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Threat and Hope: Women’s Rituals and Civil War in Roman Epic

Vassiliki Panoussi

College of William and Mary, panoussi@wm.edu

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FINDING PERSEPHONE

WOMEN’S RITUALS IN THE ANCIENT MEDITERRANEAN

Edited by Maryline Parca and Angeliki Tzanetou

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These are the contemptuous words of the Latin warrior and Aeneas’ chief rival Turnus in *Aeneid* 7, when the fury Allecto, disguised as an old woman, urges him to start war. Turnus here makes a neat distinction between men’s and women’s social roles: worship of the divine and practice of ritual are the tasks of women; war is the business of men. The clarity of this distinction, however, is complicated by the fact that in all of Roman epic women have an active share in war, often through the performance of ritual tasks. In this chapter I explore the close relationship between female ritual activity and the problem of civil war in Vergil’s *Aeneid*, Lucan’s *Bellum Civile*, and Statius’ *Thebaid*. An examination of women’s rituals in each of these epics reveals that female ritual activity plays a crucial role in the instigation and resolution—or lack thereof—of civil conflict.
Ritual is prominent in the representation of women's activities in Roman epic. In Vergil's *Aeneid*, for instance, we encounter Andromache in Book 3 as she makes libations to the cenotaphs of Hector and Astyanax, her husband and son; while Dido in Book 4 performs daily rituals in order to find out whether the gods look favorably upon a future union with Aeneas. Although women in ancient Rome were excluded from most aspects of public life, religious rites and ceremonies were the one area of the public sphere to which they had access. As a result, women's participation in religion to some extent constituted evidence of their identity as Roman citizens and afforded them opportunities for social visibility as well (see Schultz in this volume).

Scholars of Roman religion believe that women's religious role was controlled by men: for instance, as Schultz argues in this volume, priestesses were subject to more restrictions than their male counterparts. Nevertheless, a close look at the representations of women's rituals in Roman epic reveals that women's religious roles in ancient Rome were of great importance: in the narratives of civil war, women's rituals are powerful enough to shape public events. Though such representations would lack resonance if they were completely removed from the audience's experience, we cannot rely on epic to reflect contemporary social practice directly. Nevertheless, literary evidence can shed light on the role of women's rituals in Roman public and private life. The centrality of women's rituals in civil war thus demands a reevaluation of their function in Roman epic. Women as performers of religious activity become visible and powerful and often articulate a point of view opposite from that of the men.

Women in Roman epic engage in rituals affected by war and the demands of empire. For the purposes of this study, I focus on marriage and funeral, rituals in which women were the principal ritual actors. However, in Vergil, Lucan, and Statius, those very rites in which women occupy center stage are fraught with perversion, as it were, and ritual purity is seriously compromised. Ritual perversion may consist in the conflation of elements properly belonging to antithetical ceremonies, such as marriage and funeral. In other cases, marriage or funeral rites contain elements normally associated with Bacchic ritual, which in turn is depicted as disruptive of the social fabric. An examination of these distorted rituals allows a better understanding of the instability of the underlying social dynamics. Ritual perversion,
common in all three epicists under discussion, therefore foreshadows, reflects, or intensifies the disorder that the violence of civil war generates.

Moreover, when rituals go awry, women appear to resist male authority and thus transgress gender boundaries and confuse sexual hierarchies. Women’s rites cause them to interfere in affairs normally belonging to the male sphere and deepen the social confusion synonymous with civil war. Each author treats this emergent confusion differently: in the *Aeneid*, the Latin queen Amata conducts a fake bacchic orgy in order to stop Aeneas from marrying her daughter and establishing his settlement at Lavinium. In addition, she rouses the other Latin women to action. Women as a group thus threaten the success of Aeneas’ mission and the founding of the Roman empire. Lucan, on the other hand, presents women engaged in rites that mirror the disruption and crisis operative in the epic plot: instead of a union promoting life, the anti-wedding of Cato and Marcia is sealed by death and mourning. Statius, however, portrays women’s rituals as the only positive force in the poem. The women’s success in burying their dead in the last book of the *Thebaid* achieves the restoration of ritual order: while the men (Theseus and Creon) appear still caught in the madness of war, the women recognize the importance of Clementia for ending civil strife and perform a successful supplication and burial. In what follows, I trace this movement from threat to hope as it emerges from the representation of marriage and funeral in the three epics. In all three, women are powerful agents in the arena of civil war.

**Vergil’s *Aeneid***

Although the conflict in the second half of the *Aeneid* is between Trojans and Latins and does not therefore qualify as civil in the strict sense of the word, the narrative systematically underscores the aspects of kinship between the combatants and casts their clash as a civil war. The outbreak of violence in *Aeneid* 7 is closely linked to the theme of marriage. Aeneas is to marry Lavinia, the daughter of king Latinus and queen Amata. Through this marriage the union between Latins and Trojans will be achieved, and the two peoples will eventually produce the Roman nation. In Roman myth, as in history, marriage often averts or puts an end to war. The Sabine women are the most celebrated example. Though seized by force from
their fathers, the women soon become assimilated to the Roman state and eventually mediate between their husbands and fathers. In this instance, women act as guarantors of social stability as they and their children embody the connective links between the warring sides and succeed in cementing the peace. By offering to take the blame of civil strife upon themselves, the Sabine women's bodies function as the site on which the appropriate male homosocial bonds may be forged. In the *Aeneid*, by contrast, Amata, by not allowing Lavinia's body to serve as space that would defuse hostility, ends up unleashing it on a grand scale.

