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Prudentius' Romanus: The Rhetorician as Hero, Martyr, Satirist, and Saint

Although almost all readers of Prudentius agree that he is the major poet produced by early Christianity, some have been disturbed by what seems to them his bad taste.[1] They find his use of violence excessive, his mixing of genres anti-classical, and his shifts of tone generally troublesome.

Typical of this group of readers, Pierre LaBriolle finds the "failings of taste" in the *Peristephanon* even more intolerable than those in the *Cathemerinon*. His greatest objections are to the "grandiloquent verse in the mouths of the martyrs," and to the "interminable harangues" they deliver to their tormentors.[2] He particularly objects to the rhetorical abilities Prudentius bestows upon Romanus:

> One (martyr) "under examination" utters no fewer than six tirades—the two last of 32 and 93 lines—after his tongue has been cut out! Prudentius does not know how to keep himself within limits.

[1]Macklin Smith gives a useful summary of critical responses to Prudentius in *Prudentius' Psychomachia: A Reexamination* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1976), 3–28. W. J. Henderson gives a survey of responses to a particularly disturbing aspect of Prudentius' style in "Violence in Prudentius' *Peristephanon*," *Akroterion* 28 (1983): 84–92.

[2]*History and Literature of Christianity*, trans. H. Wilson (New York, 1968), 450. Maurice Lavarenne, a major contributor to Prudentius scholarship, attributes to his subject a bizarre taste for the horrible, in *Etude sur la langue du poète Prudence* (Paris, 1933), chap. 3.

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He attributes Prudentius' lack of self-control to "the natural bent of his Spanish temperament nourished on Roman rhetoric."

Among those who have been less eager to attribute Prudentius' peculiar qualities to Iberia, two groups have formed to argue about whether he is working in a classical or anti-classical tradition. Klaus Thraede and Charles Witke argue that Prudentius is essentially a classical poet.[3] On the other hand, Macklin Smith, proceeding from a reading of Curtius' excursus on "Early Christian Poetry," argues that, "The rich flood of his poetry is independent of the system of the antique genres and hence is not forced to come to terms with antique literary theory."[4] The basis for his opposition to Thraede, as well as to Charles Witke, is the fear[5] that Prudentius' Christian intentions may be overlooked: "With Witke, Thraede tends to overstress the positive meaningfulness of the classical form at the expense of the Christian content."[6] One faction, then, is primarily interested in dogma, the other in poetry.[7]

Part of what gives rise to the controversy is the range of Prudentius' imagination, which, as Filippo Ermini remarks, not only combines "l'orrido, l'atroce e il comico," but is also remarkably elastic: "Sovente il tropo è anche più ardito e più lontana è l'analogia con la realtà."[8] These distinctive qualities are what compel Jacques Fontaine to borrow Curtius' use of the term "manner-

[3]Klaus Thraede, *Studien zu Sprache und Stil Prudentius* (Göttingen, 1965), 48–72; Charles Witke, "Prudentius and the Tradition of Latin Poetry," *Transactions of the American Philological Society* 99 (1968): 524: "Almost every aspect of his poetry is classical in basis."

[4]*Op. cit.*, 18.

[5]A fear that is not unique to him, as Kenneth R. Haworth points out when he speaks of "the disposition to over-emphasize Prudentius' Christianity" among readers of Prudentius, in *Deified Virtues, Demonic Vices and Descriptive Allegory in Prudentius' Psychomachia* (Amsterdam, 1980), 112–13. Haworth proposes instead, "He was more a Roman than a Christian."

[6]See Thraede, *op. cit.*, 16. In fact, Witke does nothing of the sort; he concentrates on Prudentius' abilities as a Roman, Latin poet in order to demonstrate his effectiveness as a Christian poet.

[7]Maurice Cunningham, in his edition of the poems (Turnholt, 1966), xxxv, offers as his contribution to the discussion:

Non est igitur Christianus Maro vel Flaccus, ne Pindarus quidem Latinus. Prudentius est poeta Christianus; nomen utrum meruit.

[8]Filippo Ermi, *Peristephanon* (Rome, 1914), 160–61, 210. Jacques Fontaine speaks of "la puissance de l'imagination visuelle, qui est peut-être la faculté poétique majeure de Prudence," in *Naissance de la poésie dans l'occident chrétien* (Paris, 1981), 188.

ism"[9] to characterize Prudentius' poetry. The Mannerist, Fontaine says, displays an interest in irrationality, instability, excess, affective violence, as well as a taste for display, a pleasure in ambiguity, constructive imbalance, structure and ornament that do not match, and broken unity.[10] Fontaine invokes another term from art history when he suggests that the choice of lyric measures instead of hexameters freed Prudentius to indulge in "baroque" excess.[11] In addition, he finds Prudentius' performance in the *Peristephanon* naive and folkloric, offering, as the extreme case, as well as "le plus exemplaire" of these qualities, the poem devoted to the martyrdom of Romanus.[12]

Hippolyte Delehaye also finds *Peristephanon* X exemplary, but of a whole genre, and not merely of Prudentius' individual style: "La longue histoire du martyre de S. Romain pourrait être donnée comme spécimen du genre tout entièr."[13]

The genre to which it belongs, however, is compounded out of other genres, and the strange mixture has contributed to the critical disagreement about exactly what Prudentius produced. Walther Ludwig, for example, points out that Prudentius introduces bucolic in a hymn, and satire in a learned epic.[14] In his remarks on *Peristephanon* X, Walther argues that Prudentius attempts to produce a Christian tragedy, in which Romanus plays the part of "ein beredter Bekenner des christlichen Glaubens." Although Walther correctly points out that the meter is that of Senecan tragedy, it is also that of Plautine and Terentian comedy. Furthermore, as Wal-

[9]In spite of Fridolf Kudlein's respectful request that the term be laid aside when speaking of Prudentius, in "Krankheitsmetaphorik in Laurentiushymnus des Prudentius," *Hermes* 90 (1962): 104–15.

[10]Jacques Fontaine, "Le mélange des genres dans la poésie de Prudence," in *Forma Futuri: studi in onore del Cardinale Michele Pellegrino* (Torino, 1975), 757. The opposition of classical to some other decorum may remind some readers of the polarity between "classical" aesthetics and "grotesque realism" conceived and promulgated by Mikhail Bakhtin, in *Rabelais and His World* (Cambridge, 1968).

[11]*Op. cit.*, 771.

[12]*Ibid*, p. 772.

[13]H. Delehaye, *Les passions des martyres et les genres littéraires* (Brussels, 1921).

[14]Walther Ludwig, "Die Christliche Dichtung des Prudentius und die Transformation der Klassischen Gattung," in *Christianisme et formes littéraires de l'antiquité tardive en occident*, ed. Manfred Fuhrmann, (Geneva: Fondations Hardt, 1976), 305. On mixed genres, see also E. R. Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* (New York, 1963), 424.

ther himself remarks, Prudentius' decision to compose *Peristephanon* IX in the verse form Horace used to describe his journey to Brundisium seems to be a conscious allusion to comedy.[15] Prosody alone, then, does not reveal Prudentius' intentions.

Other readers have resorted to compounding genres in their attempts to describe Prudentius' accomplishments. In his discussion of the *Peristephanon*, Raby found in Prudentius' text "a combination of the epic and lyric which can almost be described as a ballad."[16] Another Prudentian text in lyric measures, the *Cathemerinon* XII, provoked Jean-Louis Charlet to speak of the mixture of lyric, allegorical, epic, tragic, and idyllic elements, producing what he calls, borrowing Brozek's term, a Pindaric quality.[17]

The mixture of genres, however, would be merely academic were it not for the sensational, violent subject matter, which is by definition unendurable. Herbert Musurillo expresses a general discomfort when he tries to deal with the accusation that martyrdom is a psychotic state: ". . . surely it is to go to excess to speak of the 'martyr psychosis' and the masochistic phenomenon of early Christianity."[18] Fantasies involving mutilation, pain, sadism, and death penetrate the poems, as martyr after martyr endures unbearable torture. Avid for specific detail, Prudentius expresses his regret, in the opening poem of the *Peristephanon*, that truly bloody details are unavailable for the *carmen triumphalis* of Hilarius:[19]

> haec loquentes obruuntur mille poenis martyres;
> nexibus manus utrasque flexus involvit rigor,
> et chalybs adtrita colla gravibus ambit circulis.
>
> o vetustatis silentis obsoleta oblivio!
> invidentur ista nobis fama et ipsa extinguitur.
> chartulas blasphemus olim nam satelles abstulit,
> ne tenacibus libellis erudita saecula
> ordinem, tempus modumque passionis proditum
> dulcibus linguis per aures posterorum spargerent. (Lns. 70–78)

[15]*Op. cit.*, 335ff, 338.

[16]F. J. E. Raby, *A History of Christian-Latin Poetry from the Beginning to the Close of the Middle Ages*, 2d ed. (Oxford, 1953), 50.

[17]Jean-Louis Charlet, *La création poétique dans le Cathemerinon de Prudence* (Paris, 1982), 187.

[18]Herbert Musurillo, *Acts of the Pagan Martyrs* (Oxford, 1954), 236, n. 1.

[19]All quotations from Prudentius' poems are from Maurice P. Cunningham's edition, *Carmina* (Turnholt, 1966). Translations are from the Loeb Classical edition of Prudentius, edited by H. J. Thomson (Cambridge, 1949).

