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## The Wrath of Theodosius as a Stormy Sea

### Images of the Sea and Sailing in Claudian (*carm. min.* 30, 134–139)

*The focus of the paper is an episode of the Laus Serenae (carm. min. 30, 134–139) in which Claudian pictures the wrath of the emperor Theodosius, which is calmed by his niece Serena. The aim is to demonstrate that the way Claudian depicts Theodosius evokes the image of the stormy sea, whereas Serena represents the only rock capable of withstanding him. This produces a strong image, frequently used in literature, which can seriously impact the audience and communicate the propagandistic message hidden in these verses more powerfully. This proposal is based on some characteristic features of Claudian poetry, such as his descriptions rich in evidentia, the allusions he made exploiting words with wide semantic fields, and especially his penchant for aquatic imagery, exploited with different purposes. Indeed, these aquatic images, whatever their primary role, often achieve the result of making the narrative more vivid.*

**Keywords:** Ambiguitas, Evidentia, Images, Poetry, Propaganda, Sea, Similes, Water

### 1. Introduction

Although Claudian has been defined as ‘the last great pagan poet’<sup>1</sup>, his poetry has been neglected by scholars for years. He has long been considered more an overly rhetorical author, or a historical source, than a

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<sup>1</sup> CHRISTIANSEN (2009).

poet to be appreciated for poetic value. His role as a propagandist in the Western imperial court might have played a part in these prejudices.<sup>2</sup> However, as has been recognized in more recent years, together with the revaluation of late Latin poetry, the poetical value of Claudian's poems and their ideological function are not mutually exclusive.<sup>3</sup>

Some characteristic features can be identified in Claudian poetic production, which often are balanced between the political and the poetical.

First of all, the poet is well known for creating vivid images, rich in *evidentia*, which often make up isolated pictures, full of colours and minute details,<sup>4</sup> to the extent that the influence of iconography has often been identified behind his descriptions.

In addition, certain themes, semantic fields, or *iuncturae* are recurrent in Claudian verses. Several reasons might be identified behind these repetitions, from propagandistic intentions, to adherence to established epic or rhetorical *topoi*, to mere preference by the poet. Among the most frequent images, as will be seen, are the aquatic ones.

Finally, Claudian verses are rich in wordplays and allusions, which often contain hidden political messages.<sup>5</sup> He often plays with terms having wide semantic fields to engage the audience emotionally, to stimulate attention and intelligence by creating subtle allusions. Indeed, one of the strategies the poet employs in his verses to add meaning to the text is that of exploiting ambiguous words or sentences.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Claudian's role as a propagandist in the Western court (working for emperor Honorius and his regent Stilico) was explicated by CAMERON (1970).

<sup>3</sup> See especially WARE (2012). Among the studies on Claudian poetry in terms of style, see GUALANDRI (1969), Fo (1982), GUALANDRI (1989), PRIVITERA (2003), MICOZZI (2013: XV–XXIII). On the revaluation of late Latin poetry see ROBERTS (1989).

<sup>4</sup> About this aspect of Claudian poetry, see e. g. GUALANDRI (1969: 8–9; 36); GALAND (1987).

<sup>5</sup> Claudian's allusive plays were constructed to convey precise ideological motives that would be received by the audience listening to the recitation of his panegyrics and by the educated public who would later read them: see GUALANDRI (2013: 115–116).

<sup>6</sup> For instance, he uses lexical ambiguity, which involves the individual word and aris-

By considering these features of Claudian poetry, this paper intends to analyse an episode of *Laus Serenae* in which they might overlap, producing a strong impact on the audience with both poetical and ideological purposes.

## 2. The theme of water in Claudian

One of the most common subjects in literature is water, which has always interested poets and authors, for scientific, philosophical, or merely literary purposes.<sup>7</sup>

However, the presence of water in Claudian's verses is so pervasive as to show the author's predilection for the subject, a penchant that reveals more than mere adherence to rhetorical conventions. Indeed, the theme of water, and aquatic imagery in general, is constant in Claudian's poetry, and he exploits it even more frequently than we might expect in an author as cultured as he, having studied in schools of rhetoric, employed established *topoi* to write encomiastic poetry, and who was interested in *progymnasmata* and literary exercises of various kinds.<sup>8</sup>

In Claudian's production, we can find many metaphors and allegories that involve the sea or sailing, many references to rivers (see for example *carm. min.* 28) that appear for different reasons, personified or not; similarly, descriptions of harbours can be found (*carm. min.* 2; 5), or of thermal baths (*carm. min.* 12), or of *aquarium mirabilia* (*carm. min.* 26;

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es from homonymy: if a word has two or more meanings it does not allow a univocal reading (on ambiguity, which can arise from homonymy, or from a morphological uncertainty, or from a dubious sentence structure, see LAUSBERG 1998: 96). See FORMISANO (2021) on Claudian's use of ambiguity in the *praefatio* of *Rapt. Pros.* 1.

