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Je suis le miroir à la fin de la décadence:

*Mirror-Games between Sidonius Apollinaris and Jean Marcel**

Abstract

Questo *paper* intende confrontare l'*Epist.* 4, 8 di Sidonio (insieme al *Carm.* 29) e la riscrittura dello scrittore canadese Jean Marcel (1941-2019) nel romanzo *Sidoine ou la dernière fête* (1993), uno degli esempi più significativi della fortuna di Sidonio negli ultimi decenni. Nel 467 d.C. circa l'aristocratico gallo-romano Sidonio Apollinare compose dei versi da incidere su un bacile d'argento a forma di conchiglia per la regina Ragnahilda, moglie del re dei Visigoti Eurico. I versi (*Carm.* 29), inclusi nell'*Epist.* 4, 8, hanno ispirato il capitolo di Marcel intitolato *Ce que dit le miroir de Ragnahilde le 10 décembre 467*, in cui si immagina siano destinati a essere incisi sulla cornice di uno specchio per «la più bella del reame»: la splendida Ragnahilda. La regina è ritenuta un po' strega, ed ecco che la superficie d'argento comincia ad animarsi in «onde del tempo». L'artificio è introdotto affinché Ragnahilda veda scorrere davanti alcuni episodi cruciali della vita di Sidonio, ma soprattutto i principali eventi della “decadenza” di Roma, fino alla fatidica data della «caduta senza rumore» dell'Impero d'Occidente, il 476, lo stesso anno in cui il poeta è prigioniero per la sua resistenza contro i Visigoti.

This paper aims to make a comparison between Sidonius' *Epist.* 4, 8 (together with *Carm.* 29) and Jean Marcel's rewriting, which is one of the most relevant examples of Sidonius' reception in the last decades. In 467 A.D. ca the Gallic-Roman aristocrat Sidonius Apollinaris composed a poem to be engraved on a shell-shaped silver basin for Queen Ragnahilda, the wife of Euricus, King of the Visigoths. The poem (*Carm.* 29), included in Sidonius' *Epist.* 4, 8, has recently inspired the Canadian writer Jean Marcel in his novel *Sidoine ou la dernière fête* (1993). In the chapter entitled *Ce que dit le miroir de Ragnahilde le 10 décembre 467* Sidonius' verses are destined to be engraved on the frame of a mirror for «the fairest of them all»: the splendid Ragnahilda. She is reputed to be a bit of a witch, so the silver surface suddenly begins to come alive. Looking through those «waves of time», the queen glimpses several crucial episodes of Sidonius' life against the background of Roman “decadence”, until the fateful date of the «noiseless fall» of that Western Empire, 476 A.D., the same year in which the poet is prisoner for his resistance.

1. Introduction

The first subject of this paper – on which the second one will “reflect” – is Sidonius Apollinaris, a key figure in Late antiquity.

Born in Gaul in 430 (ca), Sidonius witnessed the fall of the Roman Empire and died in 486 (ca) as a subject of the succeeding barbarian kingdom. He had all the traditional markers of the Roman *élite*: an aristocratic birth, a classical education and a good marriage to Papianilla, the daughter of Avitus the Emperor. But he also experienced the

* This paper was presented at the International Virtual Mirror Studies Conference (Beijing, China, March 4th-5th, 2021).

main turbulences of his age: he became bishop of Clermont-Ferrand during the collapse of the Empire and its political structure, and was imprisoned because he led a military and cultural campaign against the Visigoths, when the Christian church and the secular state were closely linked at the centre of power.

He wrote 24 poems and 146 letters which include 17 *carmina inserta* (poems in the letters) usually numbered from 25 to 41. Both the poems and the nine books of letters, beyond their literary value, are an important historical source for this period, with the cultural clash between Romans and Barbarians, and between Paganism and Christianity¹.

For a very long period Sidonius was only known to educated scholars. But since the end of the nineteenth century, he has gradually emerged into the limelight, especially in novels². The reasons for this attention which he has progressively gained can be attributed to the critical but very fascinating period in which he lived; to his difficult and eventful life itself; and also to his historical relevance as a defender of cultural values in a period of decadence. It is now possible to list so many novels about him, that, according to Wolff, «Bref, il y a un *revival* de Sidoine!»³.

