THE SOURCES AND THE ART OF PRUDENTIUS'
PSYCHOMACHIA

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DISCUSSIONS of the background to Prudentius' poem have usually presented an all-or-nothing quality. Opinion splits sharply as to whether the *Psychomachia* has, in any significant sense, sources at all. Many scholars would deny that the poem has any more specific ante-cedents than the Pauline *topos* which opposes *sarx* and *psyche*, *caro* and *spiritus*. On the other hand, a few critics find a total inspiration for the poem in one or another passage of patristic homiletics.[1]

Those passages which have been suggested as possible inspirations for Prudentius' epic—Tertullian's *De spectaculis* 29, Cyprian's *De mortalitate* 4, and Ambrose's *De Cain et Abel* 1. 4. 13 ff.—agree in general content, and, in their agreement, prove equally and similarly unsatisfying as explanations of Prudentius' poem.[2] All three, insofar as they suggest a *conflictus* between various vices and various virtues, merely reflect the Pauline *topos* which all scholars see animating the poem. But they involve further problems which recourse to the general Pauline background perhaps avoids. Although all three passages describe combats, none refers to the exact battles which occur in the *Psychomachia*, nor does any even faintly suggest the exact manner in which Prudentius chooses to describe his warfare. Further, labeling all three passages as sources suggests that the *Psychomachia* describes only a *colluctatio vitiorum et virtutum*. Elevating these analogues to the status of "source" will leave undiscussed two of the most striking passages in Pruden-tius' poem: the *praefatio* based on Genesis 14 and the conclusion describing the construction of the *novum templum cordis*.

Even as the specific-source approach to the *Psychomachia* appears unten-able, so also does the general Pauline approach. Prudentius clearly owes much to Paul, but his indebtedness is precise, specific: the poem is a pastiche of very clear, though eclectic, borrowings, a pastiche unified by careful re-course to late fourth-century allegorical methods. Prudentius is a poet of

1. Compare, for example, the expansiveness of M. Lavarenne in suggesting *De spectaculis* 29 as Prudentius' source (*Prudence*, vol. 3: "*Psychomachie*," "*Contre Symmaque*" [Paris, 1948], p. 23): "Le programme de la *Psychomachie* y est si nettement indiqué qu'on ne peut s'empêcher de se de-mander si ce n'est pas là que Prudence, qui semble avoir lu avec profit plus d'un traité de Tertullien, a pris le sujet de son poème." In contrast, Christian Gnilka, *Studien zur "Psychomachie" des Pru-dentius* (Wiesbaden, 1963), pp. 6–9, notes the suggested sources but states that the poem is best seen as a "poetische Exposition der paulinischen Gegenüberstellung σάρξ–πνεῦμα" (p. 7). Gnilka cites such general Pauline passages as Gal. 5:17 and Rom. 7:23.

2. For the texts, see Tertullian's *Opera* (ed. August Reifferscheid and Georg Wissowa), *CSEL*, 20:28, lines 7–12; Cyprian's *Opera* (ed. Wilhelm Hartel), *CSEL*, 3.1:299, lines 10–21; Ambrose's *Opera* (ed. Karl Schenkl), *CSEL*, 32.1, esp. p. 348, lines 3–22.

renovatio, of making the old anew, and that is both his Pauline theme and the core of his poetic method.[3] In examining the types of source material on which Prudentius relied in the three main parts of his poem—*praefatio*, *colluctatio*, *aedificatio*—one can see how the poet was able to create from inherited materials a careful poem on the renovation of the Christian man.

The prologue, with the story of Abraham's battles (Genesis 14), is simultaneously the least original portion of the poem and in artistic terms the most important. In his conclusion (*praef.* 50–68),[4] Prudentius states succinctly the commonplaces of Christian interpretations of Genesis 14–18, but these interpretations, because they are platitudes, provide a fitting context for all that ensues. In effect, the remainder of the *Psychomachia* only amplifies and renders more concise the spiritual development which Prudentius outlines here. Or to state the same point in more directly rhetorical language, the remainder of the *Psychomachia* translates into new and schematic representational terms the materials of the *praefatio*.