Amata's resistance to the unifying wedding of Lavinia and Aeneas destabilizes social as well as sexual relations and serves to promote war. The theme of resistance to marriage is ubiquitous in Greek and Roman literature. Reluctance on the part of the bride as well as on the part of her natal family is one of the standard features of wedding narratives. This resistance reflects the pain at the prospect of separation and loss that a bride and her family suffer and may take various forms: the young girl is compared to a delicate flower refusing the male's touch, a city that is sacked by the enemy, or a wild animal resisting domestication. Eventually, however, everyone eagerly anticipates the girl's new life as a wife and mother. In the *Aeneid*, Amata passionately wished for Turnus to marry her daughter, Lavinia. She receives a visit from the Fury Allecto, who infuses her with madness and pushes her to conduct a fake bacchic revel (*simulato numine Bacchi*, 7.385). The use of bacchic ritual as a means to express resistance to marriage is often found in Greek tragedy. For instance, in Euripides' *Trojan Women*, Cassandra, seeking to avoid an unwanted and shameful marriage with a foreigner and an enemy (Agamemnon), resorts to bacchic frenzy, singing her own wedding song. Amata employs a stratagem similar to that of her tragic counterpart: she hides her daughter into the woods and proclaims her a maenad (*te lustrare choro, sacrum tibi pascere crinem*, 391). The union that the queen envisions between Lavinia and the god precludes a union with Aeneas but also, surprisingly, a union with Turnus. It appears that Amata, by dedicating Lavinia to Bacchus, negates her daughter's bridal transition altogether as she relegates her to the status of a maenad forever under the god's control. The mother's natural resistance to the separation from her daughter, which is expressed in maenadic terms, turns here into a perverse negation of Lavinia's right to marriage.
The description of Amata’s ritual employs elements appropriate for both bacchic and marriage rituals: she brandishes a blazing torch (*flagrantem . . . pinum*, 397), which evokes the torches held at the marriage ceremony and the pine thyrsus customarily held by maenads. The wedding song that she sings on behalf of Lavinia and Turnus (*natae Turnique canit hymenaeos*, 398) stands in contrast to Lavinia’s previous dedication to Bacchus and Amata’s assertions that Lavinia is also a maenad. In addition, Amata insists on her role and rights as a wronged mother (*si iuris materni cura remordet*, 402). At the same time, despite the narrator’s claim that we are witnessing a fake bacchic revel, Amata’s behavior as a possessed maenad is unmistakably genuine: she is frenzied (*feruida*, 397), her eyes are bloodshot, her gaze wandering (*sanguineam torquens aciem*, 399); she screams savagely (*toruumque . . . / clamat*, 399–400); and the Fury’s control over her is explicitly labeled as bacchic (*reginam Allecto stimulis agit undique Bacchi*, 405).

Marriage and bacchic ritual elements are thus combined to create a bizarre and disturbing effect. To be sure, the narrator had hinted at this by calling the rite fake. Such a characterization at once maligns the power women can exert through their ritual activity and demonstrates the dangers of their interference in the affairs of men. The same slur is used to describe the rite Helen performs during the sack of Troy in *Aeneid* 6.512–29: she faked a bacchic revel in order to help the Greeks. Amata, however, is genuinely possessed by divine force. This important distinction is testimony to the extraordinary powers associated with the performance of ritual. Amata may have begun her rite as a fake bacchic revel; by the end of the description, however, a benign return to norms is impossible, the entire community is infected, and the effects of this pollution are pernicious for Latins and Trojans alike.

Amata’s perversion of marriage and bacchic rituals in order to resist her daughter’s marriage turns into a women’s collective movement that succeeds in reversing social norms: Amata’s maenadism transgresses her role as a wife and queen and causes others to do the same. Not only has she left her home and taken refuge in the wild, she has also crossed the threshold of silence, which Lavinia observes throughout the poem. As the ritual unfolds, the queen’s voice grows progressively louder (*locuta*, 357; *uociferans*, 390; *canit*, 398; *clamat*, 400) as bacchic action enables female speech. Amata’s voice has the power to stir the Latin mothers to bacchic frenzy, and they too collectively abandon their homes and run to the woods.
fama uolat, furiosis accensas pectore matres
idem omnis simul ardor agit noua quaerere tecta.
deseruere domos, uentis dant colla comasque;
ast aliae tremulis ululatibus aethera complent
pampineasque gerunt incinctae pellibus hastas. (7.392–396)
rumor flies about and the mothers, their breast fired by madness,
are all driven at once by the same passion to seek new abodes.
They abandoned their homes, baring to the wind their necks and hair;
and some fill the air with quavering cries
and dressed in fawnskins bear vine-covered wand spears.

