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**Women in the *Aeneid*: Foreign, Female, and a Threat to Traditional Roman Society or
Examples of Model Male Citizens?**

by

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Senior Honors Project

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When asked to consider the role of women in ancient Greece and Rome, most people are quick to picture “the ideal Roman woman,” that is a woman who dutifully sits at home, cares for the children, spends her days weaving at the loom and tending to household tasks, and is characterized by typical feminine traits. In considering the role of men, most would conjure up an image of a man both a fearless warrior and a dedicated statesman. In the classical world, few would imagine a woman who possesses not feminine traits, but instead those traits characteristic of a prominent male citizen. In his epic poem the *Aeneid*, written between 29 and 19 B.C., Vergil¹ intentionally portrays characters in a way that serves simultaneously as a threat to traditional gender roles in Roman society while also providing an example of ideal Roman values. Specifically, the characters that are both foreign and female, despite embodying certain Roman virtues, threaten the standard cultural norms of ancient Rome. Dido, the queen of Carthage, Penthesilea, an Amazon warrior queen, and Camilla, another female warrior, represent women who, while possessing certain Roman qualities, are doomed to fail in a world that is, according to societal standards of the time, rightly dominated by males. Vergil uses his epic poem as a means to describe a national identity that was distinctly Roman; to identify the qualities characteristic of Roman citizens; to serve as a warning as to what happens when certain limits are surpassed; and to reinforce gender roles. The *Aeneid*, then, serves not only to establish a Roman identity that acknowledges, however grudgingly, that women are a physically necessary component to that continued existence, but also what happens when their role extends too far. It also addresses the problem of assimilation and the incorporation of other cultures into a Roman society.

¹ Throughout my argument, I will spell Vergil as such. However, in citing other authors who chose to spell the author’s name “Virgil” I have intentionally left their spellings.

Women in the ancient world had a single function that defined their existence, that is, to produce children, and male children at that. They experienced few, if any, legal and political rights and were believed to be inferior to men in every aspect. Gender stereotypes were prevalent in the classical world and not only stemmed from preconceived notions held by the common people but were even legitimated by philosophical thought which justified gender stereotypes. Thus, women were relegated to the world of household tasks such as spinning, weaving, and caring for children. Due to their supposed physical, mental, and even emotional inferiority, they had absolutely no place in the public realm of politics and warfare. Aristotle said that “the male is by nature fitter for command than the female.”² This was the way of thought that dominated classical society and much of history. Women’s bodies were physically suited for the task of child rearing and consequently were restricted to that role, as “the dominant medical image of women reflected contemporary conceptions of female nature and women’s role in society.”³ Classical society held that women’s bodies were built for the purpose of carrying, birthing, and nurturing children.

Differences between men and women were not only in physical construction but also in mental capacity, as Hippocratic theory argued that the physical differences between males and females directly accounted for the difference in mental ability between the two genders. To ancient Romans and Greeks, a weak body was synonymous with a weak mind. Galen, another important philosopher and physician, supported this in stating that “the female is less perfect than the male for one principal reason, because she is colder, for if among animals the warm one

²Aristotle, “The female role” in *Politics*, in *Women's Life in Greece and Rome*, Mary R. Lefkowitz and Maureen B. Fant, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1982), 38.

³ Elaine Fantham, Helene Peet Foley, Natalie Boymel Kampen, Sarah B. Pomeroy, and H. A. Shapiro, *Women in the Classical World: Image and Text*, (New York: Oxford UP, 1994), 184.

is the more active, a colder animal would be less perfect than a warmer.”⁴ Aristotle shared a similar outlook in regards to the mental and moral inferiority of females when he asserted that they are “more prone to despondency and less hopeful than the man, more void of shame, more false of speech, more deceptive.”⁵ Thus, in the classical world, it was believed that women’s inferior physical nature directly resulted in their inferior intellect and consequently their inferior sense of morality. Women’s assumed inferiority in regards to their intelligence and morality, as a result of the fact that they were the weaker sex, was justification for excluding them from holding positions of authority.

Furthermore, classical society assumed that women had no interest, much less an ability to succeed, in the realm of politics, business, or warfare. The great Roman historian Livy described how women “cannot partake of magistracies, priesthoods, triumphs, badges of office, gifts, or spoils of war; elegance, finery and beautiful clothes are women’s badges, in these they find joy and take pride, this our forebears called the women’s world.”⁶ Because men were of a more noble spirit, they found joy in higher callings such as holding public office or command in war.

Women, on the other hand, were confined to a world that concerned itself not with politics or business but rather household tasks and serving out their ultimate purpose— to be a wife and to ensure posterity who would continue the legacy of Rome. Roman men could not deny that the Roman state could not survive without reproduction, thus women were viewed as a

⁴ Galen, “Comparison of male and female anatomy” in *On the Usefulness of the Parts of the Body*, in *Women's Life in Greece and Rome*, Lefkowitz and Fant, 244.

⁵ Aristotle, “History of Animals” 608a-32-b19, in *Women in the Classical World*, eds. Fantham et. Al, 192.

⁶ Livy, History of Rome 34.1. 146 in *Women's Life in Greece and Rome*, Lefkowitz and Fant, 146.

necessary evil. Livy recorded a speech written by censor Quintus Caecilius Metellus

Macedonicus who shared this grudging acquiescence when he said that:

If we could survive without a wife, citizens of Rome, all of us would do without that nuisance; but since nature has so decreed that we cannot manage comfortably with them, nor live in any way without them, we must plan for our lasting preservation rather than for our temporary pleasure.⁷

Thus, Roman men acknowledged that although women were emotional and irrational creatures, they were physically necessary in order for continued existence. In acknowledging this, many of the laws of ancient Rome reflected the belief that males were superior to females and that females, due to their inferiority but necessity for the continuance of the state, had to be subordinate. For instance, guardians were appointed to women, regardless of age because “females, however, both under and over puberty, on account of the weakness of their sex as well as their ignorance of legal matters”⁸ required guardianship. The Twelve Tables, which served as the basis of Roman civil law and originated around 450 B.C., also propagated a sense of the inferiority of women and the consequently obligatory legal obligation to have them in subordinate positions. Table V stated that “women...even though they are of full age, because of their levity of mind shall be under guardianship.”⁹ These attitudes towards women were so ingrained into the Roman psyche that there are even instances of women articulating an acceptance of their oppression and inferiority as if it were an inevitable and unchangeable fact. A Roman woman stated that:

⁷ Quintus Caecilius Metellus Macedonicus, *Malcovati*, in *Women's Life in Greece and Rome*, Lefkowitz and Fant, 103.

