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FUNCTIONS OF CLASSICAL BORROWING IN MEDIEVAL LATIN VERSE

E. P. M. DRONKE

For a considerable body of medieval Latin verse, we today have accurate and substantial evidence of its classical echoes and classical adaptations. To have established these in detail is the achievement of a number of outstanding scholars, such as those who edited the Carolingian poets for the *Monumenta Germaniae Historica*, or again Max Manitius and Paul Lehmann. By assembling the details relevant to classical borrowing, these scholars have laid the foundations for what I believe is the next, equally important, stage of enquiry: the evaluation of this evidence, the detailed literary study of the classical elements in medieval Latin verse, distinguishing their various functions, and assessing for each poet what the classical elements contribute to his poetic intentions, to his artistry, to the fabric of his verse.

Where do we find more than simple echoes and straight assimilations? Where does the poet effect an individual transformation of his classical reading, and for what purposes? These problems have seldom been broached. I should like to indicate by one or two specific illustrations the kinds of literary problem that arise, offering first some provisional distinctions.

Classical parallels such as are presented at the foot of the page in the volumes of the *Poetae Aevi Carolini* may include, first, unconscious borrowings—elements that would form part of the poetic *koinê* of a well-read author, expressions he would use instinctively in certain situations without focusing on their classical context, because his education had made them second nature. At times such an unconscious borrowing may be scarcely distinguishable from a mere coincidence. Second, there is conscious borrowing, ranging from unassimilated adaptation of classical phrases to the most individual and sophisticated transmutations of them. Third, there is a range of explicit quotation, where the classical borrowing is meant to be seen as such by an educated audience, and is meant to modify their

response to the poem. Here it can enrich the new context, by evoking the connotations of the original context, or the poet can implicitly contrast these connotations from the older context with those of his own; this itself can have a number of different artistic effects, such as pathos, irony, critical reflection, or parody.

A passage from the *Waltharius* can serve to illustrate some of these distinctions. Walter and Hiltgund have escaped from Attila's court, and the queen has just told Attila the wounding news:

> He tears his whole robe from shoulder to foot,
> and rends his sad spirit, now this way, now that.
> As the sand is racked by Aeolian storms,
> so the king is in turmoil with cares within...
> Care could not give his limbs easeful rest.
> When black night had drawn earth's colours away,
> he sank into bed, but not closing his eyes,
> lay on his right side, now on his left
> and, as if pierced by a sharp javelin,
> shuddered, tossed his head to and fro,
> then, raising himself in the bed, sat distraught.
> Useless. He rises, races about the town,
> back to his bed, reaches it, leaves it again.
> Thus Attila squandered a sleepless night.
> But the fugitive lovers, walking through friendly stillness,
> hasten to leave his baneful land behind.
>
> Day had scarce broken when, calling his elders,
> he cried 'Oh, if any would bring me that runaway,
> that Waltharius, bound like a mangy bitch—
> I'd soon clothe such a man in twice-refined gold,
> I'd load him down with gold from all sides
> and, as I live, bar his way with talents utterly!'[1]

These are the thoughts, with their swift transitions of tone and mood, that the poet expresses in a language dense with allusions and borrowings; in the ways these are used we can perceive an individual artistry at work.

Ex humeris trabeam discindit ad infima totam... The rending of one's garments is a biblical gesture,[2] but the poet's words are closest to those evoking Aeneas's grief—*umeris abscindere vestem*—when the Trojan women set fire to the ships. What is unusual, however, is the note of violence: Attila tears his whole garment from top to toe in a single, furious gesture. The next verse—*et nunc huc animum tristem, nunc dividit*

[1] *Waltharius*, 382–407 (*MGH*, *Poetae*, VI, i, 39–41, with parallels cited *ad loc.*).

[2] Cf. Jud. xi. 35 (Jephtha seeing his daughter), or Matt. xxvi. 65 (Caiaphas accusing Christ).

illuc—copied almost exactly from a line describing Aeneas, gains its special effect by the way that *dividit*, describing Attila's inner state, parallels the physical *discindit* of the previous line. So two widely separated citations from the *Aeneid* are brought together for a specific purpose.

