

MICHAEL SCHULZE ROBERG (RUHR-UNIVERSITÄT BOCHUM)

MARY AS A HEROINE: JESUS' MOTHER IN RENAISSANCE EPIC

*During the Renaissance, poets writing Latin bible epic endeavored to combine the classic Virgilian pattern with their new Christian subject. As one of the outstanding saints, Jesus' mother Mary seems to be an obvious candidate for an epic heroine, if not as a female Aeneas, then as a Christian epigone of, for example, Dido. Jacopo Sannazaro in his epic *De partu Virginis* and Marco Girolamo Vida in his *Christiad* both attempt to present Mary in their epic contexts, Sannazaro even as the main character. The figure of Mary is examined in three decisive situations: the Annunciation, Jesus' birth and his death. Both authors apply Virgilian imagery and diction to characterize Mary according to a classical model, but after all, Mary remains what she is: a Christian heroine, a saint, an obedient servant of God, who thus accomplishes a deed by far more important than any of the ancient heroes.*

Keywords: Renaissance; Bible epic; Virgil; Jacopo Sannazaro; Marco Girolamo Vida; Mary; Neo-Latin; heroine.

There are few biblical persons that have experienced a career similar to that of Jesus' mother Mary. From a rather marginal figure in the canonical New Testament Gospels she was soon turned into one of the most important persons in Catholic liturgy and the veneration of the saints. This development has left its trace, among others, in the form of an intense worship of the Virgin Mary from the Antiquity until our times.¹ Here, however, I shall

¹ For a short overview on the development of the worship of the Virgin Mary see GROTE, HEINER. 1992. "Maria/Marienfrömmigkeit II: Kirchengeschichtlich." In: *Theologische Realenzyklopädie*, vol. 22, Berlin – New York: De Gruyter, 119–137. A detailed and extensive examination on this subject is offered by RUBIN, MIRI. 2009. *Mother of God: a History of the Virgin Mary*. London: Lane. An anthology of latin poetry in praise of the Virgin Mary around Sannazaro's and Vida's time, including also passages from *PV* (pp. 318–335) and the *Christiad* (pp. 388–403), is offered by PIASTRA, CLELIA M. [ED.] 2002. *La poesia mariologica dell'Umanesimo latino. Testi e versione italiana a fronte*. Tarnaruzze (Florence): SISMEL Edizioni del Galluzzo.

focus my attention on the role that was assigned to Mary by writers whose intention was not merely religious but also motivated by a certain humanist claim for literary excellence, namely the two Italian neo-Latin Virgilian epigones Jacopo Sannazaro (1458–1530) from Naples and Marco Girolamo Vida (1485–1566) from Cremona, a city where even Virgil himself had spent some years of his education. I am going to examine the role that Jesus' mother plays in their respective epic works, Sannazaro's *De partu Virginis* (hereafter: *PV*),² which was first published in 1526 and Vida's *Christiad*, first published in 1535, five years after Sannazaro's death.

For the present study, I will limit my examination of Mary's role as an epic heroine in those two poems to three significant turning points: the Annunciation, Jesus' birth, and then his death.

But first of all, the very first aspect, and the most significant one, that we must pay attention to when we examine the two Renaissance works in question, is the different emphasis put on Mary's role. Of course, both Vida and Sannazaro present us with an image of Mary that is strongly influenced by the common worship of the Virgin Mary practiced in the Catholic Church. However, while Mary in the *Christiad* is only one figure among many others, nevertheless an important one of course, she is the central figure in *PV*, as is suggested already by the title; even more – in its proem, the classical invocation of the Muses is replaced by an invocation of Mary herself as a holy, god-like guide, even a goddess herself (*dia*, *PV* 1,139). In the slightly later *Christiad*, the poet instead asks the Holy Ghost for literal “inspiration”. The importance is emphasized by Sannazaro in the very first words of his poem: *Virginei partus*. . . This is not only the presentation of the epic subject corresponding to the famous Virgilian *arma uirumque cano*, but clearly reflects the poet's priority by alluding to the Virgin. Vida's appeal to the Holy Ghost (*Qui mare, qui terras, qui coelum numine comples, / spiritus alme, tuo liceat mihi munere* etc., *Chr.* 1,1f) seems to have more in common with the Homeric Ἄνδρα μοι ἔννεπε, Μοῦσα (*Od.* 1,1). In the proem of the *Christiad*, Mary's role is implied only indirectly by referring

See also PIASTRA, CLELIA M. 1994. *La poesia mariologica dell'Umanesimo latino. Repertorio e incipitario*. Spoleto: Centro italiano di studi sull'alto medioevo.

² A short summary of Sannazaro's biography as well as of the content and structure of *PV* is given by NAZZARO, ANTONIO V. 2009. “Il *De partu Virginis* del Sannazaro come poema parafrastico.” In SABBATINO, PASQUALE [ED.]. *Iacopo Sannazaro. La cultura napoletana nell'Europa del Rinascimento*. Florence: Olschki, 2009, 167–209, here: 167–189. After his introduction, Nazzaro examines another scene that I have not included in this study, namely Mary's visit to Elizabeth, also in comparison to Vida's *Christiad*.

to Jesus as *rex bis genitus* (cf. *Chr.* 1,3).³ Thus it is clear from the beginning that Mary is not actually meant to be a heroine, or at least to play an all too important role, but rather a “supporting actor” in the epic, which is entirely focused on the *heros*⁴ Christ. In fact, she does not even personally appear on stage until immediately before Jesus' death in the fifth book.

