

# The dress of Venus in *Aeneid* 1.314–417

*Revised from a paper given to the Virgil Society on 1 December 2018\**

While exploring the *silva* around Carthage, Aeneas encounters his divine mother under the appearance of a virgin huntress (*Aen.* 1.314–417). A survey of the bimillenary reception of the scene, from the early imperial period down to the present day, shows a persistent disquiet about it.<sup>1</sup> This disquiet – mainly caused by the fact that Aeneas, in the woods, meets a beautiful maiden who is actually his mother – is particularly clear when readers deal with passages concerning the dress of Venus (and more broadly her physical features). Here I will take under scrutiny the interpretive responses given to both the description of Venus’ disguise (in particular 320, *nuda genu nodoque sinus collecta fluentis*) and to the mention of her dress in the end of the episode (*pedes vestis defluxit ad imos*, 404). Often, as we shall see, interpreters tend to add erotic details that are absent from the narrative, and to enhance the idea of nudity, imagining Venus as topless in her false appearance, and even as completely naked in her final revelation.

From the earliest interpretations, Venus’ girt-up dress (*nodoque sinus collecta fluentis*), the nudity of her knee (*nuda genu*) and the mention of her calves (*purpureoque alte suras vincire coturno*, 337) have acted powerfully on readers’ imagination. Already the late-antique commentator Tiberius Claudius Donatus underlines the sexual appeal of the disguise:

*Nam cum se ei obtulisset media in silva composita ad fallendum femina, sub virginis habitu et forma quasi venatrix, motus in libidinem non est, cui dabant omnia audendi facultatem, locus, virginitas, pulchritudo, vestitus ... Ecce quanta inritamenta libidinis Aenean non moverunt: nam fuit pulchra, bene vestita, capillis diffusis et genu nuda.*

Through the centuries, these details are often insisted upon and even expanded. Renaissance commentators, for example, are obsessed by Venus’ boots. They seem particularly interested in

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<sup>1</sup> The survey is conducted in detail in Starnone (2020), of which this text summarises a section.

determining the meaning of the adverb *alte* in 337,<sup>2</sup> and, consequently, the amount of naked leg on display. For the Italian Corradus (the author of a commentary on the first book of the *Aeneid*, published in 1555), for example, *alte* means “up to the knees, but in such a way that the knees themselves were bare”: *usque ad genua, ita tamen ut genua ipsa essent nuda*. The French Turnebus (*Adv.* 28.16, end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century) assures us that the virgin’s *coturni* were sufficiently high so as to cover her naked legs: *cum usque ad genua esset sublata vestis, ideo altos gerebat cothurnos, ne cruribus nudis cerneretur*. Even when the interpreters are eager to see the virgin huntress as a masculine, severe, and chaste figure, her attire does not cease to bother them. For Christian Gottlob Heyne, the adjective *Spartana*, with which Venus in disguise is introduced (1.316), may evoke lustful images of Spartan maidens exercising naked in the *palaestra*,<sup>3</sup> and thus it may induce the reader to imagine also *this* virgin as completely naked:

*De Spartanarum puellarum exercitatione, quam huc vocant interpretes, palaestrica nota res. Enimvero tum nudaerant, ut tot loca docere possunt ... In nostro autem poeta vestitae illae sunt et arcu pharetraque instructae. Itaque ad communem potius puellarum Lacaenarum habitum erit referendum, cum militaria opera tractarent, atque ideo brevibus tunicis, iisque ad femur usque dissutis, uterentur, ut nudum femur in incensu appareret.*<sup>4</sup>

But let us turn to *Aen.* 1.320, *nuda genu nodoque sinus collecta fluentis*. Apparently, in order to disguise herself, Venus has modified her dress. Virgil says that she has her knees bare (*nuda genu*), having collected (*collecta*) the flowing folds [of her robe] (*sinus fluentis*) in a knot (*nodo*). As is well known, this line is indebted to a passage from a hymn to Diana attributed to the late Republican poet Laevius (fr. 32.1 Bläns. = 12a.1 Court): *balteus et revocet volucres in pectore sinus*.<sup>5</sup> Diana’s *volucres sinus*, hitched back upon the chest by a *balteus*, become Venus’ *sinus fluentis*, gathered in a knot. In addition, among the possible literary echoes in Virgil’s passage, there is Catullus’ description of Ariadne undressed by the waves (64.63–69):

