

Victims of War: Gendered Dynamics of Suffering

In any war narrative—prose or poetry, ancient or modern—feelings of fear, sorrow and suffering inevitably play an important role. In war-centred epic, where the plot is structured around battles, sieges and sackings of cities, these feelings are so omnipresent that the reader is in danger of becoming numb to them. The narrative pattern in which fear, pain, and loss figure prominently obviously derives from Homeric epic, from Graeco-Roman historiography and from Athenian drama, but in the epics of the early Principate, it is often modified slightly to suit the milieu of the narrative.¹ In this chapter, I scrutinise this narrative pattern in more depth, in order to examine how it contributes to the establishment of gender dynamics and gendered focalisation in the genre.

Western culture has a long tradition of labeling transgressive female behaviour as maenadic, hysteric, ‘overemotional’ or just plain irrational—in other words, as ‘the other’ in terms of the symbolic order of logic and reason. This tradition of ‘gendering emotions’ can be observed both in Roman war epics themselves and in the modern research tradition. In particular, the idea of the dominating male vantage point in Roman war epic appears to be strongly based on the idea of women’s overemotional behaviour. Scholars who stress the juxtaposition of genders in the genre often argue that the victimised position of women in war epic marks them as marginalised objects, when compared to the “male, mobile hero of epic”—instead of taking action, they are acted upon, and the suffering is inflicted on them by the male-driven war narrative.² Likewise, it has been suggested that epic women’s intense outbursts of grief or pain serve the purpose of alienating the reader from them, urging him to identify with the male protagonist instead.³ These are valid arguments, and to

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- 1 Fantham discusses in more detail the ways in which the Roman epic poets combine and mix literary models in their representation of negative emotions. Fantham 1999, 221–232. See also Murnaghan, who examines female lament in Homeric epic and its similarities to the phenomenon in Greek tragedy. Murnaghan 1999, 205–217.
 - 2 Keith 1999, 218, 228–230. See also Zarker 1978, 22; Newlands 2009, 391, 393–396; Ganiban 2007, 207–232.
 - 3 Syed 2005 (see e.g. 116–135.); see also Brazouski 1991, 133–134; Nugent 1992 (*passim*); Gill 1997, 228–229; Wright 1997, 174–179; Mack 1999 (*passim*); Dietrich 1999, 47–48; Keith 2000, 67–73; Panoussi 2009, 123.

some extent, they do seem to explain the strongly male-centred focalisation in the genre. Epic women are indeed marked by strong, negative emotions, and as Fredrick notes, intense emotions (such as fear, pain, or grief) tend to be “language-destroying”. They are usually better expressed not verbally, but through asymbolic communication: silence, non-verbal wailing or bodily movements.⁴ Epic women’s suffering is very often *beyond words*, and this is why, in a phallogocentric order, they easily get labeled as threatening others.

While there are various episodes in the Roman war epics where this phenomenon can be clearly observed, equally interesting are the storylines that seem to question this conventional casting of roles. There are storylines where women’s expressions of fear and grief seem to invite the reader to share their viewpoint and their emotional turmoil, as well as episodes where the suffering that is beyond words is expressed through the male subject of the epic, instead. These, I suggest, are equally noteworthy for our understanding of gender dynamics in the genre, and therefore deserve to be discussed in more detail.

1 The Victimised Female Body and the Construction of Roman Identity

If one popular way of reading gender in Roman war epic is that of examining female characters as warmongers and troublemakers—a tradition discussed in more detail in the previous chapter—another is to read them as innocent and helpless victims, whose personal experience of war questions the heroic drive of the poem. Zarker, for example, has suggested that the women in the *Aeneid* movingly reveal the futility of epic heroism; he sees them as “persons without a voice in the epic decisions; yet they pay the terrible costs of war”.⁵ Other scholars have argued that the phenomenon is even more prominent in post-Virgilian epic.⁶ In their studies of the *Silvae* and the *Thebaid*, Newlands and Ganiban, for instance, suggest that Statius utilises female suffering to emphasise the utter pointlessness of war and to question what is called Virgil’s imperial, Augustan vision.⁷ While these readings clearly differ from each other on the age-old question of Virgil’s ‘Augustan optimism’, what they appear

4 Discussed further in Fredrick 2002, 238.

5 Zarker 1978, 22.

6 See e.g. Augoustakis 2012; Newlands 2006; Micozzi 1998, 114.

7 Newlands 2009, 391, 393–396; Ganiban 2007, 207–232. Besides Ganiban and Newlands, the structural role of female lament in Flavian epic, and its tendency to challenge the heroic

to agree on is the function of female grief in Roman epic—to all three scholars, women's suffering is an element of pathos that questions the heroic drive of the epic, and reveals the human suffering behind Rome's great imperial narrative.

The idea of female suffering as juxtaposed to the unstoppable drive of war is perhaps best crystallised in the personifications of ravaged, raped and destroyed cities.⁸ This is a Homeric topos: in the *Iliad*, the sack of Troy is often depicted with an imagery and vocabulary that aligns the city with a suffering woman.⁹ As Scully points out, metaphors of motherhood and metaphors of sexual violence are entwined in the Homeric language: Troy is repeatedly depicted as a fertile city ravaged by war.¹⁰ This is a feature that is prominent in the Roman epic tradition, as well.¹¹ In Statius' *Thebaid*, Jupiter claims that

*ipse manu Thebas correptaque moenia fundo/excutiam versasque solo
super Inacha tecta/effundam turrets aut stagna in caerula verrem/imbre
superiecto—.*

STAT. *Theb.* 3.248–251

With my own hands I will seize Thebes and her walls, knock her off her foundations, tear up her towers and spread them over the Inachian houses, or throw a storm-cloud over them and sweep them into the dark blue waters.¹²

Thebes is humanised and gendered when Statius depicts it as a sentient being to be acted upon. The city is violated, mutilated, and ruined by the ultimate

thrust of epic, have been argued, e.g., by Fantham, Malamud and Vinchesi. See Fantham 1999, 232; Malamud 1995, 188; Vinchesi 2005, 97–98.

8 The topos of *urbs capta* is particularly popular in the tragic depictions of the fall of Troy (Euripides' *Hecuba*, *Andromache* and *Troades*) and in Roman historiography. For further discussion of its origins in ancient literature, see, e.g., Rossi 2002, 232–238, 243–249.

9 See, e.g., Hom. *Il.* 6.58–59, 22.77–86.

10 Hom. *Il.* 16.100. Scully 2003, 193–194, 197.

11 The humanising and gendering of conquered cities is a phenomenon that strongly colludes with the traditions of Roman visual arts and, particularly, with the Roman history of imperial conquest. Roman imperial art typically features female personifications of conquered areas, and considerably often these are represented as subjugated, compliant, and melancholic, expressing traditional signs of mourning. The association of the female with a conquered area is symbolically rich; these personifications manifested the fertility of the area, while also firmly linking the concept of Roman imperial hegemony with the male dominion over the female. See Syed 2005, 142; Huskinson 2000, 8.

12 See also *Theb.* 10.870–872.

male agent, Jupiter himself. The ravished city itself is completely passive and does not react to its destruction in any way.

Another way of discussing this topos can be found in Silius Italicus' *Punica*. In his epic, Silius recurrently introduces a humanised personification of a city, who both acknowledges its suffering and reacts to it. The first time this happens is at the siege of Saguntum:

*Sed postquam clades patefecit et horrida bella/orantum squalor, praesens
astare Sagunti/ante oculos visa est extrema precantis imago.*

SIL. *Pun.* 1.630–632

But when the unkempt appearance of the suppliants revealed the disasters and horrors of war, they [the Senate] thought they saw before their eyes the figure of Saguntum, close to her end, beseeching for help.¹³

A similar metaphor is utilised later, in book 13, when describing Capua's distress:

*at Capua, aut maestis ululantum flebile matrum/questibus, aut gemitu
trepidantum exterrita patrum,/tormentis finem metamque laboribus orat.*

SIL. *Pun.* 13.258–260

But Capua, terrified either by the sad howling and distressed complaints of the mothers, or by the moans of the frightened senators, prays for an end to her sufferings and a limit to her hardships.

The Lucanian influence is strong in these passages; they seem to be modeled on an episode in the *Pharsalia* where the distressed city in question is Rome herself. But whereas Silius mentions the misery of Saguntum and Capua only briefly, Lucan provides Rome with a suffering voice of her own:

*Ut ventum est parvi Rubiconis ad undas,/ingens visa duci patriae trepidantis
imago/clara per obscuram voltu maestissima noctem,/turrihero canos
effundens vertice crines,/Caesarie lacera nudisque adstare lacertis/et gemitu
permixta loqui: 'Quo tenditis ultra?/Quo fertis mea signa, viri? Si iure
venitis,/si cives, huc usque licet.'*

LUC. *Phar.* 1.185–192

13 Silius uses a similar kind of imagery when describing Carthage. Sil. *Pun.* 17.349–356.

When he reached the waters of little Rubicon, the general saw a great figure of his frightened homeland. Her deeply sad face could be clearly seen in the darkness of night, and white hair streamed down her head, crowned with towers. She stood before Caesar, with her arms bare and torn, and her speech was mixed with moans: "Where further do you proceed? Where are you taking my standards, O men? If you come respecting the law, then here, citizens, you must stop."¹⁴

Thanks to the traditional signs of mourning—loosened hair, torn garments—the image of Rome appears submissive and supplicant. Lucan depicts the city as completely defenseless, left to the mercy of the invader.

In these episodes, the idea of the female body as a *locus* of male action and imperial conquest is clearly discernible. The conqueror takes the city into his possession and has the power to redefine its identity either by completely demolishing it or by forcing it to adapt to his own—the formation of identity is, in this imagery, represented as exceptionally violent. The erotic overtones further strengthen the impression of 'male' imperial dominion over a 'female' city or people. War becomes allusive to rape, and the power dynamics of the epic universe are defined according to the law of the strongest.

Considering the popularity of this imagery—female personifications of ravaged and grieving cities—in Roman war epic, it is striking how few references to actual physical war-time violence against women there are in the genre. Rape, for instance, is practically non-existent as a topic:¹⁵ the episode that comes closest is a short passage in the second book of the *Aeneid*, where Cassandra is dragged out of Athene's temple in chains.¹⁶ Other acts of violence against women are extremely rare as well, as are deaths of women at the hands

14 See also Luc. *Phar.* 1.84–86.

15 There is one explicit rape episode in Roman war epic; however, it takes place, not during a war but, instead, during the Bacchanals: this is Achilles' rape of Deidamia in the *Achilleid* (Stat. *Achil.* 1.619–647). For further discussion of the episode, see Davis 2006, 132–137. Dealing with the theme of sexual violence is one of the aspects in which Ovid's epic poetry considerably differs from the war-centred epics of the Principate; the repetition of the rape theme is one of the characteristic features of the *Metamorphoses* and the *Fasti*.

16 *ecce trahebatur passis Priameia virgo/crinibus a templo Cassandra adytisque Minervae,/ad caelum tendens ardentia lumina frustra,/lumina, nam teneras arcebant vincula palmas.* Verg. *Aen.* 2.403–406. Virgil evokes the passage in Euripides' *Troades*, where Cassandra is violently dragged from the safety of the temple by the soldiers. However, the Roman poet also appears to allude to an alternative tradition, according to which Ajax raped Cassandra inside the temple, thus committing an outrageous *sacrilegium*. This version is supported by Quintus Smyrnaeus (Quint. Smyrn. 13.422) and Tryphiodorus (*The taking of Ilios* 644).

of men.¹⁷ It would appear that instead of describing actual violence against women, the Roman epic poets are more interested in the pathos created by the expectation of violence. As in much of the contemporary Western screen entertainment, where the actual rape cannot be shown because of the system of ratings, the suspense is created by constantly hinting at the possibility of rape—by making the audience imagine that which cannot be explicitly shown. In the *Pharsalia*, Lucan describes the danger that would befall Cornelia, wife of Pompey, when her husband ponders leaving for Parthia. When expressing his objection to Pompey's plan, Lentulus argues that:

Sed tua sors levior, quoniam mors ultima poena est/nec metuenda viris. At non Cornelia letum/infando sub rege timet.—Proles tam clara Metelli/stabit barbarico coniunx millesima lecto/quamquam non ulli plus regia, Magne, vacabit/saevitia stimulate Venus titulisque virorum.

LUC. *Phar.* 8.395–397, 8.410–413

But your lot is easier, since death, the ultimate punishment, is not frightening to strong men. But death is not what Cornelia fears under the abominable king.—So the noble descendant of Metellus will stand by the bed of the barbarian, as his thousandth wife; however, O Magnus, the king's desire will be devoted to her more than to any other, because it will be fuelled by his cruelty and by the renown of her husbands.¹⁸

Lentulus' speech reflects a strong orientalist attitude towards the Parthian culture, which is depicted as barbaric, uncivilised, bestial and hypersexualised. The potential rapist appears as the Absolute Other, into whose character the animalistic drives of sex and death are located.¹⁹ It is particularly interesting that while this abjection works in the same way as in Lucan's depictions of Cleopatra, for example, in this passage the gender roles are reversed. It is Cornelia, the Republican noblewoman of most distinguished birth, who becomes

17 As for other forms of war-time suffering, one reference to a famine is to be found in the *Punica*. During the battle of Saguntum, the Spanish matrons are depicted as conquered by famine. Sil. *Pun.* 2.489–491.

18 Cornelia was the daughter of Q. Caecilius Metellus Pius Scipio Nasica, the consul of the year 52 BCE. Scipio Nasica was of extremely distinguished birth, belonging to one of the most respected patrician *optimates* families of the late Republic. Before her marriage to Pompey, Cornelia was married to P. Licinius Crassus, who died at the battle of Carrhae in 53 BCE.

19 For further analysis on the strong association between the Orient and aggressive, unconventional sexuality in Roman thinking, and on the repetitions of the theme in Roman epic, see, e.g., Reed 2007, esp. 73–100.

the representative of values that are defined as ‘Roman’—and her Roman-ness, in turn, is underlined by juxtaposing it with the contemptible barbarian Other. The juxtaposition between righteous republicanism and corrupted monarchy, a question that is at the heart of Lucan’s epic, is thus turned into a matter of cultural significance, where an inclination to monarchy signifies barbarism and a lack of self-discipline in all other aspects as well. Intriguingly, on this occasion the poet does not complete the picture of the Absolute Other by associating it with femininity as well. Instead, by means of the character of Cornelia, Lucan introduces another kind of femininity, the kind that is firmly absorbed into and in line with the ideals of Roman society and culture.

This means that the episode grants Cornelia considerable subjectivity, since it makes her a potential point of identification for the projected Roman reader, who would like to think of himself as a representative of the values that she embodies. There is nothing particularly surprising or revolutionary about this, since female exemplarity was an established part of the historiographic tradition long before Lucan’s time. However, the fact that the poet deliberately engages with this tradition seems significant, since it clearly challenges the idea of a male hero as the self-evident subject of war epic. The passage shows that feelings of fear and the role of a helpless victim could indeed be utilised to encourage the reader’s identification with epic women, and not only to alienate him from them.²⁰

Rhetoric of a similar sort can be perceived in another passage from the *Pharsalia* where the fear of wartime rape is discussed. When the narrator depicts Caesar addressing his soldiers before a battle, he states that

*Non illis urbes spoliandaque templa negasset/Tarpeiamque Iovis sedem
matresque senatus/passurasque infanda nurus—.*

LUC. *Phar.* 5.305–307

Unrestrained by him, they would have sacked cities and temples, even the Tarpeian seat of Jupiter; and they would have inflicted outrage on the senatorial mothers and daughters-in-law—.

What this passage has in common with Lentulus’ speech—besides the anticipation of a potential rape—is the use of *infandum*, a word that emphasises the outrage and shamefulness of the act that is feared. The narrator appears to

20 This alienating function of women’s negative emotions has been argued for, e.g., in Syed 2005, esp. 53–113.

consider even the *potential* raping of Roman elite women as a sacrilege of the worst kind; it is comparable to the ravaging of Jupiter's temple on the Capitol, the holiest of all places and the signifier of the Roman state at large. Accordingly, this passage clearly locates the defining aspects of Roman-ness in the victimised female characters. It depicts *Romanitas* as crystallised in *pietas* and *pudicitia*, the values embodied by the senatorial women.²¹ Female virtue, therefore, comes to define and construct Roman-ness in contrast to the enemy.

