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, they never had access to rhetorical training. 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. 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; 76-74.
in its third sense, that of a particular type of classroom exercise, the
eleventh of the fourteen exercises known as progrsymmata, which
are situated at a transitional stage from grammar to rhetoric.

In progrsymmata manuals, ethosocia is defined as the
imitation of the character of a particular person in a particular
situation. Three subclasses are commonly distinguished, ethical,
pithetic 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
pledge their own cases, skilled composers of speeches earned money
ghost-writing addresses for the less verbally adept, 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, 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. 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 (Maesta, Hortensia).
But those were rare enough cases to provoke attention.
Moreover, there never existed any serious tradition of logography
in Rome.

7 Among ethosocia preserved from antiquity, the following are in female voices:
Aphrod; Prag 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, 1, 544, 11-
19 Walz (Brielle). Nicol., Prag 1, 383, 8 - 384, 3 Walz (Cassandra); 1, 392, 22 - 394, 18
Walz (Laristius); Eanod., Dict. 25 (Thestis); 27 (Juno); 28 (Dido). Andromache as
suggested subject in Pr.-Herngg, Prag 20, 8 21, 14 Rabe and Nicol., Prag 64, 12
8 See e.g. Fernández Delgado 1994.
9 P. Vin. 1978, 14-27 (Pack 1978); P. Graves I, 9-17 (Pack 1986); edictus princeps in Graves 1885; P. Cyn. XII 3002.
10 P. Heid. inv. 1271 v. (Pack 1911); edictus princeps Gerhard - Grau (1905); see
Grimora 1996, pp. 262 (no. 353) and 52.
11 AP. IX 126 449, 451-480.

It is surprising, then, that about one third of the examples of
written ethosocia 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).

The proportion of female impersonation in ethosocia
preserved on papyri or tablets is quite similar, approximately one
fourth to one third. There are, for instance, a prose ethosocia of
Claramnestra, and hexametric pieces of Calliope and Athena.
In a series of short hexametric ethosocia preserved on a Heidelberg
papyrus, two out of six are in the voices of women. Of the similar
short verse ethosocia found in the Anthologia Palatina 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. Accordingly, they were
anxious to make them avoid anything that might bring about
effeminy of any kind. If Gleason is right, however, then arises an
obvious inconsistency between this concern and the undeniable
popularity of female ethosocia. Would not an exercise that

See Lipsius 1912, pp. 905-906.
Women had to be represented by a male person; see Lipsius 1912, p. 791.
See Gardner 1987, p. 262.
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 pro gymnasmatists provide is very meagre. Theon only states: διὰ φόσιν γυναικείον καὶ ἄνδρι ἐτερον λόγοι ἀρμόττοιεν ἡν. 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 (阋 λέγει ἀλάσσωμα τύχων ἁπαίς ἢ τριλε ἐπί ην 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 paragraphs 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

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 Italy15. 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 possible16.

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 pro gymnasmatists 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 declamer 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

13 Theon, Prog. 116, 1-2; Speagel = 70 Paulloni; Emporius, De ethopoeia, 562, 1-2; Halm, loc. cit., Erasm. II 14.
14 Aphth., Prog. 35, 17 - 36, 20 Rabe.
16 Cfr. Verg., Aen. IV 31-55; 437-458; and esp. 672-687, vs. VI 455.
17 See Russell 1983, p. 11.
18 Nicol., Prog. 63, 12-21 Feltén; Quint. Ill 8, 52-54.
20 Quint. Ill 8, 51; cfr. VI 2, 36; XI 1, 55. They are present, however, in proseopoeia; 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 Lattro makes a woman, who tries to spur her husband towards tyranny, say: *Escende, [...] occide tyrannum; nisi occideris, indicabo. [...] Tempus est; escende; [...] Escende, occide tyrannum; [...] Escende*. 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 tuis nocibus mater sum, video, fruer, iam et narro*. 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 garulous wife, who racks him with endless questions such as: *Ποι τε παρακολούθησα; πάνταν ἀφίξαι; τῷ διελθάντι; τί καθοῦ ἤγγελα; γεγοναν ἐπιδόσεις; έγραφη τί ζήσεσαι; κτλ.*

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 envisaged. 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. 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...». 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 declaration 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. 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. Both Theon and Nicolaus point out that the exercise of ethopoeia is useful for...
epistolography. 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. And, «[i]f a secretary received any instruction in the *prosopopeia*, it probably included the exercises in *prosopopeia*. (...) Thus secretarial training may well have included training in the art of mimicking the style of another.» As letters were also written by or on behalf of women, one might infer that female *ethopoia* 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 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. This is confirmed by what Pliny says about the elegance of the letters written by his wife Calpurnia. 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 *ethopoia* 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.

As this explanation also fails, we may perhaps resort to the hypothesis that the final objective of female *ethopoia* may have been creative literary writing. Quintilian and Theon affirm that *ethopoia* is useful for poets, historians or other writers. 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. Certainly it is no coincidence that the standard heroines of female *ethopoia* 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 *ethopoia* 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 *ethopoia* were most naturally chosen from their works. The attested predilection for Euripides might thus partly account for the frequency of female characters in *ethopoia*.

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

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35 Quint. III 8, 49; Theon, Prog. 70, 26-29 Spengel = 15 Patillon; cf. also Nicol., Prog. 65, 2-3 Felsen.
36 See Ureña Bracero 1995.
37 Cf. Theon, Prog. 68, 22-25 Spengel = 12 Patillon; see Morgan 1998, pp. 97-100; 219-220; 313; 316; Cibrioe 2001, p. 226.
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. 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. 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. 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. The fact that simple and disjointed style, as opposed to complex periods, is best for ethopoeic purposes, is observed by Dionysius of Halicarnassus. Likewise, Nicolaus suggests that in ethopoeia syntax should be

commatic. In his view, however, this kind of style produces pathos. Similarly, Pseudo-Hermogenes states that asyndetic construction is pathetic. That ethical speech may be conveniently employed for arousing pathos is a view already found in Cicero. Quintilian, too, is quite positive about ethopoeia producing affectus. 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 κλεῖσμα or μεταφορά, 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 Apeithous’ Niobe ethopoeia with the short passages of female speech from declamations, we will notice that whereas Apeithous’ 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 ethopoeia 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 Fehsen; 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 ethopoeia was to be won by the boy who best expressed emotions of anger and grief.  

Thus, in the background of female ethopoeia there seems to be an imagination of a particular affinity of the female gender towards pathos. 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 piteful 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. 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.

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65 Idem., Epwm. II 14; Aug., Conf. I 17.
67 Cf. Quini, IX 2, 30; see also Woods 2002, p. 290.

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