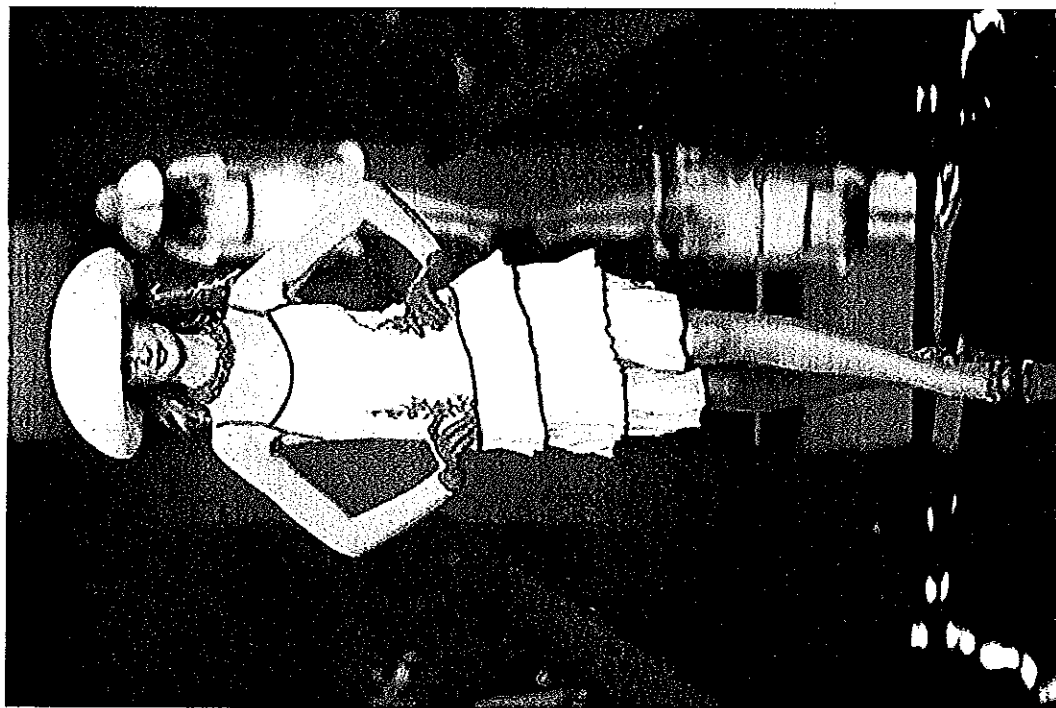


ANNE HOLLANDER

THE DRESS OF THOUGHT:
CLOTHING AND NUDITY IN HOMER AND VIRGIL,
DANTE AND ARIOSTO

I want to look at clothes in the works of these four great poets, who represent a cumulative literary tradition, with a huge influence on centuries of later writing. Each of these writers was essential to the next; and a great deal of later Western literature shows constant evidence of having internalized them all. I'll be dealing with a few of these poets' common themes that treat of dress, undress and armor, with their differences in attitude about clothes, and with real clothes in their time. I will also note how one powerful literary treatment of clothing and nakedness is silence about both.

I. Homeric clothing itself and Homer's references to it are the most remote from modern assumptions. In the *Iliad*,¹ male characters in armor are omnipresent. Clothed women appear rarely, but Homer uses them to intensify their visual contrast to armed men and dramatize the moment, as when Helen appears on the ramparts, wrapped in her snowy veil (*Iliad* 3:142-43), to survey and name the warriors. In the *Odyssey*,² almost no characters are military, but civil dress is shown to have a transformative power, often through divine agency. The flying nymph Ino only has to throw down her veil to drowning Odysseus, and he gets safely to shore; and after he's dressed, Athena invisibly adds an improving tweak to his cloak and a becoming curl to his hair. We see Homer inaugu-



4. Renato Balestra - Collezione Primavera/Estate 2008

rating the literary idea that there is something unearthly about the power of clothing.

Actual garments in Homer's time were simple rectangles of fabric, woven in many different proportions, sizes and textures and worn as they came off the loom, variously hung, draped or wrapped around the body, and pinned, sashed or belted. The stuff was never cut. Off the body, garments were like so many shawls and sashes of different dimensions and thickness, and looms were of many sizes. Everybody wore two garments: a chiton – or tunic/ shirt/ gown/ robe/ dress; and a himation – or cloak/ cape/ wrap/ mantle. Homer uses mainly the two Greek words, and translators have supplied the modern variations.

Men's tunics were short, women's were long. Homer specifies the "long" character of women's dresses again and again in his descriptive epithets, along with the whiteness of women's arms, from which we infer that the long dresses revealed arms, and were all "well-sashed" or "finely-girdled." Other frequent epithets are about hair – all women are seen to have "lovely braids" or "fine ringlets," depending on the translator; and we infer that female hair was carefully arranged, never loose or untended. Allure lay in careful adornment and covering – no flowing hair, no bareness other than arms. Female nakedness is never mentioned.

