

Weavers of Fate: Symbolism in the Costume of Roman Women"

by

Judith Lynn Sebesta

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Ronald A. Schwarz, textile and clothing scholar, has commented that "clothing and adornment are universal features of human behavior, and an examination of what they reveal, and attempt to conceal, contributes to our knowledge about the fabric of cultures and to our understanding of the threads of human nature."¹ Costume consists of clothing and adornment when they communicate a culture's conception of how its society is structured and the position of an individual in that society. "Text" and "textile" are cognate words, after all. Just as one can read a text such as the *Annals* by the Roman historian Tacitus in order to unravel the reweaving of Roman society accomplished by the emperor Augustus, so one can read the "text" of Roman costume. That same emperor was well aware of the importance of costume as a visual representation of cultural identity and ideology. As part of his programme to re-establish the values and traditions of the Roman republic, Augustus decreed that Roman men should wear the toga when in the Forum and when conducting state business.² Augustus' elevation of the toga to national dress is echoed both in the text of the *Aeneid* by the poet Vergil, who hails the Romans as the "masters of the world, the toga clad nation," and also in the context of the well-known Augustan monument, the Altar of Augustan Peace, on which Augustus and his senators are portrayed soberly clad in their togas.

I began to study Roman costume in 1988 by participating in a summer seminar funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities. The study of costume illustrates how interwoven the humanities are, not only with each other, but with other areas of study as well. My fellow participants and I touched on the disciplines of art history, archaeology, language and literature, and even chemistry, geography, and economics. We examined not only artistic representations of Roman clothing, but also actual finds of shoes and woven garments. We consulted passages in classical authors which name or describe clothing or Roman attitudes towards clothing. We learned how wool, cotton, and linen were dyed, where these fibers were produced and what their economic importance for the provinces of the Empire was. From my initial concentration on the fibers and dye colors

used by the Romans, I came to be interested in the costume worn by the majority of fiber workers of Roman society, the women.

Were you to visit the ruins of Pompeii, you would notice that the Pompeians' tombs are located outside the city walls. Religious law ordered that cemeteries be located outside of the sacred city boundary. Statues of the people buried there decorate many of the tombs. The statues of women typically show them with their head and body tightly wrapped in their cloak or palla. Classical art historians call this attitude the *pudicitia* or "modesty" pose. The epitaphs of these Roman women frequently include the phrases: "I kept the house. I worked with wool." The work of keeping the house clean and of spinning wool have in the past been seen as so routine, so typically feminine, and so—well, taken for granted—that these phrases have not seemed worthy of remark. The story of Lucretia, however, indicates that the Romans viewed spinning and weaving wool as the occupation of a virtuous wife. The Roman historian Livy recounts that when some young Roman husbands became bored while besieging a neighboring town, they began to boast about the virtues of their wives. To settle the discussion, they returned to Rome and found, much to their chagrin, that all their wives—save Lucretia—were enjoying dinner parties. Only Lucretia was sitting among her slave women spinning and weaving. The other husbands declared her the winner of this contest of wifely virtue; Livy unfortunately does not tell us the fate of the frivolous wives. Augustus also acknowledged the symbolism of virtuous womanhood which weaving had. In his vain attempt to reform Roman society, Augustus required his wife and daughter to spin and weave his togas in order to set an example of feminine virtue and industry for other Roman women. As togas averaged twelve to fifteen feet in length and five feet in width, the task of weaving one would not allow a wife too much time and energy to spend on frivolity! Nonetheless, the sheer necessity of weaving all the garments for a family does not seem sufficient to answer the question, "Why do the epitaphs single out the working with wool from the other daily, onerous house-keeping chores and make it the sign of feminine virtue?"

Unlike the Greeks, Romans used clothing symbolically—for them clothing was costume. For example, the toga itself was a sign that its wearer possessed the coveted Roman citizenship. For a long time only the children of the patricians could have their toga bordered with a purple band. The expensive purple dye was made from the small ink sacks of a Mediterranean mollusk. As a result of the long struggle between the patrician Romans and

the common people, the children of the commoners gained the privilege of wearing a purple border on their togas. But does the use of clothing to express such social snobbery alone explain the importance of working wool?

