

Reading Beauty in Late Antiquity

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1. KEYNOTE SPEAKER:

Valerio Neri (Professor of Roman History, University of Bologna): Representation and aesthetic evaluation of the barbarian body in Late ancient literature

Notoriously in Greek thought, humanity was divided between Greeks and barbarians, that is, not Greeks. The concept of Greekness and Greek identity expands in the East as a consequence of the conquest of Alexander and the formation of the Hellenistic kingdoms, but remains discussed and controversial to the point that the emperor Hadrian creates an organism, the Panhellenion with the task of evaluating the titles of Greekness of those who aspired to it. The Romans, who are considered by pro-Roman Greek intellectuals as culturally assimilable to the Greeks and even by Dionysius of Halicarnassus as citizens of a Greek city, generally consider to be barbarians the populations outside the borders of the empire.

Before addressing the question of the representation and aesthetic evaluation of the barbarian body in the Greco-Roman world, it is necessary to mention the conviction of the superiority of the Greek and then Roman man, which is also supported by the pseudoscientific theory of climatic bands and their relationship with the character of their inhabitants. The Greeks and then also the Romans consider themselves privileged by their central position: while the northern barbarians are handsome and warlike but suffer from a lack of rationality, the southern barbarians are intelligent but temperamentally weak, cowardly and physically frail. In the late republic and early imperial age, Greek intellectuals such as Posidonius and Strabo exalt the centrality of Italy with respect to the north-south and east-west directions, and therefore with respect to Germans, and to Africans on the one hand and with respect to Celts and Iberians and to Greeks and Asians on the other: Italians have the bellicosity of the Nordic peoples and the intelligence of the Oriental peoples. The conviction of a superiority on an ethical and character level is reflected, as we shall see, in the conviction of an aesthetic superiority, since the beauty and harmony of the body in its fullest and most significant substance is the reflection of beauty and harmony of the soul. The barbarians may have valuable body features but not the harmony of the totality of the body which is a privilege of the Greek and Roman model. Above all, they lack the beauty and expressiveness of the gaze.

As for the barbarians of the north, Germans and Celts, whose physicality and customs are described in a substantially similar way, the ambiguity of the Roman attitude is expressed in Tacitus' *Germania*. On the one hand there is admiration for the prowess of the body, its height and muscularity, on the other the affirmation of the limits of this prowess which is not illuminated by reason. These bodies are incapable of complex movements on a military level, they are *tantum ad impetum valida*. Even the admiration of Germanic bodies, however, is not related to an aesthetic evaluation: it is never said that they are *pulchra* or *decora*. In late antiquity this ambiguity is manifested even more clearly in the detailed description of the body of Theodoric II in a well-known letter from Sidonius Apollinaris. In the description of the facial features of the king there is no hint of the eyes while only the eyebrows are recalled. In the description of the body Sidonius emphasizes the hardness of the muscular masses, which is different from the praise of compactness, often expressed by the adjective *solidus*. The Germanization of the army in late antiquity even in the higher ranks and later the creation of the Roman-barbarian kingdoms led the intellectuals linked to the barbarians to attenuate the features of a barbaric otherness of their body and to emphasize their Roman character. Claudian, speaking of Stilicho, even presents him as a model of Roman beauty admired as such by men and women during an embassy to the Persian court. Ennodius in his panegyric to Theodoric celebrates the natural beauty of the Ostrogothic king by opposing it to the peregrina *pulchritudo* of the Byzantine emperors. Germanic women in Tacitus and Sidonius Apollinaris,

like Celtic women in Ammianus Marcellinus, are generally described as masculine and unattractive women, but the relationship with a Germanic girl in Ausonius's Bissula is outlined in a completely different register. Yet even in this case, the limits of the relationship on the Roman side with the Germanic body emerge. Ausonius describes himself fascinated by some traits of Bissula's physicality: blond hair, blue eyes and the wonderful whiteness of the complexion, however he never defines her as *pulchra* or *formosa*. The girl's carnality is dissolved in color and light. This masks the erotic attraction that emanates from her body but also the expressive character of the body and especially of the face and reveals the limits of the relationship with the person Bissula.

