

DISTURBING FLOWERS: THE THREE-DIMENSIONAL COLOURS OF CLAUD. *RAPT. PROS.* 2.90-132

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Summary: Claudian's colourful images have often been studied for their decorative function and as examples of late-antique fragmentary style. More recent scholarship, instead, has proposed that colouring provides coherence to the text through its symbolic meanings. This article analyses the aesthetic and symbolic significance of colourful imagery by differentiating between the three main dimensions of colour: brightness, saturation and hue. The blossoming meadow of Claud. *Rapt. Pros.* 2.90-132 is an ideal case study: a focus on all three colour components highlights that the formal choices and the symbolic meanings are not opposite or separate, but parallel in their fragmentary coherence, and each important for the interpretation of the text. Both the visual effects and the metaphoric charge of Claudian's colourful flowers undermine the idyllic atmosphere of the meadow and foreshadow Proserpina's abduction.

INTRODUCTION

Accumulations of colour-terms characterize the fully-detailed images of Claudian's poetry, as research has been highlighting since Gualandri 1968, Charlet 1988 and Roberts 1989.¹ The poet privileges clusters of similar hues, of polychromatic imagery and of sharp contrasts between white and black or white and red. Such visual intensity and variety of

* I am grateful to Professor Andrea Balbo and Doctor Aaron D. Pelttari for their constant and precise suggestions on how to improve this paper. I would also like to thank the anonymous reviewer and the editors of *Classica et Mediaevalia* for their valuable comments.

1 See Gualandri 1968, Charlet 1988, 1991, and Roberts 1989 on the style of Claudian and other late antique authors' poetry.

colours have often been studied for their aesthetic value and taken as examples of a 'jewelled' and fragmentary style. Recently, Coombe's article on *De Raptu Proserpinae* has proposed that colouring possesses, instead, a structuring besides decorative function, and that it provides coherence within an apparently episodic narration.² Light effects, in particular, bring cohesion to the narrative plot for their recursive symbolic meanings: interplays of light and darkness signal the mixing of upperworld and underworld thematized by Proserpina's myth, and the staining action of dark shades and pallor on light-filled elements constantly reminds the reader of the irruption of death into life.³

Coombe's paper suggests that structuring colours are evident in the colourful ekphrases of vegetation of *Rapt. Pros.* 2.90-130.⁴ Focusing on these lines, my article seeks to introduce tools for examining colours which allow for a deeper comprehension of this and other texts. I will argue that, in order to gain a more complete understanding of the text, it is essential that we conceive colour as a composite phenomenon: although previous discussions have centred on effects of brightness and darkness, the full range of chromatic components (brightness, saturation and hue) is employed to create a plot that is fragmented but coherent symbolically.

My focus on all three colour components will highlight that the perspectives adopted by stylistic and hermeneutic studies are parallel and interdependent, rather than separate. The way in which colour-terms are formally organized on the page, indeed, can mirror and suggest emotional responses or symbolic meanings. From a formal and aesthetic point of view, for instance, white and red juxtaposed form a contrast between the most and the least saturated hue. In parallel, this precise juxtaposition recalls a sensation of conflict and hints at the symbology of death. The final section of the paper will draw particular

2 Coombe 2017: 260. The reference is especially to Gualandri 1968 and Roberts 1989, and their comparisons between late Latin poetry and mosaics. Hardie 2019 disapproves of these comparisons and highlights, instead, the coherence of late antique texts.

3 See also Borca 2000 and Mandile 2013 specifically about the Underworld: its lifeless atmosphere is recalled by non-colours (grey, foggy shades), paleness and darkness.

4 Coombe 2017: 253-54, 258.

attention to lines 98-100, a simile between the Etnean flowers and a 'green' rainbow. The three colour components will offer a deeper understanding of this unlikely colourful description and of its underlying symbolic meaning. The symbolism recalled by the colour-terms will be connected to a colourful allusion to *Thebaid* 4, which is critical to the interpretation of the whole passage.

The final purpose of this article is to suggest new potential research perspectives on how colour operates in general in poetry, and in particular in Claudian. Firstly, it will propose a more accurate instrument of analysis (chromatic tridimensionality) that fully highlights the visual sensibility of these texts. Secondly, and as a consequence, it will offer a more precise view of how colours imply metaphoric meanings that also work as factors of coherence. Ultimately, the study of this passage makes it possible to go beyond Roberts' stylistic viewpoint of 'jewelled style' and 'disjoint fragmentation'.⁵ The late antique text uses both the aesthetic and symbolic impact of colour to suggest meaningful associations: in doing this, it creates coherent narratives within fragmented visions, and fragmented visions according to a coherent plan.

