

Virgil's Feminist Counterforce:  
Juno's *Furor* as Matter of *Imperium*'s Unjust Forms

**ABSTRACT:**

In this article, I offer a new philosophical interpretation of Virgil's *Aeneid*, dually centered on the queens Olympus and Carthage. More specifically, I show how the philosopher-poet Virgil deploys Dido's Junonian *furor* as the Aristotelian matter of the unjust Roman *imperium*, the feminist counterforce to the patriarchal force disguised as peaceful order. The first section explores Virgil's political and biographical background for the raw materials for a feminist, anti-imperial political philosophy. The second section, following Marilyn Desmond, situates the continuing misogynist condemnation of Virgil's two goddess-queens in the context of their honored centrality in Roman and Carthaginian culture. The third section reinterprets Virgil's goddess-queens as agents of *furor* as (apparently mad) feminist counterforce to the (actually mad) unjust force of the Roman empire and its agents Jupiter and Aeneas. The fourth section translates these poetic philosophical interpretations into prose, arguing that Dido's Junonian *furor* is the Aristotelian matter constituting the unjust forms of Roman *imperium*. And the conclusion applies the latter analysis to Hardt and Negri's *Empire*, suggesting Dido as a model for the "multitude" in the fight against the imperial injustice of today's globalized empire.

**KEYWORDS:** Virgil; Juno; Dido; feminism; global justice; Hardt and Negri

Juno, according to Virgil scholar W. R. Johnson, is "the central figure in the poem's structure"; and Dido, according to Virgil scholar Michael Putnam, is "the poem's great *regina*."<sup>i</sup> The importance of both figures has been noted since Virgil's own era, with Juno universally demonized as the source and symbol of *furor* (which I translate, depending on context, as "madness" or "frenzy"), and Dido interpreted as everything from a fickle widow betraying her dead husband, to a bad monarch who abandons her responsibilities for pathological infatuation, to a tragic heroine betrayed by a spineless anti-hero and manipulative gods.

In almost every case, though, Dido is viewed with at least a modicum of sympathy and admiration, which has apparently been her fate since the poem's debut. The primary flaw in these merely minimal affirmations of Dido, however, is that they are (at least implicitly) self-castigating, attributing readers' attachment to Dido a misplaced subjective preference for a figure who is objectively villainous. From that perspective, valorizing Dido is an understandable (but ultimately embarrassing) adolescent phase, which if not outgrown may earn the sympathizer a place next to hers in Dante's *Inferno*.

As usual, however, such hellish fictions are based in ignorance. In this case, said ignorance concerns the figure of Dido prior to Virgil—an historical and mythological woman whose remarkable story has been almost completely overwritten by Virgil's poetic-philosophical revision. So, too, for the pre-Virgilian version of Dido's patron goddess, Juno. The issue there is also one of historical ignorance frosted with Virgilian fiction. Queen Juno, the primary source of powerful *furor* for Queen Dido, and indeed for the entire poem, is the Roman goddess of marriage, childbirth, and women, and one of the chief protector gods of the Roman state, especially its economy and material wealth (as suggested by her epithet "Moneta," the source of the English words "mint" and "money").<sup>ii</sup> Before attempting a recovery of these pre-Virgilian and Virgilian feminist figures, however, I will begin with a little background on Virgil, the philosopher-poet.<sup>iii</sup>

## I. Maidenly Virgil as Feminist Political Philosopher

Multiple Virgil scholars have already made the case for a kind of feminism at work in the *Aeneid*. For two recent examples, Joseph Farrell argues that most critics have exaggerated the importance of Aeneas' father, Anchises, while underestimating the saving grace of his divine mother, Venus; and Sara Mack emphasizes Virgil's exceptional sensitivity to the distinctive suffering that warfare inflicts on women (and especially mothers).<sup>iv</sup> The fact that both interpretations emphasize motherhood, moreover, buttresses my claim that Juno is ultimately a heroic figure in the poem, given her status as Roman goddess of marriage.

My primary evidence for Virgil's feminism can be found in the editor's introduction to Christine Perkell's anthology on the *Aeneid*. For starters, Perkell notes that the "earliest extant biography" of Virgil was written by "Aelius Donatus, a fourth-century A.D. grammarian and commentator," whose own primary source "was probably Seutonius' (born ca. A.D. 69) biography of Vergil in his now lost *De Poetis (Lives of the Poets)*."<sup>v</sup> Getting into the details of Donatus' text, its first relevant point for the present article is the fact that Virgil was born in Mantua, an originally Etruscan (aka "Tuscan") town in present-day Northern Italy, and a town whose ethnically Italian citizens had only recently been granted Roman citizenship in Virgil's time. As an Etruscan living through the Augustan civil wars between Rome and the Italians, Virgil's land was almost confiscated by the empire, before he was ultimately spared by his powerful patron (4). Thus, by virtue of his race/ethnicity, as well as the infringement of the empire on his home, Virgil had ample reason to be sympathetic to Rome's enemies.<sup>vi</sup>

The second relevant aspect of Virgil's biography for the present article is that, having already studied philosophy in his youth, he planned to devote the rest of his life (after completing the *Aeneid*) to studying philosophy again in Athens. As for his philosophical preferences, Virgil appears to have been most sympathetic to Epicureanism and Stoicism. As Susanna Morton Braund notes, the philosopher-poet "spent some time with the Epicurean teachers Philodemus and Siro at their base near Naples," but also "moved in the same circle as Aelius Didymus, a Stoic philosopher."<sup>vii</sup> One connection here to the present article is that both the Epicureans and Stoics welcomed women (and enslaved persons), thus contributing another possible proto-feminist influence on the *Aeneid*. Virgil's intended life of philosophy was cut short, however, when Augustus ordered him to instead return to Rome, and later "countermanded" Virgil on his death bed, where the poet has "requested repeatedly that the *Aeneid* be burned."<sup>viii</sup> One can only speculate as to Virgil's reasons for wanting to destroy his poem (and Augustus' reasons for preserving it), but one plausible explanation that is consistent with Virgil's Stoic and Epicurean philosophical education is that he realized that the poem's critique of Rome was too subtle and feared its usefulness to Augustus as imperial propaganda.

