

‘Subtle and Subversive: Sedulius’ Intertextual Argument with Vergil in the *Paschale carmen*’

In his *Paschale carmen*, consisting of five books and written sometime between 425 and 450, the Christian epicist Sedulius uses two chief intertexts: the Christian Bible, especially the Gospels, and the poems of Vergil. Sedulius demonstrates close familiarity with all three of Vergil’s works, but, perhaps not surprisingly, the *Aeneid* looms largest in Sedulius’ poem, the subject of which is the life and miracles of Christ: *clara salutiferi taceam miracula Christi?* (PC 1.26). Over the past two centuries, Sedulius’ use of Vergil has been remarked upon and studied occasionally. In recent times, illuminating works such as C.P.E. Springer’s *The Gospel as Epic in Late Antiquity* (1988) and R.P.H. Green’s *Latin Epics of the New Testament* (2006) have promoted in important ways the discussion of how and why Sedulius employs his epic predecessors.

In this paper, I shall endeavor to contribute to that conversation through close analysis of the dynamics of Vergilian reception in Sedulius’ narration of two of the miracles of Christ: the raising of the synagogue-ruler’s daughter (PC 3.103-15 and 129-42, with source-texts in *Aeneid* 4, 6, and 11) and the healing of a demon-possessed boy (PC 3.293-312, with its source-text in *Aeneid* 12). The investigation of these two episodes will reveal a Sedulius who is sensitive, subtle, and subversive in his use of Vergil, as he borrows significant elements of the Vergilian thought-world while implicitly polemicizing against Vergil’s hero (Aeneas) and tragic figures (for example, Dido and Turnus). Sedulius not only undercuts Vergilian heroism to replace it with a new and perfected ideal; he also undercuts Vergilian theology to show the superiority of Christian theology—all through an implicit and intricate intertextual argument.

For instance, in the raising of the synagogue-ruler’s daughter, Sedulius makes deft allusive use of three different scenes involving death in the *Aeneid*. Two of these involve parents and children (Evander and Pallas in A. 11 and Aeneas’ beseeching of the Sibyl to allow him into the Underworld to visit the dead Anchises in A. 6), and the third is the suicide of Dido (A. 4). When the three source-texts have been analyzed, the conclusion is unmistakable. The Christian has hope in spite of death, as demonstrated by Christ’s raising of the dead girl, while the non-Christian has only despair. This contrast, however, is never made explicit, but can only be seen through examination of the relationship between the *Paschale carmen* and its source-texts. In such a way, Sedulius reinforces one of the points of the biblical narrative (Christ’s power over death) and adds another dimension by contrasting it with a literary—and spiritual—alternative, discernible only to an audience with a detailed knowledge of Vergil.

It is my contention that many other passages in Sedulius, including but not limited to those to be discussed, repay such close reading and open a significant vista from which to observe late antique Christian ways of reading and re-appropriating Vergil in a classicizing Christian intellectual milieu. Such close reading contributes, in turn, to a greater understanding of the ‘dynamics of a tradition’, to use Philip Hardie’s phrase,¹ and therefore makes for a valuable advance in the study of the reception of Vergil. I hope that this paper will be one small step in that direction.

¹ I borrow it from the title of his book *The Epic Successors of Virgil: A Study in the Dynamics of a Tradition* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993).