What Women Want: Female readers of Virgil's *Aeneid* in the Middle Ages

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In this article I will consider the influence of female readers of Virgil's *Aeneid* on two medieval adaptations of Virgil's text, namely, the C11th Latin *Encomium Emmae Reginae,* and the C12th Old French *Roman d'Enéas*. In these two texts female readership of Virgil is manifested in two ways; the *Roman* is tailored to a female audience and the *Encomium* is tailored for a female patron. Virgil's *Aeneid* was well known in the Middle Ages, not only to those who were not literate in Latin, but also to those who could not read themselves (i.e. the aurally literate) (Tyler 2005a: 366). It was a narrative well known at court and as such could be used to exert political and social influence. While some have dismissed female patronage as no more than a literary topos, there is evidence that women commissioned works (Ferrante 1994: 3). Literary patronage was in fact one of the few spheres in which women could have influence at court (McCash 1996: 1).

For Emma of Normandy, the patroness of the *Encomium*, Virgil's text was a tool she could use to influence politics at court. In the case of the *Roman D'Eneas,* written under the patronage of Henry II and Eleanor of Aquitane's court and for a mixed-gender audience (Desmond 1994: 105), rather than for a specific female figure, Virgil's text was a space in which women's place in society was both worked out, and set out, as models for them to follow. Through a comparison of these two texts, we can see that Virgil's epic could be used to exert influence both for, and on women. The *Encomium* was commissioned by Emma in order to intervene in the fraught politics of the C11th English court (Tyler 2005a: 359). Emma evidently knew Virgil's epic, to which the text she commissioned makes explicit reference, and commissioned a Latin work modelled on it as a political tool to influence the actions of men. The *Roman* was written for Henry and Eleanor's court. Although Eleanor was known to be a patron of literary works (McCash 1996: 6), there is no evidence that she as an individual patronised the *Roman.* The *Roman*, as well as providing entertainment, also serves as a comment on women, who like Eleanor herself, seek erotic autonomy in a politically complex world. As such, it reflects not so much writing influenced by the desires of women, but writing influenced by the desire to control the female readers of the text. Both adaptations of the *Aeneid* affect a move away from Virgil's male-centric social model. While their emphasis on the power of love and marriage to create and support empire foregrounds the importance of women in the political sphere, I will argue in this article that in the *Encomium* we see 'what women want' politically and socially, whereas in the *Roman*, we see rather a vision of what men want women to want, in order to further their own political ends.

The judicious choice of which texts to patronise was one of the few ways that women could influence political discussions at court. As McCash suggests, 'a clear underlying motive and impetus for a great deal of women's patronage in the Middle Ages... was the need to influence societal attitudes and make their voices heard' (1996: 36). This is evident in the *Encomium*. Female patronage - a 'iubentem dominam'[1] (commanding mistress) - is explicit within the *Encomium*. The Encomiast specifically identifies Emma as this patroness and addresses his work to her, leaving little doubt that it was at Emma's behest that this text was written. While Emma was probably not able to read or write in Latin (Tyler 2005a: 374), women such as her could nonetheless use Latin texts for their own political and social ends. The *Encomium* was written to influence the spoken discussions going on at court (Tyler 2005a: 364-6) to influence the immediate political and social sphere, as opposed to the removed sphere, of the written and clerical. As such, Emma as patroness harnessed Virgil's politically loaded text - for it is impossible to divorce his epic of destined empire from its political significance – to support a fiction of unified dynasty in the interest of fostering peace. While the Encomiast uses the work of several other Latin authors including Lucan and Sallust (Campbell 1998: xxix), only Virgil is mentioned explicitly, thus indicating that it is the Virgilian political themes of unified empire and destined rule that he wants his audience to have in mind.