All Homeric clothing was spun and woven at home by women, who also spun and wove all household blankets and bedspreads, towels and tablecloths, palls and shrouds, protective coverings and decorative draperies, along with tents, awnings and sails for ships. Whatever else they did, women's lives were filled with this work, and female honor was bound up in it. Homer says that the excellence of women's weaving in certain cities was famous; and any palace treasury would contain magnificent garments accompanied by jeweled brooches, received as gifts or made as future gifts and perhaps

never worn. The palace storehouse, on the other hand, would contain huge chests of household cloaks and tunics ready, like casks of oil and wine, for constant guest and family use. We know from the *Odyssey* that these garments might only be washed once a year, or less often; and they were all quite similar. But in the *Iliad*, Hecuba, looking in Troy's treasury for a suitable offering to Athena, finds that the most beautiful robe there was woven in the palace by Sidonian women, famous for their weaving, whom Paris had cleverly scooped up as slaves on his way back to Troy with kidnapped Helen. While the war is raging, Helen is twice shown weaving in Troy, as if her earth-shaking beauty had no real importance unless she wove. Early in the *Odyssey*, we find her back home in Sparta preparing to spin, as she sits enthroned beside King Menelaus to welcome Telemachus.

In the *Iliad* during the war, the goddess Hera, who supports the Greeks, decides to seduce her husband Zeus, who sides with the Trojans. She knows that sex will unfailingly distract him from the battle he is watching, in which he would certainly intervene to turn the tide in Troy's favor. But instead of approaching him suggestively and baring her heavenly charms, she enters her boudoir. Then Homer gives us eight lines of bathing, oiling and perfuming, combing, braiding and coiling, followed by fourteen lines of arranging and fastening with gold brooches a remarkable robe, woven and embroidered by Athena, a hundred-tasseled belt, and a veil, "fair and bright, all glistening," the ensemble finished off with jeweled drop earrings and a pair of sandals (*Iliad* 14: 166-87).

But just in case Hera's stunning array fails to entrance her husband (she knows he likes artless girls), she asks to borrow Aphrodite's girdle. Homer then devotes another fourteen lines to this mythic object, with which Aphrodite can command the mad lust of anyone for anyone else. Hera hides it in her bosom

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— and it works, as if Homer meant to show it as the hidden unearthly secret of any seductive feminine toilette. This long passage has had endless literary echoes in the later history of fiction, whenever the action stops dead while the author describes the compelling dress of the desirable woman. Samuel Richardson did it in *Clarissa*; John Updike and Philip Roth are still doing it.

Hera's trappings, like Helen's snowy wrap, are offered in extreme contrast to the harsh male panoply of war — for none of which, unlike all the woven stuffs, is any human maker ever mentioned. The shield of Achilles, and armor to match, is made to his mother's order by the god Hephaestus; and with these immortal arms, Homer inscribes a superhuman quality into any epic armor — no man makes it, only the poet. Homer lets the divine glamour of Achilles' arms add an extra charge of holy dread to all armor's grim destiny in war. Any gleaming bronze helmet, greaves, and breastplate, weapons and war-chariot become fused with the fighter's life; and he and they together are lifted into the tragic dimension, all bearing the acute value of anything precious put at absolute risk.

To fulfill its destiny, all war gear is wielded with pitiless violence. Ferocious javelin throws pierce the many layers of the toughest breastplates, heavy helmets and multilayered shields are irretrievably split, pierced or crushed. Swords are thrust through skulls by way of an exposed temple, or shoved up under the cuirass to slit the liver; often they strike through the neck, just where the helmet and breastplate fail to meet, leaving a gap. Spears routinely rip throats and plunge into guts. Homer shows how a warrior's battle dress exists to be brutally destroyed along with him, or else ripped off his dead enemy, and worn by him in further bloody triumph. All this opposes the integral woven stuff that is never cut, and of which any damage or raggedness is a humiliating and trans-

forming disgrace. Odysseus becomes unrecognizable when he wears rags in his own house; and the goddess Athena pointedly takes off her own dress, woven by her own divine hands, before donning her armor to join the fight.

Throughout the *Iliad*, Homer repeatedly mentions Hector's flashing, crested helmet, so we see he carries the whole war — and also that he will be brought low, which we learn again when he removes it, not to frighten his little boy. He then tells Andromache to stay indoors and keep all the women weaving throughout the bloody war, while the armed Greeks and Trojans slash away at each other. Women must spin and weave while men arm and fight, as if their endless warp and woof will hold the world together so it can survive, even if the armed fighters do not.

But epic male armor indeed proves to be immortal, as no other human apparel is. We learn this when Odysseus tells the Phaeacian royal family about his visit to the Underworld. There he identifies the individual dead who floated toward him in a mist, saying he tried vainly to embrace his mother; but Homer gives him no word to say on whether these lifelike wraiths are naked or clothed. Then Odysseus sees dead warriors, and he says they all wear their bloody armor. A procession of famous men and women out of history comes toward him — again, no bodies, no garments, no trappings, how does he know them? But when the human ghost of the half-god Heracles appears, Odysseus describes the magnificently ornamented sword-belt he wears. In Erebus, civilian clothes and bodies merge into a featureless blur; but armor persists after death, in glorious or gory detail, itself conveying the immortality of heroes.

Homer emphasizes the nakedness only of Odysseus himself, washed ashore on the island of Phaeacia, shielding his bare body behind a shrub while he addresses the princess

Nausicaa with compliments. Odysseus is uncomfortable conversing with a lady while he is naked and filthy all over; but it was perfectly natural that she turn his bare body over to the maids to wash and dress. Her status, not her sex, made his nakedness indecent – short, draped male tunics slid off too easily for male nudity to be much of an issue. There is also evidence that some ancient warriors fought naked, armed only with helmet, sword and shield, as if heroic nudity were The Other Armor, equally superior and immortal. We see them rep-resented (if not recorded) on the classical-period Parthenon.

