

## Some Aspects of Commodian

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Commodian has never gone short of detractors. *Scriptis mediocri sermone quasi versu*, opined Gennadius,<sup>1</sup> his one<sup>2</sup> ancient critic. "Altogether wanting in literary style," pronounced the compilers of *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*,<sup>3</sup> and for those of the *Tusculum Lexikon*<sup>4</sup> "Der Stil ist absonderlich," whilst T. D. Barnes<sup>5</sup> wondered "if the word poetry can be used of so hispid a writer." All of this makes Browning<sup>6</sup> seem quite kind in his glancing allusion to our author's "enigmatic" verses.

Some of this chorus of vituperation is the result of Commodian's apparent association with Africa. There are more verse inscriptions from that country than any other province; some three hundred have so far been published.<sup>7</sup> Their wide range of metrical competence, classical allusion, and artistic skill argue for amateur production as well as the efforts of professional hacks.<sup>8</sup> Africa is to later Latin poetry what Egypt was to Greek (remembering the mordant claim of Eunapius, *VS* 493, that Egyptians are crazy over poetry but care for nothing important). Yet scholars have been less than kind. Mommsen<sup>9</sup> thundered, "we do not meet in the whole field of African-Latin authorship a single poet who deserves to be so much as named," whilst Raby<sup>10</sup> asserted that "the African temperament would seem

<sup>1</sup> *De vir. illustr.* 15, ed. E. C. Richardson (Leipzig 1896) 67.

<sup>2</sup> Which is not to overlook Gelasius' remark in the *decretum de libris recipiendis et non recipiendis*, ed. E. von Dobschütz (Leipzig 1912) 317 (=Migne, *PL* 59. 163), that the *opuscula Commodiani* are numbered amongst the apocrypha.

<sup>3</sup> F. L. Cross and E. A. Livingstone, 2nd ed., rev. (Oxford 1983) 320.

<sup>4</sup> Ed. W. Buchwald, A. Hohlweg, and O. Prinz (Munich 1982) 175.

<sup>5</sup> *Tertullian* (Oxford 1971) 193.

<sup>6</sup> R. Browning, *The Cambridge History of Classical Literature II: Latin Literature. Part 5, The Later Principate* (Cambridge 1983) 15.

<sup>7</sup> Mainly in *CIL* 8 and redeployed in such collections as *CLE* and R. Lattimore, *Themes in Greek and Latin Epitaphs* (Urbana 1962).

<sup>8</sup> See (e. g.) E. S. Bouchier, *Life and Letters in Roman Africa* (Oxford 1913) 84; J. Lindsay, *Song of a Falling World* (London 1948; repr. Westport 1979) 41-42; and most recently E. J. Champlin, *Fronto and Antonine Rome* (Cambridge, Mass. and London 1980) 148, n. 86.

<sup>9</sup> *Provinces of the Roman Empire*, tr. W. P. Dickson (London 1909) 11 373.

<sup>10</sup> F. J. E. Raby, *Christian Latin Poetry*, 2nd ed. (Oxford 1953) 95; cf. his *Secular Latin Poetry*, 2nd ed. (Oxford 1957) 99-116; 142-46.

to have been on the whole unfavourable to the production of verse." Despite some welcome dissent,<sup>11</sup> this remains the prevailing view.<sup>12</sup>

The other source of Commodian's dismal reputation is (of course) his own notorious style of versification, with its medley of quasi-hexameters, rhythmic effects, and accentual verse. So much has been written about this<sup>13</sup> that it will here not be Hamlet without the prince to evade a detailed restatement of the metrical facts and go directly to the bigger issues. African poets could handle all the classical metres. More to the point, from the third century on, they disclose a range of novelties. Not just verbal and ocular novelties such as acrostics, but lines that conflate hexameters with quantitative and accentual verse, with much syllable shortening and emphasis on rhyme. So when Beare puts Commodian down as a freak, coming from nowhere, leading to nowhere, he is talking nonsense.<sup>14</sup> Commodian is firmly in the tradition of African literary Christianity and (assuming for the moment—see below—that he came first) a pace setter for Augustine's *Psalm Against The Donatists*, an especially illuminating point of comparison.<sup>15</sup> Augustine stresses that his piece was written to be understood and sung by the ordinary people, hence it was composed in acrostics, with regular metre eschewed to keep out unfamiliar words, and with each line ending in *-e*. Earlier in the fourth century, Arius had produced in Greek his *Thaleia*<sup>16</sup> to reach (in the words of his enemy Athanasius) the roughest of folk in the roughest of places. It is a piquant thought that these two churchmen prefigure punk rock! One very practical reason for metrical innovation was that on Augustine's own evidence,<sup>17</sup> the African ear could not distinguish long and short vowels. Commodian has

<sup>11</sup> Averil Cameron, "Byzantine Africa—The Literary Evidence," *University of Michigan Excavations at Carthage VII* (Ann Arbor 1982) 37, calls Raby "extraordinarily hostile to African culture."

<sup>12</sup> Thus even the admirable Champlin (above, note 8) 17, could write "Bad poetry flourished in Africa," and leave it at that, whilst H. Isbell's *Penguin Last Poets of Imperial Rome* (Harmondsworth 1971) included only Nemesianus from Africa.

<sup>13</sup> Apart from the prefatory remarks and statistics of J. Martin in his edition of Commodian (Turnhout 1960) xiv–xviii, see (e. g.) W. Beare, *Latin Verse and European Song* (London 1957) 177–92; G. Boissier, *L'Afrique romaine*, 9th ed. (Paris 1901) 302–04; Bouchier (above, note 8) 84, 118–26; P. Monceaux, *Les Africains, étude sur la littérature latine d'Afrique: les Pâiens* (Paris 1894) 108–10. Paradoxically, these scholars for all their valuable analysis tend to show the least understanding of the new poetry. Linday (above, note 8) and M. Rosenblum, *Luxorius: A Latin Poet among the Vandals* (New York 1961) 32–33, show a proper appreciation of its causes and quality.

<sup>14</sup> Beare (above, note 13) 242, at the beginning of his chapter (242–47) on Commodian: "Wherever we put him, his peculiar versification seems to be outside the general trend of development; there is nothing quite like it, it follows on nothing and perhaps it leads nowhere."

