Strategic Imaginations

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Defurne, Aude and Anke Gilleir.
Strategic Imaginations: Women and the Gender of Sovereignty in European Culture.

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In the post-secular age, the Virgin continues to spark political fantasies. Since 1988, the founder of France’s far-right Front National party (FN), Jean-Marie Le Pen, has held an annual gathering on May Day to honour Joan of Arc. Together with his fellow party members, the founding father of the FN marches to the statue on the Parisian Place des Pyramides to commemorate the heroic action of ‘his’ medieval *pucelle* – a tradition that his daughter and current party leader, Marine Le Pen, continues to embrace today.1 The medieval icon is obviously being instrumentalized: by enacting this rite, the FN incites nationalist sentiment directed against all those who – according to the far-right party – betray the notion of French national identity and adhere to a global European project, as well as those who keep the borders open for immigrants and refugees and thus betray the values that Joan of Arc supposedly fought and died for.2 As an icon, the virgin promises national unity and purity as well as ‘a collective experience of belonging and identity’.3

Such figures of female virginity continue to invoke a rhetoric of inclusion and exclusion, self and other, global and national in Europe today. Metaphors of ‘healing the wounds’ that accumulate in times of political crisis are imagined in analogy with the intact virginal body. What is more intriguing about Le Pen’s honouring speech is the allusion he draws between the pristine body and the military corps. In his commemorating address, he blusters about the nation being in ‘mortal
danger” and vilifies all those who betrayed the traditional guard of the *grande nation* and opened the national borders within Europe, exposing the unified French nation to exterior dangers. The virginal body, along with the fantasized hymen, reflects on a concrete level the fantasy of invincible resistance, lockdown, exclusion of the other and a competent and regulating army that fulfils its duty as an apparatus of national surveillance.

Taking the figuration of political integrity as virginal body as point of departure, I want to investigate different narratives on political uprising or the founding of the state and how they mobilize a similar rhetoric. The examples I will discuss cover a wide spectrum ranging from Roman historiography on the Roman Republic, visual art depicting the reign of terror in the wake of the French Revolution, German theatre a few years before the French Revolution and present-day news reports. This political imagery transcends writing modes, media and historical conditions. These are not arbitrary choices. For what connects these different genres, historical eras and political and cultural contexts, is a narrative device following a gendered scheme in which a pristine female body functions as the trigger for military alliances, acts of legislation, elections and more. What it reveals is another echo of the longue durée imaginary template of the awkward relationship between women and power this volume sheds light on.

Investigating military alliance and strategy in works of art is not haphazard; it is justified by the etymology of ‘strategy’ itself. The term, derived from the ancient Greek ‘stratégia’, originally means the ‘art of the general’ or the ‘art of arrangement’ of troops. Representing and narrating stories of war are thus dependent on aesthetic representation or visual media, especially to reflect unity in times of war. Therefore, my analysis considers works of art as well as historiography, that blends historical facts with fiction, and focuses on the aestheticization of violence, particularly on the affective politics of the immaculate female body. I will argue that female virginity serves as a strategic device for the generation, arousal, and control of affect in the mechanisms of male sovereignty. Analyzing several examples, I point out how the virginal body functions as an aesthetic pendant of the military corps. To point out a paradox, narratives on the founding of a republic – the political form of governance in which the supreme power rests in citizens, elections and representatives – practise the exclusion of women from the public political sphere and assign them a merely aesthetic role: as allegories, symbols or icons of, for instance, political unity or national
purity. Whereas this practice was common long before 1789, it is striking how the personification of the revolutionary idea(l)s liberty, equality, fraternity were solely female, as Natalie Scholz has shown in her analysis. By doing so, the political arena and agency are kept as a male domain.

**Virgins as Aesthetic Representations of Military Arrangement**

In his history of Rome and the Roman people *Ab urbe condita*, Roman historian Livy embeds various stories of virgins who sparked popular revolts that led to the foundation or the restoration of the Roman republic, such as the legendary story of the rape of the Vestal priestess Rhea Silvia by Mars, the god of war. This violation resulted in the birth of the twins Romulus and Remus. The myth is followed in Livy’s writing by another well-known and comparable event in Roman mythology that will be discussed here: the abduction and rape of the Sabine women. In particular, I want to highlight how virginity, rape and deflowering function in the strategic imagination of military organization and the tactics of warfare.

After Romulus killed his brother and became sole king of Rome, the founding script appears to be completed. However, the end of one story proves to be the beginning of the next one, which is characteristic of the continuous narrative technique in Livy’s historiographic writing.