Some of the clothing Roman women wove has been long recognized as having a religious significance. The toga of a Roman priest had to be "pure,"³ which meant not only clean of dirt, but also clean of religious pollution, which could come from contact with certain objects, for example, a human corpse. The togas of a priest and of a magistrate (who also conducted sacrifices and religious ceremonies) were distinguished from the plain, natural colored toga of the male citizen by a purple border identical to that of the child's toga just mentioned. This purple border clearly had some religious significance; it is just as clear that the woolen fiber of the toga had religious significance.

Priests' garments had to be made of wool (unlike common togas which could be made of blends of wool and vegetable fibers). Wool fillets or bands were, to judge from artistic representations, long rolls of carded, undyed wool fastened at intervals with wool yarn. These fillets were tied around the heads of sacrificial animals, sacred trees, altars, temple pillars, and tombs as well as around the heads of priestesses and priests. For example, the Flamen Dialis, the priest of Jupiter, wore a strange cap with a spike wrapped in wool. These woolen fillets and threads indicated that the objects they adorned were *sacer*, religiously unpolluted and pure, and were separated from the profane world.

Throughout the Mediterranean cultures, from Mesopotamia to Rome, wool possessed a sacred nature, a fact which has been overlooked because wool was so commonly used for clothing.⁴ The religious symbolism of spinning and weaving has also been overlooked because they were commonly carried on in the home and were primarily a woman's occupation.

Let us look more closely at the sacred nature of wool among Mediterranean cultures. Not only were woolen bands used in rites and processions to protect against evil, but they were also tied onto the ill to cure their diseases. Water and wool were used in the same rituals—the religious symbolism and function of water is easily surmised. The cleansed and purified initiate in mystery cults was made to stand, bare-footed on a woolen fleece. The initiate had to be bare-footed because leather, which is the skin of a dead animal, is religiously polluting. Woolen fleece miraculously comes from a living animal and is thus associated with life, health, strength, and correct relationship with the gods.

One striking property of wool, well-known in antiquity, was that it produced static electricity when stroked with amber (a mysterious substance itself which was passed by trade from Denmark and Germany to the Mediterranean). The peoples of the Mediterranean correctly connected the sparks of static electricity with flashes of lightning. They therefore thought that wool had a particular role in the cosmos.⁵ To them the cosmos was a source of what the Greeks called *pneuma*, a word meaning "Spirit, Living Air, the Breath of Life." The Greek philosopher Anaximenes saw *pneuma* not as an inert material but as an active, everlasting element which sustained the universe: "Our soul, which is made of air, holds our bodies together: just so does Living Air envelope the whole world."⁶ He explained that this Living Breath could be transformed into the other three elements: into Fire through rarefaction, into Earth through condensation, and into Water through liquefaction. Less philosophically oriented common people saw air somehow producing the thunder clouds which we call cumulus clouds. The shaggy lower edges of these clouds reminded them of the hanks of long wool hanging from the bellies of their sheep. "Wooly clouds" may be a metaphor for us, but the Greeks and Romans meant it more literally.⁷ They equated the sparks of static electricity produced from wool with the strokes of lightning which brought life-giving rain to the earth. Just as these lightning clouds were imbued with *pneuma*, Life Breath, so was wool; its sparks of static electricity proved it. But how did this Life Breath get into the wool?

Once the women had carded this wool, they spun it into thread on spindles around which the woolen thread collected in a cone-shaped form. As they did with the cosmic *pneuma*, the ancient peoples connected the act of twisting the cone-shaped spindle with an astronomical phenomenon. The Sumerians, the earliest astronomers of western civilization, knew that during a lunar eclipse, a cone-shaped shadow falls onto the earth. They connected the cone-shaped shadow of the lunar eclipse with the cone-shaped spindle, which, whirled by the spinner, twisted wool fibers into a thread. The whirling motion of the moon, sun and stars around the earth (as they thought) brought the *pneuma* that infused the cosmos to the earth. There the *pneuma* gathered in clouds and fell to the ground as rain. Thus, sometimes, people spun tops during sowing, hoping that through imitative magic the whirling motion of the tops would bring additional fertility to the fields should rainfall be scanty.⁸ Wool was a magical, special material because, unlike any plant fibers they used in clothing, wool gathered this

pneuma in its fibers.