<sup>7</sup> Literary images involving water, or ships, are widespread in Greek and Latin literature in general: let us think about personifications (of rivers or of the sea), which are frequent, especially in epic poems, since the *Odyssey*, or descriptions of *loci amoeni*, or ships allegories, or symbols of poetic activity.

<sup>8</sup> On Claudian biography, see e. g. CAMERON (1970: 1–29).

33–38), or of sources, shown as natural phenomena (*carm. min.* 26), or as mythological symbols of poetic initiation (*carm. min.* 30, 8). Finally, water is often used to create contrasts, for instance in figures of speech such as antitheses or oxymora, or to produce aquatic periphrases or lists of aquatic terms. In this extensive material, a categorization might be proposed, based on the function the water image assumes in every specific context, although some of these uses may sometimes overlap in the same passage or may not be so easily identifiable.

First, the political and ideological function is very common, as we can expect from an official court poet who was the propagandist of Emperor Honorius, and especially of his regent Stilico. The main example of aquatic images exploited with this function in Claudian poetry is that of the ship-state allegory, a literary *topos* since archaic lyricism.<sup>9</sup> The ship in the stormy sea in Claudian often symbolizes the Empire in difficulty, while the only sailor capable of leading it to safety is compared to Stilico: see *Stil.* 1, 281–290; *IV Cons.* 419–427; *Ruf.* 1, 70–73; *Ruf.* 1, 275–277; *Gild.* 215–222; *Get.* 1–14. This allegory sometimes occupies only a few verses, while others are much longer, as in the case of *Laus Serenae*, vv. 30, 202–206, in which the pilot able to steer the ship when the storm rages is compared to Stilico's ability to hold the Empire together and save it from ruin. Besides, there is also an example where the motif is exploited for Manlius Theodorus; see *Theod.* 42–46: Manlius at the head of the Empire is compared to a sailor who takes control of everything thanks to his experience.

Moreover, the metapoetic function is also extremely frequent. Claudian usually inserts programmatic or metapoetic allusions in the *praefationes* to his poems. The image of sailing occurs as a symbol of literature

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<sup>9</sup> Alc. fr. 208a Voigt; on this *topos* see especially the commentary of NISBET–HUBBARD (1970: 179–182) on Hor. 1, 14. For Claudian's use of this long-standing image, see e. g. CHRISTIANSEN (1969: 111–112); TARIGO (2012).

in the famous *praefatio* to the first book of *De raptu Proserpinae*, in which the poet alludes to his own poetry by describing ships and sailing.<sup>10</sup> Also, the *topos* of the source as a symbol of poetic initiation can be appreciated in *carm. min.* 30, 8.

The paradoxographical interest appears especially in some short poems that describe *aquarum mirabilia* and must be connected to the general interest in *mirabilia* shown by cultured people between the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries AD. Claudian appears to be interested in every property of the water,<sup>11</sup> as is proven by the six short poems he dedicated to the rock crystal to describe its dual nature, liquid and solid.<sup>12</sup> In this way, he made his public curious, and tested his own skills in using different synonyms and expressions for designating water. Among these poems, see especially *carm. min.* 34, where the names *lympha*, *aqua*, *unda*, and *glacies* recur.<sup>13</sup>

The fourth function might be called the stylistic function, because it is related to antithetical figures of speech (numerous antitheses involve, for example, water and fire), or to the variations Claudian plays on the same aquatic subject in the same passage, showing his indulgence in varying the way he refers to water, through very elaborate periphrases or synonyms.<sup>14</sup> See, for example, the passage quoted above from

<sup>10</sup> *Rapt. Pros.* 1 *praef.* 1–12 : *inventa primus secuit qui naue profundum / et rudibus remis sollicitavit aquas, / qui dubiis ausus committere flatibus alnum / quas natura negat praebuit arte vias, / tranquillis primum trepidus se credidit undis / litora securo tramite summa legens; / mox longos temptare sinus et linquere terras / et leni coepit pandere vela Noto; / ast ubi paulatim praeceps audacia crevit / cordaque languentem dedidicere metum, / iam vagus inrumpit pelago caelumque secutus / Aegaeas hiemes Ioniumque domat.* On this preface see MINISALE 1975–1976.