> At these words the martyrs are overwhelmed with a thousand tortures. Stiff fetters curve round their two hands and clasp them in their grip, and heavy rings of iron surround and chafe their necks. Alas for what is forgotten and lost to knowledge in the silence of the old time! We are denied the facts about these matters, the very tradition is destroyed, for long ago a reviling soldier of the guard took away the records, lest generations taught by documents that held the memory fast should make public the details, the time and manner of their martyrdom, and spread them abroad in sweet speech for posterity to hear.

However, Prudentius' martyrs endure pain and death not merely with conventional Stoic fortitude,[20] but with joy, a sense of play, and in several instances, among which *Peristephanon* X is the most elaborate, with a loquacity that is simultaneously stunning and disturbing.

For them, torture is sport and pain is pleasure. They deliver speeches of great length, while parts of their bodies are cut, burned, whipped, and amputated, in scenes that seem designed to illustrate Wordsworth's contention that verse is a kind of *pharmakon*, enabling readers or listeners to endure what they could not bear to see or hear in the real world.[21]

In *Peristephanon* V, for example, Vincent grows *laetior* (l. 125) as he is torn to pieces:

> Ridebat haec miles dei
> manus cruentas increpans
> quod fixa non profundius
> intraret artus ungula.
>
> But the soldier of God laughed at these commands, rebuking the blood-stained hands because the claw thrust into him did not enter more deeply into his body.

[20]For Stoic indifference to death, combined with extraordinary rhetorical competence, see Musurillo, *op. cit.*, 237.

[21]Lactantius' interest in the details of suffering offers a useful contrast, since he devotes lavish attention to the sufferings of those who refuse to accept Christianity, producing what J. L. Creed describes as "an uncharitable delight . . . in the sufferings of the discomfited persecutors," in *De Mortibus Persecutorum* (Oxford, 1984). The detailed, graphic description of Maximilian Galerius' illness, 50 ff., is probably as disgusting as any produced in this particular branch of Christian diatribe. For more on this topic, see Arnaldo Momigliano, "Pagan and Christian Historiography in the Fourth Century A.D.," in *The Conflict between Paganism and Christianity in the Fourth Century* (Oxford, 1963), 79.

When he is taken from the pit, his followers wander with their kisses over the double rows made in his body by the claws, joyfully licking the purple gore:

> ille ungularum duplices
> sulcos pererrat osculis,
> hic purpurantem corporis
> gaudet cruorem lambere. (Lns. 337–40)
>
> One covers with kisses the double cuts made by the claws, another eagerly licks the red gore on the body.

In *Peristephanon* XI, Prudentius varies the representation of dismemberment by describing a painting[22] that depicts Hippolytus' death, with a catalogue of bodily parts, and the martyr's fellow Christians soaking up the blood from the sand:

> Ille caput niveum conplectitur ac reverandam
> canitiem molli confovet in gremio;
> hic umeros truncasque manus et bracchia et ulnas
> et genua et crurum fragmina nuda legit.
> Palliolis etiam bibulae siccantur harenae,
> ne quis in infecto pulvere ros maneat.
> Si quis et in sudibus recalenti aspergine sanguis
> insidet, hunc omnem spongia pressa rapit. (Lns. 137–44)
>
> One clasps the snowy head, cherishing the venerable white hair on his loving breast, while another picks up the shoulders, the severed hands, arms, elbows, knees, bare fragments of legs. With their garments also they wipe dry the soaking sand, so that no drop shall remain to dye the dust; and wherever blood adheres to the spikes on which its warm spray fell, they press a sponge on it and carry it all away.

When the executioner approaches Agnes, in *Peristephanon* XIV, she greets him as a savage lover, more welcome than a delicate, perfumed young man; she promises to respond eagerly to the full, vigorous thrust of his sword between her breasts:

> exulto, talis quod potius venit
> vaesanus atrox turbidus armiger,
> quam si veniret languidus ac tener
> mollisque ephebus tinctus aromate,
> qui me pudoris funere perderet.
> hic, hic amator iam, fateor, placet:
> ibo inruentis gressibus obviam,

[22]A technique he also uses in *Peristephanon* IX for the death of Cassian.

> nec demorabor vota calentia;
> ferrum in papillas omne recepero
> pectusque ad imum vim gladii traham. (Lns. 69–78)
>
> "I rejoice that there comes a man like this, a savage, cruel, wild man-at-arms, rather than a listless, soft, womanish youth bathed in perfume, coming to destroy me with the death of my honour. This lover, this one at last, I confess it, pleases me. I shall meet his eager steps half-way and not put off his hot desires. I shall welcome the whole length of his blade into my bosom, drawing the sword-blow to the depths of my breast."

This is the kind of detail that provoked Fontaine and others to invoke the term "Mannerism." The art of rhetoric, however, rather than the plastic arts, may account for more of what goes on in Prudentius' verse.

When panegyrists claimed saints' lives as their material, Delehaye points outs, "l'éloquence s'empare d'un thème nouveau."[23] For Christian poets, then, saints' lives offer a new subject for an ancient discipline—Graeco-Roman rhetoric—as Walther implies when he describes Romanus as "ein beredter Bekenner des christlichen Glaubens." Prudentius shows none of the guilt about using classical rhetoric that penetrates the texts of Jerome and Augustine, perhaps because he sees literary ramifications in the Eusebian proposition of "the empire as a providential preparation for the unity of mankind in Christ."[24] By exploiting pagan rhetoric, then, he may adapt it to Christian uses, and he may also surpass it.

On the basis of this hypothesis, violence, for example, becomes more appropriate and comprehensible. Certainly Virgil's description of the death of Priam should satisfy most appetites for *Grausamkeit*.[25] Fascination with the horrible had characterized the Roman declamatory tradition, and the poems of Lucan, and the plays of Seneca reflect that tradition.[26] Four centuries later, Pru-

[23]*Op. cit.*, 184.

[24]M. A. Wes's formulation, in a review article in *Vigiliae Christianae* 25 (1971), 234.

[25]*Aeneid* 3.618 and 4.64 supply grotesque images of feeding, as well as gory sacrifice, that may have provoked Prudentius' competitive impulses.

[26]S. F. Bonner, *Roman Declamation in the Late Republic and Empire* (Liverpool, 1969), 59–60, 165. Bonner also gives momentary consideration to the influence of Iberia: "The love of gruesome detail, in which Seneca is only equalled by his nephew Lucan, may perhaps be partly a Spanish characteristic, but probably owes something to the declaimers" (165). See also G. Sixt, "Des Prudentius Abhängigkeit von Seneca und Lucan," *Philologus* 51 (1982): 501–506.

dentius' use of violence is not necessarily a violation of classical decorum, as Miceislaus Brozek suggests when he points out that several passages in Quintilian might have served as models for Prudentius' use of gruesome detail.[27] According to the statistics compiled by Henderson, only twenty percent of the lines in the *Peristephanon* qualify as in some sense violent.[28] More important, he suggests, is the rhetorical, thematic function of the violence: "Prudentius' intention is clear; the greater the mortification of the flesh in all its terrifying details, the greater the triumph of the spirit."[29] The violence, then, is not necessarily a sign of a Spanish fondness for "excess," which for some readers is a word synonymous with "rhetorical."[30] Instead, Prudentius' rhetorical excess is part of a deliberate, even programmatic attempt to provide his subject matter with what Milton, in a similar predicament, called "answerable style."

Traditionally, the defense of literary excess relies on matching words either to subject matter, or to feelings. For example, Roland Barthes defends the stylistic excesses of late eighteenth-century writers by insisting that their words matched the events themselves. In addition, he insists upon the difficulty of later times perceiving the function of rhetorical amplification:

> The Revolution was in the highest degree one of those great occassions when truth, through the bloodshed that it costs, becomes so weighty that its expression demands the very forms of historical amplification. Revolutionary writing was the one and only grand gesture commensurate with the daily presence of the guillotine. What today seems turgid was then no more than life-size.[31]

[27]"De Prudentio—Pindaro Latino," in *Eos* 49 (1957): 140. He also remarks: "Nam rhetoricam videmus Prudentio fuisse generis dicendi magistram praecipuam, rhetores autem scimus alumnos ita loquendi arte exercuisse, ut multas variasque possent res et copiose tractare et accuratissime describere."

[28]*Op. cit.*, 84.

[29]*Ibid.*, 91. See also R. Henke, *Studien zum Romanushymnus der Prudentius* (Bern, 1983), 88 ff., for the arguments that the graphic representation of horror is a means of emphasizing the supernatural powers granted to the martyrs by God.

[30]In the Loeb Classical edition of Prudentius, the editor, H. J. Thomson, finds "an excess of rhetoric" in the *Peristephanon* (Cambridge, 1949), xiii. Such judgments characterize much of the criticism of early Latin Christian poetry; see, for example, Dag Norberg's response to Sedulius' description of the martyrdom of the Innocents in *Au Seuil du Moyen Age* (Padua, 1974), 148–49.

[31]Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero* (New York, 1968), 21.

