

Nordic Journal of Renaissance Studies

20

2023



Sophonisba in Early Modern Literature

eds.

**Anastasia Ladefoged Larn &
David Hasberg Zirak-Schmidt**

Sophonisba, eds. Anastasia Ladefoged Larn & David Hasberg Zirak-Schmidt. *Nordic Journal of Renaissance Studies* 20 • 2023. General Editor of *NJRS*: Johann Ramming

(*NJRS* was formerly known as *Renæssanceforum: Journal of Renaissance Studies*)

ISSN 2597-0143. URL: www.njrs.dk/njrs_20_2023.htm

Introduction:

Rediscovering Sophonisba in Early Modern Europe

Early modern dramatists and poets took a remarkable interest in the Carthaginian noblewoman Sophonisba who lived during the Second Punic War (218-201 BC). Although she was a minor character in Greco-Roman histories of the war, Sophonisba became a popular, yet often ambivalent, female character across confessional and national borders in early modern Europe. According to the Latin historian Livy (59 BC-17 AD), whose account of the war in *Ab urbe condita* was fundamental for early modern retellings, Sophonisba was a beautiful patriot, the daughter of the general Hasdrubal Gisco and married to Syphax, king of the Masaesyli tribe of western Numidia. As the fortune of war began to favour Rome, Syphax and Sophonisba came under siege in the city of Cirta by Masinissa, king of the Massylii tribe and an ally of the Roman general Scipio Africanus. After Cirta fell and Syphax was taken prisoner, Sophonisba seduced Masinissa and made him swear that he would not allow her to become a Roman prisoner of war. In order to keep his promise, Masinissa married Sophonisba. Scipio, who was afraid that she might succeed in turning Masinissa against the Roman cause, opposed the match, rebuked Masinissa for his lust and insisted on taking Sophonisba as Roman war booty. In order to uphold both his promise to his new wife and the Romans, the distraught Masinissa sent Sophonisba poison so she could commit suicide in order to be spared Roman captivity; a fate which she willingly and bravely accepted.

This special issue of the *Nordic Journal of Renaissance Studies* highlights the ways early modern authors and dramatists reshaped, reimagined and negotiated the character of Sophonisba. From the Greco-Roman sources, the early modern world inherited an ambivalent female character. In Livy, dramatists and poets could find a frightening but brave figure, and the first meeting between Sophonisba and Masinissa in Cirta was well-suited as a dramatic scene. In other sources, Sophonisba is not a seductress but rather the wronged party. According to Appian (c.95-165 AD), Sophonisba had previously been engaged to Masinissa but had been forced to break the engagement and marry Syphax to settle local political strife. As we shall see in this theme issue, there were two distinct traditions that shaped how early modern writers handled Sophonisba. In the Livian tradition, particularly influential in the first part of the sixteenth-century, Sophonisba was a patriot who bravely committed suicide to protect her honour, yet she was a dangerous *femme fatale* who posed a threat to Roman power. In the Appianic tradition, however, Sophonisba and Masinissa were framed as pitiable lovers who were

tragically subjected to political and historical forces outside their own control. This double-sided nature of the character supplied the early modern imagination with a moldable story that could be shaped and made to serve a variety of different purposes.

While not always condoning her marriage to Masinissa, early modern writers took a much more sympathetic approach compared to the Greco-Roman historians. Petrarch, who kickstarted early modern interest in Sophonisba, took up her story in multiple works including his Latin epic *Africa* (composed 1337-1343) wherein he treats her as a second Dido. Writing two decades later, Giovanni Boccaccio portrays Sophonisba as an example of exceptional female fortitude in his *De mulieribus claris* (written 1361-62), raising her to the heights of Roman and Biblical women. Beginning with Gian Giorgio Trissino's *Sofonisba* (written 1514-1515 and published in 1524), Sophonisba and Masinissa's doomed love furnished the plot of countless tragedies. Trissino's tragedy was furthermore translated into French by Mellin de Saint-Gelais in 1556 at the request of Catherine de Medici, with yet another independent French translation by Claude Mermet in 1584. The tragic fate of Sophonisba was subsequently taken up in such dramatic traditions as English restoration drama (Nathaniel Lee's *Sophonisba, or Hannibal's Overthrow*, 1676), the German Trauerspiel (Daniel Casper von Lohenstein's *Sophonisbe*, 1680) and Venetian opera (Nicolò Miato's *Scipio Africano, dramma per musica*, with music by Francesco Cavelli, 1664) to name just a few. The death of the courageous Carthaginian was furthermore interpreted by artists such as Andrea Mantegna who depicts Sophonisba as a virtuous woman in contemporaneous Italian clothes.

