

Portraying the Female in Late Antiquity: The Poetry of Prudentius

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European culture and society underwent a time of intense transformation during the latter half of the fourth and early fifth century, which is reflected in the literary representations of the period. By examining the Latin poet Prudentius' portrayal of women and the feminine in his work *Psychomachia*, this paper will show how the depictions contained therein represent the shifting values of a society and culture in transition.

INTRODUCTION

Ancient Mediterranean culture and society underwent a time of subtle yet definitive transformation during the latter half of the fourth and early fifth century. Conflict between the pagan beliefs and conventions of the classical world, on the one hand, and Christian beliefs and practices, on the other, had gradually given way to a fusion of the two traditions. The portrayal of women in the poetry and literature of this period mirrors this social and cultural transition. In particular, this is evident in the literary representations of women and the feminine found in the works of the Latin poet Prudentius. By synthesizing the Greco-Roman literary past with Christian poetry, Prudentius laid the groundwork for future allegorical representations in the Middle Ages. His portrayal of women and the feminine reflects a unique blending of traditional Greco-Roman representations of the female with elements that are solely Christian in character. In order to illustrate this fusion and evolution of ideas, this study will focus on Prudentius's poem the *Psychomachia* and the struggle between the feminine Vices and Virtues that it contains. By examining his portrayal of the feminine in this work, this paper will show how his depictions represent the values of a society and culture in transition.

Politically this period was marked by unrest and contention. Various emperors and their agendas came and went; however, Theodosius I stands out for his role in Christianizing the Roman Empire. The reign of Emperor Theodosius I was embroiled in conflict between Christians and pagans. As a Roman emperor, Theodosius I was an heir to the Greco-Roman classical pagan traditions; however, these traditions went against his Christianity. Consequently, Theodosius I actively promoted the removal of the remaining vestiges of paganism during his reign while at the same time advancing Christianity's influence in the Mediterranean.

Although politically during this period paganism was quickly being overtaken by Christianity, the lines were more unclear in the cultural arena. This is particularly

evident in the uneasy relationship Christians maintained with classical education and the tensions that arose as a result, for in reality there was no viable Christian alternative to the education that the Greco-Roman tradition had long offered. This was true even for members of the clergy such as bishops. There existed no real schools of theology or divinity for them to attend. Therefore, their religious training was limited to what could be learned from older bishops and clerics, often in the form of a one-on-one discussion. In order to obtain such instruction, they were often required to travel across the Mediterranean to meet with these mentors. For example, in his youth, St. Jerome traveled to Antioch, Alexandria, and Constantinople to receive private lessons from older Christian leaders.¹ However, if bishops wanted to learn how to read and write in Latin and Greek, they were forced to supplement their theological discussions and what they could garner from the Bible with pagan texts. This reliance on Greco-Roman pagan writings was not limited to clergy alone but pervaded all levels of education. As a result, an invisible line was drawn. Students learned about classical mythology in school while, conversely, learning the precepts of their own religion from their families and churches. In essence, students were supposed to learn what they could from the pagan writings but were to approach it from the mindset of a Christian and thus not fall prey to its inherent falsehoods and vices. Even so, this created a crisis of conscience for many Christian students. Perhaps the most famous example of this tension is the case of St. Jerome, who has a dream in which God berates him and calls him a "Ciceronian instead of a Christian."² Yet an education could not be totally dismissed by devout Christians. As a religion based solidly in religious texts and teachings, Christianity required some form of education. Furthermore, an education in rhetoric or classical learning opened up windows of opportunity in life, such as the pursuit of a career in law or administration.³ Thus, in culture, if not in politics, the Greco-Roman tradition was still vibrant and heavily relied upon.

