

## ‘Playing Supermen’: The Manly Matrons of Roman Epic

Whereas reckless behaviour and the lack of emotional control are something traditionally associated with women in epic, the ideals of Stoic magnanimity and self-restraint have usually been considered to be the ‘male’ ideals inscribed into the epic narrative. In the previous chapter, I sought to demonstrate that the gendering of emotions in war epic is not this simple, and that the resort to the semiotic modality of communication—a result of overpowering emotions such as fear, or grief—is something that very often marks male characters too. In this chapter, we shall look more closely at the other side of the phenomenon: at those women who appear to successfully manifest the male virtues of the genre and who challenge the preconception of epic women as ‘transgressive’ or ‘over-emotional’. These kinds of female characters can be considered as the best examples of women ‘absorbed’ into the male ideology of epic: their communication takes place almost exclusively in the symbolic sphere, and they fully subscribe to the norms and mechanisms of the patriarchal society. In Kristevan terms, they are “identifying with the father”—that is, with the values considered to be masculine—and this way, they “gain access to the temporal scene, i.e., to political affairs”.<sup>1</sup> Arguably, these women are the reason why the warlike, destructive conduct of some other female characters in epic appears all the more disturbing. The women who identify with the Stoic ideals of logic and self-restraint seem to show that this is something women can do—hence, they make the others who do not do so to appear either to have failed in the social role of a civilised human being or to have deliberately chosen the road of rebellion.

The best example of such a woman is the literary archetype of a devoted and virtuous wife, a recurring figure in Roman war epic. She is a character who appears to embody both male *and* female virtues, and is therefore sometimes referred to as *matrona virilis*—a manly matron.<sup>2</sup> Remarkably, the combination

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<sup>1</sup> Kristeva 1974 (in Moi 1986, 154–156).

<sup>2</sup> See Bessone 2002, 190. For further discussion of this topos in genres other than epic, see Petrone 1995, *passim*; Arrigoni 1984, 877.

of both male and female virtues in her person does not result in a conflict or a travesty, but typically creates a positive moral *exemplum* for the audience to admire and emulate. These are women who are 'playing supermen' in the best possible sense of the expression: overcoming their innate feminine weakness, they manifest courage and selflessness that outweigh those of many male characters. At the same time, however, they do not transgress the social norms that regulate acceptable female conduct; their behaviour does not question the hierarchy of the patriarchal society or its ways of working. By being simultaneously brave patriots and chaste and selfless wives, the manly matrons of Roman epic recall the exemplary tradition of Roman historiography: they bring to mind the stories of famous women who showed exceptional magnanimity without compromising their *pudicitia*. In this chapter, I will investigate into the narrative and ideological functions of this epic archetype, and examine how it contributes to the question of female subjectivity in the genre. My argument is that, because of the combination of male and female virtues, merged in their persons, manly matrons can become possible points of identification for both male and female readers of epic who wish to associate themselves with the defining ideals of *Romanitas*.

### 1 *Mentem aequare viros et laudis poscere partem: Female Groups in Defense of Their Cities*

Most typically in Roman war epic, the courage and high-mindedness of women comes to light at the crucial moments of the war, when the community is facing remarkable hardships. In *Aeneid* 11, the Laurentian matrons take part in the defense of the city when they see the death of Camilla, the Volscian warrior maiden. We read that amid the general chaos and confusion,

*ipsae de muris summo certamine matres/(monstrat amor verus patriae), ut  
videre Camillam,/tela manu trepidae iaciunt ac robore duro/stipitibus fer-  
rum sudibusque imitantur obustis/praecipites, primaeque mori pro moeni-  
bus ardent.*

VERG. *Aen.* 11.891–895

Mothers themselves, when they see Camilla, in keenest struggle (true love of their homeland guides them), throw spears with trembling hands from the walls, and hastily substitute hard oak stakes and poles, sharpened with fire, for swords. And they are ablaze to be the first to die defending the walls.

The poet uses the word *imitantur* to underline that the women do not wield actual weapons, but use other objects in place of them. This has led some readers to suggest that Virgil views the women's actions, not as heroic, but rather as a pitiful mimicking of the male deeds of war. Arrigoni considers the women's reaction to be emotional and amateurish; Quinn views it as an act of "perverted heroism" and as a demonstration of war's corrupting influence on the women.<sup>3</sup> These arguments are clearly grounded on the popular way of reading war epic, which regards the binary opposition of genders as an integral part of the genre. According to this juxtaposition, female characters—always and without exception—cannot be assessed by the standards of epic heroism. Even when they manifest a patriotic spirit of self-sacrifice, this is at best an 'imitation' or 'perversion' of the idealised male conduct. The 'damned if you do, damned if you don't' double standard by which patriarchy tends to assess women is evident in these readings. Identifying with the male values of clan and *patria* is the best women can do—but even then, they are inevitably marginalised and belittled within these units of male power.

Zarker, on the other hand, has suggested an alternative way of reading this episode. He argues that the women's defense of the city walls should be taken seriously and seen as an exceptional expression of patriotic courage in the genre of war epic. He considers Virgil's Latin matrons to be "fit foremothers" of the strong women of the late Republic and stresses that, unlike most epic women, they are not acting out of divine inspiration, but of their own free will.<sup>4</sup> In his view, the matrons are actually imitating *Camilla's* example and, as a result, "become like Amazons themselves".<sup>5</sup> Although Zarker's attempt to align the Laurentian women's actions with the courage and skill of the warrior maiden might be something of a stretch, his argument concerning the women's patriotism and its value to the construction of Roman identity is observant. It is important to notice that these are the same women who, in book seven, spread chaos as maenadic warmongers. But now, in their community's hour of need, it is not private pain but *amor verus patriae*—an emotion firmly grounded in the political sphere—that drives them on. If not in their conduct, then at least in their state of mind they could very well be considered points of identification to the male reader of the *Aeneid*.

Another detail worthy of attention is that the concept of *patria* in question is not specified. It appears significant that the women of Laurentum are overwhelmed by patriotic love at the sight of *Camilla*, a Volscian warrior maiden.

3 Arrigoni 1984, 887; Quinn 1968, 251.

4 Zarker 1978, 21.

5 Zarker 1978, 20.

This does not seem to pose any kind of a problem to Virgil: without the slightest controversy, the women become representatives of the *esprit de corps* among the Italian peoples—and by doing so, they deliver a message about the future unity of Italy, an idea that is so crucial to Virgil's understanding of *Romanitas* at large. Thus, by conveying the Laurentian women's spontaneous emotion and action, the poet is able to represent the war in the *Aeneid* as a conflict that both dissolves identities and constructs new ones. *Patria* is a flexible concept, and the Laurentian matrons' identification with the Volscian warrior maiden underlines this.

Virgil's epic successors can be found repeatedly rewriting this episode to suit their own war narratives. When Statius depicts the Thebans preparing for battle, he stresses the manly courage of the matrons:

*illas cogit amor, nec habent extrema pudorem:/ipsae tela viris, ipsae iram  
animosque ministrant,/hortanturque unaque ruunt—.*

STAT. *Theb.* 10.570–573

Love urges them on; their ardour knows no shame. They themselves hand weapons to the men, they themselves supply the anger to their minds, exhort them, and rush along with them.

Statius' *matres* are notably less active in actual warfare than Virgil's Laurentian matrons. They do not participate in the battle themselves, but encourage the men with their warlike spirit. In addition to *Aeneid* 11, Statius is obviously alluding to *Aeneid* 7, where women's warlike frenzy excites the men to take up arms. However, there is a notable difference between the episodes in Virgil and Statius, since in the *Thebaid*, the warlike anger—referred to as *ira*, not *furor*—is a productive form of anger, channelled to the defence of community.<sup>6</sup> Another intriguing detail is that in the passage above, the Theban matrons are depicted as compromising their *pudor*, the ultimate feminine virtue, for the sake of this warlike anger.<sup>7</sup> They appear in public, stirring up battle lust and handling

6 Anger in Roman poetry and in Roman philosophy has been extensively studied during the past few decades. On some definitions of *ira* and *iracundia* in the Roman late Republican/early imperial context, see Harris 2001, 200–228. On the importance of *ira* and *furor*, and the different forms of anger in the *Aeneid*, see Harris 2001, 217–219; Wright 1997; Galinsky 1988; Gill 1997, 228–241; Putnam 1990; Hershkovitz 1998, esp. 95–124. For a more detailed analysis of the different aspects of anger and rage in the *Thebaid*, see Hershkovitz 1998, 247–301; Fantham 1997.

7 Stat. *Theb.* 10.570.

weapons—however, this behaviour is not represented as shameful or inappropriate, but as a laudable reaction to exceptional circumstances.

Silius Italicus, likewise, recalls the Virgilian model when he depicts matrons finding their courage and their patriotic devotion in times of trouble. When the Saguntines prepare for battle in *Punica* 1, the narrator stresses how all the citizens pull their weight to protect the city:

*hinc puer invalidique senes, hinc femina ferre/certat opem in dubiis miserando nava labori,/saxaque mananti subvectat vulnere miles.*

SIL. *Pun.* 1.561–563

Here a boy and feeble old men, and there a woman, struggle passionately to carry out the miserable toils at the moment of adversity, and soldiers with leaking wounds drag stones up [to fortify the walls].

In a very Virgilian manner, the matrons are praised for breaking their traditional roles in the community's hour of need. They take part in the defense of the city by reinforcing the wall, since all hands are needed for the task. Nevertheless, their actions are strictly supervised and regulated by the men. The women's behaviour transgresses the boundaries of their conventional social roles, but not up to the point where it would challenge the community's inner dynamics.