*Non flavo retinens subtilem vertice mitram,  
non contacta levi velatum pectus amictu,  
non tereti strophio lactentis vincta papillas,*

<sup>2</sup> Famously, 337 recalls the description of a marble statue of Diana in the *Eclogues* (*levi de marmore tota / puniceo stabis suras evincta coturno*, 7.31–32): Venus aims to look like her divine opposite, often represented with tucked up robe, naked knees, high buskins. See Austin (1971) *ad Aen.* 1.320.

<sup>3</sup> On the basis of Prop. 3.14, often quoted by early-modern commentators along with Eur. *Andr.* 595–601, where the old Peleus complains about the debauchery of the Spartan women.

<sup>4</sup> Heyne (1767–75) *ad loc.* See also Forbiger (1837) *ad loc.*: *Male autem interpretes quidam haec ad Spartanarum puellarum exercitationem palaesticam referunt, in qua nudaerant conspiciebantur ... immo Wagner verissime docet comparationem cum puella Lacaena institutam ad arma tantum spectare.*

<sup>5</sup> On the connections between this fragment and Virgil’s line see e.g. Courtney (1993) *ad loc.*

*omnia quae toto delapsa e corpore passim  
 ipsius ante pedes fluctus salis alludebant.  
 Sed neque tum mitrae neque tum fluitantis amictus  
 illa vicem curans.*

Ariadne's *fluitantis amictus* may well have inspired Venus' *sinus fluentis*: Virgil would have transferred Catullus' literal image (Ariadne's clothes are actually floating in water) to a metaphorical level; and perhaps also Catullus' *non tereti strophio lactentis vincta papillas* has left a vague trace on the Virgilian *nodoque sinus collecta fluentis*. In short, Virgil seems to have alluded to Laevius' hymn through Catullus' description of Ariadne, blending the fluttering folds of Diana's robe with Ariadne's dress fluctuating in water and – possibly – the memory of her naked breasts.

However, even though Virgil insists on the body of Venus throughout the episode, the only explicit allusion to nudity is the expression *nuda genu*.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, the repetition of sounds *nu / nud / nd* seems to work as an amplifier of this detail of nakedness.<sup>7</sup> Ovid, describing Medea in the *Metamorphoses*, captures this effect and makes it explicit, turning the alliteration *NUDA NODO* into a polyptoton: *vestes induta recinctas, / NUDA pedem, NUDOS umeris infusa capillos* (7.182–83).<sup>8</sup> Similarly, in vernacular translations, nudity is empowered: the word *nuda* almost spills over the female figure and ends up affecting other body parts. See e.g. Ercole Udine (1597): “e col ginocchio allor volle mostrarse / tutto d'ogni coperta nudo e scarco”; Angilu di Capua (early 14<sup>th</sup> century): “e tutte le gambe mostrava, e le braccia semigliantemente portava sansa niuno coprimento”.<sup>9</sup> In some cases, the expression *sinus fluentis* – also due to the effect of *NUda geNUNODO*, still resounding in *siNUs* – is surprisingly interpreted as “flowing breasts” (based on the secondary meaning of *sinus*),<sup>10</sup> rather than “flowing folds”, and – possibly due to the proximity of *nuda* – as “flowing, naked breasts”. Perhaps already Juvenal, when describing the slave Psecas, beaten by her mistress, played with the Virgilian *nuda* and *sinus*: not only does he employ the polyptoton of *nudus*, just like Ovid in the *Metamorphoses*; he also extends nudity from the *umeri* to the *mamillae*: *nuda umeros Psecas infelix nudisque mamillis* (6.491).<sup>11</sup> But

<sup>6</sup> On the seductive power of Venus' knee see Heuzé (1985) 329–31. Henry (1873) *ad loc.* has the following note: “I have myself seen peasant women in Italy returning from work in the fields, so ‘*succinctae*’, i.e., wearing a second or lower girdle, or page, between which and the ordinary girdle their long skirts were partially pulled out, so as to overhang the lower girdle all round by some four or five inches, and expose the knee”.

