

COLOURFUL LANGUAGE IN CLAUDIAN'S  
*DE RAPTU PROSERPINAЕ*

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LENGUAJE COLORIDO EN *DE RAPTU*  
*PROSERPINAЕ* DE CLAUDIANO

**ABSTRACT:** The *De Raptu Proserpinae*, like much late antique poetry, is highly visual, and contains an abundance of colour imagery. This article argues that the use of colour terms to depict light and dark should be analysed systematically, within a holistic reading of the poem as a text about the recurrent chaos of the underworld. It demonstrates that this language reveals the driving theme of the poem to be the ability of Dis both to stain and make pale the people, places, and objects upon which his power of chthonic chaos is inflicted.

**KEYWORDS:** colour; late antiquity; poetics; Claudian; darkness.

**RESUMEN:** El *De Raptu Proserpinae*, como mucha de la poesía de la Antigüedad tardía, es altamente visual, y contiene abundantes imágenes de color. Este artículo argumenta que el uso de términos de color para representar la luz y la oscuridad debe ser analizado sistemáticamente, dentro de una lectura holística del poema como un texto sobre el caos recurrente del inframundo. Este lenguaje revela que el tema principal del poema es la capacidad de Dite tanto de manchar como de hacer palidecer a las personas, los lugares y los objetos sobre los que obra su poder del caos ctónico.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** color; la Antigüedad tardía; poética; Claudiano; oscuridad.

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‘Claudian... lingers fondly over his work, seeking to bring before the eye the presentment of his conception by massing colour upon colour... The reader sees in Claudian’s case and feels in Virgil’s<sup>1</sup>.’

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<sup>1</sup> Glover 1901: 224.

As Glover shows us, the abundance of terms and striking imagery denoting colour in the poetry of Claudian, and in late antique literature more widely, is a long-recognized phenomenon. It is, in many ways, a clear development of a rhetorical approach, which goes back to Cicero, to the ornamentation of texts and speeches in ways which parallel the chromatic variety and vivid brilliance of the visual arts<sup>2</sup>. Indeed, the full extent of the relationship between late antique literature and art is continuing to receive scholarly attention, both in terms of the composition and the ornamentation of texts<sup>3</sup>. However, limited attention has been given to the way in which the specific use of visuality in the poetry of Claudian contributes to the overall interpretation of each poem, over and above its contribution to poetic *ornatus*. The intention of this paper is to examine one particular aspect of the visual in Claudian's *De Raptu Proserpinae* (*Rapt. Pros.*): the use of colour to reflect light and dark. It will argue that two aspects of colouring are used throughout the poem to indicate manifestations of underworld chaos: firstly the use of dark colours to indicate staining by underworld night, and secondly the use of pale colours to indicate the draining of colour by underworld forces<sup>4</sup>. By use of these two techniques of visual description, Claudian is able to link the different episodes that make up his poem so that they form a coherent narrative about the recurrence of chaos in his universe.

Colours in Claudian, I shall argue, function beyond ornamentation to act as symbolic signifiers for the wider themes which unite the poem<sup>5</sup>. In this way they serve to link the otherwise seemingly disjointed episodes from which the poem is constructed, and to emphasize that the overarching level at which the poem can be read holistically is concerned with universal forces and the harmony of the cosmos. Claudian is therefore using the visual elements of his poetry in a way which goes beyond the ornamentation recommended for rhetoric and poetry by his predecessors<sup>6</sup>, transforming them into factors which contribute to the poem's structure and message at the level of its construction. There are ninety-seven colour terms in the *Rapt. Pros.*, as well as eleven terms for painting and colouring.

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<sup>2</sup> Cicero uses the term *color* to describe the use of ornamentation added to rhetoric which allows it to reflect the vividness and variety of the visual arts (Cic. *Fin.* 2.3.10); other key terms which reflect the visual transformed into literary techniques include *flos*, *lumen* and *uarietas*, all of which reflect the brightness and decoration of the visual arts. The same relationship between decoration in art and in text can be seen in Horace's formulation: *ut pictura poesis* (Horace *A. P.* 361).

<sup>3</sup> In particular, Roberts 1989. See also Mehmel 1940; MacMullen 1964; MacCormack 1981. On Claudian, Gruzelier 1990.

<sup>4</sup> I do not think it is sufficient to conclude, as Galand (1987) argues concerning this text, that the effect of *ecphrasis* is confined to ornamentation and variety, on the one hand, and emotional effect upon the reader, on the other, and that thus, in so far as it acts symbolically, its role is to signify the poetic art of the author.

<sup>5</sup> It should be noted, however, that a similar means of reading has also been applied to Virgil's *Aeneid*, although that poem does not suffer the same accusations of disjointedness or lack of coherent uniting narrative. Edgeworth 1979.

<sup>6</sup> For a detailed discussion of the use of *color* as a technical term in literary *ornatus*, see Roberts 1989: 38-59.

An analysis of these contributes not only to a better understanding of the visual scenes of the poem, but also of the nature of late antique poetry and its construction out of individual episodes and symbolic elements. If colour terms are understood as recurrent signifiers, they can be interpreted as one way in which all the constituent parts of late antique poetry (contrary to popular claims about its disjointed appearance) do function to create a poem which can be read holistically, albeit at a more abstracted level than the individual parts of the text<sup>7</sup>.