In another episode in the *Punica*, women's contribution to the war appears even more conventional. In book twelve, the Roman matrons are depicted as embodying the unity and the spirit of self-sacrifice amongst the Roman people—admirable emotions that the hardships of war have called forth. The poet relates how the news of a victory at Nola reaches the city and revives the morale of the people. Deserters are punished, and donations to the public cause are made:

*talia corda virum. sed enim nec femina cessat/mentem aequare viros et laudis poscere partem./omnis, prae sese portans capitisque manusque / antiquum decus ac derepta monilia collo,/certatim matrona ruit belloque ministrant./haud tanta cessisse viros in tempore tali/laudis sorte piget; factoque in saecula ituro/laetantur tribuisse locum. tum celsa senatus/subsequitur turba. in medium certamine magno/privatae cumulantur opes; nudare penates/ac nihil arcanos vitae melioris ad usus/seposuisse iuvat. coit et sine nomine vulgus./corpore sic toto ac membris Roma omnibus usa/exsanguis rursus tollebat ad aethera vultus.*

SIL. *Pun.* 12.306–319

Such were the hearts of men; and indeed, nor did the women delay in matching the manly minds, and claiming their share of the praise. All the matrons came forth together, bringing their old family ornaments for head and hand, and necklaces snatched from their necks, and eagerly rushed to give them as a contribution for the war. And it did not irk the men at all to come second to women in praise in such times: they rejoiced in allowing a deed that would be remembered for generations to come. Then, the eminent throng of senators followed suit. With great rivalry, they piled up private wealth for the public cause, happy to strip their houses bare and put nothing aside for their private use in better times to come. And the nameless common people, too, joined in. Thus a united Rome made use of all her members and again raised her exhausted face towards the heaven.

The passage is firmly built on the Roman historiographic tradition, where the economic contribution of women during times of crisis is a recurring topos. Silius recalls Livy, in particular, who relates similar episodes that took place from the Punic Wars onwards.<sup>8</sup> The women's voluntary donation of their jewelry is an act that demonstrates the patriotic spirit of self-sacrifice among the Romans.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, it is crucial to notice that the value of the act is not primarily about money: by giving away their ornaments, the women sacrifice the symbols of their social status and power.<sup>10</sup> Thus, a spontaneous willingness to let go of these assets is depicted as one of the greatest sacrifices that women could make for the public cause. In particular, the women's moral *exemplum* is depicted as something that encourages the men to identify with them and to emulate their behaviour. *tum celsa senatus/subsequitur turba* makes clear that the matrons' spirit of self-sacrifice kindles imitation in the very leaders of society.

8 Liv. 5.25.8–10, 5.50.7, 27.37.9–10. See also App. *B Civ* 4.33; Plut. *Vit. Cam.* 8.3; Val. Max. 5.6.8.  
9 During the Republic, elite matrons were repeatedly blamed for their love of luxury. See, e.g., the debate over the annulment of the *lex Oppia* in 195 BCE; Livy reports a speech by Cato the Elder on this occasion, in which the elite matrons are harshly scorned for greed and for hoarding luxury goods. Liv. 34.3.1–2. In general, accusations of greed as one way of defaming unpopular women is a feature very typical of Roman literature; see, e.g., Cassius Dio on Fulvia (Cass. Dio 47.8.2), and Tacitus on Messalina and Agrippina the Younger (Tac. *Ann.* 11.1, 12.7, 12.59). On Terentia and Servilia, see Cic. *Att.* 2.4.5, 11.2.2, 12.32.2, 15.17.1, 12.20.4. During the Republic, laws such as the *lex Voconia*, *lex Falcidia* and *lex Oppia* were applied as an attempt to restrict and control the elite's excessive consumption; they have often been understood to be targeted against elite matrons in particular. See, e.g., the analysis by Bauman 1994, 34; Hemelrijk 1987, 220–222; Herrmann 1964, 55; Culham 2004, 146.

10 Hemelrijk 1987, 223–224, 231. See also Hermann 1994, 63.

These examples show that female virtuousness, and especially the ability to overcome the characteristically feminine vices—timidity, weakness, *avaritia* and *luxuria*—in the name of a greater good, are of crucial importance for the construction of Roman identity. The yearning for unity that marks both the Augustan and the Flavian periods is strongly reflected in the self-sacrificing, virtuous matrons in the epics of Virgil, Statius and Silius Italicus. In these works, the women's contributions to war are examples of a selfless devotion that overcomes the whole of the populace. For a moment, the people becomes one in a very tangible manner: all difference is dissolved, and the shared goals and values of the people are stressed. We should note that this can happen only when epic women identify with the value system of the temporal scene: when the inner logic and hierarchy of the society are taken for granted and remain unchallenged.

It is telling that these kinds of episodes are lacking in the *Pharsalia*, an epic that falls between the Augustan and the Flavian periods and generally expresses much less belief in the unity and virtuousness of the Roman people. In the *Pharsalia*, the farthest Lucan ever goes in representing the spirit of self-sacrifice in a group of elite matrons is an imaginary situation. Before the battle of Pharsalia, Pompey urges his soldiers on with a speech that alludes to the Virgilian model:

*Credite pendentes e summis moenibus urbis/crinibus effusis hortari in  
proelia matres;/credite grandaevum vetitumque aetate senatum/arma  
sequi sacros pedibus prosternere canos,/atque ipsam domini metuentem  
occurrere Romam—.*

LUC. *Phar.* 7.369–373

Imagine the matrons hanging from the top of the city walls with dishevelled hair, urging you to battle; imagine that elderly senators, whose age prevents them from following the camp, strew at your feet their hallowed grey hair, and that Rome herself, fearing to be subjected to a master, comes to meet you.

The Roman people, matrons included, are represented as virtuous and valiant, deeply committed to the Republican cause. However, they are such merely in Pompey's imagination. He is urging his soldiers to believe in something that does not really exist, namely, the Roman solidarity and team spirit as embodied in the group of matrons. The allusion to Livy's virtuous female groups of the distant past is deliberate and bitter, because as the reader well knows, *Pharsalia* is a battle between Romans and Romans. The matrons, therefore, are also

divided in the matter of war: there is no Other, no outsider enemy who could unite them in virtue (although Lucan's Pompey is picturing Caesar as one). The illusionary idea of virtuous women, therefore, is used to underline the dissolution of Roman unity in the Republic's darkest hour. The association between Roman women and Roman virtue therefore works both ways, as Lucan artfully demonstrates.

## 2 *Fida coniunx—comes ultima fati?*

As the examples discussed above show, in Roman war epic, female virtue is very often a collective phenomenon that manifests itself in groups of women. This is a feature characteristic of Roman literature in general: from the legendary past to the recorded events of the civil wars, Roman women can be observed as being at their strongest and most valiant when they form a group.<sup>11</sup> Not only do women boost each other's virtuousness when they come together, but their appearance in the public sphere also seems less inappropriate and less damaging to their *pudicitia* when there is a multitude of them. To some extent, the tradition that emphasises the virtuousness and power of female groups is doubtless due to the ritual significance of these kinds of groups in the Roman religious sphere. On the other hand, it can be considered to reflect the literary traditions of Athenian drama, where female groups often represent the public opinion.

The strongly collective nature of female virtuousness notwithstanding, Roman epic poets also repeatedly depict individual matrons who are able to deal courageously with a crisis and to 'rise above their gender' all on their own. These characters are most typical of post-Virgilian epic, and what they all have in common is that the status of a wife is clearly their most defining characteristic. Their devotion to their husbands' political ideals and their willingness to share their partners' hardships are qualities that mark these women throughout their appearance. Like most of the recurring archetypes in Roman war epic, this character too strongly reflects the literary traditions of Roman historiography. In their depictions of the civil war period, Appian, Velleius Paterculus and Cassius Dio describe devoted wives who expose themselves to all sorts of dangers in order to save their husbands from proscriptions.<sup>12</sup> It has been argued that these stories were, at least partially, an attempt to shape

<sup>11</sup> Discussed further in Mustakallio 1990; Mustakallio 2012.

<sup>12</sup> App. *B Civ.* 4.39–40; Vell. Pat. 2.67.2; Cass. Dio 47.7.4–5.



reality through literary representation. As Hallett points out, in Republican politics, wives were often considered less reliable allies than blood relatives. Since marriages were generally short-lived and determined by political alliances, it is likely that many elite men felt more comfortable relying on their mothers and sisters in matters of political importance, rather than on their wives.<sup>13</sup> While it is almost impossible to prove such a claim, it is more than probable that the political environment to some extent influenced the literary portraits of devoted wives in the works of Roman authors. It is notable that in Roman historiography, an endlessly loyal and devoted wife, whenever she appears, comes off as a half-mythical figure, a treasure of immeasurable value and a cause of continuous amazement. This kind of glorification of women who played by the rules of the patriarchy and identified with values that were generally considered masculine could be a way of validating this kind of behaviour and of setting it up on a pedestal for others to emulate.

