CLAUDIAN AND THE ART OF IMITATIO IN THE DE RAPTU PROSERPINAE

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Claudian is what is commonly termed a doctus poeta. He has read widely in Classical Literature and he strews his poetry with learned allusions to his forebears. This imitation of predecessors, which was prevalent in the Silver writers\(^1\), had reached a slavish absurdity by Claudian's time at the end of the fourth century A.D., when poets were far more concerned about their powers of expression than about the sense of what they had to express.

True imitation is only successful if the words and ideas borrowed are transferred to a new context in order to express a new thought, not merely lifted unthinkingly from the old one. Claudian's mastery of the art of literary allusion deserves a good deal more credit than he is granted by Dilke, who suggests that Claudian, while writing the De Raptu Proserpinae, read systematically through Vergil Georgics 1 - 2 twice, Lucan two and a half times and Statius' Achilleid three times!\(^2\)

Since we are dealing with a practised poet, it is not surprising that he can pick half-conscious echoes, derived from years of wide reading and stored in a lively and retentive brain, from a half a dozen treatments of similar motifs and effect a successful amalgam which forms a new whole.

An investigation of the nature of these "new wholes" is the purpose of this paper.

Firstly, the invocation at the beginning of DRP, 1.20ff:

\[
\text{Di, quibus innumerum vacui famulatur Averni} \\
\text{vulgus iners, opibus quorum donatur avaris} \\
\text{quidquid in orbe perit, quos Styx liventibus ambit} \\
\text{interfusa vadis et quos fumantia torquens} \\
\text{aequora gurgitibus Phlegethon perlustrat anhelis...}
\]

1 Cf. Williams, G., Change and Decline (California 1978), 193ff.
"O gods, upon whom the innumerable, strengthless throng of empty Avernus attends; as whose greedy property is granted the gift of whatever perishes on the earth; whom the Styx encircles, flowing between with its livid shallows, and through whose midst Phlegethon, whirling its smoking streams, passes in panting surges..."

An invocation is an important moment in a poem, where the poet is striving for a grand, formal tone, and Claudian has taken great care in choosing the vocabulary in which he calls upon the deities of the underworld to inspire him.

The first echo is of Vergil's own invocation of the underworld deities (Aen. 6.264ff.):

Di, quibus imperium est animarum, umbraeque silentes et Chaos et Phlegethon, loca nocte tacentia late, sit mihi fas audita loqui, sit numine vestro pandere res alta terra et caligine mersas.

"O gods, upon whom is the rule of the spirits, and the silent shadows, and Chaos and Phlegethon, the places silent in the night far and wide, may it be right for me to speak what I have heard, right by your power to lay open things buried deep in the earth and the darkness."

And there is also direct influence from Statius' passages:

Di, santes animas, angustaque Tartara poenis qui regitis, tuque umbrifero Styx livida fundo quam video... (Theb. 1.56ff.)

"O you gods, who rule the guilty souls and Tartarus, confined with punishments, and you, o livid Styx whom I see, with your waters that carry the shades..."

and

Tartareae sedes et formidabile regnum Mortis inexpletæae, tuque, o saevissime fratrum, cui servire dati manes aeternaque suntum supplicia atque uti famulatur regia mundi...(ib. 4.473ff.).

"Tartarean realms and terrible kingdom of unsated Death, and you, o most savage of the brothers, to whom the dead are granted as slaves, and upon whom attend the eternal punishments of the guilty and the palace at the bottom of the world..."
Claudian’s first two words are a direct quotation from the Vergil passage: *Di, quibus...*, and the following idea of "rulers of the spirits" is also common to both, but at this point the two poets part company totally. As always, Claudian opts for an extended particular, visual description of a crowd of spirits, while Vergil contents himself with a more subtle and abstract portrayal, resulting in a grander and more mysterious atmosphere.

