NODUM INFORMIS LETI

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Vergil’s Amata has drawn more attention from classical scholars in recent years. Apart from writers of general studies on Vergil, like Brooks Otis, Kenneth Quinn, Michael Putnam and others, who have dealt with Amata in passing, Hans Jörg Schweizer and John W. Zarker have published separate studies on the queen. These two scholars seem to examine, more or less in parallel, Vergilian and more broadly Italian links in the story of Amata. In this paper I intend to treat certain aspects of the Amata problem which have been touched but lightly, and often inconclusively, by the commentators of Vergil: first, I will look more closely at the Aeneid passage dealing with the death of the queen, and then, I will investigate Vergil’s models for the same passage and the significance of Amata’s hanging per se.

The violent end of Amata, wife of King Latinus and mother of Lavinia, is framed, in Vergil’s Aeneid, by the description of the defence of Laurentum against the attacking Trojans (the Latins are aptly compared to bees overwhelmed in their chambers by smoke) and the wailing of the city over the suicide of their queen. The incident of Amata’s self-destruction is described as follows:

Accidit haec fessis etiam fortuna Latinis,
quae totam luctu concussit funditus urbem.
regina ut tectis uenientem prospicit hostem,
incessi muros, ignis ad tecta uolare,
nusquam acies contra Rutulas, nulla agmina Turni,
infelix pugnae iuuenem in certamine credit
extinctum et subito mentem turbata dolore
se causam clamat crinemque caputque malorum,
multaque per maestum demens effata furorem
purpureos moritura manu discindit amictus
et nodum informis leti trabe nectit ab alta. (12.593-603)

A new misfortune now befell the exhausted Latins, so grave that it shook the whole city to its foundations. The queen had looked forth from her apartments and seen the enemy approaching, the walls under the threat of attack, and flames flying up to the roofs, but nowhere any Rutulian battle-line to confront the attackers, and no sign of the army which Turnus led. The poor queen believed that the young prince had lost his life in the battle's conflict; and, with her mind distraught, in sudden agony she cried out that she was herself the culprit, the whole cause and source of the calamity. Frantic, demented, she poured out her heart in words of grief; and, intent on ending her life, violently rent her purple robes and attached a noose of rope to a beam on high in preparation for an ugly death.

(translation by W. F. Jackson Knight)

As accido generally expresses something negative and is, in this sense, opposed to evenio, the passage is aptly introduced with accidit. The word fortuna then stands for ‘accident’, ‘misfortune’, and is rightly translated as such by Jackson Knight. This first line might have sufficed as introduction to the event of Amata’s death, but the poet chose, apparently on the example of tragedy, to stress his point by rounding up the introduction in a second line full of resonant words: luctu, concussit, funditus.

For the rest of the passage, we note the shifting from the past forms accidit and concussit to the more vivid presents prospicit, credit, clamat, discindit, nectit, to describe the emotional stages through which the queen passes rapidly, in a crescendo fashion, until the moment of self-annihilation. We may observe here the pathetic negatives nus quam and nulla, and the position of infelix. The adjective belongs to regina but is ingeniously separated from it to introduce, by suggestion, the very reason of Amata’s tragedy, that is her secret attachment to Turnus. Also, the force of the queen’s guilt is, I think, stressed by the alliteration of c in causam clamat crinemque caputque of line 599, whereas regina and purpureos . . . amictus, terms declarative of a high status, are effectively contrasted with nodum informis leti of line 603.

This last line, which describes the actual hanging of Amata, seems to be a verbal reminiscence of Homer Odyssey 11.278 which, together with the line preceding it, are found in the larger reference to Jocasta (called here Epicasta) (Odyssey 11.271–280), whose shade Odysseus sees in the underworld:

4. Cf. Di Cesare (n. 1 above), p. 222: ‘Her (Amata’s) link with Turnus is emphasized (…) she is regina and infelix, incorporating the destruction and death of the city (…) the image of her death (…) suggests fully enough what the outcome would have been had she lived and Turnus lived’.

