Cadau, C.


The proceedings of a recent conference on “Signs of Life? New Contexts for Later Greek Hexameter Poetry” (Ramus 37, 2008, ed. by K. Carvounis and R. Hunter) include one paper each on Dionysius Periegetes, Oppian, Quintus of Smyrna, and Gregory of Nazianzus, two on Nonnus, but no less than three—by Lucia Prauscello, Michael Paschalis, and myself—on Colluthus. The Abduction of Helen has become a hot property in town (let me also mention the newly published commented edition by O. Karavas, Athens 2015). Now Cosetta Cadau (henceforth C.) has produced the first monograph ever devoted to it: a most welcome addition to the flourishing scholarship on Late Antique Greek poetry.

The book comprises four chapters, plus 13 pages of “Conclusion” (263-275). Reading it straight through is a gratifying crescendo. Ch. 1, “Colluthus in His Context” (pp. 5-35), is the least satisfactory of the four, and includes some very questionable statements. The Oppians have nothing to do with the epyllion (p. 24); whether Euphorion in fact wrote elegies, we will never know, but I see no reason to think that “his work in elegiacs was of higher quality than his hexametric production, or that his elegiac production was simply larger compared to what has survived” (p. 33); his Χιλιάδες (‘Thousands’) in five books will hardly have been an epyllion (p. 31 n. 176); and Gallus in some way imitated and/or adapted Euphorion’s poetry (Servius on Verg. ecl. 6.72 = Euph. test. 14 Lightfoot, using an utterly imprecise transtulit), but did not ‘translate’ it (p. 24). Nor should we credit the late Martin West (either in his 1978 paper, quoted by C., or in Die griechische Dichterin. Bild und Rolle, Stuttgart/Leipzig 1996) with the theory that “elegiac poems were addressed to a female audience” (p. 33). More interesting and innovative ideas come forth in ch. 2, “Colluthus and His Models” (pp. 36-134), offering a detailed analysis of the poet’s use of (and play with) a well-established literary tradition. Here too there is room for disagreement—but for praise as well. That river, sea, and παίγνια at Coll. 1-9 may have a poetological meaning of Callimachean lineage (pp. 42-47), is a clever interpretation which many scholars will surely approve: I must confess to be more skeptical, since no derogatory tone can be detected in Colluthus’ mention of either river Xanthus or Aegean sea, and the Nymphs in fact leave their παίγνια on the same river’s banks. Even less convincing I find the theory of a link between Nonnus’ Proteus and Colluthus’ Paris, implying that “as Proteus loses to Nonnus . . . , so Paris . . . loses to Colluthus” (p. 51: but in n. 56 C. is right in seeing Nonnus’ attitude towards Homer less unfriendly than some scholars thought: her opinion is shared by N. Hopkinson, in Studies in the Dionysiaca of
Nonnus, Cambridge 1994, 11 with n. 25). Again, I do not think that κωπρίζων at Coll. 103 may remind the reader of Zeus (p. 50: C. quotes A.R. 1.508 and 3.134, one could even add Call. Jov. 54), or that the oak of l. 124 alludes to Dodona and the ship Argo (p. 70), or that the use of διάκτορος at l. 122 (p. 69) and Eris’ apple (p. 95) have Christian nuances. This said, there are also many thought-provoking, well founded interpretations and remarks, such as those on the aetiological tone of the proem (p. 40; more at p. 229), on the fully characterized personification of Eris (p. 82), on the narrative predominance of Aphrodite (p. 96). The detailed analysis of Aphrodite’s invective (pp. 111-134), with its many Nonnian models and its marked ‘iambic’ flavour (p. 112), is especially valuable. And a very interesting question that C. aptly discusses is Claudian’s possible influence on Colluthus: if an allusion to the former’s Latin Gigantomachy in Coll. 85 (p. 107) seems to me very speculative, I find both the parallel between Claud. Rapt. 1.268-271 and Coll. 124-125 (p. 72) and that between Claud. Nupt. Hon. et M. 101-111 and Coll. 131ff. convincing (pp. 78f.: for a long list of further parallels, see pp. 44f. n. 39). On the whole, this chapter is very useful. Apart from the above mentioned disagreements, I am glad to see how successfully C. reasserts and corroborates the idea—quite unthinkable some decades ago—that Colluthus was not a plagiarist, but a learned poet who aims at producing some kind of refined literary work.

Ch. 3, “Colluthus’ Visual Epyllion” (pp. 135-221), discusses the poet’s enacting of sight and its terminology, his attention to the physical aspect, attire, and gesture of his characters, and the influence of Late Antique iconography as well as of ethopoiia and pantomime. C. is definitely right with stressing the “strong visual impact” of the Abduction of Helen, and I find most of her interpretations very convincing. The contrast between the detailed description of Aphrodite and the (unexpected) lack of description of Helen’s beauty (p. 154) is an important point, the meaning of which C. analyzes effectively. There also is a perceptive analysis of Paris’ speech to Helen, fully investigating its rhetorical skill and cunning lies (pp. 195-200: on the allusion to Laomedon at Coll. 285ff., cf. Ramus 37, 2008, 157). Paris’ art of persuasion is aptly compared to that of both Odysseus and Jason—not properly an intertextual link, yet a narrative affinity that Colluthus’ audience must have been able to appreciate. There are some evaluations of the reader’s response to Colluthus’ narrative strategy which I cannot subscribe to: I do not think that “the readers were left speechless before the beautiful topless goddess” (p. 172: didn’t they perceive the subtle irony underlying the whole scene?), let alone that at ll. 201ff. they are “embarking on this journey with Paris, supporting him” (p. 171: italics mine). On the other hand, C.’s suggestion of Neoplatonic nuances in the episode of Paris’ sea-crossing (p. 173) is fascinating and probably right.