The third point from Virgil's biography that is relevant to the present article is that there are several indications that he was queer, and thus more likely to be sympathetic to others disempowered by their sexuality or gender, including women. For example, Perkell references the biographer Seutonius' "assumption that Vergil loved boys," to which Ellen Oliensis adds that Virgil "addressed a [sexual/romantic] favorite [of Virgil's] named Alexander under the name 'Alexis' in the Second Eclogue."<sup>ix</sup> For a second example, Virgil's famous nickname, "Parthenias," means "maidenly, virginal" (and is thus roughly comparable to the modern homophobic slur, "sissy"). Against this queer interpretation of "parthenias," other scholars note that it can also mean "modest" or "virtuous," in Virgil's case referring specifically to "the moderation of his personal conduct."<sup>x</sup> This non-queer interpretation strikes me, however, as an

anxious defense of *the* central poem of the Western canon against “contamination” from its author’s queerness. Put as a question, since “Parthenias” could mean both “sissy” and “virtuous,” why deny the queer possibility outright, especially given the other indications to that effect? For my part, I have attempted to keep this possibility alive by prefacing his name with one literal translation of the word *parthenias*, on the model of a Homeric epithet: “Maidenly Virgil.”

## II. Injustices Against the Goddess-Queens Before Virgil

I now turn from Maidenly Virgil’s personal history to those of the *Aeneid*’s two goddess-queens, whose histories the philosopher-poet inherited and refashioned. Beginning with the Olympian goddess-queen, it is startling that the scholarly consensus remains that the Juno of the *Aeneid* is not only singularly to blame for the poem’s villainy (both directly and indirectly), but is even a personification of evil itself. This, despite abundant counterevidence both within and without the poem, which further illuminates the misogynistic irrationality behind this interpretation. I will now briefly review that counterevidence, starting outside the poem.

At the most general level, the honored centrality of Juno to ancient Roman culture is undeniable, as noted briefly above. Ignoring that honor, however, most Virgil scholars emphasize the epic poet Ennius’ identification of Juno with the Carthaginian goddess Tanit, sworn enemy of Rome during the Punic Wars (between Carthage and Rome).<sup>x1</sup> My objection to applying this identification to the *Aeneid* is that whereas Carthage and its goddess Tanit were clearly trying to destroy Rome from the outside, Juno is not (and she appears to realize that she could not). Instead, Juno successfully transforms the empire from within, by sowing the seeds of its death at its birth. More precisely, she deploys a just counterforce of frenzy (*furor*) to provoke Rome into manifesting its normally-disguised unjust force of violent madness (*furor*). In other words, since Juno cannot by herself immediately destroy the empire, she opts for the strategy that was also central to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s method of civil disobedience, namely bending the imperialistic universe toward justice by forcing it to theatrically manifest its (otherwise) hidden violence.<sup>x2</sup>

One additional domain of Juno, rarely emphasized today, and of central importance to the present article, is that she “is the allegorical representation of *aer*, the lower air, the realm of storms.”<sup>x3</sup> In the concise formulation from Richard Heinze’s classic study, “Juno is the air.”<sup>x4</sup> Translated into the dichotomous terms of Aristotle’s conception of matter and form, Juno is the matter through which Jupiter’s lightning bolts take form (striking their victims with what the *Aeneid* implies is arbitrary injustice, the latter being more commonly associated with Juno). One advantage of conceiving Juno as the Aristotelian matter to Jupiter’s forms is that it explains why she is described as his consort and sister. That is, the two deities are not only genetically related (as siblings) but achieve generative union (as spouses).

This Aristotelian conception also clarifies an interpretive challenge germane to the present article, namely Virgil’s logic in having Jupiter send one of the Furies (the goddesses of vengeance) directly from his throne to help kill Turnus (the adversary of Aeneas). To wit, Juno as the principle of *furor* is effectively Jupiter’s metaphysical body. Or, as W. R. Johnson describes this same event, “it is almost as if Jupiter had come under the spell of Juno.”<sup>x5</sup> Paraphrased in terms of my Aristotelian reframing, Jupiter is like the spelling of Juno’s spell (the order of the letters), while Juno herself is the letters that Jupiter spells (in Aristotle’s Greek, *stoicheion* means both elements and letters). From this perspective, it is hypocritical to condemn Juno as symbol of the inconstant feminine air, while nevertheless praising Jupiter as symbol of

commanding masculine lightning, because lightning is simply electrically charged ions of air—and therefore merely a deadlier form of the same matter.

Shifting from the metaphysics of Juno to her ethics, no one seems to deny that she is the survivor of multiple injustices, nor that she is the champion of others who have also been multiply wronged. Regarding the injustices against the goddess herself, consider just two examples of her husband's many betrayals of his marriage vows. By the human woman Electra, Jupiter became the father of the Trojan race, after which he slept with one of these male descendants, namely the young Trojan cupbearer Ganymede. In addition to these undebatable injustices, there are also other cases where Juno was arguably wronged. For example, in the Judgment of Paris, that Trojan descendant of the Electra affair chose, literally and figuratively, beauty and desire over marriage and family. At the literal level, Paris deemed Aphrodite (goddess of love and beauty) more beautiful than Juno (goddess of marriage and family). And at the figurative level, he kidnapped Queen Helen of Sparta from her husband Menelaus and forced her into an adulterous relationship with him. Finally, regarding Juno as a champion of others treated unjustly, she fought in support of the indisputably-wronged Menelaus and the Greeks by fighting against their Trojan enemies, who exacerbated Paris' crime by fighting a war rather than simply surrendering Helen to her wronged husband.