THE COMPONENTS OF COLOUR AND THEIR USE IN THE FLOWER CATALOGUES

Colour is a complex phenomenon that depends on how the human visual organs and the brain elaborate the physical properties of light. Light is the spectrum of the electro-magnetic radiation with wavelengths between 380 and 760 nanometres. White light is what we perceive when all these wavelengths are mixed together. When we de-compose white light in single beams (for example making it pass through a prism), we obtain a continuous, rainbow-like sequence from violet to red, the visible spectrum: each chromatic sensation that we can detect on the spectrum corresponds to a certain wavelength.⁶ Colloquially, we call the portions of this continuum as 'colours'. According to scientific terminology,

5 Roberts 1989.

6 See Tovée 2008: 1-108, Tilley 2011: 1-48 for an introduction on physics of light and colour.

though, we should say ‘hue’: a ‘hue’ is the way in which we perceive a specific section of the spectrum with a specific wavelength. ‘Colour’ is a general term that describes how we sense an item in virtue of its hue and of other two related factors, brightness and saturation. Saturation corresponds to how ‘intensely’ we sense a certain chromatic radiation: this depends on the percentage of the same (monochromatic) wavelength compared with the percentage of white light contained in such radiation. Brightness is the amount of light perceived in a colour. In fact, every radiation has the same light intensity, but the human eye senses wavelengths around 550nm (yellow-green) as the most intense. As I mentioned, hue, saturation and brightness in connection to each other define the colour of a certain item: blood is red, dark, and very saturated; a brick is red, less dark, and less saturated. Black and white are the two poles of the ‘brightness’ spectrum; red and white, instead, are respectively the most and the least saturated colours.⁷ Claudian’s poems contain several visual effects that integrate all these chromatic components in different ways. His texts often juxtapose different hues, degrees of saturation and light effects, and tend to favour chromatic contrasts that exploit the sharpest oppositions within all three parameters (typically, white and red, dark and light, red and black). The scene that I am going to analyse, *Rapt. Pros.* 2.90-132, offers several examples of how Claudian plays with them to generate visual effects with high emotional and symbolic impact.

First of all, I shall introduce the context of the passage. A few lines earlier, Etna had prayed to Zephyrus (the subject of *volat*) asking that he prepare its meadows. Here, Zephyrus has completed his work: Claudian describes the fields made fecund by the wind, where Proserpina and her companions are cheerfully collecting flowers. Mount Etna is portrayed as a *locus amoenus*: the atmosphere is typical of a spring day, winds fertilize the soil, the sides of the volcano are described as gentle hills, and blossoms, fountains and a lake fill the landscape with life.⁸ Let us zoom on the description of the flowers, my main point of interest:

7 See above and Smithson 2015: 437-65, Gunther 2019: 325-407, Hemming 2012 on science of colour and colour anthropology.

8 Gruzelier 1993: 186, Onorato 2008: 257. See also Charlet 2019: 23. For a detailed study on the ekphrasis of this *locus amoenus*, see Galand 1987.

- 90 Quaque volat vernus sequitur rubor; omnis in herbas
 turget humus medioque patent convexa sereno.
 sanguineo splendore rosas, vaccinia nigro
 imbuat et dulci violas ferrugine pingit.
 Parthica quae tantis variantur cingula gemmis
 95 regales vinctura sinus? quae vellera tantum
 ditibus Assyrii spumis fucantur aeni?
 non tales volucer pandit Iunonius alas,
 nec sic innumeros arcu mutante colores
 incipiens redimitur hiemps, cum tramite flexo
 100 semita discretis interviret umida nimbis.

And wherever he flies, the redness of spring follows; all the ground brims with grass and the celestial vault is disclosed, cloudless in its centre. He dips the roses in blood-red brilliance, the bilberries in black glow, and stains the violets with soft rust. Which Parthian belts, destined to gird the breasts of kings, are varied by so many gems? Which fleeces are equally dyed in the rich foams of the Assyrian vats? The bird of Juno does not spread such colourful wings, nor is the rising storm thus wreathed by the bow that shifts between countless colours, when its watery path quivers green in its bent stream amidst the parted clouds.⁹

At line 101, the flower catalogue and the related similes are followed by a lengthy description of the hills, the trees and the depths of Lake Pergus. Venus brings the attention back to the flowers at line 119, where she urges Proserpina and the nymphs to take advantage of the blossoming field. The virgins follow her exhortation:

- Pratorum spoliatur honos: haec lilia fuscis
 intexit violis; hanc mollis amaracus ornat;
 130 haec graditur stellata rosis, haec alba ligustris.
 Te quoque, flebilibus maerens Hyacinthe figuris,
 Narcissumque metunt, nunc inclita germina veris,

9 Claudian's texts are from Gruzelier 1993; translations are mine.

praestantes olim pueros [...]

The grace of the meadows is stripped: this one weaves lilies with dark violets; soft marjoram adorns this other one; this one walks forth starred with roses, this one white with privet-flowers. You too they reap, Hyacinthus, lamenting with your mournful shapes, and you, Narcissus, now famous shoots of spring, once outstanding young men.