The southern barbarians are populations characterized mostly by the dark color of the skin with shades ranging from the *fuscus* of the peoples of northern Africa to Egypt to the *niger* of the peoples of central Africa, particularly the Ethiopians. In late antiquity there is some evidence of moral prejudices against the Ethiopians: for example, the anonymous author of a treatise on physiognomy probably written in the fourth century states that Egyptians and Ethiopians were cowards. In remote antiquity from Homer to Herodotus these people were recognized as having important ethical and cultural qualities, but still in the third century Philostratus in the life of Apollonius of Tyana recalls the consideration in which Herodes Atticus held his Ethiopian disciple Memnon. On an aesthetic level, the black color of the skin was generally associated with a negative aesthetic evaluation. In an extraordinary metric epitaph from Antinoupolis the same author, an Ethiopian slave, recognizes the ugliness of his black complexion, affirming the whiteness of his soul. Among the many passages that could be cited in this regard, it will be enough to cite Gregory Nyssen's comment on the *nigra sum sed formosa* of the Song of Songs: it is not possible that the hands of God have shaped a black and beautiful body, the color and the ugliness were added later. In the novel by Heliodorus the Aethiopics the protagonist, daughter of the king of Ethiopia, is beautiful but white because at the moment of her conception her mother was watching a painting depicting Andromeda. Not only are Ethiopians judged negatively from an aesthetic point of view but so are other dark-skinned individuals such as Egyptians or Garamants. To some extent, as we have suggested, the ugliness of black-skinned populations is associated with an ethical weakness, cowardice, but even more, physical ugliness is related to the symbolism of the black color, especially in Christians, in whom it is associated with sin and is the color of the devil and devils. There is extensive discussion on the "racist" character of these prejudices against blacks. Of course these prejudices are not associated with discriminatory measures against blacks, therefore they have no political relevance, but whether it is called ethnocentrism or proto-racism it is undoubted that they are forms of contempt and distancing towards people or peoples perceived as different and inferior.

Traits of evident otherness on the physical level appear in the description in Ammianus Marcellinus of the body of the Persians as a whole even though the historian recognizes that the Persian empire is made up of a number of different ethnic groups. . The Persians are described as somewhat similar to the Egyptians in complexion (*subnigri-subfusculi*) and body frailty (*graciles-gracilenti*). They have regular features in their face, such as arched eyebrows and a well-groomed beard, but they have eyes defined as similar to goats eyes, which are considered by physiognomy as a sign of a libidinous character. The *torvitas* of the gaze is an ambiguous trait since it is attributed to the German barbarians as to animals such as the lion, in which, however, they are associated with an evident physical superiority. Persian women, on the other hand, are celebrated for their beauty.

An absolute otherness on the physical plane that fully reflects their otherness on the ethical level is the one that the descriptions of Ammianus Marcellinus and Claudian attribute to the Huns, who are represented as similar to beasts and live in total symbiosis with their horses. The Huns are unaware of any form of civilization as indifferent to any attention on the aesthetic

level to their appearance: they engrave their cheeks from an early age in order to avoid the growth of the beard. As opposed to them are the Alans, a lineage of Iranian extraction, who ally with the Huns against the Greuthungi. Alans are tall and handsome, with a higher degree of civilization than the Huns which is reflected in the temperate *torvitas* of their gaze.

2. Cosetta Cadau (Maynooth University): Kind eyes and pretty feet: evolving evaluation criteria in Late Antique epic beauty contests

In his *Abduction of Helen*, Colluthus portrays the judgment of Paris. In this Late Antique version of the myth, Paris is summoned to evaluate Hera, Athena and Aphrodite's beauty, and his attention is drawn to the goddesses' heels and feet. This paper discusses the evaluation criteria adopted by Paris in his assessment of the three divine contestants, focussing on a linguistic analysis of Colluthus' text in parallel with two other contemporary passages that also describe beauty in comparative or competitive terms, namely Nonnus' *Dionysiaca* 4 and Paul the Silentiary's *Ekphrasis of Hagia Sophia*, which dates to the second half of the sixth century AD and may thus have been written with Colluthus and Nonnus' texts in mind.