Straightaway there is present Claudian’s love of the clever and witty, in the juxtaposition of *innumerum* and *vacui* - the spirits are countless, but Avernus is still empty enough to hold many more. (For the use of the phrase *vacuus Avernus* cf. Verg. *Aen.* 6.269 *domos Ditis vacuas* (empty halls of Dis) and V.F. 2.602). The *vulgus iners* has pitiful, or even derogatory, overtones, cf. Lucan’s use of the phrase to describe an army of mutineering soldiers cowed by the speech of a single man (5.365) and St. *Theb.* 5.120, stemming from Homer’s formula of the "strengthless dead" νεκύων ἀμενηνᾶ κάρηνα (*Od.* 11.29). Claudian presents a far more precise initial picture of the underworld and its social organization than does Vergil’s plain *quibus imperium est animarum* - reinforced by the use of the non-Vergilian *famulatur* (attends) (cf. St. *Theb.* 4.476). This suits a fourth-fifth century world where the court hierarchy was much more rigid then before, where the emperor was *dominus* and the subjects *servi* (Cor. *Iust.* 1.5f.).

The next picture starts with the idea of the gods of the underworld greedy to pile yet more souls into their coffers. *Avarus* and *avidus* are common epithets of Death, or the gods of death (Verg. *Geo.* 2.492 *strepitumque Acheronis avari* (the hungry clamour of hell), St. *Theb.* 11.410 *avidus regnator* (the greedy ruler) (Pluto)). But here Claudian transfers the adjective from the animate gods to the inanimate "resources", in a habit common to him of brief personifications of the inanimate. He also seizes on the brilliant contrast by using *perit* with its connotations of loss, squandering and waste - in the world things waste which the chthonic deities are miserly to gather to them.

The next lines about the rivers of the underworld contain Vergilian echoes:

*Aen.* 6.296f. *turbidus hic caeno vastaque voragine surgés/aestuat*

"Here a turbulent surge heaves with a mighty abyss of mud"

320 *illae remis vada livida verrunt*

"They sweep the livid shallows with oars"

439 *novies Styx interfusa coercet*

"The Styx nine times flowing between hems in"

550f. *(moenia) quae rapidus flammis ambit torrentibus annis*
Tartareus Phlegethon, torquetque sonantia saxa.

"(walls) which the tearing river Tartarean Phegethon encircles with burning flames, and whirs its resounding rocks"

Again these are modified by touches of Statian influence, e.g. *Theb. 4.522ff*:

...liventes Acheron eiectat harenas
fumidus atra vadis Phlegethon incendia volvit,
et Styx discretis interfluca manibus obstat.

"Acheron casts out livid sands, smoking Phlegethon rolls black fires in its shallows, and the Styx, flowing between, blocks the dead who are separated off."

Cf. *Sil. 13.563-5*:

... large exundantibus urit
ripa saevus aquis Phlegethon et, turbine anhelo
flammarum resonans, saxosa incendia torquet...

"Savage Phlegethon burns its banks with abundantly overflowing waters, and, resounding in a panting vortex of flames, whirs its rocky fires".

Claudian's personal stamp is discernible in the compression of effects gained by his predecessors: the colour (*liventibus*), the motion (*ambit, torquens, perlustrat*), the visual aspect (*fumantia* of the foaming and steaming of the waters), the heat and the sound (*fumantia, anhelis*). The alliteration of the hard *q, g, p, t* sounds in 23f. effectively contrasts the boiling, boisterous Phlegethon with the softer *s, l, i, a* sounds of the smooth-gliding Styx in 22f.

Every word in Claudian's poetry is made to work very hard, especially his verbs and adjectives, as can be demonstrated by a passage from his ecphrasis on the island of Sicily and its volcano Aetna (*DRP 1.142ff*):

... Trinacria quondam
Italae pars una fuit, sed pontus et aetas
mutavere situm. rupit confinia Nereus
victor et abscessos interfluit aequore montes
parvaque cognatas prohibent discrimina terras.
nunc illam socia raptam tellure trisulco
opponit natura mari: caput inde Pachyni
respuit Ionias praetentis rupibus iras;
hinc latrat Gaetula Thetis Lilybaeaeque pulsat
bracchia consurgens; hinc indignata teneri
concutit obiectum rabies Tyrrhena Pelorum.
"Trinacria once upon a time was a part joined to Italy, but sea and time have changed the lie of the land. Victorious Nereus broke his bounds and flowed through the cleft mountains with his stream and a narrow channel separates the related lands. Now Nature sets it in the face of the three-pronged sea, snatched from its kindred mainland: on one side the headland of Pachynum spurns the anger of the Ionian sea with its crags stretched out before it; on another barks Gaetulian Thetis which rises up and beats against the curving arms of Lilybaeum's harbour; on the third the fury of the Tyrrhenian Sea, chafing at restraint, shakes the obstacle of Pelorus".