Before I start to examine the first of these three scenes, namely the Annunciation, I should bring to mind that also the narrative situation concerning Mary at this point in Vida's poem is much different from the one that we find in Sannazaro. We do not encounter an omniscient narrator as in *PV*, but the report of the Annunciation forms a part of Joseph's plea in behalf of Jesus before Pilate, which originally was told to Joseph by Mary herself. Joseph, an old man, remembers the episode that took place about thirty years before when he, as he says himself, already was an old man.⁵ So, in this case, we see young Mary through the eyes of her husband, who describes himself as her protector, having taken the role of her father, not of a “real” husband (*Domo degemus eadem, ipse tibi ut genitor, mihi tu ceu filia semper*, *Chr.* 3,247f). Or, to say it more precisely, the Annunciation is presented to the reader through the eyes of Mary, when she tells it to Joseph, who in turn presents the story to Pilate, as he saw it from his point of view and thus, finally, to the reader. The image of Mary conveyed here thus is “filtered” not only through the fictional decades passed in the *Christiad* after the related event, but also refracted through the eyes first of Mary, then Joseph's, who, finally, retells it to Pilate (and thus for the reader).

The first impression that the reader gets about Mary in the *Christiad* (surprisingly late – two books have gone by without her even being mentioned)⁶

³ The idea of Christ as *bis genitus* is explained, for instance, by Isidore of Seville (*Etym.* 7,2,12): *Unde et bis genitus dicitur* (scil. *Christus*), *siue quia Pater eum genuit sine matre in aeternitate, siue quia mater sine patre in tempore.*

⁴ This epithet appears 43 times in the *Christiad* and is applied exclusively to Christ. Sannazaro uses it only five times; interestingly enough, this term is applied twice to Mary's husband Joseph (*PV* 2,292.409), who does not carry any further importance within this epic poem. However, this is obvious, as there is no other (male) character that this ‘title’ might be rightfully applied to before Jesus' birth; three times it appears in a plural form, referring more generally to ‘heroes’ or ‘heavenly beings’ (*PV* 1,234; 3,213.229).

⁵ He calls himself *aeui maturus* at the time when Mary's parents assemble the suitors (*Chr.* 3,163). The great difference in age between Joseph and Mary is a traditional *topos*.

⁶ One may think, of course, that this ‘oblivion’ of Mary is not only due to Vida's centering upon Christ and his works, but actually to distance his own work from Sannazaro's, which had been published only a few years before – at a time, however,

is not that much of a divine being equal or superior to angels, but a young girl, just having grown old enough to get married. We must not forget that, technically, this is the same Mary as in *PV*, in age as well as in the other significant circumstances.⁷ By giving information on the “story before the story”, i.e. the detailed description of Joseph’s election as Mary’s husband and their marriage (*Chr.* 3,140–204),⁸ Vida conveys a more human image of Mary (and also of Joseph) than does Sannazaro: she is but a normal young girl, afraid and over-challenged by the unexpected and undesired marriage to a much older man. But still, even Vida reminds us that she is more than that. Her ‘divine’ features are not shown until she actually comes herself into contact with divinity, but are already alluded to in the very first scene Mary is mentioned. Joseph introduces the girl Mary as *Iudaeas inter uirgo pulcherrima nymphas* (*Chr.* 3,141). This statement not only underlines her virginity, which she has retained until the very day Joseph is telling his story to Pilate; it also places her in one line with *nymphae*, that means, with half-goddesses. Of course, here *nymphae* is doubtless used as a general term for young women, but especially when talking about the Virgin Mary, we cannot discard the supernatural connotations of this term. Even more so, we must take them into account, as only a few verses before, John the disciple refers to Mary as *nympha* when encouraging Joseph to speak to Pilate: *nymphae dignate superbo coniugio* (*Chr.* 3,101s.). As an obvious adaptation of the Virgilian line *coniugio, Anchisa, Veneris dignate superbo* (*Aen.* 3,475), this presents Mary as a ‘Christianized version’ of Aeneas’ mother, the goddess Venus.⁹

when Vida had already been working on his own *opus magnum* for about eight years.

- 7 Of course, there *are* differences according to the tradition which each of the authors follows respectively, but in both cases, the action takes places around the same moment in time, with young Mary about to be married or recently married to Joseph.
- 8 This report in the *Christiad* is loosely based on the description of the same events in the apocryphal Gospel of St. James (ch. 8–10; the Greek text and several English translations are available from URL <<http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/infancyjames.html>> [quoted June 26th, 2011]; see also ELLIOTT, JAMES K. 1993. *The Apocryphal New Testament*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 48–67, with a list of editions and translations.). Sannazaro does not make use of the opportunity to insert a similar non-biblical excursion but omits the episode, as does the New Testament. When the action of *PV* starts, Mary is already married, and nothing is mentioned concerning her marriage except the poverty in which she lives.
- 9 Di Cesare recognizes the conflict between the pagan-mythical *nympha* and the Christian subject of the poem without seeing this hidden praise of Mary (DI CESARE, MARIO. 1964. *Vida’s Christiad and Vergilian Epic*. New York: Columbia University Press, 120): “Awkward and troublesome, ‘Nymph’ has little point in the context of the whole poem.” This is not surprising, since he – rightfully – does not consider Mary as

It is obviously also due to the increased importance of Joseph the storyteller in the *Christiad*¹⁰ that the relation and the interaction of the Holy Couple has a much higher weight in the *Christiad* than in *PV*, where Joseph rather remains within the limited role in which he is already known from the New Testament.¹¹ Vida, on the other side, provides us with an explicitly subjective introduction to Mary, but in such a way that at first glance one cannot classify her as a “heroine” in a classical sense of the word but would rather assign this part to her husband Joseph – which, at that point of the story in the *Christiad*, is doubtless true.

