

“Empire Building 101: What Not To Do,” or  
Tropes of Gendered Empire and Colonization in Virgil’s *The Aeneid*

Kali Noonan  
English 396: Loving Dido  
Professor Thomas Hahn

## Sexualized Power Dynamics of Roman Imperialism

In his book *Imperialism, Power, and Identity*, David Mattingly devotes a chapter appropriately titled “Power, Sex, and Empire” to the effect of sexual dynamics upon power structures in the Roman Empire.<sup>1</sup> He proceeds to trace the ways in which imperial interactions with colonial subjects reflect patterns of sexual dominance and submission, and the subtle psychological underpinnings that engendered such arrangements; these patterns, as he explains, were “increasingly male-oriented” in form<sup>2</sup> and created a link between power and the body that was at the heart of Roman colonial attitudes. Critical to these interpretations is the coding of the imperial center of Rome as a highly masculinized entity whose tendencies toward expansion, aggression, and invasion allowed it to effectively dominate and control feminized territories.

This pattern of gendered colonial power can also be seen at work in *The Aeneid*, particularly in the first four books that detail the saga of Dido, queen of Carthage. The primary concern of this paper will be to outline the ways in which mechanisms of gender and colonialism interact to produce the power structure in Book IV of *The Aeneid*, and the implications of such a structure for the legacy of the Dido story. I intend to begin with a discussion of how colonial power paradigms like those recalled by Mattingly create a highly gendered interpretation of imperialism and the ways in which that interpretation maps onto a reading of *The Aeneid*. I will subsequently explore the ways in which viewing the narrative of *Vigil* through a lens of gendered colonialist practice creates specific meanings about the role of Dido, as well as commentary on Roman beliefs of power and gender that can be seen reflected in the Dido story. Finally, I will

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<sup>1</sup> Mattingly, “Power, Sex, and Empire,” 94-95

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 105-6

close with a short examination of the original cultural and historical context in which *The Aeneid* was written and trace how the imperialist themes in it thus contributed to its deeper meaning.

To fully understand the depth of imperial themes in *The Aeneid*, we must return to a more subtle description of their features. The tendency of providing gendered characteristics to the various parties involved in colonialism is not a new one: the misogynistic tradition of providing dominant or conquering parties with the label of ‘masculine’ and submissive or conquered ones with the label of ‘feminine’ extends back to the very concept of gender identity in the ancient world.<sup>3</sup> In Roman society, the criteria for manhood had less to do with biology or behavior than with reputation; in the realm of sexual exploits, this was expressed by a requirement for any respectable Roman man to be the active party during acts of intercourse, as there was “an obvious relationship to broader structures of hierarchical male power” implied.<sup>4</sup> As Mattingly explores, the development of such customs was inextricably linked to notions of power and control held by Romans, and thus it should come as no shock that this “dominant male view of sexuality was profoundly affected by the experience of imperial success.”<sup>5</sup> While Mattingly’s argument is designed to emphasize the effect of imperialism on sexual practices, the interaction was undoubtedly bidirectional, necessitating that the hypermasculine sexual mores of Roman society were applied not only onto their colonial holdings but also onto the imperial dynamic as a whole. In fact, phallogocentric ideas of sexual domination and subjugation were such core aspects of the Roman masculine identity that their central role in any imperial endeavor would make that

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<sup>3</sup> Williams, *Roman Homosexuality*, 17-19

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 18

<sup>5</sup> Mattingly, “Power, Sex, and Empire,” 108

imperialism an inherently masculine venture.<sup>6</sup>

It should be made clear that, in the context of power dynamics discussed in this paper, the designations of masculine and feminine do not necessarily align, respectively or otherwise, with the realities of male and female. In his book on the sociocultural implications of sexual power dynamics in Roman society, Craig Williams provides a clear distinction between masculine perpetrators, which by the nature of phallogentric practice are indeed male, and the feminine receptors, which while possessing feminized characteristics are not necessarily female: instead, the subordinate group is able to contain both male and female individuals as representatives of a feminized position characterized not by being female but rather by a position of feminine-coded submission, subjugation, and receptiveness within a masculine-feminine power dynamic.<sup>7</sup> Even men—and, possible within the case of imperial dynamics, whole races<sup>8</sup>—are able to assume this demeaned feminine position by assuming a role of passivity or subjection, either in the context of individual sexual liaisons or positions of power within a colonial relationship.

