

DEATH-LORATION: THE EROTICIZATION  
OF DEATH IN THE *THEBAID*\*

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My original intention for this paper was to examine the deaths of a number of warrior-virgins in Statius' *Thebaid* and to put forward two propositions: one, that a significant number could be read as a narrative of perverse defloration, and two, that the diction employed in the descriptions of death contains such powerful elements of elegiac language that a strongly eroticized picture of these doomed youths emerges. It soon became clear, however, that such a project was far too ambitious for the scope of this paper: so I have chosen to focus on the death of the Arcadian warrior-youth Parthenopaeus, in Book 9 of the *Thebaid*,<sup>1</sup> and to consider two elements in his death. These are his apparent modelling on the virgin warrior-queen Camilla in Book 11 of the *Aeneid* and the resulting portrayal of his death as a defloration, and the emphasis placed on his snow-white countenance, distorted by dark red blood, and his hairlessness and languid appearance. Thus the death of Parthenopaeus may be read within a framework of boy versus man, and this opposition is couched within terms of femininity; that is, his feminization underscores his lack of masculinity. The strong association with Camilla lends a powerful sense of violation to his death, whilst the imagery usually associated with elegy enhances the intimations of erotic beauty.

Before commencing the main thrust of my argument, it is appropriate to acknowledge my debt to Fowler's article 'Vergil on Killing Virgins', which did much to enable such a discourse in the first place, and on which this piece aims to build.<sup>2</sup> In it, he establishes the links between the imagery of defloration and that of the death of virgins in the *Aeneid*, and argues convincingly that 'wherever the idea of blood and the idea of

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<sup>1</sup> See Stat. *Theb.* 9. 570–907.

<sup>2</sup> D. P. Fowler, 'Vergil on Killing Virgins', in M. Whitby, P. Hardie and M. Whitby (edd.), *Homo Viator: Classical Essays for John Bramble* (Bristol, 1987), 185–98.

virginity are collocated, it makes sense for the reader to think of defloration.<sup>3</sup> It is this reading which provides a backdrop for my own reading of the *Thebaid*.

Critics have recognized that Camilla provides the strongest, though by no means the only, model of death for Parthenopaeus. The importance of this, however, has scarcely been analysed to a meaningful degree. Not only is the diction of their deaths strikingly similar, but the links between the two characters are set up throughout the *Thebaid*, thus strengthening the claim for the influence of Vergil's Camilla on Statius' Parthenopaeus. It is essential, then, briefly to examine the similarities between the two from the outset, rather than merely making the somewhat superficial assertion that Statius has drawn on the death of Camilla. In doing this, I hope to establish the full import of this assertion in terms of sexuality.

Both are virgins,<sup>4</sup> both dedicated to Diana and both will be avenged by her (in the case of Parthenopaeus) or her agent (Opis avenges the death of Camilla).<sup>5</sup> Camilla is described as a maiden, *virgo*, as soon as she is introduced in the epic<sup>6</sup> and is repeatedly thus described or, indeed, addressed in the course of Book 11.<sup>7</sup> And Parthenopaeus' very name highlights his virginal status as well as the ambiguity of his gender: Parthenopaeus means 'girl-boy' or 'maiden-face'.<sup>8</sup> He is also consistently referred to as a boy, *puer*.<sup>9</sup> Thus he has clearly not attained sexual maturity. The dedication of both Camilla and Parthenopaeus to Diana, goddess of chastity, confirms the virginal status of each.<sup>10</sup> Diana is also, of course, the goddess of hunting and it is no less significant that both Camilla and Parthenopaeus are primarily

<sup>3</sup> Fowler (n. 2), 185.

<sup>4</sup> The theme of virginity is more relevant to girls than to boys, suggesting, perhaps, that when it is made explicit for boys, they are in some ways feminized.

<sup>5</sup> For the revenge of Diana on those who killed those who were sacred to her, see Verg. *Aen.* 11. 836–67; Stat. *Theb.* 9. 875–6.