As in other occasions throughout the *Aeneid*, *fama*, the personified
voice/rumor is the agent of this escalation, converting private passion to
public response.⁸ Amata and the Latin mothers are transformed from civi-
lized beings and respected pillars of the community to maenads. Their shed-
ding of their social status as Latin women is evident in their change of dress:
they let their hair loose (394) and wear fawn skins (396). As a result, the
movement of the maenads to the wild not only suggests the collapse of spa-
tial differentiation between human and animal, civilization and the wild, but
also dissolves gender and social hierarchies. The women's bacchic ritual, in
turn, interferes with warfare, triggering violence among men:

tum quorum attonitae Baccho nemora auia matres
insultant thiasis (neque enim leue nomen Amatae)
undique collecti coeunt Martemque fatigant. (7.580–582)
the kin, then, of those mothers who in ecstasy danced for Bacchus
in the wilderness (Amata's name no light encouragement)
came in from everywhere with cries for Mars.

Women's power to instigate war becomes directly related to their role as
mothers (*matres*) as well as to their bacchic ritual activity. Under Amata's rit-
ual lead, women have lost their individuality and act collectively. At the same
time, the bacchic rite may render mothers dangerous for their sons, as the ex-
ample of Agave in Euripides' *Bacchae* poignantly attests. In the *Aeneid* too,
the women's frenzy affects their sons; the emphasis on the mother's bacchic
rage is indirectly transferred onto their male offspring as they gather to pre-
pare for battle.

This perverted blend of bacchic and marriage ritual is so potent that it
overcomes the authority of men. The women's actions result in stripping
king Latinus of his power; soon after he announces his withdrawal from the
public sphere, Latinus is confined within the house (saepsit se tectis, 600), secluded and silenced, withdrawn from action and speech (neque plura locutus, 599). As we have seen, through their bacchic activity, women take on the exteriority associated with men, thus endangering the integrity of the domus, which stands to be destroyed devoid of the women who normally secure its welfare. At the same time, Latinus’ resignation from the action suggests that the entire state is in peril as a result of the women’s ritual action (rerumque reliquit habenas, 600). The violence that the women’s bacchic rituals generate not only threatens social stability but also jeopardizes the success of Aeneas’ mission, the creation of the Roman state, altogether. Women’s interference initiates the war that ends in the death of Turnus, thus permanently transforming Amata’s “marriage” ritual into a funeral. This theme of perversion of marriage to funeral as a result of civil conflict is fully developed in Lucan’s epic of civil war.

**LUCAN’S BELLUM CIVILE**

Lucan’s *Bellum Civile* relates the civil war between Caesar and Pompey. Highly rhetorical and intense in movement, the poem, paradoxically, both laments and celebrates the disintegration of Roman values. *BC* showcases few female figures, most with marginal roles in the thrust of the epic action. Phemonoe and Erictho appear in key episodes of the poem, while Pompey’s wife, Cornelia, and the ghost of his dead wife, Julia, are featured in poignant scenes. As is the case in Vergil, here too most of the epic’s female figures are associated with ritual: Phemonoe is the Pythia of the Delphic oracle, Erictho is a witch, and Cornelia laments the death of her husband, Pompey. In all cases, women’s rituals are cast as utterly corrupt and fail to accomplish their purpose. Ritual perversion in *BC* is symptomatic of the disintegration of all institutions that civil conflict brings about; moreover, nowhere in the poem is there any hope for restoration of the ritual (and by extension the sociopolitical) order. Marriage rites are no exception, as the brief episode of Cato and Marcia’s wedding eloquently demonstrates.

The two figures envision their roles as husband and wife as a means to promote their engagement in civil war. In Roman thought, familial ties are the cornerstone of social structures: the relationships among men of the state are regularly depicted as bonds of kinship; political alliances are often
cemented through marriage. At the same time, the relationship of the leader of the state to his people is typically cast in the image of the *pater-familias* ruling over his family. Within this ideological framework, it is no surprise that *BC* dramatizes the paradox, ironies, and contradictions of fratricide in marriage ritual. Furthermore, the close association of ritual with the dissolution synonymous with civil war also results in the depiction of Marcia as an agent, a female empowered through ritual activity to seek actively what she wants, to criticize the male point of view that demands female objectification, and to impose her will on that of her husband. Despite her success, however, the point of view she articulates is as flawed as Cato’s and indicates that the private realm cannot provide an appropriate model for political life. Civil war perverts the institution of family and irrevocably subsumes family ideals to the madness and chaos that it causes.

Ritual perversion is signaled by the confusion of funeral and marriage rites. The representation of marriage as funeral is salient in Greek tragedy, where the crisis in the tragic plot often takes the form of ritual corruption in general and very often of marriage in particular. Distortion of marriage at times of war is especially common. For instance, in Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon*, Iphigeneia, the daughter of king Agamemnon, dies at the altar of Artemis instead of being given in marriage; and in Euripides’ *Hecuba*, the Trojan princess Polyxena, betrothed to Achilles, becomes a funeral offering at his tomb. Closer to home, in Seneca’s *Troades* the same motif resurfaces, as here too, Polyxena’s sacrifice is represented as marriage to the dead Achilles and constitutes a central event to the series of inversions that mark the general state of dissolution that the play deplores. In *BC* Lucan appropriates these motifs in the episode of the remarriage of Cato and Marcia. Although this wedding does not draw on the tragic motif of the perverted wedding in the Greek and Senecan tragedies, it nevertheless mobilizes a similar type of perversion, since standard features of marriage ritual are replaced by others appropriate for funeral. Furthermore, the absence of a number of customary wedding ritual practices jeopardizes ritual correctness since it causes the bride and the groom to violate cautionary and protective ritual measures. At the same time, this wedding aims to unite Marcia and Cato in war and destruction and thus negates the creation of offspring, which is the primary reason for entering marital life and which would guarantee Rome’s future.
The historical background surrounding Cato and Marcia’s marriage provided Lucan with ample potential for manipulation: in 56 BCE the orator Hortensius asked Cato to give him his daughter, Porcia, in marriage. Since Porcia was already married, Cato eventually agreed to divorce his own wife, Marcia, so that she could marry Hortensius. Plutarch (Cato minor 52) reports that when Hortensius died, Cato remarried (the by-then-very-rich) Marcia just before he left Rome with the Pompeians because he needed someone to look after his household and young daughters. In his rendition, Lucan has Marcia enter in ritual mourning garb, straight from the funeral of her husband Hortensius:

... miserando concita vultu,
effusas laniata comas contusaque pectus
verberibus crebris cineresque ingesta sepulchri (2.334–336)

... [she rushed] with pitiable face,
hers loosened tresses torn, her breast bruised
by repeated blows, and covered in the ashes of the tomb

Marcia's bridal attire is that of a mourning wife. While in funeral ritual the squalor of mourners is expressed by smearing symbolic ash on the forehead, Marcia has literally covered herself with cremated ashes (Fantham 1992, 141–42), which serve as her only bridal decoration. She goes on to ask Cato to marry her in order to regain “the empty name of marriage” (nomen inane/conubii, 342–43). Emptiness characterizes Marcia, since she is no longer able to bear children. In this regard, she reverses the tragic model of marriage to death: whereas in tragedy, the bride is usually a virgin whose death negates the natural process of procreation, in BC Marcia wishes to marry Cato, not for the purpose of childbearing, but only to be buried as his wife, to be permanently known as belonging to him (Catonis/Marcia, 343–44).

Yet on closer scrutiny, Marcia’s request to remarry reveals that ritual perversion is accompanied by transgression of gender roles: Marcia comes unannounced, acts as her own marriage broker (Fantham 1992, 140), and renounces her past treatment as an object of exchange for the production of male offspring. In her wish to die as Cato’s wife (343–44), she also claims for herself the Roman female ideal of univira. Marcia thus assumes a male role, that of guardian of social ideals. Her past is marked by passivity, embedded in the text that reports her history (iuncta, 329; datur, 332; exhausta, 340; tradenda, 341; expulsantradita, 345). The only active role assigned to her is
that of procreation and of uniting households (*impletura*, 332; *permixtura domos*, 333). Marcia's transformation from a passive object and a vessel for the bearing of children to an agent is indicated by her violent motion (*irruptit*, 328), a violence that is often associated with female grief and that has the potential to erupt and threaten male authority. In her speech she associates obedience to her husband with her ability for childbearing (*dum vis materna, peregi/iussa*, 338–39) but declares that, now that she is no longer a vehicle for the creation of children, she will be the one to set the terms of their new relationship. At this precise moment her language bears ritual echoes: the triple anaphora (*da foedera*, 341; *da tantum nomen inane/conubii*, 342–43; *da mihi castra sequi*, 348) points to ritual incantations, where triple repetition is a standard feature. Marcia's "emancipation" is thus accompanied by a critique of her husband's past treatment of herself and their family and a desire to set things right (*nee dubium longo quaeratur in aevol mutarim primas expulsa an tradita taedas*, 344–45). She thus emerges as the guardian of social traditions that men have allowed to disintegrate.

Marcia carries her point, and Cato silently accepts her proposition (*hae flexere virum voces*, 350), despite the inappropriateness of the wedding under the circumstances (350–53). But if Cato's priorities are confused, so are Marcia's. The motivation behind her transgression of gender boundaries and her eagerness to preserve social stability and the long-revered Roman values prove to be superficial and secondary to a desire to participate actively in civil war (*da mihi castra sequi*, 348) and play as central a role in the conflict as that of Cornelia (*sit civili propior Cornelia bello?* 349). Marcia engages in a competition with other wives at war, the same type of rivalry that caused fratricide among the men in the first place. As a result, Marcia articulates a point of view that initially appears as aiming to correct but ends up replicating the destructive male attitudes that caused civil war. But unlike what happens in the *Aeneid*, the perverted wedding rite she performs does not instigate further violence but rather underscores her desire to participate in carnage, a desire that matches that of her husband.

The ensuing description of the wedding reveals striking similarities between this husband and wife. The poignant ironies of the elaborate description of what the ritual does not include, along with the use of elements normally associated with funeral, cannot fail to emphasize the disintegration of religious and social institutions. Social dissolution is also
vast in the mirroring of husband and wife, who envision their marital roles as enabling them to become enmeshed in civil war. This mirroring is manifest in a number of narrative elements: their mourning attire (334–36 and 375–76); their characterization as sancti (327, 372), a word deeply ironic, given their involvement in civil conflict; the celebration of a marriage that negates sexual pleasure (342–44 and 378–80) and ability for procreation. Ritual correctness is further denied as the narrative implies that the bride steps over the threshold (358–59), a particularly ominous sign. As a result, Marcia’s empowerment fails to articulate a viable alternative to her husband’s cause but renders her instead a complement to his persona. The flawed ritual, along with the confusion of marriage and funeral rites, highlights the deeply disturbing nature of their fervor to participate in civil war. Cato and Marcia’s mirroring thus adds the blurring of gender lines to the epic’s central themes of general dissolution of boundaries and loss of identity. At the same time, it confirms that Cato and Marcia’s social roles as husband and wife are now in the service of civil conflict. The bankruptcy of family ideals is symbolically grafted onto Marcia’s drained body, their failure as transparent as that of all other social and political institutions.

