

Features and Effects of the Jeweled Style in Juvencus

Juvencus, a Spanish priest who wrote under Constantine, was the first to render the Christian gospels into Latin hexameters, known as the *Quattuor Libri Evangeliorum*, connecting two influences already entrenched in Western civilization - namely the primary Christian texts with the epic tradition. Despite this achievement, his work has perhaps not been as favorably viewed as other epic authors, especially in the area of his style. Even Conte himself states that, “To give the elegance of Virgilian poetry to the biblical narrative was an enterprise beyond Juvencus' powers, however; he was crushed beneath the weight of his two models” (Conte, 1994). I will argue rather that we can better appreciate Juvencus if we situate him within his own context of the aesthetics of Late Antiquity, especially through the framework of the “jeweled style” as laid out by Michael Roberts.

As Roberts argues, the jeweled style is a feature of the poetics and visual art of Late Antiquity. It is distinguished by mathematical regularity or symmetry as well as a contrasting antithetical use of words, meter, or ideas; play between *repetitio* and *variatio* likewise play a role. Stratification (the unification of an entire line, as opposed to dividing up sections *within* a line) and alliteration are also used to great effect. The end result forms a poetic creation which contains elements which interact with each other in intricate detail, like a gem (Roberts, 1989). It is not a consistent feature throughout any one work, but rather an element which appears – or, to continue the metaphor, “glitters” - for emphasis and the marking of passages. I will demonstrate how Juvencus uses the jeweled style to frame the beginning of certain scenes or aspects of an episode, consequently distinguishing the progression of events and moving the narrative forward. Additionally, he uses it with lists of people or geographical areas to demonstrate his poetic prowess due to the difficulty of rendering proper nouns in verse.

This use is immediately evident in Juvencus' work; such an early appearance establishes

that Juvenecus wishes to prepare the reader for his stylistic usage thereafter. In lines 2-3 of his *praefatio*, he gives a lucid demonstration of the jeweled style:

inmortale nihil mundi conpage tenetur,
non orbis, non regna hominum, non aurea Roma,
non mare, non tellus, non ignea sidera caeli. (Prae.1-3)

The consistency of *non...non...non...* in both lines establishes regularity between them. A further parallel is the increasing metrical size of both tricola: the progression of *orbis...regna hominum...aurea Roma* takes up more and more space in the line; likewise, *mare* is two short syllables while *tellus* is two longs, finished off by *ignea sidera caeli*. The progression of size in the two lines, however, is antithetical. Line two has the effect of “zooming in” - the earth, then the dominions of men (smaller than the earth itself), and then Rome. In contrast, line three is expanding: the sea (i.e. the Mediterranean), then the land around it, followed by the heavens around the earth. All of these features combined make these two verses sparkle in their intricacy; in fact, the only two adjectives used are visual: *aurea* and *ignea*.

The function of this opening is multi-purpose: besides simply opening with a flourish and establishing stylistic expectations, he is marking the beginning of his work with the jeweled style in the same way that he does periodically throughout the rest of the narrative. A reader can then expect that as the episodes within his epic progress, certain settings and events are set off and framed by the use of the jeweled style.

A second usage he employs is the invigoration of lists and place names which appear ordinary in standard prose. A particularly clear example of this occurs in the episode of the Magi when they are presenting their gifts:

tum munera trina
tus, aurum, murram regique hominique deoque

dona dabant.

(I.249-251)

Munera trina...dona frames line 250 itself, coordinating words on both sides; this is continued by *tus* being the gift to *deoque*. The pattern changes through the chiasmic structure in the middle, since *aurum* is paired with *regique* while *murram* accompanies *hominique*. Furthermore, the line is internally symmetrical, with three words in the accusative followed by three in the dative, each with the addition of *-que*. By taking what is a normal prose list, Juvencus adds his own flair and draws attention to the event.

Bibliography

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