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VERGIL AND THE FEMININE: INTRODUCTION

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THIS SPECIAL ISSUE OF *VERGILIUS* ANSWERS TO ELAINE SHOWALTER'S 1985 prediction that we need "even more drastic re-estimations of the old masters."¹ While the so-called Father of the West has not escaped feminist scrutiny, his works have rarely been seen as fertile territory for women's studies and gender studies, especially in comparison to Homer, the Greek tragedians, and Ovid.² In part because of the status of Vergil's epic as a canonical monument to patriarchy, imperialism, and male political-poetic authority, feminist readings of Vergil, or approaches to reading his works through the lens of gender as a discursive system, still represent a tiny portion of modern and contemporary scholarship. Thus the *Cambridge Companion to Virgil* (1997) fits "gender" into a single chapter (Ellen Oliensis on "Sexuality and Gender"), and the index entry for "women" also directs us to the same essay, with the (performative) subheadings "abandonment or exclusion of" and "as threat in *Aeneid*."³ In many major studies of the politics

1. Showalter 1985, 6: "We may expect that the next decade will see even more vigorous feminist questioning of our criteria of aesthetic value, and even more drastic re-estimations of the old masters."

2. The label "Father of the West" was given by Theodor Haecker (1934), an obvious influence on T. S. Eliot's (1957, 138) reception of Vergil. On feminist and queer readings of gender in Homeric studies see the summary in McHardy 2018; cf. Cavarero 1995 on Homer's Penelope. On feminist engagement with Ovid see, e.g., Kennedy 1993; Spentzou 2003; Gardner 2013; Roynon and Orrells 2019; Rimell 2019, cf. 2006; Ranger 2016. Feminist readings of Greek tragedy and tragic figures such as Antigone have, by contrast, proliferated since the 1980s: see, e.g., Butler 2002; Zajko and Leonard 2006; and Honig 2013. Important monographs by classicists exploring feminist perspectives on Roman epic include Keith 2000; Augustakis 2010; Lovatt 2013; McAuley 2015, the latter also covering the character of Cyrene in the *Georgics*.

3. Martindale 1997, 370, index, s.v. "women"; these subcategories (epitomized respectively by Creusa and Dido) do not appear in the index of the second edition (Mac Góráin and Martindale, 2019), but they still shape Oliensis's contribution (2019,

of the *Aeneid*, the impact of feminist inquiry is barely registered, even as it informs interpretations of, for example, Dido’s political disruptiveness, or Dryden’s misogyny as a reader of Vergil’s women.⁴ The labor of retracing, articulating, and developing this far-reaching analysis, with its own distinctive philosophical tradition, is still born disproportionately by female scholars and siloed off as a niche interest in classical scholarship. Yet, as this volume reiterates, feminist thought—as a self-reflexive, performative, interdisciplinary mode of analyzing and disrupting power as a gendered system—situates itself at the core of debates about the politics of reading ancient texts, and indeed the politics of being a classicist. It should no longer be a “special issue.”

Feminist readings of Vergil, in keeping with first-wave feminist texts and activism but also in oppositional response to the history of these texts’ reception from the Augustan period onward, have tended to focus on recuperating female characters who are demonized, silenced, and elided in and by Vergil (and Vergilian criticism), and on finding ways to counter the patriarchal-imperialist drive of the *Aeneid*, or the *Georgics*’ project of cultivation as domination. One of the most prominent philosophers of the French second-wave, Hélène Cixous, wrote in her 1975 feminist manifesto *La jeune née* that she vehemently rejected the victimhood and passivity of Dido (Cixous and Clément 1996, 77; see the discussion of the quotation in Desmond 1993, 1–3; and Cox 2011, 15), and the call to “rescue Creusa” opened Marilyn Skinner’s introduction to the 1986 special edition of *Helios* devoted to “New Methodological Approaches to Women in Antiquity,” even though none of the issue’s contributors dealt with the *Aeneid*, and Skinner herself deemed elegy more conducive than epic to a feminist analysis of

436–39). Neither edition devotes a chapter to women in Vergil (let alone feminist or queer readings of Vergil). Yet “gender equality,” “motherhood,” and “modern women’s writing” all feature in passing in Mac Góráin’s (2019, 473 n. 14) closing chapter on the future of Vergilian studies. Cf. Sharrock 2011, 73.

4. E.g., Thomas 2001. This book’s index includes entries on “anti-fascist readings of Virgil,” “deconstruction,” “ideology,” “imperialism,” “intertextuality,” “Marxist readings of Virgil,” “oppositional voice,” and “Sabine women—rape of,” but no mention either of feminism or gender (although “feminist” is used in the index to refer to John Davis Long, the 32nd governor of Massachusetts and translator of the *Aeneid*, introduced as “the closest we come to a naïve reader of Virgil,” p. 173). It is the norm even for theoretically engaged monographs on the *Aeneid* to invisibilize gender and feminist philosophical thought: other examples include Smith 2005; Seider 2013; Stahl 2016 (the latter featuring Saint Augustine as the first feminist reader of *Aeneid* 4; see the review by Giusti 2018, 2) on Saint Augustine as “the first feminist reader of *Aeneid* 4, and the only one worth mentioning.”

