

# **GUILT, REDEMPTION AND RECEPTION: REPRESENTING ROMAN FEMALE SUICIDE**

ELEANOR RUTH GLENDINNING, BA (Hons) MA

Thesis submitted to the University of Nottingham for the  
degree of Doctor of Philosophy

DECEMBER 2011

## Abstract

This thesis examines representations of Roman female suicide in a variety of genres and periods from the history and poetry of the Augustan age (especially Livy, Ovid, Horace, Propertius and Vergil), through the drama and history of the early Principate (particularly Seneca and Tacitus), to some of the Church fathers (Tertullian, Jerome and Augustine) and martyr acts of Late Antiquity. The thesis explores how the highly ambiguous and provocative act of female suicide was developed, adapted and reformulated in historical, poetic, dramatic and political narratives. The writers of antiquity continually appropriated this controversial motif in order to comment on and evoke debates about issues relating to the moral, social and political concerns of their day: the ethics of a voluntary death, attitudes towards female sexuality, the uses and abuses of power, and traditionally expected female behaviour. In different literary contexts, and in different periods of Roman history, writers and thinkers engaged in this same intellectual exercise by utilising the suicidal female figure in their works.

## Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the Arts and Humanities Research Council for providing the financial assistance necessary for me to carry out this research. The Roman Society also awarded a bursary that allowed me to undertake research at the *Fondation Hardt pour l'étude de l'antiquité classique*, in Geneva, Switzerland (June 2009). I am also grateful for the CAS Gender Histories bursary award which aided me while making revisions to the original thesis. I owe a great debt of gratitude to my supervisor, Mark Bradley, who has patiently provided feedback on this thesis, as well as offering personal support when it was much needed. I also owe many thanks to my second supervisor, Doug Lee, who has offered welcome suggestions and comments on my work and supplemented the supervision process. I am grateful to the suggestions and advice from my two examiners, Betine van zyl Smit and Catharine Edwards, in revising and improving my original thesis. I am indebted to all the support from the members of staff and my fellow postgraduate students at the Department of Classics, University of Nottingham, but especially to Jack, with whom I have shared a long university experience that has been at times challenging, but always rewarding. Finally, I would like to thank my friends and family for all their encouragement and support over the years. My parents, Lynn and Ken, have always supported me in my chosen paths, and my sister Katherine and brother-in-law Neil have always been on hand to help out in whatever way they could. And to Rob, who always manages to put a smile on my face, I want to express my heartfelt gratitude for all the ways he has supported me, which are far too numerous to mention.

## Contents

<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>1</b>
1. Themes, theories and modern scholarship	5
i. Death	6
ii. Suicide	9
iii. Roman male suicide	20
iv. Women, gender, sexuality and female suicide	25
2. Thesis arguments and structure	44
i. Thesis arguments, research questions and methodology	44
ii. Chapter summary	48
<b>Chapter 1: LUCRETIA vs. CLEOPATRA: SUICIDAL MODELS OF ROMANNESS AND BARBARITY IN AUGUSTAN ROME</b>	<b>52</b>
1. Introduction	52
i. Livy and Augustan Rome	55
ii. Lucretia's story	56
iii. Modern scholarship on Livy's Lucretia	57
iv. Cleopatra and Augustan Rome	62
2. Lucretia	64
i. Livy's Lucretia	64
ii. Ovid's Lucretia	77
iii. Livy vs. Ovid: conflicting portrayals of Lucretia?	85
3. Cleopatra	89
i. Vergil's Cleopatra	89
ii. Vergil's Dido and Cleopatra	91
iii. Horace's Cleopatra	93
iv. Propertius' Cleopatra	101
v. Official propaganda and the portrayal of Cleopatra	109
4. Conclusion	115
<b>Chapter 2: GREEK TRAGIC SUICIDES THROUGH ROMAN EYES</b>	<b>119</b>
1. Introduction	119
i. Tragedy and tragic suicide	123
ii. Female suicides in Greek tragedy	125
iii. Greek female suicides in Roman literature	131
2. Ovid's <i>Heroides</i>	135
i. <i>Heroides</i> 7: Dido	138
ii. <i>Heroides</i> 2: Phyllis	143
iii. <i>Heroides</i> 9: Deianira	147
iv. <i>Heroides</i> 11: Canace	149

v.	<i>Heroides</i> 15: Sappho	153
vi.	Suicide suppressed?	155
3.	Seneca's tragedies	159
i.	<i>Phaedra</i>	162
ii.	<i>Oedipus</i>	172
iii.	<i>Troades</i>	177
4.	Conclusion	180

### **Chapter 3: THE SUICIDAL FEMALE IN TACITUS' ANNALES** **184**

1.	Introduction	184
i.	Tacitus and Women	189
ii.	Tacitus and Stoicism	190
iii.	Tacitus and Suicide	196
2.	Agrippina the Elder	198
3.	Female suicides: the exemplary paradigm	202
a.	Exemplary women	202
i.	Paxaea	202
ii.	Sextia	205
iii.	Pollitta and Sextia	208
b.	Stoic women	212
i.	Pompeia Paulina	212
ii.	Servilia	214
iii.	Arria the Younger	216
4.	Female suicides: the negative paradigm	220
i.	Plancina	220
ii.	Aemilia Lepida	222
iii.	Albucilla	225
iv.	Messalina	227
5.	Morally ambivalent suicides	231
a.	Females directly targeted by empresses	231
i.	Poppaea Sabina	231
ii.	Lollia Paulina	233
b.	The female other	235
i.	Boudicca	235
ii.	Epicharis	239
6.	Conclusion	244

<b>Chapter 4: LUCRETIA AMONG THE MARTYRS: REPRESENTATIONS OF FEMALE SUICIDE AND FEMALE MARTYRDOM IN THE PATRISTIC LITERATURE AND MARTYR ACTS OF LATE ANTIQUITY</b>	<b>247</b>
1. Introduction	247
i. Women in Late Antiquity	250
ii. The Church Fathers	251
iii. Christian persecutions and the martyr acts	254
iv. Martyrdom vs. suicide?	260
2. Lucretia	263
i. Tertullian's Lucretia	263
ii. Jerome's Lucretia	267
iii. Augustine's Lucretia	270
3. The female martyr acts	276
i. Perpetua (and Felicitas)	276
ii. Agathonice	286
iii. Blandina	289
iv. Potamiaena	291
v. Valentina	293
vi. Irene, Agape and Chione	294
vii. Crispina	296
viii. The Donatist female martyrs	298
4. Prudentius' female martyrs	299
i. Eulalia	301
ii. Agnes	305
5. Conclusion	308
<b>CONCLUSION</b>	<b>311</b>
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY</b>	<b>318</b>
Ancient sources	318
Modern scholarship	321

## Introduction

vir et uxor iuraverunt, ut, si quid alteri accidisset, alter moreretur. vir peregre profectus est, misit nuntium uxori, qui diceret se decessisse. uxor se praecipitavit. recreata iubetur a patre relinquere virum; non vult. abdicatur.

A man and his wife swore an oath that if anything should happen to one of them, the other would die. The husband, having departed abroad, sent a message to his wife, which said that he himself had died. The wife threw herself down [from a cliff]. Revived, she is ordered by her father to leave her husband, but she is unwilling to do this. She is disinherited.<sup>1</sup>

(Seneca the Elder, *Controversiae*, 2.2)

This complex and imaginative tale of a married couple features in the *Controversiae* of Seneca the Elder, written in the early first century AD. In the course of the debate afterwards, the wife argues that she meant to die because she had both motive and precedent, citing examples to support this (2.2.1). Her very alive husband, believing that she might try and kill herself again, argues that he is not worth committing suicide over (2.2.3). Seneca claims that he heard Ovid declaiming this *controversia*, and that his speech included the words, ‘Wife, there is no need

---

<sup>1</sup> All translations are my own, unless otherwise stated.

for you to satisfy yourself as if you were the first to commit a moral offense (*peccaveris*). Some women have died with their husbands, some women have died for them. Yet those women every age will honour, every talent will celebrate' (2.2.11).

This short excerpt from Seneca alludes to a number of key issues relevant to this thesis. A woman could feel obliged to commit suicide, especially when it was for a loved one; however, once she had committed suicide or attempted the act, for whatever reason, the elite men around her could react in diverse ways to it. It might be admired or condemned, or treated with suspicion, or be debated and cause controversy. Why does the Ovid of Seneca think that some women deserved praise and lasting veneration for killing themselves, whereas the woman in question here could be censured for trying to commit what is termed a moral transgression? Part of the answer must lie in the character and motivations of the individual female. And one of the themes which this thesis aims to explore is that of the differing viewpoints attached to acts of female suicide and what this reveals about attitudes towards women as a whole, as well as the moral significance of suicide as an act.

The act of killing oneself was intrinsically ambiguous, as it could be an honourable end or the coward's way out; as a result it was a subject used by writers, orators and thinkers to tackle important gender and ethical issues, revealing the writers' own thoughts and attitudes about these as well as prompting their readers or audience to consider such issues. This is demonstrated in the example detailed above, as the *Controversiae* were imaginary legal cases that were designed to prompt debate about the rights and wrongs of each side of the relevant

arguments; in this case, the issue is whether females were right to commit suicide for loved ones. The act of suicide was a provocative and highly subjective gesture imbued with powerful moral and social associations. As a result, suicide narratives are also changeable and organic phenomena that can be shaped, exploited and redeveloped over time.

Central to this thesis are such questions as the following: how do different writers portray the act of female suicide, and why do they portray the act as they do? What do their different approaches reveal about the usefulness of the motif of female suicide as a literary tool? How is this motif utilised to comment on different societies at different times? What do they reveal about the writers' attitudes towards gender? The very nature of female suicide – a thought-provoking and ambiguous action both endorsed and reviled by different writers and thinkers within the same time periods – points to its great value as a means through which writers could comment on moral, social, political, cultural and ethical values and practices occurring in their own day.<sup>2</sup>

Any discussions of female suicide are, therefore, particularly noteworthy in the search for writers' political, moral and ethical agendas. Of course suicide committed by males can be just as revealing about such matters, and many studies of the ancient world have approached this topic.<sup>3</sup> An elite Roman forced to kill himself by a corrupt emperor can divulge much about his contemporary society and ruler. However, the gendered nature of portrayals of female suicide goes one step further. If an elite Roman female is either compelled, or feels herself that it is

---

<sup>2</sup> As Edwards & Osborne describe it, the act of suicide 'can be staged in many different ways: as theatre, as gesture, as refusal, as affirmation, as pedagogy'; these scenographies of suicide are also 'subject to particular kinds of moral and semantic framing' (2005, 174).

<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of portrayals of male suicides, especially that of Cato, see pp. 20-5.

necessary, to commit suicide either along with her male relative or because of her own misfortunes, then any reader or audience is bound to pay particular attention to such an action. In a patriarchal society, women (it can be argued) should not have to resort to such an act, so when they do, it is highly revealing about the society in which they live. It is the character, underlying rationale, and historical development of these issues that this thesis will discuss and explore.

One further issue that needs to be introduced here is the definition of suicide in Roman society. There was no single word or phrase used to describe the act; as will be clear from the discussion of specific examples in the following chapters, a variety of different terms could be used, for example, *voluntaria mors*, the reflexive pronoun *se* qualifying different verbs for killing such as *conficere* and *occidere*, or *liberum arbitrium mortis*.<sup>4</sup> Often there is no specific word denoting death in itself, but the chosen method of suicide is described (regularly in some detail), for example Livy's Lucretia stabbing herself with a sword or several of the women in Tacitus' *Annales* cutting their veins. The fluidity of descriptions of suicide is consistent with the idea presented above that portrayals of it were multifaceted and frequently changing.<sup>5</sup>

Although the primary focus of this thesis is suicide, it also engages with other types of voluntary death, which, it can be argued, are intrinsically linked to suicide in the ways that writers approach the act. Alongside 'straightforward' suicide (for example, deciding of your own accord to stab yourself), one could

---

<sup>4</sup> In fact, the Latin term for suicide, *suicidium*, does not appear until the seventeenth century: see Griffin, 1986, 68-9; Van Hooff (1990, 136-41) also discusses the Latin terminology used for the act in the ancient world; Plass notes that the terminology for suicide could overlap with that used for execution (1995, 93-4).

<sup>5</sup> For more on more modern definitions of suicide, especially as outlined by Durkheim, and the relationship between this and ancient definitions see pp. 9-12.

categorise less obvious forms, for example 'enforced' suicide, voluntary sacrifice, and martyrdom, as 'sub-sets' of suicide.<sup>6</sup> The first of these can be seen in some of the suicides committed under the Julio-Claudians as described by Tacitus (see Chapter 3), the second in Seneca's portrayal of Polyxena (see Chapter 2), and the last in accounts from Late Antiquity (see Chapter 4).<sup>7</sup> It is possible to see in representations of all these different kinds of voluntary death the same issues being explored. Indeed, within portrayals of 'straightforward' suicide itself, as noted above, diverse language is utilised in accounts of these deaths, which appear in different types of narrative and contexts. This thesis, therefore, integrates a range of different types of voluntary death in order to explore a common set of issues surrounding gender, morality, self-harm and power.<sup>8</sup>

## **1. Themes, theories and modern scholarship**

There is no comprehensive study addressing female suicide in the Roman world. A number of scholars have discussed key figures such as Lucretia, Cleopatra, Dido, Seneca's wife (Pompeia Paulina), and Arria, but this is done either in articles dealing with these figures individually or in small groups, or in the context of studies on women, death or suicide in general. Female suicide in the Roman world has not received detailed scholarly attention as a social and literary phenomenon in

---

<sup>6</sup> Indeed, those acts one might categorise under 'straightforward' suicide might also be additionally grouped in these other categories: e.g. Lucretia is often seen as sacrificing herself for the good of her family and Rome itself; see e.g. Langlands (2006, 95): 'Lucretia's suicide is also a sacrificial offering of herself for the good of Roman society (and the birth of the Republic)'.

<sup>7</sup> There is a much fuller discussion of suicide/martyrdom in the introduction to Chapter 4: see pp. 260-3.

<sup>8</sup> As Hill maintains, 'in the Roman context the word [suicide] is used to refer not just to self-inflicted deaths, but, more broadly, to deaths with honour implications in general' (2004, 11).

its own right. This thesis aims to show that the subject deserves focused treatment and that it has the potential to illuminate many wider issues.

This section outlines the key ideas and theories surrounding the major interrelated topics integral to a study of female suicide in Roman society: death, suicide, male death and suicide, women, gender and associated subjects. It examines the most recent publications that analyse death, dying and the dead; explores how suicide, both ancient and in general terms, has been approached (including scholarship on Greek suicide); considers Roman attitudes toward male death and suicide, particularly that of Cato; and finally, discusses relevant approaches to the study of women in the ancient world, gender categories and roles, issues surrounding sexuality from the late Republic to Late Antiquity, and some initial thoughts on Roman female death and suicide.

#### **i. Death**

Death in the Roman world has been the subject of many publications in recent decades. Scholars have focused on a range of topics, for example representations of the actual act of dying, attitudes to the dead, and funerary rituals. The most important studies reflect the different theoretical approaches taken to studying death. Donald G. Kyle's *Spectacles of Death in Ancient Rome* (1998) and the first half of Paul Plass' *The Game of Death in Ancient Rome: Arena Sport and Political Suicide* (1995) explore various aspects of the violent spectacle of

the arena games in ancient Rome.<sup>9</sup> Plass discusses the 'social purpose' of the deadly violence in the arena, whereas Kyle investigates the origins of the games, the victims killed during them, what happened to their corpses afterwards; both address the issue of the ritualisation of this type of violence and killing.<sup>10</sup> Kyle makes only sporadic reference to suicide, for example when discussing the disposal of this type of corpse;<sup>11</sup> the second half of Plass' book looks at political suicide (see below).

A different approach is that of Mario Erasmo, who examines literary depictions of funerary and burial ritual in *Reading Death in Ancient Rome* (2008). His aim is not to reconstruct the evidence for these practices, but instead to analyse how these narratives create a fictive version of the ritual through their allusions to them and the interaction of these allusions with the reader or audience. He offers some comments on Tacitus' portrayal of the suicide attempt of Paulina, the wife of Seneca, but does not discuss suicide in general, or the other female figures to be considered, in any detail.<sup>12</sup> Valerie M. Hope's *Roman Death: the Dying and the Dead in Ancient Rome* (2009), provides an overview of a variety of related themes associated with the topic. She focuses on the actual act of dying and attitudes towards different kinds of death, as well as the customs and traditions surrounding burial, mourning and commemoration of the dead. Her short section on suicide summarises the main arguments in relation to approaches to this kind of death as

---

<sup>9</sup> On this, see also Edwards, 2007, Chapter 4.

<sup>10</sup> For more on other types of extreme violence in antiquity, from the ancient Near East to the Rome of Late Antiquity, see Zimmermann, 2009; Charlier (2009) considers several different types of violent death, including suicide, execution, and human sacrifice in a variety of source material.

<sup>11</sup> Kyle, 1998, 163-4.

<sup>12</sup> See Erasmo, 2008, 27-33 on Paulina.

noted in Edwards, Van Hooff, and Hill (see below), but does not offer any new insights on the topic.<sup>13</sup>

The most recent study that is of particular relevance to the objectives and methodology of this thesis is Catharine Edwards' *Death in Ancient Rome* (2007). Focusing on Latin literature from the late Republic and early Empire, Edwards looks at the 'significance Romans attached to the act of dying', which she argues has not yet been fully explored.<sup>14</sup> She also examines the extent to which the Romans aestheticised death, an approach to which she returns frequently when discussing a writer's presentation of death. Her focus on Roman representations of death, particularly how people approached death, actually carried out the act and were perceived, offers significant insights into Roman attitudes not only to dying, but also to the social, political and cultural changes and conditions of their time. Chapters 4 ('Defiance, complicity and the politics of self-destruction') and 7 ('A feminine ending?') are particularly relevant to this thesis. In the former Edwards discusses the deaths, mostly suicides, of those who died violently, often forced to by an emperor or in defiance of their tyrannical rule. In the latter, Edwards examines the deaths of prominent females, including Lucretia, Cleopatra, Dido, and the empresses, among others. Looking at noble suicides alongside violent non-voluntary deaths, Edwards notes that these endings are a further means by which writers such as Tacitus highlighted 'the twisted nature of this Rome in which proper distinctions of gender and status are radically confounded', where gender distinctions could be blurred. Furthermore, she emphasises the significance that the

---

<sup>13</sup> Hope, 2009, 57-60. See also Hope's 2007 volume, a collection of wide-ranging sources on death and the dead, with a short section on suicide at 31-37.

<sup>14</sup> Edwards, 2007, 5.

gender of the dying figure had on how the action was perceived, particularly as many key female deaths in Latin literature demonstrated a connection between the act of killing and rape. Edwards also argues that the relationship between death and sexuality is a decidedly complex one.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, she notes that 'there is certainly a sense in which female deaths in general and female suicides in particular can command admiration'.<sup>16</sup> Edwards' book is, therefore, important in demonstrating how death was used as a 'thinking tool' in narratives.

## ii. Suicide

Any survey of scholarship on suicide must begin with Émile Durkheim's ground-breaking *Le Suicide* (1897). Durkheim's innovative thinking on the subject marked a watershed in the study of suicide. His methodology involved taking a sociological approach to the subject, whereas previous thinkers had largely interpreted suicide as the outcome of individual failings and despair. Durkheim believed that the level of an individual's integration into their society had a significant impact on whether they would commit suicide or not. He identified four different types of suicide. He discusses 'egotistical' suicide, which would occur due to very low levels of integration into society and excessive individualism; 'altruistic' suicide, where an individual might kill himself as a result of being too firmly integrated into society and a lack of sufficient individualisation; and 'anomic' suicide, where suicide occurs due to a breakdown in social norms and values

---

<sup>15</sup> Edwards, 2007, 205, 206.

<sup>16</sup> Edwards, 2007, 179. For a more detailed discussion of female death, and topics such as gender and sexuality, see pp. 24-44.

resulting from economic crises, but also from more personal factors such as divorce and widowhood. The final category, not discussed in detail by Durkheim, is 'fatalistic' suicide, which can occur in overtly oppressive societies or environments as there is a greater preference to die than go on living (for example, for an individual in prison).

Durkheim utilised a large volume of statistics on suicide in order to evaluate these categories and provide a comprehensive overview of the relationship between suicide and diverse factors such as religion, the economy, the military, and marriage. His work has not been without its critics, particularly as there is no easy way in which to measure levels of integration into a society, or the extent to which issues such as economic downturns might have affected individuals.<sup>17</sup> However, Durkheim's pioneering work is still utilised in modern research on suicide in sociological, psychological and ethical fields.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, his 'altruistic' suicide can be viewed more broadly as an individual killing him/herself either on behalf of someone else, or for the benefit of society as a whole. Such a definition could be applied to the political suicides committed under the Julio-Claudians, or to the religious suicides of the later Christian martyrs, or even to present-day suicide bombers, as they believed that their autonomous deaths would help the fight against oppressive authorities.<sup>19</sup>

Durkheim also offers some thought-provoking ideas on the definition of suicide. He states that 'suicide is the name given to any death that results directly or indirectly from a positive or negative act, carried out by the victim him/herself,

---

<sup>17</sup> See e.g. Sills, 1968, 381.

<sup>18</sup> On this, see e.g. Pickering & Walford, 2009.

<sup>19</sup> For 'altruistic' suicide in the ancient world, see Van Hooff, 2004.

which he/she was aware would produce this result'; under Durkheim's broad classification of what constitutes suicide, then, martyrs are suicides.<sup>20</sup> Despite the differences between Durkheim's approaches and the methodology adopted in this thesis, his work is useful for extending and clarifying definitions and approaches to suicide.<sup>21</sup>

However, there are several difficulties in using Durkheim's work in relation to an analysis of suicide in the ancient world, an issue noted by many scholars in the field, but most recently discussed in some detail by Hill.<sup>22</sup> One of the problems is that, as noted above, there is no single word to describe the act of suicide in ancient literature, and as Hill notes, Roman expressions for suicide 'are often far broader than the Durkheimian definition' as they include words that denote the exiting or departing of life. Such phraseology is used for self-inflicted deaths as well as for death in general and thus does not always fall under Durkheim's criteria.<sup>23</sup> Other features of ancient depictions of suicide scenes, such as the focus on the state of mind of the dying figure and the honour/dishonour attached to certain methods, are not covered by Durkheim's definition set out above; for example, Hill observes that a description of suicide such as 'to rage against one's own body (*saevire ad suum corpus*)' is a 'distinction hardly implied by the Durkheimian definition'. Hill also urges that we move away from Durkheim's definition because it focuses too much on the agency of death, rather than the status and social persona

---

<sup>20</sup> For more on martyrdom and suicide, see pp. 260-3.

<sup>21</sup> For more details on Durkheim's work, reactions to it and developments from then onwards in the field, as well as statistics on suicide rates, trends and such issues as ethical ones relating to the subject see entries for 'Suicide' in Sills, 1968 and Smelser & Baltes, 2001.

<sup>22</sup> For other discussions of the problems of Durkheim's categories when applied to the ancient world, see Alvarez, 1971, 74ff., 115-17, 150; Gris , 1982, 21-8; Van Hooff, 1990, 79-81; Flemming, 2005, 301ff.; Edwards, 2007, 9-10.

<sup>23</sup> See Hill, 2004, 6 n.18 on the use of certain vocabulary for both suicidal and non-suicidal deaths.

of the dying person. Nevertheless, Hill also maintains that some ancient suicides can be categorised in Durkheimian terms, for example, Cato and Dido, and states that Durkheim's claim that the act is a result of the inadequate interconnection between the self and society is a 'universal truth applicable to all cultures and historical epochs'.<sup>24</sup> As a result, while Durkheim's definition of suicide and suicide categories cannot be applied to a great extent to those in the ancient world, some of his insights, for example his 'altruistic' suicide (outlined above), are of potential relevance to certain cases that are discussed in this thesis.

Several scholars have explored the phenomenon of suicide in societies from the medieval to the modern worlds. Al Alvarez, in *The Savage God: a Study of Suicide* (1971), attempts to consider such questions as why people commit suicide, and can rational explanations ever be found for the act – questions not addressed in this thesis, but nevertheless important to studies of suicide. He also gives background information, including some observations on Greek, Roman and early Christian attitudes towards suicide.<sup>25</sup> The main part of his work focuses on suicide and literature ('not suicide *in* literature', as he carefully points out), spanning the medieval period to the twentieth century. Alvarez examines the 'power the act has exerted over the creative imagination' in works ranging from Dante to Thomas Chatterton.<sup>26</sup>

Another important contribution to the field is George Minois' *History of Suicide: Voluntary Death in Western Culture* (1999), which charts representations of and attitudes towards suicide from classical antiquity to the twentieth century,

---

<sup>24</sup> Hill, 2004, 4-17.

<sup>25</sup> Alvarez, 1971, 76-93.

<sup>26</sup> Both quotes: Alvarez, 1971, 166.

although his main focus is on the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, mainly in England and France.<sup>27</sup> Minois covers a wide range of issues in a wide range of evidence, including suicide rates and the motivations for suicide at different periods in time, portrayals of suicides in literary works and the media and how these changed and developed over time, reactions to suicide by various legal and religious authorities, and the treatment of the corpses and surviving families of suicide victims. Minois focuses his analysis on representations of suicide by male elite writers, and what these portrayals tell us about contemporary attitudes towards suicide, death, honour and moral issues. In particular, the pattern that emerges throughout his work indicates not only that for the upper-classes of society at this time suicide was a real and honourable way to die, but that it was also a topic they could discuss in relation to classical and mythical figures with impunity from public censure, even though the reality of their social and religious environment condemned suicide as a sin.

On the front cover of Ronald M. Brown's *The Art of Suicide* (2001), the writer comments, 'if images of suicide say one thing above all, it is that this strange death has never had a fixed meaning'. Even though Brown deals with visual representations of suicide rather than literary portrayals, this comment can apply to all kinds of depictions of suicide. Brown analyses material ranging from kraters in the ancient Greek world to paintings in the twentieth century, although his main focus is how attitudes towards suicide were portrayed through the medium of visual imagery from the early modern period onwards. Brown himself admits that

---

<sup>27</sup> Part 1 of the book offers some thoughts on representations of suicide in the classical era, but does not go beyond the arguments expressed elsewhere in Gris , Van Hooff, Hill, etc. See also McDonald & Murphy (1990) for attitudes towards suicide in this period in England. Murray (1998) looks at the subject in medieval Europe, c.1000-1500.

'suicidal imagery in antiquity was limited', and women in particular were not often portrayed committing the act. He can really only develop exploratory arguments on this material, and concludes that 'a hierarchy of heroic suicide emerges that gradually divides into active and passive deaths'.

Finally, female suicide in Victorian England has received some scholarly attention in recent years. Barbara T. Gates (1988) and Lisa J. Nicoletti (2004) both examine the proliferation of representations of female suicide in literary and artistic works from the period.<sup>28</sup> A woman throwing herself from a height or drowning in the Thames was a commonplace portrayal. As Gates has argued, this was largely due to the fictionalisation and mythologisation of women during this time; women were presented as the 'other' and suicide was displaced to women as a female malady. A large proportion of these representations also attested to the sexual laxity of women at this time: prostitutes, girls who had been seduced and abandoned (often whilst pregnant), adulterous wives. In order to cope with such loose morals, male writers and artists had to portray women as both sorry for their actions (so, exploring why they felt they had to commit suicide) and as committing the actual act itself. Thus, although dealing with the motif of female suicide almost two thousand years later, these studies indicate that the act continued to have significant political and social connotations in different societies.

Turning to ancient suicide, The *Oxford Classical Dictionary's* entry on suicide (by Miriam T. Griffin) notes that both sociological and psychiatric approaches to

---

<sup>28</sup> See also the short chapter of Higonnet (1986) on approaches to female suicide, with a focus on the nineteenth century.

ancient suicide are near-impossible due to the limitations and nature of the evidence. The best approaches to take are those involving the examination of attitudes and values, as these can be assessed by looking at portrayals of suicide that detail the methods used and motives for the act, and opinions expressed on the person carrying it out. Griffin ends by stating that 'at all levels of society then, there seems to have been no blanket approval or condemnation of suicide', at least not until the fourth century and advent of Christianity, an observation that attests to the complexity of tackling this topic in the ancient world.<sup>29</sup>

Suicide in the ancient Greek world has received much attention from modern scholars. For example, in her lengthy article 'Attitudes towards suicides in ancient Greece' (1991), Elise P. Garrison looks at a variety of different evidence, including inscriptions, oratory, history, tragedy and philosophy, from the fifth century BC to the second century AD, although her focus is principally on the Classical period. Garrison concludes that the Greeks could view suicide quite diversely, as either an honourable and therefore praiseworthy action, or as a cowardly deed and therefore deserving condemnation. She draws attention to ambiguity as an important theme related to suicide, a theme explored at length in this thesis. Suicide was also often an act carried out because of a need and desire to live up to society's expectations, whether this be to behave honourably or offer oneself in sacrifice for the greater good.

With a more specific focus, Nicole Loraux's short book, *Tragic Ways of Killing a Woman* (1987), examines the deaths of prominent females in Athenian tragedy. In her section on suicide she discusses the deaths of key women such as Jocasta and

---

<sup>29</sup> *OCD*<sup>3</sup>, 1453.

Deianira, looking in particular at the gendered aspects of their ends. Loraux suggests that within the tragic genre, suicide was a woman's 'solution'. Nonetheless, depending on the method adopted, she could assume some masculine characteristics in her death.<sup>30</sup> Loraux's comments are valuable for her insights into Greek female suicides, a topic to be treated extensively in the context of Roman interpretations in Chapter 2 of this thesis. However, some of her reasoning must be approached with caution, especially as she devotes less space to the analysis of the tragedians' moral and political agendas which a study of these female suicides should entail.<sup>31</sup>

There are two volumes that provide comprehensive overviews of suicide in the ancient world: Yolande Gris 's volume *Le Suicide dans la Rome Antique* (1982) concentrates on the Roman material, whereas Anton J. L. Van Hooff's *From Autothanasia to Suicide: Self-killing in Classical Antiquity* (1990) explores the phenomenon in both ancient Greek and Roman societies. Gris  includes a catalogue of the cases she has collected, and once again this material is useful to anyone approaching the topic as a novice.<sup>32</sup> Van Hooff documents 960 cases of suicide that he has collected from literary material from the pre-mythical era (before 750 BC) to the late Empire.<sup>33</sup> Both volumes offer insightful observations on aspects such as the different categories of people who kill themselves, frequency of suicide,

---

<sup>30</sup> See pp. 125-8 for further discussion of Loraux's arguments.

<sup>31</sup> Faber (1970) analyses suicide (both male and female) in the tragedies of Sophocles and Euripides; he does not, however, consider the 'historical implications' of these representations (1970, 7).

<sup>32</sup> See 34-53, with comments on this data at 53-7; this table is reprinted from her earlier article (1980). Gris 's survey of the material does not go beyond the literature of the second century AD.

<sup>33</sup> See Appendix B.5 for the distribution of cases over the different time periods.

motivations for the act, the different methods adopted,<sup>34</sup> some reactions to the corpses of suicides (for example those who had hanged themselves), the various philosophical and theological attitudes towards suicide, and legislation relating to the act, both from the Republic and early Empire. These works thus offer a solid basis from which the subject can be pursued further, with the catalogues in particular providing an invaluable platform from which to launch an enquiry about ancient suicide.

However, due to the wide variety of source material, time periods, and issues that both Gris  and Van Hooff approach, there is little room for detailed analysis of individual cases and contexts. Indeed, this is not the purpose of their work. Gris 's chapter 'Suicide et litt rature latine', including 'histoire' and 'litt rature d'imagination' (Chapter 8) is very brief (just twenty pages long).

Although there are discussions of the attitudes towards suicide as portrayed in the literature elsewhere, this section might have benefited from greater detail.

Similarly, Van Hooff does not consider aspects of all his writers' literary approaches, genres, aims and contexts in any depth when forming some of his conclusions; for example, Lucretia is one of his most cited figures, but her treatment at the hands of various thinkers is not explored extensively in any instance.<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, one of Van Hooff's objections to Gris 's work is that she misinterprets some of her source material, largely because she has taken much of it from earlier publications on the

---

<sup>34</sup> Charlier's chapter on suicide has similar sections to Van Hooff and Gris  on methods, e.g. ' gorgement', 'pendaison', and 'empoisonnement', and he also considers material evidence, such as inscriptions (2009, 101-36).

<sup>35</sup> Van Hooff's article (1992) provides more information on female suicide specifically, but again, focuses on considerations such as methods, motives, and so on. In other articles (1994, 1998) he discusses ancient imagery of suicide; here representations of women, or women alongside men, account for only thirty-one of his 106 cases (see 1998, Appendix).

subject and not analysed it all for herself.<sup>36</sup> Nevertheless, both volumes provide a useful background for much of what will be discussed in this work and are valuable as informative overviews of many themes related to suicide.

Other scholars have focused on more specific aspects of suicide in the Roman world. Miriam T. Griffin's two articles 'Philosophy, Cato and Roman Suicide: I and II' (1986) suggest some initial ideas about the perception of suicide by the educated male elite, mainly in the late Republic and early Empire. Griffin discusses key figures such as Cato and Seneca, as well as observations on suicide from the philosophical schools of the Stoics, Cynics and Epicureans. Griffin offers some fundamental conclusions. Suicide could be seen as a way of preserving virtue, especially when the individual has been forced to death by someone else. The deaths of those such as Cato provided exempla for numerous imitations. Furthermore, a suicide carried out for rational reasons could be laudable and the reason so much emphasis was placed on this factor in the literature was to make it a possible option for those living at a time when it might become a necessity, for example under the oppressive regimes of some of the early emperors.

Finally, the most recent thorough examination of representations of male suicide in the literature of the late Republic and early Empire is Timothy D. Hill's *Ambitiosa Mors: Suicide and Self in Roman Thought and Literature* (2004), which explores the works of writers including Cicero, Lucretius, Vergil, Ovid, Seneca, Lucan and Petronius. As Van Hooff puts it in his review of this book, Hill's main objective is to consider: 'was suicide a "Roman death" as the modern usage suggests?' Hill starts with Cicero (Chapter 2), who was concerned with the question of whether

---

<sup>36</sup> Van Hooff, 1990, 3-4, 252-3 n.2. Van Hooff also notes some deficiencies in her data.

the act of suicide proved that an individual was being true to their own nature, their self, and continues this idea in relation to Seneca (Chapter 7). Chapter 8 ('The concept of political suicide at Rome') is most relevant to this thesis, and a subject explored also in the second half of Plass (1995). Hill examines the suicides portrayed by Tacitus among others, and argues that these acts served to define the individual's social persona. Hill notes that voluntary death in this context established 'one's status as a moral witness in the community'.<sup>37</sup> However, Hill pays little attention to the female suicides of Tacitus' work. He does offer analysis of Dido in Vergil's *Aeneid* (Chapter 5) and Ovid's *Heroides* (Chapter 6), and of Phaedra in Seneca's tragedy (Chapter 7), but these are isolated cases, apart from other more sporadic references to key figures. Indeed, in his introduction he acknowledges that he gives 'extremely limited attention' to female suicides, and that 'much work remains to be done in this field'.<sup>38</sup> Hill's volume is an important resource when undertaking a study of suicide in ancient Rome. This thesis may not share all of his objectives: Hill strives to set suicide within the context of Roman death in general, investigating whether suicide would have been viewed as a good or bad way to die in relation to what it revealed about the individual self's persona. Nevertheless, as the most up-to-date work on Roman male suicide, it provides much food for thought for any examination of Roman *female* suicide, as well as offering some useful comments on the individual women listed above.<sup>39</sup>

---

<sup>37</sup> Hill, 2004, 184.

<sup>38</sup> Hill, 2004, 28, 29.

<sup>39</sup> See also Huttner (2009) for an analysis of some of the key male suicides, including that of Seneca; Hofmann (2007) focuses on suicide in Late Antiquity, analysing topics such as the definition of suicide, suicide in Roman and Church law, and the suicides of emperors.

### iii. Roman male suicide

The most detailed account of the suicide of Cato at Utica in 46 BC is from Plutarch (*Cato Minor*, 66-73). The actual death scene is described at 70.5-6:

Cato drew his sword from its sheath and stabbed himself below the breast. His thrust, however, was somewhat feeble, owing to the inflammation in his hand, and so he did not at once dispatch himself, but in his death struggle fell from the couch and made a loud noise by overturning a geometrical abacus that stood near. His servants heard the noise and cried out, and his son at once ran in, together with his friends. They saw that he was smeared with blood, and that most of his bowels were protruding, but that he still had his eyes open and was alive; and they were terribly shocked. But the physician went to him and tried to replace his bowels, which remained uninjured, and to sew up the wound. Accordingly, when Cato recovered and became aware of this, he pushed the physician away, tore his bowels with his hands, rent the wound still more, and so died.<sup>40</sup>

Cato's son and friends had tried to prevent him from killing himself, but he would not be swayed by them. After realising that Caesar's ascendancy as first man in Rome was complete, Cato chose to die rather than have to live under what he viewed as a tyranny, and suffer the indignity of receiving Caesar's *clementia*.

---

<sup>40</sup> Translations from Plutarch are from the Loeb edition.

Plutarch goes on to remark that Cato was called ‘the one man who was free, the only one unvanquished’ and that his body was buried near the sea where a statue of him still stands, ‘sword in hand’ (71.1-2). More immediate reactions to Cato’s death are evident in the letters of Cicero, who also wrote a panegyric treatise, *Cato* (followed by Brutus with a second *Cato*), with Caesar replying with his *Anticato*:<sup>41</sup> ‘Cato’s death was rapidly taken as emblematic of Roman striving to place liberty above life – a death which marked the end of the Republic yet also served as a testament to the value some Romans at least placed on its ideals’.<sup>42</sup>

Cato’s death shaped how Roman (and Greek) writers and thinkers wrote and thought about death, particularly suicide. Edwards makes this point clear in her book on Roman death: Cato’s suicide would be viewed as the ‘inspiration or point of comparison for a host of other deaths’; it precipitated the ‘Roman obsession with aristocratic death’ or at least took it ‘to a new level of intensity’; the memory of his end ‘played a role in determining both how and when individuals chose to die and how other others responded to their deaths’.<sup>43</sup> Thus the influence of Cato and his chosen mode of death should not be underestimated. Himself influenced by firm Stoic principles, Cato provided the style and etiquette for suicide, particularly to

---

<sup>41</sup> See e.g. Cicero, *Fam.* 9.18.2; *Att.* 12.4.2: see Edwards, 2007, 2-3, 148. There are numerous other accounts of Cato, beginning in the years after his death and stretching right through the imperial period, including Valerius Maximus, 3.2.14; Lucan, *Bellum Civile*, e.g. 1.128, 2.390; Dio, 43.10-13.

<sup>42</sup> Edwards, 2007, 3. Van Hooff comments that ‘soon after his death, Cato became a legend’ (1990, 52).

<sup>43</sup> Edwards, 2007, 1, 3, 114. In an earlier work, Edwards states that Cato’s suicide acted as a ‘kind of script for subsequent suicides’ (2002, 390). For more on the symbolic value of Cato’s death and ancient as well as later responses to it, see also Donaldson, 1982, 147-68; Brown, 2001, 99-102; Edwards, 2002, 390-1; 2005, 203-6 (207-15 detail eighteenth-century responses).

those who chose to take their own lives during the early imperial period.<sup>44</sup> The political aspect of his death was the most powerful characteristic that his successors wanted to imitate: from the late Republic onwards the focus on the political meaning of suicide started to sharpen, and Cato's death more than any other strengthened the idea of suicide as a political act, usually committed to assert political freedom against a political enemy.<sup>45</sup>

As a result of the setting of his suicide scene and the method chosen, Cato's suicide represented a quintessentially honourable and masculine form of Roman death. A defeated general in the civil war against Caesar, Cato chose to end his life rather than face death at the hands of his enemy, or worse for him, have to live due to their good grace – a factor which is the focus of Plutarch's account. In this sense, he was following a 'military code' that ensured the survival of his reputation as a praiseworthy individual.<sup>46</sup> His suicide demonstrated his *virtus*, similar to that exhibited by a gladiator facing death in the arena, but in this case operating on an 'altogether higher plane'.<sup>47</sup> His chosen method of the sword or dagger would have been seen by his contemporaries and later Romans as intrinsically Roman, as

---

<sup>44</sup> Griffin, 1986, 198; see also Hill, 2004, 71, 186-7. Griffin comments that those who were put to death or chose to commit suicide under the emperors 'came to be thought of, and probably thought of themselves, as following the great Stoic Cato in death' (1986, 195); Van Hooff states that Cato 'became an object of identification for the intellectual opposition during the early empire' (1990, 109); in his discussion of Roman suicide during this period, Hill states that 'aristocratic writers laboured strenuously to ensure that the phenomenon was publicised widely and appeared consistently and uniformly *Catonian* to their readers' (my italics) (2004, 187).

<sup>45</sup> Plass, 1995, 84-6. See also Ker (2009, 255), who also links his death with those of the great Stoics Seneca and Thrasea Paetus under Nero (2009, 55): for more on their deaths, see pp. 216-19.

<sup>46</sup> Van Hooff's phrase: a code followed by later generals (Van Hooff, 1990, 53).

<sup>47</sup> Edwards, 2007, 78.

opposed to that adopted by many foreigners and barbarians; for example jumping into a fire was seen as a particularly 'exotic' and barbaric method.<sup>48</sup>

It is clear that in committing suicide in the way that he did, Cato was performing a very masculine deed. As Langlands remarks, suicide by a metal instrument in Roman culture was 'prestigious' and therefore gendered as masculine, resulting in any death by sword being 'masculine, heroic and Roman'.<sup>49</sup> Jonathan Walters, in his chapter on concepts of manhood in Latin literature of the first century BC to the early third century AD, provides further arguments for the fundamental masculinity inherent in the form of Cato's death, and indeed in any suicidal act carried out in a similar fashion. The image of the Roman soldier was 'central to the concept of Roman manhood', his wounds were 'honourable, not dishonouring' and penetration by a sword did not result in any loss of superior status; rather, the scars from wounds are 'his mark of manhood, the signifier, permanently inscribed on his body, of his social status as a full man'.<sup>50</sup> Wounding to kill oneself does not give a more permanent mark of this status.

Cato's suicide was configured as an essentially masculine act, as well as being particularly influential in providing the stimulus for future suicides carried out by male figures to (re)assert their authority and honour as men. However, what would happen when a female killed herself in a manner similar to Cato? Of course this would be unlikely to be on a battlefield or in a war-time setting, a sphere traditionally the domain of males and one in which women did not normally

---

<sup>48</sup> See Gris , 1982, 96-8; Van Hooff, 1990, 47-54, 57. The Romans often remarked on the act of *suttee* by the Indians where widows threw themselves onto the pyre with their deceased husbands: see, e.g., Cicero, *Tusculanae Disputationes*, 5.27.78; Propertius, *Elegiae*, 3.13.15-22; Valerius Maximus, 2.6.14.

<sup>49</sup> Langlands, 2006, 183 n.135, 184.

<sup>50</sup> Walters, 1997, 40.

participate (although there are some notable exceptions, such as Boudicca). Similarly, when those men under the Julio-Claudian emperors decided on suicide for political reasons, again, one would not customarily expect women to be imitating them in committing suicide with a sword. However, as is argued in this thesis, suicide did come to be represented as an act carried out by more and more females from the late Republic onwards. Writers from this period thus had to negotiate how to narrate such deeds with the highly masculinised, honourable death of Cato in mind, alongside the sex of the figures committing suicide. If a Roman female chose to stab herself to death, was she to be portrayed as to a certain extent masculine, or would this be detrimental to her status as a figure worthy of approbation, as she had transgressed the bounds of her sex? As writers portrayed more and more females committing suicide, did death by the sword become less masculine and more an act applicable to both sexes anyway? These are some of the questions discussed in this thesis in relation to the gendered nature of the suicide scenes examined.

As a final point, it should be noted that although Cato received near-universal admiration for his suicide, not all men who killed themselves did. As will become clear from the examination of female suicides in this thesis, writers approached the act in different ways and could suggest to their readers and audiences a multitude of ways of approaching and interpreting those figures carrying out the deed. For example, Seneca very often does not speak well of those who committed suicide, especially if for the wrong reasons; Tacitus' complex treatment of the subject ranges from seemingly complete admiration for the deed

to outright criticism of it.<sup>51</sup> In what follows, there will be some discussion of male suicide, particularly where it is relevant in relation to those female suicides explored; in Chapter 3 with husband/wife and familial suicides, and in Chapter 4 with some of the martyrs. What is of key importance to this study, however, is the gender of the individual females when portrayed, whether they are depicted as intrinsically feminine, encroaching on masculine acts, or a mixture of the two, as writers approach the act of female suicide in a multi-faceted manner.

#### **iv. Women, gender, sexuality, and female suicide**

The topics of women, gender and sexuality in antiquity have benefited from much scholarly attention in the past fifty years or so. Either studied as separate subjects, or often together, scholars have considered these topics with a wide variety of different theoretical approaches. Turning first to the study of ancient women, an overview of all the scholarship on Roman women and their representation in the source material would be neither feasible nor useful here. However, the major publications can be summarised briefly, in order to give some sense of how approaches to the study of women have changed with the passage of time.<sup>52</sup> There has been a succession of volumes exploring such topics as the prominence of women and the 'realities' of their lives, their position and status in

---

<sup>51</sup> Seneca lauds Cato who to him represents the 'supreme example of the resolute, agonised, and therefore noble suicide', but in general, self-killing in his work often acts as an 'instrument for the delusion of oneself and the deception of others' (Hill, 2004 25, 175-9; see also Plass, 1995, 85, 235): for more on Seneca's attitudes to suicide see p. 161; for examples of this in Tacitus and more on his general attitudes to suicide, see p. 196.

<sup>52</sup> See also Chapter 1 of Dixon (2001), which helpfully surveys much of the scholarship on Roman women from the 1970s onwards; Lefkowitz & Fant (1982) provide a wide variety of source material on numerous aspects dealing with women's lives in antiquity.

the Greek and Roman worlds, among which the seminal volume by Sarah B. Pomeroy (1975) has been particularly influential.<sup>53</sup> Other broad trends in the scholarship can be identified in contributions such as Elaine Fantham *et al.* (1994), arguing that one must analyse the position of Greek and Roman women within the contexts of their own time, and Emily A. Hemelrijk (1999), who presented the case for the educational and patronage roles of some elite women.

Most of these works focus on the 'reality' of women's lives, whereas in more recent years there has been greater scholarly interest in the representation of women – a development of particular relevance to the subject of this thesis. Two good examples are Gunhild Vidén's *Women in Roman Literature: Attitudes of Authors under the Early Empire* (1993) and Suzanne Dixon's *Reading Roman Women* (2001), focusing on source material from the Late Republic and Early Empire. These scholars argue that both the genre of a text and the attitudes of its writers influenced its subject matter, and Dixon maintains that women presented in ancient texts are symbols designed to express how women should really behave, rather than a reflection of historical reality. She examines how male elite writers exploited various stereotypes of women to make moralising statements, for example how licentious, transgressive females often functioned as symbols of a corrupt society that had degenerated from its pure and virtuous past. The approaches of both these works to the literary sources adopt a similar methodology to the one to be employed here, and Chapter 3 can be seen as following the lead of Vidén and others in examining key female figures of the early imperial period for

---

<sup>53</sup> See also Peradotto & Sullivan (1984); Cantarella (1987); see Balsdon (1962), Schuller (1987) and Bauman (1992) on historical figures in the Roman world; for further on the legal position of women specifically during the Republican period see Peppe, 1984; D'Ambra (2007) provides an introductory survey to Roman women.

what they can reveal about a writer's aims and agenda within his political and social context.<sup>54</sup>

An important contribution to this exploration of the representation of Roman women has been Maria Wyke's *The Roman Mistress: Ancient and Modern Representations* (2002). She focuses on the representation of the Roman mistress in love elegy of the Augustan period, part of which argues for Cleopatra's representation as a 'transgressive mistress'. Wyke explores the motif of the female acting outside the traditional boundaries of her sex as displayed in the poetry of Propertius, Ovid and Horace, to investigate what this reveals about male elite thinking on these females as well as attitudes towards sexuality and promiscuity. She notes that 'transgressive femininity' was often utilised in love poetry of Augustus's day to show unease about traditional Roman gender categories and changes in power systems such as that of ruler and subject.<sup>55</sup> Chapter 6 ('Meretrix regina: Augustan Cleopatras') offers some useful comments in relation to my own study of Cleopatra in this period and as such provides a starting point for this material, discussed in Chapter 1.

The closely related subject of gender has attracted increasing interest. Many scholars examining this subject in the Roman world have (rightly) argued that concepts of gender as displayed in Latin literature are fluid, flexible and multifarious. For example, Marilyn B. Skinner maintains that 'gender boundaries were more fluid for Romans than for Greeks, and thus more prone to destabilisation', and that the 'instability of Roman masculinity' resulted in many

---

<sup>54</sup> For a different approach to the imperial women, see e.g. Hahn (1994), who analyses the honours they received in the Greek east in the epigraphical and numismatic evidence, covering the period from Livia to Sabina.

<sup>55</sup> Wyke, 2002, 4.

ancient writers playing around with gender roles; Walters states that the two genders are 'not mirror images of each other, nor do they each "objectively" occupy the space that the other does not....the "truth" that the two genders are mutual opposites is a mystification'.<sup>56</sup> More recently, Skinner has echoed such comments in her volume *Sexuality in Greek and Roman Culture* (2005), which charts the history of sexuality from Homer to the second century AD. She asserts that because the Roman female was not necessarily the antithesis of the Roman male, she was therefore a 'combination of "Sameness" and "Otherness"'.<sup>57</sup> Moreover, there was always the possibility of feminising 'social masculinity'. Various writers could exploit the inherent volatility in Roman gender structures in order to express concerns about the fluctuating roles of elite men during the political upheavals of the late Republic and early imperial period, 'when the rules of the power game were completely rewritten'.<sup>58</sup>

Thus while perceptions and representations of women can be markers of 'radical alterity',<sup>59</sup> they can also be configured as possessing some of the same characteristics as men, while men in turn may be perceived at times as possessing feminine features or acting in a typically feminine manner. Distinctive masculine features include, as the suicide of Cato demonstrates, taking an active role,

---

<sup>56</sup> Skinner, 1997, 11, 16-19, 20 (for the idea that the differentiation between men/women and male/female was different in the Roman to the Greek world see also Hallett, 1989, 67; Skinner, 2005, 239); Walters, 1997, 32. These ideas are expressed in the introduction of and one of the chapters in the Hallett & Skinner volume, which provides a good example of how gender and sexuality in Rome (from the late Republic to c.200 AD) has been approached in recent scholarship. See also Richlin (1992) and Golden & Toohey (2003) for essays on sexuality, gender and women in the Greek and Roman worlds; Rabinowitz & Richlin (1993) for essays that approach classical antiquity using feminist theory.

<sup>57</sup> On this, see also Hallett, 1989, 59, 67.

<sup>58</sup> Skinner, 2005, 239. The introduction to this work details how sexuality has been studied in the last few decades, approaches to the topic in the ancient world, etc.

<sup>59</sup> Skinner, 1997, 8.

asserting authority, particularly against an oppressive other, and acting in a courageous and honourable fashion; distinctive feminine features on the other hand include assuming a passive role, obeying the authority of others (usually men), and also behaving honourably – although traditionally for women such behaviour would have been confined to their roles within the family and household.<sup>60</sup>

However, as many scholars have noted in their own studies of gender, and as will become apparent in this study, portrayals of key figures in narratives from many different genres of Latin literature often blur these features and roles, feminising males or masculinising females, frequently in order to either titillate their readers or to make a specific point about these figures and the society in which they live. Therefore, in analysing representations of female suicide in this thesis, each case is explored for how gender is constructed for that certain individual and why the writer has chosen to construct their gender in this way. And suicide connected with females is a particularly pertinent topic to investigate to broaden our understanding of how and why ancient writers thought about and understood gender. As Skinner argues, ‘although they frequently attribute Otherness to females as a group, Latin authors do single out certain women for displaying praiseworthy attributes said to be typical of men and rare in members of their own sex’.<sup>61</sup> it can be argued that, certainly at the start of the period discussed here, suicide fits this criterion well.

A different approach to gender is to focus on terminology. This has been done particularly effectively by Francesca Santoro L’Hoir in *The Rhetoric of Gender Terms: ‘Man’, ‘Woman’, and the Portrayal of Character in Latin Prose* (1992) which

---

<sup>60</sup> On the active/passive roles linked to penetrator/penetrated in sexual activity see e.g. Parker, 1992, 99; Wyke, 2002, 166.

<sup>61</sup> Skinner, 1997, 10.

examines gender terms, focusing on *vir*, *homo*, *femina* and *mulier*, in the works of Cicero, Sallust, Livy, Velleius Paterculus, Tacitus, Pliny the Younger, Suetonius and Petronius. The first two words denote male figures, and the latter two females, but what is more significant is that all these terms, regardless of sex, are imbued with the rank, status and values of the individuals to whom they are attached. Thus *vir* and *femina* can be placed alongside each other as for the most part being applied to the upper classes of Roman society and denoting complementary characteristics, whereas *homo* and *mulier* are normally applied to the lower classes and often function in a pejorative sense.<sup>62</sup> Although there are differences in how each term is utilised by different Roman writers, it can be argued that with their employment we see similarities between the sexes, and differences between classes, rather than characteristics that are either assigned to males or females.

Constructs of gender were influenced to a great extent by current political, social and economic developments. Romans concerned about these might represent individuals as deviating from sexual norms, and express their anxieties about 'a radical shift in the structure of government' by inverting gender roles and categories.<sup>63</sup> It is not surprising then that an obvious turning-point in Rome's history, the fall of the Republic and advent of imperial rule, would have affected how gender was viewed, idealised and portrayed in the writings of many from this period onwards. This is not to say that gender roles and behaviour had not figured before this time; it is clear that Polybius, in the second century BC, is shocked at the ostentation demonstrated by Scipio Aemilianus' female relatives, despite the 'social

---

<sup>62</sup> Santoro L'Hoir, 1992, 1-2.

<sup>63</sup> Skinner, 1997, 25. As Milnor points out, it was not just women that were affected by political and social changes but women as a 'representational category' (2005, 2).

transformations of the fourth and third centuries'.<sup>64</sup> However, the Augustan age arguably marks a re-definition of acceptable gender roles and acts, particularly for women, and an increase in feminised portrayals of men as the elite were left virtually politically impotent by the dawn of imperial rule.<sup>65</sup>

Sexuality in Roman culture has been studied a great deal in recent years.<sup>66</sup> It is a topic that applies to both sexes; however, the discussion here will focus on female sexuality. Rebecca Langlands' volume *Sexual Morality in Ancient Rome* (2006) considers the term *pudicitia* and how this concept of 'chastity'<sup>67</sup> is shaped and developed, focusing on the principate of Augustus to the writings of Tacitus in the early second century AD.<sup>68</sup> In general terms, Langlands argues that female sexuality is often linked to a crisis or religious innovation.<sup>69</sup> It is therefore important to sustain control over female sexuality because when it becomes out of control, the state as a whole suffers. Women should conduct themselves with decorum in public, avoid adorning themselves too brazenly, and avoid trying to attract the wrong sort of male attention.<sup>70</sup>

---

<sup>64</sup> Skinner, 2005, 200-1.

<sup>65</sup> See also Wyke (2002, 39), who acknowledges that female sexual misconduct began to be associated with political and social disorder from this period onwards: 'a figure like Sempronia was not articulated in texts before the middle of the second century BC'; Treggiari argues that the representation and reality of women was 'rooted in Roman tradition' but experienced a 'marked development' under Augustus (2005, 131).

<sup>66</sup> See e.g. Hallett & Skinner, 1997; Golden & Toohey, 2003; 2011; Skinner, 2005; Langlands, 2006; Richlin, 2006. Golden & Toohey (2011) shows the importance of the subject across the ages, as it is the first volume of six that charts the history of sexuality from the ancient world to the present day, examining themes such as homosexuality, sex related to medicine, and prostitution.

<sup>67</sup> Although Langlands points out that the translation of *pudicitia* is more complex than this (2006, 29-32).

<sup>68</sup> For the cult of *pudicitia* and the goddess Pudicitia in Rome from the third century BC to the fifth century AD see Palmer, 1974.

<sup>69</sup> Parker also asserts that feminine virtue was a 'sign of the moral wealth of the commonwealth' (2004, 564).

<sup>70</sup> Langlands, 2006, 57, 71. The *Lex Oppia* of 195 BC had sought to limit extravagant displays of women (see Milnor, 2005, 158ff.).

Any discussion of female sexual behaviour and sexuality and attempts to control them cannot ignore the important Augustan legislation of the late first century BC. The *Lex Julia* of 18 BC and *Lex Papia Poppaea* of AD 9 dealt with and modified certain rights related to various aspects of marriage, property and reproduction; the *Lex Julia de adulteriis coercendis*, thought to have been passed shortly after the *Lex Julia*, made illicit, extramarital sexual intercourse (with a respectable free woman) a crime, that would be tried by a special court, and firmly restricted the circumstances in which the wronged father or husband could resolve the matter himself by killing the male party.<sup>71</sup> Kristina Milnor's *Gender, Domesticity and the Age of Augustus* (2005) examines the legislation by exploring 'gendered Augustanism', the ideals and values promoted by the first emperor, and their representation in different literary sources. As Milnor notes, there was a fundamental paradox in the ideals and ideology of gender that existed during this time. Women were expected to confine themselves mainly to the household and were praised most for being morally-upright wives and mothers, and yet at the same time, there is much evidence that the women of this period acted as benefactors, patrons and owners of property.<sup>72</sup> The Augustan regime therefore had to carefully balance how it treated women, particularly those of the elite. Moreover, writers of the imperial age expressed concerns about these more

---

<sup>71</sup> There is a wealth of bibliography on the legislation, most of which can helpfully be found at Milnor, 2005, 141 n.2; to this can be added Palmer, 1974, 137-40; Gardner, 1986; Treggiari, 1991; Langlands, 2006, 20-1; Skinner, 2005, 206-7; Eidinow, 2011, 99-102, 105; Lape, 2011, 28-35. For a good detailed overview of the points of law see Treggiari, 1991, 60-80. Milnor's chapter 3 ('Women, History and the Law') considers the legislation as a 'historiographical event', thus looking at how the laws changed the ways that writers read and represented the laws, as well as the history of the laws in the early Roman empire. Treggiari (2005) explores more general topics related to women in Augustus' day, for example the religious roles some played and the official recognition of Octavia and Livia.

<sup>72</sup> Milnor, 2005, 3, 1; see also Skinner, 2005, 202-3; Treggiari, 2005, 142-3.

intrusive roles women now played in their society, exploiting traditional gender norms and roles to achieve this.<sup>73</sup>

There has been much debate over Augustus' motivations for introducing the legislation. For example, Milnor argues that the legislation was brought in partly to 'break the will and power of the aristocracy'.<sup>74</sup> It seems clear, though, that much of the legislation was concerned with monitoring and controlling female sexuality and behaviour: one scholar maintains that it was interested in the 'proper exercise of female sexuality', and as a result artistic depictions of women showed them as 'moral signs of civic morality and health', defending the stability of the state; another that one of the major aims of the program was to 'keep women in their place' as the laws 'both depend on and enforce the existence of certain categories of women: those worthy of marriage and those not; those sexually available and those off-limits'.<sup>75</sup> The legislation did give rights and privileges to women, but these were confined to their roles as loyal wives and mothers: for example, they could escape *tutela*, but only if they were first married and then had a certain number of children.<sup>76</sup>

The law concerning adultery would also have affected women.<sup>77</sup> As Skinner has commented, due to the fact that women were associated with the male members of their family in political and social networks, 'lurid tales of their adulteries could encapsulate corollary messages of political and social

---

<sup>73</sup> See also Sebesta (1998) on the construction of females and feminine bodies during Augustus' principate. This article features in a volume edited by M. Wyke that includes essays on the gendered body in ancient Rome and Greece, as well as in the near East and Judaea.

<sup>74</sup> Milnor, 2005, 15.

<sup>75</sup> Sebesta, 1998, 106-7; Milnor, 2005, 150.

<sup>76</sup> For more on the Augustan legislation and its relationship with Livy and his portrayal of Lucretia, see pp. 69, 76.

<sup>77</sup> On this particular legislation, see Fantham, 1991, 267-8; Eidinow, 2011, 99-101.

destabilisation'; 'the adultery metaphor stood for other concerns beside female sexual conduct'.<sup>78</sup> Thus the sexual mores of females were symbolic of much more than their own personal chastity. Again we see this aspect of female sexuality linked not just to the family, but also to the wider state. And in order to emphasise the harsh penalties for those women found guilty of this sexual indiscretion, or to curtail it completely, Augustus' law made women 'answerable to the state for their actions in the bedroom' for the first time.<sup>79</sup> In addition, it is likely that the men – from the family of the guilty woman at least – would also have felt the impact of this legislation as it deprived them of the opportunity to settle such issues themselves without state intervention.

Adultery was often a concern for both families and Roman society.<sup>80</sup> In Chapter 1, we will see this subject in relation to Lucretia, particularly the 'question of consent' that was an anxiety discussed a great deal by Roman writers.<sup>81</sup> Parker has collated a list of trials against women in the Republic, many of which involved an adulterous female.<sup>82</sup> As many scholars have noted, one of the key charges laid against women of the imperial age, especially members of the imperial family, was that of adultery; figures such as Clodia had suffered similar censure during the late Republic.<sup>83</sup> The emperors of the early empire also continued Augustus' other programmes concerned with female chastity. In the early years of his principate, the goddess Pudicitia had attained a public cult for the first time; Domitian, nearly a hundred years later, was responsible for rebuilding the shrine of plebeian chastity.

---

<sup>78</sup> Skinner, 1997, 5; 2005, 203.

<sup>79</sup> Milnor, 2005, 150.

<sup>80</sup> For more on adultery, see Lape, 2011, 30-3.

<sup>81</sup> Eidinow, 2011, 101.

<sup>82</sup> See Parker, 2004, 590-1, appendix; see also Fantham, 1991.

<sup>83</sup> See e.g. Skinner, 2005, 242.

From the empress Plotina onwards, empresses either chose or were encouraged to advertise their *pudicitia* on coinage.<sup>84</sup> As Chapters 9 and 10 of Skinner's 2005 volume demonstrate, similar anxieties, jokes, legislation, and approaches to female chastity and sexuality lasted from the Augustan period right through to the end of the second century AD.<sup>85</sup>

Another topic connected to those already discussed is rape. Sylvana Tomaselli and Roy Porter's edited volume, *Rape: An Historical and Cultural Enquiry* (1986), demonstrates the different ways in which the subject has been approached, with chapters on legal reforms in the twentieth century, the differences between rape and seduction (a topic that links to the issue of consent discussed above and in Chapter 1), rape in Greek myth, and artistic representations of the Sabine women and Lucretia in sixteenth to eighteenth century European art. These diverse approaches indicate the various moral and ethical issues the act represents a violation of, and the diverse reactions that it prompts in individuals and the wider community as a whole. As Tomaselli notes, rape 'provides a problem....for society as a whole', as well as being a form of physical violence and (in some societies at least) a criminal act.<sup>86</sup> Charting the period from the early first century AD to the early fifth century AD, Richlin maintains that in this period rape was a crime, but that victims were often blamed.<sup>87</sup> Beard emphasises the complex approaches to representations of rape in antiquity in her short paper on the Sabine women, whereas Richlin attests to the prominence of rape in the Rome of Ovid's day – it

---

<sup>84</sup> Palmer, 1974, 113, 141-2.

<sup>85</sup> The volume stops short of discussing these topics later, when the rise of Christianity complicated attitudes towards gender and sexuality: see p. 36ff.

<sup>86</sup> Tomaselli, 1986, 41, 11.

<sup>87</sup> Richlin, 2006, 351.

pervaded the theatre, rhetorical schools and pictures in people's houses.<sup>88</sup> Two other publications, *Pornography and Representation in Greece and Rome* (1992) edited by Amy Richlin and *Rape in Antiquity* (1997) edited by Susan Deacy and Karen Pierce, explore depictions of rape and seduction on Attic pottery, in Greek myth, in Greek and Roman drama, and in the works of Ovid, Livy and in ancient novels.<sup>89</sup> Again, these volumes demonstrate the numerous issues and questions surrounding depictions of rape in classical antiquity, such as the problem of consent and the relationship between mythical rapes and the social reality of the author writing about them.

Many of the modern publications on gender and sexuality cited above stop short of exploring these subjects in Late Antiquity.<sup>90</sup> This is not to imply that with the impact of Christianity, the rules governing attitudes towards and representations of these topics changed completely. On the contrary, as will be demonstrated below, there was much continuity in how women were viewed and represented, and in the ideals surrounding proper sexual behaviour.<sup>91</sup> And yet Christianity did bring with it some different criteria for the definition of gender roles and correct sexual conduct. During its beginnings in particular, Christianity was by no means a unified and constant force across the Roman world, as different exponents of the religion sought to promote a variety of interpretations on key moral and social issues.

---

<sup>88</sup> Beard, 1999; Richlin, 1992, 161.

<sup>89</sup> For Arieti's chapter on rape in Livy (1997) see pp. 60, 70, 80, 86: for Richlin's chapter on rape in Ovid (1992) see pp. 79, 81, 87-8.

<sup>90</sup> The period focused on here is from roughly the early third to early fifth centuries AD.

<sup>91</sup> As Evans-Grubbs is keen to point out in her discussion of marriage and the family in this period (2009, 202).

In terms of gender constructs and the different roles assigned to men and women, little had altered. The early Church Fathers often quoted from the Bible to reaffirm roles already traditionally associated with women, for example the good housewife, chaste and loyal *matronae*, warnings against loose women, etc.<sup>92</sup> Throughout this period and beyond, women continued to appear on coins as symbols of concord, which endorsed the key roles that they played within the family.<sup>93</sup> Literary constructs of women were still utilised by writers to explore a number of relevant concerns.<sup>94</sup> Kate Cooper in particular has taken this approach, developing a theoretical framework that argues that constructions of prominent or influential female figures of this period were subject to the rhetorical agenda of their male authors.<sup>95</sup> There is also evidence that the designation of gender was still unfixed and open to interpretation: Elizabeth A. Clark discusses the ‘gender-bending’ tactic adopted by some in the exegesis of certain biblical passages, often to ‘exhort, upbraid or shame fellow Christians’.<sup>96</sup>

In terms of the two traditional roles associated with women, being wives and mothers, it is clear that these remained the normal responsibilities for most women. The emperor Constantine repealed the Augustan laws in AD 320, resulting

---

<sup>92</sup> Clark, 1983, 16.

<sup>93</sup> Cooper, 2009, 194.

<sup>94</sup> See Cooper 1992, 2009, 194; Kraemer, 2008, 479. The latter gives an overview of the sources for women in Late Antiquity, as well as the approaches taken to the subject by modern scholars. Brown comments that ‘Christian writers still used women to think with’ (1988, 153); Clark’s volume explores the ways in which the Church Fathers ‘praised and blamed, honoured and disparaged the female sex’ (1983, 15).

<sup>95</sup> See Cooper, 1992, 1996; the latter explores more unfamiliar texts from Late Antiquity, analysing constructs of Christian wives and virgins, both figures of ‘female reluctance and of female power’ (1996, 145-6).

<sup>96</sup> Clark, 1999, 138-40. See Clark, 2001, for an overview of the different approaches to both ‘women’s studies’ and ‘gender studies’ in Christian history.

in the penalties on the unmarried and childless being rescinded.<sup>97</sup> However, despite this legislation and the move towards asceticism (see below), the population still did, and indeed needed to, marry and reproduce in order to keep the population stable:<sup>98</sup> 'Christianity needed the family as much as families needed Christianity'.<sup>99</sup> Thus for the majority of women, marriage and motherhood were the usual life-course, and they were encouraged to take control of their households and obey their husbands.<sup>100</sup> Many of the Church fathers defended marriage, although most did not condone remarriage after being widowed.<sup>101</sup> There is much evidence that many families (mostly of the elite) tried to prevent their children from deciding on a life of perpetual virginity rather than marriage and reproduction, as this would limit their capacity to build alliances and continue their family line, and they might also lose out financially if some of the family's wealth was given over to the Church.<sup>102</sup>

There were stricter attitudes towards adultery.<sup>103</sup> It was still of course utterly shameful for a woman to be an adulteress, but men were now also outwardly censured for having concubines or engaging in extra-marital affairs.<sup>104</sup> On the other hand, there was still very much a 'double standard' against women in terms of sexual behaviour.<sup>105</sup> Some scholars have argued that despite the censure

---

<sup>97</sup> Although as Evans-Grubbs points out, this was probably more due to his desire to court the goodwill of the elite rather than to assist those who wanted to remain celibate (2009, 207).

<sup>98</sup> Brown, 1988, 6-7.

<sup>99</sup> Nathan, 2000, 54.

<sup>100</sup> Clark, 1995, 369.

<sup>101</sup> See e.g. Brown, 1988, 78, 135-6, 138; Clark, 1995, 375. There were those like Origen in the third century who did not support marriage at all (Brown, 1988, 173-4).

<sup>102</sup> Castelli, 1986, 81-2; Brown, 1988, 343-5; Clark, 1995, 372-3; Evans-Grubbs, 2009, 208. At the same time, there is also evidence to the contrary, for example families sending daughters off to monasteries to avoid having to pay a dowry, many welcoming the prestige brought by having a virgin daughter (Evans-Grubbs, 2009, 209).

<sup>103</sup> As Fantham notes, 'it was left for Christianity' to condemn sexual relationships outside marriage 'more absolutely' than ever before in the Roman world (1991, 290).

<sup>104</sup> Nathan, 2000, 46-7.