In mythology, spinning is especially associated with the goddesses of fate. Plato's cosmology explains how the spinning the Fates perform brings pneuma to the earth. He imagines that the universe is composed of spheres inside one another; we may liken this to an onion slice composed of round sections one inside the other. A Greek, however, would liken these concentric spheres to the whorl of a spindle. Plato says the earth, the innermost sphere, is connected with the outermost sphere through a column of light which is attached to a cosmic spindle spun by the Fates. The spinning motion which brings pneuma to the world is particularly performed by the goddess of fate called Clotho, whose name means "the Spinner." She spins, in Plutarch's words, "clouds charged with pneuma (visible as lightning)" into the "golden thread of life," which is rain.⁹

The connection between the human spinning of wool and the cosmic spinning of fate is not peculiar to the Greeks. In his book, *The Origins of European Thought about the Body, the Mind, the Soul, the World, Time and Fate*, Richard Broxton Onians, Professor of Latin at the University of London, shows that many cultures make this same connection. The Norse, for example, called their gods "the Binders." The Norse goddesses of fate are the Norns who spin and weave for warriors webs full of battle.¹⁰ In the epic *Njals Saga*, while Brian's Battle was being fought at Dublin, a man saw the Valkyries setting up their loom, which they described in their weaving song: "Blood rains / From the cloudy web / On the broad loom / Of slaughter. The web of man, / Grey as armour, / Is now being woven...The warp is made / Of human entrails; / Human heads / Are used as weights; / The heddle-rods / Are blood-wet spears; / The shafts are iron-bound, / And arrows are the shuttles. / With swords we will weave / This web of battle."¹¹ Similarly, in the Aryan *Atharva Veda*, the Indie goddesses of fate are invoked in these words: "They (the goddesses) who spun, wove, and stretched the web, let them wrap thee in order to old age; as one long lived, put about thee this garment."¹²

The Romans called their goddesses of fate the "Parcae." The root of this name comes from the Latin word that means "to give birth to." Like the Greek goddesses of fate, the Latin goddesses spun the child's fate as it was born. That which is spun can, of course, be made into clothing, and the metaphor of wearing one's fate as clothing is common to Mediterranean cultures. In the Old Testament, for example, the Psalmist sings "It is God that girds me with strength" (*Ps.* xviii.32), while the writer of the *Book of*

Enoch says, "The angel Azbuga will clothe the righteous and pious with garments of life and wrap them in the cloak of life that they may live in them eternal life" (*Enoch* xviii.22).¹³

In the mundane world, the diligent spinner spun wool that was endowed with the mysterious substance called *pneuma* into a thread which she would subsequently weave into a garment. Made of woolen thread this garment likewise contained *pneuma*; as it folded around the body, the garment also folded the *pneuma* around the person. The garment visually clothed the person just as the fate which the *Parcae* had woven clothed him or her in a metaphysical sense.¹⁴

As the child matured, it would don new garments in rites of passage which signified its entering a new stage of life and a new stage of its fate. Even today we change our costume as we go through a rite of passage: infants often wear elaborate lace or embroidered gowns for their baptism; kindergartners wear miniature graduation gowns and mortarboards; seniors at their prom, one part of the rite of passage into adulthood, wear formal dress. Entering a new stage of life means beginning a new stage of one's fate. The change of costume not only signifies this new beginning, but also re-binds the fate to the person at this critical time.