On the other hand, Henri Peyre defends the inflationary tendencies of Romantic rhetoric on the basis of the need to express an excess of feeling:

> Even when they resorted to inflated language or to exclamatory rhetoric to convey an experience they deemed unique, they were trying to render passionately and exaltedly what they had experienced ardently.[32]

Prudentius' poems offer an opportunity for both defenses; the poet attempts to fabricate a style analogous both to the divine nature of the events related, and to the poet's feelings about his subject matter.[33]

Even his prosody shows signs of deliberate excess. The number and variety of metrical forms he uses is at least remarkable, if not excessive; the *Praefationes*, for example, offer alternating iambic trimeter and dimeter, iambic trimeter, and aeolian verse (aesclepedians and glyconics). The *Cathemerinon* offers hypercatalectic dactylic trimeter, Phalaceans, asclepedians, catalectic diambs, iambic trimeter, sapphics, catalectic trochees, and catalectic anapestic dimeters. The variety among the fourteen poems that make up the *Peristephanon* is equally impressive.

Prudentius' prosodic self-consciousness also asserts itself in a cadenza on Saint Vincent, inserted into *Peristephanon* IV, where he exceeds the number of syllables permissible in a sapphic line, in order to introduce the name of Saturn.[34] In the process of violating the rules, he fastidiously calls attention to his transgression, and claims that his subject matter is sufficient excuse for what otherwise would be blameworthy and, in effect, in bad taste:

> quattuor posthinc superest virorum
> nomen extolli renuente metro,
> quos Saturninos memorat vocatos
> prisca vetustas.
> carminis leges amor aureorum

[32]Henri Peyre, *Literature and Sincerity* (New Haven, 1963), 134.

[33]A process clearly antithetical to the process described and labelled "Augustinian" by Erich Auerbach in *Literary Language and its Public in Late Latin Antiquity and in the Middle Ages* (New York, 1965), pp. 37 ff. Auerbach does remark that although Prudentius cannot be wholly identified with the *sermo humilis*, he nevertheless has much in common with it. See also remarks below on *Peristephanon* XII.

[34]For an analysis of *Peristephanon* IV, with considerable emphasis on the significance of speech, see Alison Goddard Elliot, *Roads to Paradise* (Hanover, 1987), 27–33.

nominum parvi facit, et loquendi
cura de sanctis vitiosa non est
nec rudis umquam. (Lns. 161–68)

It still remains to exalt the names of four though my meter refuses. Old times of long ago tell that they were each called Saturninus. Love of their golden names makes light of the rules of verse, and concern to speak of the saints is never incorrect nor barbarous.

By divine literary standards, Prudentius insists that his measure is "full," or "complete," and appropriate for the heavenly book, to be explicated at the right moment:

plenus est artis modus adnotatas
nominum formas recitare Christo,
quas tenet caeli liber explicandus
tempore justo. (Lns. 169–72)

The measure of art is full if we recite to Christ the forms of the names as they are written down and contained in the book of heaven which shall be opened at the due time.

Prudentius' self-conscious use of images of the book is one of several ways in which he implies that his achievements will be judged in terms of, rather than in spite of, his rhetorical propensities. In several poems of the *Peristephanon*, rhetoric itself becomes not merely a tool, but the central subject matter.[35] In addition to Romanus, at least three other Prudentian martyrs provide examples of self-conscious, even heroic, rhetorical competence. In *Peristephanon* III, for example, composed in hypercatalectic dactylic trimeters, Saint Eulalia's major use of language is to provoke her tormentors. When they respond by tearing her sides, she triumphantly calls the torn flesh "God's writing."[36]

Nec mora, carnifices gemini
iuncea pectora dilacerant
et latus ungula virgineum
pulsat utrimque et ad ossa secat
Eulalia numerante notas.

[35]Henke, *op. cit.*, establishes the precedents, with an emphasis on Christian texts, for some of what Prudentius does. As a result, however, two elements in Prudentius' poem, which contribute to its unique (and for some, its unbearable) quality, are left unaccounted for: his use of Roman rhetorical strategies to attack ancient Roman religion, and a related element, the ludic motif that runs through the hymn to Romanus, as well as through several of the other poems in the *Peristephanon*.

[36]See Curtius, *op. cit.*, 311–12, for comments on Prudentius' self-consciousness about language, particularly in his use of images of the book and writing.

"Scriberis ecce mihi, domine.
Quam iuvat hos apices legere,
qui tua, Christe, tropaea notant.
Nomen et ipsa sacrum loquitur
purpura sanguinis eliciti." (Lns. 131–40)

In a moment, two executioners are tearing her slim breast, the claw striking her girlish sides and cutting to the bone, while Eulalia counts the marks. "See, Lord," she says, "thy name is being written on me. How I love to read these letters, for they record thy victories, O Christ, and the very scarlet of the blood that is drawn speaks the holy name."

Even more self-consciously involved with images drawn from books and writing, although more involved with literal elements, *Peristephanon* IX, composed in alternating dactylic hexameters and iambic senarii, depicts the martyrdom of Saint Cassian, the *magister litterarum* of Imola. The poem begins with Prudentius praying at the saint's tomb, looking at a picture of Cassian's martyrdom:

Erexi ad caelum faciem, stetit obvia contra
fucis colorum picta imago martyris
plagas mille gerens, totos lacerata per artus,
ruptam minutis praeferens punctis cutem.
innumeri circum pueri, miserabile visu,
confossa parvis membra figebant stilis,
unde pugillares soliti percurrere ceras
scholare murmur adnotantes scripserant. (Lns. 10–16)

I lifted my face towards heaven, and there stood confronting me a picture of the martyr painted in colours, bearing a thousand wounds, all his parts torn, and showing his skin broken with tiny pricks. Countless boys round about (a pitiful sight!) were stabbing and piercing his body with the little styles with which they used to run over their wax tablets, writing down the droning lessons in school.

Since the children and their weapons are small, the wounds they make are small, but sufficient in number to bring about the death of Cassian.

A verger who happens to be present proceeds to relate the story to the grateful poet, assuring him that the event represented in the picture has been *tradita libris*, in good faith, and is no *inanis aut anilis fabula*. Cassian's skill was not in composing poetry or prose, but in the physical, necessarily tedious act of writing:

praefuerat studiis puerilibus et grege multo
saeptus magister litterarum sederat,
verba notis brevibus conprendere cuncta peritus,
raptimque punctis dicta praepetibus sequi. (Lns. 21–24)

He had been in charge of a school for boys and sat as a teacher of reading and writing with a great throng around him, and he was skilled in putting every word in short signs and following speech quickly with swift pricks on the wax.

When Cassian refused to worship pagan gods, he was taken from the classroom, and then handed over to those whom he used to beat, *donetur ipsis verberator parvulis* (ln. 38). With the roles reversed, he now becomes the object of sport to his pupils:

ut libet inludant, lacerent inpune manusque
tinguant magistri feriatas sanguine.
ludum discipulis volupe est ut praebeat ipse
doctor severus quos nimis coercuit. (Lns. 39–42)

"Let them make sport of him as they please, give them leave to mangle him at will, let them give their hands a holiday and dip them in their master's blood. It is a pleasant thought that the strict teacher should himself furnish sport to the pupils he has too much held down."

His former pupils hurl writing instruments at him, and as he heroically encourages them to redouble their efforts, they ironically describe themselves as paying him back in kind:

non potes irasci quod scribimus; ipse iubebas
numquam quietum dextera ut ferret stylum. . . . (Lns. 73–74)

Exerce imperium, ius est tibi plectere culpam,
si quis tuorum te notavit segnius.
Talia ludebant pueri per membra magistra . . . (Lns. 81–83)

"You cannot be angry with us for writing; it was you who bade us never let our hand carry away an idle style . . . Use your authority; you have power to punish a fault, if any of your pupils has written carelessly on you."

Cassian, however, is not the most satisfying rhetorical hero, since the pupils, not the martyr, get to "play," and they also get the last word in the exchange.

Saint Lawrence offers a better model for the *rhetor* as hero; in the iambic dimeters of *Peristephanon* II, play, dogma, and literary self-consciousness combine to produce a martyr with an unusual sensibility. At one point in the poem, in response to a lengthy harangue against materialism that Lawrence has just delivered, and which the saint has supported by an allegorical reading of a group of beggars, the angry prefect exclaims that he is being mocked:

"ridemur," exclamat fremens (furens A)
praefectus, "ac miris modis
per tot figuras ludimur:
et vivit insanum caput!
inpune tantas, furcifer,
strofas cavillo mimico
te nexuisse existimas,
dum scurra saltas fabulam?
Concinna visa urbanitas
tractare nosmet ludicris?
egon cachinnis venditus
acroma festivum fui? (Lns. 313–24)

"He is mocking us," cries the prefect, mad with rage, "making wonderful sport of us with all this allegory. And yet the madman lives! Think you, rascal, to get off with contriving such trickeries with your comedian's quibbling and theatrical buffoonery? Do you think it neat pleasantry to make a butt of me? Have you made your guffaws out of me and turned me into a merry piece of entertainment?"

That he is laughing at his tormentor becomes theatrically clear when, on the gridiron, Lawrence makes jokes well enough to serve as Curtius' example of medieval kitchen humor:[37]

"converte partem corporis
satis crematum iugiter,
et fac periclum, quid tuus
Vulcanus ardens egerit."

praefectus inverti iubet.
tunc ille: "coctum est, devora,
et experimentum cape
sit crudum an assum suavius. (Lns. 401–408)

"This part of my body has been burned long enough; turn it round and try what your hot god of fire has done." So the prefect orders him to be turned about, and then, "It is done," says Lawrence; "eat it up, try whether it is nicer raw or roasted."