It is notable that in this narrative structure, the virtuous wives are usually highly aware of their own value to their husbands' cause. The most famous example is Porcia, daughter of Cato the younger and wife to Brutus. Porcia's reputation is based on her role as a member of one of the most prominent *optimates* families of the late Republic.<sup>14</sup> Because she was so strongly associated with 'the last Republicans', Porcia unsurprisingly became a character in whom the historiographers of the Principate could later locate all the virtues of an idealised Roman matron of the 'good old days'.<sup>15</sup> The result was an archetypal wife-figure, a sort of Cornelia "mother of the Gracchi" Africana reborn.<sup>16</sup>

Plutarch, in particular, makes Porcia not only a pinnacle of *pudicitia*, but also a moral *exemplum* in whom this idealised female quality is complemented by

13 Hallett 1984, 214, 224–226. See also Valerius Maximus' exemplary stories on marital love, where loyalty and faithfulness are attributed mostly to husbands, not to wives. Val. Max. 4.6, 6.7.

14 Plut. *Vit. Brut.* 13.2–11, Val. Max. 3.2.15, Cass. Dio 44.13.2–4.

15 Porcia's reputation did not suffer from the fact that her husband was defamed as Caesar's murderer; in Roman imperial literature, her devotion to the family is always depicted as just, unshakable and admirable. After Brutus' death at Philippi, Porcia is said to have taken her own life by swallowing live coals. Plut. *Vit. Brut.* 53.4–7; see also Val. Max. 4.6.5.

16 Cornelia, daughter of Publius Cornelius Scipio Africanus (the victor over Hannibal), became one of the legendary female archetypes in Roman culture. Being both Scipio's daughter and mother to Tiberius and Gaius Gracchus (two of the most famous and controversial politicians of the late Republic), she exemplified virtuous female behaviour in all the roles suitable to an elite matron. See Plut. *Ti. Gracch.* 1.1–2; Plut. *C. Gracch.* 4.2–4, 19.1–3; Val. Max. 4.4.

manly courage and *magnanimitas*. He relates a famous story about Porcia cutting her own thigh in order to demonstrate her indifference to pain—on this occasion, Plutarch gives her a voice of her own, and an elaborately constructed speech where she highlights her own virtue:

Ἐγώ, Βρούτε, Κάτωνος οὔσα θυγάτηρ εἰς τὸν σὸν ἐδόθην οἶκον οὐχ ὥσπερ αἱ παλλακευόμεναι, κοίτης μεθέξουσα καὶ τραπέζης μόνον, ἀλλὰ κοινωνὸς μὲν ἀγαθῶν εἶναι, κοινωνὸς δὲ ἀνιαρῶν. τὰ μὲν οὖν σὰ πάντα περὶ τὸν γάμον ἀμεμπτα. τῶν δὲ παρ' ἐμοῦ τίς ἀπόδειξις ἢ χάρις, εἰ μήτε σοι πάθος ἀπόρρητον συνδιοίσω μήτε φροντίδα πίστεως δεομένην; οἶδ' ὅτι γυναικεία φύσις ἀσθενῆς δοκεῖ λόγον ἐνεγκεῖν ἀπόρρητον. ἀλλ' ἔστι τις, ὦ Βρούτε, καὶ τροφῆς ἀγαθῆς καὶ ὀμιλίας χρηστῆς εἰς ἦθος ἰσχύς. ἐμοὶ δὲ καὶ τὸ Κάτωνος εἶναι θυγατέρα καὶ τὸ Βρούτου γυναικῆ πρόσσεστιν. οἷς πρότερον μὲν ἦττον ἐπεποίθειν, νῦν δ' ἐμαυτὴν ἔγνωκα καὶ πρὸς πόνον ἀήττητον εἶναι.

PLUT. *Vit. Brut.* 13.4–6

Brutus, I am Cato's daughter, and I was brought into your house, not like a mere concubine, to share your bed and board merely, but to be a partner in your joys, and a partner in your troubles. You, indeed, are faultless as a husband; but how can I show you any grateful service if I am to share neither your secret suffering nor the anxiety which craves a loyal confidant? I know that woman's nature is thought too weak to endure a secret; but good rearing and excellent companionship go far towards strengthening the character, and it is my happy lot to be both the daughter of Cato and the wife of Brutus. Before this I put less confidence in these advantages, but now I know that I am superior even to pain.<sup>17</sup>

Hallett considers this episode to be one of the best examples in the whole of Roman literature where the emphasis is placed on gender likeness, instead of difference. She argues that by representing exemplary male courage in a woman, the author questions the alleged difference between the nature of men and women, depicting them in essence as potentially the same.<sup>18</sup> I would suggest, however, that what happens is actually the opposite, since Porcia's speech explicitly stresses the innate sexual difference and her successful struggle to overcome it. It is striking that the *exemplum* operates on a highly injunctive mode—the very reason why Plutarch relates the story is to emphasise the

17 English translation of the *Life of Brutus* by B. Perrin, LCL 1961.

18 Hallett 1989, 63.

exceptionality of Porcia's behaviour. Her action demonstrates that manly courage *can* flourish in a woman—but simultaneously, it distinguishes her from most other women.<sup>19</sup>

Porcia's speech strongly supports the structuralist contrast between 'nurture' and 'nature': she believes that innate characteristics can be changed, improved and 'cured' by social interaction. More specifically, she is arguing that since she has become fully absorbed into the symbolic order and into the patriarchal society—having been raised by the best representatives of the said order—she can renounce the inborn feminine weakness that is inscribed onto her body. In order to prove this, Porcia stabs herself, to demonstrate how completely her mind is superior to and in control of her body, how entirely the bodily drives have been suppressed. Plutarch's story is a reference to the legendary tale of Mucius Scaevola, an exemplary youth who burned his hand in the fire to demonstrate his immunity to physical pain.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, it seems that the author deliberately assimilates Porcia to Cato himself, who took his own life by stabbing himself.<sup>21</sup> These allusions to the patriotic acts of admirable men reflect the ideology according to which the woman earns the highest praise when she is compared to men and depicted as (almost) as good as them. Porcia's speech does not question the mechanisms of the patriarchy: while she is clearly aware of her own worth, the tone is still submissive and pleading, and her actions do not overstep the boundaries of her traditional female role. Instead of putting on armour and heading for war, she is simply trying to show how her 'manly' qualities make her worthy of Brutus' trust. As Arrigoni states, masculine daring in a wife could be considered an ultimate manifestation of conjugal *societas*.<sup>22</sup> This is what Porcia appears to have in mind, and what she wants her husband to recognise. Her adoption of the value system of the temporal scene is so complete that it helps her overcome and silence the bodily drives to which she, as a woman, is 'naturally' more tuned in.

The important point is that this kind of an archetype—a female character who embodies male virtues—appears to work as a point of identification and emulation for the male audience, as well. In these kinds of stories, the

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19 For a comparison, see Tac. *Ger.* 18.4, where the author depicts the barbarian women as sharing *laborum periculorumque sociam*. Here, too, the behaviour of these women is depicted as courageous, devoted and admirable—but, at the same time, as something that differentiates them from most Roman women of the time.

20 Liv. 2.12; Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 5.29; Plut. *Vit. Pub.* 17.

21 Plut. *Vit. Brut.* 13. For Porcia's reputation as a woman who displayed manly courage, see also Plut. *Vit. Cat. Min.* 73.4.

22 Arrigoni 1984, 877: Arrigoni refers especially to situations where a wife is able to overcome her fear of death and pain to commit suicide together with her husband.

courage of the virtuous women helps them overcome their sex, and enables them to participate in the discourse that defines Roman masculinity and male heroism. A complete absorption into the temporal scene and a super-human control over the bodily drives, therefore, grant the woman narrative subjectivity, since they make her a character whom the male reader can look up to and relate to. Even Porcia's wounding of herself does not alienate the reader, as self-destructive violence often does, because it is an act entirely grounded in logic, not an impulsive outburst of emotion.

Plutarch's story about Porcia is of crucial importance here, because it bears strong resemblance to the virtuous matrons in war-centred epic, in terms of both structure and ideological content. In the following examples from the *Pharsalia* and the *Punica*, the women's self-confidence and their political awareness are especially striking. Like Plutarch's Porcia, the epic matrons refuse to be defined exclusively in terms of home, marriage and motherhood. Instead, they demand to be taken seriously as their husbands' allies and to be granted an access to their political affairs. At the same time, however they appear to be aware that however hard they try, the full immersion in the temporal scene will never be possible: even if applauded for their 'manly' qualities, they will inevitably be assessed as performing a role that is not 'natural' for them.

The topos is particularly recurrent in Lucan's *Pharsalia*. While virtuous female groups are rare in Lucan's epic, individual devoted matrons are not. This may have something to do with the content of the epic: the fact that the *Pharsalia* is a historical war epic offers the poet an excellent opportunity to portray some of the famous figures from the last century BCE, and to represent them as embodiments of the crumbling Roman virtue. One of the archetypal representatives of the topos is Pompey's wife Cornelia, whose exemplarity I have briefly discussed in the previous chapter. Besides being modest and restrained, Cornelia is strikingly devoted to all the men in her family—to her father, to her late first husband, to her children and, above all, to Pompey.<sup>23</sup>

Cornelia's unwavering loyalty to her husband and to everything he stands for makes her Pompey's most devoted companion not only in the domestic sphere but in political affairs, too. The poet depicts her as an unwavering supporter of

23 Cornelia's feminine virtues are emphasised in Luc. *Phar.* 8.155–158: *tanto devinxit amore/hos pudor; hos probitas castique modestia voltus,/quod summissa animis, nulli gravis hospita turbae;/stantis adhuc fati vixit quasi coniuge victo*. For her devotion to the men of her family, see, e.g., 8.410–413, 9.51–100. Plutarch, too, depicts Cornelia as a very sophisticated and well-read woman: Plut. *Pomp.* 55.2–3. On Cornelia's character as an exemplary matron, see also Finiello 2005, 165–169; Utard 2010, 181–182.

her husband's cause: he refers to Cornelia as *fida comes Magni*,<sup>24</sup> and represents her as the only one who stays by his side until the very end. When Cornelia is devastated upon hearing about the defeat at Pharsalia, Pompey consoles her:

*Nobile cur robur fortunae volnere primo,/femina tantorum titulis insignis  
avorum,/frangis? Habes aditum mansurae in saecula famae./laudis in hoc  
sexu non legum cura nec arma,/unica materia est coniunx miser.—Nunc  
sum tibi gloria maior,/a me quod fasces et quod pia turba senatus/tantaque  
discessit regum manus: incipe Magnum/sola sequi.*

LUC. *Phar.* 8.72–76, 8.78–81

Why do you let the first wound of Fortune break your strength—you, a woman distinguished by the fame of such outstanding ancestors? Here is your opportunity for fame that will last throughout ages. Neither civil government nor war is a source of glory to your sex: its only source is a wretched husband.—Now, I bring you more glory, when my lictors and the pious ranks of senators and all my kingly entourage have left me: from now on, be the sole follower of Magnus.