The Annunciation

The Annunciation is set at the very beginning of *PV*, and reminds us very much of Mercury’s mission to Aeneas in Carthage to fulfill his *fatum*, that means, to become the founder of the Roman nation that would rule the world. By means of this parallel – or, if one prefers, the parallel to the model that Virgil himself used for this scene, namely the encounter of Ulysses and Hermes on Calypso’s island in the *Odyssey* – we have once more evidence that Sannazaro really sets up Mary as the central figure of his poem. This intention is already implied before and, obviously, in a more subtle way even the title of the epic itself points to that direction. We may not find that clear a reference to the main character in the title of the poem as Vida has it in his later *Christiad*, a title clearly inspired by that of Virgil’s *Aeneid*. But still we do not have any problem to identify Mary herself within the title *De partu Virginis*; there is no need of a title like, for instance, *Mariad*.¹² We may say, of course, that Sannazaro voluntarily chooses to distance his work from the classical, war-centered epic, introducing instead a heroine of peace that becomes heroic just by passively allowing God’s plans, not by

a central figure of the *Christiad*: cf. *ibid.*, 192, where he states that “Vida’s epic lacks a dramatically-unifying central character”.

- 10 On Joseph’s role in the *Christiad* see SCHULZE ROBERG, MICHAEL. 2008. “Mihi alma parens accredita tantum.” *Die Rolle Josefs in Marco Girolamo Vidas* *Christias*. MA thesis, Ruhr-Universität Bochum.
- 11 Still, Sannazaro honors him with the epithet *heros* (cf. above n. 4), which may be seen as a compromise in order to prove him worthy of his ‘divine’ spouse Mary. In fact, there would not be any objective reason – neither due to his social position nor his role in the poem – to call him so.
- 12 However, a manuscript of an earlier version (Cod. Vat. Lat 2874) shows that at least the ‘working title’ of *PV* was *Christeid*; see NAZZARO (2009: 171).

actively fulfilling them. All this also serves to emphasize Mary's part as a means in God's plan for the salvation of mankind.

Of course, we might say that either poet, in the case of the Annunciation, is only making use of the biblical pattern, where we also read that the archangel Gabriel is sent to Mary in order to tell her about her role in God's plans.¹³ It is true that the Bible already provides a setting similar to the famous Virgilian and Homeric scenes: a divine messenger (Hermes – Mercury – Gabriel) is sent by the highest divine instance (Zeus – Jupiter – God the Father) to make the central character (Ulysses – Aeneas – Mary) act as it is necessary to fulfill a superior plan (in the *Aeneid*: go to Italy so that later the Roman Empire can rule the world – in the Bible give birth to the Messiah so that the world can be redeemed). Of course, the way that the angel addresses Mary in *PV* has nothing of Mercury's rebuking tone towards Aeneas,¹⁴ as there is no reason to rebuke Mary, who learns only at that moment that she is going to play a part in the salvation of mankind, while Aeneas already knows that his destiny awaits him in Italy, but he prefers a more comfortable life with Dido in Carthage. What is more: while Virgil can depict his Aeneas as an imperfect hero,¹⁵ Sannazaro's Mary has to be perfect to cope with the conditions of being the mother of the perfect man.¹⁶ This exaggeration becomes almost comic when even God himself admires Mary, deeming her worthy of more than her humble human existence and already considering some kind of apotheosis:¹⁷

¹³ Cf. Lk 1. On Sannazaro's transformation of the gospel report into epic see VISSER, TAMARA. 2006. "Sannazaros Epos *De partu Virginis* zwischen Lukas-Evangelium und Vergil: Betrachtungen zur Episierungstechnik Sannazaros." In SCHÄFER, ECKART [ED.]. *Sannazaro und die Augusteische Dichtung*. Tübingen: Narr, 2006, 206–217.

¹⁴ The most famous element of it being probably Aeneas' debasement as a 'henpecked husband' (*uxorius*; *Aen.* 4,266).

¹⁵ Cf. ARMSTRONG, DAVID. 1967. "The Other Aeneid." *Arion*, 6, 143–168, here: 166 s.; WLOSOK, ANTONIE. 1990. "Der Held als Ärgernis: Vergils Aeneas." In WLOSOK, ANTONIE. *Res divinae – res humanae: Kleine Schriften*. E. HECK und E. A. SCHMIDT [HRSG.]. Heidelberg: Winter, 1990, 403–418. More recently see VON ALBRECHT, MICHAEL. 2006. *Vergil. Bucolica, Georgica, Aeneis: eine Einführung*. Heidelberg: Winter, 13.

¹⁶ Cf. M. RUBIN (2009: 173–176).

