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## Claudian's *Gigantomachia*: Coping with Reality and Dealing with Loss

Claudian, described by Augustine as an “adversary of Christ” in his *City of God*<sup>2</sup>, and as a “very obstinated Pagan” by Orosius<sup>3</sup>, was born in 370 AD in Alexandria. His mother tongue was Greek, and he learnt Latin by studying the Classics, which explains why he was a “Pagan<sup>4</sup>”, insofar as he reproduced the religious way of thinking he had read in the classical texts he was familiar with<sup>5</sup>.

He was a very important poet in his time, and he even became the official poet for Emperor Honorius in 395 AD in a very troubled political context as<sup>6</sup>, at the death of Emperor Theodosius in the same year, the Roman

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<sup>2</sup> Augustinus, *De Civitate Dei* V 26.

<sup>3</sup> Orosius, *Adversus Paganos Historiarum* VII 55.

<sup>4</sup> J.-L. Charlet, *Claudian, chanteur païen de Roma aeterna*, “Koinonia” 37 (2013) p. 255-269. Charlet explains that if Claudian sometimes refers to Christianity, it remains rather rare and it only appears as a token of respect towards the official religion of the Empire. Claudian, as an Alexandrian poet, born and raised in Egypt, is nothing but a non-Christian, that is to say a Pagan, a believer in the traditional Roman religion.

<sup>5</sup> About Claudian's life, cf. C. Coombe, *Claudian the Poet*, Cambridge 2018, p. 1-32. Cf. J.-L. Charlet, *Claudian. Œuvres. T. I, Le Rapt de Proserpine*, Paris 1991, p. IX-XIX. Also cf. P.G. Christiansen, *Claudian: A Greek or a Latin?*, “Scholia” 6 (1997) p. 79-95.

<sup>6</sup> D. Viellard (*Les préface des traducteurs de Claudien entre 1650 et 1800*, in: *L'art de la préface au siècle des Lumières*, ed. I. Galleron, Rennes 2007, p. 229-239) reminds us that Claudian presented his *Panegyric on the Consuls Probinus and Olybrius* on the 1<sup>st</sup> of January 395. It was a very successful reading which led to his being chosen to become the official poet of Honorius.

Empire had been split in two parts, the western one and the eastern one<sup>7</sup>. The military context was also quite complex, marked by many conflicts with Africa and the Barbarians<sup>8</sup>, and the religious context was not any simpler, as the Christianisation of the Empire created a number of disruptions<sup>9</sup>.

Thus, Claudian's role as an official poet was a difficult one, as his work was meant to glorify the Empire, its agents and their actions in a world turned upside down with which he probably disagreed, given his origins and his beliefs<sup>10</sup>. However, Claudian remained loyal to his role and wrote several panegyrics to glorify Emperor Honorius. Some of his epic poems

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<sup>7</sup> J.-L. Charlet (*Claudian. Œuvres. T. 2, Poèmes politiques: 395-398*, Paris 2000, p. XVII) states that according to Stilico, Theodosius' general in chief, the Emperor himself, before his death, let the Roman Empire for Stilico to rule as his sons were not old enough to do so by themselves. Honorius and Arcadius disagreed on this matter as there was no real material will, whereas Stilico seemed to say otherwise. This quarrel finally led to the official partition of the Roman Empire in two parts. On Theodosius' will, also cf. A. Cameron, *Claudian. Poetry and Propaganda at the Court of Honorius*, Oxford 1970, p. 42-44.

<sup>8</sup> Two main events must be remembered. The first one is the war against Gildo which took place in 397. Gildo oversaw the province of Africa on behalf of the Western Roman Empire. He finally decided to secede from this part of the Empire and to become allies with the Eastern Roman Empire. Stilico led a war against Gildo and won it quite rapidly. The second event is the war against the Goths between 398 and 402. The Goths had previously been trying to invade the Roman Empire, and in 398, they succeeded under the leadership of the infamous Alaric. Eventually, in 402, Stilico was able to win the war, but not for long since the Barbarians took back control of Rome in 410. About the military context in Claudian's time, cf. B. Lançon, *Le monde romain tardif*, Paris 1992, p. 31-34. See also B. Dumézil, *Les Barbares*, Paris 2016, ch 3.

<sup>9</sup> At first, at the beginning of the Christianisation of the Roman Empire, in the fourth century, Pagans and Christians coexisted rather peacefully. However, throughout the fourth century, Christians became more and more numerous, surpassing the number of Pagans, which led to Christian abuses towards Pagans, such as the destruction of temples. Furthermore, at the end of the fourth century, Christians were given very important responsibilities in the Empire, while Pagans often were not. This is also why the Roman Empire stopped financing Pagan temples, leading to the decay of many of them. These examples show that, throughout the fourth century, the traditional Roman religion underwent many changes. Cf. H. Inglebert, *Les Historiens et les clairs-obscur de l'Antiquité tardive*, in: *Une Antiquité tardive noire ou heureuse*, ed. S. Ratti, Besançon 2015, p. 43-61.