What is particularly intriguing here is that, whereas in the episode about Cornelia, the threat to her *pudicitia* came from the barbarous Parthians, in this case, the enemy is none other than Caesar's army, a troop of Roman soldiers whom the civil war has turned into reckless beasts and enemies of the Republic. In other words, those who should be the best representatives of Rome and its defining virtues become a threat to them instead. Caesar's soldiers are assimilated with barbarians intent on sacking the holiest shrine of Rome and tearing down its defining features. Not only have these men become strangers to their people, but they also threaten to strip Rome of its identity and make its people 'strangers to themselves'.²² The episode demonstrates the volatility of the categories of 'Roman' and 'other'—an aspect of Lucan's epic that I have discussed in the previous chapter, when examining the conflation of the characters of Caesar and Cleopatra. In this episode, when the poet discusses the potential raping of *Romanitas*, the phenomenon is clearer still. In the *Pharsalia*, civil war exposes the dissolution within Roman society, and reveals the illusory nature of collective Roman-ness. Abroad, Caesar's legions are representatives of Rome who defend its values against the barbarians; in the city, they are the enemy.

When examined from a Kristevan perspective, the *Pharsalia* could therefore be considered a prime example of a work that acknowledges the deceptive nature of 'otherness' and discusses the process of abjection. The passage about Caesar's bloodthirsty army makes it clear that what makes the Parthian king the

21 Another example of this phenomenon is in the Claudia Quinta episode in the *Punica*, where female chastity is depicted as representative of the moral state of society. Sil. *Pun.* 17.1–47. For the definition and the value of *pudicitia*, see, e.g., Sen. *Dial.* 12.16.4, or Val. Max. 2.1.3, 7.1.1. For a thorough analysis of the moral and religious aspects of *pudicitia*, see Langlands 2006, 37–77.

22 We should note that with this message, Lucan deliberately challenges Caesar's own account of his role in the civil war. In the *Bellum Civile*, Caesar consistently represents himself as *defensor rei publicae* (see, e.g. Caes., *BCiv* 1.5, 1.9, 1.32, 3.10) and as a liberator who defends the *patria* against Pompey's 'barbaric' troops. As Whittaker points out, Caesar's rhetoric deliberately constructs Pompey and his supporters as the Other in relation to the *res publica* (see, e.g., Caes. *BCiv* 1.6, 1.19.2, 1.27, 3.14). Whittaker 2011, 63–68.

Absolute Other is actually something that resides in the heart of the Roman citizen male, as well—‘otherness’ is circumstantial and easily exposed. However, Lucan seems to believe that instead of embracing and accepting these animalistic drives, one should practice Stoic self-control to banish them altogether. Cornelia is a perfect example of someone who does exactly that: her ‘feminine’ fear and vulnerability do not explode in a violent outburst, but are confined within the limits of language, logic and social norms. Caesar’s troops, on the contrary, have given in to the drives of sex and death, and revel in them. Intriguingly, in this equation, gender seems to make no great difference. In the *Pharsalia*, while women might in general be more susceptible to overwhelming emotions and more vulnerable to the pressure of the semiotic *chôra*, gender or sex alone does not determine how one turns out. The decision to devote oneself to the temporal order is made by each individual for him- or herself—that is true Roman-ness.

This idea clearly distinguishes Lucan’s civil war epic from Silius Italicus’ imperial epic. In book fifteen of the *Punica*, the poet takes up the theme of potential sexual violence, when the young Publius Cornelius Scipio is shown in Tarraco viewing the booty gained in the battle. Among the captured civilians, there is a virgin betrothed to the leader of the Spanish enemy tribe. Silius relates that upon seeing the girl, Scipio summoned her fiancé and, “was happy and delighted to give the girl (famous for her beauty) back to him, and the groom rejoiced in an untouched bride” (*hanc notam formae concessit laetus ovansque/indelibata gaudenti virgine donum*).²³ Obviously, the episode is all about highlighting Scipio’s virtuousness. In a speech that follows, the Roman warrior Laelius draws a comparison with the commander to the Greek heroes of the Trojan war, claiming that “you alone showed more respect to a barbarian girl than was shown to Apollo’s Trojan priestess” (*tibi barbara soli/sanctius Iliaca servata est Phoebade virgo*).²⁴ This is a reference to the rape of Cassandra, a story about *nefas* and about the downfall of epic heroism. Accordingly, Silius uses rape of a woman as a way of assessing male behaviour in war. The objectification of the female body is part of the discourse that defines the heroic code of action.

23 Sil. *Pun.* 15. 270–271.

24 Sil. *Pun.* 15.281–282. On Scipio’s *pietas* and his association with sexual continence in particular, see Tipping 2009, 201, 209; Tipping perceives in this episode reflections of Domitian’s familial *pietas* and his moral reform. See also Marks 2005a, 209–288, 237–242; Tipping 2010, 12–13. Asso likewise considers Scipio as the best possible model for Roman virtue in the *Punica*, the semi-divine son of Jupiter who, like Hercules, the comparative hero of the epic, “chooses the toils of virtue over the seductions of vice”. Asso 2009, 189.

When we compare this episode to Lucan's dealing with the theme in the *Pharsalia*, a distinct difference can be observed: whereas Lucan uses the foreshadowing of rape to imply the potential barbarism of Romans themselves, Silius uses it to stress the honour and the self-restraint that define a Roman leader and distinguish him from 'the others'. The Spanish maiden is different from Scipio in all respects; whereas he is Roman, she is foreign, whereas he is male, she is female, and whereas he is an active agent, she is a defenseless object. The dynamics of power between the two are clear; but instead of defining Roman-ness merely *in contrast* to the foreigners, Silius defines it in terms of behaviour *towards* them. When Scipio gives the bride back to the Spanish chief unspoiled, he renounces the violent form of imperial dominion, and by so doing redefines the Roman self-perception. Scipio's respectful treatment of the defeated enemy not only underlines his own virtuousness, but also epitomises the ideal of Roman imperial *clementia*.²⁵ It thus becomes an *exemplum* for both the internal and the external audiences to emulate and a model on which to fashion their Roman identity.

It is therefore clear that, while the foreshadowing of rape is recurrently utilised as a narrative element in war epic, the Roman poets' ways of dealing with the theme of gendered violence considerably differ from each other. Lucan challenges the dominant male focalisation of the genre and encourages the reader to identify with a female character, while also underlining the fluidity of the line that distinguishes *Romanitas* from barbarism. Silius, on the contrary, uses gender and ethnicity as complementary categories of otherness, and defines *Romanitas* in terms of behaviour towards the barbaric other. However, it is crucial to notice that in both epics, the Stoic ideal of the mastery of mind over body is evidently present. Both the *Pharsalia* and the *Punica* seem to suggest that banishing and renouncing the destructive animalistic drives that dwell in the human heart is not only something that one *can* do, but something that one's moral duty as a Roman requires one to aspire to do.

It can be argued that both Lucan's and Silius' ways of dealing with the theme reflect issues of concern to their contemporary societies. For Lucan, the fear of tyranny is aligned with the fear of the barbaric ravishing of female *pudicitia*.

25 Arguably, Laelius represents Scipio's *clementia* and his capacity for reason, logic and self-control as characteristics that distinguish the Romans from the others (even from the Homeric heroes) and thus appear to justify their imperial dominion. While shaping the idea of Roman-ness, it also strengthens the power dynamics between Rome and the rest of the world. On the particular definition of *clementia* as an imperial virtue, and on its relationship to *pietas*, see Ganiban 2007, 214–232; McNelis 2007, 163–174. For the significance of the concept for the *Thebaid* and the *Punica*, see also Ripoll 1998, 425–467.

Civil war works as a metaphorical narrative frame for the shattering of the collective psyche: there is no more need for barbarians, since the Romans themselves have become savages. Drunk with violence, they give their animalistic drives free rein, and destroy the defining virtues of their Roman-ness. For Silius, on the contrary, wartime rape serves the purpose of discussing issues of imperial ideology that were topical in the Flavian period. In an age that saw the violent repression of several provincial uprisings, the poet delivers an image of the Roman Empire as an all-encompassing, merciful ruler that is able to control its violent drives and abstain from unnecessary cruelty. In both historical contexts, the objectified and victimised female body becomes a fertile ground for a discussion of the human—and, in particular, the Roman—psyche.

2 The Victim's Viewpoint: Female Gaze and Epic Subjectivity

While women's fear for themselves—and especially, the fear of sexual violence—is clearly an established part of the epic tradition, an even more prominent feature is women's fear for others—that is, for the safety of their menfolk. Usually, when the women of Roman epic worry about the war, they worry about their husbands, brothers, fathers and sons. One of the most telling examples can be found in book eight of the *Aeneid*, where Virgil depicts Aeneas' Pallantian allies' departure for war:

*vota metu duplicant matres, propiusque periclo/it timor et maior Martis iam
apparet imago.—stant pavidae in muris matres oculisque sequuntur/pul-
veream nubem et fulgentis aere catervas./olli per dumos, qua proxima meta
viarum,/armati tendunt—.*

VERG. *Aen.* 8.556–557, 8.592–595

In alarm, mothers double their vows; fear draws near because of the danger, and the image of Mars now looms larger.—Mothers stand trembling on the walls, and follow with their eyes the cloud of dust and the troops shining with bronze. Through the undergrowth, where the goal of their journey is nearest, the armed men move forward—.

The women's vulnerability is made manifest in their immobility: they are incapable of acting, speaking or making any difference, and the trembling of their bodies is the only, averbal, form of communication that reveals their anxiety. The women's lack of both words and action marks them as outsiders not only to the symbolic order, but to the war and to the epic itself. The war narrative runs

past their eyes without involving them in its course. However, it is crucial to note that at the same time, the emphasis that the narrator puts on the mothers' anxious gaze, grants them some power in this narrative to which they remain marginal. The women's gaze directs the reader's attention to what they are seeing. It determines what the reader at this point will learn about the events. Furthermore, because the mothers' gaze is anxious and fearful, the episode is emotionally more charged and more full of pathos than it otherwise would be, if these events were described neutrally from the external narrator's viewpoint. Therefore, although it would be an overstatement to claim that these Virgilian *matres pavidae* enjoy textual subjectivity *per se*, their 'feminine' fear and anxiety are definitely used not only to colour the description of events, but also to invite the reader to relate to their suffering on an emotional level, albeit briefly and momentarily.

Virgil's way of utilising the female gaze as a narrative tool is recalled and remodeled by Statius, who builds on its pathos in book four of the *Thebaid*, when he depicts the Argive men leaving for the war:

*iamque suos circum pueri nuptaeque patresque/funduntur mixti summis-
que a postibus obstant./nec modus est lacrimis: rorant clipeique iubaeque/
triste salutantum, et cunctis dependet ab armis/suspiranda domus; galeis
iuvat oscula clausis/inserere amplexuque truces deducere conos./illi, quis
ferrum modo, quis mors ipsa placebat,/dant gemitus fractaeque labant sin-
gultibus irae./sic ubi forte viris longum super aequor ituris,/cum iam ad vela
noti et scisso redit ancora fundo,/haeret amica manus: certant innectere
collo/bracchia, manantesque oculos hinc oscula turbant,/hinc magni caligo
maris, tandemque relict/stant in rupe tamen; fugientia carbasa visu/dulce
sequi, patriosque dolent crebrescere ventos.*

STAT. *Theb.* 4.16–30

And now children and wives and fathers, all mixed together, flock around their own men, blocking their way to the outer doorways. There is no limit to tears. Shields and crests are sprinkled with tears as they utter sad goodbyes, and to every set of arms clings a household to be sighed for. They wish to plant kisses through the visors of closed helmets, and to pull down fierce crests with their embrace. Those who just now rejoiced in the thought of the sword, in the thought of death itself, utter moans: their broken anger collapses in sobs. Thus, when men are about to go far overseas, when the wind is in the sails and the anchor returns from the ploughed seafloor, a loving woman clings to them. They struggle to wrap their arms around a neck, their flowing eyes are blurred by kisses and by

the great sea's mist. And, at last abandoned, they nevertheless stand on a cliff; it is sweet to follow the fleeing sail with their gaze, and they grieve that their country's winds grow stronger.

By reinventing the elegiac *relicta* theme—a literary topos about deserted women who are left behind waiting on the shore—the poet adds a touch of sentimental pathos to his description of the events.²⁶ The emphasised significance of the female gaze and the fog that blocks the view from unhappy eyes also strongly recall the Virgilian model. In this Statian simile, too, the women who are left behind stand motionless; they are simultaneously active viewers and passive, petrified victims. While they are marginalised as outsiders to the war, at the same time their viewpoint is utilised to construct a subject position for the reader.

In Statius' version of the scene, however, the victims' Stoic self-discipline is not as strong as in the Virgilian model. Whereas in the passage from the *Aeneid*, the semiotic *chôra* could be observed only in the women's lack of words and in the trembling of their bodies, in the *Thebaid*, their desperation breaks out in a more powerful manner: we are told that "there is no limit to tears" (*nec modus est lacrimis*). It would seem that while a certain degree of distress at the sight of the loved ones' departure for war might be understandable, here the family members' uncontrolled weeping crosses the line of appropriate behaviour regulated by social norms—much like Amata's fury discussed in the previous chapter, anger that was technically justified but out of control and *sine more*.

What seems important is that, in the *Thebaid*, this emotional breakdown is not something that would mark women alone: *pueri nuptaeque patresque* makes very clear that it is the entire family—all those who are not capable of taking up arms themselves—who lose control of themselves and let the fear and anxiety get the better of them. Moreover, this emotional recklessness

26 As Skinner points out, this literary tradition was presumably strongly built on the lost episode of Callimachus' *Aetia*. Skinner 1997, 145. Catullus' hexameter poem 64 could be considered a starting point to the tradition in Roman poetry—his depiction of Ariadne's abandonment by Theseus is an episode that appears to have greatly influenced other Roman poets later on. In the development of the topos, great credit is also due to Ovid, who designed the *Heroides* as a whole around the *relicta* theme—his influence can be clearly observed in the later epic repetitions of the topos. In the surviving Roman war-centred epic, Dido's abandonment by Aeneas is the first episode where water provides a barrier between the man who leaves and the woman who is left behind. Virgil's combination of tragic, elegiac and epic elements in this episode was highly influential on his epic successors. For further analysis of the *relicta* theme, see Bessone 2002, Fulkerson 2005.

spreads like a wildfire in the city, and contaminates even those who should be the most devoted servants of the temporal order: the departing warriors themselves. The narrator states that “those who just now rejoiced in the thought of the sword, in the thought of death itself, utter moans: their broken anger collapses in sobs” (*illi, quis ferrum modo, quis mors ipsa placebat, / dant gemitus fractaeque labant singultibus irae*). The warlike anger, *ira*, which is the fuel for heroic deeds and can be harnessed to serve society’s interests, is replaced by a more private and uncontrollable emotional turmoil. Unable to speak, the soldiers now engage in bodily, semiotic communication: indistinct moaning and wailing. At the moment of desperation that is beyond words, this is the one way in which they *can* communicate with their loved ones who are in the same state of mind.

Naturally, this kind of behaviour conflicts drastically with the so-called ‘heroic drive’ of the epic. It is interrupted abruptly when the soldiers are swept off by the war preparations, and the families are left behind, never to be mentioned again. However, the emotional turmoil has already done its job: the passage has powerfully affected the reader’s view and understanding of the events, inviting him to relate to the private suffering of these people and to judge the war as *nefas*. Importantly, it is not only women who are employed to deliver the message about the private costs of war—the fear and anxiety that are expressed in indistinct sobs are now something that mark the epic warriors themselves. The juxtaposition of genders, often argued to be the distinguishing feature of war epic, is temporarily dissolved, as the fear of war reduces the Argives as a whole into babbling infants.

These episodes challenge the idea of the dominant male vantage point of war epic, and demonstrate how the construction of subject positions in the genre is by no means a simple matter. The suffering, scared women are depicted as the internal audience of the narrative, whose viewpoint guides and determines that of the external audience. Intriguingly, this female vantage point temporarily alienates and removes the reader from the war narrative, making him ‘an outsider’ similar to the gazing women. While the war supposedly moves on in the centre stage of the story, the reader momentarily remains on the margins of the narrative with the distressed women, helpless and petrified. These episodes thus show that marginalisation and subjectivity are not necessarily mutually exclusive phenomena in war epic.

With their emphasis on the narrative significance of the female gaze, these passages from the *Aeneid* and the *Thebaid* recall a specific feature of Graeco-Roman literary tradition: *teikhoskopia*. This is a scene where the female gaze, female fear and the female vantage point are closely entwined. The earliest epic model is in book three of the *Iliad*, where Helen and Priam gaze at the

Greek heroes from their position on the top of the walls of Troy.²⁷ In Roman epic, one can find several variants of this scene; one of the best examples is in the *Thebaid*, where Statius depicts Antigone on the top of the Theban wall. She is accompanied by an aged slave, Phorbos, who points some of the Argive warriors out to her.²⁸ It is noteworthy that while Antigone is free to observe the heroes, she herself is hidden from sight:

Turre procul sola nondum concessa videri/Antigone populis teneras defenditur atra/veste genas—.

STAT. *Theb.* 7.243–245

Far away on a tower, lonely Antigone, whom the people are not yet allowed to see, covers her tender cheeks with a black cloth.

