

*Docta Mulier Psallere: An Anonymous Christian Woman as Prudentius' Ideal Poet*

In his poem to the Christian martyr, Romanus, the Late Antique poet, Prudentius, also describes the martyrdom of a young, unnamed boy. The child professes the faith he learned from his mother, is tortured, and ultimately beheaded. The pagan prefect, however, also condemns the mother, not to a physical punishment, but to the psychological torture of witnessing her son being scourged and executed. Instead of suffering, however, she rejoices and explains to her son the true meaning of his martyrdom.

Scholars have explored Prudentius' portrayal of this anonymous woman as an ideal Christian (Henke 1983, 119-132) and as a martyr (Fruchtman 2014, 148-153). But I will argue that, among her other roles, she appears as a Christian poet. Her harsh rebuke (*severis vocibus increpat, Peristephanon* 10.720) becomes a *carmen* by which she delights her son (*talia canente matre iam laetus puer*, Pe. 10.791) and she sings a psalm as her son is beheaded (*docta mulier psallere / hymnum canebat carminis Davitici*, Pe. 10. 837-838). Nor is this woman only musically-talented and well-versed in scripture; she also shares characteristics with the poem's narrator that suggest that she too is a poet. The mother drinks in the Holy's Spirit's milk of faith, by which she nurses her son ('*illa ex parente Spiritu docta inbibit / quo me inter ipsa pasceret cunabula; / ego, ut gemellis uberum de fontibus / lac parvus hausit, Christum et hausit credere,*' Pe. 10.682-685); likewise the narrator prays for spiritual milk to enable his poetic enterprise (*sed si superno rore respergas iecur / et spiritali lacte pectus inriges, / vox inpeditos rauca laxabit sonos*, Pe. 10.13-15). Furthermore, Prudentius places this woman both in the Judeo-Christian tradition of poetry (extending from David to himself), as well as within the broader context of Roman poetry. For example, the Spanish poet repurposes Horace's praise of the erotic artist Chia (*doctae psallere Chiae*, Ode 4.13.7) in his praise of this devout woman's final prayer over her

son (*docta mulier psallere*, Pe. 10. 837). Through explicit statements, literary allusions, and implicit analogies between the narrator and the Christian mother, Prudentius presents the latter as an ideal Roman poet.

Although this paper will focus primarily on proving the anonymous Christian woman's status as a poet in *Peristephanon* 10, it will also explore the significance of this portrayal. For example, the eminent Prudentian scholar, Jacques Fontaine, has argued that Prudentius displays a generally harsh and pessimistic view of women (Fontaine 1980, 418). Should the fact that in Pe. 10 a woman is not only an ideal Christian but also a poet nuance our understanding? More broadly, if Prudentius presents the Christian mother as a poet, then we must conclude that her speeches to her son must be not only pedagogical but also poetic. How does the mother's relationship with her son model the relationship the ideal Christian poet should have with his audience? This paper, therefore, will shed light not only on this unnamed character in *Peristephanon* 10 but also Prudentius' understanding of his poetic vocation as a whole (cf. Dykes 2011).

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