<sup>6</sup> Verg. *Aen.* 7. 806.

<sup>7</sup> Verg. *Aen.* 11. 507; 11. 508; 11. 536, which Servius D takes to refer as much to Camilla as to Opis; 11. 565; 11. 664; 11. 676; 11. 718; 11. 762; 11. 778; 11. 791; 11. 808; 11. 841.

<sup>8</sup> P. R. Hardie, *The Epic Successors of Virgil* (Cambridge, 1993), 48. The derivation of Parthenopaeus' name was a subject of debate even among ancient scholars: see M. Dewar at Stat. *Theb.* 9. 613; xxx–xxxI. Virgil kills a young Parthenius at 10. 747–8: see A. Cuchiarelli, 'Virgil on Killing Parthenius', *CJ* 97 (2001), 51–5.

<sup>9</sup> Stat. *Theb.* 4. 256; 6. 602; 6. 628; 8. 743; 9. 666; 9. 716; 9. 744; 9. 780; 9. 810; 9. 877; 9. 892; 10. 421; 10. 427; 10. 440; 12. 127.

<sup>10</sup> They may both also be linked to Hippolytus, that other doomed virgin dedicated to Diana. For Camilla, this is strengthened by the proximity of Hippolytus Virbius and Camilla in the catalogue of Verg. *Aen.* 7. 761–82, and is again emphasized in Hippolytus' *amore Dianae* (7. 769) and Camilla's *Dianae . . . amor* (11. 537–8).

hunters. Indeed, hunting is crucial to Camilla's *aristeia*, and she is a huntress (*venatrix*) when she embarks upon her fatal quest for Chloereus.<sup>11</sup> At *Theb.* 9. 712–21, Diana herself recognizes that Parthenopaeus was only just ready for hunting and is thus not prepared for battle, which will result in certain death. She lays out the logic of the book: he who is scarcely fit for hunting will find death in warfare. Thus she emphasizes Parthenopaeus' youth – *puer, cruda* . . . *festinaque virtus, parve*.<sup>12</sup> She makes it clear that he cannot even rival the hunting weapons of his mother (indeed, that hunting itself is 'scarcely safe' for him without the tutelage of his mother); how, then, can he expect to succeed in battle? While Camilla's *hubris* lies in her entry to the world of a *vir* as a female, that of Parthenopaeus – for all his impressive and appealing precocity – lies in his entry into the world of a *vir* as a *puer*. But the strength of the association also affiliates Camilla to Parthenopaeus in a feminine sense, as does his boyish beauty.

Let us move on to their deaths. Camilla's occurs as she chases Chloereus in her desire for booty. She is unaware of the weapon of Arruns coming through the air, and it pierces her through her naked breast: *hasta sub exsertam donec perlata papillam / haesit virgineumque alte bibit acta cruorem* ('The spear pierced her bare nipple, clung there and, driven deep, drank the virgin blood').<sup>13</sup>

The imagery is significant. She is killed by a *hasta*, a weapon which can easily be seen to possess certain sexual connotations.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, this sexually connoted weapon 'drinks deep of her virgin blood'. Now, as Fowler rightly says, it is easy to connect this with the moment of defloration.<sup>15</sup> And we might – as Heuzé does, and Fowler agrees – wish

<sup>11</sup> Verg. *Aen.* 11. 780. In this book, the first conflict which is set in the context of hunting comes at 11. 677 ff., with the *venator* Ornytus, and this episode itself prefigures the death of Camilla. It is significant that the word 'hunter' is applied to someone shortly before his or her death. The use of the word *venator/-trix*, then, signals an entry into a world inappropriate for those who have not fully become warriors. Ornytus is represented as a hunter's prey. He has marked himself out for death in his dress as an animal, by playing the role of the hunted, not of the hunter (as Camilla too will become the prey of Arruns). And when Camilla goes for the kill, she points precisely to Ornytus' inability to distinguish between the worlds: *Aen.* 11. 686–8.