<sup>105</sup> Clark, 1995, 370; Lape, 2011, 35-6.

they might face for committing adultery, in reality men did not face the punishments that women faced for the act, and sexual affairs, particularly before marriage, were tolerated.<sup>106</sup> And women were not only punished for extra-marital affairs; those who had taken vows of virginity also faced penalties from the Church. Similarly, those who violated sacrosanct virgins were punished harshly.<sup>107</sup> Because there was so much focus on sexual purity and chastity in this period, especially when associated with women, rape was seen as an even more villainous crime. Many accounts of pagan persecutors raping consecrated women or threatening to send them to the brothel reflects this anxiety about female purity.<sup>108</sup>

The trend towards Christian asceticism was a powerful one within the Roman world in Late Antiquity. As stated above, most people, both men and women, did not remain chaste throughout their lives but chose instead to marry and have children. Therefore, as Clark points out, the idea of asceticism and its propaganda should not be over-emphasised.<sup>109</sup> However, it is also clear that some men and women did rigorously adopt an ascetic lifestyle, and for those who did not, the ideals and values attached to asceticism still affected how their sexual conduct was viewed. Sexual renunciation was not the only element of asceticism: fasting, sleep reduction, financial divestment and overcoming emotions such as anger and pride were also key facets.<sup>110</sup> Yet it can be argued that the former was a particularly important characteristic and one that preoccupied many writers and thinkers of the period, and indeed Peter Brown's seminal work, *The Body and*

---

<sup>106</sup> Brown, 1988, 23, 29; Clark, 1995, 358; Nathan, 2000, 97, 102-3.

<sup>107</sup> Nathan, 2000, 131. See also Brown, 1988, 207.

<sup>108</sup> Brown, 1988, 192; for examples of this see pp. 295, 306.

<sup>109</sup> Clark, 1995, 378. Brown notes that 'the chaste married woman faithful to her husband, rather than the brittle virgin girl, was the figure who was held up for admiration' (1988, 206).

<sup>110</sup> Clark, 1999, 11.

*Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (1988) focuses on this aspect of the movement.<sup>111</sup> Furthermore, there is also an explicit link between women and sexuality. 'Female honour....tended to focus much more exclusively on sexual purity'; females were often seen as 'the symbol for sexuality, the lusts of the flesh, the downfall of rationality when confronted by desire'.<sup>112</sup>

In the second century AD, those who were viewed in the Christian community as visionary and prophetic figures (and who had normally been married and had children) were expected to be sexually continent. Most Christians were still encouraged to marry, although within marriage sexuality was to be strictly controlled. Abstinence from sexual intercourse was, according to Tertullian, the 'most effective technique with which to achieve clarity of soul'.<sup>113</sup> Throughout the third century, further arguments were put forward encouraging Christians to remain sexually pure, although this was still primarily advocated in those who had been widowed.<sup>114</sup> However, 'by the year 300, Christian asceticism, invariably associated with some form or other of perpetual sexual renunciation, was a well-established feature of most regions of the Christian world' and by the late fourth century, Christianity, now a religion of the young as well as the old, produced girls

---

<sup>111</sup> For detailed discussions of asceticism see, in addition to Brown, Elm, 1994; Clark, 1999 (on the use of biblical verses in the construction of ascetic meaning); Krawiec, 2008 (and bibliography); Finn (2009) explores several aspects of the topic, including abstinence from food, drink, sleep and wealth. See also Brown's new Introduction in the twentieth anniversary edition (2008) for some discussion of how the subject has been approached since *The Body and Society* was published.

<sup>112</sup> Gaddis, 2009, 514; Clark, 1983, 18.

<sup>113</sup> Brown, 1988, 67-9, 78-9; see also Castelli, 1986, 68. For earlier views on celibacy and marriage, see Brown, 1988, 53-9. For more on Tertullian's views on marriage, children, etc. see Nathan, 2000, 44-7. There will also be further discussion on him, Jerome and Augustine in Chapter 4: see pp. 251-3.

<sup>114</sup> Brown, 1988, 146, 149-50; Nathan, 2000, 116.

deciding for themselves to remain virgins and some young men deciding not to marry but to enter the clergy.<sup>115</sup>

For those women who chose this 'alternative' to marriage and motherhood, there were arguably some benefits to be gained. There was no pressure on the families to find suitable marriage partners, the female party was not tied to her husband and did not have to worry about either having children or about them once they had been born. In addition, the way was open for many to be embraced by their local churches as patronesses and figures of advice (and some could even become deaconesses), they could also gain an education, travel, and really make some sort of impact on the Christian church.<sup>116</sup> Virginité represented the 'pinnacle of Christian achievement', particularly after the early fourth century when martyrdom was no longer a viable way of 'manifesting one's superior commitment to Christianity'.<sup>117</sup> Thus those women who chose to remain virgins were revered with the utmost respect: imperial legislation of the fourth century refers to consecrated women as the 'most sacred persons'; surviving letters congratulate young elite women who decided to take the veil.<sup>118</sup>

These women became almost a 'third sex', as they led lives so different from the rest of the female population in general.<sup>119</sup> However, it is right also to emphasise the fact that ascetics of both sexes were admired, that their practices were often very similar, and that for all who embraced it, asceticism created a new

---

<sup>115</sup> Brown, 1988, 202, 191, 260-269.

<sup>116</sup> Although much of this was only available to those members of the elite who had their own wealth. For these arguments see Clark 1983, 16-20, 23-4; 1995, 380; 1999, 25; Castelli, 1986, 69-70, 82-4; Brown, 1988, 263-5, 369-71; Nathan, 2000, 132; Cooper, 2006, 73-4, 83-7; 2009, 193-4; Evans-Grubbs, 2009, 206, 209-10.

<sup>117</sup> Brown, 1988, 254; Clark, 1983, 22; see also Burrus, 1994.

<sup>118</sup> Brown, 1988, 262; Cooper, 2006, 79. Castelli notes that the 'special status' accorded to virgins became a commonplace in fourth century literature (1986, 67, with examples at n.23).

<sup>119</sup> Clark, 1983, 17.

body that was changed from its 'fallen state to one that anticipates the heavenly state'.<sup>120</sup> Ideals and values related to sexual behaviour were to a large extent the same for both men and women; the rise of Christianity helped to lessen the clearly marked boundaries between the sexes that had existed before. And yet, as noted above, for many women traditional roles and gender definitions remained as they always had been. Moreover, for virgin females specifically, the idea emerged of them being the bride of Christ, a feat not even a male virgin could achieve.<sup>121</sup>

Finally, it is appropriate to return to two modern works that have considered all of the issues discussed above in specifically analysing female death, in order to assess how the subject of this thesis corresponds to and advances work on this closely related topic. This thesis intends to explore and develop further approaches to female death such as those already explored by Edwards (2007; see above). Edwards to some extent plays down the force of the female deaths she discusses by concentrating primarily on their 'femininity'. Although she claims that there are many masculine characteristics in the deaths of Lucretia, Dido, Porcia and Arria, Edwards emphasises the feminine aspects of their ends; for example she says of Lucretia: 'this suicide [which] atones for, upstages, rape could be read as a quintessentially feminine suicide'.<sup>122</sup> However, it is important to explore how some women, such as Lucretia and Tacitus' female figures, are often credited with masculine roles in specific contexts where the cosmos has been disturbed by cultural and political forces. Moreover, it is very difficult to pinpoint the quintessentially 'feminine' death or suicide. Cato provides the paradigm for males,

---

<sup>120</sup> Brown, 1988, 269; Krawiec, 2008, 774-5.

<sup>121</sup> Castelli, 1986, 71; Brown, 1988, 274.

<sup>122</sup> Edwards, 2007, 182.

and to a great extent Lucretia for the females, but there are still some problems with her chosen type of suicide that might endow her with masculine attributes. As a result, it is imperative to consider each case of female suicide individually to see how each writer interplays gender and the status and character of those individuals before offering some more general observations on approaches to female suicide. This thesis builds on Edwards' observations on female death and suicide, as well as following a similar literary approach, and hopes to expand on these observations in a more extensive study of the feminine in relation to death.

Elisabeth Bronfen in *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic* (1996) tackles the theme of gender related to death in a somewhat different way. With a focus on nineteenth century literature, Bronfen looks at numerous interpretations of the intersection between femininity and death for the aesthetic values, tropes and significance that such representations symbolise. There is really only one area where she focuses on suicide, and this is 'suicide as a form of feminine authorship'.<sup>123</sup> And yet some of Bronfen's opening comments in her preface are relevant to this thesis. She suggests that the 'feminine body is culturally constructed as the superlative site of alterity' and that the 'represented feminine body also stands in for concepts other than death, femininity and body – most notably the masculine artist and the community of the survivors'. She goes on to argue that 'death and femininity serve as ciphers for other values, as privileged tropes', and that they also 'cause a disorder to stability, mark[ing] moments of ambivalence, disruption or duplicity'.<sup>124</sup> Thus Bronfen clearly recognises what is at

---

<sup>123</sup> Bronfen, 1996, xiii (Chapter 8 'Noli me videre').

<sup>124</sup> Bronfen, 1996, xi-xii.

stake in representations of female death: the relationship between the male writer, his contemporary society, the values of this society and the portrayal of the dead female, as well as the fact that female death is often used to denote a society in crisis. As has been demonstrated above, all of these issues are relevant to studies of gender, female death and sexuality in ancient Rome.

## **2. Thesis arguments and structure**

### **i. Thesis arguments, research questions and methodology**

In ancient Greek culture, suicide was normally the domain of the tragic woman. Of course there are exceptions: Ajax is the great hero who stabbed himself; Socrates' death by hemlock is usually regarded as suicide. Nevertheless, when one thinks about Greek suicide, it is usually tragedy one thinks of, and here there are many more females committing the act than males. Furthermore, it is often these tragic scenes that Roman writers had in mind when describing their own suicide victims. On the other hand, in Roman thought, suicide was traditionally the domain of a man; this was especially the case after the suicide of Cato (see discussion above: pp. 20-3). An honourable death by the sword in the face of an enemy was considered commendable and many sought to emulate this deed.

So where do Roman female suicides fit into the picture? The ancient Greeks discussing their women killing themselves could do so easily because these were women of myth and within the conventions of tragedy the audience need not see the actual death scene. But how were the Romans to approach real women

committing suicide in a wide variety of genres? This was difficult, as they fall somewhere between their Greek predecessors and their Roman male counterparts. But this was part of the appeal and fascination with discussing female suicides. The unease attached to a woman killing herself meant that she was an attractive and useful tool with which to debate a multitude of issues. If there was no defined way in which a reader or audience should react to her, then a writer could use this to his advantage and approach her death in a variety of different ways. And if she was viewed as being particularly brave against a powerful foe, then this would have stimulated further questions. This is why many of the writers discussed here were so careful to focus on the gender of the figure in question. If a woman is particularly feminised in her suicide scene (for example, portrayed as passive and lacking autonomy), or indeed, masculinised (for example, depicted as being in control of her actions and adopting the traditionally male method of the sword), this makes an important point about traditional gender roles and their transgression.<sup>125</sup>

One of the main objectives of this thesis is to consider how and why writers portrayed female suicide not only to ask questions about gender and ethical issues, but also to comment on contemporary society and politics. This was mainly to incite male elite members to think about these matters, as they would have constituted the principal readership of much of the literature to be discussed. However, with works such as Seneca's tragedies, this might have encompassed both genders and a broad cross-section of social class. How could even the uneducated masses see a woman physically stabbing herself on stage and not at least wonder why the writer

---

<sup>125</sup> For an example of a modern approach to similar issues, see e.g. Noble (2004): this book looks at the masculine female figure in a variety of different sources from the twentieth century.

had chosen such a graphic topic? They presumably had also heard stories about very real women who had suffered a similar fate very recently (see Chapter 3). The potency and symbolism of female suicide was utilised in various ways by many writers who wanted to suggest that something was not quite right in their own society. Whether this be lax morals and uncontrolled sexuality, a tyrannical emperor, or religious persecution, the motif was adapted, developed and worked well in providing thought-provoking narratives.

There is not space here to discuss in detail all instances of female suicide in Latin literature.<sup>126</sup> However, the material selected covers a wide enough range of both genres and time periods to address effectively the research questions outlined above. The sources used include history, poetry, epic, tragedy, religious treatises, and martyr acts. Due to the nature of these different genres, female suicide will be addressed in a range of different ways. However, it is also possible to identify similarities in how and why writers approached the act, and chose to exploit the theme. The time period covered by this thesis is extensive, examining material from the first century BC to the fifth century AD. Chapter 1 covers literature of the Augustan period, including Livy, Ovid, Horace, Propertius and Vergil. Chapter 2 looks again at Ovid, this time alongside the plays of Seneca the Younger, while Chapter 3 examines Tacitus' *Annales*. Chapter 4 covers a variety of literary works from the early third to the early fifth centuries AD. In this way, this thesis will make a number of observations about developments over time in patterns and representations of female suicide.

---

<sup>126</sup> The research for this thesis was based on a database that I compiled, collating approximately one hundred female figures from Latin literature.

This diachronic approach is an important aspect of what this thesis sets out to do. The first three chapters of this work focus on the representation of female suicide by Roman male elite writers. The different ways in which they tackle the topic are revealing and thought-provoking enough in themselves. And yet, by including the last chapter, where we are still largely dealing with male elite thinkers, we are able to see how the motif of female suicide was used in a culture with a changing religious, moral and social background. How did the early Christians retell the story of Lucretia to suit their own agendas within their own day? Chapter 4 analyses the writers' and artists' engagement with the same type of intellectual exercise that was being carried on within classical antiquity itself, but also acts as a climax to the thesis as the transition to Christianity alters approaches to death and sexuality.<sup>127</sup> Horace's portrayal of Cleopatra, Seneca's of Jocasta, Augustine's of Lucretia – all tackled the theme of Roman female suicide in diverse ways for a number of reasons. This thesis provides a wide-ranging history of this topic by foregrounding representation and reception of this highly thought-provoking and subjective motif.

Finally, the methodology of this thesis will remain largely the same throughout all the genres and time periods covered. In each chapter, it will be of utmost importance to establish the literary aims, objectives and style of the individual writers, as this has a fundamental impact on how and why they chose to represent female suicide as they did. Hence subjects such as the political climate, moral legislation, and religious developments of their day must be considered when

---

<sup>127</sup> As Hill points out, the 'dynamics' of political suicide in the early imperial period are 'analogous to those governing Christian martyrdom' as individuals still willingly choose to die rather than renounce their ideals (2004, 192).

examining what they hoped to achieve in covering the topic in question. This is not always easy, and often we can do no more than conjecture about the aims and objectives of a particular text. However, by maintaining this same methodology throughout the thesis, it is hoped that these questions can be explored and investigated in a consistent way as far as the material allows.

## ii. Chapter summary

Chapter 1 'Lucretia vs. Cleopatra: suicidal models of Romanness and barbarity in Augustan Rome' includes an examination of the rape and suicide of Lucretia in Livy's history and Ovid's *Fasti*, and of the suicide of Cleopatra in the poetry of Vergil, Horace, and Propertius. The political and social climate of these writers, writing under a new type of regime in the form of the first emperor Augustus, played a key role in determining how these writers approached the depiction of topics dealing with rape, death, powerful women and the morality of a death like suicide. Therefore, the objectives of these writers as related to these matters will be of great significance in assessing how and why they have chosen to portray these two women. The two suicides will be treated as separate incidents since no surviving writer discusses them together until Late Antiquity. However, due to the nature of the great veneration usually accorded to Lucretia, as opposed to the contempt often associated with Cleopatra, it will be instructive to observe how, when it came to their suicides, a more complex picture of these two women emerges. The ambiguity inherent in the act of suicide blurs the traditional characteristics assigned to these two females.

Chapter 2 'Greek tragic suicide through Roman eyes' analyses the representation of Greek female suicides, including Jocasta, Phaedra and Deianira, in the *Heroides* of Ovid and tragic plays of Seneca the Younger. Long before the Romans had their own figures such as Lucretia to laud, the Greeks had already formulated stories, largely through the medium of tragedy, about mythical women who had committed suicide. These Greek accounts, themselves reworkings of earlier version of the myths, influenced how the Roman writers appropriated this same material, but also how they explored their own female suicides. Thus it is constructive to place a study of Latin writings on Greek female suicides alongside the other chapters that focus on Roman female suicides. Once again, it will be important to focus on the writers' political, social and cultural contexts in assessing their chosen portrayal of female figures who have been transported from a very different time period, and in Ovid's case, from a different genre. Ovid provides a bridge with the last chapter, although the character of the *Heroides* is different from that of the *Fasti*. Using Seneca's dramatic works progresses the research further into the first century AD and gives an insight into how female suicide was written about under the Julio-Claudians, as well as providing a further link with the following chapter on Tacitus.

The subject of Chapter 3 is 'The Suicidal Female in Tacitus' *Annales*'. This chapter examines the writer's portrayal of sixteen female suicides, or suicide attempts, throughout the course of his major work on the Julio-Claudian emperors written in the early second century AD. The corruption and tyranny that Tacitus viewed as central to the rule of these emperors in the topsy-turvy political world of early imperial Rome resulted in suicide assuming a particularly political character as

the elite strove to regain some autonomy by taking control of the only aspect of their life left to them – their death. However, this does not mean that Tacitus wholeheartedly embraces suicide as the correct course for everyone to take. Each depiction of suicide must be analysed for what it can reveal about contemporary approaches to the deed, as well as towards women, the elite and the emperors. The proliferation of female suicide in this single work means that a chapter devoted solely to it is both necessary and highly informative. Furthermore, much work has been done on the dominant female figures that litter the pages of the *Annales*, and this chapter intends to complement such studies as it includes an examination of females transgressing the norms of feminine behaviour. Moreover, scholars have also studied the male suicides of the *Annales* (see above) but not really touched upon their female counterparts in any detail. So one question to address is why certain women were now also taking their own lives, an act traditionally associated with males, and what Tacitus aims to reveal about their current society by narrating and examining this act.

Chapter 4 ('Lucretia among the martyrs: representations of female suicide and female martyrdom in the patristic literature and martyr acts of Late Antiquity') explores the portrayal of the rape and suicide of Lucretia alongside the representations of female martyrs in literature from the early third to the early fifth centuries AD, including works by Tertullian, Jerome and Augustine. The Church Fathers had much to say about Lucretia, and despite the fact that she was a pagan Roman, their views on her are not all derogatory. Indeed, revolts and persecutions that took place during this time meant that suicide either precipitated by rape, or carried out to avoid it, was a relatively common occurrence and thus many writers

had much sympathy for Lucretia's predicament. The new type of writing in the form of the martyr acts resulted in many opportunities for writers to explore novel ways in which women chose to end their lives. Religious beliefs now played a key role in the decision to commit suicide, but the abundance of martyrs of both sexes that has been recorded provides a picture of voluntary death not that dissimilar to the one that emerges from Tacitus: suicide was still seen as a form of last-ditch opposition and assertion of independence against an oppressive authority. Finally, Augustine ties Lucretia and the martyrs together as he reveals disapproving attitudes towards both in his critical views on suicide that were to influence thinking on the subject for hundreds of years to come.

## Chapter 1

### Lucretia vs. Cleopatra: suicidal models of Romanness and barbarity in Augustan Rome

#### 1. Introduction

Lucretia is one of the most frequently cited female figures of ancient Rome. She is mentioned with great regularity both by ancient writers and orators and in modern scholarship dealing with Roman women, myth and society. She has been lauded countless times from antiquity right through to the twentieth century for demonstrating great *pudicitia* in her conduct when raped by Sextus Tarquinius and for her subsequent suicide following this traumatic event. Cleopatra, the last Egyptian queen, was just as renowned and best known for her interactions with the most important men of late Republican Rome. In very different circumstances she too took her own life, and over the past two thousand years or so her story has been retold numerous times. These women are not so unrelated or dissimilar as they may seem, despite their typical characterisation as virtuous Roman matron (Lucretia) and barbaric foreign queen (Cleopatra). The parallels between them are particularly noticeable when analysing their portrayal in the works of writers from the early part of Augustus' principate, where they become symbolic of much wider-reaching social, cultural and political events and ideals.<sup>128</sup>

---

<sup>128</sup> For convenience, Octavian/Augustus will be referred to as Augustus throughout this chapter, even when describing events before he assumed this title.

Edwards has described their suicides, along with that of Dido, as marking 'three key moments in Roman – or proto-Roman – history'.<sup>129</sup> By examining the suicides of Lucretia in Livy and Ovid and of Cleopatra in Vergil, Horace and Propertius, this chapter discusses how these writers used these women as models of 'Romanness' and barbarity within the context of Augustan Rome, but also how some parallels can be drawn between the women that also blur the boundaries of these models. The suicides of these two women have been studied in some detail, and so the aim of this chapter is to place them within a much larger framework of female suicides from this and later periods. Suicide, especially when committed by a female, was an act that allowed writers to create a great sense of ambivalence when representing events or characters in their narratives or poetry. The significance attached to both Lucretia and Cleopatra's suicides provided Augustan writers with pertinent examples which they could utilise in their works, and as a result contribute to the intellectual currency of female suicides in Roman literary culture of their own and later times.

The aim of this chapter is to analyse the suicides of Lucretia and Cleopatra in the literature of the early Augustan period. It begins by looking at Lucretia's suicide as it appears in the history of Livy and in the *Fasti* of Ovid. This includes analysing the moralistic and political implications apparent in both representations of Lucretia's death, as well as the matter of gender. This section ends with a comparison between Livy's history and Ovid's *Fasti*, looking particularly at why there might have been differences in the ways in which the two writers present

---

<sup>129</sup> Edwards, 2007, 186.

Lucretia's story. The following section analyses the presentation of Cleopatra's suicide in the poetry of Vergil (including some similarities and differences between his presentation of Cleopatra and Dido), Horace and Propertius. Finally, it looks at what the official propaganda against Cleopatra might have entailed, and how these three poets were influenced by this and contemporary events, and whether their representations of Cleopatra's suicide strictly followed the official version of events.

Throughout this chapter, the suicides are treated as two isolated incidents for what they can reveal about the act of suicide in Roman culture, and the place of suicide in descriptive narratives. This analysis will also look at what these suicides reveal about femininity, as well as masculinity, and sexuality in the works of writers from a variety of genres. However, before embarking on a discussion of the suicides themselves, it is necessary first to look at Livy as a writer within the context of the period in which he was writing. This analysis will also be useful more generally with regards to the other Augustan writers to be considered. This introduction then presents a brief synopsis of the Lucretia story as it appears in Livy, before moving on to summarise relevant studies analysing this story. These do not focus exclusively on the suicide, but are nevertheless of importance in understanding how the myth has been approached. Finally, this introduction looks at the downfall of Cleopatra within the context of Augustan Rome and previous research on the subject.

## i. Livy and Augustan Rome

Livy wrote the early books of his *Ab Urbe Condita* around 27-25 BC, during the very early stages of Augustus' principate. A major concern for Livy when he was writing was the 'moral value of history', as indicated in his Preface.<sup>130</sup> To this end, his account of certain events and characters in the regal period provided instruction to his contemporary Romans as to how to live well by following strict morals in their day-to-day lives. His moralising views were largely framed by his origins in Padua, a place known for its traditional approach to life and old-fashioned morality.<sup>131</sup>

For Livy, the desire for luxury that had led to a decline in Rome's standards had been a fairly recent development.<sup>132</sup> It is perhaps unsurprising that, at least in his eyes, this decline of the latter years of the Republic had not yet come to an end. Augustus had only just established peaceful rule in Rome, and the fact that much of his legislation was concerned with strengthening traditional family and moral values indicates that at this point there were still internal problems within Rome's society even though externally she was now stable.<sup>133</sup> Thus to some people, Augustus and Livy among them, Augustan Rome was very much a time of the reaffirmation of traditional values to reinforce her internal structure and avoid further corruption.

And one way to do this was to look to an idyllic past, and figures like Lucretia, that

---

<sup>130</sup> See e.g. Moore (1993, 38).

<sup>131</sup> Joshel, 2002, 165. Quintilian criticised him for his *Patavinitas* (*Institutio Oratoria*, 1.5.56; 8.1.3), although this might be referring to his use of language.

<sup>132</sup> Fox, 1996, 96.

<sup>133</sup> For the legislation see pp. 32-4. Augustus had, however, been considering changes for some time before the laws were brought in; e.g. he proposed a law just before the battle of Actium imposing a hefty tax on bachelors; see Badian, 1985; Moses, 1993; Milnor, 2005, 155-6; Skinner, 2005, 204. As Moses has pointed out, both Propertius (*Elegiae*, 2.7) and Livy (in his Preface at 9) seem to allude to the failure of these early attempts of Augustus (1993, 54-5).

could provide education into how this might be achieved.<sup>134</sup> As Milnor explains it, 'Livy's life work goes hand in hand with the systematic antiquarianism of the Augustan regime' with both he and Augustus, in their own way, imagining themselves 'bringing the good old days back to Rome'.<sup>135</sup>

## ii. Lucretia's story<sup>136</sup>

Lucius Tarquinius Superbus, king of Rome, attempted to capture Ardea, a city of the Rutuli tribe. Whilst laying siege to the place, his men became idle and often held drunken dinners. On one of these occasions, hosted by Sextus Tarquinius, the king's son, and attended by Tarquinius Collatinus, the subject of wives was broached. Collatinus bragged that his wife, Lucretia, was the best wife. To solve the matter, the men decided to ride first to Rome and then to Collatia and see what each of their wives was doing in their absence. They found the daughters-in-law of the king holding a sumptuous banquet, whereas Lucretia was weaving, even though it was late at night. Collatinus and the others dined at his house, and Sextus' great desire for Lucretia was formed, prompted by her great beauty and proven chastity.

A few days later, Sextus returned to Collatinus' house alone. After dining, he later goes to a sleeping Lucretia and rapes her. He first threatens to kill her if she will not submit to him, and when even this does not deter her, threatens to kill her

---

<sup>134</sup> As Chaplin puts it, Livy 'built his gallery of heroes to provide models for the future' (2000, 202); see this work for more on Livy's use of exempla. See also Langlands 2006, 27-9 for the use of exempla in general.

<sup>135</sup> Milnor, 2005, 155.

<sup>136</sup> This synopsis is based on Livy, 1.57-60.

and a slave so as to make others think he had found her committing adultery with the slave. Afterwards, Lucretia asks her father and husband to come to her, each with a friend. She tells them what Sextus has done to her and they try to convince her that she is not guilty. But Lucretia does not listen to them and commits suicide by stabbing herself through her heart. Lucius Junius Brutus, brought by Collatinus, takes the bloody knife and vows to avenge her death. Lucretia's body is carried out for everyone to see and Brutus makes a speech, causing the people to drive out the king and his family. Brutus and Collatinus were then appointed the first two consuls in Rome's Republic.

### iii. Modern scholarship on Livy's Lucretia

Walsh has put forward the view that Livy's work may have influenced Augustus' legislation. The moral lessons highlighting the importance of *pudicitia* demonstrated by his tales of Lucretia and Verginia (a girl killed by her father due to the unjust actions of the *decemvir* Appius Claudius in c.450 BC) would have been known to his readers by 25 BC and Augustus did not enact his laws until 18.<sup>137</sup> Events surrounding the deaths of Lucretia and Verginia showed that 'high ideals of chastity are essential for the well-being of society'.<sup>138</sup> Livy may not have been as influential on these reforms as Walsh contends, but he certainly reflected and contributed to the social and political climate of the period in which this legislation was produced.<sup>139</sup> Ogilvie also comments on Lucretia as representing a moral

---

<sup>137</sup> On the legislation see pp. 32-4.

<sup>138</sup> See above pp. 31, 33 for this argument also.

<sup>139</sup> Walsh, 1961, 13, 76.

exemplum for the value of chastity. He goes on to say that the tradition surrounding her rape and suicide leading to the fall of the Tarquins was 'too well-established to be doubted seriously'. Furthermore, Ogilvie argues that Livy has presented this part of his narrative in the style of a play, primarily tragic in nature, confirmed by a comparison with Dionysius of Halicarnassus' version.<sup>140</sup> Grant and Donaldson also deal with the traditions of the myth, arguing that the fall of a tyrant following a sexual transgression of his own or that of a member of his family was a recurring theme in ancient stories in both Greek and Roman cultures.<sup>141</sup>

Philippides has noticed the parallel that Livy has created between events in Ardea and those at Lucretia's house. These indicate that Rome's 'moral sickness' is down to both the king's greed for expansion and his son's debauched lusts, and the only way to cure this sickness is to expel the royals. Moreover, he has noted how Livy uses judicial metaphors when discussing Lucretia, which serves not only to highlight the injustice she suffers but also to justify the abolition of the monarchy. Finally, like many others, Philippides has pointed out that Lucretia is a 'moral paradigm' for *pudicitia*, but he further suggests that Sextus too is given this label, as he represents the binary opposite of her in his 'negative *virtus*'.<sup>142</sup>

Joplin emphasises the political aspects to the stories of Lucretia and Verginia, arguing that the rivalry between male figures meant that violence was committed against the chastity of the wife or daughter of their political rivals. Within this context, the female figures served as 'surrogate victims'. Lucretia herself

---

<sup>140</sup> Ogilvie, 1965, 218-19.

<sup>141</sup> Grant, 1971, 171; Donaldson, 1982, 7. Harmodius and Aristogiton killed the tyrant Hipparchus in Athens in 514 BC due to a sexual transgression of Hippias, Hipparchus' brother.

<sup>142</sup> Philippides, 1983, 113-14, 116-17. Lucretia arguably possesses *virtus* in her death when she takes hold of and uses the dagger.

remains unaware of this rivalry and this highlights her role as a victim, rather than as a 'real' person. Joplin also argues that Collatinus' role is 'rarely recognised for what it is', as she believes Sextus' rape of Lucretia was to get back at Collatinus for winning the wager on who had the most virtuous wife.<sup>143</sup> Calhoon also explores the political rivalry idea put forward by Joplin. The contest between the men about their wife's virtue reflects this, as a woman's reputation contributed greatly to a family's social standing. She sees Livy as viewing a Rome undergoing a crisis at this point, a crisis begun by the ambitions of Tanaquil and Tullia. In order for this crisis to pass, an 'appropriate sacrifice' must be made, with the 'most suitable victim' chosen for this. Therefore the contest between the drunken men was the equivalent to a 'sacrificial search' for the most apt victim. Furthermore, it is also a prerequisite of her sacrifice that she be raped. This is because she has to be alienated from the rest of her community so that when she is used as a sacrifice, this completely fulfils its cathartic purpose.<sup>144</sup> Such an argument could be viewed in the context of seeing the strife of Lucretia's day being analogous to that of the civil wars: for Augustus to become supreme, many sacrifices had to be made by the innocent.

Bauman and Moses have both approached the legal aspect of Lucretia's rape. The former maintains that Lucretia would have been guilty of committing adultery because she 'consented' to the rape, as the element of coercion by violence in such acts was only allowed for from the early first century BC onwards.<sup>145</sup> Moses argues in a similar vein, emphasising the questioning that took

---

<sup>143</sup> Joplin, 1990, 52, 60-1.

<sup>144</sup> Calhoon, 1997, 154-5, 163-4.

<sup>145</sup> Bauman, 1993, 552.

place in the Augustan period with regard to the issue of consent in acts of *stuprum*. She sees it as related to relevant legislation from Livy's period (see Introduction: pp. 32-4), and also that Livy was warning of the dangers about the treatment of women contemporaneous to himself who, unlike Lucretia, had committed consensual *stuprum*.<sup>146</sup> Arieti focuses on the rape itself. He links it with the rapes of Rhea Silvia and the Sabines in book 1, noting that each is associated with important political developments. He views the act of rape as a 'mingling of Mars and Venus', made up of both violent, but also sexual and creative, elements. The rapes that Livy described as having a significant effect on the creation of Rome displayed a union of opposites, where conflicting forces gave rise to the harmony represented by the city.<sup>147</sup>

Vandiver aims to look at the women in Livy's first book as 'subjects in their own right', and not to analyse only their effects on the men around them and their symbolic value. Although not fully achieving this within the scope of her article, some of the points she makes are nevertheless of relevance here. She points to the tough decisions made by female figures such as Lucretia, as indicative of the fact that Roman society recognised that it was members of both sexes that could be called upon to make moral decisions. Furthermore, society could profit from women with strong moral characters. Vandiver even goes as far as to say that Livy assumed a female aristocratic audience for his work as well as male.<sup>148</sup> This may or may not have been the case, but the idea of Livy advising his female

---

<sup>146</sup> Moses, 1993, 39; 79. The *lex Julia de adulteriis coercendis* of 18 BC came after Livy wrote his early books, but the issue was nevertheless an on-going one when Livy was writing.

<sup>147</sup> Arieti, 1997, 214, 218-20.

<sup>148</sup> Vandiver, 1999, 206-7, 218. Langlands also suggests that a female readership could have been likely for some ancient works (2006, 8).

contemporaries is a persuasive one. It is possible that he was also trying to communicate to them the idea that they must suffer for Rome to be great, just as their men-folk have and will do in the future. This might not necessarily mean sacrificing their lives like Lucretia, but could involve other sacrifices, including wealth and ostentatious displays.

Most recently, Joshel has assumed some of the viewpoints of those scholars already mentioned, as well as adding her own interpretation of certain areas. Her main focus is to highlight the importance of male characters and values in the events surrounding Lucretia. The late Republic had witnessed a crisis because of political ambitions and 'male bodies out of control in the social world'. The heroes in Livy were men like Brutus who, in a highly disciplined manner, acted after the female figure died. Promiscuous behaviour in women was partly to blame for moral decline, but it is the men who act out and solve this problem and carry Rome's history forward. Lucretia's rape scene is not presented from her point of view, and Lucretia herself is not present, but only her chastity is there, acting as a symbol. Like Calhoun, Joshel views Lucretia only as a sacrifice necessary for 'men's liberation and political advances', thus for the greater good of Rome.<sup>149</sup>

---

<sup>149</sup> Joshel, 2002, 170, 172, 176, 181-3.

#### iv. Cleopatra and Augustan Rome<sup>150</sup>

Cleopatra provided Roman writers of the Augustan period with a powerful and enigmatic female figure to exploit and portray in a wide variety of different ways. Her suicide in particular was a subject much discussed, probably because aside from the official version detailing what had happened, no one was fully aware of how the queen had killed herself.<sup>151</sup> Wyke has commented that the only near-contemporary texts to survive are 'male, Roman, and poetic', which means that we are 'witness only to the extreme partiality of the winning side', where Cleopatra is an Egyptian mistress, a whore and represented predominantly as a defeated enemy of Rome. Nevertheless, she goes on to argue that there are certain aspects of these poems about Cleopatra which 'do not seem to be straightforwardly critical of Cleopatra nor unambiguously supportive of Octavian'.<sup>152</sup> Thus there is a case for seeing some more constructive and ambivalent portrayals of Cleopatra in the Augustan poets. Furthermore, Wyke notes that in general, the Roman mistress was deployed as a 'site for the exploration of issues of gender and politics'.<sup>153</sup>

In a short article, Griffiths discusses her suicide in more general terms, arguing that the method used was most likely snakes, and that there were probably

---

<sup>150</sup> There is a wealth of bibliography on Cleopatra, and so the modern scholarship used here has been mainly restricted to discussions focusing on her suicide, particularly as it appears in Vergil, Horace and Propertius. Two recent volumes aimed at 'reassessing' Cleopatra, Walker & Higgs (2001) and Walker & Ashton (2003) offer much new material on Cleopatra, but like so many other works, are mainly artistic in focus, and as a result provide little insight into the presentation of Cleopatra in literary sources. See also Goldsworthy (2010) and Roller (2010) for analyses of various aspects of Cleopatra's life. Wyke (2002) explores Cleopatra in conjunction with poetic mistresses, as well as discussing her portrayal in twentieth-century film.

<sup>151</sup> The 'official version' is in itself something of a mystery: see pp. 109-13 on what it is likely to have led people to believe happened, and what might have been suppressed.

<sup>152</sup> Wyke, 2002, 196, 221. There are, however, two mentions of Cleopatra's suicide in fragments of Livy: see pp. 109-10.

<sup>153</sup> Wyke, 2002, 6.

two of these. This was largely due to the double uraeus being used as an Egyptian royal symbol.<sup>154</sup> Baldwin disputed some of Griffiths' arguments, arguing against the use of snakes and that Griffiths did not prove the presence of two.<sup>155</sup> Both these scholars cite the ancient texts, but do not deal with the literary evidence in any detail. For example, Baldwin's statement that Augustus believed Cleopatra had used a snake-bite to kill herself does not take into account the different interpretations of her death by various writers with different agendas in the new political climate under Augustus.

Therefore, a critical point to consider when examining the Augustan poets is the influence propaganda of this period may or may not have had on their work. As the on-going moral legislation could influence and be reflected in Livy's history, the work of the three poets was most certainly connected with recent events and the viewpoint on them that more official records may have wanted to promote. It is inevitable, then, that these writers chose to appropriate the figure of Cleopatra as the perfect model for a barbarian queen who must be thwarted, and that her suicide was a means through which this barbarity could be brought out more explicitly. However, whether they fully conformed to the propaganda was down to their own judgment and thus the picture of Cleopatra's portrayal in this period is not straightforward.

---

<sup>154</sup> Griffiths, 1961, 116; 117.

<sup>155</sup> Baldwin, 1964, 182 (for Griffiths' answer to this see his 1965 article).

## 2. Lucretia

### i. Livy's Lucretia

Lucretia's name first enters Livy's narrative juxtaposed to the verb *praestare*, as Collatinus boasts that she 'surpasses' all the other men's wives (1.57.7). Right from the very beginning, then, Livy marks her out as possessing exceptional characteristics. The reader is not simply to take Collatinus' word for it, because we are then taken to view Lucretia for ourselves:

...sed nocte sera deditam lanae inter lucubrantes ancillas in medio  
aedium sedentem inveniunt. muliebris certaminis laus penes Lucretiam  
fuit. (1.57.9)

She is in the very heart of her house where a proper wife should be (*in medio aedium*). Even though it is late at night, Lucretia is working her wool (*deditam lanae*) and also has her maids engaged in work, and she is thus a worthy winner of the praise for the contest of feminine virtue (*muliebris certaminis laus*).<sup>156</sup> Ogilvie has compared this scene to similar ones in New Comedy and in Tibullus, but notes that the connection of wool-working to female virtue was a very traditional ideal in both Greece and Rome. And this is not simply Livy promoting Augustus' moral

---

<sup>156</sup> Santoro L'Hoir argues that *muliebris* in Livy's history represents 'undesirable behaviour' and thus any competition of this nature 'is bound to end in disaster' (1992, 80, 83).

reforms, which as noted above came later, but rather shows him concerned about the same type of ethos.<sup>157</sup>

As Sextus is 'taken over by a wicked longing to dishonour Lucretia by violence' (*mala libido Lucretiae per vim stuprandae capit*), Livy makes it clear that it is not just her *forma* that provokes him, but her *castitas* as well (1.57.11): one commentator notes the use of *castitas* as indicating the very visible signs that show Lucretia's virtue, and that this, rather than *pudicitia* which is used by Livy later on in the narrative (see below), suggests Lucretia's purity in general.<sup>158</sup> When he enters Lucretia's bed-chamber in order to rape her, Sextus takes a sword, thinking that this will be enough to encourage her to submit to him (*ferrum in manu est; moriere, si emiseris vocem*, 1.58.2). Livy foreshadows Lucretia's suicide with *morte imminetem* ('imminent death', 1.58.3), as Lucretia at first thinks that this is what fate she will suffer at this stage. But Sextus is not successful in his first attempt: the positioning of *quidem* between *mortis* and *metu* emphasises the fact that *even* death is not enough to induce Lucretia to yield (1.58.4). The reader is therefore prepared for her brave suicide later, as Livy has presented us with a woman who does not fear the prospect of death.

However, Lucretia is forced to surrender to Sextus when he tries a different tact and threatens to kill her along with a slave, as though he had found them committing adultery (1.58.4).<sup>159</sup> Langlands notes that it is her fear of 'what people

---

<sup>157</sup> Ogilvie, 1965, 222. Augustus made sure that even his own female relatives were taught how to spin and weave (Suetonius, *Divus Augustus*, 64.2). Numerous inscriptions attest to wool-working as a feminine virtue: see e.g. no.s 39, 41, 43 and 168 in Lefkowitz & Fant, 1992.

<sup>158</sup> Langlands, 2006, 88.

<sup>159</sup> Adultery with such a low-status figure would have been seen as worse than adultery with an elite male, and the fact that Lucretia decides it is actually better to be raped highlights the great loss of honour associated with a woman found committing such an act.

might think' that finally overcomes Lucretia, and not a fear of death or the physical force of being raped. Knowing that even her *obstinata* ('resolute', 1.58.5) *pudicitia* cannot recover from it, Lucretia is forced to yield and Sextus rapes her: she sacrifices her *pudicitia* in order not to damage her *fama*. In some respects, it could be argued that Sextus has gained her consent by forcing her into making an impossible decision.<sup>160</sup>

After the event, although now grieving at what has happened to her (*maesta tanto malo*, 'mourning due to such a great disaster', 1.58.5), Lucretia acts quickly and calmly, asking her father and husband to come to her urgently. Lucretia speaks to her family, using direct speech for the first time – she is now composed enough to reassert her authority and dignity after the terrible outrage she has suffered. She tells them that although she has been raped, only her body has been violated, as her soul is innocent, *insons*, and her death will be testimony to this: the emphatic *mors testis erit* ('death will be my witness', 1.58.7) indicates that she has already decided that she must die.

Lucretia implores her family to punish Sextus. The alliteration of the letter 'd' in *sed date dexteras fidemque*, ('but devote your right hands and your faith', 1.58.7), is used by Livy to stress the force of Lucretia's plea;<sup>161</sup> this plea needs emphasising because it results in the abolition of the tyrannical monarchy and establishment of the Republic, events intrinsically linked to Lucretia's fate. Her father and husband try to persuade her that she is innocent of any wrongdoing. But to Lucretia, this no longer matters: she knows that she has not sinned, but still feels

---

<sup>160</sup> Langlands, 2006, 90-1.

<sup>161</sup> As noted by Ogilvie, 1965, 224.

that she needs to punish herself so that in the future, no unchaste woman will ever live using her as an example:

ego me etsi peccato absolvo, supplicio non libero; nec ulla deinde  
inpudica Lucretiae exemplo vivet. (1.58.10)

The very next word to appear after her final speech is *cultrum*, 'knife'. Livy gives no more preliminaries to her suicide, which is described thus:

cultrum, quem sub veste abditum habebat, eum in corde defigit  
prolapsaque in vulnus moribunda cecidit. conclamat vir paterque.  
(1.58.11-12)

In describing her death, Livy does not simply say that she stabs herself, but uses the 'forcefully rhetorical periphrasis' *in corde defigit* ('she buried it in her heart').<sup>162</sup> She then dies as she collapses onto the wound made by the knife that still sits inside her. The picture of her falling onto the ground with the knife in her breast is all the more vivid as Livy repeats the idea of her collapsing, using *prolapsa* ('slipping forward') as well as *cecidit* ('fell').

Ancient and modern commentators alike have questioned Lucretia's reasons for committing suicide. Looking at Lucretia's own words, the answer is obvious:<sup>163</sup> she had to die so that women who acted less honourably than her in the years to

---

<sup>162</sup> Ogilvie, 1965, 225.

<sup>163</sup> At least until Augustine questioned her motivation and prompted several others to do the same: see pp. 270ff.

come would not and could not use her example to excuse their disreputable behaviour.<sup>164</sup> Langlands expands on this argument by noting that Lucretia must commit suicide to prove her innocence, as it was the only way available for a woman to prove her *pudicitia*, and that she had not willingly consented to an illicit sexual act.<sup>165</sup> This was of paramount importance in a society where *stuprum* blurred the distinctions between rape and seduction, and where sex outside marriage by women was viewed 'with extreme severity'.<sup>166</sup> It was essential for married women to demonstrate their *pudicitia* to the wider community.<sup>167</sup> There is also a further dimension to Lucretia's motivation for suicide. This would be the pollution and contamination that she now carried, not just because of the rape itself but also because there was the possibility that a child had been conceived and should this child be born, it too would be defiled and would also defile the bloodline.<sup>168</sup> All these explanations seem likely when considering that Lucretia's overriding concern was for the preservation of her *pudicitia* and *fama*.<sup>169</sup>

Van Hooff's interpretation, that she committed suicide largely due to the shame she felt from her violation, is perhaps, then, too simplistic.<sup>170</sup> Certainly she was shamed by the rape, but as noted above, other considerations also played a significant role in her decision, or at least in her decision as Livy presents it; of

---

<sup>164</sup> Edwards notes the use of *supplicium* and suggests that Lucretia warns those who might consider actual offences against chastity (2007, 182); perhaps to warn them off, or they will face a similar *supplicium*? See also Langlands, 2006, 94 on her *supplicium*.

<sup>165</sup> Langlands, 2006, 94-5.

<sup>166</sup> Fantham, 1991, 270. *Pudicitia* was particularly vulnerable to *stuprum*, which Lucretia has now been subjected to (Langlands, 2006, 32, 92); Fantham sees *pudicitia* as 'a kind of negative' of *stuprum* (1991, 271).

<sup>167</sup> Langlands, 2006, 37.

<sup>168</sup> For Lucretia being tainted by rape, see Joshel, 2002, 178; for the moral pollution a child would represent, see Ogilvie, 1965, 225; Donaldson, 1982, 12; Matthes, 2000, 31.

<sup>169</sup> Santoro L'Hoir's argument that Lucretia's reaction to her rape is 'utterly negative' (1992, 82) seems to miss the point.

<sup>170</sup> Van Hooff, 1990, 50, 117.

course, Lucretia's story is portrayed by Livy in a specific way to illustrate specific points he wanted to make. Langlands lists the various symbolic and pedagogical functions of her tale, which, in whatever form it appears, 'is designed to illustrate some kind of moral value or ideological statement'.<sup>171</sup> With Livy's narrative, we can relate Lucretia's story to the moral restoration that was taking place under Augustus, which climaxed in his legislation of 18 BC (see pp. 32-4), with his law on adultery particularly affecting women more than men.<sup>172</sup> The concerns in this period with regulating sexuality, especially that of women, are demonstrated in this part of Livy's history with his emphasis on Lucretia's absolute submission to her *pudicitia*.<sup>173</sup>

There has been much discussion about the value Lucretia's dead body plays in Livy's narrative. Indeed, one scholar has remarked that 'she has far more power as a corpse than as a living woman'; another comments that her dead body 'speaks volumes'.<sup>174</sup> After her suicide, Brutus takes Lucretia's bloody knife and swears that he will ensure that Tarquinius and his family are exiled from Rome and that there shall be no more kings (1.59.1). Lucretia's corpse is then carried out to the Forum for all to see what she had suffered, and this prompted others to reveal the violence they had experienced under Sextus (1.59.3-4). Brutus makes a speech in the forum, detailing the 'abominable dishonour' (*stupro infando*, 1.59.8) Lucretia suffered, as well as countless other crimes committed under the monarchy and managed to persuade the people to abolish the monarchy and exile Sextus' family (1.59.10-12). Lucretia's body is used as a symbol of the wickedness of the kings, as

---

<sup>171</sup> Langlands, 2006, 81.

<sup>172</sup> Fantham, 1991, 290.

<sup>173</sup> See Joshel, 2002, 165-6.

<sup>174</sup> Joplin, 1990, 64; Matthes, 2000, 30.

the rape she has suffered marks a moment of great political change: Beard notes that rape is repeatedly used as a marker of such events in the state's past.<sup>175</sup> However, there is no mention of her heroic deeds or suicide at this 'funeral'.<sup>176</sup> In fact, it can be argued that she is not even really given a funeral: there are no rites bestowed on her body, and once Brutus has mentioned her in his speech, Lucretia disappears from the narrative altogether.

This disappearance of and disregard for her corpse is one of the reasons why scholars have given it so much attention. The silent, and in the end unnoticed, body of Lucretia underscores the role that women were to play in the Republic, and perhaps the type of role that Livy thought might benefit Augustan Rome if women were to conform to it.<sup>177</sup> Lucretia embodies a 'carrier of culture and cultural value', but her very silence and non-action indicates that she is not a participant or maker within these.<sup>178</sup> Furthermore, one theory suggests that for the people to be incited to act out against the tyrant, they needed the visual display of a bloody knife and corpse to spur them on. Another theory argues that the Romans would have viewed her pierced body as analogous to a wound in their own 'body politic', and thus would have been unified in their desire to heal this wound by turning against the king.<sup>179</sup>

Linked to this use of her body to rouse the crowd to abolish the monarchy is the role her death played in Livy's account of the establishment of the Roman Republic. Edwards notes that it is Lucretia's suicide that precipitates the foundation

---

<sup>175</sup> Beard, 1999, 2; see also Arieti, 1997, 209.

<sup>176</sup> As Matthes points out (2000, 37).

<sup>177</sup> See Introduction, pp. 31-3 on why women were encouraged to act decorously in this period.

<sup>178</sup> Matthes, 2000, 35.

<sup>179</sup> Joshel, 2002, 179; Joplin, 1990, 65.

of this new form of government.<sup>180</sup> Moore believes that a comparison of Livy with the account given by Dionysius of Halicarnassus, a Greek contemporary of Livy's, indicates that Livy has definitely put more emphasis on the rape and suicide of Lucretia as being the catalyst for the downfall of the monarchical regime. Looking particularly at Brutus' speech after her death, Moore sees that Lucretia is mentioned only at the end of Brutus' list and is then forgotten altogether when he concludes the speech. Dionysius presents the Roman people as being prepared for some time to rebel, and Lucretia's suicide conveniently provides a pretext for them to do so. Livy, however, puts full emphasis on her suicide as being the only and immediate cause of the people's desire to revolt.<sup>181</sup>

Lucretia's last words are also aimed at inciting her family to punish Sextus' family. She does not say explicitly that they should abolish the monarchy outright, but Livy was possibly hinting at this in her 'you will consider what is due to that man' (*vos....videritis, quid illi debeatur*, 1.58.10). In Dionysius however, there is no mention of Sextus being punished, and her final words, recorded in indirect speech, are only concerned with her having a quick death. In the account of Diodorus Siculus, also written in the first century BC, Lucretia tells her kinsmen to punish Sextus, but only with respect to his crimes against 'the laws both of hospitality and of kinship'.<sup>182</sup>

Furthermore, it is only in Livy's version that Brutus is present at her actual suicide. Diodorus does not mention him,<sup>183</sup> and he appears on the scene only

---

<sup>180</sup> Edwards, 2007, 180.

<sup>181</sup> Moore, 1993, 39-41 (Dionysius, 4.81.3-82.4, 4.83).

<sup>182</sup> Dionysius, 4.67.1; Diodorus, 10.20.3 (Loeb translation).

<sup>183</sup> Although his work at this stage only survives in fragments.

afterwards in Dionysius' portrayal of events.<sup>184</sup> As one critic has pointed out, 'to a Roman the name of Brutus could only mean the regicide',<sup>185</sup> and presumably the name of one of the first consuls of the Roman Republic as well. And Brutus was there witnessing Lucretia's death and it is he whose name appears in the chapter immediately following her suicide, he who takes the bloody knife from her body whilst the other men are too grieved to act (1.59.1). Livy has taken care to highlight Brutus' prominent part in the action directly following Lucretia's death, which would have prompted a Roman audience to associate her suicide with Brutus' crucial role in founding the Republic.

As was noted in the Introduction, gender is a fluid and changeable category. It is not surprising then that in this important tale about the foundation of the Republic, Livy's representation of Lucretia's rape and suicide embodies a complex interplay of male and female tropes.<sup>186</sup> Traditional gender roles and characteristics are distorted and as a result it is possible to view Lucretia in a variety of different ways. Several commentators have chosen to focus on the more feminine facets of her characterisation. Thus Ogilvie describes Livy's presentation of Lucretia as 'not as a flat and lifeless figure but as a Roman matron such as Romans loved to idealise'.<sup>187</sup> Yet does this not mean that she is portrayed so that she conforms to a female stereotype? Another scholar comments that the only words worthy to be

---

<sup>184</sup> Dionysius, 4.67.4.

<sup>185</sup> Ogilvie, 1965, 219.

<sup>186</sup> See e.g. Calhoon, 1997, 168, for the idea that her suicide is neither straightforwardly masculine nor feminine.

<sup>187</sup> Ogilvie, 1965, 219.

recorded for posterity were her last, viewing Lucretia's role as passive.<sup>188</sup> Edwards argues that her suicide can be read as a 'quintessentially feminine suicide'. It is clear, however (as Edwards herself points out), that her suicide 'upstages' the rape performed by Sextus, that Lucretia uses a method – the dagger – usually associated with male suicides, and that the display of Lucretia's body was as politically resonant as the display of Julius Caesar's corpse was in 44 BC.<sup>189</sup> Lucretia's suicide was a morally and socially complex act.

There is further evidence that we should read Livy's Lucretia as representing some masculine attributes. Lucretia's sacrifice of her life can be compared with Brutus' later sacrifice of his feelings when he presided over the execution of his own sons (2.5.8).<sup>190</sup> This points to a reversal in the sacrifices that the different sexes would normally have to make. A woman would be expected to sacrifice her feelings when, for example, obeying her father in his choice of marriage partner for her, whereas it would be men who would traditionally have to sacrifice their lives for the state, usually in warfare. Lucretia's suicide can also be seen as representing a moral triumph over the male characters in her story. She is not only superior to Sextus, but even to her husband Collatinus as he appears somewhat foolish, and as noted above, he could be viewed as partly responsible for her rape because of his bet with Sextus. Therefore, despite all her suffering, Lucretia can be seen as assuming some aspects of a masculine role in deciding on her suicide, and the men around her display characteristics, such as rash and thoughtless behaviour, more

---

<sup>188</sup> Calhoon, 1997, 167; see also Santoro L'Hoir who describes Lucretia as one of the women in Livy who are 'prosaic and treacly' (1992, 77). Lucretia is given much more direct speech in Ovid's version: see pp. 77ff.

<sup>189</sup> Edwards, 2007, 181-2. Joshel also links Lucretia with Caesar, commenting that Livy 'seems simply to have replaced one dead body with another' (2002, 184).

<sup>190</sup> Donaldson, 1982, 12.

suiting to women. Moreover, Collatinus' reputation and masculinity is threatened because his wife has been raped by another in his very home, and her very existence after the rape symbolises the violation he has suffered.<sup>191</sup>

This reversal of gender roles can also be extended to comparing Lucretia with the men who witness her suicide. They plead with Lucretia not to kill herself, but in doing this, put her affections and personal desires 'before her duty to Rome'. This marks an 'extraordinary' reversal of roles as the men talk of personal and private feelings, whereas Lucretia does not give in but bases her argument for dying around the benefit it will give to society as a whole.<sup>192</sup> Matthes extends this point by remarking that 'in some odd way, Lucretia's suicide has taught them [her kinsmen] how to be men', as her death prompts them into action that will abolish the kings and found the Republic. Langlands also emphasises the decisive nature of Lucretia's actions and the fact that 'one of the most significant aspects of her deed is the effect that she has upon men'.<sup>193</sup>

Hence, there is much to be said for viewing Lucretia's suicide as in many ways embodying male characteristics. However, this is not to say that there is nothing feminine about it at all. Indeed, despite the above arguments, perhaps there is something to be said for reasoning that Livy intended to focus on these feminine attributes above all. Certainly Livy wants to make a specific point about *female* chastity here – the language he uses is specifically feminine in nature: for example, Lucretia wins the competition of feminine virtues (*muliebris certaminis* 1.57.9), she has a resolute chastity in the face of Sextus' threats (*obstinatam*

---

<sup>191</sup> Joshel, 2002, 176, 179.

<sup>192</sup> Vandiver, 1999, 216.

<sup>193</sup> Matthes, 2000, 39; Langlands, 2006, 95-6.

*pudicitiam* 1.58.5) and she does not want her tale to be used as an excuse by any future unchaste woman (*ulla....inpudica* 1.58.10).<sup>194</sup> And although Livy was not afraid in his history, particularly in the early books, to present powerful female figures, he would not have wanted them to always outdo and dominate his male figures.<sup>195</sup> The fact that Lucretia killed herself in an ostensibly male and heroic manner with a sword (see pp. 22-3) might be overshadowed by the typically female cunning she displays in hiding the weapon from her family until the last moment.<sup>196</sup>

It could also be argued that there is an element of eroticism in the suicide scene, as the dagger entering Lucretia's body imitates Sextus' penetration of her body.<sup>197</sup> This could be one of the reasons why Livy chose to describe the suicide in such detail: he does not describe the rape in any detail and thus the suicide acts for both violent, penetrative acts. The rape itself can be read very much as a male action, an event where Lucretia is silent (until afterwards) and we are not privy to her thoughts but see her instead as simply a subject of violation.<sup>198</sup> It has been suggested that Lucretia has to perform violence on herself to 'cancel out' the violence done to her by another; the knife 'eradicates unchastity and kills any anomaly in female sexuality'.<sup>199</sup> Presumably the dagger would have been an appropriate means with which to do this because of its phallic shape.

---

<sup>194</sup> Indeed, Langlands argues that as Livy uses the same adjective, *obstinata*, to describe both Lucretia and her *pudicitia*, 'the virtue and the woman are one' (2006, 91).

<sup>195</sup> Milnor comments that stories such as those of Lucretia and Verginia 'mark the extent to which Livy's history is able, eager even, to admit women to its project as both historical and textual markers; their stories structure not just Roman politics and their history, but the *AUC* which records them' (2005, 157-8).

<sup>196</sup> As Langlands suggests (2006, 183 n.135).

<sup>197</sup> As Edwards points out (2007, 183).

<sup>198</sup> Joshel, 2002, 182. This is in contrast to Ovid's version where he includes details on Lucretia's experience at this point: see pp. 79-80.

<sup>199</sup> Donaldson, 1982, 25; Joshel, 2002, 173. Parker notes that with the sacrifice of Vestal Virgins 'improper violence is channelled into proper violence' (2004, 575-6).

Thus it is clear that although Lucretia can act as bravely as a Roman male in her death, she nevertheless retains much of the feminine qualities that are so essential to Livy's characterisation of her. Another point highlighting this is that her death takes place in her home. She may commit a seemingly male act, but this is within the confines of a very female context, a domestic setting. She does not die on a battlefield or in a public, political place.<sup>200</sup> Livy's presentation of Lucretia's suicide is highly complex. There are the obvious moral and political points being made. Livy uses this episode to comment on female behaviour, behaviour which he hopes his female contemporaries will emulate when they read or hear about Lucretia's glorious deed committed for the sake of her own *pudicitia*, but also for her female descendants and the greater good of Rome. Many scholars explicitly link Livy's account of women such as Lucretia with contemporary concerns about uncontrolled female sexuality and its threat to the state,<sup>201</sup> and suggest that Livy wanted to get his readers thinking about certain aspects of their sexual ethics.<sup>202</sup> This argument can be furthered to include the way Livy presents certain men, such as Sextus, acting 'out of control'. The story of Lucretia also demonstrates the price society must pay when men succumb to avarice, lust, and excessive pleasures, all traits Livy believed had contributed to the civil war and social upheaval Rome had recently faced.<sup>203</sup> But just as Brutus had liberated the people from a tyrannical monarchy, now Augustus too had rescued the state and begun to reinstate traditional values (such as *disciplina*).

---

<sup>200</sup> *Pudicitia* can be seen as a feminine virtue parallel to the masculine virtue won on the battlefield (Langlands, 2006, 76).

<sup>201</sup> See e.g. Eidinow, 2011, 102.

<sup>202</sup> Langlands, 2006, 121.

<sup>203</sup> Joshel, 2002, 169-72.; see also Milnor, 2005, 156.

There is also the idea that suicide in the present political climate, under Augustus, would not be necessary – Lucretia’s was an extreme response to a tyrannical political climate, and emulation in Augustan Rome need go only so far as her modesty and virtue. Finally, Livy also uses this episode to explore gender issues, a theme significant to his own day when women were assuming more prominent roles as patrons and owners of property, resulting in them being involved in activities outside of the home which some viewed as a potential threat to the wider community.<sup>204</sup> Tradition dictated that a woman’s action should be mainly limited to domestic and private concerns: under the new regime ‘woman was to be returned to her proper place’.<sup>205</sup> However, the status Livy assigns to Lucretia also suggests that there was some explicit recognition of the value and importance of female figures within contemporary society.

## ii. Ovid’s Lucretia

Ovid begins his narrative of Lucretia’s story in the *Fasti*, an elegiac treatment of the Roman religious calendar which Ovid was working on when he was exiled in AD 8, by saying that he now intends to discuss the *Regifugium* (2.685). Ovid follows Livy closely in terms of the sequence of events: we see the men languishing away in Ardea and a wager between them about who has the most faithful wife (2.725-32). Again, Collatinus steps in and says that the matter can easily be settled by them riding back to the city, where they see the king’s daughters-in-law drinking wine

---

<sup>204</sup> Skinner, 2005, 201-3; see above pp. 32-3.

<sup>205</sup> Joshel, 2002, 174.

and hosting banquets (2.739-40). In this version Lucretia is also weaving with her maids. The light they are working by is described as 'dim' (*exiguum*): this is a sign of Ovid presenting Lucretia as a good housewife, as she displays thriftiness (*lumen ad exiguum famulae data pensa trahebant* 2.743).<sup>206</sup>

However, here we meet the first fundamental change in Ovid's characterisation of Lucretia from Livy's version. Lucretia speaks directly to her maids, whereas Livy's Lucretia had remained silent until she had to speak to her family after the rape. Her voice is described as *tenuis*, 'soft', and so even when she is urging her maids on to complete their work faster, she does not speak in a harsh manner (*inter quas tenui sic ait illa sono* 2.744). It could be argued that this is a feature appropriate to an elegiac heroine.<sup>207</sup> Wyke suggests that because Lucretia has been transferred from a work of history to a work of elegy, Ovid must depict more of Lucretia in her home, carrying out domestic tasks and showing concern for her absent husband.<sup>208</sup> Indeed, Lucretia is portrayed as being very concerned about her husband being away at war, as demonstrated by the series of questions and exclamations she makes as the women spin (2.747-54). This also serves to highlight the flaws in Collatinus' character: his wife is at home worrying endlessly about him whilst he engages in a drunken bet with his friends and then spies on her with them in their own home! Immediately, then, there are clear differences between Ovid's and Livy's representations of the story as the genre of Ovid's work results in a markedly elegiac portrayal of Lucretia.

---

<sup>206</sup> As Lee notes (1953, 111-12).

<sup>207</sup> As Newlands suggests (1988, 37).

<sup>208</sup> Wyke, 2002, 89-90: she argues that here Lucretia 'takes on some new features that parallel and recall those of the Propertian Arethusa'.

Again, Sextus is seized with desire for Lucretia. A clever play on words, *hostis ut hospes*, shows that he intended to rape her when he returned to Collatinus' home as he disguised himself, an enemy, as a guest (2.787). Ovid proceeds to heighten our sympathies for Lucretia by saying that she is *inscia* and *infelix* (2.789-90) and he even compares her to a lamb when Sextus, who is posited as a wolf, has come to her with a sword (*sed tremit, ut quondam stabulis deprensa relictis/parva sub infesto cum iacet agna lupo* 2.799-800). Commenting on Ovid's description of the Sabine women in his *Ars Amatoria* as a lamb fleeing wolves, Hemker notes that 'these comparisons overtly challenge the validity of the men's actions by emphasising the helplessness of those hunted by an overwhelming violent predator'.<sup>209</sup> Indeed this traditional image of cruelty vs. powerlessness was also deployed by Ovid elsewhere, for example in his portrayal of Philomela in the *Metamorphoses*. Rapists, on the other hand, are commonly portrayed as wolves or eagles.<sup>210</sup> Thus this reveals much about how Ovid wanted his readers to perceive the event, highlighting Lucretia's role as defenceless victim and Sextus' as ruthless predator. Richlin elaborates on this awareness of Lucretia's vulnerability by stressing the fact that she is described as a lamb 'lying under a wolf':<sup>211</sup> to this should be added the description of the wolf as *infesto*, or 'dangerous'.

Ovid then describes Lucretia's thought process as another series of questions and answers shows the chaotic state of her mind at this point. As noted above, this expression of her experiences at this point was lacking in Livy's version. Again, it is apparent that in his rape scenes, Ovid often stopped to dwell on

---

<sup>209</sup> Hemker, 1985, 45; see also Beard, 1999, 8-9 on the Sabines in the *Ars Amatoria*.

<sup>210</sup> Richlin, 1992, 163, 166: Richlin comments that 'the simile of doves and lambs is similarly familiar, and was in fact a commonplace', evident in Horace also (1992, 167).

<sup>211</sup> Richlin, 1992, 172.

responses of his rape victims, as he did so for the Sabines in the *Ars Amatoria*, the violated virgins in the early books of the *Metamorphoses* and Rhea Silvia in the *Amores*.<sup>212</sup> The reader sees the great conflict taking place in Lucretia's mind, as she asks herself, 'What should she do? Should she fight?...Should she cry out?...Should she runaway? (*quid faciat? pugnet?.../clamet?... /effugiat?* 2.801-3). However, like Livy's Lucretia, Ovid's Lucretia also eventually yields in order to protect her *fama*: she will not have this destroyed by Sextus implicating her in an act of adultery (*succubuit fama victa puella metu* 2.810).

Ovid at this stage decided to add to his account a sense of foreboding with regard to Sextus' fate, as he speaks directly to the prince: 'why, victor, do you rejoice? This victory will destroy you' (*quid, victor, gaudes? haec te victoria perdet* 2.811). But the narrative then returns to Lucretia. She summons her father and husband to her, but does not share the courage of Livy's Lucretia in telling them what has happened to her. Her tears are poetically described as running like a *perennis aqua*, ('perpetual stream' 2.820). The repetition of *ter* emphasises the fact that she is struggling to tell her family that she has been raped, as she tries and fails three times to find the right words (*ter conata loqui ter destitit* 2.823). In this version, Lucretia lacks the firm conviction in her speech that we see in Livy.

Once she has eventually told her male relatives what Sextus has done to her, they say that they forgive her role in it (2.829). However, this is not enough for Lucretia: she denies this *venia* that they have given her (*quam....veniam vos datis, ipsa nego* 2.830). The positioning of *ipsa nego* at the end of her speech is very

---

<sup>212</sup> Hemker, 1985, 45; Arieti, 1997, 210-11.

emphatic and reinforces her absolute refusal for the matter to be resolved without further suffering to herself. Ovid portrays her suicide in as graphic a style as Livy:

nec mora, celato fixit sua pectora ferro,  
et cadit in patrios sanguinolenta pedes.  
tum quoque iam moriens ne non procumbat honeste  
respicit: haec etiam cura cadentis erat. (2.831-4)

He stresses how the *ferrum* pierces her breast and how she falls in her own blood: the juxtaposition of *pectus* and *ferrum* could only result in one outcome. The length of *sanguinolenta* attests to the bloodiness of the scene and its position between the adjective and noun emphasises the violent and disruptive nature of what has taken place. This unusual adjective, 'rare in poetry other than Ovid',<sup>213</sup> is utilised by Ovid to stress the physical bleeding-out of Lucretia as she falls, and its position highlights this further as she falls in this way at the feet of her male relatives. Richlin comments that Ovid takes care in his narrative to emphasise such physical details, noting the force of *sanguinolenta* in particular compared to Livy's use of *moribunda*. Such a physical detail is given again when Ovid portrays Brutus as snatching the sword from her half-dead body (*fixaque semianimi corpore tela rapit* 2.838).<sup>214</sup>

Ovid enhances his picture of Lucretia here by describing her modesty as she dies. The adverb *honeste* points to her attempt to die decently, and the *etiam*

---

<sup>213</sup> Knox, 1995, 214, commenting on the form *sanguinolenta* used in *Heroides* 7 (see pp. 138-9); there are only three other known uses of it in classical verse aside from in Ovid, who uses it fifteen times.

<sup>214</sup> Richlin, 1992, 172.

stresses that this is her concern even as she falls. Frazer points to the model of Polyxena in Euripides for this, as both drew their clothes around them as they died so as to preserve some modesty.<sup>215</sup> As Lucretia's body is carried out to be buried, Ovid describes her as an *animi matrona virilis*, 'a matron of manly courage' (2.847), with the juxtaposition and association of a feminine word, *matrona*, and a masculine one, *virilis*, highlighting this great compliment given to her here. Ovid ends the narrative with only two short lines on what happened to the monarchy: Tarquin was banished, consuls were established, and kings never ruled in Rome again (*Tarquinius cum prole fugit, capit annua consul/iura: dies regnis illa suprema fuit* 2.851-2). Frazer remarks that Ovid has 'cut short the momentous sequel of the tragedy', but does not consider why this might have been the case.<sup>216</sup>

Lee has argued that Ovid focused so much of his narrative on Lucretia because she provided him with an attractive figure and in describing her so sympathetically, he was in some way atoning for the 'grave offence given by his *Ars Amatoria*'. However, he also gives another reason as to why Ovid places so much emphasis on Lucretia's innocence and tragic situation. Due to the dilemma posed as to why she actually committed suicide,<sup>217</sup> it was imperative that Ovid convince his reader of her constant *pudicitia*, but also that her motivation for suicide was utterly convincing. For example, Lee points to the poet's portrayal of her as a woman who goes out little, knows hardly anything of the world and whose whole life centres

---

<sup>215</sup> Frazer, 1929, 508-9.

<sup>216</sup> Frazer, 1929, 509.

<sup>217</sup> Most notably considered by Augustine (see pp. 271-2): if Lucretia was innocent, why did she commit suicide?; but if she was guilty, why is she so lauded as an example of chastity?

around her husband as a means by which Ovid achieves this. To such a woman, rape would be devastating.<sup>218</sup>

Holleman has approached Ovid's account by considering it as evidence for the origins of the *Regifugium*. Frazer tells us that this took place on the 24<sup>th</sup> February and that the Sacrificial King fled quickly from the forum after offering a sacrifice in the Comitium; the ancients equated this with Tarquin's flight from Rome. Frazer's own theory is that this king was a type of the 'mock King of the Saturnalia' who 'ruled' during this festival in December.<sup>219</sup>

Holleman, however, has seen a reason for the connection between the story of Lucretia's suicide and the flight of the king, whoever this may have originally referred to. Sometime around 500 BC the *Hieros Gamos* rite (thought to have taken place on 24<sup>th</sup> February) was thought to constitute a rape, and thus gave a pretext for abolishing the monarchy. This was because, Holleman construes, the king had selected a woman, Lucretia, from the Luchre family (whose duty it was to supply an annual representative of the goddess Uni who performed the rite with the king) who was already married – a move going against all the rules. Thus, the *Regifugium* later came to be understood as Tarquin's flight from Rome.<sup>220</sup> Presumably, Lucretia's suicide had a significant role in why the *Hieros Gamos* was suddenly thought to be a rape around the time Holleman specifies. Ovid obviously was interested in describing ancient rites and events in the *Fasti*; however, much of Holleman's argument is conjecture. Another way of looking at this episode in the

---

<sup>218</sup> Lee, 1953, 108-9, 112.

<sup>219</sup> Frazer, 1929, 499, 501.