A relevant example of this «revival» is Jean Marcel's *Sidoine ou la dernière fête*, which is the second subject of this paper.

In 1993 the French-Canadian author Jean Marcel⁴ published with this title, the third and final novel of a trilogy about the end of the Roman Empire (*Triptyque des temps perdus*), also involving Hypatia and Saint Jerome⁵. The second part of the title, *La dernière fête*, refers to one of the final feasts which is hosted in Narbonne by Myron, one of Sidonius' friends. It is 467 A.D. and, leaving Narbonne after the feast, Sidonius passes the fort of Livia, where, about ten years later, he will be held prisoner by Euricus, and where, on August the 26th, he will watch a long procession of Barbarian tribes, which symbolizes the final day of the Roman Empire.

But leaving this modern, fantastic rewriting aside for a while, the starting point of this paper will be the historical reality.

¹ The most recent and comprehensive research tool for Sidonius Apollinaris is now KELLY – VAN WAARDEN (2020).

² See GIANNOTTI (2020).

³ WOLFF (2014, 260).

⁴ «Jean Marcel (Jean-Marcel Paquette) est né à Montréal (Québec) en 1941. Après une prolifique carrière universitaire à l'université Laval où il a enseigné la littérature médiévale, la littérature québécoise et la création littéraire, Jean Marcel a vécu en Thaïlande où il a continué son œuvre jusqu'à son décès, à Bangkok, le 30 juin 2019» (<https://www.jeanmarcel.info/>). From among his works, besides many translations: *The joual of Troie* (1973); *Pensées, passions et proses* (1992); *Sous le signe du singe* (2001); *Lettres du Siam* (2002); *La Chanson de Roland. Métamorphoses du texte* (2014); *Méditation de Thaïs* (2014); *Histoires des pays d'or* (2013 and 2019).

⁵ For Jean Marcel's trilogy and his Sidonius novel in particular, see the author's interview with Dominique Garand in GARAND – MARCEL (1992), together with GIANNOTTI (2020, 712-17), GIANNOTTI (2009, 127-31) and DION ET AL. (2005). Further bibliography in the website cited above <https://www.jeanmarcel.info/>.

2. Between 466 and 467 A.D.

Sidonius Apollinaris, who is already an acclaimed poet – and in a few years' time will become a combative bishop (470 A.D.) –, is travelling from Lyon to his villa in the countryside of Aydat⁶. His friend Euodius, through a messenger, begs him to compose a poem to be engraved on a shell-shaped silver basin. He wants to give it as a present to Queen Ragnahilda, the wife of Euricus⁷, who had become King of the Visigoths a short time before. The poet stops for a while, writes twelve lines as required and gives the letter containing the poem to Euodius' messenger.

The letter containing the poem is now number 8 of book 4 and its last paragraph includes the poem, which is usually quoted as number 29 of the whole series of Sidonius' *carmina*⁸:

*Pistrigero quae concha uehit Tritone Cytheren
hac sibi conlata cedere non dubitet.
Poscimus, inclina paulisper culmen erile
et munus paruum magna patrona cape
Euodiumque libens non aspernare clientem, 5
quem faciens grandem tu quoque maior eris.
Sic tibi, cui rex est genitor, socer atque maritus,
gnatus rex quoque sit cum patre postque patrem.
Felices lymphae, clausae quae luce metalli
ora tamen dominae lucidiora fouent! 10
Nam cum dignatur regina hinc tinguere uultus,
candor in argentum mittitur e facie.*

The shell that carries Cythere on the back of fishy-tailed Triton would not hesitate to yield place if compared with this one. Incline for a moment, I pray thee, thy sovereign majesty, accept as a great protectress this small gift, and be pleased not to spurn Euodius as thy vassal, whom making great thou shalt thyself be greater. So mayest thou, with father and husband and husband's father all kings, see likewise thy son a king with his father and after him. Happy the water which, enclosed in the radiant metal, refreshes the still more radiant countenance of its mistress! For when the Queen deigns to moisten her face from this basin a gleam is shed upon the silver from her visage. (Translated by Anderson⁹)

⁶ «Sur la route de Lyon à Clermont, en 466 ou 467» according to LOYEN (1970, II 128).