THE POET

Aurelius Prudentius Clemens was born in 348 CE in what is now northwestern Spain, and although it is never explicitly stated that his family was Christian, this can be inferred from a preface attached to his collected works.⁴ After receiving an education in the Roman tradition of rhetoric, an education that would have enabled him to become well acquainted with the pagan texts of the Greco-Roman tradition, Prudentius began to practice law before taking a position in government. He served two terms in the post of provincial governor and was then summoned to the court of Emperor Theodosius I.⁵ It was here, according to his preface, that Prudentius obtained some sort of higher rank from the emperor, although his exact office remains unclear.⁶ Regardless, after a successful career as a civil servant, Prudentius turned toward more spiritual matters, leaving public life to become an ascetic. It was during this time that Prudentius turned his attention to poetry, writing the preface to his collected works by around the age of fifty. Remaining an ascetic for the rest of his life, Prudentius died in 410 CE, leaving behind a collection of poetry of unrivaled literary and historical merit, ranging in topic from an allegorical battle for the human soul in the *Psychomachia* to tales of the martyrs in the *Liber Peristephanon*.

THE PSYCHOMACHIA

In his poem the *Psychomachia*, Prudentius relates an allegorical battle for a human's soul fought between feminine personifications of Virtues and Vices, representing Christian beliefs on one side and sin and pagan religion on the other. The poem begins with a brief preface on biblical history, setting the stage for the main conflict, after which Prudentius immediately launches into the battle. This conflict is divided into seven distinct confrontations between the opposing forces, in which the Virtues always emerge victorious. The first confrontation, between Faith and the Worship-of-the-Old-Gods, is swift and brutal, for faith destroys her enemy in only a few short lines:

Faith first takes the field to face the doubtful chances of battle...but trusting in a stout heart and unprotected limbs challenges the hazards of furious warfare, meaning to break them down. Lo, first Worship-of-the-Old-Gods ventures to match her strength against Faith's challenge and strike at her. But she, rising higher, smites her foes head down[.]⁷

This confrontation is then followed by six more in like vein, interspersed with verbal challenges and rebuttals from both sides. Following Faith's victory over Worship-of-the-Old-Gods, another Virtue, this time Chastity, faces off against Lust, who in turn is dispatched quickly by a sword thrust to the throat. Subsequently, Long-Suffering confronts Wrath and Lowliness, Pride. Unlike the

confrontations in the first two battles, however, in these later encounters Long-Suffering and Lowliness more or less watch the Vices destroy themselves. Wrath, after being unable to harm Long-Suffering, takes her own life, while Pride slips into a trap dug for the Virtues and is mortally wounded; it is then left to Lowliness to finish her off. The next sets of confrontations are not that simple. After the death of Pride, another Vice, Indulgence, takes the field. She breathes poison upon the Virtues, and their will to fight begins to crumble. The Virtues begin to lay down their weapons in surrender until Soberness takes command and attempts to rally the troops. Bearing a cross, she faces the Vice:

So speaking she holds up the cross of the Lord in face of the raging Chariot-horses, thrusting the holy wood against their very bridles; and for all their boldness they have taken fright at its outspread arms...then she is thrown out and the whirling wheels entangle her who was their mistress, for she fall forward under the axle...Soberness gives her the death-blow as she lies, hurling at her a great stone from the rock.⁸

The battle is then resumed once more as Greed appears on the field of battle and is first blocked by Reason, before changing her appearance to appear as a Virtue: "...she puts off her grim look and her fiendish weapons and changes to a noble bearing."⁹ Masquerading as the Virtue Thrifty, Greed is eventually discovered for her true nature by Good Works, who then chokes her to death. The Virtues then assume the battle is over and that victory has been achieved. However, upon entering their camp, they are once again attacked. Disguising herself as a Virtue, Discord attempts to assassinate Concord upon her entrance into the camp. Wounding but failing to kill Concord, the Vice is then torn to pieces by the other Virtues. After the Vices have been finally defeated, the poem closes with the building of a new temple where Wisdom sits enthroned forever.¹⁰

