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RESEARCH ARTICLE

‘Making a Murderess’: Gender Bending Dracontius’ *viragines*

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Abstract

In the late fifth- and early sixth-century Latin poetry of Dracontius complex female characters abound. This article analyses Dracontius’ use of the word *virago* in reference to three women, all murderesses: Medea, the mother-cum-murderess, who kills Glauce, her husband’s betrothed and Glauce’s father Creon, before stabbing her own children to death; Clytemnestra, the mother of Orestes, who conspires with her lover Aegisthus to murder Orestes’ father Agamemnon; and Judith, the biblical heroine, who saves Israel by decapitating the evil general and tyrant Holofernes. It argues that Dracontius’ use of the word *virago* to refer to these women is a distinct attempt to gender the act of murder, as it is only by these characters’ murderous acts that they become *viragines*.

Keywords: Dracontius; Medea; Latin literature; Late Antiquity; Clytemnestra; Judith

Introduction

According to Servius Danielis’ commentary on Virgil there are two *viragines* in the *Aeneid*.[1] One is Iuturna, the sister of Turnus, who muscles in on her brother’s chariot driver Metiscus and then takes over the reins.[2] Iuturna’s status as a *virago* is clear – Virgil explicitly labels her as such, and then explains that she almost becomes Metiscus, adopting his voice (*vox*), his physicality (*corpus*), and his weapons (*arma*). Iuturna’s actions fit, and indeed may well have exerted some influence over, the

[1]Serv. Dan. ad loc. Verg. *Aen.* 4.335 and 12.468. For Servius’ didactic context see Foster (2017: 270–80), who notes that Servius could not assume that his students knew Greek, presumably even fewer knew Punic.

[2]Verg. *Aen.* 12.468–72: *Hoc concussa metu mentem Iuturna virago | aurigam Turni media inter lora Metiscum | excutit et longe lapsum temone reliquit; | ipsa subit manibusque undantis flectit habenas | cuncta gerens, vocemque et corpus et arma Metisci*. For a recent study of Iuturna, see Köves-Zulauf (2017: 22–6) who is at times somewhat reductionist in his assessment of Iuturna as a *virago*, e.g. p. 22: ‘Virago ist nichts anderes als eine inhaltliche Variante von *horrenda virgo* in ein einziges Wort gefasst’ (‘*Virago is* nothing else other than a variant of *horrenda virgo* contained within a single word’). Echarte Cossío (2016: 545) argues that Iuturna’s status as a *virago* is similar to Camilla as a *bellatrix virgo*.

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eventual definition of *virago*, first articulated by Jerome, and codified by Isidore of Seville, of a woman acting like a man (*vir-ago*).[3]

Servius Danielis' other Virgilian *virago* gains this label through different means (Serv. ad. loc. Verg. *Aen.* 4.335):

> 'Elissae' autem Didonis, quae appellata est lingua Punica virago, cum se in pyram sponte misisset, fingens placare manes prioris mariti, cum nubere se velle Iarbae mentiretur.
>
> 'Elissa's' but actually Dido's, which is how a *virago* is called in the Punic language, because she willingly sent herself onto the pyre, pretending that she was placating the spirit of her first husband, when she was actually lying about wanting to marry Iarbas.[4]

Dido's immolation, her resolve to kill herself, and her eventual suicide, her self-murder, render her in Servius Danielis' reckoning as a woman acting like a man.[5] In both cases *virago* describes women who stand up to men and assert themselves in a man's world.