⁷ For this spelling of the names Ragnahilda and Euricus see MATHISEN (2020, 117 and 93).

⁸ Text established by LOYEN (1970, II 130). For a commentary on the letter see AMHERDT (2001, 223-49). On this letter see also CLOPPET (1989), PERCIVAL (1997), GUIPPONI-GINESTE (2014), BECHT-JÖRDENS (2017) and LEATHERBURY 2017. On the poem see now CONSOLINO (2020, 356-57 with further bibliography).

⁹ ANDERSON (1965, 95).

According to the last four lines, when the Queen is reflected in the water of the basin, it will be her beauty that will illuminate the silver¹⁰.

Following the poem, the prose conclusion of the letter (4, 8, 5):

Si tantum amore nostro teneris, ut scribere has nugas non erubescas, occule auctorem, de tua rectius parte securus. Namque in foro tali siue Athenaeo plus charta uestra quam nostra scriptura laudabitur. Vale.

If you are so attached to me that you do not blush to inscribe this trifle, conceal its authorship. You have better reason to feel easy in your mind about your contribution; in that sort of forum or Athenaeum your writing-material will get more praise than my writing. Farewell. (Translated by Anderson¹¹)

Here Sidonius begs his friend not to reveal to the Queen who the author of these verses is. Then, a hint of contempt is shown for the ignorance of the Barbarian court¹². Sidonius thereby emphasizes that, rather than the poetry (in this case “my writing”), it is the silver (in this case “your writing-material”) that Ragnahilda will admire.

3. *March 1993*

A chronological leap of one thousand and five hundred years will now take us to March 1993, when Jean Marcel’s *Sidoine ou la dernière fête* came out.

Its chapter entitled *Ce que dit le miroir de Ragnahilde le 10 décembre 467* takes inspiration from Sidonius’ *Epist.* 4, 8 and from the story that has just been summarized above.

But some details of the letter are reworked by Jean Marcel (besides the fact that Sidonius is going from Aydat to Narbonne, rather than from Lyon to Aydat). First of all, the present for Queen Ragnahilda is no longer a basin but a mirror. Secondly, Sidonius is here only required to write four lines, the last four of the original epigram which had contained twelve lines. It is these four which are destined to be engraved on the base of the silver mirror¹³. Lastly, Sidonius’ friend Euodius also gives a translation to the Queen. It is a double translation: in Gothic, which is the language of her husband, and also in the language of her people, the Alemanni in Jean Marcel’s opinion, because, according to Marcel again, Ragnahilda wouldn’t be able to understand Latin.

¹⁰ These last four lines are modelled on Claudian *Carm. min.* 45, an epigram in two couplets for the basin of Serena, who, by washing her face in it, will bestow upon its waters virtues superior to the Hippocrene spring: see GUIPPONI-GINESTE (2010, 307-13).

¹¹ ANDERSON (1965, 95).

¹² For the negative representation of the Barbarians in Sidonius see now FASCIONE 2019.

¹³ MARCEL (1993, 163).

In this short passage, Sidonius' verses about a basin and about the water in which the Queen is destined to be reflected are translated by Jean Marcel quite closely. But his great idea is to replace the water with waves («ondes»)¹⁴:

Bienheureuses les ondes contenues dans l'éclat du métal!
Car elles mirent les joues éclatantes d'une souveraine.
Lorsqu'elle daigne y baigner son visage de reine,
c'est toute sa beauté qui confère à l'argente son éclat...

Happy the waves contained in the splendour of the metal!
Because they admire the shining cheeks of a sovereign.
When she deigns to bathe her queen's face in them,
it is all her beauty which gives silver its shine...(My translation)

This is not without meaning. Jean Marcel imagines the mirror as a vessel for waves, and the reader will realize right away that he means them to be "waves of time".

Another important detail, closely linked to the mirror theme, is the extraordinary beauty of the Queen. For Sidonius, who probably never had occasion to meet her, it is a commendation element, related to the flattering dimension of his verses. On the other hand, for Jean Marcel, it is a key factor in Ragnahilda's representation¹⁵:

Ragnahilde, en effet, était d'une très grande beauté. Sidoine ne l'avait jamais vue, mais en avait su quelque chose par les légendes et par Evodius. [...] Euric eût voulu l'épouser par politique, mais il se contenta de le faire par amour, tant la splendeur de Ragnahilde, sa noblesse, ses vertus faisaient d'elle la souveraine de tous les cœurs barbares. Ses longues tresses de miel brillaient même dans la nuit, ses yeux gardaient encore les reflets de la mer d'où étaient jadis venus ses ancêtres; des mains lactées donnaient de la grâce à ses joues roses lorsque d'aventure elle les agitait devant elle en parlant.