⁸ Ulpian, *Rules* 11.1, in *Women's Life in Greece and Rome*, Lefkowitz and Fant, 101.

⁹ The Twelve Tables, in *Women's Life in Greece and Rome*, Lefkowitz and Fant, 95.

I agree that men should be generals and city officials and politicians, and women should keep house and stay inside and receive and take care of their husbands. . . Courage and intelligence are more appropriately male qualities because of the strength of men's bodies and the power of their minds.¹⁰

The opportunities for women to exhibit any sense of authority or autonomy was restricted to very narrow confines, as their lives were centered around staying out of the public sphere and within the private sphere of the home. Thus, the only true roles in which they could potentially experience some degree of authority would be in the female realm as homemaker or wife. There was a difference between the public sphere and the private sphere in the ancient world, and a different set of standards and behaviors that went along with each. For instance, while at home and out of the public eye, women were able to enjoy a lesser degree of restraint and regulation, as they were actually charged with certain tasks, such as child-rearing and supervising the slaves. In the public sphere, however, men made all of the decisions and held the positions of power and thus women were forced to remain in subordinate positions, if they ventured into the public sphere at all.

Despite these limitations, it was possible for women to exert agency, but only within the confines of domestic concerns. Although women were excluded from the realm of politics and their subordination was made legal and necessary by law, they often were able to have some influence, even though that influence typically stemmed from their position as a mother, wife, or daughter, and very rarely as an independent female. An example of an ideal women in ancient Rome who exhibited agency even within narrow confines is Lucretia, who was “beyond a doubt .

¹⁰Phintys, *Thesleff*, in *Women's Life in Greece and Rome*, Lefkowitz and Fant, 163.

... the most virtuous” wife and dutiful daughter.¹¹ According to Livy in his *History of Rome*, after Lucretia had been raped by King Tarquin’s son, she was so idealistically virtuous that she took her own life.¹² Immediately before stabbing herself with a dagger, she exclaimed that “from now on, no woman can use the example of Lucretia to live unchaste.”¹³ Thus, Lucretia became a lasting legacy for later generations of women in Rome and served as an example for what it meant to be a chaste and virtuous wife, the ultimate goal for any Roman female. Her death, which stemmed from a desire to maintain her virtue, resulted in spurring political action and “provoked the expulsion of the Tarquin dynasty and the creation of the free people’s government (*res publica*).”¹⁴ While women in ancient Rome were not allowed to be in positions of actual political power, there are several instances throughout Roman history, such as the rape of Lucretia, which instigated political upheaval or change. However, Lucretia is remembered not as a woman who spurred political action but rather a woman who fulfilled the Roman ideal of being a chaste wife to the highest degree. This exemplifies the fact that Lucretia is one of those women who had agency in a specific realm and fulfilled the specific ideas about women in regards to Roman character, despite the limitations that the entire female sex faced as a result of their inferiority.

The *Aeneid* reflects many of the dominant cultural norms and beliefs that existed at the time, such as the accepted inferiority of women and the exclusive right to rule that males possessed. But further, Vergil wrote the *Aeneid* during a period of major political and social change in Rome. The Republic had fallen and Augustus had established an Empire that he went

¹¹ Livy, *History of Rome* 1.57.6-58, in *Women's Life in Greece and Rome*, Lefkowitz and Fant, 132.

¹² *Ibid.*, 132.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 133.

¹⁴ Fantham, et al, *Women in the Classical World*, 225.

on to rule. Augustus' reign was characterized by a desire to return to traditional Roman moral values and a goal of having the Roman population view their nation as an empire and not merely a republic. This agenda is definitely reflected in the writing of Vergil, who "designed the *Aeneid* strategically to help the Romans meditate on the duties, problems, dangers and possibilities of a new national identity."¹⁵ Vergil wrote this epic poem in order to redefine Rome's national identity by manufacturing the history of the origins of Rome through the character of Aeneas and all of the trials and tribulations that he faced. Given the historical context of the time, "Vergil seized this occasion to conceive of Roman Italians as a new entity, to frame for this new citizenry a new myth of nationhood, and, by means of his myth, to endow posterity."¹⁶ Vergil shapes this Roman identity not only through the character of Aeneas, the protagonist of the poem and *pater* of Rome, but also through the characterization of the female characters in the work and the interactions that they have with Aeneas. Rome is the nation "which the *Aeneid*'s Jupiter promises shall continue indefinitely (l. 278-79). If Roman expansion were to be so indefinitely long and large, it was all the more important to study and nurture the first phase carefully, to make it exemplary."¹⁷ Vergil's readers would be quick to accept this promise of an "indefinite" and powerful Rome and would also be eager to learn about the noble qualities which had existed with its earliest founder from Rome's beginning. The *Aeneid* thus provides its audience with an understanding of how Rome came to be founded and what kind of characteristics were a part of its inherited national identity. Indeed, the *Aeneid* is indisputably a patriotic piece which summarizes the qualities and legacies that Romans of Vergil's day had inherited while also serving as an example for future generations.

¹⁵ Katharine Toll, "Making Roman-Ness and the 'Aeneid'," *Classical Antiquity* 16.1 (1997): 34.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 41.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 40.

A fundamental component of the Roman Empire was a return to traditional Roman values, including a reinforcement of traditional gender roles. Thus, Vergil creates three female characters in his history—Camilla, Penthesilea, and Dido—who exemplify what happens when women are outside of cultural norms. And yet, all of these females embody certain characteristics which would be appropriate for any Roman to have, such as patriotism. Other qualities that they possess, while inappropriate for a Roman woman to exhibit, are the exact virtues that Roman men strove to demonstrate in their own lives, whether it was on the battlefield or in the Senate. Ultimately, Vergil uses his epic poem as a means to demonstrate that women who step outside the restraints that the male-dominated society has placed upon them—by possessing admirable characteristics which are only appropriate for males—are doomed to fail.