Then follow two lines that are a piece of sleight-of-hand:

> Ac velut Aeolicis turbatur arena procellis,
> sic intestinis rex fluctuat undique curis.

The Aeolian storms are Virgilian in atmosphere and diction, yet these lines are directly adapted from some humorous mock-heroic verses of Venantius Fortunatus, in which the *abbé gourmand* describes what happened inside his stomach after eating too well: *non sic Aeoliis turbatur harena procellis*! I think it possible that the most sophisticated members of the poet's audience recognised the allusion and enjoyed the recognition. It is the first of a series of parodistic touches that exaggerate Attila's hectic rage till it borders on the ludicrous. A moment later, his restlessness—*nec placidam membris potuit dare cura quietem*—is expressed in almost the same words as are used of Dido in the *Aeneid*. The incongruity is deliberate—the world-conqueror, frustrated, waxes womanish. The poet heightens the effect by yet another Virgilian allusion:

> Namque ubi nox rebus iam dempserat atra colores,
> Decidit in lectum...

Virgil's image comes at the solemn moment when Aeneas and the Sibyl descend to the shades—on a path as awesome as when 'black night has taken earth's colour away'. Here Virgil's words are used for a burlesque anticlimax: when black night had taken earth's colour away, Attila sank, not into the shades, but into bed. The effect is dramatically apt: for Attila is not the hero, he is the hero's dupe.[1]

There are further Virgilian phrases in the lines that follow—expressions such as *latus...fultus*, *iaculo...acuto*, *insomnem noctem* (which is also biblical), *patribusque vocatis*. But these are not I think used for conscious effects—they are such as would come instinctively to a well-read medieval author. When Attila wanders distraught

[1] The function of the phrase *decidit in lectum* is perhaps not limited to the burlesque: it occurs twice in the Bible near the opening of the First Book of Maccabees (i. 6; vi. 8), once of Alexander the Great, at the moment when he knew he had to die, and once of King Antiochus, when his armies had fled. If this phrase too should be a conscious, rather than instinctive, borrowing, then the poet must mean it to be more than simply grotesque: for those aware of its original context, it would serve to heighten the sense of a pagan king's defeat.

through his city at night, the poet may well be thinking once more of Dido (*totaque vagatur / urbe furens, qualis coniecta cerva sagitta*): Attila too, though not doe-like, is as if pierced by a shaft. Yet here it is only some of the thoughts that are alike—the language is very different. One other phrase, however, seems inserted as a deliberate quotation: the escaping lovers walk *per amica silentia*. Through its associations—the Greek moment of exultation as the wooden horse is opened in Troy—the poet may even be sounding a first note of hope for the fugitives, a turning-point in their fortunes. The two experiences of night, with all their connotations, are contrasted: Attila, like Dido, finds the night a torment; Walter and Hiltgund, like the Greeks, need the night for cover and sense it as their friend.

Attila's flamboyant speech, challenging his warriors to vengeance, is in a different key and idiom from all that has gone before.[1] It is unclassical; its closest analogue, as Jakob Grimm saw, is in a very ancient Norse poem, *The Battle of the Goths and Huns*, where the Gothic king Angantýr says to his young half-brother, who is claiming his inheritance:

> As you sit
> I will measure you in silver,
> as you walk
> I will rain down gold on you,
> so that on all sides
> rings will roll...[2]

Here too, as in *Waltharius*, the promise of a reward is made to sound ever more like a threat (*Atque viam penitus clausissem vivo talentis*). The choice of a contrasting diction in the Latin is deliberate: Attila may have seemed comic in his rage, he seems far from comic to his men as he plans revenge. The poet needed something that would stand out from the whole tenor of his classical echoes. Against the phrases of conflict and anticlimax, with their strongly disjunctive syntax, he sets a threefold variation on the notion of reward, that mounts inexorably to a climax; against the allusions to Dido and Aeneas in their moments of anguished weakness, the picture of a barbarian prince in the fullness of his might.

These reflections on a few lines of *Waltharius* illustrate some of the possible functions of classical borrowings in medieval Latin verse—but indeed there are numerous others. It is possible, for instance, for

[1] Only the phrase *auro...recocto* is Virgilian (cf. *Aen.* VIII, 624).