<sup>10</sup> Reading some of his panegyrics, it is possible to interpret Claudian's apparent belittling of Emperor Honorius' authority as proof that the poet did not get along with the man who incarnated the power of the Western Empire. In the *Panegyric on the Sixth Consulship*, dedicated to Honorius, Claudian compares Honorius' youth to that of the assembly gathered in Rome at the time, implying that Honorius is too young to rule the

take on a historical value – which makes them valuable for the modern historians as they deal with historical events – and praise the great military actions of the Emperor and his general in chief, Stilico. Besides the numerous epigrams he wrote, Claudian is also famous for two mythological epic poems, the *Rape of Proserpina*, written in three books, and the *Gigantomachia*, a 128-lines poem.

The main theme of the *Gigantomachia*<sup>11</sup>, which narrates the great war between the gods and the Giants, is vividly felt at that time, given the historical context during which it was written. This piece, besides being mythological in a Christian world, remains unfinished, and this incompleteness raises some questions: did Claudian do it voluntarily? Was he forced to do so? Was the end lost?<sup>12</sup> And more generally, why would an official poet choose to write on a non-Christian subject, while rewriting a myth which tends to echo the military and the political context he was living in?

To provide an answer to these questions and to study this perspective in depth, it may be interesting to observe Claudian's adaptations in rewriting the myth, in order to grasp the different aspects of the context he was living in and that he was trying to mirror, and also to question the function of such a narration for Claudian himself, between pessimism towards loss and hope for a brighter future.

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Empire and not fit for the role. Cf. Claudius Claudianus, *Panegyricus de sexto consulatu Honorii Augusti*, 547-551.

<sup>11</sup> For some recent editions of the *Gigantomachia*, cf. J.-L. Charlet, *Claudian. Œuvres. T. 4, Petits poèmes*, Paris 2018. Also cf. *Claudianii Carmina*, ed. J.-B. Hall, Leipzig 1985. For some studies, cf. W. Kirsch, *Claudians Gigantomachie als politisches Gedicht*, in: *Rom und Germanien. Dem Wirken Werner Hartkes gewidmet*, Berlin 1982, p. 92-98. Also cf. D. Meunier, *Claudian. Une poétique de l'épopée*, Paris 2019, p. 179-182.

<sup>12</sup> According to J.-B. Hall (*Claudianii Carmina*, p. 409), the incomplete nature of the poem is not voluntary, which would mean that someone forced the poet to stop writing. Cameron (*Claudian. Poetry and Propaganda*, p. 467-469) states that the poem was incomplete because of the death of the poet. However, J.-L. Charlet (*Claudian. Œuvres. T. 4, Petits poèmes*, p. 189) reminds us that several of Claudian's poems are incomplete, which would point at a pattern and indicate that Claudian may have had very good personal reasons to stop writing his *Gigantomachia*. It may be that the writing of a mythological poem was not a priority for an official poet, but this study offers to go further and question this assertion by analysing other possibilities, which could be linked to his personal beliefs and convictions and mirror a deeper meaning for the interruption of the writing.

## 1. Claudian's *Gigantomachia*: an official poet appropriating a myth

### 1.1. Narrative outline of the myth

The history of the myth of *Gigantomachia* is quite complicated, as the myth evolved and was transformed throughout Antiquity, even if it constantly remained about violence and passions: this myth was first tackled by Hesiod in his *Theogony*<sup>13</sup>, and then rewritten by Pindar in the *Pythian odes*<sup>14</sup>. The two narratives I have just mentioned were slightly different from one another, and these differences continued to develop when the myth first appeared in the Latin era with Ovid's *Metamorphoses*<sup>15</sup>. The first author to systematize the narrative was Apollodorus<sup>16</sup>. His version is probably the most thorough, as he tried to establish a canon for the myth. To achieve this aim, he read all the authors who had previously tackled it. One may suppose that Claudian, in the fourth century, had read – or maybe heard of – Apollodorus' version of the myth since the compiler was renowned for giving complete views of the myths he studied<sup>17</sup>. It is thus interesting to first observe the narrative of the myth of *Gigantomachia* according to Apollodorus, and later compare this full version to Claudian's and study the specific choices of Claudian in order to interpret them.

According to Apollodorus, the myth opens with the Muses honouring the gods by chanting. Then, the Earth's wrath is unleashed on Ouranos. This wrath gives birth to the Giants, who throw themselves into a battle

<sup>13</sup> Hesiodus, *Theogonia* 617 and following.

<sup>14</sup> Pindarus, *Pythica* I 15-20.

<sup>15</sup> Ovidius, *Metamorphoseon libri* V 315-361.