<sup>7</sup> See Reckford (1995–96) 20.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. also the description of the arrival of Venus in the Virgilian cento *Iudicium Paradis*: *NUDA genu, NUDOS cervix cui lactea crinis / corripit in NODUM* (21–22).

<sup>9</sup> Ed. Spampinato (2002).

<sup>10</sup> Cf. e.g. *OLD s.v.* 1.b.

<sup>11</sup> The humanist Giovanni Pontano, in his poem *Urania* (c. 1476), while imitating the Virgilian description of Venus (both in disguise and in her true appearance), adds a reference to the breasts: *Has inter succincta sinus, redimita papillas, / et roseum spirans fragranti vertice odorem / errat nuda genu per florida prata Voluptas* (1.183–85, Ed. Weh, 2017).

the interpretation of *sinus* as “breast” emerges more clearly in vernacular literature. Aldobrando Cerretani’s 1540 translation reads: “il colmo seno acceso / raccolto ne stringeva in dolce nodo”.<sup>12</sup> The Spanish humanist Cristóbal de Villalón, in his philosophical dialogue *El Scholástico* (1550), while describing a fountain sculpted with scenes from the *Aeneid*, inserts the detail of the naked breast into the description of Venus in disguise (2.87–88): “traía los cavellos sueltos, que mucho la perfeçonavan, y su pecho descubierto, regaçadas todas sus faldas y presas atrás con un cordón de oro”.<sup>13</sup> In the humanist commentary of Giovanni Fabrini, Carlo Malatesta and Filippo Venuti (1581), the passage is explained as follows: “[*collecta sinus*] havendo ligato il seno [*fluentes*] piene di sugo [*nodo*] con un nodo”. “Piene di sugo” literally means “full of juice” and it translates *fluentes*, showing that the commentators have interpreted *sinus* as “breast”. In the same years, Francis Bacon, in the *Discourse in the Praise of the Sovereign*, states that he aims to use the verses of Virgil, “the chastest and the royalest” among poets, in order to describe the beauty of Queen Elizabeth. Each of her physical features is then expressed through Virgil’s words:

Of her gait: *Et vera incessu patuit Dea.*

Of her voice: *Nec vox hominem sonat.*

Of her eye: *Et laetos oculis afflavit honores.*

Of her colour: *Indum sanguineo veluti violaverit ostro si quis ebur.*

Of her neck: *Et rosea cervice refulsit.*

Of her breast: *Veste sinus collecta fluentes.*

Of her hair: *Ambrosiaequae comae divinum vertice odorem spiravere.*<sup>14</sup>

Here Bacon replaces *nodo* with *veste* and, like the interpreters listed above, reuses *sinus fluentes* just as if *sinus* meant breasts rather than folds.<sup>15</sup> In 1869, the commentator Andreas Weidner advances a similar interpretation: “Um den Busen zu heben, wurde unterhalb desselben ein Busenband aus feinem Leder (*strophium*) um den Körper geschlungen. Dies hat man hier unter dem *nodus* zu verstehen”. By *nodus*, in Weidner’s opinion, Virgil would mean *strophium*

<sup>12</sup> Ed. Borsetto (2002).

<sup>13</sup> Ed. Martínez Torrejón (1997). On this passage see Bollard (2005) 67–69.

<sup>14</sup> Ed. Spedding (1861), 138.