<sup>220</sup> Holleman, 1981, 243-4.

work is how Ovid adapted the tale and put his own subversive spin on it, as is discussed below.

Scholars have also discussed gender in relation to Ovid's presentation of Lucretia's suicide. One theory points to the fact that Lucretia makes no mention of the fact that she wants her kinsmen to punish her rapist. Instead, Ovid has 'transferred' the call for the royals' punishment from Lucretia in Livy's version to Brutus in his own (2.837-44). It would seem that the role of Lucretia's suicide is very feminine in that she does not discuss matters that were not for women to discuss, such as how men should be punished, but it takes Brutus to interpret her death and act accordingly. But yet again, there are reasons to see some more masculine attributes in Lucretia's suicide. Her death could be seen as constituting a 'virtual reversal of sex-roles', where Lucretia dies modestly as opposed to the abandonment of this virtue by her father and husband who throw themselves on her body, 'forgetting decorum' (*ecce super corpus communia damna gementes/obliti decoris virque paterque iacent* 2.835-6).<sup>221</sup>

In this sense then, Lucretia shows that she can act with more decorum than her male relatives, and yet it is she who has been violated and committed suicide. Furthermore, Ovid's *animi matrona virilis* indicates that in her final act she transcended the 'weakness of her sex'. She may be delicate and feminine before this, but her suffering has led her to an action in which she 'displays the resolution of a man' in a highly courageous deed.<sup>222</sup> It is also possible that Suetonius, in his depiction of Caesar's murder, alluded to these lines.<sup>223</sup> Is it possible that the later

---

<sup>221</sup> For both points see Newlands, 1988, 43.

<sup>222</sup> Lee, 1953, 117.

<sup>223</sup> As Frazer (1929, 509) and Donaldson (1982, 107) note.

biographer had Ovid in mind when describing the death of Caesar? If so, this would suggest that he saw in Ovid's description of Lucretia's suicide a death worthy of a very important Roman male. It is likely that Ovid's audience in general would have viewed her suicide in this way, as Lucretia has certainly conformed to one of the ideals of Roman *virtus* in choosing to kill herself with a sword (see Introduction: pp. 22-3), and taking a very dignified stance in a highly distressing situation where other members of her sex may have faltered.

### iii. Livy vs. Ovid: conflicting portrayals of Lucretia?

Although Ovid follows Livy closely for the narrative details of Lucretia's story, clearly there are several important differences in their versions (some of which have already been mentioned). One of the greatest disparities is probably the absence from Ovid of the overt political and historical significance attached to Lucretia's suicide in Livy. Although Ovid introduces the figure of Brutus at much the same point in events as Livy does, Ovid does not develop his character as fully.<sup>224</sup> And as in Diodorus and Dionysius' accounts, Brutus is not present at Lucretia's actual suicide, but suddenly 'appears' in the narrative again afterwards, with no explanation from Ovid apart from *Brutus adest* (2.837). One scholar comments that Livy's Lucretia 'relishes' an audience at her death so that she can compel her family to take vengeance for her, but that Ovid's Lucretia has no such intention.<sup>225</sup>

---

<sup>224</sup> As Fox points out (1996, 211).

<sup>225</sup> Newlands, 1988, 40.

Another interpretation is to view Ovid as providing us with something of a parody of Livy's presentation of Lucretia as a firm supporter in punishing the monarchy. After Brutus swears over her body to punish the royal family, Ovid remarks that 'in response to these words, even lying down, she moved her lifeless eyes and seemed with the stirring of her hair to give assent to his speech'; the use of *probare* indicating her affirmation of Brutus' oath (*illa iacens ad verba oculos sine lumine movit/visaue concussa dicta probare coma* 2.845-6). Either Ovid is romantically suggesting that her dead body was seen to agree with Brutus, or he distorts Lucretia's fervent desire to punish the king as presented in Livy. The hyperbole prevalent in this description suggests that Ovid is being subversive by 'playing around' with the moral paradigm prompted by Livy in his account:<sup>226</sup> such a distinctive characterisation was typical of Ovidian elegy, a genre very different to that of Livy's history. This subversive nature would be echoed by Horace and Propertius in their presentations of Cleopatra's suicide, as is discussed below.

It could also be argued that there is not the same moralistic tone in Ovid's account. Certainly, there is no mention by Ovid's Lucretia of her having to commit suicide so that future promiscuous women cannot use her case as an example to hide their own wicked behaviour. Moreover, erotic elements were noted above in the suicide of Livy's Lucretia, but Fox points to erotic elements throughout the whole narrative in Ovid's version. He argues that the presentation of Lucretia weaving and speaking to her maids, an act 'hidden' in Livy, creates a 'voyeuristic picture' in which even the reader is complicit. Ovid creates a picture of a woman very much like those in his *Heroides*. Lucretia's modesty is a virtue, but here it

---

<sup>226</sup> Arieti notes that this detail is a 'touch worthy of a Verdi opera' (1997, 213).

'becomes the focus of desire', and even Lucretia's unbound hair further eroticises the picture Ovid paints for his reader.<sup>227</sup>

Fox argues that Ovid wanted his audience to identify with the desires of the early Romans, and not their virtues as in Livy. Ovid 'modernised' the use of Lucretia's story in Livy, where the past does not provide a model for good behaviour, but shows instead that the same immoralities that took place in Ovid's own day were also current then.<sup>228</sup> Fox makes a persuasive argument; but this is not to say that any form of moral point is absent. It could be argued that in Ovid's portrayal of Lucretia's physical beauty he is emphasising the virtue of the women of Lucretia's day. Features such as her pale colour (*niveus color* 2.763) and yellow hair (*flavi capilli* 2.763) would have been envied by Ovid's female contemporaries as they were highly idealised physical characteristics. However, Lucretia does not use cosmetics to enhance her features, or bother with her hair (2.772), and thus she represents the 'old Roman ideal of *simplicitas*'.<sup>229</sup> In this sense, Ovid could be viewed as stressing a moral paradigm like Livy, as she instructs the women of his own day on how to conduct themselves. On the other hand, this could be Ovid parodying traditional morals and ideals by exaggerating Lucretia's *simplicitas* to an even greater extent than Livy.

The reasons for the differences between Livy and Ovid's accounts must lie in the genre of their works, history vs. elegy, and their aims in representing Lucretia's story. By recalling the rape in an account rife with elements more at home in erotic elegy, Ovid undermines Livy's version where the rape is politically symbolic. The

---

<sup>227</sup> Fox, 1996, 213-14. Richlin notes that Lucretia 'ends as she began, as object of the gaze' (1992, 172).

<sup>228</sup> Fox, 1996, 217.

<sup>229</sup> Lee, 1953, 114.

eroticism of Ovid's genre results in diminished historical significance.<sup>230</sup> However, as Beard has pointed out, 'Roman men talked rape constantly' and it was 'one of its [Roman rape's] jobs....to debate its own terms and definitions'.<sup>231</sup> Ovid may not be making 'strong antirape' statements in his rape scenes<sup>232</sup> but there is probably something to be said for the argument that 'the nature of Ovid's rapes surely bears on the lives of the women who heard his poems and live(d) in the sign system that produced the canon'.<sup>233</sup> As noted above, the issue of rape/seduction was particularly prominent in this period when attempts were being made to tighten the control on female sexuality, and Augustus' legislation would have been passed by the time the *Fasti* was being written. Ovid was engaging with contemporary concerns by exploring the subject through mythical figures.

At the same time, it is surely to be expected that there is less historical and political significance to Ovid's version. Ovid was not writing a history, nor indeed was he as concerned as Livy with the moralistic lessons that events from history could impart to a contemporary audience. And, in her suicide, Ovid's Lucretia does conform to the type of 'stern Roman matrona' portrayed in Livy.<sup>234</sup> Thus we may see that in her suicide at least, both writers display Lucretia as representing similar characteristics. As Fox has stressed, the two works do not necessarily signify a 'clear divide' between 'state ideology, an "Augustan discourse" and the poetic discourse of the *Fasti*'.<sup>235</sup> The accounts overall may suggest disparities, but to both, Lucretia's

---

<sup>230</sup> Fox, 1996, 212; 216.

<sup>231</sup> Beard, 1999, 10.

<sup>232</sup> As Richlin suggests Hemker argues in his 1985 article (1992, 168).

<sup>233</sup> Richlin, 1992, 159.

<sup>234</sup> As Newlands remarks (1988, 36).

<sup>235</sup> Fox, 1996, 227. See also Chaplin (2000, 192-6) on the complex relationship between Livy's and Augustus' ideals and goals.

suicide at least could be viewed as an ideal, virtuous act and her principles and virtue as worthy of emulation and deserving of record. However, the differences apparent between the two versions do indicate that Lucretia's suicide, indeed any act of female suicide, was a controversial and complex subject, open to multiple interpretations, and this unfixed and adaptable act provided these writers with a scenario to be utilised and exploited in a variety of ways.<sup>236</sup>

### 3. Cleopatra

#### i. Vergil's Cleopatra

In the *Aeneid*, written during the last ten years of the poet's life (20s BC), Vergil does not describe Cleopatra or her suicide in any detail. However, she is referred to in his Actium motif contained within the ekphrasis on the shield given to Aeneas (*Aeneid*, 8.626-728). Augustus and Agrippa are mentioned first, praised for their part in the battle, and even Antony is not described in too negative a light (8.678-88). But, Cleopatra is introduced, unnamed, as his Egyptian wife, and this is in conjunction with *nefas* (*sequiturque (nefas) Aegyptia coniunx* 8.688).<sup>237</sup> As will become apparent below, Cleopatra is nowhere named in Roman poetry. Wyke argues that this is because she is so notorious that identification is not necessary: certainly her name would have been known by all in the years immediately after her suicide when Vergil wrote his epic. Furthermore, denying Cleopatra her name

---

<sup>236</sup> Beard comments that the rape of the Sabine women was a story 'invented and reinvented by Roman writers' (1999, 2).

sets her apart from her dynasty and ancestors, making her the one disgrace in a long succession of illustrious monarchs.<sup>238</sup>

Vergil then goes on to describe the battle poetically and says that Cleopatra 'in the midst summons her troops with their native rattles' and does not 'even now look back at the twin snakes at the rear':

regina in mediis patrio vocat agmina sistro,  
necdum etiam geminos a tergo respicit anguis. (8.696-7)

This is presumably a foreshadowing of her death by snakebite. Does this suggest that her efforts were doomed from the start, as the cause of her death was already present at the time of the battle? One might argue that Cleopatra is shown as being short-sighted in that she pays no heed to the fact that her actions may lead to her own destruction and eventual death.

Vergil's representation of Cleopatra's death demonstrates the complex approaches taken to Cleopatra at this time. One commentator has denied that she even has a physical presence in the poem, and that as she appears on a shield within a poetic ekphrasis, Cleopatra's body is designed 'for the voyeuristic pleasure of her Roman spectators'.<sup>239</sup> Certainly in depriving Cleopatra of a flesh-and-blood appearance and denying her her royal background, it could be argued that Vergil in fact best reflects the official version of events given at the time, both before and after Actium, where Cleopatra was repeatedly depicted as the conquered enemy of

---

<sup>237</sup> As Wyke points out, she is really not a wife as 'an *Aegyptia coniunx* is no real *coniunx* at all' in a Roman's mind (2002, 206).

<sup>238</sup> Wyke, 2002, 201-6.

<sup>239</sup> Wyke, 2002, 207-8.

Rome. This is not to say that there is no ambiguity in Vergil's account (for more on this, see pp. 92-3, 113-15).<sup>240</sup> Yet it is important to note that it is likely that the *Aeneid* came first, followed by Horace 1.37 and then Propertius 3.11, and that the two later poets had Vergil in mind, but took his portrait of Cleopatra in rather different directions.<sup>241</sup> Thus their descriptions of Cleopatra's death were most likely influenced by Vergil as well as by other knowledge they may have had from other sources.

## ii. Vergil's Dido and Cleopatra

Cleopatra's fate is linked closely with that of Dido. Vergil had described the suicide of the Carthaginian queen at the end of book 4 of the *Aeneid*. Once Aeneas has left her to sail on to Italy, Dido determines on death and builds a large pyre, although she actually kills herself with a sword left behind by Aeneas (4.663ff.).<sup>242</sup> In addition to the fact that both commit suicide, the two queens have much in common: they are both rulers of foreign countries, they have both had to deal with threats to their rule, and both became involved with a 'Roman' figure.<sup>243</sup> Yet Vergil also links the women verbally: both are 'pale at the coming of death' (*pallida morte futura* 4.644; *pallentem morte futura* 8.709).<sup>244</sup> Furthermore, as Cleopatra's illicit marriage would not have been recognised by Roman law, Dido's union with Aeneas

---

<sup>240</sup> As Wyke points out (2002, 221-2).

<sup>241</sup> Tronson, 1998, 49; 45; 47.

<sup>242</sup> Hill maintains that for Dido in the epic, suicide is almost a character trait, with *Dido moritura* appearing four times (2004, 106).

<sup>243</sup> The description of Dido's palace in book 1 (e.g. at 637-42, 697-700, 726-30) can also be compared to the luxuries often associated with Cleopatra's kingdom.

<sup>244</sup> As noted by Bertman, 2000, 396.

would also have been viewed as illegitimate, and hence both women assume, at least in a Roman mind, the status of a mistress, which in the literary traditions of the time was a metaphor for 'danger and social disruption'.<sup>245</sup>

However, one idea put forward suggests that as well as representing Cleopatra in her final moments, Dido also 'becomes' Antony, in order to allow Aeneas to become the moral prototype of Augustus. And this is why he has her use a sword to commit suicide, as this is Antony's chosen method. This was part of Vergil's attempt to help his audience come to terms with events leading up to Actium.<sup>246</sup> Was Vergil's complex portrayal of Cleopatra therefore an effort on his part to persuade his audience of the complexity of Dido's character, and through her Aeneas' character? Both women may be described at times as embodying similar destructive qualities, but it has often been noted that Vergil did really intend to evoke some pity for Dido in his depiction of her suicide. Another possibility is that perhaps Vergil was wary of directly evoking any sympathy for Cleopatra, and so instead used the figure of Dido to suggest subtly that Cleopatra should not be viewed in a straightforwardly critical manner.

The verbal allusions above link both the women specifically at the points of their death: emphasising Cleopatra's suicide, then, was one way the poet could demonstrate his response to the dogmatic morals and values of contemporary politics and propaganda. The suicide act could be understood by a Roman audience as redemptive for even the most un-Roman, immoral of figures: suicide was seen as the normal 'way out' for those condemned or defeated in battle and was usually

---

<sup>245</sup> Wyke, 2002, 41.

<sup>246</sup> Bertman, 2000, 397; 398.

linked with preserving honour rather than being due to a fear of execution/capture. Moreover, in most cases committing suicide did succeed in safeguarding one's endangered honour and it is probably correct to argue that 'there is a measure of redemption in any brave death'.<sup>247</sup>

### iii. Horace's Cleopatra

Horace wrote his Cleopatra ode (*Carmina*, 1.37) sometime between 30 and 23 BC, thus not long after Cleopatra had committed suicide in 30. The poem begins in the style of a celebration of Cleopatra's defeat and death. The repetition of *nunc* emphasises the fact that *now* is a good time to be a Roman and to rejoice at Augustus' victory (*nunc est bibendum, nunc pede libero/pulsanda tellus, nunc Saliaribus/ornare pulvinar deorum/tempus erat dapibus, sodales* 1.37.1-4). Again, Cleopatra is not named but her first appearance is marked by *regina* (1.37.7).<sup>248</sup> This is juxtaposed to *dementis ruinas*, ('wild destruction'), and although this refers to her plans for the Capitol, the reader is also drawn to associate them with Cleopatra herself (*dum Capitolio/regina dementis ruinas/funus et imperio parabat* 1.37.6-8). Her companions are described in highly derogatory terms: Horace describes them as *turpis*, 'indecent' or 'disgusting' (1.37.9). This does not reflect well on their queen, who is also *impotens* and a drunk (*quidlibet impotens/sperare fortunaque dulci/ebria* 1.37.10-12).

---

<sup>247</sup> Hill, 2004, 197-8.; Edwards, 2007, 122 (with examples in evidence of this; see also 32).

<sup>248</sup> See pp. 89-90 on this.

Cleopatra is then portrayed as being in a *furor* and this image of her is elaborated by Horace's portrayal of her frenzied, *lymphata* mind (*sed minuit furorem/...mentemque lymphatam Mareotico* 1.37.12-14). Again, she is not named but Horace keeps her clear in our minds with the reference to the wine being Mareotic.<sup>249</sup> She is chased by Augustus, who intended to put 'that deadly monster in chains' (*catenis/fatale monstrum* 1.37.20-1).<sup>250</sup> However, there is then a marked change in Horace's characterisation of Cleopatra. She is now determined to die with some dignity still intact, and Horace even remarks that she is not scared, as a woman should be, of the sword (*quae generosius/perire quaerens nec muliebriter/expavit ensem* 1.37.21-3). The adjective *muliebriter* immediately preceded by *nec* suggests a playing around with gender roles here: Cleopatra has transcended her sex by her refusal to be afraid of death, and more specifically, the traditionally male death of the sword.<sup>251</sup> She is now strong in her mind and faces death both calmly, indicated by the adjective *serenus*, and bravely, as she is *fortis* (*ausa et iacentem visere regiam/vultu sereno, fortis....*1.37.25-6). The *serenus* in particular provides a strong contrast with her earlier frenzied state.

Horace describes the actual suicide, graphically depicted here as by snakebites:

....et asperas

tractare serpentes, ut atrum

corpore combiberet venenum,

---

<sup>249</sup> A region around Lake Mareotis in Egypt (Rudd, 2004, 93 n.77); alternatively, it could also be taken as a synonym for Alexandria itself due to its proximity to the capital.

<sup>250</sup> For the various interpretations of *fatale monstrum*, see pp. 96-8.

<sup>251</sup> Wyke comments that this is the moment when Cleopatra is most dignified (2002, 240).

deliberata morte ferocior. (1.37.26-9)

It is not enough that Cleopatra is simply bitten by the snakes – Horace also has her body ‘drink up their black poison’. The deadly nature of the venom is highlighted by *atrum*,<sup>252</sup> and the alliteration of *corpore combiberet* and assonance of ‘b’ in *combiberet* stress the damage it is doing to her body that is literally soaking the poison up. The next line also delivers a striking picture of Cleopatra’s defiance as she dies: not only is she determined to die, but she approaches death in an almost fierce manner (1.37.29). Horace’s final depiction of her is as a proud female who has escaped the triumph that her victor had intended for her, as she ends the poem as not a humble woman (*non humilis mulier* 1.37.32).

Most scholars who have commented on this ode have noticed the critical treatment of Cleopatra in the first half, before Horace goes on to offer a more complimentary view of her. Thus they note the use of the oxymoron *Capitolio* and *regina* as a means by which Horace provides a slur on Cleopatra’s character. The idea of a *rex* would have been insufferable to a Roman mind, a *regina* even more so.<sup>253</sup> Furthermore, it has also been pointed out that Horace uses terms familiar from ancient invective in this portrayal of Cleopatra. Nisbet and Hubbard see *dementis* as indicative of the political invective apparent in the works of Cicero, Johnson the drinking cliché as a standard formula known in propaganda of the times.<sup>254</sup>

---

<sup>252</sup> This can mean both black and deadly (Nisbet & Hubbard, 1970, 419).

<sup>253</sup> Nisbet & Hubbard, 1970, 413; Mader, 1989, 185.

<sup>254</sup> Nisbet & Hubbard, 1970, 413; Johnson, 1967, 388.

And yet there is a clear change in Horace's perception of Cleopatra. The similes, where Cleopatra is compared to a dove and then a hare, Augustus a hawk and a hunter, are often cited as the start of this change (*Caesar ab Italia volantem/remis adurgens, accipiter velut/mollis columbas aut leporem citus/venator in campis nivalis/Haemoniae* 1.37.16-20): as Wyke notes, Augustus could be seen as a 'cruel Roman hunter' pursuing Cleopatra, his 'defenceless quarry'.<sup>255</sup> One theory argues that these similes not only evoke pathos for Cleopatra's plight, but that the descriptions used were chosen by Horace for a specific reason. The dove and hare in particular had associations with the Ptolemies, and so the change in Cleopatra is viewed as connected to her ancestors.<sup>256</sup> Another critic suggests that the comparison of Augustus with a hawk could be intended to reflect badly on his character.<sup>257</sup> They also conjecture that Horace's description of Cleopatra as *mollis* (1.37.18), which they translate as 'weak' in comparison to Augustus, is not necessarily that derogative as this weakness is only momentary before Cleopatra regains her strength;<sup>258</sup> in fact, *mollitia* may not even be a vice in a female, as it is often used to denote effeminacy in males.<sup>259</sup>

However, the phrase which has prompted the most discussion on this poem is the *fatale monstrum* of line 21:

....daret ut catenis

fatale monstrum; quae generosius

---

<sup>255</sup> Wyke, 2002, 221.

<sup>256</sup> DeForest, 1988-9, 167, 169.

<sup>257</sup> Compare this with Sextus being likened to a wolf pursuing Lucretia as a lamb: p. 79.

<sup>258</sup> Mench, 1972, 316-18.

<sup>259</sup> See e.g. Wyke, 2002, 175.

perire quaerens nec muliebriter

expavit ensem (1.37.20-3).

Other scholars have argued that this is the decisive point in the change in Horace's presentation of Cleopatra, and not the similes before it.<sup>260</sup> One believes that Horace gives Augustus' viewpoint here, and sees Cleopatra as 'a monstrous thing to be dragged in triumph through the Roman streets'. A second argues that it could be a reference to Cleopatra being the offspring of an incestuous union.<sup>261</sup> However, others have made a case for a more complex reading of the term. Luce's article offers the most detailed argument. He has noticed that the appearances of *monstrum* elsewhere in Horace do not occur in especially abusive contexts. He also points out that Horace was following Cicero, in his portrayal of Catiline, in using the term to emphasise the complexities in Cleopatra's character and life.

Luce concludes that although in many ways Cleopatra did represent something of a horror to the Romans, for example because of her status as a queen, Horace meant the phrase to carry a deeper meaning.<sup>262</sup> Indeed, many have pointed out that it might also refer to some sort of portent and that Cleopatra embodies something ominous and in many ways inhuman.<sup>263</sup> This interpretation seems more likely than the more negative ones given above, especially in light of Horace's portrayal of Cleopatra after this. In fact, the phrase itself could reflect the ambiguity of the poem and its central place in Horace's almost opposite depictions

---

<sup>260</sup> See Wyke, 2002, 221 n.83 for all the references.

<sup>261</sup> Otis, 1968, 51; Nisbet & Hubbard, 1970, 417.

<sup>262</sup> Luce, 1963, 252-3, 257.

<sup>263</sup> See e.g. Mench, 1972, 320-1; DeForest, 1988-9, 173; Mader, 1989, 186.

of her.<sup>264</sup> Therefore it can be argued that the change does in fact take place with the *fatale monstrum*, and not before. However, what is more important here is that there is a change in Horace's characterisation of Cleopatra, and after discussing how this is apparent, we will then consider why Horace might have introduced this.

One might argue that the *quae* following *fatale monstrum* is indicative of the fact that we now witness events from Cleopatra's viewpoint, due to the feminine gender of this relative pronoun.<sup>265</sup> From then on, Horace engages in what can only be described as a panegyric of Cleopatra, whereas before, it seemed as though the poem was a paean for Augustus.<sup>266</sup> The use of *generosius*, *sereno*, *fortis*, *deliberata*, and *non humilis* all attest to Cleopatra's nobility, and Wyke points out that Horace uses *vultu sereno* to show Cleopatra 'with calm resolution' eluding Augustus in death, a touch that adds tragedy and pathos to her suicide.<sup>267</sup> Commager has even suggested that Cleopatra's suicide displays 'Stoic fortitude'.<sup>268</sup> Not only does Cleopatra die with dignity, but there is a good possibility that a Roman audience would even have found something to approve of in her suicide, and this is because Horace has taken care to characterise her more respectable qualities.<sup>269</sup> Due to the ambivalent nature of the act, and the ambivalent nature of Cleopatra's character in this poem, suicide here can be viewed as redemptive, even for a figure like Cleopatra.

However, some scholars have seen a less favourable representation of Cleopatra in the latter stages of the poem. One interpretation is to highlight the

---

<sup>264</sup> Luce has called it the 'pivot' on which Horace goes from censure to panegyric (1963, 251).

<sup>265</sup> As Otis suggests (1968, 52).

<sup>266</sup> See e.g. Commager, 1958, 48; Mench, 1972, 319.

<sup>267</sup> Wyke, 2002, 242.

<sup>268</sup> Commager, 1958, 49.

<sup>269</sup> See above pp. 92-3 on how her suicide might have been viewed as redemptive, and why.

ambiguity in the word *generosius*; another is to take this argument further and suggest that all it means is that Cleopatra wanted a nobler end than execution, which would have come at the end of the triumph.<sup>270</sup> But would this not have been a good thing in a Roman's eyes? Suicide was often seen as preferable to execution<sup>271</sup> and thus Cleopatra's decision to commit suicide should not be downplayed simply as a desire to avoid an enemy's death, but seen also in light of its more heroic form of death. Furthermore, Nisbet and Hubbard's comment that 'the poem of triumph suitably ends with this Roman word (*triumpho*)' seems to miss an important point.<sup>272</sup> It could be conjectured that the wording of this line actually suggests that Cleopatra was celebrating a 'triumph' too, as she 'triumphed' by her death over Augustus' attempts to flaunt her in his military triumph.<sup>273</sup> Another possibility is to view the *invidens* as emphasising the fact that she will not face Augustus' *superbus* triumph. Moreover, the separation of *triumpho* from the rest of the phrase by *non humilis mulier* stresses the fact that Cleopatra's pride will 'get in the way' of Augustus's planned triumph for her. The very fact that there are multiple interpretations of this poem demonstrates the capacity of suicide narratives to prompt complex debates about a variety of moral and ethical issues related to the act.

Finally, a favourable interpretation of the Cleopatra of the later stages in Horace's poem can be promoted by a comparison with Horace's reference to her elsewhere. *Epodi* 9 was most likely written either during or immediately after

---

<sup>270</sup> Mench, 1972, 322; Nisbet & Hubbard, 1970, 417.

<sup>271</sup> See p. 232 for evidence of this and how the threat of the *carcer* was often enough to drive people to suicide.

<sup>272</sup> Nisbet & Hubbard, 1970, 420.

<sup>273</sup> As Commager does suggest (1958, 51).

Actium and offers a very different view of Cleopatra. Here she is not even a *regina* but simply a *femina* who has enslaved Antony (a critical statement about his masculinity, if he can be enslaved by a mere woman), and her followers are not the plain *viri* of 1.37 but are specifically described as eunuchs, *spadones* (*Romanus, eheu – posteri negabitis –/emancipatus feminae/fert vallum et arma miles et spadonibus/servire rugosis potest,/interque signa turpe militaria sol/aspicit conopium* 9.11-4).<sup>274</sup> Otis has also noticed the exotic symbolism tied up in the *conopium*, a very un-Roman object.<sup>275</sup> Therefore, it could be reasoned that Cleopatra's suicide changed Horace's perception of her and that this is reflected in the ode written at a later date.<sup>276</sup> This is a valid point and suggests that there were possibly some Romans who approved of Cleopatra's suicide, despite her past follies. The stark differences in Horace's representation of Cleopatra in poems of different times do seem to attest to this. On the other hand, Wyke argues that even in *Epodi* 9 there is some ambiguity as the poem opens 'optimistically but ends with the enemy not yet captured', with the narrator afraid of the renewal of civil war. Even here, then, there is 'potential political ambivalence'.<sup>277</sup>

So why does *Carmen* 1.37 present the reader with such conflicting portrayals of Cleopatra? Was Horace challenging the official line of contemporary propaganda that sought to censure Cleopatra's character and death? To some extent, the answer is yes; Mader maintains that this is true for Horace's

---

<sup>274</sup> Wyke comments that this is an example of a Roman male in a dangerous position as he has lost his *libertas* to an erotic female despot (2002, 214).

<sup>275</sup> Otis, 1968, 59.

<sup>276</sup> As Commager argues (1958, 52-3).

<sup>277</sup> Wyke, 2002, 222.

characterisation of Cleopatra's moral triumph over Augustus.<sup>278</sup> However, it can also be argued that what Horace presents us with is simply a 'middle line', in that Horace offers two sides to Cleopatra in order to let his audience make up their own minds on her.<sup>279</sup> Or, it could be that Horace reflects the fact that not everyone felt the same about Actium and Cleopatra's death. Whether Horace too belonged in this 'different' camp is uncertain, but it is clear that he goes some way towards an indictment of the official propaganda.<sup>280</sup> Just as Ovid had subverted the picture of Lucretia's suicide as presented by Livy, Cleopatra's suicide was an expedient means by which Horace could achieve his subversive stance – this also corresponded well with the provocative nature of his *Carmina* as a whole. He may have utterly condemned her earlier actions, but a suicide could redeem even the most immoral of characters. Horace chose to present her death in line with the official version of death by snakebite, but he does this in such a way as to dignify Cleopatra's suicide.

#### iv. Propertius' Cleopatra

Propertius' Cleopatra poem (*Elegiae*, 3.11) is concerned with female power; indeed, although Cleopatra features in it significantly, she is not the only example of a powerful female that figures here. The tone of the piece is apparent right from the very start, where Propertius asks, 'why be amazed, if a woman manoeuvres my life, and drags away a man enslaved to her own law?' (*quid mirare, meam si versat femina vitam/et trahit addictum sub sua iura virum?* 3.11.1-2). He also lists a series

---

<sup>278</sup> Mader, 1989, 187-8.

<sup>279</sup> Mench, 1972, 323.

<sup>280</sup> Johnson, 1967, 397; 399.

of dominant females from Greek mythology: Medea, Penthesilea, Omphale and Semiramis (3.11.9-26). This builds up the poem to the entrance of Cleopatra at line 29, although as in Vergil and Horace, she is not named, in contrast to the other women who come before her. Cleopatra is immediately characterised as a repulsive figure, who has been a source of shame, *opprobrium*, to Rome and has even fornicated with her slaves (*quid, modo quae nostris opprobria nexerit armis,/et, famulos inter femina trita suos* 3.11.29-30).

Her union with Antony, who is also unnamed, is described as *obscenus* (3.11.31), presumably because it was not regarded in Rome as a legal marriage due to Cleopatra's Egyptian nationality, and there was the additional factor that Antony already had a wife, Augustus's sister Octavia.<sup>281</sup> Propertius then continues his tirade against Cleopatra through his damnation of her country. Alexandria is criminal, *noxia*, and he laments the death of Pompey in Egypt (*noxia Alexandria.../et totiens nostro Memphi cruenta malo,/tris ubi Pompeio detraxit harena triumphos* 3.11.33-5). Propertius' most pejorative line comes in the form of *incesti meretrix regina Canopi* (3.11.39). This is the only point at which Propertius chooses to describe Cleopatra having the status she deserves, as queen, but the juxtaposition of *regina* with *meretrix* negates any noble connotations her royal title may have carried. This phrase framed by the *incesti...Canopi* stresses this negative characterisation of Cleopatra even further.

Propertius then proceeds to recall specifically Egyptian items in order to emphasise the foreignness of Cleopatra. There appears a reference to the Egyptian god Anubis (3.11.41), the Egyptian instrument, a *sistrum* (3.11.43), and the *conopia*,

---

<sup>281</sup> See Richardson, 1977, 362; Wyke, 2002, 206.

mosquito-nets, an Egyptian invention (3.11.45).<sup>282</sup> Before moving on to address Cleopatra directly, Propertius adds in praise of Augustus, who has saved Rome from all this un-Romanness and is to be thanked by a long life (*cane, Roma, triumphum/et longum Augusto salva precare diem!* 3.11.49-50). But then he returns to Cleopatra, and delivers another damning line on how in the end, despite all her attempts, it was Cleopatra who had to accept Roman restraints: *accepere tuae Romula vincla manus* (3.11.52). The *Romula vincla* situated within Cleopatra's hands (*tuae....manus*) symbolises that she will no longer pose a threat to Rome as she is now under her dominion.

Propertius also uses graphic detail in describing Cleopatra's suicide:

*brachia spectasti sacris admorsa colubris,  
et trahere occultum membra soporis iter.* (3.11.53-4)

Again, it is not enough that Cleopatra dies by snakebite, but she has to watch as her arms are bitten, before enduring the poison running through her body. It is actually the 'sacred asps' who provide the means by which she dies, and Cleopatra just has to wait for them to do their work: Propertius does not even use a word for poison, but *soporis* stands for Cleopatra drifting off to sleep, hardly a painful and noble end.<sup>283</sup>

Then, Propertius enhances the distinction of Augustus by putting into Cleopatra's mouth the words, 'O Rome, I was not as awe-inspiring as your so great

---

<sup>282</sup>Camps, 1966, 108; Richardson, 1977, 363-4 (the latter were considered effeminate by the Romans).

<sup>283</sup>Mader describes it as a 'gradual drift into oblivion' (1989, 199).

fellow-citizen! (*'non hoc, Roma, fui tanto tibi cive verenda!*' 3.11.55).<sup>284</sup> And Cleopatra has supposedly said this even in a very drunken state (*dixit et assiduo lingua sepulta mero* 3.11.56). Thus even as she dies Cleopatra cannot escape her victor but is forced to recognise his pre-eminence. The rest of the poem Propertius dedicates to lauding Augustus as he has proved himself as a hero like those from legend, with the last lines advising that Augustus should not be forgotten (3.11.71-2).

In discussing this poem, scholars have often looked to the mythological women listed before Cleopatra's entrance to establish links between her and them. One theory argues that although Penthesilea and Omphale were known for their erotic powers, the other two figures, Medea and Semiramis, are not presented in the poem as being particularly dominant erotically. Propertius presents his audience with characters who exhibit female power more generally, both sexual and political, and in relation to Medea, magical. Cleopatra then continues this list of exempla, and thus Propertius meant us to view her as being a generally powerful female. After discussing figures from myth and more 'ancient' history, Cleopatra represents a more recent historical figure for Propertius to explore.<sup>285</sup> Another commentator has expanded on this argument and maintained that the four women preceding Cleopatra are a priamel, acting as a foil in a preamble to the figure that for Propertius represents the most interest.<sup>286</sup>

---

<sup>284</sup> Richardson argues that Propertius did intend these to be Cleopatra's words, and is quite right to say that Camps' interpretation of them as Propertius' own does not seem appropriate, particularly as Propertius has not referred to himself drinking excessively (1977, 366; Camps, 1966, 109).

<sup>285</sup> Baker, 1976, 58; 59.

<sup>286</sup> Mader, 1989, 188. A priamel is a literary device consisting of a list of alternatives that act as a foil to the real subject of the literary work.

One critic has noted that Propertius specifically chose women who 'have proved themselves the equals or superiors of men'.<sup>287</sup> So does Propertius mean to show us that Cleopatra has shown herself equal to Augustus? The rest of the poem does not suggest this. Indeed, Propertius' attitude to the four women is not disparaging, but this all changes once Cleopatra enters the scene and submission to a woman is now condemned.<sup>288</sup> Hence it could be that Propertius may be read as claiming that Cleopatra is worse even than Medea, who had magical powers and killed her own children; than Omphale who humiliated a man such as Heracles. Their powers, and abuse of them, were nothing in comparison with Cleopatra's.

Furthermore, it could also be argued that Semiramis was picked, and placed immediately before Cleopatra, due to the nature of her death. The first three did not commit suicide, but if Hyginus is to be believed, Semiramis, the founder of Babylon, killed herself because her horse had died.<sup>289</sup> To a reader aware of this tale, this hardly sets a favourable precedent for Cleopatra's suicide that figures later in the poem. On the other hand, if we are to view Cleopatra's death as in some ways redemptive – as the only last-ditch response to the political situation she had become entangled in – it could also be argued that she is in fact not as evil or immoral as the other female figures. The ambivalent and negotiable elements of the suicide act gave her some redemption at least, a detail missing from the stories of the other women discussed in the poem.

The genre of Propertius' work is also important when analysing how Cleopatra is portrayed. Propertius' elegiac love poetry was very much concerned

---

<sup>287</sup> Richardson, 1977, 362.

<sup>288</sup> As Mader notes (1989, 189).

<sup>289</sup> Hyginus, *Fabulae*, 243.8.

with the figure of the mistress, with Cynthia dominating in the earlier books, but book 3 embraces other female figures as well.<sup>290</sup> Throughout Propertius' poetry, the male narrator/poet/lover is often feminised and perceived as a slave to his mistress: with the Cleopatra poem specifically, it could be argued that the narrator is Antony. Antony has many of the characteristics of the poetic lover – he is romantic, reckless, submissive to a woman who demeans him – and in 3.11, if he is the narrator, he is still enthralled by Cleopatra even as she dies, still captivated by her appearance and power.<sup>291</sup> Therefore, this poem could be viewed as being much more about the destructive relationship between Antony and Cleopatra than the political one between Augustus and Cleopatra; this may be interpreted as a way in which Propertius parallels Cleopatra's role as political enemy to that of dangerous mistress who can captivate men and render them submissive.

Propertius arguably conforms more closely to official propaganda of the period than Horace. It is clear that from line 49 onwards, Propertius' presentation of Cleopatra is recalling at least in part some sort of picture or effigy Propertius himself saw carried in Augustus' triumph of 29 BC – Wyke links this idea of Propertius recalling a Roman simulacrum in describing Cleopatra to her similar none flesh-and-blood appearance in the *Aeneid* and thus downgrading her portrayal to a work of art designed to be aesthetically pleasing to Roman viewers.<sup>292</sup> The poem itself may have been written some time after the event, perhaps in 24 BC,<sup>293</sup> but Grant stresses that Propertius also expresses the 'verbal onslaught' against

---

<sup>290</sup> Wyke, 2002, 80.

<sup>291</sup> Wyke, 2002, 167-8, 195-6, 221.

<sup>292</sup> Camps, 1966, 109; Richardson, 1977, 365; Wyke, 2002, 208: see above, pp. 90-1.

<sup>293</sup> See Richardson, 1977, 365.

Cleopatra in the years before Actium.<sup>294</sup> Both Camps and Mader have pointed to the emergence of a patriotic theme at line 29 that replaces the love theme expressed at the start.<sup>295</sup>

A comparison with Horace also reveals how Propertius has brought out a much less noble side to Cleopatra. Aside from the obvious lack of complimentary phrases that appeared in Horace, Propertius also demeans Cleopatra herself, whereas Horace had reserved such censure for her supporters.<sup>296</sup> One could make a case for Propertius deliberately seeking to subvert the heroic image of Cleopatra displayed in Horace's work. He did this by incorporating the hostile propaganda motifs associated with her, as he wanted his poem to act as a 'literary rejoinder and reinterpretation of Horace's heroic queen'.<sup>297</sup>

There seems no more obvious evidence for this than in Propertius' portrayal of Cleopatra's suicide. The introduction of wine at the point of her death could suggest that Cleopatra had to resort to this to dull the pain of the snakebite.<sup>298</sup> Certainly Cleopatra takes on a much more passive role in her suicide in Propertius's poem than the bold, active figure she appears in Horace. The use of *spectare* indicates that she is a detached witness to the snake biting her arm, and not a woman in control. Furthermore, Propertius frames her suicide with the picture of her bound in Roman chains and an exaltation extolling the greatness of Augustus. The focus here is not on her death as a dignified end but rather placed within the

---

<sup>294</sup> Grant, 1972, 202.

<sup>295</sup> Camps, 1966, 107; Mader, 1989, 190.

<sup>296</sup> Nethercut, 1971, 421.

<sup>297</sup> Mader, 1989, 198, 200.

<sup>298</sup> See Nethercut, 1971, 421; Mader, 1989, 199-200.

context of her submission to Rome. She does commit suicide, but Propertius makes it appear as though she has little choice in the matter.

Cleopatra appears in another of Propertius' poems (*Elegiae*, 4.6), and the picture of her here is just as uncomplimentary. She is introduced again as *femina*, and this time she must pay the penalty for her crimes against Rome (*dat femina poenas* 4.6.57). Furthermore, the weapons of those defeated at Actium are 'shamefully' in the hands of a woman (*pilaque feminea turpiter acta manu* 4.6.22).<sup>299</sup> The use of *turpiter* echoes the use of this type of language in relation to Cleopatra in Horace at 1.37.9 and 9.13. Propertius would seem then, to be consistent in his portrayal of Cleopatra. However, some scholars have argued for a slightly different interpretation of 3.11. One argues that it is not 'pure propaganda'; another that Propertius 'pays handsome if oblique homage to Cleopatra'.<sup>300</sup> One could argue that on the whole, his poem offers a complex assessment of Cleopatra's character and suicide. Moreover, Wyke argues for the ambiguous nature of even 4.6.<sup>301</sup> Propertius' aims then, were not to promote a straightforward picture of the Egyptian queen, but to prompt a range of feelings towards her; the ambivalent nature of the act of suicide facilitated his multifaceted portrayal of Cleopatra.

---

<sup>299</sup> As Wyke (2002, 207) notes.

<sup>300</sup> Baker, 1976, 61; Johnson, 1967, 397.

<sup>301</sup> Wyke, 2002, 222.

## v. Official propaganda and the portrayal of Cleopatra

Before examining what the official propaganda against Cleopatra might have entailed and its influence on the three poets discussed above, it is instructive first to take a look at other works detailing the events after Actium and Cleopatra's suicide, which provide an alternative perspective to the versions already considered. Suetonius, Plutarch and Dio offer the most thorough accounts. In brief, the points these writers agree on are as follows: all three put forward the idea that Augustus wanted to keep Cleopatra alive because he wanted to display her in his triumph;<sup>302</sup> Suetonius and Dio both mention the fact that Augustus made great efforts to try and save Cleopatra once she had been poisoned by the snake;<sup>303</sup> Plutarch and Dio, however, also refer to another theory concerning her suicide that involved her taking poison.<sup>304</sup> These sources are from a later period though, as Suetonius and Plutarch were writing in the early second century AD, Dio in the early third century AD.<sup>305</sup>

However, there are some historical sources nearer to our period in date, and it is not unlikely that the later sources used these and other now lost Augustan works in their own writings.<sup>306</sup> Unfortunately Livy's account for this time is now lost, although there are two fragments that suggest what might have appeared in his history. The summary of book 133, which discussed events from 31 to 29 BC, tells

---

<sup>302</sup> Suetonius, *Divus Augustus*, 17.4; Plutarch, *Antony*, 78.1; Dio, 51.11.2.

<sup>303</sup> Suetonius, *Divus Augustus*, 17.4; Dio, 51.14.3.

<sup>304</sup> Plutarch, *Antony*, 86.2; Dio, 51.14.1. Plutarch also reports an earlier attempt she made at stabbing herself (*Antony*, 79.2); it is possible this was in part from Horace's comment on her no longer fearing the sword (see p. 94).

<sup>305</sup> Other descriptions of her suicide can be found in Velleius Paterculus (2.87.1) and Florus (2.21.11.11).

<sup>306</sup> We know that Suetonius at least made use of the imperial archives.

us that 'Cleopatra, so that she would not come under the authority of her victor, died a voluntary death' (*Periochae* 133). A fragment from this book recalls how Cleopatra would claim, 'I will not be shown in a triumph' whilst Augustus' captive (Fragment 54).<sup>307</sup> Velleius Paterculus, writing around AD 30, says that she died from an asp bite (2.87.1). Finally, the geographer Strabo, a contemporary of the three poets, confirms the story in Plutarch and Dio that there were two versions surrounding Cleopatra's suicide, one that a snake was used, and the other poison (17.1.10).<sup>308</sup>

To summarise, the evidence from other writers alongside that from the poets seems to confirm four important points regarding the stories surrounding Cleopatra's suicide: Augustus wanted Cleopatra kept alive so that he could parade her in his triumph; he tried to save her when she killed herself; Cleopatra probably died from a snakebite; however, she might alternatively have used poison. All these points go some way towards expressing the gracious behaviour of Augustus and the barbarity of Cleopatra. It is unlikely that all parts of all four points were *all* contrived by the official propaganda to disparage Cleopatra further and justify Augustus' victory over her, but a significant part of these stories must have been exaggerated at the very least. Augustus constructed his propaganda against Cleopatra, and also Antony, very carefully before Actium and so there is no reason to suppose that this ended with her death.

The idea that Augustus wanted to display Cleopatra in his triumph of 29 BC is plausible. It was standard practice for the defeated enemy to be paraded in the

---

<sup>307</sup> As Beard points out, she was not the first or last figure to commit suicide to avoid being displayed in a triumph (2007, 115-16).

<sup>308</sup> For a detailed analysis of the evidence mentioned see Tronson, 1998, 36-44.

streets of Rome for all the people to rejoice and be reminded of the success of their leader. However, it is unclear how Augustus would have handled her once the triumph was over, and so it is possible that he would just simply have preferred for her to die in Egypt before this became a problem for him. He did not want to be seen as responsible for her murder though.<sup>309</sup> So the idea that Cleopatra committed suicide would absolve him of any part in her death and solve the problem of what to do with her in Rome. In this sense, the story that he wanted her in his triumph could have been a cover to suggest that he would not have had a part in her death as he had other plans for her. It could even have been a cover for murder.<sup>310</sup>

However, it is more likely that Cleopatra did commit suicide, although this act could also be manipulated in the official version of events. Tronson argues that the story of the asp comes from some type of display of Cleopatra in the triumph of 29,<sup>311</sup> and that this then became embedded in the accounts of the three poets discussed above. But the asp could have been an invention of the Augustan regime, which was fully aware of their connection to Egyptian royalty and regalia. Tronson also points to the 'bizarre nature' a death by snake presented, and that this would have fitted well with the portrayal of Cleopatra as an oriental barbarian.<sup>312</sup> In addition, this method of killing was also used for murdering enemies and executing criminals.<sup>313</sup> It would stress all the more, then, Cleopatra's crimes against Rome.

---

<sup>309</sup> Tyldesley, 2008, 189.

<sup>310</sup> Or as Nisbet & Hubbard point out, Cleopatra could have been 'allowed' to commit suicide by Augustus implementing very few measures to prevent her from doing so (1970, 409); see also Beard, 2007, 115.

<sup>311</sup> On this see also Beard, 2007, 143.

<sup>312</sup> Tronson, 1998, 37, 42, 44.

<sup>313</sup> Nisbet & Hubbard, 1970, 410.

The idea that Augustus tried to save Cleopatra as she lay dying seems an embellishment added later. It would have been too easy to say this after Cleopatra was dead, although if Augustus had had a genuine desire to have Cleopatra in his triumph, there could be some truth in it. Finally, the alternative version of Cleopatra's suicide by poison would have worked just as easily in the official propaganda. Currie's article notes the particular association of poisoning in the ancient world with women, and that the art was considered to be an uncanny skill.<sup>314</sup> So if for some reason the asp story was not believed, Cleopatra's death by poison would fit in with this stereotype of a kind of unnatural female figure.

It is fair to say that if Cleopatra did commit suicide, and it is very likely that she did, her chosen method was poison and not a snakebite. The asp story was probably invented to promote her barbarity, or by chance the display of her in the triumph with the asp prompted this story of her suicide and Augustus did nothing to refute it. Plutarch attests to the fact that Augustus was suspicious that Cleopatra had hidden poison in her chamber, as his servant Proculeius shakes her clothes in order to reveal if there was any hidden there. Furthermore, in a story in Pliny the Elder Cleopatra demonstrates to Antony her knowledge of poisons, supposedly to show him that she has the power to kill him at any point.<sup>315</sup> One critic also points to the similarities in symptoms that suicide by poison would exhibit in relation to suicide by a snakebite.<sup>316</sup> It is reasonable to assume, then, that Cleopatra was prepared for the idea that she might have needed to commit suicide at some point

---

<sup>314</sup> Currie, 1998, 147-8.

<sup>315</sup> Plutarch, *Antony*, 79.3; Pliny, *Natural History*, 21.9 (examined in Currie's article).

<sup>316</sup> Tronson, 1998, 43.

in the future when she locked herself away, and as a result prepared herself for this by taking a poison that she knew would do the job.

Aside from the 'realities' of Cleopatra's suicide, it is clear that the three poets were mainly influenced by the official record of her death, whether they believed this or not. Wyke has said that Cleopatra in each 'transgresses all the social and political constraints which Roman society imposed (ideally) upon its women'.<sup>317</sup> Just as Livy and Ovid's portrayals of Lucretia demonstrated contemporary concerns about female behaviour and sexuality, so too do the poets' representations of Cleopatra. In a work of love elegy like Propertius' in particular, women were given different, more dominantly sexual roles than the traditional ones of marriage and motherhood, and men were often depicted as submissive and slave-like.<sup>318</sup> Cleopatra, the erotic and lustful enemy of Rome, provided a pertinent example to exploit in revealing fears about uncontrolled female sexuality; in Propertius, this fear is relieved when she is put under firm control again. Moreover, the Romans' fear of the threat that Cleopatra posed should not be underestimated. She represented the last great danger at the culmination of the civil wars. However, this does not mean that the poets were simply tools of Augustan propaganda, but could mean that their works were in line with the feelings of some of their fellow Romans at the time, that 'Augustus was right and Antony and Cleopatra were wrong'.<sup>319</sup>

None of the poets present a straightforward picture of Cleopatra.<sup>320</sup> Horace in particular depicts some noble characteristics in Cleopatra, especially in the hour of her death. Propertius is more damning about her, but if his poem was in part a

---

<sup>317</sup> Wyke, 2002, 220.

<sup>318</sup> Wyke, 2002, 32-8, 168.

<sup>319</sup> Grant, 1972, 244.

<sup>320</sup> As Wyke points out (2002, 221).

kind of retaliation against Horace, this may have been due to the constraints of this challenge of Horace. Vergil does point to the greatness of Cleopatra's Egypt,<sup>321</sup> and the parallels made between Cleopatra and Dido diminish the force of a wholly derogatory view of Cleopatra. There was a complex system of interchange both between the Augustan poets and the official propaganda of the period, and between the poets themselves: Wyke describes it aptly when she says that 'Augustan poetry does not merely reproduce the propaganda of Augustus, but refracts, interrogates, or even enables the social, political, and economic changes that were taking place under the new regime'.<sup>322</sup> At times Cleopatra can be viewed as a wanton, barbaric enemy who is rightly vanquished by Rome, at others she is a somewhat tragic figure and the poets make use of her story to explore the abuse of power, immorality, effeminacy and some unpleasant truths of civil war.<sup>323</sup> In addition, none of them could escape from the fact that Cleopatra had committed suicide.<sup>324</sup> To a Roman this was more often than not a courageous act, and a person in Cleopatra's situation would especially have been viewed as making the right decision in taking her own life. Thus Cleopatra's suicide was in many ways commendable and there is evidence that the poets tried to reflect this in their own ways. By paying attention to this last action of hers, these poets managed to allow even the most reviled figure of their day the achievement of at least some

---

<sup>321</sup> Johnson, 1967, 397.

<sup>322</sup> On this idea see also Wallace-Hadrill, 1985: Augustan poets could 'articulate acceptance or rejection of the social order he [Augustus] was struggling to restore and of his own role in doing so' (184).

<sup>323</sup> Wyke, 2002, 226, 209, 243.

<sup>324</sup> As Wyke points out, this robbed Augustus of displaying her in his triumph and of a symbol of his victory, and also resulted in the emergence of her as a 'defiant and regal figure' in her death (2002, 240-1).

redemption; this is testament to the efficacy of suicide in provoking a variety of responses.

## vi. Conclusion

There are several major differences between the suicides of Lucretia and Cleopatra. Lucretia is portrayed as the archetypal Roman *matrona*, who kills herself because she has been raped, but also because this is what is best for her own reputation, her family and for the state. On the other hand, Cleopatra is practically forced to commit suicide when defeated by Augustus, and she is guilty of heinous crimes against Rome. On this basis, then, the women represent polar opposites of a suicidal model: Lucretia's virtue and typical Romanness versus Cleopatra's vice and barbarity. Even the methods chosen for their deaths are indicative of these opposing qualities: the sword versus snakebite/poison.<sup>325</sup>

However, this view does not take into consideration the Augustan writers' complex portrayals of these two women. In a variety of genres, but all roughly contemporary with one another, these writers approached the two women in their own unique way. The subjects of Lucretia and Cleopatra's suicides provided much scope for a writer to display his literary skill, but also the means by which he could explore issues relevant to the day. Lucretia's suicide could point to the kind of morals that people in Augustan Rome should live by, and on the reverse side, Cleopatra's character could be used to show what should not be lived by; both

---

<sup>325</sup> One could also argue that Cleopatra is portrayed as a 'noble savage' in Augustan literature, in a similar way to that of Tacitus' portrayal of Boudicca: see pp. 235ff.

could be used to make comments about correct and incorrect female behaviour and about the benefits and dangers of controlled and uncontrolled female sexuality. In political terms, Lucretia's suicide sanctioned the founding of the Republic; was Cleopatra's suicide a symbol of Augustus' 'refounding' of this Republic? Or, is there some irony in the fact that the two suicides mark 'opposites' in political terms? Lucretia signals the move from monarchy to the Republic, whereas Cleopatra signals the move from the Republic to the principate, which although technically not a monarchy, marked a major change in how Rome was now governed. This comparison would certainly be a 'sting in the tail' for Augustus who sought to distance himself from any ideas that his new government could be compared to a kingship; and yet no writer from this period puts the two women together.<sup>326</sup> Was this because the connotations produced by such an association would have been too provocative, too much for a regime not wanting to appear monarchical?

Gender is also pivotal to these narratives. No matter how virtuously Lucretia might have been portrayed, and no matter how Cleopatra was sometimes depicted as acting nobly, these writers still had to deal with women who had committed suicide, an act that was not to become associated with women in any significant way until the later rule of the Julio-Claudians.<sup>327</sup> At this stage, it is reasonable to argue that a female suicide provided male writers with a somewhat unusual topic for discussion. And if these suicides were thought to have been brave and masculine in some ways, the writers would want to suggest this, but also find ways

---

<sup>326</sup> The first writer to do so discussed in this thesis is Tertullian: see pp. 263-7.

<sup>327</sup> As portrayed by writers like Tacitus: see Chapter 3.

in which they could downplay their magnitude. Lucretia becomes a symbol of an event led by men, whereas Cleopatra becomes the captive prisoner of Augustus and finds the most barbaric way possible with which to kill herself.

Furthermore, both women are similar in that they are suggestive of the prominence of females in the late Republic (on this, see Introduction: pp. 30-3) and Augustus' attempts to counteract the new influence they now had in Rome's social and political life. Elegy at this time constituted a 'response to, and a part of, a multiplication of discourses about the female that occurred in the late Republic and early empire'.<sup>328</sup> the same may be said for the other genres of work discussed above. Indeed, it could be argued that Lucretia's suicide as a topic became so popular because of the 'real-life' case provided by Cleopatra. Viewed alongside each other, the two women show the fascination with and reaction to the authority exhibited by women in the writers' own lives, for example some women involved themselves in financial transactions or acted as patrons and benefactresses (see p. 32). And this was connected to the political mayhem of the years leading up to Augustus' principate, and what many viewed as a decline in traditional values and standards. Therefore, Lucretia and Cleopatra's suicides were used both to explore and to instruct on moral, political and social issues that were pertinent topics in the early years of Augustan Rome; both figures were connected with autocratic regimes that resulted in them being related to topics uncomfortable to writers – this is why so much ambivalence is attached to their acts of suicide.

One might argue that this discourse sets the stage for uses of the motif of female suicide by later Roman writers, who took its function as a moral and political

---

<sup>328</sup> Wyke, 2002, 41.

tool to new levels. Indeed, one could argue for the 'tragic' representation of Lucretia and Cleopatra in some of the works analysed above, and see this as a foreshadowing of the tragic display of female suicide in writers such as Seneca the Younger (discussed in the next chapter). Ovid's vivid description of the bloody end of Lucretia or Horace's representation of Cleopatra drinking in the poison in a fierce manner would not have been out of place on a Roman stage. Tragedy, nobility, redemption – there were multiple ways in which an act of female suicide could be approached, even when the figure was the same and the writers contemporary. As this chapter has shown, representations of women such as Lucretia and Cleopatra were highly complex.

## Chapter 2

### Greek tragic suicides through Roman eyes

#### 1. Introduction

Representations of figures such as Lucretia and Cleopatra in Latin literature were informed by the discourse on tragic female figures that already existed in Greek literature. In view of this, this chapter explores these suicidal figures, which include Jocasta, Phaedra and Deianira, and their depiction by Roman writers. A constructive starting-point for analysing the appropriation of Greek tragic suicidal figures in Roman literature is the work of 'Hyginus'. Hyginus helpfully summarises the key female figures and their manner of death: at section 243 of his mythographical work, the *Fabulae*, he lists 'women who killed themselves' (*quae se ipsae interfecerunt*), with the names of twenty-five women, twelve of whom are given more detailed accounts earlier in the *Fabulae*. In addition, six other female suicides are given elsewhere in the work but do not feature in this list, giving a total of thirty-one female suicides for the *Fabulae* as a whole. Many of the women discussed had their origins in Greek tragic works: for example, he mentions Deianira, Phaedra, Alcestis, Hecuba, Evadne, Jocasta and Antigone, who were already popularised from Sophocles and Euripides' plays. Thus his work emphasises the links between suicide and tragedy.

Hyginus' work was probably designed primarily to teach the Roman elite about Greek mythology,<sup>329</sup> and as a result drama and spectacle were not priorities in his descriptions of female suicide. Yet Hyginus still has his uses. He often gives information unknown elsewhere, or offers a new perspective on an already established story. For example, the suicides of Aethra (243.2) and Neara (243.4) are not described anywhere else in surviving literature. In his account of Stheneboea in the list and earlier on, Hyginus makes it clear that she committed suicide (57.5, 243.2), but Grant argues that in a play now lost by Euripides, she was killed when thrown from Pegasus by Bellerophon.<sup>330</sup>

Hyginus' list of suicidal women is much longer than the similar list for men (242) where there are only fifteen cases. Several other lists also catalogue death scenarios, including 'fathers who killed daughters' (238) and 'wives who killed their husbands' (240). However, the female suicides list is by far the longest.<sup>331</sup> Perhaps after writing his initial narratives on these men and women, Hyginus then decided to include these lists to highlight the proliferation of disastrous and macabre events that occur in Greek myth. And as the female suicide stands at the lengthiest, this record in particular may have been noteworthy to the reader as one of the most shocking forms of death.

The twenty-five women catalogued in the list are presented in a very formulaic fashion. Ten do not include any description of the actual suicide, with often just a few words giving the reasons behind their deaths. Six are given the standard language of *se* plus the relevant part of *interficere*, *occidere* or *obiere*. The

---

<sup>329</sup> As Smith & Trzaskoma point out (2007, liv).

<sup>330</sup> Grant, 1960, 163-4; 61.

<sup>331</sup> The list mentioned at 238 has seven cases, at 240 only six cases.

others are assigned a method of death, although again Hyginus follows the same linguistic categories for those who died in similar ways. For example, Evadne and Semiramis both throw themselves onto a burning pyre, with the same expression – *in pyram se coniecit* – used in each case (243.2, 243.8). Of the ten women not assigned a method for their deaths in the list, six are mentioned elsewhere in more detailed accounts. For example, Pelopia is said to have killed herself with a sword (88.10); Laodamia also threw herself onto a pyre (104.3).

Identifying ‘Hyginus’ and dating the original *Fabulae* is very difficult. The work was probably written by the end of the second century AD, but it could have been written much earlier. Moreover, the version we have now is almost certainly different from the original. Parts have been removed, while it contains excerpts added as late as the fifth century AD.<sup>332</sup> Nevertheless, this does not detract from the value of his work, which provides us with a plethora of information about Greek myth.<sup>333</sup> Mythographical works in general do not engage with the same social and political concerns as history, elegy and other literary genres. However, Hyginus’ *Fabulae* can serve as a useful starting point for the subject of this chapter, especially as it is the ‘only surviving example of its kind, a handbook of Greek myth, written in Latin, aiming at something approaching comprehensiveness’.<sup>334</sup> And if nothing else, Hyginus’ work points to the surfeit of tragic female suicides in Greek myth, with the majority of cases fitting the traditional pattern of a woman killing herself due to intense grief, usually as a result of the death of a husband or loved one.

---

<sup>332</sup> Grant, 1960, 1; Smith & Trzaskoma, 2007, xliii.

<sup>333</sup> See Cameron (2004) on Greek mythography (his Chapter 2 discusses the Greek sources of Hyginus).

<sup>334</sup> Smith & Trzaskoma, 2007, liii.

The last chapter examined the deaths of Lucretia and Cleopatra, two key examples of female suicide described by *Roman* authors. However, hundreds of years before the exploration of the theme of female suicide in Roman literature, the Greeks had already created and established many stories surrounding Greek women who took their own lives. In the genre of tragedy in particular there is a wealth of information about Greek women committing suicide, with some notable examples including Jocasta, Phaedra, and Deianira. It is also evident that Roman writers and thinkers embraced these Greek female suicides in their literary works, alongside their own female suicides. Thus, the earlier Greek accounts inform and shape not only the Romans' appropriation of this same material, but also their explorations of Roman female suicides.

This latter point can be seen in some respects in the preceding chapter on Lucretia and Cleopatra, as well as in subsequent chapters, for example that dealing with the suicidal female in Tacitus' *Annales*, notable in the death of, for example, the conspirator Epicharis who hanged herself like so many of her Greek predecessors (see pp. 239-43). The purpose of this chapter, however, is to analyse the appropriation and integration of tragic Greek suicides within a Roman literary context. These stories surrounding Greek females are examined to see how they have been adapted, changed and expanded to produce new versions of their deaths from a Roman perspective. As the Greek sources are of fundamental importance when addressing these questions, some analysis of the key female figures and suicide in general in these works is necessary first, before exploring the development of the female suicide motif by Roman writers. Furthermore, one aim

of this study is to examine not just how these writers adapted this material, but also the underlying rationale for this adaptation.

As a preliminary consideration, the introduction to this chapter first examines general points on the definition of tragedy of relevance to this study, what makes a suicide tragic, and in particular, what constituted a female tragic suicide in the Greek tragic genre. This introduction then examines the depiction of some key Greek female suicides in the plays of Sophocles and Euripides, including Jocasta, Phaedra, Deianira, and Evadne. Finally, it offers some initial comments on the utilisation and appropriation of Greek female suicides in Roman literature.

This chapter then moves on to analyse the 'suicide notes' in Ovid's *Heroides*, including those 'written' by Dido, Phyllis and Deianira, and to examine Phaedra and Jocasta in Seneca's tragedies. In the discussion of these works, the context and aims of these writers play a key role in determining how and why they adapted the Greek myths for their own purposes. Seneca in particular lived during a time when female suicides became a very real actuality (see Chapter 3).

#### **i. Tragedy and tragic suicide**

In the *Poetics*, Aristotle maintains that the composition of tragedy is an imitation, or *mimesis* (1447a). The genre developed initially from improvisations until it reached its 'natural state' (1449a). He then gives this fuller description:

Tragedy is an imitation (*mimesis*) of an action that is admirable, complete and possesses magnitude; in language made pleasurable,

each of its species separated in different parts; performed by actors, not through narration; effecting through pity (*eleos*) and fear (*phobos*) the purification (*katharsis*) of such emotions. (1449b)

The plot, which Aristotle considers the most important feature of tragedy, includes the elements of reversal (*peripeteia*), recognition (*anagnorisis*) and suffering (*pathos*). The latter is described as ‘an action that involves destruction or pain’ (1452b). The plays that people find the ‘most tragic’ are those that see a change from good to bad fortune, due to a serious error (*hamartia*) by that person/those people on whom the play is centred (1453a).<sup>335</sup>

It is not my intention here to analyse Aristotle’s thoughts on tragedy in any great detail.<sup>336</sup> However, relevant here are his arguments about the significance of *pathos* and the need for a successful tragedy to evoke fear and pity in its audience so that it might undergo a *katharsis* of these emotions. As Heath points out, however, this purification is not about ‘getting rid of those feelings’, but rather geared towards ensuring they are not taken to an excessive state but embraced in a more balanced condition. This in turn is pleasurable to the audience, although it will benefit those who have more disordered emotional dispositions than those members who have a more balanced state of mind to start with.<sup>337</sup> It is clear that death, including suicide, would have been of key importance in both the realisation of *pathos* and presumably also in effecting *katharsis* by evoking the emotions pity

---

<sup>335</sup> All Heath’s (1996) translations.

<sup>336</sup> Heath’s ‘Introduction’ (1996) offers a lengthy discussion.

<sup>337</sup> Heath, 1996, xxxix-xi.

and fear. Following Aristotle's logic, death would have been a crucial factor in making a tragedy 'tragic'.<sup>338</sup>

Linked to this evocation of certain emotions in its audience is the idea that the tragic genre frequently included characters and situations that represented transgressions of the normal social order, an order dominated by males.<sup>339</sup> And due to the cultural and legal restrictions placed on women in a society like that of Athens, it is not surprising that more often than not it was female characters in tragedy who epitomised the greatest challenges to social norms.<sup>340</sup> One significant way in which this was achieved was in the depiction of their deaths, and the mode of death for many of the female characters was suicide. Both Loraux and Zeitlin argue that within the tragic genre, suicide was a woman's 'solution'. Loraux goes further and maintains that because suicide was disapproved of in 'real life', it was also a 'tragic solution'.<sup>341</sup> Thus there is a definite link between suicide being a signifier of a tragedy, and more specifically, suicide being in many cases symptomatic of a tragic woman.

## ii. Female suicides in Greek tragedy

'The struggles of the great mythic women....remain among the most troubling, and most vital, legacies of ancient theatre'.<sup>342</sup> Zeitlin argues that because women are fully engaged in the action and speech of the drama, they are involved

---

<sup>338</sup> Segal remarks that Euripides knew that 'death more than any other event shows what a human being is' (1993, 4).

<sup>339</sup> As noted by many scholars: see e.g. Des Bouvrie, 1990, 317-318; Rehm, 1994, 8, 137.

<sup>340</sup> Seidensticker, 1995, 165.

<sup>341</sup> Zeitlin, 1996, 351; Loraux, 1987, 8.

<sup>342</sup> Rehm, 1994, 8.

'in the ensemble of tragic experience and thereby earn the right to tragic suffering'.<sup>343</sup> These struggles and the women's suffering (Aristotle's *pathos*) revolve around issues such as familial relationships and society's expectations of women, and the resultant act is more often than not death. As noted above, this death is often realised as a suicide. With the exception of the suicides of Ajax and Haemon, and the sacrifice of Menoeceus, all men on the tragic stage are murdered, either on the battlefield or in a more private context, for example by a family member. There are of course females like Clytemnestra who are also murdered; however, there are more who commit suicide, or who are sacrificed for a male cause.<sup>344</sup>

How are the suicides of these great mythic women to be interpreted? Are they truly 'tragic'? If we consider Aristotle's views on the plot of a tragedy involving some sort of reversal, recognition or suffering, then it can be seen that they are tragic. In most of these stories, the women kill themselves due to the recognition that they have erred in some way, or because they experience such intense suffering that their only way of escaping this is by taking their own life. No doubt any audience being told about these deaths would be moved to feel pity for the women involved. But in carrying out such deaths they were acting outside the normal boundaries of their sex, boundaries that were fundamental to the society in which the audience lived.

Loraux argues that because suicide was a 'woman's solution' it was, therefore, not heroic, particularly as they often resorted to hanging which was a highly disgraceful method. She does, nevertheless, concede that those women who

---

<sup>343</sup> Zeitlin, 1996, 362-3.

<sup>344</sup> Loraux, 1987, 4.

opted for the more masculine sword, such as Deianira, could achieve a 'liberty' in this sort of death. She also suggests that as many of the women who committed suicide did so for men, usually their husband, they were reconfirming their marital and maternal ties in doing so.<sup>345</sup> However, this latter point suggests that these women did embody some form of heroism in their deaths. If their suicides reaffirmed the aspects of their lives that were the very essence of their femininity, then surely they displayed at least a female kind of heroism? This was not the same type of heroism as the male characters who died bravely on the battlefield demonstrated, but within the private context of the home and family, it is all they could do. And it is to be expected that the audience might have recognised this, as they would have recognised the suffering they had gone through to reach this point.

The relationship between the tragic and the heroic has been much discussed by modern scholars. Several commentators note the use of Homer in Greek tragedies, which bestows a heroic quality on the tragedians' protagonists.<sup>346</sup> Twice in his *Poetics* Aristotle refers to tragedy as portraying those who are 'better' than the rest of humanity: he thus acknowledges the 'heroic nature of tragedy' and implies that the genre depicts those who are exceptionally powerful and courageous, and those who can also suffer exceptionally well.<sup>347</sup> Furthermore, Gould argues that the tragic Chorus represent an 'otherness' to the heroic code of the protagonists, but here he only refers to male protagonists: those playwrights, like Euripides, who include female protagonists, usually portray them as being

---

<sup>345</sup> Loraux, 1987, 8-9, 17, 23-6.

<sup>346</sup> See e.g. Rutherford, 1982; Gould 1983; Mossman, 1988, 85-6.

<sup>347</sup> Halliwell, 1986, 153, 165 n.33; 1987, 11, 75.

'wholly alien' to the heroic men.<sup>348</sup> Therefore, the 'heroic' in tragedy is usually confined to male characters.

So can tragic women ever be seen as heroic? Gender boundaries are often blurred in the tragic genre and perhaps it is possible at certain moments to view some women as heroic if they assume masculine characteristics.<sup>349</sup> On the other hand, in her discussion of the heroic in Greek tragedy, Easterling comments that 'the heroic world of tragedy is designed to be identifiable'.<sup>350</sup> Was Seneca suggesting that some of his contemporaries would have found themselves in similar positions to Phaedra and Jocasta in terms of their sexual offences? Perhaps not, although it is possible that he wanted his audience to identify their wrongs and recognise correct sexual behaviour.<sup>351</sup> As Easterling goes on to argue, the plays were often designed to offer 'something for everyone in the audience', with political and social issues addressed in such a way that they invited different interpretations.<sup>352</sup> Furthermore, we must be cautious about labelling these women as unequivocally heroic: the act of suicide was still a highly provocative act, and as Seidensticker points out, tragedy was prone to dealing with 'ambivalence and unease'.<sup>353</sup> Even Loraux maintains that a woman's glory in tragedy was ambiguous, and there to give 'food for thought' to the audience.<sup>354</sup> As a result, no single case of female suicide can be viewed as straightforwardly tragic and/or heroic. Now we

---

<sup>348</sup> Gould, 1996, 219, 222-4.