Sophonisba was not the only African queen to pique the interest of early modern writers and artists—other notable examples include Dido and Cleopatra—but her popularity and ubiquity in the period has gone largely unnoticed by critics. But why were early modern writers and dramatists so fascinated by the Carthaginian? One reason for this was the inherent ambiguity of Sophonisba which became firmly entrenched in the early modern imagination. Contrary to Mark Antony, Masinissa did give up his rebel queen which seems to have made Sophonisba's transition into a male-dominated world of politics more morally condonable. This made Sophonisba's story psychologically compelling, and it also made her an exceptionally versatile character for the early modern period's many generic experiments such as the reintroduction of Latin and Greek styled tragedy. Many of the articles in this theme issue underscore the importance of Trissino's *Sofonisba* which proved influential throughout the sixteenth century and well into the seventeenth century. *Sofonisba* is one of the first original tragedies in Italian and reintroduces a number of Greek and Latin

stylistic elements such as a chorus to divide the action, the unity of time and place and a non-allegorical character gallery. Trissino was not alone in using Roman history as his source for the reintroduction of Greek and Latin styled tragedy, nor was he the first to take up the Sophonisba story in dramatic form as he was preceded by Galeotto Del Caretto who wrote a *Sophonisba* around 1502. Yet Trissino's version of the story was to have a lasting impact on subsequent tragedies, and his miserable Sophonisba bewailing her misfortune to her confidant Erminia became a tragic trope in early modern tragedy at large. In this way, Trissino placed Sophonisba as the very core of early modern renegotiations of tragedy.

The articles that follow also make clear how Trissino's tragedy was rarely a model to imitate blindly but functioned as something to critically negotiate. Trissino closely follows Livy's account, and his Sophonisba remains a somewhat secondary character. Masinissa's choice whether to break his marriage vows or break his pledge of allegiance to the Romans is a major focus point of the *Sophonisba*, and Scipio is represented as a mentor who tries to steer Masinissa away from the dangers of succumbing to his lust. Later dramatists exploited other nuances of the story and played around with the Livian character gallery. Thus, dramatists increasingly questioned Masinissa giving up his Sophonisba and pictured him killing himself alongside her or doomed him for his weakness. Similarly, Scipio could be framed as a ruthless dominator to criticise the Habsburgs' claim as heirs to the Roman empire in the Netherlands and in Silesian Germany. Or he could be praised for his unaffectedness when it comes to women to underscore the dangers of women in politics. These different rewritings build on each other in a complex network of intertextual references with Trissino as just one amongst many other versions. In this way, our theme issue complicates Trissino's importance. The following articles testify to the ways dramatists contributed to an ever-growing imaginary pool of stock-scenes, rhetorical soliloquies and political allegories across national boundaries. This points to a complex transnational intertextual impact of the Sophonisba story throughout the early modern period.

