

# Dying in Purple: Life, Death, and Tyrian Dye in the *Aeneid*

*Revised from a paper given to the Virgil Society on 26 January 2013*

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Purple is the colour of empire: the colour for Rome's magistrates, its emperors, and its imperial achievements.<sup>2</sup> But to Rome's authors, it was also the colour that came to symbolise desire and luxury. For Cicero, the desire of men to wear the purple was a symbol of their overweening ambition (e.g. Caesar, *Div.* 1.119.4) or degeneracy (e.g. followers of Catiline, *Cat.* 2.5.10), and he included Tyrian purple among the gifts offered to the corrupt Verres (*Verr.* 2.5.146). For the elegiac poets the colour purple was a prominent feature in their works, used in reference to luxurious furnishings and personal attire (e.g. Propertius 3.14.27) as well as being offset with the colour white to symbolise the sexual awakening of young, blushing girls (e.g. Tibullus 3.4.29-30). For Virgil, purple was not just a colour of luxury (e.g. *Aen.* 1.639), sexual desire (e.g. *Aen.* 12.67), or representative of Rome's future ambitions (e.g. *Aen.* 5.205). Through the purple-dyed cloth worn by his protagonists, or prominent use of the adjective *purpureus*, the colour purple became an extension of life and death, reflective of the ability – and more often failure – of Virgil's youths, as well as those of Augustan Rome, to realise

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this article I deliberately use the word “dying” as the participle and gerund of both “to dye” and “to die”, with the intention of punning upon the ambiguity between the two. *The Oxford English Dictionary* (s.v. ‘dye’) lists “dyeing” as the correct form for “to dye”, but notes that “the convenient distinction in spelling between *die* and *dye* is quite recent”.

<sup>2</sup> Purple dye was used for example to colour the stripes on the togas of Rome's senators, the robes of the emperor, the garments of men of religious rank, and the clothes – twinned with gold – that were worn by the winners in a triumph. See for example Statius *Silv.* 3.2.139-40 (purple stripes) and Ovid *Tr.* 4.2.27 (triumph). On the use of purple as a status symbol in the Roman Republic and early empire, see especially Reinhold (1970) 37-61.

their potential: the youthful Octavian, whose success Virgil promises to honour with the “purple triumph” of his verses (*Ge.* 3.16-48), offset by the premature deaths in purple of Pallas (*Aen.* 11.72-75), Camilla (*Aen.* 11.818-19), and Augustus’ nephew Marcellus, mourned with purple flowers at *Aen.* 6.884.

Despite the complexity of Rome’s use of the purple, studies on colour in the *Aeneid* have been relatively few in number. Robert Edgeworth’s *The Colors of the Aeneid* (1992) is the only published full-scale study of colour usage, although individual studies on the colour purple, particularly in reference to Virgil’s descriptions of purple flowers (*e.g.* Brenk, 1986) are more numerous and few commentators (*e.g.* Hardie, 1994, on 9.435) have failed to observe that the adjective *purpureus* is often used by Virgil to reflect the vitality of youth. So too Oliver Lyne (1983) and Don Fowler (1987) have observed that the colour is synonymous with a character’s life-blood, as well as a symbol of his or her sexual awareness or even symbolic “deflowering” in battle. Colour, then, and specifically the colour purple, clearly matter in the *Aeneid*. What is lacking in these studies, however, is an appreciation of how Virgil employs purple in a way that reflects the diversity of its usage throughout Roman literature and culture.

For “dying in purple” – both the dye production and Virgil’s lost youths – was for Rome’s authors often a case of dying in *Tyrian* purple, prompted by the association between this most sought-after purple dye and its main production centres in Tyre and Sidon.<sup>3</sup> The choice by Rome’s authors to focus on the “Tyrian” or “Sidonian” aspect of dye-production is indicative of the association that they made between the purple dye and the supposedly decadent Tyrian city of Carthage, a city frequently viewed by Rome as its opposite number.<sup>4</sup> In Virgil, or amongst his predecessors and contemporaries, we find the purple terms *murex*, *ostrum*, and *purpura* all used in conjunction with the adjectives *Tyrius* and *Sidonius*,<sup>5</sup> most frequently in contexts that stress the luxurious nature of these Tyrian-dyed garments, but also in contexts where Tyrian purple is the symbol for Roman

<sup>3</sup> See for example Biggam (2006) 25-26.

<sup>4</sup> The tendency by Rome to view Carthage in this way was due largely to the ferocity of their military encounters during the three Punic wars, especially the Second, which Livy describes as the “most memorable war ever waged” (*bellum maxime omnium memorabile quae unquam gesta sint*, 21.1.1). The association between Carthage and dye production was not limited to Tyre: the Western Mediterranean also had a strong connection to Carthage, and “the origins of the industry are placed in the Phoenician colonies of southern Spain” (Lowe, 2004, 46).

<sup>5</sup> See, for example: Cic. *Flac.* 70.10 (*purpuram Tyriam*); Tibul. 2.4.28 (*Tyrio murice*); Hor. *Epist.* 1.10.26 (*Sidonio ostro*); and Virgil *Ge.* 3.17 (*Tyrio...ostro*).

success: in the triumph (e.g. Virgil, *Ge.* 3.17).<sup>6</sup> The association made by authors between Carthage, purple dye, and purple cloth is thus evident throughout Latin literature, and it is therefore difficult to think of purple as the colour for Rome, without also being reminded of its perceived Carthaginian pedigree.

In Virgil's *Aeneid* there is only one stated example of *Tyrian* purple (4.262), but the colour is blazoned throughout every area of Dido's Carthage in books 1 and 4, and the association continues to be felt in later books, where robes of purple and gold, gifts from Dido to Aeneas, feature as the burial shroud for the dead youth Pallas (11.72). Viewing purple in the *Aeneid*, then, is on one level about witnessing the tension created by a colour that represented both the epitome of Roman strength – its *imperium* – and its inherent (one might say “Carthaginian”) weakness: a penchant for luxury and vice. Thus we see Aeneas, our proto-Roman whose task it is to secure Rome's future by wearing the purple *amictus* (3.405) risk upsetting Rome's future – and Virgil's plot – by wearing luxurious Tyrian purple and helping to found the walls of Carthage (4.260-64).

### Purple Power: Rome's obsession with Tyrian purple

The colour purple came in many shades. Not just the dye, which could vary in tone from a reddish hue to the more popular (and expensive) Tyrian blue/black “purple”, said to resemble clotted blood (Pliny *Nat.* 9.135),<sup>7</sup> but the variety of words used to describe it.<sup>8</sup> Among these colour terms four are prominent: *murex*, *ostrum*, *purpura*, and the adjective

<sup>6</sup> We see an increase in the number of references to *Tyrian* purple amongst Virgil's successors. This is particularly the case for the combination *Tyrium ostrum*, for which the earliest example in a literary text is Virg. *Ge.* 3.17. After this there are 7 further examples in literary texts: Ovid (*Her.* 12.179; *Met.* 10.211), Seneca the younger (*Thy.* 955; *Her. O.* 644), Statius (*Theb.* 6.62), and Silius Italicus (8.487; 15.25).

<sup>7</sup> *Laus ei summa in colore sanguinis concreti nigrans aspectu idemque suspectus refulgens.* (“It is considered at its best when it is the colour of clotted blood, black in appearance but also reflecting the light when lifted up”, Pliny *Nat.* 9.135). All translations are my own.

<sup>8</sup> The varying quality of purple dye is something noted by Rome's authors. Horace for example speaks disparagingly of someone who is unable to tell the difference between dye from Aquinum and the (superior) Sidonian purple: *Non qui Sidonio contendere callidus ostro / nescit Aquinatam potentia vellera fucum / certius accipiet damnnum propiusve medullis / quam qui non poterit vero distinguere falsum* (*Epist.* 1.10.26-29). The most expensive, Tyrian, purple dye appears to have been introduced to Rome comparatively late: in 63 BC P. Lentulus Spinther, a curile aedile, was allegedly the first Roman to use this particular dye on his *toga praetexta*: “a display of luxury which met with disapproval in Rome” (Reinhold, 1970, 43).