ancient sexualities.⁵ Skinner's title was an explicit nod to Rachel DuPlessis's (1985) feminist reading of Creusa, interpreted as the forgotten foremother of the Etruscans, side-lined and yet never quite erased by Aeneas and the Romans, and as symbolic of feminist discourse within and against patriarchy.⁶ Both *Helios's* call for new feminist methodologies and DuPlessis's chapter, published in Elaine Showalter's 1985 *The New Feminist Criticism*, reflect live debates taking shape in the humanities in the 1980s about the hermeneutic possibilities of feminist literary theory, more than a decade after the founding of the Women's Classical Caucus (1972) and the publication of a first special issue of *Arethusa* on women in antiquity (1973).⁷

We can trace the feminist zeitgeist of the 1970s in the history of *Vergilius* itself: under the editorship of Janice Benario (herself the author of a foundational article on Dido and Cleopatra in the 1970 issue of the journal), the journal published more articles explicitly devoted to female characters in Vergil in the 1970s than in any other decade, and comparable numbers can be seen in the issues of the 1980s and 1990s. Among these, Page DuBois's 1976 reading of "Dido as Scapegoat" stands out for its explicitly feminist analysis of the patriarchal structures of Rome's religion (21). DuBois echoes Simone De Beauvoir's (1976) discussions in *The Second Sex* when she reads Dido both as the quintessence of "otherness for Aeneas, an evil which has affected him within, which must be expelled, cast out, burned out" (18) and as "a part of Aeneas, a part of the city, a part of the Roman character which can and must be *externalized*, given a reality *outside* the body, physically, geographically, spiritually, and decisively rejected, if the city is to maintain a sense of self" (22, emphasis original).⁸

If DuBois's take was to denounce the scapegoating of Dido in the service of the *Aeneid's* patriarchal plot (an interpretation much echoed, thenceforth, in Vergilian studies),⁹ successive (quasi-)feminist approaches to the *Aeneid* were often more interested in centering female characters than in dwelling

5. Cf. Skinner 1983 on Dido, which is implicitly attuned to feminist thought, and Skinner 2007, which reads Venus's healing of Aeneas as a feminine intervention in the homosocial, homoerotic, and rational operations of Iapyx (via Apollo); cf. Pandey's and Dressler's papers in this issue.

6. Nugent (1999, 252) writes of the *Aeneid's* "representational strategy, which casts the woman both as what must be rejected—even destroyed—and as what remains most indelibly present"; see below.

7. Note that the Women's Classical Committee UK was founded only in 2015.

8. Cf. De Beauvoir 1949, 38–69 on the need for the male subject to posit the Other as unequal in order to maintain a sense of unity of the self.

9. See, e.g., Keith 2000, 111–19, although with no reference to DuBois.

on and condemning the poem's misogyny (these two moves, of course, are not necessarily distinct). For example, in her 1979 article on Anna and Juturna, Grace Starry West (1979, 14) acknowledges the extent to which the poem associates the sisters, and many other female characters, with a monstrous irrationality gendered as feminine, but is also focused on their agency and compassion as sisters. From a twenty-first century perspective, in both her 1980 reading of Dido as an “unnatural” *dux femina* who goes “against the grain of her nature as a woman,” and in her 1985 article on Camilla’s “paradoxical” gender and “distorted sexuality,” West seems aligned with normative-patriarchal views on the naturalness of women’s “femininity” and of men’s “masculinity,” and projects (or shares what she sees as Vergil’s) disapproval of Chloereus’s effeminacy. Yet at the same time, she proposes that *Aen.* 11.782 (*femineo praedae et spoliolum ardebat amore*, “She burned with a feminine love for prey and spoils”) “upsets our notion of what feminine desires usually are” (1985, 24), and her work is suggestive in pointing toward the politics of gender as an unstable process in the *Aeneid* itself.¹⁰

By the time the *Helios* special issue appeared in 1986, Creusa’s abandonment had come to epitomize the patriarchal instrumentalization and erasure of women as (non)subjects (cf. Perkell 1981, revisited forty years later for this volume). Since then, Dido has often been understood, in Irigarean terms, as a mirror for the male subject, who comes to be defined by *her* negation and annihilation.¹¹ Anna and Juturna have afforded the possibility of a feminist sisterhood; Camilla (and to a certain extent Dido) have framed discussion of gender nonconformity in the poem, stirring debate about the extent to which a rejection of gender norms is fostered or disciplined by (our interactions with) the text. And Lavinia—the most enigmatic character of the *Aeneid*—has been the catalyst for various and often mutually contradictory feminist agendas. In 2008, Ursula Le Guin famously made Lavinia speak, though not perhaps as others would have wished, in what sounds like a meditation on the pitfalls and limits of textuality and of the very process of “recovery” that the novel attempts.¹² But

10. Cf. Pach Wilhelm 1987, 48; Spence 1988, 46–47; and McManus 1997 on “transgendered moments” in the *Aeneid*, with McHardy 2018.

