

In his *In Eutropium*, Claudian formulates a uniquely delegitimising and total form of political attack by effectively embodying the central charge (i.e. that Eutropius' consulship in particular and the man himself in general constitutes a violation of the social and natural order) in the form of his invective (an inversion of the traditional consular panegyric).

This charge is first outlined at the very outset of the panegyric. Claudian begins with an invocation of a variety of menacing omens of the sort widely associated with incoming disaster in Roman and broader literature. The character of variety subtly heightens the overall effect by the accumulation of a quality of comprehensiveness as the text progresses. Claudian cites omens ranging from the astrological ("moons that clash in mid heaven and twin suns"¹) to the meteorological ("stones falling like rain"²), but repeats twice over instances of the blurring of natural distinctions in the human sphere (respectively "the births of creatures half human and half bestial"³ and "beasts that speak to their astonished herds"⁴). This all builds to the concluding stroke, which is in itself the main thesis of the work: "All portents pale before our eunuch consul"⁵.

This is a crucial aspect of the invective approach. At least as important as the *who* of Eutropius is the *what* of Eutropius, which not only is presented as but likely simply *was* an object of intense social horror both by Claudian and to the Western court and intelligentsia he wrote for. The fact of his simultaneously being a eunuch and a consul constituted a near-inversion of the traditional social order, however much it was in flux relative to the High Empire in the 5th century. His sterility and felt ambiguity consequent to his (quite literal) emasculation ran fundamentally counter to a West Roman conception of power (*potestas*) steeped in a cult of masculinity (that of the Roman *vir*), whose highest realisation was the conspicuously virile *paterfamilias*.

This theme of unsettling and despised ambiguity is stressed by the description of Eutropius as "an old woman"⁶ and the felt shame implicit to the attribution of "a woman's name to the year"⁷. His near-certain origins as a slave - one alleged to have taken the passive role as many eunuchs did, no less – made his status in the Eastern court an inversion of both sexual morality (both pagan and more novel Christian varieties) and social hierarchies.

The fact of Eutropius' successes as a war leader and the context of the strategic realities of the 5th century across the Roman world does not serve to invalidate this revulsion – rather, to strengthen it. His "hold[ing] parley with the Getae"⁸ is not held in the context of a Roman world wherein parley and negotiation with nomadic groups was an indispensable tactic employed by both courts, but rather taken as proof of his failure to live up to the austere and antique Consular

¹ (Claudian, 1922)

² (Claudian, 1922)

³ (Claudian, 1922)

⁴ (Claudian, 1922)

⁵ (Claudian, 1922)

⁶ (Claudian, 1922)

⁷ (Claudian, 1922)

⁸ (Claudian, 1922)

heroes (Brutus, Aemilii, Camilii, etc.) Claudian contrasts him to. It is noteworthy that Claudian does not deal with the military fact of his victories except insofar as to dismiss them and return to the subject of his purported effeminacy and essential impropriety in wielding power as a eunuch - “Why attempt battle on the bloody field? ’Tis to the arts of that other Minerva thou shouldst apply thyself”⁹.

This, once again, is a function of the core thesis of *In Eutropium* - “A eunuch is judge[...][w]hatever he does is a prodigy”¹⁰. In other words, the *what* overrides the *who*, both in portrayal and in form. Eutropius’ victories cannot be acknowledged by Claudian for much the same reason his inevitable failings could not be acknowledged in a proper consular panegyric – both politically and poetically, positively and negatively, the form can only allow for ambiguity through omission. More saliently, as hinted at in the plea closely following this section (“Why seek to divide the two empires and embroil loving brothers in strife? Madman, remember thy former trade; ’twere more fitting thou shouldst endeavour to reconcile them”¹¹), success or failure whether as a military leader or statesman is not the relevant criterion by which Eutropius is judged.

Furthermore, for as much as Eutropius is the axis of the work, he is conceptualised not as a *who* but a *what* – not as an actor, but as a portent. He is a kind of symbolic disaster, socially comparable in the text to a catastrophic rerouting of the river Nile – an eventuality, given the importance of Egyptian grain and Claudian’s origins in Alexandria, essentially synonymous with famine. He is a simultaneous punishment by and blasphemy against the gods whose death is conceived of as an act of concomitant deliverance and redemption - “What offering [will] appease the cruel altars? The consul’s own blood must cleanse the consular insignia, the monster itself must be sacrificed”¹². Politically, Claudian accuses him of being the root of the division between East and West, and, implicitly, both cause and symptom of East Roman political and moral corruption relative to an (explicitly) morally superior West.