<sup>16</sup> Apollodorus, *Bibliotheca* I 6, 1-3. Apollodorus may have chosen to establish a canon for the myth, apparently for two main reasons. First, such a work did not exist, and Apollodorus, in his great mythographic compilation, may have judged this myth as an important one, which leads to the second reason: the myth of *Gigantomachia* may have been important and well-known enough at the time to catch Apollodorus' attention. The fact that several versions of the myth exist may also be an indicator of the necessity to formalise the narrative.

<sup>17</sup> Claudian, as an Alexandrian poet, was educated quite traditionally at school and was well aware of classical references. Either Claudian read Apollodorus, which is not certain, or he read authors writing about Apollodorus' *Bibliotheca*. However, his knowledge of the myth of *Gigantomachia* may also only depend on his readings of ancient poets.

against the gods in order to avenge their mother, the Earth. A prediction is then revealed to the gods: the only way to kill a Giant is to request the help of a human. This is when Herakles intervenes. Then, the gods need to get rid of Porphyrio, the King of the Giants: he is tricked by the gods into desiring Hera and dies. The gods – mostly Zeus and Athena, with her shield adorned with Medusa's head – kill the Giants, who are then imprisoned in Tartarus. The gods finally face Typhon, an even stronger enemy, who is defeated by Zeus after a raging battle in which the King of gods almost succumbs to his wounds. The basis of this narrative generally offers a specific interpretation which mirrors the political context to which it is linked.

## 1.2. A general interpretation of the myth of Gigantomachia

Myths are usually understood as bearing a specific meaning. In his article *From Myth to Reason*, Glenn Most underlines that myths are not only fictional narratives, since they feature some meaning<sup>18</sup>. The idea is that myths, working as apologues, express an opinion on the context in which they were written.

The specific meaning of the myth of Gigantomachia is generally a political one, according to the Greek tradition in which it was born<sup>19</sup>, and this interpretation was also, to a certain extent, that of Ovid. If one thinks about the outline of the myth, it appears that Mount Olympus is threatened by enemies who want to overthrow the organisation of the world they live in, an attempt in which they almost succeed. However, even if these enemies al-

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<sup>18</sup> G. Most, *From Muthos to Logos*, in: *From Myth to Reason? Studies in the Development of Greek Thought*, ed. R. Buxton, Oxford 1999, p. 25-47: "Muthos refers to mythic imagination. It creates and forms, on the basis of the unconscious, a fictional narrative which transposes a specific meaning onto reality". For another definition of myth and a study of its implications in Antiquity, cf. Y. Lafond, *Le mythe, référence identitaire pour les cités grecques d'époque impériale*, "Kernos" 18 (2005) p. 329-346. Cf. also R. Borderie, *Sur la panique: mythe, figures, savoirs*, "Poétique" 166/2 (2011) p. 215-227.

<sup>19</sup> In the Greek world and in the Ovidian tradition, the victory of Zeus/Jupiter against the Giants – among them Typhon – is a means to assert the superiority of the leader – the King in Hesiod's time and the Emperor in Ovid's – and to express confidence in the stability of the world, as shown at the end of the myth since the narration traditionally seems to illustrate a victory of order over chaos. Thus, the political meaning may aim at supporting the political organisation at the time of writing. Cf. F. Blaise, *L'épisode de Typhée dans la Théogonie d'Hésiode (v. 820-885): la stabilisation du monde*, "Revue des Études Grecques" 105 (1992) p. 349-370.

most achieve their ends, Zeus illustrates supremacy, through his being able to resist the assaults and even to plan some himself. The narrative therefore puts forth the superiority of Zeus, the ancient monarch, and this appears to be an obvious praising of the King. Indeed, the general meaning of the myth of Gigantomachia, at least in the works of the authors who follow the common narrative of the myth, is to honour the monarch and to extol the worth of the monarchic system. However, Claudian's example makes it clear that the myth of Gigantomachia does not have a unique narrative and a single interpretation.

### 1.3. The particularities of Claudian's adaptation

Claudian adapted the myth according to his own reading of its narrative, which is why his way of telling the story is slightly different from the others. First of all, Claudian's narration begins with the Earth exhorting her children<sup>20</sup>, the Giants, to defend their mother and to diminish the power of the Olympus gods in order for the Earth to recover her supreme leadership. The gods are first attacked by the Giants, and they manage to answer the assault quickly and honourably. In Claudian's narration, two gods are presented as the main heroes: Minerva and Mars.

Minerva, who also appeared in the original narration as well as in Claudian's version, carries her distinctive weapon, a shield adorned with Medusa's head. As an extremely brave protagonist, she competes in bravery with Mars, who did not appear in the classic narrative but to whom Claudian gives a specific importance to illustrate his heroism.