Another reason for Sophonisba's enduring popularity was early modernity's increasingly complex and ambiguous relationship with the Roman past as Greek authors, including historians such as Appian and Plutarch, were rediscovered in the second part of the sixteenth century. These supplied Renaissance humanists with new nuances on the familiar Roman past and on history writing as such. Particularly the rediscovery of Plutarch's 48 biographies on famous men from Greek and Roman history in the *Parallel Lives* introduced early modern poets to a diverse set of stock characters and added new nuances to such familiar figures as Mark Antony and Scipio

Africanus. Jacques Amyot's French translation of Plutarch's *Vies des hommes illustres* (1559, with revised editions published in 1565 and 1567) made Plutarch available to a new vernacular audience outside the narrow university setting, and the translation became a veritable bestseller with numerous reprints throughout the century and furnished countless tragic plots. Amyot's French version was also translated into English by Thomas North in 1579 and famously influenced Shakespeare's Roman plays.

Sophonisba formed part of this Greek revival. The story of Sophonisba is told in the *Life of Scipio* which, however, did not form part of Amyot's translation. Plutarch's original version is now lost, but existed in a recreated Latin version by Donato Acciaiuoli (1467/68) which would have been accessible to scholars, and the biography also existed in French in a translation by Simon Borgouyn (from before 1515) and another by Charles de L'Écluse (found in Simon Goulart's annotated version of Amyot from 1583). Here dramatists and poets could find a short mention of Masinissa and Sophonisba, but with Scipio as the main character. This meant that their story and inner life lacked the kind of details available for the story of Cleopatra and Mark Antony in the latter's biography, and this might have prompted dramatists to explore Masinissa's inner life in the same way.

On a more abstract level, the rediscovery of Plutarch also gave history a more human face. Together with new translations of Appian, this way to read history seems to have inspired dramatists to play around with the story and introduce another Sophonisba and prompted the question of who was the tragic hero of the story. Was it Sophonisba who had to surrender to forces outside her own control? Or rather Masinissa who was caught between personal wishes and political loyalty? The story of Sophonisba seemed ideally suited to negotiate not only the one-sided point of view of the Roman sources, but also explore the many layers of history.

A third and final reason for Sophonisba's long afterlife was her suitability as a political allegory. Surprisingly, Sophonisba's political usefulness was not restricted to any political opinion or context in particular. In France, both Catholics and Protestants claimed her as a mirror image during the religious wars. Sophonisba also proved a potent reflection during the War of Candia (1645-1669) in Venice, and in the Netherlands and in Germany, she was used to express critique of the Habsburgs' claim to power in these two territories. The story of Sophonisba with its conflation of love, lust and politics could furthermore be used to reflect on abstract themes such as loyalty, the hardships of war, the precariousness of civilians, particularly women, in cities under siege or to warn against the mixing of politics and personal desire. With its mixed character gallery of both conquerors and captives, the story of

Sophonisba offered dramatists and writers a prism through which they could examine the conflicts and issues of their own time.

The theme issue brings together articles by a wide array of scholars whose work showcases just how versatile Sophonisba proved to the early modern imagination. In the opening article of this volume, Samuel AGBAMU examines the racialisation of Sophonisba, tracing it from antiquity, particularly in the works of Livy, to early modernity. Comparing and contrasting Sophonisba with other important North African queens, Dido and Cleopatra, the article shows how Petrarch's works—*De viris illustribus*, the *Africa* and *Triumphus Cupidinis*—were pivotal moments in the racialisation of Sophonisba, and how they are crucial in understanding the development of modern discourses on race.

Nina HUGOT's article uncovers French sixteenth-century dramatists' diminishing fascination of Sophonisba's eloquence vis-à-vis the Latin and Greek source material as well as Gian Giorgio Trissino's Italian play. Whereas Mellin de Saint-Gelais's 1556 play showcases the queen's eloquence, the subsequent drama by Claude Mermet (1584) introduces a new ambiguity by stressing more firmly her dangerous ability to divert two kings from their alliance with Rome. With Antoine de Montchrestien (1596) and Nicolas de Montreux (1601), the fascination for her rhetorical skills is relegated to the background as Sophonisba's eloquence becomes almost exclusively a tool of manipulation. A development which questions the possibilities of women in public discourse at the turn of the century.