Read as a whole, these passages picture the scene preceding Proserpina's abduction, which all the main literary transpositions of the myth report.¹⁰ The *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* and Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and *Fasti*, like Claudian, draw great attention to the flowers and their colours: the reasons for this emphasis are that a flower (Narcissus) is responsible for Pluto's break-through, and that picking blossoms is a traditional element in representations of virginal rape.¹¹ As expected, Claudian's description offers numerous intertexts with the Homeric hymn and Ovid.¹² The structure of the catalogue and the flowers listed are borrowed from the Homeric hymn, although the later text is enriched with more species.¹³ Ovid *Met.* 5.385-396 and *Fast.* 4.435-444, instead, influence the fact that Claudian does not present the daffodil as the trigger of the rape: in both passages, vegetation remains a pictorial element in the background. Claudian's debt to *Met.* 5 is also evident in the colouring conveyed by violets and lilies, the presence of Lake Pergus and a similar emphasis on

10 Ryser 2020: 154-80 offers an exhaustive discussion on Claudian's models and his re-elaborations.

11 About the implications and literary connections between Claudian's text and the *topos* of virginal rape, see especially Rosenmeyer 2004: 175-76 and Coombe 2017: 254. I will just recall a few examples: in *Theoc. Id.* 11.30, Galatea is picking flowers when the cyclops falls in love with her; in *Ap. Rhod. Arg.* 3.896-99 Medea is doing the same before meeting Jason; in Moschus' *Europa* the girl is abducted while collecting flowers with her companions.

12 Onorato 2008: 261-62, Gruzelier 1993: 180, 189. Galand 1987 fully examines Claudian's debt to these models.

13 *Hymn. Hom. Dem.* 6-10: “ἄνθεά τ' αἰνυμένην, ῥόδα καὶ κρόκον ἢ δ' ἴα καλὰ / λειμῶν' ἄμ μαλακὸν καὶ ἀγαλλίδας ἢ δ' ὑάκινθον / νάρκισσον θ', ὃν φῦσε δόλον καλυκώπιδι κούρη / Γαῖα Διὸς βουλῆσι χαριζομένη Πολυδέκτη, / θαυμαστὸν γανῶντα.”

*ver.*¹⁴ The author echoes *Fast.* 4 as he parallels the hyacinth at line 439, mentions the rose and the *lilia alba* at lines 441-42, and creates a similar effect of polyptoton and of asyndeton at lines 128-30.¹⁵ At a formal level, one remarkable difference can be detected between *De Raptu Proserpinae* and the other three texts: the late antique poem breaks the unity of the single scene and doubles the flower catalogue. By bringing fragmentation into this structure, Claudian actually intensifies the reader's attention and aesthetic response towards a single (meaningful) detail.

I will now focus on the first part of this broken catalogue as a first example of how the text employs chromatic components and creates repeated emotional-symbolic meanings through them. Previous scholarship has touched on the metaphoric charge of the blossoms and their colouring, but a comprehensive analysis that adopts a composite perspective makes it possible to recognize new shades of meaning.¹⁶

Lines 90-93 mention red, bright red, purple, and blue-black plants. The variety of these colours recalls the luxurious atmosphere of the *locus amoenus*. At the same time, scholarship has noticed a connection with the erotic and violent charge of Proserpina's story exactly in the choice of these visual effects.¹⁷ Focusing on the purely aesthetic aspect of the passage, we notice that *vernus rubor* at line 90 introduces the general sensation of 'red', the dominating hue of these lines. In accordance with

14 *Ov. Met.* 5.385-96: "haud procul Hennaëis lacus est a moenibus altae, / nomine Pergus, aquae. Non illo plura Caystros / carmina cycnorum labentibus audit in undis. / Silva coronat aquas cingens latus omne, suisque / frondibus ut velo Phoebeos submovet ictus. / Frigora dant rami, tyrios humus umida flores: / perpetuum *ver* est. Quo dum Proserpina luco / ludit et aut violas aut candida lilia carpit, / dumque puellari studio calathosque sinumque / implet et aequales certat superare legendo." In this I follow Galand 1987: 93, *pace* Onorato 2008: 261-62.

15 *Ov. Fast.* 4.435-44: "haec implet lento calathos e vimine nexos, / haec gremium, laxos degravat illa sinus: / illa legit calthas, huic sunt violaria curae, / illa papavereas subsecat ungue comas: / has, hyacinthe, tenes; illas, amarante, moraris: / pars thyma, pars rorem, pars meliloton amat. / plurima lecta rosa est, sunt et sine nomine flores; / ipsa crocos tenues liliaque alba legit, / carpenti studio paulatim longius itur, / et dominam casu nulla secuta comes." I refer to the polyptoton *haec / hanc* and the asyndeton at *Rapt. Pros.* 2.128-30.

