

Reading Antiquity: Claudian *De Raptu Proserpinae* lecture

A) Background

- Claudian: late antique pagan professional poet (c. 370-404 AD)
- associated with Honorius' court; mostly writing poems for his patron Stilicho (Honorius' imperial regent)
- Claudian moved from East (b. Alexandria, a native Greek speaker, probably Egyptian) to West; bicultural

1) "In your consulship I first drank of the streams of Roman song and my Greek Thalia yielded to the Latin toga" (Claudian, *Carm. Min.* 41.13-14)

2) "To Claudius Claudianus, Rt. Hon., tribune and notary ... our Emperors Arcadius and Honorius ... have bidden this statue to be raised and set up in the Forum of the Divine Trajan.

Rome and Emperors set up Claudian, the mind of Virgil and the Muse of Homer in one man"

(*CIL* 6.1710, incl. Gk. Epigram in last line "Rome...")

- political context: young Honorius = ruler of West (dominated by Stilicho); brother Arcadius = ruler of East (sons of Theodosius, last emperor to rule both East and West); conflicts/tensions in period: wars which could be seen as civil (and note tensions between brothers in East/West)

3) "Most of the wars in this period could be seen as types of civil war, either against usurpers or against rebellious former troops and allies." (Wasdin 2014)

- Claudian wrote numerous poems e.g. panegyrics for emperor Honorius and *Epithalamium of Honorius and Maria*; (unfinished) *De Raptu Proserpinae* = composed sometime between 395 and 404 AD (c. 395 and 397?); on abduction of Proserpina (Persephone) by Dis (told e.g. by Homeric *Hymn to Demeter*; Ovid in his *Metamorphoses*)

and *Fasti*)

▪ *De Raptu* plot

Book 1: preface; Dis about to wage war; Furies supplicate him; Dis sends threatening message to Jupiter; Jupiter makes a decision; Ceres entrusts Proserpina to Sicily (described) and leaves for Ida; Jupiter orders Venus to lure P. into the meadows; Venus, Pallas and Diana go to P.; P. leaves tapestry unfinished; Dis' horses champ at bit

Book 2: preface; P., Venus, Pallas and Diana go to meadows; description of P.'s dress; Naiads accompany P.; Henna calls on Zephyr to be present; description of countryside; company picks flowers; Dis emerges; panic and flight; Pallas and Diana resist but Jupiter signals his approval of rape; P. is carried away complaining; Dis attempts to console her; wedding and celebration in Hades

Book 3 (unfinished): Jupiter explains at divine council and forbids gods to inform Ceres of ravisher; Ceres suffers bad dreams, including vision of P.; Ceres returns to Sicily and finds house deserted; nurse relates story of abduction; Ceres rages at, then supplicates, Olympian gods who keep silent; Ceres decides to search; picks cypresses for torches and sets out lamenting.

B) Links between *De Raptu* and political context:

e.g. Florentinus (*praefectus urbi* from August 395 to the end of 397) had problems with corn-supply: connect with poem's (untold) explanation of origins of agricultural knowledge

4) "It pleased me to push peoples who had long been paralysed by my father's sluggishness with the goads of a troubled life, so that their crops should not grow of their own accord in uncultivated fields, or trees run with honey" (*DRP* 3.22-5: Jupiter stops spontaneous fertility of Saturn's rule > acorn diet)

5) "Since I bore so often such complaints from mother Nature, at length I ... decided to turn aside man from his oak-tree food; indeed it is decreed that Ceres ... should wander over sea and land in

insatiable grief, until, in her joy at finding the traces of her lost daughter, she grants man crops and her chariot is borne aloft through the clouds to scatter unfamiliar corn-ears among races" (*DRP* 3.45-53: Ceres will give agricultural knowledge after finding her daughter)

- Claudian's changes: innovative start with warring brothers (Dis angry due to lack of family: considers war against Jupiter); threats to universe; placatory intervention of the Fates (*DRP* 1.48-75)> demanding speech to Jupiter

6) "Once upon a time, the leader of Erebus blazed forth into swelling anger, intending to wage war on the gods" (*DRP* 1.32-3: Dis angry because has no wife/family)

7) "Now all the monsters that lurked in the abyss of the dead rushed to form squadrons and a battle-line, and the Furies swore a joint oath against the Thunderer; Tisiphone with hair of evil-doing snakes and brandishing a pine-torch of inauspicious gleam, summoned the spirits of the dead in arms to the ghostly camp." (*DRP* 1.37-41)

8) "The elements, once again fighting with resisting matter, would have almost broken their bond, and the young Titans, their prison torn open within the depths and their chains unloosed, would have seen the light of heaven, and again bloody Aegaeon would have thrown off the knotted ropes from his enlarged body and battered at the thunderbolts hurled at him with the blows of his hundred hands" (*DRP* 1.42-7)

9) "do not overturn not in civil war the fraternal compact" (*DRP* 1.64-5, Fates supplicating Dis)

10) "if you refuse to obey my words, I will throw open and stir up Hell, I will loosen the ancient chains of Saturn, and shroud the sun in darkness. The structure of the world will be loosened, and the shining heavens will be mingled with shadowy Avernus." (*DRP* 1.113-16)

11) "The father had heard the orders and was considering it by

himself. He pondered different options, considering who would seek such a marriage, who would wish to exchange the sun for the haunts of the Styx. At last a fixed intention came to him in his musings.” (*DRP* 1.118-21: Jupiter decides to marry his daughter Proserpina to his brother Dis to keep the peace)

12) “we map it [potential-civil-war dualism] along a different axis....