Through this formulation of political invective, the symbolic and political fuses with the personal to become a totalising form of attack. The very fact of Eutropius’ existence as both a eunuch and a consul justifies his killing as an act of redemptive violence threefold. Firstly, to “appease the cruel altars”¹³; secondly, to relieve the shame brought on the office and Rome as a whole by his ascension; thirdly, as a personal chastisement for what Claudian construes as a lifetime of moral failure to which he was consigned from birth by the Armenian surgeon, and exacerbated beyond tolerance by his very success in rising above his circumstances. To heighten this effect, dehumanisation is applied with both frequency and enthusiasm, beginning with his characterisation as the greatest of all unnatural portents, progressing to the description of

⁹ (Claudian, 1922)

¹⁰ (Claudian, 1922)

¹¹ (Claudian, 1922)

¹² (Claudian, 1922)

¹³ (Claudian, 1922)

Eutropius as "a mass of senile pendulous flesh"¹⁴, and returning again and again to intentional and seemingly genuinely felt evocations of personal disgust for Eutropius' person. Here, he appears "as if a swallow were dying in winter sitting on a branch"¹⁵, there, "his lousy head dust-sprinkled and his face bleached whiter by the sun"¹⁶. The comprehensiveness and cruel inventiveness of these evocations of the grotesque seem to imply a very real personal disgust or aversion besides political antipathy fuelling the invective broadside, likely rooted in the vein of anti-eunuch sentiment in Roman society into which Claudian was tapping.

Within the context of the form and the society surrounding it, *In Eutropium* represents both a Late Antique context wherein panegyric constituted one of the prime means of conveying political information and centuries of refinement upon a technique traceable to Pliny's *Panegyricus*, and before that as far as Cicero's musings on the *laudatio*. This context essentially grounds *In Eutropium*'s form as effectively indistinguishable from its subject matter – the language of imperial legitimacy. Function is identical to form is identical to content. Just as Eutropius is represented as a living contradiction of – and affront against – the natural, social and divine order as it was understood by the imperial intelligentsia that composed his readership, so too is *In Eutropium* composed as a deliberate inversion of a poetic form steeped in imperial legitimacy.

Politically, the overall broadside against Eutropius that constitutes the poem is inescapably downwind of Claudian's patronage by Stilicho and the broader downturn in relations between Milan, Constantinople, and their respective emperors. Indeed, *In Eutropium* is practically twinned with the *De Consulatu Stilichonis*, of which it is particularly apt to note begins with the declaration of Stilicho as a new Scipio. Thus, the attack on Eutropius comprises a one-two punch. The first punch – a blow against an enemy without, a political and military success but by virtue of his circumstances positioned at the very lowest rung of a conservative Roman's hierarchy of esteem. The second – an exaltation of Stilicho as all Eutropius was not in an exercise of triumphantly straight-faced panegyricism, conveniently obscuring Claudian's patron's Vandal origins by way of exaggerating his eastern counterpart's least-loved traits to the point of parody.

All in all, if one were to draw a thread connecting each aspect of Claudian's attack on Eutropius, it would be this – the deliberate evocation of disgust and revulsion, both for Eutropius himself and what he was taken as a totem of. In the person of Claudian, this disgust appears genuine and personal, but it was nonetheless rooted in both political concerns and social contempt. Eutropius' person was not on trial so much as the fact of his existence. "All portents pale before our eunuch consul"¹⁷ – that was the root of the matter. In an age of flux, barbarian invasions and turmoil, Eutropius – the eunuch turned consul – was, to an imperial intelligentsia grappling with

¹⁴ (Claudian, 1922)

¹⁵ (Claudian, 1922)

¹⁶ (Claudian, 1922)

¹⁷ (Claudian, 1922)

religious, social, and political upheaval, the ultimate symbol of a world turned upside down. That, in the final analysis, is why he made for such an inviting target.

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