<sup>349</sup> Pelling, 2000, 208. Pelling comments that critics often emphasise Medea's masculine attributes, for example her assertiveness, 'by which they mean a version of her "heroism"' (2000, 203).

<sup>350</sup> Easterling, 1997, 22.

<sup>351</sup> Again, this can be linked back to the discussion of sexuality in the Introduction, where it was noted that from Augustus onwards the sexual behaviour of women was closely monitored and 'correct' behaviour promoted: see pp. 31-4.

<sup>352</sup> Easterling, 1997, 25.

<sup>353</sup> Seidensticker, 1995, 165.

<sup>354</sup> Loraux, 1987, 28, 30.

turn briefly to four of the major instances of female suicide in Greek tragedy most relevant to this study, to examine how Sophocles and Euripides dealt with the issue in their plays.

In Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus*, Jocasta kills herself after realising that she has unwittingly married her son, and that he has murdered her former husband. Her death is reported by a messenger who says that she hanged herself (1234-85). Although certainly tragic, there is nothing particularly striking about the reason or method of her death. However, Euripides' *Phoenissae* ascribes a different reason and a significantly different mode of suicide to Jocasta. She kills herself after seeing her sons Polynices and Eteocles kill each other on the battlefield. And this time she uses a sword, as Seneca's Jocasta was to in his play (see pp. 173-5). Consequently, she dies not only in a 'male' manner, but also in a 'male' context, on the battlefield.

In Euripides' *Hippolytus*, Phaedra kills herself because of the torment she feels over her unrequited love for her stepson Hippolytus. She commits suicide to escape this suffering, but also in the hope that her death will serve as evidence to her husband Theseus that she has been wronged by Hippolytus and he will punish him accordingly. Phaedra too uses the noose to end her life, with her death being described by the Nurse and Chorus (774-810). There is a much more vengeful aspect to her death than that viewed in Jocasta's. And once again Seneca chose Phaedra as the focus of one of his plays (based on Euripides' *Hippolytus*); like Seneca's Jocasta she also kills herself with the sword (see pp. 165-7).

Deianira commits suicide in Sophocles' *Trachiniae* after realising that she has unwittingly caused the death of her husband Heracles by sending him a robe that she did not know was laced with poison. The Nurse reports her death (874ff.); she stabbed herself (930-1). Loraux draws attention to the masculine attributes to her suicide by noting that her death is described with a form of the word *sphagē*, which denotes a 'pure' end as opposed to the descriptions of those women who die by hanging, often denoted by a form of *aiōra*. However, Loraux then proposes that, in fact, Deianira's death was not that manly because although she stabbed herself in a very male area, the liver, she uncovered her left, and therefore female, side rather than the right in doing so.<sup>355</sup> However, Loraux may perhaps have taken these stereotypes a step too far. We cannot escape from the fact that Deianira boldly stabs herself, and as Loraux herself points out, the 'confusion in tragedy' allows a woman to assume a man's death.<sup>356</sup> In the discussion of Ovid below, we examine how he approaches Deianira and her death in the *Heroides* (see pp. 147-9).

The final female suicide to be discussed here is that of Evadne in Euripides' *Supplices*. She is not discussed in any detail in the Latin sources;<sup>357</sup> however, her suicide is important here because it appears to be the only one, apart from the death of Alcestis, that occurs on-stage in the extant Greek corpus.<sup>358</sup> The extraordinary nature of her death, jumping on the funeral pyre of her husband Kapaneus, has been observed by various scholars.<sup>359</sup> The scene is all the more startling as it occurs so unexpectedly. Would the audience have considered it

---

<sup>355</sup> Loraux, 1987, 13-14, 17-20, 55.

<sup>356</sup> Loraux, 1987, 14.

<sup>357</sup> Ovid mentions her briefly at *Ars Amatoria*, 3.21; Hyginus at 243.2

<sup>358</sup> Loraux implies that it is only Alcestis who dies on-stage, and she is an exception because she is saved from death by Heracles (1987, 20-3).

<sup>359</sup> See e.g. Rehm, 1992, 129-32; 1994, 111-14, 120-1; Foley, 2001, 42.

tragic? Despite its drama, it is clear that Evadne follows the pattern of dying due to the suffering she felt, and because of the deep bonds she felt with her husband. Was it because of this play that Seneca was to follow this innovation in his on-stage representations of the suicides of Jocasta and Phaedra? It is impossible to answer this question with any certainty, although we do know that he was well-versed in Euripidean drama, and so in the discussion below, this phenomenon of on-stage suicide can be explored in greater detail.

### iii. Greek female suicides in Roman literature

The influence of Greek tragedy on Roman culture and literature began in the early third century BC, when the two societies came into contact.<sup>360</sup> From the first century BC onwards it was used as the basis of discussions at the dinner tables of the Roman elite, in the writing of a variety of different types of literature, and as part of an orator's training.<sup>361</sup> Unfortunately no complete Roman tragedies are extant except those of Seneca (and Pseudo-Seneca).<sup>362</sup> However, there is a wealth of evidence available from before Seneca to demonstrate the influence of Greek tragedy on various genres of Latin literature, including Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura*, Vergil's *Aeneid* and many of Ovid's works, and in works after Seneca too, including Statius' *Thebaid*. This chapter aims to assess and evaluate this influence in different genres including tragedy and elegy. The flexibility of the concept of the 'tragic'

---

<sup>360</sup> Although Rome had had earlier contact with parts of the Greek world, such as Magna Graecia; for example diplomatic relations had begun with cities such as Neapolis in the late fourth century (see Gruen, 1992, 28, 51, 227-9).

<sup>361</sup> Garland, 2004, 57; 60-2.

<sup>362</sup> See Garland (2004, 58-9), Panoussi (2005, 413-14) and Schiesaro (2005, 270-7) for the evidence relating to Republican tragic literature.

permitted its use in themes and motifs across the literary genres.<sup>363</sup> As Pelling has argued, the tragic theatre was an apposite setting to encourage the people to think about relevant political and moral issues.<sup>364</sup> Concepts of the tragic in genres other than tragedy itself can also be seen to be explored in a suitable context for the discussion of these issues. What follows is an outline of the themes and approaches that are dealt with in the rest of this chapter.

It has often been noted that the Greek dramatists wrote their tragedies with the contemporary political and social climate in mind.<sup>365</sup> One interpretation offered is that as the women in these plays were so different to their lived reality, the dramas were used in part to criticise the oppressive attitude towards Athenian women.<sup>366</sup> This point is key to an understanding of the Roman appropriation of tragic motifs and stories. Panoussi comments that 'the Romans found creative ways to incorporate a wealth of tragic material in their works in order to express the problems, anxieties, and ambiguities of their own times'. One of her conclusions is that in Seneca's *Troades*, the connection of Troy with Rome indicates that Seneca is making a statement about the women of his own day: women are 'victims of authority' who nevertheless 'find ways to resist or transcend the constraints imposed on them', and in doing so highlight the 'flaws of the order that demands their demise'.<sup>367</sup>

---

<sup>363</sup> In Greek literature alone tragedy and concepts of the tragic were utilised in a variety of different genres, for example in Thucydides' history and Plutarch's biography: see Macleod, 1983; Mossman, 1988.

<sup>364</sup> Pelling, 2000, 178-9, 187.

<sup>365</sup> Although as Garland points out, making specific connections to contemporary events or culture is not a straightforward task (2004, 4); see also Easterling, 1997; Pelling, 2000, 164-6.

<sup>366</sup> See e.g. Wohl, 2005, 146, 149. Pelling notes that the audience must have been interested in female behaviour as they are so frequently invited to wonder about it, and that tragedy can find great dramatic potential in women (2000, 196-7).

<sup>367</sup> Panoussi, 2005, 425-6.

Panoussi's comments here are very relevant to this study. For what better way was there for women to show their resistance to a flawed regime than by committing suicide, a final and brave act, but also one shrouded in controversy and ambiguity? Loraux's assertion that suicide was a 'tragic solution' in the context of Greek tragedy is almost certainly right. However, it can be argued that by the time of the late Republic and early Principate, suicide was not *just* a tragic solution. Ever since Cato had killed himself in 46 BC to avoid living under Caesar's rule or suffer the indignation of being pardoned by him, suicide had become a very real solution to very real problems. It was now a means of noble escape or resistance towards an oppressive authority (see above, pp. 20-3).<sup>368</sup> Thus although in the literature discussed here there are still tragic implications to the suicides committed, there is also a new angle to these deaths in terms of their relevance to the social and political climate of the day, as well as their transmission to an early imperial audience. This is what is meant here by the 'Romanisation' of the Greek tragic suicides.

Furthermore, as we are dealing with female suicides, there are additional gender inferences to be made. Segal has noted that in the Greek plays, the undermining of the patriarchal order by female characters to overcome their relative powerlessness was not akin to the behaviour of real Athenian women.<sup>369</sup> However, as was observed in the Introduction and Chapter 1, from the late Republic onwards growing concerns were expressed about women assuming roles that were a little too prominent in the community, and moves were made towards

---

<sup>368</sup> Plass suggests that political suicide during this period was a 'socially sanctioned practice' (1995, 3).

<sup>369</sup> Segal, 1993, 8.

tightening the state and family's control over female sexuality (see pp. 32-4). It could be that rather than exploring this disturbing issue directly, some Roman writers chose to write about mythical Greek female figures as a way of exploring aspects of female autonomy and sexuality. The use of the sword to commit suicide also has gender implications (see pp. 22-3). Zeitlin notes that in the Greek originals, this indicated a violation of gender rules.<sup>370</sup> However, in the context of late Republican and early Principate Rome, there is something to be said for suggesting that by now, the sword was also a woman's weapon of choice. Tales of Lucretia's noble deed had set the scene for real future women to adopt this method (as can be seen in Chapter 3).

In works such as Ovid's *Heroides*, female suicide is not actually carried to its conclusion, but there is still much to be said for analysing his representations of the suicidal female in terms of his tragic influences and what he wanted to say about his own society and experiences. As noted above, the women of the Greek tragedies more often than not kill themselves for their husbands. Some of the *Heroides* can be seen as 'suicide notes',<sup>371</sup> an attempt to give a voice to those women who died for a loved one or because they had been spurned by the one they loved. Finally, the innovation of Seneca deciding to represent his female figures as actually dying on-stage will also be important, as again this runs counter to the gender rules of tragedy, since a feminine suicide traditionally occurred off-stage.

---

<sup>370</sup> Zeitlin, 1996, 351.

<sup>371</sup> This term best describes those discussed individually below (2, 7, 9, 11 and 15) and of course this does not apply to all the women of the *Heroides*, e.g. Penelope's letter shows no suicidal tendencies.

## 2. Ovid's *Heroides*

Ovid wrote the *Heroides*, a collection of letters from mythological females to male addressees, early in his career.<sup>372</sup> Transporting female figures from tragedy, epic and Hellenistic poetry to elegiac verse, Ovid's innovation in composing this collection is well documented, and no more so than by the poet himself. Scholars point to his claim in the *Ars Amatoria*, where he says of the letters: 'he [Ovid] first invented this art, unknown to others' (3.346).<sup>373</sup> Although Propertius had produced something very similar to the *Heroides* with Arethusa (*Elegiae*, 4.3), critics are keen to point out that the important difference with Ovid's work was his utilisation of mythological figures unlike Propertius' 'real' Arethusa. Ovid's use of intertextuality within the *Heroides* context, and an epistolary context at that, was highly innovative within ancient literary traditions.<sup>374</sup> Furthermore, the adoption of a female writer's standpoint was also contradictory to normal literary practice.<sup>375</sup>

It is difficult to ignore the previous versions of the myths surrounding these women when reading the *Heroides*. Indeed, Ovid did not want his readers to forget them. Much of the interpretation of the characters and circumstances of his female figures relies on assumed previous knowledge of the stories. This is no more apparent than in *Heroides* 7, Dido's letter to Aeneas, where there are undoubtedly intertextual references and allusions to Vergil's *Aeneid*. Yet in the case of other letters, for example those of Phyllis (2) and Canace (11), modern readers are on

---

<sup>372</sup> Most agree this was sometime between 10 and 1 BC: see Jacobson, 1974, Chapter 16; Knox, 2002, 119. *Heroides* 16-21 were written later, however, probably in the latter years of Ovid's life while he was in exile (Knox, 2002, 122).

<sup>373</sup> See e.g. Knox, 1995, 14-15.

<sup>374</sup> Reeson, 2001, 7-8.

<sup>375</sup> Farrell, 1998, 311.

more unstable ground in working out the earlier versions.<sup>376</sup> It must be assumed, however, that Ovid's ancient audience were acquainted with the 'master' versions of these myths, and that they have simply not survived today. Many of the canonical works Ovid used were Classical Greek tragedies, although the influences of epic and Hellenistic poetry are also evident in some of the letters.<sup>377</sup>

Modern scholarship on the *Heroides* has often focused on gender: why *female* writers? Ovid was by no means a feminist in the modern sense of the word, but he was arguably more interested in women and their behaviour than some of his contemporaries and as a result represents female figures in a distinctive and nuanced way. Spentzou has argued that by allowing these female figures to voice their complaints, Ovid let them create their own parts of the myth, and especially those parts that would not have featured in the larger narratives.<sup>378</sup> However, others have argued that in fact, by doing this, Ovid actually made these women vulnerable to a rewriting of their story that was not always to their advantage.<sup>379</sup> In her work on the *Metamorphoses*, McKinley views the 'voice' Ovid gave to his females as something of a 'setback' as it could be brought to the fore by the only means associated with women, by the 'language and rhetoric of emotional excess'. Furthermore, when Ovid alluded to works such as those by Euripides, he was tapping into a discourse that was already reliant on assumptions of gender and determined by social conventions.<sup>380</sup>

---

<sup>376</sup> Knox, 1995, 24.

<sup>377</sup> Knox, 2002, 125.

<sup>378</sup> Spentzou, 2003, 162; see also Lindheim, 2003, 4.

<sup>379</sup> Fulkerson views this in light of many being drawn to presenting themselves as a suicidal heroine, a 'compelling but dangerous model' (2005, 14).

<sup>380</sup> McKinley, 2001, 8-9.

A straightforward reading of the *Heroides* as granting a voice to the normally suppressed sex, then, is not possible. On the other hand, it is clear that Ovid viewed women as 'good to think with', and that he exploited the voice of the distressed heroine in order to explore 'some of the complexities, ambiguities and contingencies of human experience'.<sup>381</sup> And the representation of the suicidal female was a particularly apt way with which to achieve this. Hill has noted the 'sustained treatment of suicidal motifs' in the *Heroides*; Fulkerson claims that all but Penelope become 'trapped in the suicidal world of abandoned women'.<sup>382</sup> Ovid's (re)shaping of these women's inclination and motivation for suicide allow us to examine the intertextual and intratextual allusions in his work, as well as offering an interpretation of his literary objectives. Ovid's debt to Greek tragedy was great, and so an analysis of the letters written by women such as Deianira and Canace demonstrates how he inserted himself into the tradition of tragic female suicides. And yet at the same time, he also hoped to 'reorient dramatically the reader's perception' of these earlier texts from which he had taken his material.<sup>383</sup> Those female figures not from an obvious tragic background, Phyllis and Sappho, can, however, still be examined for their 'tragic' traits. This study begins with Ovid's Dido. Although from the epic genre, Dido is most certainly a tragic figure. Moreover, she provides a model and established topoi for so many of the other heroines of the *Heroides*.<sup>384</sup>

---

<sup>381</sup> McKinley, 2001, 16.

<sup>382</sup> Hill, 2004, 124; Fulkerson, 2005, 39.

<sup>383</sup> Hill, 2004, 122.

<sup>384</sup> See e.g. Fulkerson, 2005, 28.

i. *Heroides 7: Dido*

Ovid adheres to the story of Dido and her abandonment by Aeneas that his readers would have been familiar with from book 4 of the *Aeneid*.<sup>385</sup> Having been left behind in Carthage whilst Aeneas goes on to Italy, Dido writes to him to let him know how much she is suffering now he is gone. Her chief concern, however, is seemingly not with encouraging him to come back, as she knows that will never happen, but with her own demise. Right from the very start of this epistle, Ovid sets the mournful tone with a reference to the swan song in the first two lines, a song commonly thought to precede death.<sup>386</sup> He also makes it clear that Dido sees Aeneas as responsible for her death. At line 64 he is the *causa* of it and at line 68 she claims she has been 'compelled to die' (*coacta mori*) because of Aeneas' deceit.<sup>387</sup>

Dido then gives an image of herself dead:

coniugis ante oculos deceptae stabit imago

tristis et effusis sanguinolenta comis. (69-70)

Again there is the idea that she has been deceived (*deceptae*) by Aeneas. She also posits herself as Aeneas' legitimate wife, indicated by the use of *coniugis*.<sup>388</sup> The use of the graphic *sanguinolenta* indicates the bloody nature of her suicide,

---

<sup>385</sup> In fact, the exact timing of Dido writing this letter can even be slotted into a precise point in the book, at line 415 (Palmer, 2005, 339).

<sup>386</sup> Knox, 1995, 203.

<sup>387</sup> Knox notes that line 64 indicates the first explicit reference to suicide (1995, 213).

<sup>388</sup> See Knox, 1995, 214.

foreshadowing the use of the sword that appears in the narrative later, and this unusual adjective reinforces the vividness of the gory scene that the reader knows will soon be Dido's fate.<sup>389</sup> At line 76 the cause of her death is again attached to Aeneas; here he has the 'honour' (*titulum*) of knowing he brought it about. Next, Dido implies that she deserves to die because she knew of Aeneas' faithlessness from the story he told her about Creusa. The strong imperative, made all the more emphatic by its positioning at the start of line 86, is directed straight at Aeneas: *ure*, or 'burn me'!

Ovid implies that Dido might be pregnant by Aeneas, as she is 'perhaps heavy with child' (*forsitan....gravidam* 133). The adverb ensures that the reader is left to wonder whether she is pregnant or not, but Ovid has no doubt included this possibility to add to the tragedy of Dido's situation. By committing suicide, Dido would not only be killing herself but also her unborn child. Aeneas has the blood of two people on his hands.<sup>390</sup> After half-heartedly trying to persuade Aeneas to return to her, Dido then makes her intentions to kill herself even more explicit:

si minus, est animus nobis effundere vitam....  
scribimus, et gremio Troicus ensis adest,  
perque genas lacrimae strictum labuntur in ensem,  
qui iam pro lacrimis sanguine tinctus erit.  
quam bene conveniunt fato tua munera nostro! (181, 184-7)

---

<sup>389</sup> This word appears in an alternative form in the *Fasti* at 2.832 in conjunction with Lucretia's suicide: see p. 89 n.213 for its unusual nature.

<sup>390</sup> As noted by Jacobson, 1974, 77; Gross, 1979, 311; Knox, 1995, 224.

The juxtaposition of *effundere* and *vitam* can only mean one thing: she is determined to put an end to her life, with the verb implying the pouring or spilling of her blood.<sup>391</sup> She now also refers to the sword that is lying in her lap: here Ovid presents his readers with a woman on the very verge of death. Khan has suggested that the closeness of the sword lying in her lap to her potential child heightens the pathos of the scene.<sup>392</sup> There may be some truth in this, particularly as *gremium* can also refer to the womb: another suggestion that Dido may be pregnant and about to kill this child as well as herself.

Dido describes her tears falling onto the sword, but soon these will be replaced with blood. Again there is the graphic idea of blood staining (*sanguine tinctus*), but this time it is the sword that will be marked by the spatters as well as Dido herself. Dido then sarcastically thanks Aeneas for his gift (*munera*) of the sword that she will use to kill herself. Then we are given further information about her death: her body will be 'destroyed by the funeral pyre' (*consumpta rogis* 193). Not only must Aeneas (and the reader) imagine her stabbing herself, but also her body being consumed by the pyre's flames.

Finally, the letter ends with Dido giving the epitaph she would like displayed on her tomb:

PRAEBVIT AENEAS ET CAVSAM MORTIS ET ENSEM;

IPSA SVA DIDO CONCIDIT VSA MANV. (195-6)

---

<sup>391</sup> Knox calls this phrase a 'graphic combination' (1995, 231).

<sup>392</sup> Khan, 1968, 284; although Jacobson finds such an observation 'incredible' (1974, 82-3 n.13).

This is a final and, should her wishes come true, also a tangible denunciation of Aeneas as the one who caused her death and even supplied the sword with which she could commit suicide. However, although he is the cause of her death, Dido acknowledges that it was by her own hand (*sua manu*) that she actually died. Throughout the letter it has been Aeneas at the forefront of her mind, he who is to blame for her current circumstances. Yet in her final moments Dido can regain some autonomy in at least being the one who holds the sword, even if she is determined to implicate Aeneas in why she has arrived at this stage in the first place.

Scholars have pointed to how Ovid has taken the already-tragic figure from the *Aeneid* and succeeded in creating an even more pathetic female. This is largely to do with Ovid's reinvention of Dido as a (slightly) less angry, more reasonable and more realistic woman than the frenzied figure last seen at the end of book 4. As noted above, Dido realises that she should have been aware of Aeneas' faults from the way in which he treated his first wife. Her recognition also that Aeneas will not return to her indicates a more rational and less naive mind.<sup>393</sup> Ovid allows his readers to view Dido's thought processes that inevitably lead to her suicide. The reader knows that this is the outcome, but at least in Ovid's version Dido is allowed to account in more coherent terms for this outcome herself.<sup>394</sup> Furthermore, the reference to a potential pregnancy also heightens the pathos of Dido's situation.

Secondly, scholars have also been keen to point to the subversive nature of Ovid's presentation of Dido. In fact, Ovid has been credited with not only giving a

---

<sup>393</sup> For such arguments, see e.g. Jacobson, 1974, 85, 89-90; Desmond, 1993, 56, 59.

<sup>394</sup> As noted by Hill, 2004, 123.

'pessimistic' view of the epic, but for beginning such a response that has characterised how numerous readers have viewed Vergil's work ever since.<sup>395</sup> By allowing Dido to put her side of the argument across, Ovid goes some way towards vilifying Aeneas' character. He also downgrades Aeneas' heroic stature and reduces him to that of a philandering lover.<sup>396</sup> Thus Ovid's Dido constitutes an undermining of the imperial theme of Vergil's epic, where Aeneas and his destiny is the focus.<sup>397</sup> And what was the point of this? Ovid arguably preferred giving a voice to the vanquished rather than the victor as such a stance provided him with the opportunity to produce verse that was provocative and risqué. One might also argue that in representing Dido as he did, Ovid subtly voiced concerns about the new regime in Rome, concerns presumably held by some of his contemporaries.

Hill argues that in order to communicate that Aeneas' abandonment of Dido was shameful, Ovid had to concentrate on 'accusatory suicide', where Dido would be pitied and the reader would feel anger for Aeneas who was to blame for her predicament.<sup>398</sup> This 'shame' Ovid wanted to create could be analogous to the shame he wanted those in charge to feel, especially for how they had treated those, like Dido, who stood in the way of empire. However, the end result of Dido's story still remains: she still commits suicide, and not even Ovid could have deviated from this blatant fact. Her position is still one of frustration and despair, perhaps an indication of Ovid's realisation of his own and his contemporaries' positions in society now. As a writer, Ovid needed to be aware of what he discussed, in so far as he could not openly criticise Augustus' regime. Yet Ovid still managed to create a

---

<sup>395</sup> See e.g. Desmond, 1993, 65; Knox, 1995, 202.

<sup>396</sup> For such arguments, see e.g. Jacobson, 1974, 93; Gross, 1979, 310, 313; Hill, 2004, 123.

<sup>397</sup> As noted by Desmond, 1993, 58, 65.

<sup>398</sup> Hill, 2004, 140.

truly tragic figure in Dido. Like the women of the Greek tragedies before her, she realised that the only way out was death, and she also like them, could assert some independence of action in deciding how and when she should die.

## ii. *Heroides* 2: Phyllis

The story of Phyllis and Demophoon is not known from Homer and was apparently not dramatised in Greek tragedy. It is most likely that Ovid knew the story from Callimachus and that the tale was a popular one in antiquity. It is also attested in Hyginus (at 243.6), Servius and Apollodorus, who all confirm she killed herself, with the first two giving the method of hanging.<sup>399</sup> In brief, Phyllis, a Thracian princess, fell in love with Demophoon, son of Theseus and Phaedra, and the two were married in Thrace. Demophoon left her, apparently homesick for Athens, but promised to return to her at a set time. When Phyllis realised he would not be returning, she hanged herself and this letter is written as though she is just about to kill herself.<sup>400</sup>

Most of the epistle is Phyllis' account of her suffering in her abandonment, and Demophoon's deception of her as he had even set a specific time for his return (*promissum tempus* 2). She complains about his treatment of her when she was so welcoming and accommodating to him in Thrace, fearing he may have met with some disaster while he has been away, and then imagining he might now have found a new bride. As Knox notes, from line 91 onwards, like Dido she too is

---

<sup>399</sup> See Jacobson, 1974, 58; Fulkerson, 2002, 146-8; Knox, 2002, 130; Palmer, 2005, 289.

<sup>400</sup> Synopses of all the stories for *Heroides* 1-15 are available at Spentzou, 2003, xi-xx.

resigned to the fact that he will not come back to her and so makes no attempt to persuade him to do so.<sup>401</sup>

From line 131 to the end of the letter, Phyllis states her intentions to commit suicide. One commentator has said of this passage that 'Phyllis takes over so completely the role of narrator that one almost expects a description of her hanging',<sup>402</sup> although of course this cannot be the case. Particularly notable here is the lengthy discourse on the different ways in which she might kill herself. First, she contemplates throwing herself into the sea and drowning:

hinc mihi suppositas inmittere corpus in undas  
mens fuit; et, quoniam fallere pergis, erit.  
ad tua me fluctus proiectam litora portent,  
occurramque oculis intumulata tuis! (133-6)

She attaches blame to Demophoon for her death. It is because he goes on deceiving her (*fallere pergis*) that she will die. The emphatic positioning of *erit*, 'it will be', at the end of line 134 indicates her resolve and the idea that she will definitely die very soon. In a similar way to Dido describing Aeneas seeing her dead body, Phyllis also wishes for Demophoon to see her: the sea is to carry her specifically to his part of the world (*tua....litora*). There is not the graphic bloody image of her body, but still, he will have to see her unburied (*intumulata*) corpse.

Phyllis then imagines other forms of dying:

---

<sup>401</sup> Knox, 1995, 129.

<sup>402</sup> Knox, 1995, 136.

saepe venenorum sitis est mihi; saepe cruenta  
traiectam gladio morte perire iuvat.  
colla quoque, infidis quia se nectenda lacertis  
praebuerunt, laqueis implicuisse iuvat. (139-42)

Knox describes Ovid's use of language here as 'graphic and luxuriant'.<sup>403</sup> It is not simply that Phyllis has considered taking poison, but that she has a violent craving, a thirst, for it (*sitis*). Stabbing herself would actually be pleasing (*iuvat*). The use of *cruenta* gives the reader a vivid image of her blood stains. There is a further slur against Demophoon, who embraced her with 'unfaithful arms' (*infidis lacertis*). Finally, the reader is given what they know to be her actual method of suicide, hanging (*laqueis implicuisse*). And yet even this also pleases her, as suggested by the repetition of *iuvat*.

To end the epistle, just as Dido also ends hers, Phyllis imagines what will be written on her tomb:

PHYLLIDA DEMOPHOON LETO DEDIT HOSPES AMANTEM;  
ILLE NECIS CAVSAM PRAEBVIT, IPSA MANVM. (147-8)

Here there is a clear indication that Phyllis sees Demophoon as fully responsible for her death. In line 147 his very name is juxtaposed with *letus*, 'death', and in line 148 the pronoun referring back to him, *ille*, is again juxtaposed with a word for death,

---

<sup>403</sup> Knox, 1995, 138.

*necis*. From Dido's epitaph there is the repetition of *causam* and *praebuit*. Anyone reading this epitaph would know of Demophoon's role in bringing about Phyllis' death. However, it is still Phyllis who at the very end decided on her fate. It may have been Demophoon was the cause, but she died by her own hand.<sup>404</sup>

Scholars have often approached *Heroides* 2 in light of the similarities with *Heroides* 7; some of these have already been noted above. It is clear that like Dido's letter, Ovid gives Phyllis the opportunity to explain her thought processes that lead to the final act of suicide.<sup>405</sup> One scholar argues that Ovid creates a fully sympathetic version of Phyllis, who unlike some of the other heroines, displays genuine and not excessive emotion and retains some composure.<sup>406</sup> Fulkerson comments that Ovid can add to the tragic irony of his work because in some versions of the story Demophoon actually did return to Phyllis; thus here, she has decided on death unnecessarily and prematurely. Fulkerson also, viewing the women as the actual writers of their tales, suggests that Phyllis is 'seduced' by the stories of the other abandoned women into taking her own life. Seeing how their myths played out, Phyllis felt she had no other option but suicide.<sup>407</sup>

It is clear, then, that Ovid was trying to add to the pathos of Phyllis' story. Perhaps she could have had a happy ending, but Ovid precludes any notion of this happening by portraying her as a woman wholly determined on death. He even goes into explicit detail about how she might die. Furthermore, as her epitaph

---

<sup>404</sup> Rosenmeyer argues that the attempts of Phyllis, Dido and Sappho to write their own death scenes and obituaries are attempts to 'retain to the last moment whatever slight control they have left over their own lives' (1997, 41).

<sup>405</sup> Knox, 1995, 112.

<sup>406</sup> Jacobson, 1974, 62-5, 75. See also Fulkerson, 2002, 152-7.

<sup>407</sup> Fulkerson, 2002 and 2005, 23-8. Although as noted above, all versions of the myth had her commit suicide anyway.

makes clear, her death was controlled by a male. It might have been her own hand that was used, but Demophoon is the only subject of the epitaph and as such Phyllis appears powerless before him.<sup>408</sup> She seems less in control of her death than Dido is of hers, and the similarities evident between the two women serves to highlight this point further. Is Ovid engaging with contemporary concerns here about uncontrolled female behaviour and moves towards women being brought back firmly under the control of men, i.e. the state?<sup>409</sup> This is not to say that Ovid advocates such moves, only that it is possible he is participating in contemporary debates about such issues.

### iii. *Heroides* 9: Deianira

It is clear that there are many intertextual allusions to Sophocles' *Trachiniae* in *Heroides* 9; however, this does not mean that Ovid followed the play to the letter.<sup>410</sup> Ovid's audience would have been familiar with the Greek original: Deianira had inadvertently brought about the death of her husband Heracles by sending him a poisoned cloak, and killed herself once she found out he was dying. This first part of this epistle concerns Deianira's complaints about Heracles' prolonged absence, and by the fact that now he is to return home, he is also bringing a new love interest, Iole, with him. Thus Deianira is in a different situation to the other women in that she knows her lover is returning; her grievances are with the length of time he abandoned her and his having found someone else. She sends him the cloak,

---

<sup>408</sup> As noted by Lindheim, 2003, 106.

<sup>409</sup> On this, see pp. 31-4.

<sup>410</sup> See Jacobson, 1974, 236-7; Palmer, 2005, 359; Fulkerson, 2005, 109.

which she believes to be a love charm, to try and regain his affections. Hence Deianira can be seen to be more assertive than the other women and at least makes a concerted effort to try and rebuild her relationship.

Uniquely in the *Heroides*, an external event occurs, which causes the writer to dramatically change her stance.<sup>411</sup> At line 143 Deianira hears a rumour, *fama*, that Heracles is dying, having been poisoned by the cloak she sent him. Deianira is overcome with shock and despair, posing to herself the question: *in pia quid dubitas Deianira mori?* ('why, wicked Deianira, do you hesitate to die?' 146). In a reversal from what we have witnessed with both Dido and Phyllis, it is the female figure here who is the *causa* of the male's death (148), and must therefore also die herself. In deciding on this, Deianira hopes to prove that she deserves the title of wife of Heracles (149-50). She then repeats the rhetorical question of line 146. She has gone from being a wife bemoaning her husband's absence and mistresses, to a woman set on ending her life as quickly as possible.

Deianira recalls the suicide of her mother, whom she now sees as a precedent for herself. Her mother Althea 'thrust a sword through her own breast' (*exegit ferrum sua per praecordia* 157).<sup>412</sup> Her question is repeated twice again in lines 158 and 164, and the letter ends with her saying goodbye to her family. Vessey believes that this letter is 'totally lacking in tragic intensity'.<sup>413</sup> And yet, the reader knows that directly after she has finished writing this letter, Deianira does actually commit suicide. Much of the understanding of this text and Deianira's actions comes from the reader's knowledge of the story in Sophocles' version and

---

<sup>411</sup> As noted by Knox (2002, 132).

<sup>412</sup> In the *Trachiniae* Deianira uses a sword to kill herself: see p. 130.

<sup>413</sup> Vessey, 1969, 354.

by allusions to the tragedian's work, Ovid inserts his narrative into that of the tragedy. Furthermore, Ovid creates tragic irony because throughout the epistle up to line 143, the reader knows that Heracles is dying, and dying because of Deianira's deeds. She believes she can win Heracles back, but he is suffering because of her.<sup>414</sup>

Lindheim reasons that Ovid drew on Sophocles' characterisation of a somewhat passive Deianira in the *Trachiniae*, but that he also brought about a change in her attitude after she learnt that Heracles was dying.<sup>415</sup> This is apparent in her acceptance of responsibility for Heracles' suffering, as well as her speedy decision to end her life. She is now in control of her fate, and although this is in tragic circumstances, at least she is no longer subject to abandonment or humiliation by a male. Deianira failed to rekindle her relationship with Heracles and unwittingly caused his death. However, instead of prolonging her lamenting any further, she actively decides to take charge and this means suicide. Like Dido, Deianira regains some independence by making this decision. Even when suicide *is* the only way out, this does not mean that the figure committing suicide cannot remain in control.

#### iv. *Heroides* 11: Canace

The story of the incestuous relationship between Canace and her brother Macareus provides the backdrop to this letter. Scholars are agreed that Ovid based this poem on Euripides' *Aeolus*, a tragedy from which we now have only surviving

---

<sup>414</sup> See Casali, 1995, 505-7.

<sup>415</sup> Lindheim, 2003, 65. Although in the Greek version too, Deianira does attempt to win back Heracles' love and also commits suicide.

fragments.<sup>416</sup> In brief, Canace had an affair with her brother and had a child by him. When their father, Aeolus, found out about the baby he ordered Canace to commit suicide. This letter records Canace's final thoughts during the very moments before she is about to stab herself. However, the evidence of the story we have suggests that Macareus managed to persuade Aeolus to relent, after revealing he was the father, and yet arrived too late to prevent Canace from killing herself. He too then committed suicide.

There are no preliminaries to Canace's plight: from the very start she speaks about her imminent death, with *caede* referring to her dead body or blood (2). She mentions the fact that in her hand she already holds a 'drawn sword' (*strictum ferrum* 3). We are made aware of the fact that her father ordered her suicide as she calls him the *auctor* of the deed in line 8. Again she refers to the sword in her specifically feminine hand: the alliteration and juxtaposition of *ferrum/feminea* (19-20) emphasises the contrast between the weapon and 'opposing quality of the hand that holds it'.<sup>417</sup> Canace goes on to describe the pain of childbirth. Even then, she felt death was imminent, indicated by the repetition of *mors* in lines 55 and 56. When Aeolus discovered the baby he had him abandoned in the open; Canace was forced to listen to the child's crying (83-5).

Canace explicitly says that her father sent a guard with a sword, trusting that she would know what to do with it (95-6). She says:

scimus, et utemur violento fortiter ense;

---

<sup>416</sup> See e.g. Jacobson, 1974, 160; Williams, 1992, 201; Knox 1995, 257; Reeson, 2001, 38; Palmer, 2005, 381.

<sup>417</sup> Reeson, 2001, 48.

pectoribus condam dona paterna meis. (97-8)

The graphic language here highlights Canace's bitterness towards her father as well as her determination to kill herself. She will act boldly (*fortiter*), using the 'violent sword' (*violento ense*).<sup>418</sup> Ovid gives a visual image of her plunging the knife into her breast, an image all the more distressing because the weapon was a 'gift' from her father. Finally, towards the end of the letter, Canace imagines the suffering her child will have gone through and concludes:

ipsa quoque infantis cum vulnere prosequar umbras

nec mater fuero dicta nec orba diu. (119-20)

She is keen to join her child in death, and will 'strike the wound' herself (*ipsa....cum vulnere*).<sup>419</sup> The reader is left in no doubt that as soon as she has finished writing this letter, Canace intends to stab herself with the sword she holds at this moment in her hand.

A major factor in Ovid creating a truly tragic heroine in this *Heroides* is his decision not to focus on the incestuous aspect of her relationship with her brother.<sup>420</sup> Furthermore, unlike the earlier versions of the story which imply that Macareus either raped or seduced Canace, here she fully reciprocates his love for her: she says she too was passionately in love with him (25). In fact, it is likely that

---

<sup>418</sup> Phraseology very inappropriate for a young girl (Jacobson, 1974, 170).

<sup>419</sup> Following Knox's translation (1995, 275).

<sup>420</sup> As noted by Casali, 1998, 701; Philippides, 1996, 426-7, 430.

this romanticised version of events was Ovid's innovation.<sup>421</sup> Both these points downplay the potentially immoral elements of the myth, as well as ensuring that Canace comes across as an innocent victim, unlucky-in-love. The misery she has had to go through with the abandonment of her child further heightens the pathos of her situation. It is possible also that in Euripides' play more was made of the incestuous relationship between Canace and her brother.<sup>422</sup> By not stressing this fact in his work, Ovid instead draws the audience more to the tragedy of the couple rather than the immorality of their relationship.

Ovid also plays on his readers' knowledge of Euripides' *Aeolus* to deepen the tragic irony. As mentioned above, Macareus convinced Aeolus to relent. We must assume, then, that Canace writes this tormented final letter at the very same time that her brother actually succeeds in saving her life, and that he then rushed to tell her the news. Of course he arrived too late and also commits suicide.<sup>423</sup> We can assume in Euripides that the conversation between the two men happened on-stage, and insert Canace's suicide as an off-stage action. Then, presumably a messenger or Macareus himself reported her death on-stage; the reader appreciates this irony all the more for knowing these events of the Greek play. In allowing centre-stage to Canace and emphasising her suffering and determination to die, Ovid creates in her an even more tragic figure than she would have appeared to a spectator of Euripides' production. The fact that his readers knew the ending does not spoil his conception of Canace as a tragic heroine; on the contrary, it increases her stature as a truly pathetic figure.

---

<sup>421</sup> As noted by Jacobson, 1974, 163; Casali, 1998, 701; Philippides, 1996, 428; Fulkerson, 2005, 68.

<sup>422</sup> Casali, 1998, 706.

<sup>423</sup> See Williams, 1992, 207; Knox, 1995, 257; Casali, 1998, 707; Fulkerson, 2005, 70-1.

There is evidence to suggest that Euripides' play caused a scandal when produced in Athens.<sup>424</sup> Is this one of the reasons why Ovid chose it as a model for *Heroides* 9? He was certainly not afraid to offer his own interpretation of those tales that involved issues such as incest, as *Heroides* 4, based on Euripides' *Hippolytus*, also demonstrates. If Jacobson is to be believed in his argument that Canace was only a peripheral character in Euripides, Ovid also succeeded in giving a strong voice to a previously subdued figure. Thus at the same time as promoting the tragedy of Canace's story and focusing on the premature nature of her brave suicide, Ovid again permitted a defeated figure to convey her final thoughts. Her suicide proved to be a last act of defiance against those who had maltreated her; however, it is clear that at the time of writing at least, it was the only choice left to her. Suicide was the only way of escape, and the only way of regaining some autonomy.

#### v. *Heroides* 15: Sappho

Sappho is the only non-mythological figure in the *Heroides* corpus. As such, her letter must be approached very differently to the other letters. For example, it is clear that in *Heroides* 15 there are some intertextual links with Sappho's own poetry. However, the story of Sappho's love for Phaon, the addressee of this letter, and her supposed suicide, is not known from any surviving fragments of her work. It is likely instead that Ovid was influenced by one of the lost comedies on the poet,

---

<sup>424</sup> See Knox, 1995, 258; Palmer, 2005, 381.

or perhaps by Hellenistic biographies.<sup>425</sup> Either way, it must be remembered that here, as with all the *Heroides*, Ovid treats these stories as though they are well-known, and so his Roman audience must have been aware of such rumours surrounding Sappho's demise.

Sappho is told that if she wants to cure her passionate love for Phaon, she needs to leap from the Leucadian cliff. She is informed, however, that this will not kill her, but only cure her and she will emerge unscathed (163-72). Yet Sappho does think that she may die if she goes ahead with the jump (179-80). She would rather be saved by Phaon returning to her. If he does not, and Sappho were to die (*si moriar* 189), Phaon would be due the distinction (*titulum* 189) of being the cause of her death, an idea echoed from the same language used by Dido for Aeneas in *Heroides* 7. She ends the letter by entreating him to tell her whether he intends to return or not. If he does not, she wants to know so that 'her destiny may be sought in the Leucadian sea' (*mihi Leucadiae fata petantur aquae* 220).

The epistle ends ambiguously. Sappho clearly intends to leap from the Leucadian cliff, but does she believe this will lead to her death or not? Fulkerson has argued that she does not believe this jump will end her life; Knox suggests that the use of *fata* in conjunction with *petantur* indicates that it is her destiny, and not necessarily her death, that is being sought.<sup>426</sup> As noted above though, there are some clear indications from the text that Sappho has at least considered the possibility that she may be committing suicide should she jump into the sea. And her reasoning for doing this is not dissimilar from those already witnessed: like

---

<sup>425</sup> See Jacobson, 1974, 280-1; Knox, 1995, 278.

<sup>426</sup> Fulkerson, 2005, 156; Knox, 1995, 315.

Dido, Phyllis and Deianira she feels abandoned by her lover, and like the first two she also sees fit to place the blame for her predicament on the male figure.

Nevertheless, Fulkerson's idea that Sappho is perhaps 'too much of her own poet to suffer the usual fate of the women of the *Heroides*' is an appealing one.<sup>427</sup> Perhaps in this final single letter Ovid was giving his readers a glimmer of hope that not all women would be frustrated and eradicated from the scene because of unsuccessful love affairs? Or was this 'hope' directed at Sappho simply because she was a fellow poet?

#### vi. Suicide suppressed?

Out of the thirteen remaining heroines of the *Heroides*, four at least were popularly known to have committed suicide in the original telling of their myths: Phaedra, Oenone, Laodamia and Hero. However, suicide is not the focus of their stories as related by Ovid. He follows Euripides' *Hippolytus* closely for his depiction of Phaedra (*Heroides* 4).<sup>428</sup> And yet his Phaedra can be positioned in an earlier part of the story. She has not yet tried to seduce Hippolytus into having an affair with her, and thus has not yet decided on suicide. In fact, compared to the other women, she has a more positive outlook on her relationship with her addressee. Ovid could have penned the letter she left behind for Theseus, blaming Hippolytus for her death. Perhaps he explored Phaedra's thoughts at an earlier stage partly as

---

<sup>427</sup> Fulkerson, 2005, 158.

<sup>428</sup> Palmer, 2005, 305.

an experiment within the *Heroides*; after all, Phaedra is the only one of the women not to have been abandoned by her lover but seeking to forge a new relationship.

Oenone (*Heroides* 5) was known to have killed herself from Hellenistic literature, including Parthenius and Lycophron. She refused to help Paris at Troy, but then arrived to find him dead and killed herself.<sup>429</sup> Morton's article discusses how Ovid characterises Oenone very differently to how other sources had approached the myth. Ovid's figure is defiant and strong, whereas the other sources focused on Paris' death and her guilt over it.<sup>430</sup>

For his portrayal of Laodamia (*Heroides* 13) Ovid possibly drew on another Euripidean play, his *Protesilaus*.<sup>431</sup> From sources such as Hyginus (104.3; 243.3), we know that Laodamia killed herself after discovering her husband Protesilaus had been the first one to be killed at Troy. Ovid, though, situates her at the point where Protesilaus is still alive, not yet arrived at Troy as Laodamia begs him to return home. She has heard the prophecy about the first Greek arriving in Troy's death, but does not know that this will be Protesilaus. As Lyne remarks, she is on the 'brink of tragedy', but not quite there yet.<sup>432</sup>

The story of Hero and Leander (*Heroides* 18 and 19) is first known from Vergil's *Eclogues*. In Servius' commentary on this, he comments that she committed suicide by throwing herself from a tower after seeing Leander's drowned body. Ovid was probably influenced by an unknown Hellenistic account of this myth.<sup>433</sup> He can be accredited with a narrative giving the first major focus to

---

<sup>429</sup> Knox, 1995, 140.

<sup>430</sup> Morton, 1999.

<sup>431</sup> Palmer, 2005, 401.

<sup>432</sup> Lyne, 1998, 208.

<sup>433</sup> Kenney, 1996, 9-10.

Hero rather than Leander.<sup>434</sup> Although there are occasional references to Hero's death (for example at 18.200, 19.8, 19.105, 19.117), events have not yet progressed to the stage where she finds his corpse washed up on her beach.

In each of these cases Ovid had the opportunity to explore these women's thought processes as they were on the verge of suicide, as he does with the other women discussed above. He could have portrayed the suicidal Laodamia and Hero as they learned of their lovers' deaths; arguably this would have been less possible with Oenone as she discovered Paris on the battlefield and killed herself at the same spot. However, these women are still very much a part of the 'suicidal world' of the *Heroides*.<sup>435</sup> Ovid plays on his readers' knowledge of these myths from their earlier retelling(s) and, as a result, they know these women will commit suicide anyway, regardless of their circumstances as depicted in the letters. And perhaps this affects an even more tragic reading of these female figures: they are not yet aware of their fates and therefore represent deeply sympathetic figures.<sup>436</sup>

There is no doubt that the themes of death and suicide pervade the *Heroides*. Although Ovid cannot display the actual suicides of any of these women, his intertextual engagement with earlier versions of the myths means that his audience know these suicides were actually carried through. His often graphic language also gives a very real feel to the various descriptions of suicide, and intensifies the pathos of many of these women's desperate situations. Ovid's intertextual connections ensure that his readers recall the backgrounds to these

---

<sup>434</sup> Kenney, 1998, 71.

<sup>435</sup> A phrase borrowed from Fulkerson (2005, 84).

<sup>436</sup> Although these letters cannot then be described as 'suicide notes' like the ones discussed above.

stories. However, in many cases he was also attempting to challenge the values of the texts he drew on, and by doing so invite his readers to act as literary critics to these texts.<sup>437</sup> By putting forward a female viewpoint and eliminating the male's, Ovid positioned himself against literary norms: his 'heroes' were female, not male – a reversal of the gender roles traditionally expected of both sexes.

In his work on Ovid and his Augustan context, White says that he does not discuss the *Heroides* because they do not obviously implicate the Augustan milieu. And yet some social and political considerations can be understood from an examination of this work. Jacobson argues that Ovid was influenced by Euripides to such an extent because his attitudes were similar to the Athenian playwright's. Ovid was 'only too ready to adopt a Euripidean pose in opposition to policy and dogma' and the *Heroides* are 'in their deheroisation of the mythic material and in their rejection of the male viewpoint, a denial of the Augustan (and Vergilian, at least as envisioned in the *Aeneid*) ideal'. McKinley maintains that Ovid may have utilised females in the poems he wrote to provide a challenge to Augustus' moral regime.<sup>438</sup>

In the *Heroides* Ovid made efforts to subvert the moral ideology of his contemporary Rome. The exploration of female suicide in itself aided these efforts: while Augustus was trying to curb adultery and encourage reproduction, Ovid was discussing women stabbing themselves. Or, more specifically, he was discussing women reflecting on the implications of their suicide (presumably a subject not normally deliberated amongst the Roman female population). Furthermore, the very idea that all that was left for these women was to kill themselves did not

---

<sup>437</sup> Knox, 2002, 133-4.

<sup>438</sup> White, 2002, 10 n.25; Jacobson, 1974, 7; McKinley, 2001, 13: see pp. 32-4 on Augustus' moral legislation.

reflect well on the society of his day. Farrell sees in the *Heroides* Ovid's connection between the life of a poet and the life of women; both try to put their viewpoint across against attempts to silence them.<sup>439</sup> Of course with the *Heroides*, this is doubly true as the letters are written by writers who are female. And they may be allowed to share their perspectives, but in the end only death awaits. Their voices are those of resistance, but are then frustrated and in the end eradicated by their own hands out of desperation. Any attempt to challenge Augustan ideals cannot be successful. However, by portraying them in the act of suicide, Ovid at least allows them some defiance and nobility before this happens. Ovid has taken the idea of suicide being a noble, often heroic, deed from tragic discourses and applied it to the women of his *Heroides* in order to explore gender roles and behaviour and the morals and ethics of the suicide act.

### 3. Seneca's tragedies

Between the great dramas written by Euripides and Sophocles in the fifth century BC and the first century AD there were many retellings of the myths on which Seneca based his dramas. Ovid was a poet who influenced Seneca in many ways; *Phaedra* owes much to *Heroides* 4.<sup>440</sup> However, undoubtedly the Athenian tragedies (themselves retellings of earlier workings of the myths) were the key precedents that Seneca had in mind when he wrote his own versions of them, and it is the developments he makes with his female figures from these that are

---

<sup>439</sup> Farrell, 1998, 338.

<sup>440</sup> See Gahan, 1988.

explored below. It is not clear when exactly Seneca wrote his plays, although his experiences of being so close to the centre of power at Rome may have played an important role in influencing both the nature and scope of his literary output.<sup>441</sup>

A major source of conflict in scholarship on Seneca's plays is the debate on whether they were written for the theatre or smaller productions. Arguments range from those who believe that they were written for large-scale performances in the theatre, to those who maintain that they were only ever intended for recitations at small gatherings, and possibly only in piecemeal form, to others who go for the middle ground but accept that even in smaller settings an acting-out of scenes or the whole drama by several characters may have been possible.<sup>442</sup> The debate is not easily solved and there is no intention here to do so. However, these important points should be noted: tragedies would have been staged during and after Seneca's lifetime and there is no reason why his should not have been performed.<sup>443</sup> Moreover, the unknown make-up of the audience does not impact a great deal on the arguments outlined below. In fact, had Seneca written his plays only for a small, elite audience, the points he was making about the current state of this very part of society would have been even more incisive.

Seneca's dramas are well-known for their reflection of contemporary thought and events. An important theme in his plays is that of power, particularly its abuse.<sup>444</sup> He was very close to those in power at different stages of his life and as

---

<sup>441</sup> See Fitch, 2002, 10-13. Erasmo argues that most were probably written before Nero's principate (2004, 123).

<sup>442</sup> For the former, see e.g. Roisman, 2000, 73. For the second, see e.g. Frank, 1995, 121 n.3; Mayer, 2002, 16-17. For the latter, see e.g. Ahl, 1986, 26-7; Fitch, 2002, 19-21; Schiesaro, 2005, 278-9; Boyle, 2006, 193.

<sup>443</sup> As Erasmo points out (2004, 123).

<sup>444</sup> See e.g. Ahl, 1986, 18; Schiesaro, 2005, 280.

such was in a position to know the extent to which it was misused. His plays could be seen, then, as a medium to explore the ways in which those who were targeted by tyranny might fight back. In his philosophical works, Seneca often discusses death in general and suicide specifically.<sup>445</sup> On the one hand, Seneca believed that suicide was the ‘ultimate guarantee of freedom’ and often viewed individuals as dying virtuously if this was in defiance of unjust and despotic commands.<sup>446</sup> He advises those men ‘in the grip of tyrannical circumstances’ that they have a possibility of freedom through death, even listing in one work the various ways in which they might achieve this.<sup>447</sup> On the other hand, he could also criticise those who committed suicide when they were motivated by the wrong factors, such as a ‘desire for death’ or ‘hatred for life’:<sup>448</sup> this suggests that at times, Seneca had an ambivalent attitude towards suicide.<sup>449</sup>

Dramatic spectacle and the grotesque were popular aspects of Roman life in the first century AD, and people expected to be able to view these at the theatre and in the arena.<sup>450</sup> We should therefore perhaps not be surprised that Seneca portrayed women killing themselves on-stage. On the other hand, as Fitch has pointed out, there are actually only four deaths on-stage in all of Seneca’s eight extant plays. Two of these are the murder of Jason and Medea’s sons in the *Medea*,

---

<sup>445</sup> On references to death see Edwards, 2007, 86-90; Ker, 2009, 73-5. References to suicide appear at, among other, *Epistulae*, 4.4, 4.8, 9.3, 22.3-6, 22.16, 26.8-10, 66.13, 70.11-16, 77.19-20; *De vita beata*, 19.1, 20.5; *De ira*, 3.15.3-4; *De Consolatione ad Marciam*, 20.1-6; *Phoenissae*, 63-79. On Cato, the ‘exemplum for suicide’ as Seneca sees it (Ker, 2009, 255; see also Hill, 2004, 179; Inwood, 2005, 306) see e.g. *Epistulae*, 95.69-73; *De providentia*, 2.10. For a detailed discussion of Seneca’s views on suicide, particularly in *Epistulae*, 70, see Ker, 2009, Chapter 8; see also Hill, 2004, 151-7; Inwood, 2005, 306-12; Edwards, 2007, 98-107.

<sup>446</sup> Fitch, 2002, 23; Hill, 2004, 152.

<sup>447</sup> Inwood, 2005, 307 on *De ira*, 3.15.4.

<sup>448</sup> See e.g. *Epistulae*, 24.22-5 (Ker, 2009, 249). See also Hill, 2004, 175-8; Edwards, 2007, 104-5. For Seneca’s own suicide see pp. 212-14.

<sup>449</sup> On this ambivalence, see Edwards, 2007, 105-7.

<sup>450</sup> Mayer, 2002, 31; Benton, 2002, 40.

and the other two are the suicides of Phaedra and Jocasta.<sup>451</sup> Seneca's prominent portrayal of these female figures could then also relate to the real-life prominence of important women such as Messalina and Agrippina. The fact that both Phaedra and Jocasta are involved in sexual wrong-doings might also reflect Seneca's participation in current debates about acceptable and unacceptable female behaviour.<sup>452</sup>

i. *Phaedra*

In Phaedra's first appearance in the play, she bemoans her fate of being abandoned in Athens while her husband Theseus is constantly absent (91ff.). But, Phaedra claims, it is not this that distresses her the most. A 'greater pain' (*maior dolor* 99) causes her suffering:

non me quies nocturna, non altus sopor,  
solvere curis. alitur et crescit malum  
et ardet intus, qualis Aetnaeo vapor  
exundat antro. Palladis telae vacant  
et inter ipsas pensa labuntur manus. (100-4)

She is unable to sleep at night. Evil consumes her very being: three verbs describe its effect on her, as it nourishes (*alitur*), thrives (*crescit*) and burns (*ardet*) within

---

<sup>451</sup> Fitch, 2002, 17-18.

<sup>452</sup> On this see pp. 31-5.

her. Not only this, but she is also neglecting her wifely duties as she fails to weave.<sup>453</sup> Her Nurse tries to persuade her to forget about her passion, and is explicit on what it would amount to: a novel sexual relationship (*novos concubitus* 170).

Phaedra tells the Nurse that she understands her viewpoint and is aware of the immoral nature of her desire for her stepson Hippolytus. However, she is now compelled (*cogit*) by *furor* to follow this passion (178). In a quick exchange with the Nurse (239ff.), Phaedra discounts all the Nurse's arguments that Hippolytus will never reciprocate her love, believing she can overcome his qualms about her sex and status as his mother-in-law. Then, Phaedra appears to have been defeated and now says that she does not want her reputation to be tainted (*maculari* 252) and that she must defend her chastity (261). We now witness her first resolution to die:

haec sola ratio est, unicum effugium mali:

virum sequamur, morte praevertam nefas. (253-4)

In order to escape from this evil, death is the only (repeated twice - *sola* and *unicum*) way out. She can prevent this *nefas* from coming to fruition only by death.

When her Nurse attempts to contain Phaedra's death-wish, Phaedra's reply is emphatic, and she discusses how she might kill herself:

decreta mors est: quaeritur fati genus.

---

<sup>453</sup> Roisman links such a scene with Penelope (2005, 76). Surely a Roman audience, however, would be reminded more of the weaving Lucretia preyed upon by Sextus Tarquinius.

laqueone vitam finiam an ferro incubem,  
an missa praeceps arce Palladia cadam? (258-60)

She is now resolved on death. She wonders whether to hang herself, use a sword or throw herself from the citadel. The fact that Phaedra now contemplates how to commit suicide indicates she knows both that her love for Hippolytus is wrong, and that nothing may come of it. However, the scene ends with the Nurse suggesting that she will go and speak to Hippolytus for Phaedra (271-3). It is she who has now taken control of the situation, and Phaedra's fate is no longer in her own hands.

In the next act, the Nurse tries to tempt Hippolytus away from his chaste lifestyle. But her entreaties come to nothing as he remarks, 'I loathe all women, dread them, shun them, detest them' (*detestor omnes, horreo fugio execror* 566). Phaedra enters the scene and at first faints, and her death is foreshadowed as the Nurse remarks that her face is covered with a colour similar to death (*ora morti similis obduxit color* 586). Once she has been roused, Phaedra decides that she must tell Hippolytus how she feels and asks to speak with him in private (592-600). First she entreats him to 'accept the king's sceptre' (*mandata recipe sceptrum* 617) as she suggests that Theseus may not return, and she will be left a *vidua* (623). This tricks Hippolytus into saying that he will take his father's place until his return (630-3).

To herself, Phaedra bemoans this 'gullible hope of lovers' and 'deceptive love' (*o spes amantum credula, o fallax Amor* 634), as this is what she was been wanting Hippolytus to agree to for some time. Realising she needs to reveal more though, she tells him of her love for him. She tells Hippolytus of her *pectus insanum*

(641) and the *ferus/...ignis* (642-3) that has taken hold deep in the core of her body. Hippolytus is at first confused, thinking that she is frenzied by her pious love for Theseus (*amore nempe Thesei casto furis* 645), with the use of *casto* emphasising his belief that her present state is due to a pure and chaste love that a woman should feel for her husband. However, Phaedra then elaborates and divulges her love for Hippolytus, revealing that she knows that today will either end her pain or her life (670).

Unsurprisingly Hippolytus is repulsed by her advances. He exclaims that she excels 'the entire female race' with her crime (*o scelere vincens omne femineum genus* 687) and surpasses the evil even of her mother (Pasiphae) who had *only* (*tantum*) committed adultery (*illa se tantum stupro/contaminavit* 689-90). It is now Hippolytus who is *castus* (704), whereas Phaedra in his mind has shifted from being pure and chaste to having a shameless touch (*impudicos/...tactus* 704-5).

Hippolytus threatens to take out his sword and kill her (706), but this pleases Phaedra and she tells him to go through with the deed as it would save her honour (*pudor* 711-12). Hippolytus refuses, labelling his sword as 'polluted' (*contactus* 714) and leaves. To cover up Phaedra's guilt, the Nurse shouts out that he tried to attack and rape Phaedra (725-35): it is he who is linked to sexual crimes as the Nurse cries out that he is a plunderer who 'threatens and pursues illicit sexual and wicked acts' (*nefandi raptor Hippolytus stupri/instat premitque* 726-7).

When Theseus returns home in the next act, the Nurse tells him that Phaedra will not be swayed from her decision to die (*tenet obstinatum Phaedra consilium necis/...ac morti imminet* 854-5). Theseus then sees Phaedra holding

Hippolytus' sword and begs her to tell him what has happened (864-8). She refuses to reveal anything until he threatens to harm her Nurse. Then Phaedra, although not yet naming her attacker, clearly implicates a male whom she had tried to resist, and says she had not given in even when he had threatened her or produced a sword (891-3).<sup>454</sup> However, the short sentence *vim tamen corpus tulit* ('nevertheless my body suffered his force' 892) suggests that she was raped. Therefore, she must die so that her blood (*cruor* 893) can wash away her stained chastity (*labem pudoris* 893);<sup>455</sup> an indication, presumably, that she has decided on the sword as the mode of her death. Seneca then has Phaedra specifically incriminate Hippolytus, as she claims that the sword will identify her attacker (896). Theseus curses his son to die.

In the final act, once Hippolytus is dead, Phaedra is clearly distressed at seeing his mangled body (1168ff.). Her determination to die is once again obvious to all:

....hac manu poenas tibi  
solvam et nefando pectori ferrum inseram,  
animaque Phaedram pariter ac scelere exuam. (1176-8)

By her own hand (*manu*) she intends to gain vengeance for Hippolytus. The phrase *nefando pectori ferrum inseram* ('I will drive the sword into my wicked breast') reveals her intentions explicitly, as well as showing her realisation that she is to

---

<sup>454</sup> Boyle sees the link here with Livy, where Lucretia claims that only her body, and not her mind, was violated (1987, 191).

<sup>455</sup> A similar idea used by Tertullian and Jerome when discussing Lucretia: see pp. 266, 268; Ker also links this to Lucretia (2009, 129).

blame. She implores herself to die (1184) and knows that it is the only way she can be free from her evil love (1188). Finally, the audience sees her actually stabbing herself on-stage:

mucrone pectus impium iusto patet

cruorque sancto solvit inferias viro. (1197-8)<sup>456</sup>

Seneca graphically describes how her breast, which is still described as wicked (*impium*), is opened by a 'just sword' (*mucrone iusto*). In dying, Phaedra also attests to Hippolytus' piety.

Seneca drew heavily on Euripides' *Hippolytus* for this play.<sup>457</sup> The basic story as presented by Seneca would have been nothing new to his audience. However, there are several key differences between his portrayal of Phaedra and Euripides'. Most relevant to the study here are the motivations for and attitudes towards suicide, and the actual staging of the suicide itself.<sup>458</sup> As noted above, Phaedra's idea of committing suicide is formulated early on in the play. Once the Nurse makes her see that her passion for Hippolytus can come to nothing, the only solution left for Phaedra is to kill herself. She already understood that her desire for him was wrong, so this must have been an additional factor in her decision on death.

Scholars have viewed this first suicidal intention in different ways. Roisman argues that whereas in Euripides's version, Phaedra first threatened suicide in order

---

<sup>456</sup> We know that Phaedra has actually killed herself, as in his closing speech of the play, Theseus remarks that he has seen two deaths (1214).

<sup>457</sup> Although he was also influenced by Ovid's Phaedra and Vergil's Dido. For the latter see Fantham, 1975 and Hill, 2004, 159, 164.

<sup>458</sup> For other differences see Boyle, 1997, 86-7.

to incite her Nurse to act and speak to Hippolytus for her, Seneca's Phaedra decides on it because it is the only option left to her. She is also manipulated by the Nurse. Hill, on the other hand, suggests that Seneca's Phaedra might be interpreted as first threatening suicide in order to manipulate the Nurse into approaching Hippolytus.<sup>459</sup> It is difficult to assess how 'genuine' Phaedra is being here. From the language used to describe her passion for Hippolytus, it is not surprising to learn that she might want to kill herself considering this can never be reciprocated, and because such desire is fundamentally wrong in the first place. Her fixation on death throughout the play suggests also that she was determined to take her life and it was not merely part of a cunning plan to control her Nurse's movements. Furthermore, it is the Nurse who prevents her from first killing herself, saying they should talk to Hippolytus first, and then the Nurse again who causes further trouble by shouting out that Hippolytus has raped Phaedra.

Then again, Phaedra has much to answer for. There is a huge delay between her first declared intention to die and her actual carrying out of this deed. She could have killed herself after the first act, and ignored the Nurse's pleas and plans to approach Hippolytus. Or perhaps we should not blame her for at least wanting to give this a try first. However, Phaedra could also have committed suicide after the scene with Hippolytus, which would have related more or less to when she carried out this act in Euripides' version. Instead of writing a letter to implicate Hippolytus, Phaedra herself faces Theseus. Her language may be ambiguous here, but she still essentially accuses Hippolytus of raping her.<sup>460</sup>

---

<sup>459</sup> Roisman, 2000, 75, 77; 2005, 78; Hill, 2004, 162.

<sup>460</sup> See e.g. Mayer, 2002, 28, 57; Hill, 2004, 170; Armstrong, 2006, 142-3.

Does Phaedra manage to redeem herself in the end? On some levels, yes: she acknowledges her wickedness and claims that one of her reasons for suicide is to atone for this wickedness.<sup>461</sup> She also reinstates Hippolytus' good reputation. Conversely, she also desires to die so that she might be reunited with Hippolytus in death (1179-84).<sup>462</sup> Hill argues that this is one of two motivating factors for Phaedra: she wants to defend her *pudor* but also die in such a way that she will possess Hippolytus. By committing suicide she will no longer have to justify her thoughts and actions to others and will also be able to reconcile her passion for her stepson with her loyalty to Theseus. In both this and her role as manipulated/manipulator, Hill concludes that Phaedra's characterisation is complex; her motives throughout the play are conflicted as she struggles with her illicit feelings for Hippolytus that conflict with her position in society.<sup>463</sup>

Thus Seneca does not provide his audience with a straightforward character in Phaedra. Furthermore, there is also a sexual element to her death that would seem to incriminate Phaedra. By stabbing herself with Hippolytus' sword, it is as if this stands in for her penetration by him as she failed to tempt him into having sex with her.<sup>464</sup> As Hill observes in this death scene, Phaedra may appear to be atoning for her crimes and facing a suitable punishment, but she also envisages in her death a 'consummation' and a way of making her incestuous union with Hippolytus permanent.<sup>465</sup> On the other hand, arguably Seneca delayed Phaedra's suicide until the end of the play in order to heighten her standing as a pathetic figure and the

---

<sup>461</sup> See Roisman (2005, 79) and Boyle (1997, 80) for the idea of Phaedra redeeming herself.

<sup>462</sup> As Hill points out (2004, 174).

<sup>463</sup> Hill, 2004, 159-61, 174.

<sup>464</sup> Ker, 2009, 129-30.

<sup>465</sup> Hill, 2004, 168-9, 172-4. Ker also notes that Phaedra's death 'both consummates incestuous desire *and* delivers moral penance or even purification' (2009, 130).

tragedy of the play as a whole. Despite the crimes she has committed, she appears truly wretched and genuinely grieved when confronted with the body of Hippolytus, who after all, was the man she passionately loved. She does have the courage to face Theseus and tell him the truth.<sup>466</sup> And, as Mayer points out, Seneca's Phaedra, unlike Euripides', dies knowing how Hippolytus has suffered due to her actions.<sup>467</sup> She is more aware of the consequences of her passions and her suffering is all the greater because of this. Hence, Phaedra's character is flawed in many ways, and yet Seneca can still have her end the play as a tragic figure fully aware of the faults of her nature, an attribute that is not as visible in Euripides' Phaedra who commits suicide at an earlier stage.

Now to look at the staging of the suicide itself. Seneca's Phaedra commits suicide on-stage by stabbing herself. As noted above, Euripides' Phaedra hangs herself off-stage and her death is reported on-stage by others. There are two key differences here. The first is the choice of weapon. A woman using the sword was not unheard of in the original Greek tragedies, but it was certainly less common than the noose. The sword was much more of a Roman method.<sup>468</sup> Furthermore, scholars have linked the confrontation scene between Theseus and Phaedra with the scene in Livy (and Ovid) where Lucretia commits suicide.<sup>469</sup> Phaedra's description of Hippolytus' 'rape' of her is similar in some respects to the way in which Lucretia describes her rape by Sextus Tarquinius (see chapter 1). But,

---

<sup>466</sup> Roisman, 2005, 76.

<sup>467</sup> Mayer, 2002, 46.

<sup>468</sup> See e.g. Langlands, 2006, 184.

<sup>469</sup> As part of Seneca's 'Romanisation' of this play (Boyle, 2006, 203).

Phaedra ultimately fails to be like Lucretia because she has not remained a loyal housewife and has not really been raped.<sup>470</sup>

Seneca's allusions to Rome's celebrated heroine may have been enough to prompt his audience to connect the two women. And if Phaedra does not display the same inherent qualities as Lucretia, at least by killing herself with a sword she can mirror Lucretia's death and by association with her famous suicide regain some nobility for herself.<sup>471</sup> Conversely, a connection between the two women and the differences between Phaedra and Lucretia would have made the former's crimes all the more obvious. As a result, Seneca could have stimulated discussion about undesirable female behaviour and the devastation that might be caused by uncontrolled female sexuality, an issue that was still a prevalent concern at this time.<sup>472</sup>

The other major change in the staging of the suicide from Euripides' play is of course its dramatisation on-stage. As noted above, the only female suicide in the extant Greek tragedies to occur in front of the audience was that of Evadne. And she did not stab herself. Suicides on stage represented something very different from Greek drama, and were part of a Rome where the spectacle of death was commonplace and often something sought after by the spectators.<sup>473</sup> However, viewing a woman stab herself was not quite the same thing as seeing a gladiator killed in the arena, even if she was 'fictional'. Even this might have shocked a

---

<sup>470</sup> See e.g. Boyle, 1997, 79-80; Armstrong, 2006, 153, 157.

<sup>471</sup> There is evidence of plays by Accius and Cassius in the Republican periods entitled Brutus that centred on the rape of Lucretia and the expulsion of the kings of Rome. It is possible then, that Lucretia's suicide had been dramatised on-stage (see Erasmo, 2004, 91-101).

<sup>472</sup> See pp. 31-5.

<sup>473</sup> Ker argues that the Deianira's suicide by the sword in *Hercules Oetaeus*, a tragedy written sometime in the late first century or early second century AD, is not just a moral act but something she 'ought to do as a Senecan heroine, given the Dido-like sword suicides of Phaedra and Jocasta' (2009, 138-9).

Roman audience. Or perhaps Seneca was only dramatising what was actually going on in real life: the next chapter demonstrates that at this time female suicide was at least a very real possibility for the members of the female elite alongside their male counterparts.<sup>474</sup> And yet observing the body of a bloodied female on-stage may still have made some uneasy. But this was undoubtedly Seneca's aim – provoking his contemporaries into debating and discussing the rights and wrongs of a voluntary death.

## ii. *Oedipus*

Jocasta's character in Seneca's *Oedipus* play is not as fully developed as Phaedra's. The audience is not witness to her feelings until right at the end of the play when her notion to suicide first manifests itself. This is because she has no reason to kill herself until she has discovered that she is actually Oedipus' mother and that he killed Laius. The rest of the play follows along similar lines to Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus*. However, with Jocasta's suicide there are again some key differences between Seneca's version and Sophocles' play.

