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The Loss of Feminine Representation from the Aeneid to the Confessions

I had prayed to you for chastity and said 'Give me chastity and continence, but not yet.'

Conf., Bk.8, Ch.7

St Augustine writes in the Confessions that while he was good at his lessons, he really didn’t enjoy studying. Except, he says, for Vergil: “The wooden horse and its crew of soldiers, the burning of Troy and even the ghost of Creusa,” he wrote, “made the most enchanting dream, futile though it was.” (Bk.1, Ch.13)

There are many reasons why, when it came time for Augustin to write the story of his conversion to Christianity, he would look back on the Aeneid for reference and re-echo many of its themes in his own terms. In a sense the most he could hope for in his own masterpiece would be that his culture see his work as a translation of Vergil’s epic.

The Aeneid had “succeeded in doing something that no epic has done before or since, and helped many generation of men to formulate their views of the chief problems, of existence.” (From Vergil to Milton, 34) Further, the Aeneid is the story of a pious man on a journey to fulfill the
dictates of his god. Whatever else Augustine might have been up to when writing his *Confessions*, scholarly critics agree he was reinterpretting the Augustan vision for Christian purposes. The only points of disagreement seem to be when, where and in what way.

Augustine, himself, welcomed whatever truth might be found within the pages of his work, writing:

> For my part I declare resolutely and with all my heart that if I were called upon to write a book which was to be yested with the highest authority, I should prefer to write in such a way that a reader could find re-echoed in my words whatever truth he was able to apprehend. I would rather write in this way than impose a single true meaning so explicitly that it would exclude all others, even though they contained no falsehood that could give me offense. *(Conf., Bk.12, Ch.31)*

In that spirit of inquiry then, when viewing the *Confessions* as a transformation of the cultural goals and aspirations of Vergil’s world to that of the up-and-coming Catholic Church four hundred years later, one of the most striking changes that occurs is the disappearance and diminished importance of women. From the dozens of feminine characters in the *Aeneid* who speak up from nearly every page, Augustine has retained only his mother and two nameless objects of lust.

Not only are women missing in the numbers but when they appear in the *Confessions* they are strictly confined in their representation. Gone is the feminine rage of Allecto who, when told by Turnus, “Your responsibility is to watch over the temples of the gods and their statues. It is for men to wage war and make peace,” explodes in anger:

> Then she bent down on him eyes which were beams of flame, a while he still wavered trying to continue his reply, she thrust him back, stiffened a pair of serpents from her hair, cracked her whip, and spoke again, out of her now raving lips: “...Look now at this. I come from the Dread Sister station; and in my hand I bear war and death. *(Aen., 7.443-457)*
Augustine’s mother, Monica, rather than incorporating all the aspects of her predecessors, really only gets to keep the sometimes-foolish-but-terribly-tender-hearted-and (above all) dutiful mother/Venus qualities. Since she is a distillation of everything feminine that has gone before the change is significant. Witness Monica, the Christian ideal of feminine virtue, counseling young wives as they wash clothes together:

Many women whose faces were disfigured by blows from husbands far sweeter-tempered than her own, used to gossip together and complain of the behavior of their men-folk. My mother would meet this complaint with another — about the women’s tongues. Her manner was light but her meaning serious when she told them that ever since they had heard the marriage deed read over to them they ought to regard it as a contract which bound them to serve their husbands, and from that time onward they should remember their condition and not defy their masters. (Conf., Bk.9, Ch.9)

Of this advice Augustine says, “those that accepted it found it a good one; others continued to suffer humiliation and cruelty.”

Monica and Venus share other attributes as well. Monica is perhaps her most Venus-like when she is in tearful entreaty to God about her son, “shedding more tears for my spiritual death than other mothers shed for the bodily death of a son.” (Conf., Bk. 3, Ch.11) Like Venus, Monica nearly ruins the outcome of the spiritual mission their sons are engaged in by their desire to see them prosperous and happy. Both are loving, sweet and devoted to the family. Neither are threatening, demanding or energetically involved with their own cares and designs. They exist as adjuncts to the dominant male mission to reform the world.

“I had to recite the speech of Juno,” Augustine writes in book one. Sarah Spence, author of Rhetorics of Reason and Desire, suggests that in assuming the persona of Juno early on in the Confessions Augustine, in a sense, becomes Juno in the work. In much the same way he “becomes” Medea in book three. When he does this I submit he is incorporating the qualities of feminine rage, magic and rebirth in quite a different way than can be found in Vergil. The qualities of Aurora, Iris and Sibyl have not been lost
but transformed into a powerful and intolerant religious impulse
the likes of which the Greco-Roman world had not seen before. While Nautes tells Aeneas:

Son of the Goddess, we should accept the lead
which Destiny offers us, whether to go forward or
no and choose our way accordingly. Whatever is to
befall, it is always our own power of endurance
which must give us control over our fortune. (Aen.,
5.709-713)

Augustine sees his relationship to his God quite differently:

O Lord, for you teach us by inflicting pain, you
smite: so that you may heal and you kill us so that
we may not die away from you. (Conf., Bk.2, Ch.2)

This new Christian attitude is considerably more militant and sets
the stage for the use of force in the service of a single
interpretation of divine intention. The Romans had always been
open to many religions and welcomed all the gods, and so they
found themselves unprepared to cope with this jealous, angry deity
who insisted on exclusive worship.