However, despite the strength of the Olympian gods, Claudian's narration ends in a very pessimistic tone: Delos, Apollo's homeland, is about to be destroyed. Claudian's narration ends without tackling the usual end of the myth. It may be involuntary: the manuscript may have suffered from the passing of time and the end may have been lost<sup>21</sup>, but maybe Claudian

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<sup>20</sup> The abrupt beginning of Claudian's *Gigantomachia*, with the Earth's exhortation, gives a prominent role to this character, which is not very surprising given that Claudian puts particular emphasis on telluric forces in his works. The seventeenth poem of Claudian's *Carmina minora*, for instance, celebrates the Etna for having spared two very virtuous brothers. It thus seems that, according to Claudian, even if *Terra* is an enemy of the gods in the *Gigantomachia*, there is some truth in her quest and something righteous about her calling to war.

<sup>21</sup> Cod. Sang. 273, f. 49, Saint Gall Stiftsbibliothek.

deliberately chose to leave his narration unfinished in order to attract the reader's attention and to add a layer of meaning to his narration, a meaning which would be different from the classical signification<sup>22</sup>.

## 2. Claudian's personal choices in rewriting the myth of Gigantomachia: a means of mirroring reality, difficulties and loss?

### 2.1. Mirroring the military context

It is very common, and even more so since Plato<sup>23</sup>, to think that when an author chooses to write a myth, he wants to illustrate a specific meaning which is meant to become more obvious as the myth unravels. It is therefore important to question the meaning of Claudian's version of the myth and to confront his narration to the military context of his time, since Claudian's epic teems with martial references, as can be seen in lines 73-74: "a **horrific roar** resonates from all parts and mist **separates the battlefields**"<sup>24</sup>.

This martial atmosphere is present all through the poem, which, if one tries to link Claudian's narration to the period in which he is writing, conveys the idea that Claudian is indirectly describing the omnipresent military context he and his contemporaries were living in<sup>25</sup>.

The first important military event Claudian may be evoking is the war against Gildo, which took place between 397 and 398 AD. Gildo was re-

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<sup>22</sup> On the incompleteness of some ancient poems, cf. A. Novara, *Les vers inachevés d'Illionée ou le travail de Virgile en cours*, "Bulletin de l'Association Guillaume Budé" 3 (1996) p. 261-288. One of the hypotheses of the author is that Virgil deliberately chose not to finish his poem, in order for the reader to make suppositions freely and to try and guess the poet's intention. This means that the reader had to be involved in the creative thought process. One of the hypotheses of this paper is to see Claudian's poem in the same light.

<sup>23</sup> On Plato's conception of myths, cf. F. Fischer, *Intuition et prédication dans la dialectique platonicienne*, Lille 2002. Indeed, according to the Greek philosopher, myths – when they are not fallacious, that is to say when they are philosophical – have a didactic dimension and have been forged to develop the mind. To that extent, one may choose to read Claudian's *Gigantomachia* as a philosophical myth.

<sup>24</sup> All the translations featured in this article are mine.

<sup>25</sup> About Claudian's poetic of war, cf. D. Meunier, *Claudian. Une poésie de l'épopée*, p. 13-26. Also cf. F. Garambois-Vasquez, *Les invectives de Claudien: une poésie de la violence*, Bruxelles 2007.



sponsible for a part of Africa on behalf of Rome and decided to break with Rome. Even if it appeared to be the end of an alliance, Stilico, the general in chief, managed to maintain Gildo's territories under Roman domination.

The second important military event is the series of Barbaric attacks that Rome suffered from 398 to 402 AD<sup>26</sup>. The city managed to resist these assaults, and as Claudian wrote his *Gigantomachia* before the end of the confrontation<sup>27</sup>, he was not aware of the victorious outcome for Rome, which could explain the passionately expressed pessimistic overtones of his work, also impacted by political dissents inside the Empire.

## 2.2. Mirroring the political context

Claudian wrote his *Gigantomachia* in a chaotic political context. The Roman Empire had been split in two parts since the death of the Emperor Theodosius in 395 AD: the western part had been given to Honorius, and the eastern part to Arcadius. One of the many issues with Honorius was that he was very young when he accessed the throne, and as such, he was incapable of ruling the Empire all by himself. To answer this problem, Stilico, his general in chief, took the role of a regent. However, the two parts of the Empire were drifting apart, this explains why Honorius and Stilico attempted to weaken their counterpart<sup>28</sup>. This whole context, in which the two parts of the Empire were separated away from one another for good, emphasizes how vividly the Romans felt the break: it was the end of an era, and Claudian's contemporaries now had to adapt to a new way of life and to a new organisation of the world they lived in.

Claudian, in his *Gigantomachia*, may well mirror this very troubled political context which may have had an influence on his perception of

<sup>26</sup> About the military context in Claudian's time, cf. B. Lançon, *Le monde romain tardif*, p. 31-34. See also B. Dumézil, *Les Barbares*, ch 3.

<sup>27</sup> There are a lot of debates about the date of composition of Claudian's *Gigantomachia*. According to the more recent and more reliable analyses, it may have been written between 397 and 402, but certainly before the end of the war against the Goths in 402. Cf. J.-L. Charlet's introduction in Claudien, *Œuvres. T. 4, Petits poèmes*, ed. J.-L. Charlet, Paris 2018, p. VIII-XX. Cf. also D. Meunier, *Claudian. Une poétique de l'épopée*, p. 179-182.