As the newly established city has to be populated, Romulus sets up a shelter at the foot of the Capitol, which only men from neighbouring cities are allowed to visit. Since the absence of women eliminates all chances for reproduction and hence the existence of the Roman state, the king plots a mass abduction of the Sabine women who live in the neighbouring cities. In order to carry out his plan, Romulus invites the neighbouring Sabines to festivities honouring the Roman god Neptunus Equester. As the crowd arrives to view the spectacle, Roman soldiers, upon a signal given by Romulus, simultaneously capture the female virgins. The hostages remain under the surveillance of the soldiers for one night, after which the Sabine virgins were supposed to be married off to Romans. According to the account of the Greek historian Dionysius of Halicarnassus, the aim of the capture and rape of the Sabine women was either colonial expansion or the forging of an alliance with the powerful Sabine army by provoking their fathers. In other words, marriage policy covered up an imperialist strategy.
It is interesting to note how the two most influential historiographic accounts of this violation justify the king’s forceful amalgamation. Livy explains Romulus’s reasoning of the abduction and rape as a natural response to arrogance: ‘[t]hat what was done was owing to the pride of their fathers, who had refused to grant the privilege of marriage to their neighbours’. In Dionysius’s account, the violence is played down: ‘The next day, when the virgins were brought before Romulus, he comforted them in their despair with the assurance that they had been seized, not out of wantonness, but for the purpose of marriage’.

The abduction of the daughters motivates each of the two hostile nations to prepare for war. Without the chaste daughters, whose untouched bodies have not been penetrated before and which function symbolically as the nation’s protective armour, the Sabines are vulnerable to external attack. Romulus marches towards the city of the Sabines ‘finding the walls unguarded and the gates unbarred’, thus giving the king of the Romans the opportunity to raid their city, advance with his troops and seize hold of the unprepared enemy. The Sabine men struggle for three years to recapture their abducted daughters, who have meanwhile become mothers of Roman children, and plan ‘to advance on Rome with a great army the following year’. But first, a delegation from the Sabines was sent to the Roman enemy ‘to ask for the return of the women and to demand satisfaction for their seizure just so that they might seem to have undertaken the war from necessity when they failed to get justice’.

But why did the Romans care about the women’s virginity, and not just fertility, since they were primarily seeking reproduction and growth in their own population? The fact that the abducted women are virgins leaves no ambiguities regarding the origin and legacy of the ruling political order. If the now married virgins give birth, their offspring will be of clear paternal Roman racial descent. Read symbolically, the fact of remaining ‘untouched’ until matrimony guarantees that any exterior seed, and thus any outward politics, is averted.

Nevertheless, this attempt to perform an unequivocal political genesis of rule turns out to be a fallacy. Though the blending of the two nations appears as a political solution, the question of clear descent and roots of a political regime appears to be more complicated. Among the anonymous captured women is Hersilia, who confounds the issue. Hersilia is mentioned in Livy’s and Plutarch’s accounts as the wife of Romulus, while in some reports she is also referred to as the daughter of Tacitus, the king of the Sabines. It is said that she was already married
before the Roman abduction and was captured only by mistake. Hersilia embodies the ambiguity that overshadows the narrative of the abduction of the Sabines. Dionysius documents her decisive role in the negotiations on a peace agreement with her compatriots, after she led a female delegation and took on the role of their spokeswoman. She delivered a sentimental speech to her compatriots and relatives, asking the women’s fathers, and above all King Tacitus, to enforce peace with the Roman husbands of the Sabine women. After demonstrating submission to their male compatriots and kneeling in front of Tacitus together with her fellow women holding their offspring, an agreement is reached. Even though Livy does not mention Hersilia's role, he does relate to the role of the other Sabine women in the fight between the Romans and Sabines, in what might at first glance seem heroic:

At this juncture the Sabine women, from the outrage on whom the war originated, with hair disheveled and garments rent, the timidity of their sex being overcome by such dreadful scenes, had the courage to throw themselves amid the flying weapons, and making a rush across, to part the incensed armies, and assuage their fury; imploring their fathers on the one side, their husbands on the other, ‘that as fathers-in-law and sons-in-law they would not contaminate each other with impious blood, nor stain their offspring with parricide, the one their grandchildren, the other their children.

The role of Hersilia or the Sabine women in warfare and the peace negotiations appear to include women in political affairs, while actually utilizing them to serve military tactics conducted by men. In fact, Livy’s account follows a gendered opposition of male warriors versus affectively charged women. The Roman historiographer represents a portrayal of the Sabine women who enter the war arena as wild and ‘hysterical’, both in their appearance and behaviour. Even though they join the fight with bravery, the female warriors impulsively throw themselves ‘amid the flying weapons’ and are subjected to male strategic warfare. In her manifesto on *Women & Power*, Mary Beard analyzes the mechanisms embedded in Western culture that ‘silence women, that refuse to take them seriously, and that sever them (sometimes quite literally) [...] from the centres of power’. Beard points out two main exceptions in the classical world that refrain from silencing women in public (political) space: either they have a voice as martyrs or victims, ‘usually to preface
their own death’, or they function as spokespeople for other women of Rome ‘(and for women only)’.