<sup>11</sup> See e. g. *carm. min.* 26, *Aponus*.

<sup>12</sup> *Carm. min.* 33–38.

<sup>13</sup> *Lymphae, quae tegitis cognato carcere lymphas, / Et, quae nunc estis quaeque fuistis aquae, / quod vos ingenium iunxit? Qua frigoris arte / Torpuit et maduit prodigiosa silex? / Quis tepor inclusus securas vindicat undas? / Interior glacies quo liquefacta Noto? / Gemma quibus claustris arcano mobilis aestu / Vel concreta fuit vel resoluta gelu?*

<sup>14</sup> Fuoco (2008: 48).

*carm. min.* 30, 8, in which almost every term is aquatic, and the complex periphrasis simply refers to source Aganippe: *fons Aganippea Permessius educat unda*.

The last function is perhaps the most common one as it falls within the poet's interest in vivid descriptions and narratives, rich in *evidentia*. Indeed, the text may be reinforced by water images or metaphors involving the stormy sea, which gives it greater pathos. Many of these aquatic images, whatever their primary role, achieve the result of making the narrative more vivid, and some of them seem only to have this function. It happens, for instance, in the first book of *In Rufinum*, in which the disagreement of the assembly is compared to waves,<sup>15</sup> or the escape of Rufinus is compared to a river facing an obstacle.<sup>16</sup> Elsewhere, Eutropius' army is compared to an unmanned ship,<sup>17</sup> or Stilico, who is finally in peace after being in the midst of dangers, is compared to a sailor having arrived in port after the storm;<sup>18</sup> in the *Laus Serenae*, a passage depicts the arriving of Serena and her sister at the court of their uncle Theodosius, comparing it to the sea procession that welcomes Diana and Minerva when visiting uncle Neptune.<sup>19</sup>

From these few examples (but there would be more), it is possible to deduce the general interest of Claudian for aquatic imagery. Some scholars, noticing the frequent references to sea travel and sailing in Claudian poems, argued that the poet must have travelled extensively by sea. However, every image could be traced back to a well-known literary *topos*, and many of these themes occur elsewhere in Greek or Latin literature. What is remarkable, apart from the different variations with which the poet presents them, is that aquatic imagery recurs obsessively

<sup>15</sup> *Ruf.* 1, 70–73

<sup>16</sup> *Ruf.* 1, 269–272. On this image, see next paragraphs.

<sup>17</sup> *Eutr.* 2, 423–421.

<sup>18</sup> *Get.* 209–210.

<sup>19</sup> *Carm. min.* 30, 122–131.

in his poems, which shows he had a particular fondness for this natural element.<sup>20</sup>

### 3. The image of stormy sea

One of the topical aquatic images that Claudian exploited several times in his poetry is that of the stormy sea.

The comparison with waters – of sea or of rivers – swollen by rain or storms has its origin in Homer and it is frequent in epic poetry, often referring to a force that finds no obstacle and drags with it whatever it encounters in its passage.<sup>21</sup> In Homer, see, for example, *Il.* 11, 492–497.

Ὡς δ' ὁπότε πλήθων ποταμὸς πεδίων δὲ κάτεισι  
 χειμάρρους κατ' ὄρεσφιν ὀπαζόμενος Διὸς ὄμβρῳ,  
 πολλὰς δὲ δρυὺς ἀζαλέας, πολλὰς δέ τε πεύκας  
 ἐσφέρεται, πολλὸν δέ τ' ἀφυσγετὸν εἰς ἄλλα βάλλει,  
 ὥς ἔφεπε κλονέων πεδίων τότε φαίδιμος Αἴας,  
 δαΐζων ἵππους τε καὶ ἀνέρας.<sup>22</sup>

In Latin literature, the simile had greater fortune and can be found, for instance, in Lucr. 1, 281–289; Verg. *Aen.* 2, 304–307; 7, 586–590 e 10, 693–696; Lucan. 6, 265–266; Stat. *Theb.* 3, 671–676. Some of these passages show the fortunate motif of the rock that remains immobile and withstands the waves of the sea crashing violently on her: see, for example, Verg. *Aen.* 7, 586–590.