Any parent wishes health and attainment of maturity for her or his child. Even more anxious were Roman parents due to the high infant and childhood mortality in a society with limited effective medical treatment. We have no specific knowledge of the Roman child's swaddling clothes other than that amulets were hung about a child's neck to protect it against evil and disease. As soon as a child could physically wear it, he or she dressed in a *toga praetexta*. In weaving the woolen *toga*, the mother paralleled or re-enacted the *Parcae*'s weaving the child's fate. The wool, charged with *pneuma*, the Life Breath, would strengthen the child's weak life force against evil spirits and diseases. To enhance the power of the woolen garment, the child's *toga* had a purple border, the *praetexta*. The word *praetexta* means "woven first." This purple border was woven first to ensure a proper beginning for the weaving; it made a protective threshold, so to speak, delimiting the cloth which was being woven from the profane world and placing it in the religiously pure world.

Roman sources clearly indicate the protective, strengthening, apotropaic nature of this border. When a male child grew to maturity and no longer needed the special protection of the border, he offered his child's *toga* to his household gods. The poet *Persius* recalls, "As soon as the purple (border)

ceased to be a protection to me, a timid child, my amulet was donated to the household gods and hung on their altar."¹⁵ Quintilian, first professor of speech communications (so to speak), also points out the protective nature of the praetexta border when he says, "I swear to you upon that sacred praetexta—by which we make sacred and venerable the weakness of childhood."¹⁶ Another author, Festus, adds that obscene or impure words are not to be uttered in the presence of a child clad in a toga praetexta; he defines the term praetextate speech as pure speech, speech devoid of obscenity which is religiously polluting and therefore harmful to a child.¹⁷

The Romans and Greeks associated the color purple with blood; while we speak of "blue" blood, they spoke of "purple" blood. To them purple was one of the many shades of red, a color associated by cultures, past and present, the world over, with life. Garments dyed red or with hues of red (such as purple) are used in many cultures to protect brides, pregnant women, women in child-birth, babies and children—any one in a situation or state in which their life is tenuous and in danger.

Menarche signified that the girl had reached sexual maturity and had survived the inherent weakness of childhood. In an act paralleling her brother's dedicating his childhood toga to the household gods she, too, gave up her toga upon marriage. In one of Propertius' poems, the ghost of Cornelia reminisces of her bridal day "When my toga praetexta yielded to the marriage torches and another fillet bound my hair..."¹⁸ The girl, however, dedicated her toga praetexta to the goddess of Virginal Fortune. In the marriage ceremony which followed, she bound to herself a new fate, a temporary, transitional one spanning her passing from her father's family to that of her husband. This rite of passage required a special, ritual way of clothing herself, including a new way of dressing her hair.

As a child, she had worn her hair carefully combed, braided, and tied with a single woolen band, one of those same woolen bands I mentioned earlier which set an object apart from the profane world. Before we go on to the other elements of the bridal costume, however, we need to understand the Indo-European conception, which the Romans shared, about the life-force.

The Romans called this life-force *anima* and located it in the head. Two spiritual entities, the Genius for a man and the Juno for a woman, came into existence in the child as it was born. Genius and Juno were the divine "embodiments" of each individual's life force through which he or she as an adult would procreate his or her own family. During childhood, the anima needed protection until it matured and gained full power. For the

girl, this protection came from the toga praetexta and the woolen fillet binding her hair.

In physical form, the anima was the cerebral-spinal fluid which the Romans, as well as Indo-European cultures in general, thought of as flowing from the head down the spine (which indeed it does) down to the sexual organs. Upon maturity this life force was now ready to produce a child. During the bridal ceremony the woman passed from her earlier fate of weak child to her stage of fate of mature woman ready to become wife and mother. During this rite of passage she wore different clothes which bound her new stage of fate to her.

So important was it that no evil should befall her anima during her bridal rite of passage that the weaving of the bridal garments was not entrusted to any one but the bride herself. On the night before her wedding she slept in a tunic she had woven from undyed wool, that is unstained, pure wool, and covered her head and anima in a yellow-red hairnet she had made. The encyclopaedist, Pliny the Elder, significantly defines this yellow-red color, called *luteum*, as the color of an egg yolk, the food of the growing chick.¹⁹ As a pregnant woman was thought only to nourish the child she bore, the connection between an egg yolk color and her anima is obvious. On the day of her wedding, the bride dedicated the hairnet to her household gods and then dressed her hair in the style called the "six tresses" (*sera crines*).²⁰