The *Aeneid* served as a piece by which the average Roman citizen could reflect upon his individual identity as well as the identity of Rome as a state and what exactly the Romans should pride themselves on as a nation and what qualities they should strive to exemplify in their daily lives. Underlying every episode within the poem is a set of fundamental Roman beliefs:

The poem proffers the standard Roman triad of virtues: *virtus* (courage and strength), *pietas* (correct attitudes and behavior towards gods, kin and associates), and *fides* (honesty and constancy), plus the Caesarian fourth, *clementia* (clemency). To these it adds the large general notion that the good life seeks distinction in the service of the state, and the woman's special virtue, *pudor* (continence).¹⁸

¹⁸ Ibid., 50.

Various characters within the work exhibit these virtues— or in some cases, a lack thereof. The *Aeneid*, then, while providing a story for the foundation of the city of Rome that supersedes but does not completely replace the story of Romulus and Remus,¹⁹ also ultimately argues for the formation of a Roman identity that consists of specific qualities.

Since a crucial component of Roman imperial identity was expansionism, the question of how to incorporate the various groups that Rome conquered was a pressing one for Romans of Vergil's time. Through his work, Vergil seeks to emphasize the importance of Romans' realizing that their nation originated by the formation of a conglomerate of different cultural groups. Thus, he urges his audience to remain open minded to the incorporation of other cultures into Roman society, particularly relevant as Rome was extending her borders during the Empire. Therefore, this contemplation of Roman national character not only provides an understanding of the basis for its foundation as a nation but also presents a challenge to consider its future, especially in regards to the assimilation of other non-Roman nations, and as demonstrated specifically in the *Aeneid*, the particular problem of assimilation of women into Roman society.

While Vergil uses his work as a means by which to establish a national Roman identity, by showing what is decidedly not Roman, he also uses it as an opportunity to serve as a warning, as the poem demonstrates to its readers the consequences of what happens when certain limits are passed. For instance, Vergil shows how virtue is a quality that can degenerate into *furor*, as exemplified by Aeneas himself at the end of the poem when, regardless of the extent of his piety, he succumbs to his rage and performs an act of murder. Additionally, in Vergil's depiction of

¹⁹ The traditional story of the founding of Rome is the story of Romulus and Remus, twin brothers who had been abandoned to die in the river. They were discovered by a she-wolf who supposedly nursed them back to health, and the boys went on to grow up and build a new city in 753 B.C., the traditional date for the founding of Rome. The story of Aeneas was incorporated into this as he supposedly was a distant ancestor of Romulus and Remus.

feminine *pudor* he “acknowledges that what women expect of themselves in connection with it can lead to rack and waste” as it did for several of the female characters in the poem.²⁰ Thus,

the *Aeneid* puts forward a program of values that both noncontroversially reproduces conventional Roman formulations and at the same time makes clear that acceptable subscription to the program cannot take the form of uncritical conventionality, but must consist of vigorous, vigilant interrogation and reflective scrutiny.²¹

Therefore, as evinced by the warning against *furor* and *pudor*, the *Aeneid* is not an entirely gendered program of warning for just the males or just the females of ancient Rome. Vergil addresses the issues that are relevant and potentially problematic for both sexes, as there are some flaws which are undesirable for both male and females— however, the consequences for females are often more dire. In this paper, I will focus on the female characterizations of Camilla, Penthesilea, and Dido, and the warning that they serve to the population of Rome— both male and female. Particularly, I will argue that Vergil asks his audience to prioritize these female characters, from the one who is the least foreign and therefore most reasonable to emulate, to the one who poses the biggest threat to Roman society by being the most foreign. On the spectrum of the least threatening foreign female to the most imposing, Camilla, as a native Italian woman, is at one end and Dido, the formidable queen of Carthage, is at the other. Penthesilea, the Amazonian warrior queen, is the medium between the two as she is nowhere near as relatable to Roman women as Camilla would be but is also not as threatening as Dido because she is not the head of an organized, wealthy state that had the serious potential to contend with Rome. This continuum provides Vergil’s audience with an understanding of certain

²⁰ Toll, 52.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 53.

Roman virtues that should be emulated by all Romans as well as an example of the dangers that women who violate traditional gender roles pose to a civilized society.

In regards to the spectrum of the female characters in the *Aeneid*, Camilla is the one who, as a native Italian female represents the one who is most reasonable in terms of a Roman's ability to emulate her and her characteristics, the most defining of which is her patriotism. She is first introduced at the end of Book 7 as a member of the Italian forces that Aeneas must defeat in order to gain control of Latium and fulfill his mission of founding a new nation. From when she is first introduced, Vergil makes it clear to his audience that Camilla is a character who does not perform the standard tasks of Roman women, mainly due to the fact that she was raised by her father who "when the small child took her first steps, he armed her hands with a sharp javelin, and hung a bow and quiver from her infant shoulder" (Book XI, l. 783-5). She is identified as alien to her gender from the first: she is described as "a warrior girl whose hands were never deft at distaff or wool basket, skills of Minerva (but) was hard and trained to take the shock of war, or to outrace the winds in running" (Book VII, l. 1107-10). In Book 11, Vergil describes to his audience Camilla's origins, and how she was sacred to the goddess Diana. She was raised in the mountains by her father, thus her upbringing was quite literally not part of a traditional society. "No gold headband, no flowing outer garment covered her, but a tiger skin hung down her back from head to foot; and as a child she flung play darts" (Book XI, l. 786-89). Nonetheless, she was considered an impressive figure to her people, as "to see her, men and women pouring from the fields, from houses, thronged her passage way and stared wide-eyed with admiration" at her (Book XII, l. 1115-18). The main reason Camilla was still admired by the crowds, despite her lack of feminine skills, is that she retained the most important of female attributes— she

“remained untouched and ever cherished passion for...virginity” (Book XI, l. 795-6). In the classical world, a woman’s virtue was of utmost importance— it was one of the few things of value that she possessed and it made her worthy.