Different scholars have examined Livy’s historiographic writing which embeds legends, myths and fables to document history, one of which is the founding or restoration of the Roman Republic. In her analysis, Susanne Gödde explains the historical context that made for the fabrication, improvisation or censorship of the myth of the Sabine women, especially since Livy’s reporting goes back to the first century BCE and thus follows rules and conventions that diverge from the time he writes about. She then invites us to consider that it could actually be ‘the logic of the historical tradition’ that tells the story of the founding of an all-male society in order to steer towards the rape of the Sabines. In times of political turmoil, when new political regimes are installed and new roles are ascribed to the citizenry, the historical narrative integrates fiction that consolidates certain gender roles. Founding a republic while openly shunning women from the political sphere actually discredits the republican form of rule that is being established. However, instead of merely banning them, the narrative makes sure they are present and are attributed aesthetic roles that reinforce male bravery and heroism. As such, the purpose behind the political myth of the abduction is meant to legitimize the imperial aspirations of the Romans – the fictional narrative of the negotiation skills of the Sabine women is meant to narrate the end of hostilities. A ceasefire is indeed declared. Alliances are fixed in written contracts and agreements that are supposed to regulate the new rule. In other words, Roman historiography as it is written by Livy models as a founding narrative in which female virgins spark warfare, political rule and military action, from which they themselves are shut out. As antagonists of the soldiers, the virgins serve as legitimization and aesthetic reflection of military alliance. They – and especially Hersilia – are figures of strategic imagination, objects of a successful coup that can influence and organize military tactics and warfare.

European art has been fascinated with this myth, and artistic representations of this myth exist from different periods and traditions, ranging from Jacques Stella, Nicolas Poussin, Peter Paul Rubens to Pablo Picasso. All these examples focus on the scene of abduction, allowing the painters to show virtuosity in presenting upright, dauntless males opposed to passionate, fiery and intense female poses. A well-known painting by Jacques-Louis David deviates from these depictions by focusing on a different episode. Following no known template
or historical tradition, David’s oil painting *Les Sabines* (1799) (‘The Intervention of the Sabine Women’) turns to a scene that cannot be found in the histories of either Livy or Dionysius of Halicarnassos. The painting foregrounds the battle between the two hostile nations, not the abduction of the daughters (Fig. 1). David attributes a crucial role to Hersilia in the war and front-line fighting. On the right side, we see a naked Romulus holding up a spear and pointing towards his target Tacitus, who is, likewise naked, positioned on the left side of the painting. Behind each of the leaders, their troops march into the battle field. Dressed in white and with her arms extended to the left and right – a quasi-crucified pose – Hersilia steps into the fray ready to sacrifice herself in the fight between the women’s husbands and fathers. Hersilia stands between the two fronts, in the literal sense of the word. Interestingly, the painting shifts and transforms the familiar family constellation. The websites of the Louvre and the Brooklyn Museum, for instance, refer to Hersilia in David’s painting as the daughter of King Tacitus, thus emphasizing the familial bonds and relationships that are destroyed in a civil war.26

Fig. 1. Jacques-Louis David: *Les Sabines arrêtant le combat entre Romains et Sabins* (1799). © Louvre Museum
Hersilia’s singular position divides the painting into two asymmetrical parts. An eye-catching figure mainly because of her bright garment, she draws the viewer’s attention to the complicated situation of the two hostile nations that have become kindred on account of the abduction of the virgins. While she stands out as a figure of division and separation to prevent bloodshed, other figures who occupy darker and less central regions of the composition call to mind the fusion of the Romans and the Sabines. In the lower part of the painting or in the second row, for instance, the captured Sabine daughters – in the meantime also wives of Roman men – carry their children and flee the turmoil of war while visibly torn between their fathers and husbands. Their belonging is revealed as multifaceted.

But why was the myth of the abduction of the Sabine women revived or even relevant as a theme towards the end of the French Revolution? David, who was a supporter of the Revolution and later became friends with Robespierre and his faction, started working on the first draft of his tableau when he was imprisoned for having supported Robespierre. Read against the background of the terreur and the resulting massacres, the founder of French neoclassicism pleads, with Les Sabines, for the reconciliation of the opposing parties, also in the name of fraternité. Hersilia’s posture, with her arms separating the hostile parties, expresses the opposition to violence in politics. No more blood must be shed. Whereas Hersilia’s position and the colour composition lead the viewer to gaze at her, another key figure – who is precisely in the centre of the tableau and the only one looking directly at the viewer – is situated in the background. It is the Sabine woman in red, who can be understood as a symbol for the reign of terror that threatens the French nation.

Blending Roman myth with Greek art – such as the sculptural form or the graceful attitude and facial expressions – to depict a story of the terreur maintains a distance from the contemporary violent happenings while equally integrating the present into the longue durée of history by restoring an ancient narrative.

Like Livy, David engages in practices that might seem to be inclusive of women, although women are denied an active role in political events. To be more precise, the two types of women presented in this painting – the saviour Hersilia in white and the woman in red – limit women in times of warfare and political upheaval to an aesthetic arena: they serve as symbols or allegories, while the battlefield, on the contrary, is gendered as male. David’s contemporary Pierre-Jean-Baptiste Chaussard, who was well acquainted with David’s oeuvre, reads the
figure of Hersilia in a coeval context as an allegory, as ‘mère-patrie se levant’, which the painter indeed had in mind while conceiving his work of art, as David affirmed when asked by Chaussard. Thus, David’s Les Sabines contributes to the gender roles that are already embedded in cultural memory at the advent of modernity and modernization and are already inscribed in the ideal of brotherhood propagated by the French revolution, that actually neglects sororal bonds. The image of the male versus female parties unveils gender politics that arrange the presence of women in the public political sphere as symbols or figures of affect arousal or control. While men are warriors, women are mothers and guardians of their offspring; nationhood and political space is divided into male warriors and female symbols or mothers.