This paper aims to establish whether and how the linguistically 'traditional' evaluation of beauty found in epic Greek poetry of the sixth century AD reflects a conscious or unconscious awareness of new moral standards and concerns, and therefore represents an evolution towards a more ethical assessment of physical appearances and body parts, particularly within the Christian discourse of physical and spiritual purity.

3. Laura Miguélez-Cavero (Complutense University Madrid, Spain): Look at this (fe)male: descriptive strategies for naked bodies in the *Dionysiaca* of Nonnus of Panopolis

The first element that catches the eye of the reader of the *Dionysiaca* regarding physical descriptions is that most of them refer to women, often with a clear erotic intent and a focus on nudity, while those of males tend to refer to androgynous ephebes. The distance with the Homeric poems to this regard could not be more glaring: most of the bodies we 'see' in the *Iliad* are those of the fighters who stand out for their physical power and manly beauty. In the *Odyssey* the body of the main character wastes away in misfortune and is molded by Athena to be unrecognisable and physically appealing when needed. The bodies of Helen, Andromache, Penelope, Calypso and Nausicaa do not receive so much attention.

Not only are descriptions of females (both mortals and goddesses in human shape) more frequent in the *Dionysiaca*, but they are composed with a recurrent formula: three different catalogues, of limbs, comparisons with deities and reactions of onlookers, are combined to give a general impression of the described person, not necessarily complete, or realistic, or individualised. For the *Dionysiaca* Nonnus creates his own uniform, catalogic style of description, deploying strategies that were in ample use in the earlier literary tradition, mainly the comparison with flowers and divinities.

This paper will explore the descriptions of the *Dionysiaca* to see what they tell us about his attitudes towards the female body, especially in terms of nakedness and nudity, the reactions of onlookers, the comparisons with divine bodies, in relation with the presentation of women in funerary art, and in their own literary frames in the *Dionysiaca*.

As for the descriptions of male bodies, they cluster in the initial quarter of the *Dionysiaca* and follow the same scheme used for women, advertising a form of androgyny. What do these effeminate forms seek?

4. Stamatia Dova (Professor of Classics and Greek Studies at Hellenic College in Brookline Massachusetts): Paulus Silentiarius Between Painting and Poetry.

The purpose of this paper is to examine three epigrams by sixth century C.E. Byzantine author Paulus Silentiarius (*Anth.Gr.* 16.77, 78, 277 Beckby) in the context of the ancient rivalry between poetry and visual art. Through their shared reference to visual art's ineffectiveness in adequately rendering beauty, the three poems engage in a multifaceted discourse on aesthetics. Recent bibliography has revisited the perception of aesthetic perfection in late antiquity (Goldhill 2020), visuality in Greek literature (Kampakoglou and Novokhatko), and the reception of Greek art in Byzantium (Kaldellis). This paper intends to contribute to the scholarly discussion on reading and rendering beauty within the poetic tradition and genre limitations of late antiquity epigrams (Roberts, Smith).

Evoking the Pindaric antagonism between poetry and sculpture (Maffei, O'Sullivan), Paulus Silentiarius assumes the role of a viewer inspecting the artistic rendition of a real-life image. Enveloped in an aura of astonishing splendor, this image visibly suffers at the artist's hands, and the poet hurries to do it justice. Yet, while in *Anth.Gr.* 16.77 the epigrammatist simply laments the pencil's synecdochic failure to properly depict Theodora, a young woman whose beauty he likens to the radiance of the sun, in *Anth.Gr.* 16.78 he accuses the artistic instrument of malicious envy towards its model. A master of *ekphrasis*, Paulus Silentiarius negotiates the polarities between pictorial and poetic language by acknowledging, without any hesitation, the difficulty of rendering beauty through visual art. At the same time, by revisiting the literary parameters of an artwork's description (Floridi, Fowler, Goldhill 2007), the poet contextualizes the dialogue between text and image with the broader framework of art and beauty (Graham).