Greco-Roman Virtues and Vices

The feminine personifications of Prudentius's *Psychomachia* can be traced back to the Greco-Roman classical tradition wherein there is a long history of personifying abstract notions as feminine. It was accepted practice in rhetoric to cast these ideas in a feminine mold although the reasons behind this remain unclear. Some historians believe that this is merely a reflex action on the part of classical writers. They argue that since most intangible concepts in Greek and Latin are feminine it is logical to simply personify them as female. In any case, in a discourse called *On Style*, dating from around the first century CE, the author Demetrius claims that the female personification is the proper form to use when writing.¹¹ As a person trained in classical rhetoric, Prudentius would have been well aware of this convention. In addition, the historian Haworth has claimed that the Vices and Virtues

of Prudentius were in actuality Roman deities and not really allegorical personifications at all. However, as James Paxson has pointed out, this does not take into account the first act of combat in the *Psychomachia*, in which Worship-of-the-Old-Gods is defeated by Faith. This defeat clearly illustrates the influence of Christian thought on Prudentius's poetry; furthermore, his combatants do not follow an exact continuation of the Greco-Roman tradition.¹² Despite this fact, Prudentius does draw on other examples from classical authors. In one classical story by Xenophon, Herakles is confronted with two women at a crossroads. The women, representations of pleasure and virtue, desire him to select between them. Although a very simplistic example of Personification, it illustrates the two opposing sides, or good and evil.¹³ Furthermore, Vergil utilizes various feminine personifications in his epic work *The Aeneid*, including his own representation of Discord. Vergil's Discord, although not bearing any striking resemblance to her representation by Prudentius, is nonetheless feminine. Additionally, in the same scene featuring Discord, Vergil describes the goddess Bellona who carries a whip, a whip very like the one that Prudentius's Discord wields in the battle. In *Aeneid* 8, Discord is trailed by Bellona "...with her bloody whip."¹⁴ Prudentius's Discord is also similar to another character in *The Aeneid*. In the 7th book, Allecto, one of the Furies, disguises herself in order to bring about a major conflict. She takes on the appearance of an old woman with olive branches in her hair, a disguise remarkably similar in aspect to the one assumed by Discord in the *Psychomachia*:

For, when the Vices' army was driven off, Discord had entered our ranks wearing the counterfeit shape of a friend. Her torn mantle and her whip of many snakes were left lying far behind amid the heaps of dead on the field of battle, while she herself, displaying her hair wreathed with leafy olive, answered cheerfully the joyous revelers.¹⁵

Thus, instead of mirroring only one of Vergil's characters, Prudentius's personification is rather an amalgamation of many. By drawing on various Greco-Roman literary traditions, Prudentius's Vices and Virtues represent a strong continuity between the past and poet's own time.¹⁶ Because he was trained in classical rhetoric, it would have been natural for Prudentius to make this connection between classical traditions and his own Christian poetry. By transplanting and recreating aspects of Greco-Roman classical tradition, Prudentius's poetry reflects the larger changes taking place throughout the Mediterranean. This blending can be likened to the education he received in the pagan classics but approached from the mindset of a Christian and for the purposes of furthering his own faith.

Christian Virtues and Vices

Certainly, Prudentius was not the first Christian intellectual to use personification. Indeed, he was able to draw on Christian writers from the preceding centuries who had laid the groundwork for his own portrayal of Virtues and Vices. A simple example of this is found in the writings of Tertullian. In the 29th chapter of his work "De Spectaculis," Tertullian describes the defeat of various vices by Christian Virtues while they competed for control of the human soul. These Christian Virtues include faithfulness, chastity, compassion, and modesty, and they are opposed respectively by unchastity, perfidy, cruelty, and impudence. Yet Tertullian's description of these personifications is very short, only going on for a few lines, and does not go into any real detail about the Virtues or Vices, instead merely naming them. Additionally, unlike Prudentius's later personifications, these Virtues and Vices are not given a gender.¹⁷ Nevertheless, Tertullian's writings are important as an early example of Christian personification. Another case is that of the *Shepherd of Hermas*, which dates from the second century CE in Rome. Written by a revival preacher, this work is a sort of allegorical notebook that was extremely popular in the second century CE. Here Virtues and Vices are not only personified but are specifically female. The writer speaks of a tower, representing the church, around which twelve virgins stand in white:

And round the door there stood twelve virgins...And they were clothed in linen mantles...they were joyful and eager...Listen to the names of the stronger virgins who stand at the corners. The first is Faith, the second is Temperance, the third is Power, the fourth is Long-suffering, and the others who stand between them have these names: Simplicity, Guilelessness, Holiness, Joyfulness, Truth, Understanding, Concord, Love.¹⁸

In addition to these Virtues, the work also contains corresponding Vices, also twelve in number although these are not described as virgins:

And there were called twelve women, very beautiful to look at, clothed in black, girded, and their shoulders bare, their hair loose. And these women looked to me to be cruel...Hear also the names of the women who have black raiment. Of these also four are more powerful. The first is Unbelief, the second Impurity, the third Disobedience, and the fourth Deceit; and those who follow them are called Grief, Wickedness, Licentiousness, Bitterness, Lying, Foolishness, Evil-speaking, Hate.¹⁹

The portrayal of these Virtues and Vices and their juxtaposition to one another is similar to that of the *Psychomachia*, to the point that even some of the names

are the same, yet there are some differences. For instance, in the *Psychomachia* the Vices and Virtues actually confront one another in battle, much as in Tertullian's portrayal of them, whereas here they simply share the same place. There is an implied opposition to one another, but it is more a choice on the part of men as to which side they will take. Much like Herakles, the "servant of god" has to choose which way he will go for both are open to him.²⁰ It is up to individuals to choose with whom they will "lie," for that is what they must do. For example, Hermas, the narrator, is told to go into the virgins and take them as his lovers so as to take on their names.²¹ This is very different from the Virtues and Vices of the *Psychomachia*, where the Virtues, although living inside the human's soul, are never spoken of in such a manner. Additionally, these Vices and Virtues are silent; they give no grand speeches or exultations unlike the personifications of the *Psychomachia*. These works and their counterparts in Greco-Roman literature, surveyed in the preceding section, illustrate that the themes of Vice and Virtue were common devices of both Christian and pagan writers. However, the ways in which they were utilized and their purposes differ. It is in Prudentius's own poetry that a merging of these two traditions can be seen.

FUSING TRADITIONS

The Virtues and Vices of the *Psychomachia* exhibit a fusion of the Greco-Roman tradition with Christian ideas on various levels. On the one hand, there are the examples of Vices like Discord who bear a striking resemblance to their counterparts in pagan texts; on the other hand, there are Christian works, such as *The Shepherd of Hermas*, where clearly defined Christian Virtues and un-Christian Vices stand for the choice between right and wrong, God and sin, making it clear that one must choose between them. This influence is evident in the *Psychomachia*, where some Virtues share the same names as the ones used in *The Shepherd of Hermas* as well as in some cases their virginal description. For example, Prudentius's Chastity is called a "maiden" with "modest eyes," and Purity in turn is described as "with scarce a tinge of blood to colour her cheeks."²² The Vices in turn reflect the opposing description of being unmaidenly in a similar way to the women in black from *The Shepherd of Hermas*. In the confrontation between the Virtue, Chastity, and the Vice Lust, Prudentius describes the latter as a "whore" and a "harlot."²³ However, Prudentius's Virtues and Vices draw more heavily on the classical ideals than the other Christian work does, for, unlike in *The Shepherd of Hermas*, Prudentius's Virtues and Vices are quite literally able to speak for themselves. The Christianizing of Prudentius's Virtues is more about what they say than about their dress and behavior, which more accurately reflect the traditions of epic poetry. For although there are small, obviously Christian touches to their raiment and weapons—such as

when Soberness, their standard bearer, wields a cross on the battlefield—they more closely resemble figures of the older epic poets such as Vergil.²⁴ Here, in the speeches given by the Virtues and Vices, the full influence of Christianity on Prudentius's poetry appears time and time again. In the first speech of the poem, Chastity, upon her defeat of Lust, sets the pattern for all such speeches to come:

This shall be thy last end; for ever shalt thou lie prostrate; no longer shalt thou dare to cast thy deadly flames against God's man-servants or his maid-servants; the inmost fibre of their pure heart is kindled only from the torch of Christ....Well, since a virgin immaculate has borne a child, hast thou any claim remaining—since a virgin bore a child, since the day when man's body lost its primeval nature, and power from on high created a new flesh, and a woman unwedded conceived the God Christ, who is man in virtue of his mortal mother but God long with the Father? From that day all flesh is divine, since it conceives Him and takes on the nature of God by a covenant of partnership.²⁵