*purpureus*.<sup>9</sup> Providing a precise definition of exactly what shade of purple was meant by the ancients, or a clear distinction between the different uses of the purple words, has proven difficult to achieve.<sup>10</sup> Both *murex* and *purpura* can refer directly to the purple shellfish that produces the dye (*OLD s.v. murex* and *purpura*),<sup>11</sup> whilst all four words can refer to materials dyed purple as well as to the dye itself. It is not surprising, then, that the most common use of all four terms is in reference to clothing or furnishings (e.g. Hor. *Epist.* 2.2.181), a natural result of the colour's primary association with the purple dye and the cloth that it produced. These items dyed purple varied enormously and included the broadly-defined *vestis*, which could refer to clothing or furnishings (*OLD s.v. vestis*), the *amictus* (a cloak which often had religious and senatorial connotations),<sup>12</sup> and the *pallium*, "a characteristically Greek form of dress" (*OLD s.v. pallium* ii, 1b) which often had negative associations.<sup>13</sup>

What these garments dyed purple stood for in ideological terms, however, presents further complications, since they could be a status symbol for their wearer, representative of Rome and its *imperium*, but also a visual manifestation of an individual's greed or degeneracy. Disapproval of women wearing purple as a sign of excessive luxury, especially during times of economic hardship, is something we see in Cato (*Orig.* 7.8, 10) and was one of the underlying motives behind the introduction of the Oppian Law in 216 BC.<sup>14</sup> But there is a noticeable increase towards the end of the Republic in evidence of negativity towards men wearing purple, particularly in the works of Cicero. This shift may be unduly influenced by the increase in textual sources left to us from this period, especially with respect to the works of Cicero, but Reinhold (1970, 42-43) argues that there was also a strong motivation for this increased negativity: namely the rise of power-hungry individuals in the Roman state, whose ambition prompted men like Cicero to highlight

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<sup>9</sup> Of these four "purple" words, *purpura* and the adjective *purpureus* appear the most frequently in fragmentary and extant literary texts. Among Virgil's predecessors and contemporaries for example we find references, among other authors, in Cato the Elder (e.g. *Orig.* 113.1), Ennius (*Ann.* 11.361 Skutsch), and Lucilius (e.g. *Sat. Frag.* 3.29 Charpin/3.132 Marx). Likewise these purple terms are used heavily by the playwright Plautus (14x), usually in reference to purple attire (e.g. *Men.* 121, *vestem purpuram*, and *Poen.* 304, *purpureo coturno* where there is a deliberate play upon the word *punicus* to imply Tyrian purple).

<sup>10</sup> On this difficulty see for example Gipper (1964) esp. 57-59. Whilst often translated as "purple", these words can also refer to colours classed as "red". See for example Edgeworth (1992) 138, 215, 222 n.2.

<sup>11</sup> See n.20 below.

<sup>12</sup> See n.34 below.

<sup>13</sup> See n.15 below.

<sup>14</sup> See especially Reinhold (1970) 41.

pejorative associations between the colour purple, luxury, and Hellenistic kingship. Thus we see Cicero describe the followers of Catiline as men who are shining with ointment and gleaming in purple (*qui nitent unguentis fulgent purpura*),<sup>15</sup> and most damning of all, Julius Caesar: dressed like a king in a purple *amictus* and sitting on a golden throne (*Phil.* 2.85).<sup>16</sup>

Cicero's speeches highlight the negative gloss of purple when worn by an individual who seeks excessive power. Livy, on the other hand, provides an illustration of the positive use of purple as a status symbol. At 34.7 for example he describes the speech of the tribune L. Valerius who was in favour of repealing the Oppian law. Notable among his arguments is that it diminished the status of Roman woman in relation to those in the provinces who could, and did, wear the purple: *cum insignes eas esse auro et purpura, cum illas vehi per urbem, se pedibus sequi, tamquam in illarum civitatibus non in sua imperium sit*. Again it is not the act of wearing purple that matters so much as what that colour symbolises: here Rome's power and its authority – its *imperium*.

Purple, then, *is* the colour of empire, as well as the colour of luxury and vice, but there is one final feature of the colour worth emphasising, that is found predominantly among the elegiac and epic poets: namely the juxtaposition of purple (notably *purpura* / *purpureus*) with white.<sup>17</sup> Among these poets is Catullus, who highlights the juxtaposition in three out of four references to the colour purple in poem 64: the purple bedspread vs the ivory bed (48-49); Ariadne's imagining of the white soles of Theseus' feet vs the purple of his bedspread (162-63); and the depiction of the Fates, whose white skin is driven into sharp relief by the purple cloth of their robes: *His corpus tremulum complectens undique vestis / candida purpurea talos incinxerat ora* (307-08).<sup>18</sup> This juxtaposition, coupled with the reference to their bodies (*corpus*) is echoed in the close connection that many authors, including Ovid and Virgil, draw between purple cloth and the "white" or "shining" skin of

<sup>15</sup> Other references in Cicero that highlight purple as a colour associated with kingship include *Sest* 57 (purple as a symbol of royal authority) and *Sen.* 16.59 (purple robe of Cyrus the younger). Another of Cicero's prominent targets, Verres, is also subject to frequent criticism for his love of purple, e.g. *Verr.* 2.5.86, where Verres stands on the shore watching his fleet, dressed in a purple *pallium* and leaning on a prostitute: *stetit soleatus praetor populi Romani cum pallio purpureo tunicaque talari muliercula nixus in litore*. Heskell (2001, 134) notes that the *pallium* is "decidedly Greek" and employed by Cicero as a form of criticism against Verres.

<sup>16</sup> Cicero's negative portrayal of Caesar in purple will be somewhat reversed by later portrayals of Augustus as a "god-in-waiting", adorned with purple. See n.43 below.

<sup>17</sup> Thomson (1997) on *Catul.* 64.49 observes that "Red-white contrasts are especially popular with the Roman poets". On these red-white contrasts in Roman poetry, see especially André (1949) 324-26; Buchner (1970) 163-69; Rhorer (1980); Hinds (1987) 154; Quinn (1996) on *Catul.* 64.49; Jamset (2004) 100-01, who notes that this colour contrast is a characteristic feature of love elegy.

<sup>18</sup> The fourth usage refers to the purple light of the sunrise (275).

its wearer - an example of colour opposition that is then extended to the motif of the fallen youths of epic whose dying moments are characteristically described in terms of their purple blood flowing over their white skin (e.g. Pyramus, Ov. *Met.* 4.125-27; Euryalus, *Aen.* 9.434-37). For these authors purple cloth is more than a symbol of status or luxury: it acts as an extension of the self, matching the colour of the life-blood that pulses through – and over – its wearer.<sup>19</sup>

### Dying for Purple: Tyrian dye production and the *Aeneid*

The emphasis placed by these poets on purple as both the colour of luxurious cloth and the blood of the dying finds a parallel in the origin of the purple dye. This dye production was a hugely costly process, due in no small part to the difficulty involved in extracting the dye from its source: the sea-molluscs known as the *purpura* and *murex*.<sup>20</sup> There appear to have been two main types of extraction: crushing hundreds of thousands of the smaller specimens whole to produce dye in sufficient quantities for use,<sup>21</sup> and removing the larger species from their shells before extracting the dye.

<sup>19</sup> Pliny the Elder, when describing the resemblance of the purple dye to clotted blood (see n.7 above) says that it was for this reason that Homer referred to “purple blood”: *unde et Homero purpureus dicitur sanguis* (*Nat.* 9.135). See, too, Brotier (1826) 1778 on *Homero*, who argues that Pliny is also thinking of Virgil’s Rhoetus. See n.28 below.