As part of the discourse on art and beauty, Silentiarius also investigates the poetics of synaesthesia (Butler and Purves). Gazing at the picture of a female lyrist in Constantinople (*Anth.Gr.* 16.277), he deplors the artifact's inadequacy in conveying the model's beauty. Most importantly, however, he warns his readers of the artistic medium's inherent inability to communicate the magic of music. As a poet invested in the verbal depiction of artistic masterpieces (Curtet, Viansino), Paulus Silentiarius masterfully employs anonymous, small-scale paradigms of misrepresented human form or silenced musical harmony to showcase the epigram's poetic potential to capture and immortalize beauty.

5. Luise Marion Frenkel (University of São Paulo, Brazil): In the image of God and as a metaphor of the church: the human body in conciliar documents of the Christological controversy

The metaphor of the church as a living being, with human features, was regularly used in fourth- and fifth-century texts about synodical decision-making to justify sentences of excommunication. In the acts of the Council of Ephesus 431, the image is a recurring feature, present in proceedings and supporting documents alike, especially in letters and sermons. For example, Theodotus of Ancyra compared issuing and enforcing the excommunication to routine practices in medicine and husbandry. Just as a physician would resort to amputation to prevent contagion from a rotten part, the Christian Church had to sever ties with a member afflicted by an error, regarded as an illness of the soul which, if left unchecked, would spread and bring about death. No attention is given to further consequences of an amputation, such as reduced mobility and changed appearance. The church, although amputated of a member, was presented as better prepared, rather than less ideally shaped, to be worthy of final salvation. Moreover, when addressing the congregation in Homily VI, Theodotus claimed that the soul reveals how it is in the face, so that a cheerful appearance would indicate (inner) joy, and also stated that the success of a member of the church embellishes its body, like a crown. The paper will discuss the wider use in conciliar documentation and historiography of the metaphor of heresy in the Church as an ailing human body-part.

The focus will be on texts by proponents of a Christology in line with the thought Cyril of Alexandria sketched out in his third letter to Nestorius, for whom this concern with the beauty of the human body and its parts came hand in hand with extended expositions of the incarnation, in which the human body was presented as a fitting receptacle of divinity, all the while listing characterisations of its limitations, such as suffering, being made from dust and having the appearance of a slave. Once God welcomed all these, that are said to be by nature, for example suffering, they no longer would detract but be part of the salvation. Stating that the incarnation of Christ was beyond human understanding and condemning attempts to rationalise the dispensation, Theodotus exhorted his audience to marvel at the modifiers of physical and spiritual characteristics.

6. Paula James (The Open University): Pagan Bodies of the Figurative Kind Finding Their Place in a Christian World.

Both Claudian and Prudentius were poets of the Fourth Century CE who wrote in a Christian context, the latter being a proselyte for the adopted religion of the Roman Empire; it is less clear whether Claudian was totally committed to the faith on every level. What they share is the skill to unite pagan imagery particularly the problematic corporealization and partial deification of demonic forces from Furies to Vices with a prevailing monotheistic narrative adopted by the ruling dynasty.

The literary devices Claudian and Prudentius employ in the selected texts of *In Rufinum* and *Psychomachia* play out a colourful game with the poetic, philosophical and cultural traditions familiar to their educated target readership but they also tap into a psychology of apprehension about the ever-present threat of evil in its manifold forms.

A terrible beauty is born in Claudian's depiction of Allecto's cast of Furies (*In Rufinum* 1) with Megara a prime mover brought to the surface of Hades and suckling a serpentine Rufinus as her human protégé. Luxus, big spender, is one of the stars taking on bodily shape in the motley crew and matched by Prudentius' Luxuria complete with hangover imagery. She is vividly brought to life and then to an obscene death in the amphitheatre of *Psychomachia*, by an author who himself is luxuriating in the graphic mutilation of this crapulent creature. However, as Kathleen Kirsch powerfully argues (2020:132) their appearance is human not monstrous.