In the six centuries or so between Virgil's epic and the Vandal Latin poetry of Dracontius the term *virago* has three main uses:

(1) for Graeco-Roman deities, especially Minerva and Pallas/Athena, but also Diana, Luna, Proserpina, Victoria, and the nymph Nebrophone;[6]
(2) for heroines, from warrior-women like Iuturna or Hippolyte to female victims, including both Classical examples, such as Cassandra and Polyxena, and Christian martyrs or virgins;[7]

[3]Hier. *QHG*, p. 6, ll 6–10 (de Lagarde) discusses the Hebraic etymology of *hissa* (woman) derived from *his* (man) at *Gen.* 2.2.3. Jerome notes: *unde et Symmachus pulchre* ἐτυμολογίαν *etiam in Graeco voluit custodire dicens haec vocabitur* ἀνδρίς, ὅτι ἀπὸ ἀνδρὸς ἐλήμφθη, *quod nos latine possumus dicere: haec vocabitur virago, quia ex viro sumpta est* ('Hence Symmachus actually wants to protect beautifully this *etymology* even in the Greek, saying she will be called *woman, because she was taken from man*'). No earlier Latin versions of Gen. 2.23 use *virago*. Cf. Hier. *In Hieremiam* 1.11, *In Osee* 1.2. See e.g. Isid. *Etym.* 11.2.22: *Virago uocata, quia uirum agit, hoc est opera uirilia facit et masculini uigoris est* ('A *virago* is so called, because she behaves as a man, that is she does manly tasks and is full of masculine energy'). This explanation is rejected by Ernout (1946: 165): 'L'explication par "quae uirum agit" n'est qu'un calembour' ('The explanation "she behaves like a man" is just a pun'). De Vaan (2008: 681) defines *virago* as a 'strong or warlike woman'. Werner (1961: 176) argues that courage ('[M]utig[keit]') is a key characteristic of a *virago*.

[4]Guillaumin (2019) 135. Cf. Serv. *ad. loc.* Virg. *Aen.* 1.340, 4.36 and 4.674 (Thilo and Hagen I, p. 468). All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

[5]Honeyman (1947: 77–8) argues that this etymological explanation is a better fit for Elissa than for Dido. See also the discussion by Hexter (1992: 248). Servius Danielis first makes this claim at Serv. Dan. ad loc. Verg. *Aen.* 4.36 and then repeats it at Serv. Dan. ad loc. Verg. *Aen.* 4.674.

[6]Minerva: Ov. *Met.* 2.765, 6.129; Stat. *Silv.* 4.5.21, Stat. *Theb.* 11.409. Pallas/Athena: *Ilias Latina* 533; Mart. Cap. *De nupt. Phil. et Merc.* 6.573, 7.738. Proserpina: Arn. 5.24 and 5.37. Victoria: Prudent. *C. Symm.* 2.35. Diana: Sen. *Phaed.* 54; *CIL* 3.8298; *CIL* 11.5262. Luna: Mart. Cap. *De nupt. Phil. et Merc.* 2.170, following Shanzer (1984) which reads *virago* instead of *vertigo*. Nebrophone: Claud. *Cons. Stil.* 3.314.

[7]Iuturna: Verg. *Aen.* 12.468 (cited above). Hippolyte: Claud. *De rapt. Prosp.* 2.63. Polyxena: Sen. *Troad.* 1148. Cassandra: Sen. *Agam.* 664. Atlanta: Sid. Apoll. *Carm.* 5.170. The Christian martyr Euphemia: Ennod. *Carm.* 17.29. The Christian virgin Eunomia: Paul. Nol. *Carm.* 21.66.

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(3) in exegetical contexts, including both Classical scholia and commentaries on Ennius and Virgil's uses, and Christian commentaries and translations which use *virago* to reflect the Hebrew etymology of woman from man for the epithet used for Eve.[8]

To this list one may also add four uses that are confined to single authors and texts: Prudentius uses *virago* to describe Superbia in his *Psychomachia*;[9] the anonymous author of the *Historia Augusta* labels Viturgia, the wife of Proculus, a late third century usurper, as a *virago*;[10] Priscian discusses technical linguistic features of the word;[11] and Firmicus Maternus claims that a certain astrological arrangement can make women into *viragines*.[12] Were it not for Servius' remark regarding the Punic etymology of Dido's name, the idea that killing could turn a woman into a *virago* may well have been forgotten.[13]

This article analyses Dracontius' use of the word *virago* in reference to three women, all murderesses: Medea, the mother-cum-murderess, who kills Glauce, her husband's betrothed and Glauce's father Creon, before stabbing her own children to death; Clytemnestra, the mother of Orestes, who conspires with her lover Aegisthus to murder Orestes' father Agamemnon; and Judith, the biblical heroine, who saves Israel by decapitating the evil general and tyrant Holofernes. It argues that Dracontius' use of the word *virago* to refer to these women is a distinct attempt to gender the act of murder, as it is only by these characters' murderous acts that they become *viragines*.