<sup>12</sup> The use of *parve* makes him sound very young indeed; cf. Opheltes at *Stat. Theb.* 5. 534.

<sup>13</sup> Verg. *Aen.* 11. 803–4.

<sup>14</sup> As Heuzé puts it, 'les transpositions sont . . . universellement admises. . . qui consiste à voir en particulier dans les armes pointues. . . des éléments d'une symbolique sexuelle' (P. Heuzé, *L'image du corps dans l'oeuvre de Virgile* (Rome, 1985), 171). For the connotations of *hasta* in particular, see J. N. Adams, *The Latin Sexual Vocabulary* (London, 1982), 19–20.

<sup>15</sup> Fowler (n. 2), 195.

<sup>16</sup> *OLD* s.v. *papilla*: no mention of 'breast' is found, suggesting it is hard to read this as simple metonymy.

to see the *exsertam* . . . *papillam* (not the breast, but specifically the nipple<sup>16</sup>) as a metaphor for a suckling child: the *virgineus cruor* thus may also stand for a mother's milk.<sup>17</sup> What are we to make of this? For Heuzé, this is a rape.<sup>18</sup> The perpetrator of the crime flees in terror, revealing his shame in the act.<sup>19</sup> Fowler does not mention the possibility of a rape as such, but traces the literary development of defloration in death, comparing particularly the sacrifice of Polyxena at Catullus 64. 362–75: 'Achilles will never marry, but a virgin will be killed on his tomb, drenching him with her blood.'<sup>20</sup> What is at stake for both critics is a form of violation – either the rape of a virgin priestess or a perverted defloration. The obvious point here (which, interestingly, neither critic explicitly makes) is that the death of Camilla hinges on her femininity. It is significant, surely, that the arrow pierces not her *pectus*, the location of manly wounds,<sup>21</sup> but her *papilla*, the nipple: an exclusively feminine connotation (as indeed Opis will exact vengeance by means of an arrow touched to her *papillam*).<sup>22</sup> What is at stake in Camilla's death, then, is some form of violation of her femininity.

At first glance, Parthenopaeus' death has but a superficial echo of Camilla's. Let us look first at the diction. As Camilla dies, she 'slips' or 'glides' down: *labitur exsanguis, labuntur frigida leto / lumina, purpureus quondam color ora reliquit* ('Bloodless she slips away, her eyes drop, cold in death, the colour, once rosy, leaves her face').<sup>23</sup> Parthenopaeus' dying speech to his faithful comrade Dorceus begins also with a form of the verb *labor*: *labimur, i, miseram, Dorceu, solare parentem* ('I am slipping away, go, Dorceus, console my wretched mother').<sup>24</sup>

We may recall that Camilla too made a dying speech to her comrade Acca – both she and Parthenopaeus charge their nearest ones with the taking of a message (to Turnus, to Atalanta). But we also find that

<sup>17</sup> Heuzé (n. 14), 175–6; Fowler (n. 2), 195. See also M. Paschalis, *Virgil's Aeneid: semantic relations and proper names* (Oxford, 1997), 377.

<sup>18</sup> Heuzé (n. 14), 172.

<sup>19</sup> Heuzé (n. 14), 173–6. He cites particularly the 'spinelessness and indignity of Arruns [which] render the crime evident, as do the circumstances'.

<sup>20</sup> Fowler (n. 2), 193.

<sup>21</sup> See M. G. Leigh, *Lucan: Spectacle and Engagement* (Oxford, 1998), 216–21. The sentiments are similar to those found in Hor. *Odes*. 3. 2. 16 in *timido* . . . *tergo*.

<sup>22</sup> Verg. *Aen.* 11. 862.