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Beare 248–50 for a good analysis, though again failing to draw the right conclusions, also Raby, *Christ. Poet.* (above, note 10) 20.

<sup>16</sup> On which see G. Bardy, "La Thalie d'Arius," *Rev. Phil.* 53 (1927) 211–33.

<sup>17</sup> *De doctr. Christ.* 4. 24, *Afrae aures de correptione vel productione non iudicant.*

the same trick of ending every line in a poem with *-e*, and extends it to other vowels.<sup>18</sup>

Beare, then, was quite wrong to isolate Commodian. He fits both the secular versifiers and the African Christians.<sup>19</sup> Just as Augustine wrote his *Psalm* in defiance of his own classicism, so Commodian chose to write in a way that would reach a mass audience. It is clear that he knew how to write standard hexameters and the plethora of allusions to classical authors confirms his education, despite his own frequent *non sum doctor* disclaimers;<sup>20</sup> the snide remark by Gennadius, *quia parum nostrarum adtigerat litterarum, magis illorum* (sc. the pagans) *destruere potuit quam nostra firmare*, underlines the point.

We may not like metrical trickeries, but Commodian and company should be applauded for going beyond the limited repertoire of "classical" Latin. Even if he is judged a poetic failure, Commodian can still be seen as an important failure, a welcome change from vapid classical pastiche. Likewise, when scholars upbraid his "bad" Latin, they are wearing blinkers in the manner of L'Académie française. One is all for grammar and structure, but language must evolve. New forms and words must be treated on merit, pragmatically not ideologically.

I do not normally cite Marxists with approval. But as Churchill said at the height of the Battle for Britain, "If Hitler invaded Hell, I would make a favourable reference to the Devil in this House." So I will here mention Jack Lindsay's appraisal<sup>21</sup> of Commodian as a revolutionary ideologue: "Commodianus is then the first sign in verse of a large-scale upheaval from below. In rough form he sketches out the disruptive elements that are going to shake and reinvigorate the imperial culture; and which merge with the organising factors of the rhetorical tradition to beget the new orientations of the various poets as well as Fronto and Apuleius. He speaks for the most rowdy and unreconciled sections of the Christian movement, who still heard with understanding of the symbols the wild anti-imperial denunciations of such works as *Revelations*. The strength of those sections in Africa is attested, not only by such work as that of Commodianus, but also by the semi-heretical insurrectionary groups of Christians who became common as the imperial control weakened. These dissident elements appear strongly in the Donatist movement, a sort of Jacquerie which has embryonic democratic elements."

There is something in this. On the Donatist side, one would like to find the writings of Tichonius, extolled for his learning by Gennadius.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>18</sup> See *Instruct.* 2. 4; 2. 23; 2. 35 for poems wherein all lines end in *-e*, *-i*, and *-o*. He has no *-a* or *-u* endings, and no such tricks at all in the first book of *Instructiones*.

<sup>19</sup> Notice also the rhyming hexameters *De Sodoma* and *De Jona*, often ascribed to Tertullian or Cyprian—Africans again!

<sup>20</sup> For instance, *Instruct.* 2. 18. 15; cf. *Carmen* 61, *non sum ego vates nec doctor*.

<sup>21</sup> Lindsay (above, note 8) 43.

<sup>22</sup> *De vir. illustr.* 18, *in divinis litteris eruditus et in saecularibus non ignarus*.

Especially the *De bello intestino*, a splendidly belligerent title, as befits a sectarian mixed up with the rebellious peasants who went around shouting *Laudes Deo* and converting people with special cudgels called "Israels."<sup>23</sup> There is convergence here with recent estimates of Augustine as the outstanding semiotician of antiquity, one who thought much about the value of *verba* as a way of teaching people anything.<sup>24</sup> Commodian's poems (*quasi versu*, as Gennadius rightly emphasis) are best seen as hymns-cum-slogans, designed for singing, chanting and shouting. True, he does address readers,<sup>25</sup> but relatively rarely. Raby<sup>26</sup> was right to see his poems as "the earliest example of Latin verse which was intended for and, we must assume, appreciated by uncultured members of the Church." And when he goes on to wonder "if Commodian wrote the rude verses of the half-educated classes consciously or not," and when Beare asks, "Is Commodian then the pioneer of the new rhythmic poetry?" the answer in both cases is a resounding Yes.

This impression is underscored by the panoramic secular emptiness of Commodian's verses, especially the *Instructiones*. Few collections of Latin poems can have been so devoid of historical names and points of contact with Roman life. The only emperor named is Nero, brought in at *Instruct.* 1. 41. 7, 11 and a centrepiece in the latter stages of the *Carmen* (827, 838, 852, 869, 885, 891, 910, 933, 935), occupying his familiar role of Anti-Christ, one (it is pertinent to add) found in Lactantius, *De mort. pers.* 2. 5, 9 and persistent in West and East for many centuries to come.<sup>27</sup> An unnamed Caesar at *Instruct.* 1. 18. 6 will be discussed later. With regard to Commodian's date, the absence of Constantine or any good emperor is notable. Rome<sup>28</sup> and Romans are alluded to only in the *Carmen*. Likewise the great names of Roman literature, restricted to a single line (*Carmen* 583) in which it is admitted that (in the poet's own sequence) Virgil, Cicero, and Terence are read. No Greek author is named, and there is no direct mention of Greece or Greeks; nor (it must be said, in view of things to come) of Africa or Africans. Apart from the Goths of *Carmen* 810 who will recur below in the quest for Commodian's date, most of the names in his poems are biblical and mythological characters. The relatively special attention (*Instruct.* 1. 31. 9; 2. 15. 2; *Carmen* 627, 838) given to the apostle Paul is suggestive for the view that Commodian operated in Africa, given the

<sup>23</sup> Cf. B. Baldwin, "Peasant Revolt in Africa in the Later Roman Empire," *Nottingham Mediaeval Studies* 6 (1962) 9.

<sup>24</sup> G. Manetti, *Le teorie del segno nell'antichità classica* (Milan 1988).

<sup>25</sup> *Instruct.* 2. 22; 2. 31. 5; *Carmen* 29-30, 581-94.