<sup>28</sup> One cannot but ignore the fact that Stilico was, for example, implied in the assassination of Rufinus and then of Eutropius, two regents of the Eastern Roman Empire, who were not perceived positively. Claudian reminds us of this in his *In Rufinum* and *In Eutropium*.



the world and might be difficult to cope with. In Claudian's version of the myth, this separation appears through the fact that the children and grandchildren of the Earth, on one side the Giants, and on the other side, the gods, are fighting for domination of the world. The Giants may symbolise the eastern part of the Roman Empire<sup>29</sup>, and the gods the western part.

### 2.3. Mirroring a loss in beliefs

Finally, it is possible to find a spiritual interpretation for Claudian's rewriting of the myth of Gigantomachia, as important changes in beliefs took place during the fourth century and drastically transformed the old way of thinking, causing Claudian to express, to a certain extent, a feeling of loss towards the great Roman civilization he was familiar with<sup>30</sup>.

Even if in 313 AD it was legal to be a Christian in the Roman Empire thanks to Emperor Constantine, one must remember that in 380, Theodosius took an active part in a dogmatic feud between Christians<sup>31</sup>, showing that, at this point, Christianity had become the state's religion. At that time, Claudian was ten years old, and he could probably see a huge discrepancy between what he had been used to see in the classical literature he was very familiar with, which is not surprising for an Alexandrian, and what

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<sup>29</sup> According to a more traditional interpretation, the Giants in Claudian's oeuvre usually stand for non-Roman invaders, such as Goths. Cf. Coombe, *Claudian the Poet*, p. 108-111. However, according to our hypothesis, there might be more than one reading of the allegorical dimension of the Giants. It is indeed possible to read the Giants as a representation of the Eastern Roman Empire.

<sup>30</sup> Claudian is mainly known for his panegyrics and for their glorification of Stilico and the situation of the Empire he is ruling on behalf of Honorius. However, Claudian very often refers to the Roman tradition and expresses great pride in the great period when Rome ruled the world. Cf. Charlet, *Claudian, chantre païen de Roma aeterna*, p. 255-269. Hence there may be a discrepancy between Claudian's writing and its meaning, a breach which could support the hypothesis of the expression of a feeling of loss regarding the past of Rome.

<sup>31</sup> On the 27<sup>th</sup> of February 380, the edict of Thessalonica, ordered by Theodosius, made the Catholicism of Nicene Christianity the state religion of the Roman Empire. This means that, once again, Theodosius stated that the Christian religion was the official religion of the Roman Empire, and that Theodosius chose a branch of Christianity among others, such as Arianism. This evidences the complete Christianisation of the Empire and of the Emperor. Cf. P. Maraval, *Le Christianisme de Constantin à la conquête arabe*, Paris 2005, p. 5-34.

composed the new world he needed to adapt to<sup>32</sup>. His *Gigantomachia* seems to underline this peculiar feeling of loss and change, a feeling that turns into a religious fight inside the head of this Pagan author who could not overtly express his beliefs in a Christian world in which the last Pagans needed to abide by Christian prescriptions<sup>33</sup>. In his version of the myth, the gods, representing Paganism, suffer a fight orchestrated by Mother Earth in order to replace her first children by her second litter, the Giants, representing Christianity<sup>34</sup>. Claudian does not settle this ideological fight – which also reminds us of Prudentius' *Psychomachia*<sup>35</sup> – since at the time, he could not know for sure what the outcome of the ideological inflexion of the Empire would be. However, at the end of the narration, hope is getting thin. Delos, ruined by the Giants, cries out in line 128: “I am destroyed, I have fallen apart anew”. This exclamation

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<sup>32</sup> This does not speak for the hypothesis of *Gigantomachia* being an early work: it does not seem relevant to conclude that Claudian necessarily agreed, in his panegyrics, with the world he was describing just because he was the official poet of the Western Roman Empire and described it positively in his official poems. This study aims at evidencing the contrary.

<sup>33</sup> One cannot but remark that whereas the fight *per se* is described at length by Claudian, there is also an important intellection and reflection of the fight. It is first possible to observe this dimension in the Earth's monologue in lines 14-35, and then in Jupiter's, in lines 53-59. Furthermore, along the fight, the feelings of the dying Giants are sometimes expressed, as in line 101: “he was now what he was afraid to be”. There is thus a spiritual dimension in Claudian's text and the fight happens as much in the mind as on the field. This aspect might put forth the fact that the latent opposition between Pagans and Christians in Claudian's time is not that visible and does not show through great repressions but rather manifests itself in different parts of society, as through the fact that Pagan cults are not funded by the Empire anymore and their temples are left to decay. Cf. Inglebert, *Les Historiens et les clairs-obscur de l'Antiquité tardive*, p. 43-61.