The *Rapt. Pros.* is made up of three books, of 288, 372, and 448 hexameter lines respectively, and books one and two are preceded by prefaces in elegiacs. The story is drawn from the myth of Proserpina. In the first book, following a preface about the first sailor to venture on to the ocean, Dis threatens rebellion against heaven because he is without a wife; his anger is quelled by the Fates who suggest that he ask Jupiter for a bride, which Jupiter agrees to grant, choosing Proserpina, daughter of Ceres, who has been hidden by her mother on Aetna. Jupiter sends Venus to lure her out from the safety of the palace where she is weaving a tapestry of the universe, and Dis prepares his horses for a journey to the upper world. The preface to book two contains a dedication to Florentinus, and tells the story of Orpheus being inspired by Hercules. In book two itself, Venus, Diana, and Pallas invite Proserpina out to pick flowers, when Dis tunnels through and suddenly seizes Proserpina, who is nonetheless able to give a long speech of reproach, in response to which Dis is softened and promises her all the wonders of the underworld. Back in the underworld, torments are lifted and the marriage is prepared. Book three opens with the council of the gods, at which Jupiter forbids anyone to tell Ceres where her daughter is; Ceres herself is away with Cybele, where she dreams of a bay tree being cut down by Furies and sees an image of her daughter suffering terribly. She returns to Aetna to find the palace in ruins and Electra, the nurse, tells her the story of the attack. Ceres, maddened by grief, sets off to find her daughter, cutting trees for torches from the sacred grove where the spoils from the gigantomachy hang, to light her way on her search.

The poem is constructed from a series of episodes – speeches, ecphrases, and sections of linear narrative, often punctuated by lengthy similes – within which certain elements, such as described objects or characters, appear to be privileged. Three broad stages can be discerned to the poem's story, each of which is ultimately concerned with the release and suppression of chaos in the universe, beginning with the war Dis threatens against heaven at the opening to the first book. The first two stages correspond with the first two books, the first opening with

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<sup>7</sup> Claudian's *Rapt. Pros.* has attracted accusations of inconsistency in characterization and narrative, which apply only if one reads the poem in linear terms, expecting unity at the level of the text. (For an overview of ways the *Rapt. Pros.* has been interpreted, Charlet 2000.) A preferable way of reading is that proposed by Roberts for late antique literature, whereby the individual building blocks are understood to inform, and be informed by, an overarching message at which level they cohere. Roberts 1988: 188.

the chaos of the underworld threat, which is quelled by the promise of a bride, and the second building up to the rape of Proserpina, in which the chaos threatened against heaven is transferred on to the body of the bride. In each case, the stage is driven forward by the threat of chaos, which is then apparently harmonized, first by the pledge and then by the wedding; the recurrence of chaos in each successive stage reveals, however, that the harmony is, indeed, only apparent. In the third stage, the chaos is again transferred, this time from Proserpina to her mother, Ceres. The image of Ceres as a force for universal disorder is developed throughout the third book; since the *Rapt. Pros.* remains unfinished, it permits the tempting hypothesis that there would have been a final harmonization at the end of a fourth book. This recurrent theme of chaos is made to permeate the poem through the way in which it appears in each constituent episode and is signified by the privileged elements within each episode.

One way in which recurrent chaos is symbolized is through visual depiction of the privileged elements within the text. Specifically, the colour of objects, for example flowers or clothes, indicates the way in which they fulfil this symbolic role. Therefore, the dark of the chaotic underworld at the opening of book one establishes the relationship between terms for darkness and the threat of underworld uprising. The recurrence of dark colours in the rest of the poem, especially in terms of staining, either prefigures a further transfer of underworld chaos on to a new part of the universe, or forms part of the manifestation of that chaos. Similarly, the power of the underworld to cause pallor is established as a feature of the deathly battle camp, but it too recurs to symbolize each new appearance of deathly paleness brought about by Dis' permeation of the upper-world and his assault upon its inhabitants. In this way, it can be seen that the recurrence of colour symbols across the three books forms a link between them, by which the threat of universal upheaval in book one can be shown to have been transferred into the upper world and on to Proserpina in the subsequent books. This is foreshadowed in the events leading up to the rape in book two, manifested in the appearance of Proserpina in the dream sequence at the opening to book three, and finally revisited in the narrative of Electra towards the end of the third book. In this paper I will examine all references to colour, light, and dark which contribute to the visuality of the scene and the theme of chaos, regardless of whether the terms pertain only to the visual or could also have wider connotations.

#### DARKNESS: PREFIGURED AND MANIFESTED

Claudian has a number of worlds to create in the *Rapt. Pros.* which do not remain independent of one another. On one level these correspond to the underworld and the upper world, but he also distinguishes between the mortal world and heaven; within the underworld there is a distinction at different points between Tartarus and Elysium, and between the underworld under the power of Dis

unhappy and the power of Dis happy in his marriage. However, none of these remains exclusive, and the theme of boundary breakdown is crucial to the way in which chaos moves from the underworld into the upper world, not against Jupiter, as originally proposed, but against Proserpina as a surrogate victim. Claudian is able to link the worlds that Dis causes to merge when he breaks down the boundary between his world and Proserpina's, depicting the underworld as a place which his audience can see; one of the ways in which this is achieved is by means of its colour. He expresses this in terms of darkness, which he is then able to transfer on to the upper world, to impress upon the eye of the reader the way in which the chaos of the underworld threat is staining the upper world<sup>8</sup>. Specifically it stains Proserpina, as will be seen in the third book when she appears transformed in the dream sequence. Key terms for this underworld staining are those etymologically connected to *caligo*, which appears in all three books, once as a participle from the verb *caligo* and twice as the noun *caligo*. While not simple colour terms, since they also reflect the concept of darkness, these words clearly establish a visual image of darkness, specifically, the darkness of the underworld<sup>9</sup>.

The first instance of the term is especially important as it appears in the second line of the first book, in the first introduction of the underworld setting:

*inferni raptoris equos adflataque curru  
sidera Taenario caligantesque profundae  
Iunonis thalamos audaci promere cantu  
mens concussa iubet. (Rapt. Pros. 1.1-4)*

the horses of the underworld plunderer  
and the stars breathed upon by his Taenarian chariot-team  
and the dark marriage chambers of Juno of the lower world:  
these my inspired mind orders me to bring forth in bold song<sup>10</sup>.