11. See e.g., Keith 2000, 111–19, though with no reference to Irigaray 1985.

12. See Richards 2013, 206–7: “Le Guin uses the mask of Lavinia to problematise her novel as a feminist project of rewriting and recovery. She challenges two dominant assumptions of feminist literary criticism: that women writers suffer for a ‘more primary’ anxiety of influence than their male counterparts, and that the feminist author writes to ‘recover’ a lost or repressed ‘feminine voice’ that has been deliberately silenced in a male-authored source text”; see also Cox (2011, 247–63), who reads Le

among feminist scholars from the 1970s onward, Lavinia became a symbol for expressing the unspoken reality of male violence and the possibility of a feminine semiotics. The first aspect, though partially acknowledged in various commentaries on the verb *uiolare* (“to stain,” “to color purple,” but also to “violate,” “defile,” “rape”), used for the simile comparing Lavinia’s blushing cheeks to the staining of Indian ivory with purple dye (12.67–8 *Indum sanguineo ueluti uiolauerit ostro / si quis ebur*), was not properly articulated until Don Fowler’s 1987 essay “Vergil on Killing Virgins”; it has since been met with scepticism.¹³ Yet in 1973 it was expressed eloquently for *Vergilius*’s readers by a poem by Mary Crawford Clawsey entitled “Aeneas and Lavinia,” which is worth reprinting in full:¹⁴

She faced a stranger in the bridal chamber –
A foreign prince, a grave man twice her age,
Fate’s choice, her cousin’s blood upon his hands.

He saw her shrink from him and bitterly
Demanded of whatever powers would hear
His thoughts unvoiced, “Was this the royal bride
For whom in Troy King Priam’s daughter died?
Was it for her I fled from Dido’s shore
Unwilling but obedient? Is this
The Helen for whom I waged a second war?”
Then sternly he rebuked himself: “Do you
Complain against a fate unjustly hard –
A kingdom and a bridal bed?” He spoke:
“Princess, the gods have willed it. Surely they

Guin as joining Lavinia and Vergil in being equally silenced by the oppressive regimes of history (251). Jenkins (2015, 184–91) fails to see the limitations of reading the novel as “a new, ‘corrective’ version ... that redresses the ancient poem’s flawed depiction of female subjectivity” (184) and argues for the feminist potential of the work in Le Guin’s rewriting of the origins of Rome as a joining of “extended families” led and run by women (186).

13. Fowler (1987, 190–91), preceded by Lyne (1983, 55), who nevertheless intended it more in a moral than a concrete sense; cf. also Dyson 1999. See contra Cairns (2005), for whom *uiolauerit* only refers to the color crimson (206) and sexual violence is one of those “modern preconceptions to which Vergilian scholarship seems peculiarly susceptible” (210). Formicola (2006, 81) accepts the idea of violence, but prefers to see it as (more comfortably) metaphorical.

14. Crawford Clawsey wrote her MA thesis at the University of Maryland in 1972 on the Latin poetry of Lord Herbert of Cherbury, and then completed her PhD in 1982 on medieval epic. This poem seems to be her only published engagement with Vergil.

Will not withhold their blessing. Come.” He snuffed
The light.

She slept, tears on her flaxen lashes
For her dutifully yielded maidenhood.
She lacked the imagination to reflect
Ironically that now perhaps the seed
Of their illustrious posterity
Already germinated in her womb.
And yet she would have had to grant that he
Had been gentle with her.

He also slept,
His face engraved with cares even in sleep,
His dreams a jumble of the burning past
And meager consolation of the future.

Above, unseen, his golden mother smiled
And handed two darts to her capricious child.

Crawford Clawsey’s Lavinia, unlike Le Guin’s, is forced into a nonconsensual sexual encounter, in the dark, that annihilates her life-force (“he snuffed / the light”). Aeneas is an unknown and uncharismatic older man (a “stranger,” “a grave man twice her age,” “Fate’s choice”), who raises his voice menacingly when she attempts to hold back (“he ... bitterly demanded”). In stark contrast with Aeneas’s triple address (to the gods, to himself, to Lavinia), Lavinia’s thoughts are unspoken and unthinkable (the line “she lacked the imagination to reflect” points sardonically, too, at a lack of imagination in Vergil’s readers, who perpetuate her dehumanization). Glimpses of her agency are mediated through Aeneas’s gaze (“*he* saw her shrink from him”), her feelings conveyed not verbally but only by fleeting physical symptoms (not a blush but “tears on her flaxen lashes”). The poem sharpens awareness of what society expects Lavinia to “grant” and “yield” (“her dutifully yielded maidenhood,” “and yet *she would have had to grant* that he / had been gentle with her”), and of the structural power that conceals the conception of “illustrious posterity” by rape. The poem gestures toward critical discussion about what a feminist reading of silent Lavinia might entail, including to what extent an attentiveness to the subjectivity of female characters in male-authored texts risks identifying naively with thin manifestations of patriarchal constructs of female experience.¹⁵ In a later *Vergilius* article

