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The Figure of the Poet Claudian in Hella Haasse's Novel *Een nieuwer testament*

> Claudius Claudianus was born in the later fourth century AD, probably at Alexandria, so that his native language would then be Greek... Claudian gravitated to Italy, where he commenced his datable poetic career in 395 with a panegyric concerning Probinus and Olybrius, the *consulares ordinarii* of that year. In the same year the emperor Theodosius died and was succeeded in the West by his young son Honorius (born 384). Claudian based himself at the Court in Milan, and in a brilliant series of panegyrics celebrated the leading general Stilicho, who effectively ruled the West from 395 to 408. In 404 Claudian commemorated the sixth consulship of Honorius, and may have died soon afterwards; otherwise it is strange that there is no indication that he celebrated his patron Stilicho's consulate in 405.

In this one paragraph Claire Gruzelier gives all the known facts of Claudian's career (xvii). To write a novel about a figure of whom so little is a considerable challenge, yet this is what Hella Haasse did with her 1966 novel *Een nieuwer testament* (cited in this paper as NT; translated into English in 1993 as *Threshold of fire*, cited in this paper as TF). But the very scarcity of established facts gives her the freedom to invent much of the plot. Some of her assumptions were held also by Claudian scholars at the time when she wrote her novel, but a number of them are no longer accepted today, while others are Haasse's own invention.

Claudian's biography is important because his poems, particularly his public panegyrics, are the chief source of historical information for the reign of the Emperor Honorius. While the history of the period from 394 to 408 was likely covered in the historical work of Eunapius and continued by Olympiodorus, those writings have been lost. Claudian is mentioned briefly by two contemporaries, St. Augustine and Orosius. The bronze statue that was erected in his honor in the Forum of Trajan - probably in 400, according to Michael Dewar (xix) - adds information about his rising to the post of tribune and notary, and Haasse uses the statue, and Claudian's disillusioned and bitter response to it, at a key point in her novel.

According to Alan Cameron (*Claudian: Poetry and Propaganda at the Court of Honorius*, 418), Claudian "died in the course of 404, little more than 35 years old, still at the height of his fame, mourned by no one more than Stilicho." Haasse, however, has

Claudian live on to 414. Indeed, the action of her novel takes place in two days in that year, on July 5-6, 414, with some flashbacks. Claudian does not celebrate Stilicho's elevation to the consulship in 405 because he is banished in 404, returning secretly to Rome after the Goths have sacked it under Alaric. Honorius plays no part in the novel's action at all, and Haasse does not look at Claudian's relationship with the young Emperor, except through the poem commemorating his sixth consulship, which is full of the praise typical in such circumstances. She has Claudian, ten years after having vanished from public life without a trace and gone to live in Rome's Saburan slum, commit suicide in his jail cell rather than face the freedom offered to him by the Prefect (chief administrator) Hadrian, whom he hates. Haasse makes her task harder by presenting a Claudian who has abandoned the persona that emerges through his public poetry and who has turned his back on politics. He does not even feel particularly sorry about the Goths' sack of Rome. Since Haasse has thus lengthened his life, she must also make him react to the murder of Stilicho - by agents of Honorius - in 408. Claudian feels betrayed by the murder, although he recognizes his own unintentional role in it.

For Haasse, Claudian is pagan and thus an ideological enemy of Hadrian, who is Christian. Most critics up till Cameron have seen him as pagan, but in several other ways Haasse departs from the established scholarly path of the 1960s. In her book, he is Jewish, though unaware of this. Many researchers would agree with Haasse that Claudian was more pagan than Christian, but I believe that to date no one has suggested that he was Jewish. Nor has anyone claimed that his conflict with Hadrian led him to commit suicide while under arrest after spending ten years in obscurity.