<sup>34</sup> As said above in note 29, according to a traditional interpretation, the Giants in Claudian's work usually stand for non-Roman invaders, such as Goths. Cf. Coombe, *Claudian the Poet*, p. 108-111. According to our hypothesis, there might be more than one reading of the allegorical dimension of the Giants. It is possible to interpret the Giants as a representation of Christianity as a form of oppression on Pagans. One of the major signs of Claudian's feeling of oppression towards Christianity lies in his poem *The Savior*, which would apparently be a celebration of Christianity. However, in this poem and in comparison to other poems, Claudian does not seem particularly joyful, although he is supposed to be celebrating. Cf. J. Vanderspoel, *Claudian, Christ and the Cult of the Saints*, “The Classical Quarterly” 36/1 (1986) p. 244-255.

<sup>35</sup> Prudentius, *Psychomachia*. In his poem, Prudentius develops the ideological fight that seems to occur in the mind of an individual. The struggle opposes vices and virtues.

may testify to the general feeling of the end of an era, to which the author did not remain indifferent<sup>36</sup>.

### 3. Claudian's *Gigantomachia*: the cathartic value of a work crystallising the author's passions

#### 3.1. A myth testifying to the loss of an era

In Claudian's text, the end of the world is drawing near, and the general atmosphere seems to testify to the general impression of the end of an era. The ambient sentiment of loss can be seen in the following excerpt, in lines 62-73:

The powerful **cohort** disturbs the order of things, the island abandons the sea and the rocks hide in the waters. **So many** desolated shores! **So many** rivers withdrawing from their ancient banks! **One of them**, with vigorous strength, diverts the Oeta towards the Hemonia, **another**, his hands joined, shakes the summit of Mount Pangea, **another** seizes the frozen Athos river **to arm himself**, **another** disturbs the Ossa and lifts it up, **another** rips off the Rhodope river from the Hebrus spring and breaks the allied waters, as the Enipeas, pulled from its high ravine, floods the Giants' shoulders. The Earth, now deprived of her summits, is lowered into long stretches of plains divided between her sons.

It is difficult to overlook the importance of the military semantic field with "cohort" or "to arm himself". Nevertheless, the whole excerpt is ruled by the idea of general disruption, creating *adunata*, as natural elements move in ways opposed to their nature, for example with rivers leaving their banks. This upside-down world appears even more obvious thanks to the multiple exclamations in "so many" or the several parallelisms with "one of them [...] another [...] another". The reader's mind is thus turned to many different directions, mirroring the disturbed dimen-

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<sup>36</sup> Our hypothesis is that this feeling is not only expressed in the *Gigantomachia* but also in other poems, such as the *Panegyric on the Sixth Consulship on Honorius* as will be later explained. One of the aspects of our incoming thesis, entitled *Scribere de me. L'écriture de soi au IV<sup>e</sup> siècle de notre ère dans la poésie d'Ausone et de Claudien* will further develop this aspect in commenting on other poems.

sion of the world. This results in the estrangement of the Earth from her previous nature, which preceded the several fights between the Giants and the gods. She is now deprived of everything that used to make her a wonderful place. Would it be possible to interpret this general atmosphere and the perturbation of the Earth as a mirror for the emotions of Claudian's contemporaries? Not exactly, for Claudian is the official poet for the Emperor. But Claudian is nevertheless keen on historical epic poetry, as can be seen in his *War against Gildo*, and it would thus not be very surprising for Claudian to choose to reflect the general opinion of his contemporaries into his work<sup>37</sup>. However, even if one may not be entirely certain of the general meaning of the *Gigantomachia*, it is possible to question Claudian's implication in the expression of the emotions of his contemporaries and wonder if the poet's text may feature his own personal opinion.

### 3.2. Pessimistic personal undertones

It is not always easy for a poet to truly speak about himself in the Ancient times since speaking about oneself is, at that time, considered as a very minor part of literature, so much so that it was almost not considered as literature<sup>38</sup>. It is even more difficult for Claudian to share his intimate thoughts since he was the official poet for the Emperor: his duty was to stick to the Emperor's opinion, and especially to the one the Emperor wanted to broadcast in his Empire and beyond.

However, the more Claudian writes, the more he seems to express his personal opinion. Indeed, as Alan Cameron reminds us in *Claudian. Poetry*

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<sup>37</sup> Cf. other works by Claudianus such as *Bellum Geticum* or *In Rufinem* or *In Eutropium*. In these works, according to certain studies (such as F. Garambois-Vasquez, *Les invectives de Claudien*), Claudian seems to express the general opinion of his contemporaries – that is to say those the poet mixes with at the Court of Honorius, even if, as the official poet of the Emperor, his written opinion may also tend to be an official one.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. E. Raymond, *Vox poetae. Manifestations auctoriales dans l'épopée gréco-latine*, Paris 2011, p. 11. If a *vox poetae* exists in the antic texts, it is very different from the voice of the author and does not really express subjectivity. See also W. Anderson (*Essays on Roman Satire*, Princeton 1982) who explains that a poet who says "I" in Ancient texts creates a literary *persona*, which forbids, as it seems, to read the "I" as that of the author. However, since Claudian was a contemporary of Augustine, who developed the expression of the self, one may think that the fourth century acted as catalyst for autobiography. This aspect will be explored in my future research projects.