Following Chastity's exhortation, a number of other Virtues speak during their respective confrontations. Yet the Virtues are not the only ones to speak in the poem. The Vices, like their opposition, give speeches that reflect the Christian nature of the work as well. For example, when Discord is captured in the camp of the Virtues at the end of the poem, she is given leave to tell her name, and while doing so, she attempts to influence her listeners:

...the whole army of the Virtues surrounds her, asking in an uproar of excitement her race and name, her country and her faith, what God she worships, of what nation he that sent her. And she, all pale with upsetting fear, says: "I am called Discord, and my other name is Heresy. The God I have is variable, now lesser, now greater, now double, now single; when I please he is unsubstantial, a mere apparition, or again the soul within us, when I choose to make a mock of his divinity. My teacher is Belial, my home and country the world." No further did Faith, the Virtues' queen, bear with the outrageous prisoner's blasphemies[.]²⁶

Here, once again, Prudentius's Christian purpose becomes apparent. By the use of words such as "blasphemies" and "heresy," the Vice and the heresies that it stands for are placed in a negative light. In this moment, the Virtues can clearly be seen as Catholic Christianity while the Vice in turn essentially stands in the place of all other opposing Christian creeds.

Prudentius's portrayal of feminine Virtues and Vices in the *Psychomachia* is distinctive and indicative of the world in which he lived, a society and culture in transition. By combining various aspects of Greco-Roman classical tradition with Christian imagery and ideals, Prudentius's work represents a unique synthesis of the two traditions.

By his careful craftsmanship of the *Psychomachia*, Prudentius seemingly combined and reconciled the tensions that existed between these two traditions—tensions that a person living in this time period no doubt experienced throughout his or her life. Consequently, even though his portrayal of female Virtues and Vices was not the first of its kind in the Christian or classical traditions, it is still invaluable for its reflection of these larger societal

trends. Be that as it may, Prudentius still included elements in his depictions of the Vices and Virtues that were clearly his own, such as the speeches that these personifications give. For that reason, as much as any other, his portrayal of the feminine in the *Psychomachia* represents an exceptional benchmark in literary history as well as providing historians with a glimpse into the ever-evolving Mediterranean world in which he lived.

NOTES

¹ H.I. Marrou, *A History of Education*, trans. George Lamb (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1956), 328.

² *Ibid.*, 320.

³ *Ibid.*, 327.

⁴ Prudentius, "Preface," *Prudentius Vol 1*, 4–5.

⁵ Martha A. Malamud, *A Poetics of Transformation: Prudentius and Classical Mythology* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1989), 14. The locations of these two posts are still topics of debate among historians.

⁶ Prudentius, "Preface," 4, 5.

⁷ Prudentius, "Psychomachia," 281.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 309.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 317.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 275–343.

¹¹ James Paxson, "Personification's Gender," *Rhetorica* 16, no. 2 (1998): 152, 159.

¹² Malamud, 47–48.

¹³ Xenophon, *The Socratic Writings (Memorabilia, Economist, Symposium, Apology, Hiero)*, trans. H. G. Dakyns (Digisreads.com Publishing, 2009).

¹⁴ Malamud, 70.

¹⁵ Prudentius, "Psychomachia," 327.

¹⁶ Malamud, 60.

¹⁷ Tertullian, "The Shows," in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 3, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, trans. S. Thelwall (Buffalo, New York: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1885). Revised and edited for New Advent by Kevin Knight, <<http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0303.htm>>.

¹⁸ *Shepherd of Hermas Similitude IX*, quoted in Jean LaPorte, *The Role of Women in Early Christianity* (New York and Toronto, 1982), 135–136.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 137.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 136.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 136.

²² Prudentius, "Psychomachia," 283, 297.

²³ *Ibid.*, 283.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 303.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 285.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 329.