

Catherine Ware, *Claudian and the Roman Epic Tradition*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012. Pp. ix + 266. ISBN 978-1-107-01343-8. Hardback.

Ancient historians have long found Claudian to be the late Latin poet most congenial to their cause. Unlike the scriptural *catenae* central to the occasional poetry of Paulinus of Nola or the personification allegories and martyrial dramas composed by Prudentius, Claudian offers verses keyed to very particular moments of court ritual and very specific imperial escapades. His poems celebrated consulships, military campaigns, and the downfall of political rivals. At the same time, however, Claudian's major works have never proven easy to read as straightforward reportage of either the political machinations or the foreign and civil conflicts of the final years of the fourth and opening years of the fifth century. Not only are his performance poems skewed by the rhetorical and partisan weight of panegyric but also Claudian often preferred to couch both his praise and his vituperation in language and images drawn from a Latin literary tradition that considerably pre-dated the administrative, social, and religious changes that had shaped his own environment. The post-Constantinian world in which Claudian lived and wrote, though deeply wedded to the notion of *Roma aeterna*, was nevertheless in many ways alien to the age of the Julio-Claudian and Flavian emperors that had nurtured the poetry in which he found inspiration (and a livelihood). From the perspective of the Christian Milan and Ravenna of the young emperor Honorius and his *magister militum* Stilicho, the poetry of Vergil, Ovid, Lucan, and Statius could, therefore, seem as alien as it was (thanks to the conservative curriculum of the schools) eerily familiar. But while the hum of such dissonance clearly distracted the likes of Augustine and Paulinus of Nola, Claudian's apparent disregard of time's passage has often seemed a little startling to modern readers struck by the presence in his poetry of so much that is "classical" and so little that is "Christian." For that reason (among others), ancient historians as well as literary scholars should welcome this new study by Catherine Ware.

Ware's *Claudian and the Roman Epic Tradition* sets out to demonstrate how epic poetry, represented especially by Vergil and his first-century successors (Lucan and Statius in particular), offered Claudian both poetic templates and ideological constructs for articulating the central issues and crucial events of his age. Claudian's desire to see and portray his late Roman world as deeply continuous with that of the Republic and Early Empire, Ware argues, required that he unfold and develop ideas of time, empire, and individual character both consonant with past literary tradition and interpretable through the complex intertextual gestures that proliferate in his verse. To make this case as persuasively as she does, Ware builds effectively upon the many ways that recent scholarship has come to treat both post-Vergilian and late Latin verse as a highly sophisticated medium of discourse capable of engaging contemporary issues through nuanced allusion to earlier poets and the memories preserved in their verse.

Ware immediately faces the fundamental problem of establishing Claudian's self-understanding as an epic poet and of epic as the primary generic marker, in contemporary eyes, of his performance poetry. After an introduction rehearsing the now

widely held conviction among literary scholars that intertextual *imitatio* and *aemulatio*—constructive allusion to earlier poets—was an elemental feature of late Latin verse whose nuances were legible (and anticipated) by its original audiences, Ware offers two chapters that directly engage the issue of genre in respect to the reception of Claudian’s poetry. To argue, as she does, that Claudian’s political poems “are only different installments of the continuing story of the hero,” with Stilicho succeeding Theodosius in the role, and that though written as separate entities his poems form “an ongoing epic with no conclusion other than the preservation of Roman *imperium sine fine*” (5), Ware must both catalog the diagnostic features of Latin epic (*reges* and *proelia*, divine machinery, and the renewal of empire) and chart the permutations that marked the genre’s evolution across half a millennium and more. Late Latin epic’s idiosyncracies—its episodic nature and corresponding disinterest in narrative progress, its ornate mannerism, and its precarious tilt towards panegyric, for instance—must both be recognized as commensurate with late antique aesthetics and also be treated as acceptable developments within an epic tradition that was never static, despite the tendency (then and now) to view Vergilian epic as normative. That is, while on the one hand Claudian surely shares a late Latin stylistic palette with Ausonius, Paulinus, and Prudentius, the prominent rhetorical, panegyric, didactic, and satiric outcroppings of his occasional works are both subordinate to the heroic and imperial themes that integrate the separate pieces of his *corpus* and can also be subsumed within the “constantly evolving genre” (32) that was Latin epic. The “prompt” for this way of thinking is the statue dedicated to Claudian in the Forum of Trajan by the emperors Arcadius and Honorius, whereon Claudian was praised for singularly combining “the mind of Virgil and the inspiration of Homer” (1). The proof of the argument comes for Ware through close attention to the networks of allusions through which Claudian established his own credentials as an epic poet and the claims of his verse to a spot in the cue that stretched from Ennius through Vergil to his own day.

Close reading, then, is the hallmark of this study in chapters three through seven. Each considers in detail distinct but overlapping thematic strains of the *carmen perpetuum* that Claudian updated for the realities of a divided empire threatened (as the western court saw it) by treacherous enemies within and without. It was an adroit act of marketing; the fiction of imperial unity, central to the epic vision of empire, had to be fashioned by lionizing its heroic agent (Stilicho), excising its corrupt eastern pretenders (Rufinus and Eutropius), and denigrating those who feebly threatened it (Gildo and Alaric). It was through his “complete investment” in the epic tradition, then, that Claudian created an “idealised Roman world” that recalled Ennian and Vergilian conceits of imperial unity (98). With similar literary skill, Ware avers, Claudian plugged his age into the cycles of time that perpetually restored Roman vigor and imperial might, merging past golden ages and heroes with those of the present to offer his audiences access to the limitless vista of a Roman *imperium* and Ovidian renewal that had been packaged (and re-packaged) by earlier writers and guaranteed the perpetuity of the state and its rulers. Heroes and villains will come and go, Turnus and Hannibal be reborn,

recognizable because seen before in epic verse and memory. *Furor* will threaten *concordia* again, unleashed by human and divine agents who evoke Vergil's Allecto or can be symbolized by the Olympus–storming Giants. Honorius' Italian countryside will take on the hues of the *Georgics* and bask in the promise of the *Fourth Eclogue*. Mallius Theodorus is favored to know “the causes of things”; Gildo maligned as a Lucanian tyrant. Never are such leaps across time without danger; always they demand much of the poet's daring and the audience's imagination; and they certainly present us with significant challenges if we want to read along with them.

These, then, are Ware's grander themes and each is pursued through subtle readings of poems and passages that painstakingly pile up and unpack the dense structures of allusion that more and more modern readers, if they are willing to work hard, now grant to the genius of late Latin poets. Ware's *Claudian and the Roman Epic Tradition*, therefore, makes a strong case for the power of literature—in this instance the muscular genre of Latin epic—to make the world (at least momentarily) in its own image. This may be the most important lesson of this book for ancient historians for it gives a glimpse of contemporaries—poet and (presumably) audience—complicit in the process of understanding the mundane in cosmic as well as poetic terms. There is, indeed, history in Claudian's political verse, but a kind that defies the limits imposed by circumscribing it as just another (distasteful) facet of overblown court ritual or an exercise in escapist rhetoric. Ware has given us a book that suggests how we might continue the process of relocating late Latin poetry generally and Claudian in particular to a landscape where the imperial present and past are both remade in webs of words and images intended, as epic always was, to express the essence of Roman civic self-understanding.

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