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Rehearsing the Other Sex: Impersonation of Women in Ancient Classroom Ethopoeia

The vast majority of pupils in ancient classrooms were male. Although girls were admitted to the lower levels of primary and secondary public education rarely[1], they never had access to rhetorical training[2]. Ancient schoolboys, however, frequently practiced a popular exercise called 'ethopoeia', in which they composed speeches in the voices of various characters. Among those were also most frequently women.

The reason for the prevalence of female impersonation in the ancient classroom is not immediately apparent. To provide an account of the purpose behind it, this essay will first discuss the exercise of ethopoeia in general and the specific features of female impersonation in extant sources. Next, it will review the problems with accounts of female ethopoeia in contemporary scholarship and propose a new solution.

The exercise of impersonation was called ἠθοποιία in Greek. Rhetoricians use this term in three distinct ways[3]. First, it may signify display of the speaker's good character as a means of persuasion. A second meaning is a rhetorical figure in which an author makes another person speak within the context of his or her own text. The main focus of this essay, however, will be ethopoeia

[1] See Marrou 1948, p. 369; Bonner 1977, pp. 135-136.
[2] See Hemelrijk 1999, p. 59: «their education usually stopped short at the study of rhetoric».
[3] See Hagen 1966, pp. 5-19; 62-64; 70-74.

in its third sense, that of a particular type of classroom exercise, the eleventh of the fourteen exercises known as progymnasmata, which are situated at a transitional stage from grammar to rhetoric.

In progymnasmata manuals, ethopoeia is defined as the imitation of the character of a particular person in a particular situation. Three subclasses are commonly distinguished, ethical, pathetic and mixed, depending on whether the imitation emphasizes habitual attitudes, transient emotions, or some mixture of both.

It might seem self-evident that the ability to mimic another person's character in speech is a vital skill for any good orator. In Athens, by the 4th century B.C. that skill had been developed to perfection. Due to the legal requirement that male citizens had to plead their own cases, skilled composers of speeches earned money ghost-writing addresses for the less verbally adept[4], a profitable business known as logography. Since a great deal depended on the success of a plea, and using a ghostwriter was regarded with suspicion, it was essential that such prepared speeches appear authentic. But, since women could not speak for themselves in Athenian courts[5], there would have been no practical reason to study female impersonation.

The situation was slightly different in Rome. Roman law did not formally prohibit free women from pleading their own cases[6]. The issue was rather a matter of taste and tradition. A decent *matrona* didn't do so. But there were exceptions. The *Digests* (III 1, 1, 5) and Valerius Maximus (VIII 3) report the case of a certain Carfania or C. Afrania, who dared to plead herself in presence of the praetor. Valerius names two more examples (Maesia, Hortensia). But those were rare enough cases to provoke attention. Moreover, there never existed any serious tradition of logography in Rome.

[4] See Lipsius 1912, pp. 905-906.
[5] Women had to be represented by a male person; see Lipsius 1912, p. 791.
[6] See Gardner 1987, p. 262.

It is surprising, then, that about one third of the examples of written ethopoeiae preserved in ancient authors or as suggested themes in text-books impersonate women, mostly mythical characters such as Niobe, Medea, Hecuba, or Andromache (or, in Latin, Juno or Dido), much less frequently anonymous stock characters from comedy such as a prostitute retiring from business (Libanius, *Eth.* 18)[7].

The proportion of female impersonation in ethopoeiae preserved on papyri or tablets is quite similar, approximately one fourth to one third[8]. There are, for instance, a prose ethopoeia of Clytemnestra, and hexametric pieces of Calliope and Athena[9]. In a series of short hexametric ethopoeiae preserved on a Heidelberg papyrus, two out of six are in the voices of women[10]. Of the similar short verse ethopoeiae found in the *Anthologia Palatina*[11] 14 out of 32 are female.