When Odysseus arrives alone at the Phaeacian palace wearing the garments Nausicaa has given him and asks for help as a shipwrecked stranger, King Alcinous says, of course, be my guest. But Queen Arete asks, where did you get those clothes? Were you wearing them when you were wrecked? The artist has recognized her own handiwork, and she doubts the allegedly lost stranger's word. Then Odysseus explains about the nudity and the laundry, and praises Nausicaa's discretion and generosity. Later, back in Ithaca wearing the shameful rags that disguise him, Odysseus tells Penelope how he met the great Odysseus; and she asks, what was he wearing? He describes the textiles of garments she had woven for him – one of them delicate as an onion's skin – and the brooch she gave him to fasten them; and then she believes him. In these epics, the work of female artists of the loom is always personally attributed. The unattributed warriors' armor seems supernaturally created, only named if the god Hephaestus has made it for half-divine Achilles.

II. Seven centuries after Homer, Virgil wrote the *Aeneid*³ as a Roman national epic, celebrating the establishment in Italy of the Emperor Augustus's family by Aeneas, the only son of King Priam to survive Troy's fall. In writing his sequel

to the *Iliad*, Virgil undertook to be Homeric, even though poetry had hugely changed since Homer first turned improvised sung verse into written literature. Homer's Greek verse had been direct, repetitive and archaic, mesmerizing in the manner of a singing bard. For his modern Roman epic, learned Virgil could modulate and enrich Homer's antique tone with layers of suave, fluid literary Latin.

Virgil plunges right into the destruction of Troy through the agency of the Trojan horse, and proceeds with Aeneas' adventures as suggested by those of Homer's heroes. Like Odysseus, Aeneas meets some natural and supernatural women and visits the Underworld; like Achilles, he fights ferociously, stages funeral games and gets an immortal prophetic shield, this one ordered from Vulcan by Aeneas' mother Venus. With the help of various allies, some of them divine, he is ultimately victorious after a very long war in Italy against many exotic local forces. He marries the local princess Lavinia, his dead enemy's promised bride, and founds Rome.

Changes in the world, not just in poetry, appear in the way Virgil makes clothing, armor and nudity do their expressive work. The armor of Aeneas and his followers, for instance, is immediately recognized in Italy as Trojan, and their dress as unfamiliar. Homer had made no point about the opposing looks of armed troops, or about differing local forms in clothing or arms. Throughout Virgil's poem, elements of armor and dress are given regional adjectives, suggesting that readers knew what they meant: Evander "winds Tyrrhenian sandals on, takes up a Tegean sword"; someone has a "Lycian" bow, "Gortynian" arrows, or "oriental" leggings; a soldier's cloak is "bright with steel-blue Spanish dye." Whether or not Virgil's readers in the burgeoning Roman Empire could rightly visualize such distinctions, they were certainly accustomed to cultural differences, and such qualifiers sounded right to Roman ears.

Thus the bloody battles that fill the second half of the *Aeneid* – Homerically peppered with pierced guts, splashed brains and bursting eyeballs – may be visualized in modern cinematic style, with opposing troops in strongly differentiated gear. Virgil gives examples of the various quasi-barbarian fighters' apparel, in the initial muster of Aeneas' enemies. One group wears tawny caps of wolf-skin instead of helmets, with one foot bare and the other wearing a rawhide boot. Other troops have headgear made of bark stripped from cork-trees, and they hurl darts; still others have clogs instead of boots.

Virgil is similarly discursive about celebrity armor, going well beyond Homer's unchanging epithets for individual warriors. Turnus, the supreme commander of the enemy forces, wears several different terrifying helmets and cuirasses, each glittering with a different arrangement of gold and plumes; and as the war subsides and starts over, Virgil describes each gaudy new appearance. Cuirasses are now either sculpturally Roman, imitating an ideal torso, or made of overlapping scales (Homer offered no description, calling them all "bronze shirts"), and some Virgilian helmets have knobs and horns along with crests and plumes. But Virgil needed to use the incomparable *Iliad* for the language of armor's destruction. We hear again and again of how a hurled spear pierces through numbered layers of leather, bronze and fiber to strike artery, sinew and liver, and how a helmet and head are both split with one blow of a heavy sword.

The modern poet also wants to convey atmosphere, and to suggest how garb feels to its wearer. He makes things gleam even by moonlight, including the gear of lesser characters and columns of nameless troops; he adds the sound of arrows rattling in their quiver on a marching fighter's back; and he lets us know how the heavy trappings chafe their wearers, mentioning a spear piercing the ribs "where the stitched belt rubs

against the belly, and the buckle gnaws against rib-ends." He shows an armed soldier wearing a bright scarf, embroidered by a loving wife at home – and he mentions the fact just before describing the wearer's grim death. Embroidered, not woven – by Virgil's time, weaving had become commercial, and was losing its role as women's sovereign domestic task. This poet dwells less on the weave of any specific stuff, more on how it was used, its color and its impact.

