Sexus muliebris in Flavian Epic

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The Flavian epic poets wrote in the aftermath of renewed political turmoil and social ferment at Rome, a time calculated to re-energize, if such were needed, a genre long at the forefront in classical antiquity for engaging with the most pressing political, social and literary issues of the day. Their self-conscious exploration of poetics has been well treated by Philip Hardie and a host of recent literary critics; their political commitments have likewise received considerable attention from contemporary scholars; and their treatment of current social issues too has attracted great interest amongst cultural historians. An emergent focus of recent scholarship on these epics has been the relationship between gender and genre, especially as manifested in relations between the sexes. My paper reopens the investigation of the dynamics of gender in the long epics of

3 — Newlands 2006; Bernstein 2008; Augoustakis 2010.
Valerius Flaccus, Papinius Statius, and Silius Italicus, by analyzing their deployment of the lexicon of sexual difference. I argue that the Flavian epic poets put on display the conventions, and contraventions, of normative femininity (and masculinity) in narratives that are acutely sensitive to contemporary contestations of the territorial assignments of gender in Roman culture.

I begin with Valerius Flaccus’ *Argonautica*, which recuperates several different models of epic femininity – from the hero’s lamenting mother Alcimede, through the sacrificial maiden Helle, to the terrifying witch Medea. Alcimede reprises the Homeric role of *mater dolorosa*, associated most famously with Thetis and Hecuba in the *Iliad*, in her proleptic lament over the death of her son in his epic trial. Introduced in conjunction with her husband Aeson (*Arg. 1.296-8*), Alcimede stands out as the feminine voice of grief (*Arg. 1.315-19*):

\[
\text{Incræscunt matrum gemitus et fortia languent corda patrum; longis flentes amplexibus haerent.} \\
\text{uox tamen Alcimedes planctus super eminet omnes: femineis tantum illa furens ululatibus obstat, obruit Idaeam quantum tuba Martia buxum.}
\]

The mothers’ wailings increase and the fathers’ stout hearts sicken; long they cling weeping in one another’s embrace. But the voice of Alcimede sounds far above all other lamentations; her ravings overmaster the cries of the women, even as the martial trumpet overwhelms the Idaean pipe.

Valerius’ lexical choices in this passage clarify the traditionally gendered distribution of sex roles in epic: mothers lament their sons’ departure on a heroic adventure (cf., e.g., Antikleia at Hom. *Od.* 11.197-203, and Alkimede herself in Ap. Rhod. *Arg.* 1.251-2, 261-306); while aged fathers – once brave and thus fitting progenitors of the next generation of heroes – falter in the face of their sons’ new trials (cf., e.g., Laertes at Hom. *Od.* 11.187-96, and Aeson at Ap. Rhod. *Arg.* 1.253, 263-4). The poet identifies Alcimede as the leader of the women’s laments (317) in diction that rehearses the conventional assignment to the female sex of *gemitus* (315), *planctus* (317) and, especially, *ululatibus* (318), marked as characteristic of women by the adjective *femineis* (alluding to Verg. *Aen.* 2.487-8, 4.667). Thus, the younger Seneca observes that the Romans had traditionally stipulated a year as the period of mourning for women, not...
to make them mourn that long but to prevent them from mourning longer’ (Epist. 63.13), for women were thought to be particularly subject to grief. Alcimede exemplifies this Roman stereotype in the short speech that follows (1.320-34), with her anticipation of Jason’s death and her own insupportable grief. She acknowledges the cliché of maternal fear (trepidis matribus, 1.324) and not only predicts that any mention of her son’s whereabouts will precipitate nervous alarm (quos iam mente dies, quam saeua insomnia curis | prospicio!, 1.329-30) and fainting (quotiens raucos ad litoris ictus | deficiam a! Scythicum metuens pontumque polumque, 1.330-1), but finally even hints that his departure will occasion her own death (1.333-4): da, precor, amplexus haesuraque uerba relinque | auribus et dulci iam nunc preme lumina dextra (‘cast your arms about me, I pray; leave me with words that will cling to my ears, and even now close these eyes with your dear hands’).