Emma's motives for commissioning the *Encomium* have been suggested variously as being intended to 'discredit Edward's claim to the throne' (Barlow 1970: 47), as a reconciliation with her son Edward (McCash 1996: 17), or to defend her against those at court who accused her of having a hand in the murder of Ælfred (Tyler 2005: 362), one of her sons by Æthelred. Nonetheless, it is clear that Emma's intentions are deeply connected to what she wanted for her family. Virgil's epic, heavily invested in creating a myth of 'Troianus origine Caesar'[2] (I 286) (A Caesar of Trojan blood) for the sake of Octavian who commissioned it, undertakes to construct a fiction of direct blood relation from Aeneas to Octavian, and the *Encomium* follows this model. In the same way that Octavian, who was Julius Caesar's nephew and adopted son, is made by the *Aeneid* into 'divi genus' (VI 792) (son of a god [i.e. Julius Caesar]), a direct blood descendant, Emma constructs a single dynastic royal line in her *Encomium*. The *Encomium* suggests that Edward is Cnut's son through Emma's presentation as a 'virgo' (virgin) before her marriage. Although John suggests that this was not intended literally, and could either mean 'princess' or indicate that she was a widow (1980: 63), it nonetheless carries connotations of virginity and therefore purity of bloodline.

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[1] *Encomium Emmae Reginae* ed. Campbell, Alistair.(1998). All subsequent references to this edition.
[2] Virgil *Eclogues, Georgics, Aeneid Books 1-6* trans. Fairclough, H.R.(2006). All subsequent references to this edition.

Everyone at court would have known it was fiction that Edward was Cnut's son, but it was the fiction not the truth that was important. This was intended to assert political influence (Tyler 2005b: 154).

Emma is 'suis prudenter prouidens' (wisely providing for her own) when she extracts the promise from Cnut that he will pledge the throne to the children they have together. Surely, by identifying Edward as Cnut's son Emma is 'wisely providing' for him, too, this time through the use of fiction. Just as the model of Aeneas as ancestor of Octavian by direct line constructs a fiction of a single family line, of unity, harmony and destiny, so too does the elision of Æthelred and the fiction of Edward as Cnut's son. This fiction dissuades from factionalism within the court by presenting the complex royal step-family as a unified single family, if not literally joined by blood (as of course Julius Caesar was not to Octavian), then joined strongly enough in the public imagination to engender unity. Just as the fiction that Octavian was a direct descendant of Aeneas helped shore up his place as Emperor, and secure his position as rightful heir to Julius Caesar, among the bitter factionalism in Rome post-Civil war (Griffin 1986: 60), so did the *Encomium* act as a political tool to present the royal family as a single unit, united by blood, love and destiny. At the end emphasis falls on 'inuiolabile uiget faedus materni fraternique amoris' (the inviolable bond of motherly and brotherly love is strong) leaving us with the image of a strongly unified family. Even if the reality was far from such unity, at the beginning of the C11th (Barlow 1970: 34), the fiction of unity created by the text was intended to turn this fiction into reality.

Stenton labels the *Encomium* a 'panegyric of Cnut' (1971: 697), suggesting that its small mention of Emma reflects her relative unimportance and her limited sphere of influence. However, it is evident in the Encomiast's praise of prudent male politicians that support unity and peace that Emma's commissioning of this text allowed her to apply pressure to these men. 'Judicious praise - praise of the virtues of a ruler - can be a form of pressure on him to exhibit those virtues' (Griffin 1986: 60), and just as Virgil's 'pious Aeneas' (I 220) (dutiful Aeneas) put pressure on Octavian to be similarly selfless for the sake of his nation, the *Encomium* sets up literary ideals that compel their historical counterparts to live up to them. Cnut, praised as 'tantus...rex' (such a great king), once in power 'elegit primum qui regnum suum deberent custodire' (firstly chose those who should guard his kingdom). That 'Knutr appears as a politician rather than as a warrior' (Campbell 1998: xxii) and is presented as an ideal model of kingship creates pressure for leaders who want such praise for themselves to behave in a similarly prudent and peaceable manner.