The Pristine Body as Figure of Thought of the Inviolability of Law

A similar pattern of military arrangements reoccurs in Livy’s chronicle of the restoration of the Roman Republic in 449 BCE, in which the story of Virginia, plebeian daughter of Verginius, is embedded. Her seduction by the patrician Appius Claudius and her subsequent death – she is killed by her own father – sparked a popular revolt that lead to the restoration of the Roman republic. Virginia’s story has inspired a range of artworks as well as literary texts. The story of the plebeian daughter as founding sacrifice has been examined as well as the variations of this figure in German theatre in the second half of the eighteenth century and the early nineteenth century. In the following, I look into the affective politics of virginity in Livy’s account – in particular, how affect that leads to the forging of political communities is eventually transcended in the act of legislation.

Throughout the whole story, Virginia does not utter one single word. However, again, the pristine female body serves as a medium to refine and in fact define male action. The telling of the story of the Roman Republic would have come to a halt had it not been injected with affect, as the historiographic writing of Livy and Dionysius shows. Even though these two writers are different in style – the first concisely records the events while the latter, who is also a teacher of rhetoric, embeds lengthy speeches and gives several main and minor figures a chance to speak – a repeated gesture of exhibiting the female body to spark a popular revolt is common in both accounts. Obviously, their histories navigate towards
affect arousal, and relate a story of escalation and the transmission of affect among members of the male revolutionary community. Both historical records bring the sexual assault into a theatrical order. First, Virginia’s corpse is exhibited in the forum romanum ‘where it would be seen by all’ and is subsequently carried through the streets where it can be witnessed by an even larger audience. What is more, in a camp on the mountain Viciliius, her father Verginius eventually incites additional viewers by exposing the sword covered with the blood of his murdered daughter. This demonstration full of pathos and amended by rhetorical means of exaggeration is then crowned with ‘a general call to arms’. The march to Rome begins with the battle cry to liberate the city from the tyrant decemviri, who had robbed the plebeians of their rights and, in doing so, brought a long and ongoing conflict between the ruling class of patricians and the citizenry to a head.

To illuminate the background of the clashes, it is necessary to go back a few years before Appius Claudius’s scandalous sexual assault on the chaste plebeian daughter. The plebeians had demanded an agrarian law that granted them more of the land that they had fought for and conquered as soldiers. A committee that jointly consisted of patricians and plebeians was established to secure fair conditions and justice for all. However, ten men – all patricians, including Appius Claudius – were elected in 452 BCE to participate in the legislation procedure that had in the meantime turned into a larger project. In addition, the law, having been thus far passed down only orally, was supposed to be written down in order to achieve legal effectiveness. Notwithstanding the fact that they had accomplished their mission, the decimviri proved to be tyrants who refused to step down from office. From a narrative point of view, the Virginia episode is thus inserted into the process of a deferred act of legislation.

The daughter’s tragic fate which leads to rage and unrest among the masses, corresponds in the founding script with the driving force that helps overcome the political impasse and culminates in a written constitution. All the fierce emotions that built up in the courtroom when Appius Claudius unjustifiably claimed possession of the chaste Virginia, as well as in the public sphere after the father stabs his daughter, are assumed to be vacated in the solemn and serene act of legal writing. It is true that emotions and passions have the potential for political renewal, yet they can have fatal consequences for political governance. This is why the historical narrative concludes the founding act by transcending the affect that constituted a community in order to ensure
that political rule and legal constitution not be considered as result of volatile, affective action. Moreover, Virginia’s death is followed by a trial that restores justice and sentences Appius Claudius to imprisonment. Virginia’s story marks ‘the initial installation of law’ and does far more than account the story of the violent overthrow of an entire political system. Her death produces a foundational piece of legislative writing, a legal document: The Law of the Twelve Tables exhibited at the end of the story, like her corpse after her public sacrifice by Virginius. The fact that this document is founded on the body of a chaste woman, whose name eternalizes virginity reveals how gendered mechanisms are – literally so – at play in the establishment of ‘pure’ authority. The virgin is the figure of the inviolability of law in a republic, in which only men govern, vote, legislate and defend the republican virtù.

Theater of Political Arousal: Schiller’s Fiesco’s Conspiracy at Genoa (1783)

Schiller’s drama Fiesco’s Conspiracy was inspired by the model of the Roman Virginia and revolves around the violated virginal female body that fuels the dramatic action to set political change in motion. Written in 1783, Schiller’s play has been criticized for reviving the German literary movement ‘Sturm und Drang’ (‘storm and stress’) that occurred between approximately 1760 and 1780 and that had sought to oppose the Enlightened cult of rationalist thought. The movement rebelled against the rigorous poetic standards of the fathers’ generation, embodied by the literary critic J.C. Gottsched, and instead fostered a literature of subjectivity, exalted emotions, enthusiasm for nature produced by the poet who is a youthful genius rejecting rules and predestined paths. Schiller’s Fiesco draws on most of these themes and poetics, as I will discuss in the following section.

