The Artful Rhetoric of Inconsistency: Claudian’s *De Raptu Proserpinae* and Eudocia’s *St. Cyprian* Reconsidered

Inconsistencies in the narratives of Claudian’s *De Raptu Proserpinae* and Eudocia’s *St. Cyprian* have caught the eye of scholars, commentators, and translators alike. These inconsistencies have been attributed to the poets’ inadequacy (Cameron 1970, 265-6; Kaster 1981, 141-5) or to the fact that they drew upon contradictory source materials without trying to harmonize them – earlier poetic accounts in the case of Claudian and three extant martyr narratives in the case of Eudocia (Gruzeller 1993 xxvi-xxvii; Plant 2004, 199). But what others have seen as defects I propose we should instead read productively. Building on recent studies that have reevaluated Claudian and Eudocia’s poetic skill (Usher 1998, Coombe 2018), I argue that their use of contradictory narratives should be seen as an active choice with complex intellectual ramifications, in line with the long history of inconsistency at the heart of the Roman epic tradition (e.g., O’Hara 2007).

My paper explores one contradiction from each poem that highlights the productive use of inconsistency in each text. First, Claudian *DRP* 2.151-247 narrates Pluto’s kidnapping of Proserpina, but in 3.196-259 Proserpina’s nurse retells the event. She does so apparently as an eyewitness, but her presence was not noted in the first narration, and she includes contradictory details in her account. Similarly, Book 1 of Eudocia’s *St. Cyprian* describes how the pagan magician Cyprian employs demons to seduce a Christian woman, Justa, and how, when they fail to seduce her, he converts to Christianity. Book 2 switches to Cyprian’s first-person narration of his life story, lines 301-479 repeating the narrative from Book 1 with markedly different details. In both poems, the contradictions arise when the focalization shifts to having a character tell his/her own version of the story (the nurse in Claudian, Cyprian in Eudocia).

Through these two examples, I argue that this commonality in the context for the appearance of such inconsistency creates a self-consciously rhetorical environment in the poems. In other words, I suggest that we can read these poems’ inconsistencies as late antique explorations of the power of rhetoric: by contradicting the narratives of their own poems, the speaking characters can undermine the authority of the narration in which they themselves feature as characters, thereby highlighting the constructive and narrative quality of “reality” itself. As a result, I suggest in my conclusion, an exploration of inconsistency within these texts is in the position to speak to a crucial emerging aspect of the study of late antique literature, namely the role of rhetoric (e.g. Verhelst and Scheijnen 2022). The rhetoric of inconsistency I explicate within the texts of Claudian and Eudocia can reveal a wider method of narration central to late antique poetics more broadly.

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