Valerius pointedly contrasts Alcimede’s (implicitly weak) womanly indulgence in lament here with Aeson’s stout manly encouragement of his son (1.335-6): talibus Alcimede maeret; sed fortior Aeson | attollens dictis animos (‘so Alcimede grieved; but Aeson more stoutly raised his [son’s] spirits with his speech…’). After reporting Aeson’s encouraging speech, Valerius tenderly portrays Jason’s attention to his fainting mother and aged father (1.348-9): sic ait. ille suo collapsam pectore matrem | sustinuit magnaque senem ceruice recepit (‘So spoke Aeson. Jason supported his mother, who had collapsed on his breast, and received his elderly father on his broad back’). This exchange will prove Jason’s last sight of his parents, however, for the aged pair commit suicide at the end of the book, and in his depiction of their deaths Valerius again alludes to contemporary Roman ideals of gendered behaviour.

Alcimede, animated by maternal anxiety, consults the underworld deities, attended by her no less anxious, but better disciplined, husband (Arg. 1.730-4):

Tartareo tum sacra Ioui Stygiisque ferebat 730
manibus Alcimede tanto super anxia nato,
siquid ab excitis melius praenosceret umbris.
ipse etiam curisque parem talesque prementem
corde metus ducit, facilem tamen, Aesona coniunx.

Just then Alcimede was bringing holy offerings to the lord of Tartarus and the Stygian ghosts, in fear for her mighty son, if shades summoned forth might give her surer knowledge. Even Aeson himself, who shares
her anxiety but who hides such unmanly fears in his heart, yields and is led by his wife.

J.H. Mozely (whose Loeb translation I reproduce here unadapted), imports the gendered clichés of feminine fear and masculine self-discipline into his English rendering of the passage, and thereby accurately conveys the gendered contrast implicit in Valerius’ lexical choices in this necromantic scene. Moreover, the poet confirms these normative sex roles in his depiction of the pair’s suicide shortly afterwards. For when his father’s ghost summons him to death (1.749-51), Aeson ponders an appropriately martial exit (1.756-61) and earns comparison to a lion in Valerius’ reworking (Arg. 1.757-8) of a traditional simile applied to epic heroes (cf. Hom. Il. 20.164, Verg. Aen. 12.4-9)8.

At this crisis point, Alcimede responds with conventionally feminine fear, tears and agitation, Aeson with conventionally masculine dignity and heroism (Arg. 1.761-70)9:

contra effusa manus haerensque in pectore coniunx
“me quoque” ait “casus comitem quicumque propinquat
accipies, nec fata traham natumque uidebo

te sine, sat caeli patiens, cum prima per altum
uela dedit, potui quae tantum ferre dolorem”.

talia per lacrimas. et iam circumspicit Aeson
praeueniat quo fine minas, quae fata capessat
digna satis: magnos obitus natumque domumque
et genus Aeolium pugnataque poscere bella

But his wife, with outstretched hands, clinging to his breast, cries: “No, but you will take me as a partner in whatever fortune should be yours; I will not prolong my life, nor look on my son without you, I who had endured long enough the light of day when first he set sail over the main, I who had strength to bear this deep sorrow”. So she spoke through her tears. And now Aeson considers by what end he may outstrip the threats of the king, how he may embrace a worthy fate: his son, his home, the race of Aeolus and the wars he has fought demand a noble death.

In the event, the noble death Aeson deems fitting is suicide (Arg. 1.816-22):

adstitit et nigro fumantia pocula tabo
contigit ipsa graui Furiarum maxima dextra;

9 — Spalteinstein 2002, 283.
The chief of the Furies stood close by him, and touched with heavy hand the cup that steamed with deadly venom; eagerly they drank and drained the blood from the bowl.

A tumult arose; with a shout, there burst in soldiers bearing stern commands and weapons drawn at the king's behest. They behold the aged pair already in the grip of doom, their eyes dulled in death, and spewing forth a poisonous stream of blood…

Despite the troubling presence of a Fury presiding over this death scene, their mutual suicide, expressly undertaken in a spirit of opposition to Pelias' tyranny (Arg. 1.790-811), resonates against the suicides of many members of the Stoic senatorial opposition to the Julio-Claudian and Flavian emperors. Of particular relevance to Valerius' description of the elderly couple's death is the elder Arria's decision to die with her husband Caecina Paetus, when he committed suicide after being condemned by Claudius in 42 CE for his part in the conspiracy of L. Arruntius Camillus Scribonianus.