Christian HØGEL examines Cretan dramatist Georgios Chortatsis's tragedy, *Erofilis*. Høgel shows that Chortatsis's play uses the main plot of Giraldi's *Orbecche*—although the location of the action is moved from Persia to Egypt—and two choral odes from Trissino's *Sophonisba*. Considering Chortatsis's refashioning of these two earlier plays, Høgel argues that *Erofilis* combines the family drama of *Orbecche* with a focus on social themes which the playwright adapted from *Sophonisba*. Chortatsis's *Erofilis* is, then, a play which discusses moral rectitude, meritocratic values and the social importance of rich and poor.

In their article, Jan BLOEMENDAL and James A. PARENTE Jr. discuss two little known Dutch versions of the Sophonisba story from the 1620s by the Haarlem poet Govert van der Eemdb and the Antwerp painter and poet Guiliam van Nieuwelandt. Both made novel contributions to the theme by treating the story of Sophonisba, Syphax and Masinissa as a romance or as an historical drama about the establishment of Roman power in Africa respectively. By discussing these almost forgotten Sophonisba plays, the authors showcase the surprisingly intertextual connections between French, Dutch and German drama when discussing such themes as sexual desire,

political behaviour, and the ethos of empire at a time when the Dutch Republic was debating whether to negotiate a peace with the Spanish Habsburgs.

Guðrún KRISTINSDÓTTIR-URFALINO's article traces how Pierre Corneille in his *Sophonisba* (1663) refashions his protagonist into a political and moral reflection by exploring the implications of her pride in choosing death over dishonour. The article highlights two important poetic processes. Firstly, the leitmotif of jealousy which underlines Sophonisba's passion as both romantic and political. And secondly, the invention of a new character, Éryxe, who, by comparison and contrast, highlights the dark side of Sophonisba's patriotism which indicates a possible detachment with regard to political greatness as a critique of France's growing colonial involvement.

Beth CORTESE's article is about Nathaniel Lee's tragedy *Sophonisba, or Hannibal's Overthrow* (1676). Cortese argues that Lee uses the story of Sophonisba and Masinissa—a story fraught with love, divided loyalties and warfare—to comment on the political situation and growing tensions at the court of Charles II. Focusing on the topicality of *Sophonisba*, Cortese shows that the figure of Masinissa and his problematic love for Sophonisba becomes emblematic of ongoing questions of religion, politics, government and political allegiances that were catalysed by Charles's French mistress, Louise de Kéroualle.

Sofie KLUGE's article argues that Pedro Calderón de la Barca's play *The Second Scipio* from 1677 is a rewriting of the story of Sophonisba. Drawing on Erich Auerbach's concept of figural interpretation—which establishes a connection between two historically separate events or persons; one signifying the other and the other fulfilling the first—Kluge argues that Calderón's play conflates several Scipios—Scipio Africanus Major, who fought in the Second Punic War, and Scipio Africanus Aemilius Minor—as well as Sophonisba and Arminda. In this way, Calderón subtly rewrites the story of Sophonisba and suggests a happy ending that provided useful advice to its first audience, the future king Carlos II.

Ritchie ROBERTSON's article takes a fresh look at the exoticism in Lohenstein's *Sophonisbe* (1680). Lohenstein's heroine has been much criticised for her desperate measures, particularly her readiness to sacrifice one of her sons to propitiate the gods. However, all of Sophonisba's actions, though sometimes seemingly inconsistent, are explained by her patriotism, torn as she is by her conflict between Machiavellian statecraft and the demands of love. The article argues how Lohenstein shows us the necessary ruthlessness of politics, along with the human cost of Sophonisba's heroic and doomed resistance to Roman rule.

Finally, Enrico ZUCCHI's article traces changing conceptions of Sophonisba in seventeenth and early eighteenth-century Venice and Italy. Zucchi shows how the image of Sophonisba in Venetian literature went from a heroic *virago*, largely thanks to the popularity and influence of Trissino's *Sofonisba*, to a power-crazed woman. These changes were due to the misogyny of the *Accademia degli Incogniti* but also to the contemporary political climate. Having lost the Kingdom of Candia to the Ottoman Empire, Venice was on the brink of an international crisis. As a consequence, Venetian writers celebrated the virtuous Scipio Africanus, emphasizing the links between the Serenissima and the Roman past, and condemning the Sophonisba who became a figuration of the Ottoman Other.