15. Cf. Sharrock 2011, 71–72. Sharrock’s paper for this volume acknowledges the extent to which women, by definition, also internalize and reproduce misogyny,

from 1980, Ruth Todd attempted to retrieve the vulnerable subjectivity in Lavinia's nonverbal acts of communication, evoking Kristeva's "semiotic" order, when she interpreted the blush as a mark of individuality—"an eloquent and personal response to a deeply private emotion" (27)—in a poem that otherwise presents Lavinia not as "a voluntary participant but an involuntary adjunct ... a functional image, not an individual performing acts of her own choice" (28). Subsequently, scholars such as Francis Cairns (2005, 196) and Crescenzo Formicola (2006, 90 n. 42) retrieve only Todd's final suggestion that the blush may indicate her thought of marrying Aeneas, paying scant attention to her analysis of the character as an unspeaking subaltern. Formicola's conclusion, similar to Todd's, that Lavinia's nonverbal act of communication saves her from an "uncomfortable amorphousness" (93–94) declares no debt to feminist critique. Other scholars have shown little interest in Lavinia as a subject, analyzing her blush for what it might tell us about its viewer, Turnus.¹⁶

The interpretative challenges posed by Lavinia's absent-presence capture what has often emerged as the core quandary of feminist criticism of Vergil: How to engage with his texts in ways that draw out and interpret their biases and potential to produce paradoxical effects, and how to attempt to think outside the masculinist distortions of Vergilian scholarship, while also staying with an awareness both of our own complicity in those distortions and of the texts themselves as never purely recuperable or isolatable from their (complex, multidimensional) receptions? How to refute the history of philological analysis of ancient texts as expert excavation of imminent meaning emitting from the (nearly always male, elite) author, and how to give voice to the irrepressible life of poetic language itself, in accordance with post-structuralist critiques of phallogocentrism that are vitally politicized in feminist philosophy, without reinstating the same identitarian

gaining some conditional advantage from it (in conjunction, potentially, with other kinds of privilege): the question is how we then both understand and tolerate that fact, while also articulating how Vergil's representation of female misogyny (in woman-hating Juno, for example) is related to but *not the same as* the phenomenon of introjected misogyny in living women.

16. In this sense, the ostensibly opposed readings of Lyne and Cairns (the former "pessimistic," the latter "optimistic") coalesce around the male gaze: Lyne (1983, 62) writes that the blush "was imagined in order that we might understand something about Turnus" and Cairns (2005, 203) notes that "Lavinia was a modest maiden who was not in love with anyone" and that Turnus's gaze was not inherently violent, but was "simply excited by the increased physical attractiveness which Lavinia's maidenly blush gave her" (emphasis added). Jenkins (2015, 184) states, incorrectly for us, that Cairns "rescues the princess from earlier dismissals of her character as a passive, poorly characterized plot device."

logic of appropriation?¹⁷ Where and how does feminism as a corrective and oppositional movement for social justice rub abrasively against a deconstructive methodology in which political action is only possible in awareness of a near-intolerable aporetic? Feminism, in other words, is the mutable political and ethical space in which Vergil's "many-voicedness" (much vaunted in this volume) gets starkly real.

In his Marxist-feminist analysis of *Eclogue 6* for this issue, Tom Geue confronts this potential tension between polyphony/poetic play and a feminist politics when he reads out the exculpatory drive of "Callimachean aesthetics" in scholarship and diagnoses the poet-muse relation as "1 percent inspiration, 99 percent exploitation," before adding "you might object to that arithmetic as a little exaggerated." The notion that feminist critics exaggerate male violence or the gendered oppression of women qua women is itself a misogynistic trope, which must be refuted by (further) assertion. Yet we might still ask what gets lost, or what kind of ontological experiences of art get sacrificed, potentially, when the voice of vulnerable, imaginative critical engagement with ancient texts must also be the voice of noncompromising protest? Amid current political calls to decolonize the curriculum (often misrepresented, in the media at least, as a backlash against canonical authors exemplified by Homer and Vergil), we might recall Phyllis Culham's (1990) provocations in an unofficial WCC panel at the APA annual conference of 1985 ("Re-appropriating the Text: The Case of Ovid") when she suggested that a true feminist praxis should simply stop studying male-authored texts.¹⁸ Classicists responded, and continue to respond, by reading Vergilian women ever more self-consciously against the grain, after Judith Fetterley's (1978) model of "resistant reading." In what is perhaps the most powerful example of a feminist resistant reading meeting a pessimistic reading of the *Aeneid*, Christine Perkell (1997) rejected the interpretation of Vergilian laments, and specifically the final lament of Juturna, as "monologues of helpless, marginalized females" (267) and argued that they underpin the *Aeneid* as a poem of resistance opposed to the male ideology of war and imperial expansion. In Perkell's reading, Juturna's weakness as a violated female in the world of male political power is transformed into strength in the world of ethical ideas: "she lacks 'dominance,' but she is strong in 'moral authority,' because she is a pitiable victim of injustice"

17. Cf. Derrida 1992, 60; on the theological qualities of classical philology, see Gunderson 2020.

18. See also discussion in Rabinowitz and Richlin 1993, 9, Gold's article in the same volume, and Liveley 2006, 62–66. Sjöberg (2014) avoids all mention of Homer and Vergil in her analysis of the idealization of warfare in stories of the Trojan War.