In short, no one argues that Jupiter or the Trojans treated Juno justly, yet scholars continue to fixate on Juno's righteous *furor* as if it were excessive, specifically by suppressing and ignoring the context of multiple injustices that ennoble her *furor* by justifying it. To see the unreasonableness of this scholarly approach, imagine if the genders of Juno and Jupiter were reversed. More precisely, imagine that it was Jupiter, instead, who had been (a) cheated on repeatedly by his wife, (b) insulted by an illegitimate child from one of his wife's lovers (which child was born in a city founded by another illegitimate child, by yet another one of her lovers), (c) victimized further by having his territory violated by those illegitimate children, and (d) forced to comply with his wife's decree that these children's descendants would found an endless empire. Not only would a violent retaliation against these perpetrators *not* seem excessive, up to and including genocide (as illustrated by the case of the much-less-wronged god Yahweh), but if Jupiter failed to retaliate violently, then he would be mocked as an impotent cuckold unworthy of his throne. For her equally-justified retaliation, however, Juno has been perennially branded a monster, with her legitimate anger condemned as "madness." This mischaracterization has also caused scholars to miss or suppress Juno's agency, and her major victories in the poem, in part by leading them to mistake (a) her rational final strategy (provoking Rome, as I noted above, toward justice from inside) for (b) an irrational alternative strategy (destroying Rome from outside) that they also mistakenly project onto her.

Descending from the Olympian goddess-queen to the Carthaginian one, I begin my survey of Dido's pre-Virgil existence with the scholar David Quint.<sup>xvi</sup> Citing the earliest major interpreter of Virgil, the fourth-century Roman author Servius, Quint relates that Dido's "real name" was "Elissa," and that "after death she was named Dido by the Phoenicians, that is, *virago* in the Punic language"—*virago* being a Latin word for "manly woman" or "hero"—"because when she was urged by her allies to wed one of the African kings...she with a strong soul killed herself."<sup>xvii</sup> This naming issue has two important implications for the present article. First, Maidenly Virgil's hero could be appropriately referred to as "Manly Elissa," the "beloved wife," in Quint's words, who "takes on, after the murder of [her husband] Sychaeus, the masculine role of leader of her new city."<sup>xviii</sup> I will use this moniker hereafter to emphasize this second crucial instance of gender-bending (after "Maidenly Virgil") in the philosopher-poet of the *Aeneid*.

The second implication of Dido's real name, "Elissa," is that it is almost identical to the name of the goddess of madness, "Lyssa," in the work of the ancient Greek poet Euripides. The latter goddess, according to Virgil scholar Brooks Otis, represents the essence of the Dira whom Jupiter sends to help murder Turnus, a monster whom Otis identifies as the Fury Allecto.<sup>xix</sup> The connection to Dido here is that both Lyssa and Allecto (according to Putnam, as I will relate below) drive the central heroes of their respective poems to madness. More precisely, Allecto, like Lyssa, "wholly distorts and deranges the mind" of her poem's (nominal) hero, "so that he is in fact the quite unwitting agent of his own ruin."<sup>xx</sup> This proximity of Dido and Lyssa is another way in which the pre-Virgilian Carthaginian goddess-queen posthumously resists imperial Aeneas, in frenetic counterforce to the illusion of Rome as a pious and peaceful empire.

Finally regarding the pre-Virgil Dido, my primary source is Marilyn Desmond's *Reading Dido*.<sup>xxi</sup> Desmond's own two primary sources, she relates, are "the Greek historian Timaeus of Tauromenium (ca. 356-260 B.C.E.)" and "the Augustan historian Pompeius Trogus," though the latter's work only "survives in Justin's epitome, which dates from the second or third century C.E." (That is, a third-century Latin historian named Justin wrote a summary of Pompeius' original text). From her first historian, Desmond relates that "Dido fled to Libya with a group of followers after her brother, Pygmalion, had killed her husband," after which Dido founded a colony in Libya in Africa. There, when "a Libyan king wished to marry her, she refused him," and "when she was compelled by her people to accept him," Dido "lit a large funeral pyre next to her dwelling, and she threw herself onto it from her house."<sup>xxii</sup> Having considered the pre-Virgilian lives of this Carthaginian goddess-queen, and of her protector, the Olympian goddess-queen, I now turn to their metamorphoses with Maidenly Virgil in the *Aeneid*.

### III. Maidenly Virgil's Feminist Goddess-Queens

Before turning directly to Virgil's Juno and Dido, I suggest that any readers unfamiliar with the *Aeneid* brush up on its overall plot, in which Juno's victories are in fact numerous. First, the criminal city-state of Troy, which she justifiably opposes, is physically destroyed, in part by her own hands. Second, Aeneas is deprived, by losing his wife Creusa in Troy's destruction, of the comfort of marriage, a primary domain of Juno. Third, Aeneas' love for Manly Elissa, which Juno directly facilitates, haunts the rest of the poem, and even indirectly brings about its violent finale, with various allusions suggesting that his love for Manly Elissa is redirected to his androgynously beautiful young male ally, the womanly warrior Pallas. Fourth, by inflaming the Trojan women to ship-burning, Juno permanently deprives the Trojan men of their wives, forcing them to populate Rome with non-Trojans (thus cutting in half the Trojan percentage of the imperial Roman bloodline). Fifth, Juno personally flings open the gates of war, after inflaming Turnus to fight Aeneas for the hand of Princess Lavinia. Finally, it is vengeance for Aeneas' homoerotic love interest Pallas—whom the poem frequently links to Junonian Dido—that motivates the founding murder (of Turnus by Aeneas) of the allegedly peaceful Rome.<sup>xxiii</sup>

From this overview, it becomes clear that Juno in the *Aeneid* is not primarily interested (as most scholars assume) in Trojan genocide, as if suffering from a ridiculously long fit of bloodlust. On the contrary, given the impossibility of preventing Rome's founding (by the time of the *Aeneid*'s composition), Juno is trying to undermine it by forcing it to manifest its own hidden *furor* (namely, the madness of its unjust violence, especially against Juno and Turnus). Put concretely, Juno most effectively thwarts the empire by binding Aeneas with chains of love (and arguably marriage) to Manly Elissa—a love that is Stoically repressed before it returns to

mark the empire's beginning with unjust bloodshed. One advantage of this interpretation is that it explains why Juno was willing to let Aeneas and his Trojans live, and even worked to help them empower a flourishing Carthage. In short, Juno's goal was to defy a Trojan, European empire without end. And her success can be measured by her destruction of (a) Troy, (b) the Trojan name, (c) half the Trojan bloodline, and (d) any durable illusion that the Trojans' Roman descendants and their empire were inherently pious or peaceful.