<sup>20</sup> Scholars have identified three main species of shellfish that were used for producing purple dye in the ancient Mediterranean, of which the modern identification is: *murex trunculus*, *murex brandaris*, and *purpura haemastoma* (see Lowe, 2004, 46). Ancient Greek had several words for these shellfish: the most common appears to have been πορφύρα (“the purple”), but we also have μύαξ (Latin *murex*) and κήρυξ (“trumpet shell”). Latin, however, has four: *murex* and *purpura*, as well as *bucinum* and *pelagia*. Pliny the Elder describes two kinds (9.129): the *bucinum*, which he says is smaller, and the *purpura*, which he describes as having a shell with rows of spines. Thompson (1947, 210) says that Pliny’s *purpura* is “undoubtedly *M. brandaris*”, whereas his *bucinum* “would seem to be our *Purpura haemastoma*”, but then adds several pages later (217): “*Purpura (nomine alio pelagiae vocatur)* is defined (ib 130) by *cuniculatum procurrente rostro*, and is therefore *M. trunculus*, the true Tyrian shell; *bucinum* on the other hand, characterized *rotunditate oris in margine incisa*, is *M. brandaris*”. Dalby (2003, 271) further muddies the waters: “*bucinum* is probably *Stramonita* [*i.e. Purpura*] *Haemastoma*; *murex* is *Murex Trunculus* ... *purpura* is usually applied to *Murex Brandaris*, the species used for dyeing in Laconia and at Tarentum”. *OCD*<sup>3</sup> (*s.v.* “purple”) offers some clarity, stating that *purpura* and *pelagia* (πορφύρα) refer to both *Murex Trunculus* and *Brandaris*, whilst *murex* and *bucinum* (κήρυξ) refer “to the smaller and less precious *purpura haemastoma*”. This position is affirmed by Forbes (1964, 118) and also Marzano (2013, 143 n.3). The general consensus amongst scholars is that the *murex trunculus* was used to produce the most expensive purple dye, produced at Tyre and Sidon.

<sup>21</sup> The ancient world took dye-production to an industrial scale via a vat-process which has proven difficult to reconstruct. On this process see especially Lowe (2004) 46-47, Biggam (2006) 25-27 and Veropoulidou, Andreou & Kotsakis (2008).

This extraction process is described in some detail by Aristotle, Vitruvius, and Pliny the Elder. Aristotle’s description focuses on the “bloom” (τὸ ἄνθος, *Hist. an.* 547a7) of the purple fish, *i.e.* the coloured juice that was used to produce the dye that was situated in a white (λευκός, 547a17) vein in its throat.<sup>22</sup> Of particular note is Aristotle’s comment that the dye should be extracted whilst the fish is still alive, or else it will “vomit” up the dye upon its death (Σπουδάζουσι δὲ ζώσας κόπτειν· ἔὰν γὰρ πρότερον ἀποθάνη, συνεξεμεῖ τὸ ἄνθος, 547a26-27). The importance of capturing a “live” purple fish, and the risk that it will “vomit” up the dye when it dies, are details also stressed by Pliny the Elder:

*Sed purpurae florem illum tinguendis expetitur vestibis in mediis habent faucibus. Liquoris hic minimi est candida vena, unde pretiosus ille bibitur nigrantis rosae colore sublucens. Reliquum corpus sterile. Vivas capere contendunt, quia cum vita sucum eum evomunt.*

(“But the purple fish have that ‘bloom’ [i.e. juice], so sought after for the purpose of dying cloth, in the middle of their throats. [This juice consists of] a miniscule drop contained in a white vein, from which that prized bloom, glimmering with the colour of rose verging on black, is drained. The rest of the body has none of it. Men struggle to capture the fish alive, since they vomit up the juice with their lives”).

*Nat.* 9.125-26

This, then, is dye-production that requires actual *dying*, with both Aristotle and Pliny describing the purple dye as a bodily fluid that appears to be equated with the fish’s life-blood, since, if it is not extracted whilst the fish is still living, it will be coughed up *cum vita*. So too both Aristotle and Pliny, in their anatomical descriptions of these purple fish, refer to the dye-producing juice in terms of a flower (ἄνθος / *flos*), locating this “bloom” in the white vein of the fish’s throat (λευκός / *candida*). Aristotle takes this “language of flowers” one step further, telling his readers that the ἄνθος is produced between the μηκῶν and the neck (Τὸ δ’ ἄνθος ἔχουσιν ἀνὰ μέσον τῆς μήκωνος καὶ τοῦ τραχήλου, 547a15-16). Aristotle uses μηκῶν to refer to a part of the fish’s anatomy, a “quasi-liver” (*LSJ s.v.* μηκῶν, II) probably situated below the “neck”, but a far more common meaning of μηκῶν is poppy, so that it would be difficult for the reader not to be reminded of this “purple” flower when reading Aristotle’s description.

<sup>22</sup> The purple pigment was produced from the mucus of the hyperbranchial glands of the *murex/purpura*, which when exposed to air and sunlight went through a process of colour change over time from yellow to green, blue, and eventually the purple which ranged in hue from blue-violet to red-purple (see Biggam, 2006, 25).

Vitruvius, a contemporary of Virgil, provides another (brief) account of purple dye production that stresses the life and death nature of this process. He does not refer to flowers or the removal of the “bloom” from a white vein, but he does describe the violent method of extraction in terms that appear almost human: *Ea conchylia, cum sunt lecta, ferramentis circa scinduntur, e quibus plagis purpurea sanies, uti lacrima profluens, excussa in mortariis terendo comparatur* (“these shells, when they have been collected, are all broken apart with iron tools, and from these wounds the purple gore, flowing out like tears, is forced out and collected into the mortars for grinding”, 7.13.3).

For our natural historians the above are points of fact and anatomical observations, and their reference to the dye-producing juice as a flower is intended to stress both the lustre of the dye and that this dye is the “choice part” of the purple fish (*LSJ s.v. ἄνθος*, III and *OLD s.v. flos*, 9a). But their accounts of dye-production nevertheless contain details – notably the extraction of the dye from the white throat, the violence of this extraction, and the fish’s act of vomiting up the “bloom” (juice) with its life – that find parallels in the deaths in battle of Virgil’s ill-fated youths.

In the *Aeneid*, there are two youths in particular whose deaths *could* be viewed as a form of pseudo-dye extraction: Rhoetus and Euryalus, who are both killed in book 9. First Rhoetus, who is fatally wounded by Euryalus, is described as “vomiting forth” (*vomit*, 349) his “purple life” (*purpuream ... animam, ibid.*).<sup>23</sup> Then there is Euryalus, whose death is depicted in terms of his blood flowing over his white limbs: *candida pectora rumpit. / ... pulchrosque per artus / it cruor ... / purpureus veluti cum flos succisus aratro / languescit moriens*, 432-36). The death of Rhoetus is violent, but short. With the death of Euryalus, Virgil lingers over the details and includes a simile that compares Euryalus to a “purple flower” cut down by the plough.

The association between purple flowers and death in ancient texts, especially in the *Aeneid*, has drawn much scholarly attention.<sup>24</sup> Propertius, like Virgil and Ovid after him,<sup>25</sup> associates the purple flower with ill-fated youths, such as Hylas, the favourite of Hercules,

<sup>23</sup> There has been some controversy as to whether the right reading here is *purpuream*, to agree with *animam*, or *purpureum*, to be taken with *ensem* at 9.347. General consensus favours *purpuream*, and Henry (1889, *ad* 342-50) provides a detailed, and convincing, discussion to this effect.

<sup>24</sup> Heyne (1822) on 6.885 for example notes the parallel between blood and purple flowers “ut saepe diximus, propter sanguinis similitudinem”. On purple flowers and death in the *Aeneid* see especially Edgeworth (1992) 26-29.