In Sophocles' play, Jocasta hanged herself off-stage after learning the awful truth. Her suicide is reported by a Messenger, who also announces Oedipus' self-blinding. Oedipus then reappears on stage with Creon. In Seneca's drama, a Messenger again reports the self-blinding at the same stage and Oedipus reappears on stage. However, Jocasta also reappears and confronts her son. The Chorus

---

<sup>474</sup> Henry & Henry suggest that Seneca must have been influenced by the fact that many in Rome had killed themselves in recent years (1985, 116).

leader describes her as rushing out (*prosiluit* 1004), fierce (*saeva* 1004) and frenzied (*vecors* 1005). She unwillingly calls Oedipus her son and asks him to speak (1010-12). She tells him that it is fate's fault: *fati ista culpa est* (1019). Jocasta then expresses her intention to die:

quid, anime, torpes? socia cur scelerum dare  
poenas recusas? omne confusum perit,  
incesta, per te iuris humani decus:  
morere et nefastum spiritum ferro exige.  
....mors placet: mortis via  
quaeratur. (1024-7, 1031-2)

She accuses her spirit of being struck numb with fear (*torpes*). Jocasta thinks that she must pay the penalty (*dare poenas*) for her role in the crimes (*scelerum*) that have been committed. Every distinction of human law (*omne iuris humani decus*) has been both obscured and destroyed (*confusum, perit*) by incest. The emphatic position of *incesta* at the start of the line highlights this sinful crime. Therefore she has decided to kill herself with the sword in order to expel (*exige*) her wicked life (*nefastum spiritum*).

Seneca now portrays Jocasta's suicide on-stage:

rapiatur ensis. hoc iacet ferro meus  
coniunx....  
....utrumne pectori infigam meo

telum an patenti conditum iugulo imprimam?

eligere nescis vulnus: hunc, dextra, hunc pete

uterum capacem, qui virum et natos tulit. (1034-5, 1036-9)

The audience can see her take Oedipus' sword (*rapiatur ensis*), a weapon which she now knows also killed Laius. All Jocasta has to do is decide where to stab herself: should she thrust the sword into her breast (*pectori infigam meo*), or into her exposed throat (*patenti iugulo imprimam*)? However, neither of these places will suffice. Instead, she tells her hand to aim for her 'vast womb' (*uterum capacem*), as it has born both her husband and her children. The fact that she has killed herself on-stage is attested by the very next line, spoken by the Chorus leader: *iacet perempta* ('she lies destroyed' 1040). And more than this, the audience are graphically told what they can presumably also see for themselves on stage: 'the excessive blood drives the sword out with it' (*ferrum secum nimius eiecit cruor* 1041).

Once again, Seneca depicts a female stabbing herself on stage. This time, though, Jocasta takes care to stab herself specifically in the womb, which contributes to the pathos of her situation. Despite Jocasta saying that it is fate who is the guilty one, she still cannot bear to live knowing the truth. This understanding of her crimes is highlighted in her death when she chooses the womb as the place to wound herself. However, this detail also emphasises Jocasta's sexual misdemeanours: she pierces herself in the sexual organ that bore Oedipus, but that same place has also more recently carried children that she has had with Oedipus. Arguably a more sympathetic figure than Phaedra, both women share the same

awareness of their destinies before they die. And like Phaedra, Jocasta does not run off stage and kill herself privately. She returns to confront Oedipus and dies bravely in view of everyone, which as noted above, is an innovation from Sophocles' version of events. It is possible also that had he finished his *Phoenissae* drama, Seneca would have portrayed Jocasta's suicide there towards the end, following on from Euripides' *Phoenissae*. In this play, she again refers to her womb in a similar way to the quote from the *Oedipus* above: 'aim for this womb, which gave birth to brothers for my husband' (*hunc petite ventrem, qui dedit fratres viro* 447).<sup>475</sup>

Hind has argued for a direct link here between Jocasta and Oedipus and Agrippina and Nero.<sup>476</sup> Knowing of Nero's fixation on Greek tragedy, especially Oedipus, and the relationship between him and his mother Agrippina, Hind believes that Seneca at least in part modelled his play on the two. He makes some interesting points: that an audience watching the play after Agrippina's death may have seen something of Agrippina in Jocasta; that later writers discussing Agrippina's death possibly took the idea of being stabbed in the womb from this tragedy and applied it to her. It seems unlikely though that Seneca modelled his Jocasta scene on Agrippina's death, as the play was probably written before she died in AD 59. Moreover, Hind's point that Agrippina herself dramatised her own death after seeing Jocasta's in the play seems incredible.<sup>477</sup>

However, the idea remains that Seneca was likely reflecting contemporary events of his day in his dramas. Whether he directly invoked the imperial family or not is unclear. Nonetheless, due to the high murder and suicide count under the

---

<sup>475</sup> As pointed out by Hind, 1972, 76; Boyle, 1997, 101, 104-5.

<sup>476</sup> Boyle also sees this link, but does not develop his argument as fully (1997, 102).

<sup>477</sup> See Hind, 1972, 206-9. For an analysis of Tacitus' description of Agrippina's death scene, see Glendinning, 2010, 97-9.

Julio-Claudian emperors, both under Nero and those who ruled before him, it is possible that in his representation of mythical Greek tragedies, Seneca wanted to make a point about real Roman ones. Seneca permitted both Jocasta and Phaedra to have final speeches and dramatic bloody deaths on-stage. Such scenes must surely have been uncomfortable to watch when the audience were aware of real suicides being committed by women in their own day, often as a result of the tyranny of their emperor. Seneca 'modernised' their deaths as represented by the Greek playwrights so as to bring the reality of the tragedy of suicide to the fore, although the figures of Phaedra and Jocasta were not in the same situation as those women mentioned above in Seneca's day.

Phaedra and Jocasta's suicides are linked with their sexuality; both kill themselves because of the sexual transgressions they have either actively pursued (Phaedra) or unwittingly made (Jocasta). Because of this it could be said that Seneca was demonstrating to his audience the tragic consequences for both the individual family and society as a whole if a woman's sexual behaviour went unchecked (even if that behaviour was unconscious or involuntary).<sup>478</sup> As was discussed in Chapter 1 in relation to Lucretia, this probably did not mean that Seneca wanted his contemporaries to have to resort to suicide to correct this issue; rather, that this was an extreme response to the extreme crimes committed by these women, and that the women (and men) of his day should ensure that female sexuality was controlled sufficiently enough so that an act such as suicide would not be necessary.

---

<sup>478</sup> A concern prevalent in Roman thought and writing for some time now: see pp. 31-5.

### iii. *Troades*

As was noted in the Introduction, an exploration of other categories of voluntary death besides suicide can also reveal much about an author's attitudes towards issues such as morality and power.<sup>479</sup> For this reason, although not strictly a suicide scene, the death of Polyxena in Seneca's *Troades* is worth mentioning here in relation to some of the points just addressed above. After the Trojan war, the Greeks are told by Achilles' ghost that in order to be able to sail home they first need to sacrifice Polyxena. This is performed off-stage and a Messenger gives an account of events. Polyxena is described as lowering her gaze modestly (*pudore* 1138). The whole crowd were moved by the courage of her spirit (*animus fortis*) and her hostility to death (*leto obvius* 1146). The description of her as an *audax virago* (1151), a 'daring heroine', emphasises her bravery even when facing her murderer:<sup>480</sup> this represents something of a blurring of gender roles as the aggressive and martial disposition of Polyxena is emphasised with the use of *virago* juxtaposed with *audax*.

Thus Polyxena has not chosen to die, but she still exhibits great nobility and an almost hostile nature in dying. Boyle comments that it is in her death that 'human greatness shines'; Benton describes her heroism as 'the only power she has in a powerless position'.<sup>481</sup> Scholars have also pointed to the play as a whole being representative of Seneca's decision to reflect contemporary events and feelings. All the female characters of the play have had to suffer the fall of Troy (read Rome) as

---

<sup>479</sup> See pp. 4-5.

<sup>480</sup> As noted by Erasmo (2004, 127).

<sup>481</sup> Boyle, 1997, 69; Benton, 2002, 39.

well as personal humiliation, and yet they have endured. They have been victimised but managed to find some small ways to defy those who have oppressed them; with Polyxena it is in approaching her death defiantly. This may be futile, but their resistance would have been particularly resonant with the Roman elite of the day who must have been aware of the possibility that they might one day have to face the wrath of their emperor. Polyxena's death shows the audience how one might or should act when facing tyranny; and it also points to the flaws of those in power and provides warnings about them.<sup>482</sup>

Seneca was not afraid of staging female death and female thoughts concerning death on-stage. Whether this was in a large theatre to the populace or in a small gathering in an elite *domus*, such scenes would have been important talking-points and prompted shock in their audience's reactions. But this was deliberately done by Seneca. He intentionally changed the timing and portrayal of the suicides of Phaedra and Jocasta from the Greek originals. This was so that he could put his own mark on the tragic genre, particularly as both women die more aware of the consequences of their actions and the suffering of others: in Phaedra's case this is the awful death of Hippolytus, in Jocasta's the self-blinding and deterioration in character of Oedipus. Both commit suicide as more pathetic figures, but also as more defiant and braver women, acting outside of their traditionally expected gender roles. Each has the courage to face the relevant male at death and then kill themselves in plain view of everyone, heightening the pathos of the dramas.

---

<sup>482</sup> See Benton, 2002, 45-8; Panoussi, 2005, 425.

Then again, Seneca is also careful to highlight the sexual crimes committed by both Phaedra and Jocasta and as a result was participating in prevalent discussions about unconstrained sexuality. In her discussion of women in Greek tragedy, Rabinowitz suggests that the Athenian playwrights chose to construct female sexuality as dangerous in order to 'bolster up the masculine and to justify cultural control of female desire'.<sup>483</sup> So too in Seneca's day, it is inevitable that the playwright aimed to explore appropriate and inappropriate sexual behaviour in his plays, and the complex role of women in contemporary society.

Another reason for this change in the staging of female suicide must be to allow Seneca to tap into the current social and political culture of Rome.<sup>484</sup> The work of Tacitus, despite its exaggerations and bias, clearly demonstrates that under the Julio-Claudian emperors, suicide, often of the forced kind, was a not unfamiliar occurrence among the elite. If we believe Tacitus, the supreme power the emperors of Rome now held led to oppressive and cruel measures and it was the Roman elite that suffered the most. Arguably this idea is most recognisable in Seneca's portrayal of Polyxena. Nevertheless, there might be something to be said for linking the suicides of Phaedra and Jocasta with Seneca's views about suicide as a means through which one could (re)assert one's autonomy and moral standing. As Hill has suggested, Seneca took the view that 'the best way to establish oneself as a moral witness in society is the highly ratiocinative and painfully protracted suicide', a view

---

<sup>483</sup> Rabinowitz, 1992, 51.

<sup>484</sup> Tarrant warns against finding references to specific people or events, but agrees that the plays are 'of their time and place in several of their leading themes and preoccupations', e.g. that of 'characters who wield arbitrary and tyrannical power' (1995, 228); Schiesaro makes a similar point (2005, 280); Ker discusses the referentiality of the plays to the Julio-Claudian period, although he too repeats the idea that parallels to specific events can only remain speculative (2009, 127, 138). On political readings of Seneca's plays see also Calder (1976); on Roman and contemporary elements of the plays see Henry & Henry (1985, 169-76).

that was also reflected in society at this time.<sup>485</sup> Phaedra and Jocasta may have had very different reasons for killing themselves to those who committed suicide under the Julio-Claudians, but they too exploited the redeeming value of a suicide in order to regain some moral worth within their communities.

#### 4. Conclusion

Rewritings of Greek tragic female suicides were ubiquitous in Roman literature from different periods and in a variety of genres. The Romans had their own myths and legends, but they still owed a great debt to Greek myth in the provision of material available for the incorporation of interesting stories into their works. But writers such as Ovid and Seneca did not simply provide translations of the Greek originals. They were concerned instead with rewriting and retelling these stories in their own way. The flexibility of what it was to be 'tragic' meant that this was possible; the ambiguity of the act of female suicide in particular also ensured that these myths could be adapted to suit a variety of needs.

The 'Romanisation' of the Greek tragic female suicides manifested itself in a variety of ways. Firstly, the change in society and culture from fifth century BC Athens to Rome of the early Principate resulted in a change in attitudes to the act of suicide. It was arguably a more recurrent phenomenon for more members of the

---

<sup>485</sup> Hill, 2004, 183. See also Edwards, 2007, 42, on the idea repeatedly emphasised by Seneca in *Epistulae* 70 and 77, that committing suicide could be a 'source of freedom for anyone, no matter what their circumstances'.

elite, including women.<sup>486</sup> Thus it is not surprising that writers such as Ovid and Seneca brought the act centre-stage. Secondly, this first point is linked to contemporary culture being reflected in art and literature as a whole. The Attic tragedians may have had some political aims in portraying their tragic women, but one might argue that literary works of the first centuries BC and AD demonstrate a more compelling engagement with the socio-political culture of their day. Finally, the general role of women in society was also very different. The emergence of more conspicuous roles for female figures in society (for example, as property-owners and patrons) from the late Republic onwards,<sup>487</sup> and the new positions created in the imperial family for women such as Livia and Agrippina, resulted in writers making more efforts to consider the nature of such women in their work.<sup>488</sup>

Ovid innovatively gave a voice to women in his *Heroides*. He also pushed the boundaries of traditional female behaviour by allowing these women to discuss death, often in graphic detail. He aimed to give the frustrated and maltreated a strong voice, and a last defiant act in suicide. This was perhaps in part a critique of the new Augustan regime and its silencing of marginalised figures. Parallels to similar feelings of frustration and abandonment are visible in Ovid's own letters from exile some years later.<sup>489</sup> However, we should not try to read too much into the politicised elements of Ovid's *Heroides*, and certainly much of Ovid's rationale behind giving a voice to females may have been just because it offered him the opportunity of demonstrating his ability to write provocative poetry.

---

<sup>486</sup> Female suicide is more prominent in the first century AD (see Chapter 3); however, there are instances during the late Republic, particularly during the civil wars, see e.g. Calpurnia and Servilia (Velleius Paterculus, 2.26.3, 2.88.3).

<sup>487</sup> On this see p. 32.

<sup>488</sup> As noted by Armstrong in relation to the representation of Cretan women (2006, 16).

<sup>489</sup> See Rosenmeyer, 1997; Farrell, 1998, 338; Fulkerson, 2005, 145.

Seneca's tragedies differ in key ways from the Greek originals in staging female suicide. The deaths occurred on-stage, with swords, and after the women had had the chance to return and face their male counterparts, fully aware of the tragic extent of their actions. Seneca brought female suicide to a level Ovid could not achieve in his work. By focusing on the sexuality of figures such as Phaedra and Jocasta, and emphasising the illicit nature of their sexual crimes, Seneca could portray characters whose only chance of moral redemption was to commit suicide. He highlights the danger of women with loose morals, thus engaging with contemporary concerns about the necessity of ensuring that females remained chaste and loyal to their husbands. There are also some subtle links to the political realities of Seneca's own day. The idea of suicide representing the *only* means by which one could attempt to reaffirm, or in Polyxena's case uphold, a person's moral position in society provides a critique that does not reflect well on the world Seneca inhabited. In appropriating the female suicides of the Greek tragic world, Seneca could to some extent evaluate the inverted nature of his reality, which was too tragic and contentious a subject to be broached directly itself.

Other Roman writers also appropriated Greek female suicides. For example, Statius portrays the tragic deaths of Jocasta and Evadne (amongst others) in his epic the *Thebaid* written in the early 90s AD under Domitian.<sup>490</sup> Statius' Jocasta kills herself due to the despair she feels at the mutual fratricide committed by her sons, as well as because of the blame she attaches to herself for bringing this about. Evadne kills herself due to the extreme misery she now feels that her husband is dead. In his overall picture of suicide, Statius does not always fully endorse the act

---

<sup>490</sup> Jocasta: *Thebaid*, 11.639-41; Evadne: *Thebaid*, 12.800-2.

as the only, or indeed right, reaction to tyranny (the reason why many of his male suicides are carried out). Scholars have noted his questioning of the validity of suicide in the face of a tyrannical ruler; it is a bold, independent move, but ultimately a futile one.<sup>491</sup> A similar stance may be viewed in Tacitus' representations of some suicides. In the next chapter, we will see that with Tacitus, parallels with contemporary Rome were to become all the more pertinent as he discussed real female suicides under the Julio-Claudians.

---

<sup>491</sup> See McGuire, 1990, 30-2 (who suggests that Statius would condone assassination in some instances instead of suicide); 1997, xi, 24; Dominik, 1990, 92-3; McNelis, 2007, 186. For arguments on the links between the epic and Flavian Rome (and Domitian), see Dominik, 1990, 74-6; McGuire, 1990, 22; Coleman, 2003, 10-11; McNelis, 2007, 5.

## Chapter 3

### The Suicidal Female in Tacitus' *Annales*

#### 1. Introduction

Tacitus' *Annales* has been studied by many scholars, both for the insights it offers into the Julio-Claudian period, and for the political and cultural climate of the early second century AD. Many critics have argued that one of the reasons why the early emperors are treated with such disdain by Tacitus in the *Annales* is due to the writer's own experiences under the emperor Domitian, who Tacitus believed ruled tyrannically. Most recently, Rhiannon Ash has commented that once the 'oppression' Tacitus and his contemporaries suffered under Domitian had passed, he felt a 'compulsion to speak out at last'.<sup>492</sup> Unfortunately we do not have Tacitus' history of Domitian's principate. However, his views on despotic emperors in general are apparent from his descriptions of emperors such as Tiberius and Nero in the *Annales*. He and many others before him had remained silent and tolerated brutal regimes, but now was the time to 'salvage' something from their experiences.<sup>493</sup> He therefore wrote histories detailing the corruption of the early emperors and also the acts of defiance from senatorial members to record for his own time and for posterity how Rome had suffered, before the present 'better' times under Trajan and Hadrian.

---

<sup>492</sup> Ash, 2006, 28; this is most evocatively expressed in the *Agricola*, 1-3.

<sup>493</sup> Edwards, 2007, 141; Ash, 2006, 29.

Death, and more specifically suicide,<sup>494</sup> is an important part of Tacitus' narrative on senatorial opposition to cruel emperors, especially Tiberius and Nero. Both Edwards, in *Death in Ancient Rome* (2007), and Hill, in *Ambitiosa Mors: Suicide and Self in Roman Thought and Literature* (2004), utilise Tacitus' work in chapters about the political significance of suicides under the Julio-Claudian emperors.<sup>495</sup> The ambiguity inherent in the act of suicide meant that Tacitus could approach the subject in a variety of ways and offer his own interpretation of such death scenes in order to best communicate to his audience his view of the nature of imperial rule at this point in time. He wanted to prompt such questions as: what was the best or correct form of opposition against oppressive authorities? Was suicide the right choice, politically and morally? Just how bad had things become if women were now resorting to suicide as well as men, even upstaging some of Rome's supposedly leading citizens? By dealing with the act of female suicide in diverse ways, and creating dramatic death scenes to excite and perturb his audience, Tacitus could evoke debates and discussions on these topics amongst his male elite readers.<sup>496</sup>

Many modern scholars have analysed individual suicides of prominent men who feature in the *Annales*. For example, Allison (1997) has examined the ways in which the suicide of the general Corbulo could allude to that of Socrates in Plato. Dyson (1970) discusses Seneca's suicide in his article on the philosopher. Tucker (1987) and Wilson (1990) have put forward conflicting arguments about the death of Lucan. Suicides in Tacitus' other historical work, the *Historiae*, have also received

---

<sup>494</sup> Griffin describes it as the 'characteristic way of death' in this period (1986a, 64); Plass remarks that it was now a way of asserting 'political freedom' (1995, 85).

<sup>495</sup> For Edwards, see 'Chapter 4: Defiance, Complicity and the Politics of Self-Destruction'; for Hill, see 'Chapter 8: The Concept of Political Suicide at Rome'.

<sup>496</sup> Plass comments that for Tacitus, 'suicide forced by the emperor or used by his opponents as a gesture of defiance exemplified the principate's political irrationality' (1995, 7).

attention. For example, Harris (1962) discusses the death of one of the four emperors of AD 69, Otho.<sup>497</sup>

However, there has not been any comprehensive study of female suicides in Tacitus' *Annales*. The attempted suicide of Seneca's wife, Pompeia Paulina, is often mentioned in relation to discussions of his suicide, but not analysed in detail in its own right.<sup>498</sup> Similarly, there has been much work on Boudicca, but very little on her manner of death as portrayed by Tacitus.<sup>499</sup> In his broad sweep of women in Tacitus, Baldwin (1972) refers to several of the women to be discussed, but does not comment extensively on any of them. An analysis of female suicides in Tacitus, however, is important both in terms of Tacitus' aims in portraying the corruption of the Julio-Claudian court as mentioned above, and in his overall representations of and attitudes to women in general. A systematic examination of the sixteen cases of female suicide found in the *Annales* offers the prospect of contributing a new angle to general studies of Tacitus and his works, as well as social, political and cultural studies of his time and of the Julio-Claudian period.<sup>500</sup>

As a preliminary consideration, this chapter first looks at modern literature on Tacitus' representation of women and how work on female suicides might fit into this scholarship. It also offers some initial insights into Tacitus' approaches to Stoicism and suicide. The chapter then discusses female suicides in Tacitus' *Annales*, focusing on their portrayal and role as part of both Tacitus' literary style and his

---

<sup>497</sup> On Otho's death see also Edwards, 2007, 35-9.

<sup>498</sup> See e.g. Dyson, 1970, 77.

<sup>499</sup> See e.g. Roberts, 1988; Keegan, 2004.

<sup>500</sup> To my knowledge, there are no instances of female suicide in Tacitus' other works, the *Agricola*, *Dialogus*, *Germania* and *Historiae*.

broader historiographical project. The sixteen examples found in this work<sup>501</sup> have been divided into three groups, with the exception of Agrippina the Elder. The chapter analyses the representation of her suicide first because she is a useful case-study for exploring many of the themes related to Tacitus' presentation of female suicide. Tacitus shows a distinct moral ambivalence in his portrayal of her suicide. The ambivalence with which he approaches her death is reflected in many of the other representations of female suicide in the *Annales* and demonstrates the utility of suicide narratives for analysing gender roles and the ethics surrounding any act of resistance to a repressive authority.<sup>502</sup>

The first subdivision of the next section looks at suicides by elite Roman females who represent exemplary figures in general. The cases of Paxaea, Sextia and Pollitta and her grandmother Sextia are grouped together here because they share similarities in their suicides. They also share many similarities with the second subdivision of this section, the suicides of 'Stoic women'. Here, Pompeia Paulina, Servilia and Arria's suicides, or suicide attempts, all took place in relation to a Stoic male relative. They are courageous just as the first three women are. However, they are analysed separately due to reasons outlined below in the 'Tacitus and Stoicism' section.

The second section explores the 'negative paradigm' of female suicide as portrayed by Tacitus. The word 'negative' here is perhaps not a very informative term, but it is used in this case to encompass several aspects of the suicides of Plancina, Aemilia Lepida, Albucilla and Messalina that are 'negative' in terms of the

---

<sup>501</sup> Although Pollitta and her grandmother Sextia are treated together.

<sup>502</sup> And this episode also demonstrates the ambiguous role often played by the emperor in such scenes: see pp. 199-200.

characterisation of the women themselves and how they approach, or indeed ultimately fail to approach, the actual suicide act. On the whole, Tacitus portrays these women in a disapproving manner and unmistakably presents them as deserving of suicide. In two cases, the woman's failure to commit suicide results in them not even being able to redeem themselves by this act.

The final section returns to the theme picked up in Agrippina's suicide about Tacitus' ambiguous portrayal of female suicides. The first subdivision of this section looks at the cases of Poppaea Sabina and Lollia Paulina. It is difficult to assess Tacitus' attitudes towards these women as it is clear that he has mainly chosen to include them so that he can comment on the ploys of the two empresses who mastermind their downfalls directly. The second subdivision includes the only two suicides to be committed by non-Roman or non-elite women, that of Boudicca and Epicharis. They are morally ambiguous figures because they are outsiders to Roman elite society, and female outsiders at that.

The nature of this format means that cases are treated out of chronological sequence and it will become apparent that there are some similarities in Tacitus' portrayal of female suicides across the groups. However, the synthetic character of the structure is the best way to communicate my arguments effectively. The treatment of each suicide will follow a similar format; however, because there is no set pattern in Tacitus' portrayal of these suicides, each instance will offer differing contributions to discussions on both Tacitus' literary style and his historiographical aims. This is aided by some comparison with other historical narratives, for example that of Dio.

## i. Tacitus and Women

Modern work on the women of Tacitus' *Annales* has focused on those females who held a great deal of power and influence within the state. Unsurprisingly then, much has been said about the female members of the imperial family, two of whom, Agrippina the Elder and Messalina, do appear in the list of suicidal women in the *Annales*.<sup>503</sup> Of other imperial women discussed by scholars, Livia and Agrippina the Younger have been particularly popular.<sup>504</sup> Other discussions focus on the debate in the senate (in *Annales* 3) about whether wives should be allowed to accompany their governor husbands to the provinces, Boudicca, and women who appear after book 6.<sup>505</sup>

Characteristic of these analyses is that they all take individual women or certain episodes focused around women and examine them for the ways Tacitus has chosen to represent these females, his aims in portraying them as he does, and how they relate to his overall view on imperial power. This chapter can be seen as building on this trend of modern scholars' treatment of the women of Tacitus' work. It also synthesises important instances, where females are brought to the fore by Tacitus' characterisations, not previously discussed alongside one another and in any great detail.

Scholars such as Hill have made it clear that male suicide at this point is a significant feature of Tacitus' *Annales*, and therefore there is reason to suppose that an examination of female suicide can be just as valuable. Hill himself has noted

---

<sup>503</sup> For Agrippina, see Shotter, 2000; for Messalina, see Joshel, 1995.

<sup>504</sup> See e.g. Rutland, 1978; Hayne, 2000; O'Gorman, 2000; Kaplan (1979) discusses both Agrippinas.

<sup>505</sup> For the debate, see Marshall, 1975; for Boudicca, see Roberts, 1988; for women after book 6, see Syme, 1981.

that the 'ethic of suicide' by the time Tacitus was writing was no longer 'purely male and political'.<sup>506</sup> The previous two chapters have demonstrated how suicide was increasingly utilised in various genres for narratives concerning female behaviour, the blurring of gender roles and female suicide's relationship to contemporary political and social concerns. For Tacitus, the theme of female suicide was a useful tool to show precisely where gender and imperial political impotence met, with the prominence of the gender of those killing themselves contributing to his discourse about the failings of the principate at this point.<sup>507</sup> The fact that there are no female suicides in the surviving books of the *Historiae*, largely concerned with the civil wars of 69, a very militaristic and male-focused work, further highlights the intrusion into and engagement of women in politics in the *Annales*, a work very much concerned with the political machinations taking place under the Julio-Claudians.

## ii. Tacitus and Stoicism

Stoicism seems to have had a prominent role in many suicides of the Julio-Claudian period, especially under Nero,<sup>508</sup> and this is most notable in Tacitus' portrayal of the deaths of Seneca, Lucan, Barea Soranus and Thrasea Paetus.<sup>509</sup> All but one of these (Lucan) has a female suicide associated with the male deaths and so it is likely that the women were also influenced by Stoic ethics and ideas, albeit

---

<sup>506</sup> Hill, 2004, 257.

<sup>507</sup> Langlands detects 'shadows of Lucretia' in some of the female suicide episodes in the *Annales* (2006, 332).

<sup>508</sup> As noted by Edwards, 2002, 389.

<sup>509</sup> For more on the deaths of Seneca, Barea Soranus and Thrasea Paetus, see pp. 212-19.

through their male relatives. Nevertheless, it could have played some role in informing their decisions to die.

Griffin has commented that Stoicism 'is normally given the credit for making the practice of suicide acceptable, not only to members of the school but to society at large'. However, she cautions against the use of the phrase 'Stoic cult of suicide', because it implies that the philosophy fundamentally changed the attitudes of the elite towards suicide. This is not necessarily the case, particularly because suicide was already tolerated in the third and second centuries BC before any philosophy seriously influenced Roman views and ideals.<sup>510</sup> Yet it is also clear that among certain circles at least, like the men mentioned above, Stoicism did play a role in why and how they committed suicide. Furthermore, there is evidence that prominent men such as Seneca shaped Stoic philosophy to include a general acceptance of suicide under the right circumstances. Therefore, there is reason to believe that at least some were informed about the Stoic view on such matters, and given the dire situations many found themselves in, resorted to an end considered noble by many.

The first school dedicated to Stoicism opened in Athens in 301 BC, and its history can be traced as far as AD 263, with this year signalling the last reference to it as an organised school.<sup>511</sup> Colish identifies two key differences between the 'Roman Stoa'<sup>512</sup> and its predecessors, the 'ancient Stoa' and the 'middle Stoa'. There was no cohesive school under the 'Roman Stoa', as there was no official head

---

<sup>510</sup> Griffin, 1986a, 67-8.

<sup>511</sup> Colish, 1985, 7. For a comprehensive outline of the history of Stoicism, including the major figures involved and main components of the philosophy, see Colish, 1985, 7-20.

<sup>512</sup> Stoicism was first introduced to Rome by Panaetius in the later second century BC, but the 'Roman Stoa' dates from around the late first century BC.

and individuals could pick and choose their own ideas, and, there was a 'virtually preclusive interest in ethics'.<sup>513</sup> Therefore, men such as Seneca could take the basic ideals of Stoicism and interpret these in whichever way and in whatever direction they felt was right.<sup>514</sup> The death of the Stoic Cato (see pp. 20-3) also had a great impact on Stoic theories about suicide at this time: his chosen method of dying 'prompted an intense debate about the acceptability of suicide', with interest in his suicide being particularly prominent during the time of Nero.<sup>515</sup> For Seneca in particular, Cato was a 'powerful symbol of philosophical progress' because he committed suicide rather than live under a political system that conflicted with his own political values.<sup>516</sup>

Several critics have noted that it is with Seneca particularly that suicide became a central issue. He was especially concerned with its status as a free act that any human should and could have the right to.<sup>517</sup> Although the Stoics as a whole had no single theory of suicide, Seneca introduced the idea that suicide should be a right that people had in general, and not only if they received a divine sign/intervention, as Socrates and Plato had previously argued.<sup>518</sup> Edwards explores how Seneca's philosophy was very much concerned with conquering the 'fear of death' and that suicide committed for the right reasons could ensure a person's

---

<sup>513</sup> Colish, 1985, 12-13.

<sup>514</sup> For more on Stoic approaches to suicide before Seneca, and how his attitudes relate to these see Griffin, 1976, 373-83.

<sup>515</sup> Edwards, 2007, 101, 154ff. Edwards points out that the death of Cato seems to have had an influence on Tacitus' rendering of Seneca's death too (2007, 156).

<sup>516</sup> Inwood, 2005, 306. Thrasyllus wrote a biography of Cato which was extremely influential on later versions of Cato's death (see Hill, 2004, 187; Edwards, 2007, 154).

<sup>517</sup> See e.g. Rist, 1969, 246-7; Griffin, 1976, 383-4; Inwood, 2005, 113 n.49.

<sup>518</sup> See Rist, 1969, 54, 234-5, 246-7. Socrates and Plato were a little ambiguous on the suitability of suicide, but seemed to deem it acceptable if a god intervened and condoned, or even pushed for, the action (Rist, 1969, 234-5). Suicide was a 'fundamental problem' for the Stoics right from the start (Rist, 1969, 238). For more on Seneca's attitudes to suicide, see above p. 161.

*libertas*, as well as ensuring that the emperor received the 'most effective punishment'.<sup>519</sup> Such debates on suicide were occurring during the first and second centuries AD amongst Rome's elite.<sup>520</sup> And as Hill points out, 'by the late Julio-Claudian principate mainstream philosophical considerations did not furnish any clear or incontrovertible bar on self-killing'.<sup>521</sup>

Scholars are keen to stress the fact that members of the 'Stoic opposition' in the Julio-Claudian period were not Republicans resisting the emperors in the hope that the old form of government would be reinstated.<sup>522</sup> MacMullen states that there was 'an early and almost unanimous agreement that Rome needed' the Principate:<sup>523</sup> the aim was not to eradicate the institution, simply to ensure that only non-tyrannical emperors ruled at its head. However, the practices and ideals of the philosophy helped to shape the youth of Rome during this period, and it was inevitable that some of these would later become involved in the imperial administration.<sup>524</sup> Then, when they were in more prominent positions, their education in Stoicism meant that they were more inclined 'to say what one felt',<sup>525</sup> with the more extremist figures expressing their opposition in incidents such as the Pisonian conspiracy under Nero.<sup>526</sup> Barea Soranus and Thrasea Paetus are notable

---

<sup>519</sup> Edwards, 2007, 78-9, 87-90, 94ff., 100, 103; see also Griffin, 1976, 384-6. It is likely that Cato's death (on this see pp. 20-3) encouraged Seneca's views on the link between death and *libertas* (Edwards, 2007, 101). Inwood too explores Seneca's views on suicide as an act of freedom, whereby the person can be a true agent of his death even when he might be constrained by other factors (2005, 307, 311). For more on Seneca's philosophical background and his major influences, see Inwood, 2005, Chapter 1.

<sup>520</sup> For more on Stoic approaches to suicide, see Gris , 1982, 180-5; Hill, 2004, 36-41 (on Cicero); Edwards, 2007, 98-9.

<sup>521</sup> Hill, 2004, 189.

<sup>522</sup> See e.g. Arnold, 1911, 396; Hill, 2004, 210.

<sup>523</sup> MacMullen, 1992, 32. Hill comments that the existence of the emperor was recognised as a 'necessary evil' by the senatorial order in Rome (2004, 210).

<sup>524</sup> Arnold, 1911, 397.

<sup>525</sup> MacMullen, 1992, 53.

<sup>526</sup> For more on this conspiracy, see below, pp. 239ff.

examples of those who might be viewed as aggravating the emperor by criticising him; Edwards argues that their Stoic principles gave them a 'place from which to speak' as well as helping them face the dangers they would inevitably meet by offering such criticisms of despotic rulers.<sup>527</sup>

Tacitus' attitude towards the Stoics is ambiguous, ranging 'from the noncommittal to the actively hostile'.<sup>528</sup> The most explicit statement of his antagonism towards them is made in the *Agricola*:

Let them, for whom it is the habit to admire the forbidden, understand that great men are able to exist even under bad emperors, and also that compliance and restraint (*obsequium ac modestia*), if accompanied by diligence and vigour (*industria ac vigor*), consequently become famous, reaching the same glory, to which a great many men have ascended by a pretentious death (*ambitiosa mors*), but of no use to the state.<sup>529</sup>

There are instances where Tacitus showed admiration for Stoics, but this passage is revealing in his views of those who pretend to adhere to Stoic principles and yet do nothing of significance to oppose despotic emperors.<sup>530</sup> In particular, this passage indicates that he did not always think that suicide was the best form of opposition; the adjective *ambitiosa* indicates that Tacitus understood many of these attempts to be carried out by those who displayed vainglory. Colish has noted that Tacitus

---

<sup>527</sup> Edwards, 2007, 122.

<sup>528</sup> Colish, 1985, 304.

<sup>529</sup> *Agricola*, 42.5.

<sup>530</sup> On this passage see Hill, 2004, 9-10, 255.

viewed Seneca as a hypocrite,<sup>531</sup> perhaps this was because he distanced himself from the rest of the Stoic opposition by his close alliance with Nero.<sup>532</sup> By comparison, *obsequium* and *modestia* were equally favourable characteristics to exhibit when faced with an oppressive emperor and presumably this is how Tacitus saw himself and others, such as his father-in-law Agricola, acting under Domitian. However, this moderation was matched by Tacitus' *industria* after Domitian's death, of which the *Annales* is proof. Stoic opposition, in which suicide played a large part, was not the only means by which a male member of the senatorial class could embrace and react to a tyrannical regime. Nevertheless, Tacitus was not entirely uncomplimentary to this group, and it can be argued that he in particular endowed the Stoic women with some positive characteristics. Furthermore, as will become clear below, Tacitus' treatment of suicide in his writings as a whole was complex. He had a particular agenda in the *Agricola* which was to ensure that his father-in-law's career under Domitian was justified; however, there are many occasions where he presents suicide as a brave act and one which constitutes a 'genuine, legitimate and laudable means to vindicate one's freedom'.<sup>533</sup>

---

<sup>531</sup> Colish, 1985, 312.

<sup>532</sup> Veyne, 2003, 158. Although see Chapter 2 for ways in which Seneca may have communicated his misgivings about Nero's rule through his drama; furthermore, there is a case for seeing a more complex portrayal of Seneca in the *Annales* and some awareness from Tacitus of the difficult and restrained position Seneca found himself in towards the end of his life, after being close to those in power for so many years. Certainly Edwards points out that in his portrayal of Seneca's death, Tacitus does not depict him as a hypocrite (2007, 110-12); similarly, Griffin argues that Tacitus viewed Seneca's end as admirable (1976, 368; 441-4 provides more discussion of Tacitus' attitude to Seneca); for more on other scholarly approaches to Tacitus' presentation of Seneca's death, see Ker, 2009, 19.

<sup>533</sup> Edwards, 2007, 125-6, 133.

### iii. Tacitus and Suicide

Tacitus has a decidedly ambivalent attitude towards suicides carried out by members of both sexes and the *Annales* in particular represents a highly composite treatment of the subject. To take two examples to demonstrate this stance towards male characters in the *Annales*: Sextus Papinius is accused of choosing a 'hasty and crude death' (*repentinum et informem exitum*) by throwing himself out of a window (6.49.1); Ostorius Scapula, a man of considerable military renown and *fortitudo* dies bravely by opening his veins and then slitting his own throat (16.15.4). In the *Germania* and *Agricola*, Tacitus uses the suicide of defeated peoples to further his theme of 'the noble savage' and their destruction by Rome: members of the German tribes who had survived war hanged themselves to avoid disgrace; the Britons killed their wives and children after defeat.<sup>534</sup> Consequently, when committed for the 'right' reasons and in the 'right' circumstances, suicide was presented by Tacitus as a justified and commendable act.

The ways in which Tacitus presents any suicide reveals much about how he viewed events and people in the Rome of the Julio-Claudians. His depictions of suicide provided him with an opportunity to be stylistically creative and inventive; as Wiseman comments, Tacitus was very aware of the 'theatricality of dynastic politics'. Wiseman's theory on historiography from this period is a useful one to consider here. He suggests that the origins of Roman historiography lay in 'dramatic fiction', and that historians 'had to keep to basic outlines of the events they

---

<sup>534</sup> *Germania*, 6; *Agricola*, 38. Although the latter was not strictly suicide, it displays the same idea of a race slaughtering itself to avoid capture by the Romans. Compare this with Romans who chose to kill themselves after losing everything in the fire of 64 (*Annales*, 15.38.7).

discussed', but felt 'free to manipulate the traditional data to suit their own artistic purposes'.<sup>535</sup> Hence Tacitus gave an account of factual events, but also put his own dramatic twist on them. He would have had sources about, for example, the Pisonian conspiracy and its key players, but he could not have had hard facts about the individual suicides of these people, which occurred in relatively private places. This is not to discount everything that Tacitus reports about suicides as false. However, an awareness of his propensity to use hyperbole and an imaginative style is important when looking at such episodes in the *Annales*.

The gendered angle to scenes involving female suicides meant that the drama and tension created by Tacitus' description of such incidents was all the more heightened because a Roman audience would have been shocked to hear about women being involved in bloody, and at times courageous, acts; Wiseman says that readers wanted the 'pleasure of stirred emotions'.<sup>536</sup> Plass argues that women committing suicide alongside men would 'inevitably become a powerful political symbol of loyalty beyond the emperor's reach'.<sup>537</sup> One could also argue that Tacitus tapped into the association of female suicide with the tragic genre, as discussed in the previous chapter. If he could in some ways evoke the portrayal of those mythical figures killing themselves in dramatic scenes, then this would increase the impact of the representations of his women on his audience, and where appropriate, enhance the pathos of his female figures' situations.

---

<sup>535</sup> Wiseman, 1979, 26.

<sup>536</sup> Wiseman, 1979, 30.

<sup>537</sup> Plass, 1995, 109.

Furthermore, Wiseman has noted that 'there were many motives for embroidery and invention'.<sup>538</sup> And this is linked with Tacitus' deliberate portrayal of the circumstances of these female suicides. Comparisons with Cassius Dio and Suetonius often show that Tacitus has specifically chosen to extend or perhaps fabricate details surrounding these episodes.<sup>539</sup> This indicates that suicide scenes were also part of his larger historiographical project, whereby the *Annales* was a comment on the abuses of imperial power. The suicide of women in particular, when described with Tacitus' flair, provided him with opportunities to pass judgment on emperors he wanted to construe as weak or tyrannical, and on a Rome he viewed as in disarray.

## 2. Agrippina the Elder<sup>540</sup>

Agrippina the Elder had been banished by Tiberius to the island of Pandateria, the same island to which her mother Julia had been banished by Augustus (1.53.1), in 29.<sup>541</sup> She was still alive four years later in 33 when Tacitus returns to her to record her death. Agrippina had hoped that with the downfall of Sejanus, the prime mover in her own ruin in 29, Tiberius would now treat her less harshly and thus she was 'holding out with hope' (*spe sustentatam* 6.25.1).

However, once she realised that the emperor's attitude had not softened towards

---

<sup>538</sup> Wiseman, 1994, 34.

<sup>539</sup> Although it could be argued that Dio does not fully comprehend the significance of political suicide for Romans; see Plass, 1995, 98; Hill, 2004, 188; Edwards, 2007, 14.

<sup>540</sup> From now on she will be referred to simply as Agrippina; where her daughter Agrippina the Younger is meant this will be made clear, if the context does not make it obvious that she is being referred to. All dates are AD in this chapter, unless otherwise stated.

<sup>541</sup> Suetonius, *Tiberius*, 53.2 (presumably Tacitus would have related this event in the lost books of the *Annales*).

her, Agrippina chose to die by her own *voluntas*, unless, Tacitus notes, she was starved to death by others wanting to create the impression of a suicide:

et postquam nihil de saevitia remittebatur, voluntate extinctam, nisi si negatis alimentis adsimulatus est finis, qui videretur sponte sumptus.

(6.25.1)

It is reasonable to suppose that Agrippina did commit suicide. Suetonius supports a suicide theory and the method of starvation.<sup>542</sup> However, Tacitus deliberately reports two versions of her death to further his ambivalent portrayal of Agrippina at this point. And by alluding to both possibilities he reveals that a chief consideration in describing this episode was Tiberius' reaction to Agrippina's death. Tacitus' suggestion that Agrippina's death was actually a murder could be just part of this anti-Tiberius narrative. Whatever the true means of her demise Tiberius is nevertheless ultimately responsible. His bitter responses only serve to highlight further the enmity he felt for Agrippina, as he 'certainly' (*enimvero*) breaks out in 'vile accusations' (*foedissimis criminationibus* 6.25.2). He cannot even accuse her of realistic crimes: commentators have pointed out the absurdity of his accusation concerning her adultery with Asinius Gallus.<sup>543</sup>

Furthermore, the best Tiberius can do is to boast that he had not had her strangled or thrown *in Gemonias* (6.25.3); the emperor's role here is distinctly ambiguous as he accuses Agrippina of wicked crimes but at the same time appears

---

<sup>542</sup> Suetonius, *Tiberius*, 53.2. Dio is silent on how she died (57.22.4b). He may have had the true details from the writings of Agrippina the Younger (see O'Gorman, 2000, 123); Tacitus explicitly refers to this as a source at 4.53.

<sup>543</sup> Koestermann, 1968a, 299; Martin, 2001, 153; see also Langlands, 2006, 344.

to suggest that he would not have punished her for them. It is reasonable to deduce that this was Tacitus' own interpretation of events. The use of *iactavit* juxtaposed to *Caesar* (6.25.3) indicates that he wanted to highlight the arrogance and vanity of Tiberius; presumably any decent emperor would have kept quiet had a member of the imperial family died, and not referred to the ignoble end that she could have faced had the emperor wanted to inflict this on her. Plass analyses this scene using game theory, exploring how each party uses certain strategies to 'play off' against each other. Agrippina attempted suicide, was then forced to survive, and then either did commit suicide or was killed in a way disguised as suicide. Each party played a role in this episode trying to 'win' in this political battle.<sup>544</sup>

This struggle between the two demonstrates Tacitus' complex portrayal of both figures, with Tiberius in particular emerging as an ambiguous and dishonest character. Yet it is also clear that Tacitus does not present Agrippina as a wholly sympathetic character, even in light of her death. This could be a possible reason why he reports the alternative story that she did not kill herself, as he might have wanted to diminish the courage associated with those women who actively sought suicide. Hayne comments that here Tacitus reveals a 'traditional Roman attitude' to the kind of woman Agrippina represents.<sup>545</sup> He calls her *inpatiens* and says that she 'had cast off female defects with virile concerns' (*virilibus curis feminarum vitia exuerat* 6.25.2). Indeed, Tacitus' portrayal of Agrippina throughout the *Annales* is ambiguous, described by one scholar as 'multifaceted'.<sup>546</sup> Kaplan's article details how Agrippina is often referred to as *atrox*, which indicates that she was a female

---

<sup>544</sup> Plass, 1995, 87.

<sup>545</sup> Hayne, 2000, 39.

<sup>546</sup> Santoro L'Hoir, 2006, 118.

who tried to assume masculine roles. Kaplan states that this characterisation was 'integral and habitual' to Tacitus' portrayal of Agrippina and her daughter.<sup>547</sup>

Tacitus perhaps, then, wanted to portray Agrippina as partly to blame for her downfall, and in making his final comment on her, cannot resist pointing out for the last time her *virilis* characteristics (6.25.2). Her suicide provided him with another chance to explore this phenomenon of women in this period trying to usurp traditionally male roles, a trait apparent in several of his prominent female characters. By exploring Agrippina's gender at this crucial stage, Tacitus can push the issue of female aspirations for hegemony to the fore in a tension-filled scene. Furthermore, Agrippina, as well as her daughter, 'raise[s] the voice of dissent against the emperor'.<sup>548</sup> Therefore, in her final act of suicide, Agrippina makes one last effort to demonstrate her opposition to the tyrannical Tiberius. The fact too that Tiberius has so much vehemence against a member of his own family is indicative of Tacitus' depiction of him as an emperor who is so lacking in morals that he cannot even be magnanimous to a woman who has been at various stages Tiberius' own step-daughter and daughter-in-law.

---

<sup>547</sup> Kaplan, 1979, 411, 414. Shotter (2000) also refers to this masculine characterisation of Agrippina in his article.

<sup>548</sup> O'Gorman, 2000, 123 (referring to Tacitus' record of Agrippina the Younger's writings mentioned above).

### 3. Female suicides: the exemplary paradigm

#### a. Exemplary women

##### i. Paxaea

Paxaea was the wife of Pomponius Labeo, governor of Moesia (6.29.1). In 34 Labeo committed suicide by cutting his veins and bleeding to death; Paxaea followed his example:

Pomponius Labeo....per abruptas venas sanguinem effudit;  
aemulataque est coniunx Paxaea. (6.29.1)

Paxaea's suicide is the first instance in the *Annales* as a whole of a female choosing to die alongside a male relative who had been condemned or had been singled out for a harsh punishment. Tiberius wrote a letter to the Senate stating that Labeo had been accused of maladministration in Moesia, and when charged with this offence, tried to hide his guilt with *invidia* (6.29.2). Tiberius goes on to say that Paxaea herself would not have been harmed as a result of Labeo's trial, even though she too was guilty (6.29.2). Of course, this was easy for the emperor to say now that both were dead.

Tacitus makes it clear that in law, if a person killed themselves before being condemned legally, then he had the right to a proper burial, and for his will to be followed (6.29.1). However, it seems clear that in this case, Labeo was not going to

be shown this respect even though he had committed suicide: the fact that Tiberius personally wrote a letter to the Senate about him shows that he had been angered by the *invidia* he believed Labeo had demonstrated. Furthermore, the use of the past tense in *urgebatur* and *velavisse* (6.29.2) suggests that Labeo had already faced some formal proceedings and made some attempt to defend himself. Paxaea might have had more reason to believe that it was best to die with Labeo if he had been officially condemned and if she thought that his estate might have been forfeited. Even had this not been the case, Paxaea could still have chosen to die with Labeo for more personal reasons.

Tacitus does suggest that Paxaea displayed great loyalty towards Labeo. After describing Labeo's suicide, the use of *aemulari* and of Paxaea's name suggests that it was very much her decision that she emulate her husband in committing suicide. By placing this fidelity towards her husband at the start of the chapter, Tacitus makes Tiberius' later claims that Paxaea only killed herself because Labeo thoroughly frightened her (6.29.2) seem unjustified and petty. As Tacitus no doubt intended, it is the emperor who comes off worse here, as he tries to undermine the loyalty that a wife showed to her husband, a loyalty that he failed to inspire himself in his own subjects. It is unclear whether Labeo was innocent of the crimes that Tiberius levelled against him.<sup>549</sup> Tacitus chose to start this sequence of events by describing them as part of the *caedes* taking place in Rome at this time (6.29.1), which one scholar suggests would have left Tacitus' readers 'to imagine an unbroken chain of horrors'.<sup>550</sup> This is not strictly what Tacitus describes, but he

---

<sup>549</sup> Koestermann suggests that he was innocent (1968a, 310).

<sup>550</sup> Martin, 2001, 162.

clearly wanted to convey to his audience that these events were a sign of the corrupt and bloody nature of Rome under Tiberius.

Paxaea is not named in Dio's account of Labeo's death, although he does say that the two committed suicide together.<sup>551</sup> It could be argued, then, that a significance is attached to her and her suicide in Tacitus that is not apparent elsewhere.<sup>552</sup> Dio's version is certainly more concise than Tacitus', and does not include important details. However, Tacitus adds credit to his description by including the exact charges brought against Labeo, the letter from Tiberius, and the name of Labeo's wife, Paxaea. Tacitus' narrative at this point also highlights the fact that resistance to the imperial government during this period had extended from being the reserve of only the public, male sphere, to now being part of the private female sphere as well: providing opposition to the regime was now a feminine act as well, as women now emulated their husbands.

The way in which Tacitus has chosen to describe their actual method of death can suggest something about the frequency with which members of the senatorial class of this period resorted to opening their veins to forego condemnation, a point that Tacitus explicitly makes in this chapter (6.29.1). Martin describes *abruptas venas* as a 'slightly unusual phrase'.<sup>553</sup> However, one theory suggests that Tacitus used such a variety of terminology to describe those who opened their veins 'in order to come to grips verbally with the horrifying self-

---

<sup>551</sup> Dio, 58.24.3. She is not known to feature in any other ancient source.

<sup>552</sup> Martin, whilst also discussing the joint suicide of Scaurus and his wife Sextia, comments on the differences between the two historians' accounts but does not suggest why there might be differences (2001, 164). Furneaux & Pitman make no comment on Paxaea; Koestermann does not make any suggestions about why she might have chosen to commit suicide nor about Tacitus' inclusion of her.

<sup>553</sup> Martin, 2001, 162.

liquidation of the Roman aristocracy during the first century AD'.<sup>554</sup> This 'horrifying' reality is made all the worse by the fact that a woman participates in it, choosing not only to commit suicide, but to do it in the fashion of a 'manly exit'.<sup>555</sup> Thus Paxaea can be viewed as part of Tacitus' narrative on the erroneous nature of Tiberius' regime, when women are driven to assume traditionally male roles.<sup>556</sup> On the other hand, since descriptions of Lucretia's suicide from the late Republic onwards (see Chapter 1), and Seneca's adoption of the method for his mythical figures (see Chapter 2), it could be argued that the sword was coming to be intrinsically linked with female suicide.<sup>557</sup> Tacitus succeeds in blurring traditional gender boundaries and behaviour.

## ii. Sextia

Immediately following the suicides of Paxaea and Labeo, Tacitus describes those of Sextia and her husband Mamercus Scaurus. His downfall was due to the *odium* of Macro, who accused Scaurus of writing a tragedy with verses that supposedly referred to Tiberius (6.29.3). However, the actual charges brought against Scaurus were adultery with Livilla and involvement in magic rites (6.29.4). Again, it is reasonable to deduce that the couple killed themselves to ensure preferential treatment after death, as Sextia encouraged Scaurus to end things

---

<sup>554</sup> Van Hooff, 1990, 51.

<sup>555</sup> As Van Hooff (1990, 50) puts it in his catalogue of suicides, only seventeen Roman women, as opposed to 135 Roman men, opt for this method of suicide.

<sup>556</sup> As Van Hooff points out, dying by the sword or dagger 'were the means of soldiers and aristocrats, men who made and often wrote history' (1990, 47). The situation has now got so dire though, that women could now be included alongside the 'soldiers and aristocrats'.

<sup>557</sup> Despite Van Hooff's statement that 'suicide by a Roman woman using a cutting instrument was only recorded in rare cases providing behavioural paradigms' (1992, 149); the evidence from Tacitus contradicts this claim to some extent.

before *damnatio*, with the use of the verb *anteire* (6.29.4) indicating that a trial had yet to take place. Encouraged by Sextia, the couple committed suicide together: *hortante Sextia uxore, quae incitamentum mortis et particeps fuit* (6.29.4).

Therefore, Tacitus has recorded two 'politically motivated husband-and-wife suicides' together.<sup>558</sup> However, there are important differences between Tacitus' descriptions of the two cases, particularly regarding the role the female plays.

Scaurus certainly is not as admirable as Labeo. He is *probrosus* ('disreputable' 6.29.3) and the charges laid against him are more sordid in their nature: adultery and participation in magic practices. Tacitus does note that he reclaims some of his honour in his death, as he was 'worthy of his ancestors the Aemilii' (6.29.4). However, Sextia has more of an active role in events than Paxaea had, and given the character of her husband, is all the more commendable as a result. It is actually she who provides the *incitamentum* for her husband to commit suicide (6.29.4). Martin notes that this word was a favourite of Tacitus; however, it is rarely used in relation to humans.<sup>559</sup> This could suggest that Tacitus wishes particularly to emphasise Sextia's role here as the motivation behind their suicides. The circumstances are distinctive enough for him to adopt this word in a unique way.

One scholar describes Sextia as an example of those women who choose to die to show 'solidarity' to male relatives.<sup>560</sup> However, Sextia's situation was very different to that of Paxaea, who followed an honourable husband to his death. Scaurus was charged with involvement in disreputable deeds, and yet Sextia still

---

<sup>558</sup> Martin, 2001, 164.

<sup>559</sup> Martin, 2001, 163: it is used in only one other similar context, at *Historiae*, 2.23.5.

<sup>560</sup> Edwards, 2007, 194.

wanted to help him, and even share his fate. One possible explanation is that Scaurus was innocent of the charges, and that Sextia, knowing this, had no reason to falter in her *fides* to her husband. However, Tacitus' description of Scaurus as *probrosus* suggests that his character was not one suggestive of the ideal Roman, nor of the ideal husband.<sup>561</sup> Furthermore, there is no indication that Sextia was implicated in any of the charges.

More detail is given in Dio's account: for example, he provides the name of the play Scaurus has written, the *Atreus*.<sup>562</sup> One commentator has observed that in Dio's version, it is Tiberius who forced Scaurus to commit suicide.<sup>563</sup> However, whereas Martin does point out the fact that Tacitus includes Scaurus' wife as well as their shared suicide, neither he nor Furneaux and Pitman nor Koestermann make any further comment on this important difference, or the role Tacitus assigns to Sextia.<sup>564</sup> Nevertheless, this fundamental difference between Tacitus' account and that of Dio can be revealing about why Tacitus includes Sextia and her suicide. She is totally omitted by Dio, yet in Tacitus, she is positioned so as to capture the reader's attention and interest. It is only when encouraged by his wife that Scaurus commits suicide, and she is also *particeps mortis* (6.29.4). Sextia also plays her part in Tacitus' narrative on conditions in Rome during this period under Tiberius.

Whilst showing some appreciation for her brave act, Tacitus also implicitly indicates a reversal of gender roles here. Sextia's name is placed in the middle of

---

<sup>561</sup> Koestermann points out that other writers, Seneca and Tertullian, are also 'sehr abschätzig' about his character (1968a, 310).

<sup>562</sup> As Martin notes (2001, 164; from Dio 58.24.4).

<sup>563</sup> Furneaux & Pitman, 1912, 25 (from Dio, 58.24.4).

<sup>564</sup> Martin, 2001, 164. Koestermann highlights the fact that Tacitus has portrayed Sextia as not only brave, but as also providing the *incitamentum* for the suicides, for which she can be compared with Arria the Elder, but this is the extent of his comments on her (1968a, 311).

the ablative absolute phrase describing her encouragement (*hortante Sextia uxore*), and she is the feminine subject of the *quae*: it is she who actively abets and shares Scaurus' death and in doing this assumes a dominant, masculine role. Scaurus, on the other hand, has a dubious, weaker character and is accused of participating in magic rites, a charge more usually levelled at women. Suicide by a woman in connection with the death of her husband was not uncommon in extreme circumstances. For example, Velleius Paterculus records the cases of Calpurnia, who killed herself after her husband Antistius had been killed in 82 BC due to his connections with Sulla, and of Servilia, who committed suicide after the death of her husband Marcus Lepidus who had been involved in a plot against Octavian in 30 BC.<sup>565</sup> These exempla show the devotion that women typically demonstrated to their husbands in situations of acute danger and distress. However, Sextia stands out from these women as actually being the stimulus behind her husband's suicide. In this sense, she too transgresses the bounds of her sex and Scaurus is arguably portrayed as in some ways feminine, again indicating Tacitus' interpretation of Rome under Tiberius as in many ways inverted.

### iii. Pollitta and Sextia

Moving further on in Tacitus' *Annales*, and into Nero's principate, we come to a group of suicides involving Pollitta and her relatives in 65. Pollitta's husband, Rubellius Plautus, had been killed by Nero in 62 (14.59.3), and now the emperor also required the deaths of Pollitta herself, her father Lucius Antistius Vetus, and

---

<sup>565</sup> Velleius Paterculus, 2.26.3; 2.88.3.

her grandmother Sextia, as he regarded them as a living reproach to himself for Plautus' murder (16.10.1). Charges were fabricated by one of Vetus' freedmen, Fortunatus (16.10.2). Despairing for his and his daughter's lives, Vetus sent Pollitta to try and appeal to the emperor for clemency, but Nero proved deaf to her pleas (16.10.5). Pollitta herself suggested that the best course of action was to abandon hope (*abdicere spem*), and she was proven right when it was clear that a trial and unfair verdict were being planned (16.11.1). Vetus, Pollitta and Sextia decided to commit suicide, and in the same room, with the same knife, they severed their veins: *eodem in cubiculo, eodem ferro abscidunt venas* (16.11.4). Pollitta died last after her older relatives (16.11.5-6).

One scholar describes their death scene as a 'harrowing account', noting in particular Tacitus' depiction of the state of the women:<sup>566</sup> they were covered only by a single garment to preserve their modesty (*singulis vestibus ad verecundiam velati* 16.11.4). The episode represents one of the instances of female suicide in which Tacitus' skill at describing such distressing situations is really brought to the fore. It is presented as an acutely tragic affair. The repetition of *eodem* stresses the totality of Nero's cruelty, but also the totality of those opposed to him, as a unified family, who are very noble and even connected to the imperial family,<sup>567</sup> die together in the same room and with the same knife. The use of the present tense in *abscidunt* enhances the vividness with which Tacitus describes the scene. Male and female actions, those of the *pater, filia* and *avia*, (16.11.4) are combined in a very private space as Nero has made everyone the same and at his mercy,

---

<sup>566</sup> Baldwin, 1972, 84.

<sup>567</sup> Pollitta's late husband Plautus was the grandson of Drusus, Tiberius' son, through Drusus' daughter Julia (14.57.3).

regardless of age and sex. Even *fortuna* does not abandon this family group. The use of *servare* at the start of the sentence emphasises the fact that they have the gods on their side as ‘fate preserved the correct order’ of their deaths (*servavitque ordinem fortuna* 16.11.5).

Thus there is less focus on gender in this description of female suicide, as Tacitus concentrates rather on family unity. However, Tacitus does make much of Pollitta’s femininity in other areas. Ever since the death of Plautus, Pollitta had been a picture of despair, with Tacitus describing her as treasuring the robe spattered with her husband’s blood, and as being a *vidua, inpexa*, and in a state of *luctus* (16.10.4). Yet despite her grief, which Tacitus points out had nearly caused her to kill herself already (16.10.4), she is still willing to try and help her father and goes to great lengths to implore Nero to change his mind. Tacitus also describes her as transgressing gender boundaries: Edwards comments that Pollitta is driven to ‘behaviour which goes beyond what is appropriate for a woman’ (*sexum egressa voce infensa clamitabat* 16.10.5).<sup>568</sup> One might argue that Tacitus had a specific reason for reporting Pollitta’s behaviour in such a way: this was so that he could emphasise the desperation of her family and that her loyalty to them was such that she would do whatever she could to try and save them, even if this meant acting outside the bounds of what was normally expected of her as a woman.

In the description of the actual suicide itself we are reminded again of the sex of Pollitta: *verecundia* (16.11.4), a word for modesty that can refer to both sexes,<sup>569</sup> emphasises the fact that this scene deals with the suicides of women as

---

<sup>568</sup> Edwards, 2007, 195.

<sup>569</sup> It appears in Valerius Maximus in connection with a young male (6.1.7), but arguably could be viewed as more of a feminine word (just as *pudicitia* can refer to both sexes but has a special

well as that of a man. The fact that all use the same method of the sword provides further evidence that this was no longer an instrument for the exclusive use of men. There is no comparable episode in Dio,<sup>570</sup> and so we have only Tacitus' account to rely on for the portrayal of Pollitta and Sextia.<sup>571</sup> Pollitta can be seen as acting similarly to Sextia in that she takes a central and influential position in events. However, unlike the first two women discussed, it is clear that Pollitta and her grandmother are explicitly singled out for punishment by Nero along with Vetus, and in this sense have less choice in their decision to take their own lives. The emperor of Rome is now specifically targeting women.

Tacitus' account, involving three figures from the same family in a scene filled with pathos, serves to highlight the corruption of Nero's regime, who is *inmobilis* to Pollitta's pitiful cries (16.10.5) The use of *ludibria* ('mockeries' 16.11.6) to describe Nero's response emphasises the absurd attempts he makes to assert his authority, but this is only possible after the family have already committed suicide. His incompetence is shown by the fact that he can only ineffectually remark that he let them die without an overseer (*sine arbitro* 16.11.6).<sup>572</sup> Perhaps he had little chance to interfere: the use of *properi* (16.11.4) suggests that events moved along swiftly. The fact that he was still not willing to give any fair treatment to the family is shown by his impeachment of them even after burial (16.11.6).

---

association with women; on this see pp. 31, 68). At Valerius Maximus, 2.1.4 and Seneca, *Controversiae*, 2.7.3 it appears in relation to females, and Langlands seems to suggest that it is one of the 'moral forces' (along with *pudor* and *pudicitia*) used to guard the boundary between matronly honour and its opposite, disgrace (2006, 130-1).

<sup>570</sup> Perhaps because for this part of his work we now have to rely on epitomes.

<sup>571</sup> Furneaux & Pitman do not make any observations concerning the women exclusively.

<sup>572</sup> As Furneaux & Pitman note (1904, 133).

## b. Stoic women

### i. Pompeia Paulina

Seneca, the husband of Pompeia Paulina, had been implicated in the Pisonian plot of 65.<sup>573</sup> It is not clear whether he was actually involved: Tacitus says that an informer told on him, but this could just have been to appease Nero, as he had desired the removal of Seneca for some time now (15.60.3-4).<sup>574</sup> This information gave the emperor cause to get rid of his old tutor, and he sent a centurion to announce the death sentence to Seneca, at least giving him the option of killing himself first (15.61.5-6). Seneca embraced his wife when Pompeia declared that she too was determined on death (*quoque destinatam mortem adseverat* 15.63.2). After a final speech by Seneca to her, the pair 'with the same stroke opened their veins with a knife': *eodem ictu brachia ferro exsolvunt* (15.63.5). The use of *eodem* and *ferro* foreshadows the suicides of Pollitta and her family discussed above and indicates that this was a recurring formula in Tacitus' descriptions of suicides. Again, in these similar circumstances, the *eodem* emphasises the unity of those who opposed Nero and the blurring of gender boundaries as both sexes act in the same way. And once again the present tense is used in *exsolvunt* to create a vivid picture of the couple acting together.<sup>575</sup>

However, Nero, not wanting to increase the harsh reputation of his regime, had Pompeia's wounds bandaged up and consequently, she did not die with her

---

<sup>573</sup> For the plot see pp. 239ff.

<sup>574</sup> Griffin suggests that he may have known about the plot but was 'probably not a conspirator' (1976, 367).

<sup>575</sup> Ker gives a detailed analysis of Seneca's death scene (2009, 20-34).

husband (16.64.1). He did not want her suicide to represent a further slur on his regime. Tacitus adds the detail that her bleeding was stopped, but it is uncertain whether she was ignorant of this or not (*incertum an ignarae* 15.64.2). As he reports, there were those who believed that as long as she feared punishment by Nero, she decided to die with her husband; however, when she learnt that Nero would not harm her, she succumbed to the *blandimenta vitae* (15.64.2).

Yet Tacitus' own words suggest that he does not accept this version of Pompeia's motives. Furneaux and Pitman comment that Tacitus 'treats the belief that she wished for life as a vulgar calumny':<sup>576</sup> this is supported by his use of *vulgus* to describe those who thought the worse of her (15.64.2).<sup>577</sup> Furthermore, it is very possible that even had Pompeia had some hope of remaining alive, Tacitus would not necessarily have seen this as a debasement of her character. As the quote from the *Agricola* above demonstrates, he did not always look kindly upon those who killed themselves when they would have been of more use to the state had they stayed alive (see pp. 194-5). In some ways Pompeia does fill this criterion: she remained a praiseworthy figure to Seneca's memory (15.64.2), continuing in her role as a faithful wife and reminding Rome about the importance of her husband.

Although ultimately she fails in her suicide attempt, Pompeia should not be ranked alongside Albucilla and Messalina discussed below. At least she went through with the actual act itself, and showed a real determination to die. The loyalty that she demonstrated to Seneca is comparable with that shown by Paxaea and Sextia to their spouses, and Veyne sees her as following in the footsteps of the

---

<sup>576</sup> Furneaux & Pitman, 1904, 122.

<sup>577</sup> Erasmo's comment that Tacitus presents her as cheating death amorally (2008, 27) does not consider the full implications of the writer's words.

'illustrious precedents' set by such women.<sup>578</sup> Edwards has even gone so far as to say that 'the individual who volunteers to kill herself may appear significantly braver than the man who will have to die anyway'.<sup>579</sup> This is an accurate assessment of Pompeia's courage here, as there is no indication that Nero required her death as well, and so her decision to die was purely due to her *fides* for Seneca.

Dio says that it was Seneca who put forward the idea of dying with him, not Pompeia herself, and that it was Seneca alone who cut her veins, rather than them doing it together.<sup>580</sup> There is much less focus on Pompeia's wishes and actions. Furthermore, Dio only comments that she survived Seneca, not mentioning why this might have been the case. Tacitus, therefore, has placed significance on her independence of mind. The private nature of these events allowed for differing degrees of interpretation. In his version, Pompeia sees no reason to go on living without Seneca. This is not a great compliment to the state of Rome at this stage, nor to the emperor. Indeed, this episode also highlights Nero's fickle nature: he intervenes to prevent Pompeia's suicide, but only after she has already wounded herself.<sup>581</sup>

## ii. Servilia

Servilia was the daughter of Barea Soranus, another renowned Stoic philosopher. In 66 he was tried as being an enemy of Nero's and for plotting against

---

<sup>578</sup> Veyne, 2003, 186 n.24.

<sup>579</sup> Edwards, 2007, 196.

<sup>580</sup> Dio, 62.25.1-2.

<sup>581</sup> Ker calls this an 'ironic exercise of clemency' (2009, 49).

the emperor with Rubellius Plautus<sup>582</sup> (16.22-3; 16.30.1). However, Soranus' accuser also brought charges against his daughter Servilia, accusing her of freely giving money to magicians (16.30.2). Tacitus admits that this had in fact happened, although only because of the *pietas* Servilia had for her father, as she was keen to discover any information she could about the security of her family (16.30.3). Summoned before the senate, Servilia did not deny the charges and even tried to exonerate her father (16.30.4-16.31). However, evidence was heard against them and so they were forced to commit suicide, given a 'choice of death' (*datur mortis arbitrium* 16.33.2).<sup>583</sup>

Servilia's brave devotion to her father is plain to see, and he reciprocates this: the moment where 'simultaneously, he rushed into his daughter's embrace, while she ran to meet him' (*simul in amplexus occurrentis filiae ruebat* 16.32.2) shows the deep bonds between them. However, this reunion is spoilt when the lictors come between them. This physical parting of the pair is symbolic of what trials such as theirs were doing to innocent, honourable people in Rome. Noble families were being torn apart by bloodshed and exile. Furthermore, Servilia does not waver when placed in front of the senate, but courageously speaks the truth (16.31.3). There are several similarities between her and Pollitta. Both take an active role when their fathers are accused, attempting to save them, and both are very young and have already been deprived of their husbands by Nero: in Servilia's case here she is not yet even twenty years of age and her husband Asinius Pollio had been exiled, effectively leaving her in *viduitas* (16.30.4). Her naivety is perhaps

---

<sup>582</sup> The husband of Pollitta discussed above.

<sup>583</sup> On the *liberum mortis arbitrium* see Hill, 2004, 193-7.

highlighted by the fact that although at the 'very heart of the Stoic opposition', she still thought that information about the future could be bought.<sup>584</sup>

Dio records that Servilia was involved in practising magic that caused her father's death.<sup>585</sup> However, she is not mentioned by name, and she does not die with her father, who is killed rather than permitted to kill himself. Tacitus has made much more of her role in his version. Along with Pollitta, her suicide indicates that now the emperor had even resorted to forcing the suicides of harmless young women. Perhaps Nero had more reason to want the death of Servilia: she was, after all, the daughter of one of the Stoics who had on occasion shown their disobedience to the emperor. Thus it seems that she had been caught up in opposition to the emperor due to her family connections, and was to be punished accordingly. However, instead of bewailing her fate, she acted like a true Stoic herself, and ended her life by committing suicide alongside her father.

