CLAUDIAN THE POET

This comprehensive reassessment of the *carmina maiora* of the fourth-century poet Claudian contributes to the growing trend to recognize that late antique poets should be approached as just that: poets. Its methodology is developed from that of Michael Roberts' seminal *The Jeweled Style*. It analyses his poetics and use of story-telling to argue that the creation of a story-world in which Stilicho, his patron, becomes an epic hero and the barbarians are giants threatening both the borders of Rome and the order of the very universe is designed to convince his audience of a world-view in which it is only the Roman general who stands between them and cosmic chaos. The book also argues that Claudian uses the same techniques to promote the message that Honorius, young hero though he may seem, is not yet fit to rule, and that Stilicho's rightful position remains as his regent.

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Preface

In the late fourth century AD, the poet Claudian merged the panegyric form with Latin epic, and through this developed a means of propagating a powerful political message. In the years 395 to 404, the period of Claudian's principal output, the significance of effective political messaging was very important, as a boy became emperor, tension grew between the eastern and western empires, barbarian forces put increasing pressure on the Romans, and the justification of power had to be reiterated in word and deed by those who held it. This book intends to demonstrate exactly how it was that Claudian's poetry functioned so effectively as a tool for propaganda, and, in doing so, to demonstrate how successfully late antique poetics were employed to tell stories.

The main story that Claudian's poetry aimed to tell was the tale of Stilicho, the hero-general who acted as regent to the child emperor Honorius, and it is certainly true that the poems have been utilized as key historical sources for that man and his times. However, the actual importance of story-telling to his work has remained largely unacknowledged, not least on account of the overriding perception that late antique poetry, with its set scenes, rhetorical character, and absence of traditional narrative, is not interested in telling stories at all.

This, however, is a book about story-telling. In it I will argue that Claudian's poetry is completely concerned with telling an all-encompassing story, a new 'myth' almost, of his Rome, in which his audience become involved. I do not mean that he is writing fiction, per se, nor that he is writing history, both of which, to the modern reader at least, pass judgement as term upon the truthfulness of the events they depict. Rather, he is turning the aspects of everyday political life, portrayed in terms of the political agenda of his patron, Stilicho, into an engaging and attractive story, which reflects both myth – in terms of the Roman tradition of myth – and current affairs reporting at once, and which entertains, convinces, and provides an alternative reality for his audience, which resonates just enough with their

own that they buy into the version of the truth played out in it. It may not be a story with a traditional narrative, but it is rather an accumulation of characters, descriptions, and speeches, all of which together create a compelling story-world through which a political message can be conveyed.

As my starting point in this reassessment I understand two basic premises to be integral to an interpretation of this poetry. First of all, I foreground the fact that Claudian not only depicts himself as a poet first and foremost in his writings, rather than as a political mouthpiece or an orator, but that he was also recognized as such in his own time, as can be seen from the surviving inscription from the statue erected in his honour. With this in mind, it is natural that we should consider the poetry *qua* poetry, and should analyse its potential as a political tool from the perspective of its poetics. Second, I embrace and develop the methodology for reading late antique poetry holistically which was proposed by Michael Roberts in *The Jeweled Style*, the seminal work on late antique poetics published in 1989. This proposes that none of the disjointed elements of the poetry should simply be isolated but should instead be recognized as contributing to an overarching theme. I shall argue, therefore, that Claudian is creating a network of symbols and signifiers in his poems which, when recognized, can be identified as the building blocks from which he assembles the story that he intends to tell.

I hope that this book will serve all readers of Claudian, whether they come to his poems as historians looking for information on the critical final years of the fourth century, or as literary scholars hoping better to understand the stylistic distinctiveness of late antique poetry. A proper grasp of the construction of the poetry, and how its accumulation of episodes and set scenes can transmit a message, is integral to understanding how Claudian is able to promote the politics of his patron, Stilicho; equally, however, it is only by recognizing this overriding political agenda that it is possible for the poems to be interpreted holistically and to come together as coherent structures.