5. The line is certainly hard to translate. Neither Jackson Knight’s rendition nor C. D. Lewis: ‘and hung from a beam the noose that would horribly make an end of her’ make justice to the Latin; nectit has a double value; it both declares the tying of the noose and evokes the image of the hanging queen.
In fact, Vergil’s line may be said to be a more or less close translation of the Homer line. Βρόχον becomes nodum and τραβε ἀβ ἀλα is certainly Homer’s ἄφ’ ἐνηλότο μελάθρου; the form ἄψαμήνη is rendered by necit; αἰτήν (hanging down) is left out as superfluous, and Vergil fills up his line with informis leti, a comment by him on Amata’s method of self-destruction and a key phrase for our understanding of his decision to have her hang. Aeneid 12.603 is a good example of Vergil’s ability to incorporate and adapt borrowed material in his poetry. In Homer, the main thing is that Jocasta is dead and seen by the hero among the shades of illustrious dead in Hades; we are given her case-history and, simply as an extra piece of information, the detail of her death. In Vergil, the fact of the queen’s suicide is central; it is the inescapable outcome of dementia; it also plunges the city in mourning. Nectit, a vivid present (in contrast to the past participle ἄψαμήνη), suggests, as has been noted, both the action of tying the noose and of dying therein.

The scene of Amata’s death in Vergil is indeed, as Conington remarked early, not so much in the spirit of Homer but of Greek tragedy, and although the Latin poet does not seem to borrow any given detail from the Jocasta passage in Sophocles Oedipus Rex 1234–1264, his scene is dramatized very much on the model of the Greek writer. Both Jocasta and Amata lose their royal composure when they realize their loss; both heap curses, Jocasta on her family, especially Laius, Amata on herself; Jocasta plucks off her hair, Amata tears her purple robes; and for both dying is the only way out.

This brings us to the question of why Vergil chose to ‘hang’ his queen rather than ‘burn’ her respectably, as he did with Dido, or have her throw herself down the walls of her royal palace. Servius (commenting on nodum informis leti) thinks that Vergil used informis in order to suggest the disgrace of hanging and also avoid the more forceful

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6. J. Conington finds that nodum informis leti is imitated from Eur. Hipp. 802 βρόχον κρημασόν ἄτηγόν (a hanging noose of rope). It is probable that Vergil knew the line but his initial model for Aen. 12. 603 seems to have been Homer.
8. In n. 5 above.
9. None of the other scenes of hanging in Greek poetry, discussed below, seems to have contributed in terms of form and language to the Vergil passage.
10. There was actually a tradition that Amata had starved herself to death. Cf. Servius, on Aen. 12. 603: ‘alii dicunt quod inedia se interemerit’. It may be also worth noting that on a bronze cista (chest) from Praeneste, of late Hellenistic times, the illustration celebrating the victory of Aeneas over Turnus features, apart from Latinus, Lavinia and Amata. The latter looks very much alive and apparently still furious. See A. Alföldi, Early Rome and the Latins (The University of Michigan Press, 1971), p. 257 and plate XVII.
word *deformis* which would not become the dignity of a queen.\(^{11}\) Hanging was thought to be a particularly disgraceful kind of death. The pontifical books, as Servius reports, had a special clause condemning it, and we may speculate about the reasons of this *horror suspendii*: the sight of a hanging person is specially uninviting; the ancients widely believed that blood, the vehicle of life, had to be shed in order to free the soul from the body; or (less probably) people, who had originally hanged themselves and had been left unburied not so much for choosing this method of self-destruction but for committing some particularly hideous crime, made the notion of hanging unpopular. The pontifical books did indeed prescribe that those who hanged themselves should be cast out unburied.\(^{12}\)

By way of quoting Cassius Hemina, Servius offers an explanation of the custom in the story, according to which, at the time of Tarquinius Superbus many people, who had been made by that king to dig out the sewers of Rome and had felt outraged as a result, hanged themselves and their bodies were put on the cross as a post-mortem punishment. ‘That was the first occasion in which inflicting death upon oneself was held to be shameful’, adds Servius. Here, it seems, we move from the question of hanging to suicide in general; but even if we particularize Servius’ *se consciscere* (inflicting death upon oneself) to mean ‘self-hanging’, the incident, which Servius relates, sounds like a typical aetiological story, meant to explain the custom of denying burial rites to those who had hanged themselves.

Further, Servius (drawing this time his information from Varro) reports that the memory of those who had hanged themselves (*suspendiosi*) was honoured by the suspension of *oscilla* (little masks) (presumably representing the dead).\(^{13}\)

Although Servius’ comment on *Aeneid* 12.603 raises questions of an antiquarian and, more particularly, religious nature (the origin of the public aversion to hanging and the religious practices associated with it), it suggests quite strongly the existence among the Romans of an abhorrence of hanging and accounts, in this way, for Vergil’s choice of hanging for Amata. But one

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\(^{12}\) Cf. *CIL* I. 1418; *Dess.* 7846. The inscription comes from Sassinae Umbriae. Someone whose name seems to be Horatius Balbus offers burial from his own land to his fellow-citizens; he excludes, however, from the privilege those who were to hang themselves.