¹⁷ One may see in these lines a foreshadowing of Mary's Ascension, which is not described in the Bible but has been celebrated in the church since the 6th century, although it had not been an official Catholic dogma until 1950. On Mary's Assumption see also RUBIN (2009: 305–309); SHOEMAKER, STEPHEN J. 2002. *Ancient Traditions of the Virgin Mary's Dormition and Assumption*. Oxford. – The very term 'apotheosis' for the Assumption is used in TILLARD, JEAN-MARIE. 2007. "The Marian Issues." In DENAUX, ADELBERT – SAGOVSKY, NICHOLAS [EDS.]. *Studying Mary: Reflections on*

*digna polo regnare altoque effulgere diuum
concilio et nostros aeternum habitare penates. (PV 1,71–72)*¹⁸

Thus, in fact, Mary already appears as a god-like being while on earth, and even before being chosen to be Christ's mother. The fact that, in contrast to the Gospel report, the Annunciation is not only described from the earthly point of view but through the very eyes of God, is another proof of Mary's outstanding character and importance. Neither does Sannazaro as author offer a mere praise of Mary's chastity and her election when the angel talks to her; but a large number of images that, at Sannazaro's time, would to a great extent be standard topics of Marian hymns,¹⁹ are uttered by the angel himself and create the impression that the angel is not talking to a human being inferior to himself, but rather to someone of an equal or even higher rank. The address *oculis salue lux debita nostris* (1,109) may be an adequate phrase from the lips of a normal believer praying to Mary, but one would not expect a celestial being to speak these words. On the other side, it is only natural that an angel should behave like this if even God is as impressed as we have just seen. Sannazaro has uplifted Mary right in the beginning to the position that the angel is foretelling her for the future, that is, in fact, for Sannazaro's own time: *hominum succurrere uotis* (1,122).²⁰

The *Christiad*, however, offers us another perspective: first we see Joseph, who is astonished and confused as he sees his newly married wife in some kind of trance and surrounded by light:

*Vix thalami impuleram bipatentis cardine portas,
cum lux ecce oculis ingens offusa repente.*

the Virgin Mary in Anglican and Roman Catholic Theology and Devotion. London – New York: T&T Clark, 4–11, here: 10.

¹⁸ The quotations from *PV* are taken from SANNAZARO, JACOPO. 2009. *Latin Poetry.* MICHAEL C. J. PUTNAM [TRANSL.]. Cambridge, Mass. – London: Harvard University Press.

¹⁹ Cf. Vida's Marian hymn *Magnae Matri Virgini* (VIDA, MARCO G. 1634. *Marci Hieronymi Vidae Cremonensis, Albae episcopi opera. Quorum catalogum sequens pagella continet. Apud Antonium Gryphium.* Lyon, 88–101).

²⁰ EARLS, IRENE. 1987. *Renaissance Art: a Topical Dictionary.* New York: Greenwood Press, 141: "The Intercession of Mary". Cf. for today's doctrine the Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium* issued by the Second Vatican Council on November 21, 1964 (available from URL <http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_it.html> [quoted 2011-04-26]), no. 62: "[...] *Propterea B[eata] Virgo in Ecclesia titulis Advocatae, Auxiliatricis, Adiutricis, Mediatricis invocatur.*" See also SCHEFFCZYK, LEO. 2003. *Maria – Mutter und Gefährtin Christi.* Augsburg: Sankt Ulrich, 176–190.

*Collucent summi radiis laquearia tecti,
collucentque trabes, uisumque ardere cubile.
Ipsa autem thalami in medio sedet aurea uirgo
attonitae similis nec enim me multa rogantem
dignatur. Nihil illa meo sermone mouetur. (Chr. 3,257–263)*

Sannazaro's description of the very process is even more detailed:

[...] *At venter (mirabile dictu!
non ignota cano) sine vi, sine labe pudoris,
arcano intumuit verbo: vigor actus ab alto
irradians, vigor omnipotens, vigor omnia complens
descendit: Deus ille, Deus, totosque per artus
dat sese,²¹ miscetque utero. Quo tacta repente
viscera contremuere: silet Natura, pavetque
attonitae similis [...]* (PV 1,188–195)²²

Joseph as an eyewitness of the Conception of Christ is not found in the Bible nor in the apocryphal Gospels. It is an invention by Vida in order to enable Joseph to tell the story to Pilate. The actual details of the Annunciation, as we find them in the Gospel of Luke, are then told to him by Mary herself – the angel has been visible and audible for her alone. Thus the author can still include in his story the biblical fact that Joseph first doubts what has happened and ponders to leave his wife until he receives the divine admonition to stay with Mary.²³ Vida also uses several common *topoi* of Marian praise²⁴ on that occasion (e. g. *Chr. 3,265: aut stellae similis aut*

²¹ Here, the punctuation of the text does not follow Putnam's edition (see n. 18), but is adapted to Gärtner's reading of this passage as a reminiscence to Statius (GÄRTNER, THOMAS. 2004. "Gott und Götter bei Jacopo Sannazaro und Statius." *Humanistica Lovaniensia*, 53, 191–198, here: 193).

²² On the representation of the Conception in both Sannazaro and Vida see CZAPLA, RALF G. 2006. "Jacopo Sannazaros *De partu Virginis* – eine erotische Dichtung? Zur Poetisierung der Empfängnis Mariens in der Bibelepik der italienischen Hochrenaissance." In E. SCHÄFER [ED.]. (2006: 231–247).

²³ Cf. Mt 1:19–21; *Chr. 3,397–404*. Vida here assigns to Joseph the scepticism and the suspicions that any normal man would have when his wife tells him she has been impregnated "by an invisible power."