<sup>25</sup> See for example Ovid *Met.* 10.211, where Hyacinthus is changed into a flower described as “brighter” (*nitentior*) than “Tyrian purple” (*tyrio ... ostro*). The use of colour by Ovid has received a great deal of study in recent years. See for example Rhorer (1980) and Barolsky (2003).



who immediately prior to his abduction is described as plucking the purple poppies (*purpureis ... papaveribus*, 1.20.38) like a child (*pueriliter*, 1.20.39): in effect picking the flowers for his own “funeral”. In the *Aeneid* there are three references to “purple flowers” in addition to the simile comparing Euryalus to a *purpureus flos*: 5.79 (Aeneas lays purple flowers, *flores*, on the tomb of his father Anchises); 6.884 (purple flowers, *flos*, for Marcellus); 12.414 (the purple flower, *flos*, which Venus brings to save Aeneas). But we also have two notable references to flowers that are, according to our Latin authors, purple: again Euryalus, who in lines 9.436-37 is also compared to a poppy (*lassove papavera collo / demisere caput pluvia cum forte gravantur*), and Pallas, who is compared to a “soft violet” and “drooping hyacinth”: *qualem virgineo demessum pollice florem / seu mollis violae seu languentis hyacinthi* (11.68-69).

Together with Marcellus, whose premature death is mourned with purple flowers,<sup>26</sup> Euryalus and Pallas stand as examples of Virgil’s ill-fated youths, whose comparison to purple flowers not only affirms that they have been “cut down” in the prime of life and the beauty of youth,<sup>27</sup> but serves as a reminder of what the colour purple represents: purple death (blood), but also the radiance of the purple dye, described by our natural historians as the “bloom” (*ἄvθoς/flos*) or “choice part” of the purple-fish.

When we examine the fallen youths of Virgil’s *Aeneid*, then, we need not see a direct allusion to Aristotle or Vitruvius, just as by association we need not presume that Pliny’s account of the purple fish “vomiting up” its *flos* together with its *vita*, written some 100 years after the *Aeneid*, alludes to Virgil’s Rhoetus (9.349).<sup>28</sup> But what all these texts do demonstrate is a shared language with regard to the colour, which confirms that producing the purple – be it purple dye or purple blood – is a costly, life and death, affair.

<sup>26</sup> Fletcher (1941) on 6.882-83: “Marcellus – the youth whose early death Rome in Virgil’s day was still mourning”. On Marcellus and the purple flowers see especially Brenk (1986).

<sup>27</sup> See Heyne (1822) on why the hyacinth is an appropriate flower to represent lost youth (141 on 11.69): “quia Hyacinthus puer fuit”.

<sup>28</sup> There is some justification, however, for believing that Pliny may have had Virgil’s passage on Rhoetus’ death in mind (see n.19 above). So too, La Cerda (1617), on *purpuream vomit ille animam*, is also reminded of Pliny’s discussion of the *purpura* in Virgil’s description of Rhoetus’ death and cites Pliny’s subsequent description of the purple dye resembling blood (9.135). Gipper (1964) 45-46 contemplates the possibility of πορφύρεος θάvατος in the *Iliad* (“purple death”, e.g. 5.83) alluding indirectly to the death of the purple shell-fish, although he dismisses this as implausible, since he finds it hard to believe that the dye-production process was that well-known (“es ist kaum anzunehmen, daß ein so spezieller Vorgang in der Purpurherstellung allgemein bekannt und somit fähig war, die Geltung des Wortinhaltes zu bestimmen”). Kirk (1990) on *Il.* 5.82-83 notes that all three instances of “purple death over the eyes” in the *Iliad* (5.83; 16.333-34; 20.476-77) are “associated with blood”.

The parallel that can be drawn between the dye-production process and the deaths of Virgil's youths confirms the complexity involved in interpreting what the colour purple meant to Rome. This is a complexity further acknowledged by Pliny, who finds himself in something of a quandary: desirous of describing the production of purple to impart knowledge to his readers, but simultaneously finding it distasteful to describe in detail such a luxurious commodity.<sup>29</sup> Thus Pliny shows himself to be aware of the tension<sup>30</sup> created by the two-fold nature of purple, as he recognises its importance to Rome's sense of self (*i.e.* its *romanitas*) by virtue of it being the traditional marker of honour, but also describes Rome's madness (*purpurae ... insania*, *Nat.* 9.127) for it, a reminder that lust for the purple, that is imperial power, became a motivation for civil war. It is apt, then, that the deaths of Rhoetus and Euryalus – our “purple fish” – should occur in the most *civil* book of Virgil's *Aeneid*, book 9, which explores residual civil-war tension in Augustan Rome via the conflict between the Italians and Trojans, our proto-Romans.<sup>31</sup> Thus both Virgil's Rhoetus, vomiting up his life-blood, and Euryalus, cut down like a poppy in the field, are not just fallen youths in battle, but a reminder of the cost of Rome's lust for the purple at every level: from the expensive dye-production process that involves *actual* dying, to those who fight and fall for “purple power”, men like Catiline and Caesar. Like the dye-producing *murex* and *purpura*, then, Euryalus and Rhoetus are vomiting up the colour of Rome's empire; dying for the purple.

### **Wearing the Purple: Clothing and the *Aeneid***

This cost of empire, “purple power”, as well as the inherent tension in a colour that represented both luxury and honour for Rome, is also evident in the purple attire worn by many of Virgil's protagonists. Purple dye, of course, produces purple cloth, and Virgil's *Aeneid* conforms to our expectations by having the majority of its purple terms refer to clothing, cloth, or accoutrements and trappings: 2 out of 3 examples for *murex* (4.262; 9.614); 11 out of 12 examples for *ostrum* (1.639, 700; 4.134; 5.111, 133; 7.277, 814; 10.722; 11.72; 12.126); 2 out of 2 examples for *purpura* (5.251; 7.251); and 8 out of 15 examples for *purpureus* (1.337; 3.405; 4.139; 6.221; 7.251; 9.163; 10.722; 12.602).<sup>32</sup>

<sup>29</sup> See Lao (2011) 43.

<sup>30</sup> See Murphy (2004, 96), who notes that purple (and gold) were “traditional markers of honour among the Romans”, thus Pliny (96-97) “allows such luxuries a legitimate place in society ... But when diverted from these traditional and legitimate uses, this same purple stands as a supreme example of useless luxury ... In political terms, if luxurious display is sometimes the prerogative of the good, it is a privilege more often usurped by the bad”.

<sup>31</sup> See for example Hardie (1994) 14-18 and Stocks (2012) 138.

<sup>32</sup> Virgil also employs the adjective *punicus* (or *poenicus*) for a type of purple, although this is often defined as more of a scarlet red (*OLD s.v. punicus*). This word also has obvious links to Carthage.

This purple clothing, then, is clearly significant, and it is worth noting that even the reference to purple light in the underworld at *Aen.* 6.641 is described as “clothing” (*vestit*) the Lands of the Blessed, so becoming a virtual shroud for heroes in Elysium, who in life would most probably have worn purple on the battle-field or been honoured with a purple cloak at their burial.<sup>33</sup>

Bender (2001, 147) discusses the symbolism of clothing in Virgil’s epic and notes that: “*Vestis* ... does seem to have thematic significance when it is modified by adjectives which relate to color, dimension, or condition”. Thus we can see significance in the purple-coloured cloaks worn by Virgil’s warriors on the battle-field (e.g. Camilla, 7.814-15), which Horsfall (1999, *ad* 7.815) notes would have “carried marked antiquarian resonances at Rome”. Also of note is Helenus’ command to Aeneas that, when fulfilling his religious vows, he should wear a purple *amictus* (*purpureo velare comas adopertus amictu*, 3.405), a garment that had particularly strong religious connotations.<sup>34</sup> The use of this *amictus*, coupled with the fact that Aeneas and his descendants must continue this practice of sacrifice (*hac casti maneant in religione nepotes*, 3.409), is surely a reminder of Virgil’s own day, and the *princeps* Augustus, who was keen to cultivate an image of himself as a priest.<sup>35</sup> The *amictus* is used elsewhere in the *Aeneid* as a garment with religious and sacrificial significance, such as in the burial of Pallas (11.77),<sup>36</sup> and it is also worn by the god Tiber (8.33),<sup>37</sup> but neither of these examples involves a purple *amictus*. Edgeworth (1992, 190 n.125) would have us believe that a sacrificial veil in purple, as opposed to white, is unheard of. This may be true with respect to the *Aeneid* – there are no other scenes of sacrifice involving a purple *amictus* – but a more extensive survey suggests that Virgil has deliberately chosen a garment that