and propaganda at the court of Honorius<sup>39</sup>, there is no trace of the official poet after his *Panegyric on the Sixth Consulship of the Emperor Honorius* written in 404 and in which Claudian honoured Honorius, stating that he was the greatest Emperor of Rome<sup>40</sup>. The fact that Claudian should specify such an opinion in this *Panegyric*, while he could also have expressed it in his previous panegyrics but did not, could hint at the fact that, before his final panegyric, Honorius was not fit for the throne, which is a reminder that, when Honorius was too young to reign, his general in chief Stilico, was regent. In that respect, the *Panegyric on the Sixth Consulship* may be considered as a *eulogium* in honour of Honorius, now old enough to reign, and of the previous glorious regency of Stilico. To that extent, it is easy enough to understand why Claudian's work seems not to have been positively received, as Cameron thinks. This example shows that Claudian disseminated some of his personal opinions in his works<sup>41</sup>.

To that extent it is interesting to interpret the incomplete nature of the *Gigantomachia* which seems even more voluntary if we remember that Claudian wrote another *Gigantomachia*, in Greek, and which also remains unfinished<sup>42</sup>. Why would an author write two poems about the same theme, in two different languages, if not to express two different ideas?<sup>43</sup> Claudian

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<sup>39</sup> Cf. Cameron, *Claudian. Poetry and Propaganda*, p. 59: "Claudian was Stilico's official propagandist. It means that Claudian poems can be used to reconstruct Stilico's policies or how Stilico wished his aims and actions to appear to his contemporaries".

<sup>40</sup> For some studies about this poem, cf. C. Tournier, *La mémoire des figures impériales chez Claudien*, "Interférences" 9 (2016). See also B. Bureau, *Construire l'image du prince en Occident entre 395 et 404: les Panégyriques impériaux de Claudien et le miroir du prince*, "Interférences" 11 (2018).

<sup>41</sup> Regarding this aspect, it is important to bear in mind that in the *Panegyric on the Third Consulship of Honorius*, Claudian compares Honorius to Theodosius and Stilico and gives pieces of advice in order for Honorius to reign properly. Claudian's texts thus highlight a latent expression of the personal conviction that Honorius is not fit for the throne.

<sup>42</sup> About Hellenism among the Roman elite in the fourth century AD, cf. C. Hoët-Van Cauwenberghe, *Empire romain et hellénisme: bilan historiographique*, "Dialogues d'histoire ancienne" 5 (2011) p. 141-178.

<sup>43</sup> Thinking that Claudian would have written the same poem twice in order to answer the popularity of his topic or to challenge himself in two different languages would be far-fetched. Indeed, the changes regarding the language and the narration obviously show that Claudian, while he refers to the same topic, does not present the same narration. Indeed, in the Greek version he describes Jupiter on the battlefield, whereas in the Latin one, there is no such description. Moreover, the Greek version features a prologue, while the Latin one doesn't, hence our interpretation of the two *Gigantomachias* as being two poems expressing two different ideas.

could also have used one version to transcribe a fictional projection and another to describe a more realistic approach. Thus, the pessimistic undertone scattered throughout the whole narration, and which reaches its acme in the final lines with Delos' exclamation, may have a cathartic value and crystallise Claudian's passions. The *Gigantomachia* could therefore be considered as a catalyst for the author's doubts and negative opinion, maybe in order to open another path for a brighter future.

### 3.3. Praising political figures: hoping for a brighter future and overcoming loss?

Whereas a general pessimistic feeling appears in Claudian's *Gigantomachia*, some elements seem to help both the reader and the author get over the sentiment of loss and concentrate on brighter perspectives. One of the only positive outcomes in the Latin version of the *Gigantomachia* shows through the depiction of Mars, one of the two Olympic heroes, in lines 75-80:

Against the terrible hord, Mars is the first to ardently set off his Thracian horses, with which he used to trouble the Gelos or the Goths: **his golden shield, brighter than fire, was glowing, and shiny plumes adorned his helmet.** Then, he impetuously ran his deadly sword through Pelorus.

This description of the god, with his "plumes", is almost the same as the one that Claudian made of Stilico in his *War against the Goths*<sup>44</sup>, which could make us think that Claudian's *eulogium* of Mars in the *Gigantomachia* is a way to honour Stilico and to place his last hopes in the capacities of the general in chief<sup>45</sup>, who could well be the only protagonist capable of saving the declining western Roman Empire.