<sup>23</sup> Verg. *Aen.* 11. 818–19. There are echoes in this passage of the simile of 11. 721–4, where Camilla is compared to a falcon disembowelling her prey, the dove: its feathers *labuntur* from the heavens (*ab aethere*, just as Arruns' spear has come *ab aethere* at 11. 802). The word may also suggest a degree of feminine grace: at 11. 828, she is seen 'flowing unwillingly to the ground' (*ad terram non sponte fluens*).

<sup>24</sup> Stat. *Theb.* 9. 885.

Parthenopaeus' death is marked by the same bloodlessness and loss of colour as Camilla's: *ibat purpureus niveo de pectore sanguis* ('The dark-red blood welled up from the snow-white breast').<sup>25</sup>

For both, then, it is the loss of that colour which has so far denoted lack of masculinity – *purpureus* – by which death is framed. As Camilla recognizes, at the final moment, that she must leave the fighting to the men, so Parthenopaeus repents that he took up arms whilst still a boy, *arma puer rapui*.<sup>26</sup> The phrase itself evokes the moment at which he is unable to carry the weapons of men and seems a boy 'even to himself': *iam minus atque minus fert arma puerque videtur | et sibi* ('Now less and less can he carry his armour, and he seems a boy even to himself').<sup>27</sup> Here, the juxtaposition of *arma puerque* cannot be accidental, but must surely recall the famous opening lines of the *Aeneid*, *arma virumque*.<sup>28</sup> The whole death scene of Parthenopaeus, then, is articulated in terms of the ethos of battle as an arena for men. We may remember the importance of the location of Camilla's wound: it is found in a place with peculiarly female connotations. Parthenopaeus is wounded in his right shoulder and *facilis cutis*: the implication is of the 'light', easily penetrable skin of youth.<sup>29</sup> For both, the site of the wound is a reminder of their lack of masculinity.

There is a further resonance of sexual violation in the use of the verb *violo* with regard both to Camilla and to Parthenopaeus. Diana vows that she will take vengeance on Camilla's killer: *hac, quicumque sacrum violarit vulnere corpus, | Tros Italusque, mihi pariter det sanguine poenas* ('Whoever violates this sacred body with a wound, Trojan or Italian, let him pay to me equally with his blood').<sup>30</sup> Diana echoes these words after Camilla's death when she says this: *quicumque tuum violavit vulnere corpus | morte luet merita* ('Whoever violated your body with a wound, will atone with deserved death').<sup>31</sup> The verb *violo* can not only mean 'to profane, treat without respect' or 'to infringe a sacred relationship', but it also possesses a sexual sense.<sup>32</sup> Thus Arruns' deed has a double-entendre: not only has he profaned the sacred relationship between Camilla and Diana, but he has also profaned Camilla's body sexually.

The same is true of Parthenopaeus. At *Theb.* 9.664–7, Diana has made a similar vow of revenge for his killer, substituting *scelerarit* for

<sup>25</sup> Stat. *Theb.* 9. 883.

<sup>26</sup> Stat. *Theb.* 9. 892.

<sup>27</sup> Stat. *Theb.* 9. 855–6.

<sup>28</sup> M. Dewar notes the juxtaposition at 892, though, culpably, not at 855.

<sup>29</sup> The skin offers no resistance: *OLD* s.v. *facilis* §5b.

<sup>30</sup> Verg. *Aen.* 11. 591–2.

<sup>31</sup> Verg. *Aen.* 11. 848–9.

<sup>32</sup> *OLD* s.v. *violo* §1; 3; 2c. For the latter, cf. Cic. *Verr.* 4. 116; Tib. 1. 6. 51.