Turning from Maidenly Virgil's Juno to his Dido, Sarah Spence notes that she initially appears much like the poem's titular figure.<sup>xxiv</sup> "Like Aeneas," Spence writes, "Dido is a generous leader; like him, she too is an exile, widowed, an accidental leader of her people." On the other hand, Spence continues, the poem also links Manly Elissa immediately to Juno. "In the first book," Spence observes, "Juno describes herself precisely as queen," and just like Queen Juno, Queen Dido (and here Spence quotes the poem) "feeds the wound within her veins; she is eaten by a secret flame." "And yet," Spence concludes, "Book 4 shows the reader Dido's perspective," thus making the unjustly wounded queen even more sympathetic.<sup>xxv</sup>

Secondly from Spence, she notes a progression of divine allusions in the poem, the trend of which is to elevate the Carthaginian queen. "In Dido's first appearance," Spence elaborates, "she is likened to Nausicaa and Diana; in her last to Ajax and Minerva." Recall, first, that Nausicaa is a beautiful young huntress in the *Odyssey* who falls in love with Odysseus when he washes up on her shore, before continuing his homeward journey. Second, Ajax is the second-greatest Greek warrior (after Achilles) in the Trojan War, who rebuffs Odysseus in the underworld for having defeated him in a competition for the dead Achilles' armor. Finally, Minerva is the Roman goddess of wisdom and war, and Odysseus' constant champion in the *Odyssey*, who "is alluded to throughout the *Aeneid*, yet remains strikingly elusive," and by this haunting absence, "exerts much silent power." Thus, via the allusions to Minerva and her wisdom, Dido at her death also becomes a haunting absence in the poem (including as a literal shade in the underworld in Book 6). Overall, "to the degree that it enlists sympathy for Dido," Spence concludes, the poem "engages the audience on the side of difference and against the cause of empire."<sup>xxvi</sup> To the details of that engagement, the prose of that poetry, I now turn.

#### IV. *Furor* as Aristotelian Matter to *Imperium*'s Unjust Forms

With this section title, I am not merely suggesting that Juno's anger is the subject matter of the poem (which has been the scholarly consensus for centuries). I am suggesting, additionally, that *furor* is the material through which Rome achieved the unjust forms of its *imperium*, the energy constantly consumed by its body politic. That is, the Roman empire was from its very beginning an abyss of violent madness (*furor*), albeit disguised by Augustus' propaganda as pious and peaceful order. For this reason, moreover, Rome and its allies were no less destructive than its enemies; in fact, the latter are more admirable, insofar as their frenzy (*furor*) is a just counterforce to the unjust initial force of Rome's madness (*furor*).

Consider, for example, the poem's two central divinities. Both Jupiter's force and Juno's counterforce are violent and destructive. Both gods lack any higher authority to which to they could appeal to justify their violent destruction (that is, Jupiter is either strictly identified with Stoic fate, or else a mere partisan god among the others; and Juno fights in an openly partisan way). The biggest difference between them is that Jupiter was the first to wrong Juno, which means that it was his *furor* that came first. It is Jupiter, therefore, who is the original source of the poem's madness, even though he tries to disguise this fact by trying to make Juno appear to

be the one who is mad. Worse still, the scholars follow Jupiter's lead, emphasizing Juno's memory of the wounds rather than the injustices that caused them.

These injustices, I contend, are something that Juno is justified in remembering. Like the goddess of memory, Mnemosyne (herself the mother of the Muses), mother Juno knows that present and future justice is impossible without remembering past injustice. Moreover, the philosopher-poet of the *Aeneid* knows this truth as well, by the inspiration of those Muses, including Calliope (the muse of epic poetry, the genre of the *Aeneid*) and Erato (the muse of love poetry, invoked at the beginning of the poem's second half), and thus dramatizes it.

The opposition to such remembering, however—the effort to disguise the *imperium*'s constitutive *furor*—has always been formidable, beginning with Maidenly Virgil's own era. For example, as Eleanor Leach relates, the emperor Augustus attempted to erase and confuse the memory of the Roman people for his own self-interest.<sup>xxvii</sup> More specifically, he “put into place an extensive” and “cohesive program of new artifactual messages embodied in monuments, and statues, in which Romans might read the ideology of the post-Republican state.” In other words, with these public artifacts, “Augustus had virtually rewritten the urban narrative that comprised the historical memory of the city.”<sup>xxviii</sup> This further supports the Virgilian pessimists' conclusion that the aim of the *Aeneid* is not to celebrate Augustus, who despite his virtues was also, as noted by Quint (among others), a fratricidal tyrant.<sup>xxix</sup> On the contrary, the philosopher-poet intended to preserve the memory of Rome's injustices, as brought into sharp relief by the suffering of those who survived or died fighting, especially Junonian Dido.

To support this section's central claim, that *furor* is the matter of *imperium*'s unjust forms, I will focus primarily on W. R. Johnson's influential monograph, *Darkness Visible: A Reading of the Aeneid*. But I will preface this analysis with three other scholars who make similar observations. First, Perkell observes that, “as the poem progresses,” the original opposition between *furor*-women and *pietas*-men is undermined, specifically insofar as “male characters also are described as *furiosus*, and *pietas* and *imperium* are achieved not through transcendence of *furor* but rather precisely through its exercise.” In fact, Perkell adds, one can find “no model in the *Aeneid* of the control of *furor* other than through *furor*.” On the contrary, the two “figures in the poem's action who do attempt, like the pious statesman of Book 1, to calm a raging crowd by force of moral authority,” including Aeneas, “both fail.”<sup>xxx</sup>