Valerius' conventional treatment of the epic mater dolorosa, Alcimede, is matched by his innovative treatment of the sacrificial maiden, exemplified by Helle and Hesione. Orpheus includes Helle's sad fate in the song with which he motivates the Argonauts on the night before their departure (Arg. 1.286-93):

hic soror Aeoliden, aeuum mansura per omne, deserrit, heu saeue nequiquam erepta nouercae! illa quidem fessis longe petit umida palmis uellera, sed bibulas urgenti pondere uestes unda trahit leuicue manus labuntur ab auro quis tibi, Phrixe, dolor, rapido cum concitus aestu respiceres miserae clamantia virgis ora extremsque manus sparsosque per aequora crines!

Then the sister whose name shall live for all time deserted Aeolus' son, saved – alas! – in vain from her cruel stepmother. Still with weary hands she strains far behind the wet fleece, but the waves draw down her
garments heavy now with the drenching water, and her hands slip off
the smooth gold. What grief was yours, Phrixus, when sped on by the
whirling tide you looked back and saw the face of the pitiable maiden as
she called you, last her hands, and her hair spread out upon the waters.

I have explored elsewhere, in connection with this scene, the Roman
epicists’ predilection for making the death of a beautiful maiden the
catalyst of heroic action. Valerius treats the same topos at greater
length in the second book of the *Argonautica* in Hercules’ (successful)
rescue of Hesione from a sea-monster sent to ravage the Troad because of
Laomedon’s refusal to pay Neptune and Apollo their wages for building
the walls of Troy (*Arg.* 2.451-578). In this episode, the poet captures
the traditional hero’s attention (and implicitly captivates that of his
audience as well) with the promise of the spectacle of a beautiful young
maiden exposed to cruel death (*Arg.* 2.451-7):

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Alcides Telamonque comes dum litora blando
anfractus sinuosa legunt, uox attigit aures
flebile succedens, cum fracta remurmurat unda.
artoniti pressere gradum uacuumque secuntur
uocis iter; iam certa sonat, desertaque durae
uirgo neci quem non hominum superumque uocabat?
acrius hoc instare uiri succurrere certi;
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While Hercules, with Telamon at his side, passed along the shore
that broke back in a pleasant inlet, a voice reached their ears, re-echoing
mournfully as each wave broke and murmured away again. Astonished,
they went slowly, following the unseen path of the voice; now it sounds
distinct. A maiden abandoned to a cruel death – whom among men and
gods was she not calling? At this the heroes press on more keenly, resolved
to help.

Valerius’ introduction of the sacrificial maiden, Hesione, fetishes both
her beauty and her vulnerability as the desirable objects of Hercules’ (and
our) gaze (*Arg.* 2.462-7):

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constitit Alcides, uisue enisus in alta
rupe truces manicas defectaque virginis ora
cernit et ad primos turgentia lumina fletus;
exanimum ueluti multa tamen arte coactum
maeret ebur, Pariusue notas et nomina sumit
cum lapis aut liquidi referunt miranda colores.
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13 — On this episode, see Fitch 1976, Edwards 1999.
Hercules halted, and straining his gaze upwards sees on a high crag galling shackles and the worn face of a maiden, her eyes brimming to the verge of weeping; just as when lifeless ivory is yet constrained by masting skill to weep, or Parian marble assumes man’s lineaments and person, or flowing colours bring wonders before us.

Moreover, by memorializing her as a work of art at the very moment of her threatened death, he offers implicit commentary on his own gendered generic commitments in the Argonautica.

In response to the hero’s inquiry about the cause of her exposure, Hesione reports her royal lineage and Troy’s wealth until ravaged by a sea-monster (2. 471-92), to whom the flower of Trojan maidenhood has been sacrificed. Interestingly, Hesione increases the toll of virgins sacrificed to the beast in her explanation (Arg. 2.480-90):

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{… primaeua furenti} \\
&\text{huic manus amplexus inter planctusque parentum} \\
&\text{deditur. hoc sortes, hoc corniger imperat Hammon,} \\
&\text{uirgineam dammare animam sortitaque Lethen} \\
&\text{corpora; crudelis scopolis me destinat urna.} \\
&\text{uerum o iam redeunt Phrygibus si numina tuque} \\
&\text{ille ades auguris promisse et sorte deorum,} \\
&\text{iam cui candeunt uotiuo in gramine pascit} \\
&\text{cornipedes genitor, nostrae stata dona salutis,} \\
&\text{adnue meque, precor, defectaque Pergama monstris eripe…}
\end{align*}
\]