*violarit*. The verb *scelero* seems to correspond closely in sense here to *violo* (it is used earlier in the *Thebaid* to refer to Oedipus' sexual union with Jocasta).<sup>33</sup> And Diana, as she watches Parthenopaeus hastening to glory in a battle which will bring about his death, stains her cheeks with tears: *fletu. . . . genas violata*.<sup>34</sup> Thus there is a suggestion that the violation of Parthenopaeus also entails the violation of Diana, a symbolic rape of a virgin goddess.<sup>35</sup> For Heuzé, Diana has not killed a warrior at the end of *Aeneid* 11, but has executed an individual whom she understands to be culpable of the worst of crimes, i.e. rape;<sup>36</sup> the violation of Parthenopaeus in the *Thebaid*, mirrored by the violation of Diana's cheeks, pushes the point yet further: Parthenopaeus is not only deflowered, but raped by his killer.

It is on the colour distinction between *niveus* and *purpureus* that I wish to build for the second half of this article. What might, at first glance, seem a distinction which ought to be commonplace in epic – the idea of blood on skin seems, after all, to be a theme which may crop up with reasonable frequency in the discourse of war – in fact is much more common within the genre of elegy, where the terms are used to denote female erotic beauty.<sup>37</sup> In the Tibullan corpus, then, Delia possesses snow-white feet;<sup>38</sup> Propertius' Cynthia has snow-white hands.<sup>39</sup> Ovid is ensnared by white skin in the *Amores*, and his lover possesses white arms and a white body;<sup>40</sup> in the *Ars Amatoria*, he advises that bare shoulders are particularly fitting for those women who are *niveae*, snow-white; and in the *Heroides*, a blush on a snow-white face is one of the features which kindles love.<sup>41</sup> This elegiac blush is frequently *purpureus*: the Tibullan corpus describes the blushing newly-wed about to go to her first conjugal encounter thus: *et color in niveo corpore purpureus* ('And a dark-red blush on her snow-white body').<sup>42</sup> Ovid's lover touches her

<sup>33</sup> Stat. *Theb.* 7. 211–13. An earlier, and similarly loaded, use is found at Cat. 64. 404; Cephalus' tale of the dying Procris at Ov. *Met.* 7. 850 is again used in conjunction with sexual impropriety.

<sup>34</sup> Stat. *Theb.* 9. 713.

<sup>35</sup> cf. Ulysses' and Diomedes' theft of the Palladium at *Aen.* 2. 163–70. Fowler (n. 2), 173 cites *cruentis . . . virgineas* at *Aen.* 2. 167–8 as another example to substantiate his claim of the collocation of blood and virginity. And Diomedes and Ulysses here are *impius*, linking them to the *impius* killer of Parthenopaeus at Stat. *Theb.* 9. 667.

<sup>36</sup> Heuzé (n. 14), 177.

<sup>37</sup> This association seems to have been a prevalent image in later European literature, too: see, for example, the extensive colour imagery in Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*. Corp. Tib. 1. 5. 66.

<sup>38</sup> Prop. 3. 6. 12; 2. 3. 9–16.

<sup>40</sup> Ov. *Am.* 2. 4. 41; 2. 16. 29.

<sup>41</sup> Ov. *Ars Am.* 3. 309; *Her.* 20. 120.

<sup>42</sup> Corp. Tib. 3. 4. 30.

*purpureae* cheeks, and, in the *Metamorphoses*, Atalanta's flush as she runs, watched by her husband to be, is compared to a *purpureus* awning.<sup>43</sup> In Ovid particularly, *pudor* and *Amor*, those commonplaces of elegy, are frequently described as *purpureus*.<sup>44</sup>

So, if the colour contrast is in fact an elegiac trope, how does it fit into the epic genre? This is precisely the point: the terms *niveus* and *purpureus* are used to eroticize the young victims of war. This is prefigured in Catullus' select use of the two words, where the words refer to Hymen's snow-white feet, to the snow-white hands of the emasculated Attis (and the resulting play on gender is surely significant), and to the snow-white limbs of the dead Polyxena slaughtered on the tomb of Achilles; *purpureus* refers to marriage beds – of Peleus and Thetis, of Theseus.<sup>45</sup> In Catullus, then, the words are used only in connection with the female or feminized victim.