The link between Dracontius' *viragines* and their murders has so far evaded scholarly attention. When Dracontius' use of the word *virago* has been considered it has typically been taken with a generic, militaristic sense. Moussy, for example, considers Dracontius' use of *virago* as coda for heroine or warrior-woman, but this analysis is limited only to Dracontius' depiction of Judith.[14] Moussy's position is echoed by Stella.[15]

Sidonius Apollinaris uses *virago* to describe Medea in *Carmen* 9, a tour de force of *praeteritio* in reference to Medea's calming of the fire–breathing bulls. As this moment is well before Medea participates in any murders, this use may be placed in the secondary major category outlined above, as Sidonius is marvelling at Medea's heroic actions.

[8]On Ennius and Virgil's uses: Varro, *Ling.* 7.3.37; Pseudo–Probus *Comm. in Buc.* 6.31; The Virgilian scholia ad loc. Verg. *Aen.* 12.468; Serv. ad loc. *Aen.* 4.335 (cited above) and 12.468. For Eve: Hier. *Gen.* 2.23, *Comm. Osee* 1.2, *In Hiem.* 1.7.2, *Liber quaestionum hebraicarum in Genesim* 2.23; Aug. *De Genesi contra Manicheaos* 2.13.18; Eucherius of Lyon, *Instr.* 1.1.2; Fulgent. *Ep.* 3.7; Avit. *Carm.* 2.402.

[9]Prud. *Psych.* 178 and 194.

[10]*SHA Quad. Tyr.* 12.3.

[11]Prisc. *Inst.* 4.9, *Partitiones xii. versuum Aeneidos principalium* 1.

[12]Firm. Mat. 6.30.15.

[13]As Kaufmann (2006: 116) notes, this tradition indicates that prior to Dracontius the word *virago* did not automatically convey negative associations.

[14]Moussy (1988: 38 n. 2): '*uirago* est sans doute employé au sens d'"héroïne", "femme guerrière"' ('*virago* is probably used in the sense of 'heroine', 'warrior–woman'). Moussy (1988: 38 n. 2) distinguishes this use from Dracontius' other uses of *virago* for Medea and Clytemnestra on the basis that those uses have a 'nuance péjorative' ('pejorative sense').

[15]Stella (2020: 37). Kaufmann (2006: 55) considers Medea's epithets *virago* and *virgo* as relating indirectly to her status as a priestess of Diana and only mentions in passing the gendered aspect of *virago* (2006: 115–16). Wolff (1996: 188) distinguishes Dracontius' pejorative use of *virago* in his *Medea* and *Orestes* from his use of it in *De laudibus Dei*.

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This is not consistent with Dracontius' use of *virago* for Medea nor Clytemnestra, neither of whom can be considered heroines, nor as 'warrior-women' given Clytemnestra was a queen, who was otherwise uninvolved in war or violence, and Medea a priestess. Only Judith may be considered a heroine, but the label of warrior-woman is hardly a fit, given Judith is a widow, who uses her feminine charms to gain Holofernes' trust before decapitating him.

Medea (*Romulea* 10)

Dracontius refers to Medea using the noun *virago* three times in the epyllion.[16] The first occurs in the prooemium, where *virago* is one of five nouns used in reference to Medea (Drac. *Rom*. 10.1–5):[17]

> Fert animus uulgare nefas et uirginis arte
> captiuos monstrare deos, elementa clientes,
> naturam seruire reae, seruire puellae,
> astra poli et Phoebi cursus et sidera caeli
> arbitrio mulieris agi [...]
>
> My mind compels me to publicise an unspeakable crime and to show that the gods were taken captive by a maiden's skill, that elements are her clients, that nature serves a criminal, a girl, that the stars of the sky and the paths of Phoebus and the constellations of heaven are directed by the judgment of a woman [...]