Attention to the corrupted nature of this marriage ritual also informs our reading of Cato’s portrait as a noble and heroic persona. His choice to perform a distorted rite underscores his active participation in the dissolution of religious (wedding) and social (family) institutions and emphasizes the irony in his portrayal as a pater patriae, since he enters a marriage that will not result in children. Thus Marcia’s sterility is equivalent to his desire to achieve liberty in death (Ahl 1976, 249–51), which only manages to perpetuate corruption, emptiness, and futility. Cato’s stoicism becomes a paradox in itself, pushed to its limits and therefore rendered absurd. In BC, the ritual corruption inaugurated by Vergil’s women persists, but it has no power to destroy, only to reflect the devastation of civil war. Corruption will only lead to restoration in Statius’ civil war narrative.

**Statius’ Thebaid**

In the Thebaid, rituals regain their potency, since they emerge able to procure unity and peace. Although not devoid of ambivalence, women’s rituals play a crucial role as the epic comes to a close. As a result, the question
of the importance of women's rituals for epic and empire is raised to a new level as burial rites and lament bring to an end the tragedy of civil war.

Burial is a central theme throughout the *Thebaid* and figures prominently in the poem's final book (Pollmann 2001, 26), which begins with the aftermath of the battle between the brothers Eteocles and Polynices and focuses on the women's efforts to bring about ritual order by burying their dead. The epic topos of female supplication is here at work, but unlike what happens in the *Iliad* and the *Aeneid*, supplication is granted. The epic concludes with burial and female lamentation. The burial rites performed by the women restore the ritual order corrupted by Creon's edict prohibiting the burial of Argives and achieve a reconciliation of the two sides. Women thus emerge as a force of unity and cohesion, while their alignment with the divinity Clementia enables them to articulate a voice of justice and reason that the men appear incapable of attaining. Nevertheless, the women's assumption of these powers also appears highly problematic. The book offers examples of sexual transgression (Argia), dangerous empowerment (bacchic rites), as well as excesses in the women's performance of rituals. To be sure, these elements complicate the problem of the role of women as well as that of closure in the poem. But the fragility and precariousness of this restored ritual order does not negate the women's overall positive role at the poem's end, a positive role that is reinforced by the fact that at the epic's close the poet aligns with the women and assumes the female voice of lamentation himself.

Unity is a prominent element in the women's depiction and stands in sharp contrast with the divisiveness that has dominated the previous eleven books of the poem (see also Ahl 1986, 2890). The Argive women behave as a collective unit in their need to bury their dead. Ritual appears as a unifying, morally superior force promoting a point of view that opposes that of the men. The women's unity in grief is expressed by their shared sorrow (*sua uulnera cuique*, 107) and identical mourning attire (*par habitus cunctis*, 108; cf. also *femineumque gregem*, 146). Their alignment with a superior moral code is confirmed by Juno's intervention, which ensures that the men will not stop them from executing their task (134–36). These themes are also operative in the moving scene of their supplication in Athens:

omnis Erectheis effusa penitibus aetas
tecta uiasque replent: unde hoc examen et una
tot miseræ? necdum causas nouere malorum,
Crowds of every age streamed out from the Erechthean homes and filled the rooftops and the streets. Where did that swarm come from and so many women grieving as one? They do not know the cause of their evils, but they already groan. Through both gatherings, the goddess mingles, teaching the whole story, what race they came from, what deaths they mourn, or what they seek. And the women themselves in varying voices complain everywhere about the Ogygian laws and savage Creon. The Getic birds weep no less in their guest-dwellings with their broken speech, when they cry out against a double bridal bed and criminal Tereus.

The women assume the position of suppliant, a position implying utter helplessness. Nevertheless, the very act of supplication bestows upon them the power to tell their tale and raise their voice of mourning against the injustices of Creon's tyranny. The simile comparing the women to Thracian birds alludes to the Ovidian story of Philomela and Procne and underscores their empowerment: the two wronged sisters employed ordinary female activities (weaving and cooking) as a means to resist the brutality of male authority. The Argive women's supplication and desire for burial therefore suggests an alternative to the male perspective on civil conflict. The deity the women seek is also unique in many ways: located at the heart of the city of Athens, Clementia grants all prayers and accepts no blood sacrifices.²⁰ The absence of ritual killing, which is regularly sanctioned under religious custom and law, signals that we are faced with a different kind of divinity and associates the women with a new and superior religious order.

Nevertheless, the women's assumption of this powerful stance is depicted as being as disturbing and destabilizing as the acts of men. The women's protests against Creon's brutal injustice are described with the verb fremere, connoting anger that may lead to violent attack. The simile pointing to Procne and Philomela is also a reminder of the cruelty and excess of female revenge: the two sisters serve Tereus with the cooked flesh of his own son.²¹ The dangers inherent in women's empowerment are stressed throughout the episode and may take various forms: transgression
of the roles appropriate for the female sex, exemplified in the behavior of Argia; the women’s association with wild, uncivilized, and violent forces, expressed through their comparison to bacchants; and their penchant for indulging in the excesses of grief that can in turn lead to further bloodshed.