On the other hand, Maud Gleason has recently pointed out that the sophists of the Imperial period were exceedingly solicitous about the manliness of their pupils, about their growing up to be decent members of a male society[12]. Accordingly, they were anxious to make them avoid anything that might bring about effeminacy of any kind. If Gleason is right, however, there arises an obvious inconsistency between this concern and the undeniable popularity of female ethopoeia. Would not an exercise that

[7] Among ethopoeiae preserved from antiquity, the following are in female voices: Aphth., *Prog.* 35, 17 - 36, 20 Rabe (Niobe); Lib., *Eth.* 1 (Medea); 2 (Andromache); 8 and 9 (Niobe); 16 (Polyxena); 17 (Medea); 18 (a prostitute); Severus, *Eth.* 5, I, 544, 11-19 Walz (Briseis); Nicol., *Prog.* I, 383, 8 - 384, 3 Walz (Cassandra); I, 392, 22 - 394, 18 Walz (Laodamia); Ennod., *Dict.* 25 (Thetis); 27 (Juno); 28 (Dido). Andromache as suggested subject in Ps.-Hermog., *Prog.* 20, 8; 21, 14 Rabe and Nicol., *Prog.* 64, 12 Felten; Hecuba in Aphth., *Prog.* 35, 4 Rabe. Cf. Hawley 1995, pp. 258-260; 265-266.
[8] See e.g. Fernández Delgado 1994.
[9] P. Vindob. G 29789, 10-27 (Pack^2 2528); P. Graves I r., 9-17 (Pack^2 1844; *editio princeps* in Graves 1885); P. Oxy. XLII 3002.
[10] P. Heid. inv. 1271 v. (Pack^2 1611; *editio princeps* Gerhard - Crusius 1905); see Cribiore 1996, pp. 262 (no. 355) and 52.
[11] *AP* IX 126; 449; 451-480.
[12] Gleason 1995, esp. pp. 103-130; see also Gunderson 2000, esp. pp. 87-186.

involved overt imitation of women be in flagrant contradiction to such efforts?

For what reason, then, should female ethopoeia have been practiced in schools? Was it merely a way of making the task more difficult? This may be one point among others, but it would surely not be sufficient as an explanation.

Furthermore, we need to ask how female ethopoeia would be distinct from its male counterpart. Unfortunately, the information the ancient progymnasmatists provide is very meagre. Theon only states: διὰ φύσιν γυναικὶ καὶ ἀνδρὶ ἕτεροι λόγοι ἁρμόττοιεν ἄν. Emporius (5th/6th cent. A.D.) is slightly more explicit. He details that a prostitute's speech will sound sweet and coaxing, a matron's serious, a mother's concerned. Isidore of Seville (ca. 570-636 A.D.) remarks that in female ethopoeia speech must be adapted to gender. But he does not tell us how[13].

To understand the style of female ethopoeiae, it is necessary to analyze a specific text. The model ethopoeia Aphthonius offers (Niobe lamenting over her dead children)[14] would seem typical. While it strictly follows the technical instructions given in manuals, its most distinctive feature is its highly ornate and pathetic language, which is reflected also in syntax. The first sentence (Οἵαν ἀνθ' οἵας ἀλλάσσομαι τύχην ἄπαις ἡ πρὶν εὔπαις δοκοῦσα) is an exclamation or rhetorical question, which also employs a couple of Gorgianic figures. This kind of style is used consistently throughout the speech. Some sentences are very short; many are phrased as questions or exclamations; others form elaborate periods containing forceful rhetorical figures (such as alliterations, polyptota, homoeoteleuta etc.).

At the same time as Aphthonius is writing his handbook, Augustine of Hippo is recalling his own unpleasant classroom experiences: «I was forced», he complains, «to bewail dead Dido». A little later he reports how on penalty of shame or whipping he

[13] Theon, *Prog.* 116, 1-2 Spengel = 70 Patillon; Emporius, *De ethopoeia*, 562, 1-2 Halm; Isid., *Etym.* II 14.

[14] Aphth., *Prog.* 35, 17 - 36, 20 Rabe.

and his classmates were assigned the task of reproducing the words of Juno full of anger and grief when finding herself unable to prevent Aeneas from sailing to Italy[15]. Here again we have a clear case of female ethopoeia (Juno). Although we are not explicitly told that the exercise about Dido was an ethopoeia as well, it is highly probable. A quotation from *Aeneid* VI 457 suggests that the speaker is Aeneas, but Anna, Dido's sister, is equally possible[16].