A band of young maidens is sacrificed to its rage amid the tears and embraces of their parents. This the lot, this horned Ammon commands – that a maiden’s life and her body that drew death’s lot be doomed; the cruel urn condemns me to the rocks. But oh! If once again Heaven inclines to the Phrygians and if you are the one whose arrival was promised by augury and the gods omen, and for whom my father now feeds snow-white horses in the votive pasture, the gift pledged for saving my life, nod and rescue both me and wasted Troy from the monster…

The supernumerary maidens of Hesione’s speech have occasioned difficulty amongst the commentators\(^\text{14}\), though they well exemplify the way that the Flavian epic poets repeat and amplify the conventions of the genre, including the territorial assignments of the \textit{sexus muliebris}, whose members are so often reduced to immobility in the landscapes through which the epic hero travels\(^\text{15}\).

In Valerius’ innovative treatment of the episode, the maiden’s misery colours the unhappy landscape (through pathetic fallacy), which reminds the hero of the blighted sites of his earlier labours and thereby inspires him to another (Arg. 2.492-6):

\[
\text{auxerat haec locus et facies maestissima capti litoris et tumuli caelumque, quod incubat urbi, quale laborantis Nemees iter aut Erymanthi uidot et infectae miseratus flumina Lernae.}
\]

The place lent strength to her words, the doleful aspect too of the captive shore, the funeral pyres and the sky that brooded over the city; just so, with pity, had he looked upon the paths to Nemea and Erymanthus, and on Lerna’s poisoned waters.

In this way, Valerius motivates the exemplary hero’s salvific activity as a reprise of his earlier labours. The sight of the impending death of the beautiful maiden further confirms Hercules’ motivation when his bow and arrows unexpectedly prove useless (Arg. 2. 524-6):

\[
\text{iam breuis et telo uolucri non utilis aer. tum uero fremitus uanique insania coepti et tacitus pudor et \textbf{rursus pallescere uirgo}:}
\]

Now the space is short and useless for the flying shaft. Then Moreover he groaned at the madness of that vain task, his silent shame, and the maiden pale once more…

The moment of despair, however, is the final spur to the hero’s triumph over the monster and rescue of the maiden (Arg. 2.542-5):

\[
\text{nec minus in scopulos crudique cacumina saxi emicat Alcides \textbf{uincisque tenentibus auert virgines de rupe manus} aptatque superbis arma umeris …}
\]

No less swiftly, Hercules springs up the crags to the top of the harsh rock, and frees the maiden’s hands from the fetters binding her to the cliff, and girds his armour on his vaunting shoulders.

In a striking departure from epic convention, Valerius does not make Hesione herself the hero’s reward, as she is elsewhere\(^\text{16}\), and as he himself implies she will be in the lines that follow (Arg. 2.545-9):

\[
\text{… regem inde petens superabat ouante}
\]

\(^{16}\) And as Valerius’ model here, Ovid’s Andromeda of \textit{Met.} 4, is: see Bureck 1976.
litora tuta gradu, qualis per pascua uictor
ingreditur, tum colla tumens, tum celsior armis
taurus, ubi adsueti pectoris stabula alta reuisit
et patrium nemus et bello quos ultus amores.

Thence seeking the king he outstrips the safe shore with vaunting steps; just as through the pastures the victorious bull stalks, with swelling neck and towering shoulders, when he returns to the high fold of the herd he knows, and the woods of his home and the beloved he has avenged in battle.

These lines rework Vergil’s famous passage in Georgics 3 concerning the power of eros in the animal world, which he illustrates with the contest between two bulls for a beautiful cow (formosa iuuenca, Geo. 3.219). In the Georgics, the defeated bull goes into exile, groaning over the unavenged loss of his beloved (multa gemens ... quos amisit inultus amores, Geo. 3.226-7), precisely in order to recruit his strength for a rematch. Valerius motivates Hercules’ victory over the sea-monster and release of Hesione on the model of Vergil’s exiled bull’s determination to avenge the loss of his love by way of the bull simile applied to Aeneas and Turnus in single combat in the last book of the Aeneid (12.697-724). As Aeneas and Turnus fight for marriage with Lavinia, and possession of the kingdom she brings to the victor17, so Hercules and the sea-monster, Valerius suggests, fight for Hesione.