### iii. Arria the Younger<sup>586</sup>

Arria the Younger was the wife of Thrasea Paetus, who was charged with similar crimes at the same time as Servilia and Soranus. Thrasea was given *mortis arbitrium* along with Servilia and her father (16.33.2), but unlike them, Tacitus chose to describe his suicide in detail and this is where his wife Arria (2) comes into the story. She wished to follow her husband in his death, and in doing so, emulate the *exemplum* of her own mother, Arria (1) (16.34.3). However, Thrasea dissuaded

---

<sup>584</sup> MacMullen, 1992, 137.

<sup>585</sup> Dio, 62.26.2-3.

<sup>586</sup> For convenience in this section, Arria the Elder will be 'Arria (1)' and Arria the Younger, 'Arria (2)'.

her from taking her own life, imploring her to stay alive for the sake of their child, who would otherwise be left parentless (16.34.3). Thrasea then opened his veins in his garden, suffering agonising pain (*cruciatu*s) because he was so slow to die (16.35.3).

Arria (2) does not even attempt suicide. However, the fact that Tacitus includes her at all and records her wish to take her own life is still of importance in looking at the ways in which he uses female suicide in his narrative. Dio does not mention Arria (2) and his Thrasea is executed, not permitted to commit suicide.<sup>587</sup> Yet it is her link to her mother, Arria (1), which would have held much significance in the minds of Tacitus' readers. Both Martial and Pliny the Younger attest to the fame the Elder Arria had well into the late first and early second centuries AD. Arria (1) had chosen to kill herself when her husband Caecina Paetus had been implicated in the conspiracy led by Scribonianus against Claudius in 42. However, Arria did not simply emulate her spouse's death, but she actually led the way: Pliny records her famous last words, '*Paete, non dolet*'.<sup>588</sup>

It is highly likely, then, that Tacitus documented this conspiracy of 42 and the deaths of Arria and her husband in the lost sections of Claudius' principate. Tacitus may have acquired information about the family from Pliny, who was a personal acquaintance of Fannia,<sup>589</sup> the child of Arria (2) and Thrasea. It has been suggested that Arria (2), despite not dying with her husband, and Fannia, kept alive the Stoic opposition for many years to come.<sup>590</sup> Pliny tells us that both were sent

---

<sup>587</sup> Dio, 62.26.3.

<sup>588</sup> Martial 1.13; Pliny, *Epistulae*, 3.16.

<sup>589</sup> See e.g. Pliny, *Epistulae*, 3.16, 7.19.

<sup>590</sup> O'Gorman, 2000, 124-6.

into exile, and on more than one occasion.<sup>591</sup> Tacitus' description of Arria (2) here could perhaps foreshadow the moves she and her daughter were going to make in the future in opposition to Rome's rulers. Had he recorded the earlier death of her mother as well, then Arria (2) would also have brought this to mind. Hence Tacitus could show that the state of Rome had changed very little from Claudius' rule to Nero's, with members of the same family still prepared to die in defiance of cruel emperors.

The deaths of Barea Soranus and Thrasea Paetus represent for Tacitus the 'culmination of the destruction of Roman nobility'.<sup>592</sup> Scholars have noted the similarities between Tacitus' portrayal of Thrasea's death and his description of Seneca's death.<sup>593</sup> Hill in particular notes that the two were the 'most outstanding Stoic icons of the era' and yet both of their reputations were tarnished a little for their collusion with certain aspects of Nero's regime.<sup>594</sup> At the same time, it is clear that the two are presented as acting out honourable deaths and that Tacitus does seem to suggest that they die as free men, remaining true to their Stoic principles.<sup>595</sup> It is also possible that Thrasea acts as a surrogate for Tacitus himself: his silence might be seen as analogous to the silence Tacitus admits was also his only action under Domitian (at *Agricola*, 2.2-3). Tacitus in a way 'speaks' for Thrasea by writing him such a noble end in the *Annales*, giving him such a lasting monument of his virtue.<sup>596</sup> Despite his misgivings about some suicides, then (for example, as expressed in the *Agricola*: see pp. 194-5), it seems that overall in the *Annales*,

---

<sup>591</sup> Pliny, *Epistulae*, 3.11, 7.19 (one occasion was in AD 93).

<sup>592</sup> Edwards, 2007, 134.

<sup>593</sup> See Griffin, 1976, 370-1; Hill, 2004, 185-6; Ker, 2009, 60-1.

<sup>594</sup> Hill, 2004, 211; see also Edwards, 2007, 135-6.

<sup>595</sup> See e.g. Edwards, 2007, 131, 140, on the *gloria* Tacitus associates with Thrasea's death.

<sup>596</sup> For this idea see Edwards, 2007, 141-3.

Tacitus shows approbation for the suicides of the Stoic men he describes. And the fact that they have a female willing to die with them advances the suggestion that they are living during a time of oppression and reinforces the idea that anyone, regardless of sex, during such a time might find themselves as being part of the Stoic opposition against Nero.

This first section on female suicides in Tacitus' *Annales* has looked at the exemplary instances in his work. It is clear that these women acted commendably and that Tacitus portrays them as worthy of some approbation.<sup>597</sup> One scholar lists the first three examples under his title of 'Arriatologies', indicating that they were worthy of being linked with the celebrated Arria the Elder.<sup>598</sup> These instances of female suicide gave Tacitus the opportunity to demonstrate his skill at describing such disconcerting scenes, as well as the chance to promote his interpretation of the regimes of emperors like Tiberius and Nero as oppressive and in many ways inverted. To some extent, the second subdivision represents similar narrative aims, but with the added element of these women being related to Stoics. MacMullen has noted that despite all their efforts, the male Stoics such as those discussed actually achieved very little in their opposition.<sup>599</sup> Yet these females still chose to support their fathers or husbands, and in this respect, they can be seen as even braver and nobler than their male counterparts. Nero is upstaged not just by the male members of the Stoic opposition, but also by its female members. Tacitus advances his view of a disordered Rome at this point by reversing gender roles in

---

<sup>597</sup> The suicides of this section could also be interpreted as 'altruistic', as defined by Durkheim: see pp. 9-10.

<sup>598</sup> Baldwin, 1972, 84.

<sup>599</sup> MacMullen, 1992, 54.

representing female figures as upstaging the male figures. This chapter now moves on to examples of female suicide in the *Annales* which carry certain pejorative or negative associations.

#### 4. Female suicides: the negative paradigm

##### i. Plancina

After the death of her nemesis Agrippina the Elder in 33 (see pp. 198-201), Plancina's destruction was inevitable. Tacitus makes it clear that one of the reasons Tiberius had only allowed her to survive this long was because of the *inimicitia* of Agrippina (6.26.3),<sup>600</sup> a factor which was not made clear by Tacitus in his earlier account of the trial against her husband Piso.<sup>601</sup> Tacitus possibly mentions it now because her death comes very nearly after Agrippina's own, and it could also be to signify the fact that this disreputable woman was not saved because of her virtues. Indeed, she owed much of her survival at the trial in AD 20 to the intercessions of Livia, Tiberius' mother (3.15). However, these women were now both dead. Thus she was prosecuted and committed suicide, a fate that Tacitus notes was 'more belated than undeserved':

petitaque criminibus haud ignotis sua manu sera magis quam inmerita  
supplicia persolvit. (6.26.3)

---

<sup>600</sup> Dio also emphasises this fact (58.22.5).

<sup>601</sup> As Koestermann notes (1968a, 301).

The only indication of suicide is from the phrase *sua manu*.<sup>602</sup>

One commentator has observed that Tacitus devotes little space to Plancina's end, even failing to explain the charges against her, although these were apparently 'not at all unknown' (*haud ignotis*).<sup>603</sup> A possible explanation is that he felt sufficient narrative had been devoted to her in his earlier books, and so it was enough here to simply record the end of this infamous woman. Tacitus also does not see her method of suicide as important enough to note down.<sup>604</sup> However, the fact that her death is *sera* ('belated') suggests that she should have died much earlier than fourteen years after her involvement in Germanicus' death. This immediately draws the reader back to consider her behaviour at the trial. Tacitus made it clear then that although Plancina promised to share the fortune of her husband 'for good or ill', she nevertheless appealed to Livia for help and then even began to operate a separate defence to Piso (3.15). She is the very antithesis of those women already discussed who chose to die alongside their husbands when they had been or were about to be formally accused.

Plancina's suicide can therefore be seen as negative primarily for two reasons. Firstly, she fails to die honourably with her husband, when she was obviously guilty as well, or even show sorrow for his death. Secondly, she has committed crimes clearly of great significance to Tacitus, probably largely due to the fact that she had a hand in the death of a man considered more worthy and respectable than those who actually governed in Rome. Tacitus had also

---

<sup>602</sup> Dio only says that she was killed, with no indication of suicide (58.22.5).

<sup>603</sup> Koestermann, 1968a, 301.

<sup>604</sup> Or perhaps this was unknown to him.

commented earlier on Plancina's transgressive behaviour. Santoro L'Hoir observes that in some respects, she is portrayed similarly to Agrippina in that they both assume male roles, but that Plancina goes further than Agrippina by transgressing the 'boundaries of female propriety'.<sup>605</sup> It is possible then that Plancina is shown in such a disparaging light in book 6 so that the reader will think a little more positively about the death of Agrippina, described in the preceding chapter, and as noted above, rather ambiguously portrayed by Tacitus. Furthermore, her suicide is also a further slur against Tiberius. By juxtaposing *sera* and *magis*, Tacitus highlights his disapproval that the emperor has permitted her survival for so long, and this largely due to his dominant mother and the petty jealousies of Agrippina.

## ii. Aemilia Lepida

Aemilia Lepida committed suicide in 36. Tacitus indicates that he has already told us about her marriage to Drusus, the son of Agrippina and Germanicus (6.40.3): it is likely that this was in the lost part of book 5.<sup>606</sup> He records here that she persecuted Drusus with 'constant indictments' along with her father Marcus Lepidus (6.40.3). She represents the very antithesis of the kind of behaviour expected of an elite female, especially with regard to her disloyalty to her husband. Once her father was dead though, Aemilia herself was targeted and charged with committing adultery with a slave. As there was no doubt about her *flagitium*, she opted not to try and defend herself in court but instead put an end to her own life:

---

<sup>605</sup> Santoro L'Hoir, 2006, 119 (from 2.55.6).

<sup>606</sup> As Koestermann notes (1968a, 337).

nec dubitabatur de flagitio ergo ommissa defensione finem vitae sibi  
posuit. (6.40.3)<sup>607</sup>

Tacitus suggests that Aemilia had been working with Sejanus in the persecution of her husband. Evidence from Dio explicitly states that she assisted Sejanus in bringing about Drusus' downfall.<sup>608</sup> This corresponds with Tacitus' information here, which is suggestive of her role in Drusus' condemnation. Suetonius tells us that Drusus had been sent to a prison in the palace where he eventually died;<sup>609</sup> Tacitus also records his death there in 33 (6.23.2). Aemilia is thus described as *intestabilis* ('detestable' 6.40.3) for her role in the ruin of an innocent man.<sup>610</sup> Her connection to Sejanus also brings to mind connotations of Livilla, another lover of Sejanus and complicit in the death of another Drusus, Tiberius' son (4.3). She met a not dissimilar fate to Aemilia; Dio says that either Tiberius had her killed or she was starved to death by her mother Antonia - a kind of enforced suicide.<sup>611</sup>

The crime that Aemilia was accused of is also indicative of her wicked character. Adultery was often used as a 'convenient charge to bring against high-born women', but an allegation of adultery with a slave was 'particularly

---

<sup>607</sup> No method is specified.

<sup>608</sup> As Furneaux & Pitman (1912, 32) and Koestermann (1968a, 337) point out (from Dio 58.3.8 – although he does not mention her by name).

<sup>609</sup> Suetonius, *Tiberius*, 54.2.

<sup>610</sup> Furneaux & Pitman, 1912, 32 as well as Koestermann, 1968a, 337 pick up on the strength of this word used by Tacitus to describe Aemilia's immoral character. In general terms it translates as signalling a great moral weakness, meaning 'abominable' or 'detestable'; however, in legal terms it could also refer to someone barred from bearing witness (for example, in the making of a will).

<sup>611</sup> Dio, 58.11.7; Tacitus would have reported Livilla's fate in the lost part of the *Annales*.

heinous'.<sup>612</sup> This provides further evidence for Tacitus' claim that she was *intestabilis*. Tacitus makes no efforts to imply that these charges were false: they correspond to her behaviour with Sejanus, and he explicitly states that there was no doubt about her guilt (6.40.3). Like Plancina then, it is apparent that Tacitus wanted to portray Aemilia as deserving of this end. One scholar associates these two women together as examples of those who committed suicide because they were 'nefarious and guilty', as opposed to those who chose suicide out of loyalty to their husbands, like Paxaea and Sextia.<sup>613</sup>

Does Aemilia redeem herself to some extent in going through with her suicide? It can be argued that the context of her suicide does not render a very favourable portrayal of her. Tacitus had started the same chapter containing her suicide with the noble death of a Roman knight Vibulenus Agrippa. He had killed himself with *venenum*, but those accusing him had taken him to the dungeon as he was dying and strangled him (6.40.1).<sup>614</sup> Tacitus then lists other less distinguished men who met their deaths, including Gaius Galba and two Blaesi, all adherents of Sejanus (6.40.2). In this succession of sentences, Tacitus has begun with the most honourable and guiltless party, Agrippa, and ended it with the most dishonourable and guilty individual, Aemilia.

Aemilia is certainly more connected with the latter group of men rather than Agrippa. Indeed, the sheer contrast with Agrippa's death at the start of the chapter, and Aemilia's at the end, further highlights her corrupt and immoral

---

<sup>612</sup> Martin, 2001, 179; see also Langlands, 2006, 342. Lucretia demonstrated her virtue by yielding to rape rather than be accused of this crime (see Chapter 1). Although not all women accused of adultery were portrayed by Tacitus as being guilty: see e.g. 14.60-4 on Octavia.

<sup>613</sup> Baldwin, 1972, 96.

<sup>614</sup> Presumably so that for appearances sake he had died a traitor's death, making the forfeiture of his estate now possible.

behaviour. Tacitus' depiction of her stands out all the more because it is the only surviving record of her demise, with Dio only referring to her as the abettor of Sejanus in Drusus' downfall.<sup>615</sup> By including Aemilia, Tacitus can emphasise the spread of Sejanus' influence and corruption. There is nothing particularly gendered about the language Tacitus uses to describe her suicide. There is no indication of means or circumstances, just that she decided to put a *finis* to her life. This, along with her connection to the male suicides of this chapter, again highlights the point that roles traditionally reserved for the male political sphere, such as involvement in conspiracies and committing suicide to escape trial, were now also available to be taken up in the more private female sphere. Tacitus' interminable list of suicides, particularly noticeable in book 6 of the *Annales*, demonstrates this point effectively to emphasise what he viewed as the degeneracy that had taken place under Tiberius' rule.

### iii. Albucilla

Albucilla was part of a plot against Tiberius, formulated by Sejanus. Her husband, Satrius Secundus, had informed on her (6.47.2). She was accused of *impietatis in principem*, along with her lovers and accomplices, Gnaeus Domitius, Vibius Marsus and Lucius Arruntius (6.47.2). Domitius prepared his defence, Marsus decided to starve himself to death (6.48.1), while Arruntius opened his veins (6.48.3). Albucilla tried to commit suicide but she could only give herself an *inritus* wound and so was then taken to the *carcer*: *Albucilla inrito ictu ab semet vulnerata*

---

<sup>615</sup> At 58.3.8.

*iussu senatus in carcerem fertur* (6.48.3). Tacitus does not mention Albucilla again. Dio tells us that she died in prison: how and when is unclear.<sup>616</sup> Both Furneaux and Pitman and Koestermann suggest that she outlived Tiberius.<sup>617</sup> However, there is no indication in Dio that she died much later.

Albucilla is described in a similar derogatory tone as that used for Aemilia Lepida.<sup>618</sup> One critic proposes that she is introduced 'only as a foil', with Tacitus utilising her character as a way of introducing her lovers, the most important of whom is Arruntius.<sup>619</sup> It is true that more space is devoted to Arruntius. However, another scholar names her as the 'Mittelpunkt' of the series of trials that take place in these chapters.<sup>620</sup> This latter theory seems more credible, as the former seems to downplay her role somewhat. Tacitus does use Albucilla as a means by which he can mention the males involved in this plot, but he then refers to her again. She is connected to these males, but the language used to describe her also highlights her femininity. Her adulteries, a particularly feminine crime, are emphasised with the strong adjective *famosa*, the first aspect of her character that Tacitus notices and which he juxtaposes next to the first instance of her name in the narrative (6.47.2). Furthermore, her suicide can be compared with that of Vibulenus Agrippa (see p. 224), as both attempt the act and then are taken to the prison. However, whereas he is portrayed as noble and wrongly carried away, she can only deal an *inritus* wound before being taken. This could be due to her inability with the sword, or she

---

<sup>616</sup> Dio, 58.27.4.

<sup>617</sup> Furneaux & Pitman, 1912, 36; Koestermann, 1968a, 354.

<sup>618</sup> Baldwin comments that Tacitus treats Albucilla 'without sympathy' (1972, 87).

<sup>619</sup> Martin, 2001, 187.

<sup>620</sup> Koestermann, 1968a, 354.

might have entertained the vain hope that she would be saved. Either way, it is her feminine weaknesses that ultimately lead to her failing.

Aemilia Lepida, although just as scandalous as Albucilla, had accepted defeat and died with a little dignity. Albucilla, however, fails to carry out this final decent act. The details of what happened to her afterwards are unknown to us. Perhaps Tacitus did not consider her death to be worthy enough to record: she had failed at suicide and that was a revealing enough final comment on her. In this respect then, she cannot only be compared with the first two ladies discussed in this section, due to her criminal and immoral character, but also ranks alongside those Tacitean females who fail at suicide, the most important of whom is Messalina.

#### **iv. Messalina**

Tacitus is the only ancient source to refer to the suicide attempt of Messalina, third wife of the emperor Claudius, in AD 48 (11.38.1). Notorious for her promiscuous behaviour, Messalina went one step too far when she 'moved towards untested lusts' (*ad incognitas libidines profluebat*), agreeing to marry Silius and for them to rule together in place of Claudius (11.26.1-6). Learning of this, Claudius' freedmen, Narcissus and Pallas, contrived to use it to bring about her downfall, and compelled Claudius' concubines to reveal all to the emperor (11.29-30). Messalina was denied access to Claudius and he set about punishing Silius and other men connected with the pair (11.35.4-7). Horrified that the emperor might actually forgive his wife, Narcissus sent a tribune to execute her (11.37.3). Unable to kill herself, Messalina was eventually killed by this tribune:

tunc primum fortunam suam introscepit ferrumque accepit, quod  
frustra iugulo aut pectori per trepidationem admovens ictu tribuni  
transigitur. (11.38.1)

Dio and Suetonius both state only that Claudius put her to death once they had found out about her 'marriage' to Silius.<sup>621</sup> Hence Tacitus adds, or at least made a conscious effort to include, this extra detail about the end of Messalina. The episode provides him with the opportunity to create a dramatic narrative, as the scene is one of tension as the reader waits to see what will become of this infamous empress. Tacitus begins with *tunc primum*, emphasising the fact that it is only just at this very point that Messalina has realised the grave situation she is in. She does not use the sword or dagger to end her life, as so many honourable women had done before her.<sup>622</sup>

Tacitus puts much emphasis on the fact that she is ultimately betrayed by her feminine weaknesses in this episode. Her *trepidatio* and actions that have no result (as they are *frustra*) indicate the fear and incompetence, very feminine failings, which she displays in her final moment. Albucilla and Pompeia Paulina had at least had enough courage to attempt suicide, whereas Messalina is so lacking in dignity and morals that she cannot. Tacitus' employment of the verb *accipere* suggests that the sword was given to her; she did not take it willingly. Her previously very active role is now reversed. Her actual death is very undignified: she

---

<sup>621</sup> Dio, 61.31.5; Suetonius, *Divus Claudius*, 26.2.

<sup>622</sup> The prime example being Lucretia (see Chapter 1); see also Arria the Elder (pp. 216-18).

is the passive individual referred to in *transigitur*, 'she was stabbed'. Then, Tacitus very effectively draws a line under the whole affair, which had caused so much tragedy and grief to the imperial household, with the simple *corpus matri concessum* (11.38.1 – immediately following the passage above).<sup>623</sup> This is the only space Tacitus wished to devote to Messalina now that she was finally dead.

Tacitus' use of language in this instance of female suicide thus demonstrates his literary capabilities well, but it also allows him to leave in his readers' minds a final damning portrait of the empress. One scholar comments that 'it is a sure sign of moral weakness' that Messalina fails in her suicide attempt, a perceptive assessment of Messalina's character at this point.<sup>624</sup> Even with a tribune standing before her, ready to execute her, Messalina fails to heed her mother's advice: 'life was over and there was nothing other than honour in death to be sought' (*transisse vitam neque aliud quam morti decus quaerendum* 11.37.4-5). The role of her mother is contrasted with Messalina's here. Although estranged from her daughter, she even tried to help Messalina, feeling pity for her (11.37.4), and tried to steer her towards ending her life with *decus*. However, all she can do is bury her daughter after she has been killed.

Joshel, among other scholars, has recognised that this characterisation of Messalina is part of Tacitus' portrayal of Claudius as a foolish and weak emperor. Joshel also suggests that such a depiction of Messalina allows Tacitus to comment on imperial power and empire in general.<sup>625</sup> Messalina's suicide attempt fits well into these interpretations of Tacitus' characterisation of her. Claudius, in charge of

---

<sup>623</sup> As Koestermann points out (1968b, 107).

<sup>624</sup> Edwards, 2007, 198. Keegan is wrong to imply that she actually did commit suicide in front of her mother (2004, 107), as Tacitus makes it clear that she failed to do this.

<sup>625</sup> Joshel, 1995, 56, 71, 73.

ruling the Roman empire, has been dominated by a woman with a 'soul perverted by lusts' (11.37.5) who cannot even face death admirably when it is staring her in the face.<sup>626</sup> Messalina was meant to set the standards for women as empress, and yet she is forced to suicide because of her corruption and promiscuity. Even in her execution, Claudius fails to direct events himself. As noted above, it is Narcissus, an ex-slave, who sends the tribune to kill her, and it could be argued that Tacitus further highlights Claudius' ineffectiveness by portraying him as especially impassive when he learns of Messalina's death (11.38.2-3).<sup>627</sup> The whole episode highlights the fact that his freedmen were actually in charge of matters.

This second section on female suicides in Tacitus' *Annales* has looked at the negative examples in his work; negative in the sense that Tacitus portrays them as deserving of little approbation and as deserving of their fates, with the added disapproval in the latter two cases of their failure to see the act of suicide carried through. Messalina must be seen as the worst example because she is adulterous, has a morally corrupt character and fails to kill herself, *and* she is an empress. These instances of female suicide also serve as indicators of how Tacitus viewed the principate during this period; these emperors have allowed such women to become prominent and wreak havoc on the Roman state, which in turn has meant that in describing their ends, Tacitus had no choice but to portray these females as deserving of suicide. This chapter now returns to examples of female suicide where

---

<sup>626</sup> Even the barbarian Cleopatra redeemed herself somewhat by her decent approach to death: see pp. 93, 105.

<sup>627</sup> As noted by Plass, 1995, 94. Conversely, Claudius' inexpressiveness might be a tactic to demonstrate his authority as he did not want to express anxiety about his wife's execution.

Tacitus' attitude to the women is ambivalent, beginning with two females directly targeted by two empresses.

## 5. Morally ambivalent suicides

### a. Females directly targeted by empresses

#### i. Poppaea Sabina

Poppaea Sabina was the wife of Publius Scipio and mother of Nero's future wife of the same name. According to Tacitus, her death is brought about solely because of the petty jealousies of Messalina, in 47. The empress suspected that Poppaea had been the lover both of Mnester, Messalina's current lover, and of Valerius Asiaticus, whose gardens Messalina coveted (11.1.1). Messalina wanted to arraign the pair and Asiaticus was not even allowed a trial before the Senate (11.2.1). He had to defend himself in front of Claudius and Messalina herself, accused of adultery with Poppaea, and having an effeminate body (*mollitiam corporis* 11.2.1). However, in his defence he managed to move Claudius and even 'evoked tears' (*lacrimas excivit*) from Messalina (11.2.3). Then Messalina turned her attention to the *pernicies* of Poppaea, who was forced to a voluntary death by the empress' agents: *subditis qui terrore carceris ad voluntariam mortem propellerent* (11.2.5). Claudius allowed Asiaticus a *liberum mortis arbitrium* (11.3.1) and he chose to carry this out by opening his veins (11.3.2).

Dio makes no reference to the death of Poppaea and so we have only Tacitus' account to rely on. It seems clear though that Poppaea did go through with her 'voluntary death' (*voluntariam mortem* 11.2.5). She was threatened with the *terror* of the *carcer* (11.2.5), a reference to the threat of being strangled in prison.<sup>628</sup> Presumably this was not a pleasant thought for a member of Rome's elite, as it was better to take your own life rather than be killed like a common criminal. Furthermore, she was certainly dead a few days later when her husband Scipio dined with Claudius, whose 'ignorance' was 'so complete' that he did not even know that she was dead (11.2.5). Tacitus presents us with the suicide of a woman, forced to commit the act simply because Messalina was jealous of her.

This episode is used by Tacitus to highlight the criminal nature of Messalina, and in addition, the weak Claudius who allows her to get away with such crimes.<sup>629</sup> It is fair to say that his reactions here are also similar to those when he learnt about Messalina's own death. Moreover, Poppaea's suicide can also be seen as foreshadowing that of Messalina herself. However, Messalina, although guilty of the charges levelled at her, fails to take the honourable course like Poppaea, and so by comparison, Messalina's moral weaknesses are emphasised even further. Tacitus' attitude to Poppaea's suicide is somewhat ambivalent. She does not receive any specific praise like those exemplary women discussed above, and the use of *propellere* indicates that she was driven to suicide rather than her making a conscious decision to commit the act. Yet she cannot rank alongside those negative examples of female suicide already discussed, as she is also clearly an innocent

---

<sup>628</sup> Furneaux & Pitman, 1912, 39; Koestermann, 1968b, 31. On the *carcer*, see Bradley (forthcoming, 2011).

<sup>629</sup> Koestermann observes that this incident casts aspersions about Claudius' mental state (1968b, 31).

victim of Messalina. The main function of her suicide is that it is used by Tacitus in highlighting contemporary female aspirations, like those of Messalina, to hegemony in male spheres during this period.

## ii. Lollia Paulina

Lollia Paulina had once been married to the emperor Caligula. In 49, however, she was also a rival of Agrippina the Younger's for Claudius' hand in marriage (12.1.3; 12.22.1). Agrippina charged Lollia with being associated with magicians and for applying to the Clarian Apollo for information regarding Claudius' marriage (12.22.1). Claudius himself spoke out in her defence, referring to the *claritudo* of her family (12.22.2). However, he admitted that 'her plans were dangerous to the state' and proposed that she be exiled from Italy (12.22.2). Unfortunately for Lollia, Agrippina was not prepared to simply banish her rival. Lollia was forced to commit suicide by a tribune sent by the empress: *in Lolliam mittitur tribunus, a quo ad mortem adigeretur* (12.22.4).

Dio states that Agrippina had Lollia killed and even adds the grotesque detail of her examining Lollia's head to check that it was the right woman.<sup>630</sup> There is no indication here of suicide. Tacitus' version of events, however, can be translated as indicating that Lollia did kill herself. She is the passive subject of *adigeretur*: it is she who is being forced into doing something, not the tribune doing something (killing) to her. Once again, the use of a verb like *adigere* indicates that Lollia was driven to suicide, and did not actively choose to kill herself as, some of the women discussed

---

<sup>630</sup> Dio, 61.32.4.

above did. Yet she too was an innocent victim of an empress, a fact highlighted by Nero later allowing the return of her ashes and for a tomb to be built (14.15): after the death of his mother, he aimed to do all he could to atone for her crimes so as to present himself as all the more magnanimous and honourable. Tacitus' standpoint on Lollia is ambivalent and she does not fit neatly into either the 'exemplary' or the 'negative' categories of female suicide.

Claudius does become more involved in this instance. Was he aware of Agrippina's hatred of Lollia and thus intervened in an attempt to save her? Perhaps this was the case. Yet even when he takes an active role in proceedings, he still fails to assert his authority over the outcome of events. One way to view this episode is as a demonstration of how Claudius could be easily influenced by the environment around him, and that ultimately, despite his best efforts, is clueless as to his wife's exploits.<sup>631</sup> Agrippina obviously has no qualms in dismissing his proposal that Lollia only be exiled. Although there is nothing specifically gendered about Lollia's suicide, this episode is revealing about Tacitus' view of gender roles. Agrippina eliminates her rivals, just as an emperor would eliminate his; but the emperor in this case is portrayed as so incompetent that gender roles have been reversed. Agrippina assumes the dominant male role which Claudius cannot counteract.

---

<sup>631</sup> Koestermann, 1968b, 143.

## b. The female other

### i. Boudicca

Boudicca was the queen of a tribe in Britain called the Iceni. Her husband Prasutagus died in 61 and after his death Boudicca suffered violence at the hands of the Romans, and her daughters were raped (14.31.1). The people of her tribe were outraged by this, and along with many other tribes, decided to rebel against Roman rule in Britain (14.31.2).<sup>632</sup> Boudicca gave a rousing speech to the Britons (14.35), but this was not enough to help them to victory. The Britons were defeated, and Tacitus says that 80,000 of them were killed, as opposed to only 400 Romans losing their lives (14.37.2). Both figures are probably exaggerated,<sup>633</sup> but they are indicative of the utter defeat that the Britons suffered, and this provides plausible cause for Boudicca's subsequent suicide.

Tacitus' description of Boudicca's suicide is very short: *Boudicca vitam veneno finivit* (14.37.3). This is unlike many of his other recorded cases of suicide, where there is quite a substantial narrative leading up to the event itself, focusing on the individual(s) concerned and their motives for killing themselves. The abrupt way in which Tacitus records Boudicca's suicide mirrors the abruptness with which the revolt has ended and the Romans have re-established control in Britain after annihilating so many of the enemy forces. Boudicca's death symbolises the utter defeat of the British and continues Tacitus' theme concerning the destruction of the

---

<sup>632</sup> There were various other factors leading to the rebellion, but they are not relevant to the study here.

<sup>633</sup> Furneaux & Pitman call these figures 'guesswork', but do point out that there are other instances where Roman forces annihilated huge masses of barbarian forces (1904, 68).

resisting 'noble savage' by imperial forces, prominent also in the *Agricola* and *Germania* (see p. 196).<sup>634</sup>

Boudicca's suicide is associated with that of a Roman male, Poenius Postumus, who receives much more of Tacitus' attention immediately after Boudicca's death.<sup>635</sup> He had not joined the battle against Boudicca's forces and now felt that he had disobeyed his commander and deprived his men of their share in the glory of the victory (14.37.3). Therefore, he 'stabbed himself with a sword' (*se ipse gladio transegit* 14.37.3). Hence in this episode Tacitus presents the suicides of a barbarian female versus a Roman male; poison as Boudicca's method, the sword as Postumus'; a short description of her death for which we are to guess at her motives, and for him a long description which explicitly explains why Postumus killed himself. This serves to emphasise further the abrupt way in which Roman forces eliminated barbarian forces, as the focus is swiftly shifted from Boudicca back to an emphasis on Roman *virtus*.

In light of this comparison between the two, Boudicca's suicide may seem less splendid and less aesthetically dramatic than Postumus', particularly as she uses *venenum*. She is the only woman in Tacitus to kill herself by this method. Poison was not unknown as a mode of suicide in the Roman world, and there are examples of men using it to kill themselves in the *Annales*: Vibulenus Agrippa (6.40.1) and Clodius Quirinalis (13.30.2) died by taking poison. In other sources, Livy records the suicides of twenty matrons by poison, and Suetonius gives this as the

---

<sup>634</sup> It is possible also that Tacitus chose not to dwell on Boudicca's death because her very position, as a *dux femina*, is problematic for him, no matter how much nobility he might be able to envisage in her suicide.

<sup>635</sup> Woodcock notes that this centurion was 'otherwise unknown', but 'evidently in temporary command' (1980, 124). He does not comment on Boudicca's suicide.

manner of death for Sestilia, the mother of the emperor Vitellius.<sup>636</sup> However, it was by no means a common method, and according to Van Hooff, 'not very "Roman"'.<sup>637</sup> Could poison have been viewed as an 'exotic' method in some way?<sup>638</sup> This would certainly tie in with Boudicca's status as a barbarian: not a Roman, and the only non-Roman female to kill herself in Tacitus. Moreover, Boudicca's use of poison also heightens the contrast with Postumus' death, as he uses the sword – a very Roman instrument.

However, although the use of poison and Boudicca's juxtaposition to Postumus' suicide may highlight both her foreignness and her femininity, this very juxtaposition also implies that Boudicca could act both like a Roman and a man, as she has the courage to kill herself when things go wrong, just as Postumus does. Roman generals were often expected to commit suicide either to avoid military punishment or just after a defeat.<sup>639</sup> Boudicca can be viewed as following this honourable code of conduct and acting as a defeated general was supposed to. She is similar in this respect to Cleopatra; and both women probably shared a desire to avoid being paraded in Rome after defeat. In addition, the wife of Hasdrubal, not a queen but certainly a high-ranking Carthaginian, chose to kill herself and her children when her husband surrendered his army to the Romans in 146 BC.<sup>640</sup> Although the examples are not many, it is possible to distinguish a pattern among non-Roman women killing themselves after a defeat, and to suggest that this was used by Roman writers as a symbol to indicate that the Romans must truly have

---

<sup>636</sup> Livy, 8.18.8-10; Suetonius, *Vitellius*, 14.5 (unless it was not suicide and Vitellius had her killed).

<sup>637</sup> Van Hooff, 1990, 60: only 8% of his catalogued cases of suicide adopt poison as a method.

<sup>638</sup> As it possibly also was in relation to Cleopatra: see p. 111.

<sup>639</sup> See Griffin, 1986b, 193, with examples at 200 n.4; Hill, 2004, 199-200.

<sup>640</sup> Florus, 1.31.15.17.

been successful and all-conquering if the female members of the people they have conquered end their lives, an act signalling total loss of hope for their people.

Dio does not record Boudicca's death as a suicide, but says simply that she fell ill and died.<sup>641</sup> This could be a reference to her taking poison, which could have caused the illness. He might have felt that it was not very important to emphasise the manner of her death. Tacitus on the whole does portray Boudicca in a more favourable light than Dio does, and so he could have wanted her to die nobly. Keegan argues that Dio's alteration to Boudicca's end is moot but not of any great significance, especially as Tacitus' portrayal of her dying by poison is possibly a 'stock element' in ancient writers' reports of female suicide.<sup>642</sup> However, as we have seen, this method of Boudicca's suicide bears no resemblance to any other female suicide in Tacitus, and does not appear to any great extent in the ancient sources as a whole. Thus Tacitus had a specific purpose in mind when choosing to describe Boudicca's death as a suicide. It is reasonable to suggest that Tacitus' version of events was, in fact, the correct one; he may have had first-hand knowledge from his father-in-law Agricola, who was in Britain under Suetonius Paulinus during the revolt.<sup>643</sup> On the other hand, this does not mean that he did not take the opportunity to embellish facts in order to create an ambivalent view of this female barbarian leader in her death.

Roberts has interpreted the narrative of the rebellion in Britain as an indication that the Britons were 'in the same relation to their Roman rulers as Rome itself was to the emperor'. Moreover, Boudicca's revolt can be seen as analogous to

---

<sup>641</sup> Dio, 62.12.6.

<sup>642</sup> Keegan, 2004, 133.

<sup>643</sup> Agricola, 5.

'responses to repression in Neronian Rome'.<sup>644</sup> The Boudicca episode emphasises how amiss matters were in Rome at this point, not only in the city itself, but also in the provinces. Furthermore, the revolt is analogous to opposition put forward by Romans themselves to Nero's regime, such as the Stoic men and women of the section above. The fact that Boudicca, like her Roman counterparts, has to resort to suicide is indicative of the futile outcome of such opposition and that there is little hope for any who try and dissent from such a corrupt emperor as Nero. Finally, Tacitus' portrayal of this noble behaviour of a female, and a barbarian female at that, further highlights the depravity and very un-noble behaviour of aristocratic Roman men, including the emperor Nero, which was occurring at the same time - another instance where gender roles are reversed.

## ii. Epicharis

Epicharis was part of a plot led by Gaius Piso in 65 against Nero, joined by many leading senators and knights in Rome, with the aim of murdering the emperor.<sup>645</sup> In his first reference to Epicharis, Tacitus says that it was she who encouraged the men to make their plans firm, even though 'beforehand she had never had a care for any honourable deeds' (15.51.1), which also suggests that Tacitus felt the conspiracy was in some ways morally right. However, one of her co-conspirators turned informer and implicated Epicharis (15.51.7-8), but without evidence Nero did not harm her. However, at the start of the day on which the

---

<sup>644</sup> Roberts, 1988, 127, 129.

<sup>645</sup> The conspiracy begins at 15.49.1 and develops from there on.

assassination was to take place, a freedman of one of the conspirators, Milichus, went to the palace and revealed everything to Nero (15.55). Soon those involved were brought in and betrayed other names as well.

Epicharis, although tortured, failed to reveal any of the details or people involved in the plot (15.57.1-2) and 'thus the first day of questioning was defied' (*sic primus quaestionis dies contemptus* 15.57.2). Her actual suicide on the following day was all the more noble for this defiance in the face of such danger and pain, and because she was merely a woman, and a freedwoman at that, which Tacitus highlights with his use of *libertina* and *mulier* (15.57.3). Tacitus focuses on her courage and her determination to die rather than reveal anything, describing her suicide thus:

vinclo fasciae, quam pectori detraxerat, in modum laquei ad arcum  
sellae restricto indidit cervicem et corporis pondere conisa tenuem iam  
spiritum expressit. (15.57.3)

However, her chosen method, hanging, by using a band from her clothes *in modum laquei*, is perhaps deliberate on Tacitus' part. It may be the only means left to her, as we are told her limbs were dislocated and she was a prisoner (15.57.3), but it is also possible that her chosen method was linked to her social status. Epicharis is the only freedwoman to commit suicide in Tacitus, and the only woman who commits

suicide in Tacitus by hanging herself. Van Hooff comments that the method was seen as 'vulgar', and therefore not an appropriate means for the elite to adopt.<sup>646</sup>

However, an instance of a suicide by hanging found in Suetonius can be revealing. Phoebe, a freedwoman of Julia, Augustus' daughter, chose to hang herself when her mistress was sent into exile upon her father learning about her sexual escapades. Suetonius notes that this prompted Augustus to say, 'I would have preferred to have been Phoebe's father'.<sup>647</sup> Like Epicharis, she too is seen as acting nobly in her decision to die. Hence, although there are instances of higher ranking Roman women using this method of suicide, it is plausible that those of a lower status were particularly likely to adopt this method. Tacitus, although finding many estimable qualities in Epicharis, cannot quite give her the prestige attached to a noble 'Roman' death by the sword. He wants to include her suicide in his narrative, but even he would find it a step too far to have a mere freedwoman dying by a most Roman death.<sup>648</sup>

Dio also portrays Epicharis as being courageous even under torture, but his narrative on her is not as extended, and he does not say that she committed suicide, or indeed that she died at all.<sup>649</sup> Again, it seems as though Tacitus had his reasons for devoting space in his work to Epicharis' death. One scholar notes that Epicharis is one of only a small number of female slaves and freedwomen 'honoured on occasion' by Tacitus; another observes that the suicides of the servile

---

<sup>646</sup> Van Hooff, 1990, 6; see also Hill, 2004, 1990; Langlands, 2006, 184. There is evidence that those who hanged themselves were denied proper burial and funerary rites; see Gris , 1982, 141-9; Van Hooff, 1990 67, 165-6; Kyle, 1998, 131-2, 161.

<sup>647</sup> Suetonius, *Divus Augustus*, 65.2.

<sup>648</sup> Although Ker describes Epicharis' death as adopting 'a lowly method....nobly used' (2009, 266-7). It should also be noted that as a prisoner, this method was likely to be the only option available to Epicharis, as it is unlikely that she would have had access to a weapon such as a sword.

<sup>649</sup> Dio, 62.27.3.

classes were usually only mentioned by ancient writers so as to 'exhort or reproach their betters'.<sup>650</sup> One of Tacitus' reasons for including Epicharis here, then, was as a 'foil to the inadequate responses' of her male betters.<sup>651</sup> Indeed, her deeds do demonstrate that she has superiority in both mind and action to those who are supposedly her superiors.<sup>652</sup>

Epicharis' involvement in the conspiracy in the first place highlights the vice of the times, if a freedwoman could become involved in a political conspiracy, and even be seen as dominating prominent males, as the use of *accendere* and *arguere* (15.51.1) in relation to her treatment of her fellow conspirators demonstrates. Her suicide also further humiliates Nero because he was so sure she would break under torture (15.57.1): rather than do this she even goes one step further and commits suicide very nobly. Edwards argues that Epicharis should not be seen as a 'celebration of feminine heroism'.<sup>653</sup> However, in relation to the other female conspirator who commits, or tries to commit, suicide, namely Albucilla, Epicharis has many commendable qualities, and she is given a noble death.

The emphasis on her gender is furthered with her use of her breast-band, which she has taken from her body that very moment so that she can use it to commit suicide (*vinclo fasciae, quam pectori detraxerat*). This heightens the tension of the episode: Epicharis' desperation is amplified, but it also recalls suicide scenes in tragedies. Indeed, Loraux has noted that in Greek tragedies, women often used

---

<sup>650</sup> Baldwin, 1972, 85; Griffin, 1986b, 199-200 with examples at 202 n.23.

<sup>651</sup> Edwards, 2007, 204.

<sup>652</sup> The suicide of Phoebe from Suetonius can be seen as a direct comparison with the promiscuous behaviour of Julia; Augustus' comment particularly emphasises this contrast.

<sup>653</sup> Edwards, 2007, 205 (see also her accurate interpretation of Epicharis as an 'insight into the twisted nature of this Rome').

items of clothing to kill themselves as these were symbols of their sex.<sup>654</sup>

Furthermore, Epicharis' decision to hang herself recalls that of, for example, Phaedra in Euripides' *Hippolytus*. Thus one might argue that Tacitus wanted his readers to recognise his ability to recreate the portrayal of noble deaths of those women in tragedy: he inserted his own representation of female suicide into the tragic genre, thereby connecting his own work with that of the great playwrights of Classical Athens.

This final section has looked at those female suicides which are presented ambiguously by Tacitus. The first two women can be seen as being portrayed with a certain degree of moral ambivalence because Tacitus offers little information on their characters or actions, and because they are forced to suicide rather than choose explicitly to commit the act themselves. These instances of female suicide, however, do offer Tacitus the chance to promote his historiographical objectives, as they advance his views about gender roles, more specifically their inversions, during this period of Rome's history. The final two examples of female suicides further his ambiguous attitude, but are in many ways different to all the other examples discussed in this and the previous sections. They are suicides committed by 'the female other', non-Roman or non-elite women, and they are also striking in that the methods used are not found in the other cases, perhaps because they are indicative of the origin or status of the females involved. Tacitus can suggest that these women be esteemed, but also emphasises their gender and differences to

---

<sup>654</sup> Loraux, 1987, 10; for more on Loraux's arguments see pp. 125-8. Ker notes the links between Epicharis and Seneca's tragedies (2009, 61).

the other women discussed. However, Boudicca and Epicharis' suicides in their different ways also highlight the tyranny and topsy-turvy nature of Rome under Nero, and their function is all the more important precisely because they are *not* elite Roman females. Furthermore, because Boudicca is a foreigner and Epicharis a freedwoman, Tacitus suggests that the corruption of Nero's regime has penetrated all areas and levels of the Roman empire.<sup>655</sup>

## 6. Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be said that the female suicides in Tacitus' *Annales* vary in terms of the character of the women, the length of their description, and how and why they are put in a situation where suicide is the only option. The context of each suicide must be considered in order to determine the motives for the suicide. However, one common theme throughout is that Tacitus exploits the motif of female suicide as a window onto his anti-imperial sentiments. In their different ways, all the portrayals of suicide show the supposed 'first man in Rome' as weak, corrupt or tyrannical, and that the Rome he is ruling over has become inverted and vice-ridden. In this way, this examination of female suicides builds on the general patterns that have emerged from studies of women in general in the *Annales*, which have especially noted Tacitus' use of dominant imperial women to heighten the ineffectiveness of imperial men. In particular, it should also be noted that there seems to be a mirror image created by the suicides of women in the latter years of

---

<sup>655</sup> I.e. these two suicides demonstrate that it is not just the elite members of Roman society, specifically in Rome itself, that are affected by the corrupt nature of Nero's rule.

both Tiberius and Nero's principates. Agrippina the Elder, Plancina, Paxaea, Sextia, Aemilia Lepida and Albucilla all die in the years 33 to 37, during the last five years of Tiberius' rule; Epicharis, Pompeia Paulina, Pollitta and Sextia, and Servilia all die in the years 65 to 66, during the last two years of Nero's rule. Therefore these cases stress the fact that Tacitus viewed the latter parts of these two emperors' principates as particularly unpleasant.

The fact that Tacitus includes so many instances of female suicides also reveals his approach to gender roles and the blurring of these roles during this period. Suicide, a traditionally male action, usually carried out as a result of being thwarted in frustrating or opposing the imperial regime, is now very much an act also committed by females. Tacitus' focus on the gender of some of the suicide victims highlights this point well. Moreover, the instances of several of the female suicides discussed also provide Tacitus with an opportunity to embellish, shape, and perhaps even invent, the circumstances and dramatic scenery of these episodes: how would he have known such intimate details of how a woman killed herself? In most cases, he would have been relying on very dubious hear-say for the suicides of these women.

Tacitus' approach to female suicides is a complex one. He adapted the tension and drama inherent to suicide scenes and created his own versions of these women's deaths to illustrate his narrative capabilities to the full. The fact that the morals and ethics surrounding the act of suicide were so ambivalent meant that the capacity for creating drama-filled suicide scenes was there to be exploited.

Moreover, the links between mythical females and the act of suicide as demonstrated in tragic discourses discussed in Chapter 2, would have intensified

the experience of Tacitus' readers when reading about his tragic figures, prompting them to consider the appropriateness of the real female suicides portrayed in the *Annales*.

## Chapter 4

### Lucretia among the martyrs: representations of female suicide and female martyrdom in the patristic literature and martyr acts of Late Antiquity

#### 1. Introduction

This chapter returns to some of the ideas and themes surrounding female suicide considered in the earlier discussion of Lucretia in literature from the Augustan period. This story had powerful moral and political messages for the Romans of Livy's day, and these were to last for centuries to come. Indeed, Christian thinkers of Late Antiquity had as much to say about Lucretia's rape and suicide as their pagan ancestors.<sup>656</sup> A number of other female suicides discussed in the works of these writers are also connected in certain ways to rape. Suicide after rape was a common phenomenon across many societies and periods.<sup>657</sup> In Late Antiquity, there were many instances of women committing suicide to avoid rape in the context of barbarian invasions, or on occasion, the activities of autocratic emperors. As was noted in the Introduction (see p. 39), Christian accounts of female victims of pagan persecutors often focused on this aspect as it allowed them

---

<sup>656</sup> Here the term 'Late Antiquity' refers to the period roughly covering the early third to the early fifth century, as the writers to be discussed fall within this time period (Tertullian to Augustine). There were other mentions of the rape and suicide of Lucretia across the intervening 300 years (e.g., in the work of the Roman historian Florus written early second century AD (at 1.1.7.11)), but our next substantial account comes from Tertullian. All dates are AD in this chapter, unless otherwise stated.

<sup>657</sup> Donaldson has pointed out that it was such a frequent occurrence that it was a major factor in the condemnation of suicide under Canon Law at the Council of Nimes as late as 1184 (1982, 30).

to explore concerns about female purity and sexuality. To a Christian writer then, there were additional moral and ethical issues to debate when considering women who had not only chosen to kill themselves, but had also opted for death over a rape that had not yet even happened. The distance between themselves and the episode of Lucretia meant that her story provided a 'safe' mythical context for exploring these issues.

Furthermore, the proliferation of the treatment of female martyrs contemporary, or near-contemporary, with these same writers means that their views on Lucretia can be placed alongside their views of this very different type of female suicide. The complex relationship between martyrdom and suicide will be discussed below (see pp. 260-3), but for now it is important to recognise that there are many similarities in the ways in which these women are represented, as well as in the aims of the writers. With the increasing number of Christian persecutions in the third to early fourth centuries, the historical context is very different. However, this new threat that many of both sexes faced only served to provide further scope for women actively to choose to end their own lives, even if the motive behind this was something not seen before – religious beliefs. The moral ambiguity associated with any voluntary death meant that female martyrs provided Christian thinkers with a way of exploring not only their treatment by non-Christian authorities but also attitudes to these authorities and ethical dilemmas. Moreover, a comparison with the portrayals of some of the male martyrs also demonstrates that certain attributes were specifically assigned to female martyrs.

The remainder of this Introduction offers discussion of some important topics relevant to the central concerns of the chapter. First, the subject of women in Late Antiquity is briefly considered: how this area has been approached before, and how the work here relates to this. There follows discussion of the main Church Fathers whose works will be used in the section on Lucretia, including Tertullian, Jerome, and Augustine. It then moves on to the character and context of the martyr acts, particularly those involving females. Finally, this introduction addresses the implications and connotations of the terms 'martyrdom' and 'suicide', aiming to show the interrelated nature of the two, especially given the frequency of voluntary martyrs in this period.

The first main section of the chapter, dealing with Lucretia, concentrates on her portrayal in the writings of Tertullian, Jerome and Augustine. It explores the affirmative approaches taken to her story by Tertullian and Jerome, who position her as a figure to be lauded and emulated for her great chastity. Augustine, on the other hand, takes a more subversive stance on her suicide; arguably, this is connected to his attitudes towards the concept of martyrdom. The second section moves on to discuss the female martyr acts, beginning with Perpetua, who acts as a prototype for her martyred successors. Finally, the chapter ends with an exploration of the accounts of female martyrdom in the poetry of Prudentius, who wrote accounts of the martyrs Eulalia and Agnes in the late fourth century AD.

## i. Women in Late Antiquity

The subject of women in Late Antiquity has attracted much discussion in recent years.<sup>658</sup> Some of these studies have provided particularly important insights for the focus of this chapter. Elizabeth Clark has looked at the role of women in patronage circles within the Christian community.<sup>659</sup> She has also examined how women in this period have been studied in the past, with a particular focus on gender. She cautions that rather than simply looking for the 'real' woman in discussions by writers dealing with topics like martyrdom and asceticism, we should pay 'attention to the ways in which patristic writers construct "woman" through their discourse', as material surviving from this period is more 'text' than 'document'.<sup>660</sup> Similarly Kate Cooper has explored the representation of women by scrutinising the rhetorical agenda of the male writers behind such representations.<sup>661</sup>

These arguments of Clark and Cooper are particularly relevant to this study. While a text such as the martyr act of Perpetua can demonstrate how a 'real' woman might be drawn to Christianity to escape from the constraints of her traditional lifestyle,<sup>662</sup> this is not to say that it gives a fully representative account of what it was like for a woman who converted to Christianity or suffered martyrdom,

---

<sup>658</sup> To the discussion here should be added the analysis of gender and sexuality in Late Antiquity in the Introduction: see pp. 37-42. See also G. Clark (1993) on the legal position of women in Late Antiquity, health and asceticism; Arjava (1996) also on the legal position of women; Cloke (1995) on the important roles played by women in Church politics during this time; Bremmer (1989) on why aristocratic women might have been attracted to early Christianity.

<sup>659</sup> E. Clark, 1998.

<sup>660</sup> Clark, 2001, 423-4. Clark notes that many scholars of Late Antiquity have not always explored how "'woman" or the "female" becomes a rhetorical code for other concerns' (2001, 423).

<sup>661</sup> See above p. 37.

<sup>662</sup> As noted by Frend, 1965, 283.

because of the potential biases of the writer(s), for example, who might have embellished details to heighten the drama and suffering of the figure in question. Similarly, the female martyrs in Prudentius' work may represent models of female asceticism and virginity, but this does not mean that all women, or indeed men, followed such extreme practices all the time.<sup>663</sup> Therefore, the aim here is to search for the rationale behind the writers' construction of the female in acts of suicide or martyrdom, which will also result in some more general examination of attitudes towards women in Late Antiquity. The provocative nature of a female involved in a voluntary death meant that a whole host of representations and interpretations was possible when approaching these figures.

## ii. The Church Fathers

In general, explicit condemnation of suicide by the Church Fathers is rare and by no means unequivocal. The ethics behind suicide, as they had been to the Greeks and Romans, were still just as ambiguous for the Christian community who had more stringent views on other issues, such as infanticide or abortion.<sup>664</sup> Droge and Tabor have demonstrated that there is no overt denunciation of suicide in the Old Testament; Amundsen has pointed out that the New Testament neither condemns nor encourages the act.<sup>665</sup> The ways in which the individual Church Fathers approached the topic usually depended on their own personal

---

<sup>663</sup> As was argued above, see pp. 37-42.

<sup>664</sup> Amundsen, 1989, 77-8. It is not my intention to assess all the material on the attitudes of the Church Fathers towards suicide. Amundsen (1989) offers a good evaluation of this material; I only discuss this issue in relation to the main writers explored in this chapter.

<sup>665</sup> Droge & Tabor, 1992, 53-63; Amundsen, 1989, 80 (for further discussion of suicide in the New Testament see 81-96; see also Droge & Tabor, 1992, 113-21).

interpretation of the Biblical material, as well as their own experiences and general outlook on life and their faith.

The first Church Father chronologically who discusses Lucretia is Tertullian of Carthage (170-c.212-220). He was born a pagan but converted to Christianity, probably as a fairly young man.<sup>666</sup> From then on at least, Tertullian became a firm advocator of Christian beliefs and wrote many apologetic works in defence of his new-found religion. In particular, he put a high price on chastity and celibacy, urging both sexes who had not yet married not to, and those who had, not to remarry if their spouse died. He advised women not only to act modestly, but also to appear so; they should wear no make-up or luxurious clothes, and if at all possible, should remain at home so as not to let themselves be liable to fall into sin.<sup>667</sup> Tertullian welcomed those who martyred themselves, even deeming it a necessity in times of persecution; he also viewed it as a good opportunity for those who had sinned to receive a second chance of salvation from God.<sup>668</sup>

The next major Christian writer to mention Lucretia is Jerome (347-420). Jerome was a great advocate of asceticism, which had become a major feature of Christian thought and life by this point, and especially virginity, which he viewed as representing the very pinnacle of ascetic practice. For example, in a letter addressed to Eustochium he encourages her, as well as his wider audience, to remain at home, avoid ostentation, and lead a sexually abstinent life. He was always keen to urge the superiority of virginity to married life, but seems to have

---

<sup>666</sup> Barnes, 1971, 58-9.

<sup>667</sup> See Barnes, 1971, 100-1; Osborn, 1997, 233-5.

<sup>668</sup> On the former see Droge & Tabor's discussion of Tertullian (1992, 144-9); on the latter see Amundsen, 1989, 105; Grig, 2004, 18. See Church, 1975 for the view that Tertullian was not as misogynistic as was once thought, but that he actually considered the sexes to be equal in many respects. For more on Tertullian's views see p. 40; see also Brown, 1988, 76-82.

taken this to a greater extreme than Tertullian or others before him had. Indeed, he has been called the 'spiritual seducer' of aristocratic women in Rome on whom he urged such ideals, ideals that many saw as against their traditional way of life.<sup>669</sup>

Augustine of Hippo (354-430) is the first Christian thinker who really challenged the motivations behind Lucretia's suicide. There is clearly a marked change in his attitude both towards Lucretia and the questionable values that she represented in his eyes, and towards those women who chose death over violation. Indeed, he has been credited in the past with offering a fundamentally new outlook on suicide and martyrdom to his predecessors. However, as will become clear, and as Amundsen has pointed out, this is not necessarily the case.<sup>670</sup> Augustine may have positioned himself differently on this issue in many respects from other Christian writers of his day, but it can also be seen that much of what he said on the topic would have been agreeable to his contemporaries. As Augustine offers us much scope to address attitudes towards the pagan Lucretia, as well as female martyrs of his own day, his position and comments on both subjects will be central to our understanding of the female suicide motif in Late Antiquity.

---

<sup>669</sup> Rebenich, 2002, 33-4, 59; see also Kelly, 1975, 70; Vidén, 1998, 141-3, 155-6; Cooper, 1996, Chapters 4 and 5.

<sup>670</sup> Amundsen, 1989, 80-1.

### iii. Christian persecutions and the martyr acts<sup>671</sup>

The first persecution of the Christians by the Roman government is normally regarded as that under Nero in AD 64. De Ste Croix has emphasised the fact that until 250 at least, persecutions were fairly brief and localised events.<sup>672</sup> The persecutions under Decius (250-1), Valerian (258-60), and Diocletian (303-312/3), were larger, centrally organised affairs, and made more serious demands on the Christians; for example they were now sometimes required to eat sacrificial meat and/or burn the scriptures.<sup>673</sup> It is to these latter three that the majority (although not all) of the martyr acts date. De Ste Croix has also pointed out that for the most part, Christians were not systematically sought out to be persecuted until the Decian persecution. Therefore, although the threat of persecution was always present, it must be remembered that most Christians were fairly safe if they pursued their religious practices quietly.<sup>674</sup>

These persecutions provided ample opportunities for Christian men and women to be martyred for their faith and approach to religious duty, which were seen as contrary to traditional pagan beliefs. And out of these acts of courage and loyalty, a new type of literature was formulated: that of the martyr act. It is probably a fair assessment to say that most represent a mixture of fiction and

---

<sup>671</sup> For more information on the persecutions, see Frend (1965) on the main persecutions that took place between 177 and 312/3; De Ste Croix (1954 and 2006) and Barnes (2010, Chapter 3) on the so-called 'Great Persecution' of 303-312/3; Tilley, 1996 on the persecutions surrounding the Donatists in the fourth century; De Ste Croix (1963 and 2006) on the legal justifications for persecution of Christians.

<sup>672</sup> De Ste Croix, 1963, 6-7 (2006, 106-7).

<sup>673</sup> Frend, 1965, 407; 491. Lane Fox gives a good analysis and some discussion of the Decian persecution and edict (1986, 450-62).

<sup>674</sup> De Ste Croix, 1954, 78-9, 104 (2006, 40, 67-8).

historical fact,<sup>675</sup> particularly as many were written down some years after the events they describe, even if they claim to include eye-witness statements.<sup>676</sup> However, as this is a feature common to much literature and history from across all antiquity, the value of these acts in assessing contemporary attitudes towards religion, martyrdom and the Roman state must not be underestimated.

Many modern scholars have noted the didactic purposes of many of the martyr acts. For example, Tilley has demonstrated, by analysing two martyr acts in some depth, that this type of literature helped instruct the Christian community on how they should react to interrogation.<sup>677</sup> They might also have been utilised in promoting the idea that virginity and celibacy were superior to marriage.<sup>678</sup> Grig has argued that a dramatic style was often adopted so that the reader would be encouraged to 'visualise the martyr, then to identify with, and finally to imitate him/her'. Thus, these accounts had educational as well as moralistic objectives. Furthermore, the aim of many was also to blacken the reputation of the persecutor, here the Roman government, which was often portrayed as cruel and evil as opposed to the heroic, steadfast martyr.<sup>679</sup> This can also be viewed as part of wider Christian propaganda, which endeavoured to portray 'good' emperors as protective of Christians, and 'bad' emperors as their persecutors, even if this was not always the case.<sup>680</sup>

---

<sup>675</sup> Bowersock even links the rise of the martyr act with the decline of historical fiction in the Roman Empire during the same period (1995, 24). Indeed, Chew (2003) has proposed reasonable arguments linking female martyrs with novelistic heroines; see also Cooper, 1996, 43-4; Price, 2008, 815.

<sup>676</sup> Many, however, were based on trial transcripts and thus represent authentic accounts; on the other hand, Barnes points out that the style of writing them as though from legal proceedings was sometimes adopted to produce false acts (2010, 58).

<sup>677</sup> Tilley, 1990, 383; see also Cobb, 2008, 93, 122, on the didactic role of the martyr acts.

<sup>678</sup> G. Clark, 1998, 105.

<sup>679</sup> Grig, 2004, 21, 46.

<sup>680</sup> De Ste Croix, 1963, 15 (2006, 121).

The attitudes towards heroic death as displayed in the Christian martyr acts have much in common with similar attitudes in the pagan tradition, as discussed in the previous three chapters. As Van Henten and Avemarie point out, however, the fact that these people were motivated by religious beliefs provides a different angle to the topic that was not previously visible in Greek and Roman thought.<sup>681</sup> Jewish martyr accounts were very likely influential on their Christian successors. The tales from the Maccabees were known and utilised by the Christians for their own heroic stories.<sup>682</sup> Particularly relevant here is the story of the Maccabean mother of seven sons who provided inspiration for her children to martyr themselves before dying in this act herself. This narrative, first related in 2 Maccabees, receives a more definitely suicidal interpretation in 4 Maccabees, where she actively throws herself on the fire to avoid being touched by her persecutors. Moreover, the idea of the heroic martyrs defiantly triumphing over their merciless oppressors is another common theme in the Jewish tradition.<sup>683</sup> Shaw has noted that the writer of 4 Maccabees drew on 'ideologies of resistance' developed already by the elite societies of the Greek and Roman worlds when they had encountered tyrannical rule.<sup>684</sup>

As noted above though, the religious beliefs of the Christian martyrs to some extent differentiate them from the earlier stories of heroic voluntary death. Their faith and belief in God played a crucial role both in why they might have decided to become a martyr in the first place, and in how they acted during their

---

<sup>681</sup> Van Henten & Avemarie, 2002, 4-5.

<sup>682</sup> De Ste Croix, 1963, 23 (2006, 132); De Ste Croix 2006, 194-5, 198-9; Frend, 1965, 20-1; Lane Fox, 1986, 436-7. Den Boeft argues that Augustine went so far as to claim them as Christian martyrs (1989, 121).

<sup>683</sup> Droge & Tabor, 1992, 72-5; Van Henten & Avemarie, 2002, 46-8.

<sup>684</sup> Shaw, 1996, 276.

martyrdom.<sup>685</sup> Indeed, Clement of Alexandria suggested that since being a martyr involves bearing witness to God, death is not necessarily a required outcome.<sup>686</sup> For many Christians, however, martyrdom and the suffering it involved was a way of ensuring that they became as close to God as possible and made their faith even stronger.<sup>687</sup> Furthermore, because of their faith they believed that they were well prepared for this suffering.<sup>688</sup> Linked to this ability to withstanding physical pain was one view of the body as a separate entity to the mind/soul. As Brown has commented, in general terms both sexes came 'to see their bodies in a different light' during Late Antiquity.<sup>689</sup> J. Perkins in her study *The Suffering Self: Pain and Narrative Representation in the Early Christian Era* (1995) focuses more specifically on constructs of the body predisposed to pain and suffering while the 'person' in the body triumphs, and sees such constructs as part of an attempt in Christian writings to exhibit the Christian community as a community of sufferers.<sup>690</sup> As the martyrs believed that their struggle was with the devil, and not with the persecutors, their victory was one of the mind and not the body.<sup>691</sup> Moreover, due to the belief in the resurrection of the body, death was not the end of its existence but only a 'slight interruption' to it.<sup>692</sup>

---

<sup>685</sup> This will become visible in some of the female martyrs discussed below: see e.g. pp. 279, 284, 286, 296.

<sup>686</sup> Bowersock, 1995, 67-70; see also Castelli, 1986, 67.

<sup>687</sup> Edwards, 2007, 210, 218-19; Lane-Fox, 1986, 435; Hall, 1993, 2; see also Loades, 1993. Lane-Fox emphasises the fact that as Christians saw themselves as being on a trial by God during their martyrdoms, this gave them great motivation to overcome any bodily pain and not renounce him (1986, 421-2).

<sup>688</sup> Brown, 1988, 69.

<sup>689</sup> Brown, 1988, 30.

<sup>690</sup> Perkins, 1995, 11-12, 16; see also Lane-Fox, 1986, 439.

<sup>691</sup> Lane-Fox, 1986, 436; Perkins, 1995, 32.

<sup>692</sup> Perkins, 1995, 120-1.

Finally, it is important here to discuss briefly the literary accounts of female martyr acts.<sup>693</sup> Shaw maintains that the martyr literature celebrates them much less than their male counterparts, calculating that the latter receive approximately four times more attention.<sup>694</sup> However, the martyr acts that do involve women are all the more significant and effective because many focus on their traditional roles in society, or, more importantly, their transgression of these roles.<sup>695</sup> In her short article on the subject, Cardman stresses the idea that the ambiguity of the act of martyrdom – whether it is always the appropriate course to take or not – is heightened in those acts involving women, due to their gender and status.<sup>696</sup> As a result, they deserve special attention for the messages the writers were trying to convey, and as such, provide much evidence for the utility of the martyr act as a context for discussions concerning appropriate female behaviour, voluntary death and Christian resistance.<sup>697</sup>

L. S. Cobb's *Dying to be Men: Gender and Language in Early Christian Martyr Texts* (2008) offers a more extensive treatment of female martyrs. Her work focuses on male martyrs also, but the final chapter ('Putting Women in Their Place: Masculinising and Feminising the Female Martyr') in particular is devoted to exploring the feminisation, as well as masculinisation, of some of the female

---

<sup>693</sup> Perhaps the first female martyr can be dated to AD 96 in a letter written by Pliny to the emperor Trajan. We do not know what their fate was, but Pliny informs his master that two female slaves would not admit to their crimes even after torture (*Epistulae*, 10.96.8).

<sup>694</sup> Shaw, 1993, 13 (although he offers no definite statistical evidence for this). G. Clark also notes that there are fewer records of female martyrs (1998, 103). Conversely, Brown gives figures for some martyr acts that would seem to suggest a (slightly) more equal prominence between the two sexes (1988, 141).

<sup>695</sup> See Jones, 1993, 23, 33: an audience would be shocked not by seeing a woman suffering, but by the fact that she 'refused to break under what would be considered severe pressure by male standards'.

<sup>696</sup> Cardman, 1988.

<sup>697</sup> Hall, 1993, and Jones, 1993, also offer short discussions of female martyrs.

martyrs that are discussed below. Cobb argues that martyrs, whether male or female, were portrayed as embodying masculine attributes such as courage and strength to ensure that the Christian communities reading these stories were aware of the great virtue of the dying subjects. However, the writers of the martyr acts were not subverting traditional gender roles but instead were commenting on the 'transformation (or potential for transformation) of a female to a male', which would have confirmed these women's status as superior to that of non-Christians.<sup>698</sup>

Cobb also perceptively emphasises the fact that as well as attributing masculine attributes to some of the female martyrs, Christian authors also at times focused on their feminine traits. This was particularly important as it was a means by which they could endorse the traditional roles these women played in Christian communities, for example as wives and mothers. As we have seen in the previous three chapters, gender roles could be blurred and intermingled if it suited a particular writer's agenda. And as has been previously argued, the idea of women assuming masculine roles was a traditional subject of unease and controversy in the literature and rhetoric of the male elite. Thus Christian writers eased this 'gender tension' by exploring both the masculine and feminine characteristics of their female martyrs. Masculine women could be used to display the great superiority of the Christian faith, as these women triumphed over pagan men; and yet at the same time, a society still very much patriarchal in essence could not afford to have

---

<sup>698</sup> Cobb, 2008, 5, 7-8, 13, 15. The strategies used to demonstrate the masculinity of the martyrs included depicting them as gladiators, athletes and as in control of their emotions while they suffered physically (Cobb, 2008, 33, 59, 66) which again relates to the body/mind distinction discussed above. Their masculinity was also demonstrated by the martyrs' willing acceptance of death (2008, 66-8).

fully masculinised female figures.<sup>699</sup> Finally, as Jones points out, a specific difference between the male and female martyr acts was that the individuals in the latter were often threatened with sexual violence.<sup>700</sup> As was noted in the Introduction, this demonstrates contemporary anxieties about female purity, as Christianity at this time fervently advocated if not total sexual abstinence then at least a very high level of chastity, particularly in its female members (see pp. 37-42). An exploration of some of the differences between the presentation of male and female martyrs in the acts discussed below will highlight the specific roles that portrayals of female martyrs played in the martyr literature.<sup>701</sup>

#### iv. Martyrdom vs. suicide?

The relationship between martyrdom and suicide is a complex one.<sup>702</sup> One of the objectives of this chapter is to demonstrate the intimate links between the two in the context of Late Antiquity. Rather than viewing martyrdom as a 'positive' act, where someone dies courageously for their beliefs, and 'suicide' in a pejorative sense as a sinful or criminal act, it is more constructive to view both acts as falling into the same category of 'self-killing'. In their research into the subject, Droge and Tabor prefer to use the term 'voluntary death', as they seek to 'describe the act resulting from an *individual's intentional decision to die*, either by his own agency,

---

<sup>699</sup> Cobb, 2008, 91-3, 121.

<sup>700</sup> Jones, 1993, 32.

<sup>701</sup> As Jones notes, however, the accounts of martyrs often 'differed little according to whether the protagonists were male or female' (1993, 30).

<sup>702</sup> Much of the following discussion is based around Chapter 1 of Droge & Tabor (1992), who offer some very insightful and relevant comments on this difficult topic; Hofmann also discusses the issue in the section entitled '*Persecutiones: Märtyrer oder Selbstmörder?*' (2007, 119-52).

by another's, or by *contriving the circumstances in which death is the known, ineluctable result*'.<sup>703</sup> This definition is an important one to bear in mind in all the subsequent discussion of suicide and martyrdom, as it is clear that many thinkers in antiquity did not offer clear distinctions between the two. And this is not helped by the fact that there was no clear or singular term adopted to describe suicide. As noted in the Introduction, different types of representations of 'voluntary death', whatever their classification, can be explored for similar purposes, for example a writer's attitudes towards self-harm or to gender roles and distinctions.<sup>704</sup> Durkheim's classification of 'altruistic suicide' and his definition of suicide given above (see pp. 9-11) also demonstrate the fact that acts of martyrdom and suicide can be approached and described largely in similar terms.<sup>705</sup>

Droge and Tabor's idea of the 'voluntary' nature of both suicide and martyrdom is central to understanding the links between the two. The martyrs of the Christian persecutions are noteworthy for the willingness shown in the hour of their deaths, and at times, even in the willingness shown to be arrested or persecuted in the first place.<sup>706</sup> This was a feature of their martyrdoms that caused many problems for some of the major Christian writers of their day, particularly Augustine.<sup>707</sup> Yet it must also not be forgotten that many chose to commit apostasy rather than suffer martyrdom.<sup>708</sup> On the other hand, as Amundsen has pointed out,

---

<sup>703</sup> Droge & Tabor, 1992, 4 (my italics).