\(^{13}\) Such a custom which is not attested, as far as I know, elsewhere, should be distinguished from the custom of hanging on trees ‘little masks’ in honour of Bacchus mentioned by Vergil in *G.* 7.388–389:

\[ et te, Bacche, vocant per carmina laeta, tibique \\
oscilla ex alta suspendunt mollia pinu. \]

The idea was that the masks representing Bacchus would be turned around in different directions by the wind and would thus promote fertility (Macrobr. *Sat.* 1.7).
could go further than Servius and the modern commentators of Virgil, who also seem not to realize fully the implications of Virgil's 'hanging' of Amata. Conington reproduces Servius' comment without any criticism of his own. Page cites Servius' piece of information about the pontifical books, adding that although [sic] in Greek tragedy Jocasta and Phaedra hang themselves, the Romans appear to have thought of hanging as repulsive. Maguiness states that in Rome, would-be suicides avoided hanging as too horrible a type of death. He does not account for this statement which, I suppose, he may have derived, indirectly, from Servius. Fowler's comment is more interesting:

The answer to this question (that is, how could Virgil have a queen of Latium hang) is not simply ... that Virgil is thinking of Jocasta ... or Phaedra ... and writing, so to speak, in terms of Greek tragedy. It is that Amata was out of her mind at the time, overwhelmed with grief and shame, and with the shock of the supposed death of Turnus ... It was not a deliberate suicide like that of Dido, but done in wild and sudden passion ... Virgil meant to paint this Italian queen as he painted the Italian warrior in Turnus, subject to ungovernable fits of fury.

Pöschl goes one step further in his brief note on Amata: 'this letum informe is a mark of the queen's unallayed evil, not merely ... a mode of death usual in tragedy'. Both Fowler and Pöschl have, I think, their finger on the right spot, although I am pressed by Pöschl's remark to point out that shame and madness underlie the cases of self-hanged people in Greek tragedy, too, and that no distinction should be made, on this, between Virgil's Amata and those of other people.

The association of great shame with hanging is found clearly stated in Homer's passage about Jocasta referred to earlier. Though in ignorance of mind, says the poet, the queen committed a monstrous crime by wedding her own son. In Sophocles we have manifestations of this great shame in the queen's last actions: the curses on the house of Laius and the beatings of the royal bed disgraced by the unnatural union.

Shame also underlies, indirectly, the suicide of Jocasta's daughter Antigone, who hangs herself in her 'stone-roofed tomb', in Sophocles Antigone 1221-1222. The maiden dies for a noble cause and she is, morally if not legally, clean from any crime. But apart from the fact that having her hang was the most practical

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17. W. F. Gosling and J. J. Smith, Virgil's Aeneid XII (London, 1962), commenting also on Aen. 12.603, note simply that Romans seem to have considered hanging repulsive.
solution, from a theatrical point of view, for Sophocles, we may recall who she is: the very daughter of the self-hanged Jocasta, offspring of a shameful union and a member of the accursed house of Labdacus. As the notion of a family sin going down the family line was widespread among the ancients, neither Sophocles nor his Athenian audience had any difficulty in imagining Antigone to hang ἔπειτα μετόδει σινδόνος (in a stringy noose made from a sheet).

In Euripides also we find hanging associated with shame, issuing from some great error, not only in the case of Phaedra who dies in a noose (Hippolytus 777), but also in the case of Leda who reportedly hanged herself from shame over Helen’s elopement with Paris (Helen 134–136, 200–203, 686–687). Helen herself is rebuked by Hecuba for choosing to live rather than to hang herself (Troades 1012–1013).20

Another lady who dispatches herself by hanging is Cleite, wife of Cyzicus, King of the Doönes (Apollonius Argonautica 1.1063–1065). The reason is her shame over the circumstances of her husband’s death; for he was accidentally killed by Jason, the very man the king had been a host to shortly before. Apollonius compares Cleite’s deed with the misfortune suffered by Cyzicus and finds it κόντρα τον χρόνο (more dog-like, more shameful).21 Cleite’s case parallels that of Erigone who hangs herself from a tree at discovering the body of her father Icarius, killed by shepherds whom the old man had previously entertained with wine.22