²⁴ For general examples of those, see LÜDICKE-KAUTE, LORE. 1971. "Lauretanische Litanei." In KIRSCHBAUM, ENGELBERT [ED.]. *Lexikon der christlichen Ikonographie*, vol. 3. Rome – Freiburg – Basel – Vienna: Herder, 1971, 27–31. Another interesting contemporary testimony of allegories on Mary is the *Defensorium inviolatae perpetuaeque virginittatis castissimae genetricis Mariae* by Franciscus de Retza, first published in Basel 1487/1488, which includes even examples from ancient Roman and Greek mythology (SCHREIBER, WILHELM L. [ED.] 1910. *Defensorium inviolatae*

puniceae aurorae); but those which are not more or less quotes from the Bible²⁵ are rather spoken by Joseph, the representative of a standard simple believer throughout the *Christiad*, and to a large extent, they are limited to Mary's outward appearance during and after the Annunciation.

The most outstanding passage is the simile that compares Mary to a sculpture:

*Haud aliter, quam cum simulacrum excidit acernum
artificis manus e siluis in sede locandum
sacrata, quod plebs dehinc supplex omnis adoret,
si, postquam effigiem poliens trunco extudit arte,
extremum super imposito decus induat auro. (Chr. 3,268–272)*

The anachronism of Mary looking “like some statue”²⁶ is striking, as at Vida's time there must have been thousands of statues pretending to resemble Mary. In this case, however, it seems that the original Mary must compete with her copies to be acknowledged as such, but after all, she apparently does not succeed: she does not excel her imitations and finds herself at best on the same level (*haud aliter*, *Chr.* 3,268). So we may see here a short ironic side blow at the exaggeration of the worship of the Virgin Mary, the witness of which Vida surely has been on several occasions.²⁷

We may say that Joseph obtains, in this case, once more the part of a simple believer, who cannot comprehend the mystery of the virginal concep-

virginitatis Mariae. Aus der Druckerei der Hurus in Saragossa in Faksimile-Reproduktion. Weimar: Gesellschaft der Bibliophilen).

25 Clearly inspired by Rev 12:1 are the lines in *Chr.* 3,273–276:

*Immotam penitus circumdat lucida nubes
Solis inardescens radiis, stellaeque uidentur
lucentes capiti circum aurea tempora pasci,
sub pedibusque deae lumen dare candida luna.*

Moreover, two Old Testament events are mentioned in *Chr.* 3,452–465, which are allegorically interpreted as prophetic foreshadowings of Mary and her immaculate conception: the burning bush seen by Moses (v. 456–459; cf. Ex 3:2) and the dry fleece on wet ground that was given to Gideon as a sign of election (v. 460–463; cf. Judg 6:39–40), two allegories that Vida had already used in his hymn *Magnae Matri Virgini*; cf. PIASTRA (1994: 51).

26 *Chr.* 3,268. Translation by J. Gardner (VIDA, MARCO G. 2009. *Christiad*. JAMES GARDNER [TRANSL.]. Cambridge, Mass. – London: Harvard University Press, 141).

27 Cf. also the Bethesda episode in *Chr.* 1,436–504, where Vida takes up position against excessive belief in healing miracles instead of trusting in God with the remark *nec cuncta undis debere necesse est* (l. 500); Vida's awareness of the need for reforms in the Catholic church, also by removing such kind of excesses, is mentioned by M. DI CESARE (1964: 30–32).

tion and birth; the *Christiad* version of Mary at the Annunciation is not so much of a divine being in herself, as in *PV*; rather, she is a human mediator in order to convey God's incomprehensible working to a 'normal' human being (Joseph), very much like her actual function in Catholic worship. Still, during the Annunciation itself, she is lifted up to a divine sphere on outward and on spiritual level. In contrast to her husband, she comes into close contact with God the Father, even on the very physical level, not only by bearing the Son of God in her womb. This is illustrated by the almost biological description of Mary's feelings in the very moment when she conceives through the Holy Spirit:

*Turbine corripior rapido, uisque illa per omnes,
aurai uis omnipotens, mihi diditur artus,
aethereusque uigor toto se corpore miscet,
uisaque praedulci mihi corda liquescere amore,
qualis secreto naturae foedere tellus
concipit et uario clam fetu plena grauescit,
matris ubi in gremium descendit plurimus aether
auraque fecundos afflauit uerna tepores. (Chr. 3,385–392)*

It should be added that in both descriptions of the Annunciation Mary does not show a 'heroic' behavior in classical sense during or after the event through bravery or any heroic action:²⁸ her 'heroic deed' is her moral (and physical) integrity. According to the biblical pattern, she is rather characterized by humility, by accepting God's will in spite of responding to her own weakness and lack of understanding. Her obedience could by no means be described by Aeneas' *non sponte sequor* (*Aen.* 4,361), but Sannazaro has her even declare: *en adsum!* (*PV* 1,181). Thus she forms a pattern for

²⁸ Even the opposite: she is almost frightened to death in *PV* (cf. *PV* 1,123s.: *Stupuit confestim exterrita uirgo, / demisitque oculos totosque expalluit artus*, which corresponds to the biblical model in Lk 1,29: *quae cum uidisset turbata est in sermone eius* [...]). In the *Christiad*, the element of terror has less importance (cf. *Chr.* 3,334 s.: *Hic mihi uix paucis auditis talibus ingens / miranti gelidos subito tremor alligat artus*); Vida rather emphasizes the 'ecstatic moment' of Mary's encounter with the angel:
[...]
*Video medium discedere coelum
pennatasque acies, populos felicitis Olympi,
exsultare polo superumque applaudere regi.
Non obstant clausi postes, non pariete tectum
marmoreo circumsaeptum. Video ignea coeli
sidera sidereosque globos, superum aurea tecta. (Chr. 3,321–326)*