While maintaining one’s virginity was an attribute that was admired by all Romans, it is important to note that Camilla is a native Italian, not a Roman— Vergil subtly alludes to this concern of the establishment of the process of citizenship and the issues of assimilation of other cultures by this example of native Italians whom Aeneas must conquer in order to establish a truly Roman society.²² Thus, as a warrior she is a threat to typical Roman ideology of the feminine; but as a virgin she stays within the confines of gender norms. Although Camilla does not possess the skills typical of a Roman woman, she does demonstrate certain qualities that were evident in Roman men. “Fearlessly on foot with equal arms” (Book XI, l. 964) she engages men on the battleground. Camilla’s prowess in warfare is evident by her slaughtering of Trojan troops, as Vergil addresses her as “savage girl” and asks “whom did your lance unhorse, what victims, first and last, how many thrown down on the battlefield, torn bodies dying?” (Book XI, l. 903-6). As Camilla continues her decimation of Aeneas’ troops one of his soldiers angrily exclaims to his comrades “what cowardice has entered into you? shall a single woman drive you out of line?” (Book XI, l. 995-7). In this passage, Vergil conveys a sense of shame that the men are experiencing as a result of being bested by a woman, even one that is fierce on the battlefield. While Camilla’s prowess in fighting is made clear by the many men she kills, she is referred to as “an Amazon” (Book XI, l.881); thus, her sex remains a defining part of her identity, one that

²² Toll extrapolates this idea in her article “Making Roman-Ness and the ‘Aeneid’,” as she argues that there was the possibility that Vergil himself had not been born a Roman citizen. Thus, an underlying motive in his agenda of writing the *Aeneid* could possibly be to emphasize the importance for Rome to be willing to assimilate new cultures into its society. This assimilation, however, does not extend to allowing citizenship for women, as evinced by the problems of the female characters Aeneas encounters and their incompatibility with him.

overshadows even her military talent and cannot be ignored in war, regardless of the number of enemies slain. As a result of this, it is evident that the overall reaction to Camilla is that even a woman as skillful and impressive as she is, is out of place in a man's world.²³

Although her sense of nationalism is laudable, her lack of certain characteristics exclude her from the possibility of being considered an ideal Roman woman. For instance, "her lack of interest or skill in spinning and weaving precludes her from any association with the faithful passivity so valued by Roman men in their women"²⁴ and consequently, due to her bold nature and lack of said passiveness, Camilla cannot be commemorated in the same light as Lucretia. Her rejection of feminine behavior means that she should not be emulated.

Nonetheless, although Camilla is not representative of the typical woman in antiquity, she is still subject to a fatal flaw that is distinctly feminine. Upon seeing an enemy soldier with "luxurious Trojan gear" (Book XI, 1. 1060) she is possessed by a desire "to flaunt that golden plunder" (Book XI, 1. 1061-2) and pursues him "recklessly, in a girl's love of finery" (Book XI, 1. 1066). Camilla meets her death consequently by this feminine and "irrational desire for booty and love of spoils" despite having until this point "performed ably and well in a male-dominated war."²⁵ Desire for spoils in war is a trait which is also applied to males; Vergil makes a point, however, to emphasize that it is this "girl's" desire for finery that distracts her and brings her to her doom. Camilla meets her death at the hands of the Trojan Arruns, who ambushes her and

²³ For some scholars (see Lee Fratantuono "Diana in the 'Aeneid,'" *Quaderni Urbinati di Cultura Classica* 83.2 (2006), 29-43) the question of Camilla herself as an actual figure in history is an interesting one to ponder. If Vergil had completely invented her it would detract from her credibility and influence as a model for Roman citizens. On the other hand, if she actually existed she could serve as an example of a woman in early Italian history who exhibited extreme patriotism and love of country.

²⁴ Barbara Weiden Boyd, "Virgil's Camilla and the Traditions of Catalogue and Ecphrasis (Aeneid 7.803-17)," *The American Journal of Philology* 113.2 (1992): 216.

²⁵ Fratantuono, 36.

takes advantage of her distraction with Trojan finery but “put no further trust in his lance nor in himself to meet the warrior girl in arms” (Book XI, l. 1100-2) as he flees the scene after having hurled his javelin at her from afar. Despite her admirable performance in the theatre of war, the fact that she is a female and consequently subject to irrational feminine whims— namely, a love of finery— proves to lead to her downfall.

Camilla’s death is not completely without meaning, however, as after Camilla’s death, the “older women, mothers— as true love of homeland taught them, and as they had seen Camilla fight—outdid each other now at hurling missiles with unsteady hands” (Book XI, l. 1209-12) and attempted to defend their home “for their town wall they dared, they burned, to be the first to die” (Book XI, l.1214-15). Thus, the legacy Camilla leaves for Italian females, even if merely as a result of her fictional being and dramatic death in Vergil’s *Aeneid*, is certainly significant as these women feel compelled to demonstrate their patriotism in honor of the death of Camilla “as if the vacancy left by the wonderful girl-warrior had the power to reorient the lines of address and responsibility in Latin society in such a way as to draw the matrons toward the function she has now departed from.”²⁶ Although she has left this vacancy, it is clear that it is not feasible for the other women in the poem— or later generations of Italian women— to fill the void of an independent female, especially in a battle field setting as their “unsteady hands” exemplify the fact that they are unable to perform in war. If the Italian women observing the war and witnessing Camilla’s death saw her demise as an opportunity and inspiration to express their patriotism in a more profound way, although perhaps not as extreme as to actually partake in the

²⁶Toll, 115.

war, it can be said that Camilla is a character worthy of admiration and in respect to her patriotism, worthy of imitation, even for women.

Vergil himself “takes pains to point to the divine intervention in Camilla’s death, which helps underscore his respect for her. . . Camilla’s death serves as an example to the women of Latium, spurring them on to risk their lives to defend their home.”²⁷ When Arruns kills Camilla he does so with the assistance of Apollo, as he prays to him that he “grant (the Trojans) wipe out with arms this ignominy” (Book XI, l. 1076-7), referring to the warrior girl. Ultimately, however, the purple and gold clothes she is wearing on the battlefield, while representative of a leader, also reflect “the inappropriateness of Camilla’s participation in the war.”²⁸ In acknowledging this contradiction and her “feminine” desire for spoils, it is evident that she is worthy of being admired, but only to a certain extent.

A cultural tension has existed throughout nearly all of Rome’s history between Rome and those who are “barbarian,” that is any society that is not Roman. There is no exception in the *Aeneid*, as Camilla’s national identity is depicted more so as native Italian instead of truly Roman. Aeneas is the one who is described as the *pater* of Rome and thus, since he must defeat Camilla and the rest of her Italian allies, the latter cannot be considered forerunners of the Roman people. In order to reiterate this fact that Camilla is not to be the standard which Roman women should strive to achieve, Vergil makes sure that his audience recognizes the similarities between her character and that of Dido, who herself is a more extreme version of a foreign female threat. For instance, when Camilla is being described “the mention of purple and gold evokes Dido,”²⁹ whom Vergil has already taken extensive time and care in depicting as a threat

²⁷Fratantuono, 37.