It is worth considering Claudian's literary output, some of which Hella Haasse certainly read. After producing in 395 the "Panegyric on the Consuls Probinus and Olybrius," Claudian joined Honorius's court in Milan. In the words of Jacqueline Long,

> His next public work was an inaugural panegyric for Honorius's third consulate in 396. For the next eight years he continued to produce major poems on Western political themes, as well as more private epigrams and the mythological *De Raptu Proserpinae*. Panegyrics by Claudian hailed consulates of Honorius in 396, 398, and 404, the consulate of Mallius Theodorus in 399, and the first consulate of Honorius's *magister militum* Stilicho in 400. In 398 Claudian's Fescinnine [i.e. bawdy] verses and epithalamium [wedding song] celebrated Honorius's marriage to Stilicho's daughter Maria. His epics commemorate Western victories that extinguished Gildo's revolt in Africa in 398 and that repelled the Gothic invasion of Italy under Alaric in 402. Amid this laudatory output, Claudian also produced two sets of books attacking chief ministers of Arcadius [the Eastern Emperor], Rufinus and later Eutropius. The panegyric for Honorius's sixth consulate, in 404, is Claudian's last datable work (4-5).

Stilicho's rivalry with Rufinus ended in November 395 when Eastern troops assassinated Rufinus in Constantinople. Claudian's second poem on Rufinus portrays

him as a monster from Hell intent on crushing the Empire but opposed by Stilicho. Haasse has Claudian, as a courtier of Honorius, remember his vituperative attacks on Rufinus, but there is little in her novel that shows Claudian as a great patriot dedicated to the ideal of an empire. Rather he regrets the fact that he turned Stilicho into an idol through his public poetry. He is presented as more friendly to Stilicho's wife Serena than to Stilicho himself, but Haasse has him also note the fact that she profaned the temple of the Magna Mater, the great mother-goddess.

Our knowledge of the life of Claudian also depends on the content of his minor poems, of which there are fifty-two. Despite Haasse's attention to Claudian's Egyptian background, she does not refer to the passage in his minor poem XXXI, the "Letter to Serena," which reports that he made a visit to Africa (perhaps in 403), "where with the assistance of a letter of recommendation from her, he wooed and won a bride, of whom or her fate we know nothing" (Barr 15). Among the minor poems, Haasse quotes from XXI, "Of Theodore and Hadrian," and XXVII, "The Phoenix," and can be said to draw loosely upon XXVIII, "The Nile;" XXX, "In Praise of Serena;" XXXI, "Letter to Serena;" XL, "Letter to Olybrius;" XLI, "Letter to Probinus;" and LII, "The Battle of the Giants." Haasse does not portray Claudian as a Christian and disregards his one possibly Christian poem, XXXII, "Of the Saviour."

In her novel, Haasse addresses four mysteries in the life of Claudian: 1) his mysterious disappearance from history; 2) his attitude to the Prefect Hadrian; 3) his religious beliefs; and 4) his origins.

Firstly, then, *When did Claudian die?* The answer to this question is obviously not in the poetry. Cameron does not believe that Claudian outlived Stilicho's murder in 408, and J. B. Hall believes it unlikely that the incomplete epic *The Rape of Proserpina* was "resumed after the death of Stilicho (408)" (104). But even if he died no later than that, "one must account for the poet's failure to celebrate Stilicho's second consulship (405) or the annihilation of Radagaisus' army (406) or Honorius' seventh consulship (407), by assuming either that Claudian retired to his native Egypt after 404, or that he fell out of favour with Stilicho and was no longer called upon for the purposes of poetic advertisement" (*ibid.*). Hall concurs with the standard view that Claudian died shortly after reciting his poem on Honorius' sixth consulship in January 404 (*ibid.*).