<sup>704</sup> On this see pp. 4-5.

<sup>705</sup> Although also note the problems in using his classifications: see pp. 11-12.

<sup>706</sup> See e.g. De Ste Croix, 1954, 83 (2006, 45); De Ste Croix, 1963, 21-2 (2006, 130-2); Bowersock, 1995, 3; Grig, 2004, 19. De Ste Croix defines as 'quasi-volunteers' those who acted deliberately to bring about their own arrests or especially aggressively towards the authorities once arrested (2006, 154).

<sup>707</sup> De Ste Croix provides in some detail material relating to the official condemnation of voluntary martyrdom from a variety of writers (2006, 155-64). See also Lane Fox, 1986, 442.

<sup>708</sup> Droge & Tabor, 1992, 140.

many Christians thought martyrdom was definitely preferable to apostatising. Amundsen also makes an important distinction between those who actively sought martyrdom, and those who did not, but accepted death willingly once arrested and tried.<sup>709</sup> This distinction is a useful one, but the willingness to die shared by those martyrs who did seek martyrdom from the outset and those who did not should also be emphasised. Their readiness to die in the end still implies a voluntary aspect to their death that suggests they can be classified as suicides.<sup>710</sup>

Some more direct links between suicide and acts of martyrdom can also be mentioned briefly here. Van Henten and Avemarie define a martyr as a 'person who in an extremely hostile situation prefers a violent death to compliance with a demand of the (usually pagan) authorities'.<sup>711</sup> Can a similar context not also be used to describe those who, for example, chose to kill themselves rather than be exiled or executed by Tiberius or Nero? The motives may have been very different, but the idea of wanting to die rather than acquiesce to an authority viewed in some way as oppressive or against one's own wishes is similar.

Bowersock and Grig both link the martyrs with those philosophers who also stood up to the despotic authority of the Roman government, as detailed in Chapter 3.<sup>712</sup> Bowersock even goes so far as to say that the development of martyrdom would not have been possible without first there being the 'glorification of suicide' in the Roman tradition.<sup>713</sup> The martyr acts discussed here can be viewed

---

<sup>709</sup> Amundsen, 1989, 100, 104.

<sup>710</sup> Bowersock notes that many martyrs and would-be martyrs can be called suicides, even if arranged by an 'external agent', as there is still the 'clear complicity of the victim' (1995, 61).

<sup>711</sup> Van Henten & Avemarie, 2002, 3.

<sup>712</sup> Bowersock, 1995, 16; Grig, 2004, 60, 63. See also Chapter 2 on how Seneca's plays may be read as representing some form of challenge to some of the Julio-Claudian emperors.

<sup>713</sup> Bowersock, 1995, 72.

as part of this tradition already discussed that placed so much focus on glorious and brave deaths against a repressive authority. The context and motivations may differ, but there is much to be said for placing these female martyrs into a wider setting of female suicide in general. Moreover, the prevalence of Lucretia in sources from the same period also strengthens such a connection.

## 2. Lucretia

### i. Tertullian's Lucretia

Tertullian first discusses Lucretia in his work *Ad Martyres*, thought to date to 197, although some have conjectured that it could date to 202/3 and be addressed to the martyrs Perpetua and her companions imprisoned in Carthage.<sup>714</sup> Either way, this work was directed towards those who found themselves imprisoned by the Romans in recent persecutions.<sup>715</sup> Tertullian wanted to comfort but also motivate his addressees; to encourage them to embrace martyrdom. Tertullian gives many examples of past figures of both sexes who have died for lesser reasons than that for which they will die, in the cause of God. Lucretia's appearance comes in this series of examples:

---

<sup>714</sup> See e.g. Salisbury (1997, 56, 86) who suggests that it was definitely addressed to Perpetua and her companions. Rossi maintains that Tertullian could have been thinking of Perpetua in this work (1984, 75), although this would not be possible with the dating of 197.

<sup>715</sup> Dunn, 2004, 43.

de feminis ad manum est Lucretia, quae vim stupri passa cultrum sibi  
adegit in conspectu propinquorum, ut gloriam castitati suae pareret.

(4.4)

Tertullian describes her as follows: 'having suffered the force of violation, [she] drove a knife into herself in view of her relatives, so that she might acquire glory (*gloria*) for her chastity'.<sup>716</sup> In this section of the work he also mentions Dido and Cleopatra, giving the standard stories of these women known from earlier accounts (4.5-6).<sup>717</sup> However, it should be noted that when it comes to Dido, Tertullian gives the earlier version of her choosing to die so as not to have to undergo a second marriage to Iarbas, disregarding the story from Vergil that she was keen to marry Aeneas, as well as the sexual relationship she had with Aeneas.<sup>718</sup> Being from Carthage though, Tertullian was likely to give the more favourable account of her story in his *Ad Martyres*, and his origins are probably why she features in this work.

So what is Tertullian doing with Lucretia and the other pagan figures?

Tertullian obviously knew his Roman history and used standard lists of exempla. The inclusion of exemplary figures gave weight to his arguments, but it also gave his intended audience something to think about. One could argue that he gave such heroic examples from Rome's past so that the Christian prisoners would take heart

---

<sup>716</sup> Tertullian uses *castitas* for Lucretia's chastity, a word found more in religious contexts than *pudicitia*, and one denoting a more general purity as well as sexual purity (Palmer, 1974, 113; Langlands, 2006, 30).

<sup>717</sup> Dido and Cleopatra also feature in Tertullian's *Ad Nationes* at 1.18.3; Dido appears in his *Apologeticum* at 50.5.

<sup>718</sup> For the sources detailing this alternative version of Dido's story see Lord, 1969, 32-5; the entry for 'Dido' in *Brill's New Pauly* - [http://www.brillonline.nl/subscriber/uid=1936/entry?entry=bnp\\_e317210](http://www.brillonline.nl/subscriber/uid=1936/entry?entry=bnp_e317210) (accessed 15/11/10).

and try to emulate the deeds of these noble figures. He might not have intended any disparagement of these pagan examples.<sup>719</sup> And more than this, as Christians had the 'support of faith', surely they could achieve a higher nobility and a superiority over these pagans in their dignified deaths?<sup>720</sup> One scholar, however, suggests that rather than condemning the pagans directly, Tertullian shows by his sarcasm what he really thinks of them.<sup>721</sup> Another argues that Tertullian presents them as having false ideals, whereas he is telling the Christians that they can do better and suffer for a true cause, the cause of God, to achieve heavenly glory.<sup>722</sup>

In light of this, Tertullian's chosen description of Lucretia and the reasons for her death need some explanation. At first glance, Tertullian seems to be praising her brave deed. However, he implies that the motive behind her suicide was to achieve *gloria* for her chastity, thus for herself. This glory-seeking does seem to stand in contrast to the motivations of the Christians, which are God-inspired. Lucretia and the other pagans are inferior to Tertullian's Christian addressees, who live and die in a superior way to their predecessors.<sup>723</sup> Perhaps, then, we are seeing some early signs of disparagement towards Lucretia's celebrated suicide.<sup>724</sup> On the other hand, the positioning of Lucretia as first of the pagan exempla could suggest an alternative reading. Her position at the head of his list could mean that she is the most important of all Tertullian's examples and one he was keen for them to be aware of, and perhaps also, emulate, especially since Tertullian put a high price on

---

<sup>719</sup> As Carlson argues (1948, 103-4).

<sup>720</sup> See Bowersock, 1995, 63; Edwards, 2007, 209-10.

<sup>721</sup> Amundsen, 1989, 149 n.41.

<sup>722</sup> Barnes, 1971, 227.

<sup>723</sup> For this line of argument see Carlson, 1948, 96; Van Hooff, 1990, 194; Grig, 2004, 10.

<sup>724</sup> As Donaldson (1982, 25) and Trout (1994, 61 n.36) suggest.

chastity.<sup>725</sup> The classical accounts of Lucretia as a modest, stay-at-home woman, and her suicide committed to prove her chastity, would certainly fit this bill.

This view is reinforced by Lucretia's appearance in two other works by Tertullian: *De Exhortatione Castitatis* and *De Monogamia*. Tertullian's descriptions of Lucretia are virtually identical in both texts. The first:

vel illa Lucretia, quae etsi semel per vim, et invita, alium virum passa  
est, sanguine suo maculatam carnem abluit, ne viveret iam non sibi  
univira. (13.3)

Lucretia 'washed her polluted flesh with her own blood' (*sanguine suo maculatam carnem abluit*) after being raped.<sup>726</sup> In the second text Lucretia features after Tertullian has described Dido's suicide, again because she did not want to marry for a second time:

assidebit et illi matrona Romana, quae, etsi per vim nocturnam, nihilo  
experta minus alium virum, maculam carnis suo sanguine abluit, ut  
monogamiam in semetipsam vindicaret. (17.3)

Tertullian repeats the idea of her washing her tainted flesh with her own blood.

Lucretia's role here is primarily as a model of *pudicitia* – Tertullian used pagan

---

<sup>725</sup> As noted above: see p. 252.

<sup>726</sup> This use of Christian symbolism to describe a pre-Christian woman might be viewed as an effort by Tertullian to portray Lucretia at least in part as more 'Christianised' to his Christian audience.

figures in these works to provide models for contemporary Christian women.<sup>727</sup> He could prompt his Christian audience to consider appropriate female behaviour, and in particular endorse his view that sexual activity should only take place within a marriage and that outside of this it was to be seen as utterly inappropriate and un-Christian like. There does not seem to be a hint here of any kind of derogatory treatment of Lucretia. In fact, one theory put forward has identified Tertullian as a rhetorician of shame who used the examples of others to shame what he viewed as his lax Christian audience into greater chastity.<sup>728</sup> Of course there is an element here of ‘whatever they can do, we can do better’, but it seems clear that Lucretia is seen here as exemplary.<sup>729</sup> Furthermore, knowing Tertullian’s regard for Dido, his comment in *De Monogamia* that Lucretia will be her ‘assessor’ (indicated by *assidebit*), puts Lucretia on an even higher footing than his Carthaginian ancestor in terms of representing a model for chastity.

## ii. Jerome’s Lucretia

The next major writer to mention Lucretia is Jerome. His work *Adversus Jovinianum* (c.393) comprises the longest polemical treatise of his career. It was a direct response to the writings of Jovinian which presented a critique of ascetic practices.<sup>730</sup> Jerome was shocked about Jovinian’s claims that those who remained sexually abstinent were not superior to those who married and enjoyed a normal sexual relationship, and spent the whole of the first book rebutting this claim. He

---

<sup>727</sup> Clark, 1994, 170. Just as Livy used her as a model for his female contemporaries (see Chapter 1).

<sup>728</sup> Clark, 1991, 224-5.

<sup>729</sup> Edwards also comments on Tertullian’s argument ‘from the lesser to the greater’ (2007, 209).

<sup>730</sup> For more on Jovinian and the controversy caused by his teaching see Hunter, 2007.

ended the book by giving notable examples of pagan females celebrated for their chastity, and it is here where Lucretia, among others, appears.<sup>731</sup> In fact, this work did not go down as well as Jerome expected: many were appalled by the frequent use of violent and crude language, and by Jerome taking such a derogatory view of marriage.<sup>732</sup>

Lucretia is described in similar terms to Tertullian's description of her in his two works on chastity:

ad Romanas feminas transeam; et primam ponam Lucretiam, quae  
violatae pudicitiae nolens supervivere, maculam corporis cruore delevit.

(1.46)

'Unwilling to survive her violated chastity', Lucretia 'erased the stain on her body with her blood': the use of *maculam* and the idea of blood as a cleanser of the body shows a clear link with Tertullian's presentation of Lucretia in the works discussed above. Jerome seems to have only praise for Lucretia; she acted as she saw fit after being raped. And given the context of his work, it would be strange if he had selected examples he did not approve of if he was so keen to promote his ideal of chastity. On the contrary, he regarded the exemplary moral values that Lucretia had endorsed hundreds of years earlier as still relevant to female behaviour in his own day. Given Jerome's role as a fervent advocator of asceticism (see pp. 252-3), his

---

<sup>731</sup> Dido also appears in this section, as well as in the letter discussed below.

<sup>732</sup> Kelly, 1975, 182-4, 187; Brown, 1988, 377; Krawiec, 2009, 772.

inclusion of Lucretia in his writings suggests that he regarded her as an appropriate model for chaste and modest behaviour.

Lucretia is also cited in a letter written (c.409) to his friend Ageruchia, imploring her not to marry again now she has recently been widowed.<sup>733</sup> Lucretia and Dido feature as examples of women who had preferred to die rather than either marry again or live on having had a sexual relationship with a man other than their husband. Repeated in this letter is the idea of Lucretia being unwilling to go on living with a 'polluted conscience':

....et Lucretiam, quae amissa gloria castitatis noluit pollutae  
conscientiae supervivere. (*Epistulae*, 123.7)

Jerome's *gloria castitatis* echoes Tertullian's use of this same phrase in his *Ad Martyres*. It is very likely given the allusions to Tertullian's work, that Jerome had his representation of Lucretia in mind when discussing her himself.<sup>734</sup> It may seem odd to us that writers such as Tertullian and Jerome utilised pagan exempla in their works both influenced by Christian ideals and promoting Christian values and beliefs. However, these historical exempla added conviction to their works,<sup>735</sup> as the educated background of their audience would mean that these figures would be instantly recognisable. These women could still be praised as models for chastity, and obviously Tertullian and Jerome thought their stories relevant to the women of their own day.

---

<sup>733</sup> See Kelly, 1975, 297.

<sup>734</sup> Lord sees a connection between the two theologians, in general terms (1969, 30-1); see also Brown, 1988, 382.

<sup>735</sup> Carlson, 1948, 93.

Writers such as Tertullian and Jerome refashioned these women for their own purposes, and viewed them not as players in a wider story, but as individuals who lived and died by the right ideals. And the fact that Lucretia had committed suicide is also important in considering her reception: in some contexts at least, suicide must have been acceptable to those Christians who would have read these works, or surely they would not have included Lucretia as an exemplum. If Tertullian was not so keen for his fellow Christians to suffer and die for a cause, or Jerome not so keen to convince his fellow Christians that chastity was something worth dying for, then Lucretia need not have figured in these arguments. As it was, both found the circumstances of her tale very appropriate to their cases being made about female sexuality. And the fact that suicide was not viewed straightforwardly as a sin when rape was involved made this a pertinent topic with which they could broach relevant moral and social issues of their day.

### **iii. Augustine's Lucretia**

Thus far, despite the fact that we are now dealing with Christian writers discussing a pagan female, we have not really observed any clear disparagement of Lucretia. However, with the writings of Augustine this was all to change. He gives us the first surviving account to put any sort of significantly negative spin on Lucretia's suicide, in the context of his masterpiece *De Civitate Dei Contra Paganos* (written 413-426). The work was a response to the sack of Rome by the Goths in 410 and the criticisms afterwards from pagans that this disaster was final proof of the pagan

gods' displeasure that their religion had been deserted for Christianity.<sup>736</sup> Book 1 of this work dealt with many problems that resulted from the city's fall, and Augustine's apologetic tone in defence of his religion is obvious.<sup>737</sup> For Augustine, Lucretia provided a useful and appropriate way of addressing many of these issues, particularly as during the sack contemporary women had been faced with the dilemma of whether to choose suicide over being raped by invading Goths.<sup>738</sup>

Augustine brings Lucretia into the narrative by saying 'they certainly will bring out Lucretia with great praises for her chastity' (*Lucretiam certe....pudicitiae magnis efferent laudibus* 1.19). Right from the start, he distances himself from those who praise her and suggests with his use of the third person in *efferent* that he is not necessarily part of this group. After giving the details of her story, he then wonders why she felt she had to punish herself when it was Sextus Tarquinius who raped her, suggesting that, 'if there is no sexual impurity (*inpudicitia*) in her being violated against her will (*qua invita opprimitur*), there is no justice in inflicting punishment on her as a chaste woman' (*qua casta punitur* 1.19). After asking a mock Roman tribunal why she had to die if she was innocent, he then actually suggests that perhaps Lucretia killed herself (*se peremit*) because although attacked by Sextus, she had consented to having sex with him:

---

<sup>736</sup> Menaut comments that Augustine saw it as his duty to rebut these criticisms (1987, 323).

<sup>737</sup> Hagendahl, 1967, 636-7; Trout, 1994, 53-4; O'Daly, 1999, 74.

<sup>738</sup> Like Livy before him, Augustine found Lucretia's story a 'compelling diagnostic and tool' (Trout, 1994, 69). On the likelihood of Augustine using Livy's version see Trout, 1994, 56; Hagendahl, 1967, 650.

sed male sibi consciam, se peremit? quid si enim quamvis iuveni  
violenter inruenti etiam sua libidine inlecta consentit idque in se  
puniens ita doluit ut morte putaret expiandum? (1.19)

Lucretia may have wickedly been aware of what was happening (*male sibi consciam*). Her own desire (*sua libidine*) may have caused her to consent despite the violent nature of her attacker. Consequently, she felt the need to punish herself (*se puniens*), and death was deemed the only way to atone for her sin (*expiandum*).

In Augustine's mind, Lucretia must be guilty one way or the other: either she consented to the rape, and killed herself out of guilt, or she did not consent but added to the crime already committed a self-murder because her 'greed for praise was too great' (*laudis avida nimium* 1.19). To remain alive and be thought of as an adulteress was not an option.<sup>739</sup> His treatment of Lucretia was subversive and radical, but this was the point: she was no longer simply being used as a suffering victim or as a model of chastity, but instead her story was reshaped to provoke reactions from his readers.<sup>740</sup> To his pagan audience, he was belittling and questioning the actions of one of their heroic female figureheads, as part of his rebuttal of their claims to superiority over the Christians. To his Christian audience, he was bringing in a pagan example to broach the debate on the suitability of those women who had or had not chosen suicide to avoid rape in very recent events.<sup>741</sup>

---

<sup>739</sup> He saw a 'human vanity' in her that he did not look kindly upon (Trout, 1994, 62).

<sup>740</sup> Just as Ovid subverted Livy's Lucretia, although not to the extent of Augustine: see pp. 86-8.

<sup>741</sup> O'Daly argues for the potential of readers from both groups (1999, 36).

During the section that discusses Lucretia, Augustine claims that Christian women who had suffered similar experiences to her chose not to kill themselves, as they had not sinned in their own minds, and did not want to add the crime of 'self-murder' to that of rape (1.19). They definitely had no reason to contemplate suicide before a rape had even taken place. As discussed above (see p. 257), the distinction made between mind and body in Christian thought would have informed Augustine's arguments here: a person committed to the Christian faith could suffer any bodily suffering and emerge with an even stronger mind and conviction in the existence of God by doing so. Augustine was much more concerned with the 'fallen will' and sexual desire.<sup>742</sup> These points refer to the behaviour of women during the recent sack of Rome. Augustine claims that none did commit suicide, but his comment (at 1.17) that sympathy and pardon should be given to those who chose suicide over rape would suggest otherwise. Thus we can conclude that during the sack of Rome in 410, some women either considered or actually did commit suicide; Augustine does not really condone this but he urges understanding for those that did.<sup>743</sup>

In light of this, his later comments (at 1.26) seem slightly contradictory. Here, he mentions more general cases of women in the past who have committed suicide to avoid rape during times of persecution.<sup>744</sup> He seems cautious about giving a judgement on these women, and accounts for their motivations by suggesting that they had some sort of 'divine command' (*divinitus iussae*). This goes

---

<sup>742</sup> See Brown, 1988, 402-8.

<sup>743</sup> As noted by Amundsen, 1989, 129.

<sup>744</sup> Menaut argues that these stories might refer to Pelagia and her relatives, whose story is related in Ambrose, *De Virginibus*, 3.7.23-7 (1987, 326); De Ste Croix believes they refer to the women in Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, 8.12.3-4.

back to the age-old idea, epitomised by Socrates in Plato's *Phaedo*, that suicide was permissible if a sign from god had been given. Augustine is not trying to make excuses for these women, but trying to make sense of their actions by offering the only 'loophole' he sees in suicide being acceptable.<sup>745</sup> However, his obvious disapproval of these women's actions seems to stand at odds with his earlier comment (at 1.17), mentioned above, urging sympathy for such women. Perhaps his real displeasure with these women (at 1.26) was in the fact that they were now venerated as martyrs. And this takes us back to the motivations behind Lucretia's suicide. She had been lauded for many years after her death, and Augustine saw this as the incentive for her suicide. He might also have thought that the women who killed themselves during the persecutions had similar motivations, believing that if they committed suicide in such a context, they too would be praised for years to come for their conduct.

There is no escaping from the fact that Augustine presents us with an innovative and somewhat radical viewpoint on Lucretia. And this cannot be accounted for simply by looking at changing attitudes both to pagans and suicide. Tertullian may have been writing some two hundred years before Augustine, but Jerome was a near-contemporary and shows no questioning of her character, and then there is Ambrose, also of the same era, who finds suicide acceptable when connected with rape.<sup>746</sup> Perhaps for Augustine, he just could not grasp why a woman would choose to kill herself after being raped.

---

<sup>745</sup> On this see Droge & Tabor, 1992, 176-180; Van der Horst, 1971, 287 – this article also discusses the influence of Platonism on Augustine.

<sup>746</sup> Ambrose, *De Virginibus*, 3.7.23-7. Ambrose, along with Jerome (see his *Commentary on Jonah*, 1.6), was unequivocal in his acceptance of the threat of rape as the only motive for suicide open to Christian females, which makes Augustine's wavering attitude all the more significant. Trout notes

Modern commentators often miss the point of Augustine's work when they make claims such as, 'Augustine is obviously sympathetic toward her [Lucretia]'.<sup>747</sup> On the one hand, her behaviour did not sit well with his attitudes towards pride and the act of rape influenced by his religion. He could find a possible loophole for those women who killed themselves to avoid rape, but to him, suicide *after* violation was pointless and sinful.<sup>748</sup> On the other hand, because of recent events which gave rise to the apologetical tone of his work, Lucretia was a pertinent example to exploit.<sup>749</sup> It is important to be aware of the catastrophic consequences of the sack of Rome, both in terms of the real threats faced by women and the criticisms faced by the wider Christian community. It is possible that because of the lengths to which Augustine goes in his disparagement of Lucretia, there is also an element here of him taking the Romans' oldest heroine and throwing her back in their faces: pagans had criticised the Christians for the sack of Rome, and so Augustine responded by challenging the very foundations on which Lucretia's morals and chastity had been established.<sup>750</sup>

Discussing Lucretia in his writings allowed Augustine to broach the concept of martyrdom, a type of voluntary death very relevant to Christian communities of his day. Earlier in his career, he had been less concerned with this phenomenon.<sup>751</sup> Brown has even argued that Augustine viewed martyrdom as the 'highest peak of

---

how he challenged the views of both Ambrose and Jerome (1994, 67-9); see also Amundsen, 1989, 140-1.

<sup>747</sup> Frank, 1972, 97 n.8; see also Percival, 1998, 262.

<sup>748</sup> As Donaldson notes (1982, 31).

<sup>749</sup> As this type of suicide had been 'approved' by other writers, he felt it was an issue that needed addressing (see Amundsen, 1989, 123), using Lucretia as a way of broaching it.

<sup>750</sup> Augustine's subversive view of Lucretia was not to last in its entirety, however: see the Conclusion on how she was lauded once again as an idolised model of chastity during the medieval and early modern periods.

<sup>751</sup> See Den Boeft, 1989, 117. This paper also offers some insights into how Augustine viewed the concept of martyrdom.

human heroism', although this was largely due to his view of it as a 'far greater sign of God's grace' than that given to one who had overcome their sexual impulses.<sup>752</sup> However, later writings reflect more adverse attitudes towards martyrs. He believed that they should not be celebrated too ostentatiously.<sup>753</sup> In particular, he targeted the Donatist martyrs, claiming that many were criminals, false martyrs and embraced suffering and death too readily.<sup>754</sup> Bels has argued that Augustine regarded these martyrs as motivated by pride and fanaticism.<sup>755</sup> And this can be linked to how he portrays Lucretia - she, whose greed for praise was 'too great'. Thus Augustine's reformulation of Lucretia's story also allowed him to debate the motivations behind the voluntary deaths of more contemporary males and females, and to prompt discussion about the moral and ethical rights and wrongs of embracing martyrdom. This chapter now moves on to look at some of the literature detailing the deaths of female martyrs.

### **3. The female martyr acts**

#### **i. Perpetua (and Felicitas)**

Perpetua's martyrdom took place in Carthage in 203, most likely as a result of the ban of this year enforced by the emperor Septimius Severus against

---

<sup>752</sup> Brown, 1988, 397.

<sup>753</sup> Kaufman, 1994, 4-5.

<sup>754</sup> For more information on Augustine's targeting of the Donatists, see Bels, 1975, 156-66; Amundsen, 1989, 131-3; Droge & Tabor, 1992, 167-73; Kaufman, 1994, 11; Straw, 1999, 251; Grig, 2004, 49-50.

<sup>755</sup> Bels, 1975, 157.

conversion to Judaism or Christianity.<sup>756</sup> She was arrested along with four companions: the slaves Revocatus and Felicitas, as well as Saturninus and Secundulus (Saturus joined them later).<sup>757</sup> The text informs us that she was newly married, about twenty-two years old and was still breastfeeding her baby boy.<sup>758</sup> A brief outline of the narrative is as follows: the group were arrested and taken to prison where Perpetua's father visited her to try and persuade her to reconsider her conversion; whilst detained, Perpetua had a number of visions; the prisoners were taken to a hearing before the governor, Hilarianus; as none of them recanted he sentenced them to death in the amphitheatre by wild animals; when this day arrived, Perpetua was the last to die.

The martyr act was most probably written very soon after the events which it describes.<sup>759</sup> It could have been written by Tertullian himself, but this is not certain. It is highly probable, though, that it was written by one of his circle in Carthage, and as such reflects the views of the African Christian community.<sup>760</sup> The text claims that a large part of its contents come from some sort of memoir or diary of Perpetua herself.<sup>761</sup> Some scholars have taken this as fact,<sup>762</sup> although caution should be taken concerning this matter. However, this aspect of the act is not discussed here, nor are Perpetua's visions, which have also been the subject of

---

<sup>756</sup> Shaw, 1993, 10. I am not going to discuss here the problems of dating, but accept the usual date of 203 (see Musurillo, 1972, xxvi-xxvii; Shaw, 1993, 3 n.2).

<sup>757</sup> *Passio Sanctarum Perpetuae et Felicitatis*, 2.1 (hereafter abbreviated to *Perp.*).

<sup>758</sup> *Perp.*, 2.1-3.

<sup>759</sup> De Ste Croix, 2006, 191; Barnes, 2010, 67-8.

<sup>760</sup> Rossi, 1984, 72.

<sup>761</sup> *Perp.*, 2.3.

<sup>762</sup> See e.g. Frend, 1965, 363; Rossi, 1984, 56; Hall, 1993, 16; Shaw, 1993, 15; Perkins, 1995, 104; Prinzivalli, 2001, 118.

much discussion.<sup>763</sup> Rather, this section examines the particularly gendered features of Perpetua's martyrdom, as well as her actual death scene.

One of Perpetua's prime worries when she is first imprisoned is for her baby: 'I was exhausted with anxiety (*macerabar sollicitudine*) for my baby' (3.6).<sup>764</sup> However, once the child is allowed to stay with her permanently, she is no longer worried. Indeed, her *carcer* has now become her palace (*praetorium* 3.9).<sup>765</sup> This first image of her is as a caring mother, rightly concerned for the well-being of her child. However, this picture soon becomes distorted. When brought to her hearing, her emphatic reply when asked to sacrifice, even for the sake of her son, is *non facio*, 'I will not do that' (6.4). Then, after her earlier worry about her child, she is remarkably accepting of the fact that once her fate has been decided, he must be taken from her (6.8). Lefkowitz has pointed to the fact that in the acts of female martyrs, separation from the family is often emphasised.<sup>766</sup> Many scholars have commented on how the traditional family codes and structures are ruptured by Perpetua's resistance to her father's entreaties that she recant (3.2; 6.4), and by her apparent disregard of her baby.<sup>767</sup> As noted in the Introduction (see pp. 37-42) there were other roles available now for women other than the traditional ones of wife and mother. This act explores this idea and suggests that a female can now, as a Christian, achieve praise and nobility even when they behave in a manner contrary to these ideals.

---

<sup>763</sup> See e.g. Shaw, 1993, 26-30; Salisbury, 1997, 98-112.

<sup>764</sup> The Latin text used is from Musurillo (1972).

<sup>765</sup> Heffernan & Shelton note that this represents a 'reversal of expectation' (2006, 220).

<sup>766</sup> Lefkowitz, 1976, 418.

<sup>767</sup> Cardman, 1988, 147; Prinzivalli, 2001, 121; Van Henten & Avemarie, 2002, 102. Cobb notes that Perpetua's separation from her child highlights her 'transformation from femininity to masculinity' (2008, 103).

The behaviour of Felicitas also shows a break with what was normally expected of a woman. At eight months pregnant, rather than being concerned for her soon-to-be-born child, she is actually very distressed (*in magno erat luctu*) that she would have to postpone her martyrdom because of her pregnancy (15.2). The use of the adjective *magnus* here emphasises her concern at the prospect of not being able to die with the rest of her party. The others were also upset because they did not want to leave her behind on the road to hope (*in via....spei*) they were going to travel on (15.3). Again, Lefkowitz has identified this abandonment of children as a typical facet of female martyr acts. She sees such conduct as an 'abnormal, extreme form of social protest'.<sup>768</sup> Thus, Perpetua and Felicitas are not only fighting a battle against the Roman authorities who have arrested them, but are also acting out against their traditional roles in a highly patriarchal society.<sup>769</sup> Their faith also plays a crucial role in their determination on death: Perpetua (in Saturus' vision) remarks that she is 'happier' in heaven than while she was living (12.7); Felicitas says that she knows that as she suffers for God, he in turn suffers for her (15.6).

While Perpetua and Felicitas behave contrary to expected behaviour, Perpetua's father can be viewed as being emasculated to some extent. Failing to persuade her to recant, he indulges in very un-masculine type behaviour as he throws himself down at Perpetua's feet and cries (*se ad pedes meos iactans et lacrimans* 5.5).<sup>770</sup> Her father is also physically beaten (6.5) because of his efforts again to try and dissuade Perpetua, and as the day draws nearer for her

---

<sup>768</sup> Lefkowitz, 1976, 418-19.

<sup>769</sup> On the latter point see Edwards, 2007, 212.

<sup>770</sup> This may be compared with the similar lack of dignity displayed by Lucretia's male relatives when she has told them she is about to kill herself: see pp. 73-4.

martyrdom, he again throws himself to the ground (9.2). Several scholars have commented on this seeming reversal of gender roles as Perpetua becomes all the more dignified and determined on her martyrdom at the same time that her father behaves in an undignified and increasingly desperate manner.<sup>771</sup> Cobb argues that the writer of the act de-masculinises her father in order to highlight the masculine attributes of Perpetua, and through this, the 'superiority of Christianity'.<sup>772</sup>

This inversion of normal gender roles is furthered when in one of her visions Perpetua actually says that she becomes a man (*facta sum masculus* 10.7). This seems to suggest that in order to fight against what she sees as the devil (*diabolus*), she must put aside her feelings as a mother and her femininity, so that she can triumph in an ultimate *victoria* (10.14). Gender issues come to the fore again when Perpetua and Felicitas are brought into the arena naked. However, even the pagan crowd shrinks from this (*horruit*) and so they are taken away and brought back wearing tunics (20.2-3). The very juxtaposition of women to a context normally reserved for men is striking.<sup>773</sup> In addition, their sex is highlighted by the graphic descriptions of their naked bodies, with Felicitas in particular being described as having just given birth (*a partu recentem* 20.2). When she is attacked by the wild animal, Perpetua tries to keep her legs covered, concerned about her *pudor* (20.4). Commentators have linked this here with a similar act by Polyxena;<sup>774</sup> however, this

---

<sup>771</sup> See e.g. Perkins, 1995, 105-7; Cobb, 2008, 97-8; Cooper, 2009, 196.

<sup>772</sup> Cobb, 2008, 102. Perhaps the author also emasculates her father because he is not a Christian (or at least not strong enough in his faith to want Perpetua to suffer martyrdom).

<sup>773</sup> As noted by Cardman, 1988, 148; Shaw, 1993, 6; Salisbury, 1997, 141.

<sup>774</sup> See e.g. Musurillo, 1972, 129 n.8.

act can also be paralleled with Lucretia's behaviour in Ovid's *Fasti*. She too is keen to preserve her modesty by pulling her clothes around her as she dies.<sup>775</sup>

The points just made about the description of the women as they die emphasise the specifically feminised elements of their portrayal. This is demonstrated by a comparison with the deaths of the male martyrs who feature in this act. There is no mention of how Saturninus and Secundulus are martyred. Revocatus and Saturus are described as being attacked by wild animals (19); Saturus is also given a lengthier scene but there is nothing explicitly gendered in this part of the narrative (21.1-6). Furthermore, Perpetua is the only one of the martyrs to make any sound and guide the executioner's hand at the moment of death (see below). Thus there is less focus on the male martyrs in general, no reference to them being naked as the women are, and no reaction from the crowd as detailed above.<sup>776</sup> The act ensures that the reader or audience focuses on the nude bodies of the women and each case refers specifically to either their gender (Felicitas having just become a mother) or sexuality (Perpetua trying to cover herself).<sup>777</sup>

As well as this focus on gender, the martyr act also repeatedly refers to the happy nature of the Christians, and their willingness to die, although it could be argued that this is a feature of both sexes and in this way the men and women are

---

<sup>775</sup> See pp. 81-2.

<sup>776</sup> Looking at male martyrs from other acts, these arguments can be expanded on: for example, Polycarp (*The Martyrdom of Saint Polycarp*, 13) and Irenaeus (*Passio Sancti Irenaei Episcopi Sirmiensis*, 5) are two male martyrs who are described as removing their clothing, although there is no focus explicitly on their bodies nor on the crowd's reaction to them; similarly, the descriptions of Cyprian (*Acta Proconsularia Sancti Cypriani*, 5) and Julius the Veteran (*Passio Iuli Veterani*, 4) give no mention of their bodies and their death scenes contain few details on exactly how they die.

<sup>777</sup> As Cobb points out, 'the narrative emphasis on women's bodies' is an important aspect to explore when analysing martyr acts (2008, 110). For more on Perpetua and Felicitas' femininity see Cobb, 2008, 107-13; see also Edwards, 2007, 213.

not distinguished from one another.<sup>778</sup> When they are first told that they must face death in the amphitheatre, the group, rather than being downcast, return to their prison happily (*hilares* 6.6). This adjective is used again in Saturus' vision: Perpetua tells him that she is 'happier (*hilarior*) here in this place [i.e. in heaven]' than she was when she was alive (12.7). The night before their martyrdom, they tell their fellow Christians gathered at the prison not to worry, because they actually feel lucky (*felicitatem*) in their suffering (17.1). Again, the adjective *hilares* is used to stress their cheerful nature as they walk from the prison to the arena, and this is reinforced by their trembling with *gaudium*, 'joy' (18.1). Felicitas is *gaudens* now that she can die with her fellow Christians (18.3).

The willingness of the Christians to die is also firmly addressed by Perpetua herself. As a further degradation, the women were meant to wear dresses of the priestesses of Ceres (18.4). However, Perpetua argues against this, saying that they should not have to:

ideo ad hoc sponte pervenimus ne libertas nostra obduceretur; ideo  
animam nostram addiximus, ne tale aliquid faceremus; hoc vobiscum  
pacti sumus. (18.5)

They came to this point 'voluntarily' (*sponte*) and sentenced their own lives to this (*animam nostram addiximus*) because they were informed they would not have to wear such garments. This speech is very revealing. It not only implies that the

---

<sup>778</sup> Although Perpetua is the only martyr described as taking an active role in her death by sword: see p. 283.

Roman authorities were willing to compromise with their victims, as the tribune actually agrees with Perpetua (18.6), but there is also a marked emphasis on the compliance from the Christian side. The adverb *sponte* and the first person plural used in the verb *addicere* suggest the complicity of those persecuted.

The volitional nature of the martyrs is no more apparent than in Perpetua's death scene, described thus:

inter ossa conpuncta exululavit, et errantem dexteram tirunculi  
gladiatoris ipsa in iugulum suum transtulit. fortasse tanta femina aliter  
non potuisset occidi, quae ab immundo spiritu timebatur, nisi ipsa  
voluisset. (21.9-10)

The great pain Perpetua feels as she is struck is highlighted by the onomatopoeic *exululavit*. However, despite this agonising torture, Perpetua does not shy away but actually takes control of her executioner and steers his sword herself (*ipsa in iugulum suum transtulit*) to her throat. As the writer of the act comments himself, it is made clear that she had to be willing to die. The repetition of *ipsa* reinforces that it is she *herself* who has chosen to die in this manner. And it is this powerful image, of a woman in command of herself and actually wanting to die, that the reader is left with.<sup>779</sup>

Heffernan and Shelton stress this idea that a Christian wanting to sacrifice themselves for their faith had to do so volitionally. The more willing the martyr was

---

<sup>779</sup> Cobb describes this as 'a final act of masculine volition' (2008, 107).

to die, the more likely that God would honour them;<sup>780</sup> as was noted above, this idea of dying for one's faith was key to those who martyred themselves (see pp. 256-7). This concept does seem to be at the forefront of Perpetua's mind as she dies. Can her death be described as a suicide? She certainly displays suicidal tendencies in her final moments. One scholar has suggested that 'an Arria or a Porcia would have done the same'; another that she is 'transformed into the model of a Roman matrona'.<sup>781</sup> There is some continuity in the theme of female suicide from the pagan to the Christian worlds, and arguably this is in the motivations behind her desire for death. For Perpetua, her martyrdom was about asserting her freedom.<sup>782</sup> She wanted to die to be free from the cruelty of the Roman authorities towards those of her religion: through her suffering she becomes empowered against these authorities.<sup>783</sup> Those women in the Roman tradition who had committed suicide had not been motivated by religious belief. Nevertheless, they too had wanted to be free of an oppressive authority – why else had Cleopatra killed herself, or Epicharis, or any of the other females in Tacitus' *Annales*? The motivations may differ slightly, and in Perpetua's case someone else may have carried out the actual act that killed her, but these women are all portrayed as being inspired by similar objectives.

Such a powerful act by a female caused some problems for the pagan writers who discussed female suicide. These same problems were also probably a concern for Christian thinkers. It is likely that although much celebrated in her martyr act, there was some uneasiness regarding the physical strength, mental

---

<sup>780</sup> Heffernan & Shelton, 2006, 218.

<sup>781</sup> Prinzivalli, 2001, 131; Shaw, 1993, 32.

<sup>782</sup> As noted by Rossi, 1984, 69.

<sup>783</sup> Perkins, 1995, 105.

fortitude and achievements demonstrated in Perpetua's martyrdom.<sup>784</sup> However, just as a writer such as Tacitus had adopted the ambiguity and force of the female suicide motif to make a statement about the political climate of the Julio-Claudian rule, it can be reasoned that the Christian writer of this act had similar aims. After all, he would not have described Perpetua's death in such a fashion if he had not wanted to. Therefore, we can also see continuations in the same intellectual exercise being used by writers in their approaches to representations of female suicide.

Perpetua is not the first female martyr to be discussed in chronological terms.<sup>785</sup> However, her legacy is important in terms of the development of the martyr act. As Shaw has noted, her death occurs during a very early stage in how martyrdoms were recorded and remembered and as a result her actions and those of her companions were to alter significantly later interpretations of martyrdom and its meaning to the Christian Church.<sup>786</sup> Echoes of Perpetua's behaviour both before and during her death can be witnessed in other female martyr acts from both near-contemporary and later dates. Many of the ideas and themes discussed above, then, set a precedent for these other acts which will now be examined, and in the discussion that follows, many connections with Perpetua's martyrdom will become apparent.<sup>787</sup>

---

<sup>784</sup> As Cardman (1988, 148) and Shaw (1993, 33) note. As was stated in the Introduction (pp. 37-42), although women could lead virginal lives, become ascetic, etc., the norm (particularly at this stage) was still to follow traditional customs and marry and have children.

<sup>785</sup> Agathonice and Blandina (discussed below) were martyred before her. However, it can be argued that Perpetua's is the first *extended* female martyr act.

<sup>786</sup> Shaw, 1993, 15.

<sup>787</sup> In the following acts discussed (up to Prudentius) I examine only the women who feature significantly in the Christian martyr acts of Musurillo's edition (1972) (supplemented by other female martyrs from Eusebius and the Donatist material).

## ii. Agathonice

Agathonice is mentioned briefly by Eusebius in his *Historia Ecclesiastica* as having died after 'many glorious confessions' (4.15.48).<sup>788</sup> However, this is all he has to recall about her, and so we must instead turn to her deeds as recorded in two versions, one Greek and one Latin.<sup>789</sup> The date of the composition of these acts is unknown, although the reference in Eusebius at least helps us date the actual martyrdom to the late 150s/160s.<sup>790</sup> Turning first to the earlier, Greek version, the narrative records that two Christians, Carpus and Papyrus, had been brought before the governor in Pergamum and refused to sacrifice to the pagan gods. After these men had been burnt at the stake, a woman called Agathonice, who had been watching, suddenly 'saw the glory of the Lord', realised that she had received a 'call from heaven' and 'threw herself joyfully upon the stake' (42-44).<sup>791</sup> She had not been persecuted, arrested or in any way been forced to give up her life. She voluntarily chose to die with the other martyrs,<sup>792</sup> and this is due to her faith in God, and as a result can be classified as an obvious suicide.

The later, abridged Latin version, however, provides a rather different perspective on her martyrdom.<sup>793</sup> From the very start, she is arrested along with the two men (1). She is also brought before the proconsul for questioning and is formally sentenced by him to die at the stake (6.1-4). De Ste Croix suggests that this

---

<sup>788</sup> Loeb translation.

<sup>789</sup> The Latin title: *idus Aprilis sanctorum martyrum Carpi episcopi et Pamfili diaconi et Agathonicae*.

<sup>790</sup> On this see Musurillo, 1972, xv-xvi; De Ste Croix, 2006, 166 n.44.

<sup>791</sup> Musurillo's (1972) translations.

<sup>792</sup> As noted by Droge & Tabor, who even postulate that she was a pagan, and not a Christian, onlooker (1992, 138, 161 n.44). De Ste Croix, however, identifies her as Christian (although with no evidence to suggest why: 2006, 166).

<sup>793</sup> The Latin text used is from Musurillo (1972).

formal interrogation and sentencing may simply be missing from the earlier account due to a lacuna in the Greek text.<sup>794</sup> Bowersock puts forward the argument that this could, on the other hand, reflect attempts by later Christians to play down the idea of voluntary martyrdom.<sup>795</sup> Perhaps there is some truth in this; as mentioned above, there was much official condemnation of those who sought martyrdom too eagerly.

Yet even in the Latin recension it is possible to see a definite desire from Agathonice to die a martyr's death. She tells the Roman official that if she is deserving, she 'willingly desire[s] to follow the footsteps of the saints and of my teachers': *libenter autem, si mereor, sanctorum doctorumque meorum desidero sequi vestigia* (6.1). The positioning of *libenter* at the start of the sentence emphasises her willingness to follow where others have gone before. And in her eyes, this is dying, as those other martyrs before her have, in the name of Christ, again repeating the idea that to suffer martyrdom was a sure sign of demonstrating one's faith:

ego autem ad hoc veni et in hoc sum parata ut pro nomine Christi  
patiar. (6.3)

This is the very reason for which she has come (*ad hoc veni*). Such language is very reminiscent of that found in Perpetua's martyr act. It cannot be said with any certainty which act was composed first, although given that this Latin version is a

---

<sup>794</sup> De Ste Croix, 2006, 166 n.46.

<sup>795</sup> Bowersock, 1995, 38-9. Hall suggests that the later Latin version has been 'improved in an orthodox direction' as Agathonice is not a voluntary martyr as in the Greek version (1993, 9; although he also proposes that the two versions may be of a similar date (1993, 10)).

later edition of Agathonice's martyrdom, it could be that the writer was in a position to have seen Perpetua's act. Certainly other links between the two are visible: in both versions Agathonice is not moved by entreaties about her son, just as Perpetua abandons hers.<sup>796</sup> Here too then, we have a woman acting outside the role society had traditionally reserved for her, and this is in an act of voluntary death.

In both recensions it is possible to view differences between the portrayal of Agathonice and the men, Carpus and Papyrus, who are martyred along with her. In the Greek recension we see the crowd's reaction to Agathonice's decision to die along with the men, as they appeal to the fact that she has a son (43), and they also lament her death, commenting on how 'terrible' and 'unjust' it is (44-5); Agathonice is also described as taking off her cloak. By comparison, there is no reference to the crowd in relation to the two men and no mention of them taking off any clothing (36-41). These differences are all the more apparent in the Latin recension. As Cobb maintains, Agathonice's experience here is given more treatment than the two men's: nine words describe Carpus' torture and death, ten Papyrus' (here Pamphilus), with almost three times as many for hers.<sup>797</sup> Moreover, Agathonice is again portrayed as removing her clothes (6.4) and in addition the crowd, seeing her *pulchritudo*, mourn and grieve for her (*videns autem turba pulchritudinem eius, dolentes lamentauerunt eam* 6.5). Both the crowd's, and through them the readers', gaze is focused on her body: 'the narrative gaze is led to focus on the

---

<sup>796</sup> As noted by Cardman, 1988, 147: 43 (Greek); 6.2-3 (Latin – here it is plural children).

<sup>797</sup> Cobb, 2008, 120.

beauty of the body, an issue never raised in relation to men'.<sup>798</sup> The writer of the act is keen to emphasise Agathonice's femininity as well as her more courageous, masculine attributes, as it would not be appropriate to present his readers with a fully masculine figure.<sup>799</sup>

### iii. Blandina

The martyrdom of Blandina took place in Lyons, Gaul, probably in 177. The only account that survives today appears in Eusebius' work (*Historia Ecclesiastica* 5.1.3-5.2.8), on which Musurillo's Greek text (*The Martyrs of Lyons*) is based. It purports to be from a letter written by the Christian communities from Lyons and Vienne to their compatriots in Asia, although this letter could have been edited and changed in the years after it was written and before Eusebius used it as one of his sources.<sup>800</sup> Blandina is actually the slave of one of those who have been thrown into prison on account of their Christian faith, awaiting death in the amphitheatre. Her unnamed mistress is worried that she will falter under torture and will renounce her beliefs. Blandina, however, has such power under these circumstances that she makes her torturers 'weary and exhausted' (18).<sup>801</sup> Her confession of faith actually gives her the strength to go on and withstand the pain she is suffering (19).

---

<sup>798</sup> Cobb, 2008, 121. Although in the Latin version Pamphilus is stripped (4.2): Cobb argues this 'one-word note' about the stripping can be easily missed (2008, 120), and in any case there is no dwelling on his body as there is with Agathonice.

<sup>799</sup> On this see pp. 258-60.

<sup>800</sup> See Musurillo, 1972, xx-xxii.; Van Henten & Avemarie, 2002, 98. On the martyrs of Lyons see Keresztes, 1967; Kyle, 1998, 248-52.

<sup>801</sup> Translations of this act are from Musurillo (1972).

When finally led into the amphitheatre to die, Blandina is hanged on a post in the form of a cross. She is credited with inspiring those others who suffered around her by her 'fervent prayer' (41). However, the wild animals refuse to attack her, and so she is taken back to prison to be kept for another day; again, Eusebius notes that she inspired her companions (42). She is brought back on the final day of the games with a young boy, Ponticus, to whom she gives confidence. The crowd torment both but they refuse to recant (53-4). After Ponticus dies, Blandina finally suffers her martyrdom:

The blessed Blandina was last of all: like a noble mother encouraging her children, she sent them before her in triumph to the King, and then, after duplicating in her own body all her children's sufferings, she hastened to rejoin them, rejoicing and glorying in her death as though she had been invited to a bridal banquet instead of being a victim of the beasts....she no longer perceived what was happening because of the hope and possession of all she believed in and because of her intimacy with Christ. (55-56)

The reference to her as 'mother' of the other martyrs has been seen by some as a direct allusion to the mother of the Maccabees (see p. 256).<sup>802</sup> Certainly the two women seem to take on key roles in providing motivation to their fellow sufferers, which again, suggests a gender role reversal as it is a female who

---

<sup>802</sup> Frend, 1965, 19; Musurillo, 1972, 79 n.27; Hall, 1993, 15; Van Henten & Avemarie, 2002, 121; Cobb, 2008, 115.

encourages males to withstand their tortures. Furthermore, Blandina is a female slave; she is of very low status, and yet appears to be the most noble of all the martyrs at Lyon.<sup>803</sup> The crowd's reaction to Blandina is also significant here. In general, the crowd rages at or ridicules the martyrs (61-2; although some are a little more compassionate). However, Blandina is singled out for special mention as the writer comments that even the 'pagans themselves admitted that no woman had ever suffered so much in their experience (56)'. It seems that once again the spectacle of a female martyr has prompted especial interest in the audience. And as the above passage indicates, she also has a longing for death, believing this will bring her closer to all that she hopes and believes in. Eusebius also notes that Blandina and Ponticus goaded their persecutors and treated them with contempt (53). Not only can Blandina be seen as someone very keen to die, but she may also be categorised as a 'quasi-volunteer' as suggested by De Ste Croix's classification.<sup>804</sup>

#### iv. Potamiaena

Potamiaena's martyrdom took place in Alexandria, probably in 205-6 during Septimius Severus' rule.<sup>805</sup> Eusebius is our main surviving source for the short account of her death (*Historia Ecclesiastica* 6.5.1-7), on which Musurillo's Greek text (*The Martyrdom of Potamiaena and Basilides*) is based. The text provides no evidence for why Potamiaena was arrested in the first place, only that she was led

---

<sup>803</sup> Shaw describes her body as 'doubly weak' being that of a woman and a slave (1996, 308); Cobb sees this as 'two strikes against her masculinity' (2008, 114). This could be linked with Tacitus' portrayal of Epicharis (see pp. 240-2), as both women seem to be presented as all the more courageous and noble as a result of their low status.

<sup>804</sup> See p. 261 n.706.

<sup>805</sup> See Musurillo, 1972, xxvii; De Ste Croix, 2006, 169.

to execution by the soldier Basilides. Her mother Marcella is also noted as dying with her, but again, no reasons for this are given (1). Potamiaena is actually protected by the pagan Basilides when the crowd torment her (3). She is killed by having boiling pitch poured over her whole body (4).<sup>806</sup> Basilides is beheaded soon afterwards, having converted due to encouragement from Potamiaena who appeared to him in a dream (5-7).

There is little to go on here in terms of Potamiaena's desire to suffer martyrdom. She does die nobly and is called a 'magnificent young woman' by Eusebius (4).<sup>807</sup> De Ste Croix classes her as one of his quasi-volunteers because it appears as if she must have been particularly abusive to the governor sentencing her for her to suffer such an agonising form of punishment.<sup>808</sup> This would imply that she deliberately provokes her own agony, and in this sense shows a determination to suffer and die. Furthermore, this martyrdom also refers to her 'bodily purity and chastity',<sup>809</sup> and the threat against this was one of the reasons why she was so antagonistic to her persecutors (1). This Christian ideal developed as a feature of martyr acts due to the high value now placed on female chastity (whether realised in virginity or within a marriage: see pp. 37-42) , and it is feasible to suggest that the threat of sexual abuse was especially common in female acts because of this.<sup>810</sup> The staunch defence of one's chastity, as Potamiaena shows here, was another way of showing resistance to a repressive, pagan regime, and a specifically feminine resistance at that. Although men at this time were also encouraged to limit their

---

<sup>806</sup> The first time such a unique method is recorded (Musurillo, 1972, xxviii).

<sup>807</sup> Translation from Musurillo (1972).

<sup>808</sup> De Ste Croix, 2006, 169.

<sup>809</sup> Translation from Musurillo (1972).

<sup>810</sup> Cardman, 1988, 148.

sexual activity (see p. 38), the chastity of a male martyr is not usually a factor that is highlighted.

#### v. Valentina

Other female martyrs are also mentioned by Eusebius. For example, in Alexandria in 249, an old virgin called Apollonia is physically abused and threatened with being burnt alive. As she is granted some time to deliberate whether to recant or not, she willingly throws herself onto the pyre.<sup>811</sup> During the early days of the persecution of 303-12/13, both men and women threw themselves onto the fire in Nicomedia.<sup>812</sup> In each case it seems that both Apollonia and the mixed group had deliberately chosen to kill themselves.<sup>813</sup>

In his work on the Palestinian martyrs, Eusebius mentions Valentina, whose martyrdom took place in about 309 in Caesarea, during the great persecution there.<sup>814</sup> During the torture of another woman, Valentina deliberately chose to speak out and ask the judge how long they were going to torture her sister. Valentina is then brought before the judge herself and provokes his anger further by kicking over the altar at which she is asked to sacrifice. Thus she is burnt at the stake along with the other female martyr.<sup>815</sup> Valentina can be viewed alongside Agathonice: both women were unharmed bystanders of the suffering of others, and

---

<sup>811</sup> Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, 6.41.7.

<sup>812</sup> Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, 8.6.6.

<sup>813</sup> As noted by Droge & Tabor, 1992, 155.

<sup>814</sup> For the date: De Ste Croix, 2006, 178.

<sup>815</sup> The account is given at Eusebius, *De Martyribus Palaestinae*, 8.5-8.

yet both chose to involve themselves and in doing so provoked their own deaths.<sup>816</sup>

Valentina clearly displays a desire to martyr herself by her actions.<sup>817</sup>

#### vi. Irene , Agape and Chione

The martyrdom of these three women occurs in the March and April of 304 in Thessalonica, Macedonia, again during Diocletian's persecution.<sup>818</sup> The Greek text in Musurillo (*The Martyrdom of Saints Agape, Irene, and Chione at Saloniki*) is of an unknown date. After Diocletian's first edict in 303 which demanded the Christians surrender their scriptures, the three women had taken refuge on a mountain (1.2, 5.6). However, they were then arrested in 304 and brought before the governor Dulcitus with four other women because they had refused to sacrifice (2-3).<sup>819</sup> They still refused to do so when asked by Dulcitus, with two of the other women, Philippa and Eutychia, saying that they 'would rather die' than sacrifice (3.5).<sup>820</sup> Agape and Chione are burnt; the others are for now to be imprisoned because of their youth, Eutychia because she was pregnant (4.4; 3.7).

The next day Irene was brought before Dulcitus again. However, she refused to give up the writings sacred to her religion:

It was almighty God who bade us to love him unto death. For this

reason we did not dare to be traitors, but we chose to be burned alive

---

<sup>816</sup> De Ste Croix labels Valentina as a 'volunteer proper' (2006, 178).

<sup>817</sup> In this case, there is no hint of threat to Valentina's chastity.

<sup>818</sup> See Musurillo, 1972, 293 n.21; xlii; Barnes, 2010, 140.

<sup>819</sup> Diocletian's fourth edict in early 304 had demanded that all Christians sacrifice or be put to death (for these two edicts: Musurillo, 1972, xlii).

<sup>820</sup> Translations of this act are from Musurillo (1972).

or suffer anything else that might happen to us rather than betray the writings. (5.3).

Here she displays an obvious desire to die rather than hand over the scriptures that are so dear to her and her faith, as well as demonstrating her belief that she will exhibit her belief in God by suffering martyrdom. Dulcitus sentences her to be taken to a brothel as punishment.<sup>821</sup> Thus this act shows some developments in the theme of chastity and sexual abuse noted above in Potamiaena's act; Christian writers and thinkers of this time were concerned with female sexuality and behaviour and these concerns were expressed in narratives on female martyrs. Another way of disparaging the pagans was to show them as corruptors of (or as attempting to corrupt) good, virtuous Christian women. However, no man dares approach her in the brothel (6.2).<sup>822</sup> The writer of the act presumably wanted to emphasise the chaste character of Irene; not even pagan males would try to corrupt her innocence.

Dulcitus sentences Irene to be burnt alive like her predecessors:

They ignited a huge pyre and ordered her to climb up on it. And the holy woman Irene, singing and praising God, threw herself upon it and so died. (7.1-2)

---

<sup>821</sup> A similar threat is issued to Sabina, although there is no indication whether this was actually carried out or not (*The Martyrdom of Pionius*, 7.6).

<sup>822</sup> For the same idea related to Agnes, see below p. 306.

She is condemned to death by another, but Irene actively throws herself onto the pyre. Throughout the act, she has shown a desire to die rather than betray any aspect of her religion, especially her faith in God, and in the final moment of her death she shows a willingness to end her life. In many respects she can be classified as a voluntary martyr along with those other females discussed.

### vii. Crispina

Crispina's martyrdom is dated by the act itself (*Passio Sanctae Crispinae* in Musurillo) to 5<sup>th</sup> December 304, and took place in Tebessa, Africa (1.1). She too was brought before the proconsul for not following Diocletian's fourth edict of sacrificing to the pagan gods in the name of the emperors (1.3). When the governor Anullinus tells her that she will suffer if she does not do as is demanded, she replies: *quicquid emergerit, pro fide mea quam teneo, libenter patior* (1.5). The use of *libenter* here again suggests the willingness to martyr herself for her faith (*pro fide*). Despite Anullinus' threats, Crispina forcefully tells him that she fears nothing that he says (*quod dicis non timeo* 2.2). She repeats her determination not to recant, saying that she is 'prepared to suffer any tortures' he wants to subject her to:

iam saepius tibi dixi, quibus volueris subicere tormentis parata sum  
sustinere quam anima mea polluatur in idolis, quae sunt lapides et  
figmenta manu hominum facta. (2.4)

The phrase *parata sum sustinere* furthers the impact of the earlier *libenter* at communicating her eagerness for suffering and martyrdom.

Her disregard for the polluting pagan idols (*idolis*) would have angered the proconsul further. And this deliberate provocation of her opponents continues:

caput meum libentissime pro Deo meo perdere desidero; nam  
vanissimis idolis mutis et surdis non sacrifico. (3.2)

Not only are the pagan idols mute and deaf (*mutis et surdis*), but they are ‘most false’ (*vanissimis*). The superlative in this half of her speech is balanced by the superlative in the first half referring to her willingness to die because of her faith in God (*libentissime*), with another form of *libenter* being used. In addition, the first person use of *desiderare* in the present active in conjunction with this enforces her enthusiasm even further: she most willingly desires to die.

In Crispina’s final death scene this eagerness to die is promoted again. After giving thanks to God she acts thus, ‘stretching out her own neck’ (*extendens cervicem suam* 4.2) for the sword. Her behaviour here can be linked with that of Perpetua in her final moments: both show a willingness to die by offering their necks to their executioner.<sup>823</sup> They may not actually be using the sword themselves, but the volitional nature of their deaths is the same as those women who plunged the instruments into their own bodies with their own hand.

Arguably, Crispina’s death is less dramatic than some of the other female martyrs discussed, as she has a relatively pain-free death and is not mauled by wild

---

<sup>823</sup> *Perp.*, 21.9-10.

animals, covered in boiling pitch, or the like. However, her behaviour in opposition to the Roman authorities is more extended and noticeable than those other women. Indeed, one scholar has called this act a 'veritable handbook of how to behave when on trial'; another has noted that she alone enters into any significant amount of discussion with her judge.<sup>824</sup> She consciously infuriates her persecutors with her repeated defiant replies, which would not only have aggravated Anullinus as she refused to accept the official edicts, but would have been especially exasperating due to her gender. Once again, we have a woman who steps outside of the conventional gender boundaries in defying what was normally expected of her.

#### **viii. The Donatist female martyrs<sup>825</sup>**

The literature detailing the martyrdoms of the Donatists follows the trend of previous martyr acts by aiming at inspiring Christians to stand firm in their faith and remain loyal to God, especially when faced with the threat of torture and/or death.<sup>826</sup> However, they also have a greater polemical angle to them in their censure of the Catholics. Now, the opponents were not simply the pagan authorities, but another Christian group.<sup>827</sup> The Donatist martyr acts aimed at demonstrating their superiority over the Catholics in their character and loyalty to God. Two acts deal with female martyrs: the *Passio sanctarum Maximae, Secundae*

---

<sup>824</sup> Tilley, 1990, 397; Cardman, 1988, 146.

<sup>825</sup> Tilley's 'Introduction' (1996) gives full details on the Donatist controversy; see also Bels, 1975, 147-52.

<sup>826</sup> Tilley, 1996, xxii.

<sup>827</sup> As Bels puts it, they needed to ensure that they had a system of martyrdom 'capable de rivaliser avec celui des catholiques' (1975, 154).

*et Donatillae* and the *Passio sanctorum Dativi, Saturnini presbyteri et aliorum*, or, as it is more usually known, *Acts of the Abitinian Martyrs* (both written c.304).<sup>828</sup> In the first, Secunda is not arrested along with Maxima and Donatilla, but attempts suicide in order to be able to join them. In the second, Victoria also attempts suicide, this time to avoid marriage – she survives but then chooses martyrdom over this enforced marriage. This attempted suicide feature is an innovation from the martyr acts already discussed, and one might argue that this more extreme measure was adopted to cast a further slur on the Catholics. The attempted-suicide motif could also be viewed as displaying the Donatists' superiority: these women are so committed to their faith and chastity that they are willing to die for them by their own hand.

#### 4. Prudentius' female martyrs

Prudentius was a Spanish poet born in 348, with his work on the martyrs, the *Peristephanon*, composed sometime in the late fourth century AD.<sup>829</sup> It is likely that this interest in promoting the celebration of martyrs came from Pope Damasus and Ambrose, who also wrote poetry about martyrdom and promoted martyr cults; Prudentius would have been aware of both, having worked in Milan and visited Rome at some point.<sup>830</sup> Prudentius was also probably influenced by changing attitudes towards sexuality and virginity when he wrote about female martyrs. Malamud has observed how, during the late fourth and early fifth centuries,

---

<sup>828</sup> For both acts, see Tilley (1996).

<sup>829</sup> Palmer, 1989, 22-4.

<sup>830</sup> Palmer, 1989, 30; Roberts, 1993, 42.

sexuality was 'being redefined by the ascetic movement'.<sup>831</sup> As noted above, by the fourth century virginity had become a particularly strong ideal within Christian circles and this feature now apparent in representations of virginal models can be seen in Prudentius' work.<sup>832</sup>

Prudentius' martyr acts can be distinguished from their predecessors in two ways. Although the earlier acts cannot all be seen as historically accurate in all the details they present us with, scholars have seen Prudentius as being particularly unreliable in the historical facts he provides. De Ste Croix argues that the *Peristephanon* has 'very little to do with history'; Palmer cautions the reader that Prudentius is a poet and so primarily concerned with producing interesting poetry.<sup>833</sup> However, this does not mean that he is not an invaluable source for the representation of martyrs in this period. In fact, and this leads on to the second point, Prudentius' poetry reflects how the cult of the martyr had progressed and grown during a period when martyrdom was no longer a concurrent occurrence. The writing of martyr acts was now an integral part of the wider cult of the martyrs, and that of the saints which developed during the fourth century AD, and this was achieved by converting earlier Christian figures into idealistic heroes.<sup>834</sup>

---

<sup>831</sup> Malamud, 1990, 70.

<sup>832</sup> For more on attitudes towards sexuality in this period see pp. 37-42.

<sup>833</sup> De Ste Croix, 1954, 94 (2006, 57); Palmer, 1989, 234. Barnes comments that his poem on Agnes is 'total fiction' (2010, 396); see also Harvey, 2008, 607.

<sup>834</sup> As O'Daly points out (1999, 22). For further discussion and relevant bibliography on martyrdom, martyr acts and the cult of the saints see Price, 2008.

## i. Eulalia

Prudentius provides the first reference to the martyrdom of Eulalia in Emerita, Spain in 303.<sup>835</sup> From the very beginning of his poem on her, Prudentius emphasises her noble status, noting, however, that this was outdone by the nobility of her death (3.1-2). He also specifically calls her a *sacra virgo*, or 'holy virgin' (3.3), highlighting her youth and virginity. In fact, we learn a little later that she is only twelve years old (3.11-12). Eulalia showed great fortitude in her martyrdom, even frightening her executioners by her *aspera* ('adversity' 3.14), and because she regarded her punishment as 'pleasant' (*supplicium sibi dulce rata* 3.15). From the start of this martyr act then, Prudentius makes it clear that Eulalia was a willing participant in her martyrdom.

Despite her mother trying to protect her from the persecutors, as she knows that her daughter has a 'love of death', (*mortis amore* 3.40), Eulalia loathes (*perosa* 3.41) not putting herself forward and escapes (3.44). She was not actively sought out but chose to avoid hiding and then actually presented herself to the authorities, even doing this with a *superba* attitude (3.64). Eulalia gives a lengthy speech, in which she derides her opponents.<sup>836</sup> For example, she says they are acting in a *furor* (3.66), and calls them a 'pitiable group' (*miseranda manus* 3.71). Towards the end, she lists the things that they could do to her, with the use of the imperatives giving the impression that she is almost ordering them to harm her: *ergo age, tortor,*

---

<sup>835</sup> Palmer, 1989, 239. Petruccione suggests that evidence of a cult from the fourth century onwards implies she was a historical figure, although he also demonstrates awareness of the problems of taking Prudentius as historically reliable (1990, 81-3).

<sup>836</sup> Petruccione points to the unusual nature of such a lengthy speech for a female martyr (1990, 93); although as we have seen in, e.g. Crispina's act, it is not unknown elsewhere.

*adure, seca,/divide membra* ('therefore come, torturer, burn, cut, break up my limbs' 3.91-2). Yet none of this will break her resolve (3.94-5). As Prudentius said earlier, she is devoted to her cause and religion (*pia virgo* 3.56).

By this stage, the governor in charge of proceedings is outraged by Eulalia's seemingly arrogant behaviour (3.96). However, he still tries to convince her to recant and points out the joys marriage would give her, should she choose to live (3.104-5). Yet she will not be moved and continues her provocation of him by spitting into his eyes and destroying the pagan images laid out (3.126-9). Prudentius then describes her death, as she is first tortured and then burnt alive:

'scriberis ecce mihi, Domine.

....nomen et ipsa sacrum loquitur

purpura sanguinis eliciti.'

haec sine fletibus et gemitu

laeta canebat et intrepida....

....virgo citum cupiens obitum

appetit et bibit ore rogam. (3.136, 139-42, 159-60)

She says that her lord's name is being written on her (*scriberis....mihi, Domine*), and is also happy and fearless (*laeta....et intrepida*). Shaw has suggested that the name inscribed on her body suggests that she is now owned by the bearer of that name, God.<sup>837</sup> In dying, she is dedicating and giving over her body to him; her fervent belief in God both motivates her actions and is reaffirmed by those actions as she

---

<sup>837</sup> Shaw, 1996, 306.

imagines his name appearing on her body. Certainly the description of her body being cleansed by her blood is suggestive of a baptism (3.144-145).<sup>838</sup> And she also displays a great eagerness to die. The use of both *cupiens* and *appetit* in just two lines highlights her zeal for death; she also literally drinks in the funeral pyre with her mouth (*bibit ore rogam*) – she consumes death here rather than being consumed by it. Eulalia would certainly fall into the category of a voluntary and willing martyr.

Some similarities with Perpetua's martyr act can be seen here. As Malamud has pointed out, Eulalia also rejects the traditional roles that a female would be expected to take in society. Not only had she not wanted to play with toys as a child (3.16-20), but she now also refused to become a bride. However, she is only rejecting these 'worldly' authorities: as we have seen above, she is quite happy and willing to submit to the authority of God.<sup>839</sup> Eulalia must also be linked with the female martyr Agnes, to be discussed below. Prudentius appears to have used an epigram from Pope Damasus and a hymn attributed to Ambrose, both on Agnes, in writing both Eulalia and Agnes' martyr acts.<sup>840</sup> In Eulalia he undoubtedly wanted to create a Spanish martyr worthy of her more famous Roman counterpart,<sup>841</sup> perhaps in a similar way that Tertullian, as an African, was happy to praise the Carthaginian Dido.

Scholars have also noted various links with Vergil, especially with his *Aeneid*. It has been argued that Prudentius describes Eulalia in terms reminiscent of a

---

<sup>838</sup> As noted by Petruccione, 1990, 99. There also echoes here of Lucretia's suicide as represented by Tertullian and Jerome: see above, pp.

<sup>839</sup> Malamud, 1990, 74, 77.

<sup>840</sup> See Palmer, 1989, 240; Petruccione, 1990, 84-5; Burrus, 1995, 33. Malamud calls the two figures 'almost interchangeable' (1990, 72).

<sup>841</sup> As noted by Palmer (1989, 261) and Petruccione (1990, 86).

'Vergilian epic hero'.<sup>842</sup> For example, the exploration of themes such as sexual temptation and marriage in her martyr act have many resonances of Vergil's representation of Dido.<sup>843</sup> It is not my intention here to detail all these connections. However, it is important to suggest why Prudentius might have alluded to Vergil's heroines in his own work about Christian females. Palmer has proposed that this is to portray Eulalia as someone not only embodying the same heroic characteristics as these earlier figures, but also as extending the scope and value of such qualities.<sup>844</sup> So we return to the same reason that Tertullian chose to include Lucretia and Dido in his work.<sup>845</sup> Christian writers made use of pagan figures in exalting their own heroines by suggesting that their heroines were just as (if not more) noble and virtuous as the pagans', and as Prudentius' work shows, this was still practised in the fourth century. Moreover, it is possible to view Prudentius as using the *Aeneid* specifically because he liked the metaphor produced, by allusions to the epic, of 'the most powerful empire history had ever known', as he saw the Christian empire as being equally triumphant. Eulalia acts as a symbol of the resistance Christians in general presented to the Roman authorities during the persecutions and her victory is 'emblematic of the struggle between one failing empire and one just being born'.<sup>846</sup>

---

<sup>842</sup> Palmer, 1989, 154.

<sup>843</sup> Roberts, 1993, 93; Castelli, 1996, 175ff.

<sup>844</sup> Palmer, 1989, 177.

<sup>845</sup> On this see above, pp. 264-7.

<sup>846</sup> Castelli 1996, 175, 180.