(277). Comparable takes featured in Perzell's 1999 *Interpretive Guide* to Vergil, including Georgia Nugent's (1999) influential "Vanishing Bodies, Lingering Voices," (developed in different ways by Ulrich and Aresi in this volume) which reclaims Vergil's so-called subjective style as the triumph of the feminine voice qua pathos and of poetry itself,¹⁹ and Sarah Spence's (1999) reflection on how book 4's tragic texture pushes us to "identify with Dido," engaging us "on the side of difference and against the cause of empire, if only temporarily" (95). Here, Spence developed arguments tested in her 1988 monograph, where Dido is an "anomaly in the rhetorical system" who represents not just a threat to logocentric order but the possibility of something outside that order that is not simply a negative other; likewise, she argues, "Juno is the hero of the epic Vergil would have written, and in part did write" (24–36; also see her afterword in this volume).

Yet these readings of the *Aeneid*, often predicated on a pessimistic interpretation of the poem in the wake of the "two" or "further" voices proposed by Adam Parry (1963) and Oliver Lyne (1987), seem to have run out of steam as the undertheorized infrastructure of debates about the "pro-" or "anti-" Augustanism of the *Aeneid* has been critiqued and dismantled.²⁰ In her 2011 *EuGestA* article on Euryalus's mother, Alison Sharrock is "concerned to note how literary criticism from a feminist perspective seems somewhat to have lost its way since the third wave took hold in the early 1990s" (73). She attributes this shift to a combination of equality feminism having achieved many of its aims (a briefly fashionable trope that we might now view, sardonically, with a certain nostalgia) and the "post-structuralist gender theory" emerging from the post-Foucaultian work of Judith Butler (1991, xxx), who—we might add—after noting in the preface of *Gender Trouble* that the "radical dependency of the masculine subject on the female 'Other' suddenly exposes his autonomy as illusory," adds casually "that particular dialectical reversal of power ... couldn't quite hold my attention." In the conclusion to this essay, and in her paper on the forgotten, low-class women of the *Aeneid* for this volume, Sharrock resolutely begs to differ.

A second answer to Culham's denunciation came in the move to recover female perspectives outside the canon of the Greco-Roman literary texts, either in ancient material culture or in modern and contemporary receptions. Marilyn Desmond's (1993) explicitly feminist and postcolonial engagement with Dido, for example, uses the post-Vergilian reception of Dido to uncouple her from the male, Western canonical authorship that

19. See already Nugent 1992; both essays are discussed by Sharrock (2011, 70).

20. See especially Kennedy 1992 and Giusti 2016.

stopped Cixous recognizing her as a north-African foremother.²¹ Or, as Robert Cowan notes in this issue, in her 2019 article calling for more (eco-) feminist readings of the *Georgics*, Susanna Morton Braund focuses not on Vergil's text but on modern translations of the *Georgics* published by women. And in a recent talk inspired in part by Desmond's work, Josephine Quinn (2021) laid out ways of "reclaiming" the *pre-Vergilian* Phoenician Dido. Yet this issue enacts the claim that the (rhetorical or actual) rejection of canonical male texts, especially in the case of Vergil, would be counterproductive for feminist literary theory, and also misrepresents the particularity of ancient literary texts (especially, we might say, poetry) as not just historically contextualizable social documents but as distinctive, singular dimensions in which to explore the possibilities and impacts of our relating to others, across figurative and literal space and time. It's also important to affirm that political projects of working inclusively from the margins, and deconstructively from the center, are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, the preponderance of papers on the *Aeneid* (eight out of eleven) reflects not only the prestige accorded Vergil's epic as a memorial to patriarchal and imperialist order (a complicity we cannot and should not deny) but also the exigency for feminist classicists—of whichever sex, and however we conceive of our sexed and gendered bodies amid the conflicts of the third and fourth waves—to be on the front line of debates about which stories we tell about the past, and about how, exactly, (gendered) cultural ideology tells history. The tensions in feminist literary theory between identification and resistance, critique and affirmation, empathic attunement and radical defamiliarization, also drive the history of Classics as a discipline, and are activated most sharply, perhaps, in our encounters with the *Aeneid*, an old classic bristling—as we meet it—with unexpected strangeness (cf. Goldhill 2020). The space for imagining revolutionary change in our modern worlds can be opened up, we suggest, in the politics and phenomenology of those very oscillations. This in-between space is explored and theorized by several contributors to this volume, and especially by those who engage with queer theory, in its often uneasy interaction with post-structuralist feminisms (Pandey, Dressler, McAuley).

