CHAPTER 3

Colluthus’ Visual Epyllion

Colluthus’ *Abduction of Helen* reads as a series of picturesque scenes\(^1\) with a strong visual impact. The poem’s episodes, though chronologically organised, do not form a continuous sequence\(^2\) that comprehensively covers the whole story. The poet rather seems to have chosen the episodes with the highest pictorial potential (as well as offering occasion to display his erudition by means of digressions and/or allusions to other episodes in previous literature) and to have devised them almost as vignettes. Using a standard convention widely employed in epic, the poet relies on his readers to make connections between scenes and to recall antefacts and consequences.\(^3\)

Throughout the epyllion, ekphrastic elements make up a significant portion of the text. Colluthus elaborately describes locations and surroundings, and lingers on his characters’ appearance and attire. He focusses on how characters interact through gestures, actions and speech, and on their impact on each other, the narrator and the readers. The visual impact also has a psychological influence on readers and leads their perception and evaluation, suggesting how they might read, and sometimes judge, an action or event. Helen, Paris, Aphrodite and Hermione are all described in a sort of three-dimensional way:\(^4\) we are told how they look, how they behave, what they perceive and how their actions are affected by what they see and hear.

A second interpretive context for the *Abduction* is the dramatic tradition. Although the poem is a narrative text, Colluthus in many respects tells his story as if it were a performance; or more precisely, readers are made to feel as if they were reading a description of a play rather than a story. Readers open a book but, in a sense, end up going to the theatre, seeing a performance not with their own eyes but as reported through the narrator, through his descriptions and his comments.\(^5\) Colluthus is in fact a remarkably overt and intrusive guide,

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1. Giangrande 1969, 150: the stand-alone episodes are to be mentally connected with prior events, a technique well known to Theocritus. See also Alesso 2002, 23.
2. Livrea 1968a, xx.
5. Agosti 2006b, 352 highlights how in late antiquity written and recited word interacted as in a double performance, creating a new form of communication that touched readers/viewers synaesthetically.
who constantly engages with his readers, breaks the fiction, reveals himself and operates on a metatextual level.

Finally, the occasion of Colluthus’ poem may be explored. The _Abduction_ presents features that are common in other contemporary genres destined to public declamation or performance, such as ethopoiai, rhetorical exercises in general, and performative art forms such as pantomime. The sections of the epyllion neatly map the scenes of a pantomime, and the judgement of Paris and the abduction of Helen were popular themes for pantomimes. Various possibilities arise. Does the epyllion merely play with genre and mimic a pantomime? Did it end up being publicly declaimed like some other short poems known to us, or was this the author’s aim from the beginning? Does it simply represent yet another example of late-antique poetry in which literary taste, patterns and trends of the times merge into one single multifaceted creation that aims to please its contemporary educated audience?

1 **Visuality in Literature**

Scholars discussing visuality in a text may be referring to a number of different phenomena. One of these is ekphrasis, as well as the significance of viewing and looking within the text. In addition, one may explore the repercussions of the viewer’s gender and social context, or the emotional and ethical effects of the action of looking on the audience.

In ancient progymnasmata, the rhetorical exercises that were a key element of the educational curriculum, ekphrasis refers to any sort of vivid description. Handbooks of rhetoric and ancient literary critical works elaborately illustrate how vividness is to be achieved in oratory and literature by exploiting

6 In a similar way to poems including ekphraseis, such as Asterius of Amasea’s who attempted to compete with the painter of the martyrdom of St Euphemia (Agosti 2006b, 353). On this, see especially Webb 2007, who identified the role of mimesis between the textual and visual layers of the work, exposing the typically Byzantine focus on how art affected its spectators.

7 A recent work by Froma Zeitlin on Chariton’s novel is a great example of the various levels of significance and function of ekphrasis, stretching beyond its classification as a figure of speech (Zeitlin 2013).

8 Ael. _Th. Pr._ 18 Ἐκφρασις ἐστὶ λόγος περιηγηματικὸς ἐναργῶς ὑπ’όψιν ἄγων τὸ δηλούμενον, “Ekphrasis is descriptive language, bringing what is portrayed clearly before the sight” (Kennedy 2003, 45). Definitions in other progymnasmata are very similar: see Hermog. 22 (Kennedy 2003, 86); Aphth. 36 Rabe (Kennedy 2003, 117); Nicol. _Pr._ 68 (Kennedy 2003, 166); Joann. Sard. _Comm. Aphth. Pr._ 215 Rabe (Kennedy 2003, 218). Zeitlin 2013 (especially 17–20); Elsner 2007, 20 n. 3; Webb 1999, 7–1, 15–18, and 2009b.