That Abraham is central to any discussion of the Christian life reflects Pauline argument. One can point to at least three passages which Prudentius intends his reader to remember. Preeminently, Prudentius thinks of Paul's magisterial discussion in Romans 4: "non enim per legem promissio Abrahae, aut semini ejus, ut heres esset mundi; sed per justitiam fidei" (4:13). Further allusion to Abraham as "father of faith" will recur much later in the poem when Prudentius elevates Fides to the status of *regina virtutum* (716, 823). But beyond this passage, Prudentius also has in mind Galatians—both the discussion of Abraham at 3:6–18 and the great example of Paul's *renovatio* of the Old Law at 4:21–31. Isaac, the true *filius promissionis*, looks toward a new testament of freedom, a spiritual Jerusalem above, a topic to which Prudentius will allude in the later *aedificatio*. And Prudentius' prologue also draws (in this case verbally) upon Hebrews 7 for its discussion of Melchisedek, whom Paul sees explicitly as forerunner of Christ, the true priest.

But Prudentius goes far beyond Paul in the degree of allegorical detail about Abraham which he presents. Gal. 4:24 presents an *allegoria;* Prudentius explicitly a *figura*, a "linea, / quam nostra recto uita resculpat pede" (50–51).[5] The way which Abraham shows and which every Christian must tread is the material provided by the tradition of early Christian exegesis. Allegorical—or figural—discussion of the patriarch had begun with Philo,[6] and

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3. Prudentius' numerous Virgilian echoes should be interpreted within the same critical framework. The poem makes anew the Pauline matrix on which it draws, transfers and rearranges, reinterprets its materials in a new context. Similarly, Prudentius chooses to place Virgilian locutions in a context where they refer to a war involving a supernational destiny and heritage, the attempt to found an inner model of the ultimate *civitas caelestis*.

4. All references are to Lavarenne's text (n. 1).

5. See Eric Auerbach's definitive account, "*Figura*," in *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature: Six Essays* (New York, 1959), pp. 11–76.

6. Philo's account of the warfare of Genesis 14 occurs at *De Abraham* 41. 236–44. Comparison with the Ambrosian account will show that the bishop of Milan translates Philo's reason-centered allegory into more explicitly Christian terms. This translation renders suspect Morton W. Bloomfield's designation of Philo alone as Prudentius' inspiration; see "A Source of Prudentius' *Psychomachia*," *Speculum* 18 (1943): 87–90.

it clearly shapes Prudentius' prologue. The general features of such commentary are well illustrated in Ambrose's tract *De Abraham*.

The great bishop of Milan provides a clear overview of the Christian, the
renewed, sense of Abraham's career at the start of his figural analysis. In
Abraham the human mind is purified into an image of virtue (just as the
earth had earlier been purified by the Flood); all fleshly passion is removed,
and the patriarch learns self-government, self-control.[7] In Abraham's progress to this inner purity, the battle with the kings proves a central event.
In defeating the kings, who represent the five senses and the four elements
which combine to make the carnal man, Abraham demonstrates his conquest of his own carnality.[8] By his victory, the patriarch stands as a *mens
plena prudentia iustitiaque*, a man ready to be filled with divine *sapientia*.
In refusing the spoil he has won (Gen. 14:22-24), Abraham demonstrates
his new immunity to the blandishments of the flesh. He is now prepared to
enter his covenant with the Lord: to receive both the *spiritus sapientiae*
and, through Isaac, a promise of *hereditas*.[9] Prudentius' prologue introduces
the purification of the spirit as a necessary preparation for the renewed
Christian *hereditas* of heaven, a promise demonstrated in the *aedificatio
templi cordis*.

In the remainder of the poem, both *colluctatio* and *aedificatio*, Prudentius
is much more directly inspired by Paul. But this inspiration is not, as is
usually suggested, general; rather it comes from a quite specific matrix—
the lyrical Epistle to the Ephesians. This brief and nonlegalistic document
introduces all the leading themes of the *Psychomachia*. This epistle deserves
more searching scrutiny than it has heretofore received, because it provides
definitive source material for four leading themes of Prudentius' poem:
Ephesians contains the most explicit Pauline passage on the spiritual edifice
or *templum* within the individual Christian (3:14-19); it has the most
extended Pauline discussion of *militia spiritualis* (6:10-20);[10] it comments

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7. *De Abraham* 2. 1. 1 (*CSEL*, 32.1:565, lines 6-16).