Gathered together in response to the spur "Vergil and the feminine," the papers in this volume do not so much cohere as suggest multiple positionalities, start and end points, degrees and kinds of engagement with (the reception of) feminist thought within the field of classical literature, and within the academy more broadly. This is, we might suggest, symptomatic both of the uneven levels of interest in theory among classicists working

21. See also Bono and Tessitore 1998; Ferguson 2003; Cox 2011.

with literary texts, and of the nongeneralizability of feminist thought, which starts with a critique of the concealed, universalizing tendency that conflates human with male/masculine and disappears female subjecthood. In many ways, in its oppositional and self-questioning attitude, its analysis of power from the margins, and deep investment in how representation and systems of signification operate, feminist thought has been paradigmatic of the kinds of interrogation performed by critical theory generally since the 1950s. Yet as a result there is a strong sense, now, in the field we call Classics, and in this volume, of the ramified messiness of feminist thought—as it emerges from and reaches across disciplines and between the academy and socio-political life—that in some ways marks the centrality of its analyses, and in other ways signals the tendency to appropriate, erase, dilute its distinctiveness under the nebulousness of “woman” as always a cipher, never quite a fully human subject.

The potential overlap between the nongeneralizable and the undefinable or indistinctive presents itself as a double-bind. For feminist thought, understood as an umbrella term for a web of interacting reading practices, methodologies, and modes of dissent, resisting the reduction of many into one, and two into one, and a commitment to the possibility of nonhierarchical relation between subjects (rather than to multiplicity per se), are politically and philosophically crucial. While the nonreducible plurality and diversity of women as people are political concepts in feminist thought, their potential pull against community, the possibility for collective action, and the recognition that women make up a (biological-cultural) sex class with particular, shared experience, has long constituted a core tension of modern feminisms. That tension surfaces in this volume as the idiosyncrasy of each of the papers, some of which sit awkwardly beside one another, as well as in several contributors’ allusions to contemporary feminist projects such as #metoo and #countingdeadwomen. With this tension in mind, in our role as editors we have endeavored not to file down the differences between the papers, and are wary of the fine line we tread in this introduction between tentative yet precise putting-in-relation and objectivizing synopsis. At the same time, points of contact, shared ground, and provocatively different takes on the same issues and passages do emerge, reminding us that intellectual-political communities must be actively and carefully cultivated if they are to flourish in a digitized, neoliberal age which fragments, atomizes, and isolates (even before Covid). Reverberations between the papers focusing on the *Aeneid* and those focused on the *Eclogues* and *Georgics* suggest new ways of engaging with the corpus as a whole, and its nexus of recurring themes, concepts, narratives, and affordances, through contemporary feminisms. Yet the overarching question that emerges, or is at times submerged, in the

papers, is what constitutes a feminist reading in the first place—or, more precisely, what kind of received notions do we as classicists and readers of Vergil have about the generalizability or diverse possibilities of “feminist readings,” what they do or might do, for whom?

On a macroscale, taken together, the papers act out the central dichotomy in feminist criticism outlined earlier in this introduction, in that they tend either to diagnose misogyny, the exploitation of women, and oppressive gender norms, or make moves to recover female voices, characters, ways of being in the world that are downgraded qua female/feminine, often in sympathy with what is construed as the text’s own disruptive or destabilizing potential. The question of whether and in what context those two methodologies (one damning, one recuperative) are compatible is a generalizable one for feminist thought but also has a particular edge for Classics as a field in crisis about its own value and implicatedness in reproducing structural oppressions rather than (or as well as) attending ethically to their long and complex evolution.²² Alongside this live dichotomy, the majority of the papers slide between unconcealing the misogyny or masculinist myopia of classical scholarship, and focusing on the gendered assumptions and affordances of Vergil’s texts themselves—a slippage that reveals the degree to which these modes of analysis are inseparable. One way of defining the process of “feminist reading” is as full immersion in the question of who gets to determine what or how texts mean *as* an acutely political wrestling between competing claims to power, creative potential, visibility.

Thus, for Geue, *Eclogue* 6 is “deeply complicit in the system of Roman gendered imperialism from which it emerged ... a poem steeped in a male voice habituated to interacting with the world via command.” Yet his reading is also an assertive and rhetorically self-conscious reaction to the “subtle collusion between Vergil and scholarship,” which minimizes and normalizes rape, and “actively reproduces an intertextual homosociality *between* poets that echoes the homosociality *in* the poem.” Jeffrey Ulrich’s paper on *Aeneid* 5 lingers empathically in the Trojan women’s oppositional experience of being in time and allows their othered voices to seep through the poem as a whole, pushing back again against the familiar weight of structuralist readings, which tend to delineate and reinscribe the hierarchies latent in binary oppositions (“masculine” *imperium* over “feminine” *furor*; reason over emotion; phallic drive over regressive circularity) for which the

22. Cf. Farrell (2021, 32–33, where the emphasis is exclusively on race, and *passim*) on the ethical challenges posed by the *Aeneid* and its critical reception.

master-binary is man over woman.²³ Nandini Pandey's paper, from another angle, observes the freezing out of the Trojan women's subjectivity as a condition of possibility for Trojan men's appropriation of Italian women's bodies, which is in turn a precondition for the emergence of Rome. In Pandey's recuperative reading of the making of the shield in *Aeneid* 8, the simile comparing Vulcan's labor of the long-suffering housewife is seen to bring "the gendered fullness of human experience back into an epic world where masculinity reigns." The same scene is approached quite differently by Alex Dressler, who argues that the ambivalent figure of art as teacher (*arte magistra*, *Aen.* 8.422, where *ars*, in Latin, happens to be feminine) stands queerly between Vulcan-as-housewife and Venus-as-phallic-mother. Sharrock, working with a similar intersectional axis (gender-race-class), pushes against the occlusion of minor female characters and low-status women in the *Aeneid* and in scholarship on it, alongside Perkell, who revisits her 1981 piece and shines a light on the gendered ethics of *pietas* in the epic, refusing to participate in Aeneas's/the poem's disappearance of Creusa. Laura Aresi considers the "ambiguous exclusion" of Circe and the Sirens from the *Aeneid's* narrative, and understands the performed dialogue between Vergil and Homer as an appropriative homosocial contest in constructing the feminine.