16 Galand 1987: 94-96 and 111-12, Coombe 2017: 253-54.

17 Coombe 2017: 253-54.

Berlin and Kay's terminology, *rubor* is a basic colour-term, that is a lexeme enclosing the most comprehensive concept of the hue 'red': basic colour terms are, besides their linguistic properties, psychologically salient for the perceiver.¹⁸ Two lines later, this powerful sensation is decomposed in three, more specific colour-terms: *sanguineae (rosae)*, *ferrugineae (violae)*, *nigra (vaccinia)*.¹⁹ *Sanguineus* represents the saturated red of the roses. *Ferrugineus* has to be understood as 'rust-coloured', in reference to the dark (probably purple) colour of the violets.²⁰ *Vaccinium* is either the blueberry, which is called *niger* for an intensification of its natural blue-purple hue, or the blackberry (or another similar fruit), which looks almost black. In sum, actual reds (roses) are paired with dark 'reddish' hues (violets) and even with purple-black, a note of apparent discontinuity in the colourful canvas.²¹ The variety is also suggested by the chiasmic sequence of *sanguineus* and *niger*, one at the beginning and one at the end of the verse. In fact, the hue parameter does not vary too much (all these flowers have a certain redness/purpleness), while saturation and brightness do: aesthetically, there is a chromatic sequence, a descending climax, from most saturated to least saturated hue, and from brightest to darkest. *Sanguineo splendore* at line 90 suggests a very bright nuance of red, which is in itself the most saturated colour. The following *vaccinia nigro imbuat* and *violas ferrugine pingit*, instead, diminish the concentration of red hue in favour of a greater darkness, typical of purple-black colours.

I should now analyse how these aesthetic choices affect the emotional and symbolic perception of these lines. To begin with, one should notice *vernus rubor*, the 'blush of spring'. By connecting spring with a colour-term (red), Claudian draws attention upon the seasonal cycle. This is a major theme of Proserpina's myth: according to the ancients, *ver* was linked with her culminating youth and with her presence on earth,

18 Berlin & Kay 1969: 5-7. For an application of Berlin and Kay's theory to Latin, see especially Oniga 2007.

19 Galand 1987: 94, Onorato 2008: 252 and Guipponi-Gineste 2010: 57 have signalled this pattern.

20 On the meaning of *ferrugineus*, see Edgeworth 1978. Jacobson 1998: 315 suggests that *violas ferrugine (pingit)* is modelled on the Greek ἴα ἰϙ and does not refer to a particular shade of the violets.

21 See Onorato 2008: 261.

which makes her mother benevolent. *Rubor* at line 90 and the following accumulation of red-related hues, thus, likely symbolize the exploding vitality of Proserpina and of Ceres as symbolic of nature. If the text insists so much on the colourful lush of Mount Etna in spring, though, one should wonder whether it just wants to depict its vitality, or, in fact, to prefigure its vanishing. The analysis of the three flower-colour matches at lines 92-93 leaves no doubt. As mentioned above, the list seems to evoke the prosperity of the *locus amoenus*, also because it recalls the idyllic setting of Verg. *Eclog.* 2.²² From a symbolic perspective, instead, the choice of the three hues with their different degrees of saturation and brightness anticipate death and rape.²³ The first image is the blood-red rose: the combination between the rose, flower of Venus, and a very saturated, eye-striking colour creates a strong erotic archetype connected with sexual passion and often found in epithalamic contexts.²⁴ Given Proserpina's 'flourishing' status, the red rose must be a metaphor of her sexual readiness for her soon-to-be husband -and the term *sanguineus* suggests it quite explicitly.²⁵ Ripe berries and violets, then, create visual and symbolic connections with the husband in question, Pluto. Both fruit and violets share their darkness with the king of the Underworld and with the Underworld itself. *Niger* is the god of death's standard epithet, and his *amictus* in *Rapt. Pros.* 2.275 is said to be precisely *ferrugineus*.²⁶ One possible reason for this association between *ferrugineus* and the chthonic lands is that this colour-term recalls a process of

22 Guipponi-Gineste 2010: 57. Verg. *Eclog.* 2.18 *alba ligustra cadunt, uaccinia nigra leguntur* and 10.39 *et nigrae uiolae sunt et uaccinia nigra* are the source for *vaccinia nigro* at line 93. For the position of *vaccinia* within the verse, other models might be Verg. *Eclog.* 2.50 *mollia luteola pingit uaccinia caltha* and Ov. *Trist.* 1.1.5 *nec te purpureo uelent uaccinia fuco*. The rose, instead, recalls both the *Hymn to Demeter* and its recasting in *Fasti*.

23 Galand 1987: 111-12 and Coombe 2017: 253-54.

24 Charlet 2000: 189, Guipponi-Gineste 2010: 59, Coombe 2017: 254.

25 Coombe 2017: 254 sees in the 'blood-red' adjective a hint at the breaking of the goddess' hymen. See also Onorato 2008: 260, Guipponi-Gineste 2010: 59 on the symbolic value of the rose and its potential connections with Proserpina's imagery. Wheeler 1995: 124-27, has extensively treated the marriage-death *topos* in relation to Proserpina's abduction.