Ragnahilda was in fact of great beauty. Sidonius had never seen her, but had learnt something about her from legends and from Euodius. [...] Euricus had wanted to marry her for political reasons but was glad he had done so for love, as Ragnahilda's splendour, her nobility and her virtues made her the queen of every barbaric heart. Her long honey-coloured braids even glowed in the night, her eyes still held the reflections of the sea, from which her ancestors had once come; her milky hands gave grace to her pink cheeks when by chance she waved them in front of herself while speaking. (My translation)

¹⁴ MARCEL (1993, 164).

¹⁵ MARCEL (1993, 164-65).

But a third, fundamental motif is added by Jean Marcel to the beauty and the mirror themes and it is the magic¹⁶:

Les eaux du tain d'argent étaient profondes; on disait Ragnahilde quelque peu magicienne; lorsqu'elle y eut empreint son visage de reine, elle vit soudain les ondes troubler l'infini de sa beauté dans les tourbillons du temps et le temps lui-même se rassembler dans une petite étoile diamant où se jouaient mille images du passé et de l'avenir.

The waters of the mirror's silver leaf were deep. Ragnahilde was said to be a bit of a witch. When she wet her queen's face in them, she suddenly saw the waves ruffle the infinity of her beauty in whirlwinds of time and time itself gather in a little diamond star where thousands of images of the past and the future were displayed.
(My translation)

Soon after, we learn that Sidonius, having accepted the invitation to compose the verses which were to be engraved on the mirror, becomes prisoner of the mirror itself because of its spell. Ragnahilde doesn't know who he is and what his name is, but, thanks to the mirror, she has access to the secrets of his soul and to the events of his life, in the past and in the future, and their link to the political events destined to culminate in the fall of the Western Roman Empire¹⁷.

This passage illustrates two crucial aspects of Jean Marcel's novel.

The first one is the fact that the plot tends to focus on single episodes, sometimes marginal episodes, of Sidonius' life. They are chosen by Jean Marcel as an opportunity to create a brilliant narrative. However, in doing this, he was taking the risk of leaving out relevant historical and political events. So his invention of the mirror allowed him to include them in an unusual way, by incorporating them into a story which is historically truthful and suggestively fantastic.

Jean Marcel's first option is combined with his second: he starts with the original passage in which the verses are engraved on a silver basin but gives it a fantastic dimension, taking inspiration from a very common, well-known fairytale. It is quite clear that the silver surface of Ragnahilda's mirror suddenly begins to come alive exactly as happens in the magic mirror of Queen Grimhilde in the fairytale *Snow White* by the Brothers Grimm, according to the popular iconography widely made known by the Walt Disney cartoon. Ragnahilda is, in her time, «the fairest of them all», exactly as Grimhilde of *Snow White* aspired to be. Perhaps the same affinity of the two characters' names suggested the idea of combining the two stories to Jean Marcel.

In this way, by means of the motif of Grimhilde's magic mirror in *Snow White*, Jean Marcel imbues a serious historical discussion with a fairytale dream-like atmosphere, and

¹⁶ MARCEL (1993, 165).

¹⁷ MARCEL (1993, 166).

plays down the illustration with a pleasant approach somewhere between the playful and the ironic.

Particularly relevant is the direct apostrophe to the «mirror of time». On one hand it reminds us of the famous apostrophe by Grimhilde to her mirror. On the other hand it allows us to dive into the waves of time which animate the mirror, as well as into the dramatic series of events that will lead to the end of the Western Roman Empire¹⁸:

Miroir du temps, nous diras-tu enfin, par la splendeur des yeux de Ragnahilde, ce que fut l'étrange destinée de Caius Sollius Modestus Sidonius Apollinaris?
Voici que la glace se fond aux jours dévidés, que son tain glauque scintille à peine et qu'apparaissent à sa surface un peu limpide l'imprécation de la sempiternelle sarabande des êtres et des choses, le sombre et lent cortège des derniers empereurs.