<sup>20</sup> On these topics see e. g. FUOCO (2008: 38–50); LUCERI (2020: 41–46).

<sup>21</sup> CHARLET (2000: 202); MEUNIER (2019: 122).

<sup>22</sup> 'And as when a river in flood cometh down upon a plain, a winter torrent from the mountains, driven on by the rain of Zeus, and many a dry oak and many a pine it beareth in its course, and much drift it casteth into the sea; even so glorious Aias charged tumultuously over the plain on that day, slaying horses and men' (translated by A. T. MURRAY).

Ille velut pelago rupes immota resistit,  
 ut pelagi rupes magno veniente fragore,  
 quae sese multis circum latrantibus undis  
 mole tenet; scopuli nequiquam et spumea circum  
 saxa fremunt laterique illisa refunditur alga.<sup>23</sup>

Claudian often employs Homeric similes<sup>24</sup> and explicitly recovers the idea of the resisting rock in a simile, comparing Rufinus to the rough waters of a stream that break against a rock, probably representing Stilico.<sup>25</sup>

Haud secus hiberno tumidus cum vertice torrens  
 saxa rotat volvitque nemus pontesque revellit,  
 frangitur obiectu scopuli quaerensque meatum  
 spumat et illisa montem circumsonat unda.<sup>26</sup>

Similarly common in the poetic tradition is the image of rushing water to represent destructive wrath, or the assimilation of violent feeling subsiding to the stormy sea calming.<sup>27</sup> See, for example, Sil. 7, 253–259:

his dictis fractus furor et rabida arma quierunt,  
 ut, cum turbatis placidum caput extulit undis

<sup>23</sup> 'He's like a crag as it stands unmoved against battering high seas, he's like a crag in the high seas, as breakers crash down upon it, self-maintained by its own sheer mass while, relentlessly, rollers bark all around, and around it the rocks and the reefs rumble endless protests. The kelp that is washed up its flanks slips away in the backwash' (translated by F. AHL).

<sup>24</sup> The topic is studied by MEUNIER (2019: 93–129).

<sup>25</sup> MEUNIER (2019: 122).

<sup>26</sup> Claud. *Ruf.* 1, 271–274. The text quoted is that of HALL (1985). 'Likewise a torrent swollen with snowmelt whirls boulders, overturns the forest, and tears down bridges. Boulders block it and break its impetus, until it foams, seeking its way forward, and its wave resounds as it strikes the mountain'; translated by BERNSTEIN (2023).

<sup>27</sup> MEUNIER (2019: 126).



Neptunus totumque videt [...]
   
tum sensim infusa tranquilla per aequora pace
   
languentes tacito lucent in litore fluctus.<sup>28</sup>

On the other hand, for the opposite idea, see Stat. *silv.* 2, 2, 28–29: *nullo-que tumultu / stagna modesta iacent dominique imitantia mores*.

On both sides, these examples show how pervasive these images were in Latin literature. In the panegyric for the sixth consulship of Honorius, Claudian himself proposed a similar idea, suggesting that water can display human moods and emotions, such as anger or calm.<sup>29</sup>

...cumque omnibus una
   
sit natura vadis, similes ut corporis undas
   
ostendant, haec sola novam iactantia sortem
   
humanos properant imitari flumina mores.<sup>30</sup>

#### 4. Proposal: an interpretation of *Laus Serenae*, 134–139

Before applying these premises to the episode to be analysed, it is necessary to introduce Claudian's main intentions in composing the *Laus Serenae*.

Serena was the niece of Emperor Theodosius, who adopted her after the death of his brother Honorius. Together with her husband Stilicho, she reached an enormous power in the Western part of the Empire,

<sup>28</sup> 'His words tamed their frenzy and calmed their angry weapons. So, when Neptune, the ruler of the sea, raises his serene brow above the stormy waves, and sees the whole ocean [...] then peace and quiet spread gradually over the deep, and gentle waves reflect the light along the silent shore' (translated by J. D. DUFF).

<sup>29</sup> NEWBOLD (2001: 169).