The development of the plot in Schiller’s Fiesco is frequently held back by inertia. Although the abolition of the democratically elected senate is a topic of ongoing, fervent debate among a few discontented republicans in the play, this state of long-standing political malaise does not provide a sufficient impetus to form a community that would rise against the tyrant’s rule. Instead, three scenes of violation, seduction and indecent exposure ignite the dramatic and political action – prompting a male conspiracy and its culmination in a political upheaval. These scenes do not simply inspire the genius conspirator to push for political change,
they lead to the self-birthing of the genius sovereign. Scholarly literature on this play typically distinguishes two scenes that centre on virginity and ‘defloration’, yet this analysis focuses on a third scene that, just before the conspiracy reaches its peak, consists of the exhibition of the female body to an audience onstage. In the following analysis, I will first analyze the birth metaphor that surrounds the scenes of violation of the pristine female body. In a second step, I will discuss in detail the third ‘defloration’ scene, the least explicit of all, but ties in with military and naval arrangement in its theatrical staging.

Inspired by the real historical events of the 1547 conspiracy led by Giovanni Luigi Fiesco against Andrea Doria, the absolute ruler of the city-state of Genoa, Schiller constructs a fervent plot that contains several conspiracies. Fearing that Gianettino Doria, the tyrant’s nephew, will conspire against his aging uncle and usurp the latter’s position, several dissatisfied citizens rally around the republican Verrina, who is in the process of planning an uprising against the Dorias. The conspirators manage to recruit Fiesco as a leader, although they distrust his ambiguous motives. As Verrina is suspicious of Fiesco’s intentions, he plans a further conspiracy against the eponymous hero: ‘Fiesco will bring down that tyrant. That is certain. And Fiesco will become Genoa’s most dangerous tyrant. That is more certain still’ (III, 1). He concludes that Fiesco must die as soon as Genoa is free. After the conspiracy against the ruling Dorias has run its course, the conspirators occupy the harbour and gain control of the galleys and the city under Fiesco’s leadership. Gianettino is murdered, while his uncle escapes the turmoil. However, just as Genoa is about to recognize Fiesco as the new duke, the last scene undoes the seemingly successful revolt: Verrina keeps his vow to eliminate Fiesco and pushes him into the water so that he drowns. The last lines announce the return of Andrea Doria. The previous political order is restored.

The descriptions of the different stages of this – all-male – conspiracy are replete with metaphors of birth and fertility. When Fiesco joins the group of conspirators, he refers, for example, to ‘the stupendous work of the conspiracy [that] lay swaddled in the wrappings of wantonness’ (II, 18). On another occasion, the title character diagnoses the precarious and delicate prenatal state of the forthcoming political turmoil: ‘The fruit is surely ready. And pangs announce the birth’ (II, 15). The metaphor that articulates the strong sentiments about the new political order also heralds the self-creation of the male sovereign. The conspiracy is imagined as resulting from a natural act of conception and
is attributed to a mysterious, miraculous origin. Political movement thus appears analogous to natural procreation, in other words, revolution as reproduction.

The birth fantasy reflects the poetic zeitgeist in the second half of the eighteenth century. The young generation of the *Sturm und Drang* literary movement rebelled against paternal authority and strict poetic rules. In Schiller’s drama, the genius Fiesco gives birth to a political work of art: the conspiracy. Remarkably, Fiesco’s birth as a sovereign genius is preceded by two scenes of defloration that initiate the conspiracy as a remodelled version of the Roman Virginia plot, in which the virgin’s death sparks a revolt. After his failure to convince Fiesco to join the plot, Verrina returns home to face the scandal of a violation of his domestic sphere, where, during his absence, the tyrant Gianettino Doria, disguised in a mask, has raped his daughter Berta. While the distraught father ponders how to respond to this scandal, the story of the Roman Virginia appears:

VERRINA. [...] Tell me, Berta [...] what did that old Roman do, grey like ice, when they also found his daughter—how should I put it—*also* found his daughter *so* attractive? Tell me, Berta: What did Virginius say to his mutilated daughter?  
BERTA (*shuddering*). I don’t know what he said.  
VERRINA. You silly thing—He didn’t say *a word*. He reached for a slaughtering knife.  
BERTA. Dear God! What are you about to do?  
VERRINA. No! There’s yet justice in Genoa!43 (I, 10)

The story of Virginia, which the playwright G.E. Lessing had adapted before Schiller in his bourgeois tragedy *Emilia Galotti* in 1772, was well known to the eighteenth-century audience. In the final act of Lessing’s play, the female protagonist hands over the sword to her father and directs him to kill her, suggesting that her death is to protect paternal sovereignty and the bourgeois family from the tyranny of the prince.44 While Lessing’s bourgeois tragedy is engaged in separating the private domestic world from the political sphere (and it would have to be discussed how convincing this apolitical aspect is),45 Schiller explicitly joins political scenarios with family tragedy. In fact, Verrina, like Virginius, directly instrumentalizes his daughter for his political goals. On a further level, he repudiates Lessing’s theatre of the Enlightenment with all its emotional constraints. While the enlightened narrative
favours reason, Schiller’s play, which was regarded as a revival of the spirit of *Sturm und Drang* is one of the expressions of extreme emotions. The stage directions contain a plethora of gestures, motions and feelings that are fully supported by the acting: rage, bitterness, shuddering, startling, frightening, jumping up, sinking, stopping and stepping back. Instead of the female victim being killed, Berta serves as a medium for generating and arousing affect when she is held hostage until Genoa is free. The scene then escalates into a theatrical performance of exaltation:

VERRINA. […] Until the heart’s blood of a Doria washes this blot from your honour, no ray of daylight shall fall upon your cheek. Till then—be blinded! […] Cursed be the breeze that caresses you. Cursed the sleep that refreshes you. Cursed every trace of humanity that you long for in your wretchedness. Go down into the deepest vaults of my cellars. Whimper. Howl. […] Let your life be the agonized writhing of dying vermin--the unyielding, grinding battle between being and not being. May this curse lie upon you until the last breath has rattled from Gianettino’s throat. […] Genoa’s lot has been thrown in with my Berta’s. […] I have taken an oath and shall show my child no mercy until one of the Dorias lies stretched on the ground […] I repeat […]: I hold her hostage to your tyrannicide. […] Genoa’s despot must fall, or the girl will despair. I shall not recant. 46 (I, 12)

In order to rouse the male community, the female victim is kept imprisoned as a pledge until Genoa is free. This creates a concrete promise the conspirators will commit to as part of their political mission. Therefore, the father pledges his daughter, speaks curses, vows and oaths.

A second icon of virginity returns in the following act of *Fiesco*, which takes the male enthusiasm to greater heights and thereby pushes the plot further. After a community of conspirators has been formed, the four patriots are concerned that they are still too few in number to overthrow the tyrant, and Verrina decides to lobby Fiesco. He plans to use art as a means to win him over to become the leader of their nascent movement. As Fiesco ‘loves to find excitement in exalted scenes’ 47 (I, 13), the conspirators invite a painter, Romano, to Fiesco’s palace to present his latest painting, in the hope that ‘the sight of it will rouse his [Fiesco’s; M.EH.] genius again’ 48 (I, 13). When the painter arrives
with his creation, we learn that it represents Appius Claudius, Virginia and her father Virginius. Upon viewing the image, Verrina identifies with the portrayal of his ‘counterpart’ Virginius and becomes agitated at the sight of the scene of the father stabbing his daughter to death. He starts striking at the picture while chanting: ‘Follow him, Romans.—His slaughtering knife is flashing.—Follow me, Genoese blockheads.—Down with Doria! Down! Down!’\textsuperscript{49} (II, 17) Paradoxically, instead of causing moral indignation, the depiction of the female victim arouses Fiesco, whose act of viewing is one of voyeuristic male sovereignty. While his eyes are fixed on the figure of Virginia, Fiesco identifies with the perpetrator, the tyrant ruler who was tempted to rape the Roman woman:

\begin{quote}
FIESCO. [...] You find this head of a Roman admirable? Not a bit of it. Look here at the girl. Her expression, how soft, how womanly! How much loveliness slips away through these fading lips! What ecstasy in her eyes’ dying light!—Inimitable! God-like, Romano!—And this dazzling white bosom, how deliciously it swells on the last surge of breath\textsuperscript{50} (II, 17)
\end{quote}

The episode is framed by the metaphorical evocation of the conspiracy as a birth. As it is described to ‘lay swaddled in the wrappings of wantonness’ and related to the ‘pangs’ that announced the coming of the Genoese republic, it is suggested that Fiesco’s genius is engendered by his viewing a sexually charged artwork, or by the female object of desire. In fact, right after the exhibition of Romano’s painting, Fiesco sings his own praises in a monologue as he pictures his future political prominence and self-genesis as the new sovereign of Genoa.

The most significant aspect of this scene is its revelation of the effect of a work of art on its audience: almost as a mise en abyme, the onstage viewers of the painting appear to duplicate and reflect the perception of the theatrical audience. What impact did such scenes of violation and inviolability have on the eighteenth-century audience, and what was the role of theatre or national theatre? In particular, what was its role in relation to the role the female body in the forging of communities on and off the stage? Against the backdrop of Lessing’s enlightened theatre, that pleaded for the aesthetic category of affect in order to move the audience and initiate a process of catharsis, soon after the French Revolution and the regime of terror in France the direct presentation of violence, political affect and arousal would have been perceived as a
threat to the theatre and the general order. Post-revolutionary dramas written by Goethe and Schiller worked towards warding off extra-aesthetic circumstances to protect the stage from any hostile external, mostly political, influences and emotions. Written six years prior to the French Revolution, Schiller’s *Fiesco* reflects a more complex combination of dynamics, featuring both distance and proximity to violence and the sentiments it evokes. Thus, the scene with the painting at Fiesco’s palace is primarily engaged in provoking patriotic sentiments, and at the same time, keeping them under control. Although the spectators, and especially Fiesco, as leader of the conspiracy, are stimulated and instigated by the sight of an eroticized soft, womanly body, the source of inspiration is eventually condemned by Fiesco. For at the end of the scene, he all of a sudden rebukes the painter and banishes him from the stage, together with his work of art. The scene resembles Plato’s condemnation of imitative art in Book X of the *Republic*, in which he expels art from the just city. In the denouement of the unconstrained generation of *Sturm und Drang*, the portrayed virgin functions as a medium for stimulating male inspiration and enthusiasm, yet, like any other muse, she is banished after she has fulfilled her purpose.

