

“Creticus, you are see-through!”: The Transparent Toga in Roman Invective

Although transparent togas were worn by fashionable men in Rome, in invective literature this garment signified effeminacy—a stark contrast to the manliness of the *toga virilis* (Olson 2014). This paper proposes to explain this contradiction by showing why the transparent toga acts as the antithesis to the *toga virilis*. Drawing on insights from New Materialism, the visual aspect of the object-body relationship is crucial in understanding the effect of the transparent toga. When bodies and objects interact, each affects the other with simultaneous or shifting agency; the results of these interactions create social meanings which can be interpreted by a discerning viewer (Ahmed 2010; Bourdieu 1990). I argue that the transparent toga signifies effeminacy because its negation of the toga’s main function, as an object that visually conceals the body, leads to the reversal of the expression of manliness.

First, I show how togas function in an ideal sense and explain the social meanings that result when a toga fails to perform this purpose. The primary role of the *toga virilis* as an object is to cover and conceal, as Varro implies in deriving the word *toga* from *tegere* (*Ling.* 5.114). When a toga does not do this, it is shameful. For instance, accidentally lifting the left arm too high, causing the toga to fall back and exposing one’s entire side to view, was deemed highly inappropriate (Quint. *Inst.* 11.3.118). Varro laments that “glass-like” togas (*vitreae togae*) would reveal the stripes on the tunics of “certain men” (*istorum*), showing that they are high rank but dishonorable (*Sat. Men.* 313.1). Carlin Barton’s work helps to indicate why, showing that in Roman normative views, revealing a body to the gaze makes that body shameful; one must cover either the eyes or the body (2002). Only in controlled circumstances, such as candidacy or bathing, was an honorable Roman willing to expose his body to scrutiny—though even then, Barton observes, there were ritual safeguards against peering eyes. As a result, the fact that a

transparent toga yields to a penetrating gaze is, I conclude, one basis for its negative representation in invective.

Furthermore, the translucent fabric of such a toga does more than expose a man's undergarment to the viewer—it is associated with revealing a female body, linking the object-body interface and the failure to conceal with the effeminacy and vice that reverses the masculine ideal. In one famous example, Juvenal scolds Creticus, wearing a gauze toga in summer heat, by declaring that not even an adulteress would wear such a garment and calling him completely see-through (*perluces*), exaggerating the fabric's transparency and transferring this quality to its wearer (2.65-78). In fact, the transparent toga may arguably be a common marker of the prostitute and adulteress. Such women are notorious for wearing translucent fabric like Coan silk to reveal their bodies to men; they are also frequently labeled *togatae* (McGinn 1998: 156-171; Olson 2008; Dixon 2014). Juvenal declares the gauzy toga does not just bare Creticus to view but will also infect him like a disease, leading to the abomination of cross-dressing as a worshiper of Bona Dea (2.78-87). Transparent fabric seems to have both passive agency in exposing the body to the gaze and active agency in infecting the male body with even greater vice and effeminacy.

In sum, this paper shows that the transparent toga's reversed social meaning on the male body is based on two main elements: its inability to perform the toga's primary function of covering the body and its subsequent association with promiscuous women. The gauzy fabric reveals the body to the gaze, rendering it shameful instead of honorable; such a toga is suitable only for an *infamis* woman, not a male citizen. Consequently, the transparent toga acts more like an "anti-toga" on both men and women in Roman invective.

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