More specifically, women’s transgression of the role appropriate for their sex is prominently displayed in Argia’s actions as she embarks upon finding and burying her dead husband Polynices. The Argive princess is governed by a courage characterized as unwomanly, attempting a task that causes her to abandon her sex (hic non femineae subitum uirtutis amorem / colligit Argia, sexuque inmane relicto / tractat opus, 177–79). Her desire to procure burial for the dead Polynices is expressed through the vocabulary of madness (his anxia mentem/aegrescit furiis et, qui castissumus ardor,/funus amat, 193–95), while her intention to enter Thebes is phrased in phallic terms (me sinite Ogygias . . . / penetrare domos, 198–99). Argia’s defiance of gender norms is also illustrated in a startling simile comparing her to a priest of Cybele at the moment of self-castration (224–27).

The threatening nature of Argia’s actions is also cast in bacchic terms: we repeatedly hear about her frantic demeanor (226, 269, 278, 292). Though her desire to bury her husband is wholly noble, her fearless climb to the impassable wilderness of Mt. Cithaeron is synonymous with bacchic frenzy. The narrative does not let the reader forget that this is where the young king of Thebes, Pentheus, found death at the hands of his bacchant mother (Penthei . . . iugi, 244). Antigone similarly displays signs of madness (amens, 354), engages in violent motion (erumpit, 356), and is likened to a raging lioness removed from her mother’s protection and free to give vent to her anger fully (fremitu quo territat agros/uiriginis irae leae, rabies cui libera tandem/et primus sine matre furor, 356–58). The regular depiction of bacchants as untamed, wild creatures symbolically dramatizes the belief in women’s tendency to fall victims to the violence of their emotions. As a result, women defy the role appropriate for their sex. In their zeal to perform their ritual duties, Argia and Antigone, though at first united, now appear to enact a kind of competition that mirrors that of the brothers and that ultimately causes their ritual to fail to bring about
reconciliation, as the magnificent scene of the brothers’ dividing flame indicates (429–32).

The bacchic theme in its problematic nature reaches a climax in the description of the women’s closing ritual:

... gaudent matresque nurusque
Ogygiae, qualis thyrso bellante subactus
mollia laudabat iam marcidus orgia Ganges.
ecce per aduersas Dircaeui uerticis umbras
femineus quatit astra fragor, matresque Pelasgæ
decurrunt: quales Bacchea ad bella uocatae
Thyiades amentes, magnum quas poscere credas
aut fecisse nefas; (12.786–793)

... the mothers and daughters-in-law of Thebes
rejoiced, even as Ganges, subdued by the battling thyrsus,
praised the women’s orgies already drunk.
And, look, over the shades of Dirce’s peak on the other side
the women’s shouts shook the stars, and the Pelasgian mothers
ran down; like raving Thyiads called to bacchic wars,
you’d think they were demanding a great crime, or
had done one;

The bacchic imagery used in the description of both the Theban and the Argive women continues their representation as a collective unit and a model for the ultimate reconciliation among men (see also Braund 1996, 5). The passage begins by stressing the women’s joy (gaudent). Since ritual affirms the feelings of unity in the communal lamentation of the dead, burials are often depicted as giving the mourners joy, paradoxical as it may seem in a funeral setting. Nevertheless, the two similes complicate the positive and life-affirming character of burial and the women’s role in it.

The first simile compares the Theban women to the river Ganges, who succumbs to the influence of bacchants. The likening of the women to the river underscores their formidable power; yet this power is portrayed in turn as subject to the control of bacchants whose thyrsi bear the marks of war. As a result, the women’s power yields to forces contrary to civilization and peaceful coexistence and can therefore prove dangerous to the very unity and reconciliation they celebrate.26

The second simile likens the Argive women to raving maenads who run from the mountain to the city and engage in bacchic violence (nefas). This poetic gesture intensifies the problems that the previous simile
intimated. The women's descent from the mountain is the opposite of the typical maenadic movement from the city to the wild. Rather than returning to their homes at the end of their ritual celebration, women bring the *nefas* of bacchic war to civilized society. The poet uses images of perverted bacchic ritual in order to describe the women's performance of burial, thus hinting at the fragility of ritual in its ability to procure unity within the two communities and restore the disrupted order. At the same time, the poem's emphasis on the precariousness of ritual expresses anxiety that the power women exercise through their ritual activity may be used to destruction.

Bacchic ritual is not the only means through which the poem casts doubt on the effectiveness of the women's rites to achieve restoration. The women are also implicitly criticized as taking too much pleasure in the execution of their task of weeping (*gaudent lamenta nouaeque/ exultant lacrimae, 793–94*). The pleasure arising from lamentation is well attested in Greek and Latin literature: the act of mourning prolongs the connection between the mourner and the mourned while it keeps the memory of the lost one alive and immortalizes the past in the present (Loraux 1998, 100). Nevertheless, finding pleasure in lamentation can be dangerous because it undermines the reintegration of the mourner in the world of the living and feeds the feelings of rage and desire for revenge that may ultimately prevent burial rites from achieving unity and reconciliation. As a result, excessive grief can lead to violence: the women's hesitation as to whom to seek first, Theseus, Creon, or the bodies, is described in terms of violent movement (*rapit hue, rapit impetus illuc, 794*) suggestive of the bellicosity of men. As one critic points out, the women's laments are “the first stirrings of those emotions which will send the descendants of the Seven to try—and to succeed—where their fathers had failed” (Ahl 1986, 2898).