8. *De Abraham* 2. 7. 41 (*CSEL*, 32.1:596, lines 5-9). The triumph is associated (2. 7. 42 = p. 597,
lines 4-8) with the traditional allegorization of Abraham's 318 companions, who represent *uita*
gained through belief in Christ's passion. This belief implies, for Ambrose, the cross itself as Abraham's standard (cf. Prudentius' Sobrietas at lines 347 ff.) and hence a mind fulfilled in *sapientia*
and *iustitia*. The phrase *mens plena prudentia iustitiaque* comes from 2. 8. 45 = p. 599, lines 1-2.

9. For Abraham's turning his back on worldly desires, see *De Abraham* 2. 8. 46 (*CSEL*, 32.1:599,
lines 14-15). The *hereditas* discussion begins with 2. 8. 48 = p. 601, lines 15-17. Cf. also 2. 8. 48 =
p. 602, lines 2-11 for further discussion of Abraham's rejecting the flesh¹y to receive the *spiritus
sapientiae*.

10. The standard treatment of spiritual warfare is Adolf Harnack, "*Militia Christi": Die
Christliche Religion und der Soldatenstand in den ersten drei Jahrhunderten* (Tübingen, 1905), esp.
pp. 8-46. Harnack traces the development of the *miles Christi* metaphor: originally used in the
epistles only of missionaries, it becomes a general Christian imperative in Tertullian and Cyprian.
Traditional heroic types in the early Church include the martyr (who holds vigorously to the military oath he has taken to the Faith at baptism; cf. Prudentius' Pudicitia); in the east, the monk
(who triumphs spiritually over the temptations of demons); and, less commonly, the Christian who
attempts to silence heresy (cf. Prudentius' final battle). That Christianity is a religion of *pax*—and
of a warfare only spiritual—is reflected in the desire to allegorize Old Testament battle scenes,
to make them into psychic struggles as Ambrose does with Abraham. Harnack's discussion is
complemented by Hilarius Edmonds, "Geistlicher Kriegsdienst: Der Topos der *militia spiritualis* in
der antiken Philosophie," in Odo Casel, ed., *Heilige Überlieferung: Ausschnitte aus der Geschichte des
Mönchtums und des heiligen Kultes* (Münster, 1938), pp. 21-50.

extensively upon the necessity of *unitas* or *pax* among all members of the church; and it insists continually upon a Christian *sapientia* (*veritas*, *intelligentia*, *prudentia*, *scientia* are frequently occurring synonyms) as a necessary underpinning of a new life in the Lord. Most particularly, the insistence upon *pax* or *unitas* in Ephesians seems to have captured Prudentius, for his warfare has *requies* as its ultimate goal, and this tranquillity allows construction of the inner temple, itself only a foretaste of the peace that passes understanding in the New Jerusalem (*visio pacis*).

As an example of the eclectic manner in which Prudentius sometimes handles this Pauline material, one may examine the use of the passage on spiritual warfare at the end of the epistle. These verses from Ephesians 6 form in a general manner the source for the whole *colluctatio*, but Prudentius uses them as discernible verbal inspiration only for the first two combats in the poem. And this poetic use clearly treats the original Pauline text as something less than absolutely sacrosanct: the warfare of the two basic Prudentian virtues, Fides and Pudicitia, must be measured by its distance from the source, by the extent to which it is deliberate *renovatio Pauli*, as well as by its dependence on some Pauline details.