In a colonial context, this likens imperial subjugation to sexual domination in a way that creates salient gendered roles for both parties. The conquering interlopers would naturally be the masculine agent in such a situation and the conquered natives would thus be the feminine one.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Williams, *Roman Homosexuality*, 104-10

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 15-28.

<sup>8</sup> Mattingly, "Power, Sex, and Empire," 105

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 99-101

By definition,<sup>10</sup> imperialism requires an extension of power and control to territories previously not under such influence, and this act of extension is often a metaphor for male virility or prowess, particularly when such acquisition is obtained through use of armed force or coercion.<sup>11</sup> Indeed the act of penetrating into new territory, an act so central to imperial acquisition, carries with it connotations of male sexual dominance, especially when the most common path to colonial conquest involves shows—if not utilization—of armed force. In testament to the cultural connection between phallogentric masculinity and dominating colonialism stands an examination of the Romans' own euphemisms, which reveals that

[of] the metaphorical synonyms of the penis, the largest grouping was that of weapons, whose sexual symbolism was instantly recognizable in an imperial world. By the same token, the metaphors for sexual intercourse are predominantly ones of striking, cutting, wounding, penetrating, digging, triumphing, dominating—typical soldier's work.<sup>12</sup>

Clearly, the masculine character of imperialism is not merely an invention of scholars seeking some paradigm through which to conduct a historical analysis of Roman attitudes; its presence can be traced back to antiquity as a part of Roman culture itself, the very culture from within which and for which Virgil produced *The Aeneid*. Applying these conventions to a reading of Dido, therefore, is bound to produce an evaluation of power in the relationship between Dido and

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<sup>10</sup> In this paper I intend to use the terms “imperialism” and “colonialism” interchangeably for the most part, with a slight difference in connotation: imperialism, defined by Merriam-Webster, involves a specific connotation of *extending the power and dominion* of a nation or people, whereas colonialism implies a similar notion of control over a foreign area but *lacks the implication of expansion* denoted by imperialism. As will become apparent in my argument, “imperialism” is a more appropriate term for Trojan colonialism, whereas “colonialism” more aptly describes the settlement of Carthaginians in Africa. Linguistic support for these usages can be found in definitions provided by Merriam-Webster dictionaries at their online location, <http://www.merriam-webster.com>.

<sup>11</sup> Mattingly, “Power, Sex, and Empire,” 106-07

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 106

Aeneas that is founded in the very cultural context that the text belonged to.

### **Dido as an Exemplar of Female Colonialization**

From a colonialist reading, Books I and IV of *The Aeneid* can thus be coded with the Trojans—who are led by a man that espouses all the desired characteristics of the perfect noble male figure,<sup>13</sup> and whose goal is to light upon Italian soil and there found a new, explicitly patrilineal kingdom<sup>14</sup>—as a highly masculinized colonizing force that lands upon foreign ground in Africa and there encounters the femininely receptive Carthaginians. This classification of Carthage as feminine is only reinforced by their ruler being a woman, as well as by the city being dedicated to the patron deity Juno, queen of the gods and goddess of marriage.