This presentation will argue that a Virgilian nightmare Underworld and the vivid visualisation of punitive and messy fatal charades in the arena in past poetic works and appropriated in the epics under study intentionally moved a late antique audience well out of its comfort zone. For distinct reasons the 21st century reader may react to Claudian and Prudentius with disbelief and occasionally disgust at the venom visited upon the enemies of ethical good. In late Antiquity this was a universal struggle and not to be dismissed as dystopian fantasy.

The embodiment of these acolytes of Manichean evil, as adversaries revealed in their spectacular physicality and dispatched by a general Romanised by association with Olympian gods and by a set of warrior women *Virtues* is a tour de force by the two poets. They set out to manipulatively uglify and defeat the forces of evil in the service of political and social agendas.

7. Andrew Smith (Emeritus Professor UCD): The positive evaluation of natural and artistic beauty in Plotinus.

An essential element of Augustine's spiritual Odyssey is his conviction that the beauty and goodness of this world is a manifestation of the divine beauty (*conf.* 7.23; *civ.dei* X.14). This re-evaluation of physical beauty was directly influenced by his reading of Plotinus (III.2.13, 18-25). But for Augustine as well as for Plotinus the relationship between physical and transcendent beauty is finely balanced, since the former can distract from the attainment of

spiritual well-being. In fact Plotinus often disparages the sensible world and our involvement with it in the most severe terms, as an impediment to the attainment of true happiness. In what sense, then, can Plotinus be truly positive about the beauty of the physical world? In order to better understand the nuances of Plotinus' view of physical beauty and its influence on Augustine we will firstly examine its metaphysical context (III.5.1) to demonstrate the importance of the causal presence of the power of the One in both the beauty of sensible objects themselves and in the recognition and appreciation of them as sensible beauties by the soul (VI.7.21-2). We will then analyse closely the way in which he thinks the human soul responds to sensible beauty, the relationship of this to sense-perception and the sort of art that he might have had in mind (I.6; V.8.1-2). We will conclude that Plotinus valued the beauty of sensible things (including the human body) for themselves even without them leading to their intelligible archetypes and that the immediate apprehension of their beauty is not a rational process but an instinctive apperception which is ultimately facilitated by the One, the principle of all being.

8. Gioia Soldi (PhD Student, Department of Classical Philology and Italian Studies, University of Bologna): The seeming beauty of Justinian and Theodora: imperial criticism in the secret History of Procopius

From the age of Constantin, in Late Antique literature, the exercise of good government is often symbolised by the sovereign's beauty. Deformity or illness, by contrast, is equivalent to moral and political corruption and implies the degeneration of βασιλεία into τυραννίς.

Studies on Procopius of Caesarea's *Secret History* (*Anecdota*) have so far neglected such metaphorical interpretation. In reality, the Procopian description of the rulers, though more nuanced than the dichotomic conventional reading, seems to contribute to the pivotal thesis of the work: the illegitimacy of Justinian and Theodora. Indeed, Procopius describes them as good-looking but gradually reveals details to question their integrity.

For instance, the eyes are the most important means of communication in Byzantine literature, and, indeed, a good sovereign's gaze is generally tender and beautiful. On the contrary, Justinian's gaze –apparently harmless– hides obtuse cruelty. Analogously, Justinian has a sturdy body and a nice round face that, on closer observation, resembles a mutilated statue of Domitian struck by *damnatio memoriae*. Further, he is of red complexion, even after days of fasting and waking, but his endurance is used only to oppress his citizens all the time. Because of his unusual strength and moral perversity, he is portrayed as a demon and the Antichrist, through a reversal of the imperial ideology, conversely seconded in the *Wars*. Justinian is described in satirical terms, using *Kaiserkritik's* rhetorical devices, such as confrontation, irony and exaggeration. Justinian's superhuman body betrays a superior ability to evil. (*An.* VIII 12-24; XII; XIII 2, 28-32; XV 11).