D. Romano, in his 1958 monograph on Claudian, explained Claudian's silence on politics after 404 by "disgust at Stilicho's favoritism of the Goths." In contrast, Peder Christiansen finds it most unlikely that Claudian changed sides and left Stilicho (1966: 54). Yet Haasse does show Claudian as somewhat turning away from Stilicho. She has Claudian think:

> When gods fall from their pedestals, those who have created those gods cannot watch without impunity. The day would have to come when I would realize that Stilicho was a man like other men, not the Apollonian upholder of justice and order which I had made him seem, the hero without fear or blemish; that he could make mistakes, sometimes had unclean hands and often remained

silent when frankness would complicate the situation. (TF 191-92)[1]

Haasse has Claudian turn from Stilicho, not for having a sympathetic attitude toward Alaric, but because he was not the avenger who had saved Rome from Rufinus, for "in reality I could not bear the idea that he had most probably given the order for the murder when he learned that others were plotting to do it" (TF 192).[2]

That Stilicho was "created" by Claudian, scholars tend to agree. Harry Levy believes that Claudian's major political task had been to win the favor of the senators, "a nationalistic, Rome-centered, pagan segment of Roman society," for Stilicho, "a Vandal *parvenu*, born in the Eastern part of the Empire ... and at least a nominal Christian" (1958: 340). Following the lead of Cameron's controversial book, John Matthews says that Claudian's "appearance on the western political scene, to become Stilicho's propagandist, was a masterly piece of personal opportunism" (263).

The second question the novel addresses is: *Was the conflict with Hadrian central to Claudian's political life at court and his alliance with Stilicho?* Haasse thinks so, for the only poem that she gives in its entirety is his lampoon of Hadrian *De Theodoro et Hadriano* ("the Egyptian" is Hadrian):

> While Mallius dreams in daylight and darkness
> The Egyptian steals everything; nothing is sacred to him.
> People of Rome, cry with one voice: Mallius, wake!
> Perhaps then the light of Egypt will fade away. (TF 46-47)[3]

Much controversy surrounds the longer poem XXII, "Apology to Hadrian." It uses extreme language, and Haasse senses in it a strong enmity between the two men. Platnauer suggests (2: 196-97) that the epigram dates from 396 and the apology from 397. Haasse does not date the epigram, although she describes Hadrian as seething at the memory of it in 414, all those years later. Cameron, however, believes that we should treat the Apology as a light piece, not as an indication of the bitterness between Hadrian and Claudian, who apologizes for an error of rashness that affects Hadrian alone, not the Emperor or Stilicho.

As Cameron remarks, most scholars have dated the Apology either to the period before Claudian entered the service of Stilicho, or to the period after Stilicho's death in 408, on the assumption that Hadrian would never have dared to humiliate Claudian like this while he enjoyed Stilicho's favour (397). He himself, however, believes that the "Apology" should not be taken very seriously, and that the key is provided by lines 6-8, which scholars have failed to address adequately: "What though rash wrath, though heedless youth tempted me, though pride urged, though passion led me astray, yet shouldst *thou* be above meeting me with like weapons" (2: 197).[4] Cameron speculates that the "like weapons" can only be another lampoon or epigraph. The Apology, or "Deprecatio," is no more than youthful hijinks:

> The 'Deprecatio' is Claudian's reply to Hadrian's lampoon. Claudian pretends that Hadrian's poem was so devastating that it alone brought about all the dire effects chronicled with such gusto in the 'Deprecatio.' So in effect the

> 'Deprecatio' is really a compliment to Hadrian, as well as an apology for Claudian's original lampoon. Hadrian, a fellow Egyptian as well as a fellow poet, will have appreciated and no doubt thoroughly enjoyed both the joke and the compliment (399).

Haasse, on the other hand, accepts that there was enmity between the two men, and the cause to which she attributes it is essential to her plot. Her novel is based on an ideological battle, and she needs Hadrian to be the representative of the triumphing forces of Christianity over dying paganism. Cameron would disagree with her, just as he does with Santo Mazzarino's view that Hadrian was a "Catholic extremist." Cameron feels that not only was Hadrian not a Catholic extremist, but that possibly Claudian was a Christian (216). If this is so, then the ideological structure of the book is based on a false premise, albeit one believed by scholars previously and certainly fruitful for literary creation.