<sup>26</sup> Raby, *Christ. Poet.* (above, note 10) 13.

<sup>27</sup> See the discussion of J. L. Creed in his edition (Oxford 1984) of the *De mort. pers.* Nero is invoked by (e. g.) Prudentius, *Peristeph.* 470 and *Contra Symm.* 2. 670 ff. (with Decius), also by Ambrose, *Ep.* 18 (the Statue of Victory debate). He is the only pagan emperor suffering eternal punishment in the anonymous twelfth-century satire *Timarion* (ch. 46).

<sup>28</sup> Where Martin (above, note 13) p. xi, thinks Commodian lived.

Scillitan Martyrs' veneration of him and possession of his *Epistles* in a Latin version.<sup>29</sup>

By and large, Commodian creates a timeless, placeless atmosphere. His tone throughout is that of a persecuted visionary. Perhaps the sign of an African setting. For it happens that up to the year 300 all but one of the genuine *Acta Martyrum* come from Africa.<sup>30</sup> Cyprian's extraordinary acceptance of dreams and visions as divine admonition is seen by some as a feature of African Christianity that made it unique.<sup>31</sup> Commodian also (*Instruct.* 2. 5) shares with Cyprian the theme of the *lapsi*.<sup>32</sup> His apocalyptic style is very much in tune with that of Tertullian and Lactantius, whilst his stress on conversion and persistent element of dialogue with his audience (as well as many shared mythological *exempla*) are reminiscent of Minucius Felix. The Christian authors who dominate Commodian are precisely Cyprian, Minucius and Tertullian;<sup>33</sup> African writers of various stripes made a point of mentioning each other, and also developed a characteristic African Latin idiom.<sup>34</sup> Commodian has phrases paralleled only in African inscriptions.<sup>35</sup> As will be seen, his vocabulary abounds in unique words, some of which he no doubt coined. It may be a moot point whether neologisms connote a person of learning or desperate illiteracy—children are great inventors of words when they don't know the right ones—but facility in them is pronounced in African writers from Apuleius to Martianus Capella.

For these reasons, I share the view of those who locate Commodian in Africa. However, he may not have been a native of that country. The title of *Instruct.* 2. 35 (the last poem in the collection) is *Nomen Gasei*, the piece itself containing the reverse acrostic *Commodianus Mendicus Christi*.<sup>36</sup> This is often taken to mean that Commodian was a native of Gaza, probably Palestinian Gaza. It ought to be admitted more often than it is that other explanations are possible. Martin,<sup>37</sup> for instance, accepts a Syrian influence, the word being an allotrope or corruption of a term meaning "poet" or "poor."<sup>38</sup> Possibly there is some sort of play on the

<sup>29</sup> See B. Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament* (Oxford 1987) 156–57.

<sup>30</sup> A point well made by Barnes (above, note 5).

<sup>31</sup> Cf. A. Lenox-Conyngham's review-article on G. W. Clarke's annotated translation of Cyprian's letters in *JRS* 77 (1987) 262.

<sup>32</sup> See in particular Cyprian, *De laps.* 6–9.

<sup>33</sup> As is obvious from the Index in Martin 202–07.

<sup>34</sup> This point is cogently developed by M. von Albrecht, "M. Minucius Felix as a Christian Humanist," *ICS* 12 (1987) 158: "African authors are fond of quoting their countrymen, even when there are chronological or ideological barriers."

<sup>35</sup> For example, *vivere semper*, *Instruct.* 1. 34. 19; *Carmen* 763; *CIL* 8. 7728 = *CLE* 561 (Cirta) and 8. 1247 (Vaga). For other distinctive African phrases in inscriptions, see Lattimore (above, note 7) 19, 68–69, 72–73.

<sup>36</sup> On the expression *mendicus dei*, see J. Martin, "Commodianus," *Traditio* 13 (1957) 28–30.

<sup>37</sup> Following C. Sigwalt in *Biblische Zeitschrift* 9 (1911) 243.

<sup>38</sup> Compare the Syriac meaning of "Malalas" in the name John Malalas.

noun *gaza*, ironically appropriate to a *mendicus dei*. Some joke on Commodian's name might be at stake. It is an unusual one for a Latin author, or Roman of any sort.<sup>39</sup> Given the tone and themes of his poems, one could see it as an appropriate reflection of some Greek word such as κομμός or even κομεντάριον.<sup>40</sup> Apart from his account (*Instruct.* 1. 18) of the cult of Ammydates, which is better reserved for subsequent discussion of his date, there is nothing geographically distinctive about Commodian's focus.

When all is said and done, the simplest and least subtlety-plagued explanation is to take *Gaseus* as indicating a native of Gaza. But this brings up a point not usually raised. If Commodian came from the East to Africa, does this imply that Latin was not his first language? Should he be taken as a precursor of Ammianus and Claudian? Are foreign origins part of the explanation for his supposed deficiencies of metrics and Latinity?

Defining the *Africitas* of a writer, native or immigrant, is a tricky and elusive business. Take Fronto from an earlier age: did he think of himself as African, or as a Roman who happened to be born in Africa?<sup>41</sup> There are few references to Africa in him, but that is simply because the extant letters give him little scope for mentioning the place. Things look different in his fragmentary speech *Pro Carthaginiensibus*, which seems to have attempted a résumé of local history.<sup>42</sup> Fronto is, overall, ambivalent, calling himself in a Greek letter (23, 4, Van Den Hout = Haines 1, 135) "a Libyan of the Libyan nomads," but elsewhere (206, 13 Van Den Hout = Haines 2, 21) extolling his native Cirta as the place where Jugurtha beat the Romans. Whatever his origins, Commodian was no doubt tinged with similar ambivalence, albeit as a militant Christian could reject all earthly affiliations as meaningless *sub specie aeternitatis*.

One would also like to know to what extent Commodian was influenced by Punic language and attitudes. Septimius Severus allegedly retained an African accent until old age.<sup>43</sup> He is also said<sup>44</sup> to have erected the Septizonium in Rome with the sole purpose of catching the eyes of visitors from Africa; in *Instruct.* 1. 7, ridiculing astrology, Commodian employs the word *septizonium* in the seemingly unique sense of a circle or complex of planets—is there a connection? The use of Punic, a big ideological issue with the Donatists, as an alternative to Latin and Greek in legal matters was sanctioned by Severus.<sup>45</sup> If we knew more about Punic,

<sup>39</sup> No Commodian (including our poet) features in the first two volumes of *PLRE*.