All this, however, brings us no closer to solving the problem of the reason why female ethopoeia was practiced. As it cannot have been actual training for serious judicial oratory, the next solution that comes to mind is that it may have served as preparation for declamation[17]. Some progymnasmatists affirm that ethopoeia is good exercise for declamation, and Quintilian treats it in close connection with declamation[18]. While this may hold for male impersonation, it cannot provide an explanation for female impersonation. For neither in Seneca the Elder, nor in Libanius, nor in the *Major Declamations* falsely ascribed to Quintilian, nor in Calpurnius Flaccus do we find any declamation spoken in a woman's voice. The reason why is easy to see. In the *sermo* to number 260 of the so-called *Minor Declamations* the pupil is advised that first of all the declaimer must decide whether he will speak as the litigant in person or in the role of an advocate, which latter procedure will be inevitable in the case of women[19]. And when Quintilian states that declaimers usually prefer to speak as the litigants themselves, from his list of conceivable characters women are absent[20].

What we do find, however, in declamations, is short passages of women's voices embedded into the oration proper, which is

[15] Aug., *Conf.* I 13 and 17; see Woods 2002, pp. 284-286.

[16] Cf. Verg., *Aen.* IV 31-55; 437-438; and esp. 672-687, vs. VI 455.

[17] See Russell 1983, p. 11.

[18] Nicol., *Prog.* 63, 12-21 Felten; Quint. III 8, 52-54.

[19] Ps.-Quint., *Decl. min.* 260, 1; cfr. 250, 1; see Winterbottom 1984, p. 309; Russell 1983, p. 14.

[20] Quint. III 8, 51; cfr. VI 2, 36; XI 1, 55. They are present, however, in prosopopoeia; see Quint. XI 1, 41.

spoken by a man. This clearly is ethopoeia in the sense of a rhetorical figure. In the elder Seneca's *Controversia* II 5, Porcius Latro makes a woman, who tries to spur her husband towards tyrannicide, say: *Escende,* (...) *occide tyrannum; nisi occideris, indicabo.* (...) *Tempus est; escende;* (...) *Escende, occide tyrannum;* (...) *Escende*[21]. Similarly, in *Major Declamations* 10, the mother of a deceased son appearing as a ghost every night is repeatedly introduced speaking in her own voice. When she is envisaged disclosing her secret to her husband, she begins: *Gaude,* (...) *marite, gaude; filium fortasse nocte proxima videbis, illum* (...) *iuvenem videbis...*, and closes in agitated staccato: *ego certe totis noctibus mater sum, video, fruor, iam et narro*[22]. This manner of speaking, brief and disjointed and bristling with repetitions, is also typical of the other passages. Libanius' declamations also contain sections of text in female voices. In *Declamation* 26, a man complains about his garrulous wife, who racks him with endless questions such as: Ποῖ πεπόρευσαι; πόθεν ἀφῖξαι; τῷ διείλεξαι; τί καινὸν ἤγγελται; γεγόνασιν ἐπιδόσεις; ἐγράφη τι ψήφισμα; κτλ.[23].

What is common to all these texts is the kind of language used. In every case, we notice a highly emotional language characterised by short, even elliptic sentences, by questions and exclamations, by frequent use of anaphora and repetition. But it is not only emotional, but also very simple and unsophisticated. It might be described as the kind of language typical of uneducated people innocent of rhetorical training. Here at last we get some idea of how the 'different' language of women might have been

[21] Seneca, *Contr.* II 5, 1; cf. also II 5, 10. For similar interventions, see *Contr.* I 2, 1-12; I 3, 1-5; I 5, 1-6; II 2, 1 and 4; VII 8, 1; 2; 3; 8; IX 6, 10-12.