²⁸ Ibid., 37.

²⁹ Fratantuono, 32.

to Aeneas and subsequently an enemy of Rome. Vergil also emphasizes Camilla's wild upbringing "amid rough haunts of beast" (Book XI, l. 780) by her father, who himself possessed a "fierce nature" (Book XI, l. 777). Although she is the more appropriate model for a Roman woman to admire, as opposed to Dido or Penthesilea, nonetheless Camilla still challenges the standard role of women in the classical world and therefore women in Rome would have been encouraged to follow her example only up to a specific extent. Roman males, on the other hand, would do well to emulate Camilla's patriotism in addition to her leadership skills and talent on the battle field. Thus, Vergil portrays Camilla as a woman whose patriotism causes her to be worthy of admiration but her ultimate downfall as a result of "a girl's love of finery" serves to remind his audience that her model is neither an ideal nor realistic one for Roman women themselves to follow.

The Amazon leader Penthesilea sits in the middle of the continuum that consists of Camilla at one end and Dido at the other, as she is another female warrior who is an even stronger example of a foreign female—an Amazon—who is not the ideal Roman woman. As previously mentioned, Vergil's audience would immediately understand the reference to Penthesilea in Book 1 when Aeneas contemplates a series of scenes from the Trojan War that adorn the walls of the temple at Carthage, ending with a picture of Penthesilea. In the *Aeneid* therefore Penthesilea represents a culture with which ancient Romans were familiar and that undeniably fascinated them, as evinced by the immense number of times that Amazons appear as subjects in classical art or references in literature. One reason why the Romans found the Greek myth of an Amazon nation so intriguing was that they were a group of women who possessed skills which the Romans themselves would expect to find in their own, much more civilized

society— proficiency with weapons, an ability to conquer an enemy. However, the fact that these characteristics belonged not to men but rather to women who actually spurned the advances of men, was in direct opposition to Roman beliefs and ideals. In classical antiquity, Amazons were often depicted in art as “the violent, promiscuous, and war-loving Amazons (who) became an analogous challenge to the order of civilization”³⁰ and they were often associated with any culture that was in opposition to Rome, such as the Persians, or in the *Aeneid*’s case, the Carthaginians. The fifth-century historian Hellanicus described the Amazonians as “a golden-shielded, silver-axed, male-infant-killing host.”³¹ They were feared not so much for their political cunning but rather for their military prowess and consequently were viewed as formidable and worthy opponents. Thus, they were viewed in literature as well as art as belonging to a culture that was in stark contrast to that of ancient Greece and Rome and posed a threat to their societal standards. Penthesilea therefore, while not an actual character with an active, speaking role in the *Aeneid*, is depicted in the engraving on the doors of the temple of Juno at Carthage, and observed there by Aeneas. She serves as a reference point for Vergil who draws comparisons between her and the other females in the poem that emphasize their foreignness and their femininity.

Penthesilea is described as “a girl who dared fight men, a warrior queen” (Book I, l.72). Although she receives a mere five lines in Vergil’s epic, Penthesilea is a character from Greek myth and epic poetry whom Vergil’s audience, familiar with the events of the Trojan War and Homer’s *Iliad*, would have understood. She is an essential contributor to Vergil’s characterization of foreign female characters and the role that they cannot have in a civilized

³⁰ Fantham, 131.

³¹ Hellanicus, in *Women in the Classical World*, eds. Fantham et. al. 131.

society, despite commanding an impressive array of skills and talents such as management of a city and prowess on the battlefield. Penthesilea's position as last in the literary and visual catalogue of scenes from the Trojan War is extremely significant as that is the moment when another powerful female, Dido, is introduced. Thus the connection between the two women is obvious.

Vergil also explicitly connects Penthesilea and Camilla using a number of tactics designed to emphasize their likeness, and consequently the way in which Roman society should view them as a foreign threat. For example, Vergil's intentional placement of both of these characters last in the catalogue of troops is significant because as Weiden Boyd asserts, this placement emphasizes not only threat, but failure: "as in the tradition of literary catalogues, the appearance of a female at the conclusion of the temple-frieze ecphrasis is implicitly ominous for the forces which she is allied."³² The fact that both Camilla and Penthesilea are listed last in the catalogue emphasizes the similarities between the two women and the fact that they should be interpreted by the audience as two unique characters presenting the same threat to traditional Roman feminine values. Further similarities exist in the actual text of the *Aeneid*, as "both Penthesilea and Camilla are called *bellatrix* (l. 493, 7/805), the only two instances of the word in the poem,"³³ are characterized as *furens*, and take on the role of a man in battle. Vergil writes that "amid the carnage, like an Amazon, Camilla rode exultant, one breast bared for fighting ease, her quiver at her back" (Book XI, l. 881-3). This is a direct reference to the Amazonian style of fighting: when Aeneas is contemplating the temple at Carthage, he observed "Penthesilea fiery amid her host, buckling a golden girdle beneath her bare and arrogant breast" (Book I, l.

³² Weiden Boyd, 226.

³³ Lowenstarm, Steven. "The Pictures on Juno's Temple in the 'Aeneid'," *The Classical World* 87.2 (1993): 42.

669-71). The parallels between the language that Vergil intentionally uses to describe the two women highlights their likeness. This is further stressed by the fate that befalls these women—death on the battleground, at the hands of a male. As Weiden Boyd puts it, in comparing Camilla to Penthesilea, “they are leaders of enemy troops, and so representative of the enemy; and, in spite of their personal excellence in battle and/or strategic shrewdness, they are doomed, along with their allies, to fail.”³⁴ Thus, Penthesilea can be held in a comparable regard to Camilla, as both are foreign females who are characterized by their skill— and ultimate death— on the battle field.

