
Scholarship on Claudian may not be booming business, but over the past three decades the body of classicists fascinated by the poet's strange and highly original works clearly increased. We now have commentaries on most of Claudian's poems, a conference held in Berlin (in 2002) yielded a collection of important essays on several aspects of the oeuvre,1) Marie-France Guipponi-Gineste wrote a groundbreaking article on Claudian’s metapoetics,2) while Claudia Schindler demonstrated his significance as a model for panegyric poetry in the fifth and sixth centuries3)—just to mention a few highlights. Interest in Claudian seems to be part of a general reassessment of late antique literature, that attempts to account for the different ways in which Greek and Latin authors responded to the demise of the Roman Empire. Müller’s *Lectiones Claudianeae*, a revised version of his Habilitationsschrift (Augsburg 2008), makes a substantial contribution to this field.

As the book's title indicates, Müller's focus is on Claudian's poems dealing with the complex political situation and the military campaigns of his days (395-404), in which Stilicho is known to have been the dominant force, as the emperor Honorius was only a child. Ever since Alan Cameron’s brilliant survey of Claudian’s career the poet is considered Stilicho’s main spin doctor,4) although scholars disagree on the degree of independence the poet may have had. While assuming that Claudian deliberately made his own choices, Müller shows the panegyrics and historical epics to have been intimately connected with Stilicho's political aims. The greater part of the book consists in thorough analyses of the poems' historical contexts and demonstrates the poet’s dexterity in serving the great general’s interests. Because of Stilicho’s non-Roman origins and his ineffectiveness as a military commander, Claudian’s task must have been an extremely demanding one, but seeing that in the course of a decade he was commissioned to write a dozen of panegyric poems, Müller concludes that Claudian was very successful. It is intriguing to see how the poet adapts his laudatory programme to changing circumstances.

Surprisingly, Müller interprets the fact that we have no poems written after 404 as a deliberate choice made by a professional whose job had been done: the panegyric on Honorius’ sixth consulate should be seen as Claudian’s farewell to Stilicho.

One of Müller’s aims is to determine the genre of the political poems. It is well-known that Claudian was the inventor of a new type of poetry, in which elements taken from panegyric and epic are combined into dazzling wholes. Some poems are clearly structured as epics, others resemble laudatory speeches while containing extensive narrative parts. To the backdrops of which traditions should the individual poems be read? Can we say that the corpus consists of poems participating in a common, circumscribed set of generic conventions, and if so, how might this new genre be named? It is interesting that in particular German scholars seem to have been obsessed by this problem of classification, which may not have bothered Claudian’s audiences in the least. They recognized the epical and laudatory components, while the poet’s propagandist intentions were obvious. Panegyric or epic, who cares?

Completely ignoring recent developments in literary theory, Müller’s views on matters of genre and the social contexts of poetry are informed by German scholarship from the seventies. He is certainly right in seeing genres as sets of conventions responding to social demands, but the fact that we know very little about the literary needs of Roman audiences in Late Antiquity does not seem to put him off. He simply reconstructs the audience’s demands from the poems themselves, inevitably to conclude Claudian was a masterful manipulator who at any time knew how to please his readership. Müller gives the impression not to be aware of the risks of what since 1946 is known as the intentional fallacy. The possibility, improbable though it may be, that Claudian’s response to Stilicho’s politics was not taken seriously by Honorius’ court officials does not occur to Müller at all.

Another curious omission is Müller’s neglect of recent scholarship on patronage. Taking Claudian as an autonomous poet, admittedly in Stilicho’s service, he does not consider the possibility that the administration’s instructions were strict. Given Claudian’s success in obtaining assignments to recite his poems at political ceremonies, this might be attributed to an acclaimed skill in meticulously carrying out the general’s commands. We simply do not know what freedom the poet had. For that reason it is much to be regretted that Müller fails to discuss the nature of the relationship between poet and patron at any length.

This neglect leads, in the penultimate chapter, to an absurd claim regarding the statue erected for Claudian in Rome during Stilicho’s consulate in 400. The