

Françoise Lavocat

**Dido Meets Aeneas: Anachronism, Alternative History,
Counterfactual Thinking and the Idea of Fiction
(Abstract)**

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The anachronistic character of the loving relationship between Dido and Aeneas was widely and commonly discussed among commentators, critics, and writers in the early modern period. From the 16th century onwards, when the word »anachronism« appeared in vernacular languages, its definition was even inseparable from the example borrowed from the Aeneid. The purpose of this article is to interrelate early modern debates on anachronism, reflections on the status of fiction and the history of fiction.

Starting with the hypothesis that anachronism is a form of counterfactual, the questions posed in this article are: did forms of counterfactuals exist before the 19th century, to what extent did they differ from contemporary alternative histories and, if so, why? The story of Dido and Aeneas in the Aeneid can be considered »counterfactual«, because this version of the narrative about the queen of Carthage was opposed to another, which was considered to be historical and which made Dido a privileged embodiment of female virtue and value.

Several important shifts are highlighted in this article. With the exception of St. Augustine (who saw in Vergil's anachronism confirmation of the inanity of fiction), before the 16th century indifference towards anachronism prevailed: the two versions of Dido's story were often juxtaposed or combined. If Vergil's version of Dido's story was condemned, it was for moral reasons: the exemplary version, considered more historically accurate, was favored throughout the Middle Ages, notably by Petrarch and Boccaccio.

From the 16th century onwards, however, increased acquaintance with Aristotle's Poetics promoted greater demand for rationality and plausibility in fables. This coincided with the appearance of the word »chronology« and its development, which led to a new understanding of historical time. Anachronism then appeared to be a fault against verisimilitude, and as such was strongly condemned, for example by the commentator on Aristotle, Lodovico Castelvetro. At the same time, the argument of poetic license was also often invoked: it actually became the most common position on this issue. Vergil's literary canonization, moreover, meant that the version of Dido's life in the Aeneid was the only story that was known and cited, and from the 17th century onwards it totally supplanted the exemplary version. Strangely enough, permissiveness towards anachronism in treatises, prefaces, or comments on literary works was not accompanied by any development of counterfactual literature in early modern period. Indeed, in both narrative and theatrical genres fiction owed its development and legitimization to the triumph of the criterion of plausibility.

This article, however, discusses several examples that illustrate how the affirmation of fiction in the early modern period was expressed through minor variations on anachronism: the counterfactual form of Ronsard's epic, *La Franciade*, which represents an explicit deviation from the Iliad; the metaleptic meeting of Vergil and Dido in the Underworld in Fontenelle's *Le dialogue des morts*; and the provocative proposal for a completely different version of Dido's life, which was made in an early 17th century Venetian operatic work by an author who claimed

to be anti-Aristotelian. This study thus intends to provide an aspect of the story of fiction. The change of perspective on anachronism marks a retreat from moral argument, with privilege given to aesthetic criteria and relative independence with regard to history – while still moderated by the criterion of verisimilitude, as underlined by the abbé d’Aubignac, as well as Corneille.

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