<sup>40</sup> A latinism in Greek dress (not recorded in *LSJ*) used by Athenagoras; cf. Lampe's *Patristic Greek Lexicon*.

<sup>41</sup> Champlin (above, note 8) 15–19, tackles the issue well, neatly adducing (with ample quotation) the case of Fronto's modern compatriot, Albert Camus.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. Champlin 87.

<sup>43</sup> *HA*, SS 19. 9, *Afrum quiddam usque ad senectulem sonans*.

<sup>44</sup> *HA*, SS 24. 3, *ut ex Africa venientibus suum opus occurreret*.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. T. Honoré, *Ulpian* (Oxford 1982) 4.

we might better appreciate some of the details and effects in Comodian. And his deliberate minimising of Roman and Greek names and allusions,<sup>46</sup> earlier explored, may prefigure what is now a very lively debate amongst African writers over Eurocentrism versus Afrocentrism.<sup>47</sup>

Comodian tells us very little about himself. There is (of course) nothing unusual about that, for an ancient writer. It is not clear where Lindsay (42) gets his "evidence" that Comodian was a lawyer and a bishop. The poet is very insistent on his conversion from error to Christian truth, making this the opening theme both of the *Instructiones* (1. 1, which acts as preface to the collection) and the *Carmen* (3–14).<sup>48</sup> There is no need to deny him truth or sincerity. Nevertheless, conversion is a stock literary theme in both pagan and Christian writers, and some allowance may have to be made for this element.<sup>49</sup> For all that, triteness and sincerity are not mutually exclusive, in life or literature.

A great deal of ink has been spilled over the question of Comodian's date; whether or not this is a reproach to the poet is a matter of taste.<sup>50</sup> He has been located in the third, the fourth, and the fifth centuries. Given the welter of bibliography,<sup>51</sup> I shall do no more than state breviloquently my reasons for believing with complete confidence in the third century. Some weight has been placed on the fact that Gennadius, the one significant ancient source, wrote mainly about fifth-century figures. But this is not exclusively the case, and there is no obvious sequence, alphabetical or

<sup>46</sup> We get very occasional Roman touches, e. g. funeral processions in the forum (*Instruct.* 2. 29. 6) and possibly (the text is uncertain) the circus (*Instruct.* 2. 12. 5); cf. also (*Carmen* 72) the homely metaphor, apparently drawn more from life than literature, *sic erit ut perna minime salfacta: putrescat*.

<sup>47</sup> See the report in the *Times Literary Supplement*, June 3–9, 1988, of the symposium of African literature held in Lagos, with the conflicting views on Europhone and Afrophone literature held by (*inter alios*) the Nigerian poet Chinweizu and William Conton, novelist from Sierra Leone.

<sup>48</sup> Also at *Instruct.* 1. 7. 21; 1. 7. 2; 1. 33. 2.

<sup>49</sup> One thinks easily of Lucian on the pagan side, of Augustine and (to take a characteristic conflation of classicising Christian) the historian Menander Protector (frag. 1) on the other. For an excellent demonstration of the similarities of sentiment and expression between *Carmen* 3–86 and Seneca, *Ep.* 8. 2–3, see now A. Salvatore, "Seneca e Comodiano," *Filologia e forme letterarie: Studi offerti a Francesco Della Corte* III (Urbino 1988) 329–33.

<sup>50</sup> As Courcelle (see next note) 227, n. 2, remarks, "Imagine-t-on un poète français dont on ne saurait préciser s'il a vécu en 1638 ou en 1866?" We get the same problem with some Byzantine writers; for a classic case, see C. Mango, "Byzantine Literature as a Distorting Mirror," *Past & Present* 75 (1980) 3–18.

<sup>51</sup> Provided by P. Courcelle, "Commodien et les Invasions du Ve Siècle," *REL* 24 (1946) 227–46, and by J. Martin, "Commodianus," *Traditio* 13 (1957) 1–71; cf. the notice of Comodian in the *ODCC*. Apart from Courcelle, the other major advocate of a fifth-century date was H. Brewer, *Die Frage um das Zeitalter Kommodians* (Paderborn 1910). Of the scholars and manuals cited earlier in the present paper, a third- or fourth-century date is accepted (with varying degrees of hesitance) by Barnes, Beare, Lindsay, Raby, the *ODCC*, and the *Tusculum Lexikon*. Martin's conclusions are naturally reprised in the preface to his edition (above, note 13), pp. x–xiii.

chronological, in the *De viris illustribus*. Commodian comes (e. g.) after Theodore of Antioch, Prudentius, and Gaudentius, before Faustinus, Rufinus, and Tichomius. Also, the lack of birthplace and personal details for Commodian, which is unusual for Gennadius, ought to imply that the poet was remote and obscure to him.

In *Carmen* 810, as *septima persecutio nostra*, it is prophesied that *cito traiciet Gothis inrumpentibus amne; cf. Instruct. 2. 5. 10, transfluviat*<sup>52</sup> *hostis*. Advocates of a late date attempt to connect this with the irruptions of Alaric or other fifth-century invaders. But there is surely no rational argument against identifying Commodian's situation with the Gothic invasion of Decius' time, in view of the clearcut statement by Augustine, *De civ. dei* 18. 52, a *Decio septimam*, when enumerating the persecutions. It can be added that Lactantius (*De mort. pers.* 4. 1) uses particularly strong language (*execrabile animal*) against Decius, also that Jordanes twice (*Get.* 90, 92) emphasises that the Goths crossed the Danube against him.

