

In addressing the context and style of the passage 1.20-66 in Claudian's *On The Rape of Proserpina*, the area of pressing and immediate concern is the context – both literary and geopolitical – surrounding both the passage itself and the text at large at the time of writing. Of most specific concern is the division of the Empire on East-West lines, and, more specifically, the rivalry between the Eastern and Western courts. Claudian being employed by the latter, it does not take any great stretch of the imagination to extrapolate geopolitical allegory from neo-mythical epic.

The broad strokes are self-evident – the equation of the East with the Underworld and the West with Olympus coupled with Dis and Jove being brothers effectively translating the formal political division of the Roman world into cosmic terms. However, in examining Dis' portrayal, a policy of strict extrapolation from Arcadius falls short. The reason given by Claudian for Dis' threat of war is not the ambition of a jealous brother jockeying for power, but being “unwed [and having] long wasted the years in childless state, brooking no longer to lack the joys of wedlock and a husband's happiness nor ever to know the dear name of father”¹.

In a mythological context, this constitutes a definite novelty – both in the specificity of the motive given relative to, for example, the Homeric Hymn to Demeter (which largely focuses on the *how* rather than *why* of the myth), and in its character (the ascribing of human longing, loneliness and jealousy). In an allegorical reading, however, it rules out a strict reading of Dis as Arcadius (the latter having fathered Theodosius II). It does not, however, rule out a reading of Dis as a composite allegory for both the eastern Emperor and a figure of some revulsion for Claudian and the Stilichaeian court more broadly – namely, Eutropius.

As a figure in possession of power and prominence in the East, Eutropius naturally constituted a target for invective by a Western court at odds with Constantinople. His being a eunuch invited traditional Roman prejudices into the matter. Given the greater military vulnerability of the West, even his successes as a war leader may have invited no shortage of envy. The tell of this particular animus is another work by the same author – namely, Claudian's *In Eutropium*, an invective and inversion of the traditional consular panegyric issued in the context of Eutropius' attainment and acceptance of that office.

Particularly telling is the dread of sterility – and, with it, an inability to properly act as *paterfamilias* – present in both the passage and the panegyric. Again: “to lack the joys of wedlock and a husband's happiness nor ever to know the dear name of father”². Then: “with one blow deprive[d][...of] a father's function and the name of husband”³. In both texts, the emphasis on the absence (or, in Eutropius' case, outright *removal*) of the roles of father and husband as a peculiarly terrible injury – in Dis' case, one worthy of threatening a second Titanomachy over. In Eutropius', both the root of his (to Claudian terrible) success (“his very disgrace has proved a

¹ (Claudian, 1922)

² (Claudian, 1922)

³ (Claudian, 1922)

blessing to him[...][h]ad he had his full manly vigour he would still have been a slave”⁴, and that which places him (exaggerated into a deliberately grotesque “mass of senile pendulous flesh”⁵ so as to enhance the effect) in the dimension of the chthonic. While both *In Eutropium* and *On the Rape of Proserpina* differ as to execution, both act as components in a broader invective broadside against the Eastern court – whether through the simultaneously terrifying and (sym)pathetic figure of Dis as an allegorical combination of Arcadius and Eutropius, or the more direct invective of *In Eutropium*.

It is possible to extrapolate definite Christian influences on the passage. While Claudian’s paganism on the one hand and the Church’s monotheism on the other necessarily preclude anything so bold as an outright equation of Olympus with Heaven, the Christianisation of the empire if not complete was well-advanced. Further, Claudian wrote as a favourite of a Christian court, for a Christian imperial intelligentsia faced with the weighty intellectual conundrum of synthesising *romanitas* with a nascent *christianitas* after centuries of mutual opposition. This intelligentsia – to whom education was still synonymous with the works of Virgil and Homer – accordingly had ample reason to make a success of a work that might carry Christian themes in a pagan casing.

It is worth noting how much emphasis Dis places on marital love as a source of happiness and an aspiration. “Amphitrite, daughter of Nereus, holds Neptune in her sea-grey embrace; Juno, thy sister and thy wife, takes thee to her bosom when wearied thou layest aside thy thunderbolts”⁶. The imagery employed is, by the standards of the exhaustive corpus of Greco-Roman myths of divine abduction, peculiarly intimate. It is, however, in-keeping with the Christian project of the redefinition of marriage not simply as a legal arrangement and means of the perpetuation of a *gens*, but as a physical and spiritual means by which husband and wife ‘become one flesh’. This is not to argue that marriage before this process was without sentiment, and after with it, but that the Christianisation of the Roman Empire effectively sacralised the institution in its own right. As such, despite the violence implicit to the poem’s conceit – and the unblushing paganism of the author – Christian assumptions, through a kind of cultural osmosis, can be taken to have seeped through its membrane.

Stylistically, the poem is in the epic mode, and is constructed accordingly. Epithets are used as a matter of course, as in Homer, to establish and ascribe character, especially to the divine. ‘Arcadian-born’ Mercury; ‘Iacchus smooth of skin’. Cumulative detail as to the inhabitants of the Underworld and its rivers further establish both the threat posed by Dis as its overall sovereign and the character of an unflattering allegory for the East for West Roman audiences – exotic, dangerous, subject to the rule of a sterile despot.

⁴ (Claudian, 1922)

⁵ (Claudian, 1922)

⁶ (Claudian, 1922)

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Claudian (1922). *The Rape of Proserpine*. Cambridge, Ma.: Harvard University Press.

Claudian (1922). *In Eutropius*. Cambridge, Ma.: Harvard University Press.

Homer (1987). *The Iliad*. Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin ; New York, N.Y.

(1611). *The Bible, King James Version*. London, England.