*Caligantes*, a term perhaps best translated here as 'darkening' or 'gloom-some' to reflect both visual darkness and atmosphere, specifically describes the *thalamos*, the only indication of place in this summary of the poem's content. The connotations are wide-reaching. On the one hand, the effect is to depict the underworld specifically in terms of the wedding venue and home to Proserpina that it will become, prefiguring both the rape and the transformation

<sup>8</sup> The use of darkness as a symbol also occurs recurrently in the world of Statius' *Thebaid*, as explored in Moreland: 1975.

<sup>9</sup> The word is mentioned by André (1949) but does not have its own entry. It is perhaps notable that although Claudian uses it specifically of underworld darkness, it also has intertextual connotations of the threat of rape, since it is used of the darkness Jupiter draws down to conceal his rape of Io: Ovid *Met.* 1.598.

<sup>10</sup> All translations are my own, although I am indebted to the influence of Gruzelier's 1993 translation.

of Proserpina from virgin to *profunda Iuno*; however, by the qualification that these *thalamos* are *caligantes*, both the marriage act and living space of the girl are immediately established in negative terms by the use of the dark image. If the sense of *thalamos* is also understood to refer to the marriage itself (as might particularly be suggested by the use of the plural<sup>11</sup>), there is a further connotation, since the gloom creates an atmosphere to establish the marriage as an unhappy one from the poem's very opening. Claudian is possibly imitating Statius *Theb.* 4.526-27: *Stygiaeque seueros / Iunonis thalamos*<sup>12</sup>, in which case the decision to colour the bridal chamber with darkness is even more significant, highlighting his deliberate use of the visual as a signifier, rather than employing the adjective *seueros*. The significance of the darkness is highlighted by its juxtaposition with light in the form of the stars, a motif which appears in the narrative of boundary breakdown in book 2, when the horses' breath darkens the sky (2.192). Here, too, the stars are subject to injurious breath from the underworld chariot team (1.1-2), paralleling the world from which Proserpina has come with the world in which she will be queen, the stars also reminding the reader that the rape is not only an attack against Proserpina but a transfer of an attack against heaven.

This initial darkness recurs as a theme in the narrative of Dis' attack, again in terms of contrasting the darkness of the underworld with the light of the upper world, and opposing the world of Proserpina's happiness to the chaos of the underworld which has broken into that world and to which she is to be subjected:

*rutilos obscurat anhelitus axes  
discolor et longa solitos caligine pasci  
terrui orbis equos. (Rapt. Pros. 2.192-94)*

the breath of that other colour obscures  
the bright heavens and the sun's orb terrifies horses  
accustomed to feeding long on darkness.

Claudian uses the effect of seeing the light, which terrifies the horses, to remind the reader that the animals should be grazing in the gloom of the underworld<sup>13</sup>. The skies of this upper world are not merely light, they are *rutilos axes*, the opposite of the *anhelitus discolor* which the horses inflict upon them,

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Verg. *Aen.* 10.649; Ov. *Met.* 1.658, 7.22, 12.193; *Am.* 1.8.19; *Fast.* 3.689; Hor. *C.* 1.15.16; Mart. 10.63.7; Sen. *Agam.* 256, 992; Val. Fl. 1.226.

<sup>12</sup> Gruzelier 1993: 83; there are also notable similarities between the beginnings of each epic in general, especially *Theb.* 1.3: *Pierius menti calor incidit*.

<sup>13</sup> Gruzelier takes the ablative to mean 'in darkness'; however, since *pasci* would ordinarily take the ablative, it seems likely that the horses not only feed in the dark, but actually feed on darkness (as Platnauer translates).

darkness obscuring (*obscurat*) light<sup>14</sup>. *Rutilus*, which carries connotations of red through to golden yellow, gives an image both of the sun's brightness and its colour<sup>15</sup>. *Discolor* here reflects the first of the two meanings that André gives: 'that which is not the same colour'<sup>16</sup>. Here this means the gloom of the underworld in opposition to the light, the gloom lacking any of the bright visible appearance of the upper world, and the power of the infectious breath to take away colour from the upper world scene (as Dis will of the flowers, 3.238-41). Its emphasis is on the difference between the brightness and the breath of the horses; the horses are not only out of place away from their accustomed darkness, they also bring it with them on their breath, and act as symbols of the darkness that marriage to Dis will inflict upon Proserpina.

The predicted transfer of chaotic darkness on to Proserpina by means of her rape is made clear in the dream sequence in which she appears to Ceres in book 3, where *caligo* is used again:

*squalebat pulchrior auro  
caesaries et nox oculorum infecerat ignes  
exhaustusque gelu pallet rubor, ille superbi  
flammeus oris honos, et non cessura pruinis  
membra colorantur picei caligine regni. (Rapt. Pros. 3.86-90)*

her hair more beautiful than gold  
was filthy and night had stained the fire of her eyes  
and her blush grew pale, drained with cold, that fiery glory  
of her noble face, and limbs which would not cede to the frosts [in whiteness]  
are coloured by the dark of the pitch-black realm.

Her limbs, which are usually as white as the hoar frost (*pruinis*), are turned black by the darkness of the underworld (*caligine*). The use of *picei*, which carries the emphasis of its non-transferred meaning of 'pitchy' or 'pitch black', from *pix*, has connotations, not only of the ultimate blackness of that substance, but also of its viscous, staining qualities<sup>17</sup>; it is also particularly used of the underworld<sup>18</sup>. The

<sup>14</sup> Notably, the TLL lists *obscuritas*, as well as *squalor*, as synonyms for *caligo*, the accumulation of similar terms heightening the overall impression of darkness in these lines.

<sup>15</sup> Virgil uses the colour to describe flame, reflecting the same brightness, *Aen.* 8.430. See further André 1949: 85-8.