'genuine Christian' heroes, characterized by believing God's commands and obeying them in confidence, but also in humility.²⁹

Jesus' birth

In the second scene that we are going to examine, we find ourselves with Joseph and Mary in the stable. Naturally, Mary, in the given situation, does not quite correspond to the idea that we would have of an epic "heroine": she is but a teenager in the late stages of pregnancy – we must not forget that at that time, adolescent women used to be married at a much younger age, a fact that is confirmed for Mary's case by (apocryphal) tradition³⁰ –, and she is tired after the long journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem (about 120 km) with Joseph, who, due to his age, probably had a hard time himself walking all the way. However, this young girl is about to accomplish a really heroic deed: to give birth to the future Savior of mankind.

The first thing that we must take into account when we compare Sannazaro's and Vida's rendering of the scene, is, as I have mentioned before, that in Vida's epic Mary is not actually an acting person but a narrated figure within the report that her husband Joseph gives to Pilate. Everything is told from his own point of view. I should add that Joseph in the *Christiad* is characterized as a faithful, devoted but also rather naive person.³¹ His close relationship with Mary also disqualifies him from being a neutral,

²⁹ Cf. the calling of biblical 'heroes' from the Old Testament, such as Abraham, Jacob, or Moses, who also respond with "*adsum*" (cf. Gen 22:1; 46:2; Ex 3:4). The additional particle *en* is not only used due to metrical reasons but also to underline Mary's election, which in Christian interpretation not only equals that of the ancient patriarchs but by far surpasses it. On the understanding of the term 'hero' in epic poetry see also THURN, NIKOLAUS. 2010. "Heros Aeneas und Iuno, die Hera. Der Wandel des Heldenbegriffs von der Antike zur Neuzeit." In BURKARD, THORSTEN – SCHAUER, MARKUS – WIENER, CLAUDIA [EDS.]. *Vestigia Vergiliana: Vergil-Rezeption in der Neuzeit*. Berlin – New York: De Gruyter, 2010, 9–30.

³⁰ In the Gospel of St. James (8,2–3), she is about twelve years old when the priests decide to choose a husband for her. Vida, with respect to the marriage scenery, mainly seems to follow this tradition, although he does not inform us about Mary's exact age but generally states: *Iamque erat apta viro, iam nubilis* (*Chr.* 3,153); Sannazaro does not give any hint as to Mary's age but the fact that she is referred to as *puella* when she is first mentioned in the action (*PV* 1,56) suggests that she is very young here, too. Reality however, was different: the typical age of Jewish girls for marriage at that time was higher, by "their late teens" (SATLOW, MICHAEL L. 2010. "Marriage and Divorce." In HEZSER, CHRISTINE [ED.]. *The Oxford Handbook of Jewish Daily Life in Roman Palestine*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010, 344–361, here: 354).

³¹ Cf. M. DI CESARE (1964: 165s.).

even less an omniscient narrator, while Sannazaro naturally takes exactly that position to tell the central event of his epic poem. We may say that Vida thus introduces a ‘human element’ into the Gospel story, while Sannazaro rather follows the pattern given in the Bible.

Since the birth of Jesus in relation to its significance in the Gospels is described in a rather unadorned way that would not be very appropriate for an epic poem, we cannot be surprised that both Sannazaro and Vida took their chance to embellish the episode.

While Church Fathers like Jerome still had not felt fully at ease with ancient classical – that means pagan – literature,³² Renaissance poets endeavored to unite Christian topics and classical epic form, which still was the “state of art”.³³ It had been tried, of course, to achieve this fusion already in Antiquity.³⁴ Probably one of the best-known examples is the epic written by Juvenecus, who has often been criticized for sticking too close to the text of the canonical Gospels. This problem has been avoided in *PV* and in the *Christiad* through a more Virgilian style of telling the story, including retrospectives (as we have, for example, here in the case of Joseph telling his and Mary’s story) and outlooks into the future (as we will see, for example, in the case of Jesus’ death in *PV*). Especially the latter is supported by the fact of prophecy being an essential element throughout the Bible, and the fulfillment thereof in the New Testament in particular.

We must not forget that the event that takes places in the stable of Bethlehem is the one that actually is the foundation of the worship of Mary

32 Cf. M. VON ALBRECHT (2006: 59). However, being a ‘classical’ epic poem, the 16th century *Christiad* would not have been approved by one of the Church Fathers as well.

33 Cf., for example, Vida’s *De arte poetica* (1517), a didactic poem in three books, following the classical models of Aristotle and Horace. See WILLIAMS, RALPH G. [ED.] – VIDA, MARCO G. 1976. *The ‘De arte poetica’ of Marco Girolamo Vida*. New York: Columbia University Press; GIRARDI, RAFFAELE [ED.] – VIDA, MARCO G. 1982. *L’arte poetica*. Bari: Adriatica.