<sup>33</sup> Honouring the dead with a purple cloak is a feature of the *Aeneid* (11.72-5, burial of Pallas; see below), and epic thereafter, e.g. Silius Italicus’ *Punica* 10.569-70 (death of Paulus), but prior to the composition of Virgil’s epic, it appears to have been a rare occurrence (see n.64). See also *Aen.* 1.590-91, where Venus bathes Aeneas in the “purple light” of youth, the first instance in the *Aeneid* of the “heroic colour triad” of gold, silver/white, purple/red (Edgeworth, 1992, 48-49, 151). Some scholars argue that in these examples of “purple light”, *purpureus* should not be viewed as a word for colour, but should instead be translated as “lustrous” or “dazzling”. See for example Austin (1977) on 6.641. Heyne (1822) 144 *ad* 1.591 however believes that both interpretations are possible: “non modo color, sed nitor”. On the question of whether or not *purpureus* means simply “bright”, see especially Edgeworth (1992) 215-26.

<sup>34</sup> See for example La Cerda (1613) on 3.405, *velare comas adopertus*.

<sup>35</sup> See for example Fantham (2008) 162 and Kleiner (1992) 93, who notes the parallels between the depiction of Augustus and Aeneas in priestly garb on the *Ara Pacis*: “A scene of Aeneas making a sacrifice to the *penates* or household gods is depicted on the panel on the southwest side ... Aeneas is depicted in roughly the same position as Augustus in the south frieze”.

<sup>36</sup> See n.63 below.

<sup>37</sup> See n.45 below.

affirms Aeneas' status as a proto-Roman, as well as a priestly proto-Augustus. Whilst most commentators remain silent regarding the potential problem of using a purple-coloured *amictus* within a sacrificial context,<sup>38</sup> two scholars, separated by four centuries, do pass comment. First La Cerda (1613, *ad loc.*) cites Varro's observation that the *amictus* can have a purple band around it (Varro *L. Lat.* 5.132: *amictui dictum quod ambiectum est, id est circumiectum, a quo etiam quo vestitas se involuunt, circumiectui appellant, et quod amictui habet purpuram circum, vocant circumtextum*), and so concludes "itaque ex natura & forma amictus fuit esse purpureum". Next Horsfall (2006, *ad* 3.405), who also cites Varro, goes one step further and identifies this *amictus*, by virtue of its colour and sacrificial context, as a (proto-) *toga praetexta*: "the colour refers above all to the purple band of the priestly *toga praetexta*".<sup>39</sup> His statement is convincing. Not only was the *toga praetexta* a garment worn by Rome's magistrates,<sup>40</sup> so illustrating Aeneas' position here as a proto-Roman statesman, but its status as a garment that also could be used in a sacrificial context is corroborated by Livy, who provides just such an example of its usage when he recounts the self-sacrifice (*devotio*) of the consul Decius in battle in 304 BC. Decius is instructed by a priest to don the *toga praetexta* and to cover his head (*pontifex eum togam praetextam sumere iussit et velato capite ... 8.9.4*),<sup>41</sup> as Aeneas is instructed to do here.

This will not, however, be the only occasion that Aeneas will wear purple. In the only explicit example of "Tyrian" purple in the *Aeneid*, Virgil depicts Aeneas wearing Carthaginian clothes whilst he is helping to build the walls of Dido's city:

*Aenean fundantem arces ac tecta novantem  
conspicit. Atque illi stellatus iaspide fulua  
ensis erat Tyrioque ardebat murice laena  
demissa ex umeris, dives quae munera Dido  
fecerat, et tenui telas discreverat auro.*

<sup>38</sup> See for example Conington (1872) *ad loc.* and Williams (1962) *ad loc.*

<sup>39</sup> Varro's comments on the *amictus* are positioned within his wider discussion on Roman clothing. He makes no reference to the *amictus* having religious significance, but instead focuses on its function as a garment that is wrapped around its wearer. Varro refers to the purple-bordered *amictus* as a *circumtextum*. Helen's robe at *Aen.* 1.649 also has a coloured border (*circumtextum croceo velamen acantho*) – yellow in this instance, although Conington (1872) *ad loc.* notes that "the more ordinary colour of the 'acanthus' was white, but later poets (Calp. 4.68, Stat. 3 *Silv.* 1.37, quoted by Heyne) speak of it as red or purple". Daremberg & Saglio (*s.v. amictus*) note that *amictus* is a type of covering "tel que le toga et toutes les espèces de manteaux" and in turn (*s.v. velamen*) that the toga was used as a *velamen* in Roman rituals.

<sup>40</sup> See for example Edmondson (2008) 25.

<sup>41</sup> On the act of *devotio*, see especially Oakley (1998) 477-86.

("[Mercury] saw Aeneas founding towers and renovating houses.  
 And his sword was starred with yellow jasper,  
 and the cloak that hung from his shoulders burned  
 with Tyrian purple, a gift that wealthy Dido  
 had made, and had interwoven the threads with fine gold").

(Aen. 4.260-64)

Mercury's timely arrival, at the point where Aeneas is wearing specifically named "Tyrian" garb, highlights the importance of clothing as a marker of identity – that is as an extension of the self. For Mercury's words are not just a warning that it is time for Aeneas to move on, but a warning that he is in danger of becoming a Carthaginian – or rather that he is in danger of forsaking Rome's purple *imperium* by embracing the negative attributes of luxury and degeneracy that such overtly *Tyrian* purple inspires.<sup>42</sup>

That our attention should be drawn to the purple cloak is stressed by the focus in this scene on the visual: the purple *burns* bright on Aeneas' shoulders (*ardebat*), just as the sword at his side is starred (*stellatus*) with yellow jasper. His clothing makes him a symbol of the cosmos and hints at the future Augustus, at the battle of Actium in book 8 (680-81), who will himself be a visual symbol on Aeneas' shield, depicted with head aflame and his father's star shining upon him: *hinc Augustus ... Caesar / ... tempora flammas / laeta vomunt patriumque aperitur vertice sidus* (Aen. 8.678, 680-81). The parity with Augustus here is suggestive rather than conclusive – the verbal parallels after all are not direct – but it is tempting to draw it out.<sup>43</sup> Not only would such a parallel highlight the figure of imperialism that Aeneas ought to represent – a future *princeps*, not a prince of Carthage – but it would draw attention to what Aeneas ought to be wearing on his shoulders, not just the purple *amictus* referred to in book 3, but that symbol of the cosmos, his shield, which he will in fact lift up onto his shoulders at the end of book 8 (*talia per clipeum Volcani, dona parentis, / miratur rerumque ignarus imagine gaudet / attollens umero famamque et fata nepotum*, 8.729-31).<sup>44</sup>

<sup>42</sup> See Austin (1955) on 4.260, who describes him as "a Tyrian Aeneas, dressed out in magnificence by Dido, not a grave and sober man of destiny", and Kraggerud (1968) 41.

<sup>43</sup> The star of his "father" Julius Caesar is a mark of the divine favour that Aeneas enjoys and a hint of his own future divinity. Horace takes Rome's use of purple to new heights when referring to Augustus' "purple lips" (*purpureo... ore*, C. 3.3.12). Augustus' purple lips may suggest "the vitality of a new god" (Nisbet and Rudd, 2004, *ad loc*), but the future tense of *bibet* implies that Augustus is here too a god-in-waiting, suggesting that he has learnt from the mistakes of his adopted father Caesar, whom Cicero describes as wearing purple and sitting on a gold throne (e.g. *Div.*1.119.4; 2.37.10).