Furthermore, the Encomiast directs attention to the importance of women, and men's relationship with them, for the establishment of peace and empire. The Cnut of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* has Emma 'feccean'[3] (Cotton Tiberius B.iv 1017) (fetched), while the Cnut of the *Encomium* sends 'proci' (wooers) to acquire his bride. Emma is 'ex uictrici gente' (from a victorious people) and therefore a sound political choice, but, despite the fact that Cnut needed such a marriage to secure his place politically and maintain peace (Eric 1980: 97), the *Encomium* makes sure that Emma is presented as more than a political token. The text presents Cnut as wanting her as 'imperii sui consortem' (partner to his power), a co-ruler whom he woos because her distinguishment 'prudentiae' (in wisdom) makes her an active and useful partner, not a political pawn to be 'fetched'. The model of masculinity that the patroness promotes here is one who chooses a wife to be his equal, who understands and wisely uses the power of queens and the role they play in creating lasting peace.

Lacking the influence of a strong patroness like Emma, the *Roman* still reflects, to a certain extent, the desire of women to have a valued place in society. Perhaps not to the extent of the equality that Emma imagined, however at least to a degree of recuperation from their progressive marginalization in Virgil's epic. By its transformation in genre, from epic to romance, women and their roles, are brought to the fore. The suspicion of the homosocial comitatus of the epic genre is manifested in the *Roman* as the fear that Eneas is a 'sodomite' (8583)[4] (sodomite) who might 'molt par aimme char de maslon' (8571) (like much more the flesh of a cock). Fear of homosexuality here expresses fear of a society that has no place for women (Lankewish 1998: 222). One might imagine a female reader (presumably aural, probably in translation) of the *Aeneid* left wondering what places for women there are in its society; Aeneas loses his wife, abandons Dido and he leaves the Trojan women behind after they burn the ships in Book V. When accusing Eneas of sodomy, Lavine says 'de feme lui est molt petit' (9132) (women are of little importance to him). Although these words are proven later false, insofar as Eneas enters into a heterosexual marriage, we could almost imagine them as a medieval female reader's response to Virgil's Aeneas.

The *Roman* shows a man moulded from a fighter to a lover, an opposite trajectory from Virgil, who moulds his hero from a lover to a fighter. Eneas says of the loss of his wife Creusa 'ge atandi tant a ferir, qu'en la presse la deperdi' (1182-3) (I had given so much of my attention to fighting, that I lost her in the commotion). This seems callous and uncaring, showing little regard for his wife. By the end, however, he is re-formed to such an extent that he fits the perfect mould of the suffering lover of romance: 's'amour lo destrainoit,/ ... il an ert paliz et tainz.' (9191-2) (His love gripped him hard… he was pale and harried). Conversely, Virgil's Aeneas goes from lover who

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[3] *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: A Collaborative Edition volume 6, MS D*, ed. G.P. Cubbin, (1996)
[4] *Eneas* ed. Salverda de Grave, J.J. (1968) All subsequent references to this edition.

tries 'ter frustra' (II 793) (three times in vain) to embrace the ghost of his wife 'dilectae... Creusae' (II 784) (Creusa whom [he] loved) while Troy burns around him, to a single-minded killer, who marries Lavinia because it is 'fata… profectum' (VII 255)[5] (set out by the fates). He is a hero who, in the fit of rage and violence that closes the poem, 'condit' (XII 950) (buried) his sword in his enemy Turnus, just as Turnus is begging for his life. Virgil's choice of verb - it is also used of founding cities (Def. 1b *Chambers-Murray* 2007) - equates the founding of empire with savagery, violence and death, while the *Roman* equates it with love and nuptial union; Eneas has to apply *eros* (erotic love) in the right place, whereas Virgil's Aeneas has to purge himself of it (Haas 2008: 49). The *Roman's* reversal of this character development may reflect a troubled female response to the gradual exclusion of women from Virgil's text, and as such returns importance to them. However this does not necessarily give power to them.

The *Roman* does not accurately reflect the historical situation of women, but rather the feminine function as perceived by the clerks that wrote it (Krueger 1993: 12), as such it becomes both a representation of the idea of women at this time and a potent tool for controlling them. The models constructed for women in the *Roman* are largely concerned with marriage, and women's role within it. Marriage was re-defined by Pope Alexander III to require the consent of the couple rather than that of the parents and thereby seemed to give women more autonomy (Cooper 2006: 31). However, the *Roman's* presentation of this is troubling because, while on the surface it presents Lavine as an active lover in control of her choice of husband, the concept of consent is undermined to the effect that female autonomy is revealed as illusory.