Virgil also expresses new ambivalent views of dress for the sexes. Each of the *Aeneid's* three active heroines – Aeneas' mother Venus, his lover Dido, and his enemy Camilla, a barbaric virgin warrior – is at least once described as armed with quiver and bow, in a short-skirted tunic. The maiden goddess Diana dressed like this; but she hunted beasts and never fought in wars. In wartime, a short tunic worn with weapons but no body-armor or helmet carried the flavor of the dreaded Scythians and Parthians, the mounted plains-warriors whose deadly speed and free range had often threatened the heavily-armed ranks of marching Greeks and Romans. As battle dress, it connoted unexpected danger from men, not women – unless a poet wished to evoke the legendary Amazons.

Venus appears to Aeneas just after he has been shipwrecked on the beach near Carthage, startlingly disguised as a Phoenician girl wearing what she says is local fashion, including not only a quiver and bow, but high red boots, a skirt tucked high up above the knees, and hair blowing free. Venus wants to excite her sober son and set him in motion toward Dido, whom she has already inflamed with passion for the renowned hero. It's only when she leaves him that Aeneas recognizes his mother, as Venus' clothes transform into her usual Homeric floor-length draperies and bound-up, perfume-drenched coiffure. Very soon, Dido duly welcomes Aeneas to Carthage wearing the native costume, with bow, quiver and leg-baring tunic (no boots – Venus made those

up); and Virgil compares her to the goddess Diana, perhaps to suggest she is hunting a man.

Bellicose Camilla repeatedly leads the Volscian troops against Aeneas during the long Italian wars, carrying a range of lethal weapons and wearing gold ornaments; but her short tunic also bares one breast. With this detail, Virgil instantly links her to the Amazon Queen Penthesilea, who (an ancient poem relates) fought on the Trojan side after Hector's death and was slain by Achilles, who promptly fell in love with her corpse. Virgil has Aeneas see a picture of armed Penthesilea inside a temple Dido is building, to prefigure fierce Camilla in peaceable Carthage, and to associate violent death with her mode of dress.

Virgil later tells Camilla's history, saying she refused to learn spinning and weaving, but excelled in hunting and fighting, refused to bind up her hair or wear long dresses, and wore a tiger skin down her back with its head crowning hers. Virgil also shows, besides describing these threatening female outfits, how exotic male dress could suggest doubtful masculinity. He has Turnus' blustering brother-in-law jeering at Aeneas' Trojan fighters for their long-sleeved tunics, their saffron-embroidered purple garments, "their turbans tied with ribbons" — meaning the puffy Phrygian bonnet, later famous as the Liberty cap, with side-lappets tied under the chin. He calls them women, tells them to quit fighting and leave arms to real men.

The quasi-male outfits Virgil puts on the principal female characters are not armor and have no helmets, despite the deadly weapons and bare legs. Virgil keeps to Homer's rule that no woman wears armor, just as no man weaves. He suggests that civilized women should still weave, even though the *Aeneid* never shows a woman doing any, and we might even suspect that Virgil never saw any being done. He describes Aeneas as wearing garments Dido has woven — her native city

was Sidon, home of those great weavers Paris had captured in the *Iliad* — but we see that all her time is spent in administrative, diplomatic and ceremonial tasks. Virgil says Dido is a weaver so that she can share in the talent and intelligence of Penelope, Arete, and Andromache.

Virgil's two heroines in quasi-Amazonian costume meet a dramatic death, like their original. Abandoned Dido stabs herself, and Camilla's body is finally pierced through by a stalker's ferocious javelin throw, just below the bare breast. This fighting heroine even goes mad before she is killed, as if Virgil wished to punish her with the loss of self-possession as well as life. Meanwhile, Aeneas' eventual bride is a passive creature, never seen to do anything except lament, blush and tend the altar — certainly no weaving, the sure sign of self-possession. Nor does she wear anything specific except jewels and a crown, to indicate her royalty and material value.

All the other females in the *Aeneid* are a distracted lot, usually shown with disorderly hair and unfastened garments — the witch-like Sibyl in the cave, Lavinia's hysterical mother and Turnus' mad sister in Italy, even stricken Dido before her suicide. The theme of ethnic conflict and perpetual chaos now forbids the appearance of standard female elegance, the long dress and well arranged hair so often repeated in Homer, which Virgil only describes twice — on departing Venus, and when Camilla refuses it. But the poet does not contrast the wild Amazonian style to complex hair-arrangement and fine garments, he pointedly combines them, and on Venus herself. The mythological ur-Amazon Hippolyta, whom Heracles killed to get her gold belt for Hera, had been a brutal self-mutilating fighter, neither huntress nor enchantress; but all these flavors are blended in Virgil's ambiguously costumed characters.

Aeneas must complete his epic education before founding

Rome, and he visits the Underworld after leaving Carthage. Following Homer, Virgil puts garments on the permanent staff there, who need identifying signs: a bloody mantle on Tisiphone, the gate-guarding Fury in Tartarus, a few disgusting rags on Charon the Boatman, a white robe on lyre-playing Orpheus, white bands on his dancers' heads in the Blessed Isles. Discord has snaky locks, Cybele wears her towered crown. Otherwise there is Homeric silence about what the spirits wear or don't wear, in this vast world of the dead and the unborn.

Except for armor, again the star. The mythical Romulus wears only a double-crested Mars helmet; but all the future Roman heroes (recent in Virgil's time) – Marcellus, Pompey and Julius Caesar – wear complete shining armor, which already creates their immortal heroism-to-be. In the living world, armor makes a superhuman body for fighters; and in the other world, it utterly trumps the qualities of civil dress and those of living bodies. The combined looks of those are what Homer and Virgil so often eloquently omit, giving epic permission to future writers to observe silence, as needed, about dress and nudity.