Augoustakis perceptively points out that in the *Thebaid*, Antigone gradually moves from the private sphere to the public—from the protected domestic space into the world of war.²⁹ In this process, *teikhoskopia* marks the beginning. For the first time, Antigone engages in an interaction with the surrounding world of war; however, the fact that she is protected from the gaze of others still marks her as an outsider to the events of the battlefield. In particular, it would appear that Antigone's ignorance about all matters political increases her fear with regard to the upcoming war. She is *rudis Antigone*,³⁰ and her anxiety about it is clearly audible in her words:

spesne obstatura Pelasgis/haec vexilla, pater? Pelopis descendere totas/audimus gentes: dic, o precor, extera regum/agmina—.

STAT. *Theb.* 7.247–250

Father, is there hope that these troops can withstand the Pelasgi? We hear that all of the Pelops' races are marching down on us—tell me, I pray, of the foreign troops of the kings.

27 Hom. *Il.* 3.161–242. For comparative episodes in other literary genres, see, e.g., Tarpeia in Prop. 4.4, Scylla in Ov. *Met.* 8, and Antigone in Eur. *Phoen.* 88–201. On Statius' combination of literary models, see Vessey 1973, 205–209.

28 As Lovatt notes, Statius reverses the roles of the Homeric model, where Helen is the one who presents the Greek warriors to Priam. Lovatt 2006, 61.

29 Augoustakis 2010, 68–70.

30 Stat. *Theb.* 7.253.

Antigone is starved for information and insight, and wants to become an insider to the matters of war at hand. Moreover, her desire for knowledge is not kindled merely by a fascination of the unknown, but more importantly, by her anxiety about her own chances of survival. Ignorant as she is, Antigone knows how war works: she knows that if Thebes is overthrown, these strangers will sack the city and wreck her protected domestic sphere.³¹ Like the city, she will be forced to let go of her identity and either perish or adapt to that of the conqueror. Antigone, therefore, is simultaneously the focaliser of the episode, whose viewpoint determines that of the reader's, and the victimised object. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that she clearly considers *herself* the subject of the story. For her, the foreign troops are faceless strangers, simultaneously fascinating and terrifying in their difference—the domestic female sphere is the domain of the Self, and the world of war represents the Other. Momentarily, the reader is forced to see the situation from another viewpoint, through Antigone's eyes.

An even more powerful example of the same theme can be found in another Flavian epic, Valerius Flaccus' *Argonautica*. In book six, the narrator describes how Medea falls in love with Jason when watching him in battle. The striking element in this episode, compared to Statius' *teikhoskopia* scene, is that the entwining of gender and ethnicity as complementary categories of otherness is an element that has greater significance in Valerius Flaccus' version. This can be explained by the protagonist of the episode: in many ways, Medea is the ultimate other of the Graeco-Roman literary tradition, a barbaric witch-woman who embodies the drives of sex and murder and the threatening world of animalism.³² In the whole of the Graeco-Roman mythological canon, there is no better manifestation of abjection than the story of Medea's slaughter of her children—it is a story that exemplifies the psychological need to construct 'an other' and to explain away the 'evil' in human nature as something that is characteristic of that other. Although the *Argonautica* finds Medea at an early stage of her life, the darkness of her psyche is constantly implied, as if to emphasise that it is an innate part of her being as a barbaric witch-woman (and not a sum of unexpected events and unbearable consequences that might bring out the darkness in any of us).

Considering this rather coherent representation of Medea as the abject other in the *Argonautica*, it is somewhat surprising to see her, in book six, suddenly becoming the focaliser whose experience determines the reader's view-

31 See Augoustakis' discussion of the episode in Augoustakis 2013, 165–166.

32 Vessey 1973, 243.

point. At first, Medea only reluctantly joins the other Colchian women who are standing fear-stricken on the top of the wall, watching the battle between the Argonauts and the Colchians. The external narrator relates that

—ast illae murorum extrema capessunt/defixaeque virum lituumque fragoribus horrent,/quales instanti nimborum frigore maestae/succedunt ramis haerentque pavore volucres.

VAL. FLACC. *Arg.* 6.503–506

—but they, pursuing the very edge of the walls, are petrified with fear at the uproar of men and trumpets. Like birds, distraught at the chill descending with storm-clouds, mount to the branches and cling to them, frightened.

Very much like the Virgilian *matres pavidae*, the women are depicted as paralysed by fear—not speaking, acting, or reacting in any way, they remain outsiders to the war narrative that is taking place before their eyes. Very soon, however, Medea’s eyes are drawn to Jason, who is fighting amongst the others, and her eager gaze begins to follow him across the battlefield.³³ Infatuated as she is with the hero, Medea quickly finds herself experiencing fear for him:

At regina virum (neque enim deus amovet ignem)/persequitur lustrans oculisque ardentibus haeret;/et iam laeta minus praesentis imagine pugnae/castigatque metus et quas alit inscia curas—.

VAL. FLACC. *Arg.* 6.657–660

But the royal lady pursues the man with a wandering gaze (for the god does not curb the fire), and clings to him with burning eyes; and now she takes less joy in the battle-scene before her, and scolds her fear and the worries that she nurses, not knowing why—.

The awakening of Medea’s desire—allegorised as all-consuming fire—is as strange an experience to her as is her sudden fear for Jason’s safety. These drives are rising simultaneously in her body and fuelling each other as they do. What feeds the fire is that Medea’s intense gaze seems to be answered by its object: “there fierce Jason, and no one else, met the poor woman’s eyes” (*saevus ibi*

33 Val. Flac. *Argon.* 6.575–586.

miseræ solusque occurrit Iason).³⁴ Lovatt perceptively observes that the interaction between Medea and Jason contains warlike and military overtones: The meeting of their eyes recalls a clash between two warriors in battle, and the lines *regina virum—persequitur lustrans oculisque ardentibus haeret* depicts Medea as pursuing Jason in battle, just as a warrior pursues the enemy.³⁵ Moreover, it is noteworthy that while Medea pursues Jason with her fearful, desiring gaze, she herself is made vulnerable by what she sees.³⁶ This means that both participants in this interaction are victimised by Medea's gaze and her fear—a fear that is so strong that it contains violent, warlike overtones.

Because fear can be considered *the* defining female emotion in war epic, Medea's intense fear has sometimes been argued to be a matter that *per se* marginalises her and marks her as an outsider to the war narrative. Lovatt has suggested that Medea's strong identification with Jason is undermined by her dominating 'female perspective'; she states that "[t]he dangers inspire him to rejoice but her to fear, and she becomes a woman in the midst of an epic battle".³⁷ However, it is crucial to notice that it is only *after* stressing Medea's fear that the poet shows her identifying with Jason. I would suggest that instead of preventing the assimilation of the two, Medea's fear is the very element that causes it. It evokes in her such strong empathy that it makes her imagine herself in Jason's place, engaging with the events of the combat. When Medea watches Jason in battle, not only does she see him, but her intense gaze makes it possible for her to *become one* with him. She is depicted as running alongside him, and whenever he is attacked, she feels herself wounded.³⁸

Thus, surprisingly, Medea's female fear—which ought to mark her as the outsider to the battle narrative—in effect enables her to identify with the man for whose safety she fears. The blurring of the line that separates the male,

34 Val. Flac. *Argon.* 6.586.

35 Lovatt 2006, 70.

36 As Bartsch points out, in the Graeco-Roman literary and philosophical traditions, there were varying views on the active and the passive aspects of gaze, its holder and its object. Bartsch classifies these different views in five categories: the intromission and the extramission schools, as well as the Platonic, the Aristotelic and the Stoic schools. According to a theory supported, for instance, by Lucretius, the holder of the (eroticised) gaze is in fact to be considered the vulnerable party. (Lucr. 4.1030–1036, 4.1045–1056). Thus, the gaze can simultaneously provide the viewer with a violating power over the viewed *and vice versa*. Bartsch 2006, 59, 62–66, 72–73, 75–77, 92–93. Arguably, this is what happens in the *teikhoskopia* scene in the *Argonautica*, when Medea feels wounded and vulnerable.

37 Lovatt 2006, 67–73, discussing 6.545–549. A similar way of reading is applied to the *Thebaid* by Bernstein, in Bernstein 2008, 85–86.

38 Val. Flac. *Argon.* 6.601, 6.683–685.

mobile hero of the epic from the Absolute Other is achieved through a powerful female focalisation that invites the reader to see the events through Medea's eyes. In Valerius Flaccus' depiction of Medea's gaze, one can observe how the non-verbal, petrifying fear, instead of marginalising the woman, might sometimes incorporate her into the male world of war.

3 Marginal Mothers? The Threatening Overtones of Maternal Fear

One of the most classic and recognisable epic archetypes is the figure of an anxious mother: a fearful character struggling with her son's entry into the temporal scene and with his adopting of a warrior identity. This archetype is strongly built on literary models drawn from both Homeric epic and Athenian tragedy—Homer's Hecuba and Euripides' Jocasta are the most obvious examples.³⁹ What is distinctive of maternal fear and anxiety in Roman war epic, then, is that they are phenomena that penetrate the celestial as well as the earthly sphere. The mother's fear is not something that concerns mortal women alone; it also plays a prominent role in the actions of the gods. Venus in the *Aeneid* is the ultimate concerned mother in the genre, and she has greatly influenced the many variants of the theme in Roman war epic. Heinze points out the differences between Virgilian Venus and Homeric Aphrodite, stressing that the Roman poet represents the goddess as considerably more human and relatable, a character who experiences feelings of fear, grief and worry.⁴⁰ Indeed, Virgil's Venus is first and foremost a mother, and all her actions can be interpreted as deriving from that. Throughout the *Aeneid*, she personally guides her son and pleads to other gods to win their protection for him, too.⁴¹ In these encounters, Venus repeatedly stresses family relations in general, and her devotion to her son in particular. In her speech to Jupiter in book one, she addresses the god as *genitor*, thus characterising her plea as a daughter's request to her father.⁴² She also refers to her son as *meus Aeneas*, and to the Trojans as *tua progenies*—rhetoric that attempts to strengthen the familial link between Aeneas' line and Jupiter himself.⁴³ Venus does all she can to exploit her familial

39 See e.g. Eur. *Phoen.* 1217–1283; Hom. *Il.* 77–89. Hecuba is a prominent character in Euripides' *Hecuba* and *Troades*, but since these plays depict the time after the fall of Troy, her motherly fear does not feature in them in the way it does in the *Iliad*.

40 Heinze 1903, 285–286.

41 See, e.g., Verg. *Aen.* 1.314–417, 2.587–623.

42 *quae te, genitor, sententia vertit?* Verg. *Aen.* 1.237.

43 Verg. *Aen.* 1.230, 1.250.

position, reminding the almighty father that the people in question are not just anybody, but his *own* grandchildren.

Besides protecting Aeneas from afar, Venus takes a more straightforward approach to war. In book eight, when the Latin war has broken out, we read that her mother's heart is shaken by fear. She is "the frightened mother, her mind troubled (and scarcely without reason) by the Laurentine threats and the vigorous uprising" (*haud animo nequiquam exterrita mater/Laurentumque minis et duro mota tumultu*).⁴⁴ Because she is no ordinary mother who must be content with watching by as the war narrative moves on, Venus takes action. To relieve her concerns, she seeks help from Vulcan, asking him to forge armour for Aeneas to wear in battle.⁴⁵ Once again, the goddess strongly relates to Aeneas, stating that the current hostilities are directed against herself and her family, *in me excidiumque meorum*.⁴⁶ The point is stressed further when she emphasises that she is asking for help as a mother, on behalf of her son (*arma rogo, genetrix nato*).⁴⁷ These final words reveal how Venus considers her own role in terms of the war: far from being a distant divine power, she is a worried mother neck-deep in the conflict. Jupiter's promise to take care of Aeneas is not enough for her, and her motherly fear makes her seek protection from both her husband and her father.

It is clear that the Virgilian Venus is located firmly in the celestial sphere; she relies on the Olympic order and hence constitutes a strong antithesis to Juno, who does not shrink from meddling with the underworld. Virgil's Venus, in fact, appears as a prime example of a woman absorbed into the logic of the temporal scene, estranged from the semiotic *chôra* and loyal to the mechanisms of a hierarchic patriarchal system—as the above-mentioned episodes show, her primary tactic is convincing either her father or her husband to do her bidding.⁴⁸ By doing so, Venus strongly resembles the archetype of a Roman elite matron from the late Republican period: politically active, yet not an overly threatening figure to the male-dominated social order. While the motherly con-

44 Verg. *Aen.* 8.370–371.

45 Once again, she emphasises the special relationship between herself and the addressee by addressing Vulcan as *carissime coniunx*, and by reminding him that she is entitled to the same favour that he had earlier granted to other (less significant) women. *carissime coniunx*, 8.377; *te filia Nerei, / te potuit lacrimis Tithonia flectere coniunx*, 8.383–384. Venus is referring to Thetis, mother of Achilles, and to Aurora, mother of Memnon. For Thetis, see Hom. *Il.* 18.428; for Aurora, see Verg. *Aen.* 1.489.

46 Verg. *Aen.* 8.386.

47 Verg. *Aen.* 8.383.

48 The notable exception is the episode in *Aeneid* 4, where Venus temporarily joins forces with Juno to unite Dido and Aeneas. Verg. *Aen.* 4.90–128.

cern resides strongly in her heart, Venus is able to keep these feelings in check and to channel them into productive action. She does what she can for her son, but she is not driven out of her mind by worry, nor does she ever resort to frantic fury.

The same cannot be said for everyone. Although Virgil's Venus is a powerful model for the other anxious mothers in Roman war epic, she also differs dramatically from most of them, thanks to her calm restraint and her respect for the patriarchal order. Perhaps the most intriguing point of comparison can be found in Statius' *Achilleid*, where the distressed mother in question is Thetis, Achilles' mother. She is divine, like Venus, but unlike her Virgilian model, her divinity does not seem to grant her much power within the narrative. The explanation for this is simple enough: while Venus' endeavours are firmly in keeping with the teleological, heroic drive of Virgil's epic, Thetis, on the contrary, is doomed to wage a futile war against the Homeric backstory, and against the Trojan war that is on the way. Whereas Virgil's Venus relieves her motherly anxiety by trying to advance her son's military endeavours, Statius' Thetis, on the contrary, does everything in her power to stop Achilles from getting involved with the war.⁴⁹ First, she pleads to Neptune, begging him to sink the Dardan fleet on its way to Troy. Obviously, the telos of Statius' epic requires that the plea be turned down, and therefore, Thetis' attempt to try on the role of the Virgilian Venus fails miserably before the first hundred lines of the poem are over.⁵⁰ She then decides to take matters into her own hands, and goes to Achilles' tutor Chiron, with a plan to kidnap her son for his safe-keeping. Thetis' speech to Chiron reveals the anxiety of a mother unable to protect her son from the horrors of war:

*non merito trepidus sopor atraque matri/signa deum et magnos utinam
mentita timores?/namque modo infensos utero mihi contuor enses,/nunc
planctu livere manus, modo in ubera saevas/ire feras; saepe ipsa—nefas!—
sub inania natum/Tartara et ad Stygios iterum fero mergere fontes.*

STAT. *Achil.* 1.129–134

Do I not have a good reason for my anxious sleep, for the dark signs from the gods that evoke fears in a mother (would that they were lies!)? For indeed, now I see swords threatening my womb, now my hands bruised with mourning, now wild beasts going at my breasts. Often I myself (O

49 Stat. *Achil.* 1.20–396.

50 For further discussion, see Kozák 2013, 250–255.

horror!) am bearing my son down to the empty Tartarus, to dip him a second time in the waters of the Styx.

Throughout the *Achilleid*, Thetis acts in a defensive manner, stressing her status as the rightful mother of her son. She begins her speech to Chiron with aggressive *non merito*, although he has never questioned her reasons or her right to fear. Likewise, in her earlier plea to Neptune, Thetis represents her maternal fear as an irrevocable law of nature: “let it be my divine right to fear for my son” (*fas sit pro nato timuisse mihi*).⁵¹ For one reason or the other—perhaps having been absent for most of Achilles’ childhood—Thetis appears insecure about meddling with her son’s life, and acts defensively from the very beginning. Of course, this defensive attitude could also be read as a manifestation of a rising anger and frustration at being so obviously marginalised by the epic narrative. In particular, Thetis’ repetitive underlining of her maternal right resembles Amata’s rhetoric in *Aeneid* 7. It seems that the anger of epic women, when they know their voices are not getting heard or are not cared about, is often crystallised in their furious demands for their maternal—hence, ‘natural’—rights.