This hairstyle was accomplished by a ritual act that symbolized the binding of a new fate to the bride and that strengthened the power of her anima. Attendants used a special spear, the curved *hasta caelibaris*, to divide the bride's hair into six tresses. The spear had to be one, says Festus, that had been planted in the body of a gladiator.²¹ Perhaps imbued magically with the anima of the dead, the spear seems to have activated in some way the fertility of the woman's anima; could there be some parallelism between the stroking of the hair with the spear and the stroking of wool (the hair of sheep) with amber? Over this hairstyle the bride wore a garland of flowers, which also were an omen of fertility.

A special belt, made from the fleece of a ewe, bound her tunic and tied her clothes of new fate. A square knot, which the Romans called "the knot of Hercules," fastened this belt. Considered a difficult knot for her husband to untie, it also portended fertility, for Hercules had begotten seventy children.

Lastly the bride covered her head and much of her body with the bridal veil, the *flammeum*, which was dyed a striking golden yellow. The flaminica,

the priestess wife of the priest of Jupiter, also wore this veil. The marriage of the flamen and flaminica represented and guaranteed the fertility of Roman marriages, for when death sundered their union, a new flamen-flaminica pair had to be consecrated. Through her husband the flaminica was connected to Jupiter whose weapon and omen were the thunderbolts which flashed from the wooly storm clouds. It will not surprize you that the flaminica was called the model *lanifica*, "she who works with wool."

On her feet the bride wore yellow shoes in the form of slipper socks. As yet we have no author who states what material they were made of, but the flaminica could not wear leather shoes. The bride's shoes may therefore have been made of wool, like the rest of her costume.

Having passed from childhood into adult womanhood through the bridal rite of passage, the woman now wore a new costume signifying her fate as matron, "wife-mother." Over her tunic she wore the distinctive stola. The stola, was a sleeveless dress suspended from straps, like our modern slip. The stola like the child's toga praetexta, signified that she should be kept separate from impure speech and actions. The Roman poet of love, Ovid, acknowledges in his *Art of Love*, that his verses are not for a matron's eyes, saying, "Be far from here, you signs of purity, thin fillets and long stola which covers the feet."²³ These thin fillets, which were alluded to by the ghost of Cornelia earlier, tied and bound the matron's head and hair, thus protecting her anima.

The matron wore an additional covering for the head and the anima residing in it even while she was inside her house.²⁴ The *rica* seems to have been a small veil just covering her hair, like the "church veil" we Episcopalian women used to wear in obedience to St. Paul's command that women should not attend services without covering their heads. Outside the house the matron wore a long veil, the *palla*, over her head and wrapped it around her body. The veil, isolating and protecting her and her anima, symbolized her as her husband's wife, reserved for him and his anima. The Roman lexicographer Isidore comments that the head "is the sign of marital rank and power. For man is the head of woman, and (the veil) is over the head of the woman."²⁵ Not wearing the *palla* could have serious consequences as an uncovered head could be construed as a sign of a woman's actual or potential "withdrawal" from marriage and chastity. The consul of 166 BC, Sulpicius Gallus, divorced his wife because she left their house unveiled, thus allowing all to see, as he said, what only he should see.²⁶

The oldest living male in a Roman family, called the *pater familias*, exercised enormous power over his offspring. This "power of the father" or *patria potestas* meant that his sons, their sons, and even their sons, had to obey his orders whether to marry or divorce; he could even sell them into slavery or kill them. Only upon his death did his sons, in turn, gain the "power of a father" over their own descendants.