III. More than thirteen centuries after Virgil wrote the *Aeneid*, Dante wrote his three-part *Commedia*⁴ using Virgil as a main character, the guide for his journey out of the dark wood and toward the light. We see that Dante clearly wishes to honor poetry itself as a salvific force, distinct from Christian faith. Virgil was even a hypothetical Christian, since his *Aeneid* was read as a prelude to the founding of the Roman Church, and his fourth eclogue was thought to prophesy Christ's birth. He was qualified to lead Dante toward the Christian Heaven, even though he could never go there himself. The whole poem begins in despair and takes place entire-

ly in the next world. Everyone in it is dead. The only living character is Dante himself.

For visual appearance in Hell, Dante takes Underworld effects from both Homer and Virgil, even though Dante only knew Homer through later Latin poets. For clothing in Christian Heaven, Dante's main source is the Revelation of St John the Divine. He makes up all visual aspects of Purgatory, since no ancient writer had the concept; but in all three parts we see a Christian sense of dress and bodies. Dante automatically thinks of the clad and nude states as opposing moral conditions, as Virgil and Homer never did.

Armor, however, keeps its eternal honor. As Virgil and Dante cross the broad plains of Limbo in Hell's first circle, past the throngs of Virtuous Heathen, they see Homer himself coming toward them, leading Horace, Ovid, and Lucan, and welcoming Virgil – Dante happily says they invite him to join them. Nobody's looks or clothes are described; but to show his immortal status as Great Leader and War Poet, Homer's ghost carries a sword. In this circle, Dante meets many other ancient world celebrities but he says nothing about their looks, although he carefully describes the look of their surroundings, as he always does. Homer, Virgil and Dante all seemed to believe that great ancient personages don't need looks, even the famous beauties; the references are purely literary, invoking the power of naming, not appearance. That power is very great; and reading the names of these apparitions with no appearance, we don't feel we are missing anything.

Dante sees Socrates and Plato, Thales and Zeno, Cicero and Seneca, among many others, plus Cleopatra, Semiramis and Dido, and even warlike Penthesilea and Camilla. They all have no clothes, no accessories, no looks at all. But sure enough, when Caesar's ghost appears, it is fully armed. The

idea that heroic armor remains part of the surviving soul is later invoked by the ghost of Hamlet's father, who is armed from head to foot, but with "his beaver up," so his face shows and he can be identified and speak.

When Virgil and Dante are about to cross the Homeric river Acheron, they see a rushing, howling mob of the demoralized Neutrals, who cannot go to Hell or Heaven, but must eternally bemoan their worthless condition. They are being stung by wasps and hornets as they run, and Dante specifically says they are naked. Naked, too, are the hundreds of freshly damned souls he sees jostling to board Charon's boat. This is adult Christian nakedness, which Dante clearly associates with absolute moral and spiritual failure – it's the basically sinful state of man, after Adam's fall destroyed the pristine innocence of bare flesh.

Clothing is an acute moral necessity, sometimes wickedly used as a snare or a crutch to promote evil, and only virtuous if it symbolizes virtue. And since Hell exists for punishing willfully unrepentant sinners, Dante must give them sinful nakedness, so they can feel their torments. They must be able to bleed and blister, they must have bodies that can be charred by fire or frozen in ice, skin that can be pusulent and moldy, limbs that can be gangrenous, trunks that can be slit from neck to crotch so entrails hang out. Dante only calls them naked when he sees them crowding at a distance. Up close, he describes what only naked bodies could be seen to undergo.

But there are other punishments, such as that of Francesca, who tells Dante how she and her lover were led into adultery by reading the romance of Lancelot and Guinevere. Dante, the writer and lover, clearly sympathizes with so responsive a reader. Francesca's fruitless whirling embrace with Paolo demands only a non-body in its non-clothes, and her soul is a wraith like the ghost of Odysseus' mother. The only damned souls wearing

specific costume in Hell are the Hypocrites, found among the worst sinners near the bottom of the Eighth Circle. These venal friars must walk eternally in hooded robes made of heavy gold, lined with thick lead plates – the poet says they glitter in dark Hell. Dante here delivers a judgment against fine dress itself, crushing the souls of fake-virtuous, money-hungry monks under too-rich, impossible-to-manage garments.

Weaving by this time has most literary value as a reference to the striking myth of Arachne, whose spidery punishment Dante mentions in Purgatorio. Cloth-making was now a big business in the hands of men, no longer at all associated with individual female value. Spinning, something queens did in Homer, was now done by working women paid by merchant middlemen, who sold the spun yarn to dyers and weavers. Thirteenth-century European clothing for both sexes covered the body's entire surface except for face and hands, blurring its precise shape and hiding women's hair and necks.

But near the end of Dante's life in the early fourteenth century, upper-class European clothing began to be more closely fitted, and tailoring became a more exacting craft. Men's doublets became shockingly short and shapely (to resemble the new plate armor), women's necklines became alarmingly low and their torsoes outlined by tight fit, fancy headgear even began to show off their hair. Dante must have noticed. He has his dead friend Forese Donati in Purgatory express outrage at the exposed breasts of Florentine ladies, predicting that the clergy would soon forbid this, and that God would punish it.