[22] Ps.-Quint., *Decl. mai.* 10, 6; cf. also 10, 2; 4-6; 7; 11-12; 13-14; 16; 18; 19. For further examples, see *Decl. mai.* 8, 5; 20; 21-22; 15, 12; 18, 17; Ps.-Quint., *Decl. min.* 247, 1; 8; 306, 6-7; 14; 327, 6; 299, 5-6; Calp. Flacc., *Decl.* 35; 40; 42.

[23] Lib., *Decl.* 26, 15 Foerster; see also 26, 16; 18; 21; 40; 41. For further examples, see Lib., *Decl.* 32, 35-38; 39; 40; 44; [Lib.], *Decl.* 43, 69 and 49, 57-58; 72; 77. Cf. Hawley 1995, pp. 260-261.

envisaged[24]. But, would such brief interludes of female speech render extensive training in female ethopoeia really worth while?

Of our ancient sources, the *Minor Declamations* offer the best prospects for examples of female declamation. In a number of cases female characters are involved as litigants; yet nearly always the speech on their behalf is delivered by an advocate[25]. But in a small minority of cases, there are indications that declaiming in the voice of women seems to have been reckoned with. For in *Declamations* 354 and 357 instructions given in the *sermo* specify: «This woman will say...»[26]. Accordingly, the declamation would have been in the woman's voice. Unfortunately, in both cases, the declamation is missing. Among a total of 145 *Minor Declamations* preserved, only in one single instance (no. 360) the text of a female declamation is given in full. But this text is an utter disappointment. For not only is it of small length, but it is also formulated in a hopelessly arid style, full of dry and dull legal subtleties, reminiscent of the style of legal treatises[27]. Surely, for writing a text like this, one would not need rhetorical, but legal training. No woman would have been supposed to plead in such way. At any rate, there is nothing to remind us of the emotional and candid style observed in the brief interpolations of female speech in declamations.

As preparation for declamation appears not to offer sufficient explanation for the extensive practice of female ethopoeia, another possibility would be letter-writing[28]. Both Theon and Nicolaus point out that the exercise of ethopoeia is useful for

[24] Note the striking similarity of the language of those passages to that of female ethopoeiae in 'real' logographers' speeches such as Lys., *Or.* 1, 12. Female personifications of abstract entities (e.g. Cic., *Cat.* 1, 18; 27-29) are of a different category and should not be compared here.

[25] See Ps.-Quint., *Decl. min.* 247; 259; 272; 299; 325; 327; see also Lib., *Decl.* 43.

[26] Ps.-Quint., *Decl. min.* 354, 1; 357, 1; cfr. 360, 1.

[27] Ps.-Quint., *Decl. min.* 360. Winterbottom 1984, p. 563, calls this piece a «legal puzzle».

[28] This solution was suggested to me in discussion by Carol Poster (York University, Toronto), to whom I am also much obliged for various helpful comments and for revising my English.

epistolography[29]. Carol Poster's studies on ancient epistolography have yielded that in antiquity letters were often written or even devised by professional secretaries, who could have considerable rhetorical education[30]. And, «[i]f a secretary received any instruction in the *progymnasmata*, it probably included the exercises in *prosopopoeia*. (...) Thus secretarial training may well have included training in the art of mimicking the style of another»[31]. As letters were also written by or on behalf of women, one might infer that female ethopoeia might have been useful for secretaries-in-training facing the task of composing letters on behalf of some upper class ladies. Yet the evidence of the letters themselves points to a different direction. For in some of the letters preserved on papyrus the female senders even pride themselves of being capable of writing[32] and will consequently not necessarily have needed the service of secretaries. But even those letters where there is no or negative information about the sender's literacy (and, thus, a secretary may have been involved) also show a businesslike but rather elegant and elaborate style[33]. This is confirmed by what Pliny says about the elegance of the letters written by his wife Calpurnia[34]. There can be no doubt in concluding that in letter-writing women of a certain social standing tried to emulate the style of men as best they could. But if this is true, female ethopoeia with its highly emotional but simple language would not have been the model to follow and consequently have been of little if any use for the training of secretaries.

[29] Theon, *Prog.* 115, 20-22 Spengel = 70 Patillon; Nicol., *Prog.* 67, 2-3 Felten.

[30] Poster 2002, pp. 119 and 123.