With Camilla at one end of the spectrum of foreign female threat and Penthesilea in the middle, Dido is positioned at the extreme opposite end and is depicted as the most foreign and consequently the most dangerous in regards to how far she oversteps gender boundaries. Although not a warrior, as the head of an organized state, she poses the most formidable threat to Aeneas and the future of Rome. Dido is the female who has the most intimate relationship with Aeneas, which ultimately proves to be her own undoing. Dido is technically the first of three women whom Aeneas encounters on his journey after he flees the fallen city of Troy to find a new homeland. Aeneas arrives upon the shores of Carthage, where Dido “in such delight moved amid her people, cheering on the toil of a kingdom in the making” (Book I, l. 685-7), exerting the authority of an experienced and well-respected ruler. As he waits to encounter her for the first time, Aeneas studies a temple³⁵ which had been erected by Dido in Juno’s honor and was adorned with various scenes from the Trojan War.

³⁴ Weiden Boyd, 219.

³⁵ There is no actual remaining physical evidence of the temple at Carthage, only textual evidence.

While Dido may initially be admired by Vergil's audience for her ability to rule a nation and her current status of celibacy, the fact that she succumbs to her lust for Aeneas results in a degeneration of her moral character. As mentioned earlier, in Book I, Dido is compared to Diana, which is inappropriate as she cannot

accurately be compared to Diana, the virgin huntress. . . Dido has been living celibate in a wild place. But in the context of Aeneas' first sight of her, she is more akin to Minerva or even Juno, fulfilling the role of city-builder and lawgiver, watching over her people with a mother's affection.³⁶

Although she has been celibate and living in a wilder place, her relationship with Aeneas spurs her to abandon her celibacy and she can no longer be considered comparable to Diana. An abandonment of her celibate lifestyle, after she had already abandoned the stereotypical role of mother and wife in favor of being a political ruler, culminates in Vergil's audience's low opinion of Dido.

Although Dido's love for Aeneas and the consequent madness she is driven to is characteristic of females and their inability to control their emotions, it originated as a result of divine influence when Venus plots to "ensnare the queen" (Book I, l. 921) and to "pin her down in passion" (Book I, l. 922). Dido's epithet throughout the *Aeneid* is *infelix* Dido, and she is consumed by this love for Aeneas, "burning, in her madness" (Book IV, l. 95) that was inspired in her not simply because of her femininity but as a result of divine intervention. Vergil's audience however would readily accept Dido's madness as stemming from her emotional instability as a woman. As a result of this, Dido is an even more threatening female than Camilla

³⁶ Fratantuono, 30.

or Penthesilae because she represents the capacity for all women, even those who had established themselves as an able and effective ruler, to be driven mad by love and therefore abandon all their responsibilities.

Dido is not only a threat in representing all women's capacity to lose their minds over love, but as queen of Carthage, Dido presents a direct, political threat to the future of the foundation of Rome, for if she had been successful in convincing Aeneas to remain with her in Carthage he would have retained his Trojan identity and never would have reached Latium and consequently would not have founded Rome. Dido attempts to persuade Aeneas to remain with her, by taking him "with her among her buildings, showed her Sidonian wealth, her walls prepared" (Book IV, l. 104-5) and offers that the Trojans "join (the Carthaginians) on equal terms" (Book I, l. 777). Dido is "the woman for whom his Trojan-ness defines him,"³⁷ as she gets to know him better by asking questions about Troy and the entire scene prior to their first meeting is a description of the events of the Trojan War. As Aeneas is to be the founder of Rome, he must abandon his Trojan identity, just as he must choose his duty to his future country over his love for Dido. "In contrast to erotic *amor*, is the *Aeneid's* other great love motif, *amor patriae*: when Dido appeals to Aeneas' love for her, invoking her generosity to him and the dangers his departure leaves her to confront, he says to her, about Italy, *Hic amor, haec patria est* (4, 237)."³⁸ Dido serves as a dangerous distraction on his long journey to Italy— she never was his end goal.

Aeneas and Dido are described as having become "unmindful of the realm, prisoners of lust" (Book I, l. 265). So not only does Dido serve as a threat to Aeneas because she is a

³⁷ Ibid, 43.

³⁸Toll, "What's Love Got to Do with It? The Invocation to Erato, and Patriotism in the 'Aeneid'," 113, "There is my love, there is my homeland."

distraction, but also is herself distracted from good governance by lust. The opposite of a virtuous woman in the ancient world was one who was driven by lust— and although Aeneas is equally culpable in engaging in these lustful acts with Dido, women are traditionally the ones who are blamed for being ruled by their passions and emotions. And although Dido and Aeneas enter into a relationship which gives the appearance of marriage, it does not have a legitimate hold over Aeneas. This is representative of yet another way in which Dido is a more serious threat than Camilla or Penthesilea, as she attempts to manipulate marriage as a tie where one did not legally exist in order to cover her lust. After informing Dido of his need to continue on his journey, he tells her that he “never held the torches of a bridegroom, never entered upon the pact of marriage” (Book IV, l. 467-8). Vergil uses very deliberate language in describing how Dido, on the other hand, “thought no longer of a secret love but called it marriage. Thus, under that name, she hid her fault” (Book IV, l. 236-8). This is another reference which Vergil’s contemporaries would have understood and not faulted Aeneas for abandoning Dido, as they did not perform any of the marriage rituals and consequently it was not a sanctioned or legal marriage.

Dido is not merely depicted as a victim of tragic love, as she possesses characteristics which do make her a formidable leader. When Aeneas sees her for the first time she “took her seat (and) began to give (the Carthaginians) judgments and rulings, to apportion work with fairness, or assign some tasks by lot” (Book I, l. 690-2). These are tasks which Roman men would have had the exclusive right to perform in their society. Dido, on the other hand, is portrayed as an able and just ruler— that is, until she becomes ensnared by love and as Vergil

describes her, not even a thousand lines into his epic poem, “luckless, already given over to ruin” (Book I, l. 972).

As mentioned above, the positioning of Penthesilea prior to the introduction of Dido is extremely significant in that Penthesilea’s death and defeat foreshadows Dido’s. The final scene depicting “the Amazonian queen inwardly prepares the reader and Aeneas for the appearance of Dido which follows immediately” and yet “Dido is not now Penthesilea, but the tragic death of the frenzied Amazon is destined to be Dido’s.”³⁹ Dido does not share Penthesilea’s skill on the battlefield, a skill which the Romans admired, but does resemble her in the way that she is a foreign female leader. Dido is not, however, equivalent to Penthesilea in terms of foreignness but rather supersedes her.

