Decolonization and Gender in the Reception of the *Aeneid* in Frank McGuinness' *Carthaginians*

Since the 18th century, Irish writers have drawn subversive power from identifying Ireland with ancient Carthage, using it as both an origin myth and a metaphor for the effects of British colonialism. In particular, this reframed the colonialist discourse of the British, in that the opposition was no longer between civilians and barbarians, but between a colonial power and a fully sovereign civilization, possessing its own unique culture (Cullingford 1996: 222). They also were able to manipulate to their advantage the gendered associations of their mythical genealogy, by tending to focus on Dido rather than someone like Hannibal, because the feminine Carthage was in opposition to the less favorable, masculine, barbaric Scythians, which had been assigned to them as their previous genealogical derivation (Cullingford 1996: 223). Frank McGuinness makes use of these associations in his 1988 play *Carthaginians*. However, the tradition of the Rome-Carthage metaphor is reversed in it, in a way that creates a change in both how it receives Virgil's *Aeneid*, and how it reflects on the aftermath of Bloody Sunday, the murder of thirteen Irish civilians by British soldiers in Derry in January of 1972.

The play is set in a graveyard, where seven citizens of Derry are waiting for the dead to rise from their graves, but in the meantime they tell their stories, and put on a play within a play. In particular, this paper is concerned with the main character Dido, who, contrary to what one might have expected, is portrayed as a homosexual male. In centering the play on the character of Dido, and his defiance of conventional gender norms, McGuinness has perhaps captured something important from the *Aeneid* itself and the character of ancient Dido. In her 2013 article, Helen Lovatt argues that Dido occupies a position which requires her to continually navigate different gender norms as shown through the mixed messages her speech gives in the *Aeneid*. Lovatt maintains that, although Dido remains distinctly feminine, she remains a mirror for Aeneas in her

political dealings and governance of her people. Meaning, for the purposes of this paper especially, Dido and Carthage are not *simply* feminine, but also have masculine sovereignty and political virtues. It has been argued by Cullingford that McGuinness' Dido is a reversal of the Dido seen in book 4 of the *Aeneid*; in surviving the massacre and, in the end, burying the dead, Dido maintains that there should be no retribution but rather an end to the violence of the Troubles (1996). This paper will proceed to take a closer look at gender in respect to *decolonization* rather than anti colonialism, or the mentality that maintains that the colonized people have both a past and, importantly, a future beyond mere atonement, and that yet is aware of continuing colonialist attitudes (Hardwick 2002: 239-40). In particular it will conduct a close reading of passages in *Aeneid* Books 4 and 6 alongside McGuinness' play in order to argue that in privileging Dido's gender and sexuality as a central part of his character, McGuinness retains the meaning of Virgil's Dido's complex relationship with gender, and rejects the Rome-Carthage metaphor as a remnant of colonialist thinking, while taking a stance among post-colonial literatures in a decisively de-colonized world. He rejects a narrative of retribution and vengeance and denies the colonizer victory to begin with.

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