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On the Tomb of a Great Beauty by Claudian

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On the Tomb of a Great Beauty

Claudian
In sepulchrum speciosae

Fate never permits
longevity to beauty:
all that is exalted
and preeminent
ends all of a sudden—
just like that.
Here lies a beautiful
woman: Venus's
loveliness belonged
to her, but hers as well
covetous Heaven's
malice, a poor exchange
for that first honor.

The poet of late antiquity known as Claudian (or, formally, Claudius Claudianus, 370–404 AD) is usually overlooked in whatever grouping he is placed. He tends to be overshadowed by his near contemporaries of the early Christian Church—Augustine and Jerome—and among fellow Latin poets, he and his work have not endured amid the company of classical authors such as Virgil and Horace, or even later Silver Age poets such as Lucan. Yet in his own time his reputation was formidable, and at least one poem of his, “De raptu Proserpinae,” an unfinished epic in three books written near the end of the fourth century, has continued to be read and highly regarded, not only in Claudian’s own day but also from the medieval era onward. Consider, for example, references to it in Chaucer as well as poet and translator David Slavitt’s including it in *Broken Columns: Two Roman Epic Fragments*.

Born in Alexandria, Claudian found success as a court poet by writing just the sort of verse—formal, occasional, and often uncomfortably flattering to a modern ear—that is likely to meet only with obscurity amid today’s poetry readership, even among those readers with a taste for classical or medieval poetry. He wrote effusive eulogies to a pair of patrons, Probinus and Olybrius, along with other starchy (by our standards) “panegyrics.” He also wrote *epithalamia*, formal attacks (the best known one against Rufinus), and other more heroic, epideictic poems, in hexameters, in praise of the deeds and leadership of consuls such as Stilicho. Similarly, his “De bello gothico” suggests a poet interested in his times. Although not a certainty, a sudden lack of testimony makes it likely that Claudian was dead by 404. By 400, even before his death, the placing of a statue of him in the Roman Forum suggests the extent of his reputation at the end of his career.

Claudian is even more overlooked as a poet of *carmina* or short lyric poems. Like his Roman predecessors such as Ovid, Propertius, and Tibullus, Claudian showed much skill in composing elegiac couplets. These poems are hardly studied at all, even among specialists, but I find them to be of great interest and promise. If not great late-antique lyric poems in their own right, Claudian’s lyric poems at least provide an occasion, with their attention to image and choice of interesting subject and delicate development of thought, to the literary translator who is hopeful to render a readable contemporary poem from this source text, and by so doing give Claudian a twenty-first-century voice. That has been my goal with this Claudian translation included here.

The slender line lengths of “On the Tomb of a Great Beauty” leave behind Claudian’s original stanza shape in favor of lines that overall may give some readers the impression of a tomb stone and the epitaph shown there. It is lean in appearance but also in its unflinching, brooding sentiment. (Claudian’s early readers would have recognized his own choice of elegiac couplets as the common meter for such epitaphs on tombs.) I realize that this may be seen as perhaps over-subtle, but I was hoping for a subconscious “migration of effect” for the contemporary reader of this English-language version of Claudian’s poem. I have tried to

accentuate the structure and expression that makes this poem lively—moving from proposition to the present occasion, and with a sharp but conversational voice (the talkative “just like that,” for example). Claudian’s original tersely invites readers to infer their own conclusions from the pairing of the “possessions” of the poem’s great beauty—the beauty itself, along with Heaven’s spite. My version allows itself one final, dry point to be verbalized: these two gifts cannot exist side by side; the bearer must be willing, after all (and has no choice but to be willing), to suffer an exchange.