<sup>16</sup> André 1949: 126, cf. Bradley 2009: 140. The term is not negative or even dark in and of itself, (and is not used as such elsewhere in Claudian: *Cons. Stil.* 3.289; *c.m.* 26.40) but rather simply reflects, in the words of the TLL, '*i. q. diuerso uarioue colore*', which makes it so here in the underworld context. Cf. the underworld usage of the word by Virgil: *discolor unde auri per ramos aura refulsit* (*Aen.* 6.204).

<sup>17</sup> These dual connotations may have a precedent in *Aen.* 9.813, where Turnus breaks into a sweat like a river of pitch (*piceum...fluuium*).

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Claud. *Ruf.* 1.121; Ov. *Met.* 2.800; Prud. *Ham.* 825.

idea that her body has been stained or tinged is also carried by the verb *colorantur* to describe her limbs, the colouring of pure white with darkness emphasising the attack upon her chastity, her bodily transfer to the underworld (paralleled by the transfer here of the underworld on to her body), and the transfer of the chaos that had been threatened against Jupiter physically on to the body of Proserpina.

The staining black of the underworld upon her white skin reflects the similar effect of night upon her eyes: their brightness, expressed by the use of *ignes*, has also been stained or tinged (*infecerat*) by the black of night (*nox*), the verb also carrying connotations of tainting or spoiling<sup>19</sup>. Her hair is described as once having been more beautiful than gold, which carries a similar sense of a lightness or brightness now tainted, and the verb *squalebat* brings out the connotations of dirt and decay which are suitable for Claudian's underworld. Specifically, it recalls the scene in book one of *Dis* in gloomy majesty in the underworld, where it was used to describe his sceptre amid a scene characterized by its darkness:

*ipse rudi fultus solio nigraque uerendus  
maiestate sedet: squalent inmania foedo  
sceptra situ; sublime caput maestissima nubes  
asperat et dirae riget inclementia formae;  
terrorem dolor augebat. (Rapt. Pros. 1.79-83)*

He sat supported by a rough throne and awesome  
in black majesty: his great sceptre was filthy  
with foul decay; the most gloomy cloud made fierce  
his lofty head and the harshness of his dreadful form grew stiff;  
resentment increased his terribleness.

The gloomy cloud which surrounds his head gives a sense both of melancholy and a dark mood manifested in physical darkness (1.80-81), and Claudian makes this link between the god's feelings and his appearance partly explicit when he tells the reader: *dirae riget inclementia formae*. His very majesty is described as black (*nigra*), as Claudian makes use of visual colour to describe the whole atmosphere of this underworld throne-room<sup>20</sup>. In the scene, the king and his kingdom are characterized by the same darkness which will be transferred on to Proserpina by means of her rape, and the sceptre, symbol of his power, has been made filthy by underworld horror. His power will, with the rape, transfer to the pure white body of Proserpina.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. *Ov. Met.* 13.601; *Plin. H.N.* 6.19.22, 11.37.56, 28.7.23; *Stat. Theb.* 1.124; 11.423; *Verg. G.* 3.481, *Aen.* 7. 341.

<sup>20</sup> *Niger* frequently carries connotations of death; see Clarke 2003 102-4.



However, as well as the staining of the underworld darkness upon Proserpina in the dream sequence, it is also significant to note that the underworld chaos has had a draining quality, drawing life from her cheeks and turning them from pink to white (*exhaustusque gelu pallet rubor*)<sup>21</sup>. As will be discussed below, the power of the underworld is not only to darken but also to drain colour, and this effect on Proserpina is also prefigured in the colour imagery of the first two books. The extent of the effect is enhanced by the juxtaposition in the line of *pallet* and *rubor*, with the reference to *gelu*, a term which suggests not only cold, but specifically the chill of fear and death<sup>22</sup>. The draining or emptying (*exhaustus*) of colour by means of Proserpina's entrapment in the underworld is made all the more emphatic when compared with the blush that emphasised her vulnerability and virginity when Venus first arrived to entice her out of the palace, as part of Jupiter's plot to sacrifice Proserpina to Dis and thus stop him attacking heaven<sup>23</sup>:

*et niueos infecit purpura uultus  
per liquidas succensa genas castaeque pudoris  
illuxere faces: non sic decus ardet eburnum,  
Lydia Sidonio quod femina tinxerit ostro. (Rapt. Pros. 1.272-75)*

and purple tinged her snow-white face  
kindled in her smooth cheeks and chaste torches of modesty  
began to glow: not with such beauty does ivory glow,  
which the Lydian woman has stained with Sidonian purple.

Here her face is also tinged or stained (*infecit*) but with a blush (*purpura*), contrasted to the whiteness of her face (*niueos*); the use of the simile to describe the effect repeats the colouration but in different words, the ivory (*eburnum*) reflecting the white face, stained with the purple dye (*tinxerit ostro*). The two colour terms for purple are particularly significant, especially when considered within the context of staining or tinting: later it will become clear that Proserpina will be stained with the black of Dis' kingdom, but first she will be tricked by the power of Venus and overpowered on account of the erotic desire of Dis. To make Proserpina's blush so clearly purple here, by the means both of *purpura* and *ostrum*, is to taint her with the colour of Venus<sup>24</sup>, whose arrival causes both the blush and,

<sup>21</sup> The image is, of course the exact opposite of the lover's blush: eg. *Ov. Epist.* 4.72; *Am.* 3.3.5-6.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. *Luc.* 4.653; *Verg. Aen.* 8.508; *Sen. Troad.* 624. On *pallor* as an unhealthy indication, particularly of destroyed innocence, and in comparison with the blush, see Bradley 2009: 155-6.

<sup>23</sup> On the wider significance of blushing in Latin literature, including the theme of modesty, see Gruzeliier 1993: 148-49; Moreno Soldevila 2011: 139-40. *Rubor* is used of Lavinia's blush at *Verg. Aen.* 12.66, and a comparison is made to stained ivory: *sanguineo...ostro* 12.67. Ovid uses similar language and imagery for Corinna's blush of shame in *Amores* 2.5.33-42. For a discussion of Lavinia's blush, see especially Bradley 2009: 150-3.