Lawrence's sense of humor in this poem is one of the items that offended Pierre de LaBriolle:[38] "St. Lawrence draws an almost ludicrous parallel between physical ills and the ills of the soul." The pun that Lawrence makes in the following passage, referring to

[37]Curtius, *op. cit.*, 425–26.

[38]*History and Literature of Christianity* (London, 1924), 454. See below for Romanus' use of medical material.

morbus regius (jaundice) as the illness from which his judge suffers, is what particularly offended LaBriolle:

> tute ipsis, qui Romam regis,
> contemptor aeterni Dei,
> dum daemonum sordes colis,
> morbo laboras regio. (Lns. 261–64)
>
> You yourself who rule over Rome, who despise the everlasting God, worship foul devils, are suffering from the ruler's sickness.

The ludic element appears again, though only briefly, in the iambic dimeters of *Peristephanon* V, when Saint Vincent speaks of dying as a Christian sport:

> tormenta carcer ungulae
> stridensque flammis lammina
> atque ipsa poenarum ultima
> mors christianis ludus est. (Lns. 61–64)
>
> Torture, imprisonment, the claws, the hissing red-hot plate, even to the final suffering of death, are all mere sport to Christians.

His persecutor picks up the motif:

> inpune ne nostris sibi
> dis destruendis luserit. (Lns. 101–104)
>
> He shall not get off with pulling down our gods for his amusement.

Both the torture and the tortured, then, describe their common activity as "play."

Prudentius' tendency to attribute a ludic quality to elaborately amplified scenes of pain and violence is responsible for producing most of the disapproval which LaBriolle and others, particularly those primarily interested in Christian dogma, have expressed. However, piety and play are not necessarily exclusive categories, as the work of Huizinga, Rahner, Suchomski, and others has demonstrated.[39]

[39]For discussion of the relationship between play and Christian doctrine, see Johann Huizinga, *Homo Ludens* (New York, 1970); Hugo Rahner, "Der spielende Mensch," *Eranos-Jahrbuch* 16 (1949), and his article, "Eutrapélie," in *Dictionnaire de spiritualité* 4.2 (Paris, 1960): 1728; Jean Charles Payen, "Le comique de l'énormité," *L'esprit créature* 16 (1976): 46–60; Joachim Suchomski, *Delectatio und utilitas* (Bern, 1975), 55–61; and R. Levine, "Wolfram von Eschenbach: Dialectical *Homo Ludens*," *Viator* 13 (1982): 177–201.

In the poems of Prudentius, the sense of play embraces several elements, including athletic contest, rhetorical contest, and laughter. Saints are traditionally represented as God's athletes, and, in his description of Romanus, John Chrysostom compares the martyr's efforts to those of the Olympic athlete.[40] Jacques Fontaine's richly evocative comment that the struggle of Jacob with the angel, "vaut aussi pour toutes les formes de l'imaginaire dans la poésie de Prudence," may have even wider implications than Fontaine intended.[41] Brozek also likes the analogy, and uses it to support his argument for Prudentius as the Christian Pindar.[42]

The sense of rhetorical contest is more complex. The primary contest in *Peristephanon* X is the extensive attack on pagan religion Romanus delivers in three lengthy speeches to his tormentor Aesclepiades.[43] At the same time, Prudentius engages in a contest with the predominantly pagan texts and traditions from which he derives his skill and authority, but whose beliefs he as a Christian poet must oppose. Neither contest can be won by the strength and competence of an individual human being, since each is designed to demonstrate the superior efficacy and truth of Christianity.[44]

The ludic elements also fit the doctrinal purpose. Play involving laughter as well as competition was part of Roman declamatory training, as S. F. Bonner suggests,[45] but laughter was also interpreted as an imitation of God's divine play, in the texts of Gregory

[40]PGL 50.606.

[41]Fontaine, *Naissance*, 189.

[42]*Op. cit.*, 146.

[43]See Thraede, *op. cit.*, 132, for an attempt to deal with the charge that these speeches do not develop from the situation, but are, in effect, left over from the tirade against Symmachus. A century before Prudentius, Arnobius, whom LaBriolle called a "pitiless satirist" (197), had compiled the *Adversus Nationes*, "the most intense and most sustained of all extant counterattacks upon the contemporary pagan cults" (George E. McCracken, *Arnobius of Sicca: The Case against the Pagans* [New York, 1949], 4). For a concise description of the satiric traditions upon which early Christian apologists drew, see David Wiesen, *Saint Jerome as a Satirist* (Ithaca, 1964), 1–19: "The fourth century after Christ . . . witnessed the sudden reawakening of interest in the classical writers of satire" (3).

[44]In addition, a pagan revival was going on in Rome; see H. Bloch, "The Pagan Revival in the West at the End of the Fourth Century," in Momigliano, *op. cit.*, 200.

[45]*Op. cit.*, 49.

of Nazianus, Philo, Clement of Alexandria, and Augustine.[46] According to Gregory, God the Word plays with the world:

> παίζει γὰρ λόγος αἰπὺς ἐν εἴδεσι παντοδαποῖσι
> κίρνας ὡς ἐθέλει κόσμον ὅλον ἔνθα καὶ ἔνθα.
>
> The Holy Word plays; with colored pictures he decorates the whole world.

In his attempt to explicate Gen. 26:8, Philo composes an elaborate Platonic allegory on Abimelech's discovery of the true nature of the relationship between Isaac and Rebecca:

> κατὰ γοῦν τὸν ἱερώτατον Μωυσῆν τέλος ἐστί σοφίας παιδιὰ καὶ γέλως, ἀλλ' οὐχ ἅ τοῖς νηπίοις ἄνευ φρονήσεως πᾶσι μελετᾶται, ἀλλ' ἃ τοῖς ἤδη πολιοῖς οὐ χρόνῳ μόνον ἀλλὰ καὶ βουλαῖς ἀγαθαῖς γεγονόσιν οὐχ ὁρᾶς ὅτι τὸν αὐτηκόου καὶ αὐτομαθοῦς καὶ αντουργοῦ τῆς ἐπιστήμης ἀρυσάμενον οὐ μετέχοντα γέλωτος, ἀλλ' αὐτὸν γέλωτα εἶναί φησιν; οὐτός ἐστιν Ισαάκ, ὃς ἑρμηνεύεται γέλως, ᾧ παίζειν μετὰ τῆς ὑπομονῆς, ἣν Ρεβέκκαν Εβραῖοι καλοῦσιν, ἁρμόττει. XLI. τὴν δὲ | θεῖαν παιδιὰν τῆς ψυχῆς ιδιώτη μὲν οὐ θέμις ιδεῖν, βασιλεῖ δὲ ἔξεστιν, ὃ πάμπολυν χρόνον παρώκησεν, ει, καὶ μὴ πάντ ἐνῴκησε τον αἰῶνα, σοφία. προσαγορεύεται οὐτος' Αβιμέλεχ, ὃς διακύψας τῇ θυρίδι, τῷ διοιχθέντι καὶ φωσφόρῳ τῆς διανοίας ὄμματι, τὸν Ισαὰκ εἶδε παίζοντα μετὰ 'Ρεβέκας τῆς γυναικος αυτού τί γὰρ ἄλλο ἐμπεπὲς ἔργον σοφῷ ἢ τὸ παίζειν καὶ γανουσθαι καὶ συνευφραίνεσθαι τῃ τῶν καλῶν ὑπομονῇ;
>
> Moses, at all events, holiest of men, shows us that sport and merriment is the height of wisdom, not the sport which children of all sorts indulge in, paying no heed to good sense, but such as is seen in those who are now becoming grey-headed not only in respect of age but of thoughtfulness. Do you not observe that when he is speaking of the man who drew directly from the well of knowledge, listening to no other, learning through no other, resorting to no agency whatever, he does not say that he had a part in laughter, but that he was laughter itself? I am speaking of Isaac, whose name means "laughter," and whom it well befits to sport with "patient waiting," who is called in Hebrew "Rebecca."[47]

[46]Play may also have negative connotations. Firmicus Maternus, for example, in the midst of attacks on pagan religion that resemble those Prudentius makes, calls the devil *ludibrosus hostis;* see Ilona Opelt, "Schimpfwörter in der Apologie De error profanarum religionum des Firmicus Maternus," *Glotta* 52 (1974): 114–26.

[47]F. H. Colson and G. H. Whitaker, eds., *Philo* 3 (London, 1954): 301.

The transaction among Isaac, Rebecca, and Abimelech provoked Clement of Alexander to compose verses in which the allegorical, or at least figural, potential of laughter and play is Christianized:

> ὦ τῆς φρονίμου παιδιᾶς.
> γέλως δι' ὑπομονῆς βοηθούμενος
> καὶ ἔφορος ὁ βασιλεύς.
> αγαλλιᾶται τὸ πνεῦμα
> τῶν ἐν Χριστῷ παίδίων
> ἐν ὑπομονῇ πολιτευομένων
> καὶ αὕτη ἡ θεία παιδιά.
>
> Oh, what wise child's-play. It is laughter supported by patience, and the king is the onlooker. Happy is the spirit of those who are patient children in Christ. That is holy play.