*Instructiones* 1. 18 is a sardonic tale *De Ammudate et Deo Magno*. At line 6, Commodian jeers that *ventum est ad summum, ut Caesar tolleret aurum*. Martin oddly neglects this, offering no note and lamenting in his preface (xii) that *de illa re nihil legimus in historiis, quo fit, ut eruere non liceat, qui fuerit Caesar*. Yet it was long ago pointed out by Tümpel<sup>53</sup> that *Ammudates* is a sobriquet for *Deus Sol Alagabalus*. Commodian's knowledge of it does not guarantee that he was especially familiar with Emesa or the East. Elagabalus' religious oddities were known throughout the empire, and the one extant inscriptional reference to include the title *Ammudates* (*CIL* 3. 4300) comes from Pannonia Superior. But it points to a third-century date rather than a later one; a degree of risky precision would put the poem before Aurelian's ostentatious re-enrichment of the Emesa cult.<sup>54</sup>

The very next poem (*Instruct.* 1. 19) ridicules the fortunetellers known as *Nemesiaci*. Devotees of a late date for Commodian might clutch at *Cod. Theod.* 14. 7. 2, where among the jugglers and other assorted professions they are legislated on by a joint rescript of Honorius and Theodosius in 412. But they are being recalled, which connotes earlier notoriety, and as we know from Ammianus' celebrated accounts, the fourth century was a bad time for such people. Astrologers and the like had their problems under pagan emperors as well, but they (overall) fit the third century better than any Christian one.

Allusions to Novatianism in Commodian are detected by the *ODCC* notice. These would pretty well guarantee a third-century date for the poet, since Novatian was martyred under Valerian and his heresy came in the

<sup>52</sup> *Transfluvio* (not in Lewis and Short or the *OLD*) seems to be a *hapax*; the cognate *transfluvialis* is found in ecclesiastical Latin.

<sup>53</sup> *PWI* (1894) cols. 1868–70, and adumbrated in the notice of the name in *TLL* I 1941.

<sup>54</sup> *HA, Aur.* 25. 4–6.



aftermath of the Decian persecution. They are not, however, so clearcut as to clinch the matter. Another pointer is provided by Gennadius who says that Commodian followed Tertullian and Lactantius, which also serves to enhance the African connection. But Commodian himself provides the most compelling panorama of evidence. Along with his preface, in which he laments *doleo pro civica turba/ inscia quod pergit periens deos quaerere vanos/ ob ea perdoctus ignaros instruo verum* (*Instruct.* 1. 1. 7-9), consider the following (partial) list of contents: *Indignatio Dei* (1. 2); *Cultura Daemonum* (1. 3); attacks on specific pagan gods and beliefs (1. 4-19); diatribes against contemporary *mores* (1. 22-32); To the Gentiles (1. 33-34); Against the Jews (1. 37-40); On Apostates (2.5); To the Soldiers of Christ (2. 8); To Christian Women (2. 14-15); To Would-be Martyrs (2. 17); on various Christian duties (2. 22-34). All of this is consistent with an age of persecution; little or none of it fits a time when Christians were in power. Some<sup>55</sup> have toyed with the idea of Julian's reign, but his "gentle persecution" does not square with the poet's fiery denunciations, and it is hard to believe that Commodian would never once attack that emperor by name, especially in his verses on apostates.

Gennadius is explicit: Commodian *scripsit adversus paganos*. This has provoked much discussion over which of the poems he had in mind.<sup>56</sup> All quite needless. In one way or another, both volumes of *Instructiones* and the *Carmen De Duobus Populis* are uniformly anti-pagan. Jerome provides an instructive parallel. To him, pagans were much less a threat than were heretics, another sign that Commodian belongs to a different age from his.<sup>57</sup> Yet he could still say that *tota opuscula mea, et maxime Commentarii, iuxta opportunitatem locorum gentilem sectam lacerant*.<sup>58</sup> So it is with Commodian, in fact the more so since, in an age of paganism, any affirmation of Christian belief was in itself *adversus paganos*.

Consideration of Commodian's poetry may usefully begin with his knowledge of Christian and Classical literature, as a basis for showing how well or otherwise he uses and fuses the two. The Christian side of things will not long detain us here. Martin's admirable indexes<sup>59</sup> disclose the quantity and nature of his debts. A question worth pondering, as does Ogilvie<sup>60</sup> in the case of Lactantius, is to what extent Commodian got his biblical texts directly or second-hand from other authors and anthologies, especially if he wrote before Jerome's Vulgate and in the light of Gennadius'

<sup>55</sup> Notably G. S. Ramundo, in various papers, e. g. "Quando visse Commodiano?" *Archivio della Reale Società Romana di storia patria* 24 (1901) 373-91; 25 (1902) 137-68; cf. Martin's *Traditio* article (above, note 51) 52.

<sup>56</sup> Summarised by Martin (above, note 13), pp. v-x.

<sup>57</sup> See D. Wiesen, *St. Jerome as a Satirist* (Ithaca 1964) 194-97.

<sup>58</sup> *Ep.* 84. 3.

<sup>59</sup> See later for some suggested deficiencies and supplements in points of detail.

<sup>60</sup> R. M. Ogilvie, *The Library of Lactantius* (Oxford 1978) 96-109.

criticism *quia parum nostrarum adigerat litterarum, magis illorum destruere potuit quam nostra adformare.*

A quick count based on Martin's index reveals some 56 allusions to pagan authors in the *Carmen*, 159 in the *Instructiones*; the proportion is unsurprising. The best place to begin is *Carmen* 583: *Vergilius legitur, Cicero aut Terentius idem.* For Virgil to take first place is no more than we would expect, likewise the fact that he is by far the most frequently used author in Commodian. There is an apparent echo of every book of the *Aeneid* except the fifth,<sup>61</sup> of all four *Georgics*, and *Eclogues* 1, 2, 4, 7, 9 and 10. A possible turn up for the book here is the relative neglect (only one allusion) of the so-called Messianic Fourth Eclogue, in flagrant contrast with Lactantius, whose rare citations of Virgil are (in the case of the *Eclogues*) restricted to the fourth.

Cicero is no surprise either, though the echoes are few, being confined to the *Aratea*, *De natura deorum*, the *Tusculan Disputations*, and *De officiis*. No speeches, but this is consonant with the Christian Cicero, Lactantius, whose own writing (as Ogilvie 71, puts it) betrays remarkably little knowledge of Cicero's oratorical works.

Terence was widely read in later antiquity. In spite of his appearance in this brief canon, Martin detected only one echo of him in the rest of Commodian. Possibly he owes his place to the fact that he came from Africa, accepting Commodian's connection with that country. This would be commensurate with Minucius Felix' quoting of him (*Oct.* 21. 2) under the general rubric *comicus sermo*, clearly designed as a recognisable crowd pleaser.