The episode resembles Plutarch's depiction of Porcia in many aspects. When Cornelia's courage is wavering and she feels anxious and desperate, Pompey reminds her of her noble lineage. What he appears to mean is that, having been indoctrinated into the Republican patriotic ideology all her life, Cornelia, if anyone, should have the power to overcome her feminine weakness, to suppress her emotions and to follow the path of logic and reason. However, while Pompey's speech stresses Cornelia's extraordinary potential to 'man up', it simultaneously marks her as marginal to the male world of politics and war. The woman's 'manliness' is supposed to manifest itself in her state of mind alone, not in action: Pompey claims that for a woman, the way of gaining glory is to stay by her husband's side in times of trouble. This ideal is simultaneously glorifying and restrictive; while it raises female loyalty almost to the same level as martial glory, it also confines female agency within the limits of family and marriage, depriving Cornelia of any opportunity for agency independent of her husband. The ideal woman that Cornelia should aspire to be is one completely absorbed into the logic of the symbolic order and who identifies with the male values of the Republic—yet expresses this devotion through familial relationships, home and care.

24 Luc. *Phar.* 5.804.

Apparently, Cornelia's indoctrination into the Republican, 'masculine' value system has been rather complete and successful: after a brief moment of despair, she is able to quickly compose herself and from then on, loyally follows Pompey from one hardship to another. After she has been bereaved of her husband, she herself recalls Pompey's words and takes pride in her position as his partner until the bitter end:

—*matrum sola per undas/et per castra comes nullis absterrita,fatis/victum,  
quod reges etiam timuere, recepi.*

LUC. *Phar.* 8.648–650

—I was the only matron to accompany him, by sea and in camp; I was not driven away by any fate. I accepted him when he was defeated, something even kings were afraid to do.

At first sight, *matrum sola* appears to be a strange choice of words: she is after all, Pompey's *only* wife, yet she seems to take particular pride in being the only woman to have followed him. Most probably, the notion is intended to draw attention to Cornelia's performance as a woman in a sphere of life that is otherwise entirely masculine. *Per undas et per castra* makes it evident that she followed Pompey on his military exploits, where all other participants were supposedly male. Accordingly, Cornelia is underlining the hardships 'unsuitable' for a woman that she has put up with, in order to stress her ability to overcome her innate feminine weakness. Again, the *exemplum* is of an extremely injunctive nature, since it juxtaposes Cornelia's exceptional virtue with all other women: while what she has managed to do is admirable, it is something generally unnatural for women.

The interesting point is that Cornelia appears to believe that in her bravery and loyalty, she has reached a pinnacle of virtue that is out of reach even for many men: *quod reges etiam timuere* clearly states this. At the same time, however, this claim reveals Cornelia's conviction that lasting loyalty can be found only in familial unions, not in the opportunistic political alliances. In Cornelia's eyes, the basic unit to which the individual is subordinate is the family/clan, and anything else is of secondary value and unreliable.<sup>25</sup> Accordingly, while Cornelia's self-representation underlines her own worth to her husband's political affairs, it simultaneously lays bare the marginality of women in this temporal scene. With all her high-mindedness and masculine courage, she is

25 See Kristeva 1974 (1984), 90–92.

primarily motivated by personal affection, love and loyalty, to which Rome takes a second place. What she is doing, she is doing not for the Republic but for Pompey—and this reveals that after all is said and done, her absorption into the male values of the Republic remains incomplete. The implied meaning of this female moral *exemplum* appears to be that, in the end, it is impossible even for the best of women to become servants of the state comparable to men. This is simply because, as women, they are naturally more bound to family, body, and private emotions: even at their most high-minded and virtuous, these are where their motivation is rooted.

In addition to Cornelia, another prominent matron who manifests manly courage and loyalty in the *Pharsalia* is Marcia, the wife of Cato the younger. In book two, Lucan relates that Cato, after having had three children with her, divorced Marcia and gave her as wife to Quintus Hortensius, on the grounds that she was still fertile and could ally the two families with each other through maternal blood.<sup>26</sup> After the death of her second husband, Marcia, nevertheless, comes back to Cato, asking him to take her back—not as a wife in a sexual or a romantic sense, but as his ally in the civil war. The speech that she delivers echoes the arguments of Plutarch's Porcia. Marcia defines herself entirely in relation to her husband and demands to be recognised in this way:

—*Da foedera prisca/inlibata tori, da tantum nomen inane/conubii; liceat tumulo scripsisse: 'Catonis/Marcia'; nec dubium longo quaeratur in aevo,/ mutarim primas expulsa, an tradita, taedas./non me laetorum sociam rebusque secundis/accipis; in curas venio partemque laborum.*

LUC. *Phar.* 2.341–347

Let me restore the full pact of my former marriage, grant me only the hollow name of a spouse. Let it be written on my tomb: “Marcia, wife of Cato”. Let it not be disputed, after a long time has passed, whether I was first driven out or given as a wife to another man. You do not receive me as a companion to share in happiness or in fortunate affairs: I come to take my part in troubles and toils.

Unlike Cornelia, Marcia does not seem to be overwhelmed by desperation. Her speech is well-structured and calm, more rational than emotional, and

<sup>26</sup> Luc. *Phar.* 2.329–333. This action seems to echo the Stoic idea, expressed, e.g., by Musonius Rufus and Hierocles, that marriage and children were not a private choice, but something that was to be pursued for the benefit of society. Schofield 1991, 119–127.

its powerful impact is strengthened by the fact that she comes straight from Hortensius' funeral, in her mourning attire. There are, however, no signs of frantic personal grief about her. She is covered in ashes, but this is no proof of inner turmoil, but rather a sign that she has done her duty to her late husband and carried out the rites that social decorum demands. In this way, Marcia has proved her worth not only as a wife but also as a member of community who has completely absorbed its values and norms. And this does not go unnoticed by Cato, the perfect servant of the temporal order; when the narrator describes Cornelia's mourning attire, he mentions that "her husband would not want her any other way" (*non aliter placitura viro*).<sup>27</sup>

At their wedding, Cato and Marcia's Stoic high-mindedness obtains such superhuman dimensions that some readers have argued that this episode is Lucan's subtle irony vis-à-vis the Stoic ideals of his time and the picture-perfect reputation of the Republican heroes.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, in the desperate reality of civil war, Cato does not really achieve anything with his absoluteness. His stern devotion to a lost cause prevents him from truly committing himself to the Pompeian faction, and casts him as the noble outsider in the conflict. In a sense, Cato and Marcia are moral dinosaurs who isolate themselves in their superiority and, as such, they appear slightly ludicrous and completely useless in the rebuilding of the society. By emphasising their *magnanimitas* to a ridiculous degree, Lucan reveals how outdated and futile this Republican identity is in the new, imperial atmosphere.

Furthermore, many scholars have argued that Marcia's sole purpose in the narrative is to strengthen Cato's reputation as the selfless champion of the Republic.<sup>29</sup> After describing the grim wedding where the couple is reunited, Lucan again turns to praising Cato's virtuousness, of which their marriage is

27 Luc. *Phar.* 2.337. On Marcia's appearance, 2.333–337. As La Penna notes, in his discussion of the *Thebaid*, plainness, austerity and severity of the outward appearance are integral parts of an epic matron's 'manly energy'; thus, *matrona virilis* can also appear as an inspiration to an archaic lifestyle (compare with Argia in Stat. *Theb.* 12.220–223). La Penna 1981, 228–229. On Argia, see also Helzle 1996, 160–174.

28 Thus, for instance, Graver 2011, 221–222. Bianchi has stressed the non-relatability of both Caesar and Cato in the *Pharsalia*, the former because of his degenerate moral decline, the latter because of his superhuman Stoicism. On these grounds, Bianchi concludes that Pompey is in fact the only hero of the epic who is relatable on a human level. Bianchi 2004, 101–102. See also Johnson 1987, 35–66. On the ambivalence of the Lucanian heroes, Utard 2010, 179–180, 185–191.

