

DESCRIPTIONS TO DREAM OF: LITERARY TECHNIQUES IN AUSONIUS, CLAUDIAN AND PRUDENTIUS

SCHMIEDER (L.) *Deskription und Metapoetik in der spätantiken lateinischen Dichtung. Untersuchungen zur literarischen Beschreibung bei Claudian, Prudenz und Ausonius.* (Millennium-Studien 100.) Pp. viii + 296. Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2022. Cased, £110, €124.95, US\$126.99. ISBN: 978-3-11-100710-6. Open access.

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The poets Ausonius, Claudian and Prudentius have always been among the best-studied poets of (early) late antiquity and may even claim larger fame since the field of late antique studies started to thrive in academia worldwide. S.'s (reworked) dissertation adds to this interest a focus on the role of description and on the way in which poets can put this space to use. His book broadens our insight into both concepts and shows how more can be gained from their analysis if all too rigid boundaries are transgressed.

The three poets central to the book are well known for their learnedness, their play with the classical literary tradition and the diversity of their oeuvre. They are also generally considered the most skilled poets of their time and its characteristic literary principles, which have been aptly coined 'jewelled style', i.e. a preference for chains of miniature literary *tours de force* over the classical interest in grand narratives, detected by M. Roberts (*The Jeweled Style. Poetry and Poetics in Late Antiquity* [1989]). Roberts's current thoughts on the matter, largely similar to the original, were published in a volume devoted to the concept (M. Roberts, 'Epilogue: The Jeweled Style in Context', in: J. Hartman and H. Kaufmann [edd.], *A Late Antique Poetics? The Jeweled Style Revisited* [2023]), which confirms the continuous relevance of a work that was a point of departure for S.'s book.

Just as Roberts's book, S.'s is restricted in scope, but his selected authors come from different geographical and social contexts. They also represent both the poets of Christ (Prudentius) and those of the Muses (Ausonius and Claudian), to speak with R. Shorrock (*The Myth of Paganism: Nonnus, Dionysus and the World of Late Antiquity* [2011]). The main texts discussed in the book are Ausonius' *Cupido cruciatus* (exemplary for worldmaking through description according to S. and therefore discussed last in the book, p. 206), Claudian's *De sexto consulatu Honorii* and Prudentius' *Peristephanon* 2 on the martyr Lawrence (although hymns 9 and 11 receive considerable attention as well on pp. 175–205). The genres mentioned are thus restricted to political, encomiastic verse, hagiographical poetry and a poet's poem, but S. points out that their use of description is not specifically late antique, but part of the classical literary tradition as well.

S. adds further reasons for the selection of these poets, however, which are directly related to the focus of the study. They all show a significant interest in the arousal of sensory perceptions among intradiegetic or extradiegetic audiences and the ways in which these are evoked. They reflect on art and its description as well as on the role poetry can play herein. S. emphasises the synaesthetic qualities of the works he studies in contrast to the rather one-sided focus on visual aspects (especially in the case of Ausonius and Prudentius, who pretend to base their work on images they saw) in the literature so far. This leads to interesting results, for example when he argues that Claudian with his

sometimes despised poetry of detail and exaggeration emulates Virgil when the hyper- and hypotext are seen from a synaesthetic perspective (pp. 119–22), to which S. prefers the term ‘sensorische Dichte’.

Oscillation is another key term in the book, since S. reserves a considerable part of his analysis for the dynamic ways in which the poets move to and from different types of text (context, hypotext), description and metapoetics, experience and reflection. He sees oscillation as a significant element of both description itself and the reflection on it. The dream, the surprising final element of the *Cupido cruciatus*, is a (description of a) state of mind in which this oscillation is particularly active, since it provides a space in between reality and representation as well as a space for literary self-representation of the poet.

The concept of description is conceived broader than usual in the sense that S. considers not only descriptions that are demarcated as such, but particularly those passages in which a description intrudes the text as part of its worldmaking, thus transcending the binary opposition of narrative and description. It seems an advisable decision, given the often forced attempts to retrieve the outlook of lost late antique art and artefacts with the help of poetry. Also praiseworthy is S.’s use of late antique commentaries on Virgil in his reconstruction of topical concepts of description at the time.

The oscillation between art and text is particularly prominent in Prudentius’ hymns on Cassian and on Hippolytus (*Peristephanon* 9 and 11 respectively) and in Ausonius’ cento *Cupido cruciatus*. S. convincingly shows the discrepancy between Prudentius’ initial description of the desolate place where Hippolytus is found and the magnificence of Hippolytus’ grave and feast mentioned afterwards (*Peristephanon* 11). Prudentius thus creates room to raise his own voice. The theoretical framework and the occasional technical writing across the book make for a difficult read every now and then, as in the conclusion to this case study (pp. 193–4).

There are aspects that this reviewer would have liked to see being discussed more. Whereas the study is said to offer cultural perspectives by means of literary methods in order to shed light on the societal and cultural context in which they functioned (p. 15), precisely the context in which the poems were performed remains largely out of view. While reading the chapter on Claudian, for example, the political dimensions of his encomium on Stilicho are hardly touched upon. S. convincingly argues that Stilicho is exalted in *VI cons. Hon.* 1.97–106 (pp. 124–6). He also points out that Claudian creates literary space to make him stand in a line with the great Homer and Virgil in the same passage. On a literary level, this is certainly true. When we consider the passage in its historical context, however, we may wonder how much space remained for the poet when this encomium was recited to an audience predisposed to courtly ritual and political sensitivities.

S.’s analysis in general is convincing, but his clever and ingenious reading of rather small passages makes one wonder whether all the subtle strategies employed by Prudentius (as detected by S.) always reached their envisaged effect. Would a single word such as (*odoris*) *qualitas*, which only appears in verse 285 of the long hymn on Laurentius (*Peristephanon* 2) really guide readers to a reception of the smell of the martyr’s burning flesh not as a ‘konstante und unveränderliche Sinneswahrnehmung’ (p. 142), but as a Platonic-Ciceronian ‘in seiner Beschaffenheit zu evaluierendes Sinnesphänomen’ (ibid.)? And does it indeed direct the audience of the poem towards the problematic nature of representation (p. 204)? Although it is not the intention of the current reviewer to judge S. on what he does not do – moreover S. does point to audiences, but to intradiegetic recipients rather than to readers or listeners of real flesh and blood – a more reader-oriented approach of the passages discussed would have made S.’s intriguing analysis of the author’s genius even more fruitful to those studying the poet’s works in their historical contexts.

Maybe S.'s approach works best when applied to the text he himself deems to be most suitable for it: Ausonius' highly sophisticated cento, which was meant to be enjoyed for its literary and learned (pedantic?) tongue-in-cheek content and style (valuable considerations in M. Kersten, *Plekos* 26 [2024], 129–34). Among other passages, the closing lines of the poem are discussed (pp. 249–58), in which the dream-motif – considered to be a particularly apt author's space (pp. 32–7) – comes most clearly to the fore.

This well-edited book (typographical errors are rare and never impede understanding) is a valuable addition to the scholarship on three great 'late' poets. It shows the potential for the close analysis of description in its widest definition not only in the poetry of late antiquity but also before and after. It equally demonstrates the literary subtlety in several late antique poems, which makes one wonder what else there is to discover in the literature from this period.

Radboud University Nijmegen

ROALD DIJKSTRA
roald.dijkstra@ru.nl