Medea is the *virgo* whose trickery has ensnared the gods, the criminal (*rea*), that is a mere girl (*puella*), and the woman (*mulier*) in control of the heavens.[18] The fifth noun reinforces Medea's dominance over the pantheon (Drac. *Rom*. 10.11–13):

> possidet astrigerum funesto pectore caelum
> et superos impune premit prece nixa virago
> invitos parere sibi [...]
>
> She possesses in her deadly breast the starry sky, and this manly woman, relying on her spells, with impunity pressures the gods against their will to obey her [...]

Medea's evolution from *virgo* to *virago* mirrors the changing nature of her relationship to the gods; initially she influences *virginis arte* 'with a maiden's skill', but then

[16]Bright (1987: 46–84) offers a comprehensive overview of the text. For consideration of Dracontius' epic narratives as tragedic, see de Gaetano (2009: 296); Wasyl (2019: 168–77); and Verhelst (2022: 134–6).

[17]The edition used is Wolff (1996).

[18]For the role of the gods in Dracontius' poem and Medea's relationship to them see Fischer (2020: 155–61). Corrigan (2013: 261) in her study of Medea in Ovid, Seneca and Valerius Flaccus includes the following in her list of roles that Medea plays: 'young princess, priestess, daughter, sister, enamoured teenage girl and helper–maiden, right through to the other woman, wife, mother, foreigner, murderess, sorceress and goddess'.

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she pressures, asserting herself as a powerful *virago*.[19] The multiplicity of terms that Dracontius uses for Medea in this opening speaks to the complexity of Medea's femineity within Dracontius' miniature epic. She is a dominant figure, immensely powerful, but also at key-points, vulnerable, a criminal who is also a girl, a maiden who stands up to men. Some of these labels are intrinsic, like *puella*, others like *rea* and *virago*, need to be earnt.

Jason is washed up on the shore and looks likely to be executed by king Aeëtes. Juno intervenes by asking Venus to send Cupid to shoot Medea, a priestess of Diana, with an arrow (Drac. *Rom.* 10.62–5):

> igne tuo flammata cadat furibunda virago,
> discat amare furor, tandem sit blanda sacerdos,
> templa pharetratae contemnat virgo Dianae,
> despiciat delubra deae. [...]
>
> so that, inflamed by your fire, the woman, full of rage, behaving like a man, falls, so her rage learns to love, so the priestess finally becomes seductive, so the maiden despises the temples of the quiver-bearing Diana, and spurns the sanctuaries of the goddess. [...]

Dracontius plays on the near homophonic nature of *virgo* and *virago*, but any suggestion that the initial list of nouns to describe Medea was diachronic, is dashed by Juno's use of *virago* in her very first reference to Medea.[20] From Juno's perspective, Medea was already mad (*furibunda*), already playing the man, even before she met Jason. The adjective *furibunda* is suggestive of Dido's self-destruction (Verg. *Aen.* 6.646): *conscendit furibunda rogos ensemque recludit* ('Full of rage she climbed the pyre and drew out her sword'). Dracontius was certainly aware of Virgil's description of Dido's final moments, given he invokes these lines again in his description of Dido in the catalogue of exempla in book 3 of *De laudibus Dei*.[21] The *iunctura* of *furibunda* and *virago* is highly suggestive of Juno's foreknowledge of what will take place through its intratextual allusion to Medea's state of mind when she murders her children.[22]

The final use of *virago* to describe Medea occurs when she speaks to Jason, as he kneels, bound in the temple, on the very cusp of being sacrificed (Drac. *Rom.* 10.247–55):

> [...] conversa sacerdos
> ad iuvenem: 'dic, nauta fugax, pirata nefande:

[19]Dracontius juxtaposes' *virgo* and *virago* at Drac. *Rom.* 10.62–65, analysed below, where the order of the nouns is reversed. Stähle (2022: 375) initially sees a contradiction between these two roles, but as Stähle (2022: 381) goes on to argue, Dracontius is speaking of what Medea was (*puella, virgo*) and what Medea became (*rea, virago*). For the complexity of Medea's Dracontius see also Scafoglio (2022: 207–8). Díaz de Bustamente (1978: 224) notes that this prooemium clearly lays out the concerns of the poem.