Of course, the Carthaginians themselves are not natives of Africa: originally refugees from Phoenician Tyre, Dido and her people adopted the role of colonizers before any encounter with the Trojans. While this may at first appear to complicate the matter of colonial dominance versus submission, a closer inspection allays such concerns. The Tyrians that founded Carthage were indeed colonizers in reference to the native African peoples; while guiding her son to the city, Venus recounts of the incident:

Reaching this haven here,  
where now you will see the steep ramparts rising,  
the new city of Carthage—the Tyrians purchased land as  
large as a bull's-hide could enclose but cut in strips for size

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<sup>13</sup> Desmond, *Reading Dido*, 23

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 1-12. A kingdom that, through patrilineal descent, is destined to become the very Rome that produces this epic in a self-aggrandizing reflection of cultural values.

and called it Byrsa, the Hide, for the spread they'd bought.<sup>15</sup>

In this episode, Dido tricks the native African chiefs with whom she made a deal for the land by shrewdly cutting a bull's hide into strips, which then covered a much larger plot of land than the native leaders had originally bargained for.<sup>16</sup> The city of Carthage is thus built on land taken, even tricked, from its original inhabitants and colonized by a foreign people. Though this might seem to put the Tyrian arrivals in a masculine position of colonizer over the Africans, there is another alternative suggested by the narrative. While I have previously explained that the position of colonizer is a stereotypically masculine one, I would like to suggest here that Carthage holds the unique position of representing female colonization, typified by its liminal occupation of a masculine space by a feminine entity. Moreover, queen Dido herself is the embodiment of this unusual role as female colonizer.

As both the political and literary representative of Carthage, Dido effectively stands in as a personification of Carthaginian qualities. After escaping from her homicidal brother, Dido renounces all connections from him and her homeland when she establishes herself as the queen of a new city across the sea: Carthage, from the Phoenician Qart Hadasht, literally meaning 'new city' and thus itself exemplifying a break from the 'old city' and old bloodline that Dido has left behind.<sup>17</sup> She forgoes her Tyrian name Elissa and takes up the mantle of Dido as a new identity,

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<sup>15</sup> Virgil, *The Aeneid*, 59-60. Lines 442-46. This is the English translation of *The Aeneid* that I use for all references to the original text made throughout this paper.

<sup>16</sup> Justin, *Epitome of the Philippic History*, 157

<sup>17</sup> Davidson, "Domesticating Dido," 67-68

one divorced from any lineage with which she might have endowed her rule.<sup>18</sup> This lack is brought into relief by the strong patrilineal lines possessed by the Trojan representative Aeneas, who is at once a descendant from the Dardan founders of Troy and the great forbearer of the future founders of Rome.<sup>19</sup> She then gains her city through womanly means and births it, as it were, from entirely under her own power: building a city becomes a creation of life, a feat that is naturally of the feminine domain, which is here made perverse and threatening to male notions of imperialism by its ability to occur as a type of ‘miraculous conception’ without the approval, control, or input of a paternal male element.

Yet male contributor or no, Dido is able to give Carthage life, and she does so in ways that work decidedly against masculine imperial notions of conquest, penetration, and subjugation. She neither gains her new territory through feats of force nor populates it with a militarily conquered people,<sup>20</sup> both in direct contrast to the ways in which Aeneas will later secure his own kingdom on the Italian peninsula. Furthermore, Carthage is not a perpetrator of an expansionist agenda—far from it, in fact. Virgil’s Dido, much like her historical inspiration, vehemently ignores any advances from the native African lords that seek her hand in marriage, despite the implicit benefits to Carthage in terms of political relations with the native peoples, as

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 68. Davidson notes that Elissa (and variant spellings) is of Phoenician origin and the “nickname” Dido is of African origin, providing the two names with significantly different cultural and lineal implications.

<sup>19</sup> Hendricks, “Managing the Barbarian,” 183-84. See for a relevant discussion on the importance of bloodlines to racial identities of Dido and Aeneas.