The poems that are treated most prominently in this book are those which use a mythological story-world as a means of expressing their particular message in accordance with the agenda of Stilicho; these are principally the three poems on consulships held by Honorius (396, 398, 404), the two-part invective against Rufinus (395–97), the epithalamium on the marriage of Honorius and Maria (398), the three-book poem on Stilicho's consulship (400), and the poem on the Gothic war (402). The poems that receive the least attention, therefore, are the poem for the war against Gildo (398), the invective against Eutropius (399), and the poem celebrating the

consulship of Manlius Theodorus (399). However, I also engage with the corpus as a whole where necessary, excluding (on account of the necessary limitations for a detailed study on this scale) the *carmina minora* and *carmina Graeca* other than those that contribute specifically to our understanding of mythology in the poems, such as the poem on the phoenix and the gigantomachies.[1]

The book is constructed in three broad parts. The first part, on the poetics of the political poems, utilizes the *In Rufinum* as an exemplum for the demonstration of the methodology – the way of reading Claudian's poetry – that is proposed in the Introduction, to explore how this might apply to reading the political poems. The overarching theme identified as the uniting factor in this poem is one of a universe under threat of disharmony on account of the monstrous force of Rufinus. The elements contribute to a recurring picture of boundary breakdown, restored by Stilicho and the beneficent gods.

The second part of the book comprises the next four chapters, which analyse how Claudian is using the individual elements of the poetic composition, and explores these by theme across the selected poems. In Chapter 2, I look at the theme of the universe, the setting created in the story-world, which is generally constructed in terms of its harmony and the potential threat of chaos to that harmony. The creator figures of Clementia and Natura are explored in detail, with particular reference to the universal construct in the tapestry of the *Rapt.* and the use of space and time in the Cave of Time in *Stil.* 2. In Chapter 3, I examine the threat of chaos itself in the form of the monster, specifically considering the recurring presence of the giants in the poems and the relationship between gigantomachy and the barbarian threat. I use an approach based on Cohen's 'monster theory' – a set of theses which define and interpret the monster as a recurrent cultural phenomenon – to analyse the two fragmentary gigantomachies by Claudian, by means of which I approach the characterization of Alaric as a giant in the *VI Cons.* and *Get.*[2] In Chapter 4, I consider the opposite characters, the hero, particularly as a method for creating a story-world version of Stilicho. I provide a detailed analysis of the consular *trabea* and the phoenix image from *Stil.* 2, and the characterization of the

[1] On the relationship between myth and poetry, and in particular the argument that on the occasion of any retelling the present version is the authoritative one, see Edmunds 1997: 416–20, Edmunds 2005: 32. Although Edmunds is not examining the sort of use of myth found in Claudian, his approach supports an examination of the myths on the terms of their appearance in Claudian first and foremost, against the backdrop of other versions and other variants.

[2] Cohen 1996, Cohen 1999.

hero in the 'Argonautica' of the *Get*. I follow this with Chapter 5, in which I examine how the hero figure can be problematized in order to make it appropriate for a depiction of Honorius, who is not quite the hero, thus justifying Stilicho's continued regency. Just as the *trabea* was used in *Stil*.2 to construct an image of Stilicho, so the ceremonial dress of Honorius provides the link for a problematic comparison between him and Liber, and in the *Epith*. the emperor is also compared to a young hero, Achilles, but specifically a transvestite Achilles.

In the third part of the book – Chapter 6 – I examine how the poet is depicted in the poems, particularly dealing with the poet's relationship with his audience and addressing the way in which Claudian utilizes another theme of the poetic tradition and manipulates his audience's expectations of poetry by depicting all poets as 'unreliable', in particular in the *Get*. This looks further at the relationship between Claudian's poetic realities and 'real life', and the ways in which the breakdown of the fourth wall and the problematization of poetic artifice can actually be used by the poet as a means of exploiting his performance space and drawing in his audience.

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Abbreviations

c.m.	*carmina minora*
III Cons.	*Panegyricus de tertio consulatu Honorii Augusti*
IV Cons.	*Panegyricus de quarto consulatu Honorii Augusti*
VI Cons.	*Panegyricus de sexto consulatu Honorii Augusti*
Epith.	*Epithalamium de nuptiis Honorii Augusti*
Eut. 1, 2	*In Eutropium* 1, 2
Fesc.	*Fescennina de nuptiis Honorii Augusti*
Get.	*De Bello Getico*
Gig. Gr.	*Gigantomachia Graeca*
Gild.	*De Bello Gildonico*
P&O	*Panegyricus dictus Probino et Olybrio consulibus*
Rapt. 1, 2, 3	*De Raptu Proserpinae* 1, 2, 3
Ruf. 1, 2	*In Rufinum* 1, 2
Stil. 1, 2, 3	*De consulatu Stilichonis* 1, 2, 3
Theod.	*Panegyricus dictus Mallio Theodoro Consuli*