Although Dido, as the founder of a city and gracious host to Aeneas and his men, may seem more civilized than an Amazonian woman “who dared fight men” (Book I, l. 672), she is undoubtedly more foreign than both Penthesilea and Camilla, as she presents the most serious threat to the future of Rome. In expressing her outrage at her failure to persuade Aeneas to remain with her in Carthage, Dido commands her descendants to “besiege with hate his progeny and all his race to come...no love, no pact must be between our people” (Book IV, l. 865-8). Even though Aeneas was successful in evading the threat that Dido posed by tempting him to stay in Carthage, she leaves a lasting legacy that manifests itself in the historic rivalry between Rome and Carthage.

The severity of the threat that Dido poses to Rome is made evident by the fact that one of the most significant historical allusions in the *Aeneid* is the resemblance between this queen of

³⁹ Lowenstarm, 43-44.

Carthage and Cleopatra, notorious queen of Egypt. “The Roman audience of Virgil’s day would have seen little in Dido besides Cleopatra, ready to seduce another Roman and threaten his fate.”

⁴⁰ There are many allusions that “consistently associate Dido with the wild, uncivilized world—a world that differs sharply from both the Carthage that she has tried to create and the future Rome that governs Aeneas’ destiny.”⁴¹ In the same way, Cleopatra was often associated with the uncivilized world and viewed as an enemy of Rome. Parallels exist in the language used to describe both Cleopatra and Dido—in “Cleopatra Ode” (Odes 1.37) Horace refers to the former as “*regina*,” just as Vergil does in regards to Dido.

Another notable similarity between Cleopatra and Dido is that both die as a result of suicide, as “each of the two queens had a sense of pride, self-respect, and dignity, all of which demanded self-inflicted death.”⁴² Suicide in the ancient world was considered to be a more honorable option than facing defeat or public shame. Dido’s suicide resulted from her being “swept away burning by furies” (Book IV, l.519) that stemmed from her failed relationship with Aeneas. Dido is so enraged that after Aeneas’ departure she resolves “at the first chance, to end her hated life” (Book IV, l. 877). The way in which Dido dies is significant in distancing her from Camilla and Penthesilea, who both meet their deaths at the hands of men on the battlefield, whereas Dido is driven to commit suicide. Indeed, “the queens are two quite distinct characters, sympathetically drawn by two poets unsympathetic to their causes; they are women whose noble characteristics make them worthy enemies of Rome.”⁴³ They are noble not only in the sense that both Cleopatra and Dido are both of royal lineage, but also in the way that some of their

⁴⁰ Fratantuono, 38. Cleopatra engaged in (what was considered by the Roman public) scandalous relationships with both Julius Caesar and Mark Antony, relationships which distracted from those men’s political agendas in Rome.

⁴¹ Christopher Nappa, “Unmarried Dido: *Aeneid* 4.550-52,” *Hermes* 135 (2007): 302.

⁴² Janice M. Benario. “Dido and Cleopatra,” *Vergilius (1959-)* 16 (1970): 4.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 5.

characteristics— their leadership skills and wealth, for instance— are honorable and reputable. Despite these factors, neither Dido nor Cleopatra can be considered admirable to the extent that Roman society would have included them. For instance, “whatever Dido realizes about her own nature, Vergil lets us see that she has strong affinities with the virginal females whose existence in Greco-Roman myth represents at best a margin of civilized life and at worst an inversion of, or challenge to it.”⁴⁴ Carthage historically was antithetical to Rome, and this sentiment is clearly reflected in the *Aeneid* as Dido, portrayed not only as the ruler but also the founder of Carthage, is depicted in such a negative light. There is no place for Dido to be included within Roman society, which is exemplified in the fact that the possibility of her joining Aeneas in Rome is never considered. Herself a leader, she can not abandon Carthage, but at Aeneas’ departure she is so distraught that she is not even fit to rule and ultimately takes her own life. This further emphasizes the idea that because women are so ruled by their passions and emotions, they cannot maintain an authoritative role within a society.

When Dido first appears to Aeneas, Vergil depicts her “as on Eurotas bank or Cynthus ridge Diana trains her dancers, and behind her on every hand the mountain nymphs appear, a myriad converging” (Book I, l. 678-81). In juxtaposition to the *Odyssey*, in the *Aeneid*, where there is no character who fulfils Rome’s standards of an ideal woman,

when Aeneas meets Dido. . . he is meeting with the political authority of Carthage, regina and dux. The *Odyssey*’s careful preservation of societal norms collapses in Dido’s Carthage...by associating Dido with (nymphs), Vergil emphasizes that her connections to civilized life are problematic.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Nappa, 309.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 312.

In comparing the *Aeneid* to one of the great epic poems of Greek literature, Homer's *Odyssey*, the most striking difference is that in the *Odyssey* there is an example of a woman who, while exceptional due to her intelligence, remains within the confines of her gender role as she is the paramount example of the dutiful and loyal wife. She is quite different from Dido in that she is a woman worthy for the protagonist to strive to return to; Aeneas, on the other hand, cannot remain with Dido. Thus, although Aeneas attempts to establish a relationship with Dido, she is so outside cultural norms that she cannot be a part of the civilized Roman life that is Aeneas' destiny and patriotic duty.

At the opposite end of the spectrum from Dido is Camilla, but the limit to which Camilla can be considered an appropriate model for a Roman woman is evinced by her association with Dido. The parallels drawn between Camilla and Dido are many, beginning with the catalogue of Italian forces in Book 7 where Camilla is first introduced. "The naming of a female as last among the leaders is ominous, with its overtones of abnormality and weakness: a woman's leadership has already once in the *Aeneid* been proven problematic,"⁴⁶ referring to the rather obvious example of Dido. Not only is Camilla a female, but she is a non-Roman, and "in a catalogue describing non-Roman leaders, a place has been found for a woman whose leadership is an inversion of typical or normative roles for women in Roman society."⁴⁷ Again, the fact that she is non-Roman is reminiscent of Dido. And although Camilla is indisputably not Roman, she is a better option for Roman women to imitate in terms of her patriotism as opposed to Dido, as there exists a conflict "on the mortal level, a conflict between the image of Eastern womanhood embodied in Dido and the image of native Italian womanhood embodied in Camilla."⁴⁸ At the

⁴⁶ Weiden, 214-215.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 218.

