

Critical Analysis of Lines 1.20-66 of Claudian's 'De raptu Proserpinae'

Lines 20-66 of Claudian's 'De raptu Proserpinae' (DRP) Book 1 lay out what will happen in the entire poem after Claudian asks the gods to share the story with him. The sequence of events as he gives them are Pluto 'bends'¹ to (the personification of) love and kidnaps Proserpina, who becomes Queen of the Underworld, Ceres' search for her child, and ending with the abandonment of acorns and usage of corn. Claudian then begins telling the story, detailing Pluto's loneliness, driving him to act, mentioning he 'knew not [...] the sweet name of father.'² The underworld and the dead rally together under the leadership of the Furies, specifically Tisiphone who wields a 'pine-torch,'³ and Claudian imagines the chaos that would be caused should Pluto rally the Titans to fight Jupiter for having not allocated him a wife. The Fates attempt to prevent this; the passage ends with a speech from Lachesis, the measurer of the thread of life. The poem continues with Claudian's interpretation of the myth. Pluto appeals to Jupiter through Mercury, who can cross freely between realms, and Jupiter offers Proserpina, who has been placed on Sicily by her mother Ceres for her protection. Pluto takes Proserpina, who has been convinced by Venus to pick flowers with Minerva and Diana. Ceres is outraged when she discovers this, as are other gods, to which Jupiter holds an assembly to explain it was planned and he approved the marriage. This upsets Ceres; the poem ends with her leaving to seek her daughter.

The symbol of the torch makes repeated appearances through the poem, starting in the passage. First, a 'torch' from Love is what made Pluto wish for marriage. Then, with Tisiphone 'brandishing a pine-torch.'⁴ The two torches seen in the passage appear to be contrasting. The first is a torch of love, whilst the second is a guiding beacon for spirits of the dead, wielded by one of the Furies. Whilst initially contrasting, they are more similar than they first appear – the reason Tisiphone has the torch to rally the spirits is because of the torch of love. The torch of the fury has connotations of violence and aggression but exists because of love. References to torches continue to be made throughout but an

¹ (Claudian, 1.26-27)

² (Claudian, 1.36)

³ (Claudian, 1.40)

⁴ (Claudian, 1.40)

allusion to Tisiphone's torch is made when Claudian is describing Ceres' anger. She destroys two pine trees which 'she would have as torches,'⁵ making her bear resemblance to the fury. Just like the previous two torches, Ceres' torch exists out of love, in this case for her daughter, the first having been made by love and the second out of the demand for love. She intends to search the earth for her child using the torches which would become a common feature in her iconography⁶. Each torch exists in very different environments – a metaphorical one for which Pluto 'bends,' a physical one in the Underworld surrounded by the dead, and a physical one in Jupiter's treasure trove.

The passage is the exposition of the poem. It lays out the direction of the poem and presents the main conflict; Pluto's disdain against Jupiter, shown by Pluto's intention to 'stir up war against the gods above,'⁷ specifically against 'the Thunderer.'⁸ The passage is particularly important in the context of the entire poem due to the fact it is unfinished. Having the plot of the poem lined out at the beginning creates an expectation of what is to come that is not fulfilled. *DRP* ends with Ceres' quest to find her daughter, not with the discovery of corn and abandonment of acorns, as the passage suggests it should. It was likely Claudian's original intention to include this as the 'abandonment of acorn' and 'discovery of corn'⁹ is within the list of 'mysteries of sacred matters'¹⁰ he asks to be revealed to him, as well as the journey of Ceres as she 'wandered on her troubled course,'¹¹ of which there is only the start. To have almost a checklist within the first passage that is only half completed is unusual. As Hinds suggests in *Displacing Persephone: Epic Between Worlds*, lines towards the end of book 3, where Ceres thinks about where to look, implies there is more to come, and those lines act as a layout for what may have been another book¹². Instead, there is an abrupt end. This may, however, be a stylistic choice, employed by Claudian to display "the epic's endless end."¹³ However, the reason for such an end could instead be an unfortunately timed death, or a case of the poem being put down and not picked up again.