[20]Stähle (2022: 382).

[21]For the influence of Virgil's description of Dido's last moments on Dracontius' description of Dido at *Laud. Dei* 3.514–15: she built a pyre herself, with her own hands, and full of rage climbed it with her own feet and burned herself (*ipsa pyram manibus propriis construxit ut aram, | quam pedibus furiata suis conscendit et arsit*). See Zwierlein (2017: 145).

[22]Drac. *Rom.* 10.531–7.

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est consors matrona decens an caelibe vita
degis adhuc nullumque domi <tibi> pignus habetur?'
'solus,' ait captivus, 'ego, mihi pignora nulla
coniugis aut subolis.' dictis gavisa virago
blanda refert: 'vis ergo meus nunc esse maritus?'
'servus,' Iason ait, 'tantum ne vita negetur
te precor et dominam fateor.'

[...] The priestess turns to the young man: 'Speak, escaped sailor, evil pirate, do you have an honourable woman or do you still live a celibate life and is there no betrothal waiting at home for you?'
'I am alone,' said the captive, 'I am not committed to a partner nor to children.' The woman-playing-the-man was pleased at these remarks, and replied seductively 'So do you want to be my husband right now?'
'I'd be your slave,' Jason said, 'just, I beg you, do not deny me my life, I recognise you as my superior.'[23]

Her seductive (*blanda*) address of Jason echoes Juno's request at the start of the epic (Drac. *Rom.* 10.63): *sit blanda sacerdos*. Jason does not accept Medea's proposition, but his answer that he will be the slave to her his mistress, speaks to the extreme circumstances of their encounter and the manifest power imbalance, as Medea holds Jason's life in her hands.[24] His labelling of Medea as *domina* draws upon and informs Medea's semi-divine status, given Cupid's use of *domina* to refer to the goddess Diana, and Cupid's effective classification of Medea as a suitable target on the basis of her divinity (a claim underscored by Dracontius' identification of her as a divine figure at the beginning of the poem).[25] Medea is again the *virago*, as she holds Jason's life in her hands.

The reader who knows the plot of the *Medea* might be surprised to see *virago*, a term that typically carries a sense of admiration in Latin literature prior to Dracontius, used repeatedly to refer to Medea.[26] This surprise speaks to the complexity of Medea's character, especially in Dracontius' telling, as he teases out the paradoxes of his prefatory remarks throughout the poem, as both a victim, of Juno, Venus, Cupid, Jason and Glauce, and a heinous perpetrator, the innocent girl who becomes a murderess.[27] Gender is critical to the tension within Dracontius' Medea, as she struggles to fulfil gendered expectations as to what she should do, and ultimately rejects these expectations by the drastic actions that she takes. By the end of the poem Medea's actions confirm her semi-divinity, if only by her lack of humanity, as the murderess mother

[23]The English term 'mistress' fails to capture the power imbalance between Medea and Jason at this point.

[24]Kaufmann (2006) 271. See also Stähle (2022: 383). For discussion of Medea and Jason's 'marriage', see Stoehr–Monjou (2021: 433–4) who notes the forced nature of Medea's proposal.

[25]Drac. *Rom.* 10.4–13, partially cited above.

[26]In the catalogue of all uses of *virago* in Latin literature prior to and contemporaneous with Dracontius the uses of *virago* are either positive or neutral. The one exception may be Prudentius' uses of *virago* as an epithet for Superbia, but the negativity of that portrayal hinges more on Prudentius' pointed use of the adjectives *inflata and ventosa* at Prudent. *Psych.* 178 and 194.

[27]For Dracontius' Medea as a victim, see Stoehr–Monjou (2017: 218).