Obviously, the warrior-virgins of epic are male, not female. Is it not then even more strange that we should find these elegiac markers employed to describe them? The point is the linking of the more common erotic motif found in elegy, and the Catullan association with tragedy. It may prove useful, then, to examine Parthenopaeus' death in the light of the deaths of other young warriors in Virgil.

The erotic beauty of Parthenopaeus is clear throughout the epic. Two particular instances might be examined. The first of these is his appearance at the footrace in book 6 (lines 571–5); the second is the radiance signalled at 9. 701–3 at the point at which he removes his helmet. Statius is preoccupied here with his beauty: Parthenopaeus is distinguished for his *forma*, he 'shines' with a youthful radiance which is unmarred by the growth of manly hair. Euryalus is described similarly in book 9 of the *Aeneid*,<sup>46</sup> where his beauty is made explicit in terms of his youth (*puer, iuventa*) and his unshorn cheeks.

It is significant that both Euryalus and Parthenopaeus compete in a foot-race, and both foot-races contain an element of cheating (in the *Aeneid* by Nisus, to benefit Euryalus and in the *Thebaid* by Idas, to cheat Parthenopaeus) which causes them to lose the race: the following descriptions stress that both youngsters have an added beauty in their distress at losing: if we compare *Aeneid* 5. 343–4 with *Thebaid* 6. 621–3,

<sup>43</sup> *Ov. Am.* 1. 4. 22; *Met.* 10. 596.

<sup>44</sup> Of *pudor*: *Ov. Am.* 1. 3. 14; 2. 5. 34; of *Amor*: *Ov. Am.* 2. 1. 38; 2. 9b. 34; *Ars Am.* 1. 232; of Cupid: *Ov. Rem. Am.* 701.

<sup>45</sup> *Cat.* 61. 9; 63. 8; 64. 364; 64. 49; 64. 163.

<sup>46</sup> *Verg. Aen.* 9. 179–81.

we shall see that the diction itself clarifies the point: the tears (*lacrimae, lacrimarum*) add beauty (*gratia*) to the already beautiful young men (*pulchro in corpore, formae*).<sup>47</sup>

This theme is continued, even expanded, for both at the point of death. Parthenopaeus' death highlights his youth, innocence and beauty. At 9. 877–9, he is introduced as a *puer*, highlighting his youth at the point of his death, and recalling the earlier charges to him not to play at war with men until he himself had grown up enough (until Atalanta's looks had faded from his face);<sup>48</sup> the interjection by the narrator *heu simplex aetas!*<sup>49</sup> reinforces this notion. As his helmet is removed, we see the *gratia* which has adorned Parthenopaeus throughout – it is now *aegra gratia*, but nonetheless, he possesses *gratia* even when dying.<sup>50</sup> As, at 9. 881–2, his companions shake his hair in an attempt to right his neck, we might recall the pulling of his hair by Idas in the foot-race.<sup>51</sup> This echo of Parthenopaeus at his radiant best in the foot-race in the moment of his dying serves to enhance the erotic associations. But it is the juxtaposition of *purpureus* and *niveo* (9. 883) which most eroticizes him: *ibat purpureus niveo de pectore sanguis* ('The dark-red blood welled up from the snow-white breast'). Statius does not employ a simile to enhance the picture of Parthenopaeus, but his use of these words does bring to mind the similes which Vergil uses in connection with the dead warrior virgins, Euryalus and Pallas. Euryalus is compared to a dark-red flower (*purpureus flos*) felled by a plough, or a poppy weighed down by rain,<sup>52</sup> Pallas to a plucked violet or hyacinth.<sup>53</sup>

Thus a strongly eroticized picture may be seen to emerge as Parthenopaeus dies. The smoothness of his chest is underlined by its whiteness, before the hair has begun to grow, and, as we have seen, he still possesses *gratia*. But in the points of reference to the similes of Vergil, Statius provides a more subtle link to the warrior-youths Euryalus and Pallas. Like Euryalus, Parthenopaeus' head refuses to stand upright and, like Pallas, his snowy-whiteness is sullied, in

<sup>47</sup> See Heuzé (n. 14), 252 for the significance of *pulcher* in the *Aeneid*.