Aresi's paper can be seen to converse with Erin Hanses's exploration of a similar dialogue between Vergil (in the *Georgics*) and Lucretius. Hanses argues that the *Georgics* "defeminize" the concept of *natura* in agonistic response to a *natura* gendered as female and associated with the female body in Lucretius's Epicurean, materialist world. Instead, she argues, generation in the *Georgics* becomes the masculine endeavor of Jupiter and male characters like Deucalion. Yet both Lucretius's association of *natura* with femininity and Vergil's "defeminization" of *natura* rest on the same bedrock of male epistemological superiority and entitlement, which in Lucretius (as Nugent 1994 argued) justifies male philosophical transcendence of base corporeal matter/the female, and in Vergil props up masculine control and appropriation of all forms of generation and reproduction. As the ecofeminist analysis underscores, patriarchal domination patterns all other forms of material exploitation, including slavery (see again articles by Sharrock and Geue), and begins from the extractive exploitation of the earth. Revisiting the ever-evolving controversies around how to respond to the

23. Structuralist readings of the *Aeneid* take shape in Pöschl 1962; cf. Hardie 1986; Heinze 1993 (German original 1903). They do important groundwork for feminist-deconstructive analysis yet stop short of bringing the hierarchization implicit in (yet not necessarily germane to) binary oppositions into focus from a feminist perspective.

patriarchal construct women = nature, Cowan's paper offers a contrasting view of the *Georgics* as a text in which the project to feminize nature (and implicitly, to naturalize woman) is overt. The question that emerges in the dialogue between Cowan's and Hanses's essays is a thorny one for feminist debates, especially in the trickle-down tensions between French feminism (long critiqued, and often misread, as essentialist), ecofeminism, and the posthumanist/transhumanist-feminist thinkers from Donna Haraway (e.g., 1991) to Sophie Lewis (2019). That is, to what extent can the body "ground feminist inquiry," as Hanses puts it, when the reduction of women to bodies-without-minds, and the violence by which the appropriation of those sexed bodies as a reproductive resource, weapon, and supply of pleasure for men is enforced, is so unconcealed in feminist thought?²⁴ Yet to "uncouple women and nature" in the sense of disconnecting gender as a tool of oppression from the sexed particularity of female bodies, is not the same as rejecting, qua cultural construct, the logic whereby woman-nature warrants the subordination of female to male. Reading Vergil reminds us that we cannot understand patriarchy as a historical phenomenon if we do not consider how it arises from a complex, context-specific interaction of actual materiality and ideas, overlaid by the cultural subordination of "feminine" materiality to "masculine" idea. To observe essentialism is not necessarily to endorse it, or to project its inevitability; on the contrary, as several contributors implicitly acknowledge, that observation or critical awareness may be a necessary step in articulating, modeling, and putting into practice relational ways of being.

Another productive, though less explicit, interchange takes place between Pandey's and McAuley's papers on the *Aeneid*. Whereas Pandey provokes by envisaging the "specular" shield in *Aeneid* 8 as not just projecting a masculine maiuetics that mimics and enfolds female care and reproduction into its own image, but as offering us a visible valorization of that labor, McAuley addresses vision as the privileged sense in image-centric Augustan Rome, as in Vergilian epic, and feels for different ways of engaging with the *Aeneid* through (the representation of) touch. To attempt to think "tactically" and "sensually" *with* Vergil as mind-bodies, she argues, is to jettison the gendered, logocentric positions implicit in a hermeneutics of suspicion and to enter into a different kind of phenomenological and antiphallocentric engagement with the text that is as much about the possibility of being touched as it is about touching. Here, as in Dressler's and Pandey's explorations of the making of Aeneas's shield, we sense a

24. On the trajectory of debates around this question in feminist thought, see Threadcraft 2016 with further bibliography.