26 OLD s.v. *niger*; André 1949: 52-8. See also *Rapt. Pros.* 1.79-81: "ipse rudi fultus solio nigraque verendus / maiestate sedet: squalent immania foedo / scepra situ; sublime caput maestissima nubes."

physical decay, the making of rust from iron. As a king, Pluto is expected to wear a purple cloak, but, as personification of death, this appears rotten into a brownish-red shade. Likewise, the natural purple shade of the violets might be here de-saturated into a rust-like colour to suggest the same sense of decay. Iron itself has connections with the Underworld, for it inhabits the depths of the earth. Indeed, the chthonic context is described as iron-made in *Rapt. Pros.*1.127-128 [...] *Acheron Ditisque severi / ferrea lascivis mollescant corda sagittis* and in *Rapt. Pros.* 3.389-390 [...] *plantisque resultant / Tartara ferratis* [...].²⁷

The colourful features of the three plants express a single concept, the present height of vitality and its imminent fading, and the red rose links such fading with the passage from virgin to wife. Each colour fills these lines with the omen that Proserpina's maturity corresponds to her withering: indeed, her marriage to Pluto is literally her death.²⁸ Considering the general colourful effect, as well, we notice that the descending climax from most saturated to least saturated, brightest to darkest hue visually reproduces the virgin's descent to the dead. This point, though, only appears if careful attention is paid to all chromatic components. As a final consideration, I will mention that this passage confirms the fragmentary aesthetics of variation highlighted by Roberts: *sanguineae rosae, ferrugineae violae* and *nigra vaccinia* stand out of each line for their different light and intensity. Nevertheless, they create visual coherence because they share a broader dominion (redness), and because they interact with each other in a coherent pattern of chromatic degradation. Both the single colour-flower associations taken alone and their coherent effects as a whole iterate, and therefore intensify, the same meaning of death.

Lines 90-93 have allowed me to introduce Claudian's way of stimulating visual effects that connect single chromatic details with the main narrative plot (Proserpina's abduction), here producing a divergence between the cheerful look of the picture and its underlying atmosphere. I will now focus on the second section of the flower catalogue at lines 128-32. The author lists, in order of appearance, lilies, violets, marjoram, rose, privet, and finally hyacinth and daffodil. The

27 Guipponi-Gineste 2010: 58, Coombe 2017: 254.

28 Wheeler 1995: 125, Guipponi-Gineste 2010: 60 and Coombe 2017: 254.

hues introduced by these flowers stand out as whites (lily, hyacinth and daffodil) or purple-reds (violet, rose, marjoram). Lines 90-93 have mostly exploited the reddish colour-range. This second ekphrasis, instead, iterates three antitheses based on the contrast of reddish and white hues and on their cognitively-opposed chromatic parameters. Each line contains a couple: at 128 *lilia* and *fuscis*, white and dark, at 129 *violis* and *amaracus*, again purple (dark red) and white, at 130 *rosis* and *alba ligustris*, red and white. Whereas hue remains enclosed in the reddish-white opposition in all three cases, the first two lines emphasize a brightness-darkness contrast, while the third is based on a most remarkable divergence in saturation. Again, the chromatic choices imply a tribute to some literary predecessors. The same hues occur in *Ov. Fast.* 4.442 *ipsa crocos tenues liliaque alba legit*, from which the author borrows the lilies, and *Met.* 5.392 *ludit et aut violas aut candida lilia carpit*, from which he takes the contrast between violets and lilies.²⁹ The privet continues the tribute to *Eclog.* 2.18 *alba ligustra cadunt, uaccinia nigra leguntur*, already recalled by lines 90-93. In his re-elaboration, though, Claudian creates a double effect of visual *variatio*: on the one hand, he puts reddish and white hues in contrast, on the other, he changes the degree of darkness and saturation in each line.

The contrast of white and red strikes the eye, because it opposes, as mentioned above, the most saturated (red) and the least saturated (white) colour. At an emotional level, this induces a sensation of conflict. Symbolically, these colours and their antithesis conjure images related to Proserpina's rape and confirm the overall negative sensation. To recall the previous discussion, dark violets are reminiscent of the tones of the Underworld, and the rose is an erotic archetype, repeated from line 91. White, instead, is traditionally the colour of innocence, young age and virginity –but also the paleness of death. White flowers, red roses or the two combined suggest love and death throughout Latin poetry. Thomas provides extensive evidence: white lilies represent death in *Tib.* 3.4.34 *lilia et autumnno candida mala rubent*, in *Verg. Aen.* 12.68-9 *lilia multa...alba rosa*, and, juxtaposed to reds, in *Aen.* 7.708-9; violets and lilies have the same function in *Ov. Met.* 10.190-191 (Hyacinth's death) and *Prop.* 3.13.29-31 (the 'death' of the Golden Age), and so do violets and roses in

29 Onorato 2008: 261-62.

Ov. *Ars.* 2.115-16.³⁰ Claudian is likely aware of the metaphoric charge of these chromatic effects, and the replacement of *candida* (*lilia*) in *Met.* 5.392 with *fuscae* (violets) in *De Raptu Proserpinae* hints at it: *fuscis violis* is broken in enjambement, so that the sensation of darkness appears twice and prevails over the brightness of the lily (stressed, instead, in Ovid's version). In sum, this passage presents a careful choice of colours and re-elaboration of models which visually and symbolically prefigures the clash and confusion between life and afterlife portrayed by Proserpina's myth. As at lines 90-93, the rose, here in contrast with white marjoram, suggests that this also corresponds to the (violent) passage from a virginal to a sexual state.