Paul is preoccupied in Ephesians 6 by his sense of the *dies mali* which the Ephesians face, by the possibility of demonic temptation and persecution in this world. In contrast, Prudentius sees man's constant daily fight as against those enemies whom Paul rejects, *caro et sanguis* (12). For Prudentius, self-mastery (Paul's subject in Eph. 4:17–5:21) must precede any true resistance of external forces. Thus, when he alludes to the famous center of the Pauline account, Prudentius deliberately reminds us of the source's details, but only to rearrange them forcefully: "in omnibus sumentes scutum fidei, in quo possitis omnia tela nequissimi ignea extinguere. Et galeam salutis assumite, et gladium spiritus (quod est verbum Dei). . . ." (17–18). Prudentius' Fides, who initiates the *conflictus* of the *Psychomachia*, is carefully described as unarmed, without shield or covering, protected only by her own ardor (23–27). In this sense, she may be *ignea*,[11] as her opponent, Veterum Cultura Deorum, is not; nonetheless, in her zeal, she literally extinguishes a nonfiery opponent, for Prudentius insists upon her stopping the breath of her adversary (33–35). The martial description deliberately recalls the source, but recalls it so that the reader becomes aware of Prudentius' inversion of the details, just as the poet inverts Paul's statement, "non est nobis colluctatio adversus carnem et sanguinem" (Eph. 6:12).

Pudicitia, the second virtue to enter the combat, includes those actions most directly opposed to the domination of the spirit by the flesh. Her combat thus may be expected to state the norm of all spiritual warfare; and, having made the point that the locale of his *colluctatio* differs from that suggested by Paul, Prudentius can return to the source in Ephesians and use it straightforwardly. Thus the details of Eph. 6:17–18 inverted in the Fides–Cultura battle recur here, but without inversion: Pudicitia fights fully armed (41); she struggles against a fiery opponent (one who in death ex-

11. Cf. "repentinus laudis *calor* ad noua *feruens*" (24, my italics).

plodes in flames, rather than dying down, 43–52); she triumphs with a *gladium spiritus* (50); her triumphant speech (one of the doctrinal centers of the poem) relies directly on scripture, the *verbum Dei*, in explaining the purified flesh of Christ, the *verbum Dei* incarnate, as a hope for the purification of all Christians (69–86). Her penultimate act of washing her sword in Jordan, a glance at the sacrament of baptism (98–106), solidifies the doctrinal points involved in battle and address by implying that the Christian is a man of *caro nova*, redeemed by Christ. In consecrating her sword in a *templum* (107–8), she looks ahead to the goal of all Prudentian warfare, a life dedicated to spiritual verities alone. Both combats rely directly on the Pauline material but, by clever rearrangement of its details, call attention to the internal warfare against the flesh which Prudentius has chosen as his subject.

The exact arrangement of the combat portion of the poem deserves some further comment: neither Paul's discussion in Ephesians 6 nor the patristic passages traditionally suggested as sources for the *Psychomachia* provide any logic for the choice of opposed virtues and vices Prudentius makes. This issue is of some importance, for the poem predates by two centuries the codification of certain vices as *peccata capitalia* (made by Gregory at *Moralia in Iob* 31. 45. 87 ff.) and by seven or eight centuries a stabilized system of Christian virtues (the four cardinal and three theological virtues as a standard for theological discussion are a product of the 1140s). One may naturally wonder whether Prudentius had any theological warrant for his presentation and ordering. For this issue I cannot present any final answer, but I can point to at least one passage, Cyprian's *De zelo et livore* 16, which provides a demonstrably closer model for the vices and virtues of the poem than any "source" so far suggested:

> Non enim christiani hominis corona una est quae tempore persecutionis accipitur. habet et pax coronas suas, quibus de uaria et multiplici congressione uictores prostrato et subacto aduersario coronamur. libidinem subegisse continentiae palma est. contra iram, contra iniuriam repugnasse corona patientiae est. de auaritia triumphus est pecuniam spernere. laus est fidei fiducia futurorum mundi aduersa tolerare. et qui superbus in prosperis non est gloriam de humilitate consequitur. et qui ad pauperum fouendorum misericordiam pronus est retributionem thesauri caelestis adipiscitur. et qui zelare non nouit quique unanimis et mitis fratres suos diligit dilectionis et pacis praemio honoratur. in hoc virtutum stadio cotidie currimus, ad has iustitiae palmas et coronas sine intermissione temporis peruenimus.[12]

The Cyprian passage provides parallels for six of Prudentius' seven combats: only Sobrietas–Luxuria does not occur in some form. In some cases the virtue or vice names are not exactly parallel (e.g., *misericordia* for Prudentius' Operatio), and Cyprian's passage clearly has an organizational framework differing from Prudentius' (e.g., *fides* as a virtue for *tempora adversa* balanced against *humilitas* for *tempora prospera*).