<sup>30</sup> Claud. *VI Cons.* 511–514. 'While it is the common nature of water to mirror the exact image of the body, it alone boasts the strange power that it mimics not human forms but human characters'; translated by PLATNAUER (1922).

which increased even more after the death of Theodosius himself. Being their official propagandist, Claudian was interested in communicating their political ideology. In particular, in order to justify the power that they had reached, the poet felt the necessity to emphasize the kinship between Serena and the Imperial family.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, it was only by reminding the audience that Serena was a princess, beloved by her adoptive father Theodosius, that Stilico could find the justification for his power.

In the *Laus Serenae* (*carm. min.* 30), the unfinished panegyric that the poet dedicated to her in around 404 AD,<sup>32</sup> a positive image of Serena is painted from various perspectives. Among the numerous themes that the poet proposed in the panegyric, there is one that recurs several times throughout the poem. It is the theme of the sincere affection that bound Theodosius to Serena (presented as his daughter, as she appears elsewhere in Claudian poetry)<sup>33</sup>. The theme recurs especially in vv. 97–114, 134–139 and 159–161, and it is of essential importance for the propaganda project of Serena and Stilico. For this reason, the motif is always proposed by Claudian through expedients that allow him to create a strong impact on the audience and a consequent greater assimilation of this fundamental idea.<sup>34</sup>

In its second occurrence in the panegyric, the theme is presented through an everyday scene of the young *laudanda*, who, in her uncle's Court, is shown to be the only one able to temper the wrath of Theodosius, every time he returns home irate; see *carm. min.* 30, 134–139.

<sup>31</sup> The importance and frequency of themes involving kinship in Claudian's diffusion of Stilico's ideology is studied by GUALANDRI (2010).

<sup>32</sup> On this poem see CONSOLINO (1986) and CHARLET (2018:159–174).

<sup>33</sup> See e. g. *Stil.* 1, 80–82: *comitata parentibus exit / purpureis virgo. stabat pater inde tropaeis / inclitus.*

<sup>34</sup> See also the vivid scenes of Serena who, still a child, complains that her uncle Theodosius wants to take her home with him whenever he visits his brother (vv. 97–114).

Et quotiens, rerum moles ut publica cogit,  
 tristior aut ira tumidus flagrante redibat,  
 cum patrem nati fugerent atque ipsa timeret  
 commotum Flaccilla virum, tu sola frementem  
 frangere, tu blando poteras sermone mederi!  
 adloquiis haerere tuis, secreta fideli...<sup>35</sup>

Often the burden of public affairs constrained Theodosius, and he came home saddened or swollen with burning anger. Then his son would run from their father, or Flaccilla would fear her disturbed husband. But you alone could blunt his rage, and your gentle speech could soothe him. He clung to your conversation, loyally...secrets...<sup>36</sup>

The hidden propagandistic message is that Serena is regarded by the emperor as a daughter, and more. Since the emperor trusted her, even more than his own children and wife, she was worthy of being regarded as a true *Augusta*, even though she was not. Claudian achieved his purpose of stressing this theme in different ways, for example by presenting the whole episode in an epical way. The motif of *ira* itself recalls epic sceneries,<sup>37</sup> and the adjective *solus* attributed to Serena, to contrast her with Theodosius' sons and wife and enshrine her superiority, constitutes a variation (in the feminine) of the *unus / omnes* dichotomy, still

<sup>35</sup> There is a textual problem in the final verse, see the apparatus of HALL (1985): some editors suggested a lacuna, others an emendation, such as *fateri* instead of *fideli*.

<sup>36</sup> Translated by BERNSTEIN (2023).

<sup>37</sup> The *ira* is a constant motif in epic and often is its driving force (see the wrath of Achilles in Hom. *Il.*; of Poseidon in Hom. *Od.*; of Juno in Verg. *Aen.*), see e. g. LAURENTI (1987) and STOCKS (2018) about Barca's *ira* in Silius' *Punica*. Claudian exploits the motif in *De raptu Proserpinae*, his most properly epic poem, in which Pluto's wrath begins the narrative (*rapt. Pros.* 1, 32–34), and in *Ruf.* 1, 44, in which the same role is played by the wrath of the Furies. Apart from these instances, however, wrath is, in Claudian's work, often employed as a literary reminiscence, to raise the tone of the scene and without an actual narrative role: see MEUNIER (2019: 254–261).

a typical epic motif.<sup>38</sup> In this epic setting, the mention of Flaccilla and the legitimate sons of the emperor is even more significant. Indeed, the former was the beloved wife of Theodosius, commonly seen as his confidante and power sharer.<sup>39</sup> Depicting her while running away in front of the husband emphasises the essential role of Serena, the only one who can calm him. Similarly, the presence of the sons of Theodosius, who had the same escape reaction, focuses the attention on the fact that Serena should also be considered as a true daughter of the emperor. These elements show the intention of the poet in conveying his political message in an incisive way, but among these clear strategies, another one might be detected in these verses.