The choice of red and its opposition to white, the variation of darkness and saturation for each colour effect, and the role of all these sensations in creating symbolic connections with Proserpina's rape make this passage a reinterpretation, or completion, of the first flower catalogue. As a result, *Rapt. Pros.* 90-130 looks studded with colour-flower associations that suggest the same mournful developments in two points. In perfect 'late antique style', the text fragments the description of the blossoming fields and gives it coherence by repeating similar colours, chromatic changes and symbolic meanings. Precisely this breaking and variation on the theme creates an even stronger and more coherent interpretation of the text.

THE VISUAL AND SYMBOLIC MEANING OF *INTERVIREO* IN THE SIMILE OF THE RAINBOW

Rapt. Pros. 98-100, like the framing flower catalogues at lines 90-93 and 128-30, generates a disturbing sensation of death. The passage compares the variety of the Etean flowers with the colourfulness of the rainbow: while the simile suggests a sensation of liveliness, the only colour-term used, *interviret* ('is green among' the clouds, referred to the rainbow), fills the text with tension.³¹ The reasons why 'green' has a threatening charge are mainly two: because, in association with the rainbow, it signals the

30 Thomas 1979: 312-14.

31 TLL 7.1.2303.84-2304.7, OLD s.v. *intervireo*.

arrival of a storm³² and because it alludes to Statius' *Thebaid*, where it describes a concerning element of the landscape. This allusion, noticed but not yet analysed in previous scholarship, is decisive for the correct perception and interpretation of the passage.³³ The following paragraph will address its implications, to shed some light on the complex relationships between visual sensations, literary *topoi* and intertexts that Claudian creates through this single colour-word. Once again, my analysis will show how chromatic components are essential for acknowledging and better understanding both the aesthetic and symbolic role of colour.

To start, it is necessary to address the association of the colour green with the rainbow, treated also by Budaragina.³⁴ Differently from the red rose and the rusty violet, this colour match is unrealistic and thus requires further consideration. One option is that the rainbow is called 'green' with no intention of reproducing real-life phenomena at all, and only to reinforce the simile between the sky and the presumably green meadow. However, there is at least one other monochromatic description of the rainbow where colour looks misplaced to the modern reader, but likely made sense to the ancient one. In his commentary to *De Raptu Proserpinae*, Onorato cites Prop. 3.5.32 *purpureus pluvias cur bibit arcus aquas*, that mentions an awkwardly 'purple' rainbow.³⁵ Both Edgeworth and Bradley have pointed out that, in this case, the chromatic sensation stressed in the Latin term *purpureus* is not hue, but brightness: compared to modern languages, where colour-terms mainly correspond to different hues, Latin terminology is sensitive to degrees of brightness to a greater level.³⁶ Since for ancient authors the rainbow carries water

32 Coombe 2017: 257-58 mentions the rainbow as an anticipatory element for Proserpina's abduction.

33 Budaragina 2005 has reported but not investigated in depth the allusion to Statius' text. She has mainly focused on the literal meaning of *intervireo*, in the attempt to solve the incongruence of a green rainbow.

34 Budaragina 2005: 280-84.

35 *Discreti nimbi* in *Rapt. Pros.* 2.100 should be interpreted 'clouds still separated' rather than 'clouds disclosing after the storm'; see Onorato 2008: 253.

36 On *purpureus* as indicator of brightness and not only hue, see Edgeworth 1979 and Bradley 2009: 189-208. Similar discussions on other colour terms, especially *candidus* (as opposed to *albus*), *fulvus*, *flavus*, *rutilus*, *niger* (as opposed to *ater*), can be found in

and often announces storms, the bright ‘purple’ must suggest a sense of menace.³⁷ Here we must wonder whether green, like *purpureus* in Propertius, reproduces some visual attribute of the rainbow seen as water-carrier. Indeed, it is not unlikely that *semita discretis interviret umida nimbis* aims to represent the visual saturation of a rainbow fraught with rain, or its iridescent, water-like aspect -and not an unexplainable green hue.³⁸ If a ‘green’, saturated and vibrant rainbow is one that carries rain, the idyllic atmosphere of the present passage is undermined. In narrative terms, this colour-term plays the same role as the flowers and berries at lines 90-93: both of them represent a climatic point (the rainbow, because it is congested with rain, the vegetation, because it is at its highest level of ripeness) which foreshadows a negative explosion -the ‘storm’ or the ‘withering’, which symbolize the rape of Proserpina and which the flower-picking actually triggers.³⁹

The tension introduced by the visual effect(s) of *intervireo* is mirrored and enhanced by the intertextual background that this verb involves. Indeed, the only comparable *locus* where *intervireo* is used is Stat. *Theb.* 4.98-100 *exutus laetisque minax interviret herbis / a miser! agrestum si quis per gramen hianti: / obvius et primo fraudaverit ora veneno*, where it refers to a snake hiding in the grass and threatening a shepherd’s safety.⁴⁰ It is

André 1949. Bibliography that discusses brightness in Latin colour terminology includes Baran 1982 and Busatta 2014.