Taking this claim further, Quint argues that even the “pious statesman” in question, the god Neptune, is only able to calm the “crowd” of storm waves using *furor*. More specifically, Quint observes that Neptune's speech betrays his anger, while the fact that he wields his fearsome trident implies a threat of physical force. Overall, then, what appears from a distance as the calm, ordered *pietas* of Rome's *imperium* is, in truth, additional and disguised *furor*. Spence echoes this point as well, observing that “the most powerful speech in the book, Dido's curse against Aeneas, is also highly emotional and all the more powerful because of it.” Moreover, “drawing on Aristotle,” Spence continues, “one could argue that the speeches in Book 4 show the effectiveness of pathos.” By contrast, “Aeneas' farewell speech contrasts hollowly with Dido's,” and its “effect is that of weakness, not authority, since it fails to engage the emotions of the audience and raises questions about the moral authority of the speaker.” In short, Dido's speech, Spence concludes, has “power through an alternate source, *furor*.”<sup>xxxi</sup>

Support for this claim by Spence can be found in Perkell's interpretation of Jupiter's prophecy of future Roman peace. More specifically, Perkell notes the following claim from Jupiter's prediction: “*Furor impius*, still roaring from bloody mouth, vital and dangerous, will be—not destroyed—but constrained by chain behind bolted gates”; in short, she concludes, the

*Aeneid* “never envisages the passing of *furor*.”<sup>xxxii</sup> Put in terms of the present article, *furor* is not a finite source of raw material for empire, but a renewable resource, inexhaustible. This same energy, however, in the heart of a hero like Junonian Dido, becomes the courage to appear filled with madness in the process of fighting (with feminist counterforce) the *actual* madness of imperial injustice (though the latter appears disguised as pious peace).

With these prefatory considerations in mind, I return to Johnson’s *Darkness Visible*. As this title foreshadows, his thesis is as follows: in Virgil’s epic poetry, the unclarity, ambiguity, vagueness, confusion, and other alleged or apparent imperfections are, in truth, deliberate techniques to capture the figurative darkness of a reality riven by endless imperial and civil wars. Such “darkness,” in Johnson’s words, appeals to those “who have come to think and feel that unclarity is more nearly capable than clarity of representing what is true and beautiful,” a class of readers that clearly includes those who have endured imperial injustice.<sup>xxxiii</sup> Though this thesis appears true as far as it goes, I wish to take it further, to the logical conclusion from which Johnson himself ultimately recoils.

To wit, Johnson writes that he has “no desire to invent a myth of darkness and call that fabrication the *Aeneid*.”<sup>xxxiv</sup> I would suggest, however, that invention is unnecessary, because mere discovery will suffice. As for the fabricated object, it is indeed not the poem, but the empire. Put simply, it is Rome’s constitutive madness (*furor*) that darkens the figures of the poem’s true heroes, Juno and Dido, in the form of their counterforce of frenzy (*furor*). In other words, Juno and Dido’s *furor* is derivative and second-order (as indicated by my translation of their *furor* as “frenzy”). The *furor* of Jupiter and Aeneas, by contrast, is primary and first-order, hardening the arterial walls of the empire’s heart (as indicated my translation of their *furor* as “madness”). Paraphrased in relation to Johnson, where he sees a metaphysical darkness, I see a political one. Thus, while Johnson sees its victims everywhere, I see most vividly those who sacrifice their lives to sew its destruction, foremost among them the poem’s two goddess-queens.

To spell out my interpretation, I now turn to Johnson’s detailed analysis of the poem, which begins with a summary of the interpretive civil war between Virgilian “optimists” and “pessimists.” In brief, the optimists’ *Aeneid* stars a heroic philosopher, courageous enough to endure the madness of the pre-imperial world and found a peaceful Augustan empire. As for the pessimists, Johnson notes that “the superior virtues and the high ideals of Aeneas are sometimes grudgingly allowed him, but he is in the wrong poem.” The result is what Johnson terms a “discordant harmony,” in which “the hero, the order, and the disorder are all gathered up into, and at last devoured by, an implacable and unintelligible nihilism.”<sup>xxxv</sup> In short, the pessimists’ Aeneas is a good man who pointlessly suffers the madness of the pre-imperial world only to institutionalize that madness anew as the future Rome.

It is with this second camp, Johnson’s protests of neutrality notwithstanding, that his sympathies appear to lie. In his own words, the *Aeneid* “prefigures (it does not affirm) a world where matter and reason and unity *may* be only illusions, where madness and discord *may* be the only realities, here below, in space and time.”<sup>xxxvi</sup> To make this case, Johnson departs from his predecessors by focusing on Virgil’s poetic technique, contrasting it with that of Homer. Johnson’s conclusion is that the *Aeneid*’s philosopher-poet deploys two main strategies to resist Homeric realism (and its attendant priorities of light, clarity, etc.). In the first strategy, Johnson claims, Virgil “abstracts as many particulars as he can from the typical scene and leaves us with its barest outline,” and in the second strategy, instead “of giving us not enough in the way of physical detail or psychological motivation, he gives us rather too much of them.”<sup>xxxvii</sup> Put in terms of Aristotelian matter and form, Virgil either flies so far away from his characters that one



can only see vague blobs of matter without definite form, or else he embraces them so closely that the reader can only feel the amorphous blobs of matter from which the thing is formed.

In neither case, crucially, does Virgil maintain the proper distance for a clear and distinct image of the figure's form and its aspects. For example, when Venus sends Cupid to Dido's court to impersonate Aeneas' son Iulus, Virgil "chooses to create a baffling design in which the supernatural and the natural, the physical and the psychological, divine intervention and psychological realism, are merged together implausibly."<sup>xxxviii</sup> The reason Virgil thus opted "for the beautiful filtered light that reveals realities only to hide them again," Johnson explains, was "to combat the problem of evil in that form that it presented to Vergil."<sup>xxxix</sup> That form of presentation, according to Johnson, was of a rational, peaceful, Stoic-Epicurean world order that in his era was starting to succumb to the madness of superstition. In my view, by contrast, that form of presentation was a propagandistic illusion created by Augustus to discredit and disempower his justified enemies, both internal and external.