Ovid provides the basic source of Claudian's description of Sicily at Met. 5.346ff. and Fast. 4.419ff., and Claudian uses the traditional motifs of the three capes and the shape and name of Trinacria, but he reworks them in his own particular style, notably in the extraordinary vigour of the verbs. As Cameron says, Claudian's description tends to be static and posed, but the posing is not always completely static, as the sea shows in this passage, where it is a raging, breaking, noisy force hurling itself against the promontories of Sicily: rupit (144), abscessos (145), prohibent (146), opponit (148), latrat, pulsat (150), concuit (152).

Homerian and Vergilian scenery is generally shown in action, so to speak, relevant to the characters' emotions and the events about to take place there; e.g. the bay in which the Trojans land in Libya after the storm (Aen. 1.159ff.) is full of calm as a respite to storm-beaten ships, a delightful haven from sea-wandering, and yet offers a certain latent menace. But by the time of Ovid and the Silver writers, the ecphrasis has become an extended diversion, often crammed with highly ornate but irrelevant material and largely detachable from context. Silver Epic poets are continually telling the audience what the scenery is doing rather than showing the effects.

So here the description is loaded - or rather, over-loaded - with words evoking violence and rage, rather than presenting an objective picture of woods and waters. Claudian is involved with a mental picture of violence rather than a physical one of seas containing real water, and this distancing of the concrete is enhanced by the tendency to learned mythological allusions on Claudian's part (Nereus, Gaetula Thetis). Claudian gives us no real sense of the terrain of the land. His Sicily has no trees or soil or rivers; only a rhetorical division into three capes and a huge volcano.

Particularly interesting as an example of Claudian's habits of making a concise mélange of the vocabulary used in this motif by many other authors is 144f. Lucretius has the simple, undecorated statement (1.717ff.):
(Empedocles) insula quem triquetris terrarum gessit in oris,
quam fluitans circum magnis anfractibus aequor
Ionium glaucis aspergit virus ab undis,
angustoque fretu rapidum mare dividit undis
Italiea terrarum oras a finibus eius.

"(Empedocles) whom the island bore on the three-cornered shores of its lands,
around which the Ionian sea as it flows in great curves, spatters slime from its
grey-green waves, and by a narrow strait the tearing sea divides with its waves
the shores of the lands of Italy from its outer bounds".

This is enlarged and adorned, has the verbs strengthened and mythological
learning introduced by way of Vergil (Aen. 3.417-9), Ovid (Met. 15.291-2),
Lucan (2.435ff., 3.60-3), Valerius Flaccus (1.588ff., 2.616ff.), until it reaches
Silius at 14.12-19. Claudian has recalled parts from all: rupit from Valerius and
Silius, confinia from Ovid and Lucan, Nereus from Silius, as an elaboration of
the original pontus in Vergil, Ovid and Lucan, abscissos from Vergil, Valerius
and cf. Silius' discidit, also Aetna 183 scissae rupes obstant (cleft crags bar the
way), interluit from Vergil, aequore Lucan, montes Valerius and Lucan. These
he has arranged and combined, transforming them with his own ideas: the
importation of victor (cf. Ovid's unda velut victrix (the wave as it were
conquering) Met. 11.553, and Vergil's victor of fire shooting up a tree, Geo.
2.307) transmutes Silius' dull mythological reference into a passing
personification of the sea as a conquering general bursting through the ranks of
the enemy. The word order of abscissos aequore montes also mirrors the sense:
the mountains are split with the sea in the middle, and the golden line in 146
resolves the upheaval into a nice, neat arrangement with the verb in the middle
keeping the different components to their separate sides.

Likewise, the following picture of the three promontories of Sicily projecting
into the three seas is a favourite descriptive point with the geographers (Strab.
6.2.1, Pliny, NH 3.87), adopted by the poets in ingenious ways (Ov. Met.
5.350f., 13.725-7, Sil. 14. 72-8). Claudian's main efforts go towards conveying
the angry power and noisy roaring of the turbulent seas dashing against the
island to emphasise its isolation and apparent unassailability. The power of the
description comes from his tendency to depict the inanimate in terms applicable
to the animate, falling short of complete personification: caput, bracchia,
respuat, latrat, indignata teneri, iras, rabies.