37 The rainbow can either be the prelude to a storm or the sign of its end. I agree with Onorato 2008: 253 and Coombe 2017: 257-58 that the first meaning seems more consistent, since both in Tib. 1.4.44 *imbrifer arcus* and in Stat. *Theb.* 10.125 *nimborum fulva creatrix* the rainbow is explicitly qualified as storm-carrier. About the imagery, functions and colours of the rainbow, see Bonadeo 2004, Bradley 2009: 36-55, Grand-Clément 2018.

38 *Viridis* can apply to fog or saturation, see Auson. *Mos.* 15 *viridis caligo*. On the other hand, Plin. *Nat.* 17.74 shows that *viride caelum* is actually a way to say ‘fresh, clear sky’. It is uncertain whether such a meaning could be transferred to *viridis arcus* (a rainbow that carries clear skies), but the fact that it forms *umida semita* seems rather to suggest an identification with the greenish and vibrant aspect of dense water. The rainbow which carries rain possesses the same aspect as a watercourse.

39 Besides the mentioned Coombe 2017: 257-58, see also Charlet 2000: 192 and Onorato 2008: 257.

40 This colour-term is actually present also in Sol. 52. 61: “beryllorum genus dividitur in speciem multifariam: eximii intervirente glauci et caerulei temperamento” Both

unlikely that Claudian, for whom Statius is a major model, employs *intervireo* without alluding to him: instead of choosing a better-established chromatic association such as *purpureus arcus*, he selects a less foregone colour-verb only adopted here.⁴¹ In purely visual terms, as well, Statius and Claudian's contexts are highly similar: a rainbow between clouds does resemble a snake in the grass for its shape, its fluidity and, above all, its colours. The snake, indeed, is often called *caeruleus*, iridescent, and I have argued earlier that a 'green' rainbow can suggest exactly a sense of vibrant iridescence -the rainbow is, after all, the iridescent phenomenon *par excellence*.⁴² Finally, Statius' snake and Claudian's rainbow are likely related in a symbolic way. Ancient myth and literature show very frequent connections between this phenomenon and the reptile, starting from Hom. *Il.* 11.26, where the dragons sculpted on Agamemnon's armour are precisely compared with rainbows. According to Bonadeo's anthropological and literary study of Iris, snake and rainbow share the same metaphoric nature as 'elements of passage'.⁴³ Whereas the first makes possible the transition and communication between the human and the divine world, the second connects terrestrial life to chthonic world. Verg. *Aen.* 5.84-89 (the description of the *anguis ingens*) is a clear example of how snake and rainbow are related, because here the animal is both intended as a link with the underworld and compared with the celestial phenomenon.⁴⁴ The culture-driven, perhaps subconscious association between these two natural elements fully justifies Claudian's reminiscence of *Thebaid* 4.98 at

the genre of the work, a collection of *memorabilia*, and the context of use of *interviret*, though, are completely different from Claudian's text.

41 Budaragina 2005: 280-84. For an overview of Claudian's frequent allusions to Statius in the embroidering of his scenes, see Braden 1979: 210 and Gruzeliier 1989. Wheeler 1995: 118-19 has also detected important allusions to Stat. *Theb.* 8.1-83 in the motif of the underworld opening in *De Raptu Proserpinae*.

42 Grand-Clément 2018: 202-07 for the iridescence of the rainbow and its connection with the snake.

43 Bonadeo 2004: 108-12.

44 Verg. *Aen.* 5.84-9: "dixerat haec, adytis cum lubricus anguis ab imis / septem ingens gyros, septena volumina traxit, / amplexus placide tumulum lapsusque per aras, / caeruleae cui terga notae, maculosus et auro / squamam incendebat fulgor, ceu nubibus arcus / mille iacit variis adverso sole colores."

lines 98-100. Needless to say, such association loads the text with another negative foreshadowing of Proserpina's passage to a new, chthonic condition: the allusion to Statius' snake joins the peculiar 'green' colouring of the rainbow in revealing the ominous character of the simile. This impression is strengthened by the fact that Statius' reptile is called *minax*, a threat for the shepherd's life. The snake actually mediates between the upper world and those chthonic lands that Proserpina, too, is destined to reach. And since the simile is between the rainbow and flowers, which in fact trigger the abduction in the original myth, the allusion to the mournful snake forecasts Proserpina's transition to the underworld in even more precise terms.

There is another important consideration. As Parkes has observed, the Statian image presents a certain similarity to Eurydice's death in Verg. *Georg.* 4.458-59 *immanem ante pedes hydram moritura puella / servantem ripas alta non vidit in herba*.⁴⁵ Both pictures portray a snake hiding in the grass, and menacing the character's life. In both, the animal cannot be distinguished from the background: *Georg.* 459 reads *non vidit in herba*, *Theb.* 4.98 reports *interviret herbis*. Precisely its invisibility causes the characters' explicit or supposed descent to the chthonic world. In Vergil, the snake plainly appears as Eurydice's killer; indeed, the girl is called *moritura*. In Statius, the suggestion of the shepherd's death is indirectly contained within the apostrophe, but is still present. It is not unreasonable to argue that Claudian, in his use of *intervireo*, is aware of the Vergilian passage on Orpheus and builds a double allusion not previously identified. First of all, the Orphic myth has several connections with that of Ceres and Proserpina. The visions of the cosmic order implied by the Eleusinian and the Orphic traditions are indeed very close, and Proserpina was probably included in later Orphic rituals. Claudian was probably familiar, if not with the Orphic mysteries themselves, with their late antique literary transpositions: the narration of Proserpina's myth reported by these texts likely had some influence on how he has elaborated his subject.⁴⁶ Secondly, Eurydice's story in

45 Parkes 2012: 97.

46 See Charlet 2000: 182-84 and above all Ryser 2020: 180-90, which contains a detailed discussion of whether, where and how Claudian could have been influenced by the orphic versions of Persephone's myth.