On Martin's reckoning, only the *Satires* and *Epistles* of Horace were exploited by Commodian, whereas Ogilvie found only the *Odes* represented in Lactantius. But as with many a moralist, there is a strong satirical element in Commodian,<sup>62</sup> and the imbalance in his Horatian tastes is therefore logical enough. As to other Roman satirists, Persius is briefly represented (as in Lactantius), but there is apparently no use of Lucilius or Juvenal. The latter two feature briefly by name in Lactantius, but perhaps at second hand.<sup>63</sup> Juvenal's absence is possibly another indication of a third-century date for Commodian, given his neglect in that period.<sup>64</sup>

<sup>61</sup> Though in earlier times (witness Petronius, *Sat.* 68. 4) this book was something of a favourite.

<sup>62</sup> A point well made by Wiesen (above, note 57) 15, who includes Commodian in his catalogue of later Latin satirists.

<sup>63</sup> Cf. Ogilvie (above, note 60) 7-8 ("Wherever Lactantius found his lines of Lucilius, it was not in Lucilius.")

<sup>64</sup> See G. Hight, *Juvenal the Satirist* (Oxford 1954) 297, n. 6, for his absence from Arnobius and Commodian; cf. P. Ceceri, "Di alcune fonti dell' opera poetica di Commodiano," *Didaskaleion* 2 (1913) 363-422. For earlier signs of Juvenal in inscriptional verse from Africa, see T. Kleberg, "Juvenalis in the *Carmina latina epigraphica*," *Eranos* 44 (1946) 422-25. As is

Petronius is more problematic. Martin claims a couple of echoes; *Instruct.* 1. 12. 12, *minervae omnisque scitoris*, from *Sat.* 43. 8, *omnis minervae homo*; *Instruct.* 1. 23. 5, *ipse tibi figis asciam in crure de verbo*, from *Sat.* 74. 16, *ipse mihi asciam in crus impegi*. Now Comodian as a reader of Petronius is a piquant notion. Unfortunately, the text of the first passage is very corrupt, and the echo is the result only of Martin's own emendation.<sup>65</sup> As to the second, the similarity of wording is suggestive, but the text is again not certain, and the expression is anyway proverbial; given our earlier proposition of Africans quoting Africans, it would be a reasonable bet that Comodian actually had Apuleius (an author not in Martin's index), *Met.* 3. 22, *meque sponte asciam cruribus meis illidere compellis?*, in mind.

Comodian reading Lucretius is also a delicious thought, but there seems little doubt that he did,<sup>66</sup> albeit some of Martin's actual examples are frail. For easy instance, can we honestly be sure that such simple phrases as *quaecumque geruntur* (*Instruct.* 1. 3. 10) or *dedicat esse* (*Instruct.* 2. 8. 14) must come from their equivalents in *DRN* 1. 472 and 1. 422? On the other hand, *per mare per terras* (*Carmen* 883; cf. *DRN* 1. 278) and *tecta domorum* (*Carmen* 1030; cf. *DRN* 2. 191) seem cogent enough. And we might add to Martin's list *DRN* 2. 1101–02, on the inaccuracy of Jupiter's thunderbolts, as a source for *Instruct.* 1. 6. 1–2, *Dicitis o stulti: Iovis tonat fulminat ipse! etsi parvulus sic sensit, cur anni dicentes?* Alternatively, this could have been inspired by Ovid's well-known joke, *Si, quotiens peccant homines, sua fulmina mittat! Jupiter, exiguo tempore inermis erit* (*Trist.* 2. 33–34), also absent from Martin's register.

Martin did not find much early Latin literature in Comodian. No Lucilius, no Plautus, and only one Ennian passage. In the case of Ennius, we may be able to double the score, if *maria salsa* at *Instruct.* 1. 29. 9 is owed to *Frag.* 117 Jocelyn (= 145 Vahlen). For the rest, one can largely depend upon Martin's index, with the following reservations: for *virgineus pudor* (*Instruct.* 2. 2. 6), Martin adduces Avienus, but the inspiration might actually come from Tibullus 1. 4. 14—Martin did note at least one echo of that poet elsewhere in Comodian; we might extend the range of his reading if *Instruct.* 2. 3. 13, *escam muscipuli, ubi mors est, longe vitate*, may be connected with Phaedrus 4. 2. 17, *qui saepe laqueos et muscipula effugerat*—Phaedrus is not in Martin's index, but a pagan fabulist might be thought congenial to Comodian; given the plethora of references to *Dominus* and *Dominator* in the poem *De lolii semine* (*Instruct.* 2. 10), the

well known from Ammianus 28. 4. 14 and Jerome's use of him (cf. Wiesen [above, note 57] 9–10), Juvenal re-emerged with a bang in the fourth century.

<sup>65</sup> We should also notice Sallust (?), *Invect. in Cicer.* 4. 7, *sed quid ego plura de tua insolentia commemorem? quem Minerva omnis artis edocuit...*

<sup>66</sup> Likewise Lactantius; cf. Ogilvie (above, note 60) 15–16, 85.

inspiration might be taken to be Virgil, *Georg.* 1. 154, *infelix lolium et steriles dominantur avenae*, a passage not adduced by Martin; the aforementioned study by Salvatore considerably expands Martin's meagre tally of allusions to the younger Seneca, an author popular with Lactantius, Tertullian, and Christian authors generally.<sup>67</sup>

Traceable allusions to Greek authors are far fewer. On the one hand, this is not surprising in a Christian writing in Latin. But it may have some bearing on the question of Commodian's nationality and origins—should one expect more from a writer from Palestinian Gaza? In general, Commodian is in tune with Lactantius.<sup>68</sup> Martin notes only one passage from Homer, whilst Ogilvie found three; both give their authors a single (not the same one) allusion to Callimachus. On Martin's reckoning, Commodian was familiar with two of Lucian's works, the *De dea Syra* and *Dialogues of the Gods*. It is worth noting that these all cluster in *Instruct.* 1. 7–19. However, one needs to be careful with Lucian, a lot of whose ridicule of paganism shares its examples and phraseologies with the early Greek fathers Clement, Justin, and Tatian. Lactantius, *Div. Inst.* 1. 9. 8, commends Lucian as one *qui diis et hominibus non pepercit*, but Ogilvie (82, giving no reason) ejects the compliment as an interpolation.<sup>69</sup>