<sup>15</sup> In the Marian sermons by Beniamino Zacchi da Pontevico (1660, 55), the partial nudity of Venus in disguise is once again stressed: “In una folta bosaglia vidde a comparirgli una bellissima ninfa, che portando scalzo il piede pareva una novella Diana che facesse la caccia de’ cuori; teneva il braccio scoperto fino al gombito, che, mostrando l’avorio polposo della carne, faceva comparire ancora la porpora del sangue gentile, che la mostrava campionessa del Cielo; portava una faretra in mano, ma dall’arco dell’occhio scoccando quadrella amorose uccideva chiunque in lei la pupilla fissava; havea la piazza del seno scoperta senza velo alcuno, che mostrando le rotonde mamme acerbe, conperse di neve e cinabro, invitava Cupido a far seco la lotta”. See also e.g. Victor Alexandre Chrétien Le Plat du Temple in his travesty *Virgile en France* (1807, 24): “Et le tulle gazait ses seins rebondissans [*sic*]”; Angelo Vitelleschi’s 1856 translation: “gli ondegianti seni / stretti con nodi della veste”; the Spanish translation by García *et al.* (2009): “en un nodo recogido su escote flotante”.

(recalling the Catullan Ariadne: *non tereti strophio lactentis vincta papillas*, 64.65). This reading resurfaces in an article by Kenneth Reckford, who explains *sinus fluentis* as follows: “I suggest... that *sinus* is a slippery word in Latin poetry, and that these particular *sinus fluentis* indicate not only the folds of Venus’s garment that are gathered up here, but also the characteristic swell of her bosom”.<sup>16</sup>

The sudden metamorphosis of the virgin into Venus is narrated in blurred and vague terms. In particular, the description of the dress is notoriously ambiguous.<sup>17</sup> Clearly, the expression *pedes vestis defluxit ad imos* (404) is meant to recall the aquatic metaphor of *sinus fluentis*.<sup>18</sup> But what exactly happens before the eyes of Aeneas? Ancient commentators agree that when the disguise fades away, the knot is untied, restoring its size and length to the dress (Servius *ad loc.*: *VESTIS DEFLUXIT quia dixit supra ‘sinus collecta fluentis’*; Tiberius Claudius Donatus *ad loc.*: *relaxata veste usque ad vestigia ipsa contacta est. Supra enim dixit ‘nuda genu nodoque sinus collecta fluentis’*). This idea that Venus would cover herself up is in line with similar images used by other Augustan poets to describe the long and wavy garments of gods: the saffron robe of Tibullus’ Osiris (1.7.46), which will be all “poured” over his soft feet, *fusa sed ad teneros lutea palla pedes*;<sup>19</sup> the flowing dress of Bacchus that “wounds” the god’s feet in Propertius (3.17.32): *et feries nudos veste fluente pedes* (two examples including both a water metaphor – *fusa; fluente* – and the mention of feet).<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, this interpretation of *vestis defluxit* is shared by most of Virgil’s imitators. Seneca’s Tiresias wears a robe that “streams” all over his feet: *lugubris imos palla perfundit pedes* (*Oed.* 553).<sup>21</sup> The Cupid of Dracontius, turning into a nymph in order to seduce Hylas, loosens his flowing dress to his feet: *pedes fluitans vestis laxatur ad imos* (*Romul.* 2.84). Prudentius represents the passage of the soldiers from war to peace by portraying their dress, which, at the end of the battle, flows down to their feet: *vestis ad usque pedes descendens defluit imos* (*Psych.* 634). And finally Isidore of Seville seems to reuse Virgil’s language to describe the length of the *tunica talaris*: *talaris tunica dicta eo quod ad talos usque descendat et ad pedes defluat* (*Orig.* 19.22.7).

<sup>16</sup> Reckford (1995–96) 20.

<sup>17</sup> On this ambiguity see e.g. Reckford (1995–96) and *infra*.

<sup>18</sup> Venus, after fleeing away from Aeneas and Achates, “pours” around them a thick “mantle” of fog: *et multo nebulae circum dea fudit amictu* (1.412). The aquatic imagery in association with (metaphoric) garments is still vital after the encounter in the woods. Cf. also 1.319, where *diffundo* is referred to the virgin’s *coma*.