So we come to our third question: *Did Claudian hope for the demise of Christianity?* Otto Seeck in 1913 suggested that Claudian had been caught making pagan sacrifices; Cameron finds this idea utterly ludicrous, but the motif is one of the cornerstones of the novel. Not only is Hadrian faced with sentencing Claudian in July 414 for making a pagan sacrifice with a rooster, but the reader has already seen in flashback Claudian making such a sacrifice in his early Egyptian days when he is, in Haasse's version of events, a slave named Klafthi on the estate of a Jew named Eliazer.

Anita Miller reads Haasse's main theme as follows:

> Thus Claudius Claudianus, poet and humanist, stands apart from both the doomed pagan Marcus Anicius, who yearns for a Rome that is lost forever, and the tormented Christian Hadrian, who, like Bishop Ambrose, has spent his life in the Roman civil administration, which was known to breed narrow authoritarianism. Hadrian views the world as Ambrose does, with restricted vision; it is Ambrose and Hadrian who are the wave of the future. Theirs is the state of mind responsible not only for the Inquisition, but for the untold suffering caused by uncompromising political movements in our own century (15).

Since Bishop Ambrose of Milan is not a character in the novel, this description is somewhat misleading. Nor is Hadrian as bad as Miller makes out. If he did not offer Claudian a chance to escape at the end, then the significance of Claudian's suicide would be diminished. Rather Hadrian represents public life and all the demands that it makes for compromise, whereas Claudian has given up public life and chosen obscurity so that he does not have to be cheapened by participation in political events.

Clifford Moore notes that in "410, when after a lapse of eight hundred years Rome was again captured by an invader, both pagans and Christians felt that the disaster was nothing less than a divine punishment," and notes that Augustine wrote *The City of God*, and Orosius composed his history, to combat the pagan party which saw in the city's fall the outcome of the abandonment of the pagan religion (109). This motif is not prominent in the novel. Christianity is so far along in achieving dominance that we see no pagan backlash against it. Claudian's

passive resistance to Christianity is not closely connected to a sense of historical disaster overtaking the Eternal City. Christiansen notes that Claudian's poem "*De Consulatu Stilichonis* marks the transition from Roma personified as Minerva to Roma personified as the mother of mankind" (1971: 673); for him it is a change from one kind of optimism to another. But for the Claudian of Haasse's imagination, only suicide, with its taste of bitter almonds, offers consolation; religion does not.

There is absolutely no agreement among scholars as to whether Claudian was a Christian or a pagan, and those who see him as one or the other dispute the degree of his commitment (see Dewar p.xix). One of the texts used in the discussion is from St. Augustine. In his account of the battle of the Frigidus (*The City of God* Book 5, Chap. 26, 222), Augustin quotes from the "Panegyric on the Third Consulship of Honorius" (Claudian 2: 277) but omits a passage, which I here put in italics:

> Verily God is with thee, *when Aeolus frees the armed tempests from his cave*, when the very elements fight for thee and the allied winds come at the call of thy trumpets (2: 277).[5]

Levy (1958: 339) feels that by omitting the reference to a pagan god, Augustine has annexed a pagan poet to praise a Christian hero. Certainly Augustine considered Claudian "a Christi nomine alienus," far from being a Christian. In the view of Orosius in the *Seven Books of History against the Pagans* (1964: 346), composed about 416 and generally considered a supplement to the third book of *The City of God,* Claudian is a "most stubborn pagan," "paganus pervicacissimus" (7.35.21) (cf. Levy 1958: 339).

Perhaps following the comments of Augustine and Orosius, Haasse subscribes to the view that Claudian was not a Christian. However, here again, scholars have re-evaluated their opinions since she wrote her novel. Dewar argues that the two famous Christian authors may not necessarily be right:

> But even [their] uncompromising statements can hardly be taken as incontrovertible fact. They may be deductions based on a miscomprehension, or hostile misrepresentation, of the literary paganism of the poetry, or else they may originate in anti-Stilichonian rumour ... Claudian's writing itself is not conclusive at all. His lesser poems include an Easter hymn ... which may be regarded either as a confession of personal faith, or else as a literary exercise written to satisfy a commission from the pious Christian court. And on the other hand they also offer us a bitter epigram against one *dux Iacobus* [General James], who is seemingly mocked for his excessive devotion to the cult of the saints (xix-xx).