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<sup>44</sup> Claudianus, *Bellum Geticum* 459: "Stilico's plumed helmet shines bright". Some resemblances appear in the use of vocabulary in both texts ("shines", "shiny", "bright", "brighter") which illustrates the parallel that Claudian draws between Stilico fighting the Goths and Mars against the Giants. Therefore, a more traditional reading of the allegory of the Giants is to consider them as a representation of the non-Roman invaders, the Goths. This parallel is also a means for the poet to compare Stilico with a god and therefore to glorify him.

<sup>45</sup> The idea that this reading of the *Gigantomachia* would contradict the interpretation of the Giants as Christianity, together with the expression of a loss of traditional

However, in his Greek version of the myth of Gigantomachia – which is also incomplete, maybe willingly – the final lines, lines 73-76, read:

The son of Cronos does not stop, and he places a rock taken from the earth on the whole body of the giant, exerting his almighty wrath, and he threw on the Giant the island that had been raised against the heavens.

The formula “the son of Cronos” directly refers to Jupiter and illustrates the King as a mighty figure able to save the world. If one accepts that the Greek version was written after the Latin one<sup>46</sup>, this may hint at Claudian’s confidence in his Emperor, who, now that he has come of age, is restored, and at his opinion towards the future of the Western Empire, which is more optimistic. The cathartic value linked to the Latin version of the *Gigantomachia* would therefore have proven useful to overcome the difficulties triggered by a feeling of loss.

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As this reflection comes to an end, it seems that Claudian significantly adapted the myth of Gigantomachia and did not follow the main narrative path, but rather changed it to mirror the general context he lived in, and to reflect his own opinion on this context. Writing the myth could be understood

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religious beliefs – as Stilico and Honorius rather stand for the Christian future of the Empire – does not seem plausible. Whereas Theodosius was a fervent Christian, Stilico and Honorius rather composed with this religion and did not try to impose it. On this historical aspect, cf. Lançon, *Le monde romain tardif*, p. 31-34.

<sup>46</sup> It is very difficult to draw a conclusion from this, since the common opinion is to consider the Greek *Gigantomachia* as a work written in Claudian’s youth, and the Latin *Gigantomachia* as contemporary to the *Rape of Propserpina*. Cf. Meunier, *Claudian. Une poétique de l'épopée*, p. 179-182. Concluding that the Greek version occurred before the Latin one is logical since Claudian spoke Greek before he spoke Latin. However, Greek was popular among the Roman elite, and since one may see hints of a personal opinion in Claudian’s *Gigantomachias*, why would the Greek *Gigantomachia* not have been written after the Latin one, with the use of Greek as a proof of a more personal meaning? For further developments on this aspect, cf. A. Bresson, *La Gigantomachie de Claudien: la réécriture d'un mythe à l'aune d'une poétique de la colère*, in: *Genres et Formes poétiques de la colère, de l'Antiquité au XXI<sup>e</sup> siècle*, ed. Hélène Vial, Paris, Classiques Garnier, to be published. On Greek being popular among the Roman elite, cf. A. Cameron, *The Last Pagans of Rome*, New York 2011, p. 527-566. Also cf. J. Geiger, *Some Latin Authors from the Greek East*, “The Classical Quarterly” 49/2 (1999) p. 606-617.



as a means to overcome loss and separation, in a cathartic way. It is therefore interesting to observe the morale value of the myth for its author.

This value attached to the myth takes on personal undertones, with Claudian illustrating the difficulties an author can have to cope with reality. In that sense, there is, in Claudian's *Gigantomachia*, an autobiographical perspective which would require further investigation through the analysis of his other poems, in order to question the autobiographical value of Claudian's text, to grasp the autobiographical hints and to observe the birth of autobiography in the fourth century, apparently caused by a deep feeling of incompatibility with the world the author lived in. Would poetry then appear as a personal means to overcome loss and change?

### **Claudian's *Gigantomachia*: Coping with Reality and Dealing with Loss**

(summary)

The subject of Claudian's *Gigantomachia*, narrating the great war between the Gods and the Giants, is vividly felt in the fourth century AD, given the historical context during which it was written. This piece, besides being mythological in a Christian world, remains unfinished, and the perspective of the incomplete end raises some questions: did Claudian do it voluntarily? Was he forced to do so? Was the end lost? And more generally, why would an official poet choose to write on a subject which does not align with the new way of thinking of a Christian Roman Empire, while rewriting a myth which tends to echo the military and the political context he was living in? In order to see through this perspective, it may be interesting to observe Claudian's adaptations in rewriting the myth in order to grasp the different aspects of the context he was living in and that he was trying to mirror, and also to question the function of such a narration for Claudian himself, between pessimism towards loss and hope for a brighter future. This study, which focuses on the difficult adaptation of Pagans to the Christian era, allows to see, through a thorough study of Claudian's *Gigantomachia*, the expression of a personal belief in an epic poem. Late Christian Antiquity poetry therefore appears both as a means to express one's feelings and to overcome them.

**Keywords:** Claudian; *Gigantomachia*; loss; coping; dealing; Christianity; Stilico; mythology; Honorius; Pagans

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