Living Dante emphasizes his own clothed state among the naked damned. He has one of them pluck at his gown, another recognize his Florentine style, and he says how hard it is to climb a big rock in his long garment. This garment is belted with a cord – which we have learned symbolizes self-discipline, because

Dante says he thought he could use it to capture the Leopard of Lust, back in the first canto. Before climbing Mount Purgatory, Dante gets a new belt made of a reed, now symbolizing his share in the repentant humility of those working off their sins.

Meanwhile, not one word on Virgil's costume – he is always a bodiless, non-symbolically-dressed Homeric shade. But Dante never forgets real life, and he puts real clothes into his epic similes. He compares Virgil, quickly rescuing Dante from some immediate harm, to a frantic mother rushing outdoors in her shift to save her child from fire, her semi-nudity as bad as nakedness in Dante's day. This little vignette is moral, too, with common decency overwhelmed by maternal self-forgetfulness.

On Mount Purgatory, sackcloth is worn, but only by the Envious. For all other struggling penitents, Dante specifies no clothing and no nakedness; and perhaps true repentance requires never acknowledging the body, even under stress. But on Purgatory comes welcome relief from so many dread or blank presences – Dante's richly costumed angels, bright creatures borrowed from the Bible, who monitor the rising stages of the mountain. First he makes a beautiful image of four hovering angels guarding the valley outside the gates, their green draperies fluttering behind them, fanned and beaten by their green wings. On the way up, more angels wear luminescent draperies in many colors, with multicolored or swan-like wings, and all have golden hair and faces like stars. These descriptions match the appearance of angels in Florentine art – a familiar, earthly visualization, suitable for what is still an earthly journey.

Finally we reach the top of Mount Purgatory and the Earthly Paradise, full of sparkling water, flowers and green grass, still rightly served by the pictorial style of describing; and here Virgil leaves Dante to the guidance of Beatrice, who

arrives riding on a float out of a Church pageant, followed by a symbolically-costumed procession. Dante says this is better described by Ezekiel; but the enamored poet himself dresses Beatrice in a gauzy white veil wreathed with olive-leaves, above a green cape and a flame-colored dress, her figure surrounded by a cloud of flowers, her hair chastely unmentioned. Her colors, symbolic of Florence, also symbolize the sacred virtues, Faith, Hope and Love, while four attendant angels wearing Imperial purple stand for secular Prudence, Temperance, Fortitude and Justice. This last canto of Purgatorio marks the end of Earth, and of all earthly beauties such as delicious scenery and lovely clothing, even for angels.

Beatrice and Dante go up through the spheres of Heaven, encountering many individuals with no physical looks. No visual dimension at all exists in the encompassing *Primum Mobile*, where the angelic orders administer the universe. Dante is addressed by important angels and great personages – Thomas Aquinas, St. Peter and the Emperor Trajan, among many others – but these have no shape or surface his eye can seize, only voices and degrees of light. Great visual detail appears only in the complex astronomical display surrounding everything, which Beatrice continuously expounds, its stark vastness a great change from the lush settings and costumed performances in the Earthly Paradise.

Then we climb a ladder up to the Empyrean, the thousand-tiered golden rose where the face and form of each redeemed soul is again recognizable; and here everybody wears the white raiment prescribed in Revelation: “[...] fine linen, clean and white” writes St. John, “for the fine linen is the righteousness of saints.” And we see why Dante makes dress important in highest Heaven. Inside the earth in Hell, the damned are stuck in their shameful naked bodies. On Earth, and all the way up Purgatory, clothing's only true task is to hide sinful flesh, never

to look fine or flatter the vile body; but the job of heavenly garments is to replace the body entirely, to clothe each soul only in what might be called the Armor of Righteousness. Left bare are the face, where the mouth utters praise, eyes see the light, ears hear the message – and the hands, which may bless and beckon, point and pray, hold an attribute and (of course) write. The rest of the body obligingly vanishes. No feet, no shoes, pilgrimage is over. No skin shows through the celestial stuff, it makes no bodily shapes discernible – this white linen in no way resembles classical drapery, as the angels' floating robes in Purgatory seemed to do.

Once in the Empyrean, Beatrice goes up to her high seat near the Virgin, telling St. Bernard to continue explaining things to Dante; but Bernard sees that the living mind of his entranced charge will soon weaken under so much supernal pressure. He says, "Time is running out and we must stop here, as the good tailor cuts his coat according to the length of his cloth." – and the poet admits that the huge three-part vision is beginning to dissolve in his mind. Dante has to concentrate on how to cut his own coat from what he can remember, and tailor the shape of everything he has seen.

IV. By the time Ariosto was writing *Orlando Furioso*³ two hundred years later in the early sixteenth century, the arts of tailoring and verse were still more complex. The narrative art of weaving now produced expensive tapestries in professional workshops. Elegant tailored garments were multipartite, ornamented and stiff, and so was armor. Armor was now being worn for sport as well as war, and Ariosto describes battle as resembling sport, or perhaps dance – even bloody sieges, with a Homeric level of slaughter. Conceptions of Sin and Virtue had been refined by an ideal of chivalric honor embodied in individual knights, and nudity was an aesthetic rather than a moral con-

dition. Ariosto further shows that a consciously theatrical spirit might now lighten the tone of serious poetic narrative.

