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It is well known that Dido has had a long cultural afterlife since the *Aeneid* was first composed. Ever since Virgil depicted the Carthaginian queen, she has served as an object of fascination. Appearing in countless paintings and operas – from Pierre-Narcisse Guérin’s *Dido and Aeneas* to Cavalli’s *La Didone* – and other cultural media, she has remained a permanent fixture in western culture. However, her frequent appearances in the arts are only part of the story. Any reception history of Dido must reckon with what, for many, is a highly unexpected phenomenon: her powerful presence in the classroom setting, from late antiquity to the early modern era. Across this vast expanse of time, her emotional speeches were routinely appropriated in the service of schoolboys’ rhetorical training. In various impersonations, declamations, and rhetorical exercises—several of which we will observe in this paper as organizing case studies—students became deeply acquainted with the queen. Despite her ideologically problematic status—Rome’s founding, after all, necessitated her abandonment—she was embraced as a model of pathetic speech. In schoolrooms across time and space, Dido was redeemed by rhetoric.



Dido and Aeneas by Pierre-Narcisse Guérin, ca. 1815 CE.

Before examining this pedagogical practice, we should ask ourselves what makes it so surprising in the first place. One primary reason seems to be its apparent incongruity with dominant ideology: Dido's pathos, after all, represents a powerful counterforce to the mission of "pious Aeneas," the hero who must abandon the queen in order to fulfill his imperial mission. To momentarily empathize with the queen, for a Roman or English schoolboy, would seem to derail "a narrative of cultural origins" and foster anti-imperial sentiment.¹ Moreover, the character was condemned by the dominant intellectual traditions. The important allegorizing tradition of the *Aeneid*, begun by Fulgentius in late antiquity, served to belittle the queen. In Fulgentius' reading, Dido is transformed "into the personification of libido—desire or lust."² In another important commentary, by the twelfth-century Platonist scholar Bernard Silvestris, the same process of disparagement is at work. As Marilynn Desmond argues, "in glossing Aeneas's journey through

- 1 Desmond, Marilynn. *Reading Dido: Gender, Textuality, and the Medieval Aeneid* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 1.
2. Fulgentius. *Myth*. 2.2 "The Exposition of the Content of Virgil According to Moral Philosophy." Fulgentius the Mythographer trans. L.G. Whitbread (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1971).

3. Desmond, 1.

the underworld, Bernard clarifies the relationship between Aeneas as rationality and Dido as libido... the normative male spirit, representing reason, has simultaneously purged himself of desire and the feminine."³ In countless other examples—among which one could include the work of Italian humanists, and, most famously, Dante's *Inferno*—the most influential intellectual traditions demonized Dido as a lustful, effeminate other. When members of this masculine, hermeneutical tradition singled out a character for praise, it was typically "pious Aeneas," the model of imperial virtue. Taking this dominant ideological encasement of the epic into account, the classroom performance of Dido's anguish seems highly surprising. Calling on boys to enact and experience the queen's grief, schoolmasters—from late antiquity to the early modern era—would seem to be disregarding the epic's socially sanctioned reading.

4. Plat. Rep. 75. Plato, "Republic." The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism ed. Vincent B. Leitch. (New York, London: W. W. Norton, 2010).
5. Plat. Rep. 75.

A further factor that makes this practice so surprising is its dealing in powerful negative affects. Set against a history of thought about the emotions dating back to Plato, the impersonation of Dido—or, for that matter, of Niobe, Medea, or Hecuba—would seem to fly in the face of a dominant tradition that values "masculine" reason over "feminine" passion. By making their students weep for Dido, Plato would argue, schoolmasters allow poetry to enact its most destructive and irrational effect: "instead of being repulsed by the sight of the kind of person we'd regret and deplore being ourselves, we enjoy the spectacle and sanction it."⁴ By impersonating the character, the boys are being forced to familiarize themselves with "an aspect...which hungers after tears and the satisfaction of having cried until one can cry no more."⁵ Virgil's depiction of Dido, as the argument goes, "[irrigate and tend] to these things when they should be left to wither, and it makes them our rulers when they should be our subjects, because otherwise we won't live better and happier lives, but quite the opposite."⁶

6. Plat. Rep. 76.

In the first of this paper's case studies—St. Augustine's famous childhood encounter with the *Aeneid*—this emotional aspect of the dramatic exercises is very much foregrounded. While the subject of his impersonation is not Dido but rather the angry wife of Jupiter, the description is still highly instructive: "I was to recite the speech of Juno in her anger and grief that she 'could not keep the Trojan king out of Italy... The speaker who received highest praise was the one who had regard to the dignity of the imaginary characters, who most effectively expressed feelings of anger and sorrow, and who clothed these thoughts in appropriate language."⁷