When her husband became *pater familias*, the woman in turn became *mater familias*, "mother-of-the-family." The only change in her costume that we know about concerns her hair which she now arranged in a distinctive style called the *tutulus*. Etruscan women wore this hairstyle during the sixth century when Rome was ruled by Etruscan kings. During this time, Etruscan culture exerted great influence on Roman culture, especially in costume. For example, Roman men adopted the Etruscan man's garment and made it the toga. It is reasonable to suppose that Roman women adopted the *tutulus* during the period of the Etruscan kings. The *tutulus* was made by sectioning the hair into tresses which were then piled up high on the crown of the head and bound with woolen fillets. As the *anima* of the mother-of-the-family would need even more protection than that of a matron, the *tutulus* would seem to be a protective hairstyle similar to the bride's six-tressed style, and in fact, Varro, renowned as "the most learned scholar of the Romans," connects the word *tutulus* with the Latin word "protected" or *tutus*.²⁷

The last change of status for a woman came when her husband died. Save for the fact that she changed her head covering, our sources do not provide us with any information on the clothes symbolizing her new fate. Over her head she now wore the *ricinium*, a square veil worn double-folded. It had a *praetexta* or purple border. The *ricinium* is likely to have been dark-colored like the man's special toga of mourning which was made from naturally black or dark brown wool. As a color of mourning, black needs no explanation. The Romans associated the reddish hue of purple with death, as Varro explains, for the dead were honored with the blood of victims sacrificed to them. More likely, the *praetexta* of the widow's veil functioned in some way like the *praetexta* of a child's toga. Perhaps the withdrawal of her husband's *anima* from their marriage caused the widow's *anima* to become vulnerable again.

Save for the marriage ritual, Roman sources do not tell us much about the rites that accompanied each change of costume which bound a new fate to the woman as she passed through life. Such gaps of knowledge are

inherent in a discipline for which the literary or archaeological sources survived by chance or accident.

Yet, if we were to generalize about the costume of the Roman woman, what could we deduce about her role in Roman society? First, the various forms of her costume indicate her role as *genetrix*, "she who produces children and thus enables the family and state to continue." Distinctive costume marked the various aspects of this role, whether she was a girl or "potential mother-to-be," bride or "passing to motherhood," matron or "actual mother," *materfamilias* or "mother of the extended family," widow or "past mother." Each costume marked, enhanced and protected her *anima* or life-force. Secondly, as spinner and weaver, *lanifica* or "she who works with wool," she was integrally associated with the gods in determining and ensuring the fate of her family. As you probably know, clippings of hair or finger nails are essential to have if you wish to curse someone. If you cannot obtain these intimate items, you can substitute your enemy's clothing or pieces of clothing, for these are his next most personal objects. In this respect, the clothing the Roman woman wove for herself and her family had an importance beyond the practical or economic. I could cite a number of parallels in modern societies of the religious importance or significance of the weaving of cloth. For example, Ibanic women know that their weaving has "enchantment" and can "attract" the favor of the spirits. The cloth they weave can "contain powerful magic that is conferred by spirits that the cloth encounters."²⁸

The study of costume provides a way of learning how the Romans, or indeed any people, understand their relationships to one another and to the natural and physical world. The anthropologist R. A. Schwarz points out that *"...more than any other material product, clothing plays a symbolic role in mediating the relationship between nature, man, and his sociocultural environment.*

In about seven weeks there will occur one of the few occasions in the lives of the mainstream population of the United States when distinctive, ritual costume is still worn. The distinctive academic gown, caps, and hood go back to European costume of 1200's A.D. At this time the costume one wore, its shape, and color identified the wearer as a member of a particular guild or occupation. Since literacy and learning were, in this period, primarily to be found in the clergy, the Masters and Scholars of the medieval university wore clerical dress. Over the past eight centuries there has been little change in this clerical costume, save in the shape and cut of the sleeves

and some attempt to systematize the colors of the hood lining to identify the institution and area of study of the wearer.

As the most recent initiates into the academic tradition, you seniors will dress in a bright red robe and try to keep on your heads a very odd flat hat. Enough has been said tonight for you to realize that this costume symbolizes the binding of a new fate to yourself. For the past four or five years, you have been living in a stage of initiation through which you have been preparing yourself for your adult life. During this time you have been presented with the loom of knowledge on which each of us professors has strung the threads of our disciplines. Through these threads we have tried to string your loom of knowledge with the central values, traditions, and essential knowledge of your own and other cultures in order to provide you with a framework for handling the problems of the present and the future. But on this loom it will be up to you to weave your own fate.