Heslin and Kozák have analysed Thetis’ speeches in the *Achilleid*, pointing out the weaknesses of her rhetorical performance and her repetitive failures to persuade her addressees.⁵² According to Heslin, Thetis’ failures demonstrate how epic speech is male by nature—its rhetoric and style are designed to match the social role of a military man, which is why epic women often lack credibility and fail to convince.⁵³ This reading is an excellent expression of the deep-rooted thinking according to which, in Roman epic, logic and language are the male domain, whereas women are illogical, irreversibly tied up with their emotions, and prisoners in their bodies. While in general, I am inclined to question this view—and will do so in more detail in chapter six—in this case, it appears to hold true. Admittedly, Thetis seems to have trouble in getting her point through to the listener—or to the reader—precisely because her pleas lack logical argumentation of any kind, and mostly revolve around her personal suffering. The above-mentioned passage, for instance, is rich in vivid imagery describing the horrors that reside in her heart. The pain that she feels is expressed with the help of extremely violent metaphors that revolve

51 Stat. *Achil.* 1.68–69.

52 Heslin 2005, 110–111, 131–134; Kozák 2013, 250–255.

53 Heslin analyses the speeches of Thetis in the *Achilleid* and those of Venus in the *Thebaid*, concluding that any rhetorical tools or psychological insight that might advance the goals of these goddesses are out of their reach. Heslin 2005, 131–134. See also Hardie 2012, 7; von Albrecht 1999, 283–284; Fuhrer 2010, 67–72, 75–77.

around her reproductive organs: Thetis describes her womb as threatened by swords, and her breasts as torn by beasts. Therefore, although it is a fairly well-structured speech, it is not exactly a triumph of logic. Rather, it consists only of deep dark images from her subconscious put into words. The semiotic modality of communication is dominant in Thetis' self-expression, and this is why her speeches fail: one cannot convincingly argue on the basis of vague fears that derive from the body. The conflict between the role that she is trying to play (the Virgilian Venus immersed in the logic of the temporal scene) and the essence of her being (uncontrollable despair and anxiety) is disturbing to the reader.

In effect, Thetis' turbulent emotions are so overwhelming that she *herself* seems to be disturbed by them and has difficulties in grasping their 'meaning': "O this pain! O fears that came too late to a mother's heart!" (*o dolor, o seri materno in corde timores!*), she exclaims in confusion.⁵⁴ Maternal fear appears to Thetis as a strange phenomenon that she cannot properly understand, presumably because of her distant relationship with the son she barely ever sees.⁵⁵ All of the dark dreams she relates—the swords piercing her womb and the beasts attacking her breasts—are about the bodily experience of motherhood: it is as if she was only now becoming aware of these physical tokens of her motherhood, only now hearing the call of the womb that she had repressed ever since her son was born.

The strange, distant relationship between the mother and the son is made evident in the scene where Achilles enters the cave and the two see each other for the first time in Statius' epic:

Figit gelidus Nereida pallor:/ille aderat multo sudore et pulvere maior,/et tamen arma inter festinatosque labores/dulcis adhuc visu—necdum prima nova lanugine vertitur aetas,/tranquillaequae faces oculis et plurima vultu/mater inest—. [F]etam Pholoës sub rupe leaenam/perculerat ferro vacuisque reliquerat antris/ipsam, sed catulos apportat et incitat ungues./quos tamen, ut fido genetrix in limine visa est,/abicit exceptamque avidis circumlingat ulnis,/iam gravis amplexu iamque aequus vertice matri.

STAT. *Ach.* 1.158–161, 1.163–165, 1.168–173

Icy paleness petrifies the Nereid: he was there, much sweat and dust made him seem bigger, and yet, in the midst of weapons and rushed toils, he

54 Stat. *Achil.* 1.42.

55 Konstan briefly addresses this issue, comparing Statius' representation of Thetis to that of Homer's. Konstan 1997, 86–87.

was still a sweet sight.—Nor yet was his first youth changing with new down, the fire in his eyes was calm and in his face, there was much of his mother—[H]e had struck down with a sword a pregnant lioness under Pholoë's rock and left her in the empty cave, but the cubs he had brought home and was playing with their claws. However, when he sees his mother standing on the dependable threshold, he casts them aside and, having captured her in his arms, envelops her with eager arms, already heavy with his embrace and now of the same height as his mother.

The episode is strange in its threatening overtones and in the imagery that mixes affection with violence. First of all, why is Thetis taken by *gelidus pallor* when she sees her son enter? Is it because the fear that she feels for his safety becomes more tangible at the sight of the boy? Or is it, as Heslin has suggested, because the mother is frightened by the contrast between Achilles' boyish appearance and the new manliness that he has acquired?⁵⁶ Whatever the reason may be, it is clear that Thetis is taken aback by her son's appearance, which is simultaneously familiar and strange—simultaneously representing the self and the other. It is explicitly stated that Achilles is going through a physical transformation, becoming bigger and stronger. On the other hand, we are told that “much of his mother” still remains in his looks. It would seem likely that the atmosphere of confusion and the looming threat that mark the passage concern this conflation of sameness and otherness. On the one hand, seeing the boy who so much resembles herself reminds Thetis of her motherhood and of the pre-Oedipal symbiosis with this child with whom she used to be of one flesh. On the other hand, the aspects of Achilles that represent the other to her—his obvious manliness, and his nearly grown-up physique—confuse the nymph and underline the fact that the bond between them has been broken. Seeing Achilles, therefore, reveals to Thetis her own position as an abjected (m)other. Since the child is no longer in her womb, her power to protect him is limited.

It is important to notice that in this passage, Thetis, who is otherwise an extremely marginalised character in Statius' epic, suddenly becomes the focaliser. It is *she* whose viewpoint the episode delivers, it is through *her* eyes that the reader sees Achilles for the first time, and it is against *her* subjectivity that the hero of the epic is defined as the threatening other. When Achilles appears, Thetis' motherhood, a topic that she has been incessantly talking about, to no

56 Heslin 2005, 182.

avail, suddenly becomes real and experienced—and, surprisingly, it grants her a position as the identifiable focaliser of the narrative.

The powerful impact of this is strengthened by the fact that both Achilles and Thetis seem to have repressed their pre-Oedipal coexistence successfully up to this point. As Achilles later relates, he had been living with his foster-father Chiron ever since he was “still crawling”—apparently, for as long as he can remember. He continues, relating that

—*non ullos ex more cibos hausisse nec almis/uberibus satiasset famem, sed spissa leonum/viscera semianimisque lupae traxisse medullas.*

STAT. *Ach.* 2.98–100

—they say that I ate no food of the usual kind, and never sated my hunger on nourishing breasts, but gnawed the tough entrails of lions and the marrow of the half-dead she-wolf.

The explicit idea that he never received breastmilk, not even that of animals, underlines the lack of a physical mother-child bond, and creates an impression of a pre-Oedipal stage somehow tragically interrupted or skipped over. This lack, in fact, appears to have become the defining element of Achilles' personality and carved into his identity—as Barchiesi points out, the name Achilles possibly derives from *a-cheilos*, “no-lips”, or “no-suckling”.⁵⁷ Studied against this background, the moment when Thetis and Achilles see each other in Chiron's cave is a moment of painful revelation to both of them. The foundations of the self waver, when they both see someone with whom they used to be one.

The mixture of affectionate gestures and violent implications in the episode could perhaps be explained by this confusion. The first things that Thetis notices about Achilles is his size and that he carries weapons—yet, in the same sentence we are told that despite these threatening features, he is still “a sweet sight” (*dulcis adhuc visu*). When Achilles rushes to embrace his mother, his arms are described as “eager” or “greedy” (*avidis circumlingat ulnis*), and he himself as “powerful” or “heavy” in his embrace (*gravis amplexu*). It is difficult to avoid the impression that Achilles' embrace might be hurting Thetis, or that at least she is worried that it might. The reader is reminded of Thetis' rape by Peleus, an event that led to her becoming a mother in the first place. Arguably, when Thetis' and Achilles' bodies envelop each other for the first time since

57 Barchiesi 2005, 56. See Apollodorus *Bibl.* 3.13.6.

their separation a long time ago, this memory comes back to the mother—it seems as if love and violence, birth and death are indistinguishable in this episode.

Heslin has brilliantly discussed the curious mention of the lion cubs that Achilles is carrying in his arms, suggesting that this intensifies the violent charge of the episode. He observes an assimilation between the lions and the human protagonists: like the cubs whose mother he has killed, Achilles is gaining ferocious strength and becoming both violent and dangerous. Likewise, like the lioness, Thetis feels vulnerable and powerless to protect her son. Moreover, the potential violence *by Achilles against Thetis* also seems to be clearly implied. The assimilation between Achilles and the lion cubs brings to mind a detail from Thetis' dream where she imagines her breasts attacked by wild beasts. Achilles, who has never suckled at her mother's breasts, therefore does so in this perverted and violent re-enactment of their symbiotic coexistence. It seems that the mother and the son are trying to reconnect with the pre-Oedipal stage that they both have repressed, but because it is far too late for that, the attempt results in a threatening innuendo that carries stronger connotations of death than of birth. Strangers to each other, they both imagine one another as wild beasts, as representatives of animals and animalism: in short, as the abject other.

Heslin suggests that when Thetis kidnaps Achilles and dresses him up as a girl in order to hide him at Scyros, she is, in a sense, becoming a father figure to the boy, engaging in a reverse *toga virilis* ceremony and "creating him in her own image".⁵⁸ According to his reading, Thetis is attempting here to fill a void in Achilles' life, to become 'an adoptive father' and the identifiable other to the boy. While a symbolic initiation rite can indeed be observed in the episode, I am more inclined to agree with Rimell, who argues that Thetis' abduction of Achilles is not only "a repetition and rewriting of her own rape by Peleus", but also an attempt to "keep her son inside her own body, or to rebirth him".⁵⁹ It seems that instead of trying to act as the Name-of-the-Father, the identifiable other to Achilles, Thetis is trying to recreate the sameness of the pre-Oedipal stage. After seeing Achilles in Chiron's cave, she has powerfully felt her motherhood, and been convinced that it is the temporal scene that poses a threat to her child. All of Thetis' actions are an attempt to prevent Achilles' entrance into that scene and into political affairs. The 'feminine sphere' that Scyros represents is a womb-like receptacle in which Thetis tries to encage Achilles, in

58 Heslin 2005, 128–129, 191, 291–292.

59 Rimell 2015, 262–270.

order to keep him safe, and to prevent him from turning into the threatening other. Ultimately, she is attempting to rekindle the symbiotic connection that neither of them appreciated when it was there.

This, of course, is an impossible mission, and its inevitable failure robs Thetis of the narrative power that her motherly fear momentarily granted her. In many ways, Statius' Thetis is an antithesis to Virgil's Venus: she is a passionate opponent of the temporal scene and the symbolic order, powerfully in touch with her bodily drives, and ultimately doomed to be marginalised by the epic narrative. Whereas Venus' motherly fear is channeled into action that does not challenge the telos of the epic or the Olympic hierarchy, Thetis' anxiety escapes reason and resonates in her body, causing her to try to rewrite one of the master narratives of classical mythology: the Trojan war.

The anxious mother who struggles to come to terms with her motherhood is a repetitive figure in Statius' epic. Another variant of this archetype can be found in the *Thebaid*, where the poet introduces Atalanta, the famous Amazon of classical mythology and mother of the young Parthenopaeus.⁶⁰ In book nine, Parthenopaeus joins the forces of the Seven against Thebes and rides off to war despite his mother's pleas—in this sense, the composition is parallel to the situation in the *Achilleid*. Unlike Thetis, however, Atalanta accepts her fate and lets her son go. After his departure, the external narrator depicts the mother waiting anxiously, tormented by nightmares: the bad omens regarding her son's fate "arouse the mother in all her heart" (*totoque erexit pectore matrem*).⁶¹

The similarities between Thetis in the *Achilleid* and Atalanta in the *Thebaid* are many and obvious. For neither of them was motherhood ever a choice; rather, it was a result of sexual violence. And like Thetis the water nymph, Atalanta the Amazon never seems to have adopted the traditionally nurturing role of a mother that society expects of a woman. Instead, she has led a most unconventional life dedicated to hunting in the wilderness. It is only now that her son is entering the world of war and offering his life in the service of the temporal order, that Atalanta painfully feels the connection to him. In one of her nightmares, we are told, she has seen "the quiver sliding from her shoulders, and her own images and familiar likenesses destroyed by fire" (*ex umeris fluxisse pharetras, / effigiesque suas simulacraque nota cremari*).⁶² The anxious mother relates this to the destruction that she is convinced will be the fate of her son, and this act of identifying temporarily dissolves all difference between the two: in her subconscious, Atalanta imagines herself and her son as one being again.

60 Stat. *Theb.* 4.309–344.

61 Stat. *Theb.* 9.570–582, 9.584.

62 Stat. *Theb.* 9.581–582.

Like Thetis in the *Achilleid*, she is fantasising about the pre-Oedipal stage of the *chôra*: the stage that she may not have enjoyed when it was reality, but that she now, upon her son's entry into the temporal scene, would like to return to.

As humans in war epic are wont to do, Atalanta turns to her protective deity, Diana, and prays for help:

*hunc mihi (quid trepidae noctes somnusque minantur?)/hunc, precor,
audaci qui nunc ad proelia voto/heu nimium tibi fisus abit, da visere belli/
victorem, vel, si ampla peto, da visere tantum!—quod si vera sopor miserae
praesagia mittit,/per te maternos, mitis Dictynna, labores/fraternumque
decus, cunctis hunc fige sagittis/infelicem uterum; miserae sine funera mat-
ris/audiat ille prior!*

STAT. *Theb.* 9.622–625, 9.631–635

—him, I pray (what do the nervous nights and slumbers threaten?), him who now goes to battles with brave determination, trusting, alas, too much in you, let me see him victorious in war—or, if I ask too much, just let me see him at all!—But if sleep sends me true omens, by your mother's labours, gentle Dictynna, and by the glory of your brother, drive all your arrows through this miserable womb. May him hear first of the death of his poor mother.

Once again, motherhood comes across as a very physical experience. Atalanta wishes to perish together with her son—better yet, before him—in order to save herself from grief. The violence targeted at her womb—again, an element shared with Thetis in the *Achilleid*—metaphorically aims at *undoing* her motherhood, the cause of all her suffering. Once again, birth and death are very closely entwined in Statius' depiction of motherly anxiety. The sexual violence done to Atalanta is repeated in this self-destructive imagery, and the animalistic drives of sex and death get mixed and are charged through her dark dreams.

In a sense, Atalanta's transformation from an Amazon warrior into a fearful mother could be read as a transformation whereby she is incorporated into a more conventional gender system and into more conventional dynamics of war—after all, fearing for their sons is what mothers are supposed to do in war epic. However, I would argue that Atalanta's obvious discomfort with the mothering role disturbs this transformation, and results in a form of fear that is not relatable, but threatening, violent and self-destructive. Statius' epic is playing with the essentialist and the performative ideas of gender and motherhood: Atalanta's world is shaken by the 'call of the womb' and by her awakening to the biological realities of her motherhood. On the other hand, however, this

biological certainty is not sufficient: because she is unfamiliar with the social role of a mother, her fear turns into self-destructive anxiety.

Therefore, whereas Thetis' motherly fear momentarily granted her some narrative power and a vantage point, Atalanta's situation is quite different. In this episode, she quickly travels from one marginalised position to another, from the Amazon huntress to a self-destructive maenadic mother. In Kristevan terms, she is like a woman who goes from 'playing a superman' to playing the role of a recluse hysteric (in every possible sense of the word). When alone in the forest, praying for her own death and for the piercing of her womb, she has become one of the "others—more tuned in to their unconscious drives, [who] sullenly hold back—occasionally punctuated by some kind of outburst: a cry, a refusal".⁶³ Unlike Thetis, Atalanta does not actively go against the heroic drive of the epic. But in her aggressive, sullen anxiety and seclusion, she does question the purpose of it all.

In a way, Statius' Atalanta and Thetis complete each other, and together they deliver a rather threatening and gloomy idea of the darker side of motherhood. Their position as outsiders to the human community—one a divine water nymph, the other an Amazon huntress—marks them as different and marginal, out of reach of society's expectations. Then suddenly, when their sons reject the isolation in the periphery and choose to dedicate their lives to the temporal scene, the narrative demands that the mothers do the same. They, however, are tragically unable to do so, never having been trained in the socially prescribed role of a warrior's mother (or any kind of mother, for that matter). As a result, Thetis and Atalanta become figures of a kind of motherly fear that does not fit well with the heroic narrative, since it reveals the animalistic drives of the body and confuses caring anxiety with impending self-destruction. As Augoustakis has aptly put it, Statius' epic is characterised throughout by "the inability to carry on female lamentation within the boundaries of his epic poem".⁶⁴ In the light of these episodes, it seems evident that it is not only grief and lament that function this way in the *Thebaid* and in the *Achilleid*, but also fear and anxiety that do not find socially approved channels for their outburst. These mothers' experience of motherhood is exceedingly bodily, extreme and threatening to the norms that hold the patriarchal society together.