The exercise that Augustine describes, it should be noted, is what Aphthonius labels a "pathetical ethopoeia," "an imitation of the character" of someone "that shows emotion in relation to everything."⁸ This is opposed to the "ethical" kind, which "introduce character only," as well as the "mixed" variety, which both introduce character and produce pathos.⁹ The example that the rhetorician uses in his *Progymnasmata*, written in the same general timeframe as Augustine's lifespan, is the "words a Hecuba might speak when Troy is fallen."¹⁰

In light of Aphthonius' work, we can see more clearly what the young Augustine was tasked to do: on the most fundamental level, the schoolboy was asked to engender pathos through the relaying of strong, negative emotions. The effects to be imitated, in other words, were precisely the ones that Plato so famously censured. Moreover, when Augustine describes his reaction to Dido's death, his language strongly evokes Plato's critique in *The Republic*: "Had I been forbidden to read this story, I would have been sad that I could not read what made me sad. Such madness is considered a higher and more fruitful literary education than being taught to read and write."¹¹ The young Augustine, at this moment, undergoes the same experience as *The Republic's* irrational playgoer, the captivated audience member who "hungers after tears and the

7. August. Conf. 19.

Augustine. *Confessions*.
Trans. Henry Chadwick
(Oxford: Oxford University
Press, 2009).

8. Apth. Prog. 280-281.

Aphthonius. "Progym-
nasmata." *Readings from
Classical Rhetoric*. Eds.
Patricia Matsen, Philip
Rollinson, Marion Sousa
(Carbondale and Edwards-

ville: Southern Illinois
University Press, 1990).

9. Apth. Prog. 280-281.

10. Apth. Prog. 280-281.

11. Aug. Con. 16.

12. Plat. Rep. 75.

satisfaction of having cried until one can cry no more.”¹² Both figures, in Plato’s framework, have abandoned reason for passion, productive wellbeing for regressive despair.

Why, then, in light of these seemingly problematic qualities, were the pathetic impersonations, as so influentially defined by Aphthonius, assigned? Manfred Kraus has provided a persuasive explanation: “... in the background of female ethopoeia there seems to be an imagination of a particular affinity of the female gender towards pathos. Accordingly, the opportunity for young men to safely display and rehearse vehement emotions appears to be the decisive element in female ethopoeia.”¹³ Ultimately, then, Augustine and other late antique schoolboys learned a crucial lesson from these female impersonations: the skill of using pathetic language. Thanks to the remarkable pathos of Dido and Juno, Niobe and Medea, these late antique students were equipped with a crucial tool. As future orators who would need to draw on pathetic power—as, for instance, in the act of arguing on behalf of a wronged client—the schoolboys received valuable training. With Virgil’s Carthaginian queen as their model, they were taught to effectively evoke sadness or pity in the listener. Thus, an initially surprising exercise can be seen to have borne real utility. Pathetic female impersonation, on Kraus’s terms, becomes a powerful means to an important rhetorical end.

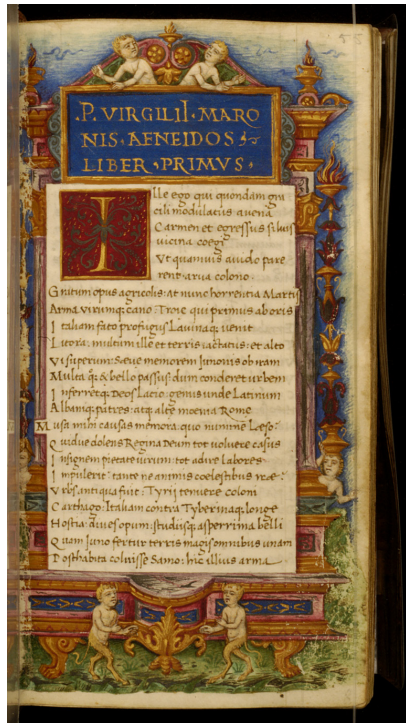
13. Kraus, Manfred. “Rehearsing the Other Sex: Impersonation of Women in Ancient Classroom Ethopoeia.” in *Escuela y Literatura en Grecia Antigua*, eds. José Antonio Fernández Delgado, Francisca Pordomingo Pardo, A. Stramaglia, 2007, 457.