29 Dangel 2010, 91–92. This has been argued also by Graver and Armisen-Marchetti: Graver 2011; Armisen-Marchetti 2003, 251–254. Marcia's Stoic high-mindedness in relation to Cato's is discussed also in Harich 1990.



yet another example.<sup>30</sup> It is specifically underlined that Cato is above both the pains and the pleasures of the flesh:

—*nec foedera prisca/Sunt temptata tori; iusto quoque robur amoris/Restitit.—Huic epulae, vicisse famem; magnique penates,/Summovisse hiemem tecto; pretiosaque vestis,/Hirtam membra super Romani more Quiritis/Induxisse togam; Venerisque hic unicus usus,/Progenies; urbi pater est urbi-que maritus,/Iustitiae cultor, rigidi servator honesti,/In commune bonus; nullosque Catonis in actus/Subrepsit partemque tulit sibi nata voluptas.*

LUC. *Phar.* 2.378–380, 2.384–391

Nor did he try to renew the former married relations with his wife: he maintained his strength even against just love.—To him it was a feast to conquer hunger; fighting winter with any roof over his head meant a mighty house for him. To draw over his limbs the rough toga, which is the traditional Roman dress—it was a luxurious piece of clothing to him. For him, the only purpose of desire was offspring: he became a father and a husband for the benefit of the state. He worshipped justice and practised unwavering virtue; his goodness was for the whole people, and there was no act in Cato's life where pleasure crept in and claimed a share.

The dichotomy and the hierarchy between the body and the mind become evident in this passage. Cato's bodily drives have been entirely suppressed by his mind, and by his *amor patriae* that is a purer, more rational kind of love than that between human beings. All in all, he appears as a flawless servant of the temporal scene—moreover, Cato perfects the spirit of self-sacrifice that Pompey's Cornelia could only aspire to, because, in his view, the state surpasses family/clan in importance and is the main unit to which the individual is subordinate. *urbi pater est urbi-que maritus* is a particularly interesting phrasing, since, in a way, it casts Cato in a female role. Not to take personal pleasure in sex—a form of the matronal virtue of *pudicitia*—and to produce children for Rome to make use of were the moral duties of any elite woman.<sup>31</sup> Therefore, with his *magnanimitas* that overcomes both his sexual drive and his desire to secure the continuity of his own family line, Cato masters the combination

30 Luc. *Phar.* 2.350–391. On Lucan's use of Cato as a moral *exemplum*, and on his literary models in the construction of the character, see Cogitore 2010, esp. 174–177. For further analysis of the specific character of the wedding episode, see Armisen-Marchetti 2003, 253–254; Augoustakis 2010, 167–176; Ahl 1976, 247–252; Finiello 2005, 165–169.

31 For discussion, see Langlands 2006, 37–50.

of masculine and feminine virtues. He becomes an *exemplum* that *everyone* should aspire to—a flawless servant of the state, free from disturbing bodily drives and emotions, from desire as well as from despair.

Marcia is depicted as a female counterpart to Cato's high-mindedness. She is a mirror that reflects his glory, and like her husband, she too is able to overcome both the pains and the pleasures of the flesh in a way that is exceptional for a woman. It is noteworthy how the narrator appears to depict Cato and Marcia as complementing each other's moral characteristics. Whereas Cato is stern, inflexible and loyal to the collapsing Republican ideals, Marcia is selfless and blindly devoted to her husband's cause. Gender difference is almost entirely dissolved when Lucan depicts the two as representatives of the ideal—albeit extreme and outdated—Republican *Romanitas*. The episode reminds the reader of Seneca's definition of the Stoic sage as 'a uniform person', never many different persons in one.<sup>32</sup> While Seneca was clearly talking about a coherent individual character, in the *Pharsalia*, Lucan seems to recall this requirement of uniformity when he completely assimilates the characters of the husband and the wife.<sup>33</sup> The line between the subject of epic—a political citizen male—and its putative 'other' is dissolved, and the two become one. We should note that this does not mean the masculine and the feminine meeting each other half way—in the symbolic order, the ideal 'sameness' can be reached only when the woman becomes as much of a man as possible, and when the semiotic is suppressed completely.

A similar phenomenon can be observed elsewhere in the *Pharsalia*. Armi-sen-Marchetti makes an interesting point when she notes that Lucan pairs each of the male protagonists of his poem with a female counterpart who is designed to reflect and stress the moral attributes of the man. While Marcia is to be read in relation to Cato, Cornelia is to be read in relation to Pompey, and Cleopatra to Caesar.<sup>34</sup> It is crucial to notice that this relationship appears to be reciprocal and complementary: Marcia's austere character stresses Cato's Stoic high-mindedness, and *e contra*, her position as Cato's wife *per se* speaks for her own virtuousness. Cornelia's fragility and humanity reflect these attributes in Pompey, and vice versa. And, as I have argued in chapter two, it is not

32 *vero tenor permanet—praeter sapientem autem nemo unum agit*. Sen. *Luc.* 120.19, 120.22.

33 Traces of a similar ideology can be perceived in the writings of Epictetus, written slightly after the *Pharsalia* and preserved in the work of Arrian (*Discourses of Epictetus*). Epictetus asserts that the wife of the sage is a person just like him. Arr. *Epict. diss.* 3.22.68–69. This ideal regarding marital unions was obviously inspired by Aristotle's thoughts on friendship; see Arist. *Eth. Nic.* 9.1166a31.

34 Armi-sen-Marchetti 2003, 251–258; thus also Dangel 2010, *passim*; Utard 2010, 180.

only Cleopatra's moral corruption that adds to Caesar's bad reputation, but it is also the queen's falling for Caesar that further darkens her image—with this couple, the gender difference is dissolved, since both the man and the woman fall victims to their bodily drives. These pairs of male and female protagonists, therefore, continuously both reflect and boost each other's moral attributes. What is more, the ongoing friction between these couples in Lucan's civil war narrative marks them as representatives of the different aspects of *Romanitas*: the hostility between them symbolises the civil war as an event that shatters the collective self. In this way, Lucan exploits the themes of gender likeness and gender complementarity to define Roman identity and to depict its collapse.

The dissolving of gender difference in the characters of Cato and Marcia, Pompey and Cornelia, and Cleopatra and Caesar demonstrates that, in Lucan's epic, the semiotic and the symbolic modalities cannot be easily gendered—in general, women appear to be more vulnerable to the semiotic pressure and men more capable of suppressing their bodily drives, but both modalities, arguably, are present in both genders. Renouncing the semiotic—which obviously is the main goal of the Stoic hero—is a matter of intrapersonal cultivation of character. The more profoundly one can identify with the 'masculine' values of the Republic, the better a servant to the temporal scene and to the patriarchal order (s)he becomes. However, it is also important to notice that in Lucan's epic universe, reaching the level of superhuman virtue is no guarantee of narrative subjectivity—on the contrary, a complete renunciation of the body and its drives might also be something that alienates the reader. Arguably, characters such as Cato and Marcia, while they might work as positive *exempla* to strive after, are just as difficult for the reader to identify with as characters such as Virgil's Amata and Statius' Oedipus, who are overtaken by inexplicable fury. It would appear that those who are entirely absorbed into one modality of communication only—be it the semiotic or the symbolic—are hard to relate to; the reader is more likely to identify with characters whose communication consists of a dynamic interaction between logic and emotion, mind and body.

### 3 *Da mihi castra sequi*: The Female Intrusion in the World of War

The distinction between—and the overlapping of—the male and the female spheres in Roman culture and society becomes particularly evident when the Roman epic poets discuss the presence of women in a military camp. As I noted above, Lucan's Cornelia takes particular pride in having followed Pompey *per undas et per castra*—the wife's determination to follow her husband to whatever end, even war, is the ultimate expression of manly courage inspired

by wedded love.<sup>35</sup> Obviously, this romantic ideal does not really reflect the historical reality; in the days of the Roman Republic, the military camp was simply no place for a respectable woman. Because the army was often followed by *mulierculae*, prostitutes or mistresses of lower birth, any association with such a lifestyle would have been extremely damaging to the reputation of an elite matron.<sup>36</sup>

In the course of the early Principate, a slight change in attitudes and practices can be observed.<sup>37</sup> The edict forbidding the presence of wives in camp is a much disputed matter—as Wintjes notes, the evidence is scanty and it is not entirely clear if there ever was such a law in place.<sup>38</sup> Even if there was, it appears to have been gradually modified and, by Tiberius' reign, it had become a dead letter. Notable Julio-Claudian empresses are examples of the new practice in the matter. Livia is reported to have frequently joined Augustus on his military campaigns,<sup>39</sup> and Agrippina the elder was famous for her presence at Germanicus' side on campaigns far away from the Italian peninsula.<sup>40</sup> These, of course, were exceptional women and sporadic cases, certainly not proof of an abiding state of affairs. Nevertheless, in the remarks of the Roman imperial historians, one can observe a slight and gradual change in the ideas about women's presence in the camp, when compared to the stern opposition during the Republic.

In a way, Roman war epic appears to reflect this development. In Virgil's epic, the topic of women in military camp is practically non-existent.<sup>41</sup> In post-Virgilian epic, on the other hand, the phenomenon flourishes: Lucan is the starting point, whose model the Flavian poets repeatedly vary and imitate. In

35 See, e.g., Luc. *Phar.* 2.348–349; 8.155–158, 8.648–650; Sil. *Pun.* 3.114–115.

36 Arrigoni 1984, 857 (see also Serv. *Aen.* 3.519, 8.688). For the definition of *mulierculae* and for some further discussion of prostitution in Roman military camps, see Petrone 1995, 267; Arrigoni 1984, 871–873; Mattingly 2011, 114–118. It is also important to note that during the political conflicts of the late Republic, having a wife follow a general to the camp was potentially damaging to *his* reputation as well: the woman's behaviour could be utilised to reflect the morals of a man with whom she was involved. See Cic. *Cat.* 2.23, Plut. *Vit. Ant.* 18.2, Cass. Dio 59.21.2. See also Arrigoni 1984, 871.