At first, due to the objections of Lavine's mother, who complains that she does not want Lavine to marry Eneas, because the only dowry Enéas can offer is 'tote la mer qu'il a siglee' (3321) (all the sea he has sailed), it seems that Lavine is asserting her choice against the will of her parent. This reflects contemporary anxieties about landless *iuvenes* created by primogeniture searching for an heiress to marry, with nothing to offer for themselves (Lankewish 1998: 210). So, Lavine's choice seems initially to go against her mother's political ambitions, to marry her to the landed Turnus. However, Lavine's father wants her to marry Eneas because 'la nostre ert por lui esçauciee' (3349) (our [family] will be made famous through him). The father's choice is just as self-interested as the mother's, only instead of land for his family; he desires fame throughout the ages.

Furthermore, as Lavine's desire compels her to follow her father's choice, the patrilineal imperative is shown to overpower female choice. Despite Lavine wanting to marry Eneas 'por

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[5] Virgil *Aeneid, Books 7-12* trans. Fairclough, H.R. (2000). All subsequent references to this edition.

s'amor' (9189) (because of her love), the love itself is troubled by the involvement of Cupid. Lavine says 'Cupido frere Eneas,/ li deus d'amor qui m'a conquise' (8630-1) (It is Cupid, the brother of Eneas, the god of love, who has won me over). Her desire is not only compelled by the gods, whose concern is fate and not human happiness (specifically the god whose compulsion to love in Virgil's *Aeneid* precipitates the death of Dido, discussed below), but moreover a god is identified by her primarily as the brother of the man who - as wandering exile - needs her land, *before* he is as god of love. He is more a divine facilitator of brother's political ambitions than he is an euhemerized metaphor for love. This problematises the idea of consent, and also of Lavine's free will. The mother appears to take the place of the parent pushing the daughter to marry against her consent, but we should note that Latinus wants his daughter to marry Eneas who she loves, she herself says 'acontre ma volanté' (8646) (against [her] will) because of the intervention of Cupid, another man. Lavine's emotions thus serve only more fully to entrench her in the homosocial exchange systems of her society outlined by Rubin (1975: 174) and make her an agent of male political desire rather than her own personal desire. On the one hand, Lavine and Eneas's marriage creates an illusion of being a love-match, but on the other hand, it functions as a grim reminder to powerful heiresses that their consent is not really their own to give, and they would do better to fit their amorous emotions to what politics dictates.

The Dido of the *Roman* functions as a foil to Lavine, through whom women deciding for themselves what they want, and following those desires, are presented as dangerous and self-destructive. Although in Virgil it is made clear that it is the 'quantus… deus' (great god [i.e. Cupid]) (I 718) who sets the love for Aeneas in Dido, Cupid is conspicuously absent from this episode in the *Roman*. This shift in causation turns Virgil's 'infelix Dido' (Unlucky Dido) (IV 68), doomed to her tragic fate by the machinations of the gods, into a woman who thinks that her consent is her own to give, and thereby meets a death brought about by her own emotional individualism and reckless lust. She is inflamed by the kissing of the adult Ascanius, whom she kisses emphatically 'a sa boche' (808) (on his mouth). This greatly differs from Virgil's little child who she 'gremio fovet' (dandles in her lap) (I 717) and treats with motherly affection. This makes the kiss that transmits the love-sickness sexual and shows how her lust is out of control (Deist 1994: 466); prey to a rabid sensuality she imagines herself 'antre ses bras tot nu tenir' (1238) (held in [Eneas'] arms, all naked). Overcome by lust, she is changed from Virgil's doomed Queen to the stock misogynist figure of the woman who cannot control her libido. At the beginning of the Dido episode of the *Roman* we are told that 'unc ne fu mais par une feme/ mielz maintenu enor ne regne' (379-80) (no domain nor kingdom was ever better governed by a woman), and yet by the end 'Amors li fait oblïer/ terre a tenir er a garder' (1413-4) (Love made her forget to guard and govern her land). Thus, the text seems to agree with Anna's words to Dido that 'Ne puet estre longue par

fenne/ bien maintenu enor ne regne' (1349-50) (Neither domain nor kingdom can be long maintained by a woman) because they cannot regulate their desires in line with political necessity.