Orlando Furioso is a romance about the knights of King Charlemagne saving Christian Europe from the concerted attacks of Infidel and Pagan warriors. But Ariosto also offers it as an *Aeneid*-like epic to celebrate the founding of the Este family of Ferrara – as if implying that Aeneas was the first Christian knight. Besides Virgil and Homer, Ariosto borrows freely from Ovid, Scripture and earlier Italian romances, which had already co-opted and translated Orlando from the original *Chanson de Roland* of Medieval France.

The poem's double heroic trajectory is further embellished with countless tales of giants, monsters, and sorcerers, of globe-circling trips on a flying horse, of jealousy and devoted love, of thievery and deception, sex, magic, nakedness and madness, all these involving dozens of characters from many literary traditions, including God and the Archangel Michael. There's a trip to the epic Underworld and a visit to Dante's Earthly Paradise, where we're startled to find a jeweled palace with the Fates spinning inside it, owned by the aged and benign John the Evangelist – who organizes a trip to the Moon to fetch back Orlando's lost wits.

The most exhilarating figure in this fantasy is Bradamante, a lady knight-at-arms and Christian warrior, the sister of Orlando's cousin Rinaldo, all three of them noble members of King Charlemagne's family. She is the destined bride of the Pagan knight Ruggiero, who will convert to Christianity to marry her, and link his heroic Trojan ancestor Hector to their joint descendants in the Este family.

Bradamante herself is no Amazon like Camilla, nor virgin goddess like Athena. She passionately loves Ruggiero and is miserably jealous when she hears of the closeness between him and Marfisa, the invincible female knight-at-arms on the

Pagan side, until she learns that they are brother and sister. Bradamante is tender-hearted and chivalrous – she often unhorses her opponents and does not slaughter them; but Pagan Marfisa is inexhaustibly ferocious, able to take on and kill a dozen in a row, a true Amazon. It helps that her armor is enchanted, like that of several other warriors in this poem; we are still being reminded of epic armor's immortality.

This point is further made by two suits of heirloom armor physically deriving from remote antiquity. Hector's armor is magic, coming to Ruggiero all the way from the Trojan War; and one pagan warrior's dragon-skin armor once belonged to his ancestor Nimrod, the Bible's mighty hunter (Gen: 10.9). This one is not magic – Genesis is mere history, the *Iliad* is immortal poetry. By now great heroes' swords all have names, like living souls, and famous arms and armor constantly change hands and sides, often by conquest, sometimes by theft or plain carelessness. Armor thus generates its own drama, which independently rolls up the legendary and literary past into the present written story. Ariosto suggests that whenever the arms of a great hero are worn or used by someone else, the original owner is virtually present in whatever battle the new owner fights.

The poet offers the familiar piercing, slicing, and crushing of breastplates, helmets, shields and body-parts underneath, many of these blows dealt by the relentless Marfisa. Despite all this, both she and Bradamante are very beautiful and sometimes wear becoming feminine clothing; but other than naming their color and saying whether jewels adorn them, Ariosto doesn't dwell on ladies' dresses. He instead suggests their similarity, evoking Homer's repetitive long skirts and fine sashes. Differences in armor are what really interest Ariosto, as they did Virgil, and the fact that both Bradamante and Marfisa are always taken for men while wearing full armor and a closed helmet.

That knightly costume had become a literary device, used for creating any perfect disguise required by a writer's plot. Ariosto finally stages what readers breathlessly wait for – a fight between the two armed women, during Bradamante's jealous period. But then there's one between the brother and sister, and another between the two armed lovers, both of these while Ruggiero is completely disguised in someone else's armor, helmet and surcoat. Surcoats were sleeveless tunics worn over armor to show the wearer's crest or device. We find virtuous ladies cutting, sewing, and embroidering them for the knights instead of weaving, using different symbolic devices according to present need, which might often be to deceive or mislead.

To balance the ancient male armor in the poem, Ariosto introduces a large piece of ancient female needlework near the end. An enormous tent is magically borrowed from the Byzantine Emperor by the good witch Melissa, to serve the lovers as a marriage pavilion. Ariosto says this fabulous object was made in Troy for Hector by his sister Cassandra the prophetess; and Ariosto devotes several verses to the lineage of the Este family that she, prophetess-like, embroidered on the fabric. He thus neatly conflates Homeric weaving and modern embroidery, adding in the prophetic shields of Achilles and Aeneas.

Ariosto gives female nudity all the erotic and aesthetic importance it has in Renaissance art, and like a painter he renders it as a beautiful costume. The universally adored Angelica, the elusive Chinese Princess who later drives Orlando mad with love, wears it when she's chained naked to a rock, waiting to be devoured by a sea monster. Ruggiero, in love with Bradamante, must rescue Angelica out of chivalry; but not before Ariosto so paints her nakedness that we can feel its effects on the virtuous knight. Once he frees her, Ruggiero tries to make love to her – but he can't get his armor off fast enough. Angelica escapes, as she always does, and we see that

his honorable armor itself has kept this susceptible hero from betraying his betrothed. Later, Orlando rescues the forsaken Olimpia, an even more ravishingly described naked lady in chains; but Orlando's passion for Angelica prevails, and this lady's nudity captivates only the King of Ireland, whom she marries. Ariosto's descriptions of nude charms resemble Homer's description of Hera's seduction clothes – the action stops, and we revel in lush details.