<sup>44</sup> On the shield as a "cosmic icon", see especially Hardie (1986) 336-76.

Aeneas' failure to wear the right type of purple in book 4 will be corrected should he continue to uphold Helenus' call that he, his comrades, and his descendants wear a purple *amictus* (i.e. the *toga praetexta*) during sacrifices.<sup>45</sup> But if Aeneas' wearing of the purple *amictus* is meant as a positive reflection of Augustanism, Virgil appears to undercut this image with the only other reference to a purple *amictus* in his works, that of the Latin queen, Amata:

*Multaque per maestum demens effata furorem  
purpureos moritura manu discindit amictus.*

("Out of her mind through raging grief she uttered many things,  
and, intending to die, she ripped apart the purple robes with her hand").

(Aen. 12.601-02)

Aeneas is meant to don his purple robe, whereas Amata rips hers to shreds. Her ripping of the purple *amictus* is thus symbolic of her desire to destabilise the future of Rome that Aeneas' purple *amictus* – that is his *toga praetexta* – represents.<sup>46</sup> So too, her *demens* state, which implies a continuation of her earlier Bacchic frenzy (*Aen.* 7.385-405) as well as her determination to die (*moritura*), reminds us of Dido and her inability to derail Aeneas' march towards *imperium*.<sup>47</sup> Thus, though Amata's purple *amictus* undeniably makes us think of Aeneas and the future that his *amictus* represents, without the context of a pious sacrifice and allusion to the future Rome, there is no reason to look upon this purple *amictus* as a prototype for the *toga praetexta*. Rather Amata's purple robe stands in contrast to that of Aeneas: a symbol of her regal status<sup>48</sup> and a reminder of the negative aspects of purple attire, when worn in excess (*e.g.* Caesar's purple *amictus*, *Phil.* 2.85; see above).

<sup>45</sup> As we have seen, Aeneas is not described as wearing a purple *amictus* at any other point in the *Aeneid*. The continued importance of the *amictus* as a symbol for Rome is, however, suggested by one of its wearers: the god Tiber (*glauco amictu*, 8.33) who "personifies the landscape of the Rome of the future" (Bender, 2001, 149). Aeneas also covers the head of the dead Pallas with an *amictus*, as well as clothing him in a robe of Carthaginian purple. See below.

<sup>46</sup> At 12.67 Amata states that she will not live as a "captive" to see Aeneas as her son-in-law: *nec generum Aenean captiva videbo*.

<sup>47</sup> Tarrant (2012) on 12.600 notes that Amata's "self-description as *causa* and *caput malorum* makes her nearly an embodiment of her city, called *causa* and *caput belli* by A., 567, 572". The concept of Amata as a (self-styled) symbol for her city, as Aeneas is a symbol for the future Rome, provides a further tie between the Italian and Trojan and highlights the failure of the former to establish her preferred future for her city.

<sup>48</sup> La Cerda (1617) on 12.602, *discindit amictus*, believes that Amata's purple *amictus* can be thought of as a sort of diadem ("quin prope est, ut credam intelligi per amictum ipsum diadema") which, he argues, ties her to the wife of Mithradates in Plutarch's life of Lucullus as well as to Sophocles' Antigone.

### Tyrian Purple: Love, Luxury, and Ambition

The purple *amictus* may hint at Rome's future under Augustus, but our first sight of purple in Virgil's epic occurs in Carthage, reminding us of the colour's Tyrian associations. Dido's halls (1.637-42), her horse (4.134),<sup>49</sup> and Dido herself (4.139) are all adorned with purple and gold, creating a luxurious environment reminiscent of the world of love elegy, as well as reminding us of the colour's royal associations.

The elegiac tone that suffuses the "Carthaginian" books (1 and 4) of the *Aeneid*, through the love affair of Aeneas and Dido,<sup>50</sup> seems to be evoked by the first scene involving purple (*purpureus*) in the poem: the appearance of Venus. Her arrival is in keeping with both an elegiac and epic world, as she appears in the guise of a virgin huntress (1.315-20, 336), foreshadowing the later appearance in battle of the virgin warrior Camilla.<sup>51</sup> In this guise, she informs Aeneas that Carthaginian girls wear purple boots (*purpureoque ... cothurno*, 1.337) – presumably she is sporting a pair herself. Despite her appearance as a virgin huntress, these boots are buskins (*cothurnus*), the same as worn by tragic actors on the stage, hinting at the "tragedy" soon to be enacted between Aeneas and Dido.<sup>52</sup> So too the scene is charged with eroticism,<sup>53</sup> hinting at the purple scenes of "defloweration" of our dying youths in battle – including that of Camilla – which are yet to come.<sup>54</sup> That we should think of the impending "purple deaths" of our virgin youths is suggested by Venus herself, who comments that it is specifically the custom of Tyrian *virgins* (*virginibus Tyriis*, 1.336) to wear these purple boots.

The image of Tyrian purple conjured by Venus' meeting with Aeneas, where purple is the colour that represents virginity, but that also carries tragic and elegiac tones, is further developed when Aeneas enters the decadent environment of Dido's halls. Here her palace is not only luxuriously furnished in purple and gold, but this purple is described as "arrogant" or "proud" (*ostroque superbo*, 1.639), a motif that is picked up later when we see the Trojan leaders arrayed proudly in purple as they prepare for battle: *ductores auro*

<sup>49</sup> See also *Aen.* 7.277, where the horses offered by Latinus to the Trojans are wearing purple and gold, further evidence that purple (and gold) trappings in the *Aeneid* are not limited to Carthage.

<sup>50</sup> The poet Ovid, in exile, was the first to accuse Virgil of turning epic into elegy, complaining to Augustus in the *Tristia* that: *et tamen ille tuae felix Aeneidos auctor / contulit in Tyrios arma virumque toros* (2.533-34). See Kennedy (2012) 199.

<sup>51</sup> See below.

<sup>52</sup> See Moles (1987) 153: "[Venus'] prologue-like recital of Dido's past (a bloody family feud suggesting Cleopatra and the Ptolemies) and her wearing of the buskin introduce a Tragedy".

<sup>53</sup> See for example Reckford (1996).

<sup>54</sup> On the "defloweration" (and eroticism) of youths in battle see especially Fowler (1987) and Jamset (2004), esp. 101: "*niveus* and *purpureus* are used to eroticize the young victims of war".

*volitant ostroque superbi* (12.126). In the books which follow Aeneas' stay in Carthage, this pride in wearing the purple finds further expression in episodes such as the funeral games of Anchises in book 5, which remind us of the danger in competing for the purple, particularly in the ships' contest, which subtly foreshadow the civil strife that awaits the future Rome.

Funeral games in epic have often been cited as a practice-ground for war,<sup>55</sup> but by their nature they usually involve participants from the same race (here Trojans), so that they are also pseudo-civil conflicts. Thus the captains of the sea-race stand arrayed as though for battle, shining (*effulgent*) in purple and gold (*auro /... ostro*, 5.132-33). This hint of civil strife – or rather competition for the purple (purple garments are among the prizes for the competitors: *ostro / perfusae vestes*, 5.111-12) – is reinforced when the captain Sergestus wrecks his ship on a ridge of rock referred to as a *murex* (5.205). Muse (2007, 593) notes that Sergestus' "mishap" has often been viewed as an allusion to the failure of the Catiline conspiracy. He argues that Virgil's use of a word normally reserved for the purple-shell fish is designed to recall the purple dye and so alludes to the damaging quest for purple amongst Rome's elite at the end of the Republic: "we might say that Catiline wrecked his career on his lust for purple".