<sup>24</sup> Schoonhoven 1978: 202-3. Cf. *Claudian Cons. Stil.* 2.353; *Carm. Min.* 25.104. See also Edgeworth 1979: 283.

indirectly, the staining of Proserpina's body through her part in setting up the rape<sup>25</sup>. Just as the white chastity of Proserpina will soon be stained by her rape, so too will her body be stained by the prison of the underworld<sup>26</sup>. On the other hand, any idea that the love of Dis and the power of Venus are causing a positive transformation of her from modest virgin to blushing bride will be dashed when the blush is drained from her cheeks in the dream appearance<sup>27</sup>.

It is also notable that Ceres' dreams predict the transfer of underworld chaos on to her in the rest of book 3, by means of the image of her clothes growing black:

*nunc sibi mutatas horret nigrescere uestes* (*Rapt. Pros.* 3.72)

now she shudders at her clothes changed and growing black.

The word *nigrescere* recalls the *nigra...maiestate* of Dis described at 1.79-80, and specifically depicts a process of transformation as the clothes 'become black'; from its first appearance in Latin literature at *Aen.* 4.454, when Dido sees the holy waters turn black, the term is a sign of doom<sup>28</sup>. As discussed below, the colour *niger* is also applied by Claudian to plants as a prophecy of the rape of Proserpina (2.92).

There are a number of other terms which recur for expressing the darkness of the underworld which will then be inflicted upon Proserpina, establishing the underworld chaos in terms of dark colour, and releasing that into the world both to prefigure and make manifest its infliction on to the body of Proserpina through rape. Another term which occurs as part of the chaotic cycle in all three books is *tenebrae* and the related *tenebrosus*. The word *tenebrae* is used to depict not simply the underworld darkness, but specifically the darkness of the chaos that Dis threatens to release against the upper world, where it will block out the light of the sun:

*'si dictis parere negas, patefacta ciebo  
Tartara, Saturni ueteres laxabo catenas,  
obducam tenebris solem, conpage soluta  
lucidus umbroso miscebitur axis Auerno.'* (*Rapt. Pros.* 1.113-16)

'If you refuse to obey my words, I shall open wide Tartarus  
and rouse it, I shall release the ancient chains of Saturn,

<sup>25</sup> *Purpureus* is also used of the flower at the death of Euryalus in *Aeneid* 9, perhaps the most famous amalgamation of erotic and death flower imagery: Fowler 1987: 188-189.

<sup>26</sup> Notably, Thomas (1979) has also identified the pairing of white and red as a symbol of imminent death in Latin literature.

<sup>27</sup> *Purpureus color* drains from the cheeks of the dying Camilla at Verg. *Aen.* 11.819.

<sup>28</sup> Edgeworth 1992: 139, 91.

I shall spread shadows over the sun, and when I have loosened its structure  
the bright sky will be mingled with shadowy Avernus.<sup>7</sup>

The significance of the power of darkness over the light is reiterated in the final lines of Dis' speech, in which *lucidus axis* is juxtaposed with the *umbroso Auerno* with which it will be mixed if Jupiter refuses to grant a wife to his brother. The mixing of the light and dark is reflected by the use here of the so-called golden line, in which the light and dark are placed next to each other, as are their origins in the heavens and in Avernus, the verb of mixing placed in the middle of the line<sup>29</sup>. A similar effect is achieved by the juxtaposition of *tenebris* and *solem* in the previous line.

In book two, the underworld is depicted as a world of darkness, but one which is adapted in response to the marriage of Dis and Proserpina:

*pallida laetatur regio gentesque sepultae  
luxuriant epulisque uacant genialibus umbrae:  
grata coronati peragunt conuiuia Manes.  
rumpunt insoliti tenebrosa silentia cantus;  
sedantur gemitus; Erebi se sponte relaxat  
squalor et aeternam patitur rarescere noctem. (Rapt. Pros. 2.326-31)*

The pallid region rejoices and the buried people  
indulge themselves and the ghosts are at leisure for the marriage feast:  
the Manes, garlanded, hold pleasing banquets.  
Unaccustomed songs burst through the shadowy silence;  
groans are allayed; the squalor of Erebus lightens freely  
and allows eternal night to become less dense.

Dark (*tenebrosa*) is here used to qualify the silence (*silentia*) which is broken by the unaccustomed song of the Manes. Significantly, the darkness is not removed by the singing and celebration: it persists, although it is thinned. The dark silence is made explicit in the lines which follow with the use of *squalor*, describing the underworld 'filth' but with a persistent sense of darkness<sup>30</sup>, and the *aeternam noctem*. The verb *rarescere* tells that the darkness thins, but not that it is replaced by light. The image of the underworld in this passage is therefore of one which has been affected by the marriage, but not to the extent of a full alleviation of the darkness, foreshadowing, therefore, the effect that the underworld will have on Proserpina in the dream sequence.

<sup>29</sup> Gruzelier 1993: 108.

<sup>30</sup> Not least on account of the etymological link with the Greek and Sanskrit words for 'black': κελαινός and *kalas*.

Here, again, *tenebrosus* is specifically used to create an image of the underworld, this time within the dream in which Proserpina appears to her mother. It foreshadows the description of the girl herself in terms of light and dark, which was discussed above.

*namque uidebatur tenebroso obiecta recessu  
carceris et saeuis Proserpina uincta catenis,  
non qualem Siculis olim mandauerat aruis  
nec qualem roseis nuper conuallibus Aetnae  
susperere deae: (Rapt. Pros. 3.82-86)*

For Proserpina was seen, enclosed by the shadowy recess  
of a prison and bound with savage chains,  
not as Ceres had entrusted her to the Sicilian fields  
nor as the goddesses had recently admired her in the rose-filled  
valleys of Aetna.