Mirror of time, will you tell us, finally, through the splendour of Ragnahilda's eyes, what was the strange destiny of Gaius Sollius Modestus Sidonius Apollinaris¹⁹?
Here the glass blends with the unwound days, here its glaucous silver leaf scarcely sparkles and on its slightly clear surface here the curse of the eternal saraband of beings and things, the sad and slow cortege of the last emperors. (My translation)

So, looking through those «waves of time», Ragnahilda glimpses not only this poet, unknown to her²⁰, but also several crucial episodes from his «strange destiny» set against the background of Roman decadence.

In the succession of the waves of time there are the days of the year 467 A.D. in which Ragnahilda is reflected in the mirror²¹. From then on, future events magically begin. The mirror shows her nothing but the agony of the Western Roman Empire: the murders which, one after the other, sweep away the last ten Roman Emperors, until the fateful date of the «noiseless fall» of that Empire²². It is 476 A.D., the year which marks the deposition of the last Roman emperor, Romulus Augustulus. And it is the same year in which, after that Sidonius' region, the *Arvernia*, has been ceded to King Euricus, the poet is imprisoned for his resistance. Right before being exiled to Livia, near Carcassone, the poet writes a touching letter (*Epist.* 7, 7), which has been called «the epitaph of the Western Roman Empire»²³. Later on, Sidonius, prisoner of Euricus, will have to stoop to

¹⁸ MARCEL (1993, 166).

¹⁹ For Sidonius' full name, according to the incipit of the manuscripts, see GIANNOTTI (2016, 19-20).

²⁰ Here MARCEL (1993, 163) refers to the final passage of *Epist.* 4, 8 about Sidonius' desire to remain anonymous and even plays on this with a certain irony.

²¹ MARCEL (1993, 177).

²² The reference is of course to the well-known article by MOMIGLIANO (1973).

²³ STEVENS (1933, 160). This letter is about the downfall of Clermont, Sidonius' hometown, under the Visigoths, in 475 A.D. It includes one of the most famous sentences of his epistolary: *facta est servitus nostra pretium securitatis alienae* (7, 7, 2). For a commentary on this letter, which is commonly dated to 475 A.D., see VAN WAARDEN (2010, 334-78).

writing a panegyric in verse in order to be released²⁴. Ragnahilda sees all this in her mirror as well and finally is moved²⁵:

Ragnahilde pleura, et ses larmes sur la glace retournée effacèrent pour un temps le temps avec ses folles images. Lorsqu'elle y replongea son visage de reine, le tain s'était brisé en champ d'étoiles qui fuyaient toutes vers l'infini. Elle ne sut jamais lire les quatre vers latins et ignora toujours qui avait été ce panégyriste sans nom.

Ragnahild cried and her tears on the glass turned upside down erased time with its crazy images for a while. When she dove her queen's face in it again, the silver leaf shattered in a field of stars all fleeing towards infinity. She was never able to read the four Latin verses and ignored forever who that nameless panegyrist had been. (My translation)

4. 477 A.D.

Going back again to the historical reality, in a few more years the unknown author of the verses engraved on the mirror will return from exile and will be able to devote himself to his works, ending his first letter collection²⁶ with one of his most memorable sentences (*Epist.* 7, 18, 2²⁷):

[...] *minime ignarus, quod ita mens pateat in libro uelut uultus in speculo.*

[...] being well aware that the mind is as fully exposed in a book as the face in a mirror. (Translated by Anderson²⁸)

A very fascinating sentence, which, in presenting a book as a mirror of the mind, is a perfect conclusion for this paper as well.

²⁴ It is the poem in letter 8, 9, which, by means of a series of allusions to Virgil's first *Eclogue*, implicitly denies the praises that it is formally celebrating: see FO (1999) and OVERWIEN (2009).

²⁵ MARCEL (1993, 186).

²⁶ As is known, Sidonius published a first collection of seven books of letters and later on added books 8 and 9: see now KELLY (2020, 185-89 and 193-4).

²⁷ For a commentary on this letter see VAN WAARDEN (2016, 252-71).

²⁸ ANDERSON (1965, 397).

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