The last scene I want to examine reveals how seduction and military violence, as well as the impact of staging, performance and theatre are blurred – not just intertwined. As the turmoil reaches its peak and open conflict is expected at any time, dramatic scenes switch back and forth between temptation onstage in Fiesco’s palace and military action in Genoa. While armed soldiers besiege the harbour, Fiesco has ordered a theatrical show that is planned at his palace and which functions as the starting pistol of the actual uprising. After the male conspirators have signed a contract, won over more members and made plans for tyrannicide to eliminate the Dorias, Fiesco invites Gianettino Doria’s sister, the countess Julia, to his palace. In the meantime, he has secretly brought in the conspirators and his wife as an audience, hiding them behind a tapestry. In the tumult preceding the uproar on the streets of Genoa, and while the onstage audience is hiding, Fiesco debauches Julia onstage, creating a metatheatrical level of a play-within-a-play. Because Julia does not know that she is being watched by an audience, she acts without diffidence and ‘excited and heatedly’ (IV, 12) unveils her adoration of Fiesco, even expressing her desire to ‘[…] be conquered’ by him (IV, 12). The scene then turns into a scandal when Fiesco raises the tapestry and exposes Julia to the audience. His mise en scène ridicules and dishonours the countess as a female member of the ruling family by
exposing her lust in contrast to the doxa of female innocence. Soon after this scene of seduction and degradation has taken place, Fiesco is seen armed in front of the palace of the ruling Doria. In other words, the tumult begins after breaching the female member of the ruling family.

The scene calls to mind Diderot’s aesthetic concept of the fourth wall, by which he instructs actors to perform as if an imaginary wall curtains them off from the audience in the theatre hall – as if the stage drapery has not been opened and nobody is watching. In his analysis of Lessing’s bourgeois tragedy Emilia Galotti, Christopher Wild draws an analogy between the hymen and the fourth wall and reads the virgin protagonist of Lessing’s play as an emblem of Diderot’s convention of the fourth wall. According to Wild, this medium serves as an outer membrane that encloses the characters and the bourgeois family onstage. Like Emilia’s virginity that is in danger of being lost, the breaking through of the fourth wall could threaten the bourgeois family and expose its private sphere to the external world. Thus, raising the tapestry on the metatheatrical level in this particular scene of Schiller’s play can be understood as a reflection on breaking this theatrical convention. When the tapestry is raised – or the fourth wall is violated – the theatrical performance is exposed to political action: a community of revolting male agitators and conspirators captures the city, takes over the harbour and takes control of Genoa.

Epilogue: Military Alliance and the Affective Politics of the Pristine Female Body

I started my reflections with an example from contemporary France, and would like to close with a picture from contemporary Egypt that strikingly resembles a scene from antiquity. The latter is the story of Hypatia of Alexandria, a Greek philosopher, mathematician and astronomer, who lived in late antique Alexandria. No details about her life as an intellectual, her works or her teachings have survived the centuries. What has been remembered, however, is the story of how, in 415 or 416 BCE, she was brutally murdered in a church in Alexandria (Fig. 2). After being accused of opposing the reconciliation of clerical and secular powers in Alexandria, legend has it that she was
captured by Christian fanatics and taken to a church, where she was stripped of her clothes, skinned and dismembered. Her remains were then taken to a square, where they were finally burned. According to another version of the legend, Hypatia was dragged naked through the streets of Alexandria. Subsequent history has tended to interpret the chaste intellectual’s terrible death symbolically, abstracting it from the specifics of its circumstances. For what matters is that it was, as a symbol, considered to reflect a then-radical shift in Alexandria’s intellectual life. Stephen Greenblatt for instance remarks: ‘The murder of Hypatia signified more than the end of one remarkable person; it effectively marked the downfall of Alexandrian intellectual life.’57 Her murder in front of a church gate that was formerly a pagan temple marks a shift towards monotheism and the collapse of a cosmopolitan intellectual tradition, open to Egyptian, Babylonian, Greek, Latin and Jewish thought and legacy.58

In Egypt’s recent history, the media have covered the political events bearing a surprising analogy to Hypatia’s fate.59 A few months after Mubarak was driven out of office in 2011, media outlets around the world reported on a violent attack by Egyptian soldiers on a woman who later became known as ‘the girl with the blue bra’. The brute force of the scene was encoded above all in the violence unleashed on an otherwise dressed body and thus in the touching of something untouchable (the image itself makes it difficult to notice that the woman is veiled). The
fact that this denuding of a female body took place near Tahrir Square, the symbolic location of the revolutionary community, was interpreted as a direct military assault on the revolution and incited the masses to gather at the square once more. As events unfolded, some people spoke of the woman as a modern Hypatia. Names vary from Hypatia, Virginia, Hersilia, Joan of Arc – one could also add Lucretia or Judith. Their aesthetic representation as martyrs, victims or sacrifices turns them into symbols or allegories that stand as antagonists of male soldiers, revolutionaries, senators, judges but most of all, as strategic devices for establishing male sovereignty.