<sup>20</sup> I am referring here to the fact that Dido plans to populate Carthage through her Tyrian followers rather than by conquering African people and subjecting them to her rule. There is the episode found in Justin’s *Epitome of the Philippic History* in which Dido abducts eighty virgins “so that her young men might have wives and her city a posterity,” (157) which of course might be called subjugating. However, given that the nature of the act has more to do with utility than domination, I would argue that its status as an imperial gesture is thus left ambiguous.

well as the integration and expanded domain of power Dido could reasonably expect by pairing herself with a powerful local king. It is also worth noting that her motivation for this refusal is to maintain her female integrity through loyalty to her dead husband and observation of chaste widowhood.<sup>21</sup> Thus, her actions and motives provide a two-fold opposition to the expected narrative of male colonialism that holds as a central tenet the necessity of virile expansionism. Dido, and by extension Carthage, does not merely maintain passive disinterest in this masculine imperative but rather actively rejects it. Instead, Carthage turns its interests inward toward the flourishing trade and city building activities that are occurring within its walls—a type of womb that is able to nourish a growing people.

### **The Downfall of Femininity: A Mating of Male and Female Colonization**

The imperial role of Aeneas in Virgil's great epic is clear from the beginning; it is in only the third line of Robert Fagles's translation that Aeneas is proclaimed "destined to reach Lavinian shores and Italian soil".<sup>22</sup> Aeneas thus has a divine mandate to resurrect the glory of his Trojan homeland in a new civilization based in Latium: one that will both carry on a Trojan bloodline through guaranteed male heirs while simultaneously absorbing the native lineage of his wife-to-be, Lavinia,<sup>23</sup> to form a combined Trojan/Latium race of children that can stake claim to both

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<sup>21</sup> Justin, *Epitome of the Philippic History*, 158; Virgil, *The Aeneid*, 127. Lines 19-36.

<sup>22</sup> Virgil, *The Aeneid*, 47. Line 3. Other translations seem to express this sentiment a few lines later.

<sup>23</sup> In the original text of *The Aeneid*, Lavinia herself is of course inconsequential and barely present; the important part is the legitimacy of rule offered to Aeneas by her marriage and the promise of children (and a mixed Trojan/Italian bloodline) offered by her uterus. The rest of her Virgil seems rather unconcerned with.

their father's legacy and their mother's homeland.<sup>24</sup> However, the imperial force Aeneas is meant to shift from Troy to Italy suffers an unexpected detour onto African soil, where his motivations and effectiveness as an empire builder will ultimately be complicated by his interactions with Dido. Yet, for the seemingly digressive nature of this episode in a grand epic on the founding of Rome, it provides a foil to the model of male imperialism espoused by Aeneas and his men that, through its failure, serves to strengthen the ideological position of Aeneas's own imperial tactics.

Before the arrival of the Trojans, Dido is portrayed as a competent and effective leader who commands the trust of her people.<sup>25</sup> However, shortly after her first interaction with Aeneas, she "burns with [a] love" for him that she is unprepared to handle and must passionately confess to her sister;<sup>26</sup> this uncontrollable love bursts into obsessive proportions after the infamous incident in the cave, after which Dido "cares no more / for appearances, nor for her reputation," nor the impact its defilement could have on her fledgling empire,<sup>27</sup> and subordinates any such concerns to her all-consuming preoccupation with Aeneas. This admits to a drastic change in character from the competent, just queen that Virgil proclaimed Dido to be in his first book, before the arrival of Aeneas and her descent into frenzied love. As will become clear, this change can be attributed to an extremity of stereotypically feminine characteristics.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Desmond, *Reading Dido*, 1

<sup>25</sup> Virgil, *The Aeneid*, 64-66

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 129. Line 86.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 133. Lines 214-15.