Indeed, the lexemes that transmit the idea of wrath also belong to the semantic field of stormy waters, suggesting the possibility of interpreting the entire passage as an image that would represent Theodosius as the sea, made stormy by public concerns, and Serena as the only safe ship or rock capable of breaking against its waves, which would then be calmed after her passage. This would produce a strong image, well established in literary tradition, that could impact the audience and communicate the propagandistic message more powerfully.

As can be seen, in a few verses there is a constellation of terms – *tristior*, *ira*, *tumidus*, *commotum*, *fremmentem*, *frangere*, *haerere* – that belong both to the semantic sphere of human passions, especially human wrath, and to that of stormy water. Indeed, *tristis* can be used not just for human passion, as here, but also in reference to natural forces, to express the idea of something gloomy and savage, as the stormy sea or water in general.<sup>40</sup> Lucretius had employed the adjective for the waves

<sup>38</sup> On this opposition, which is typical of epic, see e. g. HARDIE (1993: 3–10); it was among the most exploited in Claudian, who generally employed it to glorify Stilico.

<sup>39</sup> On the influence over her husband that was usually attributed to Flaccilla see Greg. *OrFl.* 479, 488.

<sup>40</sup> OLD (1968: 1977, 7): '(of natural forces, etc.) Harsh, grim, savage'. Examples of this

of the sea to indicate, in a metaphorical sense, the passions of those upset by worries, as Theodosius is in our passage: *et genus humanum frustra plerumque probavit / volvere curarum tristis in pectore fluctus*, Lucr. 6, 33–34. Also in Claudian's verses, *tristis* appears in association with natural elements (see, for example, *carm. min.* 28, 25: *cum tristis hiemps alias produxerit undas*). The term *ira*, too, can convey not only the image of an angry man, but also that of the stormy sea:<sup>41</sup> Claudian himself attaches the term *ira* to the sea in *Stil.* 1, 285: *pelagi caelique obnitiur irae*. The adjective *tumidus* literally means swollen, thus it can signify 'inflamed with fury or passion', but it is also frequently used to refer to a 'body of water, increased in height or swollen',<sup>42</sup> such as a stormy watercourse; again, also Claudian uses it in describing Rufinus as a *tumidus...torrens* to obtain an icastic image and convey ideas about his personality.<sup>43</sup> The verb *commoveo* can refer to human passions as well as to a liquid, and particularly to the sea, which can be stirred or agitated.<sup>44</sup> The verb *fremo*, 'to utter a deep dull continuous sound, to rumble...',<sup>45</sup> is very often used in connection with natural elements and is the Latin equivalent of the Greek βρέμω, 'to roar', similarly used in expressions related to water;<sup>46</sup> Claudian frequently exploits *fremo* in connection with natural elements (see, for example, *Stil.* 1, 281–282: *tales utrimque procellae / cum fremere-*

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use of the adjective can be found in Ov. *epist.* 18, 143: *per freta tristia*; Val. Fl. 1, 631: *tristius an miseris superest mare*; Mart. 9, 40, 6: *dispersa rate tristibus procellis*.

<sup>41</sup> OLD (1968: 965, 3): '(of natural forces, etc.) Violence, rage'. See e. g. Ov. *met.* 14, 471: *iram caelique marisque*; Mart. 7, 19, 4: *Scythici tristior ira freti*.

<sup>42</sup> OLD (1968: 1987, 3): '(of bodies of water) Increased in height, swollen (esp. after rain or storms)'; see e. g. Verg. *Aen.* 1, 142: *tumida aequora*; Hor. *carm.* 3, 3, 48: *tumidus... Nilus*; Stat. *Theb.* 4, 387: *tumidum Gangen*.

<sup>43</sup> *Ruf.* 1, 269.

<sup>44</sup> OLD (1968: 368, 2): 'to stir up, agitate (a liquid, esp. the sea)'; see e. g. Var. *lin.* 7, 23: *aequor mare appellatum, quod aequatum cum commotum vento non est*; Lucr. 2, 766: *magnum commoverunt aequora venti*.

