

Michael MCCARTHY “Savage Juno” (Aen. 1.4) and the “Fury of the Lord” (Ps. 2:5):
Pagan and Christian Embarrassment over Divine Wrath

This paper will compare the exegetical strategies of Donatus and Servius in treating Juno’s intention to destroy and scatter the Trojan fleet with Augustine’s strategy for explaining biblical texts such as Psalm 2:5 (“He will speak to them in his anger, and in his rage he will throw them into disarray”). It will argue that literary pagans and Christians of late antiquity manifest a significant cultural continuity precisely in their embarrassment over divine wrath as represented in key texts. As Peter Brown has noted, the classical *paedeia* common to both pagans and Christians stressed the exercise of self-control and ability to check one’s anger, and that concern carries over into readings of the gods. At the same time, the actual interpretative practices each group uses for explaining such wrath reflects very different theological frameworks.

Both Donatus and Servius strongly reflect the philosophical concern to condemn anger as an unruly passion. In his *Interpretationes Vergilianae*, Donatus attempts to impress Juno’s rage into the service of Vergil’s larger purpose. Her wrath, that is, underscores the extent of Aeneas’ piety. On the other hand, Donatus is not able to excuse Juno completely and notes Vergil’s amazement at the iniquity of the gods (12.503-4). In a move that reflects strategies of earlier Stoic commentators, Servius exonerates Juno by interpreting the anger of the gods as cosmic and impersonal energies.

In his own commentary on the psalms, filled with references to divine anger and vengeance, Augustine offers several strategies for assuring his readers that the Psalmist does not mean us to think that God has perturbations of the mind. Among other interpretations, Augustine includes the explanation that divine anger is the power by which God justly punishes at the end of time or that it is the emotion felt by a righteous person who knows the law of God yet sees it transgressed by the sinner. Augustine’s embarrassment is no less keen than that of his pagan counterparts and betrays classical Stoic concerns, but his defense relies heavily on a distinctly Christian notion of time as coming to eschatological completion.

The continuity between pagan and Christian notions of divine anger lies in a larger cultural disapproval of anger as an uncontrolled passion, while larger theological frameworks account for significant differences.