Another very good example in the DRP of Claudian's tendency to manipulate the
reader's concentration to focus on a particular aspect of a scene is the description
of Ceres' palace on Sicily (DRP 1.237ff.):

Devenere locum, Cereris quo tecta nitebant
Cyclopum formata manu: stant ardua ferro
moenia, ferrati postes, immensaque nectit
They came down to the place where Ceres' dwelling shone, shaped by the hand of the Cyclopes: the walls stand lofty with iron, the gates are made of iron, and steel twines together the immense bolts. No other work have Pyragmon or Steropes constructed with so much sweat; never have the bellows blown with such blasts or has molten metal flowed in such a stream so the furnace has become tired. Ivory encircles the walls, the roof top is strengthened with bronze beams and the electron rises into tall columns".


The main elements in all are conspicuous size and luxurious building materials and in most there is a glitter of jewels or precious metals. So in Claudian there is the impression of vast size (ardua...moenia, immensa...claustra celsas...columnas) and the gleam of precious metals (nitetbant, ferro, ferrati postes, chalybs, metallum, trabibus aenis, electra).

Most of the palace ecphraseis elaborate detail for the sake of pictorial delight (Homer, Apollonius, Ovid, Nonnus), and though Lucan's begins with moral strictures upon Cleopatra's corrupt wealth and luxury, his description stretches to such a length that it is easy to believe he is enjoying the graphic portrayal of all this corruption. Vergil's palace alone differs from the rest in that it does not glitter, it is full of holy significance, symbolic statues and spoils and echoes from the subconscious of Roman myth and folk-lore. Unlike all the others, Vergil gives no clear picture of the actual physical lay-out of the palace - merely of its vast size and support by one hundred columns, of the strange cedar statues in the vestibules and the war spoils on the gates.

Claudian's palace has none of the depth of significance of Vergil's because of the much greater frivolity of his theme, but it has certain threads that link the description as an artistic whole. In Orphic poetry Proserpina is left at home (Proclus on Plat. Tim. 5.307c-d, Orph. Arg. 1194), while in Nonnus she is left in a cave (D. 6.135). Claudian chooses the palace motif to impress upon the reader the idea of a fortress where Ceres, leaving Proserpina, might justly consider her to be safe: so the walls are ardua ferro (238) the doors are ferrati (239), immensaque nectit claustra chalybs (239-40) and trabibus solidatur aenis culmen (244-5). The immense effort of the palace's construction emphasizes its
impregnability, cf. *tanto sudore* (240), *spiravere Notis* (242), the metal flowed in veritable rivers and the very furnace was *lassa* (243). Ironical indeed that, after all these precautions, the rape itself is accomplished with such ease.

Claudian picks out the salient features of his palace which contribute to the impression he wishes to convey: it is hard to imagine what his palace really looks like except that it is bright, huge, and strengthened with iron and steel, having a main hall of ivory. Remarkable too are the verbs of activity (*nectit, maduit, cingit, surgunt*) in the totally static description, cf. the sea around Sicily discussed above. Noticeable too is the over-trumping of predecessors: Cleopatra's palace has ivory clothing the main hall (Luc. 10.119 *ebur atria vestit*) and Claudian caps the clothing metaphor with *cingit* - both images being difficult to imagine in concrete building materials. Hyperbole also plays its part: (242) Claudian's furnace is not fanned merely by breezes, but by whole winds - all to heighten the picture.

Overtrumping of predecessors is a taste common to all Latin epic writers including Vergil. The passage in the *DRP* where Pluto announces that he will bestow upon his young bride as a wedding gift the tree from which sprang Vergil's golden bough is a good opportunity to examine the techniques of both writers on a similar subject (*DRP* 2.290ff.):

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est etiam lucis arbor praedives opacis
fulgentes viridi ramos curvata metallo:
haec tibi sacra datur fortunatumque tenebis
autumnnum et fulvis semper ditarere pomis.
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"There is also a very rich tree in the shady groves, with curving branches that gleam with green metal: this is a sacred gift to you, and you will possess the prosperous harvest and will be ever enriched with golden apples".