The texts analyzed above show how gender roles are reconsolidated in times of war or political crisis. The political arena is divided, with a male-dominated sphere that manages the crisis while female subjects – in particular the (de)sexualized pristine body – serve as media of affect arousal and control. Similarly, it is worth mentioning that these examples, whether they are drawn from historical writing on antiquity, the aesthetic imaginings of male artists and writers around the time of the French Revolution or contemporary media reports on political upheaval or migration and refugees, are all scenarios authored by men: they rely on thoroughly conventional tropes of virginity as male fantasy and phantasm. To my knowledge, there is no tradition of female writers reviving the figure of the Roman Virginia or other similar narratives of female virginity in political context. The narrative strategies studied here leverage the familiar patriarchal obsession with virginity or the silenced female body as a plot device for sparking revolution and/or forging political communities gendered as male. The figure of Joan of Arc, revived in German theatre around 1800 when Schiller’s play Die Jungfrau von Orleans premiered, is a variation on this theme. Although Joan is one of the few legendary virgins whose story involves obvious and significant agency – leading the French nation towards victory and orchestrating a majestic scene of coronation – the play ends by re-establishing kingly rule. When the heroine dies onstage and is covered with the flags of France, transcending the stage to become a national allegory, her death marks the restoration of male reign. Thus, this tradition of instrumentalizing female virginity is meant to resolve the dramatic conflicts of political rule, sustaining patriarchy and male sovereignty in the process.
Notes


3. Thomas Macho, *Vorbilder* (Munich: Fink, 2011), p. 121. All translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.


17 Another account reports that she chose to stay with the Romans as her only daughter was among the abducted virgins. See Dionysius, The Roman Antiquities, 45.2.
18 Dionysius, The Roman Antiquities, 45.6–46.1.
20 Beard, Women & Power, p. xiii.
22 Beard, Women & Power, p. 16.
24 Gödde discusses how Livy and Dionysius wrote down the founding history of Rome and the story of the abduction of the Sabine women during the first century BCE under the rule of the Roman dictator Caesar and the principate that made a new form of national belonging and identification necessary. Hence Romulus is, according to Gödde, rediscovered as a significant founding figure. Gödde explains that this is the reason behind his common positive portrayal. See Susanne Gödde, ‘Der Raub der Sabinerinnen. Gewaltsame Assimilation’, in Mythen Europas. Schlüsselfiguren der Imagination, eds. Andreas Hartmann and Michael Neumann (Regensburg: Friedrich Pustet, 2004), pp. 83–104, here p. 91.
25 Gödde, ‘Der Raub der Sabinerinnen’, p. 86.
29 See Chaussard, Sur le tableau de Sabines: ‘Ce rapprochement que je hasardais, je le communiquai à l’artiste; il me répondit: “Telle était ma pensée lorsque je saisis les pinceaux; puisse, je être entendu!”’ (‘I doubted about this approach and talked to the artist about it, who replied: “This was my thought when I took the brush, may I be heard!”’).


34 Livy, *Ab urbe condita*, Book 3, 50.11.

35 In 1796, Germaine de Staël’s philosophical and political treatise *On the Influence of Passions Upon the Happiness of Individuals and of Nations* was published, in which De Staël addresses the violence of the terror regime during the French Revolution that put an end to aspirations of happiness. See Germaine de Staël, *l’Influence des passions sur le bonheur des individus et des nations* (Lausanne: Mourer, 1796).


‘Verrina. Berta, erzähl mir […], was tat jener eisgraue Römer, als man seine Tochter auch so – wie nenn ichs nun – auch so artig fand, seine Tochter? Höre, Berta, was sagte Virginius zu seiner verstümmelten Tochter Berta (mit Schaudern). Ich weiß nicht, was er sagte. Verrina. Närrisches Ding! Nichts sagte er (Plötzlich auf, faßt ein Schwert) nach einem Schlachtmesser griff er – Berta (stürzt ihm erschrocken in die Arme). Großer Gott! was wollen Sie tun? Verrina (wirft das Schwert ins Zimmer). Nein! Noch ist Gerechtigkeit in Genua!’ Schiller, Fiesco, p. 663.

For more on the scene as well as the following scene, see Susanne Lüdemann, ‘Weibliche Gründungspfier und männliche Institutionen. Virginia-Variationen bei Lessing, Schiller und Kleist’, pp. 594–595.


52 ‘[…] die (ich gesteh es errötend ein) so gern erobert sein möchte […].’
Schiller, Fiesco, p. 726.

53 See Denis Diderot, ‘Discours de la poésie dramatique’, in Œuvres esthétiques,

54 In this regard, the Russian director and actor Constantin Stanislavski
developed the concept of ‘Public Solitude’ by which he referred to the
actor’s ability to experience a state of privacy while performing in public.
See Constantin Stanislavski, An Actor’s Handbook: An Alphabetical Arrangement
of Concise Statements on Aspects of Acting, ed. and trans. Elizabeth Reynolds

55 Christopher Wild, ‘Der theatralische Schleier des Hymens. Lessings

56 Wild continues his analysis by showing how this underlies a paradox, as
the spectator’s gaze follows the protagonists onstage even in their private
sphere to identify with them and to, consequently, experience catharsis. See
Wild, ‘Der theatralische Schleier’.


58 See Greenblatt, The Swerve, p. 88 and p. 93.

59 Egyptian army soldiers arrest a female protester during clashes at Tahrir
reuters.com/article/us-egypt-protests-women/attack-on-egyptian-women
-protesters-spark-uproar/idUSTRE7BK1BX20111221.