The paradoxical combination of youth and wisdom articulated by Clement seems analogous with the rhetorical *topos, puer senex,* to which Curtius devotes considerable attention, and which reappears vividly in the portrayal of the infant martyr in *Peristephanon* X.[48]

Prudentius participates in this sense of divine laughter, which clearly has little to do with what we normally mean by a sense of humor. For the Christian rhetorician, engaged in a battle against the forces of darkness, laughter expresses power, not pleasure, and therefore becomes both a weapon and a sign of victory. Prudentius is also capable of turning comic material to serious purposes. For example, if Jean-Louis Charlet is correct in locating the source for the phrase *cantilenae suaserint* (*Peristephanon* X. 351), then Prudentius turned a phrase Ausonius used for the mildest kind of humor into part of Romanus' diatribe against pagan religion.[49] For the Christian rhetorician, as Peter von Moos has suggested, "everything written is exploitable."[50]

However, to demonstrate the full range of Prudentius' abilities to combine play, contest, violence, poetry, and Christian doctrine, one must turn to the longest of the poems in the *Peristephanon*, the

[48]See below. For *puer senex* among the Jews, see H. W. Surkan, *Martyrien in jüdische und frühchristlicher Zeit* (Göttingen, 1938).

[49]Jean-Louis Charlet, *L'influence d'Ausone sur la poésie de Prudence* (Aix-en-Provence, 1980), 70–71.

[50]Peter Von Moos, "The Use of *Exempla* in the *Policraticus* of John of Salisbury," in *The World of John of Salisbury,* ed. Michael Wilks (Oxford, 1984), 247.

1,140 iambic septenarii devoted to Romanus, whom Eusebius[51] lists among those martyred by Galerius at Antioch in A.D. 303. A combination of hagiography, polemic, diatribe, and lyric, *Peristephanon* X has generated the most exasperation and disapproval among its professional readers.[52] "It is a strange mixture of a poem, extended beyond reason, with anti-climactic results, the clearest case in the *Peristephanon* that Prudentius could fail to see that the half may be better than the whole."[53] Charles Witke, perhaps the most tolerant of Prudentius' American readers, suggests that the length and detail of some of the texts, as well as "his relish for grotesque injury in the *Peristephanon*," account for the difficulties readers have experienced.[54] Prudentius' excess, then, is the problem.

The answer to the problem lies in the subject matter and the poet's relationship to it, as Prudentius indicates at the beginning of *Peristephanon* X. Anticipating the major miracle in the poem—Romanus' ability to continue speaking even after his tongue has been cut off—Prudentius offers an initial declaration of incompetence, which also provides the first example in the poem of the poet's ability to make a conventional *topos* into an integral part of the poem's theme:

> Romane, Christi fortis adsertor Dei,
> elinguis oris organum fautor move,
> largire comptum carmen infantissimo,
> fac ut tuarum mira laudum concinam.
> nam scis et ipse posse mutos eloqui. (Lns. 1–5)

> Romanus, stout defender of the divine Christ, grant thy favour and stir up the tongue within my speechless mouth, bountifully bestow graceful song on the mutest of men and enable me to sing the wonders of thy glory; for thou knowest, thyself too, that the dumb can speak.

Prudentius now extends and complexifies the inability-topos by combining it with what will become the motif of milkiness,

[51]PG 20.1464–67. For graphic descriptions of torture and martyrdom nearly equal to those Prudentius provides, see also the events of A.D. 177 as Eusebius describes them in the *Ecclesiastical History*, V.I; see also W. H. C. Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church* (Oxford, 1965).

[52]Charles Witke, *Numen Litterarum* (Leiden, 1971), 128, finds that the opening strophes of *Pe* X offers a "rather curious congruence." Thraede, *op. cit.* 122, points out the anomaly of a martyr at Antioch in a list of Spanish martyrs, and gives some attempt at answers.

[53]Bernard M. Peebles, *The Poet Prudentius* (New York, 1951), 91.

[54]*Transactions*, 524.

spiritali lacte, to reinforce the image, begun in line three by *infantissimo*, of the poet as baby, a figure that combines both innocence and incompetence:

> sic noster haerens sermo lingua debili
> balbutit et modis laborat absonis,
> sed si superno rore respergas iecur
> et spiritali lacte pectus inriges,
> vox inpeditos rauca laxabit sonos. (Lns. 11–15)

> So my speech sticks and stammers with feeble tongue and labours in inharmonious measures; but if thou sprinkle my heart with the dew from on high and flood my breast with the milk of the spirit, my hoarse voice will unloose the sounds which are now obstructed.

For the powerless, of course, Christ, *potens facundiae*, is the solution; therefore Prudentius declares Christ to be his tongue:[55]

> evangelista scripsit ipsum talia
> praecepta Messian dedisse apostolis:
> "nolite verba, cum sacramentum meum
> erit canendum, providenter quaerere;
> ego inparatis quae loquantur suggeram."
> sum mutus ipse, sed potens facundiae
> mea lingua Christus luculente disserent. (Lns. 16–22)

> The Evangelist has written that the Messiah himself instructed the apostles in this wise: "Seek not with forethought for words when my mystic doctrine is to be proclaimed. I shall furnish the unready with what they shall say." In myself I am dumb, but Christ is master of eloquence; he will be my tongue and discourse excellently.

Here Prudentius turns part of Matt. 10:18–19 into verse, without giving the full message, which is made explicit in Matt. 10:20: "Nos enim vos estis qui loquimini, sed Spiritus Patris vestri qui loquitur in vobis."

The enemy in the perpetual contest is represented now by the image of a wounded snake, suggested by the recollection of the devil in the process of being defeated by Christ:

> Sic vulneratus anguis ictu spiculi
> ferrum remordet et dolore saevior
> quassando pressis immoratur dentibus,
> hastile fixum sed manet profundius
> nec cassa sentit morsuum pericula. (Lns. 26–30)

[55]A figure he may have borrowed from Chrysostom (PGL 614).

Just so a serpent wounded by stroke of spear-point bites back at the steel and keeps on shaking it in the grip of its teeth, growing more savage with the pain, but the lance has pierced too deeply and stays fast, unconscious of the futile danger of the bites.

Perhaps no figure is more familiar in Christian doxologies than that of the evil snake; however, Prudentius' use of the figure, in connection with the mouth, both in this poem and in the *Harmatigenia*, has a special significance. It provides a negative, perverse mirror image for the creative power of the Logos.[56] In the *Hamartigenia*, the image is accompanied by what Prudentius represents as a perverse sexual union by the vipers, whose oral method of impregnation destroys the three-tongued male of the species:

Si licet ex ethicis quidquam praesumere vel si
de physicis exempli aliquid, sic vipera, ut aiunt,
dentibus emoritur fusae per viscera prolis,
mater morte sua, non sexu fertilis aut de
concubitu distenta uterum, sed cum calet igni
percita femineo, moriturum obscena maritum
ore sitit patulo. Caput inserit ille trilingue
coniugis in fauces atque oscula fervidus intrat
insinuanas oris coitu genitale venenum. (Lns. 581–89)

If we may draw on the moralists for anything or take an instance from natural history, it is thus, they say, that the viper perishes by the teeth of the progeny that is brought forth through her flesh. She becomes a mother by her own death; she does not bear her young by an organ of sex, nor does her womb swell from intercourse, but when she burns with the excitement of the female's heat the lewd beast opens her mouth wide in thirst for a mate that is doomed. He puts his three-tongued head into his spouse's jaws, eagerly entering her alluring mouth and inserting his baneful seed by an oral union.

At the moment of highest passion, the female decapitates the male:

Nupta voluptatis vi saucia mordicus haustum
frangit amatoris blanda inter foedera guttur
infusaque bibit caro pereunte salivas. (Lns. 190–92)

The bride, smitten with the strong pleasure, takes her lover's head between her teeth and breaks his neck with a bite in the middle of the fond compact, drinking in the injected slaver while her dear one dies.

[56]See F. Zambon, "Vipreus liquor," in *Cultura neolatina* XL (1980): 1–15, for the "generation of vipers," with sources in Herodotus, Pliny, Hermetic literature, various patristic writings, and Ambrose particularly, since his influence on Prudentius is significant. According to Zambon, Prudentius transcends Ambrose in his use of this *incubo teologico* (15).

The female, however, does not last long, but dies in the act of giving birth, as her children tear her belly apart to escape from her body. Prudentius continues the simile, describing the soul imbibing evil from the devil, thereby producing countless sins.

No such graphic scenes of copulation and birth occur in *Peristephanon* X, but the matrix of serpents, sexuality, and procreation recurs several times.[57] The image of the serpent reappears a few lines later, applied to Galerius persecuting Christians with his "royal mouth":

haec ille serpens ore dictat regio . . . (Ln. 36)

It was the serpent that uttered these words by the imperial lips . . .

Opposed to the royal mouth, however, Romanus defends himself against Asclepiades, *ore libero* (ln. 96), provoking the king's representative to torture him. Because of Romanus' rank, the rack cannot be used; instead, he is lashed. Romanus takes the event as material for an *ex tempore* rhetorical display, in this case on the nature of nobility of blood: "generosa Christi secta nobilitat viros" ("It is Christ's noble teaching that enobles men") (ln. 125). Furthermore, Romanus asserts that the root of true nobility begins, genealogically, *Dei ab ore*, from God's mouth, and he urges his tormentor to continue the torture, to ennoble the victim: "incumbe membris, tortor, ut sim nobilis" (ln. 138). Romanus continues to develop the topic,[58] insisting that all symbols of earthly nobility pass away:

Nonne cursim transeunt
fasces secures sella praetexta et toga
licta tribunal et trecenta insignia
quibus tumetis, moxque detumescitis? (Lns. 142–46)

Do not they pass away quickly, the rods, the axes, the chair of state, the bordered robe, the lictor, the judgement-seat, and all the thousand badges of honour on the strength of which you swell with pride, and then fall flat?