37 Wintjes 2012, 43–44.

38 Wintjes 2012, 42–43. See also Arrigoni 1984, 872. Tacitus comments on the issue, stressing the demoralising influence that women supposedly had on soldiers: Tac. *Ann.* 3.33.

39 Tac. *Ann.* 3.33–34, 15.10.

40 On Agrippina's presence in the camp, Tac. *Ann.* 1.40–1.41, 1.69.

41 One exception is a brief mention in the *Bucolica* of a freedwoman named Volumnia or Cytheris (in the poem, she goes by the pseudonym Lycoris): “*Galle, quid insanis?*” inquit. “*tua cura Lycoris/perque nives alium perque horrida castra secuta est.*” Verg. *Ecl.* 10.22–23.

his epic, the virtuous wives' crowning achievement appears to be their determination not to be parted from their husbands, not even because of the war. In book five of the *Pharsalia*, Cornelia takes particularly hard Pompey's decision to send her away to hide at Lesbos during the battle of Pharsalia. The wife strongly protests:

—*credisne aliquid mihi tutius esse/quam tibi? non olim casu pendemus  
ab uno?/fulminibus me, saeve, iubes tantaeque ruinae/absentem praestare  
caput?*

LUC. *Phar.* 5.768–771

Do you believe that my safety is different from your safety? Have we not since forever been dependent on the same chance? Do you, cruel one, order me to present my head to thunderbolts and to such ruin, without you by my side?

Again, the strong assimilation between the husband and the wife—they are, ideally, of one fate—appears to underline Cornelia's virtuousness. On the grounds of her womanhood, she could easily avoid the dangers of war, but she chooses not to: in her mind, her chaste marital love gives her manly courage to face the adversities of the camp. And although Pharsalia is off-limits to Cornelia, there is reason to believe that on some other occasion her pleas may have been more successful; at least, this is what one could conclude on the basis of what Cato's wife Marcia has to say. In her speech to her husband, she refers to the presence of Pompey's wife in the camp:

—*Da mihi castra sequi. Cur tuta in pace relinquitur, et sit civili propior Cor-  
nelia bello?*

LUC. *Phar.* 2.348–349

—Let me follow the camp. Why should I be left behind in safety and in peace, and why should Cornelia be closer to the civil war than I?

Notably, besides being an exemplary model to the external audience, Cornelia becomes a model for the internal audience to emulate. Marcia does not want to stand second in virtue to anyone, since her husband certainly does not. The competitive spirit and the constant project of moral self-improvement that mark Lucan's epic demand that the elite matrons constantly strive to trump one another in their pursuit of manliness and virtue. For Marcia, being her husband's *comes* in heart and mind is not enough—she wants to be physically

present at his political and military endeavours, and considers this as a privilege that she, if any matron, should be granted.

Variants of this topos are many and frequent in Flavian epic. Statius closes the first book of the *Achilleid* with the wedding of Achilles and Deidamia before the hero's departure for Troy. Deidamia, afraid of never seeing her newly-wed husband again, appeals to him:

—*quin age, duc comitem, cur non ego Martia tecum/signa feram? tu pensa manu Baccheaque mecum/sacra, quod infelix non credit Troia, tulisti.*

STAT. *Achil.* 1.949–951

—Why not, come on—take me with you as companion. Why should I not carry Mars' banners with you? With me you carried Bacchus' sacred wands in your hand, something that unhappy Troy does not believe.

Deidamia, too, seems to believe that married love will give her power to go against her nature: she wants to leave behind the isolated feminine sphere of Scyros and to be absorbed into the temporal scene of war and politics. Apparently, her wish to be able to transgress the gender boundaries is kindled by Achilles' earlier performance in the female role. What Deidamia forgets, however, is that this performance was ultimately unsuccessful: in the end, her husband's innate male courage inevitably betrayed his 'true' sex. The *Achilleid*, therefore, plays around with the idea of the performative nature of gender, but is, in the end, uncompromisingly essentialist about sex.

Another thing that Deidamia fails to understand is that her desire to *actually* follow Achilles to the battlefield and to take part in the heat of the action would mean overstepping the social boundaries that regulate female conduct. She does not seem to understand what Lucan's Cornelia and Marcia know all too well: that being 'manly' in mind does not mean adopting the male social role—that following the husband to war does not mean *actually* riding off to battle. Whereas Lucan's Republican matrons draw heavily on the Roman historiographic tradition concerning female *virtus*, Statius' Deidamia is an elegiac lover whose wish manifests astonishing naïveté in the face of war.<sup>42</sup> Unlike the requests of Cornelia and Marcia, her plea is not in line with her personality, but is prompted by a sudden fear of the unknown. It is a wish of a child who is cast into the social role of a matron overnight and who does not know how to cope when she has to release her husband from the domestic sphere into the

42 See Bessone 2002, 189.

world of war. As a result, her dreams about transgressing the gender roles and facing the world as a united team with her husband seem naïve and unrealistic.

The topos is discussed by Silius Italicus too, although from a slightly different perspective. It is particularly intriguing that in his patriotic epic, Silius assigns the role of a manly matron to an enemy of Rome—that is, to a putative ‘other’. In book three of the *Punica*, it is Hannibal’s wife Imilce who wishes to join the Punic army on its march for Rome. As Augoustakis notes, Imilce is doubly an other, since she is foreign to the Romans and to the Carthaginians alike.<sup>43</sup> She comes from a Spanish town called Castulo,<sup>44</sup> and the poet refers to her family background as noble—we are told that “that was her homeland and from there, Imilce drew her renowned lineage” (*hinc patriam clarumque genus referebat Imilce*).<sup>45</sup> Despite this upper-class lineage, the status of an outsider is a constant defining factor in Imilce’s character. One would therefore expect this predominant otherness to weaken her textual subjectivity: the reader does not expect Imilce to be a relatable character, or one that he could easily identify with.

This would, however, be a mistaken assumption, as one finds out when Imilce opens her mouth. In her plea to her husband, she turns out to be a direct literary descendant of Lucan’s Cornelia and Marcia, the most fitting representatives of characteristically Roman, Republican virtues.<sup>46</sup> What is more, Imilce’s speech implies that she, too, is well aware of her worth and considers herself fully entitled to her demands:

*mene, oblite tua nostram pendere salutem,/abnuis inceptis comitem? sic foedera nota/primitiaeque tori, gelidos ut scandere tecum/deficiam montes coniux tua? crede vigori/femineo; castum haud superat labor ullus amorem.*

SIL. *Pun.* 3.109–115

Do you forget that my safety depends on yours? Do you refuse me as a partner in what you have started? Does our marriage pact, do the first fruits of our marriage bed, make you believe that I, your wife, would let

43 Augoustakis 2010, 208–209.

44 Sil. *Pun.* 3.97–107.

45 Sil. *Pun.* 3.106.

46 Discussed in detail in Augoustakis 2010, 205–209. Augoustakis examines Imilce’s role as the representative of characteristically Roman values also in book four of the *Punica*, where she renounces the Carthaginian habit of child sacrifice, and evaluates the war as a *nefas*.

you down when climbing with you the frozen mountains? Have faith in a woman's strength: no hardship can overcome chaste love.

As Vinchesi points out, Imilce's dignified behaviour creates a positive image of a strong, high-minded spouse of a great commander.<sup>47</sup> Moreover, her argumentation is rational and her speech well-constructed. This shows that, like Lucan's Cornelia, she is entirely absorbed in the temporal scene and in the symbolic order. By granting the role of a virtuous, brave and devoted wife to a foreigner, Silius Italicus appears to deliberately blur the line that defines subjectivity—both in terms of ethnicity and in terms of gender. Imilce's courageous character and her demand to be incorporated into the world of war not only question the sexual difference and the dichotomy between 'male' and 'female' virtues—they also call into question the very definition of 'Roman' and 'other'. Imilce's identification with values that in the universe of epic are considered not only male, but also distinctively Roman, raises questions about what constitutes *Romanitas*, about who is and who could become Roman.<sup>48</sup> This is perhaps the most evident case in Flavian war epic where the fluidity of cultural identity is seriously discussed.

Imilce's speech captures the double standard connected to the role of *matrona virilis*. While she fears that her status as Hannibal's wedded wife makes it impossible for him to regard her as his *comes* in the political sphere, she nevertheless tries to convince him that her spousal love is the very thing that enables her to overcome any obstacle. The stress that Imilce lays on her chaste love (*castum—amorem*) is meant to assure that—unlike what one might think, judging by the above-mentioned "fruits of the marriage bed"—her love is of a pure and non-corporeal kind, suitable to a virtuous matron and to an obedient servant of the state. It is this kind of unselfish and dispassionate love that makes it possible for Lucan's Republican matrons to suppress the semiotic in them—and Imilce, aspiring to do the same, does everything in her power to prove that she has what it takes. She is desperately trying to convince her husband that, despite her sex and gender, her bodily drives can be suppressed.