<sup>48</sup> Stat. *Theb.* 4. 335–7.

<sup>49</sup> See M. Dewar at Stat. *Theb.* 9. 878: 'For Parthenopaeus, war is a game. . . . and his precocity in battle does not affect his essential innocence.' Compare also Persephone's *simplicitas puerilibus*. . . . *annis* ('innocence of her young years') at Ov. *Met.* 5. 400 at mourning the loss of her flowers even at the point where she is abducted.

<sup>50</sup> Stat *Theb.* 9. 880: *aegra . . . per trepidos exspirat gratia visus* ('a sick beauty goes out from his restless eyes').

<sup>51</sup> Stat. *Theb.* 6. 614–17.

<sup>52</sup> Verg. *Aen.* 9. 435–7.

<sup>53</sup> Verg. *Aen.* 11. 68–71.



Parthenopaeus' case by *purpureus sanguis*. We find the same elements in all, then: the drooping of the head like a flower and the sulling of pale beauty by something purple or red, as Euryalus is compared to a *purpureus flos*, or as Pallas is compared to a violet or hyacinth, both, obviously, flowers of a similar colouring.<sup>54</sup> Furthermore, this imagery possesses strong reminiscences of defloration: the simile employed for Pallas particularly resonates with such imagery, though here it is inverted – the flower is itself plucked by a maiden's thumbnail (*virgineo pollice*). The elements of Catullan poetry concerning perverted love or the loss of virginity strengthen the association (compare Catullus. 62. 39–47, where, in the context of a wedding song, the loss of virginity is compared to the plucking of a flower by a fingernail).<sup>55</sup> Thus the line *ibat purpureus niveo de pectore sanguis* abounds in imagery: the erotic whiteness of the breast, which itself recalls the hairlessness of youthful beauty; the dark redness which offsets the whiteness, so often a topos in the attractive elegiac blush, here transposed to the arena of death.

I should like to make one final point about the motif of white and dark red which will connect to my initial reading of the death of Parthenopaeus as a defloration: namely, that in reading the imagery of the dark blood staining white skin it is difficult to escape a reading of defloration. The image comes first in Homer, where the staining of Menelaus' thighs with blood is compared to the staining of ivory, but it is heavily drawn upon by Vergil describing Lavinia's blush in book 12 of the *Aeneid*,<sup>56</sup> a usage which brings out its sexuality in terms closely associated with death in the poem: dark red blood, whiteness of face. There is, then, a double reading to be found here. Not only does death destroy beauty, but deaths can also look beautiful, can create a perverse beauty. Thus the red destroys and sullies the whiteness, but, at the same time, it creates a beautiful contrast. By drawing attention to, though avoiding the use of, the similes of Vergil which we

<sup>54</sup> Both the violet and, plainly, the hyacinth recall Hyacinthus: at Ov. *Met.* 10. 190, the drooping of his neck is compared to the drooping of a violet, poppy or lily, and at 10. 196, the use of *laberis* as Apollo addresses him links him to Parthenopaeus. Compare also the erotic beauty – often denoted by the white/red contrast – of Narcissus, who also becomes a flower: see especially Ov. *Met.* 3. 420–4; 3. 482–5; 3. 491.

<sup>55</sup> cf. also Cat. 11. 21–4, where a flower is cut down by a plough, as in the simile of Euryalus. Here, the simile pertains to the loss of love, but forms a striking contrast to the violent (female) lovemaking described in the previous stanza.

<sup>56</sup> Hom. *Il.* 4. 141–7; Verg. *Aen.* 12. 64–9.

have examined, albeit briefly, Statius both eroticizes his victim and points us towards a reading of defloration by the clear contrast of *purpureus* blood on snow-white skin.