With all this background of illustrious women hanging themselves for being implicated, directly or indirectly, in some grave error, it is not surprising that Vergil decided to ‘execute’ Amata this way and stress, by so doing, her shame and fury. The contrast between the dignity of a queen and her disgraceful end becomes a highly dramatic device in the Aeneid. In conclusion then, we may say that in having Amata hang Vergil voices popular opinion which held

20. Cf. also Eur. Andr. 811, 843. Having second thoughts about her maltreatment of Andromache and fearing the return of Neoptolemus Hermione attempts to hang herself; in Or. 953 1035–1036 hanging seems a better choice for Orestes and Electra than being stoned by the mob of Argos.
21. The translation ‘worse’ by E. V. Rieu The Voyage of Argo, the Argonautica (Penguin, 1959), is, in this respect, weak.
22. Apollod. Bibl. 3.14.7; Hyg. Fab. 130. The Athenian virgins also started to hang themselves from trees until Erigone’s ghost was appeased by the establishment of the festival of ‘Swings’, at which a song called ‘the wanderer’s song’ was sung in memory of Erigone (cf. also Athen. 14.618e) and small images were suspended in her honour from trees. Erigone, who is mentioned in association with Dionysus-Liber by Ovid (Met. 6.125) was placed after her death in the constellation of Virgo. There may be some connection between the Athenian festival of ‘Swings’ and the Roman custom of the ‘Little Masks’ in honour of Bacchus (see n. 13 above).
hanging to be disgraceful, but at the same time he follows a long literary tradition which invariably associated hanging with some grave error and the shame issuing from it. With hardly an exception, the people who hang themselves in epic and drama are women. The cases of these women have their individual features. Jocasta and Antigone are ultimately destroyed by Apollo; Venus is to be held responsible for the death of Phaedra; behind the hanging of Cleite we may see the finger of Ares or of an outraged Zeus Protector of Hosts; and it is Juno who drives Amata to fury and death. The magnitude and intensity of the god-inspired error and the shame issuing from it vary with the case, but the error and the shame are always hard to bear and the outlet is hanging, informe letum.

The inevitable question which emerges from our investigation is why it is only women who hang in the ancient literary tradition. The answer is, I think obvious and need not be stated in too many words. The ancient Greco-Roman society was a patriarchal society and self-hanging was considered not dignified enough for a man. Poets have chosen to follow, in this, convention. So, even Ajax who made a great fool of himself by slaughtering innocent sheep which he took for men and lashed at a sheep which he took for Odysseus dies by his own sword (in Sophocles Ajax). Vergil’s Turnus, the other great opponent of destiny, dies also ferro; he is a man and also a warrior; hanging would be unthinkable for him. On the other hand, it is high-standing women who hang, not only because ancient poetry, especially drama and epic, usually dealt with such personages, but also because it is dramatically more effective to ‘hang’ a queen than a maid.

23. In hanging the sinful maids, in Hom. Od. 22,465–473, Telenachus and Eurycleia certainly represent public views. Whether all cases of such family or state executions in Greek and Roman times followed shameful acts on the part of the condemned is not certain. Pliny (HN 18.12) reports that the Twelve Tables prescribed hanging to Ceres (suspensum ... Cereri necari) of the adult who, by stealth at night, cut the crops of others or had his animals pasture on them. Otherwise, hanging (ad furcam damnatio) was certainly one of the modes of execution under Roman law, and I suspect that at times hanging may have been preferred to other methods for practical rather than moral reasons. The ancient Germans also used to hang traitors and deserters (Tac. Germ. 12: proditores et transfugias arboribus suspendunt). In later periods, in England and other countries hanging became the usual form of capital punishment.

24. I have come upon one exception. In Theoc. Id. 23 a man hangs himself outside the door of the cruel youth who had spurned his love (a Corydon–Alexis relationship gone too far). The unique background of this case of self-hanging does not seem to violate the general rule of hanging women in ancient poetry.

25. Unlike Dido, whose death on the pyre has a purificatory effect on her tragedy (‘the pettiness has been transcended in the final grandeur of self-destruction’, as Kenneth Quinn notes in Latin Explorations. Critical Studies in Roman Literature (London, 1963), p. 58), Amata’s method of self-destruction stresses the illicit element in her behaviour.
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