⁵ (Claudian, 3.376)

⁶ (AN: 642479001, © The Trustees of the British Museum)

⁷ (Claudian, 1.33)

⁸ (Claudian, 1.38)

⁹ (Claudian, 1.30-31)

¹⁰ (Claudian, 1.25-26)

¹¹ (Claudian, 1.29)

¹² (Hinds, 2012, pp16-17)

¹³ (Hinds, 2012, pp17)

Claudian makes specific choices when telling this tale, as shown by its difference in comparison to other tellings of the same myth. Claudian's version is much more violent and dramatic – the concept that the underworld might rise and the Titans unleashed is completely absent from other retellings, such as the Homeric Hymn to Demeter and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. The characters present within *DRP* have more substance to them, aided by the much longer tale, at almost double the length of the Homeric Hymn. No reasons are given by Homer for the kidnapping, and more time is dedicated to Demeter and her reaction to the ordeal¹⁴. In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Venus tells Cupid to make Dis fall in love with Proserpine as she dislikes the fact her power does not extend to the underworld, and out of disdain for Pallas and Diana, who she believes will make Proserpina a virgin goddess¹⁵. What remains constant throughout the versions is the result of harvest, with Ceres and Proserpina being the goddesses of agriculture and agricultural fertility respectively. Additionally, each shows the unwavering bond between a mother and daughter, as Ceres proceeds to 'wander all over the earth'¹⁶ in search of her child, and the unwillingness of Proserpina to engage in the marriage, as 'the queen of Erebus grieved'¹⁷ when she is unable to return to earth permanently. Claudian's tale bears the most similarities to Ovid's telling. The sequence of Homer to Ovid to Claudian could be viewed as a progression for the myth. Homer lays the foundations of what happened and Demeter's reaction, Ovid expands on why it happened, adding Venus, and Claudian builds on all the present characters and the environment in which they are in. It could be said Claudian was inspired by Ovid's myth, but as a native Greek speaker from Alexandria¹⁸, he is likely to be familiar with both.

The changes made by Claudian may have been deliberate to reflect the politics of the time. In the period *DRP* was written, the Roman Empire had split into the eastern and western empires¹⁹. They were ruled by the child emperors Honorius and Arcadius, and Claudian had been hired previously by Honorius' court to write panegyrics²⁰. Themes that occur within *DRP*, such as brotherly conflict, are reflective of the tensions between the brother emperors at the time. Succession issues are also something Claudian raises through Pluto, potentially indicating at the questionable lines of succession when having child emperors.

¹⁴ (Homer, 90-495)

¹⁵ (Ovid, 5.332-384)

¹⁶ (Homer, 48)

¹⁷ (Ovid, 5.544)

¹⁸ (Scourfield, 2003)

¹⁹ (Ware, 2013)

²⁰ (Scourfield, 2003)

Bibliography

AN 642479001 | British Museum. (2024). The British Museum; British Museum.
<https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/image/642479001>

Claudian. (1714). *The Rape of Proserpine*, from Claudian, in Three Books; with the Story of Sextus and Erichtho, from Lucan's *Pharsalia*. (trans, N/A). Harvard University Press.

Hinds, S. (2012). UCL DEPARTMENT OF GREEK AND LATIN DISPLACING PERSEPHONE: EPIC BETWEEN WORLDS UCL Housman Lecture. University College London.
https://www.ucl.ac.uk/classics/sites/classics/files/housman.hinds_.2012.pdf

Homer. (n.d.). Homeric Hymn to Demeter. In G. Nagy (Trans.), uh.edu. University of Houston. <https://uh.edu/~cldue/texts/demeter.html>

Ovid. (2000). *Ovid's Metamorphoses* (A. S. Kline, Trans.).
<https://ovid.lib.virginia.edu/trans/Metamorph5.htm#479128843>

Scourfield, J. H. D. (2003). Claudian (Claudius Claudianus). In S. Hornblower & A. Spawforth (Eds.), *The Oxford Classical Dictionary* (Third Edition Revised, p. 337). Oxford University Press.

WARE, C. (2013). LEARNING FROM PLINY: CLAUDIAN'S ADVICE TO THE EMPEROR HONORIUS. *Arethusa*, 46(2), 313–331. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26322503>