostris... fata ferunt... iterum Aeolios Fortuna penates... spargit et infelix Scythicum gens quaeritis annem* (*a hostile kingdom at home and a destiny similar to my own carries you too away from Thessaly over unknown seas; again Chance scatters Aeolus’ household gods and you, unhappy people, seek the Scythian stream*), 2.592–4). In a speech designed primarily to strengthen the Argonauts’ resolve and to foreshadow their ultimate success (2.596–7), she advises them to secure Phrixus’ goodwill by paying due rites at his burial mound before proceeding to Colchis (2.598–600), and asks them to remember her to her brother’s shade:

’... cinerique, precor, mea reddite dicta: non ego per Stygiae quod rere silentia ripae, frater, agor; frustra uacui scrutarius Aurni, care, uias, neque enim scopulis me et fluctibus actam frangit hiemps; celeri extemplo subiere ruement Cymothoe Glaucusque manu; pater ipse profundi has etiam sedes, haec numine tradidit aequo regna nec Inois noster sinus inuidet undis.’ (2.600–7)

’... and to his ashes, I pray you, return my words: I am not driven, as you think brother, through the silent haunts of the Stygian shore, in vain, my dear, do you search the roads of empty Avernus. For no storm breaks me driven on rocks and waves; Cymothoe and Glauclus
helped me at once with a swift hand as I fell; the father of the deep himself allotted me this abode even and this kingdom, with just purpose, nor does our gulf envy Ino’s waves."

Helle here, like Creusa in Aeneid 2, is represented as acquiescing in the justice (numine...aequo, 2.606) of her fate. Yet despite her accession to divinity among the sea-gods, Valerius implies that she still grieves this ‘death’ at sea, for her demeanour as she sinks once more beneath the waves remains sad (maestos tranquilla sub aequora uilit | cum gemitu tuli | 2.608–9).

The death of a beautiful woman repeatedly serves as the catalyst in Latin epic for the epic hero’s assertion of political agency. Violence in Latin epic is unleashed first upon the eroticised female body, and this initial violence ‘displaces responsibility for what follows onto the victim’.78 The death of an ‘innocent’ woman – Ilia, Iphigenia, Creusa, Polyxena, the daughters of Anius and Orion, Helle – legitimates the epic hero’s violent mission: over her dead body, he regenerates or transforms the social order. Similarly, the death of a ‘dangerous’ woman – Dido, Cleopatra, Camilla – authorises the epic hero’s establishment of a normative order imperilled by her deviance.79 The result is the same whether the political order is implicitly critiqued (as it is in the death of an innocent woman) or confirmed (as it is in the death of a dangerous woman): the female corpse guarantees the stability of the cultural order achieved in the poem. Roman epic poetry thus produces the social order and the male political subject ‘at the expense of and through the construction of the female as object’.80 By guaranteeing the stability of the male political order, the dead woman offers further confirmation of the social structure of gender that subtends Roman culture. The female corpse in these poems is both the site of male mastery and the locus of a rhetoric of violence that repeats and reinforces the occlusion and elision of women’s agency in the larger culture.

The Latin epic tradition nonetheless offers a forum in which to articulate a critique of this paradigm, as we saw in Lucretius’ portrait of Iphigenia, where the spectacle of female death provokes an explicit cri-

tique of the heroic ethos central to the genre. And indeed the very frequency with which the rhetorical gestures of occlusion and elision occur, both in the Latin epic tradition and in individual instances of it (especially in the Aeneid and the Metamorphoses), complicates the sense in which the poems successfully occlude or elide female subjectivity. For how effective a denial of female agency is really on offer, in a literary tradition that repeatedly represents the aspirations of female characters to participate in the heroic (male) world and consistently contains those aspirations? If no Latin epic is complete without the death agony of a woman, no gesture of such occlusion finally succeeds. In addition, the centrality of female death in the Latin epic narrative (a book and a half for Dido, a third of a book each for Camilla and Asbyte, as well as an entire poem on Proserpina’s marriage to death and, perhaps, an entire poem for Cleopatra) works to undermine the genre’s denial of female subjectivity. Beyond Latin epic, Dido herself is treated with explicit sympathy not only in Heroides 7 (which participates in an elegiac tradition of inverting the epic world-view),81 but also in late antique examples of philosophical commentary and Christian theology.82 This literature alerts us to the imaginative energy mobilised but not finally expended in the Latin epic tradition with the representation of female characters, and suggests that the division between confirming and critiquing a masculine world order remains open to debate.

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78 Cf. Joplin (1990), 59–68, discussing Livy’s Lucretia, quote at 60.
79 On the functional interchangeability of the death of innocent and deviant women, see Bronfen (1992), 181.
80 Rabinowitz (1992), 51, on the structure of identification in Athenian tragedy.
81 Desmond (1993), and Wyke (1995), 124.
82 Macr. Sat. 5.17.5–6; Serv. on Aen. 4.36; Tert. ad nat. 1.18, 2.9, apol. 50, ad martyr 4; Min. Fel. 20.6; Jer. adv. Ioan. 1.43; Aug. Conf. 1.13.21. See further Pease (1935), 64–7.
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