<sup>19</sup> According to Murgatroyd (1980) *ad loc.*, the application of *fundo* to clothes is rare and it first appears in this passage (cf. *TbLL s.v. ‘fluo’*, 1568.20–33). Cf. also Tib. 1.10.68, on *Pax*: *perfluat et pomis candidus ante sinus*.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. also Hor. *Sat.* 1.3.31, where we find the expression *toga defluit*, comically portraying a man who wears a trailing *toga*.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. also Sen. *Oed.* 418–23 (about Bacchus disguised as a virgin): *Qualis iratam metuens novercam / creveras falsos imitatus artus, / crine flaventi simulata virgo, / lutea vestem retinente zona: / inde tam molles placuere cultus / et sinus laxi fluidumque syrma*.

But the same expression – *pedes vestis defluxit ad imos* – also produces opposite images. For example, when Manilius describes Andromeda in chains, he blends memories of the Ovidian Daphne, undressed by the winds while fleeing away from Apollo (*Met.* 1.527–30), of Ariadne undressed by the waves, and of the flowing dress of Venus: *Defluxere sinus umeris fugitique lacertos / vestis et effusi scapulis haesere capilli* (5.556–57).<sup>22</sup> The Virgilian *sinus fluentis* and *vestis defluxit* are here reused to describe the *sinus* that slip away from Andromeda's shoulders and her dress fleeing from her arms. The female figure is left naked in front of a male observer, Perseus. A passage from the *Historia Augusta* about Eliogabalus' eccentricities contains an even more explicit reminiscence in the same vein (*Heliog.* 5.4–5):

*Agebat praeterea domi fabulam Paridis, ipse Veneris personam subiens, ita ut subito vestes ad pedes defluerent, nudusque, una manu ad mammam, altera pudendis adhibita, ingenicularet posterioribus eminentibus in subactorem reiectis et oppositis.*

The Virgilian *pedes vestis defluxit ad imos* is barely modified into *vestes ad pedes defluerent*.<sup>23</sup> The charade of the *princeps* clearly testifies that Virgil's expression could be perceived not as a movement aiming to cover nudity but, on the contrary, as a movement aiming to display it.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Also Ovid's description of the desperation of Narcissus is, I think, reminiscent of the scene: *Dumque dolet, summa vestem deduxit ab ora / nudaque marmoreis percussit pectora palmis. / Pectora traxerunt roseum percussa ruborem* (*Met.* 3.480–82); Narcissus' final liquefaction (*sic attenuatus amore / liquitur*, *Met.* 3.489–90) "literalizes" Virgil's metaphorical *defluxit*. Both Ovid and Manilius, in their rewritings, seem to allude to Aeschylus' description of Iphigenia's dress, as well as to Euripides' Polyxena exposing her naked body to the sacrificers: see *infra*.

<sup>23</sup> The description is probably indebted to a passage by Apuleius (*Met.* 10.31; see Optendrenk, 1969, 133, n.2), which may have been influenced in turn by the Virgilian scene: *Introcussit alia, visendo decore praepollens. gratia coloris ambrosei designans Venerem, qualis fuit Venus, cum fuit virgo, nudo et intecto corpore perfectam formositatem professa, nisi quod tenui pallio bombycino inumbrabat spectabilem pubem*. In addition to staging the paradox of a Venus who is still a virgin (*qualis fuit Venus, cum fuit virgo*) – a paradox which is already in the *Aeneid* – Apuleius mentions *ambrosia* (cf. *Aen.* 1.403) and finally focuses on the almost complete nudity of the female figure.

<sup>24</sup> On the hypothetic nudity of Venus revealed there is a funny repartee between two readers of *The Gentleman's Magazine*. A reader calling himself "an academic" suggests interpreting *cervix* as bosom (1799, 69.2, 1045): "I take the epithet [*scil. rosea, Aen.* 1.402] to be applied not to the whole of the Goddess's bosom; but to that part of it, of which the budding rose affords the most appropriate emblem – the *venustae, tenellae, sororiantes, extantesque in pectore candidissimo mamillae*". Here is the other reader's mocking reply (1800, 70.2, 841): "We cannot... admit the interpretation of your correspondent, unless we suppose the *venustae, tenellae, sororiantes, extantesque in pectore candidissimo mamillae* of the goddess, of which he so luxuriantly speaks, were placed *in cervice*, or *behind*; but this ... we know to be not altogether in the order of nature; nevertheless, in a studious secluded member of C.C.C.C. [*i.e.* Corpus Christi College, Cambridge] who may reasonably be presumed to be not much versed in the contour and anatomy of the female form, the error is not only excusable, but even amiable. It gives one an exalted idea of the close attention to study, perfect abstraction, strict discipline, and rigid monachism, of that learned seminary". In recent years, the tendency to imagine Venus as naked in the conclusion of the episode has spread: see *e.g.* Reckford (1995–96); La Penna (2002) 105–06; Oliensis (2009) 62–63.