sidestepping of the long-standing dichotomy in feminist literary criticism between identifying oppressive gender norms on one hand, and seeking to transform them by reading against the grain on the other, either by focusing on what has remained unseen, or by harnessing the deconstructive potential of poetic language. McAuley asks whether reading for bodily intimacy and affective involvement with antiquity precludes detached critique of its power structures, and her answer is, implicitly, both yes and no. Speaking to Perkell's account of Creusa's forgetting, and to Viola Starnone's reading of Dido's maternity, she notes (with Michael Putnam) the prototypical trajectory in the poem whereby Aeneas is weaned from an emotional attachment that is figured as feminine, in the service of patriarchal invulnerability and imperialist fantasies of sovereignty and domination. Yet her phenomenological reading, informed by the contiguities between French feminist philosophy, Derridean deconstruction, affect theory, and queer theory, also allows McAuley to respond to the way "Vergil's language lingers over the relationship between touching and feeling, gesture and texture" and to experience the poem's elusive or futile embraces as both capturing and *generating* a longing for connection and bodily intimacy. This sense of longing converses with and intensifies the provocations of Starnone's paper, which draws out the interconnectedness of erotic and maternal love in the *Aeneid*, after Mairéad McAuley's *Reproducing Rome* (2016). Starnone shows how Venus's maternal love for Aeneas, and her "infection" of Dido, through Cupid-Ascanius, with the "violence" of a mother's attachment and desire, propels a counterdynamic in which emotional entanglement (albeit one that, in the *Aeneid's* terms, would not inform a feminist ethics of care) cannot be overridden by militaristic fantasies of masculine inviolability.

Crucially, that sensitization to traumatically frustrated desire has the effect of putting the reader's (even the classical scholar's) yearnings and affective-as-political complicity up front and center, in ways that resound through many of the companion papers in the volume and pose important questions for feminist literary theory. The subjective emotional longing for classical texts to speak to us differently, to offer gaps for female liberation and empowerment, or to promise a redistribution of power, can mask itself beneath another kind of critical status quo, and new versions of disembodied critical mastery. The desire to vaunt female agency, for instance, in its bid to escape the trauma of dehumanization and to reclaim irreducible female subjectivity, risks legitimizing sexual violence and redeploying ideas of sovereign agency that envisage the acting agent as nondependent, autonomous being (see McNay 2016). As Cowan cautions in his critical survey of the potential for ecofeminist readings of the *Georgics*, the notion that the female *tellus* "swells" and "demands" to be inseminated

by *pater omnipotens* ... *Aether*, with his “fertile showers” (*fecundis imbribus*) at *Georgics* 2.324 (*tument terrae et genitalia semina poscunt*) is all very convenient and self-legitimizing for the father. And as Val Plumwood (1993, 38; quoted by Cowan) notes, the opposition often being both rejected and revisited in readings for agency is a conventional one: “As dualised nature, conceived as inert, passive, nonsubjects, women have offered a fertile field for such control and manipulation by a rationality which structures women’s experience of reproduction in two Cartesian halves: the suffering body deprived of agency, and the mastering, external rational agent.” Agency, a concern of these and several other papers in the volume (including Dressler on the agency or autonomy of *ars* itself), is a key conceptual term and flashpoint both for contemporary feminisms and for classical studies, as the authors of *Postclassicism*s (2020, 47–64, “Agency”) discuss.

Yet Cowan also suggests that the representation of nature as a military enemy that can and will fight back in *Georgics* 1 offers a radically different conceptualization. Cowan’s attunement to the poem’s “anxieties” about its own unfixed representations of nature gets us to meditate, once again, on what is at stake for a feminist politics in reading for “further voices” in Vergil as a normative critical practice. Does the farmer’s preemptive “attack” on nature not as ally but as masculinized enemy stand in “conflict” with a competing imaginary of nature as passive female body, when the misogynist construct of the sexually aggressive, phallic female has always been the ever-present shadow of the good virgin and nurturing mother? We are reminded that mass rape as a mode of terrorization germane to all warfare is sanctioned—within the logic of war—as the *preemptive* suppression of bodies that are reproductive resources for enemy troops and can consequently be imagined as “belonging to” and as indistinguishable from hostile soldiers.²⁵ If the feminist literary critic’s power to have some transforming impact on the text (and within an academic community) is often predicated on identifying with and channeling the empowerment of female subjects in texts, it is worth recognizing, with Geue, just how horrific and overwhelming it can be to dwell on the extent and impact of structural male violence as it propels colonialism, racial oppression, human trafficking, and ecocide. In the fertile ground between Cowan’s and Geue’s essays, in dialogue with several other contributors’ reinvestment in the pleasure of the text (Pandey, Dressler, Starnone, McAuley), we find ourselves stuck with the question of to what extent we need to relinquish, or transform, our conceptualization of Vergil’s texts as arenas for recuperative intellectual

25. See essays on “War, Violence and Militarization” in Evans et al. 2014, 529–621, with further bibliography.

play and aesthetic or sensuous pleasure, if we are to confront the political consequences of our vulnerability, constitutive interdependency, and ethical responsibility toward others.

To put it another way: How to explore, and indeed enact, a way of being that doesn't simply critique but dances outside the patriarchal-philological premise of acting *on*, rather than with, or in relation to? How might we stay with the politics of complicity while resisting the traumatic and insidious impulse of self-harm and self-shaming? And to what extent are female critics still acculturated to do the work of reparation—or in banal terms, the work of making everything ok for everyone else—in scholarship as in life? The papers that follow attempt to answer these and other questions, and to reimagine the future of Vergilian studies in a spirit of commitment to feminist inquiry and praxis at the very center of what we call “Classics.”

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