At this point, Romanus begins attacking pagan religion as ludicrous, not in the sense of holy play, but as vulgar and absurd. The

[57]For a convincing reading of *Peristephanon* XIII, emphasizing the sexual perverseness of Cyprian, as well as drawing parallels between Cyprian's tongue and Romanus' tongue, see Martha Malamud, *A Poetics of Transformation* (Ithaca, 1989), 115–48.

[58]For some of the sources for the topic of "natural nobility," see Henke, *op. cit.*, 155–70. For a comprehensive catalogue see G. M. Vogt, "Gleanings for the History of Sentiment: *Generositas Virtus non Sanquis*," *JEGP* 24 (1925): 102–23.

Lupercal, for example, where each celebrant runs naked, like a slave, "puellas verbere ictas ludicro" (ln. 165),[59] is *vilissimum*.

The sequence of nudity and women at least partially generates the next part of Romanus' speech, an attack on the sexual profligacy of pagan gods, their base progeny, and the deceptions they practice on their deluded wives:

> "Iubes, relictis patris et Christi sacris
> ut tecum adorem feminas mille ac mares,
> deas deosque deque sexu duplici,
> natos nepotes abnepotes editos
> et tot stuprorum sordidam prosapiam.
>
> Nubunt puellae, saepe luduntur dolis,
> amasionum conprimuntur fraudibus,
> incesta feruent, furta moechorum calent,
> fallit maritus, odit uxor paelicem,
> deos catenae colligant adulteros. (Lns. 176–85)
>
> You bid me abandon the worship of the Father and Christ, and along with you venerate a thousand males and females, goddesses and gods and children, grandchildren, great-great-grandchildren of both sexes born to them, and the base progeny of their many unchastities. The girls marry, or often they are made the sport of trickery and violated by dishonest lovers, lewdness and stratagems of paramours go briskly on, a husband is unfaithful and a wife hates a mistress, chains bind adulterous gods.

Plato, of course, had voiced the same misgivings about the behavior of the Homeric gods, but Prudentius' Romanus goes to much greater lengths, with much more specific detail. He attacks the homosexuality of Apollo, who corrupted the young while they were at play:

> Delphosne pergam? set vetat
> corrupta ephebi fama, quem vester deus
> effeminavit gymnadis licentia. (Lns. 189–90)
>
> Shall I go to Delphi? No, I am forbidden by the spoiled of the lad on the exercise-ground, whom your god dishonoured, taking advantage of the freedom of the wrestling-bout.

At this point Romanus also recalls that Apollo's lover Hyacinth was accidentally killed while at play, "occisum gravi/ disco" (lns. 191–92).

[59]In *Contra Symmachus* II.862, Prudentius also attacks this ritual, but does not use "game," and no specific mention of women is made.

Moving from homosexuality to castration—a topic to which he returns towards the end of the poem, significantly, after his tongue has been cut out—Romanus cites the emasculation of Attis (lns. 196ff.) as another abhorrent pagan myth:

> an ad Cybebes ibo lucum pineum?
> puer sed obstat gallus ob libidinem
> per triste vulnus perque sectum dedecus
> ab impudicae tutus amplexu deae,
> per multa Matri sacra plorandus spado. (Lns. 196–200)
>
> Or shall I go to Cybebe's pinegrove? No, for there stands in my way the lad who emasculated himself because of her lust, and by a grievous wound cutting the parts of shame saved himself from the unchaste goddess's embrace.

From the sexual nightmare that anticipates his own sacrificial act, Romanus turns to the ludicrous, adulterous activities of Jupiter. In the theater, Romanus asserts, Jupiter's actions are a source of laughter that has nothing to do with what is sacred:

> cygnus stuprator peccat inter pulpita,
> saltat Tonantem tauricornem ludius;
> spectator horum pontifex summus sedet
> ridesque et ipse, nec negando diluis
> cum fama tanti polluatur numinis. (Lns. 221–25)
>
> The ravisher swan does his evil deed on the stage, a player dances the part of the Thunderer with the bull's horns, while you, the high priest, sit and watch these things and laugh at them yourself, and never discredit them by denying their truth, though the good name of this great deity is soiled.

The Roman stage offers Venus as a *meretrix* (ln. 228), lustfully mourning for Adonis, Ganymede as a symbol of Jove's perversity, Ceres searching for the daughter raped by a divinity, and Hercules made into a *ludibrium* (ln. 240) by his passion.[60]

Faunus, Priapus, nymphs at the bottom of frog-ponds, "divinitatis ius in algis vilibus" (1. 245), all make laughter a necessity:

> nonne pulmonem movet
> derisus istas intuens ineptias,
> quas vinolentae somniis fingunt anus? (Lns. 248–50)

[60]See *Contra Orationem Symmachi* I. 103ff. for attack on Priapus, Hercules' homosexual inclinations, and the perverse sexuality of ancient Roman religion.

Does not derisive laughter shake your sides at the contemplation of these absurdities, the phantasies of tipsy old wives' dreams?

Romanus continues his diatribe, attacking the absurd worship of animals (lns. 256–58) and vegetables (lns. 259–60), as well as the practice of worshipping statues. Developing the biblical injunction against worshipping statues, Romanus attacks pagan gods, because they are made of metal utensils, "broken and melted":

Non eruescis, stulte, pago dedite,
te tanta semper perdisse obsonia,
quae dis ineptus obtulisti talibus,
quos trulla pelvis cantharus sartagines
fracta et liquata contulerunt vascula? (Lns. 296–300)

Do you not blush, foolish man, devoted to pagan worship, to think that you have always wasted all those victuals that you have absurdly offered to gods like these, made out of an assemblage of ladles, basins, tankards, frying-pans, broken vessels melted down?

Here he goes beyond Commodian, the "black sun"[61] of early Christian poetry, who had reworked the biblical injunction into unscannable verse:

Nolite, inquid, adorare deos inanes
De manibus vestris factos ex ligno vel auro.[62]

Romanus now turns from ridiculing pagan religion to deliver a sermon of almost one hundred lines on the nature of true Christian belief. In response to Romanus' tirade and doxology, Asclepiades delivers a thirty-line declaration of outrage, accusing Romanus of upholding a new-fangled religion and of simultaneously violating political and religious authority, "ore foedans impio" (ln. 400).

When Aesclepiades threatens to make him pay with his blood for refusing to honor the ancient gods, Romanus refuses, and the soldiers plow lines in the saint's body until the white bones show:

Scindunt utrumque milites taeterrimi
mucrone hiulco pensilis latus viri,
sulcant per artus longa tractim vulnera,
obliqua rectis, recta transversis secant
et iam retectis pectus albet ossibus. (Lns. 451–55)

[61]Fontaine's phrase, in *Naissance*, 39.

[62]*Instructiones* 1.2.2–4, ed. Joseph Martin, *Commodiani Carmina* (Turnhold, 1960), 3.

The foul soldiers cut both his sides with gashing sword as he hangs, ploughing wounds in long lines over his body and making criss-cross cuts, till his breast shows white where the bones are laid bare.

Claiming to feel no pain, Romanus continues to defy his tormentors, arguing that what he feels is less than the pain felt by those with fever, arthritis, gout, as well as less painful than that inflicted by doctors in their attempts to cure physical ills. He describes in detail his own torture and the medical practice of lancing, to prepare for a kind of Socratic paradox by means of which the torturer is the healer:

Putate ferrum triste chirurgos meis
inferre costis, quod secat salubriter.
Non est amarum quo reformatur salus.
Videntur isti carpere artus tabidos,
sed dant medellam rebus intus vividis. (Lns. 501–505)

Fancy that the surgeons are putting the grim knife to my ribs and it is cutting me for the good of my health; that by which health is restored is not vexatious. These men appear to be rending my wasting limbs, but they give healing to the living substance within.

Romanus now modulates to an attack on the flesh and its pleasures, appealing to the *carnifex* to "heal" him by leaving nothing for the devil to cut off: "quod tyrannus amputet" (ln. 520), continuing the motif of amputation.[63] Drawing from Isa. 24:4, and Rev. 6:13–14, his vision of the end of all things includes the vision of the book: "quandoque caelum ceu liber plicabitur" (ln. 536). In recognition of his opponent's rhetorical superiority, Asclepiades becomes so angry that he wants to cut into Romanus' very words:

verbositatis ipse rumpatur locus,
scaturrientes perdat ut loquacitas
sermonis auras perforatis follibus,
quibus sonandi nulla lex ponit modum;
ipsa et loquentis verba torqueri volo. (Lns. 551–55)

"Shatter the seat of his verbosity, puncture the bellows so that his loquacity may lose the gushing winds of words, since no law puts a stop to their sounding. I will have the very words tortured even as he speaks."

[63]Torture that cures occurs in Eusebius' description of the martyrdom of Sanctus V.i.24.