The theme of excessive lamentation continues as the narrative of the burial rites draws to a close. Evadne and Deipyle both exemplify the extremes of such behavior:

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turbine quo sese caris instrauerit audax
ignibus Euadne fulmenque in pectore magno
quAESierit; quo more iacens super oscula saeui
corporis infelix excuset Tydea coniunx;
ut saeuos narret uigiles Argia sorori . . . (12.800–804)
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how bold Evadne strewed herself on the flames she loved
and sought the thunderbolt in the great breast;
how Tydeus’ unlucky wife made her excuses for him
as she lay there and kissed his fierce corpse;
how Argia told her sister of the cruel watchmen . . .

Evadne’s famous leap onto her husband’s pyre figures prominently in Euripides’ Suppliants. Statius mentions it only briefly. Nevertheless, Evadne’s action contrasts sharply with her previous plea to Theseus to resolve the problem of burial and restore ritual order (see also Feeney 1991, 362). Deipyle, on the other hand, is shown performing the ritual act of catching the deceased’s last breath with a kiss. But her denial of the criminal nature of her husband’s feats undercuts the closure she hoped her ritual act could effect. The list continues with Argia narrating her adventures to her sister. Argia’s presence as a narrator at this juncture in the epic is important because it highlights her agency; but equally revealing is her absence from participation at the present funeral, especially in view of the failure of the burial she had earlier attempted.

Ultimately, however, the women’s rituals offset these ambiguities and assert the beneficial effects of their connection with religious law and justice. This link is first suggested by their association with Theseus: as we have seen, through their supplication to Clementia, the women articulate a superior moral code that stands opposite to the brutal authority of Creon. By granting their supplication and acting to ensure burial for the fallen Argives, Theseus emerges as an ally to the women and an advocate of Clementia’s superior moral code. Yet Theseus represents a male solution (violence) to the problem of fratricide that contrasts with the female desire to see the conflict end through the powers of reconciliation and mercy. Nevertheless, the battle between Theseus and Creon produces an unsatisfactory solution, since much in the narrative suggests that it is far from ideal.

However one interprets Theseus’ characterization in the Thebaid, a closer look at his behavior in ritual terms demonstrates his failure as a representative of the superiority of Clementia, which contrasts sharply with the success of the women. Theseus offers Creon as sacrifice (hostia, 771) to a deity that abhors blood offerings, an act that effectively negates the validity of his way of resolving civil conflict. Moreover, his intervention, through its allusion to the final battle between Aeneas and Turnus in the
Aeneid, promises to put an end not only to the conflict but also to the poem. But it is the women, not Theseus, who end the narrative of civil war through the performance of burial and ritual lamentation. Despite the ambivalence accompanying the women's empowerment through the performance of ritual, they alone appear capable of achieving restoration of the disrupted order and unity between the warring sides, as the lament of Atalanta, Parthenopaeus' mother, makes plain:

Arcada quo planctu genetrix Erymanthia clamet,
Arcada, consumpto seruantem sanguine uultus,
Arcada, quem geminae pariter fleuere cohortes. (12.805–807)

how the Erymanthian mother lamented the Arcadian,
the Arcadian, who kept his beauty though blood was gone,
the Arcadian, for whom two armies grieved as one.

The narrative thus concludes with proper burial and lamentation: the threefold repetition at the beginning of successive lines of the name of Parthenopaeus (Arcada) points to the ritual practice of calling for the last time on the dead three times (Hardie 1997, 156). Moreover, the unifying force of ritual is stressed in the concluding line of the lament: the young man is mourned equally by both sides. Thus, women's ritual appears ultimately capable of channeling the madness of civil war into a power that serves the communal good.

The power that women exert through the performance of their ritual tasks is further emphasized by the connections the poet draws between epic and lament. As the narrator is about to conclude his description of the burial rites, he employs the hundred-mouths epic topos to express his inability to relay the women's lamentations:

non ego, centena si quis mea pectora laxet
uoce deus, tot busta simul uulgique ducumque,
tot pariter gemitus dignis conatibus aequem: (12.797–99)

If a god should loose my breast in a hundred voices,
I could never equal with worthy effort so many funerals
of chieftains and common people, so many shared lamentations . . .

uix nouus ista furor unienisque implesset Apollo,
et mea iam longo meruit ratis aequore portum. (12.808–809)

For these hardly a new frenzy and Apollo's coming would suffice,
and my ship, so long at sea already, deserves a harbor.
The poet's confession that he is unable to convey the women's lament implies a competition between his powers of narration and the women's lamentations (*non . . . aequem*), thus setting up a parallel between the epic voice and that of the women. The connection between the two is not surprising. After all, lament immortalizes the past, emphasizes the loss the community has suffered, and seeks to provide relief by asserting the cohesiveness of the community of the living. These are all also functions of epic poetry. Statius is thus able to embrace the voice of women in order to express alternative points of view. In the final lines of the poem, where he addresses his work and envisages it as achieving immortality, he asserts the equation of epic with female lamentation.\(^{35}\)