The darkness gives a visual atmosphere to the sense of imprisonment that is highlighted throughout these lines. The sense that the underworld is a place removed from the light is emphasized both by *recessu* and *obiecta*. The introduction of *carceris* in the emphatic first position of line 83 makes explicit the nature of her enclosure, brought graphically home when the line tells us both Proserpina's name, and the way in which she is contained: *uincta catenis*. *Tenebroso* makes it clear that the enclosure is a manifestation of the underworld, a long way removed from the promised paradise of Pluto's speech. Although she had been promised a purer light in the underworld (*lumen purius* 2.283-84), with its own stars and sun, here her role as victim of underworld chaos is revealed by the darkness within which she is trapped.

The concept that the place and forces of the underworld are not only coloured by darkness but actually inflict it is made most clear by the influence of Dis upon his surroundings when he breaks through into the upper world; the change of colours used by Claudian enhances the idea that the underworld chaos is being unleashed through the rape of Proserpina, and that even the presence of Dis is therefore capable of staining the world into which he has irrupted. There are two colour terms which can be used to exemplify this effect further: *ferrugineus* and *liueo/liuor*.

*Ferrugineus* is a colour used to characterize Dis as a force of the underworld, used to describe the dusky cloak he wears when he snatches Proserpina and which he uses to wipe away her tears<sup>31</sup>:

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<sup>31</sup> Notably, this term is only used by Virgil in the *Aeneid* for situations associated with death. Edgeworth 1992: 126-27.

*tum ferrugineo lacrimas detergit amictu  
et placida maestum solatur uoce dolorem (Rapt. Pros. 2.275-76)*

Then he wiped away her tears with his dusky cloak  
and comforted her sad grief with gentle words.

As a colour it is intrinsically problematic; André lists it under three separate headings of 'rouge', 'noir', and 'vert', whereas Edgeworth lists possible translations of brown, black, grey, dark, red-brown, and blue or purple<sup>32</sup>. Although it is used to describe the hyacinth (Virgil *G.* 4.183; Col. 10.305), it is also memorably used to describe the boat of Charon (Virgil *Aen.* 6.303), reflective of its particular appropriateness for the underworld<sup>33</sup>. Apart from its role as a tool in the narrative, Claudian uses the cloak to provide a visual image of Dis, in particular focusing on him as he interacts with Proserpina. He is described as overcome by her speech and as feeling first love (2.273-74), yet the colour of the cloak is still a reminder of his underworld origins: the darkness which will soon engulf the girl is hinted at in the very act of wiping away her tears with the dusky garment. The negative emphasis of *ferrugineus* is made clear when it is compared with its other appearance in the same book of the poem, during the colouring of the flowers by Zephyr. The flowers emerge at Aetna's request; indeed, she is named as *parens florum* as she addresses Zephyr, an appellation which recalls not only her relationship to the flowers, but also to their colours, since *flores* and *colores* have become virtually synonymous by this period<sup>34</sup>. However, in the broader narrative they are part of Venus' plot, being the means by which Proserpina is lured from the palace, and in poetic tradition simultaneously recall loss of virginity and death<sup>35</sup>. Although the colouring of the flowers seems like visual image of the glory of spring (*quaque uolat uernus sequitur rubor* 2.90), the colours that Claudian uses all resonate with the coming of Dis:

*sanguineo splendore rosas, uaccinia nigro  
imbuit et dulci uiolas ferrugine pingit. (Rapt. Pros. 2.92-93)*

<sup>32</sup> André 1949; Edgeworth 1978.

<sup>33</sup> Statius also uses it of the underworld: *Theb.* 1.600, 2.13, also *Cul.* 273 and *Sid. Apoll. Carm.* 9.275. Edgeworth (1978: 298 cf. 1981: 141) also suggests that, since the boat is elsewhere coloured by Virgil *caeruleus* (*Aen.* 6.410), that *ferrugineus* must refer to blue (although he subjects this to further debate and eventual dismissal at 301); however, limiting the interpretation to this one aspect fails to consider the idea that this is simply an aspect of darkness, particularly the underworld darkness, rather than just a simple colour term, even though he does elsewhere claim that *ferrugineus* can mean 'dark' and particularly has underworld connotations (Edgeworth 1978: 300).

<sup>34</sup> Roberts 1989: 50.

<sup>35</sup> Moreno Soldevila 2011: 190: 'La pérdida de la virginidad es asociada, míticamente, con la muerte, en tanto que el matrimonio supone una especie de ritual de iniciación en que la muchacha muere como virgen y renace como esposa y madre.'

He stains roses with blood-red splendour, blueberries  
with black and he paints violets with sweet duskiness.

The final colour of the *uiolas* prefigures the colour of Dis himself, clad in his cloak; while here it must carry, on one level, the sense of the colour of violets, as Edgeworth's survey of the term points out, its significance lies in its darkness, another heading in Edgeworth's article on the definition and nuances of the term, and the underworld associations which make it suitable for the colour of the underworld king's garment<sup>36</sup>. Notably the use of *pingit* suggests not only that Zephyr, colouring the flowers, is an artist, but that he is also creating an image of the universe in the form of flowers, since the verb is the same as that used of Proserpina creating her universal tapestry (1.266). The significance of this lies in the very fact that the colouring of the universe is in the colours of Dis, expressing the fact that, by means of his presence in the upper world, he will stain the universe with his colours. The flowers, which play a key part in luring Proserpina to her rape, and which she will be picking when Dis seizes her, are made into symbols predicting his presence by the use of underworld colouring. The blueberries are therefore dyed black (*uaccinia nigro imbuat*), just as Dis will dye the upper world by his presence and Proserpina by his touch, whereas the roses, appropriately the flower consecrated to Venus<sup>37</sup>, are coloured blood-red (*sanguine splendore rosas*), a premonition of the torn hymen which will symbolize the ultimate manifestation of underworld power upon the surrogate victim<sup>38</sup>. The colour red picks up the foreshadowing of the rape in Jupiter's speech to Venus in book one, in which he predicts a scarlet sunrise (*puniceos...ortus* 1.222) on the day of the attack<sup>39</sup>.