[31] Richards 1991, p. 61. See also Poster 2002, p. 121.

[32] Cf. P. Oxy. XII 1467, 5-10; P. Stras. VI 555, 2-3; P. Charite 8, 3 and 33, 1-2.

[33] For examples, see e.g. P. Bad. IV 48; P. Oxy. XII 1460; 1463; 1466; 1470; 1474. In Latin, the Vindolanda tablets have yielded five letters by women (T. Vindol. II 257 and 291-294), whose style is at least moderately elaborate; see Hemelrijk 1999, pp. 191-192; Adams 1995, p. 129.

[34] Plin., *Epist.* I 16, 6; see Hemelrijk 1999, pp. 197-198; also pp. 193-197 (on Cornelia).

As this explanation also fails, we may perhaps resort to the hypothesis that the final objective of female ethopoeia may have been creative literary writing. Quintilian and Theon affirm that ethopoeia is useful for poets, historians or other writers[35]. Of course, any poet or historian will at times have to represent women's speech in his works. Classical Athenian drama involved impersonation of women by men on both authors' and actors' level. And Ovid's *Heroides*, clearly rooted in their author's rhetorical education, are just the most prominent example of literary epistles in female voices[36]. Certainly it is no coincidence that the standard heroines of female ethopoeia are the same as those we meet in Homer or tragedy. But how many of the boys in a rhetor's classroom would eventually become poets? Wouldn't it have been an utter waste of time and effort to bother all of them with something that would prove useful for only very few? From Augustine's remarks, however, we see that it was not so much that students were aspiring poets but rather that the poets were the foundation of the whole curriculum. Augustine even quotes the verses from Virgil that inspired his little compositions. Thus the apparent affinities of ethopoeia and poetry are best explained by the fact that Homer and the tragedians, Menander and Vergil were the preferred authors for classroom reading, so that subjects for ethopoeiae were most naturally chosen from their works[37]. The attested predilection for Euripides might thus partly account for the frequency of female characters in ethopoeia.

Yet still we are left short of a final solution to our problem. Puzzled by the apparent practical uselessness of declamation and ethopoeia, Martin Bloomer and Erik Gunderson have recently advanced a radically new theory[38]. They hold that the main objective of ethopoeia and declamation was the affirmation of

[35] Quint. III 8, 49; Theon, *Prog.* 70, 26-29 Spengel = 15 Patillon; 60, 22-25 Spengel = 2 Patillon; cf. also Nicol., *Prog.* 65, 7-8 Felten.

[36] See Ureña Bracero 1993.

[37] Cf. Theon, *Prog.* 68, 22-25 Spengel = 12 Patillon; see Morgan 1998, pp. 97-100; 219-220; 313; 316; Cribiore 2001, p. 226.

[38] Bloomer 1997; Gunderson 2003, esp. pp. 1-58; 233.

traditional social hierarchies and gender roles in the minds of adolescent members of the male elite by making them play with alternative social roles, only to make them eventually overcome those anti-models in the process of finding their own male identity as *patres* and patrons. This would also apply to playing with gender roles. Although this theory is comprehensive and sets out to account for the whole Graeco-Roman system of education, nevertheless serious objections can be made to it. Most importantly, this theory does not take female speech seriously in its own right, but is bound to interpret it as a mere anti-model and awkward transitory step. Boys must learn to speak *as* women only to learn how to speak *for* women[39]. What is more, Bloomer's theory does not focus on female ethopoeia as an independent exercise, but rather on those «snippets of speech given women» within male declamations, in which «role playing and role projection coincide so that only the male can speak»[40]. Finally, experiments with ethopoeia in modern classrooms have proved that schooling in female ethopoeia produces quite the contrary effect, namely that mutual empathy between genders is encouraged[41]. For our purposes, then, we apparently need to dismiss this theory, too.