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of her children, unable to play the woman in a man's world, nor able to play the man without suffering dire consequences.[28] In this respect Dracontius' labelling of Medea as *virago* also encapsulates her duality, as both a priestess who sacrilegiously married and had children, and as a semi-divine being.[29]

Clytemnestra (*Orestes*)

In Dracontius' *Orestes* Queen Clytemnestra conspires with her lover Aegisthus to murder Orestes' father, Agamemnon.[30] Much of the tension in the play revolves around Orestes' hesitation about avenging his father by murdering his mother. In an extended dialogue prior to her death Clytemnestra begs her son to spare her, using language which stresses her femineity as Orestes' mother (*mater*), birthmother (*genetrix*), and wetnurse (*nutrix*).[31] The latter involves a moment of heightened drama (Drac. *Or.* 739–740):

> conturbata parens nudis exerta papillis
> orabat natum: 'per haec, puer, ubera, parce!'[32]
>
> His parent, now deranged with fear, bared naked breasts
> and begged her son: 'By these breasts, child, spare me!'

Exposing her breasts to her son amounts to a dramatic display of Clytemnestra's claim that her dutiful rearing and raising of Orestes should grant her special indemnity against his revenge. This case is made especially ardently given that Agamemnon was away at war for the vast majority of Orestes' formative years.[33]

The noun *virago* only appears in reference to Clytemnestra in Orestes' words as he finally resolves to dispatch her with his sword (Drac. *Or.* 745–6, 751–2):

> [...] tum natus 'inanes
> perdis' ait 'lacrimas, genitor te expectat ad umbras.
>
> [...]
> haec mihi Pylades meus imperat et soror urget:
> ut iaceas mucrone meo, truculenta uirago.'

[28]Drac. *Rom.* 10.533–601.

[29]Stähle (2022: 388). For the link between *virago* and Dido and Iuturna's divine status, see Hexter (1992: 348). Cf. Ovid and Statius' use of *virago* for Minerva, cited above. This assessment is *contra* Moreau (1994: 214–15, 294–6), who sees Medea's character as having a fundamental duality, involving her role as a woman behaving like a man (*virago*) and her role as a semi–divine figure who harms men.

[30]For an introduction to the text, see Roche (2023: 4–30).

[31]Drac. *Or.* 561–70.

[32]The edition used is Bouquet (1995). For an overview of direct discourse in Dracontius' *Orestes*, see Galli Milić (2010: 179–87).

[33]Drac. *Or.* 571–2: *haec pater, haec mihi mater erat pugnante parente | donec ab undecimis aetas me exemerat annis* ('She was both a father and mother to me when my father was at war until the passage of time had relieved me of my eleventh year').

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[...] then the son said:
'You waste vain tears, my father expects you among the shades.

[...]
My Pylades orders me to do this and my sister urges it
that you die by my blade, savage murderess.'

Orestes' rejection of Clytemnestra's status as his mother reaches its rhetorical crescendo with the phrase *truculenta virago*.[34] This gender-bending of Clytemnestra places her at risk and justifies Orestes' actions, removing at least rhetorically any concerns regarding the impiety of matricide.[35] From this moment on, Clytemnestra – at least for the purposes of being a victim – is placed in the same category as the male actors of the play. Her gender does not protect her from suffering the same fate as Aegisthus, her lover and accomplice in Agamemnon's murder.[36]

Judith (*De laudibus Dei* 3)

In book three of the *De laudibus Dei* Dracontius explores gendered differences and similarities, building on his earlier characterisation of Adam and Eve in book one.[37] After a theological account of how God rewards and punishes, Dracontius posits the reaction of a non-Christian reader (*profanus*) who might be included to reject his Christian claims.[38] For the benefits of such a reader Dracontius turns to the Classical canon to make his point, citing Greek, Carthaginian and Roman exempla in support of his overall premise that God punishes evil and rewards good.[39]

At the end of these catalogues Dracontius considers how a female reader might react (Drac. *laud. Dei* 3.468–475):

Sed ne forte viris tantum data verba putentur
et quasi sexus iners, fragili sub corpore mollis
laudis onus metuens, ne sit sibi fama superstes
tormentis quaesita suis, aeterna recuset
plurima dona dei – laudis mala femina summae
materiem retinere potest; audacius illis
deprensis nihil est, animos de crimine sumunt
datque nimis grandem mulieribus ira furorem.[40]

[34]Bouquet (1995: 217): 'Le mot convient à Clytemnestre dont le caractère est dominateur et énergique' ('The term suits Clytemnestra whose character is domineering and energetic').