<sup>28</sup> Syed, *Vergil's Aeneid and the Roman Self*, 116-17

In order to examine this change in character, it is necessary to acknowledge that before the events of Book IV, Dido does appear to be in possession of many masculine characteristics. Because the social position of women in classical Rome was subservient to men, stereotypically feminine characteristics that emphasized delicacy and submission were exactly those that would be anathema to leadership; therefore, it is necessary for all the qualities that made Dido fit to lead her people be ones that are coded as masculine.<sup>29</sup> Upon founding Carthage, Dido “becomes a [ruler] with full responsibility for her city,” and because the destiny of ruling is “a heroic calling consistent with the emphasis of the entire *Aeneid* upon the ultimate heroism of political founding, that destiny is properly masculine.”<sup>30</sup> This is the Dido that undertakes an endeavor of female colonization on the North African coast, and it should be understood that despite possessing masculine characteristics, the colonization that she heads is nevertheless female. This distinction is possible because, while the personal qualities that Dido possesses may be of an either feminine or masculine coding, the colonial processes toward which she uses them are feminine, and the nature of those processes remains feminine regardless of what gender is assigned to the personal qualities that enable them.

Due to sexist cultural biases, the traits that allowed Dido to be an effective leader were thus all masculine ones. When Aeneas arrived in Carthage, however, and Dido fell in love with him, it was through characteristics of a highly feminine nature that she then began the descent

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<sup>29</sup> West, “Caeneus and Dido,” 320-22

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 317. Also see the second chapter of Desmond’s *Reading Dido*, “Dux Femina Facti: Virgil’s Dido in the Historical Context,” for a brief discussion on applying this masculinization to the historical figure of Dido.

toward her death.<sup>31</sup> In her first speech at the beginning of Book IV, Dido laments to Anna of the passion that, for the first time since the death of her husband Sychaeus, has driven her to desire “the joy of children, all the gifts of love”<sup>32</sup>—in other words, trappings of traditional womanhood. Faced with Aeneas, the paragon of Romanesque masculinity, she is suddenly and quickly overcome by these desires, to which her previous mission of city building becomes decidedly subordinated. The depiction of Dido in the fourth book of *The Aeneid* is one in which “Virgil emphatically presents Dido’s attitudes and actions, her desires for marriage and a family, as feminine qualities, by their nature opposed to her masculine role as ruler. Absorbed in her fond passion for Aeneas, she neglects her city” and thus her colonial duties.<sup>33</sup>

While an agent of female colonialization, it is her stereotypically masculine-coded qualities that allow Dido to be successful at colonialization in any form. When those personal characteristics of a masculine nature are overshadowed by more typically feminine ones, there is too much femininity injected into the recipe to enable success in a text that is designed to code cultural triumph as a product of masculine virtues; faced not only with an unstable female form of colonialization but also inadequate feminine personal qualities, Dido becomes destined to fail.<sup>34</sup> She is described throughout Book IV with epithets meant to convey just how “mad with

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<sup>31</sup> Syed, *Vergil's Aeneid and the Roman Self*, 125-27

<sup>32</sup> Virgil, *The Aeneid*, 128. Line 41.

<sup>33</sup> West, “Caeneus and Dido,” 320

<sup>34</sup> The unstable nature of female colonialism that Virgil presents will be elaborated further into the paper, but suffice to say here that it is the inevitability of its failure that I will argue is its ultimate purpose in *The Aeneid*.

love” Dido has become,<sup>35</sup> that she is “ablaze with love, / drawing the frenzy deep into her bones” in such a way that makes it clear the emotional, irrational nature of her sudden infatuation is to be coded as a feminine hysteria, an insanity of sensuality<sup>36</sup>—that the “lovesick Dido” presented to the reader is in some way fundamentally different from the rational, fair, and balanced woman that Aeneas first encountered handing out judgments to her people.<sup>37</sup> Dido is undone by the very female-ness suggested in her sex, it being the previous lack of which that had allowed her and her city to enjoy brief prosperity in the first place: as she laments to Anna in the final scenes of Book IV, it is “the bridal bed that brought [her] doom”.<sup>38</sup>