The real God was pictured as being at war against
all rivals... That a divine being would extend his
wrath even beyond this dualism and send down
suffering upon human beings simply for their
failure to offer him regular cult seemed an even
more blasphemous idea. As Livy put it, ‘people
even attack the gods with headstrong words but we
have never heard of anyone on that account being
struck by lightning.’ (Christianizing the Roman
Empire, 18)

To serve the Christian god then required from the outset not
only exclusive devotion but a dedication to the eradication of other
gods and the elimination of conflicting ideas. It was not only
permissible in this holy mission to coerce compliance from friends
and neighbors, it was one’s duty.

At the turn of the century Augustine addressed his
congregation in Carthage with ringing invocations
to smash all tangible symbols of paganism they could lay their hand on 'for' he tells them, 'that all superstitions of pagans and heathens should be annihilated is what God wants, God commands, God proclaims!' Words uttered to 'wild applause' as one modern biographer put it. (Christianizing the Roman Empire, 95)

It seems to have mattered little whether converts were won over by persuasion or force so long as they were, in fact, won over. Augustine reports "how pagan rebels by conversion bought their lives from a merciful emperor in 39, for 'he wanted them made Christian by the occasion.'" (Christianizing the Roman Empire, 3)

In the Confessions Augustine assumes the feminine attributes of rage, magic and rebirth in order to capture these qualities to serve his god and to prevent their scattering attention and passion vital to Christian worship into secular and worldly pursuits. The transformation was so successful that less directed, less organized religious cults were effectively silenced in just a few years.

Noise is what you could hear 'at a festival of the pagans,' where 'the sacrilegious ceremonies were carried out... (by) a most unrestrained dancing mob on the street running right past the doors of the church' of an African city in A.D. 408. Augustine was shocked... Before A.D. 312 it would have been easy to hear and see activities like this going on everywhere in the empire. By A.D. 400 or so, it was very rare. And yet pagans still made up a good half of the population. An interesting fact then: they existed, but they had been taught to keep quiet. (Christianizing the Roman Empire, 85)

Women have always been suspect. They have a power that doesn't arise from brute strength and that is difficult to suppress even given the limited opportunities to education and the trappings of power not traditionally available to them. In fact the traditional power attributed to women extends far beyond the power of sexual attractiveness but, by the time Augustine writes, that is the only power he will acknowledge.

Everything connected with women is discomforting to the
saint. Though Aeneas is the Son of the Goddess, Augustine finds the thought that Jesus was born from a woman almost more than he can face:

I did not believe that a nature such as his could have taken birth from the Virgin Mary unless it were mingled with her flesh; and, if it were such as I imagined it to be, I could not see how it could be mingled with her flesh without being defiled. *(Conf., Bk.5, Ch.1)*

Being a “slave to lust” he cannot come in contact with strong and vital women with fear he will be defiled by his own desires. A situation which might have provided some comfort to another man fills his life with turmoil.

I went to Carthage where I found myself in the midst of a hissing cauldron of lust...To love and to have my love returned was my heart’s desire, and it would be all the sweeter if I could also enjoy the body of the one who loved me... (but then) my love was returned and finally shackled me in the bonds of its consummation... I was lashed with the cruel, fiery rods of jealousy and suspicion, fear, anger and quarrels. *(Conf., Bk.3, Ch.1)*

When he considers the breeding ground for evil he writes, “A man commits murder and we ask the reason.” Of the five reasons Augustine can think of, “because he wanted his victim’s wife,” is the first one he mentions. *(Conf., Bk.2 Ch.5)* He is afraid of the power women have over him and for that reason would see them rendered harmless. Monica will do, Dido will not.

Even given that he assumes the anger and forcefulness leaving only the loving mother and siren to cope with, he is still uncomfortable and suspicious of the qualities he would allow as feminine. Here he writes about the quality of compassion:

Of course this does not mean we must arm ourselves against compassion. There are times we must welcome sorrow on behalf of others. But for the sake of our souls we must beware of uncleanness. My God must be the Keeper of my
soul, the God of our fathers, who is to be exalted and extolled for ever more. My soul must guard against uncleanness. (Conf., Bk.3, Ch.2)

Augustine's internal spiritual journey was away from pleasure that held him to the corporeal world. As Hans Von Campenhausen points out in *Men Who Shaped the Western Church* Augustine wasn't converted to Christianity from some other religion or from a different philosophy. He was "converted from worldliness to a new, really Christian course of life." (201)

So gone is Juno and her cry for recognition. Dido's rage at dishonor is reduced to Monica's shabby abandonment, Camilla's ferocity is consigned to the ancient forest. Vergil presented strong, vital, colorful, vital feminine representations who, while they never win, are heard and voice considerable complaint. In the end of the Aeneid they may even be vindicated:

Aeneas kills Turnus by himself, unmotivated by any god; Juno is not responsible for this act...by removing her from the text Vergil finally tells us that it is not she who is responsible; it is Aeneas, it is everyman. (*Rhetorics of Reason and Desire*, 48)

Women of the *Confessions* are absorbed, diminished and dismissed precisely because they were vital elements of the world of the flesh and this, as much as anything else in the *Confessions*, is indicative of a new cultural orientation. As M. Rostovtzeff writes in Rome, "the center of gravity was shifted and men's hopes and expectations were transferred... beyond the grave." (308) The participation of women is necessary and desirable to build a productive and happy life on earth, but it is only marginally required and may even be a hindrance to building a life in heaven.
Works Cited