Possessing the woman must mean possessing the land for Eneas to be successful (Waswo1995: 287). Dido's offer that Eneas 'de ma terre ait une partie' (631) (may have a part of my land) is not enough. He needs total possession, and this is why he cannot stay with Dido. Lavine 'pou plain la deseritoison' (9911) (little mourns being disinherited), thinking Eneas will take the land and spurn her. She has no desire for land and power for herself, and indeed has to imagine herself dispossessed and worthless, giving herself up to love for Eneas, in order for the poem to reach its conclusion (Haas 2008: 63), because Eneas must attain total possession of the land and the woman to establish both the Roman Empire and his dynasty. In contrast, Dido 'illustrates the dangers of socially unregulated female desire' (Desmond 1994: 108) and functions as a warning that women must want what is politically useful for men. Any other desire is typecast as lust and condemned.

We can, however, in the *Roman,* hear what seems to be a female voice of anxiety about women's autonomy and choice in marriage, but it is ventriloquised only to be silenced. That voice is Lavine's mother, who is concerned that Aeneas is fighting 'plus por la terre' (more for the land) (7866) than for Lavinia's love, and that it is Turnus 'qui t'aimme' (who loves [her]) who deserves her. The imperatives of free will, personal emotion and reciprocal love are subordinated to the concerns of politics and empire building. However, the text through its choice of genre - romance - marginalises these concerns and coerces the love of Lavine to the function of empire-making. The Virgilian ambiguity of Lavinia's blush, for example, is utterly lost. When Lavine looks at Eneas from the window, 'i a changié cent foiz colors:''por lui l'a molt Amors navree' (8059), (8065) (there she changed colour a hundred times… On his [Eneas'] account Love had greatly wounded her). While this change of colour is a conventional topos in the pathology of love popular in the Middle Ages, derived from Ovid (Yunck 1974: 81), and also applied to Dido (1489), when used of Lavine it cannot help but recall Virgil's famous scene of Lavinia's blush, described as like 'mixta rubent ubi lilia multa/ alba rosa' (XII 68-9) (white lilies mixed with many roses become red). Virgil's heroine is enigmatic, but the author of the *Roman* removes this, and thus reflects back on Virgil's text, re-representing it as a tale of love supporting empire. This serves simultaneously to allay concerns that may have been voiced by female readers about Lavinia's happiness beyond the text, but also to explain and define the woman in such a way that her emotions neatly serve the political interests of men.

Lavine herself asks 'Soz cui maint il? An quel jostice?' (8197) (Who does [Love] serve? Under what law?). In this question we have the hint of a female voice speaking back and asking what has agency over her emotions. In this text, the answer is dynastic feudalism. It is the compulsion of love by Cupid that will lead to the creation of a dynasty; love becomes yet another political tool. According to Galen's female seed theory (Cooper 2006: 33), in order for a ruling family to establish a lasting line of patrilineal descent it is important for a woman to fit her love to whoever is the best political choice in order to produce heirs.

Krueger suggests that the female subject is 'both… a social construction and [a] site of possible resistance' (1993: 15) - Lavine, her mother and Dido all form sites of resistance within the text. Although the text either condemns or silently removes their autonomy, it does not do so without raising troubling questions. Desmond suggests we view the gender-power relationships in the *Roman* in light of Eleanor of Aquitane's transgression of gender roles (1994: 118), that is, her active involvement in the annulment of her first marriage and the arrangement of her second marriage to Henry II, and her later rule of England as regent through her son Richard I while he was on crusade. As such, Dido functions as a warning against following individual ambition to Eleanor, and those who might follow her example, while Lavine becomes the figure for one who *seems* to escape social convention in her active choice of Eneas, but whose free will must be guided by Cupid to legitimise it. Eleanor, like Lavine, has exercised agency and survived, but like Lavine's firing of the arrow, such agency is dangerous and potentially destructive in all but exceptional circumstances. The implication is, perhaps, that Eleanor might not be so lucky a second time. Lavine is only able to act with seeming agency because her autonomy is little more than an illusion: the male god, Cupid, controls her.