The empress Theodora, even more explicitly, has positive descriptors to which negative descriptors always correspond. Her beauty is then belittled compared to the absolute one mentioned in the Procopian panegyric, the *Buildings*. In the *Anecdota*, she is attractive and graceful, but κολοβός, “short, maimed”, and ὑπόχλωρος “sallow”; her eyes are vivid but grim. She is far from the prototype of the ideal bride, a ὀρθότιθον (X 2) «erect of breast» noble virgin. In fact, she is a deviant woman and becomes the object of a sexual and political slander, based on the Classical and Christian misogynist *topoi*, in which Theodora's lustful and intriguing past mixes with her despotic and violent present. She is merciless like her husband and, in addition, greedy – she cannot give up sleep, food and pleasures as well as power. According to Procopius she is a disease that contaminates the State. She is described coldly and, at the same time, ferociously, employing the technical terminology of medicine together with the lexicon of Archaic comedy. The author does not deny Theodora's charm but deeply relativise it. (*An.* IX; X 11; XV 5-10, 19).

In conclusion, the presentation of the bodies of Justinian and Theodora, with their specificities, has a clear negative connotation and shows their inability to govern, condemning the regime of actual chaos. Therefore, even the imperial appearance is functional to the *Secret History*'s programmatic unveiling of the truth.

9. Giovanni Trovato (PhD student at the University of Genoa): Whose Pleasure Should It Be? Some Observations on M. Valerius' *privata voluptas*.

Whenever the focus of a critical debate is set on Latin pastoral poetry, the first names that usually occur are obviously those of Vergil, Calpurnius Siculus and, sometimes, Nemesianus. Not as often, however, do authors such as Endeletius, Paulinus from Nola or Venantius feature in the discussion, since the amount of information (i.e. extension of the preserved text, reliability of ancient sources, quantity of scholarly contributions on the matter) we currently possess about their bucolic compositions is relatively modest if compared to the much greater acquisitions made so far about the extant Pastoral from the Latin Golden and Silver Age. Nevertheless, one of the most characteristic hallmarks of the bucolic genre seems to keep its prominence throughout the centuries. That is, on the one hand, the tendency to import lexicostylistic items originating from other genres; on the other hand, the influence it gained over certain genres, such as the Biblical exegetical and philosophical treatise, in terms of imagery reuse and ideological adaptation, which in turn testifies to the importance of Latin pastoral for ancient education. The identification of the shepherd with the figure of Christ bonus pastor in several Christian works or the depiction of virtues and vices through bucolic sceneries or characters may well serve as examples.

Chances are, though, that a bucolic collection can act not only as source, but also as beneficiary of this literary crossover. The aim of this paper would consist in looking more carefully into this hypothesis by taking into account a series of textual passages from Late Antique bucolic works, most notably from M. Valerius' *Bucolica*, whose dating is still under scrutiny, but a collocation of these enigmatic eclogues in the 6th century AD looks more and more likely in view of the most recent research on this fascinating subject.

The expression *privata voluptas* will be the object of particular attention, owing to its rarity, its unusual placement in a bucolic ode and its meaning in the context. Being the exact translation of the Greek ἰδία ἡδονή, which recurs in the writings of Gregorius Nazianzen and Apollinaris of Laodicea in very interesting pastoral contexts, a compare-and-contrast analysis of various excerpts from these texts may lead to the conclusion that this correspondence is not to be dismissed as brought about by sheer chance. On the contrary, this should be an excellent opportunity to discuss the literary awareness of the author and the semantic transition of the expression and its multiple connotations, both aesthetically and ethically speaking, within the frame of the contact between Classical tradition and Christian ideology. Should the arguments brought up in support of this thesis be meaningful and convincing enough, this brief contribution ought to shed some additional light on a matter which remains in many respects quite obscure as of today. Furthermore, the implications of this paper's central idea would raise many more questions, which could afterwards constitute the core of upcoming studies on this topic.