What makes this phenomenon even more intriguing is that it does not seem to be limited to Amazon warriors and rebellious nymphs—nor even to female characters in general. In Statius' epic, the non-verbal, bodily anxiety of

63 Kristeva 1974 (in Moi 1986, 155–156).

64 Augoustakis 2010, 29.

a mother is such a crucial theme that one can see reflections of it even in those whom one might expect to be the most devoted servants of the temporal scene: male, political leaders. As I have pointed out above, men playing female roles is not a rare phenomenon in Statius' epic: in the previous chapter, I discussed Oedipus' role as a warmongering Fury. Here, it is worth noting one example of a situation where the role of an anxious mother is played by a male character. In book ten of the *Thebaid*, Creon, the viceroy of Thebes, finds out that his son Menoeceus is demanded as a sacrificial victim in order to turn the luck of war.⁶⁵ Taken by instant panic, Creon refuses to accept the oracle, and does everything in his power to convince his son that the omens are false. The passage where the oracle is first uttered is descriptive: it shows how the father's entire demeanor changes in a heartbeat from that of a composed political leader into that of a terror-stricken anxious 'mother':

*Stabat fatidici prope saeva altaria vatis/maestus, adhuc patriae tantum
communia lugens/fata, Creon: grandem subiti cum fulminis ictum,/non
secus ac torta traiectus cuspide pectus,/accipit examinis sentitque Men-
oecea posci./monstrat enim suadetque timor; stupet anxius alto/corda metu
glaciante pater: Trinacria qualis/ora repercussum Libyco mare sumit ab
aestu./mox plenum Phoebos vatem et celerare iubentem,/nunc humilis
genua amplectens, nunc ora canentis,/nequiquam reticere rogat—.*

STAT. *Theb.* 10.616–626

Near the prophetic seer's cruel altar stood Creon. He was sad, but still mourning only the fates of his country and his community—then, he feels the mighty stroke of a sudden thunderbolt, just as though a flying lance had pierced his breast, when he learns of the council and hears that Menoeceus is demanded. Truly, fear guides and urges him on: deep terror freezes his heart and the anxious father stands stunned, just like the Trinacrian shore receiving the sea back from the Libyan surge. Then he in vain begs the seer, who is full of Phoebus and orders haste, to be silent, now humbly embracing his knees, now trying to silence his lips as he chants.

The beginning of the passage, where Creon is standing sad and motionless, already hints at his future role as a mourning mother. Like the Virgilian *matres pavidae* on the wall, he is a *stabat mater* character—only at this point still

65 Stat. *Theb.* 10.616–720.

unaware of it himself. In the beginning of the episode, Creon thinks he knows what fear and grief are: he is worrying about the body politic, and his anxiety is controlled and regulated by social norms. However, this emotion—located in the mind and in the symbolic order—is no fear at all, as Creon is soon to find out. When he hears that it is *his* son whose life is demanded, the true bodily fear penetrates him and becomes a lived experience out of reach of both words and logic. It is explicitly stated that *grandem subiti cum fulminis ictum, non secus ac torta traiectus cuspide pectus*—he feels as if his heart is being pierced by a spear. The similarities of this imagery with that used to describe Thetis' and Atalanta's overpowering anxiety are striking: since Creon does not have a womb to be pierced, his heart becomes a surrogate 'motherly organ' to be destroyed by war. Furthermore, the mention of "deep terror" "freezing" his heart (*stupet anxius alto/corda metu glaciante pater*) reminds the reader of Thetis' "icy pallor" at the sight of her son. In a heartbeat, what is political becomes personal and the body overcomes the mind. Creon's composed grief becomes corporeal, overwhelming and impossible to control. When his words fail to convince the seer, the father actually attacks the man and engages in physical violence to stop him from talking. His behaviour lacks both logic and restraint, since he is now completely driven by the *chôra*.

The episode ends abruptly, as if to emphasise the semiotic pressure on the narrative logic; the reader will not know what happens to Creon at this point, nor whether he manages to put himself together. He returns, in his role of an anxious mother, sixty lines later when Menoeceus storms through the city, convinced by the oracle and adamant on taking his own life. The poet relates that

Iamque iter ad muros cursu festinus anhelus/obtinet et miseros gaudet vitasse parentes,/cum genitor ----- /steteruntque ambo et vox haesit utriusque,/deiectaeque genae.

STAT. *Theb.* 10.686–688

And now he makes his way to the walls, short of breath and in a hurry, and he is glad to have avoided his miserable parents, when his father ----- and both stood still, with their faces downcast, and neither can find the voice to speak.

The surprising rupture in line 1.688 and the following silence are very untypical of Statius' epic style. The line abruptly breaks off after *cum genitor*, and the following line, an intact six-foot verse, seems to continue from something that has been left out. Logically, what should have followed is probably Menoeceus' suddenly running into his parents on top of the wall, where they may have

been waiting for him, aware of his suicidal plans. However, this encounter is not explicitly described and, intriguingly, the mother is not mentioned at all—it might be that she *is* there, standing next to the father, both equally dumbstruck by their fear, but the line that follows does not make this clear.

I am tempted to suggest that this break in the hexameter, instead of being a trace of later corruption of the manuscript, is deliberate and intended to draw attention to Menoeceus' sudden stop at the sight of his father. Creon, petrified by fear, becomes a very tangible obstacle on his way, stopping him from advancing towards his destiny. In this way, Creon has more narrative power than Thetis did when she tried to stand in the way of the heroic drive of the epic. The father's powerful, threatening presence not only temporarily stops Menoeceus, but also interrupts the flow and the logic of Statius' hexameter. *cum genitor*—violently forces the reader to halt and to take in the semiotic pressure on the narrative. Creon's anxiety is so strong that it cannot be bypassed, not by his son and not by the reader.

The invisibility of Menoeceus' mother in the episode is also telling, as is the fact that immediately before the break in the line, Creon is referred to as *genitor*, not as *pater*. This choice of words appears to stress and underline the biological nature of his fatherhood over the social role of a father. When he is standing on the wall, he is not thinking of his son's heroism or of the glory that his death will bring to the family. He is there because his bodily drives—an indissoluble connection to his child that could perhaps be called 'love'—force him to go against the role that the society expects from him as a father and as a leader. In a way, he becomes both mother and father to his son: both the object of primal abjection, and the identifiable other.

After this break in the narrative, Creon momentarily regains his restraint and strives for symbolic communication. It is related that “finally, the father spoke first” (*tandem pater ante profatus*). In his speech, then, Creon tries hard to put his feelings into words, and to convince his son by logical arguments. He claims that the prophecy is false, directed against him and his family (one can hear echoes of the Virgilian Venus in this argument). He also swears that, if Menoeceus only refrained from taking his own life, he would happily let his son face the horrors of war, since this would be the right way of serving his country (*hoc malunt Thebae*). Creon also begs Menoeceus to wait and reconsider: “do not let your ardent mood lead you; give it time, a brief delay—impulse is always a bad master” (*ne frena animo permittite calenti, / da spatium tenuemque moram, male cuncta ministrat / impetus*).⁶⁶ His arguments, however, fail to convince, since

66 Stat. *Theb.* 10.703–705.

they appear to be both contradictory and false. On the one hand, Creon argues that he only wants his son to serve Thebes in the best possible manner; on the other, he claims that true honour can be found only in one's devotion to the family, not to the state. His attempt to plead to Menoeceus' reason and logic also seems distorted, considering that he himself is acting out of impulse and has fallen victim to sudden, uncontrollable emotions. Creon's speech, therefore, is rhetorically weak because it is in fact nothing but an expression of his inner tumult, much like Thetis' pleas in the *Achilleid*. He is trying to perform the role that he was comfortable with earlier—the political leader and *paterfamilias* deeply absorbed into the symbolic order—but his poorly composed speech betrays him, since it reveals that he is now completely dominated by the pulsation of the *chôra* that has aroused the *genitor* in him.

The most telling part of Creon's speech is his reference to Menoeceus' mother: "I beg you, son, by your years and mine, by your poor mother's breasts—do not believe the seer, boy!" (*'per ego oro tuosque,/nate, meosque annos miseraeque per ubera matris,/ne vati, ne crede, puer!'*)⁶⁷ Again, the reader becomes painfully aware of the father's physical inadequacy (he does not have breasts of his own to flaunt) and of his consequent lack of the rhetorical means that epic mothers generally employ. Earlier on, Creon's heart played the role of an epic mother's womb in his self-destructive hallucinations. Here, the father draws attention to the nourishing breasts of the lad's mother, as if to represent them as his own. The mother, whom one does not hear speak once in the episode, seems to be there (*if* she is there) for her physique only; she is a substitute body that Creon uses like a theatre mask in his performance of the role of a *misera mater*.

Of course, as is usual with *miserae matres*, Creon's attempt to hinder the course of the epic narrative is ultimately unsuccessful, and after his failure, he is cast into the margins of the story. As Menoeceus rushes off, we read that the father's "heart is drowned in a dark fog, his senses confused. His sense of duty roams uncertain, his fears are in conflict" (*illi atra mersum caligine pectus/confudit sensus; pietas incerta vagatur/discordantque metus*—).⁶⁸ It would be difficult to find another passage in the whole of Roman epic where someone so obviously falls victim to the Kristevan 'marginalisation'. Creon finally gives in to his mixed and confused emotions; he "sullenly holds back" and resigns the symbolic order.⁶⁹ By so doing, he masters the role of an epic mother, becoming one of the characters that "forever remain in a sulk in the face of history, politics

67 Stat. *Theb.* 10.694–696.

68 Stat. *Theb.* 10.735–737.

69 See Kristeva 1974 (in Moi 1986, 155).

and social affairs; symptoms of their failure, but symptoms destined for marginality".⁷⁰ After this event, Creon is gradually faded out of the narrative, and he never again appears as his former self, the capable viceroy and devoted servant of the temporal scene.

While Statius' Creon is a somewhat unique character in Roman war epic—in the role of an anxious mother, he is more convincing than many actual epic mothers—he is not alone. In effect, men who try on stereotypically feminine epic roles seem to constitute a phenomenon typical of Flavian epic at large.⁷¹ In Valerius Flaccus' *Argonautica*, the anxious and fearful 'mother' is Pelias, king of Iolcus. He is father to the young Acastus, whom Jason lures to take part in Argo's voyage, against his parents' wishes. In Valerius Flaccus' version of the story, Acastus' free will remains dubious: it is stated that he is abducted (*raptus*) by treachery. Unsurprisingly, upon finding out what has happened, his father is both furious and fearful. Intriguingly, Pelias does not even momentarily try to control his rage or to disguise it in the cloak of logic, but proceeds directly to the semiotic mode: we read that "all his fury bursts on them" (*ruat omnis in illos/quippe furor*).⁷² The use of *furor* immediately makes clear that the king's rage is beyond words and reason. The narrator continues, relating that

Saevit atrox Pelias inimicaque vertice ab alto/vela videt nec qua se ardens effundere possit.—quin etiam in thalamis primoque in limine Acasti/fusus humo iuvenis gressus et inania signa/ore premit sparsisque legens vestigia canis—“qua te, infelix, quibus insequar oris?/non Scythicas ferus ille domos nec ad ostia Ponti/tendit iter, falsae sed captum laudis amore/te, puer, in nostrae durus tormenta senectae/nunc lacerat.—o domus, o freti neququam prole penates!”/dixit et extemplo furiis iraque minaci/terribilis “sunt hic etiam tua vulnera, praedo,/sunt lacrimae carusque parens.”

VAL. *Arg.* 1.700–701, 1.709–711, 1.715–719, 1.721–725

Savage Pelias rages when he sees, from a high summit, the sails of his enemy, and does not know how to vent his frenzy.—Furthermore, he lies stretched out on the threshold of Acastus' bedroom. The ground where the youth has stepped, and the empty traces of him, he presses with his lips, and with his grey hair dishevelled goes through every footprint: “—Where, you poor thing, to what coasts can I follow you? Neither the houses of Scythia nor the gates of Pontus are the purpose of that savage

70 Kristeva 1974 (in Moi 1986, 156).

71 For further discussion, see Bernstein 2008, 68.

72 Val. Flac. *Arg.* 1.698–699.

man's journey—but you, boy, captured by the love of false glory, that hard-hearted brute now destroys, tormenting me in my old age.—O, my house, O spirits of my ancestors that in vain trusted your offspring!” He spoke, and immediately, threatening fury and anger made him seem terrifying: “Here, robber, are also the means to hurt you, here are tears and your dear father.”

It is evident that the king is out of his mind with anger—and, especially, with fear of what might befall his son. His speech is intermittent and not really directed at anyone; at one time he is addressing Acastus, at another he rages to Jason, and (perhaps realising that neither of them can hear him), he at times seems to be muttering to himself or just crying out his pain. In this sense, Pelias resembles Virgil's Amata at the height of her frenzy, when she engaged in the delusional simulation of the Bacchic ritual. Moreover, the episode in the *Argonautica* clearly recalls the elegiac *relicta* topos, as Pelias tries on the role of a left-behind woman, a deserted lover gazing at the sea and crying out her bitterness at the treacherous lover. The passage is full of allusions to an unhappy love affair: while Jason's abduction of Acastus hints at the classical bride rape theme, the father's crawling on Acastus' bedroom floor (*thalamis in limine*) evokes ideas of a wedding chamber and of related rites of passage.

This kind of confusion between the roles of an anxious father and a betrayed lover seems odd, at first sight; however, I would suggest that the association is deliberate and meaningful, since it clearly recalls another passage in the canon of Roman epic: Dido's *furor* upon Aeneas' departure. The episode makes use of a vocabulary similar to that which Virgil uses to describe Dido's desperation: *durus*, *ferus* and *falsa* all strengthen the impression of Jason as a version of Aeneas, someone who makes empty promises and sets sail in secrecy and in haste. *Furor*, *saevus* and *ardens*, for their part, remind the reader of Dido's emotional response. Arguably, these allusions stress the seriousness of Pelias' madness, and anticipate his terrible revenge. As his speech implies, he is planning on killing Jason's parents, so that Jason should suffer the same fate as he himself has: a violent and forcible separation of the parent and the son. When a priestess warns Jason's parents of the king's plan, she states that “against you the unstable king is preparing a bitter crime, a familial war, and is nursing the savage flames of his anger” (*sed tibi triste nefas fraternaue turbidus arma/rex parat et saevos irarum concipit ignes*).⁷³ The reader recalls Dido's curse of eternal war, as well as her prayers that Aeneas should live to see his son killed. In her

73 Val. Flac. *Arg.* 1.747–748.

agony, Dido even regrets that she did not murder the child herself when she had a chance.⁷⁴ This means that Pelias is clearly fashioned as a version of Virgil's Dido: a bloodthirsty, vengeful epic woman—only, his lack of self-control appears even more complete. His son is not even dead yet, but his fear has already turned into a violent rage that knows no limit or logic and cannot even temporarily be curbed by the symbolic order. His attempt to play the role of a mourning mother, apparent in the mention of his dishevelled hair, fails, since he rather resembles a bloodthirsty *dira*, impossible for the reader to relate to and hence inevitably marginalised.

From these examples one can observe how extreme fear and anxiety often appear to challenge the role that the character is supposed to play in the narrative and to throw him or her into a sudden bodily turmoil and inner crisis. This is equally true of the distant mothers Thetis and Atalanta as it is of Creon and Pelias, who are committed to their roles as political leaders. For all four of them, these social performances fall apart when primitive fear for one's child pierces their bodies and paralyses their minds. It would appear that, at least in Flavian epic, maternal fear and anxiety are extremely powerful emotions that derive from the body and 'destroy the language'. When reasonable communication is ruled out by the pressure of the *chôra*, these characters are inevitably marginalised by the epic narrative. The fearful mother is a difficult character for the reader to relate to, because what she (or he!) is experiencing is, by its very nature, beyond words, and cannot be grasped or communicated by the logic of language. She remains alien and threatening to the audience—pitied perhaps, but inevitably destined for a lack of subjectivity.

4 Grief, Lament and the Dissolution of Differences

It goes without saying that, in the violent world of Roman epic, a mother's fear is rarely groundless. On the contrary, motherly anxiety is grounded on another integral feature of the epic narrative: constant and repetitive loss.⁷⁵ Because of this, female lament has a structurally significant role in the Roman war epics of the early Principate—as it does in Roman literature in general.⁷⁶ In war nar-

74 Verg. *Aen.* 4.601–602.

75 The archetypal starting point of motherly grief in epic can be found in Hom. *Il.* 24.748–759, where Hecuba mourns Hector's death. This is the model that the Roman epic poets repeatedly rework in their depictions of mourning mothers.

76 See Fantham 1999; Whittaker 2011; Hope 2011; Newlands 2012, 110–135. On the complexities of gender and emotion in the Roman culture of death, see McCullough 2011. For the socio-

ratives, where disorder and insecurity are constant, the proper mourning rites that are conducted in detail provide structure as well as a feeling of order and continuity. It is therefore important to point out that female grief is not always or exclusively something that would challenge the logic of the temporal scene and society's ways of working. It is also—when prescribed by social norms—something that validates and enforces the said order.