Georgics recalls perfectly the narrative context of this passage, which is located right before Proserpina's descent to Hell. If this interpretation of text and (hypo-)hypotext is correct, Eurydice's death as described by Vergil would suggest and anticipate Proserpina's descent to the Underworld, as much as a 'stormy' greening rainbow does. While Orpheus' beloved, though, is destined to the afterlife forever because of his failure, the latter will be permitted to go back to the earth thanks to her mother's power.

The passage is handled with great skill. The text progresses from description to simile. The simile then includes a composite visual sensation which loads the whole picture with the prediction of a storm. The storm symbol, in turn, functions as an anticipation of Proserpina's physical passage to a new condition as dead wife. Through this very same chromatic term, Claudian alludes to Statius in what looks like a *Kontrastimitation*: in the hypotext, *intervireo* is inserted in a negative picture (a snake ready to bite), in the text, the context is positive (a rainbow recalling the exuberant colours of the flowers).⁴⁷ In fact, the two passages are in alignment, as suggested by the threatening meaning of green and a possible second allusion to Vergil. As a final parallel, the flowers of lines 90-93 and 128-30 will provoke Proserpina's abduction into the chthonic world, as Statius's snake will send the shepherd to the afterlife. Claudian is writing with extreme compositional subtlety and shows great sensibility to multiple layers of communication: visual, emotional, symbolic, allusive. All this is suggested by the simple, yet highly conscious use of one colour-term exploited in all its possibilities.

CONCLUSION

Colourful details in *Rapt. Pros.* 2.90-132 respond to the late antique taste for strong, polychromatic visualisation, and are fully aligned with the depiction of Mount Etna as a *locus amoenus* present in the literary tradition. Nevertheless, both the aesthetic effects and the symbolic charge of such colours suggest a contrast with what superficially appears as an idyllic atmosphere. In the first example discussed, the insistence

47 For a definition of *Kontrastimitation*, Kaufmann 2017: 156-58.

on red hues varied in darkness and saturation, and the fading of reds into dull and dark purples prepare the reader for the erotic and chthonic character of this myth. In the second, contrasts between whites and different types of dark or saturated hues remind of the struggle between life and death, chastity and sexuality, that this poem thematizes. Finally, the use of the verb *intervireo* plays on multiple chromatic dimensions to create an ominous atmosphere, enhanced by an intertextual reference to Statius and Virgil. The rainbow and the allusion to the snake stress the concept of 'bridge' between upper and underworld, and become themselves a 'bridge' between temporal events, an anticipation of Proserpina's death.

The present paper confirms Coombe's statement that Claudian can skilfully bend colour to multiple needs: aesthetic, decorative, emotional and also narrative. To recall her words, cohesion may not be found in *De Raptu Proserpinae*'s rational and chronological presentation of facts, but certainly in the symbolic meanings of its chromatic effects.⁴⁸ However, my approach differs both from hers and from previous contributions in two ways. On the one hand, I have considered the formal and aesthetic choices (for example, the degradation of colours in lines 90-93) as neither separate nor in opposition to the symbolic meanings, but parallel -if not necessary- to them and equally important in suggesting the interpretation of the text. On the other, the discussion has introduced a more precise perspective on chromatic dimensions, which has made it possible to bring attention to more than the single colour (hue), or the single light effect. The focus on brightness, saturation and hue has allowed me to offer a more detailed and comprehensive understanding of the effect of colours-terms on the reader's visual perception of the text, emotions and expectations. Not only do variations within brightness anticipate Proserpina's abduction; juxtapositions and contrasts between different degrees of saturation and hue are also essential for Claudian's narration. Finally, it has been highlighted that colour choices engage with multiple literary models at a formal but above all contextual level. Chromatic allusions to previous texts, in particular an undetected parallel with Vergil's *Georgics* and a not-yet-analysed reference to Statius' *Thebaid*, are the key to disclose the genuine

48 Coombe 2017: 242.

character of the ekphrasis and, therefore, become elements of storytelling in their own right.

With my analysis, I wish to suggest that a similar, multi-perspective and complex approach to colour in poetry might open new possibilities for a more complete interpretation of Claudian's work. A viewpoint that encompasses style and meaning can show how late antique colourful descriptions do not have only a decorative function and are not only part of mosaic-like, formally disjoint narrations. Colours suggest that both formal patterns and symbolic meanings can be fragmentary and connected, or coherent even when the single detail is stressed.

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