[35]*Contra* van Zyl Smit (2010: 35), who interprets *virago* in a more positive way as reflecting Clytemnestra as she 'boldly tackles all obstacles to realising her ideal of a union with her unsophisticated but sexy lover'. This interpretation does not consider that the label *truculenta virago* is used directly against Clytemnestra with some intense hostility from Orestes.

[36]Bureau (2003: 11) rightly identifies the intensity of the violence in Dracontius' *Oreste*, especially with regard to the deaths of Aegisthus and Clytemnestra.

[37]For a translation and commentary of *De laudibus Dei* 1, see Irwin (1942) and Camus and Moussy (1985), and for *De laudibus Dei* 3, see O'Shea (1952) and Moussy (1988).

[38]Drac. *laud. Dei* 3.251–61.

[39]Drac. *laud. Dei* 3.263–467.

[40]The edition used is Moussy (1988).

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> But lest perchance these words are thought to be provided only to men, as if the mild sex refuses the many, eternal gifts of God, afraid of the burden of praise on their soft, fragile bodies, lest their notoriety gained through their own torment, survive themselves. A wicked woman can keep the basis of greatest acclaim. Nothing is more daring than they are when caught. They take spirit from the accusation, and their womanly wrath gives them exceedingly great rage.

Dracontius carefully imbeds gendered criticism within the negative purpose clause, and then pivots against it, arguing that women are capable of great evil, and therefore are also in need of corrective exempla to guide their moral decisions. In the catalogue of heroines Dracontius justifies the inclusion of female exempla by comparisons between their actions and what men would have done in similar situations. The first feminine exemplar for instance, the biblical heroine Judith, decapitates the tyrant Holofernes in his own camp (Drac. *laud. Dei*. 3.480–90):

> Iudith Holofernem castissima finxit amare
> et sibimet peperit de ficto crimine laudem
> castra ducis metuenda viris ingressa virago.
> Inter belligeros fremitus et tela cruenta,
> inter et ensiferas saevo sub Marte catervas
> ingreditur vestita fide, munita pudore
> et quod tanta manus non est adgressa virorum,
> nocte sub obscura perfecit femina sola
> et duce truncato viduavit castra tyranni!
> Quae caput ad patriae proceres portavit et urbis
> civibus una dedit cum libertate triumphum.

> The most chaste Judith pretended to love Holofernes and the *virago*, once she entered the general's camp, a place feared by men, she received praise from him for a crime that she invented. Among the warmongering roars and bloody weapons, and sword-bearing hordes in the midst of fierce war, she entered clothed only with her faith, armoured only by her honour, and did what such a band of men had not attempted, the woman, all on her own, during a dark night, decapitated the general and so widowed the tyrant's camp! She carried the head to the leaders of her county and on her own gave to the citizens of the city a triumph to go with their freedom.

Judith lies twice, first by pretending to Holofernes that she loves him, and secondly by pretending that she has done some sort of criminal act worthy of praise.[41] Dracontius however is full of praise for Judith, as he contrasts her heroic actions, as a *virago* – a heroine or warrior woman – with those of the men (*viris*) who are too scared to

[41]Holofernes resolves to commit adultery with Judith but is killed before he has the opportunity to do so, for which see Zwierlein (2019: 190).