After his face has been slashed, anticipating the remarks Shakespeare's Antony makes at Caesar's funeral, Romanus asserts that the results are in his favor, since the multiple wounds give him multiple mouths:

> grates tibi, o praefecte, magnas debeo,
> quod multa pandens ora iam Christum loquor.
> artabat ampli nominis praeconium
> meatus unus, inpar ad laudes Dei. (Lns. 562–65)
>
> "Much thanks I owe to you, sir, because now I open many mouths to speak of Christ. The single passage used to restrict the publishing of his mighty name; it was too little for the praises of God."

Romanus' supreme rhetorical ability to make something good out of everything bad continues, when the increasingly furious Asclepiades decides to burn his victim, to humiliate him, as Christ was humiliated on the cross. Romanus takes the cue, and argues that Christ's humiliation was a symbolic act of sublimity; rather than new-fangled, it is eternal.

To prove the strength of his position, Romanus now asks to examine a child, to hear from the harmless infant's "milky mouth" the truth of Christianity:

> ardens experiri innoxiam
> lactantis oris indolem. (Lns. 666–67)

Asclepiades agrees, and orders a child ("nec olim lacte depulsum") brought forth to be examined.[64] Paradigmatically pious, the child gives the answers which Prudentius tells us were imbibed at his mother's twin fountains:

> ego, ut gemellis uberum de fontibus
> lac parvus hausi, Christum et hausi credere. (Lns. 684–85)
>
> And I in drinking as a babe the milk from the twin founts of her breasts drank in also the belief in Christ.

Infuriated once again, Asclepiades orders that the child be beaten; when the child cries out with thirst, he is castigated by his mother, in whose speech the motif of milk reappears, now mingled with blood and honey, in a passage that recalls, both for the child and for the readers of the poem, the Massacre of the Innocents:

[64]See Henke, *op, cit.*, 136–51, on the use of children as a means of argument in ancient literature.

> Hic hic bibendus, nate, nunc tibi est calix,
> mille in Bethleem quem biberunt parvuli;
> oblita lactis et papillarum immemor
> aetas amaris, mox deinde dulcibus
> refecta poclis mella sumpsit sanguinis. (Lns. 736–40)
>
> This, this, my son, is the cup you now must drink. A thousand little ones in Bethlehem drank of it; forgetting their milk, with no thought of the breast, their life was restored by bitter cups that turned to sweet, partaking of blood that was changed into honey.

Addressing him now as *fortis puer*, she reminds him that he has also received *sapientia*, as she weaves the ludic motif together with the idea of sacrifice, reminding the child that his play was learning Christian doctrine. In the Bible, she reminds him, Isaac stretching his neck at the altar prepared by his father is the major model for infant sacrifice:

> Scis, saepe dixi, cum docenti adluderes
> et garrulorum signa verborum dares,
> Isaac fuisse parvulum patri unicum,
> qui, cum immolandus aram et ensem cerneret,
> ultro sacranti colla praebuerit seni. (Lns. 746–50)
>
> You know, for I have often told you, when you used to turn my lessons into play and prattle sounds that stood for words, that Isaac was a little boy, his father's only child, and how, when he was to be sacrificed and saw the altar and the sword, of his own will he stretched out his neck to the old man who was making the offering.

Her next biblical illustration is taken from 2 Macc. 7, where children again died before their mother's eyes.[65] Like a typical Prudentian speaker, she provides specific, graphic detail for the "contest" ("certamen") (ln. 753), which she paraphrases:

> Comam cutemque verticis revulserat
> a fronte tortor, nuda testa ut tegmine
> cervicem adusque dehonestaret caput. . . . (Lns. 761–63)
>
> The torturer tore away the hair and skin of the head from the brow backwards, so that the bare skull uncovered down to the neck should dishonour it.

Anticipating Romanus' own fate, the child's mother describes the amputation of the tongue of one of the biblical martyrs, allowing the Maccabean mother to compose an encomiastic series of

[65]Prudentius also uses the incident in *Peristephanon* V.523ff.

apostrophes to the tongue, culminating in addressing the tongue as "redemptrix prima membrorum omnium," an analogue for Christ himself:

> Linguam tyrannus amputari iusserat
> uni ex ephebis; mater aiebat: "Satis
> iam parta nobis gloria est, pars optima
> deo immolatur ecce nostri corporis,
> digna est fidelis lingua, quae sit hostia.
>
> Interpres animi, enuntiatrix sensuum,
> cordis ministra, praeco operti pectoris,
> prima offeratur in sacramentum necis
> et sit redemptrix prima membrorum omnium." (Lns. 765–74)
>
> The oppressor commanded the tongue of one of the young lads to be cut out, and his mother said: "Now we have won glory enough, for lo, the best part of our body is being sacrificed to God. The faithful tongue is worthy to be an offering. The mind's spokesman, which declares our sentiments, the heart's servant, which proclaims the silent thoughts of our breast, let it be offered first for the celebration of the mystery of death, and be the first to redeem all the members."

Responsive to his mother's exhortation, *laetus*, the child laughs at the blows that fall upon him, provoking Asclepiades to torture and decapitate him. As the executioner strikes her baby's neck, the blood pours over his ecstatic mother, and the *docta mulier* sings Ps. 115:6–7 (116:15–16 AV), then catches the blood (lns. 841–45) and "palpantis oris exciperet globum" (ln. 844). In an ironic reworking of the motif of milk, then, the maternal flow undergoes a grim reversal, and the "pectoris nectar" (ln. 783) is returned as a flood of blood.[66] The child, then, is the ultimate *puer senex*, a Christ-like martyr, whose mother, like Mary, is left with the remains of her son; unlike Mary, however, she is left not with the body, but with the blood of her son.

The death of the child may also be an example of the contest with pagan texts in which Prudentius imagined himself to be engaged, if the scene is regarded as an attempt to "correct" a scene in Statius' *Thebaid*. Mourning the death of the infant Opheltes, killed by a snake, Hypsipyle describes her milk as a barren, unfortunate rain falling from her breasts upon the child's wounds, and she attributes the calamity to the gods:

[66]The mother grateful to God for her child's death is a commonplace of the genre, according to Delehaye, *op. cit.*, 228.

> sic equidem luctus solabar et ubera parvo
> iam materna dabam, cui nunc venit inritus orbae
> lactis et infelix in vulnera liquitur imber.
> nosco Deos . . . (V.617–20).
>
> For so indeed did I console my griefs, and gave the babe a mother's breasts, where now in my bereavement the milk flows in vain and falls in barren drops upon thy wounds. " 'Tis the gods' work I see . . ."[67]

Where Hypsipyle blames the gods, Prudentius' Christian mother thanks the one God, in an example of intertextuality that anticipates Dante's use of Rifeo to correct Vergil's "diis aliter visum."[68]

Prudentius now returns to Romanus' predicament. When the pyre being prepared for him is extinguished by rain, Asclepiades becomes enraged that his victim seems to be turning punishment into play:

> "Quousque tandem summus hic nobis magus
> inludet," inquit, "Thessalorum carmine
> poenam peritus vertere in ludibrium?" (Lns. 868–70)
>
> "How long," he asked, "is this great sorcerer to make game of us through his skill in turning punishment to mockery with a Thessalian spell?"

If "quousque tandem" is intended to invoke the opening of the first oration against Catiline, then Cicero is both invoked and defeated in this passage, since Asclepiades in the analogy is parallel to the most famous Roman orator. If the suggestion that Romanus is parallel to Catiline weakens the impulse to draw the parallel, however, the saint's ability to speak after his tongue is cut out may rekindle the enthusiasm. Since Cicero, in the process of being assassinated, said nothing after losing his tongue, the comparison with Romanus' tongueless performance suggests that the Christian speaker is superior.

Prudentius continues to ring the changes on the motif of dismemberment; Asclepiades now expresses the desire to kill Romanus as many times as his victim has members. To carry out his wishes in a responsible, professional manner, he summons a *medicus*, who undertakes, as his first assignment, the task of amputating Romanus' tongue. Prudentius focuses sharply on the extended tongue, on the scalpel as it cuts, on the tissue being torn,

[67]Text and translation from *Statius*, ed. J. H. Mozley, (Cambridge, 1957).
[68]*Paradiso* XX.

and on Romanus' Stoic ability to resist clenching his teeth or swallowing the blood:

> Linguam deinde longe ab ore protrahens
> scalpellum in usque guttur insertans agit.
> Illo secante fila sensim singula
> numquam momordit martyr aut os dentibus
> conpressit artis nec cruorem sorbuit. (Lns. 901–905)
>
> Then drawing the tongue far out from the mouth he puts his lancet inside, right down to the gullet. While he was gradually cutting the filaments one by one, the martyr never bit nor let his teeth meet to close his mouth, nor swallowed blood.

The amputated tongue was a hagiographical commonplace,[69] which Prudentius also uses in the recollection of 2 Macc. 7 that occurs in *Peristephanon* V:

> Num Maccabei martyris
> linguam tyrannus erutam
> raptamve pellem verticis
> avibus cruentis obtulit. (Lns. 533–36)
>
> Did the oppressor offer the Maccabean martyr's tongue to bloodthirsty birds after it was plucked out, or the skin of the head after it was torn out?