Tracing these many early modern dramatic and literary representations of the Carthaginian woman, this special issue gives due critical attention to the intriguing character of Sophonisba and studies early modern representations of her from a comparative perspective. Taken together, these articles form a larger picture of the meaning of Sophonisba and the cultural network in which she is embedded and show just how influential Sophonisba was in the early modern period.

March 2023,

Anastasia Ladefoged Larn & David Hasberg Zirak-Schmidt

Table of Contents

Contributors	XI
Samuel AGBAMU, Petrarch's Sophonisba between Antiquity and Modernity	1
Nina HUGOT, L'éloquence de Sophonisbe, de Saint-Gelais à Montreux (1556-1601)	29
Christian HØGEL, Erofilí – an Egyptian Sofonisba from Crete	53
Jan BLOEMENDAL and James A. PARENTE, Jr., The Historicization of Desire: Sophonisba in Early Modern Dutch Drama	73
Guðrún KRISTINSDÓTTIR-URFALINO, La Fierté d'Empire: <i>Sophonisbe</i> (1663) de Pierre Corneille	105
Beth CORTESE, Love and War: Court Politics in Nathaniel Lee's <i>Sophonisba, or Hannibal's Overthrow</i> (1676)	127
Sofie KLUGE, The Second Sophonisba: Figuralité and Counter-factuality in Calderón's <i>The Second Scipio</i>	<u>147</u>
Ritchie ROBERTSON, Lohenstein's <i>Sophonisbe</i> : A Vindication of the Heroine	165
Enrico ZUCCHI, A Fickle Power-crazed Seductress: Misogyny and Republicanism in Late Seventeenth-century Venetian Representation of Sophonisba	183
David HASBERG ZIRAK-SCHMIDT, Sofie KLUGE, Anastasia LADEFOGED LARN & Rasmus VANGSHARDT, Epilogue. Reflections on Historical Comparativism Prompted by the Case of Sophonisba	211

Contributors

Samuel AGBAMU is a Leverhulme Early Career Fellow and Lecturer in Classics at the University of Reading. He is currently working on a project investigating the role of Petrarch's Latin writing, and especially the *Africa*, in the development of discourses of nationhood, empire, and 'race'. He has also worked on the ideological uses of the Roman empire in modern Italian imperial contexts, and is writing a book on this theme. He has also written about classical reception in contemporary art as well as a number of pieces on topics around inclusivity and anti-racism in classical studies.

Jan BLOEMENDAL is a senior researcher at the Huygens Institute for the History and Culture of the Netherlands, Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences, and Privatdozent at the Ruhr University Bochum. He is the coordinator of the *Erasmi Opera Omnia*. He has published on Neo-Latin literature, transnationalism and early modern drama in Latin and the vernaculars, and Erasmus. He was a co-editor (with Philip J. Ford and Charles Fantazzi) of *Brill's Encyclopaedia of the Early Modern World*, and is chief editor of the series 'Drama and Theatre in Early Modern Europe'. He also co-edited a special issue of the journal *Renaissance Studies* entitled *Transnational Exchange in the Early Modern Low Countries* (2022). He is currently conducting the NWO-funded project *TransLatin: The Transnational Impact of Latin Theatre from the Early Modern Netherlands*.

Beth CORTESE is an Assistant Professor (Lecturer) in English Literature, specializing in Restoration and 18th Century Literature at the University of Iceland. Beth wrote her Doctorate on women's wit onstage in comedies from 1660-1720 at Lancaster University, UK. She was a research fellow on the Unearned Wealth: A Literary History of Inheritance project at Aarhus University, Denmark. Her research has been published in *Restoration and 18th Century Research* journal, *Law and Literature Journal*, and in edited collections with Routledge.