But there may still be a conceivable solution for our problem. Recalling the kind of style typical of female ethopoeia we will remember that it was plain and simple, but also highly pathetic. Yet in his work *On Types of Style* Hermogenes describes a kind of style which he finds to be typical of women, but also of children, young lovers, cooks, farmers and the like. This kind of style he calls ἀφέλεια, simplicity, a sub-class of ethical style[42]. The fact that simple and disjointed style, as opposed to complex periods, is best for ethopoetic purposes, is observed by Dionysius of Halicarnassus. Likewise, Nicolaus suggests that in ethopoeia syntax should be

[39] Cfr. Bloomer 1997, p. 66.
[40] Bloomer 1997, p. 68.
[41] See, for instance, Woods 2002, pp. 289-290.
[42] See Hermog., *Id.* II 3, 323, 9 - 324, 6 Rabe.

commatic. In his view, however, this kind of style produces pathos. Similarly, Pseudo-Hermogenes states that asyndetic construction is pathetic[43]. That ethical speech may be conveniently employed for arousing pathos is a view already found in Cicero[44]. Quintilian, too, is quite positive about ethopoeia producing *adfectus*[45]. He even states that there would be no use in putting on other people's masks, if not for taking on their emotions. Are we to take this as an indicator that Quintilian believed that displaying emotions and rehearsing passionate speech was the main objective of ethopoeia? Besides 'manly' passions such as wrath or anger, the display of 'womanish' emotions such as grief, mourning, fright or pity was indeed at times required for the oratorical task of ἐλεεινολογία or *miseratio*, the arousal of pity. Yet for the orator the most effective way of accomplishing this aim was to display strong emotions of his own.

This theory, that female impersonation would train orators in creating and displaying a range of emotions not found in male impersonation, would account for the features of female ethopoeia discussed so far. First, if we compare Aphthonius' Niobe ethopoeia with the short passages of female speech from declamations, we will notice that whereas Aphthonius' language is highly artistic, theirs is plain and simple; the most prominent feature they definitely share, however, is their high pitch of pathos. Moreover, virtually all examples of female ethopoeiae known are being classified as pathetic. Conversely, ethopoeiae of anonymous stock characters, a category usually classified as ethical, are strikingly rare among female ethopoeiae. In that respect, the predilection for Euripides' highly pathetic female characters would also only be natural. Finally, Isidore states that the purpose of ethopoeia is to express emotions, and Augustine reports that his classroom contest

[43] Dion. Hal., *Lys.* 8; Nicol., *Prog.* 66, 9-13; 67, 10-15 Felten; Ps.-Hermog., *Prog.* 6, 2 Rabe.
[44] Cic., *De or.* III 204-205; quoted *verbatim* in Quint. IX 1, 30-31.
[45] Quint. VI 1, 25; 2, 36; cf. also IX 2, 58; XI 1, 41.

of ethopoeiae was to be won by the boy who best expressed emotions of anger and grief[46].

Thus, in the background of female ethopoeia there seems to be an imagination of a particular affinity of the female gender towards pathos[47]. Accordingly, the opportunity for young men to safely display and rehearse vehement emotions appears to be the decisive element in female ethopoeia. This is not to say that all other explanatory approaches are ruled out. In truth a plurality of factors may ultimately have contributed to the attested popularity of the exercise.

But why was female ethopoeia so indispensable for pupils practicing pathetic speech? The obvious answer is: because they could not be allowed to display violent grievous, timid or pityful emotions in their own persons, for this would have evoked danger of effeminacy. Thus ethopoeia imposes itself as a convenient means of saying things and expressing feelings one cannot say or express in one's own person[48]. To steer clear of any danger of effeminacy, the juvenile orator almost has to stick to role-playing when trying his skills at extremely passionate speech. Finally, Augustine reports that in one of his little compositions he actually wept for Dido. But, if Gleason is right, was an ancient schoolboy expected to weep openly? Hardly. So, by choosing a female character for impersonation (i.e. Anna rather than Aeneas) he might have effectively saved himself from the whips of the Master.

[46] Isid., *Etym.* II 14; Aug., *Conf.* I 17.

[47] See Hawley 1995, pp. 257-258: «Unlike men, women as a gender seem more chosen for their stereotypical association with πάθος».

[48] Cf. Quint. IX 2, 30; see also Woods 2002, p. 290.

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