## ii. Agnes

As noted above (p. 303), two sources on Agnes predate Prudentius' version of her martyrdom, thought to date to 303-4: Damasus' epigram and the Ambrosian hymn.<sup>847</sup> She was a very popular Roman saint and was the first female one to be venerated in Rome, as well as being one of the earliest female saints to have enjoyed a considerable cult throughout the empire.<sup>848</sup> It is not surprising then that Prudentius would have wanted to model his own martyr Eulalia on her. Prudentius' praise for Agnes begins right at the start of his poem on her. She is a 'brave' (*fortis*) girl and an 'illustrious' martyr (*martyr inclyta* 14.2). He also assigns her a double crown of martyrdom (*duplex corona*) as she not only kept her virginity until the end but also died willingly, enforced by the use of the adjective *liberae* (14.7-9).

Like Eulalia she too is very young; we are not given a definite age but told that she was just about old enough to marry (14.10-11). Again, it also appears as though the governor tried to dissuade her from her course (14.15-17). However, Agnes also shows her determination to die:

stabat feroci robore pertinax

corpusque duris excruciatibus

ultro offerebat non renvens mori. (14.18-20)

---

<sup>847</sup> See Palmer, 1989, 250-1.

<sup>848</sup> Grig, 2004, 79-80.

Agnes actively offers her body voluntarily to 'harsh torments' (*duris excruciatibus*). In fact, she is unwaveringly committed to her faith, as the juxtaposition of *feroci robore pertinax* ('obstinate with defiant strength') suggests. Her persecutor then decides to send her to a brothel (14.25).<sup>849</sup>

However, the crowds who see her in the forum do not dare to approach or mock her, but decide to pity her instead (14.41-2). One man who did look at her was blinded by a sudden thunderbolt of fire (14.43-7). Agnes triumphs over her adversaries as their punishment has failed to work: she too is described as a *virgo* (14.52). Angered by this, the governor decides to have her executed, and so Prudentius describes her death scene. She is even happier (*laetior*) at the sight of her executioner, rejoices (*exulto*) and is pleased (*placet*):

ut vidit Agnes stare trucem virum

mucrone nudo, laetior haec ait:

'exulto....

hic, hic amator iam, fateor, placet:

ibo inruentis gressibus obviam,

nec demorabor vota calentia:

ferrum in papillas omne recepero

pectusque ad imum vim gladii traham.'

....vulnus ut imminens

cervix subiret prona paratius. (14.67-9, 74-8, 86-7)

---

<sup>849</sup> The same punishment given to Irene: see p. 295.

Agnes willingly accepts the whole sword into her body (*ferrum in papillas omne recepero*), and will drag (*traham*) the blade into the depths of her very being. Her neck is also leaning forward (*prona*) so that she is even more prepared (*paratius*) to suffer.<sup>850</sup>

There are many erotic elements in this narrative. It is almost like Agnes is welcoming a male lover rather than an executioner with a sword; indeed, she even calls him her 'lover' (*amator*) and his sword is given the additional detail of being naked. There is also much focus on her female body as she describes how she will welcome the sword into her breast, with the use of both *papillas* and *pectus* reinforcing this picture of her feminine bodily features.<sup>851</sup> The use of *cervix* for her neck also has the obvious connotations of referring to her female genitalia, and so the sword is not just penetrating her neck. However, if this is a metaphor for a sexual act, this is acceptable because by martyring herself she is becoming 'Christ's bride' (*nupta Christo*). Thus, as Eulalia had offered ownership of her body to God in her death with his name being inscribed on her, Agnes is shown as offering her body to him in a form of marriage and consummation of this marriage by being killed by a phallic-like sword.

Scholars have had much to say about this erotic imagery.<sup>852</sup> One critic argues that Agnes' sexual nature is central to the poem, but that Prudentius refrains from going too far as he has her beheaded rather than fulfilling her desire to draw the sword into her breast.<sup>853</sup> Another has linked her virgin sacrifice with

---

<sup>850</sup> A feature also of Perpetua and Crispina's deaths, as noted above: see pp. 283, 297.

<sup>851</sup> As above, reflections on the female body can be viewed as being a feature specifically of martyr acts dealing with women.

<sup>852</sup> See e.g. Burrus, 1995, 36-8

<sup>853</sup> Malamud, 1990, 79-82.

similar pagan sacrificial figures like Polyxena, whilst also maintaining that Agnes has a very feminised death as she humbly submits to the sword in the end.<sup>854</sup> It is possible that Prudentius wanted to provoke a reaction by using the erotic overtones in his poem; perhaps he wanted to attribute some kind of sexual power to Agnes to show her strength in having rejected sexual temptation. She is a woman with sexual feelings and yet has remained a virgin until death and is only prepared to undergo any type of marriage with God. This portrayal could also be seen as Prudentius engaging with contemporary concerns about female sexual behaviour and the current trend towards females completing renouncing any sexual activity (see pp. 37-42).<sup>855</sup> Prudentius can assure his readers that Agnes conforms to the ideal of the moment, the fervent virgin who will not join with anyone except God. And the manner of her death does not detract from her status as a brave martyr, who once again, is a willing participant.<sup>856</sup> Putting the erotic imagery aside, she rejoices and welcomes her executioner and fully involves herself in her act of martyrdom which she sees as glorious.

## 5. Conclusion

This chapter has examined a variety of different female suicides and martyrdoms in the literature of Late Antiquity, covering a wide time span from the early third to the early fifth centuries AD. By returning to representations of

---

<sup>854</sup> Grig, 2004, 82-3; see also Burrus, 1995, 39. The connection with Polyxena was also made with Perpetua: see p. 280. For an analysis of Polyxena in Seneca's *Troades*, see pp. 177-8.

<sup>855</sup> This could be linked with similar concerns expressed in some of the martyr acts above, where the threat of sexual violence is used.

<sup>856</sup> De Ste Croix classes Eulalia as a voluntary martyr but does not include Agnes in his list (2006, 174).

Lucretia's suicide in a social and political climate very different from Augustan Rome, we can nevertheless observe how her death could still be approved of and utilised by Christian thinkers for their own philosophical, literary and religious purposes. Connected to these portrayals of Lucretia were the very real cases of women committing suicide to avoid rape, a consequence of persecutions and foreign invaders from the third century onwards. Such events provided a relevant background to discussions on Lucretia and contemporary female suicides. This topic was certainly at the forefront of Augustine's mind when he gave his own interpretation of Lucretia's celebrated suicide. Just as Ovid reshaped her story from Livy's version, as Seneca reformulated Jocasta's suicide from the Greek tragedies, Augustine offered his own interpretation of this provocative act. Furthermore, the high value now placed on a woman's chastity, particularly virginity, by many Christian thinkers, must have made discourses on these suicides all the more ambivalent and diverse, which in turn would have prompted much debate and discussion among their contemporaries about these contentious moral and social issues.

This chapter has also looked at a number of female martyrdoms from this same period. The deaths of these women are not straightforwardly classifiable under the heading of 'suicide', but they were represented as voluntary, and responses to them have much in common with responses to suicides. In addition, it can be said that the motif of intentional female death was still used as a means through which writers could express approbation for their contemporaries or ancestors, as well as demonstrating the resistance displayed by these people. The opponents may now be different, and the motives behind the volitional act now

religious, but the underlying idea was still the same. Martyr acts in general were utilised to show the Christians as a strong community who stood firm in their faith and could withstand any opposition, and the martyrdoms themselves symbolised the Christians' conviction in this faith.<sup>857</sup> They also had didactic purposes in encouraging Christians if not to martyr themselves also, then at least to follow the same ideals of remaining strong in their faith and renouncing pleasures of the flesh.<sup>858</sup> It could be argued, then, that giving these women a brave end was a way to demonstrate the fact that Christianity had triumphed over an oppressive pagan power because of its superior ideals. Moreover, examining Lucretia alongside the martyrs shows that female suicide was still a prevailing and ambivalent theme used in a variety of manners. The context was now a Christian one, but such a theme was still available to provoke reactions and suggest that Roman society, at least from the writers' points of view, had somehow 'gone wrong' – whether this be because its leaders adhered to a non-Christian faith, or because it forced women to transgress the traditional roles assigned to them as wives and mothers, as Perpetua, Felicitas, Eulalia, Agnes and Victoria all demonstrate. On the other hand, this rejection of traditional feminine roles also displays the triumph of these Christian women as they chose to discard any sexual desires and instead conform to increasingly idealised models of chastity that prevailed at this point in the history of Christianity.

---

<sup>857</sup> See Perkins, 1995, 114-15.

<sup>858</sup> Just as Livy used the story of Lucretia to encourage the women of his day to control their sexuality (see Chapter 1).

## Conclusion

Representations of Roman female suicides did not end in Late Antiquity. Educated elite male writers in post-classical contexts continued to be influenced and inspired by classical figures, events and legends. The classical period, as well as the concept of the 'classical', was distant enough in time to provide an expedient means by which contemporary moral, social and political themes could be explored.<sup>859</sup> From the medieval era onwards, figures such as Lucretia and Cleopatra feature numerous times in literary works of different genres and in various European languages.<sup>860</sup> These portrayals demonstrate how later authors tackled issues such as subversive women, transgression of gender roles, and heroic death. Furthermore, another medium also now celebrated the classical suicidal female: from the Renaissance onwards paintings, drawings and engravings depicted the deaths of Lucretia and Cleopatra.<sup>861</sup>

These writers and artists offered their own interpretations of the classical figures. Chaucer presents a very loving and vulnerable Cleopatra in the *Legend of Good Women* (c.1386), as she kills herself due to her great love for Antony and dies naked in a pit of snakes; Shakespeare dwells on the feelings of Lucretia in his *Rape of Lucrece* (1594) in a lengthy lament that one scholar has called 'one of the most

---

<sup>859</sup> As Edwards has argued (when looking at eighteenth-century literature), using the classics had the 'power to justify practices which had little or no sanction in Christian ethics' (2005, 216).

<sup>860</sup> See, e.g., Jed (1989) on Lucretia in the *Declamatio Lucretiae* of Coluccio Salutati (an Italian contemporary of Chaucer's).

<sup>861</sup> Apart from the possible identification of Lucretia on three Etruscan urns (see Small, 1976; Van Hooff, 1994, 182; 1998, 55-6), surprisingly there are no known artistic representations of her from antiquity. See Van Hooff, 1994, 184; 1998, 62, for possible representations of Cleopatra in the ancient world. Donaldson (1982) explores the myth of Lucretia from Livy to the modern day, focusing particularly on literature and art of the Renaissance period.

extended tragic utterances attributed to a woman in English Renaissance literature’;<sup>862</sup> both women are the subject of many paintings, particularly in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and are often depicted as naked or semi-naked in the works of Raphael, Reni, Cagnacci and Artemisia Gentileschi; from the twentieth century the interpretation of these figures is continued in media such as Benjamin Britten’s opera *The Rape of Lucretia* (1946) and the film *Cleopatra* (1963). Accounts of these women’s suicides that had prompted outrage, admiration, shock and pity in antiquity persistently provoked comparable diverse reactions throughout the medieval era through to modern times in Britain and Western Europe. The complexity surrounding the issue of female suicide continued to provide a suitably ambiguous motif that provoked the exploration of controversial topics and issues surrounding contemporary morality and approaches to gender.<sup>863</sup>

This thesis has examined representations of Roman female suicide in a variety of genres and periods from the poets of the Augustan age to the patristic literature of Late Antiquity. It has explored how the highly ambiguous and provocative act of female suicide was developed, adapted and reformulated in historical, poetic, dramatic and political narratives. Various writers and artists took advantage of the capacity of suicide narratives as a means by which contentious and complex subjects could be broached. As Higonnet has commented, the theme of female suicide ‘in various periods has permitted writers to....juxtapose silent resistance with the dominant discourse, and to demonstrate the costs of the social

---

<sup>862</sup> Berry, 1992, 34.

<sup>863</sup> Brown says of images of Lucretia and Cleopatra that ‘though they hark back to old stories, they make statements that are present-centred around the social establishment and formulation of meanings of suicide’ (2001, 97).

order to the individual'.<sup>864</sup> The intellectual potency of an image of a woman committing suicide meant that it was a topic which was 'good to think with', that could be reshaped and rewritten numerous times in both literary and artistic contexts.<sup>865</sup> The writers of antiquity continually appropriated this thought-provoking motif in order to comment on and evoke debates on issues relating to the pressing moral, social and political concerns of their day, for example the ethics related to the act of a voluntary death or traditionally expected female behaviour.

Chapter 1 analysed the portrayals of Lucretia in Livy's history and Ovid's *Fasti*, and Cleopatra in the poetry of Vergil, Horace and Propertius. These writers of the late Republic and early Principate lived at a time when gender roles, attitudes towards sexuality and the shape of the political system in Rome were being redefined. Suicide narratives focusing on women provided contemporary writers with a useful methodology for approaching these issues. In their representations of these female figures, the writers engaged in complex interchanges with one another, as well as with contemporary events and attitudes. Lucretia remains a virtuous figure in both Livy and Ovid, but the latter can be seen to adopt a provocative and subversive stance against some of the former's more straightforwardly moralising messages. In both accounts, the link between rape and female suicide is emphasised as Lucretia is portrayed as committing suicide in part because of this sexual transgression. Vergil, Horace and Propertius presented their readers with portraits of Cleopatra that both subverted official propaganda, and questioned and challenged each other's portrayals. The multifaceted nature of

---

<sup>864</sup> Higonnet, 1986, 81.

<sup>865</sup> Commenting on Velleius Paterculus' portrayal of the suicide of Antistius' wife Calpurnia (see above, p. 208), Santoro L'Hoir remarks that the historian 'echoes a vicarious sado-masochistic enthusiasm for feminine suicide that pervades Roman history' (1992, 116).

these figures resulted in the possibility of differing interpretations. Lucretia succeeds in retaining her chaste reputation despite having been tainted by rape, and Cleopatra achieves some redemption in her choice of death: these narratives, then, demonstrate the potency of suicide as a transformative act in the contemporary Roman mind. Both figures are also represented to some extent as tragic, driven to extreme measures by their desperate circumstances.

Chapter 2 picked up some of the tragic themes displayed in the representations of Lucretia and Cleopatra in the literature explored in Chapter 1. It examined the appropriation of Greek tragic female suicides in Ovid's *Heroides* and Seneca's plays. These writers formulated their own descriptions of women like Jocasta, Deianira and Phaedra and to some extent 'Romanised' them, by transforming them into more autonomous figures, who often assume masculine traits, or by having them adopt the more Roman method of the sword and bringing their suicides more centre-stage. In these ways, they became suicidal figures not that dissimilar from Lucretia or Cleopatra; Ovid and Seneca reshaped the Greek women's tales, tapping into external traditions established in the Greek versions, but also influenced by Roman discourses on female suicide. These Greek female figures also assumed more politicised roles in that they provided a subtle way for these writers to discuss and prompt debate about current events, whether this be the frustration of speech under the new principate or the atrocities that took place under Nero. With Seneca's Phaedra and Jocasta in particular, it is clear that both of these women are portrayed as committing suicide because of sexual transgressions they have committed (unwittingly or not). Through these representations, Seneca broached contemporary concerns about female sexuality and inappropriate female

behaviour. The engagement by these writers with figures from the Greek tragic corpus demonstrates the influence this genre had on many portrayals of suicide in Roman literature, especially as in this corpus the majority of suicides were committed by females.

Chapter 3 explored representations of the suicidal female in Tacitus' *Annales*, extending the theme of female powerlessness against patriarchal and repressive authorities that was examined in the first two chapters. The proliferation of suicides in this single work attests to what Tacitus viewed as the oppressive and inhibitive conditions suffered by Rome's elite under the Julio-Claudians. Tacitus projected back his own derogatory views about Domitian's regime onto the principate of these earlier emperors, and the female suicide narratives contribute to his creation of a Rome characterised from the outset of the principate by inversion, immorality and desperation. The private nature of these suicide acts meant that he could embellish and devise his own death scenes and by doing so demonstrate his literary capabilities at producing thought-provoking, dramatic events imbued with a sense of tragedy that could rival those narratives focusing on female figures from the tragic genre, as discussed in Chapter 2. Tacitus also often presented his readers with an inversion of gender roles – women were now actively participating in traditionally male spheres. Tacitus exploited the innate ambivalence attached to the act of suicide by endowing many of his women with ambiguous qualities and characteristics. This encouraged his elite audience to question both the nature of a Rome where female suicide was a real possibility, and the validity and appropriateness of a voluntary death as a means of opposing imperial authority. His own complex views on suicide, where he often points to the futility of

the act, shaped how he presented these figures. The *Annales* itself was a work designed to justify his own inaction under Domitian and thus his approaches to suicide are multifaceted.

Chapter 4 shifted the focus forward onto Late Antiquity, analysing the representations of Lucretia in patristic literature alongside accounts of female martyrs. It explored how female suicide narratives were approached during the later Empire, whether this be reinterpretations of the figure of Lucretia, or discussions of contemporary female martyr figures. In the writings of Tertullian and Jerome Lucretia was recognised as a virtuous, exemplary figure whose devout chastity was to be lauded and emulated. Augustine, however, was the first to challenge her revered reputation by questioning her motivations for suicide. In order to retaliate against the pagan community that represented an affront to Augustine's Christian beliefs, he disputed the virtue of one of their most venerated heroines. Augustine's portrayal of Lucretia is linked to his views about martyrdom and the suitability of those who sacrificed their lives for the Christian faith. The martyr acts of Late Antiquity often empowered those women who decided on this course, and showed them transgressing some of the traditional roles the Church had given them, such as motherhood or embarking on marriage. They appear as brave, often masculine figures against the persecuting imperial authorities. Several are often sexualised in terms of how their deaths are described, or are threatened with sexual violence; these features do not generally appear in relation to male martyrs and so are all the more notable when applied to female martyrs. The exercise the writers of these acts engaged in was similar to that employed by Ovid, Seneca and Tacitus – using suicide dialogues to present victimised figures resorting

to suicide in opposition to oppressive authority figures, as well as deliberating over the morals and ethics surrounding an act of voluntary death.

This thesis has explored representations of female suicide by a select number of elite male writers. It has shown that suicide is a subjective, organic, interactive phenomenon that evokes powerful responses from members of the community and can be used as a topic for exploring delicate and topical issues such as morality, politics, death and gender. Furthermore, this thesis has also demonstrated that suicide is an important component in the history of women in the ancient world because of its capacity for reinstating autonomy in the face of an oppressive authority. And yet, it is clear that even this discourse remained firmly in the hands of the (dominating) male elite in the classical world. The enduring potency of Roman female suicide in a diverse range of contexts, locations and societies, is an unequivocal reminder that the misfortunes of past women live on in the subjective, organic and overwhelmingly male traditions and discourses that debate the relationship between gender, power and morality.

## Bibliography

### **Ancient sources**

*Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, translated by H. Musurillo (Oxford University Press 1972).

Aristotle, *Poetics*, translated by M. Heath (Penguin Classics 1996).

Augustine, *City of God, Volume 1: Books 1-3*, translated by G. E. McCracken (Loeb Classical Library 1957).

Cassius Dio, *Roman History, Volume 6: Books 51-55*, translated by E. Cary (Loeb Classical Library 1917).

Cassius Dio, *Roman History, Volume 7: Books 56-60*, translated by E. Cary (Loeb Classical Library 1961).

Cassius Dio, *Roman History, Volume 8: Books 61-70*, translated by E. Cary (Loeb Classical Library 1985).

Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations*, translated by J. E. King (Loeb Classical Library 1954).

Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History, Volume 4: Books 9-13.40*, translated by C. H. Oldfather (Loeb Classical Library 1946).

Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Roman Antiquities, Volume 2: Books 3-4*, translated by E. Cary (Loeb Classical Library 1939).

*Donatist Martyr Stories*, translated by M. Tilley (Liverpool University Press 1996).

Euripides, *Hippolytus*, translated by J. Morwood (Oxford World's Classics 1997).

Euripides, *Phoenician Women*, translated by E. Craik (Aris & Phillips 1988).

Euripides, *Suppliant Women*, translated by J. Morwood (Aris & Phillips 2007).

Eusebius, *The Ecclesiastical History, Volume 2: Books 6-10*, translated by J. E. L. Oulton (Loeb Classical Library 1932).

Eusebius, *Martyrs of Palestine*, translated by A. C. McGiffert (Christian Literature Publishing Co. 1890).

Florus, *Epitome of Roman History*, translated by E. S. Forster (Loeb Classical Library 1929).

Horace, *Odes and Epodes*, translated by N. Rudd (Loeb Classical Library 2004).

Hyginus, *Fabulae*, edited by P. K. Marshall (Teubner 1993).

Jerome, *Adversus Jovinianum*, edited by J.-P. Migne (Patrologia Latina 1883).

Jerome, *Epistulae, Pars 3: Epistulae 121-144*, edited by I. Hilberg (Tempsky 1918).

Livy, *History of Rome, Volume 1: Books 1-2*, translated by B. O. Foster (Loeb Classical Library 1919).

Livy, *History of Rome, Volume 4: Books 8-10*, translated by B. O. Foster (Loeb Classical Library 1926).

Livy, *History of Rome, Volume 14: Summaries and Fragments*, translated by A. C. Schlesinger (Loeb Classical Library 1959).

Martial, *Epigrams: Volume 1*, translated by D. R. Shackleton-Bailey (Loeb Classical Library 1993).

Ovid, *Ars Amatoria*, translated by J. H. Mozley (Loeb Classical Library revised edition 1979).

Ovid, *Fasti*, translated by J. G. Frazer (Loeb Classical Library second revised edition 1989).

Ovid, *Heroides*, translated by G. Showerman (Loeb Classical Library second edition 1977).

Pliny (Elder), *Natural History, Volume 6: Books 20-23*, translated by W. H. S. Jones (Loeb Classical Library 1951).

Pliny (Younger), *Letters, Volume 1: Books 1-7*, translated by B. Radice (Loeb Classical Library 1969).

Pliny (Younger), *Letters, Volume 2: Books 8-10*, translated by B. Radice (Loeb Classical Library 1969).

Plutarch, *Antony*, in *Roman Lives*, translated by R. Waterfield (Oxford World's Classics 1999).

Plutarch, *Cato the Younger*, translated by B. Perrin (Loeb Classical Library 1919).

Propertius, *Elegies*, translated by G. P. Goold (Loeb Classical Library 1990).

Prudentius, *Peristephanon*, translated by H. J. Thomason (Loeb Classical Library 1953).

Quintilian, *The Orator's Education: Volume 1, Books 1-2*, translated by D. A. Russell (Loeb Classical Library 2001).

Quintilian, *The Orator's Education: Volume 3, Books 6-8*, translated by D. A. Russell

- (Loeb Classical Library 2001).
- Seneca (Elder), *Declamations, Volume 1: Controversiae, Books 1-6*, translated by M. Winterbottom (Loeb Classical Library 1974).
- Seneca (Younger), *De Consolatione ad Marciam*, in *Moral Essays: Volume 2*, translated by J. W. Basore (Loeb Classical Library revised edition 1990).
- Seneca (Younger), *De Ira*, in *Moral Essays: Volume 1*, translated by J. W. Basore (Loeb Classical Library revised edition 1994).
- Seneca (Younger), *De Vita Beata*, in *Moral Essays: Volume 2*, translated by J. W. Basore (Loeb Classical Library revised edition 1990).
- Seneca (Younger), *Epistles: Volume 1*, translated by R. E. Gummere (Loeb Classical Library 2006).
- Seneca (Younger), *Epistles: Volume 2*, translated by R. E. Gummere (Loeb Classical Library 2006).
- Seneca (Younger), *Epistles: Volume 3*, translated by R. E. Gummere (Loeb Classical Library 2006).
- Seneca (Younger), *Oedipus*, translated by J. G. Fitch (Loeb Classical Library 2004).
- Seneca (Younger), *Phaedra*, translated by J. G. Fitch (Loeb Classical Library 2002).
- Seneca (Younger), *Phoenician Women*, translated by J. G. Fitch (Loeb Classical Library 2002).
- Seneca (Younger), *Trojan Women*, translated by J. G. Fitch (Loeb Classical Library 2002).
- Sophocles, *Oedipus the King*, translated by R. Fagles (Penguin Classics 1982).
- Sophocles, *Women of Trachis*, translated by P. Meineck and P. Woodruff (Hackett 2007).
- Statius, *Thebaid: Books 8-12*, translated by D. R. Shackleton-Bailey (Loeb Classical Library 2003).
- Strabo, *Geography, Volume 13: Book 17*, translated by H. L. Jones (Loeb Classical Library revised edition 1936).
- Suetonius, *The Deified Augustus*, in *Lives of the Caesars: Volume 1*, translated by J. C. Rolfe (Loeb Classical Library revised edition 1998).
- Suetonius, *The Deified Claudius*, in *Lives of the Caesars: Volume 2*, translated by J. C. Rolfe (Loeb Classical Library 1914).

- Suetonius, *Tiberius*, in *Lives of the Caesars: Volume 1*, translated by J. C. Rolfe (Loeb Classical Library revised edition 1998).
- Suetonius, *Vitellius*, in *Lives of the Caesars: Volume 2*, translated by J. C. Rolfe (Loeb Classical Library 1914).
- Tacitus, *Agricola*, translated by M. Hutton (Loeb Classical Library revised edition 1970).
- Tacitus, *Annals: Books 1-3*, translated by J. Jackson (Loeb Classical Library 1931).
- Tacitus, *Annals: Books 4-6, 11-12*, translated by J. Jackson (Loeb Classical Library 1937).
- Tacitus, *Annals: Books 13-16*, translated by J. Jackson (Loeb Classical Library 1937).
- Tacitus, *Germania*, translated by M. Hutton (Loeb Classical Library revised edition 1970).
- Tertullian, *De Exhortatione Castitatis*, edited by J.-P. Migne (Patrologia Latina 1878-9).
- Tertullian, *De Monogamia*, edited by J.-P. Migne (Patrologia Latina 1878-9).
- Tertullian, *Ad Martyres*, edited by J.-P. Migne (Patrologia Latina 1878-9).
- Valerius Maximus, *Memorable Doings and Sayings, Volume 1: Books 1-4* translated by D. R. Shackleton-Bailey (Loeb Classical Library 2000).
- Valerius Maximus, *Memorable Doings and Sayings, Volume 2: Books 6-9*, translated by D. R. Shackleton-Bailey (Loeb Classical Library 2000).
- Velleius Paterculus, *The Roman History*, translated by F. W. Shipley (Loeb Classical Library 1955).
- Vergil, *Aeneid 1-6*, translated by H. R. Fairclough (Loeb Classical Library revised edition 1935).
- Vergil, *Aeneid 7-12*, translated by H. R. Fairclough (Loeb Classical Library revised edition 1934).

### **Modern scholarship**

- Ahl, F. (ed.) (1986), *Seneca: Phaedra* (Ithaca; London).
- Allison, J. W. (1997), 'Corbulo's Socratic shadow', *Eranos* 95: 19-25.
- Alvarez, A. (1971), *The Savage God: A Study of Suicide* (Harmondsworth).

- Amundsen, D. W. (1989), 'Suicide and early Christian values' in B. A. Brody (ed.) *Suicide and Euthanasia: Historical and Contemporary Themes* (Dordrecht; London): 77-153.
- Arieti, J. A. (1997), 'Rape and Livy's view of Roman history' in S. Deacy and K. F. Pierce (eds) *Rape in Antiquity* (London): 209-29.
- Arjava, A. (1996), *Women and Law in Late Antiquity* (Oxford).
- Arnold, E. V. (1911), *Roman Stoicism* (London).
- Armstrong, R. (2006), *Cretan Women: Pasiphae, Ariadne, and Phaedra in Latin Poetry* (Oxford).
- Ash, R. (2006), *Tacitus* (London).
- Badian, E. (1985), 'A phantom marriage law', *Philologus* 129: 82-98.
- Baker, R. J. (1976), 'Propertius, Cleopatra and Actium', *Antichthon* 10: 56-62.
- Baldwin, B. (1964), 'The death of Cleopatra VII', *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 50: 181-2.
- Baldwin, B. (1972), 'Women in Tacitus', *Prudentia* 4.1: 83-101.
- Balsdon, J. P. V. D. (1962), *Roman Women: Their History and Habits* (London).
- Barnes, T. D. (1971), *Tertullian: A Historical and Literary Study* (Oxford).
- Barnes, T. D. (2010), *Early Christian Hagiography and Roman History* (Tübingen).
- Bauman, R. A. (1992), *Women and Politics in Ancient Rome* (London).
- Bauman, R. A. (1993), 'The rape of Lucretia, *quod metus causa* and the criminal law', *Latomus* 52: 550-66.
- Beard, M. (1999), 'The erotics of rape: Livy, Ovid and the Sabine women' in P. Setälä and L. Savunen (eds) *Female Networks and the Public Sphere in Roman Society* (Rome): 1-10.
- Beard, M. (2007), *The Roman Triumph* (Cambridge, Mass.; London).
- Bels, J. (1975), 'La mort volontaire dans l'oeuvre de saint Augustin', *Revue de l'histoire des religions* 187.2: 147-80.
- Benton, C. (2002), 'Split vision: the politics of the gaze in Seneca's *Troades*', in D. Fredrick (ed.) *The Roman Gaze: Vision, Power and the Body* (Baltimore; London): 31-56.
- Berry, P. (1992), 'Woman, language, and history in *The Rape of Lucrece*', *Shakespeare Survey* 44: 33-9.

- Bertman, S. (2000), 'Cleopatra and Antony as models for Dido and Aeneas', *Echos du Monde Classique* 44: 395-8.
- Bowersock, G. W. (1995), *Martyrdom and Rome* (Cambridge).
- Boyle, A. J. (ed.) (1987), *Seneca's Phaedra* (Liverpool).
- Boyle, A. J. (1997), *Tragic Seneca: An Essay in the Theatrical Tradition* (London).
- Boyle, A. J. (2006), *Roman Tragedy* (Abingdon).
- Bradley, M. (forthcoming, 2011), 'Crime and punishment on the Capitoline hill', in M. Bradley (ed.) *Rome, Pollution and Propriety: Dirt, Disease and Hygiene in the Eternal City from Antiquity to Modernity* (Cambridge).
- Bremmer, J. (1989), 'Why did early Christianity attract upper-class women?', in A. A. R. Bastiaensen, A. Hilhorst and C. H. Kneepkens (eds) *Fructus Centesimus: Mélanges offerts à Gerard J. M. Bartelink à l'occasion de son Soixante-cinquième Anniversaire* (Dordrecht): 37-47.
- Bronfen, E. (1996), *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic* (Manchester).
- Brown, P. R. L. (1988), *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York) (twentieth anniversary edition 2008).
- Brown, R. M. (2001), *The Art of Suicide* (London).
- Burrus, V. (1995), 'Reading Agnes: the rhetoric of gender in Ambrose and Prudentius', *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 3.1: 25-46.
- Calder, W. M. (1976), 'Seneca: tragedian of imperial Rome', *Classical Journal* 72.1: 1-11.
- Calhoon, C. G. (1997), 'Lucretia, savior and scapegoat: the dynamics of sacrifice in Livy 1.57-59', *Helios* 24.2: 151-69.
- Cameron, A. (2004), *Greek Mythography in the Roman World* (New York).
- Camps, W. A. (ed.) (1966), *Propertius: Elegies Book III* (Cambridge).
- Cantarella, E. (1987), *Pandora's Daughters: The Role and Status of Women in Greek and Roman Antiquity* (London).
- Cardman, F. (1988), 'Acts of the woman martyrs', *Anglican Theological Review* 70.2: 144-50.
- Carlson, M. L. (1948), 'Pagan examples of fortitude in the Latin Christian apologists', *Classical Philology* 43.2: 93-104.

- Casali, S. (1995), 'Tragic irony in Ovid, *Heroides* 9 and 11', *Classical Quarterly* 45.2: 505-11.
- Casali, S. (1998), 'Ovid's Canace and Euripides' *Aeolus*: two notes on *Heroides* 11', *Mnemosyne* 51.6: 700-10.
- Castelli, E. (1986), 'Virginity and its meaning for women's sexuality in early Christianity', *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 2.1: 61-88.
- Castelli, E. (1996), 'Epic in Prudentius' poem for the martyr Eulalia' in E. Castelli and H. Taussig (eds) *Reimagining Christian Origins: A Colloquium Honouring Burton L. Mack* (Valley Forge, Pa.): 173-84.
- Chaplin, J. D. (2000), *Livy's Exemplary History* (Oxford).
- Charlier, P. (2009), *Male mort: morts violentes dans l'Antiquité* (Paris).
- Chew, K. (2003), 'The chaste and the chased: sophrosune, female martyrs and novelistic heroines', *Syllecta Classica* 14: 205-22.
- Church, F. F. (1975), 'Sex and salvation in Tertullian', *Harvard Theological Review* 68.2: 83-101.
- Clark, E. A. (1983), *Women in the Early Church* (Wilmington, Del.).
- Clark, E. A. (1991), 'Sex, shame and rhetoric: en-gendering early Christian ethics', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 59.2: 221-45.
- Clark, E. A. (1994), 'Ideology, history, and the construction of "woman" in late ancient Christianity', *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 2.2: 155-84.
- Clark, E. A. (1995), 'Antifamilial tendencies in ancient Christianity', *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 5.3: 356-80.
- Clark, E. A. (1998), 'Holy women, holy words: early Christian women, social history, and the "linguistic turn"', *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 6.3: 413-30.
- Clark, E. A. (1999), *Reading Renunciation: Asceticism and Scripture in Early Christianity* (Princeton).
- Clark, E. A. (2001), 'Women, gender and the study of Christian history', *Church History* 70.3: 95-426.
- Clark, G. (1993), *Women in Late Antiquity* (Oxford).
- Clark, G. (1998), 'Bodies and blood: late antique debate on martyrdom, virginity and resurrection', in D. Montserrat (ed.) *Changing Bodies, Changing Meanings: Studies on the Human Body in Antiquity* (London): 99-115.

- Cobb, L. S. (2008), *Dying to be Men: Gender and Language in Early Christian Martyr Texts* (New York).
- Coleman, K. M. (2003), 'Recent scholarship on the *Thebaid* and *Achilleid*: an overview', in D. R. Shackleton-Bailey (ed.) *Statius: Thebaid Books 1-7* (Cambridge, Mass.; London): 9-37.
- Colish, M. L. (1985), *The Stoic Tradition from Antiquity to the Early Middle Ages, Volume I: Stoicism in Classical Latin Literature* (Leiden).
- Commager, S. (1958), 'Horace, *Carmina* 1.37', *Phoenix* 12.2: 47-57.
- Cooper, K. (1992), 'Insinuations of womanly influence: an aspect of the Christianisation of the Roman aristocracy', *Journal of Roman Studies* 82: 150-64.
- Cooper, K. (1996), *The Virgin and the Bride: Idealised Womanhood in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, Mass.).
- Cooper, K. (2009), 'Gender and the fall of Rome' in P. Rousseau (ed.) *A Companion to Late Antiquity* (Malden, Mass.; Oxford): 187-200.
- Currie, S. (1998), 'Poisonous women and unnatural history in Roman culture' in M. Wyke (ed.) *Parchments of Gender: Deciphering the Bodies of Antiquity* (Oxford): 147-67.
- D'Ambra, E. (2007), *Roman Women* (Cambridge).
- Deacy, S. and Pierce, K. F. (eds) (1997) *Rape in Antiquity* (London).
- DeForest, M. M. (1988-9), 'The central similes of Horace's Cleopatra ode', *Classical World* 82: 167-73.
- Den Boeft, J. (1989), "'Martyres sunt, sed homines fuerunt": Augustine on martyrdom' in A. A. R. Bastiaensen, A. Hilhorst and C. H. Kneepkens (eds) *Fructus Centesimus: Mélanges offerts à Gerard J. M. Bartelink à l'occasion de son Soixante-cinquième Anniversaire* (Dordrecht): 115-24.
- Des Bouvrie, S. (1990), *Women in Greek Tragedy: An anthropological approach* (Oslo).
- Desmond, M. (1993), 'When Dido reads Vergil: gender and intertextuality in Ovid's *Heroides* 7', *Helios* 20.1: 56-68.
- De Ste Croix, G. E. M. (1954), 'Aspects of the great persecution', *Harvard*

- Theological Review* 47: 75-113; reprinted in M. Whitby and J. Streeter (eds) (2006), *Christian Persecution, Martyrdom, and Orthodoxy* (Oxford): 35-78.
- De Ste Croix, G. E. M. (1963), 'Why were the early Christians persecuted?', *Past & Present* 26: 6-38; reprinted in M. Whitby and J. Streeter (eds) (2006), *Christian Persecution, Martyrdom, and Orthodoxy* (Oxford): 105-52.
- De Ste Croix, G. E. M. (2006), 'Voluntary martyrdom in the early Church', in M. Whitby and J. Streeter (eds) *Christian Persecution, Martyrdom, and Orthodoxy* (Oxford): 153-200.
- Dixon, S. (2001), *Reading Roman Women: Sources, Genres and Real Life* (London).
- Dominik, W. J. (1990), 'Monarchal power and imperial politics in Statius' *Thebaid*', in A. J. Boyle (ed.) *The Imperial Muse: Ramus Essays on Roman Literature of the Empire: Flavian Epicist to Claudian* (Bendigo, Victoria, Australia): 74-97.
- Donaldson, I. (1982), *The Rapes of Lucretia* (Oxford).
- Droge, A. J. and Tabor, J. D. (1992), *A Noble Death: Suicide and Martyrdom among Christians and Jews in Antiquity* (San Francisco).
- Dunn, G. D. (2004), *Tertullian* (London; New York).
- Durkheim, E. (1897), *Le Suicide*, translated by R. Buss as *On Suicide* (Penguin Classics 2006).
- Dyson, S. L. (1970), 'The portrait of Seneca in Tacitus', *Arethusa* 3: 71-83.
- Easterling, P. E. (1997), 'Constructing the heroic' in C. Pelling (ed.) *Greek Tragedy and the Historian* (Oxford): 21-37.
- Edwards, C. (2002), 'Acting and self-actualisation in imperial Rome: some death scenes', in P. Easterling and E. Hall (eds) *Greek and Roman Actors: Aspects of an Ancient Profession* (Cambridge): 377-94.
- Edwards, C. (2005), 'Modelling Roman suicide? The afterlife of Cato', *Economy and Society* 34.2: 200-22.
- Edwards, C. (2007), *Death in Ancient Rome* (New Haven; London).
- Edwards, C. and Osborne, T. (2005), 'Scenographies of suicide: an introduction', *Economy and Society* 34.2: 173-7.
- Eidinow, E. (2011), 'Sex, religion, and the law' in M. Golden and P. Toohey (eds), *A Cultural History of Sexuality, Volume 1: In the Classical World* (Oxford): 87-106.

- Elm, S. (1994), *'Virgins of God': the Making of Asceticism in Late Antiquity* (Oxford).
- Erasmio, M. (2004), *Roman Tragedy: Theatre to Theatricality* (Austin).
- Erasmio, M. (2008), *Reading Death in Ancient Rome* (Columbus).
- Evans-Grubbs, J. (2009), 'Marriage and family relationships in the late Roman west' in P. Rousseau (ed.) *A Companion to Late Antiquity* (Malden, Mass.; Oxford): 201-19.
- Faber, M. D. (1970), *Suicide and Greek Tragedy* (New York).
- Fantham, E. (1975), 'Virgil's Dido and Seneca's tragic heroines', *Greece & Rome* 22.1: 1-10.
- Fantham, E. (1991), 'Stuprum: public attitudes and penalties for sexual offences in Republican Rome', *Echos du Monde Classique* 10: 267-91.
- Fantham, E., Foley, H. P., Kampen, N. B., Pomeroy, S. B. and Shapiro, H. A. (eds) (1994), *Women in the Classical World: Image and Text* (Oxford).
- Farrell, J. (1998), 'Reading and writing the *Heroides*', *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 98: 307-38.
- Finn, R. (2009), *Asceticism in the Graeco-Roman World* (Cambridge).
- Fitch, J. G. (ed.) (2002), *Seneca: Tragedies Volume I* (London).
- Flemming, R. (2005), 'Suicide, euthanasia and medicine: reflections ancient and modern', *Economy and Society* 34.2: 295-321.
- Foley, H. P. (2001), *Female Acts in Greek Tragedy* (Princeton; Oxford).
- Fox, M. (1996), *Roman Historical Myths: the Regal Period in Augustan Literature* (Oxford).
- Frank, R. W. (1972), *Chaucer and The Legend of Good Women* (Cambridge, Mass.).
- Frank, M. (1995), 'The rhetorical use of family terms in Seneca's *Oedipus* and *Phoenissae*', *Phoenix* 49.2: 121-30.
- Frazer, J. G. (ed.) (1929), *The Fasti of Ovid: Volume II* (London).
- Frend, W. H. C. (1965), *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church: a Study of a Conflict from the Maccabees to Donatus* (Oxford).
- Fulkerson, L. (2002), 'Writing yourself to death: strategies of (mis)reading in *Heroides 2*', *Materiali e discussioni per l'analisi dei testi classici* 48: 145-65.
- Fulkerson, L. (2005), *The Ovidian Heroine as Author: Reading, Writing and Community in the Heroides* (Cambridge).

- Furneaux, H. and Pitman, H. (eds) (1904), *Cornelii Taciti Annalium: Libri XIII-XVI* (Oxford).
- Furneaux, H. and Pitman, H. (eds) (1912), *Cornelii Taciti Annalium: Libri V, VI, XI, XII* (Oxford).
- Gaddis, M. (2009), 'The political church: religion and the state' in P. Rousseau (ed.) *A Companion to Late Antiquity* (Malden, Mass.; Oxford): 512-24.
- Gahan, J. T. (1988), 'Imitation in Seneca, *Phaedra* 1000-1115', *Hermes* 116.1: 122-4.
- Gardner, J. F. (1986), *Women in Roman Law and Society* (London).
- Garland, R. (2004), *Surviving Greek Tragedy* (London).
- Garrison, E. P. (1991), 'Attitudes towards suicide in ancient Greece', *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 121: 1-34.
- Gates, B. T. (1988), *Victorian Suicide: Mad Crimes and Sad Histories* (Princeton).
- Glendinning, E. R. (2010), 'Heroic female death in Tacitus' *Annals* 14 and 15', in L. Langerwerf and C. Ryan (eds) *Zero to Hero, Hero to Zero: In Search of the Classical Hero* (Cambridge): 96-119.
- Golden, M. and Toohey, P. (eds) (2003), *Sex and Difference in Ancient Greece and Rome* (Edinburgh).
- Golden, M. and Toohey, P. (eds) (2011), *A Cultural History of Sexuality, Volume 1: In the Classical World* (Oxford).
- Goldsworthy, A. (2010), *Antony and Cleopatra* (New Haven; London).
- Gould, J. (1983), 'Homeric epic and the tragic moment' in T. Winnifrith, P. Murray and K. W. Grandsen (eds) *Aspects of the Epic* (London): 32-45.
- Gould, J. (1996), 'Tragedy and collective experience' in M. S. Silk (ed.) *Tragedy and the Tragic: Greek Theatre and Beyond* (Oxford): 217-43.
- Grant, M. (1960), *The Myths of Hyginus* (Lawrence, Kansas).
- Grant, M. (1971), *Roman Myths* (London).
- Grant, M. (1972) *Cleopatra* (London).
- Griffin, M. T. (1976), *Seneca: A Philosopher in Politics* (Oxford).
- Griffin, M. T. (1986a), 'Philosophy, Cato, and Roman suicide: I', *Greece & Rome* 33.1: 64-77.
- Griffin, M. T. (1986b), 'Philosophy, Cato, and Roman suicide: II', *Greece & Rome* 33.2: 192-202.

- Griffiths, J. G. (1961), 'The death of Cleopatra VII', *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 47: 113-18.
- Griffiths, J. G. (1965), 'The death of Cleopatra VII: a rejoinder and a postscript', *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 51: 209-11.
- Grig, L. (2004), *Making Martyrs in Late Antiquity* (London).
- Grisé, Y. (1980), 'De la fréquence du suicide chez les Romains', *Latomus* 39: 17-46.
- Grisé, Y. (1982), *Le Suicide dans la Rome Antique* (Montreal; Paris).
- Gross, N. P. (1979), 'Rhetorical wit and amatory persuasion in Ovid', *Classical Journal* 74.4: 305-18.
- Gruen, E. S. (1992), *Culture and National Identity in Republican Rome* (Ithaca, New York).
- Hagendahl, H. (1967), *Augustine and the Latin Classics: Volume II – Augustine's Attitude* (Stockholm).
- Hahn, U. (1994) *Die Frauen der römischen Kaiserhauses und ihre Ehrungen* (Mainz).
- Hall, S. G. (1993), 'Women among the early martyrs' in D. Wood (ed.) *Martyrs and Martyrologies: Papers read at the 1992 Summer Meeting and 1993 Winter Meeting of the Ecclesiastical History Society* (Oxford): 1-21.
- Hallett, J. P. (1989), 'Women as *same* and *other* in classical Roman elite', *Helios* 16.1: 59-78.
- Hallett, J. P. and Skinner, M. B. (eds) (1997) *Roman Sexualities* (Princeton).
- Halliwell, S. (1986), *Aristotle's Poetics* (London).
- Harris, B. F. (1962), 'Tacitus on the death of Otho', *Classical Journal* 58.2: 73-7.
- Harvey, S. A. (2008), 'Martyr passions and hagiography' in S. A. Harvey and D. G. Hunter (eds) *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies* (Oxford): 603-27.
- Hayne, L. (2000), 'Tacitus and women', *Ancient History* 30.1: 36-41.
- Heath, M. (ed.) (1996) *Aristotle: Poetics* (London).
- Heffernan, T. J. and Shelton, J. E. (2006), '*Paradisus in carcere*: the vocabulary of imprisonment and the theology of martyrdom in the *Passio Sanctarum Perpetuae et Felicitatis*', *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 14.2: 217-23.
- Hemelrijk, E. A. (1999), *Matrona Docta: Educated Women in the Roman Elite from Cornelia to Julia Domna* (London).

- Hemker, J. (1985), 'Rape and the founding of Rome', *Helios* 12: 41-7.
- Henry, D. and Henry, E. (1985), *The Mask of Power: Seneca's Tragedies and Imperial Rome* (Warminster).
- Higonnet, M. (1986), 'Speaking silences: women's suicide', in S. R. Suleiman (ed.) *The Female Body in Western Culture: Contemporary Perspectives* (Cambridge, Mass.; London): 68-83.
- Hill, T. D. (2004), *Ambitiosa Mors: Suicide and Self in Roman Thought and Literature* (New York; London).
- Hind, J. (1972), 'The death of Agrippina and the finale of the *Oedipus* of Seneca', *Journal of the Australasian Universities* 8: 204-11.
- Hofmann, D. (2007), *Suizid in der Späetantike: Seine Bewertung in der lateinischen Literatur* (Stuttgart).
- Holleman, A. W. J. (1981), 'Ovid and the story of Lucretia', *Liverpool Classical Monthly* 6: 243-4.
- Hope, V. M. (2007), *Death in Ancient Rome: A Sourcebook* (Abingdon).
- Hope, V. M. (2009), *Roman Death: the Dying, and the Dead in Ancient Rome* (London).
- Hunter, D. G. (2007), *Marriage, Celibacy and Heresy in Ancient Christianity: The Jovinianist Controversy* (Oxford).
- Huttner, U. (2009) 'Sterben wie ein Philosoph. Zur Inszenierung des Todes in der Antike' in M. Zimmermann (ed.) *Extreme Formen von Gewalt in Bild und Text des Altertums* (München): 295-320.
- Inwood, B. (2005), *Reading Seneca: Stoic Philosophy at Rome* (Oxford).
- Jacobson, H. (1974), *Ovid's Heroides* (Princeton, New Jersey).
- Jed, S. H. (1989), *Chaste Thinking: the Rape of Lucretia and the Birth of Humanism* (Bloomington; Indianapolis).
- Johnson, W. R. (1967), 'A queen, a great queen? Cleopatra and the politics of misrepresentation', *Arion* 6: 387-402.
- Jones, C. (1993), 'Women, death, and the law during the Christian persecutions' in D. Wood (ed.) *Martyrs and Martyrologies: Papers read at the 1992 Summer Meeting and 1993 Winter Meeting of the Ecclesiastical History Society* (Oxford): 23-34.

- Joplin, P. K. (1990), 'Ritual work on human flesh: Livy's Lucretia and the rape of the body politic', *Helios* 17.1: 51-70.
- Joshel, S. R. (1995), 'Female desire and the discourse of empire: Tacitus' Messalina', *Signs* 21.1: 50-82.
- Joshel, S. R. (2002), 'The body female and the body politic: Livy's Lucretia and Verginia' in L. K. McClure (ed.) *Sexuality and Gender in the Classical World: Readings and Sources* (Oxford): 163-87.
- Kaplan, M. (1979), 'Agrippina semper atrox: a study in Tacitus' characterisation of women' in C. Deroux (ed.) *Studies in Latin Literature and Roman History* (Bruxelles): Volume 1: 410-17.
- Kaufman, P. I. (1994), 'Augustine, martyrs, and misery', *Church History* 63.1: 1-14.
- Keegan, P. (2004), 'Boudica, Cartimandua, Messalina and Agrippina the Younger: independent women of power and the gendered rhetoric of Roman history', *Ancient History* 34.2: 99-148.
- Kelly, J. N. D. (1975), *Jerome: His Life, Writings and Controversies* (London).
- Kenney, E. J. (ed.) (1996), *Ovid Heroides XVI-XXI* (Cambridge).
- Kenney, E. J. (1998), 'The metamorphosis of Hero', in P. Knox and C. Foss (eds) *Style and Tradition: Studies in Honour of Wendell Clausen* (Leiden): 55-71.
- Ker, J. (2009) *The Deaths of Seneca* (Oxford).
- Keresztes, P. (1967), 'The massacre at Lugdunum in 177 A.D.', *Historia* 16: 75-86.
- Khan, H. A. (1968), 'Dido and the sword of Aeneas', *Classical Philology* 63.4: 283-5.
- Knox, P. E. (ed.) (1995), *Ovid Heroides: Select Epistles* (Cambridge).
- Knox, P. E. (2002), 'The *Heroides*: elegiac voices', in B. W. Boyd (ed.) *Brill's Companion to Ovid* (Leiden): 117-39.
- Koestermann, E. (ed.) (1968a), *Annalen, Bd. II: Buch 4-6* (Heidelberg).
- Koestermann, E. (ed.) (1968b), *Annalen, Bd. III: Buch 11-13* (Heidelberg).
- Kraemer, R. S. (2008), 'Women and gender' in S. A. Harvey and D. G. Hunter (eds) *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies* (Oxford): 465-92.
- Krawiec, R. (2008), 'Asceticism' in S. A. Harvey and D. G. Hunter (eds) *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies* (Oxford): 764-85.
- Kyle, D. G. (1998), *Spectacles of Death in Ancient Rome* (London; New York).
- Lane Fox, R. (1986), *Pagans and Christians* (London).

- Lape, S. (2011), 'Heterosexuality' in M. Golden and P. Toohey (eds) *A Cultural History of Sexuality, Volume 1: In the Classical World* (Oxford): 17-36.
- Langlands, R. (2006), *Sexual Morality in Ancient Rome* (Cambridge).
- Lee, A. G. (1953), 'Ovid's "Lucretia"', *Greece & Rome* 22: 107-18.
- Lefkowitz, M. R. (1976), 'The motivations for St. Perpetua's martyrdom', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 44.3: 417-21.
- Lefkowitz, M. R. and Fant, M. B. (eds) (1982), *Women's Life in Greece and Rome: A Source Book in Translation* (London).
- Lindheim, S. H. (2003), *Mail and Female: Epistolary Narrative and Desire in Ovid's Heroides* (Madison, Wisconsin).
- Loades, D. (1993), 'Introduction', in D. Wood (ed.) *Martyrs and Martyrologies: Papers read at the 1992 Summer Meeting and 1993 Winter Meeting of the Ecclesiastical History Society* (Oxford): xv-xviii.
- Loraux, N. (1987), *Tragic Ways of Killing a Woman* (Cambridge, Mass.; London).
- Lord, M. L. (1969), 'Dido as an example of chastity: the influence of example literature', *Harvard Literary Bulletin* 17: 22-44.
- Luce, J. V. (1963), 'Cleopatra as *fatale monstrum* (Horace, *Carm.* 1.37.21)', *Classical Quarterly* 13.2: 251-7.
- Lyne, R. O. A. M. (1998), 'Love and death: Laodamia and Protesilaus in Catullus, Propertius and others', *Classical Quarterly* 48.1: 200-12.
- Macleod, C. (1983), 'Thucydides and tragedy' in C. Macleod (ed.) *Collected Essays* (Oxford): 140-58.
- MacMullen, R. (1992), *Enemies of the Roman Order: Treason, Unrest, and Alienation in the Empire* (revised edition) (London).
- Mader, G. (1989), 'Heroism and hallucination: Cleopatra in Horace C. 1.37 and Propertius 3.11', *Grazer Beiträge* 16: 183-201.
- Malamud, M. A. (1990), 'Making a virtue of perversity: the poetry of Prudentius', *Ramus* 19: 64-88.
- Marshall, A. J. (1975), 'Tacitus and the governor's lady: a note on *Annals* 3.33-4', *Greece & Rome* 22.1: 11-18.
- Martin, R. (ed.) (2001), *Tacitus: Annals V and VI* (Warminster).
- Matthes, M. M. (2000), *The Rape of Lucretia and the Founding of Republics*

(Pennsylvania).

- Mayer, R. (2002), *Seneca: Phaedra* (London).
- McDonald, M. and Murphy, T. R. (1990), *Sleepless Souls: Suicide in Early Modern England* (Oxford).
- McGuire, D. T. (1990), 'Textual strategies and political suicide in Flavian epic', in A. J. Boyle (ed.) *The Imperial Muse: Ramus Essays on Roman Literature of the Empire: Flavian Epicist to Claudian* (Bendigo, Victoria, Australia): 21-45.
- McGuire, D. T. (1997), *Acts of Silence: Civil war, Tyranny and Suicide in the Flavian epics* (New York).
- McKinley, K. L. (2001), *Reading the Ovidian Heroine: Metamorphoses Commentaries 1100-1618* (Leiden).
- McNelis, C. (2007), *Statius' Thebaid and the Poetics of Civil War* (Cambridge).
- Menaut, L. (1987), 'Saint Augustin et le suicide des vierges consacrées', *Bulletin de Littérature Ecclésiastique* 88: 323-8.
- Mench, F. C. (1972), 'The ambiguity of the similes and of *fatale monstrum* in Horace, *Ode*, 1.37', *American Journal of Philology* 93.2: 314-23.
- Milnor, K. (2005), *Gender, Domesticity, and the Age of Augustus: Inventing Private Life* (Oxford).
- Minois, G. (1999), *History of Suicide: Voluntary Death in Western Culture* (Baltimore; London).
- Moore, T. J. (1993), 'Morality, history and Livy's wronged women', *Eranos* 91: 38-46.
- Morton, R. (1999), 'Abject Oenone: blunting the edge of Ovid's *Heroides* 5', *Classical Bulletin* 75.1: 37-53.
- Moses, D. C. (1993), 'Livy's Lucretia and the validity of coerced consent in Roman law' in A. E. Laiou (ed.) *Consent and Coercion to Sex and Marriage in Ancient and Medieval Societies* (Washington): 39-81.
- Mossman, J. M. (1988), 'Tragedy and epic in Plutarch's *Alexander*', *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 108: 83-93.
- Murray, A. (1998), *Suicide in the Middle Ages, Volume I: The Violent Against Themselves* (Oxford; New York).
- Musurillo, H. (ed.) (1972), *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs* (Oxford).

- Nathan, G. (2000), *The Family in Late Antiquity: the Rise of Christianity and the Endurance of Tradition* (London).
- Nethercut, W. R. (1971), 'Propertius 3.11', *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* 102: 411-43.
- Newlands, C. W. (1988), 'The rape of Lucretia in Ovid's *Fasti*', *Augustan Age* 8: 36-48.
- Nicoletti, L. J., (2004), 'Downward mobility: Victorian women, suicide and London's *Bridge of Sighs*', *Literary London* 2.1 (from <http://www.literarylondon.org/london-journal/march2004/nicoletti.html>, accessed 03/11/10).
- Nisbet, R. G. M. and Hubbard, M. (eds) (1970), *A Commentary on Horace: Odes Book 1* (Oxford).
- Noble, J. B. (2004), *Masculinities without Men?: Female Masculinity in Twentieth Century Fictions* (Vancouver).
- O'Daly, G. J. P. (1999), *Augustine's City of God: a Reader's Guide* (Oxford).
- Ogilvie, R. M. (1965), *A Commentary on Livy: Books 1-5* (Oxford).
- O'Gorman, E. (2000), *Irony and Misreading in the Annals of Tacitus* (Cambridge; New York).
- Osborn, E. (1997), *Tertullian, First Theologian of the West* (Cambridge).
- Otis, B. (1968), 'A reading of the Cleopatra ode', *Arethusa* 1: 48-61.
- Palmer, A. (2005) *Ovid Heroides Volume 2: Commentary* (Exeter).
- Palmer, A.-M. (1989), *Prudentius on the Martyrs* (Oxford).
- Palmer, R. E. A. (1974), 'Roman shrines of female chastity from the caste struggle to the papacy of Innocent I', *Rivista Storica dell'Antichità* 4: 113-59.
- Panoussi, V. (2005), 'Polis and empire: Greek tragedy in Rome', in J. Gregory (ed.) *A Companion to Greek Tragedy* (Oxford): 413-27.
- Parker, H. N. (1992), 'Love's body anatomised: the ancient erotic handbooks and the rhetoric of sexuality', in A. Richlin (ed.) (1992), *Pornography and Representation in Greece and Rome* (New York; Oxford): 90-111.
- Parker, H. N. (2004), 'Why were the Vestals virgins? Or the chastity of women and the safety of the Roman state', *American Journal of Philology* 125.4: 563-601.

- Pelling, C. B. R. (2000), *Literary Texts and the Greek Historian* (London).
- Peppe, L. (1984), *Posizione giuridica e Ruolo sociale della Donna romana in età repubblicana* (Milano).
- Peradotto, J. and Sullivan, J. P. (eds) (1984), *Women in the Ancient World: the Arethusa Papers* (Albany).
- Percival, F. (1998), *Chaucer's Legendary Good Women* (Cambridge).
- Perkins, J. (1995), *The Suffering Self: Pain and Narrative Representation in the Early Christian Era* (London).
- Petrucione, J. (1990), 'The portrait of St. Eulalia of Merida in Prudentius' *Peristephanon 3*', *Analecta Bollandiana* 108: 81-104.
- Philippides, S. N. (1983), 'Narrative strategies and ideology in Livy's "rape of Lucretia"', *Helios* 10: 113-19.
- Philippides, K. (1996), 'Canace misunderstood: Ovid's *Heroides XI*', *Mnemosyne* 49.4: 426-39.
- Pickering, W. S. F. and Walford, G. (eds) (2009), *Durkheim's Suicide: A Century of Research and Debate* (London; New York).
- Plass, P. (1995), *The Game of Death in Ancient Rome: Arena Sport and Political Suicide* (Madison, Wis.; London).
- Pomeroy, S. B. (1975), *Goddesses, Whores, Wives and Slaves: Women in Classical Antiquity* (London).
- Price, R. M. (2008), 'Martyrdom and the cult of the saints' in S. A. Harvey and D. G. Hunter (eds) *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies* (Oxford): 808-25.
- Prinzivalli, E. (2001), 'Perpetua the martyr', in A. Fraschetti (ed.) *Roman Women* (Chicago; London): 118-40.
- Rabinowitz, N. S. (1992), 'Tragedy and the politics of containment', in A. Richlin (ed.) (1992), *Pornography and Representation in Greece and Rome* (New York; Oxford): 36-52.
- Rabinowitz, N. S. and Richlin, A. (eds) (1993), *Feminist Theory and the Classics* (New York; London).
- Rebenich, S. (2002), *Jerome* (London; New York).
- Reeson, J. (2001), *Ovid Heroides 11, 13 and 14: A Commentary* (Leiden).

- Rehm, R. (1992), *Greek Tragic Theatre* (London; New York).
- Rehm, R. (1994), *Marriage to Death: the Conflation of Wedding and Funeral Rituals in Greek Tragedy* (Princeton).
- Richlin, A. (1992), 'Reading Ovid's rapes', in A. Richlin (ed.) (1992), *Pornography and Representation in Greece and Rome* (New York; Oxford): 158-79.
- Richlin, A. (ed.) (1992), *Pornography and Representation in Greece and Rome* (New York; Oxford).
- Richlin, A. (2006), 'Sexuality in the Roman empire' in D. Potter (ed.) *A Companion to the Roman Empire* (Malden, Mass.; Oxford): 327-53.
- Richardson, L. (ed.) (1977), *Propertius: Elegies I-IV* (Norman, Oklahoma).
- Rist, J. M. (1969), *Stoic Philosophy* (Cambridge).
- Roberts, M. (1988), 'The revolt of Boudicca (Tacitus, *Annals*, 14.29-39) and the assertion of *libertas* in Neronian Rome', *American Journal of Philology* 109.1: 118-32.
- Roberts, M. J. (1993), *Poetry and the Cult of the Martyrs: The Liber Peristephanon of Prudentius* (Ann Arbor).
- Roisman, H. M. (2000), 'A new look at Seneca's Phaedra', in G. W. M. Harrison (ed.) *Seneca in Performance* (London): 73-86.
- Roisman, H. M. (2005), 'Women in Senecan tragedy', *Scholium* 14: 72-88.
- Roller, D. W. (2010), *Cleopatra: A Biography* (Oxford; New York).
- Rosenmeyer, P. A. (1997), 'Ovid's *Heroides* and *Tristia*: voices from exile', *Ramus* 26: 29-56.
- Rossi, M. (1984), 'The passion of Perpetua, everywoman of late antiquity' in R. C. Smith and J. Lounibos (eds) *Pagan and Christian Anxiety: A Response to E. R. Dodds* (Lanham): 53-86.
- Rutherford, R. B. (1982), 'Tragic form and feeling in the *Iliad*', *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 102: 145-60.
- Rutland, L. W. (1978), 'Women as makers of kings in Tacitus' *Annals*', *Classical World* 72: 15-29.
- Salisbury, J. E. (1997), *Perpetua's Passion: the Death and Memory of a Young Roman Woman* (New York; London).
- Santoro L'Hoir (1992), *The Rhetoric of Gender Terms: 'Man', 'Woman', and the*

*Portrayal of Character in Latin Prose* (Leiden).

- Santoro L'Hoir, F. (2006), *Tragedy, Rhetoric, and the Historiography of Tacitus' Annales* (Ann Arbor).
- Schiesaro, A. (2005) 'Roman tragedy' in R. Bushnell (ed.) *A Companion to Tragedy* (Oxford): 269-86.
- Schuller, W. (1987), *Frauen in der römischen Geschichte* (Konstanz).
- Sebesta, J. L. (1998), 'Women's costume and feminine civic morality in Augustan Rome' in M. Wyke (ed.) *Gender and the Body in the Ancient Mediterranean* (Oxford): 105-17.
- Segal, C. (1993), *Euripides and the Poetics of Sorrow: Art, Gender, and Commemoration in Alcestis, Hippolytus, and Hecuba* (Durham, North Carolina).
- Seidensticker, B. (1995), 'Women on the tragic stage', in B. Goff (ed.) *History, Tragedy, Theory: Dialogues on Athenian Drama* (Austin): 151-73.
- Shaw, B. D. (1993), 'The passion of Perpetua', *Past & Present* 139: 3-45.
- Shaw, B. D. (1996), 'Body/power/identity: passions of the martyrs', *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 4.3: 269-312.
- Shotter, D.C. A. (2000), 'Agrippina the Elder – a woman in a man's world', *Historia* 49.3: 341-57.
- Sills, D. L. (ed.) (1968) *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences: Volume 15* (New York).
- Skinner, M. B. (1997) 'Introduction: *quod multo fit aliter in Graecia...*' in J. P. Hallett and M. B. Skinner (eds) *Roman Sexualities* (Princeton): 3-25.
- Skinner, M. B. (2005), *Sexuality in Greek and Roman Culture* (Oxford).
- Small, J. P. (1976), 'The death of Lucretia', *American Journal of Archaeology* 80.4: 349-60.
- Smelser, N. J. and Baltes, P. B. (eds) (2001) *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioural Sciences: Volume 22* (Oxford).
- Smith, R. S. and Trzaskoma, S. M. (eds) (2007), *Apollodorus' Library and Hyginus' Fabulae: Two Handbooks of Greek mythology* (Indianapolis; Cambridge).
- Spentzou, E. (2003), *Readers and Writers in Ovid's Heroides: Transgressions of Genre and Gender* (Oxford).

- Straw, C. (1999), 'Martyrdom and Christian identity: Gregory the Great, Augustine, and tradition', in W. E. Klingshirn and M. Vessey (eds) *The Limits of Ancient Christianity: Essays on Late Antique Thought and Culture in Honour of R. A. Markus* (Ann Arbor): 250-66.
- Syme, R. (1981), 'Princesses and others in Tacitus', *Greece & Rome* 28.1: 40-52.
- Tarrant, R. J. (1995), 'Greek and Roman in Seneca's tragedies', *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 97: 215-30.
- Tilley, M. A. (1990), 'Scripture as an element of social control: two martyr stories of Christian North Africa', *Harvard Theological Review* 83.4: 383-97.
- Tilley, M. A. (1996), *Donatist Martyr Stories: the Church in Conflict in Roman North Africa* (Liverpool).
- Tomaselli, S. (1986), 'Introduction' in S. Tomaselli and R. Porter (eds) *Rape: An Historical and Cultural Enquiry* (Oxford): 1-15.
- Tomaselli, S. and Porter, R. (1986), *Rape: An Historical and Cultural Enquiry* (Oxford).
- Treggiari, S. (1991), *Roman Marriage: Iusti Coniuges from the Time of Cicero to the Time of Ulpian* (Oxford).
- Treggiari, S. (2005), 'Women in the time of Augustus' in K. Galinsky (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Augustus* (New York; Cambridge): 130-47.
- Tronson, A. (1998), 'Vergil, the Augustans, and the invention of Cleopatra's suicide – one asp or two?', *Vergilius* 44: 31-50.
- Trout, D. (1994), 'Re-textualising Lucretia: cultural subversion in the *City of God*', *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 2.1: 53-70.
- Tucker, R. A. (1987), 'Tacitus and the death of Lucan', *Latomus* 46: 330-7.
- Tyldesley, J. (2008), *Cleopatra: Last Queen of Egypt* (London).
- Van der Horst, P. W. (1971), 'A pagan Platonist and a Christian Platonist on suicide', *Vigiliae Christianae* 25.4: 282-8.
- Vandiver, E. (1999), 'The founding mothers of Livy's Rome: the Sabine women and Lucretia' in F. B. Titchener and R. F. Moorton (eds) *The Eye Expanded: Life and the Arts in Greco-Roman Antiquity* (Berkeley): 206-32.
- Van Henten, J. W. and Avemarie, A. (2002), *Martyrdom and Noble Death: Selected*

- Texts from Graeco-Roman, Jewish, and Christian Antiquity* (London).
- Van Hooff, A. J. L. (1990), *From Autothanasia to Suicide: Self-Killing in Classical Antiquity* (London; New York).
- Van Hooff, A. J. L. (1992), 'Female suicide: between fiction and fact', *Laverna* 3: 142-72.
- Van Hooff, A. J. L. (1994), 'Icons of ancient suicide: self-killing in classical art', *Crisis* 15.4: 179-86.
- Van Hooff, A. J. L. (1998), 'The image of ancient suicide', *Syllecta Classica* 9: 47-69.
- Van Hooff, A. J. L. (2004), 'Paetus, it does not hurt: altruistic suicide in the Greco Roman world', *Archives of Suicide Research* 8.1: 43-56.
- Van Hooff, A. J. L. (2009), Review of T. Hill, *Ambitiosa Mors: Suicide and Self in Roman Thought and Literature* (New York; London 2004) (from <http://bmcr.brynmawr.edu/2005/2005-09-09.html>, accessed 23/11/10).
- Vessey, D. W. T. C. (1969), 'Notes on Ovid, *Heroides* 9', *Classical Quarterly* 19.2: 349-61.
- Veyne, P. (2003), *Seneca: The Life of a Stoic* (New York and London).
- Vidén, G. (1993), *Women in Roman Literature: Attitudes of Authors under the Early Empire* (Goteborg, Sweden).
- Vidén, G. (1998), 'St. Jerome on female chastity: subjugating the elements of desire', *Symbolae Osloenses* 73: 139-57.
- Walker, S. and Ashton, S. (2003), *Cleopatra Reassessed* (London).
- Walker, S. and Higgs, P. (2001), *Cleopatra of Egypt: From History to Myth* (Princeton).
- Wallace-Hadrill, A. (1985), 'Propaganda and dissent?: Augustan moral legislation and the love-poets', *Klio* 67.1: 180-4.
- Walsh, P. G. (1961), *Livy: His Historical Aims and Methods* (London).
- Walters, J. (1997) 'Invading the Roman body: manliness and impenetrability in Roman thought' in J. P. Hallett and M. B. Skinner (eds) *Roman Sexualities* (Princeton): 29-43.
- White, P. (2002), 'Ovid and the Augustan milieu', in B. W. Boyd (ed.) *Brill's Companion to Ovid* (Leiden): 1-25.
- Williams, G. (1992), 'Ovid's Canace: dramatic irony in *Heroides* 11', *Classical*

*Quarterly* 42.1: 201-9.

Wilson, J. P. (1990), 'The death of Lucan: suicide and execution in Tacitus', *Latomus* 49: 458-63.

Wiseman, T. P. (1979), *Clio's Cosmetics: Three Studies in Greco-Roman Literature* (Leicester).

Wiseman, T. P. (1994), *Historiography and Imagination: Eight Essays on Roman Culture* (Exeter).

Wohl, V. (2005) 'Tragedy and feminism' in R. Bushnell (ed.) *A Companion to Tragedy* (Oxford): 145-60.

Woodcock, E. C. (1980), *The Annals of Tacitus: Book XIV* (Letchworth).

Wyke, M. (2002), *The Roman Mistress: Ancient and Modern Representations* (Oxford).

Zeitlin, F. I. (1996), *Playing the Other: Gender and society in Classical Greek literature* (Chicago; London).

Zimmermann, M. (ed.) (2009), *Extreme Formen von Gewalt in Bild und Text des Altertums* (München).