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Weeping for Dido: The Classics in the Medieval Classroom

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Woods, Marjorie Currie.

Weeping for Dido: The Classics in the Medieval Classroom.

Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019. Pp. xxi, 176 + 20 ill. ISBN 978-0-691-17080-0 (hardcover) US\$39.95.

This beautiful book—small in format, but big for the topic and the fluency of the writing—examines how a few particular texts put medieval boys in contact, in their scholastic education, with emotions that in daily life were untaught due to a behavioural code that did not envisage “male” feelings.

The starting point of the volume is the memory of the schoolboy Augustine, who recalled in his *Confessions* how hard it was to remember Virgil’s *Aeneid* (in particular, the wanderings of Aeneas), and yet how the figure of Dido stood out for him. Augustine reports weeping as he read of the death of the queen. Indeed, we all tend to retain stories that give us unknown feelings and emotions.

Which were the texts that, in general, medieval students read and studied? Providing a detailed analysis of some 150 manuscripts, produced between the twelfth and the fifteenth centuries in what we can assume was the contemporary intellectual centre of Europe—that is, Italy, France, Germany, and England—Marjorie Woods focuses on three works that we know were part of the scholastic curriculum of the time: Virgil’s *Aeneid*, Statius’s *Achilleides*, and the *Ilias latina* attributed to Publius Baebius Italicus. If in the *Aeneid* the attention was focused in particular on the figure of Dido, in the *Achilleides* it was focused on the attempt of Thetis to remove from the war (and hence from death) her son Achilles, hiding him in the island of Skyros among a group of girls. The *Ilias latina* was an important text because it was performed by boys who had to act and sing as girls.

Thanks to Wood’s analysis, the interlinear glosses of the manuscripts as well as the glosses written on the margins acquire meaning; the many images play a fundamental role in our comprehension of the text; the transcriptions of the glosses, their translation into English, and the Latin text in the footnotes clearly show how every word of the text was taken into consideration and how students, listening to the glosses, used them as a continuous and sequential elaboration of the text, sharing a lesson that was mainly “spoken”—unlike today, where the reader manages the text autonomously. In some manuscripts,

there are instances of a “musical notation called neumes [which were] added to metrically difficult or intensely emotional passages” (36).

The three texts focus on three fundamental aspects of medieval scholastic teaching: emotions, gender, and performance, with a special emphasis on emotions. If the death of Dido elicited feelings of support because her suffering had no gender, the *Achilleides* recounts a more complex story in which a boy (Achilles) had to transform himself into a girl. The aim of this text was in fact to reassure the boy that his identification with the “other” (female) was only temporary: Achilles would reassume his male characteristics and do what men do, that is, wage war. The *Ilias latina*, an introductory text, had a simpler structure and was used as a scholastic work as late as the fourteenth century in Florence. Here, the most important death was that of Hector (because the *Ilias* “supported” the Trojans), but the central figure is Andromache, who tries to throw herself on the pyre where Hector’s body was burning. These “literary characters allowed schoolboys to experience varieties of emotions not encouraged or even tolerated outside the classroom” (22).

While chapters 1 and 2 focus on Dido (and Augustine) and on the *Achilleides* and the *Ilias latina*, the third chapter takes its cue from an anonymous singer whose song is so beautiful that the author of the lyric, Marbod of Rennes (ca. 1035–1123), recalls that “it becomes a reality, not a song” (104). Recently rediscovered, Marbod was the author of a series of poems that described the physical attraction between a man and a woman. At the heart of *Liber floridus* is the complaint of a woman cradling the head of a dead warrior. While in the beginning, the singer is identified as a boy, the complaint soon becomes genderless, though according to some scholars the poem represents the weeping of Andromache over Hector’s body. Young singers learned to express the emotions of the characters, often women, using their tone and gesture, following quite accurately (but not completely) the instructions of the pseudo-Ciceronian *Rhetorica ad Herennium*. Other works, too, like the *Geta* or *Pamphilus de Amore*, focused on sexual desire and, as in the *Achilleides*, confronted sexual violence, which students could identify with as victims or perpetrators. For those who work with manuscripts, this book is a joy. It puts manuscripts at its centre without, however, being too technical or too exclusive. It is well worth reading.

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