One variation on this "darkness" strategy, Johnson elaborates, is "the negative image," which he describes as "clusters (not series or groups) of blurred images that suggest but do not and cannot try to define the fluctuations and uncertainties" of a character's "distorted perceptions." With these negative images, Johnson summarizes, "what Vergil offers are not inner realities, but illusions." One of Johnson's examples of such negative images appears in the scene in which Princess Lavinia's father, King Latinus, tries to persuade her fiancé, Prince Turnus, not to fight the Trojans. Her father's words provoke her into blushing, and the negative image here, for Johnson, is specifically the way that this blush appears to Turnus, or is interpreted by him: namely, through the filter of his *furor*, itself amplified by that blush. In Johnson's paraphrase of this passage, "Turnus suffers from an irrational sickness" that is "beyond any help."<sup>xl</sup>

I would argue, however, that Turnus' "sickness," his erotic love, is not the objective source of the "illusions" to which Johnson refers (at the core of the negative image), nor is Turnus the subjective source of the (actual) illusions. Instead, the objective source of the illusions is the image of the empire as pious and peaceful, and its subjective source is the imagination of the imperial agents. It is this image, for example, that imaginatively inspires the would-be Stoic Aeneas to considerable violence (to self and others), sustaining his self-perception as executor of the holy will of the god-emperor Jupiter. On this anti-imperial reading, Aeneas becomes a victim and perpetuator of supernaturalism, no doubt exacerbated by the fall of Troy, which he survives only by imagining that his gods destined him to a new home in Rome. In short, the illusion behind the negative image that causes Turnus' *furor* is better understood as Aeneas' imperial illusion of Jupiter's commands, to which Turnus' illusion is merely a justifiable reaction.

In support of this anti-religious interpretation of Johnson's negative image, the *Aeneid* is, after all, the work of a philosopher-poet who formally studied Epicureanism, which school explicitly denounces the standard conception of the Greco-Roman gods (as anthropomorphic beings who intervene in the world) as a destructive illusion. In other words, perhaps the darkness of *furor* that overtakes Turnus is neither the supernatural work of a god (as the surface of the poem suggests), nor the pathological work of an individual psychological disorder (as Johnson claims), but instead the natural reaction of a courageous individual (Turnus) to the actual madness of an agent of imperial violence (Aeneas), as the pre-imperial world of Italy dissolves into nightmare.

Further support for my anti-imperial, anti-religious interpretation of the negative image can be found in Johnson's later generalization, from the specific case of Lavinia's blush to the

larger pattern of negative images of darkness-as-madness that he identifies in the poem. Mostly involving Manly Elissa, “the image of sickness as madness,” Johnson writes, “is, perhaps paradoxically, exact,” and it achieves its maximum effect when a character such as Dido is “so fully identified” with her madness “as to be indistinguishable from it.” This process makes Dido, for example, “in a very real sense, a phantom wandering through broken images that constitute” her “delusions” and “consciousness.” In short, Johnson concludes, “through the eyes of” his characters, Virgil is “trying to imagine the incomprehensibility of reality by the disintegration of images.”<sup>xli</sup>

To this I would add that the reality in question and its destruction are both fundamentally political. Beginning with the reality, Maidenly Virgil’s negative images depict an event in which imperial injustice so dominates the mind, life, and even the being of a character that she becomes indistinguishable from her political context, as her figure disappears into its new imperial (back)ground. As for the destruction of that reality, the “disintegration of images,” that process amounts to the breakdown of any pre-imperial images of the world, dissolving pictures of selves and lives which no longer make any sense in the wake of the madness of imperial conquest. For example, when Manly Elissa is betrayed by Aeneas, she is not merely a woman whose husband abandons her, but also a queen whose consort abandons his ongoing political project to rebuild her home in the glorious image of his own. This is the reason why it is not only her life that is broken and extinguished by Aeneas, but also the life of her city, beginning with the grief that consumes it like fire, and ending with its literal destruction by Rome in the last Punic War.

Finally on this subject of the negative image, Johnson also argues that Dido’s death constitutes another such image. In addition to further clarifying his conception, his analysis of that scene also affords an opportunity to dispel what is usually taken to be an obstacle to viewing Maidenly Virgil as a feminist. Beginning with the image, it concerns the multicolored iridescence of Iris, goddess of the rainbow, sent by Juno to ease Manly Elissa’s journey to the underworld, and which according to Johnson overpowers and obscures Dido herself. The line in question, “*mille trahens varios adverso sole colors,*” I would translate as follows: “drawing a thousand different colors across the sun.”<sup>xlii</sup> In this context, Johnson claims, the word *varios* “paradoxically at once presents a vision and annihilates that vision with excessive brightness.” That is, “Iris’ epiphany, the shifting beauty of the rainbow that betokens her coming, distracts our attention from the fact of Dido’s suffering and thereby blurs the significance of that suffering.” In short, Johnson concludes, for both Dido and the reader, “it is precisely the moment when the light is at its fullest that the apprehension of darkness overtakes us.”<sup>xliii</sup> Put in terms of my reinterpretation of Johnson’s conception of the negative image, the imperial darkness had so consumed Dido that only the beautiful colors of Juno’s righteous frenzy, manifested in her emissary Iris, could liberate Manly Elissa.

Connecting this back to the philosopher-poet’s feminism, the keyword of the negative image, *varios* is also key to the seemingly most misogynist claim in Maidenly Virgil’s oeuvre (more precisely, in *varios*’ declension as *varium*). The claim takes the form of Jupiter’s infamous warning to Aeneas, in reference to Dido, and delivered by Mercury. “*Varium et mutabile, semper femina,*” Mercury says to Aeneas, usually translated as “Fickle and ever-changing is woman.”<sup>xliv</sup> One could also translate it more neutrally, however, as follows: “Versatile and transformative is woman.” In support of the latter translation, Johnson notes that the word *varium* (or, more precisely, its declension as *varios*), “is a favorite word with Vergil when he wishes to stress complexity and confusion.”<sup>xlv</sup> Since complexity is often a good thing, and confusion can just as

easily lie in the perceiver rather than the perceived, it is not automatically negative to describe women with the word *varium*.

