 CHAPTER 4

Colluthus’ Polyphonic Epyllion

The Abduction of Helen’s structure, organised in scenes individually enjoyable, has already been highlighted by many scholars and by this work. In the past scholars have criticised Colluthus’ unconcern with chronological order, but today his selection of the most dramatic stages of the story is praised as a winning technique that fits the format of a short epyllion perfectly.¹ In fact, Colluthus’ choice to delve into the least-told but most pathetically-charged parts (such as Hermione’s role), and to build on side-events such as Paris’ journey to Sparta exploiting its ekphrastic potential, works well towards creating the effect of a dynamic text that switches seamlessly across scenes as well as genres: we have seen Colluthus playing with bucolic poetry in the proem, with rhetoric in Aphrodite’s speech, among other genres.

The epyllion’s multicoloured nature is in line with Nonnus’ ideal of ποικιλία as expressed in the Dionysiaca’s proem centred on the multifaceted figure of Proteus,² a model for ever-changing pantomime actors, and Colluthus made the most of many devices such as genres, vocabularies and narrative techniques such as digression and allusion to create the effect of variety within his poem. There is little time to be bored between changes of scenery, of characters, of linguistic register in the space of less than four hundred lines.³

An important element that contributes to achieving this variety effect is the effective employment of narrative techniques⁴ such as the switch of voice (whoever is speaking) across the poem, the addresses to readers, the direct or indirect address that characters employ in unmatched contexts, and the emotionally-focussed use of direct speech within the poem. Colluthus provides different points of view by letting his characters speak,⁵ as well as by allowing his

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¹ For episodic narrative as a common feature of late antique epic see Miguélez-Cavero 2013, 12–13.
³ It is interesting to note that in Claudian’s Rapt. 3.13, Proteus attends the wedding of Pluto and Proserpina, but he had decided to adhere to one appearance: certo mansurum Protea vultu.
own voice to be heard; he acknowledges his narratees, he addresses divinities (Dionysus, the Nymphs) and mythological characters (Phyllis); he makes his characters speak to other characters as if they were not there (Paris speaks of Helen as a reward to Helen herself) or as if they were (Hermione interrogates Helen—who is absent—while speaking to her maids).

The employment of these techniques is part of the earlier epic tradition: Homer first employed many of them, and so did Apollonius, Callimachus and also late antique poets; Colluthus chooses the devices he borrows to achieve different effects that all share dynamism and pathos. We hear many voices aside from Colluthus’, and also different versions of the same story: this contributes to constructing a polyphonic text, a multicoloured story that is told by different people at different times, and most of which is not narrated by the same voice. Colluthus enjoys narrating when this involves ekphrastic descriptions that offer him the opportunity to display his erudition, as for instance the wedding of Thetis and Peleus (17–40), the geographic scenery of Paris’ journey to Sparta (193–250), the digressions about Hyacinth (240–48) and when narration is centred on particularly picturesque moments, such as the behaviour and formidable plans of furious Eris (41–63). When it comes to speeches, however, Colluthus prefers direct to indirect speech, limiting his role to adding a short comment after or before each character has spoken. His choice ensures that the plot becomes current and vivid for the readers, who hear many of the characters’ voices telling the story and are not simply told of what happens by the narrator.

In the previous chapter, I have defended the possibility that Colluthus may have been influenced by rhetorical exercises and by contemporary forms of theatrical performances such as pantomime: his preference for techniques such as direct speech, direct addresses and apostrophes may add further evidence to this. In particular, the choice of a style rich in pathos, where words

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7 For instance, Hermes gives directions on the beauty criteria to be followed by Paris, but he uses different criteria; the goddesses undermine each other’s offers to Paris; Paris tells Helen about the promise Aphrodite had made to him; Helen lies about the circumstances of her “abduction”, after we witness the facts.
8 Callimachus also relies on a direct speech for the key moments of the story in Aetia (Harder 2012, 55–6).
9 Ας τοίην συνόδην καλλισφυρός ἔννεπε νύμφη, “such is the agreement the fair-ankled lady proposed”, 317.
10 Compare the role of young Callimachus as the curious reader in Aet. 1–2 (Harder 2012, 53).