Furthermore, Roman war epic is rich in episodes where female grief clearly validates and strengthens the heroic drive of the poem. Motherly grief, in particular, was strictly institutionalised in the Graeco-Roman culture and hence in the epic tradition; in the Roman poets' works, it is repeatedly depicted as an essential (and final) stage on the hero's journey towards valour and glory.⁷⁷ Typically, the mother's public lament manifests the virtuousness of both the dead son and the mother herself.⁷⁸ This can be observed, for instance, in Hannibal's speech to his fallen brother in Silius Italicus' *Punica*:

*dignus Carthagine, dignus/Hasdrubale ad manes ibis; nec te optima mater/
dissimilem lugebit avis, Stygiave sub umbra/degenerem cernens noster vit-
abit Hamilcar.*

SIL. *Pun.* 5:595–598

Worthy of Carthage, worthy of Hasdrubal, you go down to the underworld. Your good mother will mourn you as no differently from your ancestors; and when our father Hamilcar meets you under the shadows of the Styx, he will not shun you as degenerate.

In this episode, female grief clearly underlines and enhances the fallen warrior's heroism, and the mother's tears are depicted as a kind of triumph that a courageous soldier deserves. It is particularly interesting that in this epis-

cultural background of (female) lament in Roman epic, see Greene 1999; Murnaghan 1999. The significance of the phenomenon can be observed particularly clearly in Roman historiography, where lamenting matrons often have a functional position as the internal audience of exemplary stories. See Mustakallio 1990; Mustakallio 2003; Mustakallio 2012, 169–171.

77 Fantham aptly defines lament as “women's contribution to celebrating the life and death of a man or a community”. Fantham 1999, 221. Moreover, female lament, and the appropriately conducted funeral ceremony of which it was a part, had a crucial place in the Roman culture of commemoration—for Romans, a post-mortem oblivion was a real and particularly frightening fate, as it could happen even to those who were powerful and prominent in their lifetime. Whittaker 2011, 61.

78 For some episodes in Homeric epic, see Hom. *Il.* 11.450–455; Hom. *Od.* 11.421–425.

ode, the foreign enemy becomes a mouthpiece of values and ideas that are apparently considered universal. When Hannibal stresses the significance of motherly lament, the symbolic importance of female grief becomes a connecting link between the Romans and the Carthaginians.⁷⁹ The shared values between Rome and ‘the barbaric other’ are underlined, and the Roman reader presumably would have had no difficulties in identifying with this glorification of heroic death.

The fear that the body of a loved one would be denied proper grieving rites is a repetitive theme in Roman war epic—the topos derives from Sophocles’ and Euripides’ *Antigone*, but it certainly reflects the anxieties of the war-centred Roman society, as well.⁸⁰ Dyson describes death without burial “the epic hero’s nightmare”—and certainly, as Micozzi states, the theme serves to develop drama and pathos in the epic narrative.⁸¹ The episode in the *Thebaid* where Antigone and Argia defy the law and secretly bury Polynices’ body is the most famous example of this topos in Roman war epic.⁸² Another example is in Lucan’s *Pharsalia*, where Pompey’s wife Cornelia is robbed of her right to grieve her husband in an appropriate manner. Cornelia is forced to watch from a ship Pompey’s decapitation on the Egyptian shore; the dismembered body is then left by the sea to be consumed by nature.⁸³ However, in the dead of night, Cordus, a veteran of Pompey’s troops, sneaks to the beach and secretly burns the body. Cordus is well aware of the inadequacy of the rite, and moreover he laments aloud the fact that Pompey’s wife is not there to execute it:

Sit satis, o superi, quod non Cornelia fuso/crine iacet subicique facem con-
plexa maritum/imperat, extremo sed abest a munere busti/infelix coniunx
nec adhuc a litore longe est.

LUC. *Phar.* 8.739–742

79 See Ripoll 1998, 332–336.

80 The ritual and religious importance of the burial can be observed in Servius’ notion that *cum pontificibus nefas esset cadaver videre, magis tamen nefas fuerat, si visum insepultum reliquerent*. Serv. *Aen.* 6.176; see also Hor. *Carm.* 1.28.

81 Micozzi 1998, 105.

82 Stat. *Theb.* 12.312–463. For other examples, see, e.g., women’s desperate search for corpses on the battlefield, as depicted in the *Pharsalia* and in the *Thebaid*: Luc. *Phar.* 3.756–761; Stat. *Theb.* 3.114–132; 9.351–403; 10.354–355. Dyson discusses death without burial in the *Aeneid*: Dyson 2001, 74–94. Van der Keur examines the importance of burial and funerary rites in Flavian epic: van der Keur 2013, esp. 333–342.

83 Luc. *Phar.* 8.663–691.

Be content with this, O gods, that Cornelia does not lie prostrate with dishevelled hair, nor does she embrace her husband or order the torch to be lit—that his miserable wife is not there to do her last service by the burial mound, although she is still not far off from the shore.

Cornelia herself is grief-stricken because of her inability to fulfil her duty. Her shame and grief are enhanced by her knowledge that she was not able to give a proper burial to her first husband either. Anxiety caused by the pattern of a repetitive failure can be heard in her speech:

Similisne malorum/sors mihi semper erit? Nunquam dare iusta licebit/coniugibus? nunquam plenas plangemus ad urnas?/quid porro tumulis opus est aut ulla requiris/instrumenta, dolor? non toto in pectore portas,/in pia, Pompeium? Non imis haeret imago/visceribus? quaerat cineres victura superstes.

LUC. *Phar.* 9.66–72

Is my wicked lot always going to be the same? Will I never be allowed to do right by my husband? Am I never going to mourn over an urn that was not empty? Also, what need is there of a grave, or why do you require any properties, O grief? Do I not, undutiful wife, carry Pompey in all my heart? Does his image not cling to my inmost parts? Let a wife intent on outliving her husband look for his ashes.

It would appear that with these words, Cornelia is trying to convince herself that genuine feeling is more important than an appropriate conduct of the funeral rites. The crucial point, however, is that she seems to be more worried about her own reputation than about her husband's journey to the underworld—her words make it clear that the socially prescribed manner of mourning, with its rules and rituals, is more about the living than about the dead. In order to compensate for her inability to grieve properly, Cornelia, after her return to Rome, executes a funeral rite for Pompey's armour and arms.⁸⁴ With this last tribute to her husband, she endeavours to regain what is left of her role as the most respectable matron in Rome. In a laconic way, Lucan depicts the moral devastation of the civil war: the dishonourable death of Pompey on a distant shore, and Cornelia's inability to play the part of a virtuous wife for

84 Luc. *Phar.* 9.171–181.

the people to look up to. In this manner, female grief becomes a measuring rod of the moral state of society.

These episodes are firmly in keeping with the 'heroic drive' of the epics: they are, after all, mostly about female *conduct* regulated by social norms, and have very little to do with *emotions*. Arguably, public lament and private grief are two entirely different phenomena, one of which belongs in the symbolic sphere of communication and the other in the semiotic modality. In another episode from the *Pharsalia*, this difference is beautifully demonstrated, when the narrator describes the immediate reactions of a household after a warrior has fallen:

Sic funere primo/attonitae tacuere domus, cum corpora nondum/conclamata iacent, nec mater crine soluto/exigit ad saevos famularum brachia planctus,/sed cum membra premit fugiente rigentia vita/voltusque exanimis oculosque in morte minaces;/necdum est ille dolor, nec iam metus: incubat amens/miraturque malum.

LUC. *Phar.* 2.21–28

Thus, at the first moment of death a household is stunned and speechless, when the body has not yet been laid out to be lamented, nor does the mother yet with dishevelled hair summon her handmaids to beat themselves with cruel arms. Instead, she is still pressing herself against the limbs stiff with the departure of life, and the expressionless face, and the eyes threatening in death. She does not yet feel grief, and fear no longer: incapable of thought, she lies on her son and marvels at her misfortune.⁸⁵

The passage offers a rare glimpse of the experience of grief *before* the tragedy has sunken in and before society has imposed on the family its institutionalised ways of recovery. The poet pays attention to the two natures of grief—the private sorrow in seclusion, and the public ritual lament.⁸⁶ Public mourning is marked by the traditional signs of female grief: the loosened hair, the tearing at one's cheeks and the ritual wailing. It is significant that these are symbols and signals with a very clearly determined meaning, and with great communicative value in the symbolic order: they are signs that deliver messages about the

85 Epic models for this episode can be found, e.g., in Hom. *Il.* 6.293–311 and in Verg. *Aen.* 1.479–481, 11.477–482. Sannicandro also argues in favour of a probable Livian model, in Liv. 26.9.7–8 and 27.50.5. Sannicandro 2010a, 109.

86 For further discussion of the public and private natures of lament in the ancient world, and on the relationship between grief and mourning, see Hope 2011, 92–95.

family's loss to the surrounding community. Their social function is stressed by the collective nature of the ritual: the choreography of lament is carried out by female groups (*famularum*), and gazed upon by other members of the household and the community.

Private grief is private in more senses than one: besides taking place within the walls of the household, it takes place in everyone's body privately—it is the kind of experience that cannot be shared, because it cannot be communicated in any sign system that the symbolic order knows of. *Attonitae tacuere* clearly refers to grief that is beyond words. A couple of lines later, we read that *necdum est ille dolor, nec iam metus: incubat amens/miraturque malum*. This formulation makes it clear that the bereaved mother lacks words, and that she is also struggling to string coherent thoughts together. While the fear has disappeared, the grief has not yet entered: emotionally and cognitively, she is empty, incapable of finding a connection to the sphere of logic. *Miratur*, a word that is often used in epic to express marvel at the sight of something supernatural or divine, completes the picture of a woman who is stunned speechless.⁸⁷ Incapable of expressing herself in any other way, the mother resorts to bodily communication and embraces her son's lifeless corpse: it is therefore when words fail her that the semiotic modality comes to her aid, and the pressing of her body against his (as they once were of one flesh) is the only message that is left.

In Lucan's epic universe, motherhood is a powerful metaphorical tool. In addition to addressing individual suffering, it symbolises the continuity of the family, and the future in general. For this reason, the figure of the grieving mother—one of the recurring archetypes in the *Pharsalia*—could perhaps be viewed as allegorical of Rome herself, the mother of the people who slaughter each other in a fraternal strife. This episode has been perceptively read by Sannicandro as a metaphor in which female lament forms a bond between the private world of family and the wider sphere of *civitas*. She argues that a mother's grief at the sight of her son's body becomes symbolic of the Roman citizens' suffering in the civil war, and gradually transforms into a public lament over the death of the Republic.⁸⁸ Sannicandro's observant reading shows how, in the Lucanian civil war narrative, female grief is not a feature that would necessarily stress the difference between the epic's public and private (or male and female) spheres. On the contrary, it links them metaphorically to each other. Furthermore, I would suggest that the passage represents the pious female lament as a feature that defines the self-perception of Roman

87 See, e.g., Horsfall 2000, 527. *OLD* (1997) defines an object of the verb as “cause of wonder, marvelous, remarkable, extraordinary”.

88 Sannicandro 2010a, 109; see also Sannicandro 2011, 252–253.

people. The basic components of *Romanitas* are crystallised in the character of a grieving mother who, after a devastating experience, puts herself together, re-enters the symbolic order and carries out of her socially prescribed duty. The semiotic and the symbolic are not mutually exclusive; both are powerfully present in the character of this exemplary matron—the dynamics between the two are simply determined by the occasion. In this way, the *Pharsalia* transforms female grief from something that is marginal to the war narrative into something that defines and upholds the crumbling ideals and values of *Romanitas*. For Lucan's civil war epic, it seems like a natural choice to associate the personal loss of a mother with the bigger picture of the collapsing state.

In other Roman epics, too, the civil war theme is repeatedly raised in the episodes that represent female lament—but a peaceful harmony between the symbolic order and the semiotic pressure, such as one can observe in the *Pharsalia*, is rare. Instead, bitterness, frustration, and the futility of death are recurring issues that simultaneously enhance the emotional pathos of a mother's lament and point critique towards the unrighteousness of the war in question. If the war is unholy or utterly pointless, the mother's loss is all the more impossible to overcome. Thus, female grief is used to emphasise the futility, not necessarily of war in general, but of *bellum sine hostes* in particular. One of the best examples can be found in *Aeneid* 9, where the poet discusses the sacrifices of the Latin war by describing a mother's grief over her son's death. The unprompted grief of Euryalus' mother is the first surviving example of a motherly lament in Roman epic,⁸⁹ and an influential model for all later variants on the theme:

—*at subitus miserae calor ossa reliquit, / excussi manibus radii revolutaque
pensa. / evolat infelix et femineo ululatu / scissa comam muros amens atque*

89 Fantham and Keith discuss female lament in pre-Virgilian Roman epic, namely, in Ennius' *Annales*—although this kind of frantic, uncontrollable lament is not to be found in the surviving fragments, there are other episodes related to the subject that demonstrate that the Roman epic tradition concerning lament went back further than to Virgil. For instance, in Enn. *Ann. frag.* 61, the poet depicts the collective grief of the Roman people after Romulus' disappearance (an episode that Fantham compares with Luc. *Phar.* 7.37–39.) In *Ann. frag.* 147, an unnamed woman prepares the body of King Tarquin for funeral rites. See Fantham 1999, 222–223; Keith 2007, 72 (the *Annales* edition by Skutsch, 1985). Of course, in their ways of representing female lament, Roman epics are also heavily indebted to the historiographic tradition; for further discussion of the development of the literary topos and of the interplay between different literary genres, see Hope 2011, 97–105, 107–114; Mustakallio 2003, 86–87, 91–95.

*agmina cursu/prima petit, non illa virum, non illa pericli/telorumque
memor, caelum dehinc questibus implet—.*

VERG. *Aen.* 9.475–480

Then immediately warmth left the poor woman's bones: the shuttle is cast aside from her hands, and the thread comes unwound. The miserable lady rushes forth and, with womanly howls and torn hair, out of her mind she makes her way to the walls and to the front line troops. She is unmindful of the danger of men and weapons. Then she fills the sky with her complaints—.

Unlike in the example from the *Pharsalia* (discussed above), where the two modes of grieving were kept apart, in this episode, the private (semiotic, non-verbal) grief and the public (symbolic, institutionalised) lament get strangely confused and mixed. On one hand, the mother is depicted as acting on impulse and rushing through the city in a maenadic frenzy, much like Amata in book 7. On the other hand, her tearing of her hair, while it might be an impulsive act, clearly alludes to the public rites of lament. *Femineo ululatu*, moreover, could mean frantic, mindless moaning—an averbal expression of private pain—but it could equally well be a reference to women's ritual wailing at funerals. The episode therefore deliberately blurs the line between private and public grief, and shows the semiotic pressure making itself heard *through* the logic of the symbolic order, through its institutionalised signs of grieving.

This same phenomenon can be observed in the speech that the mother pours out:

*heu, terra ignota canibus date praeda Latinis/alitibusque iaces! nec te tua
funere mater/prodixi pressive oculos at vulnera lavi,/veste tegens tibi quam
noctes festina diesque/urgebam, et tela curas solabar anilis./quo sequar?
Aut quae nunc artus avulsaque membra/et funus lacerum tellus habet?
hoc mihi de te,/nate, refers? hoc sum terraque marique secuta?/figite me,
si qua est pietas, in me omnia tela/conicite, o Rutuli, me primam absum-
ite ferro;/aut tu, magne pater divum, miserere, tuoque/invisum hoc detrude
caput sub Tartara telo,/quando aliter nequeo crudelem abrumpere vitam.*

VERG. *Aen.* 9.485–497

Alas! You lie in a strange land, given as prey to the dogs and vultures of Latium! Nor did I, your mother, escort you to your death, or close your eyes, or bathe your wounds, or wrap you in the robe on which I worked in a hurry, night and day, for you, soothing with the loom the cares of old age.

Where am I to follow? What earth now holds your torn limbs and your dismembered corpse? Son, is this all of you that you bring back to me? Did I follow by land and sea for this? Pierce me, if you have any decency, hurl on me all your spears, O Rutulians, destroy me first with your swords—or you, great father of the gods, have pity on me, and with your lightning bolt thrust down to Tartarus this hateful life, since in no other way can I break free from this cruel life!

In her bitter complaint, one can observe the desire of Euryalus' mother to be part of the temporal scene and to fulfill her socially prescribed role as a mother. However, since she has been denied what she considers her natural maternal right—to give her son a proper funeral—she declines that role altogether and resorts to an overwhelming desperation that lacks reason and logic. Again, one can perceive reflections of Amata who, after the negation of her maternal right, gave in to the destructive drives of her body. Moreover, the wish of Euryalus' mother to be pierced by the Rutulian steel and to become the sole target of the war recalls the self-destructive dreams of Statius' Thetis and Atalanta (and very probably inspired them). Clearly, motherhood has been the defining feature of this woman and the essence of her very being: she has followed her son over land and sea and dedicated her entire life to him. Having now 'failed' at this role, since she is unable to carry out its symbolically most significant task, she wants to have her motherhood and herself erased from the world and from the narrative.