However, the amputated tongue was also a commonplace in the literature of pagan philosopher-martyrs. Zeno of Elia mutilates his inquisitor, the tyrant Nearchus, by biting off either his ear or his nose, then biting off his own tongue and spitting it at his tormentor, in return for which he is pounded to death in a mortar. Diogenes Laertius tells roughly the same story about Anaxarchus.[70]

Since the pagan martyrs with whom Romanus, in a sense, is competing, cut out their own tongues, and since Romanus denounces self-mutilators twice in the poem, another correction of a pagan notion may be taking place here also.[71]

[69]See Delehaye *op. cit.*, 281.

[70]Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, trans. R. D. Hicks (Cambridge, 1965), II, 436–37, 472–73. Plutarch says that Zeno bit his tongue off to prevent himself from revealing anything; see *de garrulitate* 505 D, in *Moralia*, trans. W. C. Helmbold (Cambridge, 1939), VI, 414–15. See also Woldemar Görler, "From Athens to Tusculum," *Rhetorica* 6 (1988): 230–33, on the philosophical martyr.

[71]Since both fabliaux and saints' lives draw upon popular traditions, R. Howard Bloch's proposal of a connection between mutilation and linguistic competition may have some relevance in a discussion of this commonplace: "False castration casts the fabliaux in the mold of narrative competition between various protagonists, a competition that, once again, mirrors the rivalry between jongleurs" (*The Scandal of the Fabliaux*, [Chicago, 1986]; 98). Bloch connects castration with the "desire for narrative," speaks of the poet as trickster, makes a parallel between bodily dismemberment and linguistic disruption, and points out that under these conditions absences speak (101–102). That the connection between sex and speech may have psychoanalytic significance does not exclude the fact that such a connection was part of the rhetorician's stock-in-trade.

Romanus, however, kingly in the purple of his own blood, without a tongue in his head, speaks on (lns. 926ff.), explaining that this miraculous speech is a gift of the creator, who can change the laws of nature, since he who established them may violate them at will. Furthermore, Romanus' ability to speak after his own tongue has been cut out reinforces the validity of the miracles Christ performed in biblical times:

> Habet usitatum munus hoc divinitas,
> quae vera nobis colitur in Christo et patre,
> mutis loquellam, percitum claudis gradum,
> surdis fruendam reddere audientiam,
> donare caecis lucis insuetae diem.
>
> Haec si quis amens fabulosa existimat,
> vel ipse tute si parum fidelia
> rebare pridem, vera cognoscas licet.
> Habes loquentem, cuius amputaveras
> linguam. Probatis cede iam miraculis. (Lns. 951–60)
>
> It is a familiar power of the true divine nature which we worship in Christ and the Father, to restore speech to the dumb, a quick step to the lame, the benefit of hearing to the deaf, and give to the blind the unwonted light of day. If any man is fool enough to think these things are fabulous, or if you yourself formerly judged them unworthy of belief, you may learn that they are real: you have here a man speaking after you have cut his tongue out. Yield now to miracles you have proved.

Cede infuriates Asclepiades yet once more; instead of yielding, however, he attacks the incompetence of the doctor who performed the mutilation. The doctor replies that Asclepiades should look for himself, and asks for a test pig upon whom to perform a repetition of the operation. When Asclepiades asks whether the blood that he saw was truly that of Romanus, the saint insists that the blood is his own ("Meus iste sanguis verus est, non bubulus") (ln. 1007).

Blood now becomes a topic to be amplified, and he proceeds to compose an attack on pagan blood-letting rites of initiation.

First he attacks the *taurobolium*, with a graphic description of the slaughtered ox and the priest who stands below the bleeding animal, bathing in the blood and drinking the dark gore as it rains upon his tongue:

> Quin os supinat, obvias offert genas,
> supponit aures, labra nares obicit,
> oculos et ipsos perluit liquoribus,
> nec iam palato parcit et linguam rigat,
> donec cruorem totus atrum conbibat. (Lns. 1036–1040)
>
> Laying his head back he even puts his cheeks in the way, placing his ears under it, exposing lips and nostrils, bathing his very eyes in the stream, not even keeping his mouth from it but wetting his tongue, until the whole of him drinks in the dark gore.

Prudentius' Romanus scornfully describes the blood-smeared priest standing before the devotees of Mithras and the Magna Mater, an absurd object of worship ("visu horridus") (ln. 1043), and then proceeds to attack hecatombs ("centena ferro cum cadunt animalia") when so many animals are slaughtered that the worshippers seem in danger of drowning in blood:

> vix ut cruentis augures natatibus
> possint meare per profundum sanguinis. (Lns. 1054–55)
>
> So that the augurs almost have to swim to make their way through the sea of blood?

Modulating from this sardonic attack on mutilating animals, Romanus turns to self-mutilation, attacking the pagan practice of castration, extending his earlier diatribe against the ritual (lns. 196ff.) with a routine on the indeterminancy of the resultant sexuality:

> ast hic metenda dedicat genitalia,
> numen reciso mitigans ab inguine
> offert pudendum semivir domum deae;
> illam revulsa masculini germinis
> vena effluenti pascit auctam sanguine.
>
> uterque sexus sanctitati displicet,
> medium retentat inter alternum genus,
> mas esse cessat ille, nec fit femina.
> felix deorum mater inberbes sibi
> parat ministros levibus novaculis. (Lns. 1066–75)

> Another makes the sacrifice of his genitals; appeasing the goddess by mutilating his loins, he unmans himself and offers her a shameful gift; the source of the man's seed is torn away to give her food and increase through the flow of blood. Both sexes are displeasing to her holiness, so he keeps a middle gender between the two, ceasing to be a man without becoming a woman. The Mother of the Gods has the happiness of getting herself beardless minsters with a well-ground razor!

Now almost at the end of his final diatribe, Romanus attacks the practice of branding the body with burning needles, a lesser form of self-mutilation, but one whose absurdity permits Romanus to return to the ludic motif, in this case offering the practice as evidence of demonic delusion:

> Has ferre poenas cogitur genitilitas,
> hac di coercent lege cultores suos.
> Sic daemon ipse ludit hos quos ceperit,
> docet execrandas ferre contumelias,
> tormenta inuri mandat infelicibus. (Lns. 1086–90)
>
> Such are the sufferings pagans are compelled to bear, such the law their gods impose on their worshippers; this is how the devil himself makes sport of those whom he has taken captive, teaching them to suffer accursed indignities and ordaining that marks of torture be branded on his luckless victims.

Asclepiades now orders him to prison, giving specific instructions to strangle Romanus by breaking his windpipe:

> Aliter silere nescit oris garruli
> vox inquieta quam turba si fregero. (Lns. 1104–05)
>
> "The restless voice in your chattering mouth can only be silenced if I break its pipe."

As the poem moves towards its conclusion, images of books return; Prudentius asserts that Asclepiades sent written documents ("chartulis vivacibus") as a report of his proceedings against Romanus to the emperor, but time has decayed them; Christ's page, however, is immortal, and Romanus' martyrdom is recorded forever "in regestis . . . caelestibus."

At the end of the poem, as he had at the beginning of the poem, Prudentius calls upon Romanus for assistance, in a version of the humility-topos, this time not to aid him to speak, but to become an analogue for the the Word itself. He says that Romanus' prayer could change him from a goat to a lamb, from the abhorrent

animal, the pagan "scapegoat," to the sacred Christian animal, the "agnus Dei," i.e., the Logos:[72]

> Vellem sinister inter haedorum greges
> ut sum futurus, eminus dinoscerer
> atque hoc precante diceret rex optimus:
> "Romanus orat, transfer hunc haedum mihi;
> sit dexter agnus, induatur vellere. (Lns. 1136–40)
>
> Would that I, standing as I shall be on the left among the flocks of goats, might be picked out from afar and at Romanus' petition the King most excellent might say: "Romanus prays for him. Bring this goat over to me; let him stand on my right hand as a lamb and be clothed in a fleece."

Thus Prudentius provides a hero whose *fortitudo* and *sapientia* are fused. Polemic dominates the poem; like the *Psychomachia*, and the *contra orationem Symmachi*, *Peristephanon* X represents a battle, in which the hero's only weapon is speech, winning an argument his only task. Romanus wins the encounters with his torturer-antagonist by drawing his arguments both from Christian doctrine, and, giving the impression that he is performing *ex tempore*, from his opponent's own words. Stripped of his only weapon, his tongue, he manages nevertheless to perform the ultimate rhetorical accomplishment for a Christian poet: He defeats the religion of the culture that produced the very skill in which he is supreme.[73]

The result, a poem compounded out of hagiography, polemic, diatribe, and lyric, offers a rare combination of ideology and literary technique[74] that reflects what Charles Witke described as "an inner landscape of offering . . . not penetrated again until much later, by the Latin and vernacular poets of love, both sacred and profane, of the eleventh and twelfth centuries."[75]

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[72]As Wolf Steidle has remarked, for Prudentius the Logos made flesh was more significant as a factor in man's salvation than the death on the cross; see "Das Dichterische Konzeption des Prudentius umd das Gedicht contra Symmachum," *Vigiliae Christianae* 25 (1971): 247.

[73]Anne-Marie Palmer offers an example of such competition when she speaks of Prudentius "out-satirizing" Juvenal (in *Peristephanon* X.269–95) in *Prudentius on the Martyrs* (Oxford, 1989), 182.

[74]See Gian Biagio Conte, *The Rhetoric of Imitation* (Cornell, 1986), 97, for the conventional split.

[75]*Transactions* 525.