⁴⁸ Fratantuono, 40.

very least, Camilla is an Italian who is driven by a sense of duty to her country. Dido, on the other hand, is a foreigner who allows her infatuation with Aeneas to cause her to be distracted and “unmindful of the realm” (Book IV, l. 265). Vergil describes how “towers, half-built, rose no father; men no longer trained in arms or toiled to make harbors and battlements impregnable. Projects were broken off, laid over, and the menacing huge walls with cranes unmoving stood against the sky” (Book IV, l. 121-126) as a result of Dido’s preoccupation with Aeneas. This would further enforce Roman beliefs that women were unable to participate in the realm of politics and government, because they were subject to being ruled by their passions and their irrationality. Dido is then similar to Camilla in the way that both suffer from a fatal flaw that is feminine in nature.

The consistent theme that has been discussed thus far is the idea that the women in Vergil’s *Aeneid* were foreign, female, and a threat to traditional gender roles in ancient Rome. Vergil intentionally characterizes Camilla, Penthesilea, and Dido as being a combination of these three qualities in order to emphasize their overall dangerousness and the fact that they are ultimately inappropriate models for women in Roman society, despite the redeeming qualities they possess. Foremost, they are foreign because “ethnographical curiosity about the customs and society of ‘barbarians’ is combined with a stereotype about powerful women to indict the peoples led by such women as either figuratively effeminate (in Herodotus’ case) or literally female (in Virgil’s case).”⁴⁹ In portraying any society that was in opposition to Rome, Roman authors typically characterized their enemies by describing qualities that were in direct contrast to Rome— for instance, male: female, Roman: barbaric. Secondly, females represent the

⁴⁹ Weiden Boyd, 219.

naturally weaker and inferior sex, subject to emotional instability and rash action, which is clearly represented in Dido's deteriorated mental state of mind when Aeneas leaves Carthage for Rome. Finally, and as a result of those two aforementioned characteristics, these women serve as a threat to Roman society because they challenge the cultural norms and standard gender roles, often by having direct confrontations with men. They thus provide a dangerous example for women as there is potential for them to serve as inspiration, and to the men in the *Aeneid* they are an actual threat (especially in the case of Penthesilea and Camilla, who physically endanger the men and their lives on the battlefield) to their positions of power. Ultimately, despite all of Vergil's poetic compassion in his depiction of the fate of these women, "he represents the state as a structure in which women must ever serve men's needs or be suppressed,"⁵⁰ thus explaining the reason as to why all three of these female characters' fates result in their deaths.

Although the *Aeneid* is careful to establish a certain set of virtues which Romans should strive to imitate, it also contains an overarching warning to its audience as to what happens when certain boundaries of those virtues are surpassed, regardless of gender. This warning applies not only to women who overstep cultural norms— as clearly exemplified by Camilla, Penthesilea, and Dido, all of whom meet a tragic end— but also to men who exceed a certain point, as demonstrated by Aeneas. In the final book and in the climactic closing scene of the *Aeneid*, Aeneas exemplifies the "limitations of pietas when confronted by furor"⁵¹ when he kills his rival Turnus, despite the latter's plea for mercy. Turnus begs Aeneas to "go no further out of hatred" (Book XII, l. 1275-6). Aeneas, however, is so overcome by his wrath that he demonstrates neither piety nor compassion but instead degenerates into a state of uncontrollable rage. This act

⁵⁰ Fantham, 299.

⁵¹ Lowenstarm, 44.

is demonstrative of the fact that “heroic action, even when predicated on virtue, can succumb to an irrationality that compromises all noble goals.”⁵² This is made evident not only through the example of Aeneas but through the women in the poem who possess admirable characteristics—patriotism, prowess in battle, and ability to lead—and yet, as a result of overstepping cultural boundaries by possessing all of those characteristics, are doomed to fail. One of the main themes of the *Aeneid* is that “in a civilized culture, the pursuit of *pietas* always entails compromise and subsequent suffering.”⁵³ Thus, Vergil serves to emphasize the fact that qualities that are held in high regard in Roman society—even when exhibited by the proper figures, namely male citizens of Rome and not foreign females—can still be potentially detrimental if they exceed a certain point. Vergil does not make explicitly clear what point that specifically is, but it is evident that the virtues by which Romans sought to define themselves had to be exercised with caution and held in careful regard.

The *Aeneid* serves as a national identity piece by which Romans could reflect upon what it truly meant to be Roman. There were certain characteristics which were admirable for Romans to have, but not Roman women, as evinced by the examples of Camilla, Penthesilea, and Dido and the tragic fate which ultimately befalls them. These women, fulfilling the double threat of being both foreign and female, serve as an example for what happens when women overstep cultural boundaries and transcend gender norms.

Despite that conclusion, Vergil depicts these three women as being part of a spectrum which serves to represent which character is most worthy of being emulated and which one poses the most significant threat to Rome. As a native Italian and an individual driven by her love of

⁵² Ibid., 45.

⁵³ Lowenstarm, 48.

country, Camilla is the foreign female character in the *Aeneid* who can reasonably be imitated, to a degree. As Camilla is the final female character that is introduced in the plot, Vergil has had time to establish the other foreign female individuals to whom he compares Camilla in order to emphasize both their foreignness and the threat that they ultimately pose to not only the protagonist of the work but to Roman society as a whole. Camilla is reminiscent of the character of Penthesilea in that they are both warrior females who dare to fight among men and lead troops into battle, which is clearly a male dominated world. The description of Camilla's purple and gold clothes also evokes Dido, reflecting her inappropriate participation in warfare. Camilla and Penthesilea share a connection in that Vergil positions them last in a catalogue, and in the catalogue where Penthesilea is last and used to pave the way for the introduction of Dido. The relationship that Aeneas has with Camilla and Penthesilea is one that is confined to the battlefield, and although Dido acts as his lover, which is more typical of a relationship between a man and a woman in the ancient world, she too ultimately shows herself to be outside of cultural norms and consequently unable to be assimilated into Aeneas' world, and thereby Roman society. Indeed, the relationships that each of these three women have with Aeneas all fall completely outside typical societal standards, as they are women who all have attempted to establish themselves as independent females in a world that was regarded as rightly and necessarily dominated by men due to female's supposed ineptitude.

Clearly, all three of these women are interconnected in ways which serve to ultimately prove a point about the role of women in ancient Rome, which is that women who attempt to insert themselves into a man's world of politics and warfare will ultimately fail.

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