### **Defeated Dido and the Failure of Female Colonization**

This personal feminine downfall is analogous to the failure of Dido as a female colonizer. Though able to maintain power and prosperity while unchallenged by conflicting forces of colonization, the introduction of the Trojans placed Carthage in interaction with dominating male imperialism that it was not able to withstand because of its feminized and therefore submissive nature. The compassionate, feminine empathy Dido expresses for the plight of Aeneas serves as the impetus for Carthage to welcome the Trojans into itself, into the very womb in which its success had been previously enshrined. This harkens back to the threat of a female colonization

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<sup>35</sup> Virgil, *The Aeneid*, 129. Line 83.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 131. Lines 124-25.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.* Line 146. The account paraphrased here of a rational Dido can be found on 64 of the Fagles edition.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 144. Line 622.

able to create life outside the control of male imperialistic ventures: with the introduction of a male colonial element, the feminine creation then becomes something subject to the male expansionism of the Trojans' imperial destiny. When Dido offers Aeneas a position of power and rule in Carthage, he readily accepts the opportunity to expand his own penetrative masculine influence into the receptive feminine space provided by Dido. He quickly takes up the mantle of power, adopting the building of Carthage as his own project and working actively to manage and oversee it, while Dido's role becomes one of support rather than instrumentality:

[Mercury] spots Aeneas founding the city fortifications,  
 building homes in Carthage. And his sword-hilt  
 is studded with tawny jasper stars, a cloak  
 of glowing Tyrian purple drapes his shoulders,  
 a gift that the wealthy queen had made herself,  
 weaving into the web of a glinting mesh of gold.<sup>39</sup>

Here we see that, with the introduction of a proper male colonial figure, Dido herself fades into the background of production and agency, taking on a feminized supporting position where she personally weaves garments for Aeneas and supports his efforts of explicit creation rather than taking them on herself as she effectively did before his arrival.<sup>40</sup> In this state of 'sharing' power with Aeneas, Dido seems less to be sharing power in any egalitarian sense of the word than she is participating in a redistribution of power along traditional gendered lines, where she adopts a secondary role to the direct and primary efforts of Aeneas; in doing so, Dido "is no longer

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 136. Lines 324-29.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 64. In line 607, Dido strides "triumphant among her people, / spurring on the work of their kingdom still to come." Clearly, she is capable of ruling and building a city—at least until she is consumed in a frenzy of love.

political and masculine but wifely and hence feminine.”<sup>41</sup> Relegated to such a dependent, subordinate position, Dido is no longer capable of reassuming the mantle of female power and colonization that she once held; instead, by the shift of power to masculine elements represented by Aeneas, the eventual removal of those elements leaves Dido without power, without a way to regain it, and without the ability to sustain a female rule as she could in a power vacuum—that is, a space in which no masculine form of imperial power had yet to tread and dominate.<sup>42</sup>

The influence of Aeneas on Carthage is indeed one of masculine imperial overthrow of a feminine space. In the first scene of Book IV, Dido struggles with the idea of allowing herself to love Aeneas,<sup>43</sup> which acts as a discussion of accepting the force of male imperialism embodied by the Trojans into her female colonial holding and formally opening it to their inherently dominating nature. As a response to Dido’s ambivalence, Anna gives reasons for her sister to accept this man into her heart and her city,<sup>44</sup> which includes the force of arms Carthage would gain by acceding to the militaristic, dominating, and masculine abilities of Aeneas and his band of soldiers: “With a Trojan army / marching at our side, think how the glory of Carthage / will tower to the clouds!”<sup>45</sup> The implication of this is that Carthage, on its own, lacks the combative

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<sup>41</sup> West, “Caeneus and Dido,” 317

<sup>42</sup> This also suggests a (feminine) fragility to female power/colonialization, which is easily overpowered by the inherent force of a masculine colonial endeavor and can only exist in the absence of such an endeavor.