[2] *Hlǫðsqviða*, st. 13 (*Edda*, ed. G. Neckel, H. Kuhn (1962), p. 305).

a poet to take a classical motif and treat it in a profoundly unclassical manner: thus we have a Latin *planctus* on the death of Hector, written down in Rome in the late eleventh century,[1] a simple lyrical-dramatic dialogue, in rhymed octosyllabic couplets, with parts for Hector, Andromache and a chorus. Each couplet has the moving refrain, *heu, male te cupimus!*, that evokes both Andromache's longing and the chorus's sense of loss. It is like the *ritornello* of Italian popular lyric. The existence of such a *planctus* is to me scarcely conceivable without supposing a tradition of contemporary vernacular ballads in Italy; but even if this is supposed, the wonder of such an alchemy of classical tragic theme and popular ballad-technique is no less.

For the subtlest Latin poetry of the twelfth century it will be necessary to enlarge and refine further our concepts of classical borrowing. The Archpoet, for instance, can gain unique poetic effects by his fusion of classical with biblical expressions, or again by using classical allusion to qualify his response to contemporary events. In the poem that is often called his 'hymn' to Frederick Barbarossa (*Kaiserhymnus*),[2] he likens the rebellious Lombards, building their towers to withstand the emperor, to the giants piling Pelion on Ossa. They will be destroyed—the poet does not say by Jupiter, but by a Cyclopean thunderbolt (*fulmine digna Ciclopeo*). Indeed the Cyclopes are traditionally said to forge the bolts for Jupiter,[3] yet the emphasis here, and the choice of adjective—not a divine destroyer but a Cyclopean one—are hardly the most flattering to the emperor. If, like the Archpoet, some of his audience had the Virgilian simile of the Cyclopes at their forge (*Georg.* IV, 170 ff.) in mind, the associations at this moment could only have been those of grotesque and mindless force. When a moment later the Archpoet compares Milan to Troy—*civitas Ambrosii velud Troia stabat*—does this not suggest that the rebels belong to a world of heroes, gallant in their defeat, rather than to a world of criminals?[4] The classical allusions help to transform an official panegyric into a comment as double-edged as Andrew Mar-

[1] Ed. M. de Marco, *Aevum*, XXXIII (1959), 120–2; on the provenance of the MS cf. G. H. Pertz, *Archiv*, V (1824), 85.

[2] 'Salve mundi domine', ed. H. Watenphul, H. Krefeld, *Die Gedichte des Archipoeta* (1958), pp. 68 ff.

[3] Cf. Servius, *in Georg.* IV, 171; Hyginus, *Fab.* 49; Mythogr. I, 176.

[4] These observations, slight in themselves, are borne out by many unhymnlike features in the poem, that have hitherto escaped notice. Thus in st. 2 no contemporary could have heard the suggestion that at Barbarossa's trumpet enemy citadels totter (*cuius tuba titubant arces inimice*) without thinking both of Jericho and of the emperor's recent siege of

vell's Horatian Ode to Cromwell. Once more the materials for studying such a transformation are available. It is the assessment of how the classical elements work in the poetry that is still lacking. Here is the field that awaits investigation: the literary study of how the classical past is present in this poetry. Such study is naturally inseparable from a larger task: the literary criticism of the Latin poetry of the Middle Ages.

Milan, so painfully unlike that of Jericho, as the Archpoet himself later makes plain (st. 24–5). Within the compliment lurks a grim irony. So too, in st. 3–4, the lines

> *Nemo prudens ambigit* te per dei nutum
> super reges alios regem constitutum...
> Unde diu cogitans *quod non esset tutum*
> Cesari non reddere censum vel tributum...

while they accept the realities of *Machtpolitik*, can hardly be seen as rejoicing in the idea that 'justice is the interest of the stronger'. Or again, in st. 29, the recognition of the benefits of this *Machtpolitik* in the first couplet is qualified in the second by an image worthy of Goya:

> Cesaris est gloria, Cesaris est donum,
> quod iam patent omnibus vie regionum,
> dum ventis exposita corpora latronum
> surda flantis boree captant aure sonum.

The Archpoet, even within the framework of his commissioned piece, undercuts the genre of official panegyric as much as his daring and his humanity—both of which were considerable—enabled him to do.