34 See, for example, GREEN, ROGER P. H. 2006. *Latin Epics of the New Testament: Juvenecus, Sedulius, Arator*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. A particular technique of mingling classical Antiquity and Christianity were Virgilian and Homeric centos, such as Proba’s *Cento Vergilianus de laudibus Christi* (4th century). See CLARK, ELIZABETH A. – HATCH, DIANE F. 1981. *The golden bough, the oaken cross. The Virgilian Cento of Faltonia Betitia Proba*. Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, and GLEI, REINHOLD F. 2009. “Der Kaiserin neue Kleider: Die Homercentonen der Eudokia.” In EFFE, BERND – GLEI, REINHOLD F. – KLODT, CLAUDIA [EDS.]. *Homer zweiten Grades. Zum Wirkungspotential eines Klassikers*. Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2009, 227–248.

in Christian tradition. This is the light in which we must see it when we consider its presentation through Sannazaro's and Vida's eyes. Again we must take into account the different points of view – it is part of the epic action in Sannazaro, and in Vida we learn about it through Joseph. While Sannazaro thus points out Jesus' birth as the central subject and climax of his poem, Vida does not even give us a “first-hand description” but only a “second-hand report”. This does not necessarily mean that Vida considers it less important, but he focuses rather on Jesus' mission on earth, his death and resurrection. The very event is described similarly in both cases, so it is mainly the different point of view that helps us to see how the two authors see Mary. In *PV*, we may say, she has more the air of an epic heroine who takes an active part in the course of action (although, of course, during birth she is rather passive – especially as she does not even have to suffer woes or any other pain). In her main heroic act, she accomplishes what is necessary so that God's plan to redeem humanity can be fulfilled – just as Aeneas clears the way for the Trojans to gain a foothold in Italy by fighting and eventually killing Turnus in the end of the *Aeneid*. In contrast to Virgil, however, Sannazaro leaves room for the acknowledgement of that deed, as it already takes place in the second book (out of three).³⁵ It is remarkable that Mary does not accomplish her most heroic deed in the form of a “traditional” epic hero, that is, by physical or intellectual strength, but even through passivity. Even the painless birth fits into that frame, although this motif is taken from the non-canonical scriptures.³⁶ However, it seems that without pain, be it physically or psychically, there cannot be heroism in epic. Thus, Mary too will suffer herself afterwards, as is prophesied to her later in the temple, by the old prophet Simeon:

*et tempus fore praedico, illaetabile tempus,
cum tibi cor gelidum gladius penetrabit acutus
ah miserae, et magno uirgo dotabere luctu. (Chr: 3,721–723)*³⁷

- ³⁵ The heroism of Mary's actions is then made most clear when she is praised by the shepherds with a song that does not only echo Virgil's “Messianic” fourth eclogue but is even almost a compilation of the same. See BINDER, GERHARD. 2010. “Goldene Zeiten: Immer wieder wird ein Messias geboren. . . Beispiele neuzeitlicher Aneignung der 4. Ekloge Vergils.” In T. BURKARD – M. SCHAUER – C. WIENER [EDS.]. (2010: 51–71), here: 52–57.
- ³⁶ On the idea of painless birth see the detailed study of STICHEL, RAINER. 1990. *Die Geburt Christi in der russischen Ikonenmalerei: Voraussetzungen in Glauben und Kunst des christlichen Ostens und Westens*. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 27–43.
- ³⁷ Cf. Lk 2,35: *et tuam ipsius animam pertransiet gladius* [...]. Vida plays with this prophecy, having Joseph mention it several times throughout the story in the contexts of events that seem to be its fulfillment: in the context of the Flight into Egypt (*Chr.*

Jesus' death

This takes us to the third scene: Jesus' death. Again we are facing – as we can expect – two different narrative perspectives, this time Vida giving us the “live report”, while Sannazaro, due to the chronology in his poem, can present us only a prophetic outlook on Jesus' death, given by King David in the Underworld (*PV* 1,305–400) in the course of a general foreshadowing of Christ's life.³⁸ This outlook also contains a lamentation by Mary, the *mater non iam mater* (*PV* 1,333), in direct speech. Apart from the abundant Christian tradition, which has born rich fruit in music and arts,³⁹ Mary's lamentation for her dead son in Vida's epic as well as in Sannazaro's is clearly inspired by the lamentation of Euryalus' mother in the *Aeneid* (*Aen.* 9,481–497).⁴⁰

Before she can mourn over her son, however, Vida has her look for him all over Jerusalem in a wild frenzy, in which she appears similar to Dido when she learns of Aeneas' plans to leave her. This parallel is not at all surprising.⁴¹ Both Dido and Mary will not succeed (from the human point

3,816s.) as well as when he learns about the Massacre of the Innocents (*Chr.* 3,886s.), but not in relation to Jesus' death, as he still hopes to prevent it; cf. M. DI CESARE (1964: 329s. n. 5). The use of suffering as a characterizing *topos* for Mary may be Vida's literary reflection of the Catholic concept of the “Seven Sorrows of the Blessed Virgin Mary”; see HOLWECK, FREDERICK. 1913. “Sorrows of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Feasts of the Seven.” In *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 14. New York: The Encyclopedia Press, 151s. Available from URL <<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/14151b.htm>> [quoted 2011-07-07].

38 Still, Sannazaro has composed a poem of its own, entitled *De morte Christi Domini ad mortales lamentatio*. See J. SANNAZARO (2009: 94–101). See also FANTAZZI, CHARLES. 1997. “Poetry and Religion in Sannazaro's *De partu Virginis*.” In TOURNOY, GILBERT –SACRÉ, DIRK [EDS.]. *Ut granum sinapis. Essays on Neo-Latin Literature in Honour of Jozef Ijsewijn*. Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1997, 231–248, here especially: 243–246.

39 One of the most important models for this passage, especially for the beginning in *PV*, is the Catholic hymn of *Stabat Mater*, see J. SANNAZARO (2009: 393 n. 333).