Already the humanists<sup>25</sup> connected the final part of the scene with Helen's recognition of Aphrodite in *Iliad* 3 (397–98): here the goddess, in the guise of an old woman, is recognized, among other things, by her desirable breasts (στήθεά θ' ἰμερόεντα). Aristarchus athetized these lines along with the angry exchange that follows (396–418). One of the reasons for the removal was, as Richard Hunter puts it, “the improbability of the verses describing the god's lovely body”.<sup>26</sup> But for other scholiasts the verses were appropriate (Schol. B *ad loc*): οὐδὲν ἄτοπον γυμνὴν φαίνεσθαι τὴν θεόν.<sup>27</sup>

Kenneth Reckford, who maintains that *pedes vestis defluxit ad imos* is deliberately ambiguous, has linked the scene to the Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite,<sup>28</sup> one of the texts that does indeed seem to have influenced Virgil's orchestration the most. Here the goddess, after disguising herself as a virgin in order to seduce Anchises without scaring him with her divine aspect (81–83), allows the young man to undress her (λύσε δὲ οἱ ζώνην ἰδὲ εἴματα σιγαλόεντα / ἔκδυε καὶ κατέθηκεν ἐπὶ θρόνου ἀργυροῦλου / Ἀρχίσης, 164–66), and later she reclothes herself with divinity (αὐτὴ δὲ χροῖ ἔννυτο εἴματα καλά. / ἔσσαμένη δ' εὖ πάντα περὶ χροῖ δῖα θεάων, 171–72). Even though Virgil does not show any significant textual similarities with the Hymn, the dialectic between disguise / unclothing / reclothing seems to be the same.<sup>29</sup>

But there is, I think, another Greek passage, which, in addition to *Iliad* 3 and the Hymn, has acted on Virgil's *pedes vestis defluxit ad imos*. When in the parodos of Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* the chorus recalls Iphigenia's sacrifice, it uses the much debated expression κρόκου βαφᾶς δ' ἔς πέδον χέουσα (239).<sup>30</sup> Here we find a water metaphor, χέουσα (the verb is glossed by Peter Paul Dobree as *defluere sino*),<sup>31</sup> which seems to be referred to a dress: κρόκου βαφᾶς literally means “crocus' dyes”, hence “robes dyed with the color of the crocus”. Presumably, the expression alludes to a movement towards a place, namely a downward movement headed to the ground, which is named as πέδον, etymologically connected with πούς, and – we may add – phonetically close to the Virgilian *pedes*. The Aeschylean association between χέω and a feminine garment seems to derive in turn from a scene from *Iliad* 5, repeated at *Iliad* 8:<sup>32</sup> the virgin Athena, turning from pacific to belligerent goddess,

<sup>25</sup> See e.g. Ursinus (1567) *ad loc*. See also Reckford (1995–96) 8.

<sup>26</sup> Hunter (2017) 60.

<sup>27</sup> Aphrodite-Venus, of all goddesses, is most generally thought of as naked, but only from the Hellenistic age onwards. Earlier she tends to be enveloped in floor-length draperies. In the Augustan period, due to Venus' role as ancestor of the *gens Iulia*, her iconography starts being modified and the goddess re-acquires maternal traits (see e.g. Reckford, 1995–96, 8).

<sup>28</sup> *ibid.* 21–22.