Valerius merely hints at such an erotic motivation for his hero’s exploit, despite the conventionally amatory inspiration of epic combat in both Homer (Helen in Iliad 3, Penelope in Odyssey 22) and Vergil (Lavinia in Aeneid 7-12), who bring the woman for whom the heroes fight before the assembled warriors as if to display the prize for whom they compete to the rivals at the climactic moment of combat18. Rather Valerius reserves this motivation to Medea’s early encounters with Jason and the Argonauts in Argonautica 5.363-98 and 6.575-68219. His introductory notice of Medea in the first book of the epic, however, undermines this motivation by recourse to another gendered cliché of the genre, that of the epic witch, who appears as both a sexually desirable goddess (like Circe in Odyssey 10) and the fearsome exponent of magic rites (again like Circe in Odyssey 10, or like Dido’s priestess in Aeneid 4 and Lucan’s Erichtho in Bellum Civile

17 — Keith 2000, 49-60.
19 — On the latter scene, see Fucecchi 1997, ad loc., 175-223.
SExUS mUliEbriS IN FLAviAN EPiC

6). Medea enters the Argonautica in the guise of the latter, in Mopsus’ terrifying vision of the Argonauts’ Colchian labours (Arg. 1.223-6):

“… quem circum uellera Martem
aspicio? quenam aligeris secat anguibus auras
caeede madens? quos ense ferit? miser eripe paruos
Aesonide. cerno en thalamos ardere iugales”.

“What strife is this I see around the fleece? What woman is this, dripping with slaughter, who cleaves the breezes on winged serpents? Whom does she strike with the sword? Poor Jason, snatch your little sons! Look – I see the bridal chambers ablaze!”

Passing directly from the conflict over the Golden Fleece to Medea’s murder of her children and Jason’s Corinthian bride before her flight in the chariot of the Sun, Mopsus’s vision condemns Medea as the murderous witch who both secures Jason’s heroic stature and finally undoes it. But his prophecy also emphasizes her transgression of feminine norms and renders her almost Amazonian in her engagement of indiscriminate slaughter (caede madens) and usurpation of the male prerogative of the sword (quos ense ferit). Although Valerius’ epic, cut off by the poet’s early death, does not reach even her murder of Absyrtus (let alone those of her later career), Medea’s ominous future attends the maiden (uirgo, as she is regularly styled by Valerius) and undermines our sympathy for her maidenly fears in the poem. But the martial masculine exploits of the epic androgyne, merely hinted at here, find fuller development in both Statius and Silius, who explore the transgressive potential of women on the battlefield in Thebaid 12 and Punica 2 respectively.

Thus Statius represents both Antigone and Argia, Polynices’ sister and wife, as assuming martial ambitions when they meet on the battlefield over his body. By marrying Polynices, Argia becomes privy to his desire for war with his brother (2.319-62), and so it is she who overcomes her father’s reluctance to send the Seven to war against Thebes (3.678-721) – as she acknowledges when cradling his corpse on the battlefield (12.336-7): ipsa dedi bellum maestumque rogavi | ipsa patrem, ut talem nunc te complexa tenerem (‘I myself gave you war, I myself asked my sorrowing father – that now I might hold you thus in my embrace’). But Statius transforms Argia from the mouthpiece of war into her husband’s comrade-at-arms, when she determines (as Federica Bessone has argued) to “follow” the deceased Polynices to Thebes, and alone faces death, after

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20 — On prophecy in Valerius, see Gross 2003 and Manuwald 2009.
21 — Arg. 5.240, 334, etc.; cf. Valerius’ application of the adjective virgineus to Medea at, e.g., Arg. 5.356, 392, etc.
the dangers and labours of the march, to perform his funeral honours. Statius confirms her masculine daring at the outset of the trek (Theb. 12.177-86):

hic non feminine subitum uiritutis amorem
colligit Argia, sexuque immane reicto
tractat opus: placet (egregii spes dura pericli!)
commminus infandi leges accedere regni,
quo Rhodopes non ulla nurus nec alumna niuosi
Phasidis inuuptis uallata cohortibus iret.
tunc mouet arte dolum, quo semet ab agmine fido
segueget, inmtesque deos regemque cruentum
contemptrix animae et magno temeraria luctu
prouocet; hortantur pietas ignesque pudici.

Here Argia conceives a sudden passion for unwomanly courage and engages in an immense work, abandoning her sex. She resolves (stubborn hope of noble peril) to confront head on the laws of the impious monarchy, where no bride of Rhodope, no nursling of snowy Phasis flanked by virgin cohorts would go. Then she essays an artful stratagem to detach herself from the faithful train and challenge ruthless gods and the bloody king, despising her life, rash with mighty mourning. Piety and chaste love urge her on.