Christian HØGEL is Professor of Ancient Greek, Latin, and Modern Greek at Lund's University (Sweden). He has published extensively on Byzantine hagiography and *metaphrasis*, on Arabo-Greek translations, and on the history of various concepts, not least that of Ciceronian *humanitas* in his *The Human and the Humane. Humanity as Argument from Cicero to Erasmus* (V&R Press, 2015). He is co-director of the Centre for Medieval Literature (CML, Odense/York), and of the research project *Retracing Connections*.

Nina HUGOT, agrégée in Modern Letters, is a lecturer at University of Lorraine. Her works are devoted to the tragic genre in Renaissance France and examine the role of female characters and femininity in the Tragic Aesthetics of the Sixteenth Century. In 2021, she published a book at Droz publishing house entitled “*D’une voix et plaintive et hardie*” *French tragedy and the feminine between 1537 and 1583*, which gives a new interpretation of the aesthetics of Renaissance tragedy based on the characteristics of its heroines; she has also published more than a dozen articles on this matter. Currently, she is leading a project called “Melponum – Melpomene in the digital age” aimed at publishing the theatrical corpus of the Renaissance online and her analyses open up to comic and late 16th century corpuses.

Sofie KLUGE, PhD in Comparative Literature and dr. phil., University of Copenhagen, is associate professor of Comparative Literature at the University of Southern Denmark. She is a member of the *Academia Europaea*, the author of four monographs and 40+ peer reviewed articles and book chapters on Spanish Golden Age and European early modern literature.

Guðrún KRISTINSDÓTTIR-URFALINO is a Postdoctoral Fellow at the University of Iceland working on a research project entitled *The French Wave in Icelandic Theatre*, financed by the Icelandic Research Fund (Rannís). She holds a joint doctoral degree from the University Sorbonne-Nouvelle Paris 3 and the University of Iceland. Her doctoral research concerned the Roman Civil War as a subject of French XVIth and XVIIth century tragedy. Her research interests include the memory of the wars of Religion in French tragedy and translation and adaptation of French neoclassical theatre in the Nordic countries.

James A. PARENTE, Jr. is a Professor Emeritus of German, Scandinavian, and Dutch literature at the University of Minnesota. He has published widely on early modern German, Dutch and Neo-Latin literature. His books include *Religious Drama and the Humanist Tradition: Christian Theater in Germany and the Netherlands* (1987), and more recently, an updated reprint of the co-edited volume (with George C. Schoolfield and Richard Schade) *Literary Culture in the Holy Roman Empire, 1555-1700* (2021), and (with Jan Bloemendal and Nigel Smith) a special issue of the journal *Renaissance Studies* entitled *Transnational Exchange in the Early Modern Low Countries* (2022). He is currently working on several projects concerning transnational literary relations between the German Empire, the Netherlands, and Nordic Europe.

Ritchie ROBERTSON retired in 2021 from the Schwarz-Taylor Chair of German Language and Literature at Oxford University. His recent books include *Enlightenment and Religion in German and Austrian Literature: Selected Essays* (Cambridge: Legenda, 2017), *The Enlightenment: The pursuit of Happiness, 1680-1790* (London: Penguin, 2020), and *Friedrich Nietzsche* in the series *Critical Lives* (London: Reaktion, 2022). He is currently completing a study of German political tragedy from Lohenstein to Hochhuth.

Enrico ZUCCHI is a Post-doc Research Fellow in Italian Literature at the University of Padova, where he gained his PhD in 2017 with a dissertation on the eighteenth-century Italian and French tragedy. He has been researcher in Turin (Fondazione 1563), Paris (Sorbonne-Paris IV), Leiden (Universiteit Leiden), Bergen (Universitetet i Bergen) and Strasbourg (Université de Strasbourg). His research interests focus mainly on the seventeenth and eighteenth-century theatre and on early modern republicanism and political literature. Currently, he is part of the research team of the ERC project RISK – Representing Republican State Power in the Europe of Absolute Monarchies.