Again two brothers divide

the world between them, not West to East (Honorius and Arcadius) but Upper to Lower (Jupiter and Dis): in this version of Claudianism as in that, imperial epic is split-imperial epic.” (Hinds)

- fragility of cosmic balance; threats to universe suggested by references to giants and their assault against gods (gigantomachy): Ovid *Met.* Version had one reference at beginning of story

13) “For now the king of souls was pricking his way through the dim labyrinth of the underworld and crushing Enceladus, groaning beneath the weight of his massy steeds.” (*DRP* 2.156-8, Dis on way to abduct)

14) “[Pallas' spear] had almost been sent had not Jupiter from heaven's height hurled the peace-bringing wings of his red thunderbolt, confessing him to be the father-in-law” (*DRP* 2.228-230: Athena attacking abductor Dis, along with Diana; NB thunderbolt sent against giants)

13) “Do you not see open war with heaven?” (Ceres, *DRP* 3.314: as if giant attacking Olympus)

- multiple kinds of conflict (e.g. among gods; among Proserpina's female divine companions; among males and females; intra-familial)

14) “Was this your will to thus deliver your daughter to the cruel shades and thus drive her from the whole world? Does love not move you? Do you have nothing of a father's feelings?” (*DRP* 2.251-4, Proserpina to Dis)

15) “the goddesses, ... her sisters, who have conspired to our ruin”

(DRP 3.198-9, nurse in ignorance, of Athena and Diana)

- fragile balance kept by last-minute interference, manoeuvring, crisis-management. Mythological material allows distance > exploration of difficulties faced by a leader

C) change to traditional versions: importance of the erotic

- in Ovid *Metamorphoses*, Venus shoots a love arrow at Dis because she wants power over the underworld. In Claudian, Dis initiates action as he wants a wife

16) “Once upon a time, the leader of Erebus blazed forth into swelling anger, intending to wage war on the gods because he alone was unwed and had long spent sterile years, unable to bear the ignorance of the marriage-bed and the fact that he knew not the enticements of being a husband or the dear name of father” (DRP 1.32-6)

- exploitation of the *epithalamium*, “wedding song”: see 2.306ff. e.g. Proserpina's bridal veil; “leading home” of the bride at the rise of the Evening star; Night takes the role of the *pronuba*; *allocutio sponsalis* (address to couple)

17) “Night, clad in starry raiment, stands by her as her brideswoman; she touches the couch and blesses the union of marriage with a bond that cannot be broken.” (DRP 2.362-3: like matron attending Roman bride)

18) “Proserpine ...and thou, Pluto, ... be it yours to know the alliance of conjoined sleep; pledge mutual troth as ye hold each other in intertwining arms. Happy offspring shall be yours; joyous Nature awaits gods yet to be born. Give the world a new divinity and Ceres the grandchildren she longs for.” (DRP 2.367-72)

- engages with Roman love elegy: evokes Propertius; aware of elegiac conceits; looks to elegiac Apollo and Polyphemus in the *Metamorphoses* 1 and 13 (elegiac mistress stereotyped as concerned with material goods and status; Dis boasting as elegiac

sutor)

19) “The fierce one was conquered by such words and the becoming tears and he felt the sighs of first love” (*DRP* 2.273-4, Dis like elegiac lover)

20) “I am no mountain dweller, no shepherd; ... the Delphic land and Claros and Tenedos and kingdom of Patara are subject to me” (*Ov. Met.* 1.512-16, Apollo trying to win over Daphne)

21) “there are apples loading the boughs; there are grapes like gold on the long vines; there are also purple grapes” (*Met.* 13.812-14, Polyphemus wooing Galatea)

22) “There is also a very rich tree in the shady groves whose curving branches gleam with living ore. This tree is sacred to you. You shall be master of blessed autumn and ever enriched with golden fruit.” (*DRP* 2.290-3, Dis trying to win over Proserpina: like elegiac suitor)

- Elegiac voice: highlights unsettling aspect of rape. Not just imagery of warfare of love: real violence

23) “And as the concealed soldier hastens against the unsuspecting foe and beneath the foundations of a tunnelled field leaps across the fields which are deceived by a secret path, and a crowd victoriously bursts into the outwitted citadel, in imitation of earth-born men.” (*DRP* 2.163-7, Dis from underworld)

24) “he urges on his triumphant steeds” (*DRP* 2.306, Dis)

25) “they direct the horses which have completed their service to the familiar pastures” (Dis' horses after the abduction, *DRP* 2.319: *emeritos*)

- Epithalamic material > disturbing gap between reality and idealized conventions of epithalamia

26) “they [matrons in underworld] bind up her scattered locks” (*DRP*

2.324: NB Roman bride has hair styled through *hasta caelibaris*; P's hair dishevelled from abduction)

27) “meanwhile Proserpina is carried off in the swift chariot, her hair streaming in the South wind” (*DRP* 2.247-8)

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