Inspired by piety and chaste love (186), Argia is emboldened to unwomanly manliness: the juxtaposition of non feminine with uiritus (177) underlines the masculine daring of her ‘huge project’, an undertaking (opus, 179) marked as ‘epic’ by its very size (immane, 178). Statius thereby signals Argia’s pretensions to the role of the epic ‘man’ (cf. arma uirumque cano, Verg. Aen. 1.1), in her transgression of feminine conventions, and concomitant assumption of manly valour (uiritus, 12.177), motivated precisely by her devotion to womanly ideals, viz. the marital compact.

Her matronly virtue thus paradoxically underwrites a martial ambition that surpasses even that of the Amazons (12.181-2). On the battlefield, Argia and Antigone join forces to secure proper burial for Polynices. As the women lament over Polynices’ corpse, Argia proposes that they enter into alliance with one another (Theb. 12.378,
iunge, age, iunge fidem) and Antigone agrees immediately when she recognizes her brother’s wife (Theb. 12.382-8):


“Do you fear me, then – how blind is chance! – partner in your evils? Mine are the limbs you hold, mine the corpse you bewail. I yield, you take him. Ah shame! The cowardly devotion of a sister! She is earlier – !” Here they collapse side by side and together embrace the same body, greedily mingling their tears and locks, and sharing his limbs between them; they return with united lament to his face and glut themselves by turns upon his well-loved breast.

Their harmony is shattered, however, by the arrival of Creon’s armed guards, before whom they lay their competing claims to the burial of Polynices (12.456-60). In their rivalry for death (ambitur saeua de morte animosaque leti | spe fir, 12.456-7), they rehearse the brothers’ fratricidal duel – though in words rather than under arms (Theb. 12.461-2): nasquam illa alternis modo quae reuerentia uerbis, | iram odiumque putes (‘gone is the reverence that but now was in the words of each; you would think it anger and hatred’). Their unwavering commitment to death is only finally thwarted by the arrival of Theseus’ Athenian army, whose victory over the tyrant Creon will secure the burial of all the Argives (Theb. 12.677-81):

saeuus at interea ferro post terga reuinctas Antigonem uiduamque Creon Adrastida leto admouet; ambae hilares et mortis amore superbae ensibus intentant iugulos regemque cruentum destituunt; cum dicta ferens Theseia Phegeus adstitit…

But meanwhile Creon ruthlessly leads Antigone and the widowed daughter of Adrastus to death, their hands fettered behind them; both cheerful and proudly eager for death, they hold out their necks to the swords and baffle the cruel tyrant, when Phegeus, bearing Theseus’ message, arrived.

Argia’s and Antigone’s entrance onto the battlefield and subsequent embrace of violent death are motivated by familial piety and conjugal
loyalty, the highest feminine virtues celebrated in Flavian culture\textsuperscript{26}. Polynices’ wife and sister thereby also invite comparison with such exemplary masterful women as the elder Arria and her granddaughter Fannia, whose conjugal loyalty earned them contemporary commemoration as Roman icons of Stoic virtue\textsuperscript{27}.

Statius even adapts the quintessentially transgressive figure of the Amazon to the contemporary Roman idealization of marital fidelity. On display in Theseus’ (anachronistically Roman) triumph, the Amazons have been civilized, removed from the barbarous margins of the inhabited world and relocated to the centre of Greek civilization (\textit{Theb.} 12.523-31):

\begin{quote}
ante ducem spolia et, duri Mauortis imago,
\textbf{uirginei currus} cumulataque fercula cristi,
et tristes ducuntur equi truncaque bipennes,
quis nemora et solidam Maeotida caedere suetae,
corytique leues portantur et ignea gemmis
cingula et \textbf{informes dominarum sanguine peltae},
\textbf{ipsae autem nondum trepidae sexumue fatentur},
nec uulgare gemunt aspernantque precari,
et tantum innuptae quaerunt delubra Mineruae.
\end{quote}

Before the general are borne his spoils, the virgin chariots that recall the grim War-God, and wagons heaped with crests and downcast steeds and broken axes, with which the foe were wont to cleave the forests and frozen Maeotis, light quivers too are borne and baldrics fiery with gems and shields stained with the blood of the warrior-maids. They themselves, still unafraid, admit no thought of sex, and scorn to entreat nor utter mean lament, only they seek the shrine of unwedded Minerva.