Vergil's golden bough is Aeneas' passport across the Styx (*Aen.* 6.405-10) and is left at the palace in Elysium (628-36). *Ov. Met.* 14.113ff. is a respectful echo of Vergil: "Silver Epic made no attempt to steal the Golden Bough," as Austin comments on *Aen.* 6. 144. Steal it, Claudian may not have, but he has certainly made an effort to increase the spectacle by presenting a whole tree instead of merely a branch.

Claudian's vocabulary is reminiscent of Vergil's and some of his effects similar. He imitates Vergil's colour contrast of a gleaming object in dark and shady woods (*Aen.* 6.136ff.), and the hard consonants Vergil uses to convey the impression of tinkling golden foliage: *sic leni crepitabat brattea vento, "thus the gold leaf was tinkling in the gentle breeze"* (*Aen.*6.209); cf. *curvata metallo* (*DRP* 2.291). Also he points up the same significance of the branch as sacred to Proserpina: *haec tibi sacra datur* (*DRP* 2.292); cf. *Iunoni infernae dictus sacer "said to be sacred to Juno of the Underworld"* (*Aen.* 6.138), *hoc sibi pulchra*
suum ferri Proserpina munus instituit, "this Proserpina has appointed to be brought to her as her own sacred gift" (ib.142f.).

With these largely technical points, the resemblance ends. Claudian enlarges Vergil's single branch into the parent tree with the addition of gleaming apples, presumably having in mind the golden apples of the Hesperides. He has created a beautiful, artificial gift such as a prince might bestow on his bride in a fairy-tale or a court masque. The colour contrasts are appealing to the eye, the outlines are sharp and crisp, the atmosphere charmingly magical. There are none of the Vergilian over-and under-tones, nothing of the mystery and symbolism that has led so many scholars to ponder the meaning of this branch.

The whole contrast appears even in the first word: Claudian uses est (290), the traditional opening of an ecphrasis; Vergil uses latet (Aen. 6.136), which endows the branch with a strange animation; cf. the way it reacts when Aeneas plucks it (Aen 6.146, 210f.). It has mysterious emotions and powers; the whole forest seems to cluster protectively around to shield its preciousness (138f.), it is the passport to the sacred realms of Proserpina and it regenerates with a mysterious and divine promptitude (143f.).

Claudian's tree is not just dives (wealthy) like Vergil's bough (Aen. 6.195), but outstandingly so: praedives. He also makes a further clever play of wit on the monetary assessment diabetere (you will be enriched). His tree produces golden apples, in the normal manner of trees but unlike the regeneration of Vergil's golden bough. Of course it also gleams brightly in shady groves, with Claudian's customary delight in bright objects standing out against shadows.

It is not proper to criticize Claudian for choosing to portray a similar object in a totally different light. It is not a meaningful symbol in his poetry - it is a little like a tinsel toy offered to make a child feel better and stop it having a temper tantrum - and the picture he gives of it is appealing in its context. But it is interesting to compare the two poets on the same object and differentiate the whole atmosphere of their work: Claudian concise, vivid, pretty, with strong visual precision; Vergil a great deal more hazy, delicate and mysterious. Claudian is what is on the page in front of you; with Vergil, the word is only the beginning.

One could go on discussing passages in a similar fashion, since it is impossible to read five lines of Claudian together without coming up with a whole network of allusions to previous authors; but these few are sufficient to bring out his general hallmarks as an imitator. He is not a hack who adopts his predecessors unquestioningly, relying on their effects wholesale. He has his own characteristics of particularization, wordplay, compression, heightening and rhetorical brilliance. He is a remarkably clever poet who is capable of adopting six different literary reminiscences in one sentence, and combining them with his own stamp to effect a successful amalgam. His precise use of words without
waste, his elegant wit and his sharp power of crystal-clear delineation make him an impressive, though not an emotionally touching, writer.

* I would like to thank Professor R.G.M. Nisbet for looking over this article for me. All references are quoted from the text of the *De Raptu Proserpinae* ed.J.B. Hall, (Cambridge, 1969).