A modest article can only scratch the surface of Commodian the poet. It would be good to have a full commentary, one that emphasised the literary quality as much as the religious content. One aspect that can usefully be isolated here is his vocabulary. Martin's *index verborum*, for all its merits, does not disclose the unique or rare nature of many of Commodian's words. As earlier remarked, linguistic novelty in itself is a matter of taste. The history of his odd locutions cannot always be traced in full, especially those not yet covered by the *Thesaurus Linguae Latinae*. It is a fair presumption that Commodian will have coined at least some of them. Why? Not usually *metri gratia*, given the elastic nature of his prosody. To some extent, as noted above, it is an African trait. Perhaps also some compulsion from *patrii sermonis egestas*—if he was a native Latin speaker. On a third-century date, Commodian had few, if any, predecessors in his sort of passionate Christian poetry. Anger and humour are two passions that lead easily to the inventing of new words. Along with his metrics, linguistic innovation is the other layer added by Commodian to his use and fusion of Christian and pagan texts.

The following words (intended only as a sample) are either unique (and often not in the dictionaries) or very rare. The majority of them are in the *Instructiones*, which is sufficiently explained by the wider range of subjects and (on balance) the greater personal passion of Commodian in these. One

<sup>67</sup> See the exposition of Ogilvie 73–77.

<sup>68</sup> For details, Ogilvie 20–27, 78–83, 109.

<sup>69</sup> We need here do no more than recollect the pleasure with which such Byzantine *savants* as Photius used Lucian's satire as a weapon against paganism; cf. *Bibl.*, cod. 128 in particular.

or two are graecisms, which again raises the question of where the poet came from.

*Anastasis* (*Instruct.* 1. 44. 1; *Carmen* 992); *arabylus* (*Instruct.* 1. 9. 1); *caeliloquax* (*Instruct.* 2. 15. 3); *conjugula* (*Instruct.* 1. 26. 14); *crucistultitia* (*Instruct.* 1. 36, title and acrostic); *delumbare* (*Instruct.* 1. 16. 10); *detransfigurare* (*Carmen* 110); *incopriare* (*Instruct.* 1. 19. 6); *Iudaeidiare* (*Instruct.* 1. 37, title and acrostic); *lugia* (*Instruct.* 1. 29. 18); *parvulitas* (*Instruct.* 1. 6. 2); *protoplastus* (*Instruct.* 1. 35. 1; 2. 13. 4; 2. 18. 2); *transfluviare* (*Instruct.* 2. 5. 10); *vinivorax* (*Instruct.* 1. 18. 6).

As for the *Instructiones* at large, a potpourri shall suffice as example and appetiser. The prefatory piece is suitably characteristic:

Prima praefatio nostra viam erranti demonstrat  
 Respectumque bonum, cum venerit saeculi meta.  
 Aeternum fieri, quod discredunt inscia corda.  
 Ego similiter erravi tempore multo  
 Fana prosequendo parentibus insciis ipsis;  
 Abstulit me tandem inde legendo de lege,  
 Testifico Dominum: doleo pro civica turba,  
 Inscia quod pergit periens deos quaerere vanos;  
 Ob ea perdoctus ignaros instruo verum.

Apart from biblical texts, Martin sees echoes of Ennius (via Cicero) and Seneca. The theme of conversion blends genuine autobiography with a literary convention that is both pagan and Christian. *Parentibus insciis ipsis* is strikingly similar to Minucius Felix, *Oct.* 24. 1, *ab inperitis parentibus discimus* (of pagan myths). *Viam erranti . . . erravi fana prosequendo* comport a hint of the wandering poet or prophet, with an implied play on the physical and metaphysical connotations of *errare*. The verb *discredo*, frequent in Commodian, is rarish and late. *Testifico* in the active form is uncommon. Using the same word more than once in different forms and cases (*insciis/inscia*, neut. pl./*inscia*, fem. sing.) is a classical trick.

The following observations assume the reader will have Martin's text to hand; all plain numerical references are to the *Instructiones*.

1. 2. 1: *caeli, terrae, marisque*. Martin adduces Ovid, *Met.* 2. 96, but Commodian seems almost to go out of his way to avoid a Virgilian *terraeque marisque* effect.

1. 3, title: *cultura daemonum*. Arguably a conscious play on *cultura dei/deorum*, both a pagan and Christian formula; cf. Tertullian, *Apol.* 21. 27; Lactantius, *Inst. Div.* 5. 7; HA, *Elag.* 3. 5.

1. 4. 7: *sorbsit*. This alternative form of the verb is frequently singled out for comment by the grammarians, e. g. Velius (*GL* 7. 74, 4 Keil), Charisius (*GL* 1. 244, 4), Diomedes (*GL* 1. 366, 27); cf. Valerius Maximus 8. 7. ext. 2.

1. 5. 4: *Piragmon*. This servant of Vulcan (Pyracmon) is a relatively abstruse creature of myth for Commodian, and is doubtless owed to Virgil, *Aen.* 8. 425.

1. 6. 15: *seducunt historiae*. Commodian is fond of the notion of seduction; cf. 1. 8. 10, *seducunt sacerdotes*, and 1. 11. 5, *quem deum seducti putastis*.

1. 7. 17: *et dein qui vadunt in piscibus tu quoque probabis*. For *quoque* there is the alternative reading *coque*. For a *cocel/quoque* pun, see Quintilian 6. 3. 47 (deprecating it in Cicero), also Vespa, *Iudic.* 96.

1. 9: ridicule of Mercury. The emphatic repetitions *depictus . . . rem video miram . . . respicite pictum . . . deos pictos* all suggest that Commodian is describing a picture; cf. 1. 14. 6, *non te pudet, stulte, tales adorare tabellas?*

1. 10. 3: *paret esse deum cumerale illi parate!* Martin obelises after *deum*, but I suspect that the text contains something to do with *cumera* in the sense of fishing basket which would be a good joke in the present context.