Earlier in the story, the evil witch Alcina makes Ruggiero forget Bradamante entirely. When they meet, the poet praises Alcina's hair, bosom, face, arms, hands and feet – not her clothes, only what they reveal. Visiting Ruggiero that night, she shows her bodily beauties through a transparent shift, "which concealed her rounded limbs as little as the stems of lilies in a crystal vase." In this literary epoch, either selectively bared or transparently veiled nudity are an unearthly enchantress' means of seduction – no longer a long robe, tasseled girdle, shimmering veil and jeweled earrings. No untidy hair and short-skirted hunting costumes, either, and no saintly draperies. This writer suggests that full armor or classical nudity is what women wear at their most appealing.

That's because equivocal Fashion has now irreversibly arrived, with its shifting imaginative scope, enabled by the humanist spirit. Ariosto shows its effects on Alcina's dissolute prisoners, Ruggiero now among them. Melissa the good witch reports them changing their clothes several times a day for various pastimes and pleasures; and she is appalled to find stalwart Ruggiero wearing curled and perfumed tresses, a gold necklace and bracelets, pearl drop earrings, and exquisite silk and gold attire woven by Alcina herself – the Circe of this poem, and its only weaver.

We learn that finery suggesting Attis or Adonis is not the

proper off-duty wear for a knight – although for a lady knight, finery suggesting Venus might be correct, and Bradamante's mother orders her a rich *trousseau*. But for a heroic man, nudity is super-honorable, and great Orlando's stout, furry nakedness inhabits the second half of the poem, after madness has made him shed every piece of his clothing and armor. Orlando rages destructively in his nude Titan costume until his wits are restored, he is cured of love, his clothes and arms are returned, and he can lead the victorious fighting in the last cantos.

Ariosto keeps demonstrating the new literary possibilities of clothing. Poetry can show the power of selective exposure in fashion, and suggest how masculine and feminine effects – or exotic and familiar effects, or ancient and modern, or sacred and profane – may be mixed, juxtaposed, exchanged or rearranged, and written about with zeal or scorn, irony or affection, or pure hilarity. An old woman is jeered at for wearing a young woman's outfit, and Marfisa punishes the jeerer; a maid is seen receiving a lover in her mistress' clothes – minutely described – and causes great harm to the lady's reputation; there's transvestism, both comic and romantic; and comic embarrassment arises when a misogynistic tyrant has cut off the skirts of three ladies up to the navel, and three knights must hastily lend them their surcoats.

Such things damaged this poem's credit during periods when Dante's moralizing use of dress seemed the most appropriate for respectable verse. Homer, Virgil, and Dante had observed great decorum for the poetic role of clothing, since epic treatment of dress had its rules; and all three sometimes left it out deliberately. Ariosto uses the same themes, but in him we find a modern, skeptical sense of literary dress, influenced by the subversive way Fashion works, where anything serious may quickly be made ridiculous, and vice versa, depending on who's writing about it, and how.

SARTOR IN NATURA
LA FILOSOFIA DEI VESTITI
IN CARLYLE E EMERSON

¹ Homer, *Iliad*, trans. A. T. Murray; revised by William F. Wyatt, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge: Harvard U. P., 1999).

² Homer, *Odyssey*, trans. A. T. Murray; revised by George E. Dimock, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge: Harvard U. P., 1999).

³ Virgil, *Aeneid*, trans. H. R. Fairclough, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge: Harvard U. P., 1934).

⁴ Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, with translation and comment by John D. Sinclair (Oxford: Oxford U. P., 1980), 3 vols.

⁵ Ludovico Ariosto, *Orlando furioso* (*The Frenzy of Orlando*), Paris One and Two, translated and with an introduction by Barbara Reynolds (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1975).

"It is written, the Heavens and the Earth shall fade away like a Vesture; which indeed they are: the Time-vesture of the Eternal. Whatsoever sensibly exists, whatsoever represents Spirit to Spirit, is properly a Clothing, a suit of Raiment, put on for a season, and to be laid off. Thus in this one pregnant subject of CLOTHES, rightly understood, is included all that men have thought, dreamed, done, and been: the whole External Universe and what it holds is but Clothing; and the essence of all Science lies in the PHILOSOPHY OF CLOTHES," (Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus*, I, xi)

"Se *Sartor Resartus* non fosse stato pubblicato," scriveva un anonimo corrispondente da Canton, Ohio, in una lettera al *Christian Register* di Boston, il settimanale dell'American Unitarian Association, "non avremmo avuto *Nature* come l'abbiamo ora." E "non è improbabile," aggiungeva subito dopo, allungando così l'ombra gettata dal *Sartor* e dal suo profondo e stravagante eroe, "che il Professor Teufelsdröckh abbia ispirato l'opera di Furness sui miracoli."¹ Era il Marzo del 1837 e l'affermazione del lontano osservatore del Midwest si richiamava ad alcuni notevoli eventi editoriali dell'anno precedente – quello che la storiografia letteraria del Novecento avrebbe canonizzato come un anno memorabile per il romanticismo americano – l' "*annus mirabilis*" del Trascendentalismo della Nuova Inghilterra.² Tra gli eventi menzionati nella lettera, due sarebbero stati destinati a restare pietre miliari nella storia culturale e letteraria dei rapporti transatlantici (immateriali e non) del primo Ottocento inglese e americano. *Nature*, il piccolo "libro sulla natura" che fin dal ritorno dal suo primo viaggio in Europa del 1833 Ralph Waldo