Accordingly, wifehood is both Imilce's source of strength *and* her greatest shortcoming: because of it, she will never be taken seriously in the world of men, although because of it, she should be. This paradox appears to confine all the matrons discussed in this chapter to the female sphere of life, their virile energy notwithstanding. Despite their spirit of self-sacrifice and their eager-

47 Vinchesi 2005, 106–107.

48 See Augoustakis 2008, 55–63, 73–74; Augoustakis 2010, 205–209.



ness to dedicate themselves to the common cause, more often than not they are not allowed to do so. And on some level, the women appear to be aware of this even as they make their pleas. Statius' Deidamia, for instance, has barely finished her request when she already gives up, asking only that her husband remains faithful and cherishes the memory of their son.<sup>49</sup> As I noted earlier, Deidamia's idea of following Achilles to war is a mere illusion, as she herself appears to understand before the husband even gets an opportunity to turn it down.

Imilce, likewise, after her bold speech about crossing the Alps, quickly falls into a timid and obedient role, stating that

*sin solo aspicimus sexu, fixumque relinqui, / cedo equidem nec fata moror—i felix—atque acies inter flagrantiaque arma relictæ / coniugis et nati curam servare memento.*<sup>50</sup>

SIL. *Pun.* 3.114–115

If you judge me by my sex alone, and are determined to leave me behind, I give in, for my part, and will not delay the inevitable.—Go and rejoice!—And in the midst of battles and flaming arms, remember to have concern for your child and your wife who was left behind.

The content of Imilce's last wish to Hannibal is almost identical to that of Deidamia's to Achilles. After courageously boasting of their resilience, these women eventually need next to no persuasion to stay behind. In a way, they appear to be painfully aware that they are, and always will be, judged by their sex alone—that even the best of women, the ones who identify with the male value system of the epic, who are in total control of their bodily drives and loyal servants of the temporal scene, will be inevitably marginalised.

This marginalisation becomes very evident, because it happens simultaneously on the ideological level of the poem (they become insignificant to its value system) and on the narrative level (they are swiftly and suddenly written off the page). It is noteworthy that in the epics of Lucan, Statius and Silius, the episodes in which the virtuous wives are left behind bear a striking similarity to

49 Stat. *Achil.* 1.952–955.

50 According to Vinchesi's interpretation, these lines express not fear, but rather Imilce's understanding that it is futile to oppose the predominant gender dynamics. Passive subordination can be perceived in Imilce's response—the use of the word *fata*, in particular, implies that she considers the prevalent situation to be unchangeable and handed down from above. Vinchesi 2005, 104–105.

each other. The crucial element in these episodes is water, a natural barrier that separates the helpless wife from her departing husband.<sup>51</sup> Statius offers a prime example of this narrative structure when he depicts Deidamia standing on the top of the wall trying to catch a glimpse of the ship that carries Achilles away:

*Turre procul summa lacrimis comitata sororum/commissumque tenens et habentem nomina Pyrrhum/pendebat coniunx oculisque in carbasa fixis/ibat et ipsa freto, et puppem iam sola videbat./ille quoque obliquos dilecta ad moenia vultus/declinat viduamque domum gemitusque relictæ/cogitat—.*

STAT. *Achil.* 2.23–29

Far away, accompanied by her sisters' tears and holding Pyrrhus (that was the child's name), the wife was hanging from the top of a tower with her eyes fixed on the sails. She followed them over the sea and now only she saw the ship. He [Achilles] too turns his sidelong gaze towards the beloved walls, and thinks of the widowed household and the groans of the one that is left behind.

Statius refers to Deidamia as *relictæ*, a word that wields strong elegiac connotations. Notably, the word appears also in Imilce's speech when she speaks of herself and her son (*relictæ/coniugis et nati*). As I pointed out in chapter three, the *relictæ* topos is typical of the Roman elegy of the early Principate, where its best representatives can be found in Ovid's *Heroides*. In the elegiac genre, *relictæ* is a deserted lover, a woman left behind waiting for a man who is not coming back.<sup>52</sup> In Roman war epic, instead, this archetype appears to be recurrently used to 'force femininity' upon women who try to transgress the traditional gender roles (Dido in the *Aeneid* is the first representative of the type). Arguably, casting the 'manly' woman into a hyper-feminine role of an elegiac mistress is to render her non-dangerous and to efficiently write her off the narrative: the episode where the woman gazes at the sea is almost always the last one hears of her.<sup>53</sup> This is a literary technique that the Roman poets make

51 The idea of water as a symbolic boundary is characteristic of Greek and Roman religious and philosophical thinking; rivers, in particular, were often considered to have symbolic significance as boundaries that separate people or spheres of life from each other—the river Styx, separating the underworld from the world of the living, is the best example. See, e.g., Taylor 2009, 38–39; Håland 2009, 117–118.

52 For the development of the *relictæ* topos in different literary genres, see above, chapter 3, footnote 26.

53 The elegiac elements in Statius' epic, in particular, are more thoroughly examined in Bessone 2002, and in Davis 2006, esp. 139.

use of in the case of the manly matrons too. Despite their best efforts to manifest masculine courage and devotion to a political cause, and despite their bold demands to be taken along to the horrors of war, the epic matrons are thrown back into the role of a woman left behind—a static, powerless bystander, juxtaposed to the dynamic, mobile, male hero.

Even though they can clearly see it coming, the wives' agony over this marginalisation is evident, and its poetic effect powerful. Part of this narrative pattern in Roman epic is that the narrator depicts the left-behind women as physically clinging to their husbands—and to the narrative from which they are being erased. In book eight of the *Pharsalia*, Lucan depicts Cornelia's anguish when she is left behind in the safety of the ship as her husband docks in Egypt:

*Haec ubi frustra/effudit, prima pendet tamen anxia puppe,/attonitoque metu nec quoquam avertere visus/nec Magnum spectare potest.*

LUC. *Phar.* 8.589–592

When she had poured out these words in vain, she still hung anxiously over the stern of the ship and, stunned by fear as she was, she could neither turn her gaze away nor look at Magnus.

Earlier in book five, when Pompey forces Cornelia to seek safety at Lesbos, instead of following him to Pharsalia, the poet utilises a very similar kind of imagery:

*Labitur infelix manibusque excepta suorum/fertur ad aequoreas, ac se prosternit, harenas,/litora que ipsa tenet, tandemque inlata carinae est.—Fida comes Magni vadit duce sola relicto/Pompeiumque fugit.*

LUC. *Phar.* 5.799–801, 5.804–805

The miserable woman sank down and, caught in the arms of her attendants, was carried to the sea-sands. She threw herself down and grabbed the very shore, until at last she was taken on board the ship.—Loyal companion of Magnus, she now goes alone, leaving the general behind and departs from Pompey.

In this second episode, the poet playfully varies the traditional *relicta* imagery: Pompey, instead of Cornelia, is the one left behind, but by the power of his own decree. The one who leaves, in turn, is carried to the ship against her will. The roles are reversed, but the power dynamics remain unaltered: the man is the

one who makes the decision to depart, the woman is the helpless victim of his decision, and the water becomes a barrier between the two. In one of these passages, Cornelia is desperately clinging to the sand of the beach; in the other, she is hanging over the railing of the ship. It would appear that, since words have ultimately failed her, she cannot resist the urge of holding on to her husband—and to the narrative—with her body, as best she can.

The return of the bodily drives is evident in Silius' Imilce too. Like Cornelia, she is separated from her husband against her will, and, like Cornelia, she is carried to the safety of a ship by force:

*dumque ea permixtis inter se fletibus orant,/confisus pelago celsa de puppe  
magister/cunctantem ciet. abripitur divulsa marito./haerent intenti vultus  
et litora servant,/donec, iter liquidum volucris rapiante carina,/consumpsit  
visus pontus, tellusque recessit.*

SIL. *Pun.* 3.152–157

While they talked thus, mixing their tears, the helmsman, feeling confident with the sea, summoned the lingering woman from his high seat on the stern. Torn from her husband, she is dragged away. Her fixed eyes cling to him and watch the shore, until the sea engulfs the sight and the land retreats, as the swift ship flies away on its water-path.

The *relicta* imagery can be particularly well observed in this passage: Imilce is depicted as following the departing ship with her gaze, for as long as she possibly can. *abripitur divulsa marito* clearly indicates that she too is physically torn away from her husband and carried away against her will. She fights back with her body and, when she can no longer do so, she clings on to the departing ship with her gaze. The Lucanian influence is strong in the way in which the unwilling wife is removed from the scene. In the end, the elaborate and carefully constructed speeches of Cornelia and Imilce—which manifest their rhetorical skills and their absorption into the logic of the symbolic order—are of little use. As words fail them and their inevitable marginalisation becomes evident, the *chôra* is re-awakened in these women, and the dramatic elegiac lover takes the place of an exemplary matron of Roman historiography. The semiotic modality of communication is evident in the way the desperate women struggle against their removal, in how they cling onto the narrative that is slowly sliding away, excluding them from its course. From the viewpoint of subjectivity, this uncontrollable bodily outburst makes the situation even worse for them. Earlier, their 'manly' spirit and their servitude to reason and logic made them plausible points of identification and objects of emulation to both the internal

and the external audiences of epic. Now, they are reduced to play the part of the frantic woman, the object and the other.<sup>54</sup>

This outburst of semiotic pressure, and the way in which it marginalises a woman, are nowhere as clear and evident as in *Punica* 6, where the poet depicts one of the most famous incidents of the first Punic War: Marcus Atilius Regulus' self-sacrifice to the Roman cause. According to the story—which already by the late Republic had become a part of the Roman patriotic imagery—Regulus, consul of 267 and 256 BCE, was taken captive in the first Punic War, and sent back to Rome to negotiate a treaty. After urging his countrymen to carry on the war instead, he honoured his oath to the enemy and returned to Carthage where he was tortured and executed. Because of this heroic deed, Regulus became the absolute *exemplum* of Roman *magnanimitas*.<sup>55</sup> In the *Punica*, his story appears in an embedded narrative told by Marus, a veteran of the war and a first-hand witness to the events related. In his story, the hero's wife—also a Marcia—has a prominent role. She makes her entrance when Regulus is about to board a ship that will take him back to Carthage and to a certain death. The wife does not value her husband's noble gesture highly, but harshly scorns him for abandoning his family—here, once again, the poet raises the question whether the individual's first loyalty should be to the family or to the political unit.<sup>56</sup> When Regulus remains unwavering in his decision, as her last bid, Marcia begs to be taken along with him. As both Ahl and Augoustakis have noticed, Marcia's willingness to share her husband's lot strongly recalls that of her Lucanian namesake:<sup>57</sup>

*tollite me, Libyes, comitem poenaeque necisque./hoc unum, coniux, uteri  
per pignora nostri/unum oro: liceat tecum quoscumque ferentem/terrarum  
pelagique pati caelique labores.—adest comes ultima fati.*

SIL. *Pun.* 6.500–502, 6.511

Take me, Carthaginians, to be his companion in punishment and death. This one thing, husband, this one thing alone I ask from you, in the name of the children that my womb bore you: allow me to suffer with you whatever hardships land and sea and sky may bring.—Here is a partner til the very end.