A similar but more explicit relationship between the underworld and Dis' presence in the upper world is made by use of *liuor* and the related *liueo*. The term *liuentibus* is used specifically to describe the colour of the water in the underworld, in the proemic passage in which the poem's locale is introduced<sup>40</sup>:

*di, quibus innumerum uacui famulatur Auerni  
uulgi iners, opibus quorum donatur auaris  
quidquid in orbe perit, quos Styx liuentibus ambit*

<sup>36</sup> Edgeworth 1978: 298-99, 303.

<sup>37</sup> Moreno Soldevila 2011: 189 on the dedication of the rose to Venus and the relationship of its colour to blood. Cf. *Rapt. Pros.* 2.122-123, where Claudian himself refers to the myth of Venus and Adonis and the rose as '*doloris...signa sui*'.

<sup>38</sup> *Flos* is also a euphemism for the hymen: Moreno Soldevila 2011: 190. Cf. Catullus 17.14; 61.56-59; 62.39-47.

<sup>39</sup> *Puniceus* is used elsewhere of blood, eg. *Ov. Met.* 2.607. On choice of colour in Ovid, see McCrea 1894 (especially, for *puniceus*, 185).

<sup>40</sup> Virgil also uses the equivalent term of the Styx: *uada liuida Aen.* 6.320, as does Statius *Theb.* 1.57 *Styx liuida*, 4.58 *liuescunt stagna*.

*interfusa uadis et quos fumantia torquens  
aequora gurgitibus Phlegethon perlustrat anhelis (Rapt. Pros. 1.20-24)*

Gods, whom the numberless and feeble mass of empty Avernus  
serve, to whose greedy wealth is given  
whatever dies in the world, whom spreading Styx surrounds  
with grey waves and past whom Phlegethon, twisting  
his smoking waters, wanders with panting whirls.

*Liuentibus* describes another dark colour, this time with bluish or lead-coloured tones, making it appropriate to water but also picking up the connotations of darkness which typify Claudian's underworld. The appearance of the related colour noun *liuor* picks up on this underworld colouring to apply to the changing colour of the grass with the appearance of Dis in the upper world. The living turf turns the colour of the deathly river.

The description occurs in the second account of the attack, which is given from the perspective of Proserpina's nurse, Electra, who explains the situation to Ceres:

*liuor permanat in herbas;  
deficient riui; squalent rubigine prata  
et nihil adflatam uiuit: pallere ligustra,  
exspirare rosas, decrescere lilia uidi. (Rapt. Pros. 3.238-41)*

Greyness flows into the grass;  
the streams fail; meadows grow filthy with blight  
and nothing lives once they have breathed: I saw the privets grow pale,  
roses die, lilies wither.

*Liur*, the colour of Dis' underworld flows into the grass, the verb *permanat* carrying the sense of flowing which might equally apply to the dark Styx which shares the colour. The sense of darkness reflects the image of the sun's light having been snatched by sudden night (3.234-35). However, the darkening of the grass also corresponds to the sudden sense of death which overcomes all the plants: the flowers, which were earlier painted with colours which prophesied death, are now overcome by death itself. The message that the arrival of Dis symbolizes not only Proserpina's rape, but also her symbolic death as wife to the king of the underworld, is made explicit by the effect that he has on all other living things. The privets grow pale, the blood-red roses die, and the lilies wilt.

## PALENESS AND THE DRAINING OF COLOUR

However, the effect of Dis in Claudian's colour-world is not only one of darkening; he also draws colour from the upper world. In these flowers, it is partly achieved by the death of the coloured plants, but also explicitly by the influence of sudden paleness. Paleness in Claudian also reflects death; like darkness, it is a typical feature of the underworld and is used to depict the atmosphere of the infernal uprising:

*Tisiphone quatiens infausto lumine pinum  
armatos ad castra uocat pallentia Manes. (Rapt. Pros. 1.40-41)*

Tisiphone shaking her pine-torch with its inauspicious light  
calls the armed Manes to the pale camp.

The camp is described as *pallentia*, suggesting not only paleness but progressive paleness, which may reflect the growing chaos of the underworld. The effect is on the place, specifically the place in association with the war, as emphasized by the camp, rather than on the *Manes* themselves, who might reasonably be expected to be described as pale in their ghostliness. This atmosphere of the underworld, precisely associated with the chaos growing within it, is what will be inflicted upon the upper world by the arrival of Dis. It is specifically the influence of his rage which leads to the preparation for war and hence the existence of the paling camp, yet it is also his rage which is redirected on to the upper world, beginning with the flowers, which in turn prefigure the transfer on to Proserpina's body in the act of rape<sup>41</sup>.

To depict the drawing of colour from the flowers to transform them to the colourlessness of the underworld, Claudian supplies the same verb, *pallere*, as part of the same passage discussed above for the infusing of the grass with *liuor*<sup>42</sup>:

*liuor permanat in herbas;  
deficient riui; squalent rubigine prate  
et nihil adflatam uiuit: pallere ligustra,  
expirare rosas, decrescere lilia uidi. (Rapt. Pros. 3.238-41)*

Greyness flows into the grass;  
the streams fail; meadows grow filthy with blight

<sup>41</sup> In terms of the overall chronology of the three books, the flowers actually pale after the rape of Proserpina, owing to the fact that they are described by Electra, telling the story to Ceres in book 3 that the reader has already experienced in the narrative of book 2. This has the effect of it both acting as a premonition within the narrative of Electra's speech, and providing comment on the events of the previous book.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. Ov. *Fast.* 1.688; 4.918.



and nothing lives once they have breathed: I saw the privets grow pale,  
roses die, lilies wither.