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confront Holofernes.[42] The verb *viduavit* emphatically underlines Judith's inversion of her role and status as society, as the widow who forces the camp into widowhood by killing Holofernes. The feminine participles *vestita* and *munita* underscore Dracontius' claims regarding Judith's incredible actions, as a woman, acting all on her own (*femina sola, una*).[43] In the end Holofernes (Drac. *laud. Dei*. 3.491): *Femineo mucrone perit* ('dies by a woman's blade').

Judith's capacity not only to overcome gendered expectations regarding her behaviour, but in so doing, outdo the men justifies both Dracontius' decision to include a catalogue of female exempla, and his decision to begin with Judith. By gendering Judith's heroic action against Holofernes, Dracontius broadens the relevancy of her exemplum. Women should look to Judith for inspiration, but men can too, as they look to avoid following the men in the story, who are all anti-exempla, either on account of their cowardice in refusing to confront Holofernes or in Holofernes' case on account of his tyranny.

Conclusion

Dracontius' use of *virago* to describe violent female figures is not wholly without precedent in the history of Latin literature. In a fragment that has often puzzled commentators, Ennius wrote (Enn. *Ann*. 220–1 Sk.):

> corpore tartarino prognata Paluda virago
> cui par imber et ignis, spiritus et gravis terra.
>
> The *virago* Paluda, born with a hellish body,
> to whom rain and fire, spirit and weighty earth are equal.

It is difficult to reconcile this picture, of a grotesque, ghastly woman with the heroic imagery associated with a Iuturna or Minerva. Beginning with Norden, scholarship has suggested that these lines are a description of the goddess Discordia, which is consistent with the use of *virago* to refer to deities, and more broadly consistent with the militaristic and violent connotations that *virago* can convey.[44] Dracontius' use of *virago* to describe murderesses may thus be seen as a continuation of a tradition begun by Ennius, and perpetuated by Virgil (by way of Servius) through the etymology of Elissa/Dido, whereby a woman behaving like a man is coda for a female killer whether of themselves or others.

For Wolff, a clear divide can be seen between the biblical heroine and positive exemplar of Judith, and the negativity and evil of a Medea or Clytemnestra, but we may bridge this divide in two ways.[45] Judith's murder of Holofernes is a triumphant act, but

[42] Stella (2020: 38): '[Dracontius] reiterates the femininity of her undertaking against a courageous male commander'. Simons (2005: 141 n. 238) notes that Judith's actions are exemplary, and so she is, in contrast to Medea and Clytemnestra, a positive example of a *virago*.

[43] Moussy (1988: 102).

[44] Norden (1915: 15–18). For further discussion, see Fraenkel (1945: 12), and for a recent assessment linking this passage to Discordia, see Kraggerud (2020: 182–6). For a list of all uses of *virago* in Latin literature prior to Dracontius to describe deities, see above.

[45] Wolff (1996: 188).

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this triumph is as much against the Assyrian general as it as the men who failed in their duty to confront Holofernes. There is thus a sense of shame operative in Dracontius' account of Judith's actions, not for the pious widow who necessarily undertook such a risky and violent act, but for the men who stood by while it happened. In this regard Judith is both a perpetrator, and a victim of male incompetence and tyranny. The same may be said of Medea, whose guilt for the murders that she commits is necessarily complicated by the conspiracy of divine and human interests that have made her into a victim, from Juno to Jason.[46] To a lesser extent one may even see some victimhood in Clytemnestra given Agamemnon all but abandoned her. By using the word *virago* to refer to these women Dracontius invokes the epic tradition embodied by Ennius and Virgil, while highlighting the complexity of these female characters, as they defy their gendered social expectations of their behaviour, and try to assert themselves against powerful men.[47]

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[46]Drac. *Rom* 10.571–2 specifically blames a list of deities for Medea's fate, for which see Edwards (2004: 155), and for this as an authorial pronouncement on the text, Wolff (2020: 142). Bureau (2015: 302) notes the complexity of the concept of guilt in Dracontius' *Medea*.

[47]All of Dracontius' uses of *virago* occur in his poems which are part of the epic genre, whether as epyllion or in the case of *De laudibus Dei* long–form epics, for which see Wolff (2011: 97).

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