

Names Written in Gold and Blood: Prudentius's *Peristephanon* and Poetic Immortality

This paper will examine how Prudentius re-formats ideas from the pagan Roman literary tradition about immortality conferred by verse into terms appropriate for the cult of the martyrs. The classical idea of immortality granted by verse receives perhaps its most striking articulation in Horace's *Odes*. In *Odes* 4.8 and 4.9, Horace not only describes the *vates*, priest-poet-prophet of the Muses as granting this immortality upon the subject of his *carmen*, but also goes so far as to present the worth of one's good deeds as contingent upon this remembrance by a *vates*. In the *Peristephanon*, poems recounting to the passions of martyrs, Prudentius modifies this idea, previously only articulated in pagan terms, to fit a Christian worldview. Instead of the martyrs' names and fame being contingent upon praise written down on perishable paper (*Carmina* 4.8.20-22), Prudentius presents them as already written "in golden and bloody letters" (*Per.* 1.1-3): the golden letters indicate their remembrance in Heaven, where Christ preserves their glory eternally; the bloody letters, their memory on earth. The Christian poet has the sacred duty to perpetuate the latter.

Palmer 1989, Roberts 1993, and Hershkowitz 2017 have extensively treated various dimensions of the *Peristephanon*. Palmer focused on situating the poems within fourth century society, providing cultural, literary, and religious context for the reader to understand Prudentius's innovative and deeply religious poetry. Roberts discussed the poems' pivotal roles in the development of the cult of the martyrs in the fourth century by a careful analysis of various literary devices across the poems. Most recently, Hershkowitz undertook to put together an image of Prudentius's Spain from the clues scattered throughout the poems. Focusing as they do on bigger picture ideas, whether the cult of martyrs or society, these studies have not called

attention to Prudentius's attitude towards poetic immortality vis-à-vis Horace. Among the immense scholarship dedicated to Horace and the so-called "vates-concept," Sage 1994 has proven most influential in my understanding of 4.9 as not a purely encomiastic poem, but as a prime example of Horace as *vates*.

This paper will work within the context framed by these studies to show how Prudentius reworks the relationship between poet, poem, and subject in *Peristephanon* 1, 4 and 11 by comparing them to the Horace's *Odes* 4.8 and 4.9. Both poets wrestle with the importance of recording and passing down the great deeds and lives of past generations, as they know poetry lives on when "marble cut with public words" (*Carmina* 4.8.13) turns "silent" (*Per.* 11.9). However, Prudentius places a greater emphasis on what is recorded than his own poetic "strength, favor, and tongue" (*Carm.* 4.8.26) because he knows that ultimately martyrs' stories have already been recorded in a manner sublime and eternal. Reworking the classical tradition for his Christian theme, Prudentius presents the martyrs' glory and remembrance as preserved in eternity by Christ, claiming for art the task of keeping their names and deeds remembered here below.

Bibliography

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