<sup>45</sup> OLD (1968: 732, 1); see e. g. Enn. *Ann.* 497: *fremeat imber Neptuni*; Stat. *Theb.* 4, 817: *fremunt undae*.

<sup>46</sup> Cf. e. g. Hom. *Il.* 4, 425: [κῦμα] ὀγγνύμενον μεγάλα βρέμει; Soph. *Ant.* 592.

ent; *carm. min.* 30, 208: *fremuit.../ tempestas*). The verb *frango* normally means ‘breaking against a barrier’ and it is often used to refer to the ship against the waves or to the sea against a rock;<sup>47</sup> in Claudian, see, for example, *Ruf.* 1, 270–271: *torrens...frangitur*. In the description of Theodosius offered in *Laus Serenae*, this primary meaning is overshadowed by the figurative one of ‘taming’, ‘calming’. Finally, also the verb *haereo* could refer to the calming of water: in Claudian, see *Stil.* 1, 186: *haesit et Alpheus*; *IV Cons.* 348: *fluvios...haerentes glacie*; *carm. min.* 26, 51: *haerent stagna lacu*.

What Claudian might do here is to use a procedure opposite to the one he employed in the passage of *In Rufinus* quoted above. In that passage, the image of the raging river breaking against the rock was intended to evoke the moral sphere of Rufinus, in addition to the rock evoking Stilico. The same role is played here by Serena, allusively recalling the rock capable of opposing the wrath of ‘swollen’ forces. Moreover, in the passage of the *In Rufinum*, which was a clear simile with stormy water, Claudian places the same lexical items as our episode: *tumidus [...]* *frangitur*.

The constellation of ambiguous terms, together with the background of epic tradition and of Claudian’s own poetry related to stormy water comparisons, might suggest here the allusion to the sea, which, moreover, would be placed in an epic-inspired context. Although the problem of intentionality is always relevant while speaking about allusions and ambiguity, the poet was probably aware of the aquatic image he evoked, and he created it with the precise intention of describing a vivid scene in order to communicate his message in a more emphatic way<sup>48</sup>.

<sup>47</sup> OLD (1968: 730, 1c–d): ‘*navem frangere* (and sim.), to wreck a ship (usu. pass.) ... to break (waves)’; see e. g. Verg. *Aen.* 1, 161: *insula portum efficit obiectu laterum, quibus omnis ab alto frangitur...unda*.

<sup>48</sup> In addition to the examples mentioned, one can also consider the semantic range of the name Serena, which might suggest this interpretation: Serena is the only one

## 5. Conclusions

Many elements suggest that in the episode narrated in *Laus Serenae*, 134–139, Claudian is depicting the wrath of Theodosius as if he were the stormy sea, and Serena as the only rock capable of opposing him. The image finds a strong background in poetic tradition (especially epic), where similes involving stormy waters were widespread, and human passions were very often compared to the sea, whether calm or tempestuous. Claudian knew this tradition and this kind of Homeric comparison, and he had exploited it elsewhere. In addition, the poet had a general interest for aquatic imagery that drove him to choose this natural element on many occasions and with different purposes. Significant is his own statement that water can display human moods and emotions.

Moreover, Claudian's interest in creating vivid images is well known, especially if he had something important to communicate; the image of the stormy sea perfectly fitted this purpose.

Finally, his frequent use of lexical *ambiguitas* and his ability in exploiting words which offer a wide semantic field allow him to exploit, in this passage, both the semantic field of sea and sailing, and that of human wrath.

Claudian might have done it with a mere pathetic purpose, but considering the context in which the *Laus Serenae* was written, it appears that the ideological purpose is also present. Indeed, Claudian aims at communicating more powerfully the strong relationship between Serena and the emperor, in order to legitimize her power and the power of her husband. In the *Laus Serenae*, the poet always shows similar care in conveying the same concept with the greatest possible *evidentia*.

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capable of making Theodosius (or the sea) *serenus* (I thank the anonymous reviewer for the suggestion).

To summarise, the necessity to convey this ideological message – essential in the Serena and Stilico political project – is reinforced by Claudian's penchant for aquatic imagery, for vivid narratives, and for allusions. In this episode, his role as propagandist and his value as a poet coexist in a perfect balance.

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