40 M. DI CESARE (1964: 151) rather sees another parallel in the *Christiad* to Aeneas' reaction when he sees the mutilated Hector. For *PV* see J. SANNAZARO (2009: 393 n. 345), and J. BLÄNSDORF, who points to a similarity of Mary's lamentation in *PV* to the lamentations for Pallas in the *Aeneid* (BLÄNSDORF, JÜRGEN. 2006. “*Nulla priorum vestigia*: Sannazaros *De partu Virginis* und Vergil.” In E. SCHÄFER [ED.] (2006: 193–205) here: 199s.

41 The mention of Dido's suffering in the context of Christ's passion (as an atithesis) is found already in Augustine, *Conf.* 1,13: ... *et plorare Didonem mortuam, quia se occidit ab amore, cum interea me ipsum in his a te morientem, deus, vita mea, siccis oculis ferrem miserrimus.*

of view), as they are both confronting invincible opponents: Dido will lose her lover to the *fatum*, and Jesus must die in order to accomplish the divine plan of salvation.⁴²

We might say, of course, that in this scene it is difficult to see Mary as a heroine at first glance, especially if we remember that Mary does not play such a prominent role in the *Christiad* as in *PV*. But still we may compare the situation to its Virgilian model to get an idea of the different concepts that are conveyed in the Renaissance epic, in contrast to its ancient counterpart. It might even be said that we are *obliged* to examine this aspect, as the textual parallels in the *Christiad* inevitably evoke the Euryalus scene in the ninth book of the *Aeneid*.⁴³

An analysis is also interesting because we do not have explicit biblical evidence for Mary's behavior at Jesus' death. Thus, the author has been absolutely free to render this scene according to his own imagination, or at least to shape it freely within the limits set by tradition. It is not surprising that Vida uses a Virgilian model. But if we take a look at the circumstances beyond the mere fact of a mother in sorrow, we can find interesting differences between the situations of Euryalus' mother in the *Aeneid* and Mary in the *Christiad*. Euryalus has died after a heroic battle, in which he has killed a great number of Trojan enemies – the complete opposite of Christ, who not only renders himself voluntarily but also reproaches any act violence committed his disciples to deliver him. His death has not been glorious, something worthy of a “hero” in a traditional sense, but he has died in the most shameful way. So far, we might say that, from the human point of view, Mary thus has even more right to lament. However, if we see the final outcome, we can justly say that Jesus' death goes beyond that of Euryalus: the latter has died (notwithstanding his success) in a rather insignificant battle, while Jesus, who seems to have lost his battle, will achieve complete triumph afterwards. Surely, both mothers' lamentations are very similar on a verbal level, but the reader knows that afterwards Mary's sorrow will be turned into joy.⁴⁴

⁴² While the Virgilian *fatum* is superior even to Jupiter himself (cf. SCHAUER, MARKUS. 2007. *Aeneas dux in Vergils Aeneis: eine literarische Fiktion in augusteischer Zeit*. Munich: C. H. Beck, 103–105), the Christian God is Himself creator of the *fatum* – represented, in this case, by the plan of the redemption of mankind. On the problem of Christ being an epic hero, God and subject of the *fatum* at the same time see GREGORY, TOBIAS. 2006. *From Many Gods to One: Divine Action in Renaissance Epic*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 80–89.

⁴³ On the commonness of Virgilian reminiscences in the epic presentation of Mary's lamentation see PIASTRA (1994: 11s., esp. n. 45).

⁴⁴ Although we do not find any expression thereof for Mary's particular case, we can

Finally we can say that, corresponding to the importance of Mary in Catholic tradition, it is not unusual to find her playing a greater role in epic retellings of the Gospel theme. In the case of the two epic poems considered here, we have seen that Vida, who assigns to Mary a considerable part without making her a central figure of his work, uses her figure rather to embed her into the epic frame provided by the *Aeneid*, making her a “Christianized” epic figure (but not necessarily a heroine). In Sannazaro’s *PV*, on the other hand, Mary is the main figure and thus must be considered as a heroine in a stricter sense of the word. This reaches its climax in her giving birth to Jesus as her decisive heroic ‘action’. In both cases, however, the foundation of her “heroism” is different from the ancient, classical understanding (which would be bravery, eloquence, or the like), and adapted to a Christian pattern of virtue:⁴⁵ what makes a Christian hero – or, in this case, heroine – is trusting, humble obedience – or, to use a Virgilian term, a Christian form of *pietas* – to God, who alone can perform ‘real’ heroic deeds, in Christian terms: miracles.

surely apply Sannazaro’s joyful praise, considering it as implied by Sannazaro’s directly following praise of the risen Christ (*PV* 1,401–406); and the simile through which Vida compares Mary Magdalene to a rising flower when she realizes that Christ is alive (*Chr.* 6,381–387), might be transferred without any problem also to Jesus’ mother. With respect to that scene, see also GLEI, REINHOLD F. 2010. “Das leere Grab und die Macht der Bilder: Vergilrezeption in der *Christias* des Marco Girolamo Vida.” In T. BURKARD – M. SCHAUER – C. WIENER [EDS.]. (2010: 107–119).

⁴⁵ Cf. JOHNSON, W. RALPH. 2010. “Epic.” In GRAFTON, ANTHONY – MOST, GLENN W. – SETTIS, SALVATORE [EDS.]. *The Classical Tradition*. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 2010, 313–319, here: 315.