Theseus’ martial mastery of the Amazons complements his marital mastery of their queen, Hippolyte (\textit{Theb.} 12.533-9):

\begin{quote}
\ldots nec non populos in semet agebat
\textbf{Hippolyte, iam blanda genas patiensque mariti}
\textbf{foederis}. hanc patriae ritus fregisse seueros
Attihdes oblique secum mirantur operto
murmure, quod nitidi crines, quod pectora palla
tota latent, magnis quod barbara semet Athenis
misceat atque \textbf{hosti ueniat paritura marito}.
\end{quote}

Hippolyte too drew all toward her, friendly now in look and patient of the marriage-bond. With hushed whispers and sidelong gaze the Attic

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{26} — See, e.g., D’Ambra 1993; Bernstein 2008, 7-29.

\textsuperscript{27} — Carlon 2009, 175-82; La Penna 2000, 28-30; Franchet d’Espèrey 2008; Centlivres Challet 2008; Shelton 2013, 15-91.
\end{flushright}
women marvel that she has broken her country’s austere laws, that her locks are trim, and her whole breast hidden beneath her robe, that though a barbarian she mingles with mighty Athens, and comes to bear offspring to her enemy husband.

The Athenian king’s reduction of the Amazons to prisoners of war, and their leader to his bedmate, restores the traditional hierarchy of the sexes and thereby anticipates the restoration of order that he will impose on Thebes after defeating Creon. In Statius’ epic, the bellicose queen of the Amazons thus emerges as a model Greek wife, whose modest dress confirms her chaste readiness to bear her husband an heir.

The pregnant Hippolyte is in no position to campaign on her own, or her husband’s behalf (Theb. 12.635-8):

isset et Arctoas Cadmea ad moenia ducens
Hippolyte turmas: retinet iam certa tumentis
spes uteri, coniunxque rogat dimittere curas
Martis et emeritas thalamo sacrare pharetras.

Hippolyte too would have gone to Cadmus’ walls leading her northern troops: already the sure hope of her swelling womb holds her back, and her husband asks her to put aside the cares of Mars and to dedicate her retired quivers to the marriage chamber.

Hippolyte is here transformed from transgressive female warrior into dutifully reproductive wife, her weapons retired from the battlefield despite her own inclination to return to the fray. Statius is clearly indebted to earlier epic characterization of Amazons in his portrait of Hippolyte, most notably to Vergil’s description of Camilla28. But his domestication of the warrior woman Hippolyte also engages historical precedent in at least one respect. For in 60 or 61 ce, Boudicca – the widow of Prasutagus, the Romans’ client-king of the Iceni in East Anglia – led the combined forces of the Iceni and the Trinovantes in rebellion against the Roman governor Suetonius Paullinus and his army29.

If contemporary Roman descriptions of Boudicca implicitly draw on the mythological figure of the Amazon, the fate of the historical British queen may reciprocally inform the Flavian epicists’ representation of Amazonian warrior queens. In this context, a final figure to consider is Silius’ Asbyte, introduced (like Vergil’s Camilla) as both virgin huntress (haec, ignara uiri uacuoque assueta cubili, | uenatu et siluis primos dependerat annos, Pun. 2. 68-9) and also (like Vergil’s Penthesilean Dido) as a

28 — Pollmann 2004, ad loc.
queen (*regina*, 2.66, 169) of Libyan forces, in this case from Marmarica\(^{30}\). As a warrior maiden (*belligera virgo*, 2.168), she is duly compared by Silius to the Thracian Amazons (*Pun. 2.73*-6):

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quales Threiciae Rhodopen Pangaeaque lustrant
saxosis nemora alta iugis cursuque fatigant
Hebrum innupta manus: spreti Ciconesque Getaeque
et Rhesi domus et lunatis Bistones armis.
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Even so the band of Amazons in Thrace traverse Rhodope and the high forests on the stony ridges of Mount Pangaeus, and tire out the Hebrus by their speed; they spurn all suitors – the Cicones and Getae, the royal house of Rhesus, and the Bistones with their crescent-shaped shield.

Bare-breasted and carrying the Amazonian lunate shield (*nuda latus Marti ac fulgentem tegmine laeuam | Thermodontiaca munita in proelia pelta*, 2.79-80), Asbyte enters Silius’ narrative as a conventional Amazonian figure, right down to the company of female comrades-at-arms that surrounds her (2.82-3)\(^{31}\). Her two-horse chariot (*biiugo curru*, 2.82), however, links her to Boudicca, whom Tacitus portrays addressing the British troops ‘from a chariot with her daughters before her’ (*curru filias prae se uehens*, Tac. *Ann.* 14.35; cf. Dio 62.8.2).