Dewar reminds us that Sidonius Apollinaris wrote poems with pagan trappings, and he was a bishop and saint. Outside of *De Raptu Proserpinae*, Claudian "tends to avoid the traditional Greco-Roman pantheon and prefers instead more abstract and less offensive personifications, such as Roma" (xx).

Haasse ignores the material in the two minor poems which treat Christianity rather than paganism, perhaps because they prove nothing. In Minor Poem L, "Against James, the Commander of the Cavalry," Claudian jests: "By the ashes of St. Paul and the shrine of the revered St. Peter, do not pull my verses to pieces, General James" (2: 279).[6] Whether this is an attack just on James or on the saints as well is not at all clear. Jean-Louis Charlet (xix) suggests that Claudian's paganism was more cultural than religious, but Haasse actually connects Claudian to religious paganism by having him sacrifice a rooster.

For poem XXXII, "Of the Saviour," a face-value reading implies that Claudian is a Christian, but the text may also be only a formal literary exercise. It begins:

> Christ, lord of the world, founder of a new age of gold, voice and wisdom of the Most High, proceeding from the Father's lofty mind and given by that Father a share in the governance of this great universe, thou hast overcome the sins of this our mortal life, for thou hast suffered thy Godhead to be clothed in human form and hast allowed mankind to address thee face to face and confess thee man (2: 261).[7]

The 21-line poem closes with a discussion of the Incarnation and Crucifixion followed by a blessing for the Emperor. Platnauer claims that it cannot be said to "stamp its author as a sincere Christian," (1: xix) while J. Liebeschuetz writes that "just possibly Claudian ... [was] Christian when [he] wrote" the poem (150).

Our fourth and last question is: *Were Claudian's religion and politics related to his Egyptian origins?* Levy would say no. He believes that Claudian, "Alexandrian by birth, in migrating to Rome, had transferred not only his person and his possessions, but his loyalties as well," and "came to regard himself, and sought to be regarded, as a Roman singer of Rome's imperial glory, and as the mouthpiece of the old Roman aristocracy" (1948: 90). Haasse, however, by stressing Claudian's humble Alexandrian origins, contrasts him with Roman imperialism, which in her view became allied c. 400 with the triumph of a closed-minded Christianity.

It is possible to see Claudian as a kind of Phoenix, a Greek writer from Alexandria reborn as a Latin writer from Rome and Milan. Haasse points to this image by useing as an epigraph for the novel three lines (69-71) from Claudian's poem "The Phoenix," which she gives in Latin:

> Qui fuerat genitor, natus nunc prosilit idem
> Succeditque novus; geminae confinia vitae
> Exiguo medius discrimine separat ignis.
> (TF 5, NT 5)

or in Platnauer's version: "He who was but now the sire comes forth from the pyre the son and successor; between life and life lay but that brief space wherein the pyre burned" (2: 229). In his last letter from prison, Claudian says that he hopes to be reborn like the phoenix from the ashes. Haasse may be using the phoenix to suggest that her apolitical Claudian, who reappears in 414, was reborn from the earlier public Claudian, the political poet of his first ten years in Rome, from 395 to 404.