Applying Johnson's analysis of *varios* in the negative image of Dido's death, Jupiter's warning about women could also be interpreted as a fearful response to a power that is more common among women under imperial patriarchy, namely the power to variously transform oneself in response to the unpredictable dangers of patriarchal power structures. Put differently, to survive patriarchy, let alone flourish, women must be willing and able to transform (*mutabile*) their matter into various forms (*varium*). And if successful, this versatile transformability empowers women in a way that the defenders of patriarchy, like Jupiter, have reason to fear. One could, in this differing light of Iris' rainbow, paraphrase and elaborate Jupiter's warning as follows: "Guard your power and control carefully, because women can transform themselves variously and thereby frustrate men's efforts to control them." Clearly, Dido too possesses a comparable power to Iris, manifesting an overwhelmingly bright and complex splendor of her own. Put in terms of Dido as Junonian agent of *furor*, no matter how bright the blinding sun of the empire, there will always be vaporous resistance in the Junonian *aer*, refracting the empire's unjust forms with their beautiful counterforce. For a present-day application of this point, to the globalized empire as analyzed by Hardt and Negri, I now turn to my final section.

## V. Conclusion

As is clear from the work of Foucault and Deleuze (among others), much of what is today called "madness" is better understood as a life-affirming counterforce to present-day societies. Applying such analyses to present-day globalism, Negri and Hardt's *Empire* echoes Spinoza's claim that "the necessary weapons reside precisely within the creative and prophetic power of the multitude." Today, the authors specify, this power consists in "the productivity of the multitude, the immediate actor of biopolitical production and reproduction."<sup>xlvi</sup> Globalizing, they insist, "must be met with a counter-globalization, Empire with a counter-Empire."<sup>xlvi</sup> Significantly, this rhetoric is almost identical to Brooks Otis' repeated epithet for Juno in the *Aeneid*, "counter-fate" (in opposition to Jupiter as "fate").<sup>xlvi</sup> Moreover, just like the *furor* that Juno represents to Jupiter, the frenetic Spinozist power of the multitude, from the perspective of the imperial agents, "must be controlled but not destroyed," because, the authors explain, "the constitution of Empire depends for its own existence on the forces that pose this threat."<sup>xlvi</sup>

Put in terms of my above analyses, this frenetic counterforce is composed of the *varius et mutabile* Junonian strategies of Hardt and Negri's "multitude," fighting against imperial regimes that call their own unjust violence "peace" and "order." And this multitude, as Maidenly Virgil illuminates, include the many mothers and other women who suffer disproportionately these injustices. In this iridescent, Iris-reminiscent light, it is undoubtedly Juno who is the divine symbol of this feminist counterforce of *furor*, courageously fighting the empire's illusions. In Johnson's view, this is "the bitter truth of his poem," namely that "no one—not Dido, not Aeneas, perhaps not even Jupiter—has reckoned with" Juno, "or can reckon with her."<sup>1</sup>

Reframed by the present article, it seems more accurate to say that each person, inside the poem and out, is forced to reckon with Juno, to choose between becoming her ally or remaining her enemy (by default, as a cowardly inertial agent of empire). More precisely, one must either admire and emulate Juno's resistance to imperial injustice, or else succumb to that injustice, becoming just another figure who never stands out against the figurative darkness of imperial madness. The foremost example of those who succumb is Aeneas, capitulating to Jupiter's will even at the cost of betraying the love of his life and abandoning his new home. Some Epicureans

or Stoics might be able to rationalize these decisions as constituting an allegedly noble retreat, whether a physical retreat outside the polis (a la Epicureanism) or a psychological retreat within one's duties to the polis (a la Stoicism). Such rationalizations, however, ring hollow. Even Heinze, one of the central scholars of the optimistic school of *Aeneid* interpreters (who, as such, is largely sympathetic to Aeneas) explicitly calls the Trojan a coward in the poem's first half.

In addition to this future emperor (and god), no less a figure than Jupiter, emperor of the gods, also capitulates to Juno's power in the poem. Johnson notes, for example, that Jupiter's "smiling at Juno" near the poem's end "in effect sanctions what she is doing and what she is." Moreover, Johnson continues, "though Juno now disappears from the poem" after striking a deal with Jupiter, "the poem began with her and in effect in ends with her." More specifically, it "ends, on one level at least, with the triumph of Juno," as Jupiter deploys the *furor*-figure of the Dira directly from his divine throne to help murder Turnus.<sup>li</sup> On the view articulated here, however, that *furor* is always the matter of *imperium*'s forms, and Juno could be justly said to triumph not merely because Jupiter acted with *furor*, but because he only did so immediately after she forced him to bend his will toward hers, by wiping Troy's name from the earth.

In other words, Juno successfully deflects the course of the empire by securing permanent evidence (through the "Roman" name, after its fratricidal mythical founder, "Romulus") of the injustices that fueled its founding. As Johnson puts it, "the longer Vergil pondered his contents and design, the more his poem came to be about the nature of history"; and Johnson concludes that "it is for this reason that Juno comes to stand more and more at the center of his design." From the present article's perspective, "this reason" is Juno's connection to history, via memory, specifically of the many injustices in her part of imperial history.<sup>lii</sup>

Put differently, and by way of conclusion, the method to Juno's (apparent) madness, the form of her frenzied fire, is a resistance of courageous counterforce to the (actual) madness of imperial injustice, making the *imperium* strip off its disguise of *pietas* and wield its hidden *furor* to suppress that resistance. In Dido's case, this Junonian *furor* manifests as a refusal to capitulate to Aeneas, that delusional, resigned agent of the unjust Jupiterian empire. Manly Elissa, in other words, forces "pious" Aeneas to manifest his submissive cowardice to the madness of imperial injustice, which he both foreshadows and perpetrates. And in this way, finally, Dido continues to be a hero, for all who resist empire's multiform madness—for all of us who, like Juno, prefer to appear mad than to succumb to the true madness of imperial injustice.