54 Kristeva 1974 (in Moi 1986, 154).

55 See, e.g., Hor. *Carm.* 3.5; Gell. *NA* 7.4.

56 Sil. *Pun.* 6.516–518. Augoustakis 2006, 144–168; for further discussion of the conflicted interests of family and state in the *Punica*, see Bernstein 2008.

57 Ahl 1976, 268–271; Augoustakis 2010, 175.

Besides recalling Lucan's Marcia, Silius' Marcia also appears to be a version of Cornelia: she defines herself as her husband's *comes*, just as Cornelia did in her relationship to Pompey. At first sight, her character appears to serve the same end as these Lucanian matrons: the self-sacrificing spirit of a loyal wife—an amalgam of feminine devotion and male courage—stands out in the depressing political situation and complements the husband's virtuous character.

However, there is a distinctive grimness and recklessness about Marcia's spirit of self-sacrifice that distinguishes her from her epic paragons and evokes restlessness and fear in the reader. For while she certainly does not lack devotion, energy or courage, she does lack reason. In fact, Marcia so desperately desires to share her husband's fate that she offers that she *and* their children should go with him. She states that

*accipe mecum/hanc prolem. forsitan duras Carthaginiis iras/flectemus lacrimis, aut, si praecuserit aures/urbs inimica suas, eadem tunc hora manebit/teque tuosque simul—.*

SIL. *Pun.* 6.506–510

Let me take these children with me. Perhaps we can soften the hard anger of the Carthaginians with our tears—or, if that hostile city turns a deaf ear, then the same hour will await you and your family together.

This offer, in all likelihood, would have sounded abhorrent to Silius' contemporary Roman audience, and it entirely compromises Marcia's reputation as a virtuous Republican matron. The question is no longer whether she deems the family or the state more highly, because it is clear that she is not able to put either before her own personal suffering. By offering to sacrifice her children, Marcia violates the prime directive of epic that demands that the individual be dominated, ruled by, and reduced to the structure of the family or clan.<sup>58</sup> The elegiac and the tragic elements overrule epic in Marcia's breakdown—the semiotic genotext pierces the narrative and shatters her reputation as an ideal matron absorbed into the logic of the temporal order. In an instant, she becomes the other to both the internal and the external audiences.

It is however worth noting that Marcia's otherness had been brewing long before this eventual outburst. Compared to the other virtuous wives of Roman war epic, there are considerably more threatening and disquieting elements about her, and on a closer reading it turns out that the bodily drives, in fact,

58 Kristeva 1974 (1984), 90–92.

seem to have driven her from the very beginning. When she finds out that Regulus is preparing to leave, she is described as *trepida*, and the narrator states that “she let out a terrible howl and hurried to the shore” (*tremendum/vociferans, celerem gressum referebat ad undas*).<sup>59</sup> It is difficult not to recall Virgil’s maenadic matrons, who in *Aeneid* 7 rushed through the city ululating and stirring up frenzy. Marcia’s conduct is, in fact, all about her overwhelming personal suffering, which finds an outlet in non-verbal, bodily communication. It is no wonder, therefore, that her speech does not succeed in convincing: much like the speeches of Statius’ Thetis, examined in chapter two, it is merely an imitation of symbolic communication, an attempt to disguise pain as logic.

Studied against this background, it is not in the least surprising that the way in which Marcia is removed from Silius’ narrative also strongly parallels the fate of Lucan’s Cornelia—and exceeds it in dramatic effect:

*has inter voces vinclis resoluta moveri/paulatim et ripa coepit decedere puppis./tum vero infelix, mentem furiata dolore,/exclamat, fessas tendens ad litora palmas:/en, qui se iactat Libyae populisque nefandis/atque hosti servare fidem! data foedera nobis/ac promissa fides thalamis ubi, perfide, nunc est?/ultima vox duras haec tunc penetravit ad aures;/cetera percussi vetuerunt noscere remi.*

SIL. *Pun.* 6.512–520

While she spoke, the ship was set free from the ropes and began to move little by little and depart from the shore. Then indeed the miserable wife, her mind frenzied with agony, stretched out her feeble hands towards the shore and screamed: “Look! He who boasts of keeping faith with the infamous people of Libya and with the enemy! Where is now the pact made with *me*, and the loyalty you vowed to me at our wedding, you traitor?” This, then, was the last utterance that reached the stern ear of Regulus; the thrusting of the oars prevented him from hearing the rest.

Marcia is described as *mentem furiata dolore*, “her mind frenzied with agony”. *Furor*, as noted earlier, is one of the clearest signs of the breakdown of logic and reason in an epic narrative. It is a sign of semiotic pressure penetrating the logic of the symbolic order—here, this is made explicit when Marcia’s suffering is depicted as deranging her *mind* with *furor*. Even when she attempts to insert logic into her conduct through speech, it is made clear that she is completely

59 Sil. *Pun.* 6.498–499.

driven by emotion. Marcia refers to herself as *infelix* and to her husband as *perfidus*: these elements clearly strengthen the elegiac overtones of the episode and underline the fact that hurt feelings are its driving force. What is more, the choice of words strongly recalls Virgil's Dido, the *infelix* epic woman *par excellence*. And, as the Roman reader would know, a reference to Dido always evokes fear and uncertainty about what the frantic woman might be capable of.

Perhaps it is because Marcia turns out to be only feigning the role of a manly matron that her subsequent marginalisation is more complete and more explicit than that of most epic women. After this passage, Marcia never appears again in Silius' epic. Moreover, the poet fully exploits the *relicta* topos when he depicts water, a natural barrier between the husband and the wife, gradually getting larger and larger as Marcia stands on the shore screaming. Little by little, she is faded out of the narrative, and eventually even her voice—the most crucial element constructing focalisation and subjectivity in epic—is taken away from her. As Marcia's words—the only sign of the symbolic order that remains about her—are drowned by the splashing of the oars, she vanishes and ceases to exist in the epic. In the whole of Roman war epic, there is no other episode that would so powerfully allegorise the silencing of the female voice by the unstoppable drive of war.

Marcia's marginalisation in Silius' epic is violent, and her otherness stands out clearly, but I am tempted to suggest that in this case, too, the complementary virtues and weaknesses of the husband and the wife are crucial to the story. As I have observed, Marcia's textual otherness is based on her inability to fully identify with the ideology of the epic narrative, dominated by the Law of the Father and the male values of the Republic. She fails to submit herself to the service of a greater unit (whether family or state), and her actions are entirely motivated by her personal emotion. But could it be claimed that this is precisely the weakness that marks her heroic husband, too? Is Regulus' passionate patriotism not really an expression of his hunger for glory and renown? Is his futile self-sacrifice really the best way to serve his country? As I have argued in the case of other epic matrons in this chapter, there is a fine line that distinguishes *castus amor* (pure, dispassionate, selfless devotion that serves the interests of the temporal scene) and the kind of *amor* that is motivated by the primitive bodily drives, and by selfish pleasure, anger or ambition. I would suggest that Regulus' 'heroic' spirit of self-sacrifice that leads to his futile death could, in effect, be viewed as a manifestation of the latter kind—that he, like Marcia, could merely be feigning the symbolic, pretending to be (and believing to be) absorbed into its value system.

Regulus however gets off scot-free, since his wife so grandiosely trumps him in the manifestation of these drives. Her femininity makes her a more



likely representative of the *chôra* than a political citizen male could ever be—but it would appear that the dichotomy between female/semiotic/body and male/symbolic/reason is not as clear-cut as it might seem at first sight. This episode, like the others discussed earlier in this chapter, shows how the moral and the psychological qualities of the husband and the wife clearly complement each other in the tradition of Roman war epic. Regulus and Marcia, Cato and Marcia, Pompey and Cornelia, and even Hannibal and Imilce all appear as halves of a whole—the *exemplum* that each of them delivers can be understood only in terms of his or her partner. While the impossibility of epic women's completely entering and being accepted in the temporal scene is made clear by their marginalisation, the gender complementarity in the depictions of these couples also implies that the semiotic and the symbolic modalities are anything but polar opposites: rather, it is the patriarchal power structures that define one modality as the domain of women, and the other as 'masculine'.