The extent to which pressure is put on women to fit their desires into politics through analogy, within a Virgilian framework in the *Roman,* is thrown into relief when we consider Emma, who throughout the *Encomium* remains inscrutable. The identification of Emma with Octavian rather than any of the women of the *Aeneid*, excludes Emma from any kind of Virgilian allegorical system that would type her as a Lavinia, or a Camille, or a Dido and leaves her beyond the text in a way that Octavian is not. The *Encomium*, which has been criticised for its lack of mention of Emma, and indeed deemed not to be in praise of her, actually demonstrates no models of how women should behave. While the *Encomium* praises certain male behaviours, it avoids such prescription for women and substitutes instead of praise of Emma, that would clearly define what it would be right for her to do, of 'laudem suo generi' (praise of her family). Emma does nothing, but possesses the rather general positive qualities of excelling 'pulcritudinis et prudentiae' (in beauty and wisdom)

and acts as vessel of the right rule insofar as her presence in England 'bellicos sedaret motus' (might settle the disturbances of war).

   The lack of a Virgilian female for Emma to map on to serves to free her from any social pressure exerted by the text, rather than making her irrelevant. Although the marriage of Emma and Cnut brings together two peoples in peace like that of Lavinia and Aeneas, the Encomiast is careful not to draw any parallels, thus preventing Emma from appearing as a passive token (Tyler 2005: 380). Emma is outside the schema of the allegorical text of the *Aeneid*, even more so than Octavian, the figure with whom the Encomiast aligns her, and as such holds a privileged position as one irreducible to a figure in the narrative and inscrutable. Emma is there, but as an unreadable yet pervasive presence, controlling the text and indeed using it to control court politics, to intervene in and smooth over factionalism, and to create a myth that unites the English court. Emma, whom the Encomiast says he describes in the same manner as 'giraueris circulum' (you might draw around a circle), is the invisible centre of representation, but escapes definition. Emma has read (or heard) the *Aeneid* and decided that the place of power - where women (and men) really *can* get what they want and have autonomy - is outside the text.

   These texts intersect in the image of Lavine firing the arrow carrying the letter on which she 'escrit tot an latin' (8777) (wrote it all in Latin). Although Lavine is within her text and circumscribed by it and Emma is without, the historical Emma and the fictional Lavine are doing the same thing; sending a Latin text out, hoping it will get them what they want. This letter reshapes the social and political landscape of Italy, and in a similar way the *Encomium* and the *Roman* seek to reshape social and political opinions at the Anglo-Danish and Angevin court respectively. The *Aeneid* offers itself to Emma as the means of her own political empowerment, and to the author of the *Roman* a set of models to be fashioned into cautionary tales to control women. Neither text is a passive aesthetic object, but one that is expected to effect change and influence in the political and social sphere. The *Roman* in its move from epic to romance, its re-imagination of the hero and the prominence it gives to Lavine, seems on the surface to be reflecting the desires and influence of women. In fact, the more women are represented, the more they can be controlled through the social pressure exerted by the text. Female characters were used as tools to show women what was and what was not acceptable and indeed safe and prudent for them not just to do, but also to want. Emma escapes this by being the centre of the circle, outside of the description of the author and inscrutable. The only way of women escaping the bounds that male literature sets for them is for them to not be represented at all.

The ambiguous presentation of female autonomy in the *Roman* raises the question of what the response of female listeners to *this* text might have been; while Emma in the *Encomium* is inscrutable, the presence of female characters in the *Roman* invites discussion. The grim shadow of Lavine's compulsion by Cupid hangs over the ending of the *Roman*, and while this text is not such a demonstration of female power as the *Encomium* is, the uncomfortable love-story it adds to Virgil's epic is also an invitation to question - What do women want? Who controls their desires? On a personal rather than political level, can they ever truly attain these desires?

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