

How Poetry Castrated Attis: Toward a Model of Prudentian Poetics

Near the beginning of his second poetic treatise against Symmachus, published in the early years of the fifth century C.E., Prudentius sets up a dramatic situation in which the emperors Honorius and Arcadius square off against the pagan senator. The emperors attack pagan poetry as an instrument of deception, along with painting and idolatry (*Symm.*II.39-60). In this scenario where Christianity stands opposed to pagan poetry, one can't help but wonder where Prudentius' own allegiance lies. This paper will speak to the question of allegiance—does Prudentius as a Christian join in with the emperors' condemnation of the works of classical literature? Scholars have been reluctant to set Prudentius against Vergil, Horace, and other classical poets, whose work he handles so sensitively elsewhere. Malamud (1989: 89-90) makes a concerted effort to demonstrate that the emperors' arguments are “antithetical” to “Prudentius' own views about art and society.” Others, however, including Lühken (2002: 119-120) following Cerri (1964), acknowledge the anti-pagan, polemical character of these lines and understand them within rhetorical and apologetic context of the *Contra Symmachum*.

In this paper, I reexamine *Contra Symmachum* II.39-60 to observe how Prudentius negotiates the divide between Christian and pagan by offering a model of poetry as a paraenetic medium, encouraging the audience to put poetic words into action. To elucidate these lines further, I look to a parallel passage from *Peristephanon* X (vv.196-216) that has a similar polemical context. Both passages treat the writing of poetry in connection with the Attis narrative from Catullus 63, and startlingly in the *Contra Symmachum*, Prudentius frames this connection in terms of direct agency, where “Poetry castrate[s] Attis” (*poësis castraverit Attin*, *Symm.*II.52). I consider Prudentius' treatment of the Attis narrative vis-à-vis his metapoetical statements about poetry to bring to light a model of poetics that is implicit in these passages from *Contra Symmachum* II and *Peristephanon* X. The model, I suggest, has two parts, both of which contribute to the deceptive powers of poetry in the hands of pagan poets: (1) poets always write what they believe to be true; and (2) the literary audience draws examples from poetry that they apply to and reenact in their own lives. The beliefs that inform pagan poetry and the devotional practices that result from engaging with it thus prove to be its most dangerous features. Prudentius does not implicate diction, form, or affect in this diatribe, leaving himself free to borrow from his classical predecessors, an opportunity he takes advantage of even as he condemns pagan poetry, borrowing heavily from Vergil's *Aeneid* 7.778-9 in *Contra Symmachum* II.53-54. Applied to Prudentius' own works, this model for poetry also enables us to appreciate his motives for adopting the poetic medium: (1) to express his belief in Christianity; and (2) to inspire his audience to translate their faith into practice.

Works Cited

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