Haasse also connects the phoenix theme to Claudian's renewal of ties with his Alexandrian past. This renewal of contact is triggered by Hadrian's startling revelation that Eliazer was not in fact Claudian's master but is his grandfather, that Claudian is the illegitimate child of Eliazer's son. In the light of this news, Claudian tells Hadrian that he no longer wants to leave his poetry to Rome, as he had willed in his previous testament (NT 135; TF 228). He writes to Eliazer: "Thus a testament and last will. I possess only the will to rise, like the Phoenix, from my earlier self." (TF 244)[8] Claudian's last will is a return to his Jewish roots. In the end, unlike any of the historians, Haasse has Claudian die knowing that he is a Jew, committing suicide heroically. At the same time this "newer testament," which gives the novel its title, may be a symbolic statement that the religion of Rome - Christianity - is not enough, that there has to be a "newer testament" to replace the gospels and epistles.

In Haasse's novel we see that scholars and literary creators may find different opportunities in a sketchy set of known facts. Scholars modify the view of previous scholars to arrive at a more nuanced and complete reconstruction of reality. Hella Haasse is constructing fiction. She takes advantage of the lack of facts to base her plot on a simple contrast: she shows Claudian as pagan and no longer willing to co-operate with the Christian powers represented by Hadrian. In so doing she creates a pagan hero similar to Julian the Apostate. To this end, she adds counterfactual features: her hero lives ten years longer than he probably did in fact, and finally discovers he is Jewish (and therefore, we cannot help thinking after the events of the twentieth century, one of a people oppressed by Christianity as the pagans were). In sum, she has created a second Claudian, who lives ten years after the first one and is in important ways his opposite. We have here a striking example of the processes of simplification, yet also elaboration, of the facts which a creative writer may undertake for her purposes.

NOTES

[1] Men kan niet straffeloos zelfgeschapen goden van hun voetstuk zien vallen. Natuurlijk moest ik inzien dat Stilicho een mens was als anderen, niet de apollinische handhaver van recht en orde waartoe ik hem gestileerd had, een held zonder vrees of blaam; dat hij zich vergissen kon, soms vuile handen had, vaak zich zwijgend iets liet aanleunen, als openhartigheid de zaken ingewikkelder gemaakt zou hebben. (NT 113)

[2]... in de werkelijkheid kon ik niet verdragen dat hij hoogstwaarschijnlijk wel degelijk opdracht tot de moord gegeven had, toen hij wist dat ook anderen iets dergelijks beraamden. (NT 114)

[3] Manlius indulget somno noctesque diesque;
Insomnis Pharius sacra profana rapit.
Omnibus hoc, Italae gentes, exposcite votis,
Manlius ut vigilet, dormiat ut Pharius.
(2:196)

The quotation is from Platnauer's two-volume edition with facing-page translation. Mallius Theodorus had a "distinguished

career [which] was crowned with the consulate for 399" (Cameron, 394), but seems to have had a reputation for lax administration. Hadrian, in contrast, seems to have been very active - in feathering his own nest. "Pharius" means Egyptian. Hella Haasse's Dutch version reads:

> Manlius droomt dag en nacht, maar de man uit Egypte
> (nimmermoe, niets is hem heilig) rooft los en vast.
> Volken van Rome wens nu eenstemmig: dat Manlius wake!
> Wie weet gaat dan juist het Egyptische licht onder zeil. (NT 24)

4 Me dolor incautus, me lubrica duxerit aetas,
me tumor impulerit, me devius egerit ardor:
te tamen haud decuit paribus concurrere telis. (2:196)

5 O nimium dilecte deo, *cui fundit ab antris*
Aeolus armatas hiemes, cui militat aether
Et coniurati veniunt ad classica venti. (96-98)

6 ... per cineres Pauli, per cani limina Petri,
ne laceres versus, dux Iacobe, meos. (2:278)

7 Christe potens rerum, redeuntis conditor aevi,
vox summi sensusque dei, quem fudit ab alta
mente pater tantique dedit consortia regni,
impia tu nostrae domuisti crimina vitae passus corporea numen vestire figura adfarique palam populos hominemque fateri. (2:260)

8 Een testament dus, een laatste wilsbeschikking. Ik bezit niets meer dan de wil om als een Phoenix op te stijgen uit mijn vroegere zelf. (NT 145)

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