Publius Vergilius Maro, Aeneis 8.407-415

Vergil’s famous epic poem in celebration of the founding of Rome offers us compelling portraits of goddesses and legendary women; none, however, capture the feeling of lived existence like the unnamed simple housewife in this brief simile, who rises before dawn to toil for her family. This glimpse into the labor performed in the home by the traditional materfamilias serves as a discreet bridge between the seduction by Venus of her husband Vulcan and his fulfillment of his promise to forge powerful weapons for her son, Aeneas. But not until haud secus (line 414) do we feel the impact of this image: while the two subjects and their tasks could not be more different, through this comparison Vergil makes us understand the dedication the divine metalsmith brings to his task. Both like and yet unlike, the simile portrays Vulcan’s spirit not as the work ethic of a skilled artisan but as the selfless and tireless devotion to family of a nurturing matrona. The meter is dactylic hexameter.

Inde ubi prima quies medio iam noctis abactae
curriculo expulerat somnum, cum femina primum,
cui tolerare collo vitam tenuique Minerva
410 impositum, cinerem et sopitos suscitat ignis
noctem addens operi, famulasque ad lumina longo
exercet penso, castum ut servare cubile
coniugis et possit parvos educere natos:
haud secus ignipotens nec tempore segnior illo
415 mollibus e stratis opera ad fabrilia surgit.

Click on the underlined words for translation aids and commentary, which will appear in a small window. Close the small window after each use. Click on the icon link to the right of the poem for related images and information.

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