<sup>29</sup> Reckford (1995–96, 4–7) also traces the Virgilian description back to the Catullan Ariadne.

<sup>30</sup> On the interpretative problems of this passage see Medda (2012). See also *infra*.

<sup>31</sup> Dobree (1833) 23.

<sup>32</sup> See e.g. Medda (2017) *ad loc*.

lets her fine peplos fall down on her father's threshold (πέπλον μὲν κατέχευεν ἑανὸν πατρὸς ἐπ' οὐδὲι, 5.734 / 8.385), and then she reclothes herself for war (ἦ δὲ χιτῶν' ἐνδύσα Διὸς νεφέληγερέταο / τεύχεσιν ἐς πόλεμον θωρήσσετο δακρυρόεντα, 5.736–37 / 8.387–88). The poet, in order to depict the movement of the dress, chooses the verb χέω, which generates, as Kirk (1985) writes *ad Il.* 5.734, “a voluptuous description”. Athena, in substance, as the scholia *ad Il.* 5.734 underline, remains momentarily naked (γυμνήν δὲ ἡμῖν Ἀθηνᾶν διὰ τῆς λέξεως παρέστησεν).<sup>33</sup> But the scholiast commenting upon the parallel line at *Il.* 8.385 felt differently: he praised the poet for his ability not to strip the virgin (θαυμασίως οὐ γυμνοῖ τὴν παρθένον).<sup>34</sup> Modern scholars are cautious: they usually insist on the rapid gesture of Athena; the passage from the peplos to the chiton and the armour would be so quick that it would not give any glimpses of her naked body.<sup>35</sup> The Aeschylean text has aroused a more violent critical debate. According to the scholia,<sup>36</sup> the virgin Iphigenia threw her crocus-dyed robes to the ground;<sup>37</sup> therefore, she stripped (either partially or completely) in front of her father and the other sacrificers. This is, possibly, the reading by Euripides, who, when imitating this passage in the *Hecuba*, stresses the theme of nakedness: Polyxena tears her dress apart (the water metaphor is suppressed), exposing her breasts and her beautiful chest to the sacrificers: λαβοῦσα πέπλους ἐξ ἄκρας ἐπωμίδος / ἔρρηξε λαγόνας ἐς μέσας παρ' ὀμφαλόν, / μαστοῦς τ' ἔδειξε στέρνα θ' ὡς ἀγάλματος / κάλλιστα (558–61).<sup>38</sup> But while Polyxena's breast-baring is usually interpreted as a masculine gesture, and considered bold and praiseworthy, the idea of Iphigenia exposing her virginal body to male observers that included her father has been perceived as so outrageous that readers have searched for solutions that might mitigate or erase their disquiet.<sup>39</sup>

As we have seen, the gesture attributed to the Virgilian Venus, untying the knot of her dress in front of Aeneas, has had a similar destiny from its very first interpretations. But there are other significant similarities between Aeschylus and Virgil, as against Homer and Euripides. Both Athena and Polyxena remain naked, but only momentarily: Athena, as we have seen, immediately puts on male garments; Polyxena, while dying, worries “to conceal what needs to be concealed from the eyes of men” (κρύπτουσ' ἃ κρύπτειν ὄμματ' ἀρσένων χρεῶν, 570). In Aeschylus and Virgil, there is no change of clothes: both the dress of Iphigenia and the

<sup>33</sup> Ed. Erbse *ad loc.*

<sup>34</sup> Ed. Erbse *ad loc.* In the adverb θαυμασίως we can also perceive an undertone of surprise and disappointment.

<sup>35</sup> See e.g. Loraux (1989) 264–65; Llewellyn-Jones (2001) 244.

<sup>36</sup> Scholl. T 239b ἐς πέδον] εἰς τὴν γῆν; 239c χέουσα] ῥίψασα. See Medda (2012) 106.

<sup>37</sup> The Aeschylean passage seems to be among the possible influences of the famous Pompeian fresco from the House of the Tragic Poet (now at the Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Naples), where Iphigenia is depicted with bare breasts, while her saffron robe is slipping to the ground. See e.g. Scarcia (2008).