The image is complicated by the fact that *ligustra* are usually already white, and Claudian describes them as making the nymph who wears them *alba* at 2.130, denoting a matt white or paleness<sup>43</sup>. Therefore Dis must be understood not only to draw out colour, but even to make pale that which is already pale by the standards of the upper world, the choice of verb explicitly recalling the paleness of the underworld camp. The tricolon of infinitive-accusative pairings develop the connotations of *pallere* to make clear the association with death; the roses *expirare* and the lilies *decrescere*. *Expirare* must here mean to die, whereas *decrescere* means to diminish or wilt, reducing the flowers from the blooms of spring brought to life by Zephyr, to symbols of the power of Dis to inflict death and crush growth. The flowers are the same as those picked by Proserpina and the goddesses on Aetna before Dis attacks (*Rapt. Pros.* 2.128-30), while the bees buzz among the grass which will be turned grey (*liuor* 2.127). Although the colours of the flowers are clearly chosen to function as premonitions, as demonstrated above, it is also a deliberately vivid visual scene in comparison with the pale flowers described by Electra, compared with jewels, dyed fleeces, peacock feathers, and the colours of a rainbow which appears before a storm:

*Parthica quae tantis uariantur cingula gemmis  
regales uinctura sinus? Quae uellera tantum  
ditibus Assyrii spumis fucantur aëni?  
non tales uolucer pandit Iunonius alas,  
nec sic innumeros arcu mutante colores  
incipiens redimitur hiems, cum tramite flexo  
semita discretis interuiret umida nimbis.* (*Rapt. Pros.* 2.94-100)

What Parthian belts are variegated with so many jewels,  
fit to tie round royal chests? What fleeces are dyed so  
in the rich foam of Assyrian bronze vessels?  
The bird of Juno does not open wide such wings,  
not thus is the gathering storm wreathed by its arch  
changing to countless colours, when on its curved course  
the moist path flashes bright between the parted clouds.

The first two comparisons are based upon artistic processes to produce colourful ornamentation, drawing attention to the active process of colouring as well as to the colours themselves, and thus highlighting that, as Zephyr applies

<sup>43</sup> Gruzelier 1993: 270. Columella mentions black privets (10.300), but in the poetic tradition they are usually white, eg. Verg. *Ecl.* 2.18, Ov. *Met.* 13.789.

the colour, so Dis will strip it. The *cingula* are variegated (*uariantur*), a term which must, at least in part, suggest their many colours in the many different gems. The comparison with gems draws attention to the sparkling, vivid qualities of the flowers, but also prefigures the way in which they too will provide ornament for the nymphs:

*hanc mollis amaracus ornat;*  
*haec graditur stellata rosis, haec alba ligustris.* (*Rapt. Pros.* 2.129-130)

this one the soft marjoram adorns;  
this walks along starred with roses, this one white with privet-flowers.

The verb *ornat* makes their decorative powers explicit, and *stellata* suggests their shining qualities, amplifying them beyond ordinary flowers. That this potential is associated with the way in which they have been coloured by Zephyr is apparent from the metaphor of dyeing the fleeces, the verb *fucantur* carrying the broader senses of painting and colouring as well as the specific dyeing as here of fleeces<sup>44</sup>. The word also carries connotations of deception, however, which may resonate aptly considering the trap which Venus is creating<sup>45</sup>. The second two points of comparison amplify the number and variety of the colours, using the peacock's tail, and the rainbow with its *innumeros colores*<sup>46</sup>. The rainbow (*sem-ita...umida*) is specifically appearing before the coming storm, making a clear comparison between the many colours of the flowers and the omen of future trouble which they represent<sup>47</sup>. These flowers will fade and die with the arrival of Dis, just as rape causes Proserpina to join the dead and to grow pale in the dream appearance, as discussed above (*Rapt. Pros.* 2.88); the blush, which highlighted her virginity and predicted the power of Venus, will, like the colour of the flowers, be drained away, revealing the rape for what it really is, a transfer of underworld power and death on to the surrogate victim, Proserpina.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. Verg. *G.* 2.465, 4.334.

<sup>45</sup> E. G. Cic. *Cael.* 25.95, *Brut.* 9.36, *Planc.* 12.29.

<sup>46</sup> Charlet 1991, Platnauer 1922, and Gruzelier 1993 all interpret *interuiret* to mean that Claudian specifically highlights the green colour from the rainbow spectrum. However, I think it preferable to follow Budaragina 2005: 283-4 in understanding the term to mean shine brightly, rather than shine with a specific colour. See also Bradley 2009: 7-8.

<sup>47</sup> The idea of the rainbow presaging the storm occurs in several places in antiquity (Sen. *Oed.* 315-17, Tib. 1.4.41-44, Verg. *G.* 1.351-92, Stat. *Theb.* 7.427, 9.405). On this motif, see Budaragina: 2005. Obviously the very act of flower-picking does, itself, also provide an omen of rape, given its prevalence as a precursor in Latin poetry, especially Ovid's *Met.*

## CONCLUSION

Chaos runs throughout the three books of the *Rapt. Pros.*, released from the underworld, into the upper world and on to the body of Proserpina. Its recurrence – present, foreshadowed, recalled – is signified by the colouring and discolouring of the scenes that Claudian presents, at once visual but also always presenting the reader's eye with the colour symbolic of Dis. The underworld chaos darkens and drains colour, it is infectious, and its impact recalls other physical effects associated with rape and death. This survey of the presence of colour, and light and dark imagery, in the poem helps better to explain how the episodic poetry of late antiquity can be read holistically, but also how features which might be dismissed as ornamentation contribute directly to the development of a theme and the persuasiveness of a text to convince the reader that the world being depicted is held together not by the story told, nor by the characters depicted, but by the most elemental force which runs through it, a chaos which is never resolved but always continues to stain.

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