In sum, women's rituals afford a fruitful medium through which we can explore the role of women in Roman epic. An initial examination of instances of women's rituals in the epics of Vergil, Lucan, and Statius reveals that women are empowered through the performance of their ritual duty and that they possess the ability to shape events in the public sphere. To be sure, there is a distinct anxiety about the potential destructiveness of this female power. In Vergil, it takes the form of unadulterated violence that fuels discord; in Lucan, it reflects yet another facet of the problems that civil war generates; and finally, in Statius, though dangerous, it presents a preferable alternative to male violence and is solely capable of bringing ultimate resolution to civil conflict.\(^{36}\)

**Notes**

1. Translations are my own, unless otherwise noted.
3. Goff in this volume undertakes a similar project in surveying the roles of women in Greek tragedy.
5. See, for instance, the wedding poems of Catullus, 61.82; 62.59–66; 64.118–19.
6. See Catullus 62.39–47 for woman as flower; 62.24 for marriage as sacking of a city. The likening of the bride to a wild animal is a topos in Greek and Roman literature, on which, see, e.g., Burkert 1983, 58–72, and Seaford 1994, 301–311.
7. Heinze 1915, 187 n. 16 (= 1993, 184) and also Seaford 1994, 356. Similar instances are found in Euripides' *Protesilaus* (Hyginus, *Fab.* 104) and Statius' *Silvae* 2.7.124–25.
11. For a full account of the historical details surrounding this story, see Fantham 1992, 139–40.
15. See also Keith 2000, 88. Marcia’s request is highly unusual. In the Republic, women did not accompany their husbands in their military or administrative posts abroad as they did in the Empire; see Fantham 1992, 144.
16. See Fantham 1992, 144; Ahl 1976, 247–49; and Johnson 1987, 43–44.
17. On the importance of the role of the *pronuba* in this regard, see Fantham 1992, 147.
18. For a reading of Marcia as an allegory for the Republic, see Ahl 1976, 249–50.
19. Cato’s role here is usually read as that of a responsible *paterfamilias* (Fantham 1992, 139) or as a portrait that completes his image as *pater patriae* (Ahl 1976, 247–52).
21. Ahl (1986, 2893) notes that the lament is here described as barbaric and incomprehensible, not because the women are foreigners but because they are changed into birds that cannot speak.
22. The transgressive qualities of Argia’s behavior are noted by Lovatt 1999, 136–40.
23. On the simile of Argia as Ceres (12.270–77), see Lovatt 1999, 141–42.
24. Argia and Antigone are united in the act of burial (*socio conamine*, 411); their unity poignantly contrasts with the brothers’ divisiveness in death (*hoc nupta precatur, / hoc soror*, 445–46).
27. Hardie (1997, 154) sees it as “seriously infringing the integrationist thrust of triumph and funeral as closural rituals,” while Braund (1996, 5) argues that it serves to dissolve the boundaries that separated the two sides, Argive and Theban.
28. Argia, who intends to do the same for Polynices, complains that she is too late. Deipyle’s kiss may also be read quite differently: the use of *iacens*, a word that can also connote sexual proximity, here describes Deipyle’s embrace of the body of her dead husband. Henderson (1993, 187) draws attention to the peculiarity of the use of *iacens* but does not comment on it. I believe that the word underscores the irony of Deipyle’s lying next to a corpse but at the same time hints at Deipyle’s perhaps exceedingly strong attachment to her husband.
29. For Lovatt (1999, 138), Argia “is an alternative hero for the end of the text.”
30. On the positive role of Theseus, see Burgess 1972, 347–49; Vessey 1973, 312–16; and Braund 1996, 12–16.
32. When Theseus first appears in the text as a triumphant victor, he is returning to Athens from his conquest of the Amazons. See Dietrich 1999, 45. The women as suppliants are in a position of helplessness and therefore resemble the defeated, while the triumphal procession of the captive Amazons causes them to remember their dead husbands (542). In this context, the great disparity between the conqueror and the helpless underscores Theseus’ warlike nature and absolute power. It is no coincidence that Evadne addresses him as *belliger Aegide* (546).
33. The funerals conducted by the men at the book’s opening show their failure to perform burial. They fight over who will perform the rites (33–34); they are unable to recognize the bodies of their loved ones (35–37); they indulge in excessive lamentation (45); and they commit the religious crime of not permitting burial to the fallen warriors of the enemy, which perpetuates the division initiated by conflict (54–56). Creon’s funeral rites in honor of his dead son Menoeceus similarly transgress ritual norms as the bereaved father in his raging grief sacrifices living Argives on his son’s pyre (68–70), reasserts his decision not to allow burial for the enemy (100–103), and acts in complete and thorough isolation (79), providing a sharp contrast with the collective unity of the women.
34. The connection between the women’s lament and Statius’ own voice is noted by Fantham 1999, 231–32.
35. Nugent (1996, 70–71) argues that Statius envisages the *Thebaid* as a wife to the *Aeneid*. See also Dietrich 1999, 50, on the *Thebaid’s* feminine marginality, which is ultimately an assertion of centrality.
36. I am grateful to the editors for inviting me to be a part of this volume and for being such diligent and helpful readers. I also owe thanks to my late friend and colleague Shilpa Raval, who read an earlier draft of this paper and helped to improve it with her incisive suggestions.