Further negative associations with the colour purple, specifically *murex*, occur in book 9, when the native Italian Numanus accuses the Trojans of wearing clothes dyed with saffron and purple: *vobis picta croco et fulgenti murice vestis* (9.614). Numanus makes no mention of the word Tyrian, but the choice of *murex* encourages the reader to recall the only two other examples of *murex* in the *Aeneid*: Aeneas' wearing of Tyrian *murex* in Carthage (4.262) and the allusion to civil conflict evoked by Sergestus' wrecking of his ship on the *murex* (5.205). For Numanus, his insult extends only as far as his desire to portray the Trojans as effeminate, by casting them in the role of the decadent eastern barbarian.<sup>56</sup> He sees purple-*murex* as a threat to a man's virility, yet this verbal recall of the earlier scenes in Carthage and Sicily reminds the reader that it is also a potential threat to a man's *romanitas* (Aeneas) as well as being potentially destabilising for the future Rome (Sergestus).<sup>57</sup>

<sup>55</sup> See for example Lovatt (2005) esp. 1-8.

<sup>56</sup> See Hardie (1994) on 614-20. Criticism of luxurious dress is a standard feature in Roman invective (e.g. Cic. *Cat.* 2.5).

<sup>57</sup> A further hint of civil strife is supplied by Numanus' family pedigree, since he has the *cognomen* "Remulus" (6.593), a reminder of the fraternal conflict between Romulus and Remus. See Hardie (1994) on 9.592-93. Numanus' insult is apt, but he ignores the fact that the Rutulians, as well as the Trojans, are dressed in purple and gold: *ast illos centeni quemque sequuntur / purpurei cristis iuvenes auroque corusci* (9.163).



### Dying in Purple: The Death of Virgil's virgins

Virgil's *Aeneid*, then, displays the full spectrum of Rome's purple usage: from its association with luxury (e.g. Carthage, 1.637-42), priestly *imperium* (e.g. Aeneas, 3.405), and lust for power (e.g. Sergestus, 5.205), to the purple dye and the blood of those *dying*: e.g. Rhoetus (9.349) and Euryalus (9.432-36). These fallen youths, whose deaths represent the cost of empire, are the climax to Virgil's exploration of purple, Virgil's virgins, who include not only Euryalus and Pallas, but the virgin warrior Camilla.

Camilla first appears at 7.814, in a guise reminiscent of both Dido and Venus (1.336-37) as she moves about resplendent in purple and gold:<sup>58</sup>

*attonitis inhians animis ut regius ostro*  
*velet honos levis umeros, ut fibula crinem*  
*auro internectat, Lyciam ut gerat ipsa pharetram*  
*et pastoralem praefixa cuspidem myrtum.*

("With their souls astounded they gape at how regal glory in purple veils her soft shoulders, at how the clasp binds together her hair with gold, at how she herself carries the Lycian quiver and the pastoral myrtle tipped with a blade").

(Aen. 7.814-17)

Camilla's purple becomes an extension of herself: covering her shoulders as a glowing symbol of her life, whilst the people gape at her open-mouthed (*inhians*), their own breath/life stupefied (*attonitis animis*) at the sight. This is purple that implies the regality of its wearer (*regius ostro /...honos*, 7.814-15), and coupled with the gold clasps in her hair, it strongly echoes Dido when she emerges from her palace in Carthage:

*sidoniam picto chlamydem circumdata limbo;*  
*cui pharetra ex auro, crines nodantur in aurum,*  
*aurea purpuream subnectit fibula uestem.*

("She was clothed all round in a Sidonian robe with embroidered hem; Her quiver was made of gold, her hair was tied into a knot in gold, and a golden clasp fastened her purple clothes").

(Aen. 4.137-39)

<sup>58</sup> *Tum Venus: 'Haud equidem tali me dignor honore; / virginibus Tyriis mos est gestare pharetram, / purpureoque alte suras vincire cothurno'* (1.335-37). Horsfall (1999) on 7.812 describes Camilla's arrival as "an heroic recasting of the *adventus* of a great republican magnate".

The parallel with Dido is ominous: Camilla is a virgin huntress, dressed in a manner that evokes memories not only of Dido here but also of Venus in book 1, an association which adds an erotic charge to these scenes from books 4 and 7. So too the appearance of Dido and Camilla in purple occurs before a pseudo-loss of virginity: Dido, who had sworn to remain celibate following the death of her husband (4.20-29), will shortly succumb to Aeneas' charms (with the aid of Juno and Venus, 4.90-128); Camilla's death will be styled as a form of defloweration.<sup>59</sup> Thus purple is a symbol for the status of these women, but also a reminder of the lives – and the life-blood – that is soon to be lost. For when Camilla dies, her purple life flows out of her as the colour leaves her face: *purpureus quondam color ora reliquit* (11.819).<sup>60</sup>

That we should read Virgil's purple in this way – *i.e.* as the colour of purple dye, purple life, and purple death – is highlighted by one of the final examples of purple usage: Lavinia's blush at 12.67, one of the most discussed purple-scenes in the *Aeneid*.<sup>61</sup>

The blush reflects Lavinia's sexual awaking, but it also symbolises the association between one's life-blood and the purple dye. This association works on several levels: overtly through the simile which compares her blush to ivory stained with blood-like purple (*sanguineo ... ostro*, 12.67), but also through the recollection of the Homeric simile of Menelaus' wound, compared to a woman staining ivory with scarlet (*Il.* 4.141-47). Lavinia's scene focuses on the dying of an object (ivory) but the life and death motif could

<sup>59</sup> See for example Jamset (2004) esp. 96-98.

<sup>60</sup> There is no reference to purple in Dido's death scene, but there is a macabre echo of the purple-dye production process. For when Dido, that great wearer of Tyrian purple, dies, her sister Anna attempts to stem the flow of blood with her dress, in other words literally dying the cloth with a Tyrian's (purple) blood: *atque atros siccabat veste cruores* (4.687). The verb used by Virgil here is *sicco*, which refers to the draining or drying up of liquid (*OLD s.v.*). There is only one other example of the verb in the *Aeneid*, in reference to Mezentius, who staunches his wound with waters from the Tiber (*Interea genitor Tiberini ad fluminis undam / vulnera siccabat lymphis corpusque levabat / arboris acclinis trunco*. 10.833-35), and there is a further verbal parallel between the two scenes: *vulnera lymphis / abluam* (4.683-84) vs *vulnera siccabat lymphis* (10.834). Mezentius is not dying here, but his son Lausus has just died at the hands of Aeneas, his (purple) blood filling the fold of the tunic made for him by his mother (10.818-19; compare *sinum* [10.819] with *sinu* [4.686]). Mezentius is still unaware of his son's death, but Virgil's audience is not, and that it should view Mezentius as a father who has suffered familial loss in this scene is suggested by the word *genitor* ("the father", 833). In a similar way, the familial bond is stressed in Dido's death scene (*germana*, 4.675; *germanam*, 4.686). Hardie (1986, 267, n.91) says that the Mezentius scene may be intended to make us think of Polyphemus (a model for Mezentius in the *Aeneid*), who, after the loss of his eye, bathes the empty socket in the sea: "does an awareness of the Polypheman model make the fact of [Mezentius'] loss more poignant for us?" I would suggest that the verbal parallels with Dido's death-scene also may be intended to make us think of personal loss.

<sup>61</sup> See for example Todd (1980), Lyne (1983), and Dyson (1999).

not be clearer. This is *sanguineum ostrum* and the verb for dying (staining) is a verb suitable for *dying* (being killed): *Indum sanguineo veluti violaverit ostro / si quis ebur, aut mixta rubent ubi lilia multa / alba rosa, talis virgo dabat ore colores.*<sup>62</sup> Thus, though Lavinia lives, her blush is a reminder of the youths who have already fallen and who, like ivory stained with dye, in dying stained their white skin purple.