Silius reflects on the conventional hierarchy of the sexes throughout Asbyte’s *aristeia*. As she hurls her weapons at Saguntum’s walls, the old Cretan warrior Mopsus, stationed between his two sons (*medius iuuenum*, 2.108), catches sight of her and aims his weapon, only to kill her comrade Harpe. In response, Asbyte kills his sons Dorylas and Icarus, and the devastated father leaps from the city-walls in despair at their deaths. This scandalous overthrow of the hierarchy of gender can only be righted by a second battle of the sexes, between Asbyte and Hercules’ priest Theron (*Alcidae templi custos aeraque sacerdos*, *Pun. 2.150*), who reprises the role of Camilla’s killer Chloreus, the priest of Cybele in *Aeneid* 11. Theron, however, is the diametric opposite of Chloreus – no gold-clad effeminate votary of the Magna Mater, but a club-wielding avatar of his muscle-bound god, who relies on his youth, physical prowess and Herculean weapons (club, lion-skin, and shield) to best the warrior maiden (*Pun. 2.193*-205):

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adversus consurgit equos uillosaque fului
ingerit obiectans trepidantibus ora leonis.
atoniti terreore nouo rictuque minaci
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30 — I cite Silius’ *Punica* from the Loeb edition of Duff 1934; translations are also adapted from his edition.

quadrupedes iactant resupino pondere currum.
tum saltu Asbyten conantem linquere pugnas
occupat, incussa gemina inter tempora claua,
feruentesque rotas turbataque frena pauore
disiecto spargit collisa per ossa cerebro;
ac rapta properans caedem ostentare bipenni,
amputat e curru reuolutae uirginis ora.
necdum irae positae; celsa nam figitur hasta
spectandum caput; id gestent ante agmina Poenum,
imperat, et propere currus ad moenia uertant.

He rose up right in front of the horses and held before them the shaggy head of a tawny lion and thrust it in their frightened faces. Frantic with fear unfelt before — fear of the menacing open jaws — the coursers upset the heavy car and turned it over. Then, as Asbyte tried to flee from the fight, he sprang to stop her and smote her between the twin temples with his club; he spattered the glowing wheels and the reins, disordered by the terrified horses, with the brains that gushed from the broken skull. Then he seized her axe and, eager to display his slaughter of her, cut off the head of the maiden when she rolled out of her chariot. Not yet was his rage sated; for he fixed her head on a lofty pike, for all to see, and bade men bear it in front of the Punic army, and drive the chariot with speed to the town.

The violence of Theron’s assault on Asbyte offers a striking contrast to the eroticism of Silius’ Vergilian model. Spaltenstein attributes the brutality of Theron’s killing of Asbyte to imperial taste (what used to be called ‘decadent “silver” Latin’)\(^\text{32}\), and we may agree that the violent realism owes something to the contemporary spectacles of the amphitheatre. But here again, details of the Roman rout of Boudicca’s forces provide an illuminating context for Asbyte’s violent death on the battlefield. Amazonian (and Camillan) though she undoubtedly is in her literary lineage, Asbyte’s martial exploits are depicted by Silius in a starkly contemporary idiom of military violence.

In this regard, we can trace the impact on Silius of some of the same socio-cultural developments that influence Valerius and Statius in their portrayal of the female sex in epic. Perhaps the most notable feature shared by all three Flavian epicists, however, is their repeated definition of the female sex against the standards of masculinity (and often vice versa). The traditional epic mater dolorosa acquires new purpose in her quasi-Stoic opposition to the tyrant who sends her son to sea, while sacrificial maidens and Amazonian warriors entertain epic audiences with lurid spectacles of feminine death that reflect those recently staged in the

\(^{32}\) — Spaltenstein 1986, ad loc.
Flavian amphitheatre (Mart. *lib. de spect.* 6, 7, 8, 30 Shackleton Bailey). If it is difficult to discern parallels in these epics for the chaste wives and dutiful daughters of early imperial prose literature, it is perhaps because their transgressive sisters provide such spectacular narrative counterpoints to the heroes and antiheroes of the Roman epic tradition.

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33 — Coleman 1990.

SEXUS MULIEBRIS IN FLAVIAN EPIC