If this passage from Cyprian is indeed a source for the *Psychomachia*, it demonstrates once again Prudentius' thoughtful rearrangement of received

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12. *CSEL*, 3.1:430, line 20–431, line 8.

materials. In the first two fights the poet shows the most important virtues in battle against their obvious opposites. In the second pair of battles, Prudentius describes basic, though essentially passive, virtuous impulses which must, by their nature, support or enter associations with other virtues (cf. 174–77, 197–201).[13] These virtues, models of fellowship (the *pax* or *concordia* to be hymned so forcefully later), oppose vices which are by their nature self-destructive, Ira and Superbia, both tendencies which would lead to dissolution of the entire human fabric. The next pair of battles deliberately echoes situations seen in the initial combats. But at this stage of the poem, warfare proves more difficult than earlier: both battles—Sobrietas against Luxuria, Operatio against Avaritia—require for triumph acts of discernment, not simply physical warfare. The vices here can appear pleasant or desirable; they are not easily rejected furies, as earlier vices were. And this need for inspired intellectual scrupulousness, careful spiritual self-examination, is clarified in the final battle of the poem: the last struggle before reaching fulfilled Christian *sapientia* requires the destruction of Discordia *cognomento Heresis* (710). The poem moves with a controlled progress—from direct action designed to control the senses vigorously (e.g., the trampled-upon eyes of Cultura, which demand a visible worldly sign of divinity, an idol) through a rational control of psychic processes to a suprarational concord which accepts God's way automatically.[14]

The third section of the poem, the creation of a new *templum* to replace the old *carcer cordis* (906), has the most obvious and easily apprehended biblical references.[15] The principal source is Revelation 21, John's description of the New Jerusalem, the true *hereditas* (cf. Gal. 4:30) and *visio pacis*. This gesture toward eschatology is important; for, as Prudentius' conclusion (888–915) makes clear, the struggle of the *Psychomachia* never ceases in this world, and only an inner *spes salutis* keeps the Christian pursuing a joyous triumph which cannot be fulfilled in time. Further, the eschatological references complete Prudentius' multileveled allegorical narrative. The literal narrative of the poem describes a physical battle, but a battle obviously

13. The lines on Patientia provide a very early example of a catch-phrase quoted throughout the Middle Ages in its later Gregorian formulation: "radix omnium custosque virtutum patientia est" (*Homiliae in evangelia* 2. 35. 9). Humilitas also conventionally is *radix virtutum*, for this virtue normally opposes pride, the *radix vitiorum*. And such biblical passages as Ecclus. 2:1–6 place the two virtues in close connection.

14. One should compare the extensive discussion of the order of battle provided by Gnilka, *Studien zur "Psychomachie,"* pp. 29–83. Both Gnilka and I agree about the way Prudentius divides his military action into three stages. But I think that study of the actual combatants involved allows some precise conclusions about Prudentius' intentions. Gnilka, in contrast, argues that "das wichtigste kompositionelle Moment des Gedichtes ist ja die Steigerung" (p. 74).

15. Gnilka's detailed textual commentary, *Studien zur "Psychomachie,"* pp. 93–124, carefully assembles a vast body of useful material. The *topos* of the inner temple has, surprisingly, never been the subject of a full-length monograph. Gerhard Bauer's monumental study, "*Claustrum Animae"*: *Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der Metapher vom Herzen als Kloster*, vol. 1: *Entstehungsgeschichte* (Munich, 1973), is sketchy on pre-Victorine materials. Roberta D. Cornelius, *The Figurative Castle: A Study of the Mediaeval Allegory of the Edifice* (Bryn Mawr, 1930), has abundant references to Latin allegories (see especially pp. 82–87) but traces the forms described in vernacular literature, rather than the development of the *topos*. The identification of the inner edifice as a *templum* is, of course, stimulated by such direct Pauline statements as 1 Cor. 6:19 and 2 Cor. 6:16, which see the purified body as the *templum Dei*.