<sup>38</sup> See e.g. Battezzato (2018) *ad loc.* On the confusion between Iphigenia and Polyxena, especially in iconography, see Scarcia (2008) 71, n.7.

<sup>39</sup> See e.g. Medda (2012) 106–11; Wohl (1998) 72–73.

girt-up dress of Venus just flow down “with the shimmering motion of water”.<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, Polyxena exposes her breasts to the enemy, that is to the Greek soldiers;<sup>41</sup> Athena instead removes her robe *πατρὸς ἐπ’ οὐδὲι* and then she wears Zeus’ chiton and her armour; but the father, even though his presence is evoked twice, does not witness the daughter’s change of clothes.<sup>42</sup> Conversely, both Iphigenia and Venus perform their revealing gestures right in front of male next of kin: a father, Agamemnon, and a son, Aeneas.

One final observation. Virgil in the *Aeneid* frequently draws on Aeschylus’ *Oresteia*;<sup>43</sup> usually he alludes to the Aeschylean description of the sacrifice of Iphigenia through Lucretius’ famous narrative,<sup>44</sup> which, as Alessandro Perutelli has demonstrated, alludes in its turn to the *Agamemnon*.<sup>45</sup> What is relevant here is that Lucretius, too, in his account, uses a water metaphor (*profundo*)<sup>46</sup> with reference to Iphigenia’s garments,<sup>47</sup> namely the *infula* that the sacrificers envelop around her head: *cui simul infula virgineos circumdata comptus / ex utraque pari malarum parte profusast* (1.88–89). Even though Lucretius does not mention Iphigenia’s nudity,<sup>48</sup> the headband, surrounding her hair, “pours”, as if it were liquid, along her cheeks.<sup>49</sup>

In conclusion, the Virgilian episode – the first moment in the poem in which Aeneas finds himself confronting the feminine –, concerned as it is with the gaze of the hero on the female body, is particularly useful for reconstructing what the readers see when they imagine what Virgil is narrating. From the very beginning, the text sounded unstable and destabilized the imagination of interpreters. Two possible literary echoes – the naked Ariadne and the naked Iphigenia – contribute to the general sense of unease. Nudity spreads: it invests the arms, the legs, the bosom of the virgin. The expression *sinus fluentis* prompts readers to visualize Venus’ breasts as well as the dress that covers them. A similar fluctuation characterizes *pedes vestis defluxit ad imos*. If the hypothesis that the poet was influenced by the parodos of the *Agamemnon* is legitimate, it proves that he has deliberately constructed an ambiguous text. This ambiguity would be dictated by the way in which Virgil, in this scene, applies the epic canon (the hero encounters his patron goddess in disguise) while subverting it (the

<sup>40</sup> Austin (1971) *ad Aen.* 1.404.

<sup>41</sup> Euripides, in the *Andromache*, stresses the erotic undertones of this gesture, when he attributes it to Helen, staging Menelaus seduced by the sight of her breasts (629). See Castellaneta (2013) 98–106.

<sup>42</sup> See Kirk (1985) *ad Il.* 5. 734–37.

<sup>43</sup> See Hardie (1991).

<sup>44</sup> See e.g. Hardie (1984).

<sup>45</sup> Perutelli (1998).

<sup>46</sup> The Greek equivalent of the verb is *προχέω* (*IbLL* 10.2.1740.70).

<sup>47</sup> See Bonanno (2004) 103. Lucretius, by turning the dress of Iphigenia into a sacred garment, seems to perceive the (perverse) ritual connotation of the Aeschylean *χέω*, possibly alluding to libations (cf. Eur. *Hec.* 529; 535–37).

<sup>48</sup> But see Fraccaroli (1885) 522: “Che Ifigenia doveva in qualche modo scoprirsi sull’altare, lo sentì anche Lucrezio, I, 88”.

<sup>49</sup> *effundo* is used a few lines below in its literal sense of “shedding tears” (Lucret. 1.91).

patron goddess is the mother of the hero and she appears to her unaware son in the guise of a beautiful virgin).

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