### The Cost of Purple: Augustan Success and Lost Youth

There is one more fallen youth worth discussing, whose death is marked with purple: Pallas. When Pallas has been killed, Aeneas drapes a cloak made by Dido of purple and gold over his body, which serves as a reflection of the dead youth:

*Tum geminas vestis auroque ostroque rigentis  
extulit Aeneas, quas illi laeta laborum  
ipsa suis quondam manibus Sidonia Dido  
fecerat et tenui telas discreverat auro.*

(“Then Aeneas brought out two robes, rigid with gold and purple, which Sidonian Dido, happy in in her task, in a previous time, with her own hands, herself had made for him, and had interwoven the threads with fine gold”).

(Aen. 11.72-75)

Pallas’ burial in this purple garment is striking: Aeneas, the proto-Roman, is honouring a native Italian with a Carthaginian garment, with the words *tenui telas discreverat auro* (75) providing a pointed echo of Aeneas in purple in Carthage (4.264). This mix of Carthaginian and proto-Roman is also reinforced by the presence of the *amictus* (11.77), which is wrapped around Pallas’ head – a reminder of, among other uses, the (purple) *amictus* with which Aeneas previously shrouded himself when performing his sacrificial duties.<sup>63</sup>

<sup>62</sup> Lyne (1983, 58-59) notes that the verb *violo* is much stronger than *μαίνω* in Homer’s simile, and adds (59) that “*violo* signifies physical injuring in a way that *μαίνω* does not ... Thus paradoxically, these variations from Homer assist the recall of Homer: they remind us that the simile originally applied to a wound”. Jamset (2004, 99) notes in reference to 11.591 that the verb *violare* also has connotations of sexual violence. This sense of the verb is also present in the Lavinia scene and Bradley (2004, 118) writes that Virgil uses “sea-purple dye to clarify the role that the blush performs on the blusher; a signal of personal violation as well as special and distinctive beauty”. When Diana promises to avenge the death of Camilla, she employs the same verb of “staining” as we see used here for Lavinia: *quicumque sacrum violarit vulnere corpus* (Aen. 11.591).

<sup>63</sup> The religious significance of *amictus* here is clear: Horsfall (2003) *ad* 7.77, on *obnubit*, notes that this was “a legendary action for veiling the head (traditional for the celebrant at a Roman cult-act)”.

These robes, then, are a reminder of Aeneas' past and of the tension that exists between purple as the colour of Carthage and of Rome. For, through the association with royal Dido, we are reminded not just of Tyrian purple but of kingship. So too robes of purple and gold, combined with the *amictus*, remind us of the Roman triumph and sacrificial rites. These garments speak of the future that Pallas, as the favourite of Aeneas, has lost. Moreover they continue the association between wearer and object: the purple (and gold) cloth does not glow, as it is wont to do when it reflects the vitality of its wearer (*e.g.* Aeneas, 4.262; Camilla, 7.814-15), but instead the robes are "stiff", *rigentis*, reflecting Pallas' lifeless form. Like Marcellus before him (6.878-86), Pallas is the (Augustan) youth cut off in his prime.<sup>64</sup>

Before the death, however, is the moment of promise. And when Pallas rides off to war in book 8 (588) he is described as shining like a star, conspicuous in the middle of the column in his mantle and coloured weaponry (*pictis ... armis*). Like the youthful Octavian/Augustus on Aeneas' shield (8.675-81), Pallas is an object of spectacle (*conspectus*) as he heads off to battle. There is only one other example of the participle *conspectus* in the whole of Virgil,<sup>65</sup> at *Ge.* 3.17, where Virgil envisages himself as a victor, *conspectus* in Tyrian purple, leading a triumphal procession in honour of Caesar, a metaphor for the triumphant poetry that Virgil envisages himself writing: his epic *Aeneid*.<sup>66</sup> The use of *conspectus* establishes a direct comparison between the scenes in the *Georgics* and the *Aeneid*, which draws our focus to the visual, forcing us to compare Pallas and his false promise of victory to the pomp and circumstance of Virgil dressed in purple and the promise for his poetry: poetry for and about Caesar – the epic verse of empire – what we may term Purple Poetry.

But Pallas is a youth who fails to realise his potential, who is *conspectus* amid the procession but who will wear the colours of a triumph only in death. It would be asking too much of one word, *conspectus*, to suggest that as a consequence of Pallas' failed promise the whole of the *Aeneid* should be read as a subversion of the triumphant epic foretold in the *Georgics*. But it is not too much, I think, to say that this scene with Pallas – our soon-to-be fallen youth – forces us to reflect back on the epic that was promised in the *Georgics* and to ask if the *Aeneid*, as arguably the fulfilment of that promise, is Purple

<sup>64</sup> The burial of Pallas in purple garments provides a further link between Aeneas and Augustus, since by the time of the *Aeneid*'s composition Julius Caesar was still the only man to have been laid out in purple and gold upon his death. This "use of colors [thus] brings out the similarity between Aeneas' obligation to avenge the slain Pallas and Augustus' obligation to avenge the slain Julius" (Edgeworth, 1992, 39).

<sup>65</sup> See Williams (1996) on 3.17 who writes: "Virgil pictures himself driving a hundred chariots; in one sense this suggests presiding over chariot-races, but in another ... it symbolises his verses".

<sup>66</sup> Thomas (1988) on *Ge.* 3.19-20 writes that "the import of the statement is literary, and goes to the heart of the sense of achievement that Augustan poetry was coming to feel".

Poetry that offers a revised version of what it means to live, fight, and die for Rome. An acknowledgement, perhaps, that the triumph of Tyrian purple (*Ge.* 3.17) and Rome's *imperium* is counterbalanced by the cost in purple blood required to sustain it.

### Conclusion

Virgil's use of purple in the *Aeneid* is a reflection of the wide spectrum of uses for *murex*, *ostrum*, *purpura*, and *purpureus* that we see throughout Latin literature. Whilst the colour purple applied predominantly to purple clothing, it acquired ideological significance through its use as a status symbol for Rome's triumphant generals. But it was also a colour that came to symbolise luxury, greed and ambition – a reflection both of its negatively perceived Tyrian origin and its association with powerful individuals towards the end of the Roman Republic. For the elegiac and epic poets it symbolised something further: the colour of life and death. Purple dye – through its association with the purple fish (the *purpura* and *murex*), which coughs up its life with the purple juice – became synonymous with purple blood, and twinned with the colour white it symbolised a loss of purity and the failure of youthful promise.

The concept of a colour that could, paradoxically, symbolise both success and failure extends, however, beyond the fallen youths of epic to stand as a metaphor for Virgil's epic poetry. For, at the start of book 3 of the *Georgics*, Virgil envisages himself in Tyrian purple promising a triumph of epic poetry that would celebrate Octavian's youthful success. Octavian's success is heralded in the *Aeneid*, but it is confined predominantly to images on a shield, a glimpse of – or promise for – a future that even Aeneas cannot understand (*ignarus*, 8.730). The promised epic of the *Georgics*, then, remains tantalisingly distant; for Virgil's *Aeneid* does not celebrate the foundation of Rome's *imperium* through a triumph honouring the contemporary achievements of a Caesar, but through bloodshed. Thus Aeneas ends the epic “founding” Rome's *imperium* by plunging his sword (*condit*, 12.950)<sup>67</sup> into Turnus: staining the weapon with the Rutulian's blood, dying it purple.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> On the verb *condere* and its significance as a verb of “foundation”, see especially James (1995)

<sup>68</sup> At the end of the *Aeneid* we can only assume that there is an outflow of blood from the wound that Turnus receives, but the concept of “dying” a sword with (purple) blood is clearly stated earlier, when Turnus at 12.358 “dyes” his shining blade with blood from deep in the throat of his victim (*impresso dextrae mucronem extorquet et alto / fulgentem tingit iugulo*). The verb *tingere* is commonly used for “dying” cloth (e.g. Pliny in reference to the dying of purple cloth, *Nat.* 9.125).

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