And erased she will be, although not in the manner that she had had in mind. While her outburst receives no direct reply whatsoever, its impact on the internal audience is nonetheless powerful. We read that

hoc fletu concussi animi, maestusque per omnis/it gemitus, torpent infractae ad proelia vires./illam incendentem luctus Idaeus et Actor/Ilionei monitu et multum lacrimantis Iuli/corripiunt interque manus sub tecta reponunt.

VERG. *Aen.* 9.498–502

This wailing shakes their souls, and a moan of grief passes through all. Their strength for battle is numbed and shattered. She is inciting grief, so Idaeus and Actor, on the orders of Ilioneus, with Iulus weeping profusely, pick her up and carry her indoors in their arms.

It is explicitly stated that the mother's wailing puts a dent in the Trojans' war morale. Her bodily drives are contagious: *maestusque per omnis it gemitus cre-*

ates an impression of a strong, primitive bodily reaction that her cries evoke in the warriors. Because of this “kindling of grief”, the episode has been often discussed as a classic example of the epic setting where the female, private perspective is juxtaposed with the male military quest. The grief-stricken mother has been interpreted as unable to understand the inevitability of the political events, and her over-emotional outburst has been considered as uncontrolled behaviour typical of epic women—behaviour that aims at hindering the heroic, teleological drive of the epic.⁹⁰ Wiltshire, for example, has argued that “for this mother the official themes of epic—*arma virumque cano*—cease to exist. She experiences only the costs”.⁹¹ Because of the contagious nature of the mother’s grief, she needs to be removed from the stage in order for the epic to continue: Dietrich argues that the erasure of the woman and her overwhelming suffering is necessary for Aeneas’ founding mission to continue.⁹² This reading is supported by the structure of the episode: immediately after Euryalus’ mother has been carried away, the war narrative suddenly and abruptly resumes—with a blow of a trumpet, the scene is cut and the narrator moves on to the battlefield.

We should, however, note is that while the telos of the epic might demand the erasure of the grieving mother, this does not mean that her powerful, bodily pain would mark her as altogether marginal. In effect, the very reason for her removal is that her pain is so relatable: it brings the warriors to tears and lets the semiotic pressure disrupt the logic of the narrative. And it is not only the internal audience who are moved by the mother’s misery: the external narrator, too, appears to empathise with her, calling her *infelix* and granting her a voice of her own. By so doing, the narrator delivers the woman’s viewpoint to the reader and invites the reader to relate to her suffering. Moreover, the sudden removing of the unhappy mother only strengthens this relatability, since the reader cannot help but wonder where she is carried to and what the rest of her story might have been like—did the war finally get her too, as she was hoping it would, or was she destined for a lonely old age? Thus, by quickly and irreversibly erasing the character and moving on, the narrator actually kindles the reader’s interest. As the internal audience tries to suppress and marginalise the woman’s voice, the external audience is, as a result, drawn to it—in this sense, the situation resembles the episodes discussed earlier, where the powerless and fearful women on top of the wall simultaneously appeared as both focalisers and outsiders.

90 See, e.g., Nugent 1999, *passim*; Dietrich 1999, 47–48.

91 Wiltshire 2000, 191–193. See also Wiltshire 1999, 172–176.

92 Dietrich 1999, 47–48.

The intense grief of Euryalus' mother thus demonstrates that subjectivity in an epic narrative is more than a sum of its parts: one might be marginalised in the narrative, yet still become a character to whom both the internal and the external audiences are capable of relating. One's self-expression might be dominated by the pulsation of the *chôra* and by the lack of logic, but that does not inevitably mean that she would not get her message through to the reader. The threatening elements of semiotic modality can, in some cases, become a more efficient—even an excessively efficient—means of communication than words, songs, and symbols. While Euryalus' mother is deprived of her right to express her maternal love with the socially prescribed means, she manages to express it more efficiently through her uncontrollable, self-destructive outburst. It is, however, worth stressing that the reaction that her intense grief evokes in the internal audience is exceptional in the tradition of Roman war epic: in her ability to reach the male subject of epic and to penetrate through his emotional shield, Euryalus' mother is a somewhat unique version of the archetype of a grieving mother (paralleled only by Jocasta in the *Thebaid*).

In Flavian epic, the depiction of female grief builds on the Virgilian and the Lucanian models; however, its narrative significance is further accentuated. Statius, like Lucan, appears to particularly benefit from the tragic element of pathos that female lament brings into his war narrative. It has often been noted that grief has an important structural role in the *Thebaid*, since recurring episodes of lament greatly contribute to the development of the plot, and stress the crucial turning points in the narrative.⁹³ In Statius' epic, not only does female grief take place after each decisive tragedy, but it often also anticipates them as a foreshadowing of doom—examples are Jocasta's mourning attire before the duel between her sons, and Atalanta's premature grief that precedes Parthenopaeus' death.⁹⁴ Moreover, as Ganiban points out, female lament also repeatedly intrudes into seemingly pacific environments: the episode where Eurydice and Hypsipyle grieve at the death of baby Opheltes can be read as a prelude to the upcoming war.⁹⁵

The remarkable prominence of female, especially motherly, lament in Statius' epic has been widely discussed. Many of these readings juxtapose the female, private suffering with the male, public, political quest. Newlands, for

93 E.g., Stat. *Theb.* 3.114–168, 5.588–698, 6.33–37, 6.126–192, 7.470–478, 8.641–654, 9.351–403, 9.570–636, 9.722–725, 10.791–826, 12.105–110, 12.312–463, 12.467–480, 12.782–809. For further discussion, See Augoustakis 2010, 51–61, 75–91; Micozzi 1998, 97–98, 114–119.

94 Stat. *Theb.* 9.570–636, 9.722–725.

95 Stat. *Theb.* 5.588–698, 6.33–37, 6.126–192. Ganiban 2007, 71–95. See also Augoustakis 2010, 47–61; Newlands 2006, 207–210; Micozzi 1998, 114–119.

instance, clearly builds on Dietrich's reading of the *Aeneid* when she considers the grieving mothers as embodiments of the irrational in epic, as characters who challenge the preordained, war-centred, masculine worldview.⁹⁶ This kind of clear-cut dichotomy, however, seems to overlook some crucial features and nuances of Statius' epic style. First of all, I believe that the emphatic significance of female grief in Statius' epic, instead of being targeted against epic heroism in general, is an accentuated critique of *civil war* in particular. Statius' narrative revolves around unholy familial strife and, as Ganiban aptly points out, the civil war theme is every bit as strong as in Lucan's epic, only in a mythological disguise.⁹⁷ The fraternal war is depicted as the ultimate self-destructive act that shatters the collective self and reveals the 'strangeness in ourselves'. Therefore, it is problematic to examine female lament as hindering the heroic drive of the epic (as in the case of the *Aeneid*, for example), because there is nothing particularly heroic about this epic, the only telos of which is death and destruction. The female characters, with their violent and self-destructive outbursts of grief, are just as entangled in this drive as are the male characters.

Moreover, what has rarely been sufficiently discussed is that Statius' accentuated critique of war and violence is not expressed *exclusively* through suffering women. On the contrary, the Flavian poet systematically complements his depictions of female lament with those of male grief. In these outbursts of human suffering, the drive of war is often attacked and opposed at least as harshly as in the mothers' complaints. In book nine of the *Thebaid*, the river-god Ismenos fiercely laments the death of his grandson. In his bitter address to the gods, Ismenos becomes one of the most passionate voices in the Roman epic tradition that denounce warfare and its costs:

—*stetit arduus alto/amne, manuque genas et nexa virentibus ulvis/cornua concutiens sic turbidus ore profundo/incipit: 'huncne mihi, superum regnator, honorem/quod totiens hospesque tuis et conscius actis/(nec memorare timor)—aspice quas fluvio caedes, quae funera portem/continuis telis alioque adopertus acervo./omne vadum belli series tenet, omnis anhelat/unda nefas, subterque animae supraque recentes/errant et geminas iungunt caligine ripas./ille ego clamatus sacris ululatibus amnis,/qui molles thyrsus Baccheaque cornua puro/fonte lavare feror, stipatus caedibus artas/in freta quaero vias; non Strymonos impia tanto/stagna cruore natant, non spumifer altius Hebrus/Gradivo bellante rubet.'*

STAT. *Theb.* 9.418–423, 9.429–439

96 Newlands 2006, 211; Dietrich 1999.

97 Ganiban 2007, *passim*.

He stands tall in the midstream and, beating his cheeks and shaking his horns bound with green sedge, thus wild he begins his intense speech: “Is this the reward I get, O ruler of the gods, I who so often have been a host and an accomplice to your doings (nor am I afraid to remind you).— Look what slaughter, what death I carry in my stream. Continuously I am covered in piles of spears and other stuff too. The series of wars occupy all my stream, all my waves breathe out horror, recent ghosts wander below and above, rejoining my two banks in a foggy mist. I myself, a river resounding with sacred howls, I who am reported to wash soft thyrsos-staffs and Bacchus’ horns with my pure fresh water, I am crammed with dead corpses and seek a narrow channel to the sea. The impious waters of Strymon do not swim with such gore, nor does the foaming Hebrus turn redder when Gradivus is on the warpath.”

At first, Ismenos’ private grief over the loss of his grandson is charged through his body: he is depicted as beating his face and shaking his body from side to side. Nevertheless, immediately after this, his private suffering grows into a political critique of the war. He condemns the war as *nefas*, and demands an end to all the suffering that he has had to witness. A male voice, therefore, is utilised to express the values traditionally deemed ‘feminine’ in the epic universe.

A similar attitude can be observed in Statius’ Creon, whose fear I have discussed above. After Menoeceus is dead, Creon’s grief features grim bitterness and hatred towards the unholy war—a war that he himself is somewhat guilty of stirring up and devising.⁹⁸ In book eleven, Creon demands that Eteocles face his brother in a final duel to put an end to the war once and for all. His ardent anger is motivated by his private loss, an emotion that grows into a political resolution:

—*sed ardens/ecce aderat luctu dicturusque omnia belli/libertate Creon:
urit fera corda Menoeceus,/nulla patri requies, illum quaeritque tenetque,
illum sanguineos proflantem pectore rivos/aspicit et saeva semper de turre
cadentem. ‘ibis’, ait, ‘neque te ulterius, fratrumque ducumque/pessime, fune-
ribus patriae lacrimisque potentem,/Eumenidum bellique reum, patiemur
inulti.—redde agedum miseris fratres natosque patresque,/redde arvis
domibusque viros!*

STAT. *Theb.* 11.262–267, 11.269–271, 11.279–280

98 On Oedipus, see Stat. *Theb.* 11.580–633. On Creon, 11.262–267, 12.60–92.

—but here comes Creon, burning with grief and intent on freely speaking his whole mind concerning the war. Menoeceus inflames his fierce heart, the father has no peace. It is him he seeks and holds, it is him whom he sees panting out streams of blood from his breast, evermore falling from the cruel tower.—“You shall go”, he says, “and no longer, you worst of brothers and worst of leaders, powerful in your country’s deaths and tears, guilty of the Furies and the war, no longer shall we suffer you unavenged.—Come on! Give back to the poor ones their brothers, sons, and fathers, give back men to the fields and households.”

We should note that this is not controlled grief, regulated by social norms. Creon’s speech is inspired by a passionate feeling of loss that “burns” him: he is restless and *ardens*, with *fera corda*, and his mind is occupied by nightmarish visions of his son’s death. Again, the similarities to Statius’ Thetis and Atalanta are obvious and deliberate. However, as in the case of Ismenos, discussed above, Creon’s private suffering eventually finds an outlet that fits in with the logic of symbolic language. His burning pain is transformed into a critique of the war itself, and into a condemnation of all the futile suffering.

These episodes demonstrate that, at least in Statius’ *Thebaid*, the line that distinguishes the role of a mourning mother from that of a father appears to be extremely fine. Epic fathers convincingly perform not only the role of a fearful mother but also that of a grieving one, a figure who condemns the warlike drive of the epic. In some cases, the episode’s impact on the reader can be considered to be even more powerful when this condemnation comes from a father. To see a male political leader, a faithful servant of the temporal scene, question the meaning of it all raises questions of the costs of war even more powerfully than if the character had been a mother—someone ‘naturally’ more in touch with the drives of her body and with her private suffering.

What is ironic and controversial is that very often, when they harshly condemn war and violence, the grieving mothers (and fathers) end up tangled in the web of violence and destruction themselves. The river god Ismenos is a good example: after harshly condemning the carnage of war, he vents his desperation in terrible violence and takes revenge on Hippomedon. His pain is too strong to be expressed in any other way, and therefore, he actually becomes an instrument of the violent drive of epic that he is criticising. As Newlands points out, this is a phenomenon that typically marks the mourning mothers of Statius’ epic: despite their virtual *pietas*, there is a frightening element about them that does not fit in with the ideal of motherhood. Epic mothers have blood on their hands, and their grief contains a possibility of further viol-

ence and destruction.⁹⁹ Newlands discusses the socio-historical frame of the phenomenon, suggesting that the insignificance of motherhood to the Flavian imperial propaganda and the breaking of the Julio-Claudian stereotype of the powerful mother can be perceived in the Flavian poets' negative image of motherhood. Furthermore, she seeks an explanation in the putative decline of mother-child relationships caused by high divorce and child mortality rates during the Flavian era.¹⁰⁰

Although I strongly support Newlands' argument about the threatening aspects of motherhood in Flavian epic, I am reluctant to believe that the issue could be explained by the social circumstances of the Flavian age—especially since so little can be attested with certainty about the assumed 'decline of motherhood'. Furthermore, as Hope points out, the idea of the threatening overtones of female grief is deeply rooted in Roman Republican literature: for instance, in the *Pro Milone*, Cicero describes Fulvia as weeping over the body of the murdered Clodius, displaying his wounds and exciting his followers to revenge.¹⁰¹ Therefore, rather than viewing it as a phenomenon typical of the Flavian era, I prefer to see the threatening elements of female grief as having some particular narrative and ideological significance in the larger Roman literary tradition.

In order to understand how the phenomenon plays out in the narrative strategies of different Roman war epics, it is useful to analyse a few select examples in more detail. Often, the looming threat connected to female grief becomes evident when the men who are responsible for the war express their worry about the mothers' fury that is to fall upon them. Polynices, upon planning the war against Thebes, first states that "let no household blame me for their suffering; let no furious mother glance at me askance" (*non me ullius domus anxia culpet/respectentve truces oblique lumine matres*)—fully aware that this is exactly what is going to happen if the war is carried out.¹⁰² Fear of the consequences of his actions is likewise apparent in Silius Italicus' Varro, when the consul returns from the disastrous battle of Cannae. The narrator depicts his return as a ride of shame, stating that

*quod vero reduci tum se populusque patresque/offferrent, non gratari, sed
poscere natos/quisque suos fratresque simul miseraeque parentes/ire vide-
bantur laceranda ad consulis ora.*

SIL. *Pun.* 10.634–637

99 Newlands 2006, 203–205, 209–210.

100 Newlands 2006, esp. 220–223.

101 Hope 2011, 102–103. Cic. *Mil.* 28.21.

102 Stat. *Theb.* 3.376–377.

However, although the people and the Senate then showed up to meet him on his return, it seemed that they were not there to thank him, but that each one was demanding a lost son or brother, and that miserable mothers were prepared to tear the consul's face off.

Grim and frightening overtones of motherly grief are clearly present in these episodes; instead of being directed towards the mothers themselves—as in the case of Euryalus' mother—they are now targeted at the men responsible for their losses. Paradoxically, while opposing and condemning the violence of war, the women also fall victims to it, as their own private suffering turns into a drive of destruction.

The situation does not concern mothers alone. Some of the most impressive variants of this phenomenon deal with devoted, grief-stricken wives. In book two of the *Punica*, when depicting the siege and fall of Saguntum, Silius introduces Tiburna, a matron who mourns her fallen husband. The wife's grief is so intense that the Fury Tisiphone considers her an ideal instrument for spreading havoc and destruction.¹⁰³ The Fury disguises herself to look like the grieving matron and rushes amongst the people, inciting them to a mass suicide.¹⁰⁴ At first sight, the episode might seem strange and implausible: a noble matron of a distinguished family publicly stirring up violence and self-destruction is not the most likely scenario. But when one reads the text more closely, it is easy to understand why the internal audience—the despairing Saguntines—might consider Tiburna a plausible messenger of the gospel of destruction. Bereaved of her husband, she is known to have been in a state of intense mourning. Along with the husband, she has lost much of the social power and influence that she used to wield in the community—to the reader well-versed with Virgilian epic, this is already a strong indication that this woman might sooner or later be caught up in uncontrollable *furor*. The episode is clearly modelled on Amata's frenzy in *Aeneid* 7, and like its poetic model, it manifests the merging of different bodily drives: grief turns into fury, and fury leads to self-destruction. Intense sorrow, desperation and destruction are all funda-

103 Compare the episodes in Virgilian epic, where a deity intervenes in a form of someone whom the audience can easily imagine to be in a disturbed state of mind. In *Aeneid* 5, the Trojan women burn down the ships after Iris, disguised as a distraught elderly matron, stirs them up; in book seven, Turnus is approached by Allecto, disguised as an old priestess of Juno. The common denominators in these episodes are the age and gender of the messenger; arguably, to the projected reader of Roman epic, elderly women would seem more prone to overwhelming emotions and hence plausible agitators of upheaval and turmoil. See Zarker 1978, 21.