internal. Yet this internal warfare refers simultaneously to different com-
bats: the struggle described is that of the individual Christian to achieve
an inner spiritual unity, that of the Church Militant to preserve the unity
of all its members, and that of the Christian and Church Triumphant to meet
in eternity the Lamb who is the *templum* personified (cf. Rev. 21:22). In
the ultimate terms Prudentius proposes, Christian and Church strive to
construct an inner temple which signs forth in time a unity with the Agnus
Dei which is possible only in eternity.[16]

Three of the details in the *aedificatio* deserve special consideration: the
gem walls of the temple, the pearl canopy over Sapientia's throne, and Sapi-
entia's scepter. The first, through its insistence upon the harmonious and
modulated blending of differently colored lights (851–65), provides a final
reference to the Christian *concordia* or *pax* which underpins the whole
edifice. But this *concordia* remains only a precondition for the major thrust
of the allegory, i.e., Prudentius' symbolic assertion that the purified heart
which seeks and hopes for heaven in this life will achieve its *hereditas* in
the next. The pearl, itself an allegorical expansion of Matt. 13:45 (cf. 874),
is a concrete image of this: the pearl forms a canopy, rising from an in-
voluted natural form, the conch shell (alluding to the natural source of
pearls), into a purified geometrical figure. As an emblem, the canopy re-
capitulates the subject matter of the entire poem: the Christian, through
the aid of divine *sapientia*, triumphs over his natural debilities to become
an organized and symmetrical being. And the scepter, explicitly derived from
Num. 17:8 (cf. 884), where it functions as a symbol of election, alludes to
the same spiritual process. The scepter at once replaces the *arbor vitae* of
Rev. 22:2 and represents that *arbor* within the individual. Like the symbol
of Revelation, it refers to the cross, the necessity of wise Christian reliance
on divine love for salvation. But as a symbol, Aaron's rod refers backward,
into the poem, collects and summarizes its themes. For the sprouts which
grow without natural or earthly nutriment (880) are at once the *fructus
spiritus* (cf. Gal. 5:17–25), Isaac (sign of the spiritual fruits of Abraham),
and the hope of a spiritual *hereditas* (a renewed and Christian Abraham-
covenant). At the same time, the scepter provides a forceful *renovatio* of
Aaron's rod, for it sprouts not simply leaves but also flowers (881–83),
blooms which again summarize materials of the poem. For the roses Pruden-
tius mentions are conventionally associated with martyrs, the company of
Fides; the lilies, with virgins, the rank of the blessed hymned by Pudicitia.
In this single symbol of self-mastery effected through wisdom supplied by
divine grace, Prudentius' allegorical composition reaches its greatest in-
tricacy.

Coming as it does at the climax of the poem, the scrupulously detailed

16. Prudentius has signaled this reliance on multiple allegory, the method of late fourth-century
exegesis, at the start of the poem. By replacing a more conventional address to the Muses with the
opening, "Christe, . . . dissere, rex noster" (1, 5), he makes the incarnate Word (his subject) the
speaking voice of his poem as well. Because the poem represents divine language, just as does
Scripture, it may rely on the same multiple allusiveness of meaning contemporary theologians
readily found in the Bible.

description of the *aedificatio* should not surprise us. For there Prudentius repeats in smaller and more intricate compass the imaginative acts he has performed throughout the poem. The poet works by deliberately pillaging specific sources; his brilliance resides in the tastefulness and in the sureness with which he recombines these materials. The prevalence of discernibly borrowed subjects in the poem is important, for Prudentius constantly adjusts his sources, renovates them, to accord with a new kind of epic and with a new and allusive way of making poetic meanings. Both method and material for the poem's allegories come ultimately from the Pauline matrix with which the work has always been associated. But Prudentius subjects Paul and other biblical materials to the methods of fourth-century exegesis, with its emphasis on multiple allusions arising from a single literal text. And this controlled allusiveness unifies both the poem and the discrete sources on which it draws.

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