The next case study—the process of neuming, or the placement of musical notations in the classics—is perhaps the most striking example of Dido’s rhetorical redemption. From the tenth to twelfth centuries, small markings called “neums” were written in the texts of writers like Statius, Lucan, and Virgil. We have evidence that many of the most important epics were neumed: *De bello civili*, the *Thebaid*, the *Achilleid*, and the *Aeneid* all received the notation.¹⁴ Jan Ziolkowski, in his magisterial account of the practice, has

14. Ziolkowski, Jan M. *Nota Bene: Reading Classics and Writing Melodies in the Early Middle Ages* (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols Publishers, 2007), 5.

pointed out the different kinds of passages that were selected for neuming. One popular type was “insights into the nature and workings of the universe”; another was “pronouncements on the history of Rome.”¹⁵ For our purposes, however, the most important category is the pathos-laden speeches of women. Strikingly, Ziolkowski writes, “the frenzy of Dido in the fourth book of the *Aeneid*, as it reveals itself in harangues to Aeneas and Anna as well as in a monologue, garnered more attention from neumators than any other episode in any classical Latin poem.”¹⁶ Recognized more than other passages in the classical canon for their emotional impact, Dido’s Book 4 outbursts were frequently selected for performance by students; just as in the case of the late antique ethopoeiae, the queen’s words, at the most fundamental level, were singled out for their rhetorical power. Dido’s overwhelming emotional impact, the worst nightmare of an Augustine or Plato figure, was here embraced for its pathos, with its unmatched ability to engender pity and sorrow.

When one considers our final case study—a pair of glossed fifteenth-century Italian manuscripts of the *Aeneid*, one called the *Casanatense* and the other the *Corsiniana*—Dido’s rhetorical usefulness becomes exceptionally clear. In a recent article, Marjorie Curry Woods has taken a look at these manuscripts, focusing on the way in which characters’ speeches were subdivided into different rhetorical sections: Exordium, Narratio, Confirmatio, etc.¹⁷ For the purposes of this paper, I will focus on the pair taken from Virgil’s Carthaginian queen. In the first speech, Dido addresses the recently shipwrecked Aeneas for the first time. The



Eclogues, Georgics and Aeneid manuscript from the 15th century CE.

- 15. Ziolkowski, 147.
- 16. Ziolkowski, 162.

- 17. Woods, Marjorie. “Performing Dido.” *Public Declamations: Essays on Medieval Rhetoric, Education, and Letters in Honor of Martin Camargo*. eds. G. Donovan, D. Stodola (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols Publishers, 2015), 113-132.

18. Woods, 124.

Casanatense commentator labels this “*Verba Didonis ad Eneam captando benivolentiam*”: (the words of Dido to Aeneas, trying to capture his goodwill.)¹⁸ Over the course of the speech, the two commentators outline the functions of each section, emphasizing, among other things, her *compatientia* (empathy with Aeneas), *narratio* (the point at which she tells her story,) and *hortatio* (the “call to action” when she calls the young men to come under her roof.)¹⁹ Ultimately, what emerges is a remarkable rhetorical strategy, one that, as Woods notes, could come straight out of the courtroom.²⁰

19. Woods, 125.

20. Woods, 115.

21. Woods, 128.

The next speech of Dido that receives attention from the commentators, the queen’s confrontation of Aeneas in Book IV, is especially interesting as a moment of high emotional impact and pathetic power. The *Corsiniana* commentator, Woods notes, “uses...technical rhetorical terms, thereby emphasizing the development of the speech.”²¹ By contrast, the *Casanatense* glossator strikingly “repeats *Nota* (take note!) at important points, emphasizing instead their cumulative emotional impact.”²² Ultimately, then, the intense, negative emotions so forcefully critiqued in *The Republic* are seen here to hold a powerfully useful rhetorical force. As Woods writes: “it is important to recall that the purpose of courtroom rhetoric from which these terms were taken was to generate emotion and reaction rather than to convince quietly on logical grounds. From this perspective, the interest in women speakers, or perhaps more exactly in the rhetorical situations of emotional women speakers, is significant.”²³ In other words, the successful lawyer arguing on behalf of his client necessitated the pathos-inducing power of a Dido figure; he had much to learn, rhetorically, from the Carthaginian queen. The capacity to arouse an overwhelming affective response, a cause for condemnation in *Confessions* or *The Republic*, becomes, for the fifteenth century rhetorician, a necessary skill.

22. Woods, 128.

23. Woods, 132.

Across all three moments of Dido’s classroom

afterlife that we have observed—the impersonation by the young Augustine in late antiquity, the neuming in the early middle ages, and the fifteenth-century glosses—we see something like rhetoric’s redemption of the queen. Despite the presence of a dominant ideology that disapproves of her, as well as an ancient tradition that censures the kind of passion she engenders, Dido was utilized across the centuries for her rhetorical power. Where the queen’s emotional impact actualizes Plato’s worst fears regarding the literary arts, teachers and rhetoricians found in it real value. Where Augustine deemed it ruinously destructive, others detected in it a powerful utility. For centuries, rhetoricians recognized that when it came to the art of persuasion, the crucial skill of keeping one’s audience in mind, Dido had much to teach. The particular rhetorical circumstances that a former schoolboy might face—courtroom arguments, any appeal to pathos—called upon traits that the queen uniquely possessed. Unimportant to her author, and disparaged on the terms of later ideologies, Dido found a redemption of sorts in rhetorical education. Across centuries, it was in the classroom where her powerful impact—irrelevant to some, destructive to others—could be seen to bear real value.

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