104 Sil. *Pun.* 2.558; compare the mass suicide of Pompeian soldiers in Luc. *Phar.* 4.558–573.

mental bodily drives that belong to the semiotic modality—therefore, they often find their most powerful articulation through one another. When the person is taken over by one of them, it is easy for the others to enter: in this way, grief makes the individual vulnerable to the drives of death and destruction.

The same theme is varied in Statius' *Thebaid*, where the poet explores the darker side of female grief through the figures of Argia and Antigone. In book twelve, Polynices' wife and sister temporarily join forces in order to bury his body at the dead of night.¹⁰⁵ The women's determination to do the right thing and disobey the law forbidding the burial has often been considered the best expression of *pietas* in the *Thebaid*.¹⁰⁶ Nevertheless, Argia's and Antigone's virtuousness appears in a different light when one pays attention to the violent overtones that mark their grief. When Argia sees the wound on Polynices' side, she curses his brother, swearing that she would "outdo the vultures, if only I could go [where he lies], and override the wild beasts" (*vincam volucres (sit adire potestas)/excludamque feras*).¹⁰⁷ The expression hints at a savage lacerating of the body—the idea is presumably evoked in order to emphasise the contrast between an honourable burial and the shameful fate of being consumed by vultures. However, it is also an expression of Argia's uncontrollable grief that awakens in her a bestial desire to attack Eteocles' body. The imagery of necromancy is hard to shake off, and it darkens the *pietas* of the faithful wife, whose intense grief, once again, opens the door for other animalistic drives to enter.

As for Antigone, her resort to the 'threatening world of animalism' is even more complete. The narrator depicts the princess as out of her mind with grief as she hastens out of the city:

—*amens, / ut paulum immisso cessit statio horrida somno, / erumpit muris,
fremitu quo territat agros / virginis ira leae, rabies cui libera tandem /
et primus sine matre furor.*

STAT. *Theb.* 12.354–358

105 Stat. *Theb.* 12.385–390. Lamari notes that the ban on burial after the Theban war was a much discussed topos in ancient literature, because it embodied important political, religious and social issues. Lamari 2009, 408, 413. For further discussion of the motif of burial in Statius' epic, see van der Keur 2013, 333–337.

106 Vessey 1973, 131–134; Delarue 2000, 356–362; Lesueur 1992, Arrigoni 1984, 882–884; La Penna 1981, 231; Lovatt 2006, 66. For some differing opinions, see e.g. Ganiban 2007, Hershkowitz 1998, 247–301.

107 Stat. *Theb.* 12.342–343.

—driven out of her mind, she breaks out from the walls (when the grim watchman had surrendered to sleep for a little while) with a roar like an angry cry of a virgin lioness, which terrifies the fields. Her rage was free at last and, with her mother nowhere around, her fury was unbridled for the first time.

Horrida, ira, rabies and *furor* are terms used to transform the royal maiden into something akin to a wild beast—they remind the reader of Argia's blood-thirsty desires ten lines earlier. Antigone's very humanity is called into question, as the animalistic death drive occupies her grief-stricken mind (or rather, her body). Thus, behind the pious façade of these two women lies uncontrollable rage and a desire to destroy. Their grief drives them into a *furor* that is in a risk of spreading and accentuating the violence already done. These women, despite their virtuous attempts to fulfill their duties as a grieving wife and sister, are not easy points of identification to the reader. Their grief might be a point of identification, but once it develops into an uncontrollable drive of destruction targeted at the surrounding world, they inevitably become threatening others, whose very humanity is called into question.

As with the archetype of a fearful mother, on this instance too, the male and female outbursts of emotion appear strikingly similar. Especially in post-Virgilian epic, it is easy to find men playing the role of a dangerous grieving woman. A few examples from the works of Lucan, Statius and Silius Italicus are worth comparing here, especially because these passages are strongly allusive in terms of each other, and because they repeat the same pattern whereby intense grief turns into destructive behaviour. In *Thebaid* 3, Statius depicts Ide, *magna parens iuvenum*,¹⁰⁸ desperately looking for her twin sons on the battlefield and, upon finding them, lamenting uncontrollably over their bodies. It is striking to see that Ide's search is represented as more threatening than pitiable:

—*Ide/squalentem sublata comam liventiaque ora/ungue premens (nec iam infelix miserandaque, verum/terror inest lacrimis), per et arma et corpora passim/canitiem impexam dira tellure volutans/quaerit inops natos omnique in corpore plangit.*

STAT. *Theb.* 3.134–139

—Ide, with hair standing up stiff and pressing her bruised face with her nails (no longer poor and pitiable, there is true terror in her tears). Passing

108 Stat. *Theb.* 3.134.

through both weapons and bodies everywhere, turning her unkempt grey hair on the dreadful earth, she helplessly seeks her sons and bewails them in every corpse.

With this tableau of an out-of-control grief, the poet marks the mother as a scary, semi-chthonic character. This impression is strengthened in the next line, when Statius compares Ide to a Thessalian witch searching for bodies on which to practice dark magic—as Micozzi points out, a reference to Erichtho in the *Pharsalia* seems obvious and deliberate.¹⁰⁹

There is a parallel to this episode in the *Punica*. In the second book, during the siege of Saguntum, an anonymous mother mourns the suicide of her twin sons. The episode reminds the reader of Statius' Ide thrusting herself upon her sons' bodies; however, there is a particularly violent element about the grief of this mother in the *Punica*:

—*geminaeque nota decepta figurae, / funera mutato revocabat nomine mater, / donec, transacto tremebunda per ubera ferro, / tunc etiam ambiguos cecidit super inscia natos.*

SIL. *Pun.* 2.846–849

—the mother, deceived by the likeness of the twins, called back the dead by wrong names until, driving the sword through her own quivering breast, she fell down on her sons whom even then she still could not tell apart.

Whereas the conduct of Statius' Ide merely forebodes danger and violence, the anonymous mother in the *Punica* actualises her violent potential by choosing the road of self-destruction. She manages to do what many of the fearful or grieving mothers in epic—Thetis, Atalanta, Euryalus' mother—only dream of, and actually ends her suffering by erasing herself from the narrative. It is noteworthy that this act seems to be largely motivated by her confused state of mind; she is completely overtaken by her intense grief—unable to speak, unable to think and unable to see another way out. The narrator intriguingly stresses the likeness of the twins by stating that the anxious mother cannot tell them apart (*etiam ambiguos*)—more importantly, it would appear that she cannot tell *herself* apart from the sons who both are her flesh and blood, both

109 Micozzi 1998, 100–101; see Stat. *Theb.* 3.140–146. For further discussion of the Ide episode, see Vessey 1973, 124–125. Lucan's Thessalian witch Erichtho is analysed in more detail in Johnson 1987, 1–34, and in Danese 1994.

shaped in her likeness. Her final desperate act, therefore, when she takes her life with the same sword that her sons died from and collapses on top of their bodies, appears as a desperate attempt to erase the difference between the three. It is a negation of the primal abjection, whereby the mother and the sons become one again—all three of them.

It is intriguing to note the striking similarities that these two episodes bear to a passage in the *Thebaid*, where Statius describes Oedipus' 'effeminate' grief at the sight of his sons' bodies.¹¹⁰ A deliberate gender role reversal can be observed here, as the father takes on all the classic attributes of a mourning mother—including the madness that implies further violence and destruction:

*—insternit totos frigentibus artus./nec vox ulla seni: iacet immugitque
cruentis/vulneribus, nec verba diu temptata sequuntur./dum tractat galeas
atque ora latentia quaerit,/tandem muta diu genitor suspiria solvit: 'tarda,
meam, Pietas, longo post tempore mentem/percutis? estne sub hoc hom-
inis clementia corde? vincis io miserum, vincis, Natura, parentem!/en habeo
gemitus lacrimaeque per arida serpunt/vulnera et in molles sequitur manus
impia planctus./accipite infandae iusta exsequialia mortis,/crudeles nimi-
umque mei. nec noscere natos/alloquiumque aptare licet; dic, virgo,
precanti,/quem teneo?—ei mihi, quos nexus fratrum, quae vulnera tracto!/
solvite, quaeso, manus infestasque vincula tandem/dividite, et medium
nunc saltem admittite patrem.'*

STAT. *Theb.* 11.607–613, 11.624–626

—he strews his whole body on the cold corpses. The old man has no voice to speak with; he lies and grumbles upon the blood-soaked wounds, but the words long attempted do not follow. But while the father tugs at the helmets, looking for the hidden faces, then at last his sighs, which for a long time remained mute, are released in words: "Tardy Piety, do you touch my mind after such a long time? Does human tenderness exist in this heart? You conquer, O nature, you conquer this miserable father! Look! I can moan, and tears creep down these withered wounds, and my impious hand follows and beats my breast as if I was some softy. Accept the funeral rites fitting to an abominable death, you savages, too truly mine. I cannot even distinguish my sons and adapt my words [to address them individually]. Tell me, girl, as I beg, which one am I holding?—Ah!

110 On male lament and its transgressions in Statius' epic poetry, see McCullough 2011.

What brotherly bonds, what wounds do I touch! Release your hands, I beg, break at last your infested chains, and now, at least, let your father come between you.”

At first sight, ‘being conquered by nature’ appears to refer to Oedipus’ final breakdown in the face of his loss: his hateful personality and self-centred bitterness are finally overcome by grief for another human being. However, I would suggest that *vincis, Natura, parentem* can also be read as Oedipus’ renunciation of the temporal scene. At the sight of his dead sons, his past and his present fade away, and all that is left is a connection to his sons, a connection that he feels as physical pain: *crudeles nimiumque mei*. Nature conquers civilisation, just as with Atalanta, for whom the fear for her son suddenly “aroused the mother in all her heart” (*totoque erexit pectore matrem*).¹¹¹ Like an epic mourning mother, Oedipus forgets about the surrounding world and about his place in it, as he longs for unity with the sons who are his flesh and blood. The history, the story, and its synchronic narrative—who did what and to whom—no longer matter, since they belong in the temporal scene and in the symbolic order, things that have ceased to exist for him.

Oedipus’ complete entry into the semiotic sphere is stressed by many details. In the beginning of the passage, it is explicitly stated that he struggles to find words to express himself (*nec vox ulla seni—, nec verba diu temptata sequuntur*). Even when he finally finds his voice, the most important part of his communication remains semiotic, as he himself acknowledges: *en habeo gemitus lacrimaeque per arida serpunt/vulnera*, he states. Clearly, there are no words for what Oedipus is feeling: it is something that can be communicated only with groans, moans, tears and touches. Like the mother of the twins in Silius’ *Punica*, Oedipus strokes the bodies and the faces of his sons. And as in the Silian model, here too the narrator stresses Oedipus’ inability to tell his sons apart—technically, this is a reference to his blindness, but read in comparison with the passage in the *Punica*, I suggest there could be another meaning to it. Like the mother of twins in the *Punica*, this father of twins, too, is not only at pains to distinguish between his sons, but also struggles to tell *himself* apart from them. Oedipus, too, gropes for a sword, desperately trying to unite himself with his sons in death—it is noted that had Antigone not removed all the weapons, he would have succeeded.

It is therefore clear that Statius’ Oedipus takes on the role of an epic mother whose grief is transformed into a desperate drive of destruction. As if to under-

111 Stat. *Theb.* 9.570–582, 9.584.

line this, when the king beats his breast with ‘womanly wailings’, he refers to himself as *parens*, not *pater*, thus breaking down the distinction between mothering and fathering roles. In chapter three, I discussed Oedipus as a male example of ‘feminine’ *furor* that makes the war ignite—here, he demonstrates that in Roman war epic, overwhelming grief and sorrow are no more a prerogative of women than are rage and bloodlust. All in all, Statius’ Oedipus reveals to the reader the difficulty of gendering the semiotic and the symbolic spheres in Roman war epic: overwhelming emotions could make anyone vulnerable to the surge of animalistic drives.

The Oedipus episode can be compared to a passage from book three of Lucan’s *Pharsalia*—there are many shared elements in these storylines, and it is not a stretch to assume that Lucan’s model might have influenced Statius in his creation of Oedipus’ character. In the *Pharsalia*, when the city of Massilia is falling after a lengthy siege, the father of the young Argus witnesses the fatal wounding of his son. When the tragedy sinks in, he immediately decides to give up the futile defense and to use his sword to take his own life.¹¹² The father’s experience is depicted in a manner strikingly similar to that of Oedipus:

Non lacrimae cecidere genis, non pectora tundit,/Distentis toto riguit sed corpore palmis./Nox subit atque oculos vastae obduxere tenebrae,/Et miserum cernens agnoscere desinit Argum.—Ut torpore senex caruit virisque cruentus/Coepit habere dolor; ‘Non perdam tempora’, dixit/‘A saevis permissa deis, iugulumque senilem/Confodiam.—Nondum destituit calidus tua volnera sanguis,/Semianimisque iaces et adhuc potes esse superstes.’

LUC. *Phar.* 3.733–736 3.741–744, 3.746–747

No tears fell down his cheeks, no blows on his breast; he merely stretched out his hands and his whole body went stiff. Night came over him, and great darkness veiled his eyes; seeing the poor Argus, he ceased to recognise him.—When the old man recovered from his numbness, and cruel grief began to assert its power, he spoke: “I will not waste the time that the cruel gods have granted me, but will pierce this old throat.—Not yet has the warm blood left your wounds, and you lie there half-alive; you can still survive me.”

112 Luc *Phar.* 3.709–751.

The father's shock clearly recalls Lucan's depiction of the mother stunned speechless by her son's death, discussed earlier in this chapter. Here, too, the parent is dumbstruck and emotionally bare: *distentis toto rigit sed corpore palmis* makes it seem as if his body was acting on its own, without his command or awareness. The father sinks 'into the night'—one is reminded of Statius' Creon, whose heart was 'drowned in a dark fog' that confused his senses.¹¹³ The shock, caused by the sudden loss, hampers the father's thinking and perception—and, once again, it is implied that he too has trouble recognising his son.

When the tragedy finally sinks in, Argus' father is filled, not with pious grief like the Lucanian matron in *Phar.* 2.21–28, but with fierce rage and bitterness. His *dolor* bursts out in a violent and self-destructive desire to perish together with his son, to join him in death. Like the Silian matron discussed above, he pierces his own breast and, eager to die, jumps down off the railing, "in such a hurry to die before his son that he would not trust a single mode of death" (*letum praecedere nati/Festinantem animam morti non credidit uni*).¹¹⁴ This episode is perhaps the most powerful example of a strong drive of self-destruction that adds to the chaos of the battle scene. Arguably, like the many bitter and ferocious grieving women in Roman epic, Argus' father is not an easy character for the reader to relate to. While his parental grief is more than understandable and is depicted in a deeply humane and empathetic manner, the ensuing self-destructive rage robs him of his epic subjectivity and makes him a threatening other to marvel at. Presumably, for the poet of the *Pharsalia*, this kind of perversion of pious paternal love is a useful narrative tool, because it stresses the havoc of the civil war and its destructive impact on the moral state of the individual. On a deeper psychological level, however, the episode can be read as a triumph of the *chôra*: the father moves from speechless astonishment to violent fury and, by means of self-destruction, renounces the temporal scene that he has been serving so loyally and in vain.

From the episodes in the epics of Lucan, Statius, and Silius Italicus that we have discussed above, there emerges a clear pattern that defines how the dark and gloomy overtones of grief are discussed in post-Virgilian war epic. These passages are connected by repetitive elements that underline how 'beyond words' the experience of loss is: averbal groans and silences, disrupted sentences, weakened perception, and of course, the impending self-destruction. Intriguingly, however, this experience appears as far less gendered than has

113 Stat. *Theb.* 10.735–737.

114 Luc. *Phar.* 3.750–751.

often been assumed. The chthonic rage and the foreboding of violence are not typical of epic women alone: surprisingly often, it is the men—loyal servants of the temporal scene—who fall victims to a private grief that opens the door for the destructive bodily drives to enter. Consequently, this kind of complete lack of self-control and reason is something that dooms these characters to a lack of narrative subjectivity: because their experience cannot be expressed in words, it is impossible for the reader to relate to the fury that dwells in their hearts. At the same time, however, these women and men are prime examples of characters who are simultaneously central and marginal: although they end up being erased from the narrative, they remain in it as a memory of a nagging uncertainty that underlies and weakens the heroic drive of the epic.