1. 12: on Liber. For his African cult, cf. *CIL* 8. 4681, acrostic (= *CLE* 511), and Augustine, *Ep.* 17.

1. 16 and 1. 17: attacks on all the gods and their images. It is worth noting how Commodian has organised the poems in this sequence, building up to these collective onslaughts from the previous diatribes against individual deities.

1. 16. 9: *Furina*. Obscure by the time of Varro, on the authority of *DLL* 6. 19, *nunc vix nomen notum paucis*.

1. 16. 10: *delumbant*. Either a new meaning or a good comic extension (in the context of female lust stirred by pagan gods) of this rare verb's normal sense of curving in architectural descriptions.

1. 17. 6: *Duellonarios*. This archaism for *Bellonarios* is also employed by Tertullian, *Apol.* 9, and Minucius Felix, *Oct.* 30. 5.

1. 19. 3: *mane ebrio*. Cf. Apuleius, *Met.* 9. 14 (describing the baker's wife in a possible attack on Christianity), *matutino mero*.

1. 20. 3: *Lares*. Coming after the *Titanes/tutanos* and *Mutas/Tacitas* puns of the first two lines, this is also a play on words since Lara was a goddess worshipped under the names of Tacita and Muta.

1. 25. 9: *tempus adest vitae credenti tempore mortis*. This line shows that Commodian could write (or recognise) a neat Ovidian hexameter!

1. 31. 9: *pulex*. The last word in the poem, well placed to show off its seemingly unique figurative sense (*non ego pulex*).

1. 35 (also 2. 15) is not acrostic, but of the kind whereby each line begins A, B, C, and so on. This sort of thing, pagan and Christian, can be found in (e. g.) the Greek Anthology.

2. 2. 9: *semel es lotus, numquid poteris denuo mergi?* This looks like a humorous distinction between baptism by splashing and by total immersion.

Now a few words on the *Carmen de duobus populis* (a better title than *Carmen Apologeticum*; cf. Martin x) to balance and complete the survey of Commodian as poet. Its opening line, *Quis poterit unum proprie Deum nosse caelorum?* is likened by Martin to Manilius 2. 115, but is also generally redolent of Lucretius and the *Georgics*. Then follows the most elaborate of Commodian's several mentions of misspent youth and early religious error, including the engaging *plus eram quam palea levior* (5) as well as the self-description *criminosus denique Marsus* which (albeit unremarked by Martin) may have some link with Horace, *Epode* 17. 27–29, *vincor ut credam miser! Sabella pectus increpare carmina/ caputque Marsa dissilire nenia*; the Marsi were famous as wizards and snake charmers.

Redeemed by God, Commodian determines to convert others from lives of luxury and sin. But like many another social reformer, ancient and modern, he tempers ideology with deference towards the powerful: *nec enim vituperato divitias datas a Summo* (27).<sup>70</sup> A string of Old Testament *exempla* follows, postluded by the homely metaphor (72, discussed earlier) of the salted ham, and an apparent use of Lucretius' image of the sweetening of the bitter pill of didacticism (86). Then the Christian message resumes (89) with *Adgrederere iam nunc, quisquis es, perennia nosse*, which might comport a hint of Virgil, *Ecl.* 4. 48. After this preface, the nature and origins of God, the universe, and Man are described, backed up by a sequence of Old Testament personnel and famous stories. *Mutatis mutandis*, this is strikingly similar in concept and format to the first part of Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 1, which I fancy Commodian meant us to recognise and appreciate. Indeed, he may drop a hint in line 176 with *vivere rapinis*, rightly thought by Martin to echo *Met.* 1. 144, *vivere de raptis*; Martin elsewhere detects many echoes of Ovid's poem in Commodian, including four further ones from the first book.

At 139–40, Commodian inserts a succinct version of the Phoenix and its rebirth; *Sicut avis Phoenix meditatur a morte renasci, / dat nobis exemplum, post funere surgere posse*. This may be pertinent to the perennial argument over Lactantius' claims to the extant poem *Phoenix*, since some hold<sup>71</sup> that these are invalidated by the pagan–Christian blending of that piece. It will here suffice to quote lines 160–61, *a fortunatae sortis finisque volucrem, / cui de se nasci praestitit ipse deus!* along with the concluding verse, *aeternam vitam mortis adepti bono*.

The prophets of Christ and the Messiah (285) lead into the predominantly Christian sections of the *Carmen* (altogether the piece

<sup>70</sup> Compare the controversy aroused (with admirable deliberateness) by the statement of Mrs. Thatcher in her address to the Church of Scotland (Edinburgh, May 21, 1988) that "Abundance rather than poverty has a legitimacy which derives from the very nature of Creation"; cf. the literary and theological critique of her speech (known in Britain as her Epistle to the Caledonians) by Jonathan Raban in the *London Observer*, May 28, 1989.

<sup>71</sup> See the convenient summary of theories and bibliography in the Loeb *Minor Latin Poets* 644–45, edited by J. W. and A. M. Duff.

contains 1060 lines). One might have expected, in view of signs of the *Georgics* at (e. g.) lines 100 and 587 as well as his extensive and conventional use of Virgil throughout his poetry, more effects from the Fourth Eclogue here. Commodian obviously knew Virgil well (what literate person did not?), and we have seen his singling-out with Cicero and Terence at line 583, but conceivably he fought shy of the notions of Messianic eclogues and the *anima naturaliter Christiana*.

By way of brief finale, some previous observations and conclusions can conveniently be resumed. Just as Tertullian, Minucius Felix, and Cyprian were early voices in Christian Latin prose, recasting the Greek Fathers' criticisms of paganism into their own distinctive Latin, a Latin tinged by some proudly ostentatious *Africitas* and a conscious desire to make the world aware of an African school and style, so Commodian attempts to create a popular poetic articulation of Christian thought, a deliberate fusion of pagan-Christian elements into a method of expression that the man in the African street (city or village) could both understand and exploit. Few would call Commodian a great poet, though that is a matter of taste, but on any fair reckoning he has his moments, and if adjudged a failure, he is a failure more interesting than some successful continuers of classicism. It was high time for drastic innovation in the old ways of writing and scanning Latin verse, for new ways of expressing new ideas and emotions, the use of the new being in itself an act of Christian defiance and proclamation of faith.

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