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## Notes

- <sup>i</sup> W. R. Johnson, *Darkness Visible: A Study of Virgil's Aeneid* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 13; and Michael Putnam, *Virgil's Aeneid: Interpretation and Influence* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press), 1995, 83.
- <sup>ii</sup> See "Juno," *Encyclopedia Britannica* (Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc.), 2018: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Juno-Roman-goddess>.
- <sup>iii</sup> This is the final published article in my trilogy of reinterpretations of canonical epic poets as also philosophers. For the prior two, see Joshua M. Hall, "Dante's Self-Angelizing: A Prophecy of Egalitarian Transhumanism" in *Labyrinth: An International Journal for Philosophy, Value Theory, and Sociocultural Hermeneutics* 22(2): 139-155; and "A Darkly Bright Republic: Milton's Poetic Logic," *South African Journal of Philosophy* 37(2): 2018, 158-170.
- <sup>iv</sup> See Joseph Farrell, "Aeneid 5: Poetry and Parenthood," and Susan Ford Wiltshire, "The Man Who Was Not There: Aeneas and Absence in Aeneid 9," both in *Reading Vergil's Aeneid: An Interpretive Guide*, ed. Christine Perkell (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999), 96-110; 162-177.
- <sup>v</sup> See Christine Perkell, "Editor's Introduction," in *Reading Vergil's Aeneid: An Interpretive Guide*, ed. Christine Perkell (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999), 3-28.
- <sup>vi</sup> For more on Virgil's Etruscan sympathies as manifest in the *Aeneid*, see Sara Mack, "The Birth of War: A Reading of Aeneid 7," and "Denis Feeney, "Epic Violence, Epic Order: Killings, Catalogues, and the Role of the Reader in Aeneid 10," both in *Reading Vergil's Aeneid: An Interpretive Guide*, ed. Christine Perkell (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999), 128-147, 130; 178-194, 192.
- <sup>vii</sup> Susanna Morton Braund, "Virgil and the Cosmos: Religious and Philosophical Ideas," in *The Cambridge Companion to Virgil*, ed. Charles Martindale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 204-221, 205.
- <sup>viii</sup> Perkell, "Editor's Introduction," 4.
- <sup>ix</sup> Perkell, "Editor's Introduction," 4. See Ellen Oliensis, "Sons and Lovers: Sexuality and Gender in Virgil's Poetry," in *The Cambridge Companion to Virgil*, ed. Charles Martindale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 294-311, 294.
- <sup>x</sup> Perkell, "Editor's Introduction," 4.
- <sup>xi</sup> Braund, "Virgil and the Cosmos," 211.
- <sup>xii</sup> For more on King's method in regard to social justice and peace under empire, see Joshua M. Hall, "Toward a Conception of Socially-Just Peace," in *Peace, Culture and Violence*, ed. Fuat Gursozlu (Leiden: Brill, 2018).
- <sup>xiii</sup> Braund, "Virgil and the Cosmos," 211.
- <sup>xiv</sup> Richard Heinze, *Virgil's Epic Technique*, trans. Hazel Harvey, David Harvey & Fred Robertson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 239.
- <sup>xv</sup> Johnson, *Darkness Visible*, 14.
- <sup>xvi</sup> David Quint, *Virgil's Double Cross: Design and Meaning in the Aeneid* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018).
- <sup>xvii</sup> Quint, *Virgil's Double Cross*, 68.
- <sup>xviii</sup> Quint, *Virgil's Double Cross*, 74.
- <sup>xix</sup> Brooks Otis, *Virgil: A Study of Civilized Poetry* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1964).
- <sup>xx</sup> Otis, *Virgil*, 324.

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- xxi Marilyn Desmond, *Reading Dido: Gender, Textuality, and the Medieval Aeneid* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994).
- xxii Desmond, *Reading Dido*, 24.
- xxiii For more on this Dido-Aeneas-Pallas relationship, see Putnam's groundbreaking interpretation, 27-46, as extended by Quint 124-129, 180-190.
- xxiv Sarah Spense, "Varium et Mutabile: Voices of Authority in *Aeneid* 4," in *Reading Vergil's Aeneid: An Interpretive Guide*, ed. Christine Perkell (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999), 80-95.
- xxv Spense, "Varium et Mutabile," 83.
- xxvi Spense, "Varium et Mutabile," 94-95.
- xxvii Eleanor Winsor Leach, "Viewing the *Spectacula* of *Aeneid* 6," in *The Cambridge Companion to Virgil*, ed. Charles Martindale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 111-127.
- xxviii Leach, "Viewing the *Spectacula*," 116.
- xxix Quint, *Virgil's Double Cross*, 3.
- xxx Christine Perkell, "Aeneid 1: An Epic Program," in *Reading Vergil's Aeneid: An Interpretive Guide*, ed. Christine Perkell (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999), 29-49, 38.
- xxxi Spense, "Varium et Mutabile," 91, 93.
- xxxii Perkell, "Aeneid 1," 44.
- xxxiii Johnson, *Darkness Visible*, 27.
- xxxiv Johnson, *Darkness Visible*, 20.
- xxxv Johnson, *Darkness Visible*, 11.
- xxxvi Johnson, *Darkness Visible*, 13.
- xxxvii Johnson, *Darkness Visible*, 36, 37.
- xxxviii Johnson, *Darkness Visible*, 44.
- xxxix Johnson, *Darkness Visible*, 48.
- xl Johnson, *Darkness Visible*, 53, 52.
- xli Johnson, *Darkness Visible*, 54, 56.
- xliv Virgil, *Aeneid* IV: 701.
- xlvi Johnson, *Darkness Visible*, 67-69.
- xliv Virgil, *Aeneid* IV: 569-570.
- xlvi Johnson, *Darkness Visible*, 69.
- xlvi Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 65.
- xlvi Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, 207.
- xlvi Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, 226.
- xlvi Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, 344.
- <sup>1</sup> Johnson, *Darkness Visible*, 118.
- <sup>li</sup> Johnson, *Darkness Visible*, 126, 127, 130.
- <sup>lii</sup> Johnson, *Darkness Visible*, 133.