<sup>43</sup> Virgil, *The Aeneid*, 127-28. Lines 10-36. Even though Anna is the first to explicitly attach a colonial motive to her sister’s desire for Aeneas, Dido’s own speech here demonstrates the first instance supplied by Virgil of her being overcome by the Trojan—particularly by an admiration for his masculine characteristics as seen in line 14.

<sup>44</sup> This may suggest Anna as a possible representation of Dido’s more feminine and familial/domestic side, which if true adds an interesting subtext in her encouragement for Dido to give in to love for Aeneas.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 129. Lines 61-63.

proWess associated with the more traditional male imperialism of the Trojans, and as such the city is left endangered from potential outside forces that could best it through the use of such brute force. This is the classic vulnerability of female entities in a male colonial or imperialist space, which are always in danger of being victimized by phallogentric tactics of domination—in other words, rape, which has been used as both a symbol and tactic of male colonialism from before the time of Virgil.<sup>46</sup> It is thus that Dido is able to experience some measure of success with Carthage as a venture of female colonialism when backed by the competence afforded from masculine traits and in the absence of competition from true male colonialism; however, when that more powerful, male imperial force of Aeneas arrives, the female colonial venture fails so spectacularly that the only closure Virgil deems fit is the mythic immolation of its representative.

This is, of course, the message that Virgil wants to send through his carefully crafted representations of gendered colonialism. Being avatars of Roman glory, Aeneas and his Trojan followers bare with them the imperial legacy of Rome in all the advantages of hindsight.<sup>47</sup> They are expanding, masculine, and forceful; they are able to conquer and subjugate through force of arms and a phallogentric ideal of male prowess that readers know must be successful because of the existence of their own society.<sup>48</sup> The arrival of Aeneas in Latium in the latter books of *The Aeneid* provides an example of the idealized masculine imperialism that founded Rome and that

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<sup>46</sup> Mattingly, “Power, Sex, and Empire,” 99-120; Williams, *Roman Homosexuality*, 104-07

<sup>47</sup> Hannah, “Manufacturing Descent,” 161-63

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

was aligned with Roman cultural values and military practice.<sup>49</sup> Aeneas wins his destined Italy by male colonialism in its most distilled and aggrandized form, which is exactly the narrative on the founding of his empire that Virgil intended to depict.<sup>50</sup> Thus the place within such an epic for the story of Dido must be seen, when viewed through a lens of colonialism, as a negative example designed to elevate and highlight the success of the Trojans' campaign.

The episode in Carthage, positioned as it is within the first four books of *The Aeneid*, begins the journey not only with an opportunity for Virgil to give exposition on the sack of Troy but also with a heady example of everything his hero's own practice of empire-building *should not be*—which is, incidentally, feminine. The pillar of masculinity represented by Aeneas is set against the crumbling one of Dido, a fellow refugee and city-starter that settled a far-off land and began the process of building an empire there. The main divergence, then, is that Dido is a woman, and her attempts to raise Carthage are thus infused with feminine perversions of masculine tropes. A successful empire like the one Aeneas is destined to found cannot stand for such perversions of the Roman masculine ideal, and as a demonstration of the ineffectiveness of such a venture Virgil offers up Carthage, the ultimate other,<sup>51</sup> as a representation of the failures of the feminine to the Romans' preferred style of masculinity.

### **Why Carthage? A Cultural and Historical Context**

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<sup>49</sup> Mattingly, "Power, Sex, and Empire," 114-121

<sup>50</sup> Hannah, "Manufacturing Descent," 156-61

<sup>51</sup> Davidson, "Domesticating Dido," 71-73

It is worth noting that these would have been very salient issues for Virgil while he was writing, and their reflection in his text may be less an invention of interpretation than a real, important issue facing the Romans that read his work. Virgil produced his epic over a century after Carthage had been completely destroyed by Roman forces,<sup>52</sup> during a period when the emperor Augustus sought to rebuild the great port city under the control of the Roman Empire. This was a project of no small importance for Augustus, as its success would both demonstrate his competence to lead the empire and serve as an achievement of Roman imperialism that others before him had tried and failed to secure.<sup>53</sup> Virgil's timely writing on the founding of Rome, particularly in opposition to Carthage, was very much influenced by these efforts of Augustus, who was thought to contribute patronage to Virgil.<sup>54</sup>

In this way, the Carthage depicted by Virgil in *The Aeneid* is an amalgam of Roman preconceptions about two very different places: the city that for centuries had been their sworn, bloody enemy and the city that would be built as a Roman-held port as a sign of imperial power and prosperity.<sup>55</sup> Ambler puts forth the notion of Roman Carthage as a receptor of cultural memory that Virgil helped influence by creating a link in his text between the Carthage of old and the new Roman Carthage. Virgil takes the infamous otherness of Carthage—a civilization that had been diametrically opposed to Rome throughout the Punic Wars with a reputation as an

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<sup>52</sup> Levi, *Virgil*, 14-147

<sup>53</sup> Ambler, "The Roman Rebuilding of Carthage," 110

<sup>54</sup> Levi, *Virgil*, 32

<sup>55</sup> Ambler, "The Roman Rebuilding of Carthage," 135-37

“ancient irreconcilable enemy”<sup>56</sup>—and through his poetry strategically reforms it into something familiar enough and relevant enough to the founding story of Rome to be worth resurrecting under Roman control.<sup>57</sup> This combination is delicately wrought, with the otherness of feminine Carthaginian leadership and practices balanced by customary Roman gods, architecture, and social norms that would have, though historically inaccurate, served to make Carthage feel less foreign to a Roman audience.<sup>58</sup>

If we accept Dido as the representative of Carthaginian colonization, a colonization that is female in form, then we must recognize her death as representing the symbolic failure of that female colonization, which would be carried out in the minds of contemporary readers familiar with the very real, historic obliteration of Carthage. The failure of this type of colonization tactic is thus a commentary on the superiority of masculine Roman imperialism and the phallogentric cultural values behind it; it is just as much about Aeneas’s role as the successful colonizer as it is about Dido’s role as *failed* colonizer. Dido is tragically undone by the femininity inherent in her sexual identity, a femininity that is synonymous in Roman imperial rhetoric with weakness and an unfitness to rule and that Virgil displays in direct contrast with the recessive masculine traits that allowed Dido to successfully found her city and place it on the path to prosperity before she was overcome by a highly feminizing love for the masculine archetype of Aeneas.

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<sup>56</sup> Davidson, “Domesticating Dido,” 72

<sup>57</sup> Ambler, “The Roman Rebuilding of Carthage,” 140-41

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 138; Davidson, “Domesticating Dido,” 72-89. The social norm to which I am most explicitly referring here is that of child sacrifice, which was a common religious practice in historical Carthage but which Virgil omitted in order to presumably minimize the alienating effect this would have on Romans, who found the custom horrific.

The imperialistic undertones of *The Aeneid* provide a very specific narrative meant to capitalize on the historical and cultural context in which they were written. The story of Dido, therefore, very much belongs within the larger text of *The Aeneid* and is in fact an integral part of its colonial message. In the larger saga about the founding of Rome, it serves as a demonstration of failed female colonialism that the hero Aeneas can thus define his own archetypal masculine imperialism against. Virgil depicts the death of Dido and in doing so implicitly foretells the failure of her city Carthage against its Roman conquerors, something that his readers would be able to recognize as an established historical fact. He recalls a city with features and customs perhaps unsettlingly familiar to his audience while placing the locus of that city's failure soundly within the otherness of those attributes that are still distinctly other from Roman social ideals. In the tragic death